ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	***Bend It Like Beckham*: Soccer in 21st-Century re and Performance**
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After Bend It Like Beckham: Soccer in 21st-Century Theatre and Performance examines how the performativity of the world's most popular sport is "played" by various actors for the purposes of social, cultural, and political transformation. In addition to being a type of performance, sports can be considered performative in that they can enact a consequential transformation, such that a win on the field becomes a win in life. Assumptions surrounding the transformative capacities of soccer, unabashedly described by fans and stakeholders as "The Beautiful Game," are especially potent, particularly when invested with material powers that forms the sports-industrial complex. By examining case studies ranging from the Pulitzer Prize-nominated play *The Wolves* to exhibition matches staged by authoritarian leaders, this dissertation demonstrates how soccer's performativity can be reconfigured advantageously in conditions extracted from actual gameplay. Dramas that spotlight sportswomen using soccer to forge greater individual and collective selves show how athletes can play against the barriers that inhibit their access to the sport, and how nuanced representations of the plight of sportswomen can play against uncritical deployments of representation that only validate success. National and sporting governments, on

the other hand, can leverage the sport to reify nationalistic myths and induce participants to reconfigure social memory through acts of play that elide historical accuracy and obscure the material powers invested in the game. This dissertation arrives at an ideal time to engage debates over the "true" nature of performativity, accounting for the efficacy of gestures amidst accusations of "performative activism" and redirecting attention to the conditions that make transformation possible but are more likely to sanction superficial changes that do not threaten the status quo. Soccer's performative capacity can thus be understood as both a source of empowerment for players inhibited by racial, gendered, and nationalistic exclusion and a concept that is easily manipulated by powerbrokers whose embeddedness within the sports-industrial complex is protected by the very systems that perpetuate extraction and exclusion.

AFTER *BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM*: SOCCER IN 21st-CENTURY THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE

by

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My research into soccer performance began with "The World Cup's Double-Headed Eagle: Gestures and Scenarios in the Football Arena," which was published in *Theatre Research International*. Several further publications have been incorporated into this

dissertation: “Playing On, Playing Along: Soccer’s Performative Activism in the Time of COVID-19,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*; “The President Makes a Play: Putin and Erdogan’s Sporting Statecraft,” co-authored with Sean Bartley for the anthology *Performing Statecraft*; and a review of Philadelphia Theatre Company’s online production of *The Wolves* in *Theatre Journal*. I am eternally grateful to the editors of these works, whose insight has helped me craft my research profile, and to Sean Bartley for being a great writing partner.

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Introduction—Playing to the Crowd: After *Bend It Like Beckham*

In December of 2019, I took a long and wintry drive from College Park, Maryland to Toronto so I could attend *Bend It Like Beckham: The Musical* at St. Lawrence Centre. At that time, the research that forms this dissertation was still in its infancy, so this was quite a trek for a show I knew little about, save for its source material and the fact this was its second major production following a 2015 debut in London. Upon arriving at my sparsely furnished Airbnb, I settled in for a rewatch of Gurinder Chadha's original 2002 film. The story centers on Jess (Parminder Nagra), a British Indian girl who idolizes then-Manchester United star David Beckham, famous for his uncommon ability to "bend" the ball when crossing or shooting,[1] and fantasizes about playing for the English men's national team. In real life, Jess is forced to put up with the extravagance of her sister Pinky's (Archie Panjabi) impending marriage and her mother's (Shaheen Khan) efforts to shape her into the ideal Indian wife and mother, a project that leaves no space for soccer. Enter new friend and fellow player Jules (Keira Knightley), who recruits Jess for a local club called the Harriers. Jess joins the team in secret and instantly impresses handsome coach Joe (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers). As the team goes from strength to strength, Jess and Jules struggle to manage the expectations of their families, who fear soccer—football, in most of the world[2]—will compromise their passage into acceptable womanhood, as well as reconcile their shared romantic feelings for Joe. Jess's participation is further shadowed by racism, a threat exacerbated by the specter of her father's (Anupam Kher) exclusion from the cricket clubs of his native Kenya. While the girls try to keep their affairs under wraps, a series of

[1] Virtually all players can hit a pass or shot that arcs through the air due to the spin applied to it; Beckham could do so with exceptional "bend" and accuracy.
[2] Considering this dissertation is written for an American audience, I typically use "soccer" rather than "football," with a few exceptions arising from the context of the case studies under examination.

arguments and comical misunderstandings threatens to ruin their relationships with their families and each other. Thankfully, their skillful performances eventually assuage their parents' misgivings and affirms their right to be themselves. The victorious Jess goes on to play college soccer in the United States and pursue a relationship with Joe, albeit still in secret.

As I watched the film, I noted two crucial ways in which the camera articulates Jess's story arc. The first is that it constructs Jess as appropriately Beckhamesque on the ball through a series of cuts and close-ups. Considering that editorial facility would not be available onstage, I was curious as to how the musical would articulate similar mastery within the proscenium. The second was the film's long series of misunderstandings, which include Jess's aunts mistaking Jules for an amorous White boy and Jules's mother mistaking the pair's argument over Joe for a lesbian lovers' quarrel, both of which set off a moral panic within their families. There seemed no limit to how the girls might be caught in the wrong frame at the wrong time. By the end, I recognized that repeating this device to the point of becoming rote drives home the two families' concern for being framed in all the *right* ways: Jess as a domestically competent wife who honors her family's culture; Jules as feminine and sexually available, specifically to men. In the end, being seen as skillful, happy, and straight soccer players whose exploits are validated by victory in a game framed as England's national pastime assuages the parents' anxiety and affirms the girls' right to self-determination. Assuming the musical followed the same arc, the production would need to evoke the skill necessary to realize this conclusion.

Chadha's musical adaptation, created in collaboration with co-librettist and original screenwriter Paul Mayeda Berges, composer Howard Goodall, and lyricist Charles Hart, does follow that same arc. The story remains in the year 2001, the better to lionize the long-retired David Beckham during his Manchester United prime. Pinky's extravagant wedding remains the

traditionalist counterpoint to Jess's emerging hybrid identity, while Jess's closeted friend Tony (played in the film by Ameet Chana) still provides sage encouragement to "bend" the truth rather than reveal one's true, divergent self. Jess still ends up with Joe, although the musical denies her a speech from the film in which she asserts the need to prioritize her career, and Jules's mother still panics about her daughter's sexuality, only this time she comes to her senses on her own and emerges as a rainbow flag-waving ally. As an adaptation, the musical plays it safe—much like the Toronto production did when it came to staging soccer. The actors rarely worked with the ball and when they did, it was often through a series of drills conducted at half-speed. The choreography of the Harriers' musical numbers trended toward calisthenics rather than evoking gameplay through, for example, the arc of a leg striking a ball in midair. Ashley Emerson, who played Joe, constantly (aggravatingly) handled the ball, a move incongruous to seasoned players and coaches. For Jess's climactic, game-winning free-kick, the production went so far as to exchange a real ball for a spotlight zipping around the auditorium and over the wall of aunties who appear in Jess's mind and transform a literal obstacle in her path to goal into a social obstacle in her path to fulfillment.[3]

Ironically, one number that did center ball work ended up undermining the production and by extension one of the story's central conceits. During the number "First Touch," Joe counsels Jess to stop overthinking and play the game instinctually. As staged in Toronto, Jess (Laila Zaidi) demonstrated her hesitancy by running up to kick a ball and then stopping at the last moment. Three times she made this run-up. In the first two instances, she was positioned to boot the ball straight into the audience. In the third, she changed orientation entirely and kicked

[3] In soccer, a free kick is awarded when a player is fouled by the opposing team. A designated specialist then has an opportunity to kick the ball from a fixed position. When this presents an opportunity to shoot on goal, a wall of opposition players is set up to obstruct their path. Appropriately, free kicks were one of David Beckham's signature skills.

the ball safely into the wings. While obviously considerate of the audience, I found this disruption of the rule of three dramaturgically problematic. Conventionally speaking, the rule of three suggests that Jess would successfully kick the ball at the third try, indicating that she had summoned the courage to overcome a barrier that had already stopped her twice. By changing Jess's orientation at the final instance, the production unwittingly implied that the original parameters established for the run up could not facilitate success on their own terms. This is troublesome in a number in which the central character must prove that she can play her way through her own limitations and toward self-actualization. A failure to execute that moment with clarity and conviction does more than undermine an already fragile suspension of disbelief: it constitutes a challenge to carrying off Jess's whole narrative.

This instance was not a shortcoming of the actor, nor is my critique a blanket condemnation of the production's efforts to confront the challenges of staging sport. Rather, this small but pivotal moment is indicative of an inability to sustain the production's own conditions for excellence, which in turn is a failure to dramatize the conditions for excellence in the world of the musical. This failure to convincingly showcase and frame Jess's athleticism undermines a central presumption that helped make the film a hit: that excellence on the pitch is a means of empowerment off it. The film advances this notion by composing a portrait of Jess that marks her out as a uniquely gifted player who only needs to be seen by the right people at the right time. Numbers like "First Touch," a title that refers to a skill prized in attacking players,[4] sustain this presumption on the stage. Apart from adapting the film's narrative, the musical follows the path of many a screen-to-stage adaptation by trading on nostalgia for the original and the cultural

[4] "First touch" refers to the initial contact a player makes with the ball that allows them to bring it under control. The better the first touch, the better the player is at collecting a pass and setting themselves up for a run, a shot, or another pass. Having "a good first touch" is one of the hallmarks of a quality attacking player.

values that undergird it. Even as they come to terms with the rules of the stage, the creators of *Bend It Like Beckham: The Musical* play to an imagined audience that is attached to the film and what it represents. In a story that centers soccer as a vessel for Jess's happiness, the success of that endeavor is dependent as much on making the soccer work as it is on adapting the film's narrative beats.

Rather than whine about verisimilitude in soccer staging, this dissertation takes a cue from the Toronto production of "First Touch" to examine how performances of soccer extracted from typical gameplay draw attention to the conditions that enable sport's supposed performativity. Bearing in mind the many "infelicities" that haunt the term,[5] I deploy performativity here not simply to describe the sport *as* a performance but to signal its capacity to enact transformation *through* performance. Crucially, such transformations "are all about the frame,"[6] i.e., the conditions that allow for a performance to become performative. In *Bend It Like Beckham*, Jess's skill with the ball is performative in that it enables her to change her circumstances and attain a measure of self-determination. However, it is not enough for Jess to be good at soccer: she must be good at soccer within the right frame, namely her penultimate match, during which her father watches secretly in the stands and is (eventually) moved enough to not only let her leave her sister's wedding her family but resolve his own injuries suffered as a victim of racial discrimination. Furthermore, the conditions that enable Jess to succeed are rooted in the sport's cultural status as a proving ground of English identity, not to mention the practice it takes for her to be so good in the first place. In short, an awful lot has to happen for Jess's soccer skills to be performative, so much so that critiquing how *Bend It Like Beckham* deploys the sport

[5] See Aaron C. Thomas, "Infelicities," in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35.2 (2021): 13-25, for a concise overview of the "uses and abuses" of the term in performance studies literature.
[6] Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 118.

is to critique a broader cultural narrative in which players can change their external circumstances, themselves, and even the world *if* they play well. Therein lies the reason musical numbers such as "First Touch" are productive sites of inquiry: because they unintentionally reveal that the conditions required to enact sport's performativity are deep, precise, and almost impossible to recreate elsewhere.

This is not to say that sports, like any kind of performance, do not possess transformational capacities at all. Despite old and persistent claims to the contrary, sports are political in this sense because they really can stimulate players to organize and leverage power for the purposes of transforming social relationships between individuals and their institutions, as well as shape the cultural forces that give groups both a vision of themselves and a means of sustaining that vision.[7] What is sometimes lost in representations of sport and in the representational frameworks applied to sport is the fact that these politics are inherent. Sports narratives frequently cast the playing field as merely a stage on which "real" politics are acted out, but the truth is that small playing fields are co-constitutive of larger political fields. Like the theatre, the soccer pitch does not merely reflect what happens on the outside but shapes and is shaped by it reciprocally. With that comes recognition that the conditions of sport's performativity include the conditions that affect the players. In *Bend It Like Beckham*, Jess steps into the national sport as a person whose race and social status are tied inexorably to Britain's (post-)colonial apparatus, steps away from her family as a young woman whose presumptive social role is tied to the birth country of her parents, and steps around the tropes that code women's participation in sport as lesbian and therefore aberrant. These are all elements that

[7] The capsule definitions here, particularly of the social and cultural, are informed in part by Raymond Williams's invaluable work elucidating their development in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, new edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

make her performative transformation inspirational—truly inspirational, as I will show—but they are also elements that in many circumstances limit how players enter their fields, what systems of power will allow them to accomplish, and how their accomplishments will be circulated discursively. To critique a sports narrative is not to decontextualize the sport but to recognize that its embeddedness within systems of power differentiates access and success along intersecting lines of privilege and oppression. To understand the politics of sporting performativity, then, is not just to grasp the conditions that shape the game but also the conditions that shape the player.

While this dissertation invests in the politics of sport, it is not taken up solely by the *representation* of those politics. Instead, I investigate how performances of soccer actively engage the sport's performativity. Crucial to that investigation is unpicking how performances estranged from usual game conditions reveal the representational mechanics, many of them distributed and reified by an immense media apparatus that includes pop culture touchstones like *Bend It Like Beckham*, that uphold so many sporting narratives. In starting with *Bend It Like Beckham: The Musical*, I have established that a failure to dramatize the sport convincingly due to the comparative constraints of the theatrical space is an avenue through which to explore how sport's performativity can fail, yet I have also pointed to how the musical's creators positioned their adaptation to tap into nostalgia for the original film. In this way, the creators of *Bend It Like Beckham: The Musical* endeavored to play to an affinity for the film and its cultural cache. By "play to," I mean crafting the musical to satisfy the audience's presumed demands for a show that not only reinvents the film but validates an essential premise rooted in the film's reputation. "Play" is understood here as not only acts of portrayal but inclusive of the many ways one can act in accordance with certain prescribed rules to gain an advantage, reconfigure the terms of a

performance in a pleasing and sometimes subversive way, or undertake an activity that only seems to be what it portrays. To "play to" *Bend It Like Beckham*'s audience is to reconstruct a treasured cultural object, partly to make it seem new and partly to bank on what it already is. As I will demonstrate, many performers adopt a similarly playful disposition toward soccer, one that has much less to do with actually playing the sport than retooling it for purposes that make use of its political, social, and cultural cache.

Over the course of this dissertation, I will examine case studies of soccer performance ranging from the stage to the pitch in the hopes of answering two questions. First, what does examining performances of soccer estranged from game conditions reveal about the sport's performative potentials? Analyzing such performances with a dramaturgical eye reveals the degree to which they often trade on a limited conception of sporting politics that cast it as merely the avatar for "real-world" politics and ignore the various factors, such as race, gender, class, and nationality, that condition a player's access to sport. Furthermore, each of the subsequent case studies demonstrates how presumptions of soccer's performative capacities can be advanced, nuanced, or even challenged—often most effectively by actors with a significant stake in the sport's enormous network of material powers. This brings me to the second question: how does play operate in these case studies to reconfigure the sport's performative capacities? In other words, how do these performances play *to*, play *against*, play *with*, or play *on* soccer's capacity to enact change? These questions point to a much larger consideration for scholars at the intersection of theatre, sports, and performance, which is what performance can really "do" and for whom. This is especially pertinent for soccer, whose most significant powerbrokers, including global governing body FIFA (Fédération International de Football Association), enthusiastically embrace its supposed role as a great unifier even as they partner with

governments who perpetuate human rights violations. The Beautiful Game, as fans and proponents unabashedly describe it,[8] is saturated with pleasing fictions that mask all sorts of wrongdoings and belie even what players really *can* do through sport, yet there are ways in which performances *of* soccer can be critiqued with an eye to how they resist institutional powers that thrive on the mystification of the sport. This dissertation will settle no debates as to what performance broadly writ can "really" do, but it will excavate how power shapes the conditions that produce performative transformation through the biggest sport in the world—for good or for ill.

Two Ways to Come After Bend It Like Beckham

This dissertation follows "after" *Bend It Like Beckham* in two senses. First, it designates a period of study beginning with the release of the film and continuing through 2022, a timeframe in which the global game's social characteristics have shifted. In many cases, changes in the game have been progressive in much the way that *Bend It Like Beckham* gestures to. The elite women's game in North America and Europe, for example, has grown in coverage and prestige, and many teams have made significant, if laborious gains in compensation. The biggest victory was won by the United States Women's National Team (USWNT), which successfully litigated against the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) to receive backpay comparable to that of the Men's National Team (USMNT) and eventually signed a historic collective bargaining agreement alongside their male counterparts in front of a crowd at Audi Field in Washington,

[8] The origins of the moniker are disputed, though the late Brazilian star Pelé, arguably the greatest to ever play the game, popularized the term (*jogo bonito*, in Portuguese). "The beautiful game: Pelé, Didi and the origins of football's most tiresome cliché," *When Saturday Comes*, accessed January 19, 2023, originally in print August 2017, https://www.wsc.co.uk/stories/the-beautiful-game-pele-didi-and-the-origins-of-football-s-most-tiresome-cliche/.

DC.[9] In England, the Women's Super League (WSL) has emerged as a significant force in attracting global talent, while England's national team went one better than their male counterparts by winning the European Championships on home soil in the summer of 2022. The significance of that achievement was encapsulated in several exhibits at the National Football Museum in England, including an extensive two-part special on the history of the women's game, which for fifty years was banished from the official grounds under the purview of the Football Association.[10] Perhaps if *Bend It Like Beckham* were made today, Jess would imagine herself playing alongside Lucy Bronze and Beth Mead rather than David Beckham.

In short, the fact that the women's game garners more investment now is evidence of how the sport has been shaped by larger social change. In addition to being a battleground in the fight for pay equity, the women's game in North America has been an increasingly vocal space for queer acceptance, so much so that non-binary Canadian midfielder Quinn and trans-masc forward Kumi Yokoyama have been publicly praised for coming out and continue to play for their NWSL teams.[11] While similar progress toward queer acceptance has been slower in the men's game, many elite teams have adopted rainbow motifs in recognition of annual Pride celebrations. Gestures to progressive change in the form of Black Lives Matter activism has also been widespread, particularly after the 2020 uprising accelerated by the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor. While the efficacy of these gestures is debatable (a

[9] Fittingly, the signing was staged at the edge of the pitch, overseen by former USWNT star and pundit Julie Foudy, and accompanied by a congratulatory video by former tennis star Billie Jean King. For more on the agreement, see Brian Straus, "U.S. Soccer Announces History CBA Agreement, Equal Pay Between USMNT, USWNT," *Sports Illustrated*, May 18, 2022, https://www.si.com/soccer/2022/05/18/us-soccer-cba-equal-pay-uswnt-usmnt-world-cup-prize-money.

[10] Fittingly, the two parts of the exhibit were completed either side of the European Championships, making the Lionesses victory in the tournament a highlight of the second component.

[11] Yokoyama credited Quinn, the first openly trans athlete to win an Olympic gold medal, for inspiring them; Yokoyama was later praised in a tweet by President Joe Biden. See Alex Reimer, "Japanese trans pro soccer player Kumi Yokoyama just got engaged," *SB Nation: Outsports*, November 3, 2021, https://www.outsports.com/2021/11/3/22761587/kumi-yokoyama-transgender-nwsl-washington-spirit-engaged

debate that I will return to in Chapter 3), the fact they are so visible demonstrates how the public character of soccer has changed in the Global North over the past twenty years.

While there have been visible changes in how elite soccer stakeholders position themselves, it is imperative to recognize the simultaneous expansion of economic and political capital that has perpetuated harmful power structures and threatened sectarian backlashes even as the sport has ostensibly welcomed more participants. The compulsion of the game's global leaders, particularly at FIFA, to seek out new markets under the guise of development is evident just in the locations of men's World Cups. In 2002, the year *Bend It Like Beckham* debuted, the World Cup was hosted in South Korea and Japan, its first foray away from Europe and the Americas. Since then, it has made debuts in South Africa (2010), Russia (2018), and Qatar (2022), as well as repeat stops in historic power centers Germany (2006) and Brazil (2014); its next stop is the United States, Canada, and Mexico (2026), where the field of teams will expand from 32 to 48. The two latest World Cups in Russia and Qatar plus the 2026 edition in North America indicate the degree to which global power, fueled in part by a wealth of natural resources and, in the case of Russia and Qatar, autocratic governments using "sportswashing" to burnish their global legitimacy, has drawn the sport into places where it has not traditionally dominated. The Qatari regime exemplified this strategy by adopting a four-pronged approach that included constructing state-of-the-art venues to host major events, investing in global sporting broadcast rights, promoting Qatari success at the elite level, and engaging sport celebrities to speak favorably of the regime.[12] Qatar's biggest private gamble, conducted through Qatari Sports Investments, has been French club Paris St. Germain, which shattered the global

[12] Håvard Stamnes Søyland and Marcelo Moriconi, "Qatar's Multi-Actors Sports Strategy: Diplomacy, Critics and Legitimisation," *International Area Studies Review*, 2022.

transfer record when it paid the eyewatering sum of $270million to take Brazilian star Neymar from Barcelona.[13] Elsewhere, the English Premier League, already among the most lucrative sports leagues in the world, saw an earlier influx of foreign money, beginning with the likes of Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich in 2003, continuing with American tycoons and conglomerates such as the Glazer family and Fenway Sports Group, and on to state-backed takeovers of Manchester City via the Abu Dhabi United Group and Newcastle United by the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia. These moves have garnered significant controversy, ranging from complaints that foreign investment and commercialization is eroding ties between clubs and their localities, to accusations of backroom maneuvers that allowed the World Cup into places like Russia and Qatar, both of which have poor human rights records.[14]

In short, the Beautiful Game has only gotten bigger over the past twenty years, yet with that increase in size has come increased exposure of its systemic shortcomings and resurgent currents of prejudice. For all the public deference to Pride, European governing body UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) still allowed Hungary to be a co-host of the pan-continental 2020 European Championships (EURO 2020), prompting scrutiny of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's anti-LGBTQ+ policies.[15] For all the widespread adoption of taking a knee, Black England players Bukayo Sako, Jadon Sancho, and Marcus Rashford were subject to openly racist

[13] Note that this figure *only* represents what PSG paid to Barcelona, as is customary when discussing transfer fees. The player negotiated a $54million-a-year salary with PSG separately. "How Does a Football Transfer Work?" *BBC*, accessed December 12, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20170829-how-does-a-football-transfer-work.

[14] Amnesty International has been a consistent critic of labor conditions in Qatar and has pressured the country's leadership and FIFA to establish a compensation fund. For insight into how Russia won hosting rights to the 2018 World Cup, see 'The World Cup's Mysterious Path to Russia', *The Daily* from *The New York Times*, 22 June 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/06/22/podcasts/the-daily/russia-world-cup-fifa-corruption.html, accessed 17 October 2018.

[15] Orbán became embroiled in international controversy amidst criticisms of his policies, while UEFA was itself criticized for turning down Munich's request to illuminate the Allianz Arena in rainbow colors in solidarity with LGBTQ+ citizens. See Kate Connolly, "Hungary's Orbán cancels Euro 2020 trip to Munich after rainbow row," *The Guardian*, June 23, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/23/hungary-viktor-orban-cancels-euro-2020-trip-to-munich-after-rainbow-row-germany.

abuse on social media after they missed penalty kicks in the final of the same tournament, an event marred by fan violence and operational dysfunction that harkened back to the infamous heydays of (overwhelmingly White) English soccer hooliganism in the 1980s.[16] For all the advances of the USWNT, it was less than a month after overseeing its historic collective bargaining agreement that the USSF released a damning report of systemic incompetence that allowed abusive coaches and administrators to act with impunity in the NWSL.[17] This is to say nothing of the amateur and educational levels of the game, themselves shaped by power structures that often distribute access inequitably, protect abuse under the guise of establishing respect for authority, and are contiguous with larger systems of exploitation and extraction. The very recent, very public examples above demonstrate that this era of global expansion is as much a cause for social contestation as it is for progress. Contestation is important here because it demonstrates that sports are a worthy space for asserting, challenging, subverting, re-examining, and altogether engaging the powers entangled within them. This dissertation will adopt a critical approach to sport, yes, but that is anything but regurgitating well-trod arguments that sport is either a fundamentally anti-democratic obsession that stunts progress or a pastime that activates only the most stringent immoralities in everyone who participates.[18]

A note on critique is an ideal segue into the second way this dissertation follows after *Bend It Like Beckham*. Like sport itself, *Bend It Like Beckham* is proof that sporting narratives

[16] Ben Morse, "Racist abuse directed at England players after Euro 2020 final defeat is described as 'unforgivable' by manager Gareth Southgate," *CNN*, July 12, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/12/football/england-racist-abuse-bukayo-saka-jadon-sancho-marcus-rashford-euro-2020-final-spt-intl.
[17] "U.S. Soccer Releases Full Findings and Recommendations of Sally Q. Yates' Independent Investigation and Commits to Meaningful Changes and Immediate Actions," *US Soccer*, October 3, 2022, https://www.ussoccer.com/stories/2022/10/sally-q-yates-investigation-findings.
[18] For a broader sense of these debates, see David Andrews and Ben Carrington's introduction to *A Companion to Sport*, in which they critique Christopher Hitchens' dismissal of sport as a useless activity that heightens political tension and sectarian feelings and Terry Eagleton's argument that sport inhibits true working-class solidarity. David Andrews and Ben Carrington, Introduction to *A Companion to Sport*, eds. David Andrews and Ben Carrington (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 1-16.

are complex sites that merit close critique and support diverse, sometimes contradictory assessments. In this regard, the body of *Bend It Like Beckham* literature that has emerged over the past twenty years is a useful template for approaching my case studies. For starters, it clarifies the acuity of this twenty-year time frame by highlighting some of the political assumptions of the original film. The film's multicultural aspirations, part of a "Cool Britannia" optimism under the leadership of Prime Minister Tony Blair, are rooted in the zeitgeist of 2001, the year prior to the film's release. The advent of the wars in the Middle East, which Britain joined as an ally to the United States following the 9/11 attacks, effectively put an end to that optimism, leading to an uptick in xenophobia that resonates through post-Brexit Britain today. Granted, racism and xenophobia were hardly new phenomena in Britain. Roy Williams' play *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads*,[19] set in a pub during a 2001 match between England and Germany, debuted at The National Theatre the very same year as *Bend It Like Beckham* was released and presented a far more critical perspective on interracial strife. Over the course of the play, two Black brothers, Mark and Barry, navigate their place in a White community whose disposition toward them ranges from surreptitiously prejudiced to openly antagonistic. The brothers adopt contradictory approaches to this problem: Mark, stung by his failed romance with bar owner Gina and troubled friendship with police constable Lee, plays things close to the chest; Barry, on the other hand, ingratiates himself by playing well for the pub's amateur team. As the televised game unfolds, racist dispositions regarding the players are brought to the fore.[20] Meanwhile, the overt white supremacists in the group—studious Alan and hot-headed Lawrie, both inspired by the anti-immigrant ethos articulated in British MP Enoch Powell's infamous

[19] Roy Williams, *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* (London: Methuen Drama, 2002).
[20] One significant point of contention is the performance of Andy Cole, a Black striker who excelled at league level for Newcastle and Manchester United but, according to many of the White lads in the pub, cannot deliver for England.

"rivers of blood" speech[21]—turn up the pressure on the brothers. In the end, tragedy strikes when Gina's young son Glen, a victim of bullying at the hands of some Black youths, takes out his anger on Mark, killing him. Unlike *Bend It Like Beckham*, which gestures to the utopian possibilities of a multicultural England, *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* forcefully interrogates the racism that was already bubbling in England at the time and forecloses the possibility for an easy resolution.

Over ten years after the film's debut, *Bend It Like Beckham: The Musical* traded both on love of the film and the dashed hopes that undergirded the period in which it was set. As Jerri Daboo notes in *Staging British South Asian Culture: Bollywood and Bhangra in British Theatre*, the musical *must* be set in that sunset period because its message of racial tolerance would simply not be as resonant today as it was then.[22] The optimism that buoyed *Bend It Like Beckham* and other representative examples of what Michael Giardina calls "stylish hybridity"[23] was founded not on a genuine reckoning with the politics of difference and their materiality but on a superficial multiculturalism united under a fealty to Britishness. As Gamal Abdel-Shehid and Nathan Kalman-Lamb argue, the multiculturalism evinced in the film not only fails to eradicate racial inequity but perpetuates it by promoting a "national" culture that others must assimilate into, even as it touts multiculturalism as a cure for inequity.[24] This dynamic is

[21] Allusions to the speech, which incorporates references to a river of blood via Virgil's *Aeneid*, are used as a touchstone by Alan. The speech was delivered amidst a wave of immigration from the Caribbean and is seen as an example of pan-Atlantic white nationalist discourse that became especially mainstream in the United States amidst the rise of Donald Trump. Daniel Geary, "Most Americans don't know who Enoch Powell was. But they should," *The Washington Post*, April 20, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/04/20/most-americans-dont-know-who-enoch-powell-was-but-they-should/.
[22] Jerri Daboo, *Staging British South Asian Culture: Bollywood and Bhangra in British Theatre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 2.
[23] Michael D. Giardina, "'Bending It Like Beckham' In The Global Popular: Stylish Hybridity, Performativity, and the Politics of Representation," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 27, no. 1 (2003): 67.
[24] Gamal Abdel-Shehid and Nathan Kalman-Lamb, "Multiculturalism, Gender and Bend It Like Beckham," *Social Inclusion* 3, no. 3 (2015): 144.

especially pointed in *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads*, in which a shared affinity for the national team is no guarantee of equality. Once again, Mark and Barry illustrate this failed promise through contrasting approaches: Barry proudly paints his face with the white and red of the English flag, and Mark chastises him for looking ridiculous. As Abdel-Shehid and Kalman-Lamb further contend, *Bend It Like Beckham*, like many sports films, advances a faulty cure for such discrimination by operating through the "category of 'transcendence', framing sports as an arena of opportunity in which structural inequities like racism and patriarchy can be overcome through hard work and athletic experience."[25] By fulfilling its heroine's romantic and familial desires, *Bend It Like Beckham* rewards this effort in a way that *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* does not.

While troubling the "category of transcendence" is a useful entry point for critiquing sport's supposed capacity to help players performatively rise above their circumstances, the degree to which *Bend It Like Beckham* has become a touchstone for various actors to pursue the inclusion it imagines must be accounted for. Not the least of the film's long-term benefits is increased interest in the women's game in Britain,[26] which reached new heights with the Lioness's march to victory in the European Championships just in time for the film's twentieth anniversary. That anniversary was a cause for celebration of *Bend It Like Beckham*'s influence and reflection on the work still to be done, spawning a litany of commemorative articles and even a documentary produced by the BCC.[27] The film is cited as a special source of inspiration for many women in sport, including Canadian sports journalist and critic Shireen Ahmed, cohost of the feminist sports podcast *Burn It All Down*, whose interview with Chadha alerted me to the

[25] Abdel-Shehid and Kalman-Lamb, 142–43.
[26] Giardina, "'Bending It Like Beckham' In The Global Popular," 78.
[27] *Bend It Like Beckham: 20 Years On*, directed by Miriam Walker-Kahn, aired April 15, 2022, BBC broadcast. Anniversary articles appeared in national presses such as *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, and *CBC*, sports magazines such as *The Athletic*, online publications dedicated to fans and people of color from marginalized identities such as *Just Women's Sports* and *gal-dem*, and numerous other avenues.

musical's Toronto bow.[28] That it has inspired such investment speaks to its capacity to stimulate action, even if women's sport remains contested territory, including internally vis-à-vis its privileging of whiteness.[29] The film was also notable for the time in that it depicted Jess's friend Tony, a fellow British South Asian, coming out to her, while the relationship between Jess and Jules has been a site of competing queer-feminist analyses. Jayne Caudwell critiques the film for reinforcing heterosexuality by suppressing the queer possibilities of Jess and Jules' relationship, while also leaving room for the film to serve as a challenge to normative female heterosexuality.[30] Katharina Lindner, on the other hand, argues that the text of *Bend It Like Beckham* enables lesbian spectatorship beyond the "binary understanding of sexual difference and . . . the subject-object distance implied by the gaze," in part because of the communion found in team-based athletics, an arena often marked as lesbian.[31]

Apart from the subjects it portrays, *Bend It Like Beckham* operates within a complex network characterized by diasporic and assimilationist tensions that artists like Gurinder Chadha have played to their advantage. As Mridula Nath Chakraborty observes, Chadha's work grew out of a particular site of Black British feminism and womanist cinema, which allowed her to draw on the discursive category of "Black" to "[claim] a space for the Asians within and beyond black Britishness, thereby making her work bear witness to, and record the complex relationship

[28] Shireen Ahmed and Gurinder Chadha, "Special Episode: Gurinder Chadha Spills the Chai on 'Bend It Like Beckham'—The Film & The Musical," *Burn It All Down*, November 29, 2019, produced by Blue Wire Network, MP3 audio, 47:39, https://www.burnitalldownpod.com/episodes/special-episode-gurinder-chadha-spills-the-chai-on-bend-it-like-beckham-the-film-amp-the-musical.
[29] Sheila Scraton, Jayne Caudwell, and Samantha Holland, "'Bend It Like Patel': Centring 'Race', Ethnicity and Gender in Feminist Analysis of Women's Football in England," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 40, no. 1 (2005): 71–88.
[30] Jayne Caudwell, "Girlfight and Bend It Like Beckham: Screening Women, Sport, and Sexuality," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 13, no. 3 (2009): 255–71.
[31] Katharina Lindner, "'There Is a Reason Why Sporty Spice Is the Only One of Them without a Fella …': The 'lesbian Potential' of Bend It Like Beckham," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 9, no. 2 (2011): 210–11.

between Britain and its colonized peoples from the Indian subcontinent."[32] Chakraborty argues that Chadha "embraces the very strong sense that diaspora is a place of enablement, a place from where fields may be played, advantageously, subversively, playfully, and always dialogically, from different positions, and where productively multiple negotiations of existing social identities may be effected."[33] Like other filmmakers in the Indian diaspora who found success in mainstream Western cinema during in the early 21st century, Chadha playfully operates within "an oppositional framework relative to the hegemonic narrative" both within the white-settler multicultural nation and the putative country of origin, challenging the dark sides of the former and the hierarchical social structure of the latter, even as the mainstream appeal of the film eschews overt feminist or anti-racist radicalism.[34] As Daboo observes, the musical continues to play in this in-between space thanks in part to its Bhangra score. Created in the 1970s by second-generation Punjabi youth who drew from both the traditions of their homelands and African-Caribbean music to create a new form of expression, Bhangra suits *Bend It Like Beckham*'s multicultural fusion by living "in a third space as a transadaptation of a musical form, [embodying] both tradition and modernity in its performance, as well as a re-memory of the 'homeland' transformed through the musical filtering and culture of 'home.'"[35] In keeping with critiques of the film, Daboo further notes that sonically diverse score aids the various acts of "bending" within the story, "allowing for moments of subversion and intervention that never break the conventions and rules, but certainly challenge them."[36]

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[32] Mridula Nath Chakraborty "Crossing Race, Crossing Sex in Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002): Managing Anxiety in Multicultural Britain," in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, eds. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (New York: Routledge, 2011), 122-133.
[33] Chakraborty, 125.
[34] Chakraborty, 126.
[35] Daboo, 127.
[36] Daboo, 132.

While Chakraborty and Daboo point to the play between identities in Chadha's work, Sara Ahmed dismisses the notion that *Bend It Like Beckham* offers the viewer a genuine "culture clash." As she argues, the film "does not simply represent the two cultures as 'cultures' in quite the same way'"; rather, the "migrant culture appears as a culture, as something given or possessed, through being contrasted with the individualism of the West, where you are free to do and to be 'whoever' you want to be, understood as the freedom to be happy."[37] As Ahmed argues, the attainment of happiness that truly drives the film is wrapped up in "the promise of 'the one,'" seen in the shape of Joe, the ideal subject of the nation who not only allows Jess to share in the promise of nationhood through proximity to him and his whiteness but also enables her father to "let go of his injury about racism and to play cricket again," thus bringing him back into the national fold.[38] While Chakraborty sees the film and Chadha's oeuvre as playing in the spaces of diasporic belonging, Ahmed sees *Bend It Like Beckham* as only playing into the notion that the promise of multicultural Western citizenship is a promise of happiness that diasporic subjects must demonstrate their worthiness of.[39] Central to that demonstration is soccer, which acts as a vessel for Jess's personal advancement:

> Football signifies not only the national game but also the opportunity for new identifications, where you can embody hope for the nation by filling up an empty place alongside its national hero. By implication, the world of football promises freedom, allowing you not only to be happy but to become a happy object, by bringing happiness to others, who cheer as you score. The inclusion of Jess in the national game might be framed as Jess's fantasy, but it also functions as a national fantasy about football, as the 'playing field' which offers signs of diversity, where 'whoever' scores will be cheered.[40]

[37] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 134.
[38] Ahmed, 145.
[39] Ahmed, 133.
[40] Ahmed, 135.

What *Bend It Like Beckham* trades on, therefore, is not merely the notion that someone like Jess can achieve self-actualization through soccer, but that the sport itself has an innate capacity to catalyze that self-actualization based on its inherent qualities.

The fantasy that Ahmed identifies is difficult to sustain within the confines of the proscenium stage, where the unpredictability of ball movement, the functional differences between the pitch and the proscenium theatre, and the rigorous training required to embody the sport make representation on par with that of film, never mind the heavily mediatized elite sport itself, a significant technical challenge. As the disruption of the rule of three convention in the Toronto production's rendition of "First Touch" demonstrates, the suspension of disbelief in such an endeavor is fragile to the point of necessitating visible, even sheepish compromises. Giving in to that fragility reveals that the conditions in which Jess can become the "happy object" that Ahmed identifies require her to be exceptional. For Jess to succeed and for soccer to be portrayed as the liberatory arena it is purported to be, the actor's foibles must be excised, and the sport's shortcomings must be minimized; the camera makes that possible in a way the proscenium does not. In short, where *Bend It Like Beckham: The Musical* truly fails its forebear is by revealing how easily its fantasies of sporting transcendence can be undone.

The notion that sports are an inherently inclusive pathway to liberation, integration, and self-actualization is a fantasy. It is a fantasy because its presumptions can swiftly be expelled by pointing out how contingent its powers are, how quickly they can be utilized for purposes that are far from good, and how damaging it is when diversionary claims of upward mobility, security, equality, and intimacy are frayed by constant and fruitless use.[41] It is also a fantasy

[41] "Fraying" borrows from Lauren Berlant, whose work on "cruel optimism" informs part of the first chapter. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

because it nevertheless inspires so many to believe. In the case of *Bend It Like Beckham*, it has inspired players who were otherwise excluded from the Beautiful Game to forge entry on their own terms. While visiting the National Football Museum in England in August of 2022, I took in not only the special exhibit on the history of the women's game but an additional exhibit, prominently placed on the museum's first floor, on the contemporary state of the women's game at the grassroots level. The references to *Bend It Like Beckham*, a touchstone so deeply embedded in the cultural fabric over the past twenty years as to be mnemonic, were evidence of its impact. That it should have such an organic presence in a space actively drawing the women's game into the history of the national sport, at a time so perfectly attuned to the national team's success, is evidence of how much this story has become a part of the sport itself. As many commentators will attest, that story is shadowed by frustration about what still needs to be done, even a sense that very little has changed at all. Perhaps it is appropriate that the celebration coincided with an acclaimed remounting of *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads*, a play that, as critic Anya Ryan noted, "has, miserably, taken on an even more distressing relevance," especially as the country was, at the time, headed toward a World Cup amidst a resurgence of racist abuse toward players.[42] Twenty years on, soccer is as complex and contested as ever, even if fantastical notions of what it can "do" persist on the stage, the screen, and the pitch.

The past twenty years are significant for one final reason. Growing up in southern Africa, I was surrounded by schoolmates who were obsessed with soccer, yet I remained largely uninterested until the 2002 men's World Cup. Perhaps it was the USMNT's run to the quarterfinals or the sense that watching it along with my friends finally plugged me in to

[42] The production as originally staged in 2019 and remounted at the Minerva Theatre in Chichester. Anya Ryan, "Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads review—a burning portrait of racism in Britain," *The Guardian*, July 27, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/jul/28/sing-yer-heart-out-for-the-lads-review-minerva-theatre-chichester.

something vast; whatever the case, that tournament had me hooked. Later that year, I discovered that Zambia's local channel, ZNBC, carried European Champions League games. One night, under cover of a blanket, I watched Manchester United—Jess's favorite club, and mine—beat Greek club Olympiakos 4-0 at their home ground, Old Trafford. From that point on, I followed United from afar, caught up in the ebb and flow of their success, nurturing fantasies of appearing on their hallowed ground, playing until my legs were bloodied and caked with dirt every recess and after school. Over twenty years of fandom, I have seen United play in person only twice: once in Houston during a pre-season tour of the United States, and then again at Old Trafford in the summer of 2022. That trip to their home ground, known ever-so-poetically as "The Theatre of Dreams," was made possible in part by research funding for this dissertation. It is fitting that my first trip to The Theatre of Dreams came when it did because it made me recognize how much this project is an opportunity to reflect not only on how the game has changed over the past twenty years, but how my relationship with it has changed, too. Over time, I have become more critical, more wary of being sucked in, yet even still, I am subject to the giddy rush that takes over when my team is winning or when a player executes something that truly credits the sport as "The Beautiful Game." The game still moves me in mysterious ways, even to the point of making me aggressive and partisan in a manner I try not to be in my "real life."[43] This is why, for all the critical theory I apply here and all the structural harms that I identify, I leave space for the game's unique pleasures—not decontextualized from their circumstances, but still available to those who play it. Only then can I attempt to understand what makes a game like this so fantastically powerful.

[43] The game I attended at Old Trafford was against Liverpool, United's greatest rivals. United fans often chant "you Scouse bastards" at the visiting contingent; it's a reference to "Scousers," a nickname for residents of Liverpool. I found myself caught up in it, though why I cannot tell.

Joining the Match Already in Progress

"After *Bend It Like Beckham*" arrives at a significant point in the interdisciplinary study of theatre, performance, and sport. While sports-related writing has been a consistent presence in performance studies thanks to the efforts of founding figures such as Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, two recent anthologies curated by major stakeholders in this subfield demonstrate the degree to which its influence has grown. The first, Shannon L. Walsh's *Sporting Performances: Politics in Play*, is a comprehensive collection of works accounting for everything from the fraught dynamics of sport mega-events to significant developments in Black athlete activism. In addition to noting the commonalities between student-athletes and student-artists, subjects we touch on in our work together with the American Society for Theatre Research,[44] Walsh's introduction notes how athletes from marginalized backgrounds who rise to prominence in "rags-to-riches" stories can serve "as role models of difference in a celebrity culture awash in white privilege," a system that disproportionately (and counterproductively) doles out the labor of training and games onto people who are still disenfranchised.[45] This draws attention to the disconnect between narratives that celebrate individual triumphs over social barriers through sport and power structures that maintain such barriers through the inequitable distribution of resources. In keeping with attention to privilege, Walsh's prior work draws from performance studies to illustrate how physical cultural regimes were deployed to "protect" the White race during the Progressive Era, often by using surrogation to appropriate the work of manual laborers and "perform those actions as effortless, therefore natural, aspects of an ideal white upper-class physical fitness practice, thus continually staging the actions of people

[44] Walsh generously allowed me to spearhead a working group on performance and physical culture based on her two prior installments. We co-convened the group at the 2022 gathering in New Orleans.
[45] Shannon L. Walsh, *Sporting Performances: Politics in Play* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 6.

depicted as part of an evolutionary past."[46] In her archival and curatorial work, Walsh demonstrates the degree to which reading sport and physical culture through performance productively emphasizes the role sports play in the construction and presentation of self, especially when deployed in conjunction with the levers of power.

The second significant anthology is Eero Laine and Broderick Chow's *Sports Plays*, a collection of critiques on dramatizations of sport. Whereas much of the scholarship in our field treats sport *as* performance, the works in Laine and Chow's anthology largely focus on plays that transfer sport to the stage. Working from Nicholas Ridout's observations on embarrassment, Laine and Chow offer that the potential ineffectuality of dramatizing sport onstage "might be said to obstruct the smooth functioning of the circuits of representation through which we view athletic bodies, drawing our attention to those other key contexts overdetermining the moment of representation such as race, gender, and class."[47] Leticia Ridley, writing in one of the volume's standout entries, further notes that the "framing of sport within the context of the theatre interrogates the often-presumed apolitical nature of sports by emphasizing how the convention and codes of sport (which are theatrical) are deeply embedded with ideology."[48] Building from these assertions and Walsh's observations of the competing powers in sport and physical culture, I offer my critique of *Bend It Like Beckham: The Musical* as evidence that such obstructions can be interrogated with an eye to the historical paradox of sport: it's capacity to simultaneously liberate and oppress in concert with the expansion and contestation of power.[49] The estrangement

[46] Shannon L. Walsh, *Eugenics and Physical Culture Performance in the Progressive Era : Watch Whiteness Workout* (Cham, Switzerland : Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 7.
[47] Laine and Chow, 6.
[48] Leticia Ridley, "'Surviving Against the Sharp White [Tennis] Background': Black Women's Presence and Absence in Terrence McNally's *Deuce* and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*," in *Sports Plays*, eds. Eero Laine and Broderick Chow (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022): 17-31.
[49] Peter Alegi and Brenda Elsey, "Editors' Introduction: Historicizing the Politics and Pleasure of Sport," *Radical History Review* 125 (2016): 3.

that Laine and Chow describe is useful for this project in that it not only allows us to expand the critical examination of sports narratives by considering sports plays but also utilize the similarities and differences between theatre and sport to challenge the mystification of sports performance.

While these recent anthologies are significant, the subject of *how* to read sport through theatre and performance extends much further back. I use "estrangement" not only to build on Laine and Chow's description of sports plays but also to echo the distancing effects pursued by Bertolt Brecht, who aimed to generate opportunities for critical engagement by "making strange" that which is familiar. Brecht's efforts to disrupt the representational model of bourgeois theatre by drawing attention to its illusory quality fits nicely into the tradition of counter-reification, which seeks to dismantle the "naturalized" mode of production under capitalism. Ironically, incorporating theatre into the counter-reification of sport twists Brecht's own observations on the distinctions between sport and theatre. In "Emphasis on Sport," Brecht praised sporting audiences as the "fairest and shrewdest" in the world partly because, unlike the theatre of interwar Germany, sports events consistently delivered "highly trained persons developing their peculiar powers in the way most suited to them, with the greatest sense of responsibility yet in such a way as to make one feel like they are doing it primarily for their own fun."[50] Brecht frequently returned to the lack of artifice in sport and its apparent clarity of performance, often with reference to how theatrical *mise-en-scene* could borrow similar techniques to create a relaxed but critical "smoker's theatre" similar to what he perceived among boxing spectators.[51]

[50] Bertolt Brecht, "Emphasis on Sport," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 6-8.
[51] See John Willett's note on "Emphasis on Sport" for comment on the smoker's theatre, 8. See also references to how Epic Theatre's use of titles could foster a theatre "full of experts," as apparently found in sport, in "The Literarization of the Theatre," 43-7; and notes on adopting the exposed lighting instruments used for boxing matches, in "Short Description of a New Technique in Acting," 136-147.

Brecht's comparative impetus grew out of his dissatisfaction with the theatre of his day but it also bespeaks certain assumptions that can be productively troubled today. As Meg Mumford notes, Brecht's interest in the critical distance is driven in part by "a macho assertion of masterful wit" that he expressed in himself through his "tough-boy posturing, complete with Caesar haircut, leather jacket and phallic cigar"; the boxer, meanwhile, was a potent symbol of the primitive heroic warrior fighting to reassert himself amid the erosion of rural life, the nature of mass living, and increased mechanization.[52] Even accounting for his primary interest in contemporaneous German theatre and the masculinist undertones Mumford identifies, Brecht's observations elide the complexities of sporting labor, which has, over the course of the century, became evermore exploitative in conjunction with the global expansion of elite sporting capital. Perhaps tipping his compulsion to contrast the arenas of sport and theatre into an embrace of "making sport strange" will generate the fair and shrewd critique he so desired.

Though working from a different vantage point, Robert Rinehart also proposes a reading of sport that disrupts both its place within modes of capitalist production and its tendency to be uncritically dramatized. "Sports contests are not inherently dramaturgical," he argues in *Players All: Performances in Contemporary Sport*, but "Sport discourse—the discourse of narrativity—has, in this televisually literate society, become naturalized."[53] The mediatized narrativity of sport and the "reliance upon the sport-as-drama metaphor" not only limits the research on sport but "(re)creates unexamined assumptions of linearity and causality in sport, and perpetuates hierarchy, canonization, and privileging of scholarly over popular texts."[54] Rinehart offers rhetorics of avant-garde as a more appropriate heuristic, noting that while they are inclusive of

[52] Meg Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht* (London: Routledge, 2009), 16-18.
[53] Robert E. Rinehart, *Players All : Performances in Contemporary Sport* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1998), 23.
[54] Rinehart, 25.

"traditional" dramaturgy, their non-linearity makes them "multidimensional and multifaceted, much like contemporary sport."[55] In drawing from avant-garde performance to disentangle sport from linear narrativity, Rinehart anticipates Jan-Thies Lehmann's work on the "postdramatic theatre" with its de-privileging of the text and points to ways of understanding the cultural significance of sport in a manner other than conventional narrative. Grant Farred, who writes prolifically on sport and philosophy, calls to mind both Rinehart and Brecht when opining that

> The lure/allure of sport is that it grounds our love for football or baseball precisely in how "strange" . . . it can be, how through it the miraculous unfolds before our very eyes, how poetic beauty manifests itself in the "strangest," least-expected moments or encounters . . . how it can situate us as fans at once in an intense proximity to the event and yet leave us inexplicably removed.[56]

Farred finds that the "strangeness" of sport makes legible the "burden of over-representation," which "renders the political 'visible' and thinkable," locating "the exceptional individual disjunctively within his (or her) community but also . . . dis-locates him (or her) from that community."[57] By examining key moments when racialized athletes undertook this burden, Farred shows that sport is a field in which to observe potent events that encapsulate the limitations of both representation and of a coherent, singular self that such linear representations would necessitate.

These texts indicate not only the variety of frameworks operating at the intersections of theatre, performance, and sport but also the capacity such inquiries have to disrupt assumptions surrounding sport's performativity. This extends to spectators, who are themselves conceptualized with varying degrees of agency. For example, former President Donald Trump's appearances in professional wrestling prior to his ascension to the White House have summoned

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[55] Rinehart, 34.
[56] Grant Farred, *The Burden of Over-Representation: Race, Sport, and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018), 10.
[57] Farred, 3.

conflicting readings. Sharon Mazer argued that Trump's forays proved his ability to leverage powerful affects while calling attention to the "rigged" game of politics, thus connecting with a fan base that overlapped significantly with his voter base—people who, as Mazer described, go to the arena "to feel the heat that comes from feeling one with the crowd, not necessarily to be winners themselves, but in cheering the winner and jeering the loser, to be on the side of righteousness."[58] In a critical response, Eero Laine, Broderick Chow, and Claire Warden question Mazer's assumptions about wrestling fandom, arguing not only that her reading is "antitheatrical" and "antifan," but offering

> (a) that if we watched politics more like wrestling fans then we wouldn't have a Trump presidency; (b) if we approached work as wrestlers do (as collaborators rather than as antagonists) then we would have a stronger opposition in a political sense; and (c) if we celebrated the rise of women's wrestling (and, to an extent, the broader diversification of professional wrestling) we could challenge the misogyny and bigotry that are all too prevalent in political discourse and everyday life.[59]

The contrary readings offered by Mazer and her respondents, which include a counterpunch from the former in the pages of *TDR*,[60] illustrate the degree to which discourses around sport's cultural power has as much to do with articulating the ways larger forces make subjects of athletes and the diverse ways stakeholders such as fans can forge their own meanings. This can be seen in soccer-focused work such as Natalie Alvarez's article on the cultural politics of diving, the much-maligned practice of pretending to suffer a foul in order to fool the referee and gain advantage,[61] and in Philippa Wehle's investigation of a documentary theatre piece created with fans of French club Lens.[62] As in the diverse responses to *Bend It Like Beckham*, the question of

[58] Sharon Mazer, "Donald Trump Shoots the Match," *TDR/The Drama Review* 62, no. 2 (2018): 186.
[59] Claire Warden, Broderick Chow, and Eero Laine, "Working Loose: A Response to 'Donald Trump Shoots the Match' by Sharon Mazer," *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 2 (2018): 202.
[60] "Sharon Mazer Responds to Warden, Chow, and Laine," *TDR/The Drama Review* 62, no. 2 (2018): 216–19.
[61] Natalie Alvarez, "Foul Play: Soccer's 'Infamous Thespians' and the Cultural Politics of Diving," in *TDR/The Drama Review* 60, no. 1 (2016): 10-24.
[62] Philippa Wehle, "Soccer Fans on Stage," in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 41, no. 2 (2019): 93-100.

what sports can do for participants is subject both to the reification of power relations and identify factors and to the agency of participants. The literature on sports performance within the field, coupled by the vast corpus of physical cultural studies, is proof of that.

Outlining the Field: Performance, Physical Culture, Dramaturgy

Apart from tapping into veins of sports writing in theatre and performance, this dissertation draws from the literatures of performance and physical culture and on the flexible methodology of dramaturgy. While many of my case studies lean toward the theatrical—pre-arranged events that are evidently staged, whether in a theatre or on the pitch, with a delimited purpose or narrative—my work is dependent on understanding sport and theatre as part of the larger continuum of performance; indeed, I find value in embracing the Anglo-American thrust of blurring the distinctions between theatre and other cultural performances, not to deny the utility of clear conceptual coordinates but to identify what elements and factors are salient across different events.[63] The discourses of performance are furthermore integral to this project for how they have deployed and contested the myriad dispositions of play and the diverse orientations of performativity.

At some level, all acts of play are constituted by familiar components put into "unreal" conditions. As Schechner writes, play "borrows" behaviors from their original contexts and then "redeploys them, makes a show of them, and uses them for no apparent purpose."[64] A playful punch, for example, is not an invitation to a real fight but instead to *simulated* combat. For

[63] See Janelle Reinelt's account of the distinctions and overlaps in theatricality and performativity, charted mostly across Anglo-American and Continental European traditions. Janelle Reinelt, "The Politics of Discourse: Performativity Meets Theatricality," *SubStance* 31, no. 2–3 (2002): 201–15.
[64] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 102.

Gregory Bateson, play demands a degree of metacommunication, a paradoxical "this is play" statement implying that an action is not what it typically denotes.[65] While acknowledging, as Schechner does, that play can extend to "deep" and "dark" levels wherein the metacommunicative lines are deliberately sabotaged, the tension in Bateson's paradox remains acute. Oftentimes play gains in pleasure and potency by immersing players in what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow," a state in which there is a merging of action and awareness such that a person has no dualistic perspective.[66] This sense of playing to the point of becoming extends beyond games and into everyday life. In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith identifies seven rhetorics of play, among which are play as progress, pointing to the way children develop; play as power, applied to the use of games as representations of conflict and a means of fortifying status; and play as identity, which maintains the character of a particular community.[67] Sutton-Smith notes that "play and games are played partly for their own sake and partly for the value attributed to them within the ideologies that are their context."[68] In this way, play is not just a separate realm pressing against the everyday, but a way to move through and remake the everyday. While the capacity for play to be truly formative and consequential is significant, I reiterate Sutton-Smith's use of "rhetoric" to highlight the importance of *assumptions* about play. At issue in my case studies is not just what playing soccer can do for participants but the ways in which playing it evokes values that extend beyond the pitch, appearing to "make real" what is otherwise abstract.

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[65] Gregory Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," in *The Game Designer Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, eds. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, 314-328 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 68-69.
[66] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "A Theoretical Model for Enjoyment," in *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts*, edited by Rebecca Caines (London: Routledge, 2015), 152.
[67] Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 9–11.
[68] Sutton-Smith, 78.

When seeking a foundation in performance, I gravitate to Schechner's three capsule definitions: "twice-behaved behavior," "restored behavior," and "showing-doing." These definitions constitute an understanding of performance as a recombination of behaviors that accrues meaning based on precedent and framing.[69] This makes performance akin to play in that it often recontextualizes otherwise recognizable actions. The two can even be understood as intertwined, in that playing often incorporates the performing of roles according to pre-existing behaviors and scripts, while performance can occupy a similarly liminal space between the real and the pretend. What distinguishes many performances from play is that they exist for presumably "serious" purposes, particularly in ritual and ceremonial situations, and often in the various performances that constitute everyday life. Despite such serious purposes, performances are never fixed. As Schechner writes, "[performances] exist only as actions, interactions, and relations."[70] In other words, performances are done and redone, their meaning contingent upon a variety of fluid factors, some of which, like the identities of the performer and the object being performed, are held together simultaneously through the enactment itself.[71]

Performance's interactivity can be conceptualized in several ways, including as a form of knowledge production. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor argues that despite their ephemerality, performances "replicate themselves through their own structures and codes," always mediated by the processes "of selection, memorization or internalization, and transmission [that take] place within (and in turn helps constitute) specific systems of re-presentation."[72] Performance validates the body's ability to "know" in a way that documents cannot, leading some to call it an archive of its own, "a repository imbued with polysemiotic

[69] Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 35.
[70] Schechner, *Performance Studies,* 30.
[71] Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 6.
[72] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 20-21

possibilities."[73] This is not to say that the repertoire generates exact copies. As Joseph Roach notes, "the paradox of the restoration of behavior resides in the phenomenon of repetition itself: no action or sequence of actions may be performed exactly the same way twice; they must be reinvented or recreated at each appearance."[74] Schechner describes each theatre, sport, or ritual "show" as "a palimpsest collecting, or stacking, and displaying whatever is, as Brecht says, 'the least rejected of all things tried.'"[75] Schechner's invocation of the performance as palimpsest is useful here in that both sport and theatre arrive in their contemporary states through iterative processes that exchange components based on historical factors. In European soccer, class and economics have had a significant influence on the evolution of the game, beginning with late-19th century disputes between gentlemen amateurs and working-class professionals and continuing well into the advent of "post-fandom," where even the historically proletariat and communal fanbase of major clubs have shifted into dispersed, heavily mediated spaces.[76] Throughout this evolution, the shape of stadiums, quality of materials, levels of fitness, and even tactical approaches to the game have shifted to accommodate the spectacularization of sporting events, even if the basic components of the game have remained largely the same. Understanding this process as driven in part by the interplay of bodies and recontextualizing of codes helps illuminate why the game has a potent historical heft as well as a capacity to accommodate vast social and cultural change.

For Taylor, the interactivity that drives performance often unfolds most potently through scenarios, which have the capacity to "reactivate the past, rehearse the future, and produce a new

[73] Awam Amkpa, "A State of Perpetual Becoming: African Bodies as Texts, Methods, and Archives," in *Dance Research Journal* 42, no.1 (2010): 83-88.
[74] Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 29.
[75] Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 120.
[76] Mark Turner, "Football Fandom in Late Modernity: Alternative Spaces and Places of Consumption," 43-44

'real.'"[77] Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu, Taylor defines a scenario as "a paradigmatic setup that relies on supposedly live participants, structured around a schematic plot, with an intended (though adaptable) end," which exists as a "culturally specific imaginary," a set of "possibilities, ways of conceiving conflict, crisis, or resolution—activated with more or less theatricality."[78] In this sense, scenarios are akin to open-ended "scripts" in that they seem to provide a loose narrative outline, yet it is important to point out that they are not just passed down orally or in text, but are meant to be actively embodied through simulation, generating a "once-againness" rather than a duplication.[79] A scenario must be understood not simply as an isolated phenomenon but as that which emerges out of a society in order to understand itself. As Taylor asserts,

> Because scenarios say more about the 'us' envisioning them than about the 'other' they try to model, they are fundamental to the ways societies understand themselves . . . And because scenarios are about 'us,' we need to factor ourselves in the picture—as participants, spectators, or witnesses we need to 'be there,' part of the act of transfer. Thus the scenario precludes a certain kind of distancing, and places spectators within its frame, implicating "us" in its ethics and politics.[80]

Following Taylor, I understand participation in a scenario, or any performance that appears to affirm those who invest in it, as extending beyond just the "players." To be involved in a scenario is also to validate it as a witness, to share in its reactivation and its circulation as a kind of framework that "explains us to ourselves." Soccer matches, particularly at the international level, can be understood as scenarios in that they can seem to reactivate historical and nationalistic contents, offering stakeholders an opportunity to re-present themselves in a more flattering light on one of the most consequential stages in the world.[81]

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[77] Taylor, *Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 134
[78] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 13
[79] Taylor, *Performance*, 139-140.
[80] Taylor, *Performance*, 141
[81] I developed this notion of an international match as a scenario in a prior publication: Jared Strange, "The World Cup's Double-Headed Eagle: Gestures and Scenarios in the Football Arena," *Theatre Research International* 45, no. 1 (2020): 55–71.

In positioning my work in the field of performance, I bear in mind the rich, complex powers of performativity, which I understand as retaining transformative potential. Apart from the emphasis on framing identified by Taylor, itself built on the notion of the "performative utterance" offered by J.L. Austin,[82] I follow Judith Butler in acknowledging performativity as a durational process of iteration and reiteration, "repetition and ritual," wherein an identity becomes naturalized through performance.[83] Like Schechner's notion of make-*belief*, performativity can be understood as actualizing a social role or identity, not only in the realm of gender, as Butler famously writes, but also in race, religious practice, and activism. What "counts" as performative is fluid and highly contentious; as Laurie Frederik observes, especially provocative and self-reflexive performances that "show off" or "show up" may not be performative in the "status-transforming sense," but they can gain in transformative potential through the interplay between performer and audience.[84] Reference to status checks Victor Turner, whose anthropological work identified the performative powers of rituals to catalyze a change in one's social character, particularly in agrarian societies. Significantly, Turner identified a difference between *liminal* and *liminoid* events: the former produces a consequential transformation in status; the latter are examples of the "leisure genres," "symbolic forms and actions in complex, industrial societies" that offer only temporary release from typical social relations.[85] As I will indicate in Chapter 3, Turner's distinction between liminal and liminoid can

[82] The genesis of this line of performativity is typically identified as Austin's 1955 lecture series *How to Do Things with Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).
[83] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999): xv.
[84] Laurie A. Frederik, Introduction to *Showing off, Showing up: Studies of Hype, Heightened Performance, and Cultural Power*, eds. Laurie A Frederik, Kim Marra, and Catherin Schuler (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 11–12.
[85] Victor W. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 41.

be useful, though it is worth reiterating that what constitutes "true" performativity is heavily dependent on the social expectations regarding what that performance is expected to accomplish.

Retaining transformative power in performativity is not an effort to solve the semantic debates around the term itself, which has come to mean "of or pertaining to performance" or even, in popular parlance, "disingenuous," e.g., in "performative activism." Indeed, it is the slippages in the term and the tendency to associate performativity with results (or lack thereof) that is central to my inquiry. In that vein, the second major notion to which I subscribe is that performativity's entanglement with transformative efficacy can illuminate the way performance operates as an index of achievement, justified or otherwise. In Jon McKenzie's conception, "performativity is the postmodern condition: it demands that all knowledge be evaluated in terms of operational efficiency" in realms such as performance management, performance studies, and techno-performance, and even extends across "the entire realm of social bonds."[86] In this sense, performativity has a compulsory tenor, hence the title of McKenzie's book: *Perform or Else*. Interestingly, the "postmodern condition" has often been associated with a certain playfulness in culture, accounting for the recombinations and inversions of irony and pastiche, not to mention the constant "play" in semiotics identified by deconstructionism. I would offer that both can be seen operating at the heart of cultural production encapsulated in neoliberalism in that a sense of playfulness is manifested throughout yet conditioned by the imperative to play *well*. While I share Dorrine Kondo's suspicion of a totally reified and inescapable conception of neoliberalism, as well as the conviction that performance "can constitute an imaginative, unpredictable excess that cannot be fully contained" by neoliberal forces,[87] I am mindful of how the economics of

[86] Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London: Routledge, 2001), 14.
[87] Dorinne K. Kondo, *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 90.

cultural production compel even pleasurable pursuits to be assessed on their capacity to generate economic, social, and cultural capital.[88] As critic and soccer romanticist Eduardo Galeano lamented at the turn of the millennium, "The history of soccer is a sad voyage from beauty to duty . . . professional soccer condemns all that is useless, and useless means not profitable."[89] Thinking through neoliberalism's structuring of culture requires not only a reckoning with the fusion of public services to private interests and erosion of social safety nets but also the way art, sport, and even fun are judged by their utility, forcing cultural and scholarly workers to conceptualize their work in service of the "creative economy" and the accrual of data.[90] To understand performativity, then, is not just to leave room for the transformational effects of a given performance or act of play, but to understand that even play can be compelled to operate at a level of economic achievement over and above whatever social benefits it may offer.

Like performance studies, physical cultural studies (PCS) cultivates a broad range of interests while resisting disciplinary boundaries. According to Michael Silk, David Andrews, and Holly Thorpe, PCS is best understood as "an intellectual assemblage perpetually in a state of becoming" and "a dialogic learning community."[91] Its emergence in the latter decades of the 20th century was in part the result of a growing scientization in kinesiology and sports studies, a development that often reduced the regard for humanistic inquiry and dovetails with the same forces that compel the marketization of the arts and culture industries. One of my chief

[88] The notion of the symbolic power and cache available to actors who evince aptitude for cultural codes is drawn from Bourdieu, who identifies how various modes of seemingly non-economic capital can be accumulated (though often for the purposes of economic gain). *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, trans. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
[89] Eduardo Galeano, *Soccer in Sun and Shadow* (London: Verso, 1999), 2.
[90] For more on how neoliberalism's macro characteristics affect cultural production, consult Lara D. Nielsen, Introduction to *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres: Performance: Performance Permutations*, eds. Lara D. Nielsen and Patricia Ybarra (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1-21.
[91] Michael L. Silk, David L. Andrews, and Holly Thorpe, Introduction to *Routledge Handbook of Physical Cultural Studies*, eds. Michael L. Silk, David L. Andrews, and Holly Thorpe (New York: Routledge, 2017), 2.

attractions to PCS is the way it complicates this process of hyper-rationalization, itself motivated by a neoliberal impetus for higher performance at all costs. PCS has countered that development by critically engaging the social divisions and hierarchies that are enacted, experienced, and contested in physical activities. Partially in response to the rigidity of the sociology of sport, which has sought to gain currency within mainstream sociology,[92] PCS undertakes that project on a broad scale, including everything from sport, exercise, and fitness, to dance, health, and leisure. One of the core tenants of PCS is that none of the activities within or beyond the categories listed above are isolated phenomena but instead reside within the interrelationships of body, power, and culture.[93] Susan Brownell articulates it nicely when describing her ethnographic work in Chinese physical culture programs as not about "the small world of the athlete's body" but rather the "the place of the small world of the Chinese athlete's body within the larger universe of ideas."[94]

The uniquely potent sociopolitical position occupied by sport has been articulated in numerous ways. Varda Burstyn, writing primarily about sport's masculinist tendencies, defined the "sports nexus" as "an entity consisting of sport in its associations with the mass media, corporate sponsors, governments, medicine, and biotechnology."[95] Joseph Maguire offers the "sports-industrial complex," which contains structural, institutional, ideological, and cultural dimensions. For Maguire, the sports-industrial complex's "mechanism of production, experience, and consumption [involves] several elements: the identification and development of talent; its

[92] Dominic Malcolm, "The Social Construction of the Sociology of Sport," in *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 49, no. 1 (2012): 3-21.
[93] Silk et al., 4.
[94] Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 7.
[95] Varda Burstyn, *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 17.

production on a global stage, in a single or multi-sport event; and its consumption by direct spectators or, through the media complex, by a global mass audience."[96] Finally, David Andrews articulates "*uber-sport*," which "[both] materially and expressively . . . advances, and simultaneously normalizes, the capitalist-neoliberal-nationalist institutions, interests, and ideologies governing all facets of contemporary life."[97] For Andrews, *uber-sport* is supported by the late-capitalist forces of replicative corporatization, expansive commercialization, creative spectacularization, and intensive celebritization, which, taken together, "[describe] a highly rationalized, diversified, yet integrated popular sport phenomenon designed to generate mass audiences/markets, and thereby popularity/profits, across an array of culturally and economically multiplying streams."[98] As Andrews argues, sport in these terms is not political per se, though *uber-sport* can have a political purpose in that it can act as a "surreptitious proxy, unobtrusively articulating the ideological and affective orientations bolstering" a political agenda,[99] such as that of former President Donald Trump. For my part, I lean on my prior usages of the sports-industrial complex—partly for the recognizability of the "X-industrial-complex" formulation, I admit—but bear in mind Andrews' point on the diversification of sport's cultural sway, which will be evident in the case studies under consideration here.

Whatever the nomenclature, I understand sport as enjoying a privileged position within neoliberal culture and society, partly by dint of the enormous state monies which fund, among other things, the construction of elite stadiums and sporting mega-events such as the World Cup

[96] Joseph Maguire, "The Sports-Industrial Complex: Sports Sciences, Social Developments, and Images of Humankind," in *Power and Global Sport: Zones of Prestige, Emulation, and Resistance*, ed. Joseph Maguire (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 159-176.
[97] David L. Andrews, *Making Sport Great Again: The Uber-Sport Assemblage, Neoliberalism, and the Trump Conjuncture* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 4
[98] Andrews, *Making Sport Great Again*, 8-9
[99] Andrews, *Making Sport Great Again*, 12

and the Olympics. This shapes sport at levels far beyond the elite; indeed, some of the most compelling research on sport's enormous power has been conducted at the local, collegiate, and even youth level. For example, university programs vastly overshadow many of their academic counterparts in terms of funding and exposure, yet often underdeliver on promises to generate capital for the institution as a whole.[100] Nevertheless, the re-production of these structures and the events they generate is effectively taken for granted, particularly in sports management programs, where students are often encouraged to endure exploitative labor conditions in order to secure even a marginal chance of participating in elite sports organizations.[101] Compelling research further demonstrates how the sports-industrial complex is supported in part by exploited labor on the field or court, including the "mining" of Black youth talent, which is funneled into training programs with high degrees of commitment and low returns on success or career preparation outside the program.[102] Stadiums and training facilities, meanwhile, are notorious for displacing populations and depending on "disposable workforces," particularly when it comes to massive events such as the Olympics and the World Cup.[103] In keeping with PCS's political and dialogic impetuses, I understand my responsibility to interrogate sports organizations and stakeholders with an eye to how they participate in these extractive conditions.

Like performance studies, PCS also draws our attention to the body. I take a cue from both when it comes to understanding the body as ontologically distinct and yet simultaneously marked by socialization. One of the ways in which the traditions intersect is in the realm of

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[100] King-White, "Sport in the Aspirational Corporate University: A Genealogy of Athletic Programming Development at Towson University," in *Sociology of Sport Journal* 35, no. 4 (2018): 334-346.
[101] Matthew G. Hawzen, Christopher M. McLeod, John T. Holden, and Joshua I. Newman, "Cruel Optimism in Sport Management: Fans, Affective Labor, and the Political Economy of Internship in the Sport Industry," in *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 42, no. 3 (2018): 184-204.
[102] Theresa Runstedtler, "More Than Just Play: Unmasking Black Child Labor in the Athletic Industrial Complex," in *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 42, no. 3 (2018): 152-169.
[103] Dave Zirin and Jules Boykoff, "The 'Disposable Populations' of Sports," *The Nation* Online, *The Nation*, September 11, 2020, https://www.thenation.com/article/world/qatar-labor-world-cup/

celebrity. Sports celebrities are especially prominent figures who, in the words of P. David Marshall, can be "distilled" into cultural or political representatives in service of representational media regimes that are upheld by film, television, radio, the internet, and other forms.[104] As demonstrated by Andrews et al., notable athletes such as Neymar can thus be cultivated, through advertising and promotional programs as well as press coverage, as metonyms for their nation, even to the point of replacing the national team, which typically fulfills that role.[105] The processes by which these figures become representatives is conditioned by various identity factors, including race. Take, for instance, American football quarterbacks Colin Kaepernick and Tom Brady, who have taken on divergent representative roles in the discourses on patriotism: Kaepernick for taking a knee in order to draw attention to anti-Black police violence,[106] and Brady for evincing the ideal of a resurgent white supremacist movement enabled by the rise of Donald Trump.[107] In each of these cases—Neymar, Kaepernick, and Brady—physical skill is an essential quality that contributes to or complicates their celebrity, whether it be Neymar recalling the celebrated *futebol-arte* style of Brazil, Kaepernick being derided for his apparent failures to break into a team, or Brady's legendary status. Nevertheless, by accounting for how race, nationality, masculinity, and commerce condition the celebritization of each of these men, PCS can draw attention to what an athlete's status means beyond simply what skills they possess.

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[104] P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xxxii.
[105] David L. Andrews, Victor B. Lopes, and Steven J. Jackson, "Neymar: Sport Celebrity and Performative Cultural Politics," in *A Companion to Celebrity*, eds. P. David Marshall and Sean Redmond (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016)
[106] Jules Boykoff and Ben Carrington, "Sporting Dissent: Colin Kaepernick, NFL Activism, and Media Framing Contests," in *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 55, no. 7 (2020): 829-849.
[107] Kyle W. Kusz, "Making American White Men Great Again: Tom Brady, Donald Trump, and the Allure of White Male Omnipotence in Post-Obama America," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Masculinity and Sport*, eds. Rory Magrath, Jamie Cleland, and Eric Anderson (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 283-304.

While the rarefied level of elite sport is a fruitful site of inquiry, PCS's emphasis on qualitative research also illuminates how individual bodies can be the sites of ideological contest. For example, with the advent of wearable technology and sophisticated tracking applications, everyday people can gather data to "optimize" their own performance in a manner consistent with elite athletes. While this allows people to operate as "prosumers" (consumers who also produce their own material based on their participation), it also loops them into a socialized form of datafication.[108] Rather than being induced to elevate their physical performance by advertising and top-down social pressures, prosumers work laterally by sharing and comparing their data among friends. Of course, the social bonds generated in sport can themselves be sites for progressive change, albeit with the caveat that intercultural negotiation may be required. Thorpe's work alongside Julie Brice and Anna Rolleston, for example, demonstrates that dialogue in a New Zealand women's rugby team can further a decolonial project aimed at making space for Māori bodily knowledge in conjunction with the rationalized medicine of settler colonialism.[109] By understanding how bodies are conceptualized, whether in the reproduction of neoliberal power or the de/post-colonial negotiation between differing (but not mutually exclusive) epistemologies, PCS demonstrates not only how bodies can be subject to power on the massive scale, but how they can be shaped at the micro-level.

While the conceptual categories of performance studies and the political frameworks of physical cultural studies illustrate the import of this dissertation, it is dramaturgy that holds together my analysis of each case study. Dramaturgy thrives in ambivalence, to the point that defining it is part time-honored tradition, part long-running joke. Jonathan Marks, my professor

[108] Brad Millington, "Fit for Prosumption: Interactivity and the Second Fitness Boom," in *Media, Culture & Society* 38, no. 8 (2016): 1184-1200.
[109] Holly Thorpe, Julie Brice, and Anna Rolleston, "Decolonizing Sport Science: High Performance Sport, Indigenous Cultures, and Women's Rugby," in *Sociology of Sport Journal* 37, no. 2 (2020): 73-84.

at Texas Tech, used to quip that a dramaturg is someone who goes to a conference with other dramaturgs every year and asks the question "what is a dramaturg?" In a more serious tenor, Marks offers a foundational definition of a dramaturg's function:

> [A dramaturg is] a person who mediates between the intellectual, literary, and aesthetic aspects of the theater, on the one hand, and its practice on the other; a person who sits, however uncomfortably, on the nonexistent stool between the professional and the professorial, attempting to speak the languages of thought and action simultaneously, to translate from drama to theater and back again.[110]

To mediate in this way is to be constantly aware of the various levels of play layered into theatrical practice: the text itself and the many acts of linguistic play it may entail; the interpretive interplay between the living performance and the text, which may itself be in discourse with layers of historical interpretation; and the many ways a production plays *into*, plays *to*, or plays *with* an audience, bearing in mind all its contextual elements.

One of the reasons dramaturgy remains nebulous even to this who practice it is that the term has multiple meanings. As Michael Chemers outlines, dramaturgy, in its most traditional sense, refers to "both the *aesthetic architecture* of a piece of dramatic literature . . . and the *practical philosophy* of theater practice employed to create a full performance."[111] Thus, a play or theatrical event *has* a dramaturgy in that it has a structure or set of organizing principles, and a dramaturg *practices* dramaturgy by serving the mediating role described by Marks. In order to successfully mediate these elements, the dramaturg must cultivate three areas of expertise: the analytical skills necessary to determine a play's aesthetic architecture, the research skills necessary to discover all the pertinent knowledge about the script in order to transform it into a piece of living theatre, and the practical nous required to help the whole make sense to a

[110] Jonathan Marks, "On Robert Brustein and Dramaturgy," in *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book*, eds. Susan Jonas, Geoff Proehl, and Micahel Lupu (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 1997): 31-32.
[111] Michael Chemers, *Ghost Light* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010): 3.

particular audience in a particular place.[112] Working from this list, I identify the interplay between text, performance, and context as the primary site of inquiry for the dramaturg. While each dramaturg might focus on certain components, the assumption that all three will intersect in an event rich with distinct meaning anchors my understanding of the role.

For my purposes, "text" can be easily substituted out for "narrative" or "scenario" to indicate a sequence of events given meaning through intention, context, or reiteration. As mentioned, the dramaturg's role is typically tied to an event's structure, which has historically been rooted in text. This derives in part from Aristotle, sometimes called "the first dramaturg," whose *Poetics* outlined the salient features of tragedy, with plot upheld as "the basic principle, the heart and soul," of drama.[113] Aristotle's precepts were celebrated by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, often called the modern "father of dramaturgy" thanks to his 18th century treatise *Hamburg Dramaturgy*,[114] and have been codified in numerous play analysis textbooks. Nevertheless, the Western dramaturg has demonstrated a capacity to embrace alternative positions that are attendant to structure but not beholden to a literal text. Hans-Thies Lehmann, writing in *Postdramatic Theatre*, has documented such developments that see text situated *among* the scenic materials of a theatrical event, rather than as the master.[115] For Lehmann, the role of the dramaturg is fluid, its purpose to help find "a dynamic balance to be obtained anew in each performance," often with attention to the theatrical situation as a whole and the ever-

[112] Chemers, 3.
[113] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Gerald F. Else (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967): 28.
[114] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, trans. Victor Lange (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), 257-265.
[115] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jurs-Munby (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 17. It is worth noting here that theatre without ultimate fealty to text and aesthetic subservience to action is not new to global history: case in point, the sensual aesthetics of Sanskrit drama outlined in the *Natyasastra* or the movement vocabulary of Japanese *noh*.

growing presence of new media technologies.[116] Indeed, the rise of dance dramaturgy, stimulated by postdramatic theatre, has helped expand the notion of what a theatrical piece's structure may be. Dance dramaturg Katherine Profeta prefers the metaphor of a "skeleton," which asserts the primacy of the body in making meaning by its presence, rather than serving as the vessel for a textual outline.[117] To understand the structure of a piece, therefore, requires understanding how its various components work together to form a distinct whole.

In conducting research, the dramaturg can succumb to the notion that they are expected to have all the answers. Rather than assuming ownership or responsibility for knowledge production, I take a cue from Mark Bly, who adopts a perpetually questioning spirit in part to drive his work but also to resist the limitation of the dramaturg's role, noting that it, like evolution and like art itself, does not proceed along an inevitable path.[118] That spirit liberates the dramaturg from having to have all the answers and enables them to operate more effectively in the spaces between text, performance, and context. Furthermore, it enables the dramaturg to embrace a role that is more than pure aestheticism, but instead what Kondo describes as a "intellectual/political intervention, a step toward the reparative."[119] In *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity*, Kondo draws from her experience on such "conflictual yet productive" processes as Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*[120] to theorize how social and theatrical worlds are *made* alongside each other. What Kondo offers is an elucidation of the way this process can be activated reparatively, correcting the harms

[116] Hans-Thies Lehmann and Patrick Primavesi, "Dramaturgy on Shifting Grounds," in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (New York: Routdlege, 2015): 169-172.
[117] Katherine Profeta, *Dramaturgy in Motion: At Work in Dance and Movement Performance* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015): 3.
[118] Bly, 53.
[119] Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 42.
[120] Kondo, 40.

perpetuated by oppressive systems of power and the liberal compulsion to dismiss that power when confronting problems. Attending to this process with a questing spirit is essential to understanding the dramaturg's role as not only a creative one but a civic one as well.

Context is especially important here because it will shape what specialized skills inquiries the dramaturg may need to employ in this work. A dramaturg in South Africa, for example, might be expected to engage in "discourse management" in a country diverse in theatrical forms and fraught with sociopolitical divisions.[121] The latter example is not to root the dramaturg in the role of "in-house" critic as imagined by Lessing, but maintain an eye on reception and engage with the slippery realms of spectatorship, audiences, and publics. As Robert B. Shimko and Sara Freeman note, these three categories presume slightly different relationships with artists, even if they also frequently overlap and can be difficult to define.[122] Christopher Balme further observes that the spatiality of a theatre's publics is conditioned not just by the theatre's designated physical space but also by "constantly changing sets of discursive, social and institutional factors" that determine not only what type of theatre takes place in a given space, but how that theatre is supposed to function.[123] Balme charts these factors through fluctuations in the private and public sectors, revealing the degree to which theatre's place within the cultural economy affects the audiences it cultivates and the work it produces, as well as how the two come to influence each other cyclically. This can be further broken down into a sense of the codes and conventions that are recognizable by an audience within a given context, which will determine, to some degree, the intelligibility of a theatrical event.[124] This is not to say that a production

[121] Marie-Heleen Coetzee and Allan Munro, "Dramaturgies in/of South Africa," in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (New York: Routledge, 2015): 105-110.
[122] Robert B. Shimko and Sara Freeman, Introduction to *Public Theatres and Theatre Publics*, eds. Robert B. Shimko and Sara Freeman (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publications, 2012), 9.
[123] Christopher Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 23.
[124] Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (New York: Routledge, 1997): 104.

needs to fit preconceived notions in order to determine success; indeed, as Faedra Chatard Carpenter argues, attention to the casting and characterization of a play, particularly with regard to the racial dynamics, can mobilize a production to disrupt "racial projects" ridden with subliminal and institutional bias.[125] To understand an event's dramaturgy is to situate the theatrical event in a complex sociopolitical web that brings together the cultural situatedness of the event, the codes with which the event is built, and the ways in which artistic decisions engages those codes.

To situate this project within a dramaturgical framework is to center the interplay of "text," performance, and context and draw from those diverse sources to illuminate that interplay. This lens naturally focuses my examination but also creates necessary parameters. This dissertation takes it as a fundamental truth that access to performance, whether on the stage or on the pitch, and any transformational powers ascribed to it, is conditioned by vectors of subjectivity. In *Bend It Like Beckham*, Jess's position within the sport is characterized by her race and gender, the intersection of which excludes her from the hegemonic structures of the game and includes her within a complex diasporic lineage that impresses upon her both the traditional demands of her family's birth home and the assimilationist demands of her current home. Other players' experiences may be conditioned by trans/non-binary gender identities, the likes of which are often marked as aberrant by sporting policies designed to uphold sex segregation, particularly with an eye to "protecting" women's sport;[126] or physical disabilities, which limit the player's access to normative sporting spaces and often lead successful disabled

[125] Faedra Chatard Carpenter, "Reading and (Re)directing 'Racial Scripts' On and Beyond the Stage," in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (New York: Routdlege, 2015): 145-150.
[126] See Anna Posbergh's writing on sporting policies that make an ostensibly good faith effort to protect women athletes but often do so by enforcing a rigid, "scientific" definition of "woman" that harms athletes who fall outside of its strictures. "Defining 'woman': A governmentality analysis of how protective policies are created in elite women's sport," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 57, no. 8 (2022): 1350-1370.

athletes to be patronized as inherently inspirational figures.[127] I approach these and other facets as they emerge in my case studies and often through the bodies of literature already described; this is different from articulating my dissertation as explicitly decolonial or rooted in queer or disability studies. Each of these schools of thought and more contribute to the discourses hailed in this dissertation but they also have their own foundational, intradisciplinary concerns that are integral to certain projects in a way they are not to mine. To be very clear, my aim is not to denigrate these fields but to be forthright about how I use the knowledge they have given the world and resist labeling my scholarship dishonestly.

Chapter Outline

The following chapters examine case studies beginning on the stage and concluding on the pitch. This order serves my effort to examine performance on a broad spectrum while attending to how the Beautiful Game is "played" in different contexts. By progressing from the theatrical space to the sporting arena, I demonstrate that soccer performance has a significant cache that exceeds the limits of a particular form. However, I also show that different arrangements privilege different stakeholders. While critically engaging theatrical depictions of soccer lends nuance to its many discourses, it also reveals that the very representative function applied to the sport can be leveraged in "real" situations to activate political power. To critique soccer performance *first* on the stage and *then* on the pitch shows that while both settings are contiguous with the political realms around them, they can also be used to "play out" soccer's

[127] Robert McRuer uses South African Paralympian Oscar Pistorius, "the blade runner," to elucidate what he terms "an austerity of representation": the positioning of inspirational disability tropes to ostensibly celebrate individualism and mask the limitations of an austere state. *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

performativity in a manner that suits the actor, the audience, the producer, and anyone invested in what the sport can do.

"Chapter 1—Playing Against Barriers: Caridad Svich's *Guapa* and Sarah DeLappe's *The Wolves*" looks at two soccer dramas that depict girls playing their way toward self-actualization. Caridad Svich's *Guapa* centers on a young Latina woman with an aptitude for the Beautiful Game. While she fantasizes about playing at a level akin to Brazilian superstar Marta, Guapa's immediate ambition is only to participate in a street tournament in Dallas. Unfortunately, her family's precarious economic situation, coupled with her history of personal trauma, complicates this quest. In striving against the forces that limit her ability to play, Guapa highlights the systemic inequities that frustrate received notions about disenfranchised people playing their way out of poverty. Nevertheless, Guapa's love of the game sustains her through these challenges and eventually offers her a pathway to healing after an accident leaves her unable to play at all. In this way, Svich generates a tension between the nearly impossible goal of becoming an elite player and play's capacity to catalyze personal transformation. While *Guapa* centers on one woman's intimacy with soccer, Sarah DeLappe's *The Wolves* centers the communal dynamics and dysfunctions of a girls' indoor soccer team. Over the course of six scenes, each of which depicts the players working through a pre-game warm-up, the members of the Wolves process everything from personal disagreements to geopolitics. The diverse, intersecting character arcs represent players who come to the game from a variety of vantage points and with a variety of goals: some treat the sport as a diversion, others as an opportunity to secure their future by gaining passage into college sports. In the end, the team must come to terms with a terrible loss that reinforces their collective identity yet separates that reconciliation from the need to win. *Guapa* and *The Wolves* touch on similar themes to those of *Bend It Like Beckham* yet nuance the

complexities and contradictions surrounding how soccer works performatively on and for the women who play it. To illustrate this, I identify the "biocultural creativity" exercised by the sportswomen in these plays to manage the restrictive demands placed on their bodies and articulate self-mastery in a way that extracts play from the compulsion to perform well. In doing so, I offer these plays as a useful addition to the discourse on performative success of the United States Women's National Team, whose political advancements are often oversimplified as representative of larger pushes for social change rather than recognized as inherently political.

In "Chapter 2—Playing with History: Soccer in Dramatizations and Re-Enactments of the Christmas Truce," I look at performances that deploy soccer to guide commemorations of the centenary of World War I. Soccer was a small part of the series of informal ceasefires that spread up and down the Western Front during Christmas of 1914 and came to be known collectively as "the Christmas Truce." Despite this, the sport has played an increasingly significant role in popular narratives of the event, even as the event itself has become central to social memory of the Great War, particularly in England. By the time centenary celebrations came around in 2014, the Christmas Truce was frequently categorized as a "soccer story." While popular media such as the famous Sainsbury's ad were prominent features of the centenary year, a range of live performances allowed the public to participate in the mythologization of the truce. I demonstrate this by conducting a close reading of Phil Porter's play *The Christmas Truce*, staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company under the direction of Erica Whyman. While it presents a comparatively accurate rendition of life on the Front, Porter's *Christmas Truce* still positions a soccer match between the warring English and German parties at a pivotal moment in the play. The RSC's advertisements, meanwhile, primed the audience to view it as very much a soccer story. Furthermore, the play consistently interpellates the audience into the production as co-

participants in this commemoration of the Christmas Truce. That participatory impetus extended to large-scale projects undertaken by the English government and sporting leadership, collected under the title "Football Remembers," and UEFA. Through monuments, social media challenges, commemorative matches, re-enactments, and educational materials, these projects sought to enhance soccer's role in commemorating the War and did so by using play to leverage participation. While these programs ostensibly offer soccer as a tool to ameliorate conflict, such initiatives also demonstrate the coordination of national, military, and sporting efforts to consolidate power by dictating the terms of social memory. In this way, performances of the Christmas Truce not only illustrate how soccer can be deployed to help the public play with mythology under the guise of history, but also how governmental powers can play on soccer's nationalistic character to further a particular representation of the War.

In "Chapter 3—Playing for Power: Erdoğan's Soccer Politics and the Age of Performative Activism," I continue to examine the governmental powers advanced by the Beautiful Game while holding them in contrast with the potential for collective action by elite athletes, querying the conditions that allow for two very different sets of political actors to stimulate performative change from the pitch. The primary focus is on President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, a onetime amateur player who consistently uses soccer to burnish his credentials as a populist authoritarian. In addition to inflating his career in Istanbul's amateur leagues, Erdoğan has appeared on behalf of Istanbul-based club Başakşehir, located in the conservative enclave that shares its name and backed by powerbrokers affiliated with Turkey's ruling party. He has also rubbed shoulders with high-profile players in the Turkish diaspora and seen the Turkish national team adopt militaristic salutes in support of the Turkish military's anti-Kurdish incursions into Syria. Taken together, Erdoğan's use of the game to advance his capital

is indicative of the ways in which leaders can make a play for power by playing up their own abilities or affinities for the game. These efforts are encapsulated in gestures such as exhibition matches, which aim to performatively fuse Erdoğan to the Turkish soccer apparatus, an effort that benefits from the conditions enabled by Erdoğan's behind-the-scenes influence. In contrast to Erdoğan's control over sporting and governmental mechanisms, athlete activists seek to leverage collective action accentuated by gestures such as taking a knee. In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder in Minnesota, soccer leagues all over Europe adopted Black Lives Matter messaging in droves; English Premier League players even went so far as to take a knee in unison, following the protest initiated by Colin Kaepernick, for the next two-and-a-half seasons. The adoption of taking a knee generates a useful tension in discourses on performativity by simultaneously signaling the gestural power that has made Black athlete activism iconic and feeding into accusations of "performative activism," which observe the spread of the gesture as indicative of a loss of potency. Taken together, these case studies speak to the way sports arenas continue to amplify gestures and performances aimed at enacting performative change. Furthermore, they illustrate both the varying ways in which soccer's cultural and political capital is played for the purposes of accruing power and the complex conditions that enable or foreclose change beyond the realms of the pitch.

Having begun the dissertation with a look at the enduring legacy of *Bend It Like Beckham*, I conclude by looking ahead to what discourses a new soccer narrative may shape. "After *Ted Lasso*" touches on the Emmy-winning television program centered on a pathologically cheerful American football coach who finds himself managing in the English Premier League. The show has been celebrated for producing wholesome entertainment that offers, among other things, visions of positive masculinity contrary to the toxicity derided in

professional sports. While the show may help shape the kinds of players who can find space on the soccer pitch, *Ted Lasso*'s ties to commerce suggest it is being positioned to sell the expansion of the sport into American markets. The titular character first appeared in a series of commercials created by NBC to market their acquisition of Premier League broadcasting rights in the United States; since the debut of the television show, producers Apple+ have acquired the rights to broadcast Major League Soccer, star Jason Sudeikis and other cast members have become visible fixtures at major matches, and the fictional AFC Richmond has become a playable club in the globally popular FIFA 23 video game from EA Sports. The rise of *Ted Lasso* coincides with several documentaries that indicate increased American investment in the sport, including Amazon Prime's *All or Nothing* and FX's *Welcome to Wrexham*, the latter of which documents the much-publicized acquisition of lower-league Welsh club Wrexham by actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McIlhenny. These developments, coupled with the expanded 2026 World Cup field in North America, suggest that even as portrayals of soccer figures grow more nuanced and ostensibly more progressive, the underlying media structures surrounding the game continue to privilege political and financial power centers.

Chapter 1—Playing Against Barriers: Caridad Svich's *Guapa* and Sarah DeLappe's *The Wolves*

In her preface to the Overlook Press Edition of *The Wolves* (2016),[128] playwright Sarah DeLappe states outright that her Pulitzer Prize-nominated play about a girls' indoor soccer team is not really about soccer. It is instead "[concerned] with the body, with women's bodies, not as eye candy or symbolic vessels but as muscular, dexterous, capable, contradictory, and fallible individuals."[129] DeLappe draws attention to the space in which the nine players on the titular team work out their bodies: a stretch of AstroTurf in an indoor arena, where they can be themselves while enjoying the trappings of middle-class privilege. As the play unfolds in the warmups before each match, the girls hone their physiques with coordinated precision and contest everything from interpersonal tiffs to the nuances of post-genocidal justice. DeLappe characterizes the sociality of their space in the language of a war film:

> Instead of a troop of young men preparing for battle, we watch a team of young women warming up for their soccer game. There's a captain, a rebel, an innocent, a recent recruit, a common enemy. The arc follows an escalation of blood and viscera both in the content of their speech and the actual sustained injuries and traumas. Of course, their battlefield is a carpet of artificial grass.[130]

Critic Miriam Felton-Dansky, writing of the play's debut production Off-Broadway, echoed DeLappe's sentiment, observing that this "high school soccer team is the vehicle for exploring much bigger things: sexuality, collective identity, the violence that simmer beneath organized society."[131] While *The Wolves* is a uniquely successful soccer play in the American context, the

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[128] The dates in parentheses refer to the play's professional debut, as opposed to the date of publication, which is listed in the corresponding footnote.
[129] Sarah DeLappe, *The Wolves: A Play* (New York, NY: The Overlook Press, 2018), 9.
[130] DeLappe, 9.
[131] Miriam Felton-Dansky, " 'The Wolves' Is a Delightful Meditation on Society, Sex, and Soccer," *The Village Voice*, September 14, 2016, https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/09/14/the-wolves-is-a-delightful-meditation-on-society-sex-and-soccer/.

notion that such a drama could gesture to "much bigger things" predates it. Caridad Svich, writing in the preface to her play *Guapa* (2012),[132] makes a similar assertion concerning where soccer fits in her story about a young woman obsessed with "*futbol-arte*." After recounting her father's history as a professional goalkeeper and the "strong, graceful, brave soccer players [who] took to the field on the television screen"[133] of her youth, Svich turns to the global arena of the sport:

> *Futbol* is a beautiful sport. Pages and pages have been written and sung about it in texts on globalization and economics theory, sports memoirs, reggae, punk and rock n roll songs, political manifestos, and poetry. *Guapa*, of course, is not about *futbol per se*. It is about many things, as most plays are, but mainly about the riddles and micro-shifts and little miracles that occur in life. It's an everyday play, a family play, and an aspirational story. The prism is *futbol*.[134]

Though writing from different perspectives vis-à-vis their relationships with soccer, DeLappe and Svich both insist their plays are not about the sport as such but other, graver things viewed through soccer's "prism."

As with *Guapa* and *The Wolves*, many soccer dramas—text-based plays that are dialogue and character-driven and governed primarily by the cause-and-effect mechanisms of Western linear drama—are focused less on the enactment of soccer than on the wider worlds of the people who play it. Even plays that center soccer players tend to take place before and after games; the action of a match is not staged but instead anticipated or recollected. This is the case in Martin Allen's *Red Saturday* (1983)[135] and Patrick Marber's *The Red Lion* (2015),[136] both of which depict players whose careers are threatened by compromised bodies. In *Red Saturday*, Lee, a onetime star in England's old First Division, has become so afraid of failure that he has started to

[132] Caridad Svich, *Guapa: A Play* (South Gate, CA: Santa Catalina Editions, an imprint of NoPassport Press, 2013).
[133] Svich, 15.
[134] Svich, 16.
[135] Martin Allen, *Red Saturday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985).
[136] Patrick Marber, *The Red Lion* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015).

force errors, presuming it is better to "fail" deliberately than to try and be proven past his best. Throughout the play, he laments the cost of putting his body on the line, his bitterness pointedly contrasted with the enthusiasm of a new, young teammate. *The Red Lion*, meanwhile, is set in the semi-professional, "non-league" realms of the English game. Club kitman Yates, a onetime non-league star himself, tussles with ambitious manager Kidd over an exciting prospect named Jordan, who is concealing a chronic injury. Yates and Kidd place competing bets on Jordan's future, which hinges on him having a successful trial at a larger club. All three come up short when Jordan's injury prohibits him from performing, leaving Yates and Kidd's careers in jeopardy. In both these plays, the most pivotal events take place offstage, heightening anticipation and refining the focus on the consequences of injury. Despite, or perhaps because of this, soccer dramas can, like fans, pundits, and even critics, trade on the notion that the Beautiful Game is a metaphor for life itself. Michael Billington, writing in *The Guardian*, states as much in his review of *The Red Lion*, while star Daniel Mays presented his own version of Svich's prism when he described the sport as "the gateway" through which larger issues are explored.[137]

While *Red Saturday* and *The Red Lion* focus on players, other soccer dramas, like Williams' *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* and David Farr's comedy *Elton John's Glasses* (1998),[138] center fans who find similar meaning in their association with elite teams. Farr's protagonist, Bill, is a shut-in consumed by the failure of his club, Watford, to win the prestigious FA Cup in 1984. He blames that failure on Elton John, a longtime fan and investor in Watford whose oversized glasses apparently reflected the light in such a way as to distract the Watford

[137] Michael Billington, "The Red Lion review—Patrick Marber catures football's moral contradictions," *The Guardian* online, June 11, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jun/11/the-red-lion-review-patrick-marber-football-play-daniel-mays. Liz Hoggard, "Daniel Mays: Football is just the gateway. It's really about betrayal, loss and ambition," *The Guardian*, June 7, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jun/07/daniel-mays-football-just-gateway-betrayal-loss-ambition-patrick-marber.
[138] David Farr, *Elton John's Glasses* (London ; Faber and Faber, 1998).

goalkeeper at a crucial moment, allowing the opposition to score. Since that fateful day, Bill has retreated further and further from the outside world, choosing instead to analyze tape of the offending moment on loop. As the drama unfolds, Bill finds new community outlets through a series of comical misunderstandings, such that by the end even Watford's relegation from the Premier League is not enough to send him into another spiral.[139] The notion that events on the pitch can sway events off it is also observed in Tom Stoppard's television play *Professional Foul* (1977).[140] Professor Anderson, a philosopher presenting at a conference in Czechoslovakia, is intent on playing hooky and attending a World Cup qualifying match between the host country and his native England. Instead, he becomes entangled in political subterfuge when a former student beseeches him to transport a thesis critical of the communist regime out of Czechoslovakia. While mulling over the most ethical way to intervene, Anderson learns that the match he intended to see involved a player forcing a "professional foul," a tactical infraction designed to gain an advantage in exchange for punishment. This inspires him to commit a professional foul of his own by hiding his student's thesis in a colleague's luggage, gambling successfully on the Czechoslovakian border officials searching his own bag unsuccessfully.

While it might be argued that all soccer dramas trade on the "meaning" of soccer to one degree or another, some do so by focusing less on the representational value of the sport and more on its communal nature. This can be achieved by distancing the game from professionalization and its compulsion to perform with excellence, as seen in *Jumpers for*

[139] In most countries, soccer is operated on a tiered league system. Teams that finish in the lowest spots at the end of the season are relegated to the next league down, which results in a significant loss of funding. Teams that finish in the top few spots are promoted to the next league up. Teams at the very highest end of the top leagues are eligible to play in pan-continental championships such as the European Champions League.
[140] Tom Stoppard, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour: A Play for Actors and Orchestra and Professional Foul : A Play for Television* (London ; Faber, 1978).

Goalposts (2013),[141] Tom Wells' play about a team in an LGBTQ+ amateur league. Over the course of the season, Danny, a member of perpetual losers Barely Athletic, attempts to forge a relationship with teammate Luke while concealing his HIV positive status. The other players on the team struggle with their own endeavors while attempting to rally for an ill-fated tilt at the league title. By juxtaposing the harmony of the team with their losses on the pitch, Wells privileges the camaraderie of the players as part of the fundamental unseriousness of this amateur league. This contrasts with John Donnelly's *The Pass* (2014)[142], which examines queer desire and internalized homophobia as exacerbated by the toxic, heteronormative pressures of the professional realm, and with *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads*, which illustrates the fractures within an interracial group that only presumes to be unified by a common interest. By focusing instead on a team full of players who have found an accepting community despite being historically excluded from organized sport, *Jumpers for Goalposts* gestures to the broader grassroots movement for LGBTQ+ inclusion, a movement that, despite accepting the need to cultivate safe spaces, argues that queer belonging should be a given.

As evidenced by this brief review, soccer dramas often place great emphasis on the body, complete with all the attendant risks enmeshed in sport; play on soccer's metaphorical qualities; and explore the collective foundations of team sports. These elements are typically evident despite the absence of actual gameplay, an absence that is, as I admitted in my introduction, is partly a practical necessity. Yet like the wars that lurk in the background of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, the power of sport to shape the lives of these characters is often intensified by this very absence. That in turn maximizes an assumption that undergirds many

[141] Tom Wells, *Jumpers for Goalposts* (London : Nick Hern Books, 2013).
[142] John Donnelly, *The Pass* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

narratives about sport: that it is about something more than itself. That "something more" must be understood as itself an outgrowth of the social, political, and cultural character of the sport within a particular context. In short, soccer dramas must be critiqued with an eye to the assumptions they make about soccer and the people who play it. Hence why I have curated this introductory (and far from exhaustive) review to demonstrate how much successful English-language soccer dramas are dominated by writers and characters who are White, British, and male—Williams, who is Black, being a notable exception. The plays I have chosen to analyze in-depth in this chapter trouble the racial, gendered, and nationalized focus of English-language soccer dramas by centering young women and girls, including those of color, in the United States.

Caridad Svich's *Guapa* and Sarah DeLappe's *The Wolves* exhibit many of the same qualities as the plays mentioned above, along with a more refined emphasis on the physicality and precarity of their central characters. Like *Bend It Like Beckham*, these plays depict young women pursuing self-mastery while navigating sociopolitical terrain that is often inhospitable to them. Unlike *Bend It Like Beckham: The Musical*, which reifies and trades on nostalgia for its forebear, these plays frustrate the individualistic transcendence that so often undergirds sports stories. Shifting focus to the United States is especially appropriate in this case: not only has the country long considered soccer a "girls' sport," but the highly successful Women's National Team (USWNT) has garnered widespread admiration for openly challenging inequities perpetuated by the United States Soccer Federation (USSF). Yet while the USWNT's media presence points to the team's clout, the plays studied in this chapter remind us that the difficulties girls face make success far from straightforward. Indeed, analyzing these plays with an eye to the social limitations still placed on many girls by dint of their relation to intersecting

structures of power provides a useful complication of the USWNT's predominance.[143] This is not to discount the USWNT's success, significant strides in global women's sport, or the political efficacy of celebrity women. Instead, I use these plays to complicate the notion of success on the pitch as a pre-requisite for equality. That pre-requisite depends on a limited concept of sporting performance that only retains validity in victory, not to mention a "postfeminist" strain of thought that conjoins feminism and neoliberalism into, as Sheila Scraton writes, an individualistic "new meritocracy" that ultimately extracts the politics from feminism.[144]

To highlight the unique contributions of these plays, I consider the flexible, processual nature of sportswomen's bodies. Holly Thorpe, Marianne Clark, and Julie Brice articulate sportswomen as "biocultural *creatives*," women "actively responding to and making meaning of the entanglements between their biological bodies and sporting habitats."[145] They derive this concept from Samantha Frost who, writing in *Biocultural Creatures: Toward a New Theory of the Human*, joins calls to rethink the category of the human, historically associated with a "profound refusal to admit or to acknowledge some of the muddy and messy conditions of existence that humans share with all living creatures,"[146] by articulating human beings as "biocultural creatures." Frost's notion "[refuses] the hubristic exception that would . . . [abstract] humans from the habitats that are the condition of their being able to live," choosing instead to "think of culture in terms of the verb because it nudges us to take into consideration not just

[143] The "[production of] complex, interdependent social inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, ability, and age," (44) is among the guiding premises of intersectionality as metaphor, heuristic, and paradigm elucidated by Patricia Hill Collins. *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).
[144] Sheila Scaton, "Feminism and PE: Does Gender Still Matter?" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Culture*, eds.
[145] Holly Thorpe, Marianne Clark, and Julie Brice, "Sportswomen as 'Biocultural Creatures': Understanding Embodied Health Experiences across Sporting Cultures," *BioSocieties* 16, no. 1 (2021): 1–21.
[146] Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures: Toward a New Theory of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 11.

dimensions of our living habitats that shape and give meaning to living bodies and deeply complex forms of social and political subjectivity but also those dimensions that materially compose living bodies."[147] Thorpe, Clark, and Brice extend Frost's impulse by restoring agency to sportswomen through ethnographic interviews, allowing them to comment on how they exercise their "biocultural creativity" in the heavily surveilled realms of sport, where expectations of performance are often rigidly enforced. Following on their work, I identify the biocultural creativity—the active cultivation of selves, in all their complexities, in conjunction with the environment—exercised by the sportswomen depicted in these plays.

In addition to magnifying that creativity, I consider the entanglements sportswomen work with, many of which are shaped by the ongoing effects of colonialism and the exclusions wrought by heteropatriarchal sporting power structures. Indeed, Thorpe and Brice join Anna Rolleston in arguing for the decolonization of sport science after identifying how "highly Westernized ways of knowing, measuring, and quantifying the high performance sporting body" are normalized to the extent of suppressing culturally specific understandings of the body among Indigenous sportswomen, namely Māori and Samoan.[148] While obviously less interested in the particulars of sports science, I take from Thorpe, Brice, et al. a recognition of the ways sportswomen understand and work on their bodies differently according to their positionality. For many sportswomen, their practices are not simply a matter of achieving high performance but of exercising self-mastery. Both these plays are quite explicit about the challenges these athletes face, not to mention the demands associated with their sporting lives. Ultimately, though, they set their heroines on paths toward some degree of resolution, whether within

[147] Frost, 4.
[148] Holly Thorpe, Julie Brice, and Anna Rolleston, "Decolonizing Sport Science: High Performance Sport, Indigenous Cultures, and Women's Rugby," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 37, no. 2 (2020): 81.

themselves or as part of a team. In doing so, they complicate narratives of empowerment that depend on performing well on the pitch, partly by withholding proof of their success. Given this, all the aforementioned stakes of soccer dramas—their attention to bodies, their entanglement with the sport's representational capacities, and their observation of communal belonging—are heightened. Thus, my analysis will demonstrate how both plays contribute to the corpus of soccer drama, while querying what these sportswomen are supposed to performatively "accomplish" through soccer, especially as they have been historically excluded yet implicitly encouraged to play their own way through institutional barriers.

"And for Guapa, that's enough": Beauty and the Beautiful Game

Caridad Svich's *Guapa* centers on the titular heroine, a Latina woman in her early 20s who is an avid *futbol* player with a workaday job and no ambitions but to play the Beautiful Game. Guapa lives in a dusty, nameless Texas town with her family, the members of which are also Latinx with, as one of them is keen to point out, a complex mix of European and Indigenous blood. The family is headed by Guapa's guardian Roly, a stern but loving matriarch who works as a cleaner in town. Roly has two children by different fathers, Lebón and Pepi, and serves as guardian to Hakim, Lebón's cousin. Together, the quintet attempts to balance their aspirations with the practicalities of survival. Roly pours herself into her labor and protects Pepi's time so she can focus on her education and secure a better future. Lebón and Hakim, meanwhile, clash over where their energies should be invested: Hakim follows Roly's lead by tending to his job at a local diner, while Lebón neglects school and work and decries the imperialist system that subjugated the Indigenous populations in their lineage and continues to profit from their oppression. One of the few things the family agrees on is Guapa's ability, which draws

comparisons to the world's greats, particularly Marta of the Brazilian women's national team. Guapa's very name, "Beautiful," and professed love for *futbol-arte* mark her out as intrinsically tied to the Beautiful Game. While the family recognizes her talent, Guapa is so far removed from professionalism that a respectable career seems impossible. Nevertheless, she is intent on chasing her dreams by participating in a tournament in Dallas, a city that seems awfully far away in the vast expanse of Texas, especially for a family with only one car. The question of whether Guapa will be able to attend this tournament is the dramatic engine of the play.

Apart from making her objective the thrust of the narrative, Svich privileges Guapa's point of view through a series of monologues written in a poetic register and accentuated by evocative visuals. The play begins with a Prologue, during which Guapa situates herself within her rustic environs, describing herself as "a-crazed with longing," made up of "dirt, feathers and *futbol*":

> She walked round with her hem up,
> boots on, and legs fresh,
> *Futbol* running through her head
> like there was a host of angels and saints
> callin' out her name as she moved
> 'cross the flat pitch of the field: "Guapa, Guapa, Guapa…"
> She smiled.
> Not that anyone could see.
> No one was really lookin' [here] in this dusty earth.
> To them all: it was just wildflowers
> shootin' up through the cracks in the itchy grass
> plain ol' legs kickin' a *futbol* down a scraggly patch.[149]

As she speaks, images of her dusty town, the patchy grass on which she plays, and a rolling soccer ball are projected behind her.[150] In the 2013 production by Milagro Theatre, part of the play's "rolling world premiere" sponsored by the National New Play Network, the images were

[149] Svich, 19–20.
[150] Svich, 19.

projected against the small wall of the family's kitchen, thus overlaying Guapa's vivid imagination onto the sparse realm of her home.[151] The cyclorama surrounding the back of the stage, meanwhile, was painted up as a long, empty stretch of Texas wilderness, making Milagro's confined space seem vast. Similar soliloquys appear in the Second Prologue at the beginning of Act Two and the Epilogue at the conclusion of the play, each one staged in a similar manner. In these moments, Guapa opens her mind to the audience, revealing not only her dreams but her faith in the saints and her ties to the land. These segments also illustrate the terms in which *futbol* is cast: not just as a game, but as Guapa's vessel of self-determination.

The soliloquys, so stylistically distinct from the dialogic scenes that make up the rest of the play, indicate that Guapa moves through the world differently than the other characters. They are also symptomatic of dramaturgical problems perceived by critics who assessed the play's three stops on its rolling world premiere. While some reviews, such as that of Laura C.J. Owen, writing of Borderland Theater's production in Tucson, argued that the mix of kitchen-table realism and fantastical soliloquy is akin to two plays being sutured into one,[152] I mark it is as a formal device that both elucidates Guapa's unique perspective, including on the sport she loves, and distinguishes her from the rest of the family. The Milagro production played up this difference by keeping Guapa (Michelle Escobar) constantly in motion, often in direct contrast to her family members, particularly the more restrained and studious Pepi (Crystal Ann Muñoz), who is positioned, in characterization and conservative dress, as Guapa's foil. Numerous times

[151] *Guapa*, written by Caridad Svich, dir. Olga Sanchez, starring Michelle Escobar, Milagro Theatre, Portland, OR, 2013. An archival recording of this production was generously provided by José E. González, Executive Director and Founder of Milagro. Of the three theatres that staged *Guapa* as part of its rolling world premiere (the other two being Borderlands Theater in Tucson and Phoenix Theatre in Indianapolis), only Milagro could provide an archival recording of the production.

[152] Laura C.J. Owen, "Soccer and Saints," *Tucson Weekly*, October 11, 2012, https://www.tucsonweekly.com/tucson/soccer-and-saints/Content?oid=3546774.

throughout the play, including in the opening scene when the family members prepare for dinner, Guapa escapes to the backyard to play. Even the way she sits on the floor of the kitchen as the rest of the family gathers around the table evinces a childlike disposition that accentuates her compulsion to keep playing after being called in. That childlike disposition devolves into petulance when she reacts to Roly's refusal to drive her to Dallas. These kinetic, sometimes fractious characteristics, coupled with the rich interior life revealed in the opening monologue, point to a woman testing the boundaries of her world. That Guapa wants to attain more for her herself through *futbol* is a given. Unfortunately, aspects of her past, namely the abuse she suffered at the hands of her stepfather, allude to an internal instability that threatens her aspirations. What we only glimpse in the first act is a person whose sense of self is fractured by trauma. Guapa's journey throughout the play, then, is not just to a more successful *futbol* plane but to a resolution of the harm visited upon her.

Throughout the play, *futbol* is rendered in artistic, sometimes hallowed terms that even Guapa's family subscribe to. Guapa frequently refers to the game as *futbol-arte*, drawing attention to the aestheticism embraced and accentuated by many Latin American cultures, particularly Brazil, home of "the most beautiful soccer in the world."[153] There the *futbol-arte* ethos is historically treasured and contrasted with the more "functional" style practiced in Europe.[154] Historically speaking, *Futbol-arte* celebrates inventiveness, creativity, and flair, qualities that Guapa evidently possesses. The family joins in celebrating this artistry and Guapa, too, even drawing on *Bend It Like Beckham* as a point of reference:

> PEPI: Bending it like effing Beckham.
> HAKIM: Hell with Beckham. Pelé, man. Pelé was the king. Before everybody.

[153] Galeano, 31.
[154] Andrews, Lopes, and Jackson, 421-439.

> LEBÓN (*in Portuguese, putting on Brazilian accent, but unknowingly mis-saying the phrase*): *Molto obrigato.*
> HAKIM (*putting on Brazilian accent, with affection*): Viva Brasil!
> ROLY: Nothing but *futbol* in her head.
> PEPI: *Futbol-arte*.[155]

Later in that first scene, Guapa is asked to say grace before the meal, during which she celebrates *futbol-arte* again and is greeted with an "amen."[156] In this way, Svich signals that *futbol* in this family is not only something Guapa excels at, but also a shared network of references. The allusion to *Bend It Like Beckham* is appropriate here in that *futbol* appears to offer Guapa, like the film's heroine Jess, freedom and the opportunity to become a "happy object" who brings joy to others in the form of cheers and adulation.[157] The difference is that Guapa's family shares her admiration of *futbol-arte*, making Guapa's fantasies less troublesome than Jess's, though perhaps no less unattainable.

Though her family share her adoration for *futbol-arte*, Guapa's immediate ambition to compete in a street tournament in Dallas presents a significant challenge. The danger of lost income and the risk of their derelict car breaking down on the road illustrate the precarity of their situation and the magnitude of this seemingly simple task. Even the potential the tournament holds for Guapa may not be worth the drive:

> ROLY (*in a reverie*): *Futbol* is a glorious sport for men. Such rhythm and grace. It's like a ballet when they're out there on the field.
> PEPI: And women too.
> ROLY: But they earn WHAT? Never like the men.
> PEPI: And Marta of Brazil?
> ROLY: Well, Marta is…
> HAKIM: So, so awesome.
> PEPI: Made $500,000 the year she played with the LA Sol.
> ROLY: And where's the LA Sol now? Marta is a superstar—the whole world of *futbol* knows her—but she still doesn't make the same as the men.[158]

[155] Svich, 27.
[156] Svich, 32.
[157] Ahmed, 135.
[158] Svich, 29.

In this moment, Roly affirms the aesthetic value of the game yet marks it as the purview of men. The allusion to Marta's former team the LA Sol is especially pointed: like the other Women's Professional Soccer (WPS) teams, the LA Sol dissolved in 2012, illustrating the precarity that affects the women's game even at the elite level.[159]

Thus, Guapa's aspirations and abilities are constantly juxtaposed with the material limitations placed upon her and her family. For the five of them, marginalized in their Texas town and cognization of their disadvantages, precarity is fundamental to their lived experience. The tenuousness of their socioeconomic situation not only limits the performative capacities available to Guapa through *futbol* but also points to the conditions that belie any notion that the marginalized can work their way down a reliable path toward stability and success. As Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider write,

> Thinking about precarity in relation to a past that might already have been only temporary undoes a linear streamline of temporal progression and questions "progress" and "development" narratives on all levels, challenging us to rethink all kinds of stories that we make for ourselves in order to carry on: stories about jobs, institutions, social and sexual relations, health and its preservation. But as a byword for life in late and later capitalism some have argued that 'precarity' is life in capitalism *as usual* . . . The secure 'past' upon which a future had once been balanced turns out not to have been a very deep past, after all, but more of a brief respite from a precarity that is basic to capitalism as such.[160]

Throughout the play, there is a suspicion about "progress" promised by adherence to capitalism: Roly cleans compulsively, even to the dismay of her children and wards; Pepi, ever devoted to her schoolwork, nearly crumbles under the pressure to get good grades; and Lebón is quick to point out that even President Barack Obama, seemingly a poster boy for rising to greatness out of

[159] The WPS was eventually replaced by the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) in 2013. As of this writing, the NWSL does not have a Los Angeles-based team; men's Major League Soccer (MLS) has two.
[160] Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider, "Precarity and Performance: An Introduction," *TDR (1988-)* 56, no. 4 (2012): 5–9.

nothing, "went to Harvard, too."[161] Even in the optimistic, "post-racial" landscape of the Obama years and despite Roly's persistent faith in the just rewards of labor, there is an acceptance that powers of neoliberalism and finance capitalism, as summarized by Lara D. Nielsen, are "already rigged with aggregate histories of abstraction, including capital exchange, accumulation, and dispossession."[162] While acknowledging, as critic Kathleen Allen noted in *The Arizona Daily Star*, that the characters' debates on these subjects can easily slip into didacticism,[163] they indicate clear-eyed acceptance of the fact that the system is broken and has been for a long time.

As Ridout and Schneider further argue, grasping the neoliberal condition requires an analysis of the production of feelings and the ways affect is circulated, both of which allow neoliberalism to erase the distinctions between counterculture and commerce, "[front] 'creativity' as a font for freedom, innovation, and economic promise," and cultivate feelings such as fear and collective disenfranchisement.[164] It should be acknowledged, then, that the cultures of *futbol* and the affects it deals in are themselves prey to a system that keeps workers in a perpetual state of precarity while allowing for the production of the "happy" feelings identified by Ahmed. Laurent Berlant observes that whatever the experience of one's personal optimism, "the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment," such as Guapa's to *futbol*, "involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy" that becomes cruel when the very thing itself forecloses the possibility of transformation, and doubly cruel "insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of that relation."[165] This

[161] Svich, 26.
[162] Lara D. Nielsen, "Introduction: Heterotopic Transformations, The (Il)Liberal Neoliberal," in *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres: Performance Permutations*, eds. Lara Nielsen and Patricia Ybarra, 1–21 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
[163] Kathleen Allen, "Review: 'Guapa' preaches too many messages," *Arizona Daily Star*, October 10, 2012, https://tucson.com/entertainment/blogs/caliente-tuned-in/review-guapa-preaches-too-many-messages/article_a580d3c2-12f7-11e2-9df1-0019bb2963f4.html.
[164] Ridout and Schneider, 8.
[165] Berlant, 2.

"cruel optimism," therefore, threatens to trap Guapa in a fantasy that both holds her back and obscures her perception of that very restriction. I draw attention to the potentially diverting affects Guapa and her family enjoy through *futbol* not to discount the love they share for the game but to note that Svich's explication of the family's material conditions and their appreciation for the ways that capitalism has *always* been rigged against them speaks clearly to how Guapa *cannot* play her way out of trouble, even if she might nurture the dream that she can. The family is as susceptible to the pleasures of the game as anyone, yet through Roly's insistence on practicality and Lebón's rants against capitalism they are reminded of the rarefied economic plane the elite game occupies.

Even as it elucidates the risks inherent in pursuing a professional career, *Guapa* still plays into a certain transcendent quality of *futbol* as seen in the transformation of its titular character. Indeed, a more immediate physical risk taken by Guapa catalyzes that transformation and ultimately enables her to make her trip to Dallas after overcoming incredible odds. By the end of the first act, tensions in the household have prompted the rebellious Lebón to act out. Frustrated with his job and energized by his emergent (if simplistic) liberatory ethos, Lebón decides to head for an abandoned school and tag it with graffiti. Guapa and Pepi accompany him, and together they drink and tag the building with Quechua words. While there, Guapa, overcome by the moment, executes a bicycle kick from atop the roof of the school and injures herself in the fall.[166] All of this happens offstage and is recounted to Roly at the conclusion of the first act. In the Second Prologue, Guapa stands before the audience again, longing to possess the beauty of St. Therese, her patron saint, and marveling at the Quechua language that floods her world as

[166] A bicycle kick is one of the most iconic, flamboyant, and technically difficult moves to pull off. It requires the player to leap into the air, swing their leg up and back, strike the ball so it travels behind them, and land flat on their back. Leaping off a building to do a bicycle kick provides the proper height but is also, obviously, very risky.

images of the previous night's exploits are projected behind her. In the Milagro production, Guapa's soliloquy was backed by projections of the vast expanse of Texas, the brilliant graffiti painted on the wall, and a close-up of a chain-link fence. What is lacking this time is an emphasis on *futbol*, which, along with the entrapment implied by the fence, alludes to the consequences of Guapa's fall: that she can no longer play.

As we come to learn, Guapa's fall resulted in a head injury that exacerbated previous trauma suffered at the hands of her stepfather. This has rendered her unable to speak and forced her to communicate through feeble grunts and kicks. In the Milagro production, these kicks are the only significant movement she undertook upon her initial return home; she was otherwise completely still, a stark contrast to her behavior in previous scenes. Unsurprisingly, these kicks are interpreted as a wish to keep playing *futbol*. Initially, Roly dismisses Guapa's desire to play, but she eventually comes to accept it is the only way for Guapa to return to her old self.

> ROLY: Guapa, it's your game.
> GUAPA: *quiet.*
> ROLY: Football-art. And it is, right? A kind of art. A little touch of the gods sometimes out there on the field.
> GUAPA: *a slight look away.*
> ROLY: Look, I may say a lot of things, but I won't let you give up. Between the saints and our pig-headed stubborn-ness, we'll get through this. We won't let Saint Therese, the Little Flower, say we didn't put up a fight![167]

Roly even promises to get her to Dallas for the tournament. This reversal indicates the degree to which this accident has robbed Guapa of her essence.

If Guapa's accident presents an unprecedented threat to her sense of self, the resolution provides a conveniently holistic transformation that, at first blush, evinces a fantastical view of *futbol*'s powers. During a subsequent scene, the family stages a *pelada* in the backyard that is

[167] Svich, 86.

imagined as a Champions League match between Barcelona and Manchester United, all in the hopes of aiding Guapa's recovery.[168] Guapa remains passive at first, unable to react to the most basic play, until Roly intercedes by showing off some heretofore hidden skill with the ball. Perhaps prompted by Roly's surprising aptitude, Guapa rediscovers her touch and starts to take on Hakim with some of her old flair. During their one-on-one, Guapa suddenly collapses, prompting a panic among the family. Guapa urges them not to call emergency services; instead, they stand and watch as she begins to speak in an impressionistic rush of Quechua words. As Lebón helps translate, Guapa divulges the abuse suffered at the hands of her stepfather, who called her "a dirt-and-mud-girl-stupid-bitch."[169] The abuse prompted her to seek solace from St. Therese and symbolically reach for the soccer cleats hanging from the telephone line in the neighborhood of her youth, which seemed to carry the promise of flying away through air, sky, and wing.[170] In the Milagro production, Escobar's Guapa engaged Pablo Saldana's Lebón directly, turning the translatory interchange between Quechua and English into a direct conversation; she then turned outward, stretching her arms forward toward the unseen cleats that symbolize Guapa's freedom. In this moment, Guapa's love of the Beautiful Game, allied with the reclamation of fragments of her mother's Indigenous tongue, catalyzes a breakthrough so strong it heals her trauma and enables her to make the trip to Dallas at the conclusion of the play.

Few moments could more pointedly encapsulate the notional "transcendence" of sport than a woman's physical, psychological, even spiritual impairments being resolved through a backyard kickabout. It is a striking moment in a play that focuses so much on the performing

[168] Svich translates "*pelada*" in the text as an informal pick-up game. The Champions League is Europe's elite, pan-continental club tournament. Manchester United and Barcelona contested the final of the tournament in 2009 and 2011; unfortunately, Barcelona won on both occasions.
[169] Svich, 98.
[170] Svich, 101.

body yet then briefly impairs, even disables, that body to create a dramatic crisis for its central character. In this moment, Guapa literally plays her way through pain and away from what is evidently an unconscionable fate, that of permanent disability. The gravity of that fate speaks not only to the ableist underpinnings of sports structures that treat able-bodiedness as the bare minimum for athletic fulfillment and "constructs *less than able* bodies as subaltern,"[171] but the long history of deploying disability as a metaphorical device. In *Narrative Prosthesis*, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder identify disability as "the master trope of human disqualification"[172] across multiple genres of literature, noting how its deployment not only (problematically) shapes the subjectivities of disabled persons but catalyzes a form of meaning-making across broader categories of representation.[173] While Guapa's impairment is not a central tenet of her identity (her history of head trauma is only hastily revealed following her accident), it does render her disqualified from pursuing her project of self-actualization. Disqualification through disability would finalize her exclusion from the rarefied plane of sporting excellence she dreams of *and* the comparatively more achievable goal of playing in the street tournament in Dallas. By playing her way through impairment, Guapa retains her baseline qualifications as an athlete and as a heroine capable of playing her way to more.

The metaphorical tenor of Guapa's impairment and the threat it poses to her journey is reiterated in the risk to the *fubtol-arte* she so loves and excels at. When Roly attempts to rally her by referencing the "little touch of the gods" she experiences on the pitch, she is alluding to what will be lost if Guapa is unable to play. This exacerbates the threat of impairment by affirming

[171] P. David Howe, "Cripping the Dis§abled Body: Doing the Posthuman Tango in, through and around Sport," *Somatechnics* 11, no. 2 (2021August): 141.
[172] David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 3.
[173] Mitchell and Snyder, 6.

Guapa as an embodiment of soccer's aesthetic qualities; the impairment is not simply a denial of Guapa herself but a denial of the essential artistry of the Beautiful Game. This, I argue, is part of why Guapa's impairment is underdeveloped. The family is left to tend to it under vague instructions, a fact that speaks as much to the play's disinterest in a realistic representation of psychophysical trauma (and perhaps, as several critics noted, an overabundance of themes that are not sufficiently addressed)[174] as it does to the family's inability to provide Guapa with the level of care she requires. In the Milagro production, actor Sofia May-Cuxim even plays Roly's misunderstanding of Guapa's condition for comedy by employing the trope wherein a character shouts, gesticulates, and over-articulates to a disabled person in order to be understood. Clearly, the specifics of Guapa's impairment and trauma matter less than the ramifications. If anything, it is Escobar's stillness that best encapsulates what this impairment means: a static Guapa can neither move freely enough to play *futbol* with the creative flair it supposedly requires nor leverage that same freedom of movement to play her way to success.

Fortunately, by rediscovering her ability in the backyard with her family, Guapa reaffirms that *futbol* is as much a part of her as she is a part of it. The entanglement is so essential, in fact, that it is best realized through contact between bare skin and ball. During the backyard *pelada* as staged in the Milagro production, a reenergized Guapa pauses to remove her boots and socks, allowing her to maneuver the ball with greater dexterity. This is a callback to an earlier scene when, frustrated by her crude footwear, Guapa takes off her boots and juggles the ball with aplomb. While there are certainly practical benefits to allowing the actor an improved sense of

[174] Both Owen and Marty Hughley, writing on the Milagro production of *The Oregonian*, note that the play seems overstuffed, though Hughley's overall assessment is far more positive. Marty Hughley, "Miracle Theatre Group review: 'Guapa' scores with engaging drama about ethnic identity, family bonds and the beautiful game," *The Oregonian*, March 23, 2013, https://www.oregonlive.com/performance/2013/03/miracle_theatre_group_review_g.html.

touch, dramaturgically speaking, the move to bare feet in the *pelada* scene resonates with the recurring motif of Guapa's lack of access to proper facilities and equipment, as well as to a certain intimacy with *futbol*. In the final scene of the play Guapa is rewarded with a new pair of cleats, an improved investment on the part of the family and a tacit prize for playing her way through the pain. To earn that prize, however, she first had to go back to basics by baring her feet, as well as her spirit.

At the risk of downplaying the problematics of an impairment offered solely as a dramatic obstacle, I now direct attention to how Svich articulates Guapa's sense of self within the world of the play. Guapa understands herself through Catholic and Indigenous ways of being, as tied to the guardianship of her patron saint and the Inca blood that runs through her veins. She also refers to herself as "feathers and dirt made"[175] in the Prologue, a gesture that alludes to her stepfather's "dirt-and-mud-girl-stupid-bitch" taunt, but also to a scene in the second act in which she and Roly bond over the feather collection Roly's abuela used to have. The epithet signals Guapa's ties to the land, both in terms of the scratchy patches she plays on and the Indigenous roots that find continuity in the soil. By experiencing a spiritual breakthrough—enabled by *futbol*, watched over by her family and her patron saint, and delivered in the suppressed language of her forebears—Guapa completes a near-magical journey of self-actualization alluded to in the opening sequences of the play. I describe the journey as "near-magical" to distance my analysis from deployments of "magical realism that," as Jon Rossini notes, often conflate the term with the fantastical, not to mention a faulty notion of "authentically" Latinx theatre and literature.[176] Instead, in keeping with trends observed in the work of Quiara Alegria Hudes by Patricia Ybarra,

[175] Svich, 19.
[176] Jon D. Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater : Wrighting Ethnicity* (Carbondale : Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 148.

the play sets up a complex cosmology in which the "real" and the "magical" are barely distinguished from one another, if at all.[177] Guapa's realm is not of an entirely different world than her family's but an intermingled one, a reality that is both uniquely hers and yet part of a broader plane. Her temporary impairment is therefore connected to the inner sickness, both psychophysical and spiritual, that afflicts her, one unresolvable through solely "rational" means. In these moments, Guapa as realistic, mimetically rendered character in the Western mold and Guapa as archetype intertwine, uniting the internal self rendered in her soliloquies with the outward self rendered in the rest of the play.

Guapa's suffusion of archetype deepens the contrast between her and the other members of her family, yet it also positions her as an embodiment of the hardships they suffer. Those hardships are forcefully articulated by Lebón, who decries the scale of their oppression and names the historical qualities Guapa will call upon in the *pelada* scene. For Lebón, the after-effects of colonialism necessitate a resistance to the workaday life; just rediscovering Quechua allows him to focus that activism personally while gesturing to a time when "indigenous languages are gonna rise up, and take over all the colonial crap [they've] bought into."[178] Though Lebón is emphatically *not* a migrant, he demonstrates a refusal to perform what Ahmed calls the "happiness duty," a duty to "let go of the pain of racism by *letting go of racism as a way of understanding that pain*," focusing only on what is good and ignoring present-day bigotry and historical colonialism.[179] This revolutionary impetus and steadfast refusal to perform the happiness duty puts him into conflict with other members of the family, including Hakim, who derides Lebón's "neo-Marxist" bullshit and empty "slacktivism" while accusing him of bringing

[177] Patricia Ybarra, "How to Read a Latinx Play in the Twenty-First Century: Learning from Quiara Hudes," *Theatre Topics* 27, no. 1 (2017): 56.
[178] Svich, 41.
[179] Ahmed, 158.

about Guapa's injury through his careless escapades at the elementary school.[180] This is not to say that Hakim, Roly, and the other members of the family fail to recognize the way that racism and capitalism have contrived to work them over; they are simply more committed to addressing the practical matters at hand. These confrontations with historical harm and neoliberal suppression, experienced by a non-nuclear family bound by acts of solidarity rather than direct blood ties, further situate the play within the broader trends identified by Ybarra.[181] They also demonstrate how far Guapa, as an individual and as an extension of her family, is from realizing her dream on the biggest stage.

Rather than settle in hardship, I see the family's entanglement with capitalism, as well as the blending of Guapa's mimetic and allegorical qualities, as a gesture to the reparative tenor of decoloniality. In addition to situating the play within Patricia Ybarra's work on the shifting nature of Latinx playwriting, I take a cue from Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez by arguing that the stylistic moves observed in *Guapa* can be understood within a larger discourse on "decolonial aestheSis." For Mignolo and Vazquez, decoloniality "appears inbetween [sic] modernity/coloniality as an opening, as a possibility of overcoming their completeness" through "enunciations springing from global-local histories entangled with the local imperial history of Euro-American modernity, postmodernity, and altermodernity."[182] By conceiving of decolonial aesthesis "as an opening of alternatives and not as the closure of norms," Mignolo and Vazquez argue for work that decenters the universalist claims of Western aesthetics that have exerted control over the very senses and perception of colonized subjects, work that "departs from an

[180] Svich, 71.
[181] Ybarra, "How to Read a Latinx Play in the Twenty-First Century," 51–52.
[182] Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez, "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings – Social Text," accessed August 30, 2021, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/.

embodied consciousness of the colonial wound and moves toward healing."[183] What I take from Mignolo and Vazquez is the notion of decolonial aesthesis not as the rediscovery of an "authentic" culture, aesthetic, or history, but as a process that decenters Western norms while re-centering others, all while reckoning with how the two have become intertwined. Dance scholar Jacqueline Shea Murphy observes this process in Native American and First Nation performance practices, noting not only how performers protect knowledge through iteration but also how dance can be inserted into settler spaces such as museums to revise and comment on the knowledge offered therein.[184] Something similar can be seen in the way *Guapa* deploys Quechua and *futbol*. While Lebón strives to reclaim Quechua through study, it is Guapa who summons it in a rush from her past as part of the healing process catalyzed by her participation in a sport made global in part by the forces of colonialism. In short, she actualizes the very reparative process Lebón is arguing for, if not politically then at least personally.

In placing Guapa into a family that names the material conditions that marginalize them, Svich generates a tension between the beauty and hope evinced in her love of *futbol* and a frank explication of her social station. In a way, Guapa embodies that which is good about *futbol*: an ability to play even in the humblest circumstances. Her story nods to the rags-to-riches narratives that haunt global soccer, inspirational tales in which a poor youngster, often from the *barrios* or *favelas* of Latin America, attains fame and success based on their skill alone. However, it also plays against that narrative by keeping Guapa's real-world goal so small. These narratives are mythical at best: the very processes of globalization that seem to make *futbol* the world's games

[183] Mignolo and Vazquez.
[184] See "Lessons in Dance (as) History: Aboriginal Land Claims and Aboriginal Dance, circa 1999," in *New Writings About Dance and Culture*, eds. Lisa Doolittle and Anne Flynn (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2000), 130-167; and "Mobilizing (in) the Archive: Santee Smith's *Kaha:wi*," in *Worlding Dance*, ed. Susan Foster (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2006), 32-52.

also contribute to the very localization and isolation of Guapa in her family, a rootedness that stands in stark contrast to the privileged, for whom globalization has allowed freedom of movement throughout space.[185] This undercuts the notion that "*futbol* = *libertad*," which is seen in a slogan projected on the kitchen wall during Guapa's final soliloquy, and critic Marty Hughley's rather backhanded assessment that the play "has a narrative premise out of a TV movie of the week" that is made better by Svich's "strong, sometimes graceful writing." While the Beautiful Game may offer Guapa a kind of freedom, its most powerful and lucrative structures depend on the extractive policies of global capitalism. That extraction depends as much on the rootedness of a workforce, or of "undesirables," as it does the free flow of capital. In this context, Guapa's impairment and the threat of permanent disability are the physical manifestations of social processes that have contrived to ground her in place, potentially forever.

By positioning *futbol* as fundamental to Guapa's being, Svich not only illustrates the game's importance to her central character but casts it with potentially liberatory capacities. Rather than dismiss that as evidence of the problematic "transcendence" that carries with it an implicit charge to perform for your liberation or else, I recognize Svich's vision of *futbol* as possessing an intrinsic value to players who find in it what they need. For Guapa, *futbol* is not only a source of pleasure and aspiration but a way to work through her entanglements and activate her creativity. This creativity ultimately renders her a new body that not only retains the capacity to play as she desires but aligns with a rejuvenated mind and spirit. While the play gestures to Guapa being able to play her way to greater success in Dallas, it leaves the question of her future unresolved, concluding not with a victory in the big city but another monologue in which Guapa can only imagine the heights she might climb to. That lack of resolution, along

[185] Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 88.

with the failure to truly overcome the forces of oppression that constrain the family, evinces an ambivalence identified in Latinx theatre in neoliberal times by Ybarra. "Perhaps more disappointing to audiences," Ybarra writes, "is the extent to which these plays fail to proffer solutions to the problems they engage . . . We have to imagine the way out, instead of seeing it represented before us."[186] It is therefore not surprising that, for all the cycling between mimesis and allegory, the true path to something greater, whether through *futbol*, study, or labor, goes unclaimed. What *is* claimed is a Latina woman's capacity to imagine and realize, to the fullest extent she is allowed, a more harmonious version of herself. That itself is a kind of freedom, not *from* material limitations but *to manage* them through play.

At the conclusion of the Milagro production, Escobar's Guapa emerged in a Brazil jersey, hailing Marta, her idol. It was one of the few instances in which the spectacle of the elite level is made tangible on the stage. Otherwise, Guapa's experience of the game as shared with the audience is intensely private. This is where the theatrical limitations of staging soccer can generate an incisive dramaturgy: instead of reproducing the spectacle, *Guapa* reproduces a personal intimacy with the game. That personal touch, realized in contact between foot and ball, is what persists outside the structures of the sport. Soccer is often celebrated for being a simple game: if Peter Brook understands theatre as requiring nothing more than an empty space, an actor walking across it, and someone else watching,[187] then soccer for many is much the same, save for changing the audience out for a ball. While Guapa has hopes and while she may yet achieve her goals, her beauty is only shown to us in those quiet moments when no one, save the

[186] Patricia A. Ybarra, *Latinx Theater in the Times of Neoliberalism* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 198.
[187] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Atheneum, 1984), 9.

saints and her family, is watching. "It's a beautiful game," Guapa says in the play's final words, "'*Football-art*,' and for Guapa, that's enough."[188]

"7 has always been striker": Identity in Practice

While *Guapa* marks the private pleasures of the game, Sarah DeLappe's *The Wolves* foregrounds a team in practice. Like many soccer dramas, *The Wolves* unfolds in the interstices between matches. Each of the six scenes, all staged on a stretch of AstroTurf, corresponds to a weekend spent at an indoor arena somewhere in the United States—a privileged space in comparison to *Guapa*'s rustic Texas fields. The entirety of the play's action unfolds within a team huddle made up of nine girls, with a lone Soccer Mom, who appears only in the final scene, the sole ambassador from the outside world. Throughout, the girls, each known primarily by their team number, undertake a series of warm-ups in preparation for the coming match. The first stage direction states that they "*do the same stretch at the same time for the same amount of time*"[189]; other exercises and stretches are noted throughout, indicating the degree to which the players' time together is shaped by the physical demands of preparation. As the girls work out their bodies, they also work through personal challenges both in their own lives and within the team. DeLappe's rapid, overlapping dialogue is riddled with pop culture references and slang, as well as layers of personal and social subtext. More so than any play discussed thus far, *The Wolves* takes up what it means to labor for the game, both in terms of the physicality presented on the stage and the social dysfunction that must be overcome to create a collective.

[188] Svich, 113.
[189] DeLappe, 13.

Unlike *Guapa*, which is structured around the titular character's central arc, *The Wolves* presents a snapshot of the team and all the interweaving story arcs it contains. Like most ensemble pieces, it depends on a cast of clearly drawn characters, each one articulated with a hint of archetypal familiarity. Only two are ever named, and even then, only in passing: #7 (Alex), the talented, tough, and crass striker; and #14 (Megan), #7's onetime sidekick who is gradually disillusioned with their friendship. #7 clashes with #25, the driven and dutiful captain whose intensity harkens back to her father, one of the team's previous managers. The other girls do not question #7's talent nor #25's leadership but are generally preoccupied with their own business. #8, for example, is earnest, willfully childish, and desperately concerned with whether the team will make it to the tournament finals in Miami. #11 is something of a know-it-all, quick to correct her teammates but also to lament her pair of overbearing therapist parents. #13 self-consciously leans into her goofiness, relishing the chance to unsettle the other girls with an off-color joke, while #2, the soft-spoken daughter of a religious family, is eager and well-meaning. Occupying the outskirts of the group is the goalkeeper, #00, an overachiever whose bouts of anxiety often propel her offstage to vomit.

It is clear early on that these eight players share a history, so it is fitting that we meet them at the same time as #46, a surprise newcomer. As we eventually learn, #46 is the daughter of a travel writer who lives in a yurt, a subject of fascination and derision for the rest of the girls. It is immediately obvious that #46 does not belong; as #8 and #11 remark, it's bizarre to have an outsider join their team in the first place, especially after they have been playing together so long. That #46 calls the sport "football" and positions "spots,"[190] that she does not bathe the same way the others do, and that she blabs openly about one of her teammates' possible

[190] DeLappe, 57.

abortions mark her as a social outcast with an air of foreignness. She remains on the outskirts of the team until a pivotal moment when a spontaneous show of skill impresses the group and eventually results in her supplanting #7 in the starting lineup. Indeed, #46's initial struggle to fit in is the perfect first act for a story about a girl achieving self-actualization through sport by dint of her abilities. As in *Guapa*, #46 even trades on the global reach of soccer, noting that its ubiquity makes playing it a great way to make friends:

> and everyone plays football
> um soccer
> like everywhere
> like Jakarta Krakow la Paz um Kampala
> even if you don't speak the language
> so it's uh
> it's a good way to uh
> make (*self-conscious*) friends[191]

In a play built on ensemble foundations, #46's rise from outcast to star is the most obvious example of performative empowerment through sport.

Because it is an ensemble piece, however, *The Wolves* foregoes the narrow focus that would be afforded to a central heroine. Instead, it spotlights girls drawn to the sport from a variety of vantage points, each with distinct experiences and attitudes. Not every girl is as devoted to pushing herself to the limit, not every girl gets to start, and not every girl overcomes the odds on the way to greater success. By the end of the play, some of them are not even able to play at all, for like *Guapa*, the play keeps close ties to risk and violence. This invests the girls' commitment to their team with stakes, making the communion they earn together all the richer for what it allows them to achieve despite—or perhaps, as I will suggest, because of—their shared vulnerability. For the remainder of this chapter, I will consider how *The Wolves* nuances

[191] DeLappe, 130.

some of the themes advanced by preceding soccer dramas while building on the notion of biocultural creativity to illustrate how the play captures the process of generating a collective body. Whereas *Guapa* and *Bend It Like Beckham* offer soccer as an avenue through which girls of color can pursue self-determination, *The Wolves* prioritizes the team dynamic as the engine of the drama. It also trades the somewhat mystified beauty of the sport for the labor of practice. The members of the Wolves undertake the dynamic process of managing their physical needs, disciplining their bodies, and compensating for the risks of play in a shared arena, their efforts circulated amongst themselves and reflected to each other. This allows DeLappe to articulate her stated intention: to write a play that is not really *about* soccer, but about these girls who play it. What differentiates *The Wolves* from other plays that embrace the game's metaphorical faculties is that it does not explicitly embrace the cultural capital of the game or trade in its symbolism. Instead, it dramatizes the culture—understood not just as the shared values and predominant habitus of team sports that structure both their participation and sense of what participation is supposed to entail but the process of elucidating a shared identity[192]—of a team in and of itself. That culture is a place and process in which larger politics are worked through alongside their preparations for sport. In doing so, the play presents a sociologically sound portrait of sporting participation that alludes to the complexity of participatory politics more broadly, rather than simply flattening sport into a representational battleground of the "real world." In this way, it presents a more well-rounded account of how identities are constructed and negotiated through sport: not just in individual achievement, but in the shared space between subjectivities.

[192] This notion of habitus is taken from Pierre Bourdieu, who describes habitus as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (72), one of the fundamental effects of which is "the production of a commonsense world endowed with the objectivity secured by consensus on the meaning [sens] of practices and the world" (80). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

Central to the play's dramaturgy is the embrace of multiple perspectives enabled by its ensemble foundations. This is evident in the fact that the play's dialogue is rarely limited to one conversational strand. In the first scene, titled "The Cambodian," several of the girls discuss the ethical and moral nuances of bring an aging participant in the Khmer Rouge's killing campaigns to justice, while two others counsel #2 about managing her period; later, as #2 departs to resolve her situation, some of the girls comment on her religious upbringing, while others discuss a documentary, and still another slaps her friend in the breast. Similar patterns, in which dueling conversational threads intersecting and then dissolving into each other, run throughout the play. This opening sequence indicates that, in addition to matters related to the team, the girls will discuss everything from global politics to feminine hygiene to team gossip. This in turn reveals a variety of attitudes and biases. #25, for example, questions whether the former Khmer Rouge operative will be put on trial from his hospital bed via Skype because Skype may not be available there. Some of the girls claim that her comment is insensitive, which prompts her to point out that the "internet isn't the internet everywhere."[193] Later, #11 makes an off-handed comment that the liberties they enjoy in the United States should be taken for granted, which earns a similar objection from the group, causing her to hastily clarify and self-correct. All of this unfolds as #7, #8, and #14 counsel #2 to use a tampon because a pad is unavailable, which devolves into jokes about getting period blood on a ball; when #2 runs off to the bathroom, #7 and #14 try to determine if her preference for pads has anything to do with her religious upbringing, before riffing on it with more crude jokes. In this environment, every claim or disposition is subject to review and even ridicule, and lines of similarity and difference are constantly under negotiation.

[193] DeLappe, *The Wolves*, 15.

Because much of this unfolds simultaneously through overlapping dialogue, the play can be dizzying to behold in performance. This was especially true of the Philadelphia Theatre Company production streamed in the fall of 2020.[194] Originally slated for an in-person engagement, the production was forced into the *Brady Bunch* boxes of Zoom theatre early in the pandemic. Rather than watch the girls warm up for their matches on an expanse of AstroTurf on stage, as they did in an arena space during a 2018 production at Chicago's Goodman Theatre[195] or in an intimate, two-sided arrangement at Washington, DC's Studio Theatre,[196] audiences instead absorbed the deluge of dialogue as it cascaded out of a screen. Because this version was forced to adapt to the constraints of the pandemic and shoehorn the players onto the screen, the new arrangement emphasized how isolating both Zoom life and teenage life can be, even (if not particularly) when we appear to be surrounding by friends.[197] Director Nell Bangs-Jensen accentuated this isolation in the opening scene by placing #46 (Emma Lenderman) in the center box. This left her surrounded by talking heads and invited the audience to focus in on the one still, silent figure in the middle, whose sense of confusion might well reflect their own. While this change in medium generated a refreshing shift of perspective on the play, in-person productions like the Goodman's can achieve similar isolating effects, as Vanessa Stalling's staging did by ensuring their #46 (Erin O'Shea) was consistently on the outskirts of closed circles of girls in conversation with each other. This arrangement, voyeuristic in comparison to

[194] *The Wolves*, written by Sarah DeLappe, dir. Nell Bangs-Jensen, Philadelphia Theatre Company, Philadelphia, PA, 2020. The production was streamed online in December of 2020 and allowed for multiple viewings over a limited period of time.
[195] *The Wolves*, written by Sarah DeLappe, dir. Vanessa Stalling, Goodman Theatre, Chicago, IL, 2018. I attended this production in February of 2018. Notes are based on my recollections, which are obviously limited by time, and are supplemented by production photographs.
[196] *The Wolves*, written by Sarah DeLappe, dir. Marti Lyons, Studio Theatre, Washington, DC, 2018. I watched a recording of this production made available at the Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library on the University of Maryland campus through the Washington Area Performing Arts Visual Archive (WAPAVA).
[197] This sentence in particular paraphrases my review of the production for *Theatre Journal*: Jared Strange, "The Wolves by Sarah DeLappe," *Theatre Journal* 73, no. 2 (2021): 251.

PTC's Zoom production, shows the ways in which social bonds and barriers can be implicitly mapped onto a physical space.

The team's collective dysfunction provides the characters with a series of dramatic obstacles to overcome both as individuals and as a group. While it may not be structured around a central arc driven by a protagonist, the play incorporates several stories that, taken together, multiply the ways in which the performative qualities of sports narratives can be nuanced. This is especially evident in the characters who undergo the most significant change over the course of the play: #46, #25, #7, #14, and #00. All five are significant in that they, more so than the rest of the team members, are shaped by success and failure.

As the outsider in the group, #46 is best positioned to fulfill a protagonist's role as a stand-in for the audience, someone whose very presence prompts exposition. However, DeLappe does not utilize #46 for this purpose. Instead, the other characters actively ignore or mock her—at least until she starts to show hints of her talent. After stumbling upon the girls making fun of her for living in a "yogurt," a joke based on #2's misunderstanding of the word "yurt," #46 seizes the ball and begins to juggle it while singing a made-up song with the refrain "I live in a yogurt / my feelings don't get hurt."[198] This show of playful virtuosity impresses the players—and, when executed effectively by the likes of Lenderman, O'Shea, or Studio Theatre's Jane Bernhard, the audience—and earns her passage into the starting lineup. She excels, even going so far as to execute an (offstage) bicycle kick in a match that earns the praise of college scouts who have come to recruit.

Like Guapa and Jess, #46 is positioned to play her way over an obstacle and ingratiate herself to her new teammates. While she duly obliges, there are important differences between

[198] DeLappe, 86.

#46 and her forebears. For starters, #46's affinity for the game is not tied to her family life and a need to justify her participation; as far as the audience is concerned, #46's only potential barrier to participation is a long bus ride from home. Furthermore, rather than being tied to a particular locale with all its attendant political ramifications and prejudices, #46 has lived all around the world. This is not to suggest that #46's life carries no political baggage—if anything, her globetrotting youth is an example of the global mobility afforded to members of the "first world" by globalization, in contradistinction to the "locally tied" people, like Guapa, who are constrained by their socioeconomic circumstances[199]—it simply means that her success on the pitch is not explicitly tied to a pursuit of independence. In short, soccer is not such a serious business to her: even though she has played all over the world, this is her first time in an actual team, "with like jerseys."[200] This sets her apart from the other girls, who are terribly cognizant of what the scouts' presence could mean for their prospects. Ironically, innocent and playful #46 earns her place at the expense of brash and driven #7, a shocking development considering the Wolves are about to play the best team in the league. Team captain #25 drops the bombshell in the middle of a hastily arranged warm-up initiated by #7, who forcefully argues that playing without limbering up is dangerous. Naturally, #7 resists her demotion, but #25 holds firm. As we learn in "Week 4: The Cambodian II," #7 eventually came on as a substitute in that fateful game and injured her knee, thus ending her season. #7 blames #25's unsafe practices for her injury, though #25 points out that #7's decision to play on only exacerbated her injury. Through this accident and the arguments around it, #7 and #25 illustrate not only the risks of participating in sport but the pressure to perform to the point of incurring harm.

[199] Bauman, 88.
[200] DeLappe, 129.

While #46 and #7 change status within the team, two of the other players, #00 and #25, undergo more personal transformations. As the season unfolds, #25 develops an offstage relationship with Louise, a mysterious girl from school. She then appears in the final scene, "Week 6: We Are the Wolves," sporting a buzzcut that Louise helped with, implying their relationship has become intimate. #25's affection for Louise is poignant not only because the other girls accept her implicit queerness unquestioningly—barring some light teasing about her fledgling attraction—but because it allows her a rare moment to focus on personal matters rather than the need to perform the role of captain and push her teammates, a characteristic she evidently inherited from her father, "ol' Screamy Screamy Coach Frank."[201] #00, meanwhile, spends much of the play warming up on her own. As the girls impart to #46, their goalkeeper is a high achiever riddled with anxiety, a fact punctuated by #00's frequent runs offstage to vomit. When a tragedy befalls the team, #00 takes the stage on her own in the fifth scene, "Time Out," and frantically runs through a series of drills before collapsing in anguish. Onstage, the moment performs similarly to #46's juggling in that it closes the gap between actor and athlete, drawing the audience closer to what the player experiences physically and emotionally; the Goodman production used this moment to good effect, sending actor Angela Alise hustling around the arena and tossing the ball against the net surrounding the stage, ensuring all terrain was covered and all angles were addressed. In the following scene, #00 appears much calmer. As she says, the fear of losing does not seem quite as scary as it once was. It is worth noting that by having #25 and #00 divulge this new information in the presence of the team, the play affirms that collective as a close personal space. This is especially important considering what the final scene entails: coming to terms with the death of #14.

[201] DeLappe, 55.

#14 begins the play very much in #7's shadow, eagerly repeating her jokes and adopting a similarly abrasive attitude. Unfortunately, tensions begin to fray their bonds while #7's plans for a Thanksgiving getaway to her father's cabin take shape. The plans include #7, her longtime boyfriend who will be home from college, and another college boy there presumably to pair up with #14. During "Week 4," after the getaway has come and gone, #14 lashes out at #7 for abandoning her with the other boy, who made some unwanted sexual advances. When #46 excels on the pitch and executes a perfect bicycle kick, #7 claims that she, too, can pull off the same move; #14 counters this claim, initiating a vicious argument. To add insult to injury (literally), #14 is among those, along with #46 and #00, to be called up to speak with a visiting scout at the end of the scene after impressing on the pitch; the injured #7 can only look on alongside the others. The scene concludes with the two onetime friends arguing vehemently after #46 blabs about #7's abortion, a fact #7 blames on #14. Sometime between then and the following week, #14 is killed by a distracted driver while out running in the snow.

The remainder of *The Wolves* is taken up by the team's efforts to manage their grief, beginning with #00's agonized solo exercise in "Timeout." The players reunite during "Week 6," having forfeited the previous week's match. Like #7's injury, #14's death becomes a point of contention: to some, she is to blame for taking a run in the early hours of a frosty morning; to others, it is the fault of the driver. As they process #14's death, they are visited by the play's one adult, credited simply as Soccer Mom, who is #14's mother. In a long monologue, the Soccer Mom attempts to press through her grief and cheer the girls on to "win! win! win!" in Megan's honor.[202] Sadly, the cracks in her veneer are evident and she soon runs off when she realizes she has left something for them in the car. Once she is gone, #25 walks them through the gameplan

[202] DeLappe, 172.

and leads them in a chant of "we are the Wolves," which rises in intensity "*until it feels rabid and raw and Bacchic*"[203] before dissolving into exhausted panting. The Studio production prepped for this Bacchic crescendo by underscoring each prior scene change with clapping, stomping, and whistling, pointing to the intense feelings that bubble under the surface throughout the play and find cathartic release at its conclusion. Following that release, the Soccer Mom returns, carrying with her a bag of orange slices. This is a callback to "Week 2: Todos los Ninos," when #14 had brought a similar bag to the huddle, prompting the girls to arrange a silly group photo with the rinds in their mouths. At the time, #14 was the one who stepped out to take the photo of her teammates, her absence from the frame foreshadowing her absence from the final scene. The presence of the orange slices draws a connection between this uncertain present and a happier past, pointing both to the irreparable absence of their fallen comrade and the continuity of the team as symbolized by their favorite snack. The Philadelphia production accentuated this by having actor Leah Walton push the bag toward her camera, eclipsing herself and pressing the orange slices into the place left by #14.

By concluding with the team coming together over the death of one of their own, *The Wolves* completes the shift away from individual achievement and toward a hard-won unity. As Ben Brantley wrote in his review of the debut production, the play generates a "remarkably level playing field for a team of disparate personalities who give fresh credence to the idea that onstage, in union there is strength."[204] Thus it is not the rising #46, the falling #7, or any other player who takes center stage, but the group's attempt to close the hole left by #14. In this moment, the performativity made possible through sport is not realized in the efficacy of one's

[203] DeLappe, 174.
[204] Ben Brantley, "Review: 'The Wolves': A Pack of Female Warriors, Each Determined to Score," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/12/theater/the-wolves-review.html.

individual performance, but the care enabled by the collective. Unresolved conflicts and the uncertainty of the team's fate following the death of #14 indicate that the consensus attained in their primal team chant is based on catharsis achieved within the structure of sport rather than a comprehensive reconciliation of difference. Nevertheless, the conditions set by their participation in the team ensure their bonds remain strong even in the face of uncertainty. Those bonds have been implicit throughout the play thanks to the series of synchronized warmups engaged scene-by-scene; when executed effectively, the warm-ups denote not only a skillful group of players but a cohesive unit whose physical synchronicity underscores every verbal dispute. Even the fractious first scene, as staged at Studio Theatre, begins with the girls sitting toe-to-toe in an oval shape—simultaneously at leg's length and yet still together. That the play ends with the results of their approaching match unresolved allows the team to sit with that uncertainty and recognize that, in this moment, the only firm ground is found in the huddle. Studio's production accentuates this by drawing them closer together than ever before, suggesting that the only safety can be found in clinging to one another. Thus, the bonds created between these players are validated on their own terms and removed from the false binary of performative excellence shoe-horned into winning and losing. In eschewing a "happy ending" in the form of a victory, DeLappe lets the players rest with the team as it is, rather than as "winners."

The death of #14 is not the first time the Wolves have confronted mortality and violence. In fact, few exterior forces shape the discourses within the huddle more than the risk of harm. As previously mentioned, the players grapple with global politics that far exceed the limits of their bubble, starting with the debate over the onetime member of the Khmer Rouge and continuing in "Week 2" with the matter of migrant children held in detention centers at the southern border. Both subjects summon contradictory views with varying levels of knowledge and social

awareness, pointing to how keen the girls are to assess global events and, simultaneously, how sequestered they are within their indoor arena. A far more present threat reveals itself when they discuss the men in their lives. During "Week 3," they criticize their coach for a variety of inappropriate behaviors, such as having them scrimmage in their sports bras, and speculate about his involvement in the wars in Iraq, suggesting that he may have been involved in "Abu Ghraib shit."[205] Later, a rumor is circulated about another coach, who may have "killed a man once / in like…(*scary voice*) the 80s."[206] Though extrapolated to the point of being comical, these rumors forge a masculine association with violence that is evident in references to the other men, including the college visitor #14 is saddled with at the ill-fated party. All of this is set against the backdrop of gendered difference in support of the sport, with the Wolves' male counterparts evidently benefitting from superior coaching. These experiences gesture to gender discrimination and sexual violence that remains even in a country where barriers to access have been abolished in name but are perpetuated in economic exclusion and prevailing assumptions that girls "just aren't that interested" in sports.[207]

Despite the comparative "safe space" the huddle offers, there is further risk inherent in participating in the sport, particularly when under pressure to excel. The arrival of visiting scouts from college programs during "Week 4" demonstrates that the players are very much part of a system that pursues social capital through sport, an opportunity embraced by middle- and upper-middle-class families capable of investing in their children's development.[208] Upward mobility through sport is limited to few athletes in few sports, and while soccer is typically associated

[205] DeLappe, 94.
[206] DeLappe, 92.
[207] Cheryl Cooky, "'Girls Just Aren't Interested': The Social Construction of Interest in Girls' Sport," *Sociological Perspectives* 52.2 (2009): 259–83.
[208] Kirsten Hextrum, "Amateurism Revisited: How U.S. College Athletic Recruitment Favors Middle-Class Athletes," *Sport, Education and Society* 25.1 (2020): 111–23.

with “less expensive” sports, the affluent still have an overwhelming advantage when it comes to procuring equipment, hiring coaches, and, as seen in the Wolves, enabling their children to play in up-to-date facilities even in the dead of winter.[209] Whereas Guapa’s exclusion from monied sporting structures echoes narratives about deprived yet brilliant players dribbling their way to success, *The Wolves* alludes to the investment placed into sport by privileged parents. That investment often generates pressure on children and adolescents that leads to such problems as institutional intrusion and over-specialization, and even flat-out abuses in the form of mismanaged injuries, dietary dangers, and sexual abuse.[210] The compulsion to excel in this system can drive some to take on unnecessary risk, as evident in #7’s injury and #2’s prolonged history of concussions.

As explicated in my analyses, there is a tension in *Guapa* and *The Wolves* between the limitations of sport and the capacity for sportswomen to achieve something for themselves. In *Guapa*, the risk of the title character participating in the Dallas tournament and potentially throwing herself into a career with paltry financial compensation is held in tension with the personal liberation she experiences through the game. In *The Wolves*, the risks of injury, exacerbated by the perceived need to perform, and the insidious presence of violence at multiple levels necessitates freedom through the huddle. In each case, soccer is presented as something vast and international, beloved all over the world. Playing it, on the other hand, becomes an altogether more personal matter, generating another kind of tension between what the sport *can* be vis-à-vis political power and what it often *is* in terms of what it enacts on those who play it. Obviously, the risks for Guapa, whether in sacrificing stability for her family by pursuing her

[209] D. Stanley. Eitzen, *Fair and Foul: Beyond the Myths and Paradoxes of Sport* (Lanham, M.D: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 28.
[210] Eitzen, 106–19.

dream in Dallas or exacerbating her trauma by extending her body too far, put her in a different category than the nine girls in the Wolves, who, though evidently drawn from different classes and frequently cast with an eye to diversity, at least have access to an indoor pitch. Nevertheless, both plays foreground girls and young women who are engaged in a dynamic process of self-actualization through biocultural creativity, a process that, rather than being rewarded with a clear path toward romantic fulfillment and integration into the larger culture, as in *Bend It Like Beckham*, is undertaken only partly in search of material rewards that are themselves not guaranteed. To navigate life through the game is not to achieve what their heart desires but to undertake a more tangible process of self-cultivation, understood as the negotiation between the social and physical demands of the body and all the risks attendant with it, in a medium suited to their needs.

While it is important to reckon with the risks brought on by Guapa's precarity, the Wolves' pressure to excel, and the drive to take on great challenges to advance their fledgling careers, it is also important to resist totalizing that risk. In her analysis of *The Wolves*, Kim Solga says as much when drawing from Sarah Projansky's *Spectacular Girls* to critique the false binary of the "can do" girl and the "at risk" girl, the former an ideal neoliberal citizen capable of achieving anything she sets her mind to and the latter a symbol of social failure. For Solga, sport operates in *The Wolves* not as "neoliberal handmaiden" driving the girls to achievement solely on their own terms, but as a "framework that actualizes a shared, interdependent space of subject-formation for a group of young women who actively confound the oversimplified divisions of neoliberal 'girl power.'"[211] Solga draws from Judith Butler and Carrie Noland to illustrate not

[211] Kim Solga, "Sport, Space, and Gender: Embodying Alternate Girlhoods with The Wolves," in *Sports Plays*, eds. Eero Laine and Broderick Chow (London: Routledge, 2021), 70-84.

only that fantasies of "postfeminism" have not come to pass, but that performance retains the power to challenge stereotypes that limit the social liberties of women, even if they do so for "good reasons." As she points out, many successful sportswomen are still chastised for not maintaining a demure femininity while enjoying their success. "Sarah DeLappe's response to this still-contemporary political problem," Solga observes, "is literally to body forth the ways in which normal, unspectacular, sportful girls go about achieving their personal and shared goals—that is, to foreground girlhood as an experience lived, understood, and reckoned with through the body and in concert with other, different bodies."[212] For Solga, this bodying forth is partly achieved through creating a "performative act of assembly"[213] in the Butlerian sense, joining together across lines of difference in pursuit of shared goals.

While sharing Solga's suspicion of "at risk" as a restrictive category and identification of performativity as generative of a collective rather than individual transformation, it is essential that an element of risk be recognized even in the assembly brought together in *The Wolves*. To body forth in any context is to cultivate risk, often to the point of undermining one's own ontological security, even in ostensibly "safe" spaces.[214] This is what gives sport, and play at large, so much value to its participants. Janet O'Shea writes in *Risk, Failure, Play: What Dance Reveals About Martial Arts Training* that

> Play is not the opposite of danger or of failure; rather, play provides opportunities to explore vulnerability alongside the experience of mastery. Play allows us to contend with troubling aspects of experience because of its intrinsic properties: its pleasurable nature, its structured interactions, and its absence of a utilitarian purpose gives us the opportunity to experience mastery, to contend with other people's subjectivities, to manage risk, and to reflect on the meaning of success and failure.[215]

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[212] Solga, 75.
[213] Solga, 80.
[214] Alice R. O'Grady, *Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice: Critical Vulnerabilities in a Precarious World* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 9.
[215] Janet O'Shea, *Risk, Failure, Play: What Dance Reveals about Martial Arts Training* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6.

O'Shea builds on theories of play to argue for martial arts and other sports as ideal avenues through which to establish a "radical civility" that engages with difference and with shared objectives by adopting "[the] inclination to take up opposing positions and explore their limits while recognizing that there are parameters for engagement that need to be respected in order to keep the exchange going."[216] While the players in the Wolves may not practice radical civility per se, their commitment to the team survives any number of arguments and disagreements, just as Guapa's family unit survives thanks to common needs that exceed their divergent, sometimes opposing views of their socioeconomic situation. This willingness to engage across difference demonstrates the capacity of their huddle to model for intersubjectivity in their lives.

Though O'Shea is adamant in her belief in various modes of play as ideal methods through which to explore relationships that may include conflict and harm, she is also quick to criticize how sporting structures have contributed to a widespread fear of failure. Writing about the oft-maligned practice of handing out "participation" trophies in children's sports, O'Shea flips the usual script by criticizing not the feelings of "kids these days" but the evacuation of sport's potential to explore and manage failure.[217] To deny failure in sport, she argues, is to teach "children that failure is so devastating that we can't even acknowledge it."[218] She continues by exploring the lack of participation in sport amongst adults despite the wide array of professional sporting events available to the consumer, noting that

> The need to win, or at least to excel, particularly for adults, puts us under pressure that discourages the exploration of vulnerability and the encounter with failure that kinetic play can demand. Our obsession with outcomes not only convinces us that we have to be

[216] O'Shea, 17. Broderick Chow offers something similar in his research on wrestling, what he describes as "a form of shared theatrical labor that allows for participants to model and practice a political principle of friendship, regardless of difference" (73). "Work and Shoot: Professional Wrestling and Embodied Politics," *TDR* 58, no. 2 (2014): 72-86.
[217] O'Shea, 118.
[218] O'Shea, 124.

> good at something to bother with it; it also encourages us to believe that everything in our lives, including our recreation, must serve a purpose . . . Play, by its very definition, serves no purpose. In an outcome-obsessed society, play can easily be abandoned because it doesn't do anything.[219]

Bearing in mind the flexible definitions and applications of play elided by this statement, O'Shea's lament is well-taken. In denying success on the pitch at its conclusion, *The Wolves* holds space for an encounter with failure by leaving the team to sit with the loss of a friend and the sense of emotional and physical vulnerability that brings. Guapa, meanwhile, resolves her trauma and achieves a more unified self not through success within competitive game conditions but in the private backyard *pelada* with her family.

Returning to Solga's invocation of Judith Butler's "performative assembly" in her discussion of *The Wolves*, it is important to recognize, too, that Butler writes of performative *agency* as ultimately unable to overcome "prior and constituting dimensions of social normativity"—indeed, Butler identifies "both dependency and vulnerability as part of the performative account of agency."[220] Butler critiques masculinist ideals of bodily independence by arguing for a feminist account that recognizes the body's dependency on infrastructure, understood not fatalistically but "complexly as environment, social relations, and networks of support and sustenance by which the human itself proves not to be divided from the animal or from the technical world."[221] Apart from critiquing the failure of such infrastructures to protect the chronically vulnerable and support performative agency, Butler contends that recognizing vulnerability as a facet of our relationships is much more important than submerging it in the interest of political mobilization:

> As a way of being related to what is not me and not fully masterable, vulnerability is a kind of relationship that belongs to that ambiguous region in which receptivity and

[219] O'Shea, 172.
[220] Judith Butler, *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016), 19.
[221] Butler, *Vulnerability in Resistance*, 21.

> responsiveness are not clearly separable from one another, and not distinguished as separate moments in a sequence; indeed, where receptivity and responsiveness become the basis for mobilizing vulnerability rather than engaging in its destructive denial.[222]

In this conception, the "at-risk" quality that Solga rightly identifies as a problematic construct of neoliberal girlhood can be further undermined in favor of a conception of vulnerability that is relational rather than inherent. Accepting vulnerability as the result of the inequitable power relations furthermore rejects the notion that inequality is natural and inevitable.[223]

It is important to point out here that the casting of these plays, the demographic particulars of which are evident in Svich's text but not prescribed in DeLappe's, introduce further layers of vulnerability. Both the Goodman Theatre and Studio Theatre productions of *The Wolves*, for example, cast the only dark-skinned Black actor as #00, the goalkeeper, thus marking her out from the rest of the group racially as well as positionally; this separateness might then be read as a factor contributing to her social anxiety and drive to prove herself. In 2021, the Actors Theatre of Louisville arranged a virtual reading of *The Wolves* featuring a cast of trans and gender non-conforming performers, thus bringing the play into conversation with the burgeoning anti-trans movement advanced, in part, by legislation supposedly aimed at "protecting" women's sport.[224] While each of these cases could merit closer consideration, it is enough to point out that the ways in which the play is cast can expand on, nuance, and even transform the space initiated by DeLappe's text. Bearing this in mind, the fact that their space is relatively sequestered has a redemptive, even utopian quality in that it is exclusively the players' and therefore devoid of exterior gender policing that might have been impressed upon them in other circumstances. The

[222] Butler, *Vulnerability in Resistance*, 25.
[223] Hill Collins, 46.
[224] *The Wolves*, written by Sarah DeLappe, dir. Regina Victor, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Louisville, KY, 2021. The reading was streamed online in June 2021 and was accessible to those who contributed to the Theatre's fundraiser for the American Civil Liberties Union.

same might be said of the spaces Guapa seeks out; in addition to the private realms of her home and her mind, Guapa plays her *peladas* on dusty fields where even Chico, a named but unseen trans character, are welcome.[225] These (semi)protected spaces thus have the potential to save the players from what Jennifer Doyle calls the "static"[226] they might otherwise experience as minoritized bodies within the larger structures of sport.

While the minority status Doyle identifies is dependent on various factors, the notion of bodily static in sports spaces can be appropriate for teenage girls (cis or trans) who are managing their emotional and sexual maturation while participating in sport at all, a space that has, for all its latent progress, exerted significant power in reinforcing patriarchal norms by circulating and asserting stereotypes regarding women's abilities.[227] Varda Burstyn extends this critique of the masculinism of organized sport by noting its historical ability to "literally embody forward-looking values associated with emergent, then dominant industrialization and national formation while basing itself in archaic, residual values associated with the highly differentiated, ranked gender order of tribal male warrior culture."[228] While I resist the totalizing notion of sport as masculinist to the point of trapping women in similar molds, Burstyn rightly identifies sport's role in reinforcing a rigid gender order in conjunction with the processes of modernization and colonization, an order that, as echoed in the prior criticisms of postfeminism, has been frequently reformatted in the interests of "progress" without real structural change that would protect the most vulnerable and make an individualistic ethos unnecessary. Nevertheless, though neither

[225] Svich, 33. At the dinner table, Pepi explains to Roly that "Chico's a trans"; Roly pauses but largely takes that information in stride.
[226] Jennifer Doyle, "Sex, Gender, and Playing Sport Structures," in *Sports Plays*, eds. Eero Laine and Broderick Chow (London: Routledge, 2021): 65-69.
[227] Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes, *Power Play: Sport, the Media and Popular Culture* (Edinburgh, U.K.: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 122.
[228] Varda Burstyn, *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 32.

Guapa nor *The Wolves* offers a concerted resistance to the regime of gender policing that might characterize their sport, they do dramatize a space in which vulnerability can be managed along a shared line of identification, free from static.

It is appropriate, then, that the Wolves exorcise the pain of losing #14, whose death actualizes the violence that has contoured their lives, in the huddle, a place they return to in part because it provides them the means to manage and assess their vulnerability. As Cheryl Cooky observes, for all the ways in which women's sport has come to be shaped by the hegemonic ideas of individual achievement, many girls play according to the "participation-model," which emphasizes "play, enjoyment, connections to others, and competing *with* someone, rather than *against* someone."[229] This collaborative mode is evident in how the Wolves sustain their relationships even through confrontation. By allowing the Wolves to deal with risk, with loss, with life on their own terms, DeLappe conjoins the practice of soccer and the social bonds that it can create *in recognition of* institutional harm realized at the personal and structural level. A similar, albeit more individualized process can be seen in the resolution of Guapa's temporary disability; though it does not erase the trauma she suffered at the hands of her stepfather or the degradation of her Indigenous lineage, it does lend her the means to manage the detrimental effects they have on her psychophysical wellbeing. Like the behaviors sportswomen studied by Thorpe et al., Guapa and the Wolves exercise creativity not simply by playing the game but by responding to the demands placed on their bodies in the dynamic space they share. This is not to say that participating in sports is a panacea but to say that sport is, like all other arenas of life, subject to the faults of the systems in which it is placed and is therefore a ground upon which players can participate in terms that mitigate, process, or confront those faults.

[229] Cooky, "Girls Just Aren't Interested," 277.

"being seen": Reading Alongside the United States Women's National Team

At this point, it is worth stating the obvious: that while *Guapa* and *The Wolves* dramatize camaraderie generated in women's sport, they bind the inherent dynamism of play and practice to texts, represent the game's personal intimacies for public consumption, and are subject to their own performance demands, complete with the need to succeed according to the expectations of theatrical production and monetization. Within these conditions, the characteristics I have identified so far are enough to celebrate their sociological verisimilitude and the fact that the success of *The Wolves* especially has generated opportunities for performers who might not otherwise take to the stage. Once again, however, I take a cue from the offerings of *Sports Plays*, specifically Kelsey Blair's writing on the historical basketball play *The Tall Girls*, to place these plays into a context engaged when their performers take to the stage. Blair writes extensively on the undertheorized realm of training actors for sport and extends the practical considerations of such an endeavor to incorporate ideological, philosophical, and historical dimensions. As she argues, "in performing sporting action on stage, both character and performer are pulled into a relation to the history of women's participation in sports and the ideological underpinnings of . . . history."[230] In the case of an ensemble play like *The Wolves*, pulling the nine actors playing these athletes into the historical and ideological matter of women in sport means holding them in tandem with the status of women's soccer. That is especially poignant considering not only the USWNT's formidable record, which includes winning *half* of the World Cups ever played, but also its much-publicized fight with the United States Soccer Federation for pay equity, which

[230] Kelsey Blair, "The Believability of Basketball: The Multiple Bodies of the Female Performer in *The Tall Girls*," in *Sports Plays*, eds. Eero Laine and Broderick Chow (London: Routledge, 2021): 99-114.

recently culminated in a $24million settlement.[231] To stage *The Wolves* now, as so many regional and university theatres have done, is to bring the performers into relationship with a sporting powerhouse that has enjoyed success at home and abroad not only on the pitch but in the realms of political activism.

What *The Wolves* offers, however, is a necessary complication of how elite sportswomen are, as P. David Marshall noted, simplified, filtered, and distilled into representatives in a larger fight for equity. This is especially important considering the larger systemic problems that persist in the women's game far beyond the USWNT's exploits. For example, the 2021 National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) season, which featured several of the USWNT's rising and established stars, was beset by scandals surrounding abusive coaches, failure to enforce COVID-19 vaccine mandates, and mismanagement among owners and league officials. Eventual champions the Washington Spirit were even forced to forfeit a game thanks to breaches in NWSL medical protocols[232] and belatedly fired coach Richie Burke after he was consistently accused of creating a toxic and abusive atmosphere.[233] Many of the accusations concerned long-running abuses enabled by systematic failures and even cover-ups that are observable at every level of the sport, beginning with girls' early socialization to people-please and continuing into collegiate and professional programs that frequently consolidate power within male coaching

[231] Morgan Smith, "USWNT and U.S. Soccer reach $24 million settlement in equal pay lawsuit: 'Getting to this day has not been easy,'" *CNBC*, February 22, 2022, https://www.cnbc.com/2022/02/22/uswnt-and-us-soccer-federation-reach-24-million-settlement-in-equal-pay-lawsuit.html (accessed February 28, 2022).
[232] Sandra Herrera, "Washington Spirit forfeit match against OL Reign due to breaches of NWSL's medical protocol," *CBS Sports*, September 12, 2021, https://www.cbssports.com/soccer/news/nwsl-takeaways-chicago-red-stars-break-down-nc-courage-midfield-orlando-pride-stay-unbeaten/ (accessed February 28, 2022).
[233] Molly Hensley-Clancy, "'He made me hate soccer': Players say they left NWSL's Spirit over coach's verbal abuse," *Washington Post* online, August 11, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2021/08/11/richie-burke-nwsl-spirit-verbal-abuse/ (accessed February 28, 2022).

figures.[234] As observed on the feminist sports podcast *Burn It All Down*, these institutional failures are enabled in part by the presumed essential morality of coaches and the compulsion to render women's sport as inherently "inspirational," suggesting that participation itself is an essential good that players should be thankful for.[235] Apart from these larger systemic inequities, even the progressive credentials of the USWNT, which seemed to reach a fever pitch during the 2019 Women's World Cup,[236] were called into question following the team's agreement to discontinue taking the knee in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. While it may, as player Crystal Dunn (one of the few Black women to feature consistently for the team) stated, have been taken with the stated interest of focusing efforts on more tangible action, it came after numerous occasions in which the adoption of the knee was inconsistent across American women's professional soccer.[237] Even when the gesture was revived during the belated 2020 summer Olympics, forward Carli Lloyd continued to abstain, choosing instead to stand with her hand over her heart.[238] While adopting the knee wholesale is not in itself a marker of effective, long-term anti-racist action, the disagreements within the USWNT camp indicate a political tension that somewhat belies the oversimplified progressivism applied to them.

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[234] Tom Goldman, "Again and again. Women's pro soccer players are just the latest to deal with abuse," *NPR* online, October 23, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/10/23/1048458620/again-and-again-womens-pro-soccer-players-just-the-latest-to-deal-with-abuse (accessed February 28, 2022).
[235] Amira Rose Davis and Jessica Luther, "Myths of Morality and Inspiration," *Burn It All Down*, October 12, 2021, produced by Blue Wire Network, MP3 audio, 40:20, https://www.burnitalldownpod.com/episodes/222.
[236] Amanda Marcotte, "Women's World Cup was a triumph – and totally trigged the right-wing snowflakes," *Salon*, July 9, 2019, https://www.salon.com/2019/07/09/womens-world-cup-was-a-triumph-and-totally-triggered-the-right-wing-snowflakes/ (accessed February 28, 2022).
[237] Anne M. Peterson, "U.S. women's national team players to stop kneeling during the anthem: 'We are doing the work behind the scenes,'" *Chicago Tribune*, February 24, 2021, https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/soccer/ct-us-womens-national-team-anthem-kneeling-20210224-a7ht4niacvaoxk75weniupzhu4-story.html (accessed February 28, 2022).
[238] Meredith Cash, "All but one of the US women's soccer starters knelt to protest racism ahead of the team's Olympic bronze-medal match," *Insider*, August 5, 2021, https://www.insider.com/us-womens-soccer-kneels-tokyo-olympics-game-carli-lloyd-stands-2021-8 (accessed February 28, 2022).

This is not to denigrate the objectives of the USWNT, their significant public role in challenging gender discrimination and abusive sporting structures, or even the potential for progressive action as catalyzed by the powers of celebrity. As Kim Allen observed while studying how girls consume celebrity content, celebrity is not passive observance, but a social practice negotiated through prisms of identity, a site where girls can process their political realities with an eye to success.[239] What *The Wolves* offers this discourse is an opportunity to nuance our understanding of the politics of women's sport as itself a dynamic practice that has to be engaged *alongside* the media cache of successful teams like the USWNT, a collective of winners that can be made to evoke the "can-do" spirit brought into conversation with this text by Solga. By presenting sportswomen in all their vulnerability, *The Wolves* does not essentialize them as representational actors within a larger political landscape but instead shows the very ways in which politics articulate bodies in and through the arenas of sport, a space where success is not straightforward and winning is no guarantee of external liberation.

Throughout this chapter, I have drawn inspiration from the notion of biocultural creativity to show how *Guapa* and *The Wolves* illuminate sportswomen actively engaged in the process of becoming themselves through sport, even with all the risks that entails. I have done so, somewhat paradoxically, to illustrate how these "representations" of women's sport can productively complicate the "simplified, filtered, and distilled" representational power of elite sportswomen. In this I have borne in mind the insights of Peggy Phelan, whose prescient notes on the limits of representation yield a suspicion of "visibility politics" and the "production and reproduction of visibility [as] part of the labor of the reproduction of capitalism."[240] For Phelan,

[239] Kim Allen, "Girls Imagining Careers in the Limelight: Social Class, Gender, and Fantasies of 'Success,'" in *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity*, eds. Sue Homes and Diane Negra (New York: Continuum, 2011): 149-173.
[240] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 11.

the limits of politics that center almost exclusively on "being seen" include not only a lack of transformational capacities but a misunderstanding of identity:

> Identity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly. Identity is perceptible only through a relation to an other—which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other. In that declaration of identity and identification, there is always loss, the loss of not-being the other and yet remaining dependent on that other for self-being.[241]

This is not to discount the value of representation wholesale. As Kondo notes, representation can counter the exclusion of minoritarian subjects "from fully rounded public existence" through acts of "reparative mirroring,"[242] particularly when generated through processes that account for literal and figurative "behind-the-scenes" work that fully accounts for that subjectivity. Rather, it is to not take for granted the political heft of representation or overestimate its capacity to resolve the paradoxes of intersubjectivity and identity formation. Instead, it is to question any sporting narrative that presumes a subject able to wield the performativity of sport solely on their own terms. The fluidity of identity is too unstable for that, yet it can be managed through the vulnerability shared in sport. Understanding this process as performative, as able to actualize a new self through play, not only articulates the social value of sport but tacitly undermines the compulsory utility of play that validates only success. While a successful text like Sarah DeLappe's *The Wolves* is not divorced from its own representational regimes, both it and *Guapa* lend credence to sport by denying the faulty absolution winning on the pitch would only appear to offer, and instead staging what players can accomplish for themselves, both alone and together.

[241] Phelan, 13.
[242] Kondo, 12.

In this way, these soccer dramas both spotlight sportswomen who play against the barriers imposed upon them by their socioeconomic station and the structural inequities of sport for their own purposes *and* play against oversimplified sporting narratives that implicitly demand physical excellence as a pathway to empowerment. By gesturing to the "transcendency" of sport but denying it through careful attention to the conditions that foreclose such transcendence, Svich and DeLappe evince an appreciation of sporting performativity that is not only inextricable from its conditions but bound up in addressing those conditions as such. As they say, their plays are not "about" soccer, but they are about what sportswomen can manage *through* soccer. Understanding this as a political process plays against the metaphorical qualities of sports as a vessel for other things, a facet accentuated in the way both plays' dramaturgies privilege private enjoyment of the game and the collective practice required to play it as a cohesive unit. By extracting sporting narratives from game conditions and their compulsion to win, Svich and DeLappe offer a clear-eyed vision of *why* girls continue to play despite the limitations placed upon them rather than *what* they are presumably meant to accomplish. For these sportswomen, it is the playing, rather than the winning, that retains performative efficacy.

Guapa and *The Wolves* are useful soccer dramas to turn to in the wake of *Bend It Like Beckham* because they not only build on several pertinent themes in their forebearer but provide a counterpoint to uncritical discourses on the representational cache of the sport. In the next chapter, however, I examine a selection of case studies that draw from a deep well of soccer mythology, one that was established well before Gurinder Chadha's film but reached its deepest point in the years afterward. The story of the Christmas Truce, a real-life collection of events mythologized in the histories of World War I, has been heavily invested in by soccer governing bodies, particularly in England, partly to shore up the sport's institutional powers. That project

gains from a series of depictions but also from the sense that the sport assuages political conflict, even to the point of "stopping a war." If *Guapa* and *The Wolves* illuminate the reality of sporting politics that extends further than superficial metaphor, then dramatizations and reenactments of the Christmas Truce and its historically dubious soccer matches succeed by dint of the way they trade on soccer's much-vaunted role as both a panacea for war and its natural substitute. The case of the soccer-centric Christmas Truce is also an appropriate next step because the level at which it was celebrated in England as part of the nation's World War I centenary commemorations indicates how much such ideas can engender varied performances across form and genre. Chapter 2 focuses on a Christmas Truce play written by Phil Porter and presented at the Royal Shakespeare Company, but it pivots to a system of reenactments, commemorative events, and public programs that sought to protect the myths of the Christmas Truce by inducing participants to quite literally play along with it. In this way, Chapter 2 represents a turning point in this dissertation that sees the compelling fantasies of soccer's performativity, as critiqued in my analysis of *Bend It Like Beckham* and troubled by the likes of *Guapa* and *The Wolves*, become central to projects that extend well beyond the stage and serve the interests of institutional powers that depend on soccer's unique position to maintain the status quo.

Chapter 2—Playing with History: Soccer in Dramatizations and Re-Enactments of the Christmas Truce

In June 2014, Fox Sports broadcasted a short film entitled "World War Truce,"[243] part of its *Rise as One* series celebrating that summer's World Cup in Brazil. Executive producer Scott Boggins sets the scene in World War I, a "war of epic proportions" that resulted in the loss of millions of lives. "But for a moment," he continues, "the war stopped, and the British and Germans came together in an unofficial truce. On that day, an unlikely soccer game was played between two sides." Boggins goes on to summarize the event as a remarkable moment when "the power of sport managed to stop a war." The scene then shifts to a gallery space where modern-day visitors regard a series of paintings of life on the frontlines while clutching bottles of Budweiser. For the remainder of the film, close-up shots of those paintings are intermingled with period footage and contemporary interviews to tell the story of what is now known as "The Christmas Truce." A narrator describes the wintry scenes in the Flanders region of Belgium, where "the sides' trenches were separated by no more than a few hundred feet . . . close enough to share land the size of a single soccer field." Yale historian Jay Winter makes a brief appearance to confirm the grim description of life in the trenches. Andrew Hamilton and Kurt Zehmisch, grandsons of English and German veterans, respectively, follow with accounts from their grandfathers' diaries of the Allied and German soldiers overcoming their mutual distrust to sing hymns and exchange treats together in No Man's Land. According to Hamilton, one of the Englishmen had been given a soccer ball for Christmas, which facilitated an impromptu match

[243] *Rise as One*, episode 6, "World War Truce," aired June 24, 2014, Fox Sports, video, https://www.foxsports.com/stories/soccer/fox-sports-unveils-new-documentary-series-rise-as-one.

between the erstwhile warring parties. The picture transitions to WWI-era footage of men playing soccer, overlaid by an oral record of Pvt. Ernie Williams describing the men kicking the ball around, making goals, and taking up positions. "Christmas 1914," the narrator concludes, "when the sounds of war were silenced, weapons were laid down, and the game flickered to life. The game that symbolized the life they left behind. The game that despite everything else, linked them together as one." Underscoring the conclusion is a black-and-white photograph of uniformed men leaping to head the ball, frozen in midair.

"World War Truce" was one of many pieces of media commemorating the centennial of the start of World War I, and the Christmas Truce specifically. In just five minutes, it encapsulates so many distinctive and problematic features of its central narrative. For starters, it flattens the series of truces that were instigated up and down the Western Front into a single, impromptu event. This belies the complex, frequently cooperative relationship opposing units had established in the early months of the war, without which this sort of fraternization would not have been possible. Secondly, the video blatantly showcases the commercial interests that embraced the Christmas Truce as an opportunity to sell product. The *Rise as One* series was a collection of six "timeless and universal" stories about the "world-wide and universal phenomenon" of soccer, as described by Michael Bloom, FOX Sport's Senior Vice President of Original Programming, that happened to be "produced in conjunction with Budweiser as part of their fully integrated global campaign around the World Cup"[244]—hence the prominent Budweiser bottles in the peculiar art gallery framing of the video. Finally, it centers soccer as the chief component of "the" truce, even though the sparse records of such games include it as

[244] "Fox Sports Unveils New Documentary Series 'Rise as One,'" *FoxSports.com*, Fox Sports, March 5, 2014, https://www.foxsports.com/stories/soccer/fox-sports-unveils-new-documentary-series-rise-as-one.

merely one of many instances of the warring parties exchanging pleasantries. For good measure, the film also implicitly repeats a common citation error by including the photograph of the uniformed men leaping to head a ball; the photograph was taken a year later and captures British soldiers from the 26th Division playing in Greece.[245] That misattribution speaks to the fact that these commemorative measures, like most, are governed less by historical accuracy than they are by establishing a vision of the past that suits powerbrokers in the present.

It is true that soccer was a small part of the Christmas Truce, yet its place within that narrative has grown even as the narrative itself has become increasingly central to the public memory of World War I, particularly in England. By December 2014, the Christmas Truce was presented in many circles as very much "a soccer story," so much so that major sporting organizations were starting to claim it as their own. The gradual enclosure of the Christmas Truce within the game is emblematized by the memorial "Football Remembers," located at the National Memorial Arboretum. The sculpture, part of a larger initiative executed under the same title, depicts two hands clasped together in friendship, encased within a pipe frame outlined in the shape of an early 20th century soccer ball. At the official dedication, Prince William remarked that the memorial, designed by 10-year-old Spencer Turner of Farne Primary in Newcastle, "perfectly captured" the spirit of the truce and the fact that soccer "had the power to bring people together and break down barriers."[246] An inscription in the order of service, which included poetry readings and a performance of "Silent Night"/"Stille Nacht" by a local school choir, noted how the project at large "sought to teach a new generation the positive message of the Christmas

[245] Peter Doyle, "The Christmas truce football match—a picture of a Greek kickabout is misappropriated yearly," *The Conversation*, December 14, 2021, https://theconversation.com/the-christmas-truce-football-match-a-picture-of-a-greek-kickabout-is-misappropriated-yearly-173468.
[246] "Prince William hails 'lasting memorial' to WW1 Christmas truce," *BBC News*, BBC, December 12, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-30444024. Archived: https://web.archive.org/web/20200710170749/https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-30444024.

Truce using the valuable association with modern football."[247] The presence of then-England national team manager Roy Hodgson and leaders from the Football Association (FA) and English Premier League affirmed that institutional investment, an investment that encompassed efforts by professionals and amateurs, soldiers and civilians, historians and everyday folk who took up the myth of the Christmas Truce by taking to the pitch.

While films and statues of the Christmas Truce featured prominently in centennial commemorations, live performance also had a significant role to play. In this chapter, I examine performances of the Christmas Truce and the role soccer played in connecting the British public to the larger project of commemoration. The first is Phil Porter's *The Christmas Truce*, a family-friendly play staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company in the winter of 2014. In addition to featuring a match in the climactic encounter between the two warring sides, *The Christmas Truce* also positioned football prominently in its advertisements, suggesting not only that it would center the sport within its narrative but that marketing the play required deference to the tale's framing as a soccer story. While Porter's *Christmas Truce* fits snuggly within the continuum of stage entertainment that dramatizes the event, historical reenactments and commemorative matches were more varied in how they occupied the space between the pitch and the battlefield. Volunteer reenactors and living history experts turned out on the onetime battlefields of Belgium in period dress, on a dusty stretch of land in Afghanistan in full military fatigues, and on the pitch at Aldershot Town Football Club outside of London to memorialize the Christmas Truce through play. In doing so, they helped leverage the affective registers of historical reenactment to create a rich, if factually dubious, relationship to the past that attunes the narrative of the

[247] "Football Remembers Order of Service," (event program, held by the National Football Museum in England, 2014).

Christmas Truce to its place within contemporary politics. Indeed, whether it be on the screen, the stage, or the pitch, actors engaged with soccer's place in the Christmas Truce narrative partly as an outgrowth of national belonging, what Paul Connerton describes as a society's self-interpretation,[248] that already features the sport prominently.

Like Connerton, I look to the significance of commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices,[249] particularly renditions of the latter, to examine how the Christmas Truce functions as a myth within English "social memory," understood as distinct from, but not necessarily exclusive of, historical reconstruction.[250] Significantly, myth is understood here not as falsehood or even untruth—although there are untruths that attend to the Christmas Truce—but rather what Roland Barthes describes as a potent system of communication with historical resonances that transfer certain values through collections of signs.[251] In this concept, myth's function is not to hide the truth but rather distort it.[252] While the bulk of this chapter will focus on the performances outlined above as they unfolded within the larger constellation of soccer-related commemorations, it is necessary to provide some historical context for the events of the Christmas Truce and for the gradual development of its myth. This requires holding English social memory—the collective system of remembrance that gives shape to individual recollection and aids in the self-interpretation of the nation—in tension with the particulars of historical work generated by qualified, (seemingly) independent historians, all while leaving space for creative liberties exercised both on the stage and on the pitch. As the records show, sport was a significant facet of public life in Britain during the War, both at home and on the

[248] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 12.
[249] Connerton, 7.
[250] Connerton, 13.
[251] Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 215-274.
[252] Barthes, 231.

frontlines, and had a complicated relationship with the overall war effort. Through years of social transformation at home and abroad since the conclusion of the war, sport and the military have maintained a tentative, sometimes mutually beneficial relationship that has become especially prominent in protecting a particular version of British social memory. The war itself has a complicated historiography, the framing of which has evolved significantly over the past century in tandem with new frameworks and a contentious relationship with the very forces that form social memory, among them the cultural products that made World War I, as Samuel Hynes ruefully describes it, "the most literary and the most poetical war in English history, before or since."[253]

While comprehensively tracing the role sport has played in that evolutionary process is beyond the parameters of this dissertation, it is necessary to outline the foundations that produced such a rich crop of soccer-related memorials and consider how soccer has become among "those acts of transfer that make remembering in common possible."[254] Doing so draws attention not only to the complex politics of commemoration but also the ways sport can engender a playful engagement with history, simultaneously making key subjects accessible to the public and facilitating a revisionist project that flatters sporting powerbrokers. In this way, soccer acts performatively upon history by inducing participants to reshape their conception of that history through iterative performances that both benefit from their participation and coalesce around commonly held myths that are difficult to dislodge from social memory. This is especially significant in the nationalistic context that frames these myths even as they make overtures toward peace with erstwhile warring neighbors. In these circumstances, soccer is a

[253] Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1991), 28.
[254] Connerton, 39.

performative vessel in that it not only reifies social memory but allows participants to create a sense of belonging within the nation. Intriguingly, the need to provide rich context is doubly important here because these commemorative acts are themselves nearly a decade old and are becoming as much a part of the archival record as the records they engaged in performance. To consider them as such is to reckon not only with how sport's social role and presumptive character evolves but also with how these events leave their own imprint on the archive, generating new variations on long-running wartime myths. Performances that commemorate the Christmas Truce through sport thus not only play with history as it has been recorded but constitute distinct changes to the archive.

Cooperation and Commemoration: The Christmas Truce and Its Memory

The series of truces that spread up and down the Western Front during Christmas of 1914 came just a few months into World War I. Prevailing sentiments in Britain had been that the War would be over by Christmas, a prediction that proved wildly off the mark. By the end of the year, the clash between 19th-century tactics and the brutal firepower of modern weaponry had necessitated a strategic reevaluation that changed the nature of the conflict. Among the results was trench warfare, which churned up swaths of land throughout Belgium as the Allies and Germans settled in for the long haul. To this day, the trenches—wet, dirty, cold, claustrophobic, yet the only safe harbor amidst sniping and shelling—remain perhaps the defining feature of World War I. The rustic conditions and their propensity to make combat static contribute to common narratives on the nature of the war itself. "Representations of the war have always been judged in terms of horror, death, generalship and utility," Daniel Todman observes, and while those elements were not interdependent and while conclusions derived from them vary, a purely

negative set of myths based on those four pillars achieved rhetorical dominance in Britain by the 1970s.[255] In the resulting orthodoxy, the Great War was one whose carnage and apparent pointlessness was darkly absurd even to the soldiers who fought it. Among the prevailing myths surrounding the Christmas Truce, specifically, is that it was a spontaneous show of good will that not only recognized the common humanity between enemies but defied the orders of callous officers who were detached from the barbarity on the frontlines. To fraternize with the enemy was not only to transcend the divide between armies but rebel against the powers-that-be who conspired to put these men through such existential horror in the first place. Attending to this aspect of the myth is the notion that the Christmas Truce was effectively censored from the public record and remained hidden until the 1960s.

Unsurprisingly, the truth of the matter is less dramatic and more complex. As mentioned, the Christmas Truce was not a singular, coordinated effort between the sides but a series of ceasefires conducted between individual units along the Front. By some estimates, about two-thirds of the British sector participated in some level of Christmas fraternization, though it was not continuous from one unit to the next.[256] That discounts the claim made by "World War Truce" and other outlets that the Christmas Truce effectively "stopped the war." Furthermore, the idea that it was a spontaneous show of resistance on the part of common soldiers against their commanding officers is dubious. As historian Terri Blom Crocker describes,

> The truce, which at the time it occurred was largely perceived as an interesting but unimportant event, was not an act of defiance but one that arose from the convergence of a number of factors: the professionalism of the soldiers involved, the unprecedented conditions of static trench warfare, the adaptation of the troops to their new environment, foul weather on the Western Front in the first winter of the war, the absence of major initiatives along that front during the last two weeks of December, and memories of traditional celebrations of Christmas. The holiday truce, in short, was caused by rain,

[255] Daniel Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: New York, 2005), 222.
[256] Iain Adams, "A Game for Christmas? The Argylls, Saxons and Football on the Western Front, December 1914," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 32, no. 11–12 (2015): 1403.

> mud, curiosity, lack of personal animosity toward the enemy, and homesickness rather than frustration and rebellion.[257]

As Crocker later demonstrates, the Christmas Truce was made possible by the larger disposition of the soldiers in response to their environment. At this point in the war, many of the combatants on the Front were professional soldiers who had signed up before the start of hostilities. These men admired the Germans' martial ability and possessed what Kathryn McDaniel describes as "a fading, gentlemanly expectation of mutual respect between enemy combatants (officers, particularly), an expectation that would not survive modern warfare in the trenches."[258] That base of mutual respect made cooperation a fairly consistent feature of the trenches. Furthermore, there is little in the record to indicate that soldiers were uniformly forbidden from participating in the Christmas truce; in fact, despite smatterings of discontent, there are numerous accounts of officers actively participating alongside their subordinates (even if some also used it as an excuse to engage in a bit of reconnaissance).[259] Finally, the event itself was not suppressed by military censors nor barred from the press; it was reported at the time and even formed the basis for a published collection of letters, many of which effusively describe the fraternization and mention plans for soccer matches.[260] Indeed, it remained part of the historiography of the war until the 1960s, when, as Crocker observes, "it was repackaged and repurposed by historians and others who were determined to advance a certain view of the war."[261]

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[257] Terri Blom Crocker, *The Christmas Truce : Myth, Memory, and the First World War* (Lexington, Kentucky : University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 4.
[258] Kathryn N. McDaniel, "Commemorating the Christmas Truce: A Critical Thinking Approach for Popular History," *The History Teacher* 49, no. 1 (2015): 91.
[259] "Christmas Day 1914," in *Records of the XXXth. 1st East Lancashire Regiment, Spt. 28, 1914 – May 21, 1915* (regimental diaries, held by the National Army Museum in England, 1915), 39.
[260] National Peace Council, *Peace and Goodwill: Remarkable Stories of Christmas Truce: Striking Letters from Officers and Men at the Front* (National Peace Council, copy held at the Imperial War Museum in London, 1915).
[261] Crocker, 5.

That "certain view" is characterized in part by received notions of what it meant to be "on the Front." As Crocker points out, soldiers actually spent fairly little time in the trenches, yet "combat on the Western Front, with its characteristically static nature, came to embody the typical soldier's experience in the war: endless spells of duty in horrific conditions, interrupted by orders to 'go over the top' and take part in yet another fruitless, and generally fatal, assault."[262] Subsequent narratives surrounding the Christmas Truce have accordingly "[emphasized] the disillusionment of soldiers with the war and the comradeship they felt during fraternization for the enemy troops, their fellow sufferers in the trenches . . . [to underline] the moral of the war's orthodox narrative."[263] This fits into a larger wartime narrative developed in what Hynes calls "the myth-making years" of the late-1920s, when the myth of the war's meaninglessness encompassed, among other things, "a growing sympathy for the men on the other side, betrayed in the same ways and suffering the same hardships," and an "emerging sense of the war as a machine and of all soldiers as its victims."[264] Without discounting the conditions or the truly devastating toll of combat, the notion that life in the trenches is metonymic to a larger disillusionment toward the war on the part of the soldiers not only speaks to the ahistorical qualities of social memory but discounts the variety of perspectives on the conflict represented on the Front and the general belief that the war had meaning and purpose.[265] As one truce participant described, it "[seemed] silly fighting men you have no quarrel with personally . . . What I hate is the things they have done to Belgium."[266] In short, for all the vast horrors of the war, soldiers' experience of it and their rationale for participating was hardly monolithic.

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[262] Crocker, 7.
[263] Crocker, 9–10.
[264] Hynes, 439.
[265] Crocker, 18.
[266] Cuthbert, private letter to grandmother, Mrs. Godward of Wimbledon (private correspondence, held by the Imperial War Museum in London, 1915).

The orthodox narrative of the Christmas Truce and its place within a simplified morality of the Great War suits a larger social and militaristic desire for closure. As Yvonne Chiu argues, the combat in so-called "conventional" warfare—historically far less common than "irregular" warfare comprised of skirmishes and guerilla tactics[267]—is our dominant concept of war in part "because we desire definitive resolution and because it is seen as the most successful way to wage war."[268] That neat concept becomes unstable when viewed through the lens of the enemy combatants' "systematic cooperation over time with a 'live and let live' arrangement."[269] Even after high command began to assert greater control over activities at the front and conduct shelling campaigns through the holiday season, "Soldiers adapted by ritualizing their aggression and conforming with the letter, but not the spirit, of the commands."[270] This included aiming rounds high, shooting into No Man's Land, and otherwise only appearing to engage the enemy. While Chiu uses the Christmas Truce as a setup for a broader analysis of cooperation during wartime, she does note that this "live and let live" policy was fairly unique to the period and shaped in part by trench warfare, which "just happens to have a structure that makes for relatively clean iterative, cooperative games of this sort" thanks to its "rigid and transparent structure," which "allowed for easier conspiracy."[271] The reality of life in the trenches was not merely one of stark suffering but a complex system of survival that required both parties to cooperate. Ironically, to reduce the Christmas Truce to a story of spontaneous common humanity is to delimit why it was so remarkable in the first place.

[267] Yvonne Chiu, *Conspiring with the Enemy: The Ethic of Cooperation in Warfare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 5.
[268] Chiu, 6.
[269] Chiu, 10.
[270] Chiu, 12.
[271] Chiu, 13–14.

Given the (albeit limited) basis of cooperation shared by the Allies and Germans at this point in the War, it is perhaps unsurprising that the two would turn to soccer to pass their time together. While various plans for an "official" international match between the sides likely never materialized, there were scattered reports of games and kickabouts from both sides. In some cases, reports of "official" scores—for example, a 3-2 victory for the Saxons—made their way to the *Illustrated London News* some weeks later, though seeing as how papers were in the habit of publishing letters from the Front, it may be that some soldiers wished to exaggerate their experience.[272] Regarding the paucity of reports among officers, historian Iain Adams offers that because soccer was so endemic to the British Expeditionary forces by this point in time, "such an informal kick-about by soldiers was not worth writing about," even if spotty reports of an "official" match were more than worthy of coverage.[273] As Adams further suggests, "To some, playing football means two goals, a large flat surface, a referee and a proper football. To others it may simply be any playful activity involving kicking an object around."[274] Understanding soccer as a game that can be played even with an improvised ball points to both to its useful simplicity and its larger cultural influence, which is further evident in the likely influx of balls as Christmas presents[275] and the arrival of British sports newspapers, some of which the Allies were apparently happy to pass on to their German opponents.[276] In short, there is an argument to be made that playing soccer in some form or another was as natural to the warring parties as sharing Christmas carols and swapping treats.

[272] Adams, 1405.
[273] Adams, 1404.
[274] Adams, 1408.
[275] Adams, 1408.
[276] Adams, 1410.

While playing soccer in these circumstances was appropriate, the notion that it was the central aspect of the Christmas Truce, let alone the force that "stopped the War," is not accurate. That the Christmas Truce has nevertheless become a soccer story, particularly in the eyes of the British public, is partly the result of larger forces working at the intersection of the military, the sports-industrial complex, and the political forces invested in cultivating a nationalistic social memory. To be clear, that cooperation has not always been harmonious; in fact, it was downright contentious in the early days of the War, particularly on the home front. Despite calls for cancellation, England's professional clubs played out the 1914-15 season, earning the ire of critics who deemed the continuation of play a distraction and a dereliction of duty. Clubs responded vociferously to these accusations, arguing not only that they were contributing to the war effort by raising funds and facilitating recruitment but that criticisms aimed at the sport were fundamentally classist. "[The] agitation against football," stated the December 5th match program for London-based Tottenham Hotspur, "is being conducted by prejudiced people who dislike and oppose professional football in times of peace or times of war. It would certainly appear that the attack is made on football because it is the working men's game, otherwise the same campaign would be employed in respect to horse-racing, hunting, golf, theatres and music halls."[277] Clubs furthermore hailed the game as an essential aspect of everyday life that had to continue not only for the good of the society but, conveniently, for the good of the war effort. A program for Chelsea, another London club, published on the same day argued that "football is the safety

[277] *Official Programme and Record of the Club, 5 December 1914* (Tottenham Hotspur Football & Athletic Company, held by the National Football Museum in England, 1914).

valve of the industrial population," the very people creating the "silver bullets" required by then-Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George to win the war.[278]

Despite these protests, the military leadership and upper-class powers impressed themselves upon clubs and players, prompting some to enlist en masse and form "footballers' battalions." The footballers' battalions, largely located in the Middlesex Regiment, were part of "the poignant phenomenon of the 'Pals' movement: units recruited via appeals to civic, occupational, class and even sporting identities."[279] Recruitment posters played on men's love of sport and patriotic duty, whether by encouraging territorial soldiers to sign up for a chance to play their favorite sports or by charging men to play "The Greater Game" by fighting for their country. Newspapers, meanwhile, seized on groups like the footballers' battalions to suggest that Britain's sporting pursuits made their men uniquely suited to the demands of war.[280] In the end, the war won out, and after extensive meetings and internecine debate, the Football Association elected to stop paying players while still allowing individual leagues and clubs to continue playing as they wished.[281]

As the National Football Museum demonstrated in their extensive exhibit, catalogued in *The Greater Game: A History of Football in World War I*, soccer remained a significant component of the wartime experience. Ironically, just as many historians greeted the proliferation of Christmas Truce stories by trying to disentangle soccer from the narrative, the National Football Museum sought to expand the sport's role during wartime well beyond its

[278] *The Chelsea F.C. Chronicle, Official Programme of the Chelsea Football & Athletic Company, Limited, 5 December 1914* (Chelsea Football & Athletic Company, held by the National Football Museum in England, 1914), 2.
[279] Alexander Jackson, *Football's Great War: Association Football on the English Home Front, 1914 1918* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2022), 31.
[280] "Footballers to Play the Greater Game," *The War Illustrated*, 13 February, 1915.
[281] Jackson, *Football's Great War*, 58–59.

association with the Christmas Truce. "In the popular imagination Association Football is indelibly connected to the First World War through games during the Christmas Truce and troops advancing behind the football," Andy Pearce admitted in his introduction. "However, there is much more to the story."[282] *The Greater Game* demonstrated as much by focusing on such diverse elements as the brief flourishing of the women's game on the home front, the players making up the Middlesex Battalion, and the larger picture of military soccer, which apparently demonstrated such positive effects on troop morale that it was recognized by the British Army in its 1917 manual *Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*.[283] Many of these segments have become the subject of their own dramatizations; Football Remembers even commissioned and funded a play entitled *The Greater Game*, written by Michael Head and staged at the Waterloo Theatre in London in 2018.[284]

While there is very little threat of conscription today, England's government, military, and professional leagues have often presented a united front, particularly when it comes to commemorating the Great War. As Daniel Fitzpatrick observes, much of this partnership is pinned together by the red poppy, a symbol of remembrance worn throughout November in recognition of Remembrance Day and Armistice Day, which commemorate the beginning and end of World War I, respectively. Poppies feature prominently in public events and ceremonies, including in the Premier League, where players take to the pitch in kits with poppies printed above the heart. Fitzpatrick draws on Eric Hobsbawm's notion of the "invented tradition" to

[282] Andy Pearce, Introduction to *The Greater Game: A History of Football in World War I* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2014), 4-5. Held in the archives of the National Football Museum.
[283] Iain Adams, "Football at the Front," in *The Greater Game: A History of Football in World War I* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2014), 36-43.
[284] "The Greater Game," *EFL.com*, English Football League, accessed May 24, 2022, https://www.efl.com/football-remembers/football-remembers-projects/the-greater-game/.

signal ritualistic and symbolic practices that foster a sense of continuity with the past.[285] He observes that such rituals of military remembrance in the British game "have grown evermore in scale and ostentation" over more than a decade,[286] "[constituting] a potent 'invented tradition,' through which a fracturing sense of British national identity can be made 'real' again and re-legitimize the political and military ambitions of the state."[287] This thrust to create a collective British national identity is complicated by the differences between the "home nations" of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, each of which plays its soccer under its own flag, and is conditioned in part by the efforts of successive governments to promote military values in tandem with a series of deployments that began in the 1980s with the Falklands War and continue through the conflicts in the Middle East.[288]

The roots of that initiative extend much further back. Despite the class conflict that engulfed the professional game, clubs around England played a significant role in charity fundraising for the war effort and care of wounded soldiers, celebrated the end of the war with shows of patriotism and commemorative matches, and set up their own memorials to players lost in the conflict. One of the most distinctive shows of institutional coordination, however, came at the start of the 1927 FA Cup final,[289] when attendees were prompted to sing "Abide With Me," a Christian hymn associated with the British establishment that was also sung in the trenches by Allied troops; the move apparently came at the behest of King George V himself. Fitzpatrick ties

[285] Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 1-14.
[286] Daniel Fitzpatrick, "'Football Remembers' — the Collective Memory of Football in the Spectacle of British Military Commemoration," *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, June 1, 2021, 6.
[287] Fitzpatrick, 8.
[288] Fitzpatrick, 13.
[289] The FA cup is an annual tournament contested by all of the professional clubs in England. Though now largely overshadowed by the Premier League, it retains a certain historical prestige and is often touted as the oldest continuously running tournament in the world.

that fusion of Christian worship and sport back to the Christmas Truce and the myth that was developing around it to frame this moment:

> This orchestrated, collective singing of a restricted repertoire of 'national' songs, hymns, and music of the First World War, usually led by a marching band, became embedded in the cultural fabric of football from the mid-1920s. It displayed the community-creating potential of football, and the indispensable role of history, remembrance and memory in that process. This elision of sport and the military in British consciousness from 1914 onwards provided fertile discursive ground for the creation of heroic figures of hegemonic masculinity that embody the nation's collective identity.[290]

Thus, the rush of soccer-related events and memorials commemorating the Christmas Truce has roots that are now over a century old. The centrality of soccer's role in the process and the responsibility it entails has been no secret to soccer administrators. In his foreword to the *Great War Centenary Tour* program, Football League Chairman Greg Clarke described the planned tour of monuments and graves across Europe as "aimed at raising our collective understanding, as a game, of the sacrifices made by our contemporaries during the Great War. It is our duty to ensure that their efforts are never forgotten."[291] Once an alleged enemy of the war effort, professional soccer now plays a conscious, almost possessive role in sanctifying its memory.

As identified by Fitzpatrick, hegemonic masculinity is a crucial element of the militarization of sport within the larger system of nationalistic commemorative practices. Indeed, protecting an English hegemonic masculinity was one of many undercurrents characterizing discourse leading up to and through the war, as Edwardian society came to terms with a civil war threatened by Ireland, a sex war propagated by suffragettes, and a class war prosecuted by working men; as Hynes argues, Englishmen began to "[perceive] the war against Germany as a

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[290] Fitzpatrick, 10.

[291] The Football League oversees all professional clubs in England other than the Premier League, which operates as a separate entity. Greg Clarke, foreword to *Great War Centenary Tour: Remembering the Sacrifices Made by Football, 1914-1918* (the Football League, held at the archives of the National Football Museum in England, 2014), 3.

war against all those other enemies too."[292] Sport and physical culture, particularly in the form of fitness regimes circulated through new print media, played a part in this effort by propagating a form of masculinity that harkened back to classical heroes of old.[293] Furthermore, for all its efforts to protect English culture from advancing Europeanization, the war against Germany on the battlefield and German influence at home was very much an attempt to chip away at shared cultural foundations, not least because the Saxons, one of the ethnic groups united under the German flag, were cousins to the English.[294] The sense that World War I was fought in part to preserve power in the hands of a certain class of Englishmen and the reality that the Germans and English had more in common than they might want to admit complicates any notion that the Christmas Truce is proof of sport's capacity to overcome strife in service of a common humanity. After all, it is easy to recognize the common humanity among men who are predominately White, able-bodied, presumed cisgendered and heterosexual, implicitly Christian, and clad in the symbols of national belonging.[295]

This can be seen rather pointedly in one of the most significant 20th century renditions of the Truce: the 1983 music video for Paul McCartney's "The Pipes of Peace."[296] In the video, McCartney plays both a British soldier and a German soldier. The short visual narrative follows the typical course of a Christmas Truce story and puts the budding relationship between the two McCartneys at the center. This double-act sends an implicit message about the need to recognize the "sameness" in others, underscoring McCartney's overall plea for peace. The fact that it does

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[292] Hynes, 10.
[293] Michael Anton Budd, *The Sculpture Machine* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1997), 120–23.
[294] Hynes, 78.
[295] It is important to note that, despite many contradictory portrayals, this profile did not fit every combatant on the Front. Indeed, there are even reports that some units of the Indian Corps participated in the Christmas Truce. Malcomb Brown, *The Imperial War Museum Book of 1914: The Men Who Went to War* (London: Pan Books, 2005), 270.
[296] "The Pipes of Peace," directed by Keef, written by and featuring Paul McCartney (1983; London, England; Ewart Television Studio), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TwyFTRGiIUU.

so by literally putting the same man in both leading roles tacitly, if unintentionally, affirms the very *specific* common humanity among the men on two sides. As Stephen Moss observed, "The McCartney take on history has hardened into orthodoxy," and effectively overcome many historians' best efforts for accuracy, even to the point of making it "[feel] as if the truce mattered more than the war."[297] That "orthodoxy" not only shapes the place of the Christmas Truce within commemoration of the war but also asserts the hegemonic masculinity that such dramatizations implicitly validate—a masculinity that sidelines subjects of the Empire who were summoned from India and Africa, elides the role sport played in asserting a British Colonial masculine morality abroad,[298] and conveniently asserts whiteness amidst a more racially diverse and (comparatively) more equitable contemporary Britain. This is especially significant in a nationalistic context, where, as Benedict Anderson notes, the very notion of a nation is a community of "deep, horizontal" comradeship *regardless* of the actual inequalities and exploitation the nation fosters.[299] Any overtures to a broader peace are thus limited by a very particular vision of historic manhood that is, by virtue of going unmarked, effectively coterminous with the nation.

As commentators were at pains to point out, the Christmas Truce was a brief, limited respite in a brutal war that was only just beginning. Nevertheless, the fact that men *were* able to lay down their weapons, even in a place as foreboding as No Man's Land, does point to the capacity for play to mediate between conflicting parties, albeit within a permissive, pre-established structure that belies claims of spontaneity and universalizes the release of masculine

[297] Stephen Moss, "Truce in the trenches was real, but football tales are a shot in the dark," *The Guardian*, December 16, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/16/truce-trenches-football-tales-shot-in-dark.
[298] Brendan Hokowhitu, "Indigenous Materialisms and Disciplinary Colonialism," *Somatechnics* 11, no. 2 (2021): 161–62.
[299] Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. and extended ed., 2nd ed (London: Verso, 1991), 7.

energy and fraternal good feelings that sport has historically meant to engender, particularly in England, where men of the period "saw themselves as missionaries spreading the gospel of sport and sportsmanship."[300] In other words, the soccer-centric narrative of the Christmas Truce makes especially palatable an already moving instance of peace amidst war because it affirms that sport is one of the manliest ways for men to make peace with one another. This is not to discount sport's validity as a vessel for communal bonding or the value of sport as a tool of diplomacy and development, even accounting for the power dynamics and cultural misapprehensions sometimes elided by "diplomacy" and "development."[301] Rather, it is to argue that conflating the Christmas Truce with sport's capacity to foster peace suits a masculinist framing of sport that treats the playing field as a proving ground for the battlefield. This was evident at the start of the war, when athleticism was institutionalized within upper-class public schools as a way to produce *mens sana in corpore sano*, "a healthy mind in a healthy body," in "those whose manifest destiny was to take on the white man's burden, in particular the Englishman's burden, of administering a world-wide Empire."[302] While the classism that differentiated attitudes toward professional sport shows that this perspective was not universal even within England, the notion of masculine athleticism as implicitly contiguous with martial ability suits the role of nationalistic achievement and virility that international men's soccer has assumed. Furthermore, considering the long and varied history of English-German competition, much of which has been grafted onto the soccer pitch, the soccer-centric narrative of the Christmas Truce serves a double

[300] Jackson, *Football's Great War*, 16.
[301] See Simon C. Darnell, *Sport for Development and Peace: A Critical Sociology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012) for a consideration of both the values of the "sport for development and peace sector," fostered by such significant organization as the United Nations, and the pitfalls of a "developmental" mindset that reinforces troublesome distinctions between the Global North and Global South.
[302] Brown, 117.

role by promoting peace while maintaining the predominance of an area in which national differences *can* still be sorted out.

Phil Porter's The Christmas Truce

Phil Porter's family-friendly play *The Christmas Truce* (2014)[303] debuted in November of 2014 at the Royal Shakespeare Company, where it ran in repertory with productions of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Love's Labour's Won* as part of the company's efforts to commemorate the war's centenary. While Porter's *Christmas Truce* was afforded an auspicious debut, it was far from the first play to dramatize some aspect of the truces. Indeed, according to director Erica Whyman, the idea to commission a Christmas Truce play was inspired by her work on a revival of one of the event's most celebrated renditions: a scene from the devised piece *Oh What a Lovely War* (1963),[304] developed by the Workshop Theatre under the instruction of Joan Littlewood. *Oh What a Lovely War* is now considered a classic of World War I storytelling largely thanks to its 1969 film adaptation.[305] The play is comprised of satirical vignettes constructed around songs from the period, one of which depicts the exchange of Christmas gifts between English and German soldiers. Porter himself describes *Oh What a Lovely War* as the play that hangs over every other World War I drama in Britain;[306] this is significant in part because it traffics in many prevailing myths about the conflict. While its criticisms of war profiteering and class conflict are acute and in keeping with Littlewood's

[303] Phil Porter, *The Christmas Truce* (London: Oberon Books, 2014).
[304] Theatre Workshop (London, England) and Joan Littlewood, *Oh What a Lovely War* (London : Methuen Drama, 2006).
[305] *The Christmas Truce* program note by Erica Whyman (event program, held in the RSC archives at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in England, 2014).
[306] Phil Porter (playwright) in discussion with the author, September 2022.

sincere left-wing didacticism, the play has become doubly mythologized thanks to its emergence in the 1960s, a period marked by Cold War anxieties and subject to its own uncritical historicization.[307] While *Oh What a Lovely War* is a significant entry in British World War I theatre and while its influence can be detected in Porter's *The Christmas Truce*, there are others that take a decidedly less cynical approach. Remarkably, two musical renditions of the story have grown out of Minnesota and gone on to tour: the opera *Silent Night* (2011),[308] based on the multilingual film *Joyeux Noel* (2005), commissioned by the Minnesota Opera; and *All Is Calm* (2007),[309] an annual play with music at Theatre Latte Da that combines dialogue and Christmas hymns. The former won composer Kevin Puts a Pulitzer Prize for Music, while the latter points to how the Christmas Truce has become not only a global touchstone but a family-friendly Christmas story encased in yuletide music.

In terms of tone, Porter's play resides somewhere between the critical bent of *Oh What a Lovely War* and the yuletide cheer of *All Is Calm*. Structurally, however, the preceding play most akin to it is *A Christmas Truce* (1989)[310] by Douglas Home, which was first produced by Horseshoe Theatre Company at the Haymarket in Basingstoke. Home's rendition begins with the first contact between English and German soldiers on Christmas Eve and follows a series of budding but short-lived relationships. Over the course of the play, plans are laid for a match between the English and Germans. The game itself is presented offstage, with shouts and cheers providing the backdrop as the non-playing soldiers continue to fraternize. Like many versions of the Christmas Truce, characters form bonds with their opponents despite fears of a court martial

[307] Todman, *The Great War*, 104–6.
[308] Kevin Puts, SilentNightOpera.com, *Silent Night*, accessed May 24, 2022, http://silentnightopera.com/.
[309] *All Is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914*, AllIsCalm.org, *All is Calm*, accessed May 24, 2022, https://alliscalm.org/theater-latte-da.
[310] William Douglas Home, *A Christmas Truce: A Play* (London: French, 1990).

and lament the fact that their peace is already doomed. Counterparts Wilson (English) and Brunkner (German) complain about how the politicians have coerced them into making the ultimate sacrifice. "[The] trouble," Wilson says, "is we all get taken in by bloody politicians telling us that this war is the one to end all bloody wars and that we've got to win it, whereas it's quite obvious that, if we win the bloody thing—or if you win—never mind which, all it will achieve, apart from all us poor sods getting killed—will be to sow the seeds of the next bloody war."[311] The play concludes with the men retreating to their trenches and the gunfire resuming over the sounds of the English singing "Abide with Me."

While Home's play dives directly into fraternization and presents a cast of characters very nearly balanced between English and German, Porter's *Christmas Truce* delays the pivotal encounter and overtly privileges the English perspective. The story begins with a village fete in Warwickshire, during which the townspeople play cricket and participate in other springtime activities. The first scene concludes with a photograph of the attendees and a concluding round of cricket before transitioning into the onset of war. Among those heading off to the Front is Bruce Bairnsfather, the real-life cartoonist, humorist, and soldier who crafted a distinct perspective on life at the Front through the mustachioed cartoon character Old Bill. Bairnsfather makes for a convenient hero: not only did he provide his own written account of a Christmas Truce experience, he also hailed from Warwickshire and epitomizes the "soldier writer, poet or dramatist" who, unlike their traumatized, largely silent counterparts, spoke eloquently about their wartime experience and shaped popular understanding of the War.[312] While he naturally took a degree of creative license in dramatizing Bairnsfather, Porter cleaved close his account of the

[311] Home, 48.
[312] Todman, 8.

war, recognizing not only because he was "a free thinker, a great wit, a man who was equally at ease whether talking to a colonel or a private," but also because it resolved much of the need to choose between historical sources.[313] Over the course of the following scenes, Bruce and his company prepare for combat and adjust to life in the trenches. The large cast of soldiers is made up of familiar archetypes: there's Liggins, a hapless ne'er-do-well; Old Bill, a season campaigner who bears a striking resemblance to Bairnsfather's most famous creation; Smith, the bitter complainer; and Bert, the genial romantic, among others. While the bulk of the action centers on the men, one element makes Porters *Christmas Truce* distinct among other renditions: women, specifically nurses at the Clearing Hospital several miles from the Front. The central character of this arc, newly enlisted Phoebe, tests the patience of the commanding, by-the-book Matron; their clash mirrors that between Bairnsfather and commanding officer Colonel Faulkner, who squashes plans to sustain the eponymous truce through an official soccer game at the conclusion of the play. The German soldiers, meanwhile, do not appear onstage until the second act. Thus, Porter's *Christmas Truce* is framed even more conspicuously within the English perspective of the events and within the larger English context as it pertains to life on the home front.

Nevertheless, Porter's *Christmas Truce* incorporates many of the themes and beats common to popular renditions of the narrative. For starters, it centers the camaraderie of the men on the Front and juxtaposes it to the callousness of their commanding officers. The central group of soldiers is collected in Scene Four, during which they trade crude jokes, talk about home, and assure themselves that the war will be over by Christmas—though, as Old Bill and Bert point out, the conventional wisdom was that the wars in South Africa would be over by Christmas,

[313] *The Christmas Truce* program note by Phil Porter (event program, held in the RSC archives at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in England, 2014); Phil Porter in conversation with the author.

"just not the blinkin' Christmas they was on about!"[314] In Scene Eleven, they make first contact with the unseen Germans, who call out "Hey Tommy!" and invite them to play a game in which they take turns shooting each other's targets.[315] Sadly, Liggins gets carried away after hitting the mark, strays too far above the line, and is shot; despite the best efforts of the troops and the staff at the Clearing Hospital, he dies. With the mood low, Bruce arranges a holiday concert party. The resulting spectacle mixes German drag, caricatures, lewd jokes, song and dance, and a selection of *Henry V's* St. Crispin's Day speech delivered by Alf.[316] Even stiff Colonel Faulkner is pleased with the results, though he soon breaks the news to Bruce that Command has ordered reconnaissance and attacks for the Christmas period. "I know it's beastly timing," he says, "but war doesn't stop for Christmas."[317] The first act closes with an ill-fated charge into No Man's Land, after which several men are lost.

Despite the loss of Liggins, the camaraderie between men is eventually extended to the Germans. After gathering in No Man's Land to swap gifts and bury their dead, the soldiers arrange for a photograph, mimicking the one taken at the pre-War fete in Warwickshire. Meanwhile, Phoebe decorates for Christmas, earning the ire of the Matron, who reminds Phoebe that "The rules are made for the good of us all. To ignore them for Christmas would be silly and dangerous."[318] Following the obligatory soccer match, Bruce and his opposite number Kohler tussle over who has the right to go to war. Kohler points out that they "are even of the same blood," being English and Saxons, and observes that in August, the war he joined ostensibly for the purposes of freedom now seems pointless.[319] Later, Bruce is summoned to Faulkner's tent

[314] Porter, *The Christmas Truce*, 18.
[315] Porter, *The Christmas Truce,* 33.
[316] Porter, *The Christmas Truce,* 44.
[317] Porter, *The Christmas Truce,* 48.
[318] Porter, *The Christmas Truce,* 71.
[319] Porter, *The Christmas Truce,* 89.

and ordered to break the truce up. Despite Faulkner's insistence that the enemy must not be humanized, Bruce insists on recognizing their shared traits:

> Do you know, yesterday I was naïve enough to think we were the only heroes in this godforesaken (sic) war? I thought we were the better men. Today I began to realise the men we were fighting—not the Kaiser, not Germany, but the men—were just the same as we are. Just as good, just as foolish, just as homesick, just as hopeless. If tomorrow we're fighting again because we couldn't keep our word what does that make us?[320]

Unsurprisingly, Bruce is unable to sway Faulkner, who furthermore orders him to play the unhappy role of messenger to the men. Kohler accepts the resumption of hostilities and departs with halfhearted overtures toward meeting once the war is over. Despite its Anglo-centric lens, Porter's *Christmas Truce* reiterates the humanity shared between the two parties and the notion that it presented a threat to the leadership's larger objectives for the war.

In addition to repeating the predominant narrative, *The Christmas Truce* makes ample use of Christmas music. This is partly to fulfill its brief as family holiday entertainment—a programmatic choice that, as some reviewers noted, is somewhat incongruous to a wartime tale[321]—though it also suits the pattern of conjoining the story with sport and Christian hymns, as identified by Fitzpatrick. The litany of numbers begins with the village women singing a song to the tune of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" in the first scene; continues through the strains of "Stille Nacht" sung through the German trenches, answered by the tunes of "Hark the Herald Angels" and "God rest ye merry, gentlemen"; and concludes with a medley of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," "God rest ye merry, gentlemen," "Ding Dong! Merrily on high," and "Silent Night." Other Christmas standards are interspersed throughout with military songs, folk tunes, and bawdy limericks. Apart from chiming with the Christo-centric elements wrapped in the

[320] Porter, *The Christmas Truce*, 92.
[321] Michael Billington, "The Christmas Truce review—uneasy family show about a tragic war," *The Guardian* online, December 10, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/dec/10/the-christmas-truce-review.

Christmas Truce narrative, the music fulfills two significant dramaturgical functions in the play. First, it highlights the play's theatricality, a feature that takes center stage during the concert party instigated under the direction of Bruce. That theatricality is also evident in the ways the production hails its audience members, a subject that will be returned to later. Second, the consistent use of hymns reiterates the Christian bona fides shared by the English and Germans. These are nuanced by the character Harris, an erstwhile church warden who reflects on his call to arms while presiding over the makeshift funeral of the men buried in No Man's Land. Thus, the play affirms that overtures to a common humanity are grounded within a shared religion, and furthermore hails the audience as shareholders of that religion, welcoming them into a self-affirming celebration of the *Christmas* in the Christmas Truce.

While *The Christmas Truce*'s narrative beats and seasonal tunes make it consistent with previous iterations of the tale, two aspects distinguish it from the rest of the canon. The first is the manner in which it hails the audience. In addition to frequently addressing attendees with explanations of life on the Front, the production employs sparse but pointed audience participation. Tied to that hailing is the second distinctive quality: the use of sporting culture to frame the story and embody the contours of life at home and on the front. The play's use of soccer and cricket, both in physical embodiment and in a litany of references threaded through the dialogue, demonstrates the degree to which sport not only permeates the soldiers' lives but also resides on a continuum of robust physicality that is also seen in the coordinated drills and maneuvers adopted by the men throughout the play. In addition to evoking the role organized sport supposedly played in preparing men for war and maintaining morale on the Front, the play's physical vocabulary connects character and audience by embodying the familiarity of sport within the unfamiliar environs of war. Tied to both elements is the soccer game that winds

its way through much of act two. The scripting and staging of the game incorporate pointed callouts to English soccer history, including its long rivalry with Germany. By delaying its arrival but nevertheless echoing the game's larger relevance, the play subtly positions the mythical soccer match as the most distinctive aspect of the Christmas Truce, even as it incorporates so many other crucial aspects of the truce narrative.

The opening sequence of the play clues the audience in to its role in the proceedings. As staged at the Royal Shakespeare Company and described in Porter's stage directions, the play begins with a village fete in which audiences are invited to participate.[322] Actors in period dress arrived on the RSC's distinctive thrust stage and set about arranging the scene using the production's rustic, flexible unit set made up of chairs, ladders, wooden boxes, and a prominent striped cloth deployed as a backdrop. As other actors emerged to provide musical accompaniment, a man and woman invited children from the audience to play ball games, mostly revolving around knocking other balls off spindly stands. Periodically, the actors would gently toss the ball into the audience for a friendly game of catch. As described in the text, these games eventually give way to the central element of the fete: a cricket match facilitated by Old Bill and an Umpire. The cricket match continues over the course of the fete with a series of bowlers bowling their way across the stage, their arms arcing overhead to release an imaginary ball toward the batsman.[323] This balletic sequence provides a backdrop to the annual prize draw, featuring a painting by Bairnsfather, and a medley of songs sung by the attending women. During the proceedings, the Vicar blesses the gathering, remarking on a "day on which, by enjoying life's simplest pleasures, we give thanks for the place we're so fortunate to call our

[322] Porter, *The Christmas Truce*, 7.
[323] In cricket, the bowler is the player who throws the ball against the ground, past the batsman, and into the wicket to score. If pitchers pitch in baseball, bowlers bowl in cricket.

home. 'This other Eden' as another Warwickshire lad once put it. 'This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England!'"[324] As the RSC's staging of the scene drew to a close, one final bowler bowled through, the batsman connected, and the whistle of the flying ball transformed into the whistle of a bomb that exploded through the sound system. With that, the summer celebrations give way to war.

In addition to literally incorporating the audience through games, the opening sequence of Porter's *Christmas Truce* establishes sport as a connective tissue that ties together the home front and the Western Front, the past and the present. Breaking down the fourth wall sets the play up to, at points, *present* history to attendees, even as the cast and production team set about *representing* it. Initiating that relationship through games suggests that those in attendance are not only welcomed into this dramatized, historical England but also interpellated into that space as active participants. Sport, meanwhile, provides both a means of making the past familiar to present-day audiences and a link that connects the carefree civilian player of peacetime Warwickshire to the more serious soldier through the medium of his body. Cricket remains an especially significant visual and contextual reference point. Several of the men "bowl" their way offstage in death, echoing the idyllic life they will never return to. Harris, meanwhile, keeps a score of life on the front: "So when something good happens, say the weather perks up for a bit, that's when I give us a run or two."[325] Other references to playing "ruggers" (rugby) or reports of soccer scores from home are threaded throughout the play, though neither is as evocative as cricket nor as narratively significant as the soccer match in the second act.

[324] Porter, *The Christmas Truce*, 9.
[325] Porter, *The Christmas Truce*, 31.

While the opening sequence establishes a permeable fourth wall, much of the production's audience engagement trends toward the presentational rather than the participatory. Over the course of the action, soldiers and nurses narrate their experiences at the Front, starting with a training sequence in the third scene. One motif sees the men provide wry and witty "survival lessons" in the trench, as seen in the first instance, "Trenches Survival, Lesson One: How to Stay Healthy, Warm and Dry. It is not possible to stay healthy, warm, and dry."[326] When coupled with choreographed drills, these addresses not only paint a picture of life on the front but also accentuate the rigorous demands placed on the body. (They occasionally form further connections with the audience, too: during the first survival lesson, mention is made of using pig's grease to insulate the body from cold; in the RSC's production, one of the men approached an audience member with a cannister of grease outstretched, prompting sheepish giggles from the crowd.) As the Section prepares for a Christmas Eve push into No Man's Land, the soldiers describe the various weapons deployed by the Germans and the horrors that await them when they go over the top. As fog descends, the men take up positions behind set pieces scattered across the thrust stage. They run, duck, and slide their way around the space, maneuvering around invisible shells that drop with a whistle and blast. Strobe lights flash, briefly illuminating the crouching figures in harsh, white light. In this moment, the audience transitions from participants in the play and implicit students of the historical lessons to witnesses of the War's horrors. The simple mise-en-scene, supplemented by lights and fog, ensures the focus remains firmly on the bodies of the performers. In this instance, the connection forged between the audience and characters combines with the critical distance of the presentational frame to both

[326] Porter, *The Christmas Truce*, 23.

elevate concern for the characters and create a more intimate understanding of the risks they undertake.

While the presentational frame keeps audiences at arm's length to provide context, participatory engagement returns to the fore in the pivotal soccer match. After the two sides make contact in the second act, arrangements are made for a game. As staged at the RSC, the result is a simply choreographed match played at little more than half-speed. The men played their way from the British goal and toward the walkways jutting into the audience, the thrust stage now reserved exclusively for the match. As play continued on and off the thrust, audience members were drafted in as fellow soldiers and tasked with throwing the ball back in play if it should roll out of bounds. In this way, the audience is interpellated into the match as non-playing soldiers and immersed in the playing space as it extends, in the imagination, across No Man's Land; the RSC's literal space, meanwhile, was almost entirely given over to the match, to the point that dialogue between characters was pressed far upstage to keep the (soccer) playing space clear. Throughout the match, characters continue to connect with each other across battle lines, which sometimes produces comical results: at one point, stand-in goalkeeper Bert offers to give Jurgen a haircut and then briefly steps away to save Schmidt's shot on goal as if it's not a bother at all. The playful tenor of the match changes slightly when German soldier Franz takes a tumble under pressure from Tallis, and his teammates cry out for a penalty. As Bruce takes up a position in goal, Bill offers him the wry assurance that "If there's one thing I know about Germans, they're useless at penalties."[327] This is an ironic wink to the audience, who will no doubt be familiar with the history of English and German encounters, many of which have been settled in

[327] Porter, *The Christmas Truce,* 82.

Germany's favor by penalty shootouts.[328] The results of the penalty are left up to chance, calling the audience in to experience the familiar tension that greats the unpredictability of every major encounter between England and Germany.

As in most dramatizations, the soccer match in Porter's *Christmas Truce* takes up comparatively little time in the overall narrative. Nevertheless, it stages the event more extensively than other versions and gives it an especially significant place in the action. By coming together to play a match that everyone can understand and by resolving the penalty peacefully, the soldiers prove themselves able to embrace their commonalities. Furthermore, the historical reports of plans to play an "official" match between the two sides are echoed by Bruce and Faulkner during their confrontation in scene twenty-four:

> BRUCE: I'm not suggesting we pack up and go home. I'm saying we made an agreement, we should stick to it. There's talk of another game of football tomorrow, a proper one—
> FAULKNER: So you want us to postpone the war just for the sake of a game of football?
> BRUCE: It's not just a game of football! Our men deserve to celebrate Christmas without fear of being killed.[329]

The sentiment "It's not just a game of football" resonates in two ways: first, by suggesting that cooperation and a convivial holiday spirit extends beyond the match; second, by implying that the game has become something more than *just* football. In this sense, the match takes on larger significance by gesturing to the symbolic import of a soccer match as a vessel for peace and validating the suggestion that the men would have played on had the officers not intervened.

In addition to its dramaturgical features, the significance of the soccer match to Porter's *Christmas Truce* is accentuated by the marketing campaign created by the RSC, which inflates

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[328] A penalty is given when a defending player fouls an attacking player within the bounds of the large "box" surrounding the goal. It results in an attacking player taking a shot from twelve yards with only the goalkeeper there to stop it. Penalty shootouts, in which opposing teams take a series of penalties against each other, decide knockout tournament games that have ended in a draw following regulation time and extra time.
[329] Porter, *The Christmas Truce*, 91.

the importance of soccer to the story and trades on some of the mistakes common in Christmas Truce historiography. For example, one of the central images used in marketing the play features men in uniform leaping to head the ball behind a barrier of barbed wire. The image is a colored and stylized duplicate of the one taken in Greece and debunked by several historians, among them Peter Doyle, cited earlier. The play's official trailer, meanwhile, focuses entirely on the match.[330] It opens with shots of men in uniform staring forward with stoic intensity, fake snow falling all around them, the color of the film desaturated to add an aged veneer. Eventually, a shot of a man holding a period-era ball fills the frame. The man drops the ball, which bounces heavily on the faux-snowy floor. A montage of men in full uniform kicking the ball around the snow-covered stage, back-lit by the harsh lights of the auditorium, draws the audience into the spectacle of camaraderie and play. The men tackle each other, pass the ball, head it, and hug in gleeful celebrations. All the while, the soft strains of a choir singing "O Christmas Tree" underscore the match. As the short film draws to a close, the men rise to head the ball, mimicking the misappropriated photograph, and are paused in midair. The title of the play appears against the backdrop of a bright red poppy, another element conspicuously placed on the foreground of the poster. Taken together, the trailer and the poster represent a version of the story grounded almost exclusively in soccer.

Apart from these key advertising materials, the Royal Shakespeare Company also produced several behind-the-scenes videos and community programs that speak to the institutional objectives undergirding the production. One especially significant event was a community drop-in, during which local citizens with family members who served in the war

[330] "The Christmas Truce | Trailer | Royal Shakespeare Company," Royal Shakespeare Company, accessed June 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24WXo8DVplI.

could bring photographs, medals, and diaries to help shape the story.[331] As Porter noted in an introductory video, the RSC's location in Warwickshire inspired the production, making the open house an opportunity not only to conduct research but also connect with the community. While Porter affirms the importance of soccer to the Christmas Truce story, the most revealing aspect of the video is how Whyman frames the story within the larger mission of the RSC:

> I was very keen for the RSC to make sure we commemorated, alongside lots of colleagues in the arts, the moment where the First World War started a hundred years ago. It's important because we're a national company and we, in some sense, need to tell the stories of that nation. But as the Royal Shakespeare Company, we have a special responsibility, I think—Shakespeare set us a kind of challenge in his history plays—to make sure that key moments of British history from which we might be able to learn, which might inspire us, which might reveal us to ourselves, continue to be written and explored and illuminated.[332]

Whyman's deference to the mission of the organization not only fits *The Christmas Truce* into the larger process of commemoration unfolding in Britain during that time but also casts the play within the unofficial charter handed down by Shakespeare himself. The Christmas Truce, then, is not just a story the nation tells itself but a story worthy of none other than Shakespeare's legacy. While signaling the Bard in such a way is a bold statement—and while doing so in some form or fashion may have been part of her job description as deputy director of the organization—Whyman's point about the institution's responsibilities speak to how significant the story of the Christmas Truce was at the time. That significance was not lost on Porter, who admitted to being taken by surprise by the scale of events unfolding in honor of the centenary and moved by the sense of responsibility brought on by the occasion, particularly after meeting with the community members who brought family artifacts pertaining to the war.[333]

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[331] "RSC asks public to help shape Christmas Truce war play," *BBC*, March 8, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-coventry-warwickshire-26496810.
[332] "Erica Whyman and Phil Porter introduce the Christmas Truce," Royal Shakespeare Company, accessed June 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmZSNrJY_Fc.
[333] Phil Porter in conversation with the author.

That *The Christmas Truce* is rendered in such grand terms makes the centrality of soccer to its marketing even more striking. As Whyman herself points out in the behind-the-scenes video and in a separate video summarizing the play,[334] the story has a lot more going for it. Still, soccer predominates in the materials most readily accessible to the public and most likely to be pushed by the advertising apparatus of the company, to the point that it suggests the play is *about a soccer match*, rather than an extraordinary event of which a soccer match was a part. Considering the larger apparatus surrounding the commemoration of the Christmas Truce in England at the time, it may be that positioning the play as a soccer story was unavoidable; whether thanks to cultural fascination or market forces, soccer may have been so tightly entwined with the Christmas Truce as to be a necessary component of any campaign intended to make it part of the national consciousness, not to mention commercially successful. As Porter himself admitted, the inclusion of soccer in the climactic encounter between the English and the Germans borders, in this context, on an obligatory scene:

> You can obviously write a play about the war and not mention [soccer], but if you're talking about Christmas Eve, it is probably so central to everybody's understanding of what that particular Christmas is. It's almost like—not a fairytale—it's kind of folklore, I suppose. It relates a little bit to what really happened and what matters, the actual facts of it, [but] because it's sort of part of our national mythology—and, you know, theatre's very good at myth—I thought, well, I'll just tell the myth.[335]

For Porter, the decision to "tell the myth" speaks as much to the challenge of using creative license responsibly and the impossibility of drafting a rendition that satisfies every historical dispute as it does to recognizing the role the Christmas Truce plays within the national mythology. Nevertheless, the interpellation of the audience as non-playing soldiers, the ironic winks to their sporting history, and the general engagement with the public evident throughout

[334] "The Christmas Truce | Synopsis | Royal Shakespeare Company," Royal Shakespeare Company, accessed June 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ngfTVUEIeg.
[335] Phil Porter in conversation with the author.

the play and its supplementary programming ensures the match becomes a communal undertaking, a part of the story in which all participants can find stakes.

Furthermore, the wink to England's footballing history with Germany plays on the modern state of their sporting rivalry, certainly for laughs but also in recognition of how their sporting fortunes are haunted by their old nemesis. England's one and only World Cup win came on home soil thanks to a 4-2 victory over the West Germany; since then, they have faced the Germans numerous occasions in international tournaments, often with disappointing results. As Michael Burrows and Joseph Maguire observed, the 1996 European Championship meeting between the two, which also took place in England, brought the two nations' changing fortunes to the fore. At the time, power in Europe was shifting in Germany's favor. Partly as a result, the English press's framing of the match tended toward an anti-European, latent anti-German sentiment couched within the long-term nature of the rivalry, as well as a desire for England's "Three Lions" to restore a "feelgood factor" to the nation; the German press, on the other hand, tended to avoid the nation's fraught past, preferring to spotlight an optimistic present and bright future.[336] As Burrows and Maguire summarized, "A key feature of the sports process," particularly in such historically charged encounters, "is that it is used by different groups—established, emergent, and outsider groups—to represent, maintain and/or challenge identities"[337]; this often induces citizens "to have a stronger and more emotive I/we identification with their nation rather than with the we-identity notion of themselves as *Europeans*."[338] As Porter and Whyman indicate in their interviews, their rendition of the Christmas Truce is, for all

[336] Michael Burrows and Joseph Maguire, "'Not the Germans again': Soccer, Identity Politics and the Media," in *Power and Global Sport: Zones of Prestige, Emulation, and Resistance*, ed. Joseph Maguire (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 130-142.
[337] Burrows and Maguire, 142.
[338] Burrows and Maguire, 132.

the claims of finding a common humanity, a story tailored to the "we-image" of the English people. Incorporating audiences into the soccer match at the heart of the story and playing, albeit cheekily, to anxieties about Germany's footballing superiority is a subtle but effective way to ensure that we-image has a contemporary thrust consistent with the sport's larger role in national identification.

Football Remembers: Reenactments at Home and Abroad

While the RSC's *Christmas Truce* brought one of World War I's most remarkable events to one of Britain's most honored stages, other initiatives brought the story directly under soccer's wing and, in many cases, directly to the pitch. Driving many of these events was a participatory thrust that extended well past the fourth wall of the Royal Shakespeare's Company's production. Whereas the RSC used audience engagement to forge an affective connection with the characters on stage and with the history being depicted, other initiatives drafted participants in via reenactments, often in a way that situated the events firmly under the auspices of soccer governments. A video produced by UEFA, for example, drafted leading stars of the English, Welsh, German, and French national teams to recite diary entries from soldiers describing the truce, while administrators and historical greats, including then-UEFA President and France legend Michel Platini, eulogized the sport's incredible ability to bring people together.[339] As in Fox Sport's "World War Truce," the UEFA video was given a curious artistic framing, that of a sketch artist drawing a picture of an English and German soldier shaking hands, while the artist himself looked out over the Rue-Petillion Military Cemetery in Fleurbaix, France. While it

[339] "UEFA marks 100th anniversary of World War One truce," Union European de Football Association, accessed May 24, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYv6dHy5TJE.

obviously trades on many of the assumptions and assertions made by soccer-centric renditions of the story, the act of substitution performed by Platini et al. is a distinct approach that epitomizes the ways in which soccer was insinuated into the centennial commemorations through reenactment. Rather than just inflate soccer's role, the leading lights of Europe were quite literally cast into the narrative, much as the sport at large was cast as the most effective means to "remember" the Great War.

The remainder of this chapter shifts away from the stage and toward the spaces in which the role of soldier/athlete was positioned to establish a connective tissue between the past and the present, ostensibly in service of a continuing peace mediated through sport. While Porter's *The Christmas Truce* and other such narratives validate the centrality of soccer that has threatened to become orthodoxy, placing them on a continuum with a range of reenactments only clarifies the potency of that threat. This is partly because reenactments, whether they be costumed portrayals or commemorative matches, were so widespread, playing out everywhere from a dusty pitch in Afghanistan, where British and German soldiers, now allies in the "War on Terror," played out a Christmas match in their fatigues[340]; to a youth tournament made up of teams from around Europe, where players were accompanied by writers tasked with helping them craft their own entries into the corpus of WWI literature;[341] to the online realms of video games such as *Verdun*, a WWI-era shooter whose Christmas Truce simulation was so successful, they did it again two years later for charity.[342] It is also because reenactments and symbolic acts, particularly those aimed at a wide public, are driven by what plays like *The Christmas Truce* only deploy

[340] "Christmas Truce Football Match in Kabul," Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, created December 24, 2014, https://www.dvidshub.net/video/384315/christmas-truce-football-match-kabul.
[341] "Premier League footballers read Christmas truce poem by Ian McMillan," WriteOutLoud.net, *Write Out Loud*, first posted December 10, 2014, https://www.writeoutloud.net/public/blogentry.php?blogentryid=45860.
[342] Joe Donnelly, "Verdun to reenact WW1 Christmas Truce for War Child charity," *PC Gamer*, December 16, 2016, https://www.pcgamer.com/verdun-to-reenact-ww1-christmas-truce-for-war-child-charity/.

sparingly: participation. That participation, that willingness to substitute oneself into the role, embodies the claim that those who die will not be forgotten. For some, that means adopting period dress and mannerisms in an attempt at "authentic" living history; for others, it simply means donning the ostensible spirit of the even by taking part in a game.

Rather than isolate a particular performance, I return instead to the larger programs undertaken by the soccer governance in England and the larger European federation of UEFA. As these programs indicate, apart from the obvious care put into the events by participants and military overseers, the role of the reenactment as it relates to the larger issue of commemoration is focused on the experience it assumes to provide the public. British MP Andrew Murrison, who was in charge of overseeing Britain's commemorations of the First World War, indicated in 2013 that soccer would have a significant role to play in proceedings because of "the totemic significance of the Christmas Truce in 1914."[343] Staging a match in Belgium, he argued, was considered "a no-brainer in terms of an event that is going to reach part of the community that perhaps might not get terribly entrenched in this." The "this" Murrison appears to refer to is the larger set of issues surrounding commemorations of World War I, which included renewed scholarly debate about, among other things, whether Britain should have entered the conflict in the first place. Thankfully for Murrison, the Christmas Truce is a safe event to rally around, not because it had real relevance to the outcome of the war, as he points out, but because it operates at a "deeply, intensely, personal level" and is "something that people really latch onto." "Frankly," he continued, "most people aren't really interested in the grand strategy of this time. If you can engage them in things like the Christmas truce then I think that you do offer them

[343] Nick Hopkins and Richard Norton-Taylor, "Kickabout that captured futility of first world war to be replayed for centenary," *The Guardian*, February 8, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/08/first-world-war-kickabout-replayed-centenary.

something that is of relevance and use and of interest to them." As Emma Hanna observed, Murrison's declaration rankled with many military historians, though she herself saw the burgeoning interest in the Christmas Truce giving historians the ideal opportunity to overcome their fear of "the sometimes yawning gap between history and myth" and engage in the conversation.[344] In any case, what Murrison appears to admit is that the Christmas Truce not only represents politically safe material but is also an event that speaks to the "personal, parochial" interests of the people. Implicit in that statement is not only the notion that the common people are uninterested in critically examining the War but the sense that the Christmas Truce's soccer-based qualities make it an especially appropriate vessel for commemoration.

As it happened, several matches did take place in Belgium, though the British government's plans to stage an elite-level international friendly, with the recently retired David Beckham returning to the pitch to captain England, did not come to fruition.[345] One "match" that did receive significant coverage was a kickabout undertaken by a group of living history experts who were already seasoned Christmas Truce campaigners, and whose 2014 rendition of the event was engrossed in the commemorative apparatus created by UEFA. The event in question was staged on a stretch of land in Ploegsteert, commonly known in the United Kingdom as "Plug Street," in Belgium, near the site of one of the truces. It featured men from four countries—Britain, France, Belgium, and Germany—in period uniforms representing, among others,

[344] Emma Hanna, "The Christmas Truce," *Gateways to the First World War*," University of Kent, https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/gateways/tag/football-remembers/.
[345] Nicholas Hellen, "Beckham called up for 1914 replay," *The Times*, June 23, 2013, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/beckham-called-up-for-1914-replay-0jsfcjm9hrt. The initiative was influenced by the WWI Christmas Truce and Flanders Peace Field Project lead by author and media producer Don Mullan. Don Mullan, "WWI Christmas Truce and Flanders Peace Field Project," *DonMullan.org*, accessed January 12, 2023, https://donmullan.org/hope-initiatives-international/wwi-christmas-truce-flanders-peace-field-project-2/.

companies such as the Lancashire Fusiliers and the Seaforth Highlanders.[346] The predominant British contingent represented the Royal Welsh army, members of which played their German counterparts in a separate match after the reenactment; grandsons of the commanding Welsh and German officers who served in World War I were also present and participated in an exchange of gifts.[347] Prior to the main event, the men recreated trenches in the soil and performed the meeting of Allied and German soldiers, complete with Christmas trees in hand.

The degree of preparation and dedication required to achieve the level of production seen at Plug Street is indicative of why participants such as Chris Barker prefer the term "living history." During our conversation, Barker recoiled at the term "reenactment," which he described as "a bit tacky."[348] To Barker, "reenactors" are those who show up solely for staged battles and approach history without the requisite seriousness. What living history performers aim for is complete immersion in the lives of the Great War's soldiers, including going on miles-long marches in period boots and sleeping for nights on end in cold, wet trenches. For Barker, one of the key objectives to this exercise is making history more tangible to students. "The idea is to be that living Tommy," he enthuses, "to show them the things I collected, tell them how it worked, and make their history day come real."[349] Barker speaks with complete sincerity about the value students can derive from encountering someone who can "live the part, live the role."[350] This makes his group's participation in UEFA's commemorative affair striking in that it leant the

[346] Rose Troup Buchanan, "Christmas Day Truce 1914: Volunteers re-enact football game on Belgium fields," *The Independent*, December 23, 2014, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/christmas-day-truce-1914-volunteers-reenact-football-game-on-belgium-fields-9941995.html.
[347] "WW1 Christmas truce is re-enacted by Welsh and German soldiers," *BBC*, December 14, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-30451627.
[348] Chris Barker (living history performer) in conversation with the author, August 2022.
[349] Barker, in conversation with the author.
[350] Barker, in conversation with the author.

affair a veneer of historical authenticity, even as the event played on an ahistorical understanding of soccer's role in the truce.

Despite this, Barker recognizes that the Christmas Truce has traction with the public largely because of the sporting angle, even if recognizing that fact might appear to undercut his aims for veracity. Indeed, according to his own research, the crops at the field in question, sugar beets, would not have allowed for playing any organized soccer (though the beets themselves may have served as makeshift balls for a simple kickabout). Nevertheless, he recognizes the capacity soccer has to engage participants:

> It's almost like a gateway to encourage the young to learn and say, "look, this happened, what it's representing is two sides coming together and being normal by having a common interest." The common interest was really the Christmas festival. People were obviously a much higher church-going population at the time, so it would have been very important to them. But I think the football has kind of taken off as a way of—it wouldn't really be so much the religious angle now.[351]

Apart from the implicit point about soccer eclipsing religion's cultural sway, Barker's observations on common interests are notable because they echo similar comments he made after the obligatory kickabout during the 2014 event:

> You have to enjoy yourself, to exhaust yourself and throw yourself in the mud—but it's symbolic of what you're doing. There are obviously no rules; it's who gets the ball first, and make sure to kick it in the right direction (preferably in the direction of the goal), and you pass it to your own side. It was good to symbolize that moment where you shared something—you put down all your hatred and hostilities and you became—you just, um, pursued a *friendly* rivalry, as opposed to a deadly rivalry.[352]

Barker's commentary is significant, first because he focuses on the experience of the match: the exhaustion, the mud, the need to react and follow only the most basic outline of the game. This speaks to the high value he places on the tactile experience of playing the game, a quality that

[351] Barker, in conversation with the author.
[352] "Countries re-enact historic 1914 Christmas truce football game," Associated Press Archive, filmed December 20, 2014, posted August 3, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYKWCmdtx9c.

chimes with the level of immersion he associates with the "authenticity" of living history. Yet even in the moment, Barker places that game within a symbolic context, pointing to how the game he is participating in is representative of a time when the relationship between parties shifted from that of a deadly rivalry to a friendly one. Then and now, Barker's endeavors to make history come alive with his own sweat are held in tension with the ahistorical hold soccer has on the social memory of the Christmas Truce, a tension that seems to promise a path for the greater public engagement living history experts strive for.

Barker's description of the experience and the philosophy to which he subscribes call to mind Rebecca Schneider's work with American Civil War reenactors. In *Performance Remains*, Schneider observes that "historical events like wars are never discretely completed, but carry forth in embodied cycles of memory that do not delimit the remembered to the past."[353] This sentiment ties specifically to the epitaph "The Civil War isn't over, and that's why we fight," a declaration that speaks to the ongoing battle over the true nature of the Civil War, itself now a flashpoint for divisive rhetoric and political manipulation. While the "truth" of World War I may not be as fraught in the United Kingdom, the veracity of historical claims about such events as the Christmas Truce and the question of whether it was a just war is an ongoing concern. As Schneider further observes, "For many history reenactors, reenactments are more than 'mere' remembering but are in fact the ongoing event itself, negotiated through sometimes radically shifting affiliations with the past *as* present."[354] Based on Schneider's own interviews, the level of investment in "authenticity" varies from performer to performer. It is this very flexibility, though, that makes reenactment such a potent arena in which to examine and contest history. As

[353] Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Abingdon; Routledge, 2011), 32.
[354] Schneider, 32.

Schneider contends, "'Reenactment' is not *one* thing in relation to the past, but exists in a contested field of investment across sometimes wildly divergent affiliations to the question of what constitutes fact,"[355] a point that provides the foundation for her to challenge the notion of "performance as of disappearance" as a limited grasp of performance "predetermined by [the West's] cultural habituation to the logic of the archive."[356]

For Schneider, the past can be found in acts quotidian or extraordinary that persist across time through numerous reiterations. "If the past is never over, or never completed," she observes, "'remains' might be understood not solely as object or document material, but also as the immaterial labor of bodies engaged in and with that incomplete past: bodies striking poses, making gestures, voicing calls, reading words, singing songs, or standing witness."[357] As the reenactments of the Christmas Truce demonstrate, one could also add "playing a game" to that list: like striking poses, making gestures, and so on, play is at once a quotidian act that can take on a larger resonance when framed as performance. It is essential to recall, however, that play, like other performances, makes and remakes its subject on its own terms, often subverting expectations and relishing in the unpredictable. To play a game of soccer is not just to restore behavior in the form of recognizable gestures, reconstructed military drills, or predictable rhythms of life from yesteryear, but also to leave some elements up to chance and contest. This is not to discount Schneider's point or to suggest that archival knowledge retains its historical validity because it is immune to unpredictability; if anything, an expansive grasp of history allows us to reckon with how all knowledge is subject to playful reconfigurations (or outright cheating) in classification and representation. Rather, it is to say that despite all its historical

[355] Schneider, 56.
[356] Schneider, 98.
[357] Schneider, 33.

roots, there is something decidedly *present* about a soccer game, something that requires the participant to "exhaust themselves and throw themselves in the mud," even as they keep one on the symbolic framing of their endeavor. As Murrison implies and as Barker seems to accept, the soccer match is appropriate not just because of its significance to the Christmas Truce but because it can use this familiar physical exertion and symbolic heft to hold the interest of a public seemingly disinterested in macro-level history; perhaps that at least has something to do with the fact that the predominance of the sport is very much a force to be reckoned with in the here and now.

That predominance is further accentuated in the memorial dedicated by UEFA at the site of Barker et al.'s living history presentation. Unlike the Football Remembers memorial in England, UEFA's entry, dedicated by then-President Michel Platini, is a more restrained affair: a ball atop a plinth, crafted with a rusty effect, with the UEFA logo and the years 1914 and 2014 stamped into it. Platini used the opportunity to premiere the official video of European stars and legends reciting diary entries from soldiers who saw the Christmas truce and provided his own addition to the memorial in the form of a soccer ball. Indeed, by the end of the ceremony, the "official" Christmas Truce ball was just one of many marking the spot just a few yards from where a piece of history had been revived.

While stylistically distinct, the Football Remembers memorial at the Royal Arboretum fulfills a similar function for a more expansive project in England. At its highest level, Football Remembers was a nationwide initiative funded by the British Council, the FA, the Premier League, the English Football League (EFL), and the Professional Footballers Association (PFA). It was a multi-year undertaking featuring events and programs conducted between 2014 and 2018, marking one hundred years since the beginning and end of World War I, respectively. In

addition to the memorial and requisite poppies, 2014 saw every Premier League, Championship, and FA Cup match on the weekend of December 6-8 commemorate the truce with a collective team photo; professional and amateur players were also encouraged to participate.[358] Players from all over could post their photographs to social media with the tag #FootballRemembers, and some of the photographs were later collected into a commemorative website. Youth teams from around Europe were also sent to participate in a special Christmas Truce tournament in Belgium, where they were accompanied by poets who helped them craft their own reflective works on the significance of the Christmas Truce; many of the same youth also formed a choir that backed The Farm's charity single "All Together Now."[359] In 2018, the FA, Premier League, EFL, and PFA celebrated Armistice Day by planting trees at stadiums and training grounds; creating the "Tull 100" project to celebrate Arthur Tull, a military pioneer and one of the first Black professional players; hosting several official games of remembrance; and funding a play entitled *The Greater Game*, the story of Clapton Orient, whose players enlisted in the military to help form the first Footballers' Battalion.[360]

In addition to marketing these events and coordinating them with high-level British leadership, organizers took pains to integrate the project within British cultural institutions and military history. As evidenced in the UEFA and Fox Sports video, art and literature played a role in bolstering the story's gravitas. Poet Ian McMillan was tasked to craft "The Game: Christmas Day, 1914," a new poem inspired by the works generated during the under-12 tournament in Belgium. The piece then received a filmed reading featuring Premier League players Vincent

[358] "English football to commemorate Christmas Truce match centenary," *The Guardian*, October 2, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/oct/02/english-football-commemorate-centenary-1914-christmas-truce.
[359] "What is Football Remembers?" (explanatory document, housed in the Football Remembers website, accessed through the UK Web Archive via the British Library).
[360] "Football Remembers," *The Premier League*, accessed June 13, 2022, https://www.premierleague.com/football-remembers#:~:text=The%20Premier%20League%2C%20The%20FA,end%20of%20World%20War%20One.

Kompany, Wojciech Szczesny, and Charlie Austin, all brought together under a partnership between the British Council, the Poetry Society, and the Premier League.[361] Grassroots cultural production extended even further thanks to an educational packet focused entirely on the Christmas Truce and distributed to some 30,000 schools by the British Council. In keeping with Murrison's efforts to connect with the populace, the packet begins by arguing that "Football has the power to bring us together and to engage young people who would not otherwise feel part of the First World War centenary."[362] Despite this strong opening declaration, the background information provided in the packet equivocates on football's role in the event, saying "it seems that they even played football" and "To this day, there is debate about whether or not anyone really played football in No Man's Land." Nevertheless, several of the activities contained in the packet encourage students to learn about the history of World War I-era soccer, design their own memorials, and practice their own soccer playing skills. It even offers a list of soccer-related museums, including those operated by Premier League clubs, among its list of resources for further exploration. While the packet includes and makes numerous references to selected primary sources, encouraging students to work from them as they draft their own diaries and participate in conflict resolution games, altogether it represents a piece of soccer-related propaganda that not only integrates soccer institutions into history but demonstrates how tightly entwined those institutions are with the government. That it at once asserts the incredible power of the sport, waffles on its actual role in the truce, and yet continues to center soccer even while paying deference to primary sources gives students license to perform similar ahistorical commemorative acts.

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[361] "Premier League footballers read Christmas truce poem by Ian McMillan," *Write Out Loud*

[362] *Football Remembers: World War I Christmas Truce Education Packet* (educational packet, held in the archives of the National Football Museum in England, 2014).

That union of institutions is further accentuated by a reenactment and commemorative match that unfolded at the home of Aldershot Town FC, a fifth-tier club based in the garrison town of Aldershot just outside London. Aldershot is an appropriate location for such events considering it is, as many officials and commentators were keen to point out, the "home of the British Army." Over two nights, Aldershot's humble Electrical Services Stadium played host to visiting military, government, and soccer dignitaries as it commemorated the events of the Christmas Truce. The first night was a concert series featuring members of local choirs and readings of poetry and other materials by area leaders. The centerpiece was an excerpt of the one-man play *Our Friends, the Enemy* by playwright Alex Gwyther,[363] which had recently enjoyed a successful run at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. The excerpt was acted out on the pitch by several men in full dress, complete with barricades set up to indicate the opposing trenches, real weapons firing blanks, and the obligatory "impromptu" soccer match, which the Germans won 2-1. The second night saw the British and German military teams play out a commemorative match at the stadium, with FA chairman Greg Dyke and England national team legend Sir Bobby Charlton in attendance. The match was preceded by the Marching Band of the Royal Logistics Corps and classical singer Marilena Grant, who sang "Silent Night" in English and German. On this occasion, the English prevailed 1-0. Each evening commanded an attendance of fewer than 3,000 people—significant numbers for a small garrison town.

Despite being "the only joint First World War commemoration planned between the Football Association and the Army"[364] and despite its relatively low attendance, the "Game of Truce" and the performance that preceded it encapsulated the union of military, history, and

[363] Alex Gwyther, *Our Friends, the Enemy* (London: Oberon, 2013).
[364] "Shots Host Game of Truce," *Aldershot Town FC*, published December 17, 2014, https://www.theshots.co.uk/shots-host-game-of-truce/.

soccer that the Christmas Truce celebrations advanced. On the surface, the excerpt of Gwyther's play performs similarly to the reenactment in Plug Street in that it traces the beats of the Christmas Truce narrative, with the significant substitution of the pristine Electrical Services Stadium pitch for the soggy one-time battlefields of Belgium. Dramatization-cum-reenactment thus extended from the comparatively "authentic" environs of the Front, where soccer had to be played out in improvised circumstances, to an arena that actualized soccer's preeminence in the narrative. Furthermore, the stadium's placement in the home of the British Army reinforced the tacit, but hardly subtle, intertwining of military and sporting history. That part of that performance is delivered through the text of Gwyther's successful play, fresh from success at the world-famous Fringe, echoes the capital deployed by the Royal Shakespeare Company and the various artistic initiatives that helped synthesize this union of institutions with the help of creative license. The commemorative match between the British and German military teams, meanwhile, heightens the legitimacy of other commemorative matches by bringing the game into a stadium, complete with kits, referees, and floodlights. While the kickabout in Belgium might be closer to the "real thing" by virtue of its improvised terrain, the game in Aldershot paid greater deference to the organizations who combined for Football Remembers. This was, after all, the "official" match commemorating the Christmas Truce, at least as far as the English were concerned.

Apart from the coordination required to stage these reenactments and commemorative matches, there is one other feature of the events and the way they were reported that is worth noting: the need to have a score. As mentioned, playing a game implies an inherent unpredictability, even if that game is meant to have historical resonance. That very unpredictability is what makes playing games as acts of commemoration so appealing: it

provides an opportunity to replay one small part of history. Under the auspices of Football Remembers, the nation not only got to celebrate the camaraderie and good feeling of sport but to commune with history *through* sport. However, the opportunity to play the Christmas Truce match again contributes to a larger attempt to revise the past into continuity with a more desirable present. Joseph Roach uses the term "surrogation" to describe the process through which cultures reproduce or re-create themselves by filling actual or perceived vacancies in social roles with new performances or performers.[365] The manner in which soccer governments sought to dominate commemorations of the Christmas Truce speaks perhaps to a very deliberate attempt to act as surrogate in these circumstances. In considering how historic practices are adapted to ever changing conditions, Roach further reminds the reader that no action or sequence of actions can be repeated exactly but must instead be reinvented; "In this improvisational behavioral space, memory reveals itself as imagination."[366] Thus, by making a new game of the Christmas Truce and by allowing it to be played out so expansively, soccer governments engaged the improvisational behavioral space of performance to induce participants to imagine other histories.

While Football Remembers and other peddlers of the Christmas Truce myth are sometimes quick to equivocate on the veracity of a single Christmas Truce match, they are happy to pay deference to the role sport *can* play in fostering peace while encouraging students, volunteers, and members of the public to view history through a sporting prism. Staging a peaceful sporting contest between onetime mortal enemies, on one of the most prominent stages in England or on the historic battlefields of Belgium, rigs representations of the game to support

[365] Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 2.
[366] Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 29.

that point, tacitly reinforcing the "orthodox" view of the Christmas Truce by suggesting that the Beautiful Game triumphs over all other concerns, just as it did on the makeshift pitches of Plug Street. Of course, revising history is not always about fostering peace; in fact, it is very often about keeping the contest going. The extent of English commemorations, which incorporated so many of the programmatic features adopted by UEFA and added an extensive educational component, suggests that the story has an outsized significance to the nation conditioned, at least in part, by the ways in which sport and the military draw legitimacy from one another.[367] That alone suggests favor for the parochial interests of the island nation rather than a truly collaborative project undertaken with the rest of Europe—not surprising, perhaps, for a country that would soon vote to leave the European Union. As Roach notes of his research into circum-Atlantic performance, to understand how performance works *within* a unified culture, which "exists only as a convenient but dangerous fiction," one must understand how performance operates *between* cultures, i.e., often in an oppositional manner that draws clear, if contrived, distinctions.[368] As decades of sociological research and sports journalism shows, soccer encounters between England and Germany are especially rife for stimulating nationalistic feeling, particularly in England. Any chance to revisit that contest is an opportunity to rehearse for cultural superiority.

Despite the political tenor of the commemorative match in Aldershot, the attending military figures, in keeping with political overseers such as Murrison, were not keen to engage

[367] While presenting a selection of this chapter at the British Society for Sports History conference in 2022, an attendee asked about the significance of the Christmas Truce story in Germany. I confessed to knowing little about Germany's relationship to the story and to assuming that it had greater significance in England; my answer was greeted with knowing laughter by the largely British crowd.
[368] Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 5.

with the larger significance of the Great War. When Simon Hattenstone, reporting on the match for *The Guardian*, inquired about that very subject, he was met with a predictable response:

> Many people know that the assassination of Franz Ferdinand started the first world war, but few can explain what the war was about. Did the two captains know? They eyed each other in silence. Senior army press officer Chris Fletcher intervened. "Now this is about a football match, not about why we had a first world war." Was the army censoring the Guardian? "I'm just directing you that this is about a football match. Not why we had a first world war."[369]

Fletcher's somewhat ironic intervention ensured the conversation remained on the match at hand but only by deferring to the larger institutional embargo on discussing the war's controversial rationale. Hattenstone himself speaks to some of the reasons why when he opines that "the truce and the poets were the only decent thing to emerge from the war that was supposed to end all wars." Granted, that notion is shrouded in its own mythology, as is the notion, repeated by Hattenstone, that the truce was the result of "the squaddies taking spontaneous and unilateral action" in defiance of the officers. Taken together, Fletcher's deference to the match, framed by Murrison's notion that football was the ideal way to engage citizens who would otherwise be unreached, points to how much soccer as an institution was deployed by the government to dictate rather than support the terms of remembrance. Even when not being centered in the narrative of the Truce itself, soccer could still distract from the larger political issues entangled in the war. This is a prime example of soccer's supposed "non-political" nature being played to great effect: despite having enormous political weight in the form of institutional support, soccer can be deftly employed to mask "real" politics under the guise of simply playing a game.

Ultimately, what the Christmas Truce initiatives demonstrate is that the notion soccer can foster peace became a significant rallying cry for advancing the powers of the sports-industrial

[369] Simon Hattenstone, "Christmas truce: a mythical football match revisited 100 years later," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/18/first-world-war-truce-football-match-replayed-centenary.

complex. In this sense, the initiatives play with soccer in a manner contrary to that seen in *Guapa* and *The Wolves*: rather than playing against generalizations that reinforce institutional barriers, these events were positioned to embrace myth in services of a nationalistic social memory. Crucial to that endeavor is the inflated myth of soccer on the Western Front, which moved from the margins of soldiers' accounts to center stage in depictions, reenactments, popular histories, and even investigative pieces designed to challenge that very myth. The truth, of course, is that soccer emerged in No Man's Land out of a much larger system of cooperation between men who shared cultural values that extend well beyond the sport. Even if the kickabouts were impromptu, the events that allowed for it to emerge were not spontaneous, nor was the "common humanity" found between the troops uncovered in an epiphany; indeed, that common humanity is very much rooted in a shared heritage united by religion, monarchical family ties, race, and a history of economic and intellectual exchange, albeit one fraught with competing political interests. What this case study demonstrates is that the forces that invest in soccer have the capacity to play on it to revise history for greater political efficacy in the present. They can play on the common love of the game to inflate its role in a profound historical moment, thus giving its contemporary power a convincing base in the past. They can play to the interests of the public by using sport to draw them into a nationwide project of commemoration that suits their terms and, by extension, cyclically reinforces the game as the purview of those ultimately disinterested in the larger tussles over "real" history. They can re-play history on the pitch, at once communing with the past and at the same time tapping the potential to revise it in continuity with a more optimistic present. In short, soccer may not be played to stop a war, but it can quite literally *play* a significant role in reconfiguring that war's public character.

The mythologization of history is a facet of the next chapter's central case study: President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, whose expansion of cultural capital is facilitated by a deep familiarity with the Turkish soccer establishment and proxy stakes in an Istanbul-based club. Erdoğan's history as an amateur player is marked by genuine success but also by a sense of untapped potential that conveniently accentuates how well he understands the nation's most popular sport. While perhaps unable to command the game as much as he would like, Erdoğan benefits from both the politicization of soccer in Turkey, which far precedes his ascension to the presidency, and from access to the mechanisms of power that tie the state apparatus to the ostensibly private apparatus of the professional leagues. Ultimately, the degree to which Erdoğan or any other political figure can truly manipulate the sport, particularly from the pitch, is contingent on the level of institutional support available to them and the nature of the performative transformation sought. To that end, I juxtapose Erdoğan's sporting politics, consistent with inflated shows of macho superiority demonstrated by other authoritarian leaders, with the gestural politics of athlete activists, particularly as it pertains to taking a knee in the elite European game. While seemingly distinct phenomena, the two examples illustrate varying approaches to leveraging sport for the accrual of political power, as well as different orientations to what the sporting arena offers in the way of transformative potential. The question of who wields true power to shape the game—the authoritarian who can rig the sport to his advantage but cannot sway the populace, or the activists whose repertoire can shift the discourse but also be reiterated into meaninglessness—strikes at the very heart of persistent debates over the political or "non-political" nature of sports, the efficacy (or lack thereof) of gestures, and the "real" nature of performativity, which is haunted both by linguistic migrations and the inconvenient truth that public performance alone rarely constitutes material action.

Chapter 3—Playing for Power: Erdoğan's Soccer Politics and the Age of Performative Activism

In the summer of 2019, the United States Women's National Team (USWNT) embarked on another successful World Cup campaign. The tournament opened with an unprecedented 13-0 thrashing of Thailand and closed with a relatively comfortable 2-0 win over the Netherlands, which sealed a record-extending fourth world title. The tournament was a comprehensive showcase of the USWNT's supremacy in the women's game, even amidst the growing powers in Europe. It was also a lightning rod for controversy in several respects. First, the tournament followed closely on the heels of the USWNT's lawsuit against the United States Soccer Federation (USSF), which accused U.S. soccer's governing body of perpetuating egregious pay inequity. It took nearly three years for the team to settle out of court for $24 million and a promise to be paid at a rate equal to the men for all friendly and tournament appearances. Second, the USWNT was criticized for their on-pitch behavior, particularly during the 13-0 victory over Thailand, when the players performed to their limits and enthusiastically celebrated each goal despite beating their opponents so comprehensively. Finally, a social media tussle between then-President Donald Trump and USWNT star and co-captain Megan Rapinoe brought an explicitly political tension to proceedings. The exchange began when Rapinoe (somewhat profanely) told soccer magazine *Eight by Eight* that she would not go to the White House should the USWNT win the World Cup. Trump responded first by tweeting that she "should WIN first before she talks!" and then by inviting the team to the White House, "win or lose," but with the

admonition to "Be proud of the Flag that you wear."[370] Taken together, the 2019 World Cup campaign became a microcosm of sporting politics, with the question of the USWNT's success on the pitch proving the lynchpin that connected labor organizing, policing of on-pitch behavior, and framing within national politics

The clash between Trump and Rapinoe, coupled with the pursuit of pay equity, cast the USWNT as progressive sporting role-models and brought to the fore many of the competing political forces and dispositions marking out territory on the pitch.[371] Rapinoe had already earned the ire of the USSF in 2015 when she followed Colin Kaepernick in taking a knee during the national anthem, a protest aimed at drawing attention to anti-Black violence perpetuated by the police. The USSF responded to Rapinoe's protest by mandating players stand during the anthem; it would change that policy in 2020 following the global outcry sparked by the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor.[372] Though Rapinoe and her teammates complied with the USSF's initial demands to stand, the incident coincided with a downturn in her form and a newfound status as activist and rabblerouser, one she continued to use to good effect in support of LGBTQ+ rights. Trump, meanwhile, had benefitted from a conservative strain of politicization and militarization evident in sport while campaigning for President. As Andrews asserts, his rise was "aided and abetted" by *uber-spot*, which "served as a surreptitious proxy, unobtrusively articulating the ideological and affective orientations bolstering the Trump

[370] Betsy Klein, "Trump: Soccer star Megan Rapinoe 'should WIN first before declining WH invitation, says he will invite them 'win or lose," *CNN*, June 26, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/26/politics/donald-trump-megan-rapinoe-white-house/index.html.
[371] Amanda Marcotte, "Women's World Cup was a triumph – and totally trigged the right-wing snowflakes," July 9, 2019, https://www.salon.com/2019/07/09/womens-world-cup-was-a-triumph-and-totally-triggered-the-right-wing-snowflakes/.
[372] Jordan Mendoza, "US Soccer Repeals Policy Requiring Players to Stand for National Anthem," *USA Today*, February 28, 2021, https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/soccer/2021/02/28/u-s-soccer-repealed-policy-kneeling-during-national-anthem/6859936002/.

campaign's (and subsequently administration's) populist agenda.[373] Despite that, Trump's public sporting profile was dominated by his affinity for golf, which was often used in progressive circles to point up how out of touch or, based on his conduct, how dishonest he was as a leader.[374]

In one sense, Trump and Rapinoe illustrate very different approaches to using sports for political advancement. Rapinoe's protests and ability to leverage her media appearances as a platform are an example of the kind of activism that has been exercised by American athletes for generations. For her and others, the pitch is a stage from which to communicate a message to a wide audience. That message is based on the supposition that sports *belong* in politics. For all the ways he has benefitted from the sports-industrial complex, Trump ostensibly falls into an opposing, typically conservative camp that subscribes to the "shut up and dribble" ethos that dismisses athlete activism.[375] From this vantage point, the charge to "WIN first" was less a demand for Rapinoe to earn her right to speak and more an attempt to put her in her place. That place is characterized not only by the notion that "real-world" politics do not belong in sports but that sportspeople are inherently unqualified to speak on such matters, even if the supposed privileges of their celebrity status appear to endow them with some authority. This dubious is in two senses: first, because jingoistic national politics are almost always welcome in the American sporting arena; second, because the politics of presidents and sports are well-documented.[376]

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[373] Andrews, *Making Sport Great Again*, 12.
[374] Gerry Dulac, "Review: What Trump's golf game reveals about him," *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* online, March 22, 2020, https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/books/2020/03/22/Book-review-Rick-Reilly-Commander-in-Cheat-How-Golf-Explains-Trump/stories/202003170008.
[375] "Shut up and dribble" was an admonishment from Fox News journalist Laura Ingraham to LeBron James that has now become for criticism of outspoken athletes. James credited Ingraham for raising awareness of his social critiques. Emily Sullivan, "Laura Ingraham Told LeBron James to Shut Up and Dribble; He Went to the Hoop," *NPR*, February 19, 2018, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/02/19/587097707/laura-ingraham-told-lebron-james-to-shutup-and-dribble-he-went-to-the-hoop.
[376] See John Sayle Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play: Sports and the Presidency* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) as an example.

Though presumably sequestered in their "private" lives, presidents are no strangers to using sport to burnish their credentials or access the sports-industrial complex by association. Ultimately, both actors are intimately aware of what sport can lend their political projects, even if they enter the arena from different directions.

Even if the pitch, the field, or the court were not deliberately used as a platform for explicit political speech, the very nature of such spaces is inextricably tied to the organization and exercise of power. This is evident in everything from government subsidized sports arenas and their purported economic benefits, the organization of economic and social capital needed to support programming at all levels, and the political sway of sporting governments such as FIFA. Importantly, one of the most successful and pernicious political articulations of sport is its so-called "non-political" character. Provocative gestures that disrupt the norms of the match, such as the double-headed eagle deployed by Xherdan Shaqiri during the 2018 men's World Cup or the litany of silent protests brought to the 2022 edition in Qatar,[377] not only carry with them potent socio-historical resonance but also point out the degree to which FIFA's stances against political speech are themselves aimed at managing the potential for violence and protecting the sport's allegedly impartial stance. In short, an "anti-political" ethos is essential to the political negotiations of national and international sport. Soccer's beauty and utility as a great unifier is part of this equation. What this chapter offers in part is a direct confrontation with how those rhetorics are backed up by systems that enable sporting governments to act in their own interest and as accessories to state power. By moving from the stage back to the pitch, I demonstrate that the cultural capital identified in my case studies thus far has real-world uses—and limitations.

[377] Shaqiri's gesture was the central feature of my work in "The World Cup's Double-Headed Eagle." Amidst a highly contentious World Cup in Qatar, many players chose to adopt silent gestural protests. One of the most prominent examples was that of the German national team, whose members covered their mouths after FIFA threatened to punish team captains who wore the "OneLove" armband in support of LGBTQ+ rights.

While Trump and Rapinoe usefully illustrate diverging attitudes about politics in sport, this chapter centers on a figure who has taken great pains to mold soccer to his political ends: President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey. Apart from his religious conservativism, Erdoğan's most distinctive public feature is his love for the Beautiful Game. Erdoğan is a former amateur player with an Istanbul stadium named in his honor and proxy stakes in a separate Istanbul club that has enjoyed increased success since coming under the brokerage of high-ranking members in the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Indeed, his entrée into politics and rise to power has been facilitated by an ability to parlay his sporting credentials into cultural capital. Since taking power, Erdoğan's government has invested in the Turkish soccer infrastructure and tightened controls over fan attendance and activity. The Turkish national team, meanwhile, has sparked controversy for adopting a militaristic salute in support of Turkey's incursions into Kurdish-controlled Syria, fulfilling their brief as pseudo-representatives of the state. While Erdoğan's efforts have had their successes, they have also inspired soccer-based political resistance, the amount of which is proof positive that sports are contested territory in and of themselves, neither completely manipulable by established powers nor solely the purview of fandoms and mass politics.[378] Nevertheless, the challenges Erdoğan has faced in advancing his hold over soccer, whether by stirring controversy internationally after rubbing shoulders with major stars in the Turkish diaspora or being booed at stadiums around his home country, must be weighed against the degree to which he has successfully manipulated the murky boundaries between the public and private sectors to suit his objectives.

[378] This is one of the key arguments in a chapter co-written by me and fellow sports performance scholar Sean Bartley, which forms part of this chapter. Sean Bartley and Jared Strange, "The President Makes a Playing: Putin and Erdoğan's Sporting Statecraft," in *Performing Statecraft*, ed. James Ball III, 165-188 (London: Methuen Drama, 2022).

While the mechanics of Erdoğan's sporting politics merit a close look, the analysis offered in this chapter will place the man himself at the center. This is because, like other authoritarian leaders in a similar mold, Erdoğan's sporting politics are held together by his own body in performance. This was most evocatively seen in a friendly appearance he made for Başakşehir, Istanbul's supposedly "pro-government" club, on his way to attaining the presidency. However, it is also seen in the way Erdoğan subtly manipulates his record as a player and mingles with (or, in some cases, alienates) Turkish and Turkish-diasporic players. In this sense, Erdoğan not only inflates his own ability but also actively participates in the culture of soccer by mythologizing its histories and asserting the power of celebrity. What Erdoğan demonstrates is not only a command of the machismo that so often burnishes authoritarian credentials but a nuanced understanding of sport's cultural capital. This chapter, therefore, is an illustration of how that capital and the accordant presumptions about performativity that have been discussed through this dissertation thus far are used in the political arena. While interventions from women's sport as evidenced in *Bend It Like Beckham*, the plays discussed in my first chapter, and the introductory example of Megan Rapinoe illustrate that such performativity is sought out by various actors, the shift toward authoritarian politics and elite men's sport in this chapter is evidence of the fact that despite significant gains, the women's game is not yet as embedded within the larger systems of power that combine to form the sports-industrial complex on a global scale. While anyone can play soccer for its performative power, men like Erdoğan are playing at a very different level and thus demonstrating just how potent it can be when the game is suited to a player's advantages.

Throughout this chapter, I will draw from my scholarship on political performance in soccer and situate it within the larger context of international sporting legitimacy modeled in the

ostensibly democratic Global North. Having engaged with scholarship on soccer in Turkey but never been to Turkey myself, I situate my critique of Erdoğan's sporting politics as it resonates within the larger field of political sports performance on the global stage. Thankfully, the athletic efforts of purportedly populist authoritarians like Erdoğan are well known.[379] Furthermore, my analysis benefits from contrast with a similarly visible, though differently situated, phenomenon: athlete activism. Coordinated protests by elite athletes, whether in the name of Black Lives Matter or in gestural resistance to oppressive regimes, is a rich reservoir to draw from, particularly as it pertains to nuancing performative efficacy in the sporting arena. Like the conflict between Trump and Rapinoe, Erdoğan and groups of elite athletes both aim to exert power over the pitch as a political platform; how they do so illustrates the complexities and limitations of sport's performativity, particularly in an era when "performative" has become a pejorative. The latter element in this equation engages so-called "performative activism" and the dismissive tenor that has been ascribed to it in public discourse.[380] Rather than linger on the fixity of "performativity" or on what the gesture accomplishes in and of itself, I query what sort of conditions enable transformational outcomes and what one can expect of leaders and athletes who use sport as a platform from which to broadcast political messages. As I will suggest, the political efficacy of sport as a catalyst for material transformation is best often accessed through conditions that privilege the performer already; nevertheless, space remains for the body's unique power to disrupt codified spectacle for revolutionary purposes.

[379] In our chapter alone, Bartley and I cite Vladimir Putin's hockey exploits, not to mention his penchant for horseback riding and spearfishing; incredible claims made of Chairman Mao Zedong's swimming abilities and Kim Jong Il's golf game; and Turkmenistan's Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, whose love of horses and bizarre feats of strength are so noteworthy they earned him a whole episode of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*.
[380] In this way, I also re-engage my contribution to the "PerformativeX" special section of *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. Jared Strange, "Playing On, Playing Along: Soccer's Performative Activism in the Time of COVID-19," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35, no. 2 (2021): 135–39.

Erdoğan on the Pitch and In Office

At sixty years of age, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan may not have seemed a formidable athlete when he trotted out onto the pitch to play for Istanbul club Başakşehir in the summer of 2014. Nevertheless, the Turkish Prime Minister, then on his way to becoming the nation's president, managed to bag a hat-trick (three goals in one game) in a 9-4 victory in front of a crowd dotted with celebrities and dignitaries. One of his goals was an especially impressive curling effort delivered with the outside of his left foot—an audacious show of skill made possible by the significant distance afforded to him by the opposition defense. Erdoğan's virtuoso display was a fitting flourish to the commemorative opening of Başakşehir's new stadium and to his own imminent inauguration as Turkey's twelfth president, an achievement he relished by donning the number 12 in Başakşehir's distinctive orange.[381] Striking though his excursion may seem, his brief foray onto the pitch is in keeping with his personal history and political branding.

Erdoğan is a former semi-professional player who has long been part of the fabric of Turkish soccer. His most notable playing stint was with the club IETT Spor, which he captained to the Istanbul Amateur One Championship in 1977. While at the club, he supposedly earned the nickname "Imam Beckenbauer," a reference both to his religious piety and his supposed resemblance in skill and physique to legendary German defender Franz Beckenbauer.[382] Despite playing at the amateur level, Erdoğan insists his future would have been bright had the military coup of 1980 not happened: allegedly, he was twice offered a chance to sign for Fenerbahçe, one

[381] Shamoon Hafez, "Istanbul: Two Days, Two Derbies, Two Continents, One New Football Power Emerging," *BBC Sport* online, April 15, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/47830726.
[382] Beckenbauer was an innovator in his defensive role, a World Cup-winning captain in 1974, and a World Cup-winning manager in 1990, so the reference carries considerable weight. Patrick Keddie, "Understanding Authoritarianism Through Soccer," *The New Republic* online, May 7, 2018, https://newrepublic.com/article/148313/understanding-authoritarianism-soccer.

of the three leading clubs in Istanbul.[383] Erdoğan eventually left IETT Spor after it was taken over by an unidentified military figure following the coup, claiming his departure was in protest of a new rule requiring the men to be clean-shaven, which was interpreted as an anti-Muslim measure.[384] While the accuracy of these claims is difficult to determine, Erdoğan has used them to advance a vision of himself as both a skilled sportsman with untapped potential and a devout believer whose career was adversely affected by Turkey's secular military establishment. As it happens, that 1980 coup resulted in the embrace of neoliberal policies in Turkey, which in turn spurred renewed political investments into Turkish soccer, unwittingly setting the stage for Erdoğan to parlay his attachment to the game for the purposes of gaining political capital.[385]

Much has been written on how Erdoğan has expanded his power and on the role soccer has played in Turkey's national and international politics. For the purposes of this chapter, my analysis focuses on three key events that give shape to Erdoğan's sporting politics and center unique or provocative bodily acts. The first is his 2014 appearance for Başakşehir, which emblematized the growth of his and his party's power. The second is a 2018 photo op featuring Erdoğan and elite players Mesut Özil, Ilkay Gündoğan, and Cenk Tosun; the first two are German players of Turkish descent and the latter is a striker on the Turkish national team. This controversial photo op accentuated Erdoğan's ties to the sport by allowing him to access the celebrity powers of elite players, almost as a fan would, and thus advance his own celebrity status by association. The third is a pair of 2019 matches involving the Turkish national team, the members of which adopted a military salute in recognition of the Turkish military's anti-Kurdish

[383] Keddie, "Understanding Authoritarianism Through Soccer."
[384] Keddie, "Understanding Authoritarianism Through Soccer." As Keddie argues in his book *The Passion: Football and the Story of Modern Turkey* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), these accusations make for a convenient myth.
[385] Dağhan Irak, "Turkish football, match-fixing, and the fan's media: A case study of Fenerbahçe fans," in *Sports Events, Society and Culture*, eds. Katherine Dashper, Thomas Fletcher, and Nicola McCullough (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015): 115-128.

incursion into Syria. The incident is useful here because it demonstrates the avatar-like role a national team can play, particularly in service of an ethno-nationalist project, but also because it prompted a backlash that revealed international sporting governments' capacity to levy sanctions. Indeed, all three cases are instructive in that they not only illustrate how Erdoğan has placed himself at the center of a contemporary nationalistic project built on the powers of the sports-industrial complex and the capital it commands, but also how advancing politics through sport engenders its own kind of resistance. In this regard, returning to Louis Althusser's influential concept of the Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses is useful in that it provides a framework for how state power can be shored up through cultural institutions such as sport. Yet the case of Erdoğan also complicates Althusser's formulation because it depends so much on the murky space in between repressive and ideological apparatus; indeed, Erdoğan's project demonstrates that at times the ostensible ideological apparatus can, in neoliberal conditions, bend the repressive apparatus to its will.

While Erdoğan himself is at the center of my analysis, it is important to outline some historical particulars that give meaning to his performances on the pitch and the way he manipulates soccer's capital for his own gain. As far as soccer in modern Turkey is concerned, it helps to begin at the beginning. In the second half of the 19th century, Sultan Abdulhamid II initiated a process of modernization in the Western mold throughout the Ottoman Empire, which included present-day Turkey. While that campaign aimed to keep pace with Western development, the Sultan still sought to maintain the rigid structures of traditional Ottoman society. This did not make space for soccer, which was "regarded as a representation, or expression of a foreign, Western European and unwanted culture and was therefore

discouraged."[386] By that point, however, soccer had already been brought to the Greek realms of the Empire, which resulted in the establishment of early clubs.[387] The city known in contemporary Turkey as Izmir heavily influenced Istanbul's soccer establishment, which emerged somewhat belatedly through the efforts of students at elite institutions, before taking off in the early parts of the 20th century. In 1901, an ill-fated team known as the "Black Stockings" was established at the Naval Academy, becoming the first known Turkish Muslim team; they played one local Greek team in 1901, lost 5-1, and were quickly taken into custody for violating Ottoman law.[388] Galtasaray High School, modeled in the French style and catering to the children of the palace elite, later saw the establishment of "the Gentlemen of Galatasary," which subsequently became the first Turkish Muslim team to play in the nascent Constantinople League; despite being born under the nose of Sultan Abdulhamid II, the team was not considered an explicit political challenge and was largely ignored.[389]

From that point on, the sport developed slowly but surely and gained a nationalistic tenor as Turkey moved toward modern statehood. This was especially pointed during the post-World War I occupation by British, French, and Italian troops, and remained so after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey under founding father Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Since then, the "Big Three" of Istanbul—Galatasaray, Fenerbahçe, and Beşiktaş—have been intimately associated with Turkish nationalism, such that long-running debates over who Ataturk supported continue to this day (despite the fact Ataturk most likely did not care about the sport at all).[390] Over time,

[386] Dağhan Irak and Jean-Francois Polo, "Turkey," in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Football and Politics*, ed. Jean-Michel De Waele et al. (Cham, Switzerland, 2018), 660.
[387] It should be noted here that because of the multiethnic makeup of Turkey, scholars such as Dağhan Irak prefer to describe their expertise as "soccer in Turkey," rather than "Turkish soccer," which might imply speaking specifically of the ethnic majority and clubs historically associated with it.
[388] Irak and Polo, 662.
[389] Irak and Polo, 662.
[390] Irak and Polo, 664.

the nationalistic fervor of the Big Three has shifted. Whereas the focus was once on proving Turkish superiority against Greek, Armenian, and Jewish clubs in the region, it is now played out in the upper echelons of the European game, particularly in the Champions League and Europa League.[391] This continental status also speaks to the serious investments prompted soon after the 1980 coup. With the help of state intervention, new corporate money was injected into the Turkish game, reshaping it over the next few decades in service of a middle-class clientele that largely, if superficially, adhered to government messaging or remained ostensibly apolitical.[392] This tenuous connection between the state and the Turkish soccer establishment, enabled by state manipulation of corporate powers, helped establish a foundation for the Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s conservative, middle-class powerbase. It also allowed Erdoğan to leverage his ties to the sport on his way to the top of the AKP pyramid.

Though now the subject of Western criticism and scrutiny, the AKP first arrived on the scene with optimism and support, particularly in Europe. The party was established in 2001 and quickly rose to power through sweeping electoral victories the following year. In addition to running on a platform of Islamic conservativism, ostensibly giving voice to a minority otherwise suppressed under the historically secular and militaristic Turkish government, the new majority leadership excelled at speaking the language of liberal democracy. This was especially important for its stated intention to join the European Union. Reforms to that end were initially successful and popular support for the AKP remained strong. In time, however, the AKP used the mechanisms of power to gradually expand its hold on the executive branch at the expense of

[391] Irak and Polo, 664. The Europa League is, like the Champions League, a pan-continental tournament operated by UEFA. It is contested by teams from "smaller" leagues around Europe and teams from major leagues that are successful but not quite at a Champions League level.

[392] Dağhan Irak, "'Shoot some pepper gas at me!' football fans vs. Erdoğan: organized politicization or reactive politics?" *Soccer & Society* 19, no. 3 (2018): 404-405.

opposition parties in the legislature and judiciary. In 2007, the AKP started cracking down on dissidents, resulting in human rights violations, oppression of minorities, and limits on freedom of speech. In 2010, a series of constitutional reforms was adopted following a nationwide vote that earned 77% participation from the population.[393] The majority supported the package of 30 amendments, which included ostensibly democratic reforms that would rein in the military and enable members of the Parliament to name representatives to the Turkish Constitutional Court. However, the AKP's hold on Parliament ensured these limits on military power and legislative sway over the judiciary effectively sanctioned Erdoğan to shore up power in the executive branch by pushing through the legislation and appointments he wanted.

From then on, the AKP was able to counter oppositional moves with increasing force. In 2013, the Gezi protests, conducted in response to the tyranny of the majority and the lack of platforms for minorities and young people to express dissent, was met with government suppression that intensified distrust in the AKP. In 2014, an investigation conducted the previous December implicated Erdoğan's son Bilal and several cabinet ministers in a series of corruption schemes. The leak of incriminating evidence is widely credited to members of the Gülen movement,[394] an Islamic social and political network that was originally an AKP ally before becoming a rival due to differences in perspectives and interests. The AKP responded by reassigning, demoting, and firing investigators and prosecutors involved in the case. Following a significant loss of support in the 2015 election, the AKP, rather than create a coalition government, called for a snap election, giving them an opportunity to maintain the status quo. The following year, a coup led by a group of flag officers in the army attempted to overthrow the

[393] Bahar Başer and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "In Lieu of an Introduction: Is it Curtains for Turkish Democracy?" in *Authoritarian Politics in Turkey: Elections, Resistance and the AKP*, ed. Baha Baser (London: I.B. Tauris), 1-20.
[394] Başer and Öztürk, 7.

government. The brief but deadly conflict was not only successfully suppressed by the government but lead to an upswell of public support fueled, in part, by the popular feeling that a return to military leadership would have been tragic.[395] The Gülen movement, which had since become something of a bogeyman for the AKP, was blamed for the uprising. Five days after the coup, a state of emergency was declared that allowed the AKP to prosecute anyone so much as accused of being an accessory to the coup. Throughout these upheavals, the Erdoğan and the AKP successfully deployed the language of "terrorism" and "counter-terrorism," which had typically been reserved for the Kurds in the southeastern region, to supposed dissidents and anti-government actors.[396] This rhetoric, combined with the party's renewed popular support following the failed coup, strengthened Erdoğan's position in the so-called "new Turkey" and enabled him to continually suppress opposition.

Bearing this context in mind, Erdoğan's appearance on behalf of Başakşehir came at a pivotal moment in his rise to power and the reformation of Turkish politics. In 2012, Parliament passed an act that allowed for the president to be elected by popular vote for the first time in Turkey's history. This enabled Erdoğan to make the transition from prime minister to president, which he did successfully after winning a majority of the votes in the August 2014 election. The victory came not only amidst the reshaping of Turkish government but in the aftermath of the corruption scandal that implicated his son Bilal and provided the AKP an opportunity to paint erstwhile allies the Gülen movement as terrorists operating a pseudo-alternative state. From this vantage point, the 2014 appearance at Başakşehir's new stadium reads as a celebratory event not only for the club but the ascension of the "new" leader into the presidency. In addition to being

[395] Başer and Öztürk, 13.
[396] Başer and Öztürk, 3.

consistent with authoritarian (and ostensibly democratic) leaders using sport to symbolically manifest their powers in the political arena, the event also served to consecrate a soccer-based project that emblematized Erdoğan's expanding control over the sporting establishment. That it was matched by backroom relationships tied together by Başakşehir—the club's president is Göksel Gümüşdağ, a former AKP official related to Erdoğan by marriage, and one of the club's main sponsors is clinic chain Medipol, owned by Erdoğan ally and Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca[397]—indicates how comprehensive the project is.

Ironically, Başakşehir is not a club readily associated with a leader as ambitious as Erdoğan, particularly when there are other clubs with far more illustrious reputations. Like the Big Three, Başakşehir is named after the Greater Istanbul neighborhood in which it was founded, in this case a relatively conservative enclave nurtured to disrupt the secular center of power in Istanbul and provide the AKP with a representative home base.[398] Unlike the Big Three, however, Başakşehir is effectively in its infancy as a top-tier club. It was only created as İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyespor in 1990, promoted to the Turkish Süper Lig in 2007, and reworked into its current form after being separated from the municipality and registered as a private company—a rarity in Turkish soccer.[399] After several seasons of gradual progress, the club won its first, and so far only, title in 2020. Compare that to the Big Three, all of which are over 110 years old and boast numerous trophies between them, not to mention an estimated 80% of the fanbase across the entirety of Turkey and a devoted following within the broader Turkish

[397] "Istanbul Başakşehir: Erdoğan's Club?" *Tifo Football* for *The Athletic*, November 4, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDHCubNOy74.
[398] Dağhan Irak (scholar of soccer in Turkey) in discussion with the author, March 2022.
[399] "Erdoğan's football project Başakşehir edge closer to winning first title," *Ahval*, July 5, 2020, https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-football/Erdoğans-football-project-basaksehir-edge-closer-winning-first-title.

diaspora.[400] Nevertheless, that 2020 championship, rewarded the following season with a debut in the lucrative European Champions League, is evidence of how much Başakşehir's fortunes have improved since it was acquired by owners affiliated with the AKP. With that new ownership came new funding, which in turn resulted in the acquisition of pedigreed players from superior European leagues and the opening of a new stadium. Despite having a small fanbase that the club has actively tried to expand,[401] the stadium has hosted pre-match spectacles of militaristic power and conservative values, including video images of fighter jets striking their targets, child mascots parading around dressed as Ottoman soldiers, and chants of "God is great" from a hardcore group of fans.[402] The club's official fan group even goes by the name 1453, the year of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, which still has nationalistic resonances today.[403] For all its comparative lack of history and low game attendance, Başakşehir has so far proven to be Erdoğan loyalists' most successful attempt yet to create an appropriately neo-Ottomanist, "pro government" club.[404] As such, Erdoğan's 2014 appearance on the club's behalf, accentuated by his conveniently excellent performance, effectively consummated the union between state and sporting institutions he has overseen and embodied.

Başakşehir's rise as a "pro-government" club makes for a pointed case study considering the history and economics that coincide with its newfound success. As a club ostensibly positioned to favor the conservative populace in Istanbul, it both relies on the politicization of

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[400] Irak and Polo, 663. In our conversation, Irak confessed that much of soccer in Turkey, and indeed much of his own expertise, is highly concentrated within Istanbul; with few exceptions, clubs or even political developments outside of Istanbul garner little attention.
[401] "Erdoğan's project team Başakşehir wins Turkish football league, but not hearts," *Ahval*, July 26, 2020, https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-football/Erdoğans-project-team-basaksehir-wins-turkish-football-league-not-hearts.
[402] Laura Pitel, "This Turkish Soccer Club May Help Erdoğan Stay in Power," *Ozy*, April 29, 2018, https://www.ozy.com/the-huddle/this-turkish-soccer-club-may-help-Erdoğan-stay-in-power/86473/.
[403] Matt Ford, "Basaksehir: Champions League newcomers with Erdoğan links," *DW*, November 3, 2020, https://www.dw.com/en/basaksehir-champions-league-newcomers-with-strong-Erdoğan-links/a-54406370.
[404] For more on neo-Ottomanism and how it intersects with Turkish soccer, see Dağhan Irak, "Football in Turkey During the Erdoğan Regime," *Soccer & Society* 21, no. 6 (2020): 680-691.

Turkish soccer for a sense of nationalistic belonging yet counteracts its most dominant philosophical strain. The Big Three, after all, were first associated with a secular, rapidly modernizing Turkey emerging onto the global stage thanks to the careful cultivation of a ruling elite. That secularism, sustained by significant military intervention for much of the twentieth century, remained the predominate force in Turkish politics and culture until the AKP first assumed power in 2002. The arrival of the AKP, on the other hand, was seen as liberatory for Turkish Muslims, whose religious practices were largely suppressed under the military. Başakşehir's ascension—rapid, monied, and representative of a conservative strain in Turkish society that had otherwise been underpowered and excluded—is the perfect metonym for the rise of its patron. As scholar of Turkish soccer Dağhan Irak argues, the rise of Başakşehir, and Erdoğan's larger use of soccer in general, is an effort to leverage cultural capital in Istanbul, a place historically dominated by a more liberal culture seen as antagonistic to the likes of the AKP.[405] Even the cultivation of the Başakşehir neighborhood (what Irak describes as the "New Jersey" to historic Istanbul's "New York") is part of a project aimed at breaking up the liberal and secular powerbase in what is, and has been, a historically Western city with problematic politics from an AKP perspective. These efforts are aided by the fact that the AKP has largely maintained a strong grip on the levers of power; Erdoğan even briefly installed Gümüşdağ as Mayor of Istanbul after disputing the 2019 elections, though the AKP eventually lost in the re-run.[406] While success in transforming the culture, not to mention the hearts and minds of fans, is limited, such instances illustrate the degree to which Erdoğan and the AKP have deliberately fostered an insurgent cultural project aimed at their own advancement.

[405] Irak in conversation with the author, March 2022.
[406] "Istanbul Başakşehir: Erdoğan's Club"

In addition to tailoring Başakşehir to their objectives, the AKP has also effectively consolidated power and suppressed dissent within the broader soccer establishment. For fans, Turkish soccer is among the most cost-prohibitive in Europe.[407] This affects both match attendance and the operations of clubs: the high cost of membership ensures the numbers are small and easily manipulated by executives and candidates looking to advance their own causes.[408] Furthermore, buying season tickets requires fans to use a bank card called Passolig, which is tied to Aktifbank, an AKP-affiliated institution.[409] The introduction of Passolig, which extracts user information and provides it directly to Aktifbank, was heavily criticized by fans and lead to protests. Still, it illustrates the degree to which the AKP has been able to rig the economic nature of the game to suit their own demands. Not only has it enabled their chosen club to rise among the ranks, but it has also facilitated greater control over a potentially unruly fan populace.

The deliberate use of soccer as a political tool, both on the pitch and in the boardroom, is exemplary of how cultural institutions can be suited to the needs of the ruling establishment. In this sense, Althusser's concept of the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) can be instructive. If the RSAs are those apparatuses that enforce state power through violence, e.g., the police and the military, then the ISAs are those that function "ideologically"[410] by only appearing to "present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions."[411] Sports, along with religious institutions, schools, and other cultural and civic organizations, can serve such a function in that they are distinct and

[407] Irak and Polo, "Turkey," 666.
[408] Irak and Polo, 665–66.
[409] Dağhan Irak, "Football in Turkey during the Erdoğan Regime," *Soccer & Society* 21, no. 6 (20200817): 683.
[410] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-186.
[411] Althusser, 143.

specialized institutions that appear to be plural and typically private.[412] For Althusser, the appearance of plurality and privacy—of being something other than the government—is part of what makes the ISA such an effective extension of the ruling ideology the RSA is designed to protect:

> If the ISA's "function" massively and predominately by ideology, what unifies their diversity is precisely this functioning, insofar as the ideology by which they function is always in fact unified, despite its diversity and contradictions, *beneath the ruling ideology* . . . we can accept the fact that [the same ruling class that operates the RSAs] is active in the Ideological State Apparatuses insofar as it is ultimately the ruling ideology which is realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses, precisely in its contradictions.[413]

Jacques Rancière notes that politics, like art and other forms of knowledge, constructs "fictions," or "*material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done."[414] In a state where there is presumed meritocracy and competition, certainly in the realm of sport, the appearance of diversity and contradiction as a fiction of ideological neutrality that seemingly cannot be contested is paramount for protecting a repressive status quo. Indeed, the role of ideology in this formulation is not to act as any "system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but [as] the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live."[415]

The way the AKP regime has asserted its ties to the Turkish soccer establishment appears to indicate an appreciation for the way the ISA and the RSA intersect. Not only does the sporting apparatus of Turkish soccer provide the appearance of relations that sport and its accompanying fandom can generate, it also provides a direct service to the government, or at the very least government benefactors, by conjoining the private institutions of sports administration with the

[412] Althusser, 144.
[413] Althusser, 146.
[414] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 35.
[415] Althusser, 166.

ostensibly private banking institutions that in reality act as a sort of proxy for the ruling powers. Furthermore, the neo-Ottoman trappings of Başakşehir almost self-consciously coopt the historically nationalistic strain of Istanbul soccer in recognition of the way it appears to organize relations among Turks seeking out a shared identity. In this sense, repressive and ideological apparatuses are not only conjoined in their functions but are articulated through entities like Başakşehir in such a way as to project a certain "authenticity" that is at once historic, i.e., suitably "Ottoman," and yet conspicuously new. The pre-match spectacles observed at Başakşehir's stadium are furthermore indicative of the "invented traditions" identified by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in that they seem designed to inculcate certain values within participants while positioning them in a continuum with the past. As Hobsbawm observes, invented traditions appear most frequently during periods of social transformation that destroy the social patterns that produced the "old" traditions or when those old traditions and their keepers are no longer suited to new conditions.[416] New traditions, unlike the old, are typically "unspecific and vague as to the nature of the values, rights, and obligations of the group membership they inculcate"; Hobsbawm identifies British patriotism and Americanism as examples of concepts that are ill-defined, yet note that the practices symbolizing these concepts—"as in standing up for the singing of the national anthem in Britain, the flag ritual in American schools"—are practically compulsory.[417] While not a national success on par with its Istanbul rivals, Başakşehir is nevertheless engineered as a symbol of the "new Turkey" that, through these invented pre-match traditions, is made historically sound through reference to a mythical Ottoman past. As is often the case with American sports, particularly American

[416] Hobsbawm and Ranger, 4-5.
[417] Hobsbawm and Ranger, 10-11.

football, the patriotic displays and practices associated with it point to a presumed identity that is clearly signified through these practices yet only vaguely defined in real terms.

If the new Başakşehir is one symbol of Erdoğan's "new Turkey," then Erdoğan's place at the center of proceedings for the opening of the club's new stadium can be understood as part of a larger framing regimen that strengthens his ties to that "new Turkey" through soccer. This effort is elevated in part by the attention the president is afforded, thanks not only to his status but his careful cultivation of the media. Erdoğan stages his appearances in games such as the Başakşehir friendly knowing he will receive full deference from Turkey's loyalist outlets. The *Daily Sabah*, a notably pro-government newspaper, even likened one of his goals in the friendly match to the work of Argentine superstar Lionel Messi, one of the best to ever play the game.[418] This is exceptionally high praise for a then-sixty-year-old athlete who, as the video evidence suggests, was afforded significant time and space to exercise such a move. Of course, impressing on this stage is a natural consequence not only of his mythicized past as a player with unrealized potential but of his carefully cultivated control of the game. In these circumstances, only a suitably excellent display, contrived though it may be, is acceptable. This is partly because Erdoğan's ongoing campaign to expand and sustain his power is, like virtually all political campaigns, as much about cultivating celebrity as it is matters of policy. In the realm of politics, the representative capacities of celebrity—the sense that they "house the popular will"[419] of the people—are used to keep the leader not only at the forefront of the public's attention but at the center of what it means to lead the country. As P. David Marshall articulates, the politician as a celebrity must be structured in part to tap into and sustain the powers of cultural hegemony:

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[418] "Turkish PM Erdoğan scores a hat trick," *Daily Sabah*, 28 July 2014, https://www.dailysabah.com/football/2014/07/28/turkish-pm-Erdoğan-scores-a-hat-trick

[419] P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 204.

> If political hegemony can be characterized as a moving consensus among various institutions and groups in society to maintain power, cultural hegemony can be thought of as the symbolic structures that are in place or developed to provide a commonality among the various groups in society . . . The leader, although institutionally an element of the political sphere, must work to embody what is perceived as universal interest or common experience, which is defined primarily in the realm of cultural life. These are mass experiences and general sentiments that cannot be seen as evidence of divisions or forms of cultural distinction. The political leader in capitalist democracies functions to wed the political hegemony to a successful characterization of cultural hegemony.[420]

Marshall's conception of the politician as one who must house the public will in part by embodying a universal or common experience is appropriate here in that it points to the way Erdoğan has carefully manipulated soccer to tap into that very kind of experience.

There are two other points that deserve mentioning. The first is that the political hegemony Erdoğan has achieved is not simply a moving consensus, but a steered consensus made possible by the expansion of his powers far beyond those of a functional democracy. Though the right to vote is fiercely protected in Turkey[421] and though elections have been used in an ostensibly democratic fashion insofar as they have been "constructed as a rational expression of the people's will and . . . positioned as such for the sake of the legitimacy" of their democracy,[422] the snap election of 2015, not to mention the gradual erosion of checks and balances in the AKP government, suggests the "construction" of elections as legitimating has been especially pointed even as their rationality has been rendered especially dubious. As Bahar Başer and Erdi Öztürk observe, "Sometimes elections only help the dominant structure to size-up the opposition"[423]; by forcing other groups to show their hand, the dominant structure gives itself time to pivot and protect its own legitimacy. The second point is that while soccer may be somewhere near a universal or common experience as Marshall describes, it does, in fact, bring

[420] Marshall, 213.
[421] Irak, March 2022.
[422] Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*, 204.
[423] Başer and Öztürk, 10.

with it divisions and the potential for cultural distinctions. Sports are contested territories, not just in terms of what transpires on the pitch but what functions they are supposed to serve. This means that wading into sport almost always means wading into some sort of argument or contest, and while some of that is ameliorated by playing to sport as a shared experience where sportsmanship matters more than anything, the notion that unity through contest is guaranteed is dubious at best. Therefore, even as Erdoğan has sought to house the public will by accentuating his ties to soccer, he has also sown the seeds of discord that have made his use of the sport problematic.

Among the ways Erdoğan has sought to solidify his celebrity credentials is by boosting his association with other celebrities. This tendency was on display in his appearance for Başakşehir: not only was the stadium full of celebrity onlookers, the players on the pitch were celebrities themselves, a fact that not only heightened coverage of the match but ensured that Erdoğan came into the arena facing players of comparable skill. Unsurprisingly, Erdoğan's courtship of major celebrities extends to the soccer world. In addition to garnering the outspoken support of such Turkish stars as midfielder Arda Turan, the president has also been seen rubbing shoulders with high-profile members of the Turkish diaspora. On May 13, 2018, he was photographed at an event in London alongside Mesut Özil, Ilkay Gündoğan, and Cenk Tosun, all players in the English Premier League at the time. All three gave the President signed shirts in their club colors; Gündoğan, who plays for Manchester City, handed his over with the inscription "To my president, with my respects."[424] That sentiment is striking considering Gündoğan and Özil are German-born players of Turkish descent who, at the time, were key members of the

[424] Philip Oltermann, "Özil and Gündoğan's Erdoğan pictures causes anger in Germany," *The* Guardian, 16 May 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/16/mesut-Özil-ilkay-Gündoğan-recep-tayyip-Erdoğan-picture

German national team preparing for the 2018 World Cup in Russia. Despite their attempts to downplay the meeting, the photo op generated a furor in Germany that renewed xenophobic sentiments about immigrants and their descendants, damaging the tolerant self-image the country had been carefully constructing with help from the men's national team. Özil eventually quit the German team; joined first Fenerbahçe and then, perhaps unsurprisingly, Başakşehir in Istanbul; and maintained his public ties with Erdoğan. Erdoğan even served as the best man at his wedding, where the president took the opportunity to give a speech that reaffirmed his conservative credentials.[425]

The case of Erdoğan and his photo op is instructive in two senses. First, it demonstrates how attuned Erdoğan is to the effects of celebrity and the ways it circulates as a kind of capital in and of itself. In *It*, Joseph Roach examines the "It-effect," the mysterious, sometimes religious allure possessed by figures who can develop that draw into celebrity status. Roach describes how celebrities, "like kings, have two bodies, the body natural, which decays and dies, and the body cinematic, which does neither."[426] Relating this to the double body of the king developed out of medieval Christology,[427] Roach reckons with how "these double-bodied persons foreground a peculiar combination of contradictory attributes expressed through outward signs of the union of their imperishable and mortal bodies."[428] In other words, while there is a kind of immortality afforded to the cinematic body of the celebrity, there is also a friction generated between that body's immutability and the very real mortality of the body natural that produced it. To constantly reproduce and sustain the cinematic body, as a conscientious performer such as

[425] Christopher F. Schuetze, "German Soccer Star is the Groom. Turkey's President Is the Best Man," *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/08/world/europe/Erdoğan-mesut-Özil-wedding.html
[426] Joseph R. Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor : The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 36.
[427] Roach, *It*, 34–35.
[428] Roach, *It*, 36.

Erdoğan does, is therefore part of sustaining a cultural project that supports one's authoritarian credentials, particularly as a supposed avatar for a "new Turkey." Furthermore, Erdoğan's associations with the likes of Özil, Gündoğan, and Tosun allows him to mingle with other cinematic bodies that possess their own "It-effect." By receiving signed shirts, Erdoğan even allows himself to play the role of fan. This feeds into what Roach describes as "public intimacy," "the illusion of proximity to the tantalizing apparition" that possess the It-Effect, an effect that, "in turn, intensifies the craving for greater intimacy with the ultimately unavailable icon."[429] What Erdoğan is allowed to do in these moments is achieve the dreams of many fans in Turkey and other parts of Europe: to be close and intimate with icons, even to the point of taking home a favor. In this way, he accentuates the access afforded to him by his status, itself reciprocally burnished by the presence of international soccer stars; he also consummates the desire for intimacy felt by presumed members of his public.

While Erdoğan's relationship with high-profile Turkish and diasporic athletes has not always been harmonious—NBA player Enes Kanter Freedom, a vocal critic of Erdoğan, being a case in point[430]—he has at times been able to lean on the fervor of the Turkish national team in its role as nationalistic avatar. This was especially notable during an anti-Kurdish military incursion into Syria during the fall of 2019. On October 11th of that year, the Turkish national team secured a 1-0 win over Albania in their EURO 2020 qualifying campaign thanks to a goal from striker Tosun, the same man who appeared with the president alongside Özil and Gündoğan.[431] Tosun later posted a picture of himself and several other players saluting during

[429] Roach, 44.
[430] After Kanter Freedom began publicly criticizing Erdoğan in 2013, the Turkish government cancelled his passport, branded him and his father terrorists, and forced him to stay in the United States for fear of extradition should he leave. Kanter Freedom eventually became a United States citizen.
[431] National teams, e.g., Turkey, Albania, and France, compete separately from club teams and must qualify for major international tournaments such as the World Cup or European Championships (EURO).

their goal celebration to his Instagram account with the caption "For our nation, especially for the ones who are risking their lives for our nation."[432] The entire Turkish team was subsequently photographed giving the salute in the dressing room; the picture was posted to the official Turkish Football Association's Instagram account with a similar message of support for the troops. The salute immediately prompted scrutiny thanks to UEFA's stance against overt political expression within the stadium. The gesture was later revived in a 1-1 draw with France, after which calls for recrimination intensified.[433] Ultimately, UEFA settled on a fine for the Turkish FA rather than the more severe punishment argued for by France, namely the retraction of Istanbul's lucrative hosting rights for the 2020 UEFA Champions League Final[434] (which was eventually moved to Portugal after COVID-19 lockdown).

That the Turkish national team waded into public discourse on the Turkish military's endeavors is not surprising considering the traditional role afforded to national teams as metaphors and metonyms of the state. As Alexandra Schwell et al., drawing on the work of James Frazier, write, the distinctions and/or overlay between metaphor and metonym can be instructive: the team-as-metaphor, shaped on Frazer's "Law of Similarity," sees a more "relaxed" association with questions of nation and nationalism and a "joyful expression of national belonging" that greets teams' participation in major events; the team-as-metonym, on the other hand, framed by the Frazerian "Law of Contagion," sees the team as "*pars pro toto* of the nation

[432] "Euro 2020: Uefa probes Turkey footballers' military salute," *BBC News*, October 14, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50041529
[433] Ece Toksabay "Turkey players salute Syria operation after goal against France," *Reuters*, 15 October 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-soccer/turkey-players-salute-syria-operation-after-goal-against-france-idUSKBN1WU1HU
[434] Roger Gonzales, "UEFA asked to change site of Champions League Final due to Turkey-Syria military conflict," *CBS Sports*, October 16, 2019. https://www.cbssports.com/soccer/news/uefa-asked-to-change-site-of-champions-league-final-due-to-turkey-syria-military-conflict/.

itself," making games "a question of honor, almost a matter of life and death."[435] In other words, the team-as-metonym is a far more serious association because it puts the pride of the nation on the line in the arena. This allows the national team to fulfill a variety of nationalistic functions, including by reinforcing the "we-image" of the nation itself, a "sense of civilisational (sic) superiority and group charisma," and the "they-image" of a supposedly inferior and untrustworthy outsider.[436] If the Turkish military's politically-motivated campaign against the Kurds in Syria can be understood as part of a larger campaign designed to oppress a minority that does not suit the predominating "we-image" of the Turkish establishment, then the Turkish national team's pointed support of the military, delivered from the media-saturated platform of elite soccer, can be understood as playing into their role as metonyms for a nation protecting that same "we-image." All of this can be consecrated with a gesture, that of a military salute. As Carrie Noland notes, gestures are at once "a motor phenomenon and therefore part of the natural world" and at the same time "a unit of significant, visible shape, a quantity of employable force, and therefore part of the cultural world"; thus, gesturing is the modality through which "bodies become inscribed with meanings in cultural environments, but it is also by gesturing that these inscribed meanings achieve embodiment and inflection."[437] In other words, the bodily act of a salute not only points to the natural capacities of the bodies themselves, which are already tested to their extremes in the arena, but succinctly reinforces the cultural meanings associated with the salute in a simple movement. In this moment, the Turkish national team takes on the role of

[435] Alexandra Schwell, Nina Szogs, Malgorzata Z Kowalska, and Michal Buchowski, "Introduction: People, Passions, and Much More: the Anthropology of Football," in *New Ethnographies of Football in Europe: People, Passions, Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 1-20.
[436] Joseph A. Maguire, *Power and Global Sport: Zones of Prestige, Emulation and Resistance* (London; Routledge, 2005), 15.
[437] Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 206.

metonym for the nation, positioning themselves, through the particulars of their embodiment, as part of a larger body engaged in the act of ostensibly protecting itself.

To this point, my aim has been to demonstrate how Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has deployed soccer in service of consolidating and expanding his political power. Though the pre-existing cultural strength of Turkish soccer and the neoliberal machinations of the AKP have produced success in that realm, they have also generated controversy and a degree of resistance that shows the limits of sporting politics. In some cases, those limits have as much to do with differing audiences and publics as they do to any deliberate politicization of sport. Michael Warner describes publics as "constitutive of a social imaginary,"[438] an association that gives shape to a populace through mode of address and is therefore motivating, not simply instrumental, especially for a political actor. For Erdoğan, the ideal public is constituted of loyal, AKP-affiliated citizens of the "new Turkey" who may find in his soccer politics a vision of a leader attuned to their cultural interests and to the mechanisms of neoliberal power that incorporate international commerce and celebrity. Yet despite the "temptation . . . to think of a public as something we make, through individual heroism and creative inspiration or through common goodwill," the actual process is far murkier and more contingent:

> The making of a public requires conditions that range from the very general—such as the organization of media, ideologies of reading, institutions of circulation, text genres—to the particular rhetorics of texts. Struggle over the nature of publics cannot even be called strategic except by a questionable fiction, since the nature and relationship of the parties involved in the game are conditions established, metapragmatically, by the very notion of a public or by the medium through which a public comes into being.[439]

So, while a politician attuned to the powers of celebrity as representative of the larger culture may be able to exert some powers over a public, a public itself is a far more complex animal.

[438] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 12.
[439] Warner, 14.

The slippery nature of publics complicates Erdoğan's project. As Warner notes, "there must be as many publics as polities, but whenever one is addressed as *the* public, the rest are presumed not to matter."[440] This puts Erdoğan in a position to privilege certain publics as the "official" public of the "new Turkey," yet it also points to the fact that publics themselves are not set up to be all-inclusive: if they were, there would be no need to privilege one public over the other, nor tailor a message to suit a particular voting bloc. The limits of Erdoğan's ability to manipulate his own public image through soccer is seen in his forays into the international arena. The photo op with Özil, Gündoğan, and Tosun, for example, might play well with a local public that is sympathetic to Erdoğan's political motives and the "public will" he ostensibly houses. In Western Europe, however, it quickly became a subject of controversy and even derision. Fortunately for Erdoğan, there was as much public backlash toward the athletes as there was toward him, especially to German players Özil and Gündoğan, who were painted as disloyal and overly sympathetic to Erdoğan's authoritarian politics. In different circumstances, however, players and other celebrities can also use their status to speak to an alternative (but perhaps overlapping) public, drawing unwanted attention to their dissent and challenging an authoritarian leader in the realm of public opinion. Enes Kanter Freedom is again useful in this regard, though his controversial comments about other political activism in the arena, namely his criticism of leading stars such as Lebron James, places him within a more complex discourse on the nature and priorities of political activism in sport.[441] In any case, Erdoğan's message is far easier to control when there is a firmer grasp on the public being addressed and on the representational media regime designed to serve that public.

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[440] Warner, 66.
[441] Isaac Chotiner, "Enes Kanter Freedom's Political Awakening," *The New Yorker* Online, December 9, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/enes-kanter-freedoms-political-awakening.

In addition to encountering obstacles abroad, Erdoğan has also faced opposition at home that draws from the same well of relations generated by soccer. Resistance has been especially vociferous among left-leaning fans of Istanbul club Beşiktaş, some of whom decried Erdoğan from their home stadium and engaged in anti-AKP, pro-democracy activism during the 2013 Gezi protests that resulted in governmental crackdowns.[442] Subsequent government moves to stifle further organizing, whether by adopting stricter crowd-control policies or setting up the controversial Passolig system, have also garnered widespread criticism among fan groups.[443] While the capacity to leverage fan engagement with politics into coherent organization is limited, any effort on behalf of elite powers to mold the social components of sport into compliance is inhibited by the dynamism and complexity inherent in fandom. The affiliations forged through sport are not totalized by a system of larger relations, even if those relations are shaped in part by the sports-industrial complex. Thus, while Erdoğan's sporting politics have been successful to a degree, they must contend with structural and social forces that utilize sport for their own purposes and treat the inherent contentiousness of sports as an opportunity to advance their own agenda. In the next section, I will complicate the presumptions of athlete activism and the possibilities of social transformation through sport; for now, it is enough to accept that, for all the massive capital generated and circulated by the sports-industrial complex and the political relations it is tied to, the ability any single figure possesses to unify even the national league for his own benefit is dubious at best.

Apart from the challenge of mastering the public sphere at home and abroad, Erdoğan has also had to contend with the power wielded by the sport's international governing bodies, a

[442] Dağhan Irak, "Football in Turkey During the Erdoğan Regime," *Soccer & Society* 21, no. 6 (2020): 683.
[443] Irak, "Football in Turkey During the Erdoğan Regime," 683.

power that was very nearly activated in the wake of the Turkish national team's military salute. Indeed, the fact that the Turkish Football Association ultimately escaped serious recrimination should not be an indicator of UEFA's ineffectuality. Such bodies are significant governments in their own right, capable of leveraging enormous material power through corporate sponsorship, national subsidies, and transnational agreements. In short, everything the sports-industrial complex appears to provide national governments in terms of revenue and cultural sway can also be wielded by these international sporting governments. FIFA is especially formidable, to the point that when the 2018 and 2022 World Cup hosting rights were controversially awarded to Russia and Qatar, respectively, there was little opposition from contesting nations such as England and the United States, despite compelling evidence of wrongdoing.[444] Choosing to allocate or withdraw lucrative hosting rights and sanctioning teams who exhibit inappropriate behaviors by, among other things, levying fines or banning fans from the stands are among the ways these sporting governments can curb unwanted political activity while asserting their supposedly "non-political" stature. It is perhaps telling that despite several efforts, Turkey has been unable to secure the prestigious hosting rights for UEFA's European Championships. Its most recent loss was in the race for the upcoming EURO 2024 tournament, which was handily won by Germany thanks to a bid that closely followed their successful 2006 World Cup blueprint. Turkey, meanwhile, raised concerns (albeit vague ones) for lacking a comprehensive human rights plan, a new stipulation introduced by UEFA.[445] Despite such overtures toward human rights, both soccer governments have been happy to collaborate with the Russian

[444] See the Netflix series *FIFA Uncovered* for more on the World Cup's controversial appearance in dictatorial Argentina (1978), the machinations that produced the tournament in South Africa (2010), and the many accusations of bribery, collusion, and human rights abuses that haunt Russia (2018) and, in particular, Qatar (2022).
[445] Steve Price, "UEFA Reveals Evaluation of Turkey and Germany's Euro 2024 Bids, *Forbes*, September 22, 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/steveprice/2018/09/22/uefa-reveals-evaluation-of-turkey-and-germanys-euro-2024-bids/?sh=7ce8003822b9.

Federation despite its patchy human rights record, and FIFA vociferously defended Qatar's right to host the 2022 World Cup despite an upswell in global criticism.[446] Nevertheless, the fact that UEFA has so consistently rejected Turkey's numerous advances and at least acknowledged the nation's human rights shortcomings is further indication that, whatever transpires on the pitch, the political stakes of international tournaments are clear, even if the rules of engagement sometimes are not.

At the time of this writing, there is an economic crisis and intense political infighting in Turkey, much of it spurred by Erdoğan's own faulty policies.[447] The path toward political and economic prosperity, whether through sport or other avenues, is perhaps not as straight as it once was. Even the landscape of Turkish soccer is not especially robust, despite significant corporate investments and national subsidies. The Süper Lig, for example, is often criticized for indulging expensive overseas talent rather than developing the next generation of Turkish stars, while the Turkish national team, where such stars would hopefully ply their trade, endured an embarrassing EURO 2020 campaign and failed to qualify for the World Cup in Qatar. AKP's proxy club Başakşehir, meanwhile, has settled into the middle of the league table after claiming the 2020 championship. The larger effort to dismantle Istanbul's traditionally secular and liberal cultural hegemony, meanwhile, has produced only mixed successes in certain cases and failed outright in others.[448] Despite all this, Turkey's president has continued to use soccer, albeit

[446] On the eve of the 2022 World Cup, FIFA President Gianni Infantino, a White man, delivered an extraordinary monologue in which he labeled European criticisms of the tournament hypocritical and claimed to understand what oppressed people experience thanks to growing up with red hair and freckles. The speech began with a series of bizarre statements—"Today I feel Arab. Today I feel African. Today I feel gay. Today I feel disabled."—that immediately became the subject of ridicule.

[447] Jared Maslin, "As Turkey's Currency Collapses, Erdoğan's Support Sinks Even in His Hometown," *Wall Street Journal* Online, *Wall Street Journal*, 13 December 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-turkeys-currency-collapses-Erdoğans-support-sinks-even-in-his-hometown-11639403803?reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink.

[448] Irak, March 2022.

fleetingly, to shore up his image. When news spread that he was in poor health, Turkey's Directorate of Communications released videos of him playing to dispel any rumors of his demise.[449] With the 2023 presidential elections on the horizon, it remains to be seen how well Erdoğan will be able to cling to the reins of power, let alone lead the nation out of crisis. What those brief videos reveal is that whatever true state he may be in, the vision of health and prosperity that soccer can help him project is crucial to his ongoing future as Turkey's undisputed leader.

"Is This Performative?" The Conditions of Taking a Knee

As the introductory example of Donald Trump and Megan Rapinoe shows, there are different, often competing conceptions of how sports performance is (or is not) politically useful. If leaders such as Trump and Erdoğan can benefit from the militarization of sport and the ability to rig its mechanics to their ends, then athlete activists can depend on the power of media coverage and the potential of collective action to articulate, or at least gesture to, new hegemonies. While different intentions may provide different approaches, the degree to which either is effective is often contested in and of itself. Without a doubt, Erdoğan's efforts to reshape the Turkish soccer establishment in service of the AKP's power has produced some success; however, as the resistance he has faced and the loosening grip on his power shows, it is not a fool-proof path to domination. Athlete activism, meanwhile, has produced iconic moments and inspired generations of like-minded actors, yet the legibility of such activism is often tied up

[449] Zvi Bar'el, "For Turkish President Erdoğan, Every Day Is an Election Campaign," *Haaretz*, October 18, 2021, https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/turkey/.premium-for-turkish-president-Erdoğan-every-day-is-an-election-campaign-1.10303934.

in spectacles that are either inseparable from the mode of production that supports the sports-industrial complex or vulnerable to being coopted into vapid performances of moral correctness. In short, even as the repertoire of athlete activists has prompted action, it has also prompted others to engage in what some call "performative activism."

For the remainder of this chapter, I hold Erdoğan's project in tension with "performative activism" in professional soccer, particularly as it pertains to taking a knee as part of the larger upswell of Black Lives Matter activism initiated in 2020. Interestingly, the two subjects intersected in December of 2020 when Başakşehir's players joined opponents Paris St. Germain (PSG) in taking a knee following the resumption of a Champions League match in Paris. The match had begun on a Tuesday evening but was postponed when players walked out after a member of the officiating team was accused of using a slur to identify Patrick Webo, a Cameroonian member of Başakşehir's coaching staff.[450] It resumed the following day with both sets of players joining a new officiating team in the center circle to kneel and raise fists before continuing play; even Erdoğan himself tweeted his condemnation of racism and deferred to UEFA's interventions on the matter.[451] The incident made headlines largely because of the player walkout, a rare instance made all the rarer for coming in response to the kind of racist utterance that for years was uncontested. What *was* familiar, however, was the gestural repertoire adopted by the players to symbolize their unity and their denouncement of the official's racist utterance. By that point, the embodied protest first made famous by NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick in 2015 had swept the European game following its return from the COVID-19

[450] "PSG-Istanbul Başakşehir match resumes with players, officials taking a knee," *ESPN*, December 9, 2020, https://www.espn.com/soccer/paris-saint-germain/story/4257786/psg-istanbul-Başakşehir -match-resumes-with-playersofficials-taking-knee.
[451] Julien Pretot, "Basaksehir and PSG walk off after alleged racism by a match official," *Reuters*, December 8, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/soccer-champions-psg-iba-int-idUSKBN28I331.

lockdown. While neither Başakşehir nor PSG can match the uniformity and consistency of their counterparts in the English Premier League, it is telling that a call to respond to racism in the arena was met with a gesture that is now globally recognized as an act of defiance, especially against anti-Black racism. That the gesture's potent signification extends across the Atlantic and several years removed from its origin points to the iterative nature of performance, which can, over time, become performative by catalyzing a transformation. At the same time, such phenomena, particularly ones so widespread as taking a knee, must be critiqued with an eye to what is truly changing, rather than what the gesture is *intended* to change.

While the Başakşehir -PSG match conveniently draws together the two chief subjects of this chapter, the discourse around taking a knee as performative activism requires a broader lens. Black Lives Matter messaging was ubiquitous amidst the resumption of elite European soccer following the COVID-19 lockdown.[452] Leagues such as the German Bundesliga and the English Premier League resumed play after the global uprising in response to the murder of George Floyd and other recent victims of anti-Black violence such as Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. In response to the moment, clubs and even entire league leadership structures adopted a bevy of slogans, logos, and commemorative jerseys that sought to direct attention to the need for anti-racist and reparative action. Elite soccer was not alone in this: in the United States, for example, sports as divergent as NBA basketball and NASCAR racing adopted similar measures. While the exact messaging varied, taking a knee was a constant, and no arena has executed it more comprehensively and consistently than the most watched soccer league in the world: the

[452] "Elite" here refers to major European leagues that broadcast in multiple regions around the world and, by virtue of their monied status, have the highest pedigree. Though not an exact measurement per se, it is easy to distinguish the English, German, Spanish, Italian, and French leagues from those that restarted before them, such as the Korean league, or did not shut down during COVID at all, such as the Bulgarian league.

English Premier League. From June 2020 through May 2022,[453] every Premier League match was marked by virtually the same ceremony: all twenty-two players, along with the referee and several coaches on the sideline, taking the knee before starting the match. In addition to being a feature of league play, it has also been adopted by the English men's national team. Indeed, there have been occasions when the national team has taken the knee and either created a frisson of tension (during the EURO 2020 match with Croatia) or been greeted by a surprising requital (during the EURO 2020 final match with eventual champions Italy).

Indeed, what is remarkable about the widespread adoption of taking a knee in the English game is the degree to which they have stuck to it while others have varied the theme or abandoned it entirely. Even in the United States, where the gesture began and where soccer's first significant adopter, Megan Rapinoe, plays professionally, the repertoire has evolved.[454] On the one hand, that uncommon commitment might be cause for celebration, yet the gesture has been met with controversy at home and abroad. While some of the backlash is expected, particularly coming from sections of the populace that misunderstand (or deliberately resist) the politics associated with the gesture, there has also been criticism from unexpected sources, namely Black members of the English sporting establishment. In February 2021, Crystal Palace forward Wilfried Zaha became the highest profile player to decline participating in the gesture, citing it as "degrading" and designed to simply "tick boxes" rather than advance actual reform.[455]

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[453] Players continued to take a knee periodically during the 2022-23, often prior to particularly significant matches. Chris Moore, "Premier League players to take a knee before games again," *World Soccer Talk*, October 18, 2022, https://worldsoccertalk.com/news/premier-league-players-to-take-a-knee-before-games-again-20221006-WST-403358.html.

[454] Recall, for example, the disagreements within the USWNT over whether to kneel at all, the controversy surrounding the apparent team decision to discontinue the gesture, and its reappearance during the 2020 Olympics, as discussed in chapter one. Interestingly, when England and the United States faced each other at the men's World Cup in 2022, England took the knee and the United States did not.

[455] "Black Lives Matter UK Back Wilfried Zaha Comments on Taking a Knee," ESPN, February 19, 2021, https://www.espn.com/soccer/crystal-palace/story/4318940/black-lives-matter-uk-back-zaha-comments-on-taking-a-knee.

Black Lives Matter UK publicly backed his statement, which came five months after former striker Les Ferdinand, now an administrator in the English Football League Championship (the next league down from the Premier League), announced his team would no longer participate. As Ferdinand argued, "taking the knee will not bring about change in the game—actions will."[456] Felicia Pennant, founder and editor in chief of *Season*, a soccer and fashion platform that challenges the White patriarchal foundations of the elite game, put the onus for that action squarely on institutional leadership and questioned the sincerity of their promises in a manner being asked of many institutions making overtures to racial justice: "Is this performative?"[457]

The subject of "performative activism," what Michelle Liu Carriger condensed to "performative-as-mere-appearance-without-substance,"[458] is a vexed one for performance studies scholars. The term's relatively new association with falsehood counters the transformative denotation developed by J. L. Austin, advanced by Judith Butler, and protected by the likes of Diana Taylor.[459] Their notion that performativity pertains to that which becomes real through action, whether aided by institutional framing or reiterated to the point of naturalization, has already been eroded by a linguistic migration that sees the term refer to anything of or pertaining to performance. At issue is to what degree performativity should denote a braid that binds *doing* and *becoming*.[460] Accusations of performative activism imply that this braid is absent, even nonexistent. If we are to assume that performativity is, at the very least, a consequential doing or

[456] "Les Ferdinand: Taking the Knee in Support of Black Lives Matter 'Will Not Bring Change,'" BBC Sport, September 21, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/54237179.
[457] Amos Barshad, "The English Premier League Returned with Strong BLM Optics. At Grass Roots, There's Skepticism," *Washington Post*, July 31, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/07/30/english-premier-league-racism/.
[458] Michelle Liu Carriger, "Of Affects, Effects, Acts, and X," in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35, no. 2 (2021): 9.
[459] Taylor, writing in *Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), resists the migration of performative to refer to anything of or pertaining to performance, writing of her preference for "performatic" (120).
[460] The image of the braid is taken from Stephen J. Bottoms, "The Efficacy/Effeminacy Braid: Unpacking the Performance Studies/Theatre Studies Dichotomy," *Theatre Topics* 13, no. 2 (2003): 173-187.

becoming realized through performance, then English's soccer's devotion to taking a knee could be evidence for one argument or another. On one hand, its ubiquity showcases not only its potent signification but how it has transformed from an aberration into the norm. Even organizations that once opposed its deployment during the national anthem, such as the NFL and the USSF, have either changed or downplayed their policies to accommodate it.[461] However, critics will point to that alone as evidence of disingenuity, citing these organizations' persistent failures to enforce antiracist policies or adequately punish offenses as proof that an affinity for taking a knee simply amounts to playing along with popular demand. Kelsey Blair works from Sara Ahmed's concept of the "non-performative" to identify the "empty gesture" as a critical term. Unlike the non-performative, which stands in for the effect it names but does not produce the effect itself, empty gestures "produce the effects they name—they are votes cast; promises made; acknowledgements uttered—but, due to content or circumstance, the effects of these utterances are weakened to the point of impotency."[462] Hence this case study suggests that performative activism can be both transformative and illusionary, equally capable of changing a public performance and obscuring, intentionally or otherwise, that which has not changed at all.

To reiterate, my intention is not to "resolve" any arguments over performativity as such. The flexibility of the term and the multiple, sometimes contradictory capacities of performance itself give it a certain value, especially when the subject of *doing* and *becoming* is under consideration. Nevertheless, in keeping with the tenor of this dissertation, I query what

[461] The NFL, meanwhile, maintains a policy requiring personnel to stand for the anthem if on the field or remain in the locker rooms during the anthem; Commissioner Roger Goodell, who admitted that the NFL should have given more credence to the initial protests in 2016, says players have continued to take a knee without punishment. Todd Haislop, "What is the NFL's National Anthem Protest Policy? Here Are the Rules for Kneeling in 2020," *Sporting News*, September 20, 2020, https://www.sportingnews.com/us/nfl/news/nfl-national-anthem-policy-2020-kneeling-protests/1o88fwivdxvqu1d8nnbiw5dw3z.

[462] Kelsey Blair, "Empty Gestures: Performative Utterances and Allyship," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35, no. 2 (2021): 57.

expectations are attached to a performance and the conditions in which it takes place. A performance can be performative in a variety of senses: it can divert and deceive, it can consecrate and actualize, it can test the limits of its own conception or serve a larger narrative purpose, and it can do all these things and more simultaneously. What gives the genealogy of performative-as-transformative heft and what drives its devolution into self-contradiction is not performance itself but the conditions that allow for a transformative outcome and the means of assessing that transformation. At some level, accusations of performative activism in the pejorative sense are motivated by a well-founded suspicion of skilled performers who are adept at fulfilling the expectations of public discourse but have not done "the work" to produce the changes they claim to pursue. While it is true that an anti-theatrical bias can haunt such accusations, it is also true that inspirational speech does not always produce transformative action. Naturally, there is much that can be said about integrity, communication, public policy—all good things that a citizen attuned to performance might be able to identify in, say, a political candidate—but there is also the question of what a given performance is expected to accomplish and whether those expectations are in tune with the conditions that would make that objective achievable.

Ultimately, rather than try to assess the sincerity of one's activism, I would instead question what exactly we expect of sport and of athletes in these circumstances. Sports events are often viewed as modern rituals that can foster what Victor Turner termed *communitas*: "The liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc. from the normative constraints incumbent upon" carrying out our various social roles and duties.[463] While the notion of sports as ritualistic is well-founded and while rituals can be understood quite expansively,

[463] Turner, 44.

Turner himself drew an important distinction between *communitas* in *liminal* events, such as rites of passage, and in *liminoid* symbolic activities, such as sport or other "leisure genres" in complex industrial societies. In Turner's view, the former facilitates a lasting transition between social identities, while the latter is an elective activity that often circulates as a commodity and offers only temporary release from the everyday.[464] Thus, while it may have ritualistic features due to the regularity of performances and the codification of pre-match ceremonies, fan behaviors, and even training, and while there is transformative potential retained by participants, whether on the pitch or in the stands, it is not quite a ritual in Turner's sense in that it does not inherently produce a consequential, socially recognized transformation.

As with the nature of "performativity," my concern is less with pinning down an exact definition of ritual, never mind one that dissolves all contentions. Instead, it is to acknowledge the subtle differences and potential for slippages that exist within the very concept itself. Hence why referring to sport as "ritualistic" rather than ritual allows space for Turner's distinction, which alerts us to professional sport's embeddedness within the marketplace and its role as a circulator and accumulator of capital. This is a function sport fills expertly, which is why, despite calls for racial justice and genuine concerns over the safety of returning to work amidst the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, elite men's sport and even collegiate men's sport was deemed important enough to resume: not because it shepherds us into a new state of being but because it represents the continuation of business as usual. At this level, any sanctioned performance on top of the match itself is an ancillary ceremony there to sanctify the event and allow the sports-industrial complex that enables and benefits from it to play on with minimal interruption. This was true not only of taking a knee across the Premier League but also of the

[464] Turner, 55.

deferential gestures to public health adopted while in the stadium. While some visible COVID safety measures were necessary, other strictures seemed to have been adopted entirely for the benefit of the public.[465] The most obvious was the moratorium on close contact goal celebrations, which forced many exuberant teammates to sheepishly adopt a little social distance during what would otherwise be a joyous moment marked by dogpiles, group hugs, and even choreographed exchanges. While the need for such rules appears superficially obvious considering what was expected of the broader public, any sense that it saved players from contracting the virus is quickly undone when we consider that the players have been in proximity to each other leading up to the match and in proximity to members of the opposing team during the match. Therefore, what the rule is ostensibly supposed to accomplish apart from suggesting to the viewing public that the players, like those watching at home, are taking COVID very seriously is unclear.

Granted, there are important differences between taking a knee and paying deference to social distancing in goal celebrations. The first is that, at least in the case of the Premier League, taking a knee far outlived keeping one's distance during goal celebrations. In fact, socially distanced celebrations were only sparingly adopted in the first place and had dissipated by the time the season reached its conclusion. Second, taking a knee brought with it a familiar cache from across the Atlantic and a relatively clear intentionality regarding what it was expected to communicate. Unlike social distancing, which resides in a vague, "non-gestural" space, taking a knee has the distinctive qualities identified by Noland and previously cited in reference to the Turkish national team's military salute. Indeed, that is likely why it has been sustained so effectively by the Premier League, even to the point of becoming controversial all over again.

[465] I argued as much in "Playing On, Playing Along, Part II: Soccer's Performative Permission," part of "The Most Important of the Unimportant Things: Performance, Power, and Activism in Global Sport," a panel at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference that I convened. August 6, 2021.

This brings us back to an important feature they have in common, namely that they draw attention to the behavioral expectations placed on the players. Taking a knee is a fractious gesture in that it at once hails (especially Black) athletic activism before it yet brings with that the contentious discourse over what athletes' rightful place is within the political arena. This is especially pertinent when considering sports as a form of embodied politics, which, as Ben Carrington argues, can be understood as a kind of "claim-making," a "deeply aesthetic and therefore political dimension . . . which is given wider racial significance in societies whose social structures are deeply racialized."[466] The discourses around ineffectual social distancing measures puts another fine point on that subject by demonstrating that an athlete's public duty is that of a "role model." In short, when an athlete enters the arena, there are a set of competing expectations that greet them and, thanks to the hyper-mediatization of the sporting spectacle and their very lives, result in a level of public (and racialized) scrutiny and subsequent discourse that is massive to the point of being inhibiting.

With all this in mind, what can we really expect of athletes, politically? At the elite scale, sport can be understood as a spectacle in the formulation offered by Guy Debord, who saw a contemporary society in which all modes of production yield "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images."[467] Debord's assertion that "spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance"[468] challenges any notion that a heavily-mediated and monetized sports event can truly support revolutionary action outside, never mind against, its own interests beyond conceding to a pre-match ceremony. By and large, elite athletes are compelled to play a role in

[466] Ben Carrington, *Routledge Handbook of Physical Cultural Studies*, 132
[467] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 12.
[468] Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 14.

these spectacles, offering their bodies up as tools for profit generation, avatars for communal longing, and commodities to be consumed in service of the sport-industrial complex. Granted, challenging presumed social relations by tampering with prevalent images, such as the "appropriate" posture to adopt during the national anthem or representations of Black masculinity that challenge the way Black athletes have been fetishized by the White gaze,[469] may prove a catalyst for change. However, if such a gesture can evolve from provocative to de rigueur on an international scale, then perhaps it can only change the image itself, not the mode of production that made it. Diana Taylor reminds us that all performatives depend on the frame: without the requisite conditions to validate the transformative act, nothing actually changes. Therefore, if the frame of the sporting spectacle remains unyielding—if its role as a generator of profitable spectacle on such a vast scale is not itself changed—then the transformative potential of this act remains inhibited.

So, why not change the frame? It is a tall order, to be sure, and one made taller by the nimbleness with which the sports-industrial complex, like other assemblages that thrive under neoliberalism, can pivot to absorb dissent into its own makeup. Nevertheless, if the aim of taking a knee is to alert onlookers toward the larger work of anti-racism, then taking that work into the very institutions of sport itself can truly make athletes, managers, trainers, and even owners part of a larger political change. As Carrington writes,

> [Rather] than dismissing sport's political practice as inherently 'compromised,' as many critical theorists have tended to do (the master's games cannot dismantle the master's house) and seeking to avoid the sometimes utopian embrace of black athletes as proto-revolutionaries found in the writings of those too eager to defend the complicated actions and lives of black athletes (resistance does not equal transformation), I want to suggest that we need to more dispassionately map these constitutive contradictions as inherent to the politics of sporting embodiment and to more precisely locate when and where such

[469] Carrington offers Dennis Rodman's challenge to hegemonic sexuality as an example of a Black athlete pushing back against the reductive fetishization of Black male bodies. "Fear of a Black Athlete: Masculinity, Politics, and the Body," in *New Formations* 45 (2002): 91-110.

> interventions may produce progressive political outcomes that are genuinely disruptive to the dominant heteropatriarchal capitalist racial order and of course, when they are not.[470]

This is where taking a knee could eventually claim a victory, for while the act itself can be coopted by unsympathetic participants and rejected by those attuned to that disingenuity, those individuals who invest in the values it articulates may find conscientization and rejuvenation through it, especially alongside teammates and allies united under a common purpose rather than a monolithic subjectivity. Rancière argues that the arts, and I would add sports, "only ever lend projects of domination or emancipation . . . what they have in common with them: bodily positions, movements, functions of speech, the parceling out of the visible and the invisible."[471] This is an important point not only because it diffuses the fantastical, uncritical notion of transformation often applied to "revolutionary" performance but simultaneously resituates performance as a political tool that can be leveraged in such projects.

As Noland contends, a gesture can itself be performative in that "it generates an acculturated body for others," even as it is also a performance in that "the moving body in a temporality that is rememorative, present, and anticipatory all at once."[472] In this sense, a gesture can hail the performer as part of a larger collective and situate them within a continuum that marks the past, present, and future. As Noe Montez argues, athlete activists can "transform a space of control and restricted movement" into a space where their defiance to business as usual can be clearly articulated.[473] In this sense, activist performance in the BLM mold does have the capacity to challenge societal attitudes toward Black bodies and politics, thus opening discourses

[470] Ben Carrington, *Routledge Handbook of Physical Cultural Studies*, 134
[471] Rancière, 14.
[472] Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 17.
[473] Noe Montez, "NFL Activism and Protest in the Age of Trump," in *Sporting Performances: Politics in Play*, ed. Shannon l. Walsh (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021), 187-198.

around emergent self-determination and resistance.[474] Thankfully, Black athletes have a gestural repertoire to draw from in these performances, whether in Colin Kaepernick's kneel or the raised fists of John Carlos and Tommie Smith. Both gestures were evocatively deployed in a demonstration orchestrated by the burgeoning collective Black Players for Change prior to the resumption of Major League Soccer play in Orlando.[475] This same collective assumed a leadership role when MLS players joined their NBA and WNBA counterparts in refusing to play after the shooting of Jacob Blake, a rare multisport walkout that could divert the conversation on player power away from gestures and toward the withholding of extractive bodily labor.[476] Kaepernick, meanwhile, has parlayed his celebrity influence into social justice initiatives such as the Know Your Rights Camp (KYRC), which leverages the social and cultural characteristics of sport, rather than its physical or competitive characteristics, to build social awareness and collective solidarity.[477] This is especially poignant because it not only indicates Kaepernick's investment in tangible social transformation through programming away from elite sport but also suggests that such programming may not have been possible had he not committed to taking a knee in the first place.

Bearing in mind there is work yet to do, I contend that it is worth leaving space for the durational power of performativity, in change wrought not in the instant legibility of the

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[474] Montez, 189.

[475] Clinton Yates, "Soccer World Is Speaking Up in America: 'We Are Ready to Make Change,'" Undefeated, July 8, 2020, https://theundefeated.com/features/soccer-world-is-speaking-up-in-america-we-are-ready-to-make-change/?ex_cid=story-twitter.

[476] Jeff Carlisle, "How MLS Players Came to Boycott, Their Reaction to Hansen's Tone-Deaf Comments and How They'll Move Forward," ESPN, August 28, 2020, https://www.espn.com/soccer/major-league-soccer/story/4168455/how-mls-players-came-to-boycott-their-reaction-to-hansens-tone-deaf-comments-and-how-theyll-move-forward.

[477] These insights are drawn from Brandon Wallace, who places KYRC within the context of sport-for-development, noting that the hegemonic model supports individual transformation in the neoliberal mold, while programs like KYRC offer more opportunities for collective transformation. "Agents of Change: Sport and Grassroots Education for Black Youth," slides for presentation at North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, November 12, 2022.

spectacle but in the gradual attunement of the mind-body-spirit that catalyzes self-determination and sustains resistance. Performativity can be seen in such spaces when cultivated by actors who invest in performance as a form of communal cultivation. Gianina K.L. Strother, for example, notes the power of Black dance as a space of protest, resistance, and healing, one that sustains those engaged in anti-racist action and can even facilitate solidarity across racial lines.[478] James McMaster notes, too, that the much-maligned practice of "virtue signaling" can, for all its equivocations, prompt a shift in social expectations that identify unacceptable practices and foster solidarity among activists.[479] If taking a knee can send ripples across the Atlantic, even if only through spectacle, then it can certainly affirm Black athletes as part of a global network with all the attendant empowerment and without what Grant Farred calls "the burden of over-representation" borne by exceptional individuals such as Kaepernick. It can also, potentially, signal to powerbrokers and citizens open to social change that new expectations will bring with them new moral and ethical demands. What sort of material change that global network and accompanying social discourse accomplishes will be measured in time, as will the success or failure of the institutions that claim to be doing more than just playing along.

On the "True" Nature of Performativity

Without wishing to foreclose the transformative possibilities of organized athletic labor, I return to the subject of conditions and what is required for a performance to be *performative*.

[478] Gianina K.L. Strother, "Performing/Performative Activism: Dance as Protest, Resistance, and Ritual or…Is It Just for Show??" in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35, no. 2 (2021): 141-144. In addition to diasporic Dance practices, Strother describes a Māori *haka* performed in solidarity with Black activists amidst the 2020 actions.
[479] James McMaster, "In Defense of Virtue Signaling," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35, no. 2 (2021): 125-129.

Because while the durational nature of performativity can be seen in the gradual absorption of gestures into an activist repertoire and in the cyclical rejuvenation of an activist movement, the true measure of a transformation initiated through performance can be difficult to determine. The "utopian performative" identified by Jill Dolan, for example, depends on a change that is enacted *after* an encounter with a utopic realm of possibility realized in the theatre and "experienced affectively, through feelings, in small, incremental moments that performance can provide."[480] Dolan herself acknowledges that she "risks sentiment" by investing in the "progressive possibilities of romanticism in performance,"[481] and she is certainly not alone: most if not all practitioners and scholars would eagerly foster a similar belief that what they create can inspire change, even if that notion is sometimes held to more in hope than expectation. While Dolan does not attempt to "verify" the change enacted in performances that contain a utopian performative, she does direct attention to the material conditions "that evoke the sense that it's even possible to imagine a utopia, that boundless 'no-place' where the social scourges that currently plague us . . . might be ameliorated, cured, redressed, solved, never to haunt us again."[482] In her case, that is a series of solo performances by feminist women who came of age in an era when lesbian or feminist representations in the public sphere could not be taken for granted, all part of a larger pedagogical strategy alerting her students to her own "urgent sense of feminist performance history."[483] In short, Dolan's notion of a utopian performative is an affective encounter contingent upon material conditions that suit an ideal performative outcome.

Once again, we must consider the act within the frame. In this sense, a sports event is inherently no better set up for executing radical action than the theatre. Both spaces must be

[480] Dolan, 460.
[481] Dolan, 478-479.
[482] Dolan, 456-457.
[483] Dolan, 464.

actively cultivated with an eye to who is being served—whether that be audiences, participants, or powerbrokers—in order to create even a sense of a liberatory alternative for those outside the dominant power structure. As it stands, elite sport's primary function is to uphold the dominant power structure as it currently exists; the material powers of the sports-industrial complex and the various sectors it unites are far too embedded in the economic, political, and social terrain of neoliberalism to accommodate much else. Elite sport serves a logic based in no small part on leveraging its affectivity for the circulation of capital, certainly not for taking on any action that would disrupt that circulation.

Hence why if we are to understand soccer as having any sort of performativity outside the fulfillment of its own duties, then we must look first and foremost to whomever and whatever benefits from it completing those duties. Herein lies the point of comparing Erdoğan's use of sporting politics with the politics of taking a knee: because the change Erdoğan wants to undertake, the change to which he lends his own athletic performance, is expressly tied to the mechanisms of power that he himself controls, whereas taking a knee is merely sanctioned and tolerated by a governing body with no serious investment in radical change. The conditions of Erdoğan's appearance on behalf of Başakşehir, the photo ops he enjoys with leading players of the Turkish diaspora, and even the militaristic posturing adopted by the Turkish national team are framed within his own influence over Turkey's soccer apparatus and the ideological function it serves on his behalf. The gestures adopted in such an arena are theatrical in that they are carefully framed to suit his success and performative in that they perpetuate his control over that arena through his own embodied choreography. A lot is made of authoritarian uses of sport and how they serve a masculinist embodiment of power, particularly for male leaders who want to accentuate their populist credentials. Oftentimes there is a pointed skepticism about the leader's

abilities, a recognition that they are not the robust athletes they claim to be and that what they are playing at is purely for show. This is true of Erdoğan to a degree, but to dwell on how "believable" he is as a soccer player misses the point. The point of the appearance for Başakşehir is not to deceive the public into thinking he is greater than he is but rather to take advantage of his power to act out any scenario he wishes. The gesture of the Başakşehir match is not "look at me, I've still got it!" It's "look at me, I can do what I want!" That doing is enabled by more than just the deference of the opposing team in the Başakşehir friendly or the affection of the Turkish stars: it is enabled by a power grab that makes his fantasy a reality. If gestures are performative in that they can bring forth an acculturated body, then Erdoğan's gestures are doubly powerful in that he is not merely taking advantage of certain conditions to bring forth an ideal body but is making those conditions himself.

Taking a knee is a kind of defiance, of course, and the degree to which it has been adopted illustrates the power it has. But taking a knee is not sufficiently tied to the mechanisms of power that perpetuate the Premier League, Major League Soccer, UEFA, the NFL—any organization that appears to sanction it as part of a larger project of anti-racist action. Though it may be adopted by players en masse and though it may exist as part of a larger constellation of antiracist messaging, it is not invested with the same institutional power to manifest the performative outcome that it gestures to. To do that, all the institutions previously listed and more would need to genuinely be aligned with a larger apparatus dedicated to combatting institutional racism; improving the lives of Black, Indigenous, and persons of color; and undermining the very systems of extraction that help make these institutions function at such a large scale in the first place—to be fair, a great deal of work that should be the realm of the very state institutions that often invest in the sports-industrial complex as a way of shoring up their

own legitimacy. Erdoğan is committed to pulling the levers of power to realize the change his sporting performance is meant to emulate; the Premier League et al. are not and, to some degree, cannot be. This is not to impugn the intentions of staff but simply to point out that the transformational impetus of political performances on the pitch are only truly made real when the conditions allow for it. Having the power to create those conditions is perhaps the only surefire way to create the desired performative outcome.

Of course, my discussion of performativity in this chapter has thus far been concerned with events and their desired performative outcome, just as my entire dissertation has been concerned with what it means to perform soccer in spaces estranged from the pitch. In Chapter 1, I argued that plays that dramatize the biocultural creativity of sportswomen illustrate the performative potential of sport when conceived as something that benefits individuals and collectives who play the sport for their own benefit, often benefits divorced from the compulsion to perform or else. In Chapter 2, I observed how major soccer institutions, conjoined with governmental and military powers, induced participants to play with history through soccer as a way of furthering nationalistic myths and social memory. This chapter has shifted attention back to the pitch and players to illustrate that similar dynamics apply to real players and real powerbrokers who are looking to leverage the sport for political transformation. Just as the marginalized can carve out a space for themselves through sport, so can the powerful manipulate the sport's symbolism for their own benefit, all while moving the goalposts of what is effective or appropriate within the frame of the game. The events on the pitch, whether they be orchestrated by a burgeoning despot or acted on as a sort of progressive obligation, are conveniently suited to such purposes when presented in a dramaturgically sound way. Erdoğan's hat-trick is the perfect sequence of actions tying together his mythologized excellence in the

game and the union of Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses he has overseen. The wholesale adoption of taking a knee is an example of simple choreography that became iconic through iteration. The history that comes with each reiteration makes the sight of mass kneeling dramaturgically potent, especially when it has crossed the Atlantic and been sanctioned by an organization ostensibly looking to turn the corner on its record. It is within the confines of these events that performance's presumed capacities are often collapsed into flat dimensions of representation and easily reproduced spectacles that provide only the illusion of real relations, yet when invested with real action backed by conditions of the performer's making, they can become performative.

It may seem like I am implicitly arguing for a very limited view of political performance in the arena by constantly centering the "real" transformation elsewhere, but that is not true. In many cases, these performances need to be sanctioned and scripted according to the demands of the institutional apparatus that enables them because if they are not, they run the risk of exposing the limits of control these institutions hold. Contrived or not, Erdoğan must perform well on the pitch and in public to demonstrate his mastery over the apparatuses at his disposal. In this sense, the *performativity* of his project depends very much on the *theatricality* of its presentation—on the fact that he is not really the athlete he might seem to be, nor is his grip on Turkish culture as comprehensive as he would desire. The Premier League and other organizations must sanction taking a knee because if they do not, they risk allowing players to adopt other protests that are much more difficult to negotiate around. To concede to taking a knee is far more desirable than facing a massive walkout and the revenue lost due to a withholding of labor, particularly Black labor, something American athletes have already exercised to good effect and something the Başakşehir -PSG match briefly brought to bear in Europe. In both cases of conceding to taking a

knee, the limits of the event and the performative outcome they presume suit the needs of the ruling powers because they foreclose the necessity for other action. The truth, of course, is that other action is possible. The soccer-based resistance Erdoğan has faced, for example, is evidence that while the sports event is central to sporting culture, it is far from the end of it. Club affiliations, admittedly complete with all their own problematic politics, provide a baseline of unity that can be leveraged for acts of resistance large and small. For all the possibility that its potency is waning in the face of total acceptance, taking a knee is part of an activist repertoire that can motivate and sustain actions outside of the arena and within the halls of power. Black Players for Change, the legal advancements made by the USWNT, the continuously strong platform afforded to athletes in the NBA and other high-profile sports, and a plethora of new antiracist programs are evidence of that.

To reiterate, however, all of these movements require labor and organization external to the event. This can be problematic in a field that produces spectacle, both in the sense of production and the nature of the events it generates, because it means operating at a level beyond the fringes of the mediatized sporting event, beyond a space where the politics can be more carefully controlled. Even as the need for political action extends beyond the arena, there is a degree to which actors who use their sporting platform for political purposes will always be tied to how well they perform. For all the limits of sport's hold on society and popular culture and for all the need to exert repressive institutional power, Erdoğan and other authoritarians are intimately aware of how weakness in any arena can affect one's standing in another. Athlete activists, meanwhile, are constantly haunted by their successes and failures, real and imagined, when it comes to the supposed efficacy of their activism. England and Manchester United forward Marcus Rashford is a compelling example of this. When the COVID-19 pandemic

emerged in early 2020, Rashford lead a successful campaign to extend school meal programs to needy children, even when school buildings were shuttered. While he earned great praise for his work in sporting circles and beyond, his subsequent fluctuations in form on the pitch were constantly contrasted to his activism off it. Countless pundits expressed admiration for his efforts while simultaneously asserting that his priority should be playing well. Like so many athletes mentioned thus far, Rashford's activism is given second billing to his athletic responsibilities; the difference here is that at least his activism merits damnation with faint praise, rather than being flat out told to "shut up and dribble." In my view, this speaks as much to a prevailing view of sport as a self-serious enterprise as it does to a view of the efficacy of sport in "real-world" politics. So extensive is the sports-industrial complex and the media that upholds it that its participants and beneficiaries need not justify it by any other measure.

Once again, my aim is not to invalidate athlete activism or undercut the very real abuses of power enabled by the sporting politics of Erdoğan and others like him but to question instead the ultimate value of political engagement in sport as a representative of larger politics. As I have endeavored to show, the politics of sport and the "real world" are most tightly conjoined by the union of material powers that support the sports-industrial complex. To put it bluntly, that is why Erdoğan's politics, the Premier League's politics, FIFA's politics, etc. are more effective and, in the long run, more stubborn than the politics of taking a knee. What is more productive for the progressive politics of antiracism, liberation, decoloniality, and so on is understanding sporting politics as part of a larger field of politics in the realm of culture, labor, economics—essentially, politics in its most inclusive sense. There is little doubt that taking a knee can generate attention and even produce the conditions in which to form a coalition of activists attuned to the same objective. What preceded that gesture and what must follow others, however, is action that

remakes the frame of the event itself or settles for working beyond it. Performance will always play a role in such endeavors—even when the time comes to refuse performing at all.

Conclusion: After *Ted Lasso*

In 2013, NBC acquired the rights to broadcast the English Premier League in the United States. To market its new prize, the network created Ted Lasso, a character aimed at bridging the divide between American audiences and the English game. Lasso first appeared in a long-form commercial titled "An American Coach in London," styled as a sports documentary spoof. In his original iteration, the mustachioed Lasso, played by then-*Saturday Night Live* star Jason Sudeikis, is a cocksure American football coach who bumbles his way through an extremely brief stint in charge of "the Tottenham Hotspurs."[484] In addition to playing on differences between America's football and England's football, the commercials satirized many tropes associated with American coaches: reckless shouting; ignorance masquerading as indomitable belief; the sartorial elegance of a visor, tube socks, and very short shorts. Lasso is accompanied by an unnamed assistant, played by Brendan Hunt, who calmly corrects his many missteps. As Jeffrey Kassing observes, the commercials leveraged the frame of American exceptionalism at a pivotal moment in American soccer fandom, "[resonating] with an audience that already understood the cultural marginalization of soccer in the US relative to the positioning and significance of the game elsewhere."[485] By juxtaposing the ignorant Lasso with the knowledgeable Hunt—a real-life fan of the game thanks to his years spent in the Netherlands[486]—the creators play up the differences between the sporting cultures of England and the United States, the latter of which celebrates its own football supremacy in almost complete isolation. Thanks in part to Sudeikis's committed performance, the commercial became

[484] We just say "Tottenham Hotspur."
[485] Jeffrey W. Kassing, "Coach Lasso and the embodiment of American exceptionalism: NBC Sports promotion of English Premier League football as the foreign sport," in *Soccer & Society* 23, no. 4-5 (2022): 389.
[486] Kassing, 393.

a hit, spawning a sequel, "The Return of Coach Lasso," and contributing to an increase in viewership between NBC's first and second seasons broadcasting the league.[487]

Like any funny commercial character, Ted Lasso was ubiquitous to the point of being annoying and then largely slipped out of the public conscious. That was until 2020, when he reemerged on Apple TV+, this time in his own show. The new series was part of the opening slate of Apple programming and thus at the forefront of the tech giant's entrée into the "streaming wars." On the outside, it seemed like a bizarre choice: a TV show based on a one-note character created for a series of advertisements by a different network with its own streaming service (Peacock). In the end, Apple need not have worried. Inspired by developments in "The Return of Ted Lasso," Sudeikis worked with Hunt and co-writer Joe Kelly to retool the titular coach from a blustery buffoon into the kind of inspirational figure they sought out in their youth; they were aided by producer Bill Lawrence, an experienced creator behind such feel-good sitcoms as *Scrubs.*[488] Together, the team recreated Ted as an irrepressibly positive fish-out-of-water, not to mention an altogether more well-rounded character with clearer stakes in the high-intensity world of Premier League soccer. Instead of spoofing elite sports machismo, the creators of the new and improved *Ted Lasso* developed its antidote—not to mention a touchstone of American soccer culture that is already exerting an influence on the sport's culture, much as *Bend It Like Beckham* did twenty years ago.

In the television series, quirky and endearing Ted is hired by Rebecca Welton (Hannah Waddingham), who recently acquired ownership of fictional London club AFC Richmond from her ex-husband Rupert Mannion (Anthony Head) in a divorce settlement. Rebeca is determined

[487] Kassing, 387.
[488] Luis Miguel Echegaray, "'Ted Lasso' and the Journey from Viral Promo to TV Series," *Sports Illustrated*, August 11, 2020, https://www.si.com/soccer/2020/08/11/ted-lasso-jason-sudeikis-apple-tv-series-nbc.

to run the club into the ground as revenge for her husband's philandering, and she believes out-of-his-depth Ted is the perfect person to do it for her. Ted arrives in London accompanied by assistant Coach Beard (Hunt) but without his wife and son, who remain in the United States because of his wife's need for space. Ted's inexperience and folksy demeanor lead him to mocked by the likes of *Independent* journalist Trent Crimm (James Lance) and arrogant star forward Jamie Tartt (Phil Dunster), dismissed by brooding veteran Roy Kent (Brett Goldstein), and routinely called a "wanker" by Richmond's furious fans. However, Ted quickly wins the affection of timid kitman Nate Shelley (Nick Mohammed) and model-turned-brand-manager Keeley Jones (Juno Temple). In time, others follow suit: Roy takes on greater leadership in the dressing room and a new relationship with Keeley, who ditches immature Jamie; Rebecca's steely façade crumbles, partly thanks to Lasso's daily offering of homemade biscuits (cookies); even Trent writes a glowing profile in his column. In the dressing room, meanwhile, Ted's relentless encouragement to Believe, exemplified in a now iconic yellow poster with blue writing taped to the wall, rubs off on the players. Despite the dissolution of his marriage and Rebecca's confession of her backroom machinations, Ted forges a collective spirit that helps the players confront their own challenges. Though Richmond ends up getting relegated, the first season of *Ted Lasso* concludes with the club confident of being promoted back to the Premier League.

In addition to winning a raft of Emmy and Golden Globe awards, *Ted Lasso* has been routinely celebrated as exemplary of a shift away from irony and toward sincerity as the predominate strain of TV comedy.[489] Deborah A. Macey and Mary P. Erickson note that the series also signals an alternative to prestige dramas that critique but also center damaged male

[489] James Poniewozik, "How TV Went from David Brent to Ted Lasso," *The New York Times*, July 26, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/26/arts/television/ted-lasso-the-office.html.

anti-heroes and an antidote to the toxic masculinity evinced by Donald Trump.[490] For Macey and Erickson, the show's biggest contribution is shifting the needle on gender representation, particularly by positioning male characters to upend tropes of hegemonic masculinity. Ted's role in the team, for example, embodies the care labor typically associated with women; providing that labor to his team not only illustrates how AFC Richmond can function as a family but nuances Ted's character by contrasting what he is able to provide the team with what he is apparently not able to provide his nuclear family.[491] In modeling positive masculinity without discounting familial strife, *Ted Lasso* gestures to the potential for challenging hegemonic norms without discounting the complex expectations bound up in the concept of the nuclear family.

While not as critically acclaimed as the first, *Ted Lasso*'s second season thoughtfully complicates its sunny predecessor. Ted's relentless happiness turns out to be cover for unresolved trauma brought on by his father's suicide, something new therapist Dr. Sharon Fieldstone (Sarah Niles) helps him identify. Sweet and seemingly benign Nate, meanwhile, slowly emerges from Ted's shadow, determined to prove himself as a manager in his own right and take Ted to task for not being the man he is cracked up to be. Many of the characters also confront challenges in their romantic relationships: Rebecca finally breaks her ex-husband Rupert's psychological hold and pursues an illicit affair with a young player, Sam Obisanye (Toheeb Jimoh); Roy and Keely's love threatens to grow stale; and Coach Beard struggles to come to terms with his toxic relationship with pointedly named Jane Payne (Phoebe Walsh). The show's challenge to toxic masculinity, meanwhile, finds its most obvious outlet in Jamie, who grows in maturity and finally stands up to his abusive, domineering father. While the second

[490] Deborah A. Macey and Mary P. Erickson, "*Ted Lasso*: A Feel-Good Show in a Not-Feel-Good Time," in *Persevering During the Pandemic: Stories of Resilience, Creativity, and Connection*, eds. Deborah A. Macey, Michelle Napierski-Pranci, and David Staton (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022): 242.
[491] Macey and Erickson, 248.

season's qualities are debatable, even its controversies—such as "The Great Nate Debate," which concerns whether Nate's betrayal of Ted was dramaturgically justified[492]—merit consideration. "What's wonderful about all these dynamics," writes critic Jen Chaney in a piece on Nate's transition, "is that they complicate the accepted narrative about *Ted Lasso*, which is that it's a show about kindness and uplift and a man who teaches everyone else to become better versions of themselves. Except that it's not entirely true, and it wasn't even totally the case in season one."[493] Chaney goes on to discuss hints that Nate always had a dark side and the fact that his critiques of Ted, including his choice to live thousands of miles away from his son, are valid. Furthermore, in positioning Nate as a managerial alternative to Ted, the creators reiterate the darker sides of the managerial role that Lasso is ostensibly meant to contradict. As Stanley Eitzen notes, coaches occupy a unique position by larger social values that trend toward the conservative and paint the coach as positive proponent of social control.[494] When Nate strikes out on his own, he lands at (real-life) London club West Ham United, which has recently been taken over by Rupert. Nate's allegiance with Rupert highlights the billionaire interests that exert so much control over sport and clarifies that the managerial role itself can be problematic due to the concentration of power within a vertical, monied leadership structure. Even Sam Obisanye is tempted to join a similar project run by a Ghanaian playboy whose efforts to "decolonize" the world with his wallet mask a hunger for power and childish petulance.

Just as *Bend It Like Beckham* offered hints of what the modern playing field could look like, *Ted Lasso* articulates that the spaces of elite men's sport are ostensibly more progressive yet

[492] The "Debate" even made it all the way to *CNN*: Sandra Gonzalez, "'Ted Lasso' and the great Nate debate," *CNN*, October 8, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/08/entertainment/ted-lasso-season-finale/index.html.
[493] Jen Chaney, "We Need to Talk About Nate," *Vulture*, October 8, 2021, https://www.vulture.com/article/ted-lasso-season-2-finale-nate-shelley-transformation.html.
[494] Eitzen, 137.

still required to confront gendered and racialized challenges. And just like *Bend It Like Beckham*, the success of *Ted Lasso* and the wholesome vision it presents must be understood as a fantasy that trades in part on what the sport is "supposed" to be. Indeed, even as its popularity has grown, so has my personal suspicion that Ted Lasso is still doing what he was designed for in the first place: selling soccer to Americans. This is partly because the show's success has seen its characters and creators tread beyond the frame and cross into other markets, including the most recent edition of EA's massive *FIFA* video game franchise. In *FIFA 23*, players can now drop AFC Richmond into the Premier League or take a photo-realistic Ted Lasso on to manage other clubs. It is also partly down to the fact that since reintroducing the world to Ted Lasso, Apple TV+ has acquired the lucrative rights to broadcast all of the Major League Soccer (MLS) games starting in the 2023—though fans who want complete coverage will have to pay extra for the privilege.[495] While not explicitly tied to *Ted Lasso*, it is hard not to imagine the service finding value in presenting the two in tandem, partly because it would take advantage of the fact that the show's characters and the people who play them have already been a presence outside the frame of the TV. Jason Sudeikis and Brendan Hunt have been spotted in the stands at several high-profile matches, sometimes in character; Brett Goldstein has appeared in a World Cup-centered Volkswagen advertisement featuring American star Christian Pulisic; and many of the show's characters, including Sam Obisanye, have official Twitter accounts. At one point, Sudeikis even appeared at a premiere wearing a black t-shirt with white writing that read "Jadon & Marcus & and Bukayo," a reference to England players Jadon Sancho, Marcus Rashford, and Bukayo Saka,

[495] Jeff Reuter, "MLS, Apple announce details of new deal: What to make of pricing, later kickoff times," *The Athletic*, November 16, 2022, https://theathletic.com/3904200/2022/11/16/mls-apple-tv-details/?redirected=1.

who were all subject to racist abuse after missing their penalties in the Euro 2020 final.[496] The gesture indicated a willingness to bring the show's politics into the real world, suggesting that Ted Lasso himself, or at least the man who plays him, really is attuned to the currents of prejudice that still run through the English game. No wonder clubs, schools, and other venues have organized costumed "Ted Lasso nights" for fans of the mustachioed manager.[497]

Over time, Ted Lasso's role as an ambassador for the game has even pivoted toward the United States national teams. In 2021, Sudeikis and Hunt reprised their roles in a video announcing the USWNT roster for the belated 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. The pair showed off their usual repartee, with Ted elaborating on the wonders of home state Kansas while introducing back-up goalkeeper Adriana French and Beard correcting Ted when he mistakes defender Kelley O'Hara for Broadway star Kelli O'Hara.[498] In November of 2022, "Ted" shifted attention to the USMNT. In anticipation of the World Cup in Qatar, the USMNT erected a series of billboards featuring letters purportedly written by Ted in several cities across the country, each one addressed to a member of the team, along with one for coach Gregg Berhalter. The letters are written in blue ink on a yellow background, imitating the iconic "Believe" sign, and in Ted's signature quirky, uplifting style. The letter to Luca de la Torre in his hometown of San Diego, for example, refers to the player as "Luca de la Torrific."[499] Pictures of the billboards proliferated on

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[496] Daniel Feliciano, "Ted Lasso actor explains shirt worn in support of Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka," *Manchester Evening News*, July 21, 2021, https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/jason-sudeikis-marcus-jadon-bukayo-21105516.

[497] A cursory Google search shows such events hosted by MLS clubs Los Angeles FC, the University of Tennessee's women's soccer team, the Birmingham Bloomfield Beavers vs. Eastside Diamond Hoppers baseball game, and Little Water Distillery in Atlantic City. Unfortunately, I missed my chance to attend DC United's event in July of 2022.

[498] "2020 USWNT Olympic Roster Revealed," *US Soccer*, June 23, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3FBOAv5urE. Lasso's surprisingly deep knowledge of Broadway is a subtle but consistent running joke in the TV series.

[499] Kristen Conti, " 'Ted Lasso' Billboards Support USMNT Before 2022 World Cup," *NBC Bay Area*, November 14, 2022, https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/sports/world-cup-2022/ted-lasso-billboards-appear-across-us-to-support-usmnts-world-cup-hopes/3077717/.

social media and were re-tweeted by the official Ted Lasso account.[500] The campaign certainly raised attention, though as Adam Snavely points out, there is some question as to who the billboards are really for. "Are they congratulating the players? Do they actually think this is cool? When Matt Turner reads a big sign in New Jersey about how Ted Lasso (who, again, is not a real guy!) 'got real good at aiming cookies into my face hole,' is that just really going to amp him up?"[501] While Snavely acknowledges that the billboards might leverage engagement form non-traditional fans, he contends that "[the] only thing they're successful at marketing is an Apple TV show that has a third and most likely final season to promote . . . like most things Lasso, it's all still a show. And the show needs to make money."

The evolution of Ted Lasso from commercial shtick to Emmy-winning television show to multi-media icon would be evidence enough of the character's unique commercial appeal without considering the way American media companies have made very public investments in the sport. In 2016, commercial giant Amazon debuted a documentary series entitled *All or Nothing*, each season of which is devoted to a specific Premier League team. The series dovetails with Amazon's entrée into live sports broadcasting, which includes the rights to air a limited number of Premier League games in the United Kingdom and recently expanded to limited broadcast rights for Champions League games.[502] Over at FX, an entire documentary series was devoted to the surprise purchase of Welsh club Wrexham by actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McIlhenny. Titled *Welcome to Wrexham*, the series follows Reynolds and McIlhenny as they fall

[500] USMNT tweet, November 13, 2022; Ted Lasso tweet, November 14, 2022.
[501] Adam Snavely, "Ted Lasso wishes USMNT luck at World Cup by writing leters to players…on billboards," *ESPN*, November 14, 2022, https://www.espn.com/soccer/blog-the-toe-poke/story/4803210/ted-lasso-sends-off-usmnt-with-billboards-written-to-players.
[502] Mark Sweney, "Amazon and BBC break BT stranglehold on Champions League football," *The Guardian*, July 1, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/jul/01/amazon-and-bbc-break-bt-stranglehold-on-champions-league-football.

in love with the game, discover the fervent community surrounding lower-league Wrexham, and endure the trials and tribulations of franchise ownership. The exposure has been so significant that Wrexham even had a match broadcast on ESPN, unheard of for a team playing in the *fifth tier* of English soccer, that compared favorably with the *top tier* MLS matches on other networks.[503] There are now reports that Netflix will enter the market with a new Premier League documentary series modeled after their hugely successful show *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*.[504] This development, amidst increased American investment in the Premier League ownership and with the specter of a pan-North American World Cup on the horizon, suggests that the drama of the Beautiful Game and the men (very much the men) who conduct it from the sidelines are pivotal to this latest effort to conquer the American market.

As this dissertation concludes, I turn to *Ted Lasso* as an example of the kind of soccer narrative that could, like *Bend It Like Beckham*, become a touchstone of the sporting culture in the future, particularly in the United States. I do so not only because the show's popularity suggests its influence could be as deep as it is wide, but also because it is, like the other case studies considered thus far, a complex text that signals the mutability of sporting narratives as a way to negotiate sport's role in culture. If *Bend It Like Beckham* can be understood, in part, as a text that shifted the discourse on women's soccer and the place of racialized women in contemporary Britain, then *Ted Lasso* could perform a similar function by reconceptualizing the character of elite men's soccer and its viability as an American interest. The friction between American sporting exceptionalism and soccer's global cache has long been haunted by social and class divisions that cast soccer as an elitist, globalist incursion against more conservative

[503] "Wrexham's ESPN2 debut averages more than MLS Decisions Day on FS1," *World Soccer Talk*, October 22, 2022, https://worldsoccertalk.com/tv/wrexhams-espn2-debut-scores-decent-tv-rating-20221018-WST-404778.html.
[504] Omar Garrick, "Premier League in initial talks over Drive to Survive-style Netflix series," *The Athletic*, September 23, 2022, https://theathletic.com/3622687/2022/09/23/premier-league-netflix-drive-survive-series/.

pastimes such as baseball.[505] The characterization of soccer as foreign, effeminate, and unworthy is not gone—UFC President Dana White made headlines recently when a clip of him describing it as "the least talented sport on earth" resurfaced amidst the World Cup[506]—but the success *Ted Lasso* enjoys suggest it is growing evermore isolated. While that alone may not shift the needle on conservative perspectives on the sport, it does model an understanding of manhood and the Beautiful Game that sits squarely within the discourses of progressive sociality. Whereas *Bend It Like Beckham* was perhaps the last icon of "Cool Britannia" multiculturalism, *Ted Lasso* is iconic of a kind of sports narrative that wears its social intervention on its sleeve because it "gets it." To what degree it will spur real-world sporting figures to do likewise is difficult to determine at this point, though the fact it arrives at a time when the public politics of elite sports are more self-reflective suggests the relationship could be reciprocal.

As I have already argued, however, deference to progressive politics on the part of powerbrokers in the elite game has a self-serving factor that must not be ignored. At the risk of indulging pessimism, I think it is imperative to approach *Ted Lasso* with a similar view. As much as the television show has expanded on the character's original commercial premise, it has also been re-incorporated into the commercial arms of sports media. The partnership with EA's *FIFA* franchise indicates a synergy between *Ted Lasso* and other media that play on affinity for the game by inducing consumers to imagine themselves in an avatar's shoes. It's a testament to Lasso's validity as an icon of the global sport, but also a natural extension of a larger apparatus that further gamifies the Beautiful Game in the interest of ever-expanding modes of

[505] See Franklin Foer's closing chapter on soccer's development among middle-class liberals, the sport as a harbinger of globalism, and high-profile critics such as Jim Rome. *How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010).
[506] Daniel Davies, "Dana White Says Football—or "Soccer"—is "The Least Talented Sport on Earth," *Men's Health UK*, December 9, 2022, https://www.menshealth.com/uk/fitness/a42197123/dana-white-football-is-the-least-talented-sport-on-earth/.

consumption. The leadership of EA said as much when they described the *Ted Lasso* collaboration as the first of many designed to leverage pop culture for the good of the brand.[507] To be fair, *Ted Lasso* is far from the first program to spin out onto other platforms looking to trade on its popularity, nor is that process necessarily indicative of any lack of artistic quality or "purity." In fact, the degree to which Lasso is consistently positioned as a mouthpiece for soccer undermines the artistic complexities of the second season, which demonstrate that mere appearances are never quite enough to obscure the reality of a damaged and damaging structure. Appearances can, however, be manipulated to benefit a structure that remains entangled within the flows of capital that overwhelming benefit the Global North and its largely White, largely male powerbrokers.

Considering larger shifts in the social character of the game and the degree to which *Ted Lasso* has become a part of that movement, it could very well spur greater reflection to the point of reconceptualizing what it means for men to change soccer for the better. Yet like *Bend It Like Beckham*, it cannot do so without simultaneously revealing the degree to which any notion of the game's liberatory capacities are dependent upon the framing. If *Bend It Like Beckham: The Musical* shows that the transcendent presumptions of the film that inspired it were built on faulty foundations, then the recapitulation of Ted Lasso as a spokesman for American soccer belies the complex social commentary the television show articulates. As a successful multi-media property, *Ted Lasso* circulates and adapts with ease, its characters suitable for everything from promotional appearances to video games, Halloween costumes to new real-life roles for the very people who play them. Yet each new proliferation hardens its central character, the cheery but

[507] Bill Shea, "How Ted Lasso ended up in 'FIFA 23'—and then racked up over 1 million wins," *The Athletic*, November 2, 2022, https://theathletic.com/3755952/2022/11/02/ted-lasso-fifa-23-ea-sports/.

aching Ted, into an icon and caricature, belying the very complexities that make his journey through the television landscape so notable. The elite men's game may become more ostensibly progressive in the Ted Lasso mold as the years go on, but the fact that this new iteration of sporting masculinity flourished at the same time as the World Cup in Qatar—and, indeed, was even positioned to comment on it—suggests that it's powerbrokers will continue to privilege the magnitude of global capital and accessorize any property or symbol that appears to serve that objective. This is encapsulated in the rainbow version of the US Soccer crest emblazoned on the media room at the USMNT's camp in Qatar, a gesture to LGBTQ+ acceptance in defiance of the host government's homophobic policies;[508] it is a statement of how the game has changed, yes, but it also concedes that when tournament time comes around, the game goes on, ensuring that Qatar's leadership and other investors in the sports-industrial complex still get what they want. Like *Bend It Like Beckham*, *Ted Lasso* could become a touchstone for others to reflect on in future, reckoning with the ways the game has changed, the way it has not changed, and what power sporting fantasies will continue to wield even as they are frayed by overuse.

To critique the ways *Ted Lasso* is played for commercial gain is not to deride it as pure cynicism, even if juxtaposing its sincerity with its economic positioning can leave a sour taste in the mouth. Instead, it is to do what I have done throughout this dissertation: to take seriously what the show reveals about the sport and its politics. Like my previous case studies, *Ted Lasso* intrigues because it illustrates how the Beautiful Game's capacity to enact transformation can be playfully retooled for various purposes. By adopting a fish-out-of-water story as its central premise, the show plays into culture clash tropes that comically reveal distinctions between two

[508] "US Soccer uses rainbow crest in Qatar," *AP News*, November 14, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/world-cup-soccer-sports-gay-rights-international-d1e00f5e14e35bf4f73dfea2eb606941.

nations. By taking a well-meaning American coach's can-do spirit to the English Premier League, the show plays with coaching iconography, twisting the usual tropes into a self-reflexive commentary on hegemonic masculinity. By extending into the broader reaches of the game, the creators, stars, and fans of the show play along with their growing embeddedness within American conceptions of soccer, a conception filtered through a rendition of leadership that only really exists on TV. By centering Ted Lasso as an ambassador of the sport, the elite game's powerbrokers play on his iconicity in the interest of expanding the flow of capital in a way that makes everyone feel good. As ever, the degree to which the sport of soccer or this soccer narrative itself retains transformative efficacy through performance is contingent upon the way it is framed and the objectives that frame serves. It is true that *Ted Lasso*, like *Bend It Like Beckham*, can inspire transformative change in the Beautiful Game and beyond when those who invest in it build upon its inspirational impetus and iterate on their own part in the sport to enact the change they desire. It is also true that myths of soccer's transcendent power—it's capacity to elevate the player above and beyond their circumstances, as if those circumstances had no tangibility at all—are easily manipulated by those invested in the material powers the sport reciprocally upholds. The Beautiful Game's very nature is a playable thing, but not everybody gets to play on equal footing.

As this project transitions into its next stage, I anticipate change to remain a constant. Like most PhD students, my research was adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced me to reschedule a trip to Argentina to study *Messi10*, a Cirque du Soleil production inspired by the great Lionel Messi. Unfortunately, after retaining funding to attend the production's rescheduled run, the creators changed the dates yet again; there are as yet no definite plans to see it post-graduation. Nevertheless, *Messi10* exerted influence on this

dissertation by pointing to the unique challenges of adapting soccer into the movement vocabulary of the Cirque brand and by suggesting how the performing arts can be incorporated into legacy-building and brand management. Holding *Messi10* in tension with other movement-based work, including by the likes of choreographer and activist Ahilan Ratnamohan, furthers one of the central conceits of this dissertation by highlighting how the body can play along the disciplinary lines that divide sport and dance, not to mention the enormous celebrity powers, like Messi, who command not only significant capital but complex feelings about identity, belonging, and national duty.[509] Contrary to Cirque du Soleil's well-oiled spectacles, Ratnamohan's work often engages community stakeholders, including African men who have traveled to Europe to ply their trade in the professional leagues, to reimagine what the physical beauty of soccer says about culture at large. These diverging approaches to soccer choreography, one embedded in a global brand and the other aimed at inserting soccer's vocabulary into the realms of concert dance, suggest yet another rich playing field is there to be examined. The challenge with *Messi10* is that so much of that experience depends on being there, particularly as Cirque du Soleil has built ancillary activities that invite audiences to imagine themselves *as* Messi. While there is a lot that could be said about *Messi10* from afar, being there to witness and participate is the only way to study the production comprehensively enough.

The addition of *Messi10* into my portfolio of case studies also presents an opportunity to pursue my evolving methodological interests. Inspired by the qualitative ethos of physical cultural studies and my own experiences interviewing artists through my varied work in the Washington, DC area, I aim to take on *Messi10* and revised versions of my current studies with

[509] My latest efforts to catch *Messi10* were thwarted by rescheduling, but not before *The Last Cup* (*La última copa*), a superb NPR podcast by Jasmine Garsd, shed light on Messi's complex relationship with his homeland. *La última copa/The Last Cup*, produced by Futuro Studios for *NPR*, https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510367/the-last-cup.

more emphasis on engaging stakeholders. My experience has shown me that incorporating their intentions and working methods into an analysis invariably reveals characteristics to the dramaturgy of their works that would not have been clear otherwise. Phil Porter's efforts to thread the programmatic needle with his rendition of the Christmas Truce is a case in point: in a situation like that, any artistic decisions must be made with an eye to the institutional apparatus and historical moment upholding the production. Furthermore, certain of my case studies cry out for a more nuanced perspective brought on by engaging the actors who live it. Chapter three's case studies especially will benefit from ethnographic methods and framing analyses aimed at determining what athlete activists, elite sports leaders, and political powerbrokers seek to accomplish through sports performance. Determining the *why* of their actions better explicates the actors' understanding and deployment of the conditions needed to effect performative transformation. One of my chief objectives is to return to this work with the help of colleagues such as Dağhan Irak and the faculty at the International Centre for Sports History and Culture, experts in both qualitative methods and in the internal mechanics of sports organizations such as FIFA. It seems strange to say that my journey as a researcher has only just begun even as this period of study draws to a close, but as my work thus far has shown, the complexities of play and performance as constitutive of our cultural experiences necessitate a big methodological toolbox.

For all my plans to continue my own research, I hope that my findings here can provide a foundation for others to chart courses of their own. As ever, there is a need to critically engage with sporting structures and the ways they reinscribe harmful contours of power. There is a need, for example, to attend to queer, trans, and non-binary participation in sport as both an essential development and a significant challenge to the rigid gender policing that has been studiously upheld by many governing bodies. The progress made and the backlash it inspires, both at the

rarefied elite level and in school programs across the world, point to new battlegrounds for scholars to investigate not only the ways sport has historically shaped (and restricted) gender performance but what "new" performers will do to those constructions. The World Cup in Qatar, meanwhile, reiterated the immense power that sporting spectacles and their ancillary ceremonies have to sportswash human rights violations away, but it also brought to the fore the challenge of articulating a nuanced critique amidst fraught intercultural encounters. One of the abiding concerns that I took away from the tournament was the challenge of navigating a discursive minefield in which the question of who has the right to criticize whom is a constant. With tournaments like the World Cup expanding and power players like Saudi Arabia growing in influence, there are opportunities for scholars, including those from the Arab world and the Global South, to interrogate how differing conceptions of sporting performances and spectacles, many of which are haunted by colonialism, can be productively interrogated with an eye to the politics they enforce at home and what it means to bring those politics into a global encounter. There are also opportunities to conduct more comprehensive reviews—of soccer dramas, perhaps—or deeper dives into how soccer performance is spun out within a particular context, such as Turkey. Whereas I have sought to explore performance on a spectrum, others might improve my offerings by demonstrating what characteristics prevail across genres.

At issue for me has been placing these case studies into a larger discourse on performativity and play. While others will find greater purchase in exploring the complex dynamics of national belonging, racial formation, fan cultures—a myriad of other subjectivities and areas of fascination—I hope that my work here encourages others to think expansively but clearly about the presumptions that so often drive conceptions of performance's efficacy. As evidenced in the genealogical touchstones of the concept and significant recent works such as the

special issue of *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, there is no end to how performance's capacities might be theorized. However, there is a need to reckon with slippages between what is *actually* accomplished through a performance and what is *claimed* to be accomplished. Once again, this is not to provide safe harbor for anti-theatrical prejudice but to spur serious reflection on how claims of efficacy can easily be leveraged for dubious gains, uncritically advanced as an ill-suited surrogate for transformative work, or mischaracterized in relation to the material circumstances that *do* allow a performance to become transformative. There is also a need for further scholarship that seriously investigates the optimization of play and pleasure. For example, the advent of "actual-play" content, in which actors or media personalities create story content out of their role-playing game experiences, begs an investigation that not only queries how a genre that was designed to make epic stories intimately available to friends through avenues such as *Dungeons & Dragons* has been professionalized but also how that process mimics the historical path taken by so many games that transformed into elite sports. At issue is not just how economies monetize play but what players themselves gain (or lose) from such a process. It might seem facile to suggest that play has and should always have a private quality that resists deterministic analyses and total consumption by the powers of marketization, but even that intimacy can be excavated through rigorous qualitative research that takes seriously why and how people play amidst a myriad opportunities and pressures to excel according to external pressures.

Finally, a pair of personal notes. As I have written, my growing consciousness of elite sport's flawed structures and the challenges of practicing ethical sports spectatorship has made me significantly more reflective about where I sit in the global game. I am first and foremost a fan, but I am also coming into my own as a critic and scholar, and with that development comes

a chance to deploy my faculties effectively. To say that is straightforward would be a lie: I struggled with it significantly during the most recent men's World Cup, when my very body craved watching every minute of action, but my mind never could banish the suffering and compromises that made the tournament possible. Amidst calls for a boycott—belated ones, it must be said—I elected to watch what I wanted, donate to a cause I believed in, critique the political characteristics of various performances throughout the tournament, and look ahead to the next men's World Cup, right here in North America. Wherever the next chapter of life takes me, I intend to engage with this continental tournament in the ways I learned from my colleagues in physical cultural studies, whether that be attending meanings, educating participants, or practicing the criticism that I hope will only grow more insightful with time.

Apart from critiquing my place within the global game, I am also taking greater part in my local game. After spending years of my adulthood reminiscing about the days I spent getting scraped and bloody on the schoolyards, I have finally made consistently playing a priority again. So far, that has involved participating in a league operated by Zogsports, one of many companies that offers de facto intramurals for adults who pay for the privilege. My first foray into Zogsports was in the Fall of 2019, when I joined a team in part to satisfy the requirements for my Performance Ethnography course. While the experience as a researcher was invaluable, I took much more solace from what it *felt like* to be playing again. That season was a rollercoaster: with me in goal, my team won its first three games, lost the second three (thanks in part to some mistakes from yours truly), and made it to the semifinals thanks to a clerical error. From there, it became the stuff of fairytales: we won the semifinal thanks in part to my performance in a penalty shootout and went on to win the final 2-1. The experience proved to me once and for all what I could never understand as a teenager: that past mistakes are never a guarantee of future

disappointments. As a boy, any mistake I made on the pitch haunted me, suggesting that any skills or talents I appeared to possess were a sham. It's a shortcoming that has trickled into my artistic life, my personal life, and certainly my scholarly life, where imposter syndrome is a standard feature. Now, I know when to get up, when to own up, and when to recognize that it is all just a game. Perhaps it's appropriate, then, that the team I played for in the Fall of 2022, while completing this dissertation, was called Ted Lasso's Spurs. To say the show's message of self-belief transformed me would be a mistake, but the fact that, to paraphrase Ted himself, sports and art can combine has given me the opportunity to play in both spaces with a little more ease.

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