

## **Martin Berger**

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“Black Power, White Power and the 1968 Olympics Protest”

In October of 1968, photojournalists recorded African American sprinters Lee Evans, Larry James and Ron Freeman accepting their Olympic medals for the 400m race in Mexico City with raised clenched fists and black berets. At the time, few spectators or reporters reacted strongly to either the athletes’ actions or the widely circulated images of the ceremony. Despite their political overtones, image and incident quickly slipped from the consciousness of most Americans. And yet virtually every American over fifty—and many considerably younger—can describe in detail the iconic image of Tommie Smith and John Carlos standing with heads bowed and raised fists as the U.S. national anthem played during the 200m medal ceremony two days prior. Whatever one feels about the image of Smith and Carlos, the image makes one *feel*. My paper explores the alternately exhilarating and unnerving force of this iconic image, rooting its emotional power in its success at exposing contradictions in dominant models of identity, agency and race. More than simply being “political,” as both its supporters and detractors claimed, the image suggested complex, multifaceted identities of black athletes whom white Americans expected to see in one-dimensional terms.