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### The Emotional Labor of "Taking a Knee"

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#### **Abstract**

We center three publicly accessible images: (1) Am I not a Man and a Brother? (1787), (2) Colin Kaepernick (2017) "Taking a Knee", (3) Mother McDowell of the Black Student in Florida Admonished for "Taking a Knee" in school (2017). The photograph of mother McDowell is included, rather than her son, who she wanted to remain anonymous across media outlets. We draw primarily from publicly accessible media and scholarship available via the Internet (museums, newscasts, scholarly repositories) to provide a composite of kneeling discourse and counter-narratives related to race (i.e., anti-slavery, abolition, anti-racism protests) and proper behavior. Each image is situated within literature supporting analysis through concepts (time, race) visual, and textual information. Rather than detailing the images, we focus on the surrounding narratives, contemporary readings, redactions, and annotations (we create or relate to) to consider emotions as part of the context, impetus, and force behind the actions captured in them. We juxtapose, redact, and critique images and texts associated with kneeling/taking a knee by men and boys racialized as Black, but not exclusively., as the practices we illustrate in response to structural racism (i.e., discipline in schools) also bring attention to events involving other students: a Black girl and an Indigenous (Inuit) boy.

#### **Keywords**

emotional labor – anti-Blackness – allochronic chrono-politics – raciological discourse – critical race (digital) media analysis – post-truth

Digital media applications (apps) have made it possible for anyone with low-level technical skills to produce deepfakes. A deepfake is an image synthesis technique that mixes audio and video sources, such as juxtaposing facial expressions and voices of different people. For example, see the Buzzfeed (2018) video using footage of former U.S. President Barack Obama https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQ54GDmieLo. Both fakes and feints challenge notions of reality – of what is real – and rest on what is artificial (artificial intelligence, artificial turf). Fakes and feints are deceptive or distracting moves (i.e., running, punting, kicking, passing) that divert another's energy elsewhere, render them unable to ward off attack, or destabilize their character or position.

Like fakery, "post-truth" concerns the instability of knowledge and the sources upon which one can justify what they believe and do, as well as the level of confidence in that, which one is seeing, reading, or hearing can be attributed to the apparent source or body of evidence. Post-truth, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary (online) is a term "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". Similarly, the Cambridge Dictionary (online) defines post-truth as "relating to a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts". In both definitions, objectivity (as facts) and subjectivity (as emotions and beliefs) are separate and emotions are treated as if they ought not to be a basis for forming an opinion or evaluating the strength of an argument. In addition to references to post-truth, other terms such as post-factual politics and post-reality politics are circulating as synonyms. Such terms similarly rest on a divide between emotion and cognition whereby emotions (and decisions based on them) are argued to be less reliable. This is a false binary for those who argue that emotion and cognition are interrelated, interdependent, responsive to broader socio-political factors, and developed within a particular time (Berlant, 2005).

Countering the post-truth rhetoric that bemoans the use of emotions in decision-making, as if apart from rationality, is Berlant (2005) who argues that the increased reliance on feeling as modes of personal expressivity is not a sign of the decline of democracy or civil society as feelings are not the opposite of thought: "each is an embodied rhetorical register associated with specific practices, times, and spaces of appropriateness" (p. 47). Emotional ambiguity over issues such as national pride, nationalism, and patriotism, etc. makes it difficult to simply reject emotional appeals as nothing more than affective outcomes. For some, the truth has been a barometer of political manipulation more than a naturally occurring, ethical (value), and emotionally free state of affairs. In other words, for those who have historically been deceived, duped,

misled and miseducated, post-truth is nothing new. Truth as a social phenomenon remains a fabrication dependent upon socio-political and economic power. While we hold that post-truth is not a new phenomenon for those who have been historically duped, we do observe an increase in the circulation of fakery and perhaps a public not adequately educated (or 'empowered') to critique it (Giroux, 2017). Given the increased exposure to and the ease with which youth can access media, education is provided with a stronger and more urgent rationale for positioning critical media literacy centrally within pedagogical efforts.

Since football player Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem, kneeling has re-entered the political discourse. For instance, it was referenced in a 2018 comment in this headline from the Washington Post on July 24, 2018: 'It's like he [President Donald Trump] took a knee to Putin': Mitch Landrieu on Helsinki, race, Democrats' identity crisis (e.g., Capehart, 2018). What is the 'truth' of taking the knee? The answer is – it depends. It depends on why the knee is taken, who is doing the taking, who is doing the receiving, the color of the knee takers' skin ... and the truths, lies, fictions, emotions that come together to create an account taken-as-true that solely serves to benefit those in positions of power. And that idea, that post-truth signifies anything like a 'new' condition, is clearly belied. Taking note of the significance



IMAGE 1 Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid kneel in protest during the national anthem on September 12, 2016 in Santa Clara, California.

PHOTO: THEARON W. HENDERSON/GETTY IMAGES

of kneeling/"taking a knee" can help to expose political and emotional moves, such as fakes and feints.

Colin Kaepernick follows the iconic baseball player Jackie Robinson in politically protesting racial oppression during symbolic events such as the singing of the national anthem. In the preface to his autobiography, Robinson wrote (1972): "As I write this twenty years later, I cannot stand and sing the anthem. I cannot salute the flag; I know I am a black man in a white world" (p. xxiv). Although Robinson stood during the National Anthem at a world series game (1947), he did so quietly (he did not sing or salute the flag with hand over heart) (Tannenbaum, 2017). Colin Kaepernick knelt, which provided a more visual representation of his protest.

In an interview with sports reporter Wyche (2016), Kaepernick 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,' Kaepernick told NFL Media in an exclusive interview after the game. 'To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder'.

Comments were later tweeted by the 45th President of the United States: "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, say, 'Get that son of a b – off the field right now. Out, you're fired!" This was followed by a response from Kaepernick's mother, Teresa, who tweeted, "Guess that makes me a proud b – !" The focus on the flag and disrespect towards it, followed by name calling, sidelined Kaepernick's rationale for kneeling during the National Anthem, which was to protest racial oppression and murder. See #TakeAKnee protest.

Berlant (2005) asserted that in the 20th century, the idea of social transformation was understood and framed as an emotional event. Such political discussions, engaging in the moral solicitation of sentiment, became more visceral and visual in the 20th century, through classic Hollywood cinema and television, as scenes of "intense emotion" were broadcast "to serve as a lubricant for a particular experience of social belonging – whether in terms of the 'traditional' patriotic National Symbolic, the carceral state, a polity of television consumers, or a collection of free autonomous individuals living in a mass-media simultaneity" (p. 70). That the "melodramatic mode" reduced ethnic, racial, and sexual differences to a singular individuality that was often linked with U.S. national identity (p. 63).

However, less evident in the 45th's response was the Christian sense of compassion used as a social ligament to frame Kaepernick's political protest toward social transformation as a democratic practice, an expression of his rights as a citizen with constitutional rights, or as a legacy of liberal theory. Instead, the 45th's response was more reflective of "the anger of the privileged, over what they feel as a threat to their control over how they are to treat historical minoritized/subordinated groups, feels like consciousness and survival among minoritizied/subordinated groups" (Berlant, 2005, p. 70). What apparently did not resonate with the 45th, among others, was a sense of virtue leading to feelings of compassion about a subordinated person or population.

Images of kneeling among Black men (those of African descent) are mired in media supporting political discourses about racial coexistence, life, liberty, American pastimes, and nostalgia for times past, and reinscribing questions such as: What is a human (and) who has human rights? Kneeling/"Taking a knee" we argue, is an allochronic discourse, which means it is a discourse "existing in different times" (Fabian, 1983, p. 143). Allochronic discourses help to reveal the fakery of post-truth, which urges us into failing to make the connections between imagined (oppressive) pasts and present emergences into the future. Fakery perhaps circulates more widely, and is more democratically available in the early quarter off the 21st Century than any other time in modern history.

Allochronic discourses in anthropology, often hinge on recurring constructs such as savage, primitive, and civilized (Fabian, 2006), which serve as vehicles for securing domination and maintaining global inequalities (Fabian, 2002). This form of discourse situates people as Others who are not only different, but "also distant in space and time" from the researcher/inquirer (Schultz, 2012), and is at the foundation of anthropology's epistemology (Fabian, 1983). Further drawing Fabian's scholarship into the study of digital media, is Ginsburg (2008) who borrowed the term "allochronic chronopolitics" to argue that current concepts such as The Digital Age promote ethnocentrism, and create "the other" as one of many who are divided in space-time from the "techno-imaginary universe." Thus the allochronic chronopolitics of digital media discourse restratify the world while often excluding Indigenous (and other marginalized) communities due to the cost, language (English), and technological literacy required to manipulate digital information. Despite the increasingly widespread accessibility to the material and discursive *tools* of fakery, some are still (always) primarily subject to it. Furthermore, digital media make allochronic discourse widely available to youth through their pastime activities (in the Cloud, on the playing fields). By digital media we mean cell phones, the Internet, and software applications that power and run on the Internet (Coleman, 2010).

At the individual level is chronemics, which refers to the ways individuals relate to time, events, and one another over time.

## 1 About a Quarter (Century) Back: Temporalities, Composites, and Chronemics of Blackness

In the study of chronemics (human temporalities), time-binding rests on the idea that humans are developed unlike other animals to organize themselves according to time (i.e., remembering the past, envisioning a future). Bruneau (2012) argued that there are two dominant kinds of human time that constitute personal time and one's identity: objective (time, times, timing, tempo) and subjective (remembering, forgetting). His theory of personal time derived from *connectionist brain theory*, a "speech communication model of how the brain is developed through contact and message sharing with other humans throughout a person's lifespan" (p. 84). Theories that attempt to separate humans from animals, and emotionality from rationality, beg for practices that counter the long line of images used to create a hierarchy of racial types, often based on Biblical history, that were "meant to be read as a comparison of white man, Negro, and animal" (Savage, 2018, p. 9).

Eric Slauter (2004) argued that the shift between rational and emotional rhetoric in the U.S. political sphere took place during the late 18th century when animal rights activist arguments concerning the ethics of human/nonhuman domination were re-deployed to make antislavery arguments. Berlant (2005) suggested that emotional appeal found dominance around 1824, during the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the U.S. republic, when nationalist rhetoric congealed through public events confirming expressions of collective public emotion. At that time, political discourse concerned with emotion and rationality was assumed to be a human quality associated with moral law as a parallel to natural law. The expectation was that affect allowed one to feel an emotion in response to injustice, but the appropriate emotion was that which was authorized by the political sphere, illustrating the epistemology of state emotion (Berlant, 2005).

Undergirding the rise of emotion in discourse about what is publicly, politically, and morally right for those living within a nation-state, was the "Christian sense of compassion as a fundamental social ligament", which according to Berlant (2005) stemmed from the Protestantism "woven through U.S. constitutional and liberal theory" (p. 52). As such, the idea of social transformation was understood and framed as an emotional event, "delivering virtue to the privileged, who got to feel good about themselves for having the appropriate

feelings about a subordinated kind of person or population" (p. 52). Images of the kneeling Black man, from the abolitionist movement to the current movement for racial justice, offer a composite counterstory that crosses objective and subjective temporalities as does the allochronic raciological discourse that accompanies such images into surrounding political discourse.

Images of Black men or boys kneeling harkens back to the iconic image of the "Kneeling Slave", made famous by a medallion by Josiah Wedgewood. This image was used to promote the abolition of slavery in the British Colonies. Written above the image was the rhetorical question, 'AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?'. According to the online description provided by the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, this question...

...calls for pity, but at the same time demands a review of the black African's place in the world as fellow human being, rather than a separate species, a status conferred upon them by slave owners and traders. The image of the kneeling slave is noble, but at the same time without threat; he kneels, and he is in chains. He may represent the literary figure of the 'noble savage,' and at the same time draw forth in late 18th-century white men and women their sense of magnanimity. http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah\_596365.

The image of kneeling has evoked, in the above interpretation, complex emotions such as pity as well as historical narratives such as "savage".



IMAGE 2 Am I Not a Man and a Brother, 1787 SOURCE: HTTP://AMERICANHISTO RY.SI.EDU/COLLECTIONS/SEARCH/ OBJECT/NMAH\_596365

"Although the intent and the effect of the emblem was to focus public opinion on the evils of the African slave trade, its ultimate effect was to underscore the perception of black inferiority". http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h67. html

Additionally, the nationalization of emotion was advocated powerfully by William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator* (1833), which saw the commingling of economic, religious, and political arguments with sentimental appeals to middle-class readers, especially women, not to be hard-hearted and to recognize the fundamental affective humanity in the slaves' suffering body and soul (Berlant, 2005, p. 75).

The image of the kneeling slave was created against a backdrop, which was "the long history of Black male imagery" (Brown & Johnson, 2014, p. 11). Historically, Christianity and biblical references helped to normalize the imagery of Black men as naturally lustful and savage (Brown & Johnson, 2014), a problem for which slavery offered a benevolent solution — containment. While abolitionists intended to use the image of the kneeling slave to raise its viewers a sense of the shame of slavery, as an institution begetting a sorrowful condition, instead it provoked sympathy. As Sharpe (2016) contends, repetition of the visual discursive, state and other quotidian violences enacted on Black people does not lead ... primarily to sympathy or something like empathy" (p. 117). In other words, emotional responses that arise when Black men kneel can be interpreted variably, as obedience or disobedience, guilt and and/or penitence, depending on the political investments and affective economy in which one is indebted.

Today, images of the penitent Black man kneeling circulate among sociocultural narratives in which genuflection is interpreted as an act of seeking forgiveness for having been or done wrong (i.e., is guilty) *and/or* showing dis/ obedience (i.e., to a flag, nation, public). Thus images of kneeling, imagery of Black men, and what Grosfoguel (2013) calls the racial imaginary, intersect to illustrate how through media, "allochronic raciological thinking continues to contribute to the vilification, criminalization, and disempowerment of Black youth" (Johnson & Johnson, p. 37). Allochronic raciological thinking can be shared through various media and enter educational systems without confronting the ways in which "deeply entrenched historical discourses delimit how African American students are conceptualized in schools and society". (Brown & Johnson, 2014, p. 11).

Sharpe (2016) calls for Black visual/textual annotation and redaction in order to imagine beyond what is captured in the frame (discursive, photographic). The pedagogical point of praxis herein is to provide a counterhistory that upends the logics of the plantation of the past (citing Mirzoeff, 2011), and future (McKittrick, 2013), now and then. There is a need for critical race digital media literacy work that supports historically and contemporarily marginalized communities to resist "allochronic chronopolitics", not simply to re-insert themselves into the techno-digital imaginary, but also to engage in strategies (i.e., redaction, annotation) that expose their histories and cultures to wider audiences, create their own cultural futures (Ginsburg, 2008), and expose the "allochronic discourses that inform public education" (Duncan, 2005, p. 93).

Berlant's (2005) discussion of how affect and emotional epistemology undergird political discourse, provides an entry point for analyzing media associated with visuals and texts of Black men kneeling/"taking a knee" through a critical race media lens today. "To summarize, at present the political sphere of the United States is saturated by the deployment of emotion to convert the nation from the liveness of politics to the time of moral clarities that actively

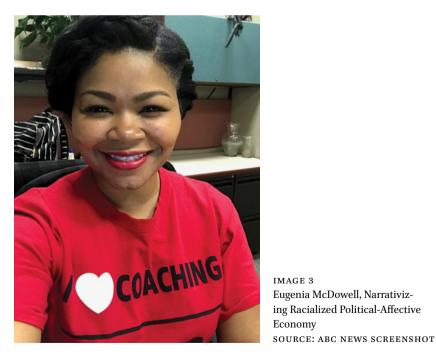


IMAGE 3 Eugenia McDowell, Narrativizing Racialized Political-Affective Economy

trump nuancing dissenting counternarratives" (Berlant, 2005, p. 73). Needed are counternarratives that emphasize aesthetic and emotional dimensions that inspire empathy (Duncan, 2005). However, the transition from affect to emotion is not automatic, predetermined, or closed off from dominant (political) narratives about how one should feel about people in general and Black people in particular.

Building emotional capital involves acknowledging and managing, rather than ignoring, emotions and can be developed through the socialization of children. For instance, Gerdin and Larsson (2018), found that boys in physical education courses were socialized to derive pleasure and display their bodies in particular ways, thus restricting other ways of feeling and being. Black adults have been found to instill in their children emotional capital, which includes emotions and their management, namely the skills or habits that translate into social advantages (Cahill, 1999; Reay, 2000). In cases such as these, building emotional capital involves socializing children/youth to recognize and respond to discourses that are gendered-racist.

In the heightened effort to racially desegregate schools, some adults socialized Black children through messages such as "fear White people," and reminders to enact deference (Brown & Lesane-Brown, 2006). However, emotional deference among marginalized youth often comes with the risk of reducing their positive racial identities, high self-esteem, and school achievement (Froyum, 2010). Another approach used with Black children to build their emotional capital is to develop the skill of managing emotions through distancing. Distancing from other people emotionally can be a way for Black children to detach from racist discourses, such as those that dysfunctionalize them (Froyum, 2010).

Allochronic racial discourse depends on allochronic data, which can serve as tools for making decisions in schools. This occurs when teachers and administrators use data to produce "surveillance systems" they then "use to monitor Black movement, judge Black behavior, and make assessments of Black children" (Johnson & Johnson, 2014, p. 32). Reading this next image and related texts of a woman whose son was reprimanded in class for "taking a knee" exposes argumentation, emotion, and patriotic discourse. Illustrated are ideas about how race/racism and rights are transmitted through public (digital) media and reverberate within the educational system of the United States, a system still plagued by racial segregation. As Sharpe (2016) reminds us, like data of other forms, "images work to confirm the status, location, and already held opinions within dominant ideology about those exhibitions of spectacular Black bodies whose meanings then remain unchanged" (p. 116). These

images, read with attention to affective and emotional labor, call attention to education purporting to support anti-racism while ignoring anti-Blackness sentiments.

Eugenia McDowell's 6-year-old son was reprimanded by a teacher when he took a knee in class as others recited the Pledge of Allegiance while standing. In the video, mother McDowell explained that her son reported that the teacher told him to stand up. In response, during an interview with ABC News anchor Breanna Edwards, McDowell stated: "We are no longer going be silenced, our voices will be heard and our little black boys that sit in classrooms today, not just my son but every other child that looks like him, they are not going to be silenced" (Edwards, 2017).

Emotional labor was a concern for McDowell, namely it was part of her condition for determining whether or not she would allow her son to remain in class with the teacher who reprimanded him. She said,

I wanted an apology to my son in the same manner that she called him out for kneeling. I also wanted to know if she would be remorseful. If she demonstrated that, then I would have been okay with him remaining in her class. (Schmidt, 2017)

Remorse involves acknowledgment of wrongdoing and, ironically, her request was equivalent to asking the teacher to figuratively "take a knee". Instead, McDowell's son was reassigned to another classroom regardless of what she wanted for him at that point. In this case of "taking a knee," both punitive discipline and guilt (and lack thereof) were wrapped up with the emotional labor of Black bodies attempting to express political agency and avoid being labeled disrespectful.

The response from the teacher (per the text she sent to mother McDowell) pointed to the son's kneeling as wrongdoing, disrespectful, and unpatriotic rather than democratic. She wrote:

I knew where he had seen it [going down on one knee], but I did tell him that in the classroom, we are learning what it means to be a good citizen, we're learning about respecting the United States of America and our country symbols and showing loyalty and patriotism and that we stand for the Pledge of Allegiance.

Also, contradicory information was provided by a district representative (Cobbe) who said in the interview with Schmidt (2017), that state policy requires parents to send a letter recusing their children from participating in the pledge

of allegiance and had the mother sent that letter it would not have been an issue, "Students could stand, students could kneel, they don't have to put their hand on their heart" (Cobbe). However, in the video segment, she stated that even when exempted "the law says they still have to stand". Such contradictory statements can feel like moves, feints or fakes, to give the appearance of being right and morally upright. In contrast, as noted by mother McDowell, "the bigger issue is cultural".

Sharpe (2016) powerfully employed Black annotation and Black redaction to make Black life visible in the story of a twelve-year-old Black girl (Mikia) in Georgia who was accused of, and faced being charged with trespassing and vandalizing school property, while her White friend faced less punitive measures and costly actions. Mikia wrote the word "hi" on the wall of the school and part of her punishment was to write a letter of apology to the school. As Sharpe (2016) claimed, the *New York Times* article made Mikia appear then disappear. In response, Sharpe (2016) redacted the *New York Times article*, except for the word "Hi" to center the girl's point of view and how she attempted to defend herself when she stated, "I only wrote one word, and I had to do all that' ... 'It isn't fair;'" (p. 124). Through Black annotation and Black redaction Sharpe (2016) aimed to counter the force of the state that landed Mikia on the front page of the *New York Times*, in front of the Henry County Board of Education, on probation, under curfew, in service to the community, and apologetic (Vega, 2014).

In the case of "Mother MdDowell's son" taking a knee, the teacher and district also addressed the issue through disciplinary measures (admonition to stand up, texting the parent, reprimanding the son for being disrespectful), and invoked state power by referencing state policy (securing students' rights through letter writing) The text from the teacher, restated here in the practice of Black redaction, highlights the underlying message behind admonitions to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, this is "our country".

what it means to be a good citizen, respecting the United States of America our country loyalty and patriotism stand for the Pledge of Allegiance.

The district missed the opportunity to confront the ways in which Black boys are surveilled and controlled through a discourse that castigates them and situates them as political Others. In a similar case, a 12 year old Indigenous (Inuit) student refused to stand during the Canadian national anthem and was sent to the Principal's office for behaving inappropriately when he was protesting the curriculum for its lack of attention his cultural past – or what his mother

referred to as their "lived history as Inuit" (CBC News, 2018). Simply disciplining students by excluding them from classrooms and then calling foul on parents and children/youth who do not comply with school, district, or state policies is way to perpetuate structural racism while ignoring how it manifests. Instead it is "drowned out in battles over symbolization" that operate through "the vernacularity of Anglo-American supremacy" (Berlant, 2005, p. 70).

#### 2 Conclusion

The act of "taking a knee"/kneeling by Black men has been understood paradoxically, as patriotic and unpatriotic, as deference and resistance, and as shameful and shaming. Critical race digital media analysis in the field of education can support the urgency of dwelling in emotions that linger while combating the allochronic tendency to distance anthropological subjects – people and topics - emotionally and politically. The visual power and possibility of using these images in education lie in how they can aid in building emotional resonance beyond pity, and discourse beyond the savage and primitive Other. If not alone, then perhaps pairing the images with the voices of mothers (i.e., of Colin Kaepernick's, the first grader in Florida), can support emotional capital development to stave off the distancing and shave off the distance between man(kind) and brother(hood), using non-specific gendered terms. While refusing to stand or "taking a knee" are acts being conducted by children/youth, each act has its own resonance within the lived histories of a community and the cultural memories that get excited by, are affected, by discourses of patriotism, citizenship, and proper behavior. Even when one thinks they are "distant from the event in both time and sentiment, language, perspectives, policy, symbols, and feelings emerge" to take one back to a place where and a time when "human worth was rated and ranked on the basis of skin color", overtly (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. xv). Pivoting on nation-state violence, biblical teachings, and human types, Black men/boys kneeling/"taking a knee" is a raciological discourse that serves as a constant reminder of what (not) to feel about them.

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