

Behind the Man, the Kneel, and the Protest

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Image events are a necessary tactic for oppositional politics in an electronic public sphere.

-Kevin DeLuca, *Image Politics* (2009, p. 92)

Pictures are apparently worth a thousand words, and for the picture Michael Zargaris captured during the 2016 football season of a sole player kneeling<sup>1</sup> justly before an NFL game, one could say that this photo is not only worth a thousand words but serves as a symbol for a new day. The man kneeling is not Caucasian—he has mocha-colored skin with yellow undertones. His hair is not shaved, close-cut, or even put up in braids, but is standing tall and proud in an Afro. His arms rest crossed over his bent left-knee in a sign of respect. And his face: his face is not set in a look of contempt, but in a look of determination and resolution. The patrons behind the man stand with their right hand crossed over their chest, resting above their hearts. But not this man, he has a point to make. A point that can no longer stand silently on the sidelines. A point that needs to be recognized, contemplated, and ultimately understood by not only football fans, but the world at large, for the betterment of society and the future of this country. To many viewers, this may just look like an everyday African-American football player kneeling during the National Anthem, but to many this picture and what this man is kneeling for represent so much more.

Colin Kaepernick, a name that used to be related just to the football realm, has now garnered an even bigger public image for himself—Colin Kaepernick, the activist. Kaepernick was the San Francisco 49ers quarterback from 2011 to 2016 (Wyche, 2016). On August 26, 2016, the third preseason football game for the San Francisco 49ers, Kaepernick sat on the bench

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<sup>1</sup> Image located in Appendix.

during the national anthem because, in Kaepernick's words, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color" (Sandritter, 2017; Wyche, 2016). On September 1, 2016, after speaking to "former Green Beret and brief NFL long snapper Nate Boyer," Kaepernick switched from sitting to kneeling. (Sandritter, 2017). Utilizing the theoretical lens of image events, I will argue how the kneeling image of Kaepernick is a representation of an image event. First, I will briefly describe the racialized police brutality affecting African-Americans that has become increasingly mediated throughout the past decade. Then, I will introduce image events and their significance throughout the past half-century. Third, I will discuss the national anthem protest at the 1968 Olympics and the militaristic presence within the National Football League (NFL). Finally, I will conclude with examining the rhetorical components of the kneeling image of Kaepernick.

### Racial Brutality and the Police

Racial brutality from Caucasians onto African-Americans dates back to the Atlantic Slave Trade. Institutional discrimination is an occurrence that many blacks face daily, with one being police brutality. This occurrence is not something new, but with the introduction of social media sites, the media attention of police brutality against African-Americans has increased tremendously. Since 2012, and the shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman (CNN Library, 2018), shootings of African-American men by the police have increased until 2015. The Washington Post created a database in 2015 "cataloging every fatal shooting nationwide by a police officer in the line of duty, collecting data on those who were killed and details of the shootings" (The Washington Post, 2019). From 2015 to 2018, 91 unarmed Black males were fatally shot by police (The Washington Post, 2019). 2015 had the highest fatal shootings of unarmed Black men by police. Since then, shootings by police have slowly decreased. One major

reasoning behind this is because of former President Obama and his action for police reform. “The Obama administration oversaw a significant reduction in federal incarceration, scaled back federal drug prosecutions and went further than any other modern White House in its efforts to reform local police departments” (Lowery, 2018) Shootings by police officers have continued throughout the years, but the number of videos of unarmed people being killed by the police have decreased. Beliefs are that police officers have become “more cautious” since many now must wear body cameras and modern-day social media photo/video journalism has become popular (Lowery, 2018).

This is the reasoning behind Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem. He wanted to bring attention to an injustice that has been occurring for too long. Because of the vast national, and worldwide, media coverage the kneeling image of Kaepernick received, that image is now a representation of an image event.

### Image Events

An image event, according to rhetorical theorist Kevin Michael DeLuca (2009), is an ocular argument. Image events specifically are “orchestrated by social movements, and deliberately staged spectacles designed to attract the attention of the mass media and disseminate persuasive images to a wide audience” (Johnson, 2007, p. 2). They garner their success because of their strong rhetorical characteristics and wide circulation through the masses.

Davi Johnson (2007) examines the rhetorical components of the image events seen at Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 march through downtown Birmingham, Alabama. These images, taken by Charles Moore, populated the pages of *Life* magazine that year and people across the globe paid witness to the racial terrorism occurring in the South. King decided that marching through Birmingham would allow the people to witness the violence that was imposed upon

them by the white police force, and that violence emerged powerfully during the Birmingham campaign. Moore's photos captured the horrors of white supremacy and circulated visual evidence of racialized violence into living rooms around the U.S. The protestors used themselves like human martyrs to the cause: to expose the hidden racial tension, hatred, and violence coursing through America's southern veins. The global distribution of the brutal images during the early 60's brought attention to the problem of racial discrimination in America.

Applying the concept of image events to environmental activism, DeLuca (2009) explains that the "image event...reconstitutes the identity of the dominant culture by challenging and transforming mainstream society's key discourses and ideographs" (p. 16). Through viewership on well-known channels like ABC, CBS, and NBC, the rhetorical images of environmentalists from the 70s to the 90s were able to be seen by hundreds of thousands. Through pictures provided by environmental salvationists, ones across the globe could witness the extensive destruction produced onto the environment by big companies. These image events challenged the mainstream environmental destruction that big corporations committed and made people aware of what was occurring in their backyards.

The 21<sup>st</sup>-century has taken a turn toward the proliferation of image events. Now through social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, anyone and everyone can become a photojournalist with the click of their camera-phone. Twitter specifically allows users to engage in the use of hashtags. Anything marked with a particular hashtag can become part of the same conversation. Following the viral image of Kaepernick's kneeling, hashtags like #ColinKaepernick, #nfl, #protest and #kneeling were some of the most utilized during the football season of 2016 to 2017 (Boyce, 2017). While consistent coverage was made by major news channels across America, like anything that goes viral on the Internet, it ultimately died

down. This is the problem with anything during this age of mass media: image events and news need consistent coverage in order to maintain their impact on society. The kneeling image of Colin Kaepernick became an image event through its wide circulation on national news channels and Twitter. People either shared comments of support or disgust, but ultimately the image produced a spectacle of global magnitude.

Schill (2012) explains how “our current understanding of images suggests visual symbols have 10 important functions in politics: they serve as arguments, have an agenda setting function, dramatize policy, aid in emotional appeals, build the candidate’s image, create identification, connect to societal symbols, transport the audience, and add ambiguity” (p. 122). While Kaepernick is far from a political candidate, his visible gesture of the kneel served many of these functions: brought awareness to the argument and aided in the wider emotional appeal of the injustice being acted upon African-Americans. Through his continuous use of the gesture, he built his own image of being an activist and created more identification for the cause, which originally started with the group #BlackLivesMatter. Goodnow (2006) explains how “a nonverbal symbol in a social campaign often acts as a logo for the movement itself” and Kaepernick turned this simple gesture of kneeling into a symbol of justice. (p. 170)

### Protesting the Racial Divide

Intravia, Piquero and Piquero (2018) explain how “there is a perceptual racial divide within the USA regarding protesting during the national anthem as either an acceptable act or instead as an unacceptable deviant act” and for Kaepernick’s case, his kneeling was seen as deviant, but he is not the first African-American athlete to make a political statement during the national anthem (p. 1059).

Tommie Smith and John Carlos turned the simple hand gesture of a fist into a symbol for the Olympic Project for Human Rights during the 1968 Olympics (Peterson, 2009). After receiving their medals for their great performance on the track, the men both held up black-gloved fists as the national anthem played throughout the stadium (Peterson, 2009). Everyone in the stadium and around the world watching on their TVs were shocked. Reporters were angered and “sportswriters seemed to believe the U.S. sprinters had violated the sanctity of sports by inserting their own politics. These reactions point to an unwritten rule or norm in sports that its participants leave their politics and social activism at the arena or stadium gate” (Peterson, 2009, p. 101). Because many people view sports as a pastime and an escape from the real world, viewers usually do not want to see real-world controversies brought into their relaxing space. When an athlete does incorporate their political and social beliefs into their place of work, the stadium, usually backlash and condemnation from fans and the media follow. “The result—pedestaled athletes’ faltering and crumbling reputational images,” for using their platform to bring attention to present inequalities. Kaepernick was criticized the same way as Smith and Carlos—he was even criticized by the President of the United States (Brown, Billings, & Devlin, 2016, p. 47).

No matter how badly their reputation could be damaged, Smith, Carlos, and Kaepernick knew they needed to do something about the racial and social injustices going on in the world, for “professional athletes, and NFL players in particular, occupy a unique position in American culture. Their visibility gives them a platform on which they can draw attention to significant social issues” (Intravia, Piquero, & Piquero, 2018, p. 1066). While the fist-raising of Smith and Carlos, and the kneeling of Kaepernick created some divide between the country, “the protest[s] illustrated the potential power of the black athlete in sports” (Peterson, 2009, p. 116). A power

that athletes continuously need to utilize for the benefit of the people who admire them. While “King’s challenge was to make visible the injustice of segregation for a group of individuals (white moderates) who did not regularly experience or even witness the evils of racism firsthand,” Kaepernick’s challenge was to make visible the continuous, and often brutal, violence imposed upon African-Americans (Johnson, 2007, p. 3). Therefore, Kaepernick knew that he could make a more significant rhetorical statement by kneeling during the national anthem when everyone else was standing than by taking to social media and expressing his opinion in 280 characters or less.

### The NFL and Military Presence

Football can be described as ‘America’s sport’ or Americans favorite pastime. Throughout the years, American football has continuously garnered a militaristic presence, whether in the players’ uniforms or the events being held at the games. The “long-standing sport/military complex...has flourished since the events of 9/11” states Rugg (2016, p. 21). Through military events like the “Salute to Service, Crucial Catch, and Play 60 campaigns,” and with increased security because of fatal gun killings like 9/11, the NFL now incorporates a sense of nationalism and patriotism within almost every single game it plays (Rugg, 2016, p. 27). The Superbowl is one major example of this. A famous singer belts out the national anthem, representatives of every branch of the military march across the field while holding their respective flag, and jets fly above the stadium at the beginning of the game. “In a span of a few decades, the NFL has emerged to stand not just at the forefront of American sports but also at the forefront of American popular culture. As such, NFL regular season games are large enough to produce meaningful and lasting social, political, and economic influence” which is where it is logical for some to feel that kneeling during the national anthem is disrespectful (Rugg, 2016, p.

23). When Kaepernick first sat, then knelt, during the national anthem, many NFL fans around the nation were angered. From the burning of his jersey, multiple death threats, and media backlash, Kaepernick was labeled Anti-American (Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro, & Spencer, 2018). Many felt that him kneeling during the national anthem and pledge of allegiance was a sign of disrespect towards military troops. Schmidt et al. (2018) examined Facebook user posts about the national anthem protest from August 27, 2016 to October 20, 2016. The major theme that emerged was American values. People stated that “Kaepernick, by not standing for the national anthem, was threatening American values” and being “un-American” (Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro, & Spencer, 2018, p. 10).

Kaepernick had no intention to be disrespectful to the troops who put their lives on the line every day to give us our freedom. This change in position from sitting to kneeling was meant to be more respectful to everyone witnessing it, especially to the military personnel. But since these men and women do fight for our freedom, it is in Kaepernick’s first amendment right the freedom of protest. The kneeling position is meant to be respectful, but also as a stand against what America has become with its oppression of minorities. Therefore, the photo of Kaepernick taking a knee during the national anthem is a representation of a rhetorical image event. Many citizens across America were constantly questioning his reasoning for the kneel, but usually for one to believe anything, they must see it with their own eyes. “The rhetorical problem is one of visibility: how to get the white moderate to see, quite literally, the actual fact of racism and thus realize the impossibility of laying hold of a moral and progressive identity in the face of the status quo brutality” (Johnson, 2007, p. 3) The kneeling image of Kaepernick challenges this “status quo brutality” that has been the basis of America’s patriarchal institution of discrimination for years. His stance questions the authority of the officers who swore an oath to

protect the lives of all citizens in America. Through consistent coverage and visibility by the media, whether for or against the kneel, the concept of racial brutality was brought into the homes of every American.

Because of Kaepernick, the kneel has shifted from a symbol of prayer and proposal to one of protest. A symbol that depicts a man who feels the need to take a stand, or in this case a knee, for what he believes in. This image of Kaepernick, through the elements of the hair, skin, and stance supplement the rhetorical impact it carries as an image event. It symbolizes a stand against the racially unequal state which has come to characterize that of America. A country which began its oppression of African-Americans during times of slavery and continues to oppress them to this day.

### The Hair

Nonverbal communication is one of the most commonly utilized forms of communication, next to tone and words, and the nonverbals behind the kneeling image of Kaepernick speak volumes. His hair, his stance and his skin tone all represent something important to the movement. While to some, Kaepernick's hair may just look like it has not been attended to, the hair in the image is one of purpose and one that demands to be seen and heard. "It was generally believed that one's hairstyle was indicative of one's politics," and during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the Afro became known as being one of the most political hairstyles of its time (Byrd & Tharps, 2001, p. 57). The hairstyle is indigenous to Africa but became more popular on college campuses during the '60s (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). From there on "well-known Afroed Black political and cultural figures" began embracing the style and "there was a growing legion of primarily younger Black Americans who were 'froing their hair in emulation of the [Black] Panthers and as a declaration of their racial pride" (Byrd & Tharps,

2001, pp. 54-56). The Afro became the hair style of choice for many African-Americans who were tired of conforming to a racist patriarchy built upon white supremacy. The style showcased one's natural curls and kinks and allowed one to feel free and unenslaved to racist social norms. The Afro was and still is a hair style that challenges the White man's political agenda. A style culturally intertwined to political change and the eradication of Jim Crow was "put forth [during the '60s and is] now apparent in many avenues of Black and mainstream society" (Byrd & Tharps, 2001, p. 67). Kaepernick's hair being in an Afro in the image is no coincidence; it is intentional. Logically, there is no way that one's hair when styled into a large 'fro could possibly fit under a football helmet. Usually African-American football players will either have their hair braided, cut short, or assembled in other compressed hair styles to not have it interfere with them while they are playing. Because of this, Kaepernick's intention was not to play football that day, but to make a statement. This also means he was strategic because cameramen line the field during games to catch action shots of the players. Kaepernick's action shot of the day was creating an image event. He arrived on the field ready to protest and ready for the world to witness it, for Kaepernick's afro in the image was assembled as a reminder. A reminder to people that we African-Americans have come so far from slavery and segregation, but we still have a long way to go in this society if we ever want to terminate the racial oppression and receive the equality and justice we deserve.

### The Skin

Kaepernick's skin tone, a mocha-brown color with yellow undertones as presented in the image, is one that aids in the rhetorical impact. "Kaepernick's birth father is African American (and his birth mother Caucasian), but his adopted parents were both white" and for anyone born with a similar makeup, growing up biracial in America is difficult (Intravia, Piquero, & Piquero,

2018, p. 1059). One constantly hears the stories in school of both their races' pasts: how your one ancestors held captive your other ancestors. Also, the continuous oppression, segregation, and racism inflicted upon your African-American side by your white side. Growing up in a predominately white household would have not made the internal confliction any easier. At the end of the day, one is still going to be considered Black by society at large, and Kaepernick knew this. He could not let his race and culture, his own people, be treated so mercilessly: killed without any remorse or consideration for life. His undertones may display part of his white genealogical background, but it is the mocha-brown skin color that represents the hardships, the pain, and the suffering of his African ancestral past that makes him kneel. The skin color that America's white supremacist society has determined does not deserve justice or integrity. A skin color that speaks volume on its own.

### The Kneel

When a man goes down to one knee, it is usually either for a moment of prayer or to ask their partner to make them the happiest in the world. Smith and Keltner (2017) point out that "research into emotion and nonverbal communication suggests that there is nothing threatening about kneeling. Instead, kneeling is almost always deployed as a sign of deference and respect... in some situations, kneeling can be seen as a request for protection." When Kaepernick knelt on one knee during the national anthem, it was meant to be employed as a statement—a statement that requested the protection of all African-Americans from the racial brutality enacted upon them by police officers. A force enacted upon Blacks since the beginning of slavery.

In 1787, a seal was drawn up for a committee that was pursuing the abolition of the Slave Trade (Hamilton, 2013). This seal displayed an African man "in chains in a supplicating posture, kneeling with one knee upon the ground, and with both his hands lifted up to Heaven, and round

the seal was observed the following motto, as if he was uttering the words himself, ‘Am I not a Man and a Brother?’” (Clarkson, 1836, pp. 64-65). While Kaepernick is not enslaved, his kneeling stance is like that of the kneeling slave on the seal and reflects the reality that the violence of white supremacy has shifted in form rather than spirit or content over the centuries. The violence of white supremacy no longer enslaves black bodies on southern plantations, but it does segregate black bodies in fact (if not in law), corral them into prison at disproportionate rates (where their enslavement becomes legal again), and allow the state’s bullets to fill black bodies with impunity. And while Kaepernick has never uttered words during his kneeling, the motto on the kneeling slave seal can be applied to Kaepernick’s motivation for the protest: are all of us African-Americans not Men and Brothers to every other American claiming the United States as their home? Clarkson (1836) explains that “this seal, simple as the design was, was made to contribute largely...towards turning the attention of our countrymen to the case of the injured Africans, and of procuring a warm interest in their favor” (pp. 64-65). As simple as a kneel can be, Kaepernick knew he needed to make his voice heard on this injustice. The countrymen in his case are the political officials, other law enforcement agents, the President, and even everyday citizens—people who can come together and make a difference to end this brutal transgression. Kaepernick is kneeling in favor for the protection of all African-Americans who face danger from the law enforcement sworn to ‘protect’ us, just like the kneeling slave is kneeling in favor for the abolition of slavery for his people.

### Conclusion

Therefore, the kneeling image of Kaepernick demonstrates the power that image events possess. Through the rhetorical components of his hair, skin, and stance, Kaepernick utilized these and his celebrity status to bring attention to a troubling injustice affecting the African-

American community. Like anything within the digital age, a photo of Kaepernick kneeling was captured and posted on the Internet. Social media brought the image of the kneel to citizens across the globe and the worldwide circulation made national news coverage. Kaepernick's image of his kneeling stance became a representation of an image event and brought racial police brutality into the homes of every American and onto the timeline of every socially-mediated person.

To some, the image of a kneeling man may just mean he is in need of a prayer or simply in love, but "images do not function independently; rather, they tap into existing cultural and historical knowledge within the audience" and for the image of Kaepernick kneeling, it means something so much more (Schill, 2012, p. 122). The image is a reminder of all the oppression, prejudices, and injustices African-Americans have faced in America since the beginning of slavery. The racism that Martin Luther King Jr. brought awareness to; the injustices that Tommie Smith and John Carlos brought attention to; and the brutality Kaepernick is kneeling against. For this image of Kaepernick teaches us that if the racially unequal patriarchy of America allows this police brutality to go on against African-Americans, Blacks will continue to bring awareness to it and fight for peace and genuine equality. Because at the end of the day, are we all not men and brothers?

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Appendix

