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WHAT IT MEANS TO “TAKE A KNEE”

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The political atmosphere around the globe is changing. Citizens are becoming increasingly weary of the lack of political and social progress found within their countries. They no longer tolerate racial inequality, gender inequality, or economic disparities. Activists call out corrupted individuals and institutions for their injustice. Instead of accepting the wrongdoing, the people are fighting against it. They rebel using every method of opposition possible. While some communities may resort to violence, such as burning cars, others take the path of nonviolence. Mahatma Gandhi, often referred as the founder of civil disobedience, stresses the importance of nonaggression. The former 49ers player, Colin Kaepernick, has adopted Gandhi's assertions of peaceful demonstrations while protesting racial injustice. By kneeling during the national anthem, Kaepernick has voiced concern of the most recent racial profiling, which Coates discusses in his novel *Between the World and Me*. Through the historical precedence of suffering, activism based on Gandhi's teachings, biased media responses, and participation of the black community, Kaepernick provides his basis for spurring a political revolution. Colin Kaepernick's nonviolent demonstration is indubitably justified for exposing racial inequality and police brutality in American society.

The injustice for those who have been subjected to oppression for far too long is the logic behind Kaepernick's movement to ease the pain of the suffering on the population. Both Gandhi and Coates believe in the power of prolonged suffering. Although their topics of discussion are different, they both consider suffering to be an instrumental weapon of political and social change. Gandhi states, "war is the law of the jungle and suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his ears" (Gandhi, *Young India*, 5-11-1931). Therefore, physical or emotional suffering is far crueler than a war could ever be. Without political or social adversity, the people would not know that the system is working

against them. While the recent police brutality and violence towards African Americans is horrendous, it is a reminder to the public that society has not changed. The institutions of society have always made the black “body breakable” (Coates 18). Police officers, courts, and legislative officials have contributed to the systematic racism plaguing America. The constant threat of run-ins with policemen has continued to strike fear in those who are considered to be minorities. The black body has the capacity to “be erased by the guns...raped, beaten, [and] jailed” by those who are supposed to protect them from harm (Coates 62). Racial profiling and allowing stereotypes to hold power is the reason why such atrocities, like the death of Prince Jones, keep occurring (Coates 144). Colin Kaepernick recognized the injustice in society for imposing fear and inferiority on a whole population for centuries. This “hideous system” cannot be reformed while most of America pretends it does not notice such suffering (Gandhi, *Young India*, 6-8-1925). The motive for Kaepernick’s protest is based on centuries of oppression and suffering that are still exist today.

By separating himself from the national anthem, Colin Kaepernick took the nonviolent route towards social reform. According to Coates’ narration, Kaepernick has lived in a society where people “invoke their right over [his] body” (Coates 94). At any moment he and others could suffer the consequences of being black in a racist nation. This extended torment is enough to break down a person and harden their heart with hatred. Even though it may seem justified to “wreak vengeance” on those that have wronged others, it will not make up for the suffering that has been imposed on the masses (Gandhi, *Young India*, 4-11-1926). Kaepernick was aware that fighting back would only amplify the already tense atmosphere, thus continuing the cycle of violence. As a result, he chose to follow Gandhi’s civil disobedience and teachings on nonviolence (Mortellaro, *M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence*). The act of defiance the nation

witnessed while Kaepernick knelt during the national anthem in 2016 came as a shock. The beloved sport became a political platform reminding the public of “systemic racism that [has been] denying African Americans” equal rights for decades (Associated Press, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2017). Reverting back to the history of America, Kaepernick took a knee for all of those that have suffered under oppression and have lost their lives due to police brutality. Channeling the “indomitable will” of the Civil Rights leaders, Colin quietly protested on the sidelines for what he thought was unjust (Gandhi, *Young India*, 11-8-1920). The pacifist act of kneeling, which is a sign of respect in football, echoes the nonviolent approach Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr stood for. His determination for equality is what Rosa Parks sat for. Kaepernick does not endanger or pose a threat to anybody, not even himself (Coates 95). Therefore, Kaepernick’s act of defiance is valid as it serves as a nonviolent message towards a corrupt and unjust society.

Much like the opposition from government officials Gandhi faced, Colin Kaepernick’s resistance has generated a multitude of responses. The news coverage of the protest has relentlessly favored and attacked his stance in 2016. Like any debate over societal issues in the United States, Americans are divided and extremely opinionated. While many citizens support Colin for utilizing his position for reform, many also criticize it (Associated Press, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2017). The opposition’s main argument is that kneeling during the anthem disrespects the flag and the fallen soldiers it represents. These so-called patriots are nothing but bullies that “harass and beat people” who do not share their same values towards the anthem (Staples, *The New York Times*, 2017). Perhaps the highest profile opposition is the president, Donald Trump. After Kaepernick was fired from the 49ers, many NFL players have adopted the practice of kneeling during the national anthem (Associated Press, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2017). Trump, taking to twitter, has repeatedly attacked the players. Chiming in, he states that

“not enough action” is being taken by the NFL to shut down the movement (Beaton 2017, Trump 2017). Trump has continued to accuse African Americans of instigating the violence against the officers (Lauren Carroll, *PolitiFact*, 2016). Claiming that they are the ones abusing guns, Trump has supported the “stop and frisk” initiative, even though it was ruled unconstitutional (Lauren Carroll, *PolitiFact*, 2016). As a candidate who appealed to prejudiced individuals for his campaign, it is not surprising that he hopes to shoot down the political activity. In doing so will ultimately do nothing to address the racial inequality in society. Those that continue to support Kaepernick and the other players recognize a need for change. Unlike the opposers that remain ignorant to racism, supporters embrace the demonstration for equality. They praise Colin for his crusade against police brutality and promotion of equal opportunities for all (Associated Press, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2017). Despite the opposition, Kaepernick’s measures and dedication is justified in order to achieve racial equality in America.

While the population has become absorbed with the nonviolent protest, it must be reminded that it does not hold sway towards Kaepernick’s actions. As a Caucasian female living in America, I cannot relate to the struggle Colin and other African Americans have endured. I have never had to fear the police with “their flashlights, nightsticks, [and] guns” (Coates 90). The small town in Massachusetts where I come from respects policemen and everything they do. They are friends, neighbors, and family of so many people. The recent police brutality that has claimed the lives of “Terence Crutcher, Philando Castile, Samuel DuBose, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray,” and so many others solidifies the notion of corrupted power (Lee and Park, *The New York Times*, 2017). As a person who lives by Gandhi’s warning on the “killing [of] living beings” in any capacity, I am horrified at the number of names on this list (Gandhi, *Young India*, 18-11-1926). These fallen citizens are victims of not only police brutality but society itself. They

are the reason why Colin Kaepernick decided to “take a knee” while peacefully protesting. He sacrificed his career in the NFL to make a political statement on their behalf and continues to speak out for reform (Associated Press, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2017). While I support Kaepernick and other players that take a knee, I remember that my opinion does not always matter. Obviously, I am biased on the issue as someone that has never been subjected to the injustice that so many people face on a daily basis. However, I am aware of my inability to participate in the movement but acknowledge that reform must be immediate. Yet, I still believe the nonviolent demonstrations are justified from observing the media coverage. Those that are not affected by the profiling have no authority or ability to criticize it, since we’ve never lived in fear of persecution.

Through his nonviolent protest, Colin Kaepernick has sparked a revolution regarding race in America. The small yet peaceful act of kneeling during the national anthem has divided the country. Kaepernick’s intention was to bring attention to the racial injustice and inequality within society. As a player for a sport that promotes nationalism, Kaepernick had the ability to reach all Americans and address the flaw in society. Even though the political movement is entirely justified based on America’s roots of racism, many people criticize the player’s boldness. Their outcries on the issue are utterly absurd. Colin Kaepernick is an audacious fighter for equal rights for all, particularly African Americans. His respectful and nonviolent behavior mimics the guidance of Gandhi. The events and narration of Coates in *Between the World and Me* provides further evidence that there is a need for social reform. As the political atmosphere continues to change throughout time, the people will always demand greater rights. They will band together behind one political leader and denounce the corrupted society. A nonviolent revolution will ensure until the rights that are promised to everyone are guaranteed. This is what “taking a knee”

means. In order for real political and change to take place, and individual must sacrifice themselves and their reputation for the good of the movement. Colin Kaepernick's acceptance of nonviolence will, without a doubt, inspire others to promote social change in the future.

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