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## Kaepernick Flips the Script: Empowering the Silenced Black Athlete

LaToya Brackett

University of Puget Sound (USA)

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# **Kaepernick Flips the Script: Empowering the Silenced Black Athlete**

**LaToya Brackett**  
**(University of Puget Sound)**

## **Abstract**

Colin Kaepernick, former quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, committed no crime, but created an uproar within the United States of America after he took the conscious choice to sit (later kneel) during the National Anthem for the 2016 NFL season. He chose to sit in protest against the injustices faced by Blacks in America, especially after a tumultuous year of deaths of Blacks at the hands of the police. He sat in protest for the lack of justice for those killed. He sat because his conscious could no longer allow him to stand for the National Anthem that for him did not represent all Americans. He sat despite the financial success his career in football afforded him, and most likely he planned to maintain as his career. This paper explores the racial implications of Colin Kaepernick's choice to protest the National Anthem, his stance of the issues that he protested, the various impacts on Americans, and the major impact on Kaepernick as a professional athlete in America. Utilizing two theories, the experiences of Kaepernick throughout his first year of protest, are analyzed. The goal of this paper is to give an accurate time line, with the emphasis on Colin Kaepernick as a representation of the Black male athlete in America. As the theories demonstrate, the Black athlete is not to be heard, and Kaepernick's silent protest flipped the script on the silent Black athlete for the current generation, in the digital age. His courage to take a stand habitually, as a professional athlete, without a specific person in mind, but an entire cause, resonated with many—in positive and negative ways. A very prominent component to this impact resided in the racial implications, and they must be recognized.

**Key words:** Black Athlete, Black Lives Matter, Double Consciousness, American National Anthem, Black Studies

## ***1. Introduction***

One of the most infamous images in African American history will be that of the Black Male athlete. One who flies high to the net, runs faster than the blink of an eye from the 40 to the 10, hits the hardest, farthest and most true on the diamond; images that say nothing of the everyday life but of the life the fans, franchises and future Black athletes desire to see. A concept of feeling free, of freedom with the creative tune up of African American athletes infusing the American sport empire. Yet, it was never a simple privilege to play with such inspirational athletic artistry, it was fought for with silence. The black athlete has in majority been quiet but determined. Slow in progress but steady to win the title of commodity for

sports. Watched with a critical eye, and forever trying to be free of true or created critique. Yet, all in all, knowing his place in the American sport empire. This is not something one simply understands, unless the history and struggle of the Black Athlete is known; a history of struggle to gain what seems to be the freedom to dunk, to steal bases, and to dance in the end zone with a uniquely African American style. Today's youth had no clue of such hindrances, of such metaphorical handcuffs binding ones hands as a college and professional athlete. Both College and Professional sports empires are greatly financed by the money of the majority—white America. Black youth today think it does not matter, it only matters how you play, if you can play, never mind the very small likelihood of playing on a major college team and then getting to the professional level; they simply don't know the double consciousness of the Black athlete in America. Until Colin Kaepernick, quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, used a silent protest that proved that even this image was too conflicting for the fans, franchisers and for future black athletes—it was a shock to the idea of their American dreams. Kaepernick reminded some Americans of Muhammad Ali, a very vocal Black Athlete in regards to personal rights as an American—he had rights. Kaepernick reminded some Americans of Roberto Clemente, a vocal man with a positive Black identity out to assist others, and dying while doing so. Kaepernick also would rejuvenate the protest of Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, who questioned the American National Anthem on the bench of the NBA team the Denver Nuggets. These men too sang of America, and so too does Colin Kaepernick. But his refusal to sing, stand and salute the most important representation of America, the national anthem, became the loudest silent protest in athletic history. All for the cause of Black lives, his life, the life of many others, and even as a representation of the silenced athletes before him.

## ***2. Colin Kaepernick, More than a Quarterback***

*There have been situations where I feel like I've been ill-treated, yes. This stand wasn't for me. This stand wasn't because I feel like I'm being put down in any kind of way. This is because I'm seeing things happen to people that don't have a voice, people that don't have a*

*platform to talk and have their voices heard, and effect change. So I'm in the position where I can do that and I'm going to do that for people that can't.*<sup>1</sup>

Colin Kaepernick is a black man, is a black athlete, is a black activist and now a black philanthropist. He is not, a man, an athlete, an activist and a philanthropist, as such definitions are only allowed for those that are visibly and at times knowingly white. As Kaepernick's silent protest of justice rocked the boat, as one would say, his identity just as anyone's came into discussion when he took a stand for a group of people the world would associate as his own. And because the skin you are in defines the parameters at which you live, compete and portray, his identity is as a Black man, not as a biracial man, raised by white parents and growing up with his white older brother, but solely Black. Until Colin Kaepernick pens a memoir, or a truly in-depth interview about his life growing up biracial as a member of a white family, the most informative of his experiences will be defined by his skin color—for this is the American way.

From what is known based on interviews and biographical information, Kaepernick was born in Wisconsin and raised in California where his athletic career began. This is where some may discredit his experience of being "black" because he lacked an intense inner city struggle, purely based on a narrow narrative of the black American experience. Kaepernick has spoken of his racial identity struggle. He spoke of a time as a child on summer vacations driving from motel to motel that no matter what he was often asked if he needed help by a concerned white patron or worker, because he was a young black man standing rather close to his white family—a family that by American standard association could not be his own. As he grew older it grew worse; as a growing black boy he became feared. During his August 28<sup>th</sup> 2016 interviews with the press he mentioned an incident of racial profiling after being queued by a correspondent question. "Yes, multiple times [I've been unjustly pulled over or have had bad experiences]. I've had times where one of my roommates was moving out of the house in college and because we were the only black people in that neighborhood the cops got called and we had guns drawn on us. [Cops] came in the house, without knocking, guns drawn on my teammates and roommates. So I have experienced this. People close to me have

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Biderman, "Transcript: Colin Kaepernick addresses sitting during national anthem," NinersWire, August 28, 2016, accessed July 25, 2017, <http://ninerswire.usatoday.com/2016/08/28/transcript-colin-kaepernick-addresses-sitting-during-national-anthem/>.

experienced this.” As it seems in the American standard one does not, or could not, protest for things if they are not subjected to it. The question asked of him was a tool to “validate” his stance on Black lives in America. Indeed he is a black life therefore he must experience it or why take such a risk. Colin Kaepernick has said he did not solely identify with one or the other of his racial heritages, and as discussions of being biracial have grown this is a common identity development for many. Yet one can say, for most athletes, especially at a young age and as they improve their skills, an identity in and of itself is one of an athlete.

### ***3. Athlete, American and Black***

*On the Conveyor Belt, young athletes quickly learn that easy passage through a white-controlled system is contingent upon not “rocking the boat,” not being a “troublemaker,” and making those in positions of power feel comfortable with the athletes’ blackness.<sup>2</sup>*

William C. Rhoden coined the term the Conveyor Belt in his 2006 book *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall and Redemption of the Black Athlete*, in which he speaks of a belt that young athletes are placed upon, allowing for continual feeding into college and professional sports if one is so lucky. “[A]t its best, the contemporary Conveyor Belt is a streamlined mechanism for developing players and offering training and showcases where talented players can display their talents for college scouts.”<sup>3</sup> This belt is one which all young athletes are placed upon and groomed, but with the Black athlete the belt is ever more essential in providing the sports empires with the “right” Black athlete. The grooming they are subjected to is one of stripping their communal connection to their racial and cultural identity, perhaps an identity owners, coaches and staff believed and hoped Kaepernick was devoid of based on his familial make up along with his stint on the belt:

“For African American athletes, the threat of the Conveyor Belt process goes beyond the ways in which it undermines character. The Belt is also designed to dull any racial consciousness and eliminate communal instincts. Instead, the Belt cultivates a culture of racial know-nothingism. Indeed, the act of “processing” athletes along the Conveyor Belt involves a significant and often subtle element of “deprogramming” potential troublemakers

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<sup>2</sup> William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall and Redemption of the Black Athlete*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006, p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, p. 176.

—black athletes who might be tempted to think of themselves, or their situations, in racial terms and who might want to use their prominence in the service of something other than enriching the institution. In a university, such troublemakers might include athletes who want to use their visibility to call attention to the need for more black head coaches or faculty on campus, or athletes interested in initiating or joining in cause that might embarrass the institution.”<sup>4</sup>

The conveyor belt creates an athlete dedicated to the sport, the team, and inevitably the empire at which they currently provide their craft. For the black athlete he or she has been programmed to only recognize the community that has “provided” for them, and praised them all along, not the community defined as one without promise. Many professional Black athletes, hailing from impoverished areas with a large Black community, are products of this belt, and may admit such an existence of the belt and how it allowed for their progress to become a professional. But as Rhoden so eloquently states, “the Belt breeds complacency, not militancy. With their eyes on the prize of individual success...players feel they can’t risk a strategy of confrontation.”<sup>5</sup> The Conveyor Belt teaches them this self-preservation. It becomes a necessary ride athletes must take. The question is, will they know they are riding it? If they do know, what if anything will they do about it? What are the consequences of stopping the Belt, a Belt that continuously creates and provides more talent? Can one protect themselves from the backlash of the powers that control the Belt and them? Does knowing about the Belt, one’s position on it, one’s liability, one’s representation, create a beneficial or a detrimental existence as a Black Athlete? It is a dichotomy as Dr. W.E.B. DuBois first wrote about in 1903 after being the first African American to obtain a PhD from Harvard. It is a double consciousness:

“From the double life every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American, as swept on by the current of the nineteenth while yet struggling in the eddies of the fifteenth century, —from this must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence. The worlds within and without the Veil of Color are changing, and changing rapidly, but not at the same rate, not in

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<sup>4</sup> Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, p. 177.

<sup>5</sup> Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, p. 183.

the same way; and this must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment. Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to preten[s]e or revolt, to hypocrisy or radicalism.”<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the concept of a triple consciousness has been discoursed, for the African American Woman, in which her gender provides yet another avenue she is guided by, and yet not the same as a white woman. The Black woman’s race remains the main avenue that delays her ability to gain access to a type of roadway that being white allows one to access. Prominent access being for white males. Thus, it can be postulated that Black male Athletes have a triple consciousness. They must look at themselves through the eyes of others, and others see them as Black, American (or living in America) and an athlete. This article is focused on Colin Kaepernick as a Black American male professional athlete. This discussion will gauge the questions about self-awareness and triple consciousness as a Black male athlete on the Conveyor Belt.

Colin Kaepernick’s decision not to stand for the National Anthem was a conscious one based on self-awareness of his identity as a Black person, under various banners of oppressive means that hinder persons of African descent in America, and originated so long ago that even with a deletion of hateful words and even laws, the foundation of racism is imbedded equating to the continual justification of Black persons’ lives as not mattering. His silent protest is not for one, it is for all, not just Black people, but all people, as he sat in solidarity. And in his triple consciousness his sitting would be seen by the other as one that is representative of all Blacks in America. He was able to sit due to a financially beneficial career on the Conveyor Belt. He was able to be heard and seen due to a financially beneficial career on the Conveyor Belt. But he could not continue on the Belt in a state of disassociation, as he was aware of that triple consciousness and the Conveyor Belt. Perhaps he was also aware of the desired disassociation from the black community his career warranted. And he did not sit when it was most convenient for him, as of 2017 he went on the market, a free agent who recognized that his freedom of speaking up, gave freedom for the

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<sup>6</sup> Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson, *Three Negro classics: Up from slavery, The Souls of Black Folk, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, (New York: Bard, 1999), p. 346.

sports empire to question him and potentially reject him. There are white athletes who have committed actual crimes that simply receive a slap on the wrist by the National Football League (NFL), while Kaepernick has received metaphorical lynchings—his Jersey was burned or used as his representation to defame him on more than one occasion. This is a consequence of a person that rejects oppressions. He decided that a song, originally written under the veil of racism, was not appropriate to stand for as Black Bodies were being shot, killed, murdered; black bodies that could be him one day or could have been him. But his sitting down created a backlash one would not imagine in a nation founded on the principle of freedom of speech. Many athletes perhaps would have simply apologized after a threat of career destruction. Kaepernick had no apologies, but knowledge of why he sat, and when meeting with a former military soldier he adjusted his protest to kneeling as not to completely disregard the semblance of the American flag. But still his silent kneeling created such an uproar from whites that one would think he held a march on the field each and every time he kneeled. For African Americans even in silence they are defined as unpatriotic, ungrateful, and eventually useless. Franz Fanon wrote, “To be [Black] in America is to be in a rage all the time.” The year 2016 was a massively explosive year of torture of the Black American’s soul, and the usual everyday rage became a rage many could no longer contain. Protests appeared in forms more than marching and chanting, and Colin Kaepernick revealed his rage in a way most would view as undisruptive, yet it completely erupted.

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder...He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.”<sup>7</sup>

#### ***4. The Protest in Three Stages***

##### **4.1 One: His original protest**

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<sup>7</sup> Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson, *Three Negro classics*, p.215.



*“And where is that band who so vauntingly swore,  
That the havoc of war and the battle’s confusion  
A home and a Country should leave us no more?  
Their blood has wash’d out their foul footsteps’ pollution.  
No refuge could save the hireling and slave  
From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave,  
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave  
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave.”*  
Star Spangled Banner<sup>8</sup>

The 49ers 2016 preseason began Colin Kaepernick’s protest. He sat during the first two preseason games as an individual choice, in a collective mission, without the intent to, as he said, have it “blown up.” He did not do this in anticipation for the major event that it would become. It was the third preseason game, and a picture of the team during the National Anthem was posted on NinersNation Twitter by Jennifer Lee Chan, and this was when Kaepernick’s protest was noticed.<sup>9</sup> The picture created questions. On August 28<sup>th</sup> he responded to the media requests for clarification, after the 49ers had already confirmed his sitting during the game on the 26<sup>th</sup>. This is the moment in which Colin Kaepernick showed with a full force that he was aware of his actions, aware of the climate, and clear on the various meanings of his protest. How does he know? He has lived as a Black Male Athlete in America, but he would not temporarily remove himself from the Belt, he would remain off the Belt. Kaepernick did not demand attention, but he sure gained it.

Colin Kaepernick was thrown many questions that if answered incorrectly, which means understanding how the other looks at him in order to answer it “correctly,” would have discredited his entire protest in one news cycle. Yet, due to his triple consciousness, he knew what was being thrown at him, and he knew what to give back in return—all while remaining calm and poised as not to be seen as an angry black man. As a Black Male Athlete being

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<sup>8</sup> Jason Johnson, "Star-Spangled Bigotry: The Hidden Racist History of the National Anthem," The Root, July 4, 2016, accessed July 25, 2017 (<http://www.theroot.com/star-spangled-bigotry-the-hidden-racist-history-of-the-1790855893>).

<sup>9</sup> Mark Sandritter, "A timeline of Colin Kaepernick’s national anthem protest and the athletes who joined him," SB Nation, November 6, 2016, accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.sbnation.com/2016/9/11/12869726/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protest-seahawks-brandon-marshall-nfl>.

angry is even alluded to from being excited after a major play— an example is Richard Sherman’s on camera excitement after the post-game victory against Atlanta securing his team’s position in Super Bowl XLVIII. Sherman is a Stanford graduate, but he is also a trash talking football player. Trash talking is a part of the African American style of play in sports used to get into the head of the opponent, but this is a part of African American style that most of the majority do not understand and have no reason to understand. This lack of understanding was used as a justification for labeling Sherman as being no more than a ‘thug.’ Kaepernick was poised, and numerous times in his long interview on the 28<sup>th</sup> he paused before speaking; he was indeed aware of his audience. Because as even Sherman stated after his incident, “It was really mind-boggling the way the world reacted... I can't say the world, I don't want to generalize people like that because there are a lot of great people who didn't react that way. But for the people who did react that way and throw the racial slurs and things like that out there, it was really sad. Especially that close to Martin Luther King Day...I learned we haven't come as far as I thought we had... I thought society had moved past that.”<sup>10</sup> Sherman’s controversy happened in 2014, and he realized that society had not moved passed using racism to suppress an individual, a group, a franchise or a victory. Two years later the *Richard Sherman’s* of the world, those on an American post-racial type of conveyor belt, would be reminded again that society had not moved past the ever-foundational divide of America, and Richard Sherman himself would support Colin Kaepernick publicly.

During the questions from the press and a recorded almost 20 minutes, Kaepernick was asked first and foremost why he was protesting: “People don’t realize what’s really going on in this country. There are a lot of things that are going on that are unjust. People aren’t being held accountable for. And that’s something that needs to change. That’s something that this country stands for freedom, liberty and justice for all. And it’s not happening for all right now.”<sup>11</sup> Those that are not aware of the injustices he spoke of are the privileged few that are

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<sup>10</sup> Dan Levy, "Richard Sherman's Outburst Was Rude, Brash, Disrespectful and Totally Awesome," Bleacher Report, January 20, 2014, accessed July 25, 2017, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1929469-richard-shermans-outburst-was-rude-brash-disrespectful-and-totally-awesome>.

<sup>11</sup> Chris Biderman, "Transcript: Colin Kaepernick addresses sitting during national anthem."

simply a man, simply an athlete or simply an activist, not a Black man, Black athlete or Black activist. Those that the flag ensures freedom, liberty and justice for have only one consciousness, that of being an American. There is no double consciousness, no necessity to view oneself from the eyes of the other, but simply to be oneself without fear or shame.

He was asked what needed to be changed in American society for him to end his protest. The media often asks for specifics and it can lead to answers that are not concrete and sometimes the interviewee's background information about the issue is not complete. Not for Kaepernick. He did not simply see the images of Black men and women killed on television and felt a temporarily "uninformed" rage, he had been ensuring he knew the reasons why. And with little doubt, as a Black American he was in a rage. The fact that the National Anthem's original verses spoke to the oppression of Africans in America as slaves, is a major cue to his desire to know why, and potentially the forces that kept him from standing for the flag and the anthem. "Yes. I'll continue to sit. . . I'm going to continue to stand with the people that are being oppressed. To me this is something that has to change. When there's significant change and I feel like that flag represents what it's supposed to represent, this country is representing people the way that it's supposed to, I'll stand... There's a lot of things that need to change. One specifically? Police brutality. There's people being murdered unjustly and not being held accountable. People are being given paid leave for killing people. That's not right. That's not right by anyone's standards."<sup>12</sup>

One of the most sensitive issues in America surrounds the American Military. To not stand for the flag, is to be an affront to the American military, and those that fight for our country; at least this is the American associated standard. Kaepernick was asked about the discussions describing his actions as an insult to the military and to the people that serve. His response would be the most important in confirming or dismantling his "anti-Americanism." "I have great respect for the men and women that have fought for this country. I have family, I have friends that have gone and fought for this country. And they fight for freedom, they fight for the people, they fight for liberty and justice, for everyone. That's not happening. People are dying in vain because this country isn't holding their end of the bargain up, as far as giving freedom and justice, liberty to everybody. That's something that's not happening. I've seen

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<sup>12</sup> Chris Biderman, "Transcript: Colin Kaepernick addresses sitting during national anthem."

videos, I've seen circumstances where men and women that have been in the military have come back and been treated unjustly by the country they have fought for, and have been murdered by the country they fought for, on our land. That's not right"<sup>13</sup>.

This would be a most defining moment for Kaepernick's protest. Not only does he share his respect for all members of the military including those close to him, but he attempted to remind those watching and listening the purpose of the military is to ensure Americans freedom. He protested for those that were not free, despite a great military fighting for it. And for those aware of the history of the military and African Americans, he spoke to the perpetual dichotomy of a black soldier abroad versus a black soldier who comes home to find that despite fighting to protect his country, and to support his country, his country did not support him equally. A key component to Muhammad Ali's protest of refusing to fight in the Vietnam war is an essential reminder of this. But also issues like the GI Bill going mostly to white soldiers, which was a major assistance in building the white middle class after WWII. But equally as such the continual support of the American military by African Americans who in their uniform earn a bit more respect, but will always have to take off the uniform and once again become a black American. Kaepernick altered his protest from sitting, during the National Anthem, to kneeling in order to not distract from his true reason for protesting: "'We were talking to [Boyer] about how can we get the message back on track and not take away from the military, not take away from fighting for our country, but keep the focus on what the issues really are. And as we talked about it, we came up with taking a knee. Because there are issues that still need to be addressed and it was also a way to show more respect to the men and women who fight for this country."<sup>14</sup> Nate Boyer was a Green Beret who had penned an open letter to Kaepernick which initiated him inviting Boyer to sit and discuss the protest. Boyer supported Kaepernick and referenced aspects he knew were true of America and around the world and ended his letter with this: "I look forward to the day you're inspired to once again stand during our national anthem. I'll be standing right there next to you. Keep on

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<sup>13</sup> Chris Biderman, "Transcript: Colin Kaepernick addresses sitting during national anthem."

<sup>14</sup> Mark Sandritter, "A timeline of Colin Kaepernick's national anthem protest and the athletes who joined him."

trying ... De Oppresso Liber” (Army motto meaning To Free the Oppressed).<sup>15</sup> Colin took a knee during the Anthem on September 1<sup>st</sup>. Kaepernick’s ability to communicate and alter his type of protest, just a little is yet another reflection of understanding his position in society and what he represents, and what he did not want to represent.

He also did not want to represent the idea that he was currently being oppressed, but that he stood for those that were. “There have been situations where I feel like I’ve been ill-treated, yes. This stand wasn’t for me. This stand wasn’t because I feel like I’m being put down in any kind of way. This is because I’m seeing things happen to people that don’t have a voice, people that don’t have a platform to talk and have their voices heard, and effect change. So I’m in the position where I can do that and I’m going to do that for people that can’t.”<sup>16</sup>

Kaepernick’s use of the word ill-treated shows thought in why he, a wealthy athlete, would be sitting in protest. He is clear to define his own experiences with racism or other forms of poor treatment that might initiate from the American institution, as completely different and not comparable to those he was taking a stance for at that moment. Despite his direct mention of this, it would not rid his persecution as being a rich brat taking a stand for something he does not suffer from. And it is postulated at this time that he would suffer at the systematic oppression of the NFL and its definition of a Black player they desire to hire, one who remains on the Conveyor Belt. A player who would erase any connection to his community. Colin Kaepernick is not that player, at least not anymore.

The poise in Kaepernick’s response to the following question is a response that shows a very important American Standard for the requirement of being a Black Activist: “Any concern about the time of this and the possibility of it being a distraction?” The concept of a media correspondent asking if being concerned about Black Lives dead in American streets is a distraction, is the simple answer to why the movement of Black Lives Matter was created—the belief that Black Lives do not Matter. The death of a Black person by government

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<sup>15</sup> Nate Boyer, "An open letter to Colin Kaepernick, from a Green Beret-turned-long snapper," Army Times, August 30, 2016, , accessed July 25, 2017, <https://www.armytimes.com/articles/nate-boyer-colin-kaepernick-commentary-flag-national-anthem-protest-nfl>.

<sup>16</sup> Chris Biderman, "Transcript: Colin Kaepernick addresses sitting during national anthem."

controlled departments, is only distracting to those that have no concept of it. An “injustice anywhere is a threat to injustice everywhere.”<sup>17</sup> It is only a distraction for those that have no concern that such a reoccurring issue would impact their lives. Kaepernick did not share any disdain for the question but simply responded with an informative response:

No, I don’t see it being a distraction. It’s something that can unify this team. It’s something that can unify this country. If we have these real conversations that are uncomfortable for a lot of people. If we have these conversations, there’s a better understanding of where both sides are coming from. And if we reach common ground, and can understand what everybody’s going through, we can really affect change. And make sure that everyone is treated equally and has the same freedom.<sup>18</sup>

Yet again, Kaepernick speaks to the continued experience of the American majority to not be “distracted” by the continual deaths of African Americans and other marginalized groups in America. He provided a response that should have catapulted the imperative concern of his protest—there’s another America that African Americans experience in their double consciousness.

Colin Kaepernick also spoke carefully as reporters inquired about his teammates and the NFL. He did not call out his teammates who did not kneel, but rather referenced the positive interactions of dialogue coming up and his willingness to share the foundation to his stance. Strategically he did not include another teammate in his campaign, as it was his own. To do so would be like the McCarthy trials in Hollywood—list a friend, get a friend in trouble. He had to work with his teammates, and his teammates had to work with him. He also insured that his stance was about what was happening in America, not with the 49ers or the NFL. And in regard to the NFL he stated: “No. No one’s tried to quiet me and, to be honest, it’s not something I’m going to be quiet about. I’m going to speak the truth when I’m asked about it. This isn’t for look. This isn’t for publicity or anything like that. This is for people that don’t have the voice. And this is for people that are being oppressed and need to have equal

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<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” Digital Public Library of America, <http://dp.la/item/f2f181011b1d780f5d6b74a36e533cdd/>

<sup>18</sup> Chris Biderman, "Transcript: Colin Kaepernick addresses sitting during national anthem."

opportunities to be successful. To provide for families and not live in poor circumstances.”<sup>19</sup> Perhaps an attempt to remain on the Conveyor Belt himself, but definitely for his fellow teammates to maintain their lucrative Belt status.

Guided by another inquiry about potential collusion, Kaepernick’s response to why others in the NFL were not protesting resides within the understanding of the Conveyor Belt. “I think there’s a lot of consequences that come along with this. There’s a lot of people that don’t want to have this conversation. They’re scared they might lose their job. Or they might not get the endorsements. They might not to be treated the same way. Those are things I’m prepared to handle. Things that other people might not be ready for. It’s just a matter of where you’re at in your life. Where your mind’s at. At this point, I’ve been blessed to be able to get this far and have the privilege of being able to be in the NFL, making the kind of money I make and enjoy luxuries like that. I can’t look in the mirror and see people dying on the street that should have the same opportunities that I’ve had. And say ‘You know what? I can live with myself.’ Because I can’t if I just watch.” The correspondent followed up with, “Do you think you might get cut over this?” Kaepernick responded without certainty of being cut but, of his continued stance, “I don’t know. But if I do, I know I did what’s right. And I can live with that at the end of the day.” At the end of the 2016 season, Kaepernick had not been cut from the 49ers yet, as a free agent he had not been acquired by another team either.

The Belt created the fear of being denied further opportunities in many players, and the Belt is what protects their jobs, endorsements and treatment—treatment from fans, and franchises. For Kaepernick it was most important to feel that he did the right thing. But also for Kaepernick, he shared his recognition of the belt. He shared the possibility that he would lose his football career, yet something encouraged him to end the silence instilled and most often perpetuated by Black athletes. His triple consciousness living in America as a Black athlete continued his connection to the Black community and situations, despite the structure of the Conveyor Belt to keep him silent and to remove him from associating with the condition of Blacks in America. Colin Kaepernick did not end his protest, he did not apologize, rather his protest began to spread, and showed solidarity in silence. But even those that protest in silence experience retaliation.

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<sup>19</sup> Chris Biderman, "Transcript: Colin Kaepernick addresses sitting during national anthem."

## 4.2 Two: Uproar, Backlash, a Definitive Stance, and No Backing Down

When asked if perhaps the way Colin Kaepernick was protesting was the wrong way to share his concerns he responded with: “I don’t understand how it’s the wrong way. To me, this is a freedom that we’re allowed in this country. And going back to the military, it’s a freedom that men and women that have fought for this country have given me this opportunity by contributions they have made. So I don’t see it as going about it the wrong way. [Racial and social injustice] is something that has to be [discussed], it has to be brought to the forefront of everyone’s attention, and when that’s done, I think people can realize what the situation is and then really effect change.”<sup>20</sup>

To truly bring the issues to people’s attention it would not be easy if only Kaepernick kneeled, but if others would kneel as well. Throughout the months of September until November 2016 support for his protest of violence against Blacks in America would grow enough to make people aware of more than the way in which the protest was occurring but asking why it was occurring. It began with a 49ers teammate, Eric Reid, and a Seattle Seahawks player, Jeremy Lane on September 1<sup>st</sup>. On September 4<sup>th</sup> Megan Rapinoe of the National Women’s Soccer League team Seattle Reign took a knee in solidarity, and would experience backlash from various avenues, but she stated the following in regards to her own experience as a gay American: “[I know] what it means to look at the flag and not have it protect all of your liberties...it’s important to have white people stand in support of people of color on this.” On September 9<sup>th</sup> Denver Broncos’ Brandon Marshall kneeled in solidarity and would suffer a major economic consequence; two of his sponsors, Colorado Credit Union and CenturyLink, pulled their support. He stated the following of why he supported Kaepernick: “I’m not against the military. I’m not against the police or America. I’m against social injustice. Kaep[ernick], he’s using his platform how he wants to use it, to reach the masses... We have freedom of speech. But then we use our platform, and we get bashed for it. It’s almost like they want us to only go with the grain. And once we go against the grain, it’s an issue.” Marshall would be the ultimate victim of the Conveyor Belt. He was very accurate in his theory of what was wanted of him and others like him when he said “us”. On November 6<sup>th</sup> Marshall would once again stand for the anthem, stating he still supported the cause, but

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<sup>20</sup> Chris Biderman, "Transcript: Colin Kaepernick addresses sitting during national anthem."



had “hope for what we can become.”<sup>21</sup> Brandon Marshall’s time off the Belt was temporary, but one impenetrable truth is that he definitely now knows what the Belt is and what it is for him.

Rapinoe and Marshall, both professional American athletes, are important in this story due to their quick support and corresponding consequences. In the three months after Colin Kaepernick’s protest began, black athletes and allies from the NFL, WNBA and NBA began to share their support on their platforms by either kneeling, locking arms or putting up the Black Power fist during their game anthems. But perhaps the most essential support came from the youth. The most prominent demonstration coming from Garfield High School in Seattle, Washington in which the entire team and coaching staff kneeled during the anthem. The head coach, Joey Thomas supported his players, and the support was based on their knowledge of the National Anthem and the situation in America for a community many of his players were a part of. “Everybody wants to talk about how [kneeling for the Anthem] is disrespectful to the American flag...That’s a smokescreen. How about we talk about the issues people are kneeling and fighting for? If we could start addressing the issues and finding solutions to the issues, we won’t have to kneel.” More high school students, college students and even marching bands kneeled during the anthem in solidarity. The key is not that they were kneeling in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick, but with the cause. Agency is a characteristic the Conveyor Belt attempts to deplete in all matters of the athlete other than his or her performance. Kaepernick was and will remain, a role model in giving a voice to those that did not have one—his goal. Not only did he give a voice, but he began discussions of being Black in America, and being a Black athlete which many young athletes should be aware of as they navigate the Belt. Also informing the future professional Black athlete that even professional Black Athletes are sometimes simply defined as Black and all of its associated connotations. The question remains who’s the best athletic role model? Those like Colin Kaepernick or those like Michael Jordan?<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Sandritter, "A timeline of Colin Kaepernick’s national anthem protest and the athletes who joined him."

<sup>22</sup> Michael Jordon was one of the most prominent Black American athletes, however throughout his career he was what William C. Rhoden defined as “race neutral,” which inevitably aided in his great financial and icon success.

Colin Kaepernick pressed the world of sports and questioned the American fabric. He stood up in a position that usually has no power, as it is deprogrammed in most Black athletes through the Belt. But his conscious pushed him to say something. He suffered in various ways, but in no way similar to those he protested in support of. The opposition to his protest questioned many things about Kaepernick as shared, but also, they wanted to know “what is he doing to fix it?” The argument is that if he was not already participating in social justice movements then he was not protesting for those he spoke of but rather he desired attention. It should be stated that in social justice movements some of the best catalysts are from a prominent voice that brings awareness of the issue and adds to the sympathies of others. In Kaepernick’s case he could create the awareness of one’s double consciousness as a Black American, and one’s triple consciousness as a Black American Athlete.

#### **4.3 Three: Youthful Responses, Economic and Social Philanthropy and Silence from the Opposition**

*Sometimes it takes people of that stature, athletes and entertainers, because the youth are drawn to them, [more than] teachers and professors, unfortunately.*<sup>23</sup> - Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf

The backlash towards Kaepernick and those supporting his protest was covered up with the military disrespect and national disrespect on most exchanges, but in the end it was a simple response to a very deep issue. And the types of ways in which the opposition of Kaepernick’s protest responded were primarily related to his race, the race of many other supporters and the race of the lives that were continually being permanently removed from American society. This type of response is exactly why Colin Kaepernick began the 2016 season sitting during the American National Anthem. In association with his consciousness he remained a positive role model for those younger than him. One essential behavior that can influence today’s youth is to not falter in the face of racism and to be aware of oneself and his or her surroundings. As was essential for young athletes that began to protest with him.

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<sup>23</sup> Jesse Washington, "Still no anthem, still no regrets for Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf," The Undeclared, September 1, 2016, accessed July 25, 2017, <https://theundefeated.com/features/abdul-rauf-doesnt-regret-sitting-out-national-anthem/>.

Protesting youth of the Beaumont, Texas, Bulls feared for their lives, a mother of one of the players stated: "Their fear was, 'O.K., we're cute little boys now, but in a few years we're going to be looked at as black men.'" According to the New York Times article in the issue that Colin Kaepernick earned the cover, "[t]he parents [said] they expected a backlash but weren't prepared for the N word to be flung at their preteen sons. 'The coaches need to be lynched,' one person wrote on the team's Facebook page, Parkerson said. 'Kill them all,' wrote another."<sup>24</sup> This type of opposing voice belongs to people who are not worried about the American flag. The image of the American flag is associated with freedom, liberty and justice for all, rather these people were worried about the disrespect from a group associated as the 'other.' The 'other' is defined as a group that should always know its place in the society they reside.

Kaepernick's number 7 jersey was one of the best-selling jerseys that season, but it was not always being worn proudly. It was used as a doormat, put on dummies to represent Kaepernick while being tackled or defamed. T-shirts were created with his image and a rifle scope placed over his head. There was no hiding the desire to physically harm him in the opposition. The mis-labeling of him as a Muslim, even as a supporter of ISIS became prevalent. Of course, throughout social media his name was taken in vain and especially with the N-word. Yet, he persisted. Kaepernick had awakened the part of America that is often hard to reach; youth. Being a face in a favorite American pastime makes Kaepernick a role model if he desired to be one or not. As a role model he must continue in his fight, especially if he asked, expected or desired others to fight as well. No change is created by one person; therefore such support is implied.

Colin Kaepernick supported the fight against injustices with both financial and social philanthropy. He states on his foundation website, "I will donate one million dollars plus all the proceeds of my jersey sales from the 2016 season to organizations working in oppressed communities, 100k a month for 10 months."<sup>25</sup> As of April 2017 Kaepernick has donated

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<sup>24</sup> Sean Gregory, "All Across the Country, Athletes Are Fueling a Debate About How America Defines Patriotism," Time Magazine, September 22, 2016, accessed July 25, 2017, <http://time.com/4504023/athletes-america-patriotism/>.

<sup>25</sup> "Colin Kaepernick Foundation," Colin Kaepernick Foundation, 2016, accessed April 20, 2017, [www.kaepernick7.com](http://www.kaepernick7.com).

\$600,000 to various social justice organizations, including the following: Black Veterans for Social Justice, 350.org, The Center for Reproductive Rights in New York, the Coalition for Human Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, Love Army for Somalia, Mothers Against Police Brutality of Dallas, Urban Underground of Milwaukee, Cuasa Justa/ Just Cause and most publicly mentioned, Meals on Wheels.<sup>26</sup> In September 2016 Kaepernick pledged to donate \$1,000,000 to groups dedicated to fight injustice. The continual documentation of Kaepernick's donations and efforts can be found at his foundation's website: [kaepernick7.com](http://kaepernick7.com). "The mission of the Colin Kaepernick Foundation is to fight oppression of all kinds globally, through education and social activism."<sup>27</sup>

Colin Kaepernick's social influence and philanthropy is most notable in his Know Your Rights Camp which is free for youth and created by Kaepernick. The purpose of the camp is to "raise awareness on higher education, self-empowerment, and instruction to properly interact with law enforcement in various scenarios."<sup>28</sup> The very structure of such a camp provides individual youth the ability to gain awareness of self in the society they reside. If they are already on the Belt, or may later embark, the youth from this camp will understand the implications and be better prepared in their approach and the approach towards them from those inside and outside the sports empire. Nevertheless, there are Conveyor Belts in many empires within America that require similar attitudes that the Belt requires for sports. With the goal of "help[ing] build a stronger generation of people that will create the change that is much needed in this world," the Kaepernick Foundation understands the need for education. Education for a marginalized person in America is not put in the books they may read in a public school classroom. The Know Your Rights Camp is a supplement in aiding in the growth of a generation that many have seen murdered at the hands of American authority appointed personnel. At the heading of the Camp's about page on its website resides a Malcolm X quote: "You don't have to be a man to fight for freedom. All you have to do is to be an intelligent human being." Colin Kaepernick has a goal to assist in creating such people,

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<sup>26</sup> "Colin Kaepernick Foundation."

<sup>27</sup> "Colin Kaepernick Foundation."

<sup>28</sup> Know Your Rights. Accessed July 25, 2017. <http://knowyourrightscamp.com/about/>.

but also to provide sustenance in order for such people to have the time and energy to gain such intelligence—intelligence on many levels.

***The Final Stage: Do not applaud, there is no end zone...***

*The worst thing I think you can do as a football player, is to have gotten to this stage, had the presence that you've had, and leave this game as just a football player.*<sup>29</sup> – Malcolm Jenkins

Perhaps thirty or forty years from now people will look back at Colin Kaepernick, kneeling during the 2016 NFL season as the number 7 San Francisco 49ers quarterback, and say; he was brave, and he brought attention to issues in America related to race that many supported as being obsolete, and he broke a major cycle in the Black Athlete in America “syndrome” by supporting issues directly related to oppressed communities, despite potential monetary backlash. Just as Americans said in 2016 when Muhammad Ali passed away; many Americans held selective memory of the love and hate he acquired during his protest of the Vietnam War, and prior with his ability to self-define as Muhammad Ali and not Cassius Clay—his name given at birth. But currently, most opposition is quiet, except perhaps in conversations on a micro level versus the macro. He took a stand, for something many with finances supported by a majority American culture controlled empire, would most likely never take. Currently, he seeks employment in the NFL, which he received from staying on the Conveyor Belt. Now that he decided to step off the Conveyor Belt without quick retraction, only time will tell what resides in his future. Kaepernick recognized this possibility prior to taking his first seat during the Anthem in August 2016, and he still sat. He felt the backlash personally as the rest of America became aware of his stance, and he respected appropriate concerns by kneeling. He heard the cry that he was not currently fighting in the war against injustice, and he pledged \$1,000,000. He saw the support of youth, and he gave them knowledge. Most of all, he continued to recognize himself, the conscious that told him what he did was right and necessary and no amount of backlash is worthy of silence. Colin Kaepernick is no one in the many people that fight for injustice, yet his being

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<sup>29</sup> Sean Gregory, "All Across the Country, Athletes Are Fueling a Debate About How America Defines Patriotism."

an athlete allows for more support to the various causes. Of course, his being a Black male, American professional athlete made his ability to fight that much more complicated and that much more a requirement to not be indecisive and to not back down. What social justice movement ever made progress in the face of giving in? However, what individual protester facing backlash from the American majority, gained prestige for pushing forward? Critique, whether positive or negative in American society, has generational adjustment and understanding. Colin Kaepernick currently remains in the generation of both positive and negative critique, but it can be surmised that he continues to have a positive self-critique and a critique he can indeed live with. That in and of itself may be the most imperative in the fight against injustice and as a person with a triple consciousness.