

The Limits of Smooth Legacies: 1968, Feminist History, and the Tradition of Athlete Activism: An Interview With Amira Rose Davis

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The Olympic Games podium protest of professional athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos is among the most frequently cited moments of 1968. Regarded as one of the most political events in Olympics history, their protest is today often recalled in celebration. In 1968, however, it drew the ire of their stadium audience, their television viewers back home, and the International Olympic Committee. At the time, sports journalist Brent Musberger described Smith and Carlos as “black-skinned storm troopers,” and the two athletes were expelled from the Olympic Village. Both suffered personally and professionally for over a decade until, in the 1980s, a “smoothing” process began to reincorporate the duo into popular culture, recasting them as heroic icons. In this interview, historian Amira Rose Davis analyzes how such smoothing occurs, what gets buffed out, and all that can be gained from focusing on the contributions of Black women when we revisit historical flashpoints like 1968.

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They are seldom seen in action and even more rarely in color. Frozen in time, rendered in black and white, three men stand atop a podium. Two of them, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, bow their heads as they hold clenched gloved fists in the air, wearing beads around their necks and black socks on their shoeless feet. The third, Peter Norman, stands in solidarity. All wear the pin of the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR). Their photograph has become a familiar one, routinely invoked to symbolize the tumult and spirit of 1968. In the process of becoming familiar, however, the image’s contextual complexities have gradually fallen from view. “While the image has stood the test of time,” explains sports journalist Dave Zirin (2005), “the struggle that led to that moment has been cast aside, a casualty of capitalism’s commitment to political amnesia” (p. 73). The image’s enduring resonance is undeniable, but we must ask: What work does it do?

A photograph can be a window into the past, but it can just as easily be a tool of historical revision, obscuring the messiness of struggle in the interest of smooth commemorations of “progress.” As a scholar of 20th-century Black athletes who focuses on the stories of Black women, Amira Rose Davis knows this tension well. Currently an assistant professor of history and African American studies at Penn State University, Davis’s work demonstrates how foregrounding Black women can enrich historical scholarship—

how telling a story from the margins often offers the widest perspective. Centering Black women not only challenges previously held understandings surrounding the racialized and gendered dynamics of sport but calls into question theoretical approaches that too often collapse these athletes' experiences into singular categories. In this interview, Davis analyzes the processes by which dissident movements are reduced to historical snapshots that are misleadingly presumed to represent the whole. She explains how the dominant national memory of 1968's athlete activism reflects and reproduces prevailing power relations. This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Courtney M. Cox: In 2018, sports journalist Jeré Longman observed that many people commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Tommie Smith and John Carlos's podium protest were at the same time turning a blind eye to the backlash against Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback who had sparked controversy two years earlier when he kneeled during the national anthem in protest of police brutality and racial inequality. In response to this discrepancy, Longman (2018) highlighted the continuity between these two moments of Black protest, noting that "history can act as sandpaper smoothing abrasive denunciation into burnished acceptance" (para. 4). What do you make of this analogy?

Amira Rose Davis: It is no secret that history is about power. To get further than this basic premise, Michel-Rolph Trouillot called for analysis of how history itself is captured in particular instances—how specific practices of archiving, of telling and retelling certain stories, generate a discrepancy between what happened and "what is said to have happened" (Trouillot, 1995, p. 3). Longman's (2018) sandpaper analogy refers to the same problem: In any given context, it behooves the victors of the past to smooth out history, to make it more palatable and digestible. Indeed, in my work, which typically centers Black women, I often have to peel back a layer of gloss, the sheen on the smoothed surface, in order even to access my subjects' stories. I situate myself there, asking: "All right, how have we made things a little too smooth, and is smooth a wise goal?"

This question immediately raises another: What value do we place on smoothed history? Is it easier to teach? Certainly. Is it great material for children's books? Absolutely. As a mother, I get the value of a simple story. But history is messy; like life, it's full of drama. Longman's metaphorical sandpaper refers to a mechanism of power, buffing out the parts that are, for me, the most interesting: the rough parts, the tense parts.

CMC: Smith and Carlos's names are used today as a sort of reverential shorthand for athlete activism, but they weren't always celebrated this way. How has the memory of their action changed over time?

ARD: Scholars are by now familiar with the barriers and burdens Smith and Carlos faced in the wake of their Olympics protest: destruction of their property, lack of economic opportunities, mental health struggles (Hartmann, 2003). But we still haven't fully grappled with their legacy. Historians and journalists started revisiting their story in the 1990s—when academic historians began deeming it appropriate to reorient to the 1960s as in the past, as properly historical. At this point, the most politically convenient story of "the '60s" became the dominant one: Voter rights legislation and the Civil Rights Act were cited as evidence not only of injustice and inequality in the 1960s but also, misleadingly, as evidence that America had embraced and loved the movements that forced us to change. Smith and Carlos were caught up in that recovery narrative, which was itself deployed to bolster nascent neoliberal multiculturalism.

All of a sudden, the famous image of them on the podium in 1968 was recast as a symbol of bravery in the face of oppression. And it is easier to applaud bravery than to oppose the oppression that makes bravery necessary. I think of the statues of Smith and Carlos on campuses and in the Blacksonian [the National Museum of African American History and Culture] and I'm reminded of Carl Wendell Hines's (1977) poem in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr: "Now that he is safely dead / Let us praise him / build monuments to his glory It is easier to build monuments than to make a better world" (p. 468). Although Smith and Carlos were still alive, a similar process unfolded around that formative protest. As soon as the photograph could be treated as an historical artifact, it didn't matter that its subjects were still alive, or even that they were still articulating their experiences of racism.

CMC: Relations of global solidarity are often omitted from the story of Smith and Carlos's podium action. Yet, this is a crucial dimension. Organizers with the Olympic Project for Human Rights, for instance, were considering a boycott of the Games if certain countries (particularly apartheid South Africa) were allowed to compete, and they also expressed solidarity with the student protestors at Tlatelolco. Why are these contextual details so rarely mentioned?

ARD: Third-world solidarity was emerging with great force at the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s. The Black Panther Party was building with people in Asia, continental Africa, and Latin America. Third World Women's Alliance was running their magazine, *Triple Jeopardy*, which analyzed the interplay of racism, sexism, and colonialism worldwide. But this moment of possibility was met with severe repression and, eventually, the internationalism with which Smith and Carlos identified was replaced with the turn to multiculturalism, which is like Third Worldism defanged and declawed: Talk about diversity, but don't think through interlocking oppressions or devise tools and pathways to disrupt the system.

The valorization of the image of their protest is relevant here. Although it's a photograph of a global event, its reproduction as a specifically American artifact has obscured the context of the action. After all, we're looking at a podium in a stadium in Mexico City, where students protested the Olympics before the Games started and were massacred by their government, their bodies dumped into the Gulf of Mexico. But when you zoom in tight, focusing only on the raised fists, for instance, you don't see that destruction. Depending on the angle of the shot, you also might not notice the OPHR badges that all three athletes were wearing, and therefore miss the OPHR's global perspective. Indeed, another OPHR badge in 1968 showed two black fists meeting, one coming out of continental Africa and one coming out of the United States, communicating to the International Olympic Committee that Black athletes would refuse to participate if South Africa was allowed to bring a segregated team under apartheid. The photo itself is sometimes cropped to omit elements of the protest's detailed curation. Sometimes you can't see Smith and Carlos's feet, for example, so you can't see that they do not have shoes on. You don't get the comment on Black poverty or their critique of capitalism without that part of the image—elements of the protest that corresponded to their internationalist politics.

Related to these omissions is the fact that only in recent years have we started to see popular stories about Peter Norman, the White athlete who stood in solidarity with Smith and Carlos. Norman was blackballed by his federation after he refused to renounce the protest—the federation's sole request in exchange for their good graces and his career. For his integrity, he never competed for Australia again, and he didn't have much to his

name when he died in 2006. Smith and Carlos were pallbearers at his funeral. When we can't see those OPHR badges, we miss his role in the story and that dimension of solidarity.

And, of course, you don't see the women, who were always on the periphery of these discussions but never invited to the table, who had to learn how to strategize on their own and mount their own protests. Today, 50 years later, despite all the celebrations, Wyomia Tyus has to continually remind people that she was in the room when Smith and Carlos's iconic protest was planned. Tyus, a gold medalist who in 1968 became the first *person* to ever retain the 100-meter Olympic title, has had to insert herself back into that image over and over. When I think of that image, that is what I see. In fact, I often use the image as a tool for calling attention to these historical omissions and oversights. Its familiarity makes people feel like they're in the know—"all right, athletic activism"—and then I get to ask: If these are the images we have of athletic activism, what is missing? And it generally takes a while—and usually it takes a woman—to notice the absence.

CMC: The 1968 Olympics were in Technicolor, but we're used to seeing this image in black and white, which is more suggestive of a distant past. When I show the image in Technicolor, it's so vibrant. How does color in the photo alter the reaction to its content?

ARD: You're exactly right. I think showing color images makes the content feel closer. I do it sometimes with people, too, like W.E.B. Du Bois. If you encounter his picture in a textbook, it will be him at age twenty in a little black and white photo. But I prefer to show all the color photos of him later in life, reminding people that he died in 1963, the night before the March on Washington. I mean, we're really only talking about a generation. My hope is that when you see the color images, you start to see the fullness of the moment—or, to bring us back up to 1968, when you see the moving images of Tommie Smith and John Carlos, you see them as fully actualized people with a multitude of layers and politics. Attending to this fullness is the best way to challenge patterns of appropriation and the impulse to avoid historical messiness. Of course, this is also a reminder of how technology changes our political opportunities. The 1960 Olympics marked the first use of the mass-produced tape. All the footage from the Games in Rome was put on a plane to New York and then run by CBS. This process seems extremely outdated today, but it generated a profound sense of connection at the time.

CMC: The Olympics are subject to various forms of mediation. In *Remember the Titans* (Bruckheimer & Yakin, 2000), the Disney sports film about a desegregated Virginia high school football team that goes to camp and bunks with teammates of a different race, the character of Julius puts up a poster of Smith and Carlos in the room he's sharing with the character of Gerry. It's a short scene but a strong illustration of the image's power. Gerry says: "I'm not looking at that for two weeks." Julius retorts, "You can close your eyes for two weeks for all I care" (Bruckheimer & Yakin, 2000, 18:43). What do you make of these kinds of invocations?

ARD: That is such a revealing citation, and one I had forgotten about. That film is set in 1971, so the poster itself would have been depicting a moment just three years earlier. This idea that in 1971 there would have been mass-produced posters of that image, hanging on walls as a source of inspiration, is so farfetched. Granted, a lot of things in *Remember the Titans* (Bruckheimer & Yakin, 2000) and in most feel-good sports movies about race are farfetched. But this historical slippage is a testament to how entrenched and

convenient it has become to use images as a kind of resonant shorthand. In turn, the shorthand exacerbates the historical revisionism.

CMC: That resonance often finds expression through commodity form. In the early 2000s, a Sean John billboard in Times Square depicted Diddy in a track suit with his fist raised (Sean John, 2004). In 2018, Jay-Z dressed up as Tommie Smith for Halloween—a branding stunt that was politically at odds with his NFL partnership and disparaging statements about Kaepernick. The same year, Kaepernick’s advertising deal with Nike launched to great fanfare. How do you understand the connection between the sanitization of protest and its commodification?

ARD: You can go back further, to the Puma shoes that Smith and Carlos were holding on the podium in 1968. The 1968 Olympics were the “shoe-war Olympics.” People were on the ground trying to get athletes to wear and sign their shoes before athlete shoe sponsorships became formal and ubiquitous. Puma stood by Smith and Carlos, which was significant in part because that sponsorship provided some of the only income they could generate amid the backlash. Both athletes had opportunities to try out for the NFL and other little professional offers (some more genuine than others), but Puma was consistent. Still, it was unsettling when Puma later came out with a red, white, and green commemorative protest shoe, a clear reference to the company’s earlier political calculation and a perfect illustration of commodified resistance.

Today, Nike is the best example of this pattern. Their digital content team has become brilliant at creating inspiration porn: commercials that tear at your heartstrings and seem to be saying a lot when they’re not actually saying much at all. They made a beautiful commercial with Kaepernick that had a lot of different stories woven into it. A friend of mine who studies disability in sports pointed out to me that it was the biggest stage ever given to athletes with disabilities. Frankly, there’s a lot to love about it. But it says nothing about police brutality, nothing about the issues Kaepernick was raising. The message was simply to have courage—but courage for what? It’s purposely ambiguous. Nonetheless, it somehow suddenly becomes a political statement to buy Nikes, even more so when the company announces an ad buy for this commercial in the middle of an NFL game. Their marketing strategy was to tell a story of good versus evil in which everyone is a consumer first: You could either be part of the revolution and buy Nikes and watch their commercial, or you could be for the NFL against Colin and watch the game.

The rub, of course, is the NFL has a preexisting contract with Nike, and the players are wearing Nike jerseys during the game. So, you’re watching Nike either way. The commodification of protest implies that participation in capitalism can be a revolutionary act, but a revolutionary act would entail the exact opposite.

CMC: The summer before Kaepernick takes his first knee, the WNBA’s Minnesota Lynx, Phoenix Mercury, and New York Liberty were engaging in antiracist protest collectively, *as teams*. Kaepernick’s prominence obscures their contributions, even though they shaped his intervention. Fifty years later, we seem not to have learned from Tyus and the other women who were completely smoothed out of the 1968 legacy of athlete activism. In her book *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete*, Amy Bass (2002) argues that the exclusion of Black women from the Olympic Project for Human Rights not only limited the group’s political potential but reinforced the belief that they would “stand by their men” no matter what (chapter 5, section 1, para. 10). This is, of course, particularly frustrating

when we think of all of the organizing happening where these women could have had an impact. I'm thinking about that well-known meeting in 1967 where Jim Brown brought Bill Russell, Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), Muhammad Ali, and others together for a summit and how even the 50th anniversary of that meeting is automatically connected to Kaepernick. How do we avoid reinforcing the historical masculinism of athlete activism?

ARD: It's incredibly frustrating to have to stand next to somebody else in order to be seen at all. How do we change that? What would it take to recognize Tyus's story as independently valuable? It's exhausting to know that by bringing visibility to Smith and Carlos, you're necessarily relegating women to the periphery.

In 2018, I hosted a panel with Dr. Harry Edwards, Tommie Smith, and Wyomia Tyus at Penn State, and the gender inequality was apparent with things as simple as speaking fees. Tyus's initial ask was four times less than those of the men. I insisted on paying everyone equitably, against those at the school who wanted to pay her "what she asked" and spend our remaining budget elsewhere. These seemingly small decisions not only perpetuate the problem but also make it clear that the solution is not simply a recovery project. It is not enough just to say that Tyus was there too, that she also put up her fist.

Instead, it's necessary to recognize the true extent of what we can gain by bringing Tyus into the conversation, or bringing in the Afro-Cuban women who placed second in the 4 x 100 who also dedicated their medals to Stokely Carmichael, or even bringing in the Cuban men who also acted in solidarity. We bring them into the conversation not merely for the sake of inclusion but because then we can ask: How does this clarify and complicate the story? What do we learn about global solidarity when we tell the story from the margins? What lessons can we learn from Afro-Cuban women who found solidarity through a shared experience of racism? These are rich questions.

There's a justified desire to use 1968 as an intellectual and strategic foundation for the cultivation of athletic activism, but we need to widen that foundation. Otherwise, we're left with a shaky house built on a foundation so smooth that it's slippery. That's the danger of Longman's metaphorical "sandpaper": For building, what you want is texture, a surface with traction.

CMC: How do we resist smoothing?

ARD: You need a different toolkit. For instance, what if, instead of Smith and Carlos, we connected Colin Kaepernick to Rose Robinson, who refused to stand for the anthem in 1959 at the Pan Am Games? Robinson was an activist and a pacifist. If you know her name at all, it is because of her antiwar work in the years following her athletic career. But when I was digging through Black newspaper archives researching her, every headline described her as an athlete. That's how I uncovered her athletic career and started looking for her voice. After all, omissions from the archive are often the result of a failure to listen, not of a failure to speak.

And I found Robinson saying very interesting things: talking about the hunger strike she mounted after getting hauled off to jail for not paying taxes, a trumped-up retaliation for her not going on a goodwill trip to support the state Department; talking about how she's getting through her hunger strike by drawing on

her conditioning as an athlete; talking about desegregating a skating rink in Cleveland and being able to evade White patrons (who were trying to beat her) because of her athletic agility. When we hear “athletic activism” today, I think we assume this means activism for racial justice, and so it seems obvious to draw a line from Kaepernick to Smith and Carlos. This misleading assumption bolsters a particular narrative about athletic activism—that it had a first wave [during the reintegration of the NFL and MLB], then the wave of 1968, then a low tide, and then Kaepernick—that only makes sense if you exclude from it the activism of women athletes for gender equity in sport, especially in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Women were hustling in the 1990s! It took activism to create the WNBA!

Everybody was applauding the beginning of the ESPYs [ESPN’s annual televised award ceremony], and how powerful it was. And all of the stories and all of the voices and all of the images circulated in this five-minute “where we’ve been.” Do you see WNBA players, did you get a sense of the Lynx? Did you see Maya Moore, who took decisive action?

Challenging our assumptions about what constitutes “athlete activism” is a precondition for broadening our analytic and strategic toolkits. This entails rethinking the archive itself and opening ourselves up to unconventional forms such as oral histories. After all, Tyus is still here; listen to her. [U.S. track and field Olympian] Edith McGuire is still here; listen to her. Letting people talk in real time, and truly listening, is integral to this project. It can’t just be for show. If you ever had an American history textbook in high school, they included these blue boxes on some pages that contained notes about minority groups. On one page the blue box would say something about what African Americans were doing, and ten pages later another would say something about what Mexican Americans were doing. You can just see that somebody went back thinking, “Okay, we have to tell them a little bit about this history.” Everything about it screams second class. If we’re talking about athletic activism and mention women as an afterthought, we’re doing no better than those little blue boxes.

CMC: In *Habits of the Heart*, sociologists Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (2007) talk about “communities of memory”: social groups that keep their past alive by telling and retelling their own “constitutive narratives,” and in the process identifying those who have “embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community” (p. 153). This conception affirms the importance of amplifying those voices that are the first to be smoothed out of the record. For other Black scholars, journalists, and artists, what are some practical steps in this direction?

ARD: I think people want recovery. We’re always searching for omissions. And my strategy has been to take every opportunity. I show up to every panel, and then when you pass me the mic to deliver my little blue box summary, I’m taking over the page. I’m cutting straight to the premise of the panel itself. That has been a core part of my toolkit: understanding what might get you to the table and then defining your expertise accordingly. It can be very hard to work under conditions where you’re assumed to only occupy that box—and where everybody is comfortable letting you do so because then they don’t have to. I have responded by taking up space and pushing that box as far open as I can and finding those communities of memory that will fortify me and help me to keep growing.

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