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aja witt

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MEDIA CO-OPTATION OF THE TAKE A KNEE MOVEMENT: PRE AND POST-TRUMP

by

aja witt

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Travis Vogan
Thesis Mentor

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Travis Vogan
Journalism and Mass Communication Honors Advisor

Media Co-optation of the Take A Knee Movement: Pre and Post-Trump

Perhaps there is nothing more compelling than how history tends to repeat itself. One of the greatest examples of this phenomenon, in contemporary U.S. society, is mainstream America's repeated appropriation of minority-led, civil and human rights organizations and movements. Throughout history, Black protest has been rejected, demonized, assimilated, and misappropriated. It has been co-opted by those with power to ensure the continuation of the status quo. This is recently most evident in the mainstream news media's co-optation of the Take A Knee Movement following Donald Trump's election to presidency. The Take A Knee Movement, started by former San Francisco 49ers quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, in August of 2016, is a social justice movement against police brutality and racial inequality (Wyche, 2016). It involves Kaepernick literally taking a knee during the national anthem before games. But what began under President Obama, following an expansion of the police state, has since been positioned as a "direct resistance to Donald Trump" (Mindock, 2017). This alteration of the storyline is not only ahistorical and misinformed but hinders the movement's progress as it's stunted for majority (**read:** white) consumption and written about biasedly. The movement becomes a resistance to *Republicans*, or this *specific* Republican, when in actuality, it is a resistance to white supremacy and anti-Blackness — existing within and outside of all political affiliations. The mainstream news media's appropriation of the Take A Knee Movement is then continuing in the tradition of quelling Black dissent by controlling and misrepresenting the narrative. This is important within the 24-hour news cycle's competition for viewers, primarily driven by sensationalism, and lacking story completion.

I looked at 174 articles over the Take A Knee Movement across mainstream, alternative, and multicultural media sites from August of 2016 to January of 2018. I took note of common themes within the reporting of the Take A Knee Movement, the context of those themes, and

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their authors. The purpose of my study was to examine whether there were any significant changes in the way the media reported on the Take A Knee Movement before and after Donald Trump's election — specifically if there were any changes following Trump's online altercation with players and owners of the NFL and NBA on September 23, 2017. I found that September 24, 2017 marked a noticeable shift in mainstream media coverage, not only increasing Take A Knee's online impact, but packaging Trump as the new “thing” to rally against, instead of police brutality. I argue that the centering of Donald Trump in this way obscures the meaning of the Take A Knee Movement as an opposition to one person instead of entire systems of inequality that will remain post-Trump.

There are many ways Black and minority-led social justice movements are (re)packaged within the hegemonic culture of the United States. This is significant because, although prevailing ideas and attitudes alter over time to represent those not currently valued by the mainstream (Oates, 2017), societal norms have never changed so much as to place the minority alongside the majority. In this way, it's not unusual for those in the majority to include fragments of the minority stance not in direct challenge to the existing state. In other words, to reimagine a movement, make it less “threatening” and more palatable. Marxist theorist, Raymond Williams, explored the interactions of social relations with culture and ideas, in his essay, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory”. Williams identified that the base, social and productive forces (pg. 5-6), condition the superstructure, “cultural activities” (pg.4) and institutions of a society. The superstructure, he said, often influences the base, meaning culture and consciousness influence reality, but the base remains primary. Black and minority-led movements have reshaped social consciousness, drawing attention to problems within American society, but those issues are rarely fully leveled. They are often returned to by a later generation.

America, like many countries around the world, has entered an interesting time where protest and “resistance” have regained national attention rivaled by only that of the Civil Rights Era. Though political activism in the United States was never completely abandoned following the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, the media attention for it diminished after the assassination of Dr. King, and the murder, incarceration, or fleeing of countless other leaders. In 2008, the election of President Barack Obama gave rise to the myth of a post-racial America, with his victory having been thought to “[demonstrate] the success of the Civil Rights Movement... and [the] ideology of toleration,” (Eskew, 2012) But that would be overturned by the 2016 election of Donald Trump, which led to a “sharp increase in U.S. protest activity,” (*The Washington Post*, 2017). Although the Take A Knee Movement began under Obama, it gained national attention in the era of Trump. Likewise, although the Take A Knee Movement is of the 21st century, I’d like to situate it historically, as another form of Black protest and resistance, by first examining the Civil Rights Movement and its experiences with media co-optation. This will offer another instance of Black movement appropriation to validate a trend.

Because the Take A Knee Movement represents a renewal in sporting protest, specifically Black protest in sport, I’d also like to look briefly at former track and field athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos’ Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics. The initial disdain and gradual acceptance of these athletes will further reveal the habits of the mainstream news media to adopt the image of Black protest over its actual message. To appropriate meaningful gestures, like taking a knee during the national anthem, and render them merely symbolic representations of racial conversation in America. Finally, it is important to consider how the Take A Knee Movement relates to other Black and minority-led social justice movements of the 21st century — most notably the Black Lives Matter (BLM) social movement, the #MeToo

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Movement, and #YouOKSis. These movements, being of the digital age, have experienced varied amounts of media appropriation, white washing, and/or misconstruction.

As stated in *VIBE* magazine (2016), the Take A Knee Movement was directly inspired by the older, more well-known, Black Lives Matter Movement, and has utilized BLM as a social justice blueprint. Both movements have goals of eradicating racial and systemic injustice as it pertains to police and state violence against the Black community and both have seen success with the use of social media, through hashtags of #BlackLivesMatter and #TakeAKnee. The increasing influence of technology in 21st century movements is yet another point of interest — being impressive, while at times, disadvantageous. The potential for virality, where an image, video, or other piece of information can be quickly circulated, represents one form of leverage today's movements may have over earlier generations.

Sportswriter Dave Zirin acknowledged the importance of social media and “viral impact” when writing about the Take A Knee Movement in 2016. He suggested that “digital connections” offer a platform to those outside of the mainstream, contributing to a variation of contemporary writers and social discussion leaders:

The sports media of 1996 and before was made up largely of older, white conservative sports writers who set the tune for how things would be discussed across the country.

That's not as much the case today... In many respects, social media sets the tone for how these discussions take place. Not entirely, but the balance of power is different from what it was in 1996 (Zirin, 2016).

One disadvantage to viral impact and increasing technological influence in contemporary movements, however, is society's impulse to disengage when mainstream and social media have

moved on to its next cause. A byproduct of the digital age and the 24-hour news cycle is the constant barrage of new information. Because of this, there is a tendency to prioritize those stories most readily available through the mainstream news. Tarana Burke, the founder and leader of the #MeToo Movement¹, spoke about this issue during her March visit to the University of Iowa. She addressed the need to continue working after the hashtag leaves the news cycle. Like #MeToo, the mainstream news media will eventually lose interest in the Take A Knee Movement, but it's important that activism continues, and the message remains intact. For this reason, and those aforementioned, I want to examine the mainstream news media's reporting of the Take A Knee Movement, how it has transformed pre and post-Trump, and how its gradual co-optation is reminiscent of Black movements past and present.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, 60s

It would be superficially plausible, but factually incorrect, to believe that every child raised in contemporary America is privy to an education about the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Most are familiar with The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, but the movement's decade-long timespan is generally condensed to the 1955 bus boycotts, one speech, and an assassination. Americans learn about these events every February, if at all, and the "story" seems to end like a fairytale — with a happy ending. Except Dr. King was assassinated. Except he didn't "fix" America, and we're not all judged by the "content of our character," (Dr. King, 1963). This is the racially colorblind story we've been told. The "respectable" version which ignores how unfavorably "two-thirds of Americans" viewed Dr. King just two years prior to his death (Gallup, 1966). This fictitious image of the Civil Rights

¹ The #MeToo Movement is a movement against sexual assault and harassment that began in 2006.

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Movement is fascinating when looked at today. 94 percent of Americans report feeling “favorable” toward Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement in 2011 (Gallup). But the modes of protest and resistance Dr. King employed is seen as “disrespectful” or unnecessary when utilized in the 21st century. One CNN poll, conducted in September of 2017, found that 46 percent of Americans viewed the Take A Knee Movement as “disrespectful to the freedoms the [national] anthem represents,” (CNN, 2017). The difference in favorability from 1966 to 2011, and the dislike for Black protest in 2017, is too vast to explain in this report. But certainly, there is a correlation between the contemporary mainstream news media’s “acceptance” of Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement following his murder, and Americans favorability towards him.

Today, Dr. King is viewed and reported on as an American saint (Dreier, 2013), but he was a radical — oftentimes labeled a communist. His F.B.I. file consists of 17,000 pages of material (Truman State University), he was jailed 30 times (The King Center) and he often spoke in opposition to the War in Vietnam, stating, “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today” was his own government (1967). With his birthday having been recognized as a federal holiday every January since 1986 (*USA Today*, 2018), it’s clear Dr. King is not marketed as the radical he once was. Instead, he is commercialized by Ram Trucks and sold during the Super Bowl (2018) and used by white Americans to quiet Black people on the topic of racism. Black Americans are still segregated into poorly funded schools, have higher unemployment rates than whites (Talton, 2018), and are statistically more likely (than whites) to be killed by police², even when unarmed (Swaine, Laughland, Lartey, 2015). But Dr. King’s 1960s message is used as a

² Indigenous Americans are statistically *most* likely to be killed by police.

symbolic “great uniter”. His image has been co-opted and distorted by the mainstream media because he can no longer speak for himself, or the movement.

Athlete Protests of the 1960s: Tommie Smith & John Carlos

The idea of being worth more dead than alive, of gaining national recognition in the afterlife, is not unique to Dr. King. It’s not unique to the Black or minority experience either, though it happens to people of color quite often. In some cases, it is your activism that is honored, but in others, it is the idyllic presentation of your personhood that extends for generations. Though Tommie Smith and John Carlos are still very much alive and have expressed their support for Colin Kaepernick via “I’m With Kap” t-shirts (Essence, 2017), their time on the activist-athlete platform has run out. Today they are seldom seen or heard on topics surrounding race and poverty, but the image of them standing with their fists raised on the Olympic podium during the national anthem in Mexico City, Mexico will live on in the history of sports and protest forever.

As the story goes, the two men were set to compete in the 200 meters — a specialty of Smith’s where he “reigned as world champion,” (Hartmann, 2003). He would finish first with a record-setting time of 19.8 seconds. Australian Peter Norman and John Carlos were second and third respectively with identical times of 20 seconds (pg. 4). Immediately following the race, the men were taken to their dressing rooms to await the presentation of their medals. As they re-emerged, Smith wore a single black glove on his right hand, and Carlos, one on his left. Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) buttons clung to their jackets, they carried their shoes and wore black socks. Smith wore a black scarf, and Carlos, “a string of African-style beads,” (pg. 5). As the Star-Spangled Banner rang out, they lowered their heads and raised their fists and, according to Carlos, the crowd began to boo them — some people then screamed the national

anthem at them. A year later, in 1969, Smith would explain their actions and the symbolism of their dress in Harry Edwards', *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*:

My raised right hand stood for the power in Black America. Carlos' raised left hand stood for the unity of Black America. Together they formed an arch of unity and power. The black scarf around my neck stood for Black pride. The black socks with no shoes stood for Black poverty in racist America. The totality of our effort was the regaining of Black dignity (Smith, 1969).

Black Americans were rightly frustrated following the assassination of Dr. King, and Tommie Smith and John Carlos could not have chosen a more perfect place and time to take a stand and make a statement. At the televised Olympics, in an act that can be simplified as akin to airing out America's dirty laundry, Smith and Carlos exposed the U.S. for its continued racism and unjust treatment of class and race-based minorities. Like the NAACP's United Nations petition (1947), which described human rights violations the U.S. had committing against Black Americans, this display embarrassed the American government on the global stage.

In the immediate aftermath of their protest, Smith and Carlos were labeled "renegades," "extremists," and "a pair of dark-skinned storm troopers," (Musburger, 1968). Their demonstration was described as "disgraceful, insulting and embarrassing," by the *New York Times*, and an "act contemptuous of the United States," by the *Chicago Tribune*. Letters in complaint of their silent protest, written by American spectators, were sent to the International Olympic Committee (IOC). In them, it was said that Smith and Carlos were "Black militants" who "detested their country," (Congelio, 2017) and deserved to have their medals stripped. One writer called the men "a national disgrace," and wrote that they should "return to the stone-age

delights of tribal Africa” as the “negro race” had “contributed nothing toward civilization.” This harassment would continue as Smith and Carlos returned to the United States, with both men receiving death threats, and eventually being suspended from the U.S. track team (Brown, 2017). But beginning in the 1980s, specifically during the 1984 Olympic Games, “Americans... [began] to view Smith and Carlos and the demonstration in generally positive, if not downright celebratory ways,” (Hartmann, pg. 10). They were described as “civil rights heroes” by *Sports Illustrated* in 1991, in 1999, HBO produced a documentary, *Fists of Freedom*, over their act, and in 2008, they received the Arthur Ashe Courage Award at the ESPYs (*ESPN*, 2008). Of course, their message never changed. Smith and Carlos never denounced their protest, or their opinions on poverty and race in America, but overtime, their activism has branded them “heroes”.

John Carlos published a book with Dave Zirin in 1994 entitled, *The John Carlos Story: The Sports Moment That Changed the World*. His and Tommie Smith’s salute is thought to have had a “lasting impact on social activism...” (*TeamUSA*, 2017) being one of the most memorable moments in sporting history. It’s true that fifty years after they “shook [up] the world,” (*The Washington Post*, 2017) the Take A Knee Movement is an emulation, at least in part, of Carlos and Smith’s protest, as stated by Kaepernick himself (*Essence*, 2017). But realistically, if Smith and Carlos’ 1968 protest was as successful as some contemporary publications have made it out to be, we wouldn’t need the Take A Knee Movement. Their demonstration was revolutionary, powerful, and long-lasting, but there remains a celebration of false progress. There is still Black poverty in racist America. There is still white supremacy. But as Smith and Carlos receive accolades in recognition of their salute, all forms of media do not address this. Likewise, in 2016, a Reuters/Ipsos poll found that 65 percent of Americans, “don’t want to see athletes express their political views at the Olympic Games” (*The Christian Science Monitor*) today. So as Tommie

Smith and John Carlos are symbolically embraced for their political activism and courage, most Americans would be against this for the Black Lives Matter and Take A Knee movements.

Beginning to Take A Knee

When Colin Kaepernick first knelt during the national anthem in August of 2016, he stated, “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color... To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way,” (Wyche, 2016). Kaepernick was referring to the growing number of unarmed people of color, specifically Black, who have been murdered by police. His statement came at a time of mounting political unrest, as the country neared the end of President Obama’s second term. President Obama is important for two reasons. First, as above-mentioned, his presidency, “celebrated” by “conservative and liberal commentators,” alike (Dawson, Bobo, 2009) was thought to have signified America as a “post-racial society,” (pg. 247). Second, his presidency preceded the election of Donald Trump, a man who has been described as “a white supremacist who has largely surrounded himself with other white supremacists,” (Hill, 2017).

During the beginning stages of his protest, in a move from passively sitting to actively kneeling, Kaepernick was criticized as “disrespectful” in the mainstream and alternative media. The word used most often to describe his movement was “un-American”. Interviews with current and former NFL players, sporting fans, and celebrities reveal a very narrow understanding of the word “patriotism” and align the movement with anti-military sentiment. Former football player, Mike Ditka, advised Kaepernick to “get the hell out” if he “[doesn’t] like this country and our flag” (*USA Today*, 2016) and NFL commissioner, Roger Goodell commented, “...We believe very strongly in patriotism in the NFL. I personally believe very strongly in that” (*Washington Post*, 2016). Fan responses to Kaepernick’s demonstration were slightly more exaggerated with

one man saying, “[he is] spitting in the face of soldiers and everyone killed in 9/11” (*USA Today*, 2016) and another saying, “if Kaepernick walked through a military hospital with people, Black and white, missing limbs, he’d soon realize he should stand up for the anthem” (*The Telegraph*, 2016). Labeling Kaepernick’s protests “un-American” or unpatriotic, completely ignores who has historically gotten to define these terms in the U.S. and who has *always* gotten to be called “American” — the white majority. There is privilege in being uncritical of America, which is then seen as being patriotic, that marginal groups seldom enjoy. Terrell J. Starr (*The Root*) addressed this in his 2017 article, “Patriotism Is for White People”, citing white America’s reaction to the Take A Knee Movement. Starr stated, “America’s inception was never designed to accommodate the liberty and freedoms of its nonwhite people.” This is true. Following the American Revolutionary War, which included Black soldiers, enslavement would legally continue for another century. Independence and citizenship would not legally extend to Black Americans until the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) and would not be actualized until 1964 with the Civil Rights Act.

Still, Black and minority Americans are impractically expected to honor their country, irrespective of history and experience, and in the same ways that white Americans do. This is a prime indicator of how definitions around ‘patriotism’ and ‘American’ exist biasedly and are contingent on the experiences of white people. When the Declaration of Independence (1776) states the “unalienable Rights” of Americans, it’s referring to white men with status. Likewise, complaints about Kaepernick’s protests, that question his devotion to America, are operating with a definition of ‘America’ that serves the white majority. The act of protest is as American as the national anthem and has existed in this country a lot longer. But when the systems that have defined America for centuries, however warped they may be, are challenged by a group that was

never supposed to have any power, it is deemed “un-American”. And because America is defined by the historically and culturally racist (Starr, 2017) actions of the white majority, the “un-American” label is not factually incorrect.

Additionally, the comment of Black soldiers and missing limbs, as a reason why Kaepernick should stand, is ahistorical in its erasure of the experiences of Black service people deployed and home from duty. The military has *never* proven to be a racial equalizer in America. There are stories of Black soldiers being regularly threatened, assaulted, and lynched across the United States following the Civil and World Wars (*Eji*, n.d.). They were not “permitted” to wear their uniforms in public on U.S. soil, were generally confined to a lesser status in service, and were beat back by Jim Crow even after having served their country. Today, as one study found, “Black service members [are] *substantially* more likely than their white counterparts to face military justice [military law] or disciplinary action,” (Protect Our Defenders, 2017, emphasis added). Considering white service members make up the largest racial group in the American military (Herreria, 2017), these disparities, some of which have gotten worse, are notable. This extends Kaepernick’s ‘crusade’ against racial discrimination to the military as well and is exemplary of historian W.E.B. Du Bois’ “double-consciousness”³. You are not American, you are a Black American. You are not a soldier, you are a Black soldier. Unlike white Americans, who enjoy the rights and definitions of being *fully* American, there is a division in the Black identity — an identity which has historically been repressed and devalued (*Kristin Does Theory*, n.d.).

³ Du Bois defines double-consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as “two warring ideals in one dark body... simply [wishing] to make it possible for a man to be both a negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows,” (pg. 215).

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Aside from labeling Kaepernick and the Take A Knee Movement “un-American”, giving no explanation of what “American” looks like, a fair amount of mainstream and alternative publications included themes of free speech in early reports over the movement. Most did so by asking, “is this free speech,” and is an athlete, who is contractually tied to the NFL, “allowed” to partake in protest while at work? In somewhat of a loose defense of Kaepernick, articles remarked how this expression of free speech and “peaceful protest” was just one of the many “beautiful” things about our country. A former active-duty Marine, writing for *The Hill*, stated, “I took an oath at 18 years of age to defend the Constitution of the United States — not the parts that fit into my worldview, but all of it, including the First Amendment and the freedom of speech,” (Sosamon, 2016). Former NFL quarterback, Terry Bradshaw, outrageously asserted that America is the *only* nation that allows people to “speak their mind,” (*USA Today*, 2016), and, most notably, in a decidedly neutral, lukewarm stance on the protests, President Obama stated, “What makes this country special is that we respect people’s rights to have a different opinion... The test of our fidelity to our Constitution, to freedom of speech... is not when it’s easy, but when it’s hard” (*CNN*, 2016).

The “free speech” argument for the Take A Knee Movement is an early form of subtle redirection, and obstruction of message, by the mainstream news media and those with power. Kaepernick’s protests are not meant to spur conversations around what is or isn’t protected by the First Amendment, but rather, who is or isn’t protected by the state. Furthermore, the First Amendment states, “*Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech... or the right of the people peacefully to assemble*” (1789, 1992, emphasis added). Throughout Kaepernick’s protests, Congress has not attempted to legislatively disallow players from kneeling, so this argument is ineffective. Additionally, aside from President Obama, Congress

would not meaningfully weigh in on the protests until 2017 when Democratic members began taking a knee on the House floor. After kneeling, Representative Mark Pocan said, “I think today, taking a knee is becoming a broader sign of patriotism and respect for our country” (*The Hill*, 2017), which again, allows the white majority to define patriotism and what it looks like. Representative Sheila Jackson Lee said, “I kneel in honor of the First Amendment. I kneel because the flag is a symbol for freedom” (2017), both centering the First Amendment and idealizing the flag instead of positioning it as a symbol of continued racial oppression. Numerous articles in “support” of Kaepernick’s protests were published explaining the free speech clause and the “debate” between the NFL and the First Amendment (*The Washington Post*, 2017). In many of these articles, writers, most notably veterans, would claim support of the First Amendment and Kaepernick’s right to protest — as aforementioned by former active-duty Marine, Cliff Sosamon. But Sosamon, like Terry Bradshaw and President Obama, were supporting the “beautiful” country of America, which they believe allows its citizens a voice, not supporting the Take A Knee Movement for an end to police brutality. This difference matters because, beyond the gesture of taking a knee, legislative action is required to demilitarize police. Appreciation for the First Amendment does not help this cause.

One final theme I noticed when looking at the Take A Knee Movement pre-Trump, was that of violence. This was, for the most part, directed by interviewed fans, and lesser known journalists, at Colin Kaepernick and anyone who chose to join him in his protest of police brutality. As stated by *NY Daily News* journalist and civil rights activist, Shaun King, the protests [are] working to expose “the violent and racist heart and soul” of America (2016). Articles with threats of lynching children, or hanging those “little monkeys,” (*NY Daily News*, 2016) furthers the necessity for the Take A Knee Movement, and its original message, in contemporary

America. A Baptist preacher was greeted with cheers as he suggested Kaepernick's supporters "should be shot," (*The Telegraph*, 2016). Another man stated, "anyone who doesn't stand for the anthem should be shot," (*USA Today: High School Sports*, 2016). Lindsay Gibbs for *ThinkProgress*, and Shaun King for *NY Daily News*, wrote extensively about a Brunswick High (OH) senior, Rodney Axson, who was repeatedly called "nigger" by his football teammates after deciding to take a knee. There were fans who wished injury on Kaepernick, hoping he'd "break his back or neck," (*USA Today*, 2016) and those who hoped he'd "die of AIDS" (*USA Today*, 2016). If this is not a testament to non-violence being met with violence under white supremacy, I don't know what is. These instances of violence are important to highlight within the initial stages of the Take A Knee Movement because they demonstrate how adamantly against the protests some Americans were. Many Americans continued to despise the protests following Trump's election, but the media would report on Take A Knee differently.

September 24, 2017: Nothing Was the Same

There are players, fans, celebrities, and members of the American public who've supported Colin Kaepernick since Take A Knee's inception, and then there are those who support the "resistance". This is not a resistance to white supremacy, to police brutality, or racial inequality, but rather, it has become a resistance to Donald Trump. And while Trump may embody white supremacy, or champion racial inequality and abuse, the institutions that forced the creation of the Take A Knee Movement, and minority-led social justice movements of the past and present, were here long before, and will remain still after, Donald Trump is gone. People who support the "resistance" would like America to return to the Obama years where complacency meant we didn't *have* to talk about racism, or any other -isms. But under Trump,

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who quite literally ran on a racist campaign slogan, Americans are forced to confront the very truth that Dr. King didn't save us from our bigoted selves. Neither did electing a Black president.

Hashtags of #Resist, and conversations referring to the "resistance", began appearing on Twitter sometime around November 8, 2016. The movement has since spiraled into an "ongoing campaign to protest Donald Trump, [and] his administration, through online activism... and boycotts," (*Know Your Meme*, 2016). The 2017 Women's March is one of the most notable public displays of resistance, happening the day after Trump's inauguration on January 21, 2017. In the months that followed, numerous demonstrations were labelled part of the "resistance". There is nothing inherently wrong with identifying the Take A Knee Movement as a part of the resistance, because in many ways, it is just that. But it should not be reported on in similar ways to the Women's March, the travel ban, or healthcare protests because it does not begin and end under Trump. Take A Knee's 2017 media coverage does not justify the movement, because, unlike the before mentioned protests, Trump does not largely initiate its formation.

The positionality of the Take A Knee Movement as a form of resistance to Trump was not instantaneous. In fact, it began two days prior to September 24 at a Huntsville, Alabama rally. Here's where Trump told a rather sizeable crowd that a refusal to sing the national anthem is a "disrespect of our heritage," and that fans should "leave the stadium" when players kneel during the anthem. He then asked, "wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he's fired'" (*CNN*, 2017). The final quote immediately went viral, to the tune of 16,000 retweets, after Donald Trump Jr. posted it on Twitter. The next day, Roger Goodell responded by saying, "divisive comments like these demonstrate an unfortunate lack of respect for the NFL, our great game and all of our players, and a failure to understand the overwhelming force for good our

clubs and players represent in our communities,” (*Fox News*, 2017). Goodell is the same man who, a year prior, disagreed with Kaepernick’s protests because he “believes very strongly in patriotism,” (*Washington Post*, 2016). He also insisted, two months later, in November of 2017, that the NFL “move past protest and toward progress” (*USA Today*). It’s evident Goodell responds to Trump as a way of covering his and the NFL’s behind. He has demonstrated no prior interest in the Take A Knee Movement or its continuation, and even urged players, in October of that year, to “honor our flag and our country” and stand for the anthem (*Fox News*, 2017). So, when Trump questions the allegiance of NFL owners to the flag and to the country, the response is not one of support for the Take A Knee Movement or an end to police brutality, but rather, a realigning of the movement and its famous gesture with anti-Trumpism.

September 24, 2017 might rightfully be recognized as the day the Take A Knee Movement was deprived of some of the energy and conviction that helped make it successful. This was the day the mainstream news media began largely reporting on the movement as part of the “resistance”, and numerous NFL players and owners participated in protests under those circumstances. One-third, or 58, of the 174 articles I studied were written on either September 24 or 25 of 2017. This is not surprising considering the media’s sensationalist tendencies, but it does demonstrate Trump’s influence on mainstream reporting around the movement. Following a September 23 back-and-forth with numerous athletes and owners, including NBA’s LeBron James and Stephen Curry, Donald Trump called for a boycott of the NFL stating, “If NFL fans refuse to go to games until players stop disrespecting our country, you will see change take place fast... Fire or suspend!” (*NY Times*, 2017). This preceded a nationwide response on September 24 by NFL players, owners and coaches who either linked arms, kneeled, or remained in their locker rooms during the national anthem in protest of Trump. *The Washington Post* wrote,

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“Players, owners unite as Trump demands NFL ‘fire or suspend’ ...” (2017), and *The New York Times* said, “After Trump Blasts N.F.L., Players Kneel and Lock Arms in Solidarity” (2017). LeSean McCoy of the Buffalo Bills, who knelt during the anthem, said Trump should “stop trying to divide us” (*SB Nation*, 2017). Cleveland Browns quarterback, Deshaun Kizer, who locked arms with his teammates said, “I know for a fact I’m no SOB” (*Cleveland*, 2017), referring to Trump’s earlier comments. And Tom Brady, who previously endorsed Trump during the 2016 presidential election (*CNN*), locked arms with his teammates stating he thought Trump’s comments were “divisive” (*CBS Sports*, 2017). This show of solidarity, while blatantly insincere, positioned the action of taking a knee in the NFL as an opposition to Trump. Trump’s media dubbed “war with the NFL” (*The Guardian*, 2017) was underway.

Throughout his time in office, Donald Trump has been infamous for making national headlines and turning cable news into “must-see tv” (*LA Times*, 2017). He’s made a habit of being the center of controversy and has the mainstream news media disgustingly salivating over what he’ll do, or who he’ll harm, next. In an act some have termed “unity” (*NFL*, 2017), the NFL Sunday protests began with more than a dozen players from the Jacksonville Jaguars and Baltimore Ravens locking arms on the sideline (*Esquire*, 2017). This included Jaguars owner, Shahid Khan. Khan, who donated one million dollars to Trump’s presidential campaign (*CNN Money*, 2017), later called Trump the “great divider” (*SI*, 2017). Miami Dolphins owner, Stephen Ross, who was “one of the few NFL owners supportive of [Kaepernick’s] protests last season” (*The Irish News*, 2017), also locked arms with his players in solidarity. In total, 19 teams and nearly 200 players participated in these “protests”, making this the “largest single day of protest in NFL history,” (*The Intercept*, 2017).

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Though locking arms and kneeling are two very different actions, the media reported on these “protests” with the following headlines: “How Donald Trump turned a simmering NFL controversy into a movement that splits the country” (*DW News*, 2017), “NFL players protest, show unity during anthems” (*NFL*, 2017), and “NFL players kneel, lock arms in unity after Trump tweets” (*Newsday*, 2017). If locking arms and kneeling are situated as a response to Trump, and these protests are being conflated with those against police brutality, where does that leave the Take A Knee Movement? What does it now mean when national anthem singers, and baseball players, are kneeling while crossing their hearts to salute the flag, or Ray Lewis takes *two* knees?

Former NFL linebacker, Ray Lewis, who met with Trump prior to his inauguration, publicly denounced the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2016. He insisted the movement was “fraudulent” because it ignored certain forms of crime in the city in favor of those he deemed “less important” (*Sporting News*, 2017). But on September 24, Lewis, like many others previously in strong opposition to Kaepernick, took a knee. He used a gesture that was very heavily linked to a cause against police brutality and racial injustice, locked arms with Ravens players, and took both knees. Lewis later claimed that he knelt, not to protest police brutality, or the national anthem, but “to honor God in the midst of chaos,” (*CBS Sports*, 2017). Regardless of his motives, however, the media led with this action, reporting, “NFL stars took a knee during the national anthem to protest Trump’s targeted tweets against players who engaged in peaceful protest” (*Romper*, 2017). The NFL was pushing back against being viewed as unpatriotic, not objecting to Trump’s treatment of player protesters. If they cared about player protesters, Kaepernick would still have a job. The Seattle Seahawks, who stayed in their locker room on September 24, claimed they did not participate in the national anthem “out of love for our

country” and to oppose those that would “deny our most basic freedoms” (*SB Nation*, 2017).

When Trump questioned the patriotism of the NFL, who has allowed its players to repeatedly take a knee and “disrespect” America, they responded by taking a knee, or locking arms, but still saluting the flag. This is to let Americans know that the gestures are not mutually exclusive, even though they initially were. This is also used to reify the NFL’s devotion to American patriotism which the sport has displayed for over a decade (*Truth Dig*, 2017).

On September 25, dozens of mainstream and alternative media sites ran articles over the Take A Knee Movement’s newfound “resistance to Trump”. *The Guardian*’s “Taking a knee and Trump: the new era of total protest”, *The Nation*’s “... ‘Choose-Your-Side Sunday’”, and *CNN*’s “Culture wars” — apparently incited by Trump and “[taking] over American sports”. Several articles were written over and over by war vets, and current soldiers detailed why they took a knee “to support NFL players against Trump” (*Newsweek*, 2017). Because American patriotism is so closely tied to the military and those who serve, it’s easy to see how the “un-American” descriptor of the Take A Knee Movement changes here. When veterans take a knee, albeit in opposition to Trump, accompanied by the #VeteransForKaepernick hashtag (*The Root*), it is largely applauded online and in the media. There were numerous articles over the seemingly oxymoronic 97-year-old WWII vet who took a knee on September 24, and the soldiers who pledged their allegiance to the Constitution, not the flag. Because of their service, veterans and soldiers are embraced for taking a knee and are less likely to be viewed as “disrespectful” by the mainstream media. When Kaepernick voiced his contradictory support for the military in 2016 he received less support. But this is where the objectives of the Take A Knee Movement are muddled. Truthfully, any movement that disagrees with violence against people of color should operate in full criticism of the American military. This is a group that, for centuries, has

terrorized people of color around the world, murdering discriminately to “protect the security of the United States,” (*Prospect*, 2013). Furthermore, it’s important to note how the Constitution is again mentioned in “supportive” articles over the movement. Supporting the Constitution and the First Amendment is *not* supporting an end to [police] brutality against people of color because those documents were created to protect *white* Americans and disadvantage or harm Americans of color.

In full recognition of the change in media reporting on the Take A Knee Movement in the aftermath of Trump’s “war” with the NFL, several niche and multicultural news sites ran articles to remind their audiences that the movement has, and always will be, about race and police brutality. The *Huffington Post* and *The Grio* reported, “Stop Trying to Make ‘Take A Knee’ About Anything but Race” and “Let’s not forget #TakeAKnee is about police brutality and race in America.” *The Root* published an article entitled, “Please Stop Defending Colin Kaepernick. You’re Doing It Wrong,” which discussed the many ways that Americans have tried to redirect the conversation around the Take A Knee Movement to the “underprivileged, inherent bias, or anything that’s not about the flag, the anthem or race” (Harriot, 2017). This is not a movement against Donald Trump that began in September of 2017, or a movement about the “resistance” of Americans to Republicans. It’s a movement against police brutality and racial inequality which has continued to affect people of color long after the Trump/NFL conflict dissipated. This could be yet another way that Trump has harmed and silenced minorities — by redirecting a movement in his favor. But white America’s standard of initial resistance and eventual co-optation of minority movements and messages plays a significant part.

Conclusion

In March of 2018, Wesley Lowery wrote an article for *The Washington Post*: “Police are still killing Black people. Why isn’t it news anymore?” In it, he discussed the decline in media attention for police violence — beatings, tasings, and killings. As of May 6, “370 people have been shot and killed by police,” (*The Washington Post*, 2018). 25 percent are listed as “Black” or “Hispanic”, 31 percent as “white”, and 43 percent, or 106 people, are listed by race as “unknown”. Unfortunately, the conversation around police and law enforcement reform, or destabilization, which movements like Take A Knee and Black Lives Matter have re-introduced on a national scale, is being obscured in ways we’ve seen before. Not only with the Civil Rights Movement and protests of the 1960s, but with Black and minority-led social justice movements of the 21st century. Currently, with movements like Take A Knee, #MeToo, and #YouOKSis, the latter two of which were created to center Black and brown girls and women in discussions of sexual assault, abuse, or harassment, we’re seeing how some forms of media like to feign the uplift of Black movements, still channeling dialogue through the experiences of the white majority. When this happens, not only is it disingenuous, but it lets people of color know that even within movements we’ve created, our voices don’t matter. There is certainly irony in the trend of anti-racist movements, that are directly against white supremacy, being paternalistically co-opted by the white majority in any way.

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