Ritual Gone Wrong

What We Learn from Ritual Disruption

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Of Fists and Feathers

THE MODERN OLYMPIC GAMES

IN THE 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, two black US athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, made history when they accepted the gold and bronze medals for the 200 meter race. One observer described the dramatic awards ceremony:

> [When] they came out for the victory ceremony we could see that both of them had rolled their tracksuit trousers up to show the black socks. In one hand they wore a black leather glove, and in the other hand they carried a black Puma shoe.
>
> As they stood on the victory rostrum they raised the gloved hand in the clenched fist salute of the Black Power Movement—and in the other hand they held the Puma shoe aloft. In one hand idealism and the other hand commercialism. When the National Anthem was played they turned towards the flag, bowed their heads and raised their black-gloved, clenched fists.
>
> At the press conference afterwards they said that they had demonstrated to show that black people are united. "We are black, and proud to be black, and white America will only give us credit for being Olympic champions. But black Americans will understand."[1]

The image of Smith and Carlos on the podium, fists raised and heads bowed, is one of the most well-known images in Olympic history (Fig 4.1). That

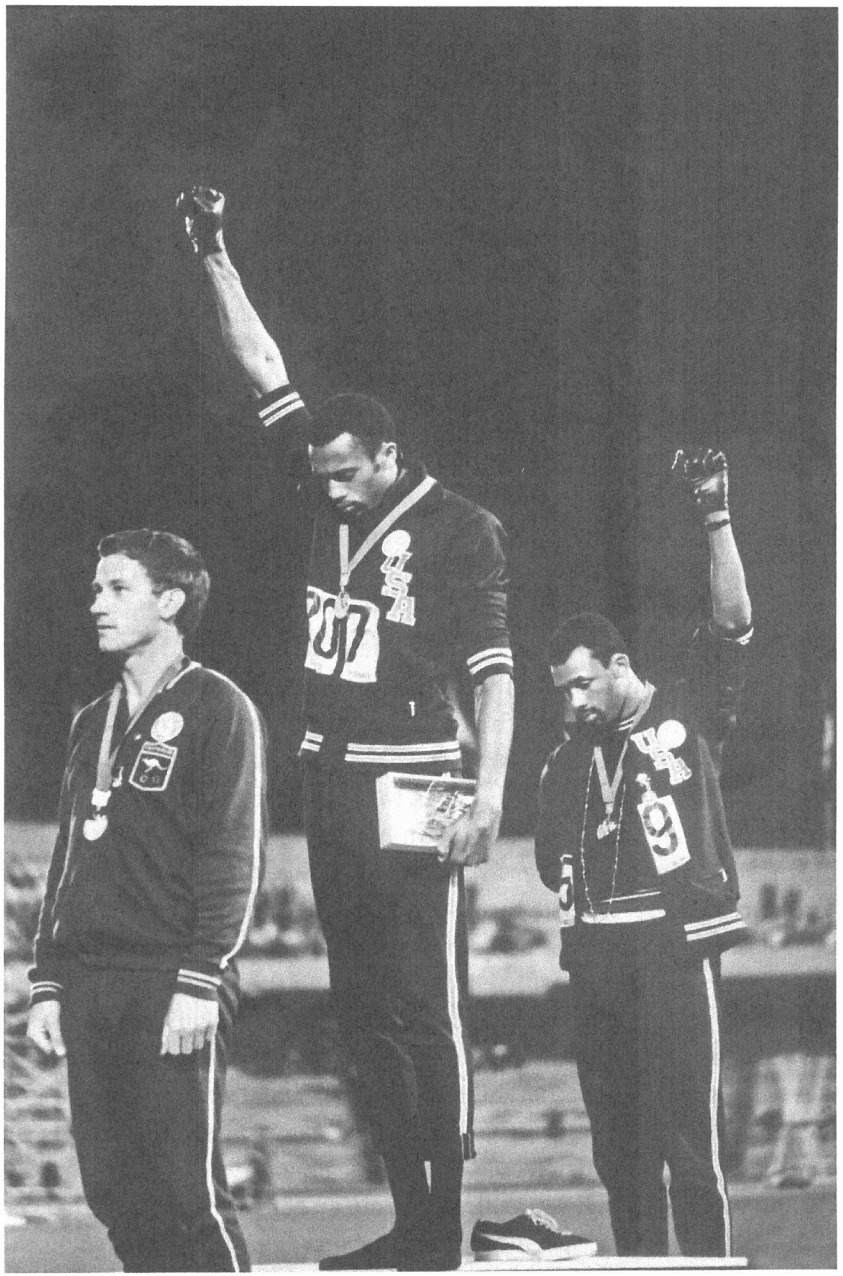


FIGURE 4.1 Smith and Carlos raising their fists.
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image captures one of the most controversial moments of the modern Olympic Games. Smith and Carlos's actions polarized fans, fans who either chastised or celebrated the two men's actions on the podium. All agree that Smith and Carlos transformed one of the best-known modern international rituals—originally designed to unify spectators from around the world to celebrate athletic achievement—into a platform that expressed personal political views in a deeply divisive way.

To understand Smith and Carlos's actions, we need to appreciate the original intent behind the athletes' medal ceremonies. Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games, did not focus solely on the athletic competitions. He felt that the ceremonies that punctuated the Games communicated the spirit of the modern Olympic athletic competition. He intentionally included three ceremonies in the Games: the opening, victory (or awards), and closing ceremonies.[2] Each of these ritual events was explicitly designed to reinforce the ideals of the Games, ideals often referred to collectively as "Olympism." These ideals and the ceremonies meant to embody them are laid out explicitly in the Olympic Charter as well as in subsequent documents. Over the years, minor changes have been made, but for the most part today's Olympic rituals are performed very much according to Coubertin's original vision—except, of course, when they are not. In the following pages, I will discuss several historic Olympic ceremonies that have "gone wrong" in specific ways. I will touch on some minor, unintentional ritual mistakes, but for the most part in this chapter I will focus on deliberately altered ritual performances. These performances, by challenging the prescribed or anticipated ritual behavior, actually draw attention to latent expectations of ritual actors and the ritual itself. In examining these disrupted Olympic rituals, we will learn something of the nature of the Olympic Games ceremonies, as well as something of the nature of ritual itself. Specifically we will note ritual's vulnerability to its own ritual actors. We will also see how various ritual stakeholders occasionally engage in contests for control of specific ritual events' messages. Finally, we will note the role of the audience, which is transformed into an active witness to ritual ceremonies, authorizing specific ritual performances and, by extension, the ideals underlying those performances. When rituals are unintentionally disrupted or intentionally subverted, the audience members are forced into uncomfortable positions, often bearing witness to a message with which they do not agree.

The Olympic Games

The modern Olympic Games were inaugurated in 1896. One man, Pierre de Coubertin, is considered the "grandfather" of these games. Coubertin, a French aristocrat with training in physical education, first proposed a revival of the Olympics in 1892. In a speech presented to the Union des Sports Athlétiques on November 25, 1892, Coubertin proposed:

> Let us export our oarsmen, our runners, our fencers into other lands. That is the true Free Trade of the future; and the day it is introduced into Europe the cause of Peace will have received a new and strong ally. . . . I shall ask that the help you have given me hitherto you will extend again, so that together we may attempt to realise [sic], upon a basis suitable to the conditions of our modern life, the splendid and beneficent task of reviving the Olympic Games.[3]

Two years later, the precursor to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was formed, and eventually the first modern Games were scheduled for Athens in 1896.

The goal of the Olympic movement, as stated on the official Olympic website, is "to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practiced without discrimination of any kind, in a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play."[4] In the self-contained world created by the Olympics, the Games are meant to replace armed conflict with athletic competition. The men propounding this view of the Games (and sport in general) remembered the wars of the nineteenth century, and they sought to offer a replacement in athletic competition. Specifically, the modern Olympics offered *civilized* competition, which includes a spirit of fair play. Jeffrey Segrave and Donald Chu note that the nineteenth-century European romantic roots of the Games are reflected in their conflation of sport with "authentic human existence."[5] They write, "The ontological, distinctly human possibilities inherent in this conception of sport account for the various individual and universal imperatives commonly derived from Olympism, including the pursuit of physical and moral excellence, international cooperation and goodwill through athletic competition, the link between sport and aesthetics and 'perfect disinterestedness and the sentiment of honor.' "[6] The term "Olympism" was not actually defined until 1991, when the 1991 Olympic

Charter spelled out the philosophy intended by the term: "Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles. The goal of Olympism is to place everywhere sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to encouraging human dignity."[7] R. G. Ousterhoudt rhapsodizes, "Olympism holds that sport is worthy of human attention only insofar as it recognizes and cultivates these connections [between sport and other aspect of human experience]. For it is only by virtue of such recognition and cultivation that sport gets linked with the mainstream of human life, and thereby contributes to the living of an authentically human existence. Only in this way is sport (or human life 'in' sport) enhanced by what is most fundamentally human, and is humanity itself enriched by its sporting inclinations."[8] The importance of "Olympism" as an ideal is noted by Avery Brundage, former president of the American Olympic Committee (essentially from 1928–1952) and the IOC (1952–1972): "'many think the Olympic Movement is concerned only with a few champions in each country. They forget that for one who makes an Olympic team, thousands [*sic*] try, and in so doing not only gain the physical benefits of participation but also learn the Olympic principles of fair play and good sportsmanship.'"[9] The values propounded by the Olympic Games and embodied in the Olympic athletes are, by extension, embraced by "thousands," including at the very least all those who tried to participate as competitors, and possibly more broadly by fans of the Olympic Games.[10]

Various elements of the Olympic Games were developed to instill "Olympism," not the least of which were the various ceremonies. The Olympic bylaws include guidelines for the opening ceremonies, the athletes' awards ceremonies, and the closing ceremonies. Over time, the opening and awards ceremonies in particular became the sites for unintentional mistakes and deliberate challenges to expected Olympic behavior, ranging from the humorous to the somber. This has occurred despite (or perhaps in response to) the officially stated aims of the games: "mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play."[11] Usually the three main ceremonies collaborate with other elements of the Games to promote fair competition in the spirit of international cooperation (in fact, the ceremonies are explicitly intended to do just this). Occasionally,

however, the Game ceremonies have become strategic venues for public protest. As we shall see, in these instances the ceremonies have challenged (rather than supported) the overarching goals of the Olympics and highlighted differing, possibly conflicting expectations of different ritual actors.

This chapter will begin with a close examination of several different "misperformances" of Olympic ritual: one change in the opening ritual prompted by an accident in the 1988 Seoul ceremonies; a mistake in the opening ceremonies of the 2014 Sochi games; the US team boycott of the Olympic men's basketball awards ceremony in 1972 (Munich); and the actions of Tommie Smith and John Carlos, two black US runners, at the 1968 (Mexico) 200 meter race awards ceremony. In all of these examples, changes were made to the ceremonies in response to specific circumstances, what I call "provocations," although the provocations for and the nature of the changes varied. Some of these provocations came from within the Games themselves; at other times, the provocations came from outside.

Feathers

From the earliest years of the Olympic Games, Coubertin designed the opening ceremonies to include certain specific elements; one of these was a flight of doves. These birds were meant to symbolize peace, and they represented Coubertin's stated desire that the athletic competition in the Games foster a spirit of cooperation between nations that extended beyond the Olympics. Specifically, he hoped that regular international athletic competition would result in less international military conflict. Originally, the number of doves in the opening ceremonies corresponded to the number of nations competing in the Games in any given year. Over time, the number of doves was increased (mostly because larger numbers looked more impressive), and audiences came to expect that the opening ceremonies of every Olympic Game would include the release of live doves. As Miguel de Moragas, John MacAloon, and Montserat Llinés write, "In the original concept, Coubertin suggested that pigeons were to be flown, their number corresponding to the number of nations. Later, many more pigeons were flown as it looked nice."[12] Eventually the Opening Ceremonies also came to include a burning flame in a cauldron as another standard element. In the 1936 Berlin Games, a torch was kindled in Greece and then carried

overland to Germany by runners and used to ignite the cauldron.[13] One modern writer rhapsodized about the combination of the doves and the flame, declaring, "Nowhere, either in Helsinki, Rome, Tokyo or Munich, have I seen the Olympic doves afraid of the flame. White, blue, black or coffee-coloured—they have floated peacefully above the stadium and, when the sacred flame has been lit in the ritual bowl, they have even alighted on its edge, with no fear of the flame burning their wings."[14]

Then, in the 1988 Seoul Games, several birds perching on the Olympic cauldron were burned alive when the flame was lit. One writer attempted to downplay the event—"a few pigeons got roasted here and there"—but animal rights groups complained, and it became clear that including live doves would no longer be acceptable.[15] However, by this point the release of the doves had become an established element of the opening ceremony ritual. Everyone agreed that "it would be impossible to abolish this symbol of peace represented by the doves," so event organizers had to adapt.[16] The 1996 Atlanta Games organizers (ACOG) chose to reinterpret the symbol: "ACOG President Billy Payne has announced that the traditional release of pigeons at the opening ceremonies will not take place in Atlanta in 1996, because of the fear of endangering live birds because of the proximity of the Olympic Flame. Payne noted, 'We elected not to put at risk any of these animals. We also thought that the best way to do it was a little more theatrically and a little more stylistically.' Payne gave no details of the ceremonial release but said no one will miss it. 'It will be obvious in at least one place that we have symbolically released doves. It will be very apparent and very obvious and you won't need to look for it.' "[17] The Atlanta Games opening ceremonies included an oversized representation of a dove on the field, comprised of hundreds of children in white costumes. The children moved in unison to simulate a dove in flight. In addition, the AOC incorporated one hundred white dove "kites" held aloft by runners in the stadium. As Liselotte Diem noted, "the Charter now calls for a 'symbolic release' of pigeons. This can signify either the launching of one pigeon—who looks very lonely and frightened—or the flying of artificial pigeons, which is a new creative aspect of the ceremony. We are very happy with these artificial pigeons, because the mail [from animal activists] has been abundantly reduced on this issue. Ceremonies have to be adjusted."[18]

Replacing live birds with artificial, symbolic ones may seem like an insignificant move, but it actually reflects a sophisticated understanding of ritual and a complex reconfiguration of ritual elements. The blueprint for the opening ceremony had developed over decades, gradually

incorporating two distinct elements that ultimately came into conflict (the doves and the flame). Over the years the doves became a significant enough ritual element that they could not simply be eliminated without doing violence to the opening ceremony as a whole. Ceremony rule makers (the ritual "priests") adjusted the ritual to respond to modern public sensibilities while simultaneously satisfying traditional desires to keep the flame and the doves in the ritual. An unfortunate accident prompted a ritual innovation that worked. This innovation was so successful that subsequent Olympic opening ceremonies have continued the new tradition of including symbolic (rather than live) doves. This change is quite a ritual feat.

A similarly sophisticated ritual move occurred in the 2014 Sochi Winter Games. During the months leading up to the Olympics, there was serious doubt as to whether or not the city of Sochi and, more important, the Russian President Vladimir Putin, would be prepared to host the Games when they opened. As one article put it, "anger, fear and suspicion ... marred the buildup to these most expensive Olympics ever."[19] During the opening ceremony, there was a "glaring mistake in the ceremony" when one of five snowflakes failed to transform into an Olympic ring, leaving the audience (and some television viewers) with an unforgettable image of four Olympic rings followed, seemingly, by an asterisk.[20] In addition, fireworks that were supposed to explode high over the heads of the audience never went off. In Russia, this was a significant enough glitch that local broadcasters broadcast footage from a rehearsal in which all five rings opened flawlessly and the fireworks exploded as anticipated. As one report noted, "Russian state television aired footage Friday of five floating snowflakes turning into the Olympic rings and bursting into pyrotechnics at the Sochi Games opening ceremony. Problem is, that didn't happen."[21] The Russian network Rossiya 1 cut to footage shot during the ceremony rehearsal, with producers "saying it was important to preserve the imagery of the Olympic symbols."[22] Outside of Russia, however, other broadcast systems chose to air the ceremony as it actually occurred, so the world witnessed a clear technical failure. One headline read, "Olympic rings fail spectacularly," noting, "the top-right ring failed to expand alongside the others, leaving four circles beside what looked almost like an asterisk."[23] One ABC commentator referred to the malfunction as "a resounding 'oops' seen round the world."[24] The unfortunate nature of the malfunction was exacerbated by the fact that the Sochi Games opened amid a host of controversy concerning human rights violations in Russia as well as a lack

of confidence that Sochi was ready to host the Games at a purely logistical level. As one journalist put it, "Sochi has been fraught with problems in the days leading up to the Olympics, but no one issue has been quite so telling of Russia's hosting struggles as a malfunction at its opening ceremony."[25] The malfunction was perceived to be so potentially problematic that rumors spread like wildfire that the "man responsible for the 2014 Winter Olympic ring failing to open" was killed.[26]

The closing ceremonies turned this around. In the closing ceremonies, Konstantin Ernst, creative director for the Sochi Games, made fun of the snowflake glitch by deliberately choreographing dancers so that when the majority of them fanned into four interlocking rings, a small group remained in a tight cluster—highlighted with a spotlight—before definitively transforming into the fifth Olympic ring.[27] The crowd in the stadium laughed and applauded, viewers around the world chuckled, and one announcer laughed and commented, "that's a very, very nice touch."[28] This unexpected self-deprecating move earned praise from around the globe. One subsequent headline read, "Who says Russia doesn't have a sense of humour?"[29]

This seemingly light-hearted gag, however, was actually a complicated ritual moment. First, the intentional "mistake" in the closing ceremonies only made sense to those who had seen the opening ceremonies—it was an inside joke that required an informed ritual community. In addition, the second mistake could only be experienced as humorous if the viewer knew it was intentional; a second genuine "misfire" of the Olympic Rings could have been disastrous. Third, the closing ceremony joke only worked in the broader context of Games that had proceeded relatively problem-free. Yes, there were well-publicized protests concerning gay rights violations by the Russian government and much more limited complaints about some residential quarters, but the 2014 Sochi Games occurred without the eruption of any international-scale logistical, political, or social crises, which many people had feared. The Russians could get away with self-deprecating humor in the closing ceremonies, pointing back to a glitch in the opening ceremonies, because the rest of the Games, by and large, had been held without incident. This larger context created the space to make fun of a relatively mild mistake. Finally, the closing ceremonies joke took many outsiders off-guard because of caricatures of Russian seriousness. At the risk of overgeneralizing, few outsiders expected the Russians to display a sense of humor. The apparently simple closing ceremony joke worked because all the ritual participants understood, if only at an intuitive level, the complicated context in which the joke was made.

I open with these minor examples of ritual adjustments and ritual humor as a gesture toward a larger point regarding the Olympic Games ceremonies that this chapter will explore in the contexts of more serious events. Simply put, rituals change, and they often change deliberately in response to factors external to the ritual itself. When changes are incorporated smoothly and without objection, an outside observer might be unaware of the ritual change or even the "provocation" that prompted the change. Most important, the observer will not feel any discomfort, because the original spirit has been maintained despite alterations to specific ritual elements. But when the ritual is altered in an obvious or dramatic way, it may be impossible to maintain the original spirit of the event. The complex negotiations that are always at work between ritual tradition, ritual rule makers, ritual participants, and ritual observers come to light. In some cases these negotiations fail, and the original spirit eludes the ritual participants.

In the two Olympic rituals that I will review next, ritual changes occurred that were not the result of unintentional accidents. Rather, they involved deliberate "misperformances" by athletes themselves. These misperformances called attention to political dynamics at work beyond the Olympic Games themselves, but they reminded viewers that the Games occur in and are affected by specific social, historical, and political factors. Despite numerous official declarations that the Games are beyond the reach of political forces, it is clear that the Games have always been extremely responsive to politics in the outside world. In some cases, organizing officials have changed elements of the rituals in response, but more frequently individual athletes have taken ritual moments into their own hands, using the ceremonies to serve their own specific agendas. The Olympic Games ceremonies, then, offer international public sites of contestation between ritual actors. By deliberately misperforming an Olympic ceremony, ritual actors can challenge the stated premises of the Games themselves on an international stage, and infuse personal or political concerns into any particular Olympic Game. Any athlete who refuses to perform the awards ceremony "correctly" fails to fulfill his or her role as a good Olympic citizen by refusing to uphold foundational elements of the mythology of the Games: universal and apolitical goodwill. Ritual misperformances thus put a spotlight on long-cherished results of the Olympic Games while simultaneously sabotaging those results.

Final Shots: Munich, 1972

In 1972 the United States men's basketball team—previously undefeated in any international contest—lost to the Soviet Union team in one of the most controversial Olympic basketball finals ever played. Olympic historians James Cook and John Goodbody describe the dramatic conclusion to the game:

> [W]ith three seconds to play the United States led 50-49 with two final shots by Doug Collins to be taken. . . . As Collins was shooting for the second time, a horn sounded, signaling time-out for the Russians. The umpire still started the game, however, and two seconds later, apparently with one second to go, halted it. The Americans, thinking victory was theirs, danced all over the court, hugging each other as the fans rushed on to the court.
>
> Inevitably protests and counter protests followed from both sides and the jury deliberated until 4.30 in the morning . . . it was decided that the Soviet Union would be allowed to play out the final three seconds as there had been so much confusion, a decision heatedly opposed by the United States team manager . . . A long pass was thrown by Modestas Paulaskas from under the Russian basket to the other end of the court where the battle was won by 6ft 7in Alexander Belov. He knocked the American, Gene Forbes, to the ground, made the lay-up without opposition . . . and that was the end of the three seconds.[30]

Obviously, athletes have disagreed with official decisions throughout Olympic history—there's nothing new about that. In most cases, however, these athletes have either shrugged it off or followed established procedures to lodge a protest. Some have been successful in appealing judges' decisions and others have not.[31] In most cases, whether or not the athletes have agreed with the judges' final decision, the competitors have not disrupted the awards ceremonies, subordinating themselves to the authority of the recognized Olympic officials and implicitly communicating respect for the authoritative structure of the Olympic Games overall. However, the 1972 United States basketball team members chose unanimously *not* to accept the silver medal in protest, and they refused to attend the awards ceremony. In fact, the US team members vowed *never* to accept the silver medal. Team captain Kenny Davis declared, "'I have placed it in my will that my wife and my children can never, ever receive that medal from the '72 Olympic games.'"[32]

The US team members' boycott of the awards ceremony was a deliberate misperformance of the Olympic awards ritual. The boycott was designed to broadcast the team's strong feeling that the officials' decision was unfair. The US athletes' concerns reached the global Olympic audience specifically through the athletes' absence at the awards ceremony. By refusing to participate in the ceremony, the US team members silently (but effectively) charged officials with basic unfairness, striking at the heart of fundamental Olympic ideals. In effect, the US team members said, "If you won't live up to the Olympic standards of fairness that we expect, then we won't be the Olympic athletes that you expect us to be." And they communicated all of this without saying a word—simply by their absence from the ritual.

Fists: Mexico, 1968

Four years earlier, in 1968, the twenty-ninth Olympics had been held in Mexico City. Tensions were already high heading into the Games; ten days before the opening ceremonies, hundreds of student protesters were massacred by Mexican police in Tlateloco Plaza.[33] In the United States, black athletes had spent months considering whether or not to stage a boycott of the entire Olympic Games as part of the national civil rights movement. The American black athletes' goal was to make a high-profile, international statement about racism in their home country. Ultimately, however, the athletes decided to participate in the Games, choosing instead to use the awards ceremonies to express their views on an international platform. Several black athletes made protests during awards ceremonies, and as Smith and Carlos's event approached, rumors spread: "There had been many rumours that Smith and Carlos would make some sort of demonstration, and indeed they had worn calf-length black socks in both the heats and finals."[34] James Carter describes the ceremony as Smith and Carlos came to receive the gold and silver medals for the 200 meter race: "And then came that famous ceremony. The athletes marched out to the centre carrying one shoe in either hand, and wearing one black glove on different hands, with Human Rights badges pinned to their track suits ([Peter] Normal also displayed the badge), and, when it came to the playing of

the Star Spangled Banner, they held their fists in a clenched salute and stood with their heads bowed." The reaction from Olympic officials was fast and decisive. As punishment for their actions, Carlos and Smith were immediately suspended from the US team and banned from the Olympic Village.[35]

The image of Smith and Carlos with their heads bowed and fists raised in the air has achieved iconic status.[36] Yet it requires quite a bit of unpacking to understand exactly what is occurring in that protest. Specifically, it requires knowledge of the Olympics, of the American civil rights movement, and of the expectations of athletes at Olympic awards ceremonies, expectations that were directly flouted in that moment. To appreciate what Smith and Carlos did, we have to understand how their actions were intended and understood, which involved relatively sophisticated senses of symbolism, display, and ritual. Let's analyze this dynamic.

Barthes's Mythologies

How can we make sense of Smith and Carlos's ritual subversions, as well as other Olympic ritual disruptions? I find it helpful to draw on Roland Barthes's notion of myth, specifically the notion of the signifier's relationship to myth. As a semiotician, Barthes argued that myth is a type of speech, one constrained by form, but not by substance. The student of myth studies mythology, that is, "ideas-in-form."[37] Myth, broadly speaking, may be communicated in a variety of forms, not just language. Barthes identifies three components of myth: the signifier, the signified, and the sign. The signifier is a concrete form that expresses the signified, which is usually an abstract concept. When the signifier and signified come together, their joint association is the sign. For example, Barthes explains that a rose (a signifier) may be used to represent passionate love (the signified); their coming together constitutes a sign. The signifier (in this case, the rose) is "empty" in that it brings nothing of its own individual history or distinctive identity to the signification process. Rather, it completely takes upon itself the abstract concept (passionate love). The signifier empties itself of anything that does not contribute to its successful deployment of that which is signified. For example, concerns about the rose's specific genus, its various parts, the garden in which it was grown, and so on are irrelevant. The rose empties itself of its own particular identity to take upon itself that which it is intended to signify.



FIGURE 4.2 *Paris-Match* cover.
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Barthes then offers a more complex example, the image of a young Sudanese boy displayed on the cover of *Paris-Match* magazine (Fig 4.2). Barthes explains, "On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the *meaning* of the picture.... I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any

colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (*a black soldier is giving the French salute*); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally there is a presence of the signified through the signifier."[38]

Key to this process for Barthes is the "emptying," the "impoverishing" of the signifier. The signifier is "emptied" of any personal, distinctive identity in order to take on the role of signifying something greater than itself. This process of impoverishment leaves history, politics, and specific identity behind. As a result, the resulting signifier is ahistorical, apolitical, deployed seemingly without contingency. Similarly, the myth the signifier serves is also ahistorical and apolitical. Because is it stripped of any specific context, myth, according to Barthes, presents concepts as *sui generis*, natural (and therefore eternal and universal), rather than as historical or political constructions.

Returning to our present study, the elements of the Olympic ceremonies are designed to contribute to the underlying Olympic myth. Each element of the ceremonies (doves, athletes, national flags) acts as a signifier. The individual elements differ from and yet relate to one another as signifiers within the grand Olympic myth. The victorious athlete is meant to be a universal emblem of the best of humanity. As such, when she is recognized, her behavior in being recognized must express the generic excellence of humanity as well, stripped of any personal, idiosyncratic elements.

When a ritual is misperformed, however, the signification process fails, and the historical and political location of these elements comes to light. Let me illustrate with a discussion of the Olympics Opening Ceremony doves. While the specific forms of the doves used in the opening ceremonies had to be altered in response to a specific provocation (i.e., the accidental burning of several live doves), we find that the "artificial" doves successfully retained their original role as signifiers, serving the overarching myth in a manner consistent with the earlier live doves. Even with alterations to their physical forms, the doves as signifiers continued to uphold the traditional Olympic commitment to universal peace. While live doves were replaced with simulated doves, the message conveyed by the doves in the opening ceremony overall did not change; thus, no challenge

was raised against the grand myth of Olympism. As a result, I call the doves "compliant signifiers." They were malleable, able to be altered in response to an outside provocation while still remaining "empty," ahistorical and apolitical. As such, they were still able to be used successfully to perpetuate the greater Olympic myth.

The 1972 US men's basketball team behaved very differently. These athletes refused to fulfill their designated roles in the awards ceremony. Instead, they absented themselves entirely from the ritual. They refused to act as signifiers for the myth that they were supposed to signify as Olympic silver medal winners (recognition for Olympic authority). By removing themselves from the ritual victory ceremony, they removed one of the key signifiers in the ceremony overall. Consequently, I designate these athletes "absent signifiers." They refused to fulfill their role in the ritual, and thus they weakened the perpetuation of the Olympic myth.

Tommie Smith and John Carlos were even more problematic in their ritual roles. We know from historical documents that Tommie Smith and John Carlos, as well as other black American athletes on the 1968 US team, seriously considered boycotting the Olympic Games. Olympic historian Frank Murphy states, "One important decision was made in Los Angeles. There would be no boycott. America's black athletes would be in Mexico City if they made the Olympic team. Lee Evans made the announcement on July 31, 1968. He said that a unanimous decision had been made to compete, although 'the vote was also almost 100 percent that we make some kind of protest.' The form of protest was unstated."[39] The decision not to boycott, but to protest, was a sophisticated ritual move. The athletes did exactly what Barthes says one should do to undermine the power of a myth: "the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn . . . The power of the second myth is that it gives the first its basis as a naivety which is looked at."[40] Specifically, by invoking the black power salute in the awards ceremony and refusing to raise their eyes to their national flag, the athletes shattered the illusion of ahistorical, apolitical Olympic Games. Instead, the athletes deliberately drew attention to a specific political situation in their home country, and they brought that political problem to the international Olympic stage. Smith, Carlos, and others refused to empty themselves of their historically located identities; in so doing, they became what I call "resistant signifiers."

It is commonly accepted that the US basketball team members, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos used the public victory ceremonies to challenge the Olympic Games—but how exactly did they accomplish this?

What exactly were they challenging? How do their misperformances in ritual contexts help us to understand the nature of Olympic ritual generally? The answers to these questions lie in the stated goals of the ceremonies. Françoise Zweifel, former Secretary General of the IOC, once commented, "Ceremonies, it has been said, take on the form of ancient ritual celebration."[41] That is, the Olympic ceremonies are intended to take the ritual observers and participants outside of time, away from a particular historical moment to an all-encompassing moment of universality. At the moment of the awards ceremony, the individual athlete should be erased; she is simply the current signifier for all victorious athletes, and she stands, silent, playing her role in a carefully scripted ritual moment. In that moment she epitomizes the Olympic athlete who embodies the perfect balance of national identity and supranational physical prowess. The victory ceremony, while acknowledging the medal winner's name and national identity (and, by extension, what she has accomplished for and on behalf of her country), also claims that she has accomplished this achievement within parameters designed to enhance international cooperation. Athletes even offer scripted responses to easily anticipated questions about how they feel as victors. The "best" athlete signifier fulfills all of these expectations. Using Barthes's language, she fills "the form of the myth without ambiguity," generating a simple system.[42]

The IOC itself has described the Olympic ceremonies in this way. Organizers are charged with providing "an impeccable observance of predefined forms, preferably identifiable forms which are recognized by those who attend and view a ceremony. Such impeccable observance is the basic requirement for the success of any ceremony. . . . The contents of the message must be simple. If possible, it should be of such a nature that it is neither to be discussed nor challenged during the ceremony . . . . The general principle should be that ceremonies should never convey messages of doubt or interrogation but messages of conviction."[43]

Both the US basketball team and the black American track athletes introduced messages of doubt and interrogation, and they did it via their refusal to play out ritualized roles. None of the verbal statements they made carried the weight of their ritual actions. By deliberately misperforming the ritual, they drew attention to the historicity and fallibility of the Games themselves, challenging that which is supposed to be held sacred within the Olympics. In both cases the deliberate ritual misperformances immediately debunked the ahistorical, transcendent image of the Games and highlighted instead the Olympics' political and contingent

nature. As one writer put it, it was "as if the two young sprinters had desecrated the American flag. Few people noted that the emotional reaction was proof that Olympics had been political long before Lee Evans and Tommie Smith came along. If the Games had not been used in the past to hoist the flag, they could not be used to lower it now."[44] The athletes' physical proximity to the flag—originally intended to reinforce the subordination of the athlete to his or her national identity (note that the athletes and audience members need to look up to see the displayed flag during medal ceremonies)—presented the opportunity for the athletes, as representatives of their country, to challenge that country.

The Olympic Charter states, "Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example *and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.*" The US basketball team members charged that fundamental ethical principles had been ignored. ESPN sports journalist Frank Saraceno notes that the 1972 US team felt it had been "cheated" and "wronged." Specifically, team members felt that Cold War politics were influencing the judging: " 'Everything pressed according to strictly Cold War politics,' said *Sports Illustrated* writer Gary Smith. 'There were three Communist Bloc judges. It's a three to two vote. America loses. The Soviet Union wins the gold medal, and at that point the American players are facing a stark reality. Do they accept the silver medal?' 'We felt like they just did something to us that was illegal and we didn't know any other way to protest than to say that you're not about to get us to show up to take that silver medal,' said team captain Kenny Davis."[45]

Clearly, on some level, the US team members understood the validation that an awards ceremony brings to an event. According to Diem, the ceremonies of the Games lend authority to the athletic competitions: "Ceremony gives form to an event, it sets the emphasis, it builds up climaxes, it carries the audience along in sympathy, reflection, repose and final harmony. Only in this way can the separate acts of the Olympic event combine to form celebration. . . . Ceremonial acts draw attention to an event, only in this way do the forms and laws of a contest achieve dignity and solemnity. The ceremony attests to the importance of the event; it invests it with spirit and soul."[46] By absenting themselves from the victory ceremony, the US team members challenged the ultimate authority of the decisions of the event judges.

Tommie Smith and John Carlos went much further with their ritual challenge. By intentionally misperforming the ritual and appropriating the ceremony to make a statement that contradicted the authorized Olympic myth, the athletes challenged the ahistorical underpinnings of the Olympic myth. MacAloon, the foremost scholar of the Olympics, notes that the Olympic Games are intended to transport participants and audiences "away from their routine, daily lives; through a special time and space; and then returned."[47] In fact, in order to be successful, the Games must remove us from the day-to-day conflicts we are caught up in, placing us in an imagined world of pure sport. Note how this resonates with Barthes's assertion, "myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things."[48] By referencing the specific historical context in which they lived, Smith and Carlos rejected the mythic dimension of the Olympic Games, politicizing that which was supposed to be depoliticized.

This is why athletes who misperform at their awards ceremonies are punished, often by being banned from the Olympics (the equivalent of excommunication). Their athletic performance qualifies them to receive their awards, but the victory ceremony is about more than athletic performance. Olympic athletes must fulfill their role as signifiers of Olympism by acting appropriately in the ritual dimensions of the Olympic Games. The most beloved Olympic athletes not only succeed in competition; they embody the fullest expression of Olympism in all aspects of their lives. Athletes such as the US 1972 men's basketball team and Tommie Smith and John Carlos failed, not as athletes, but as ritual actors in the Games ceremonies. Thus, they failed to signify Olympism successfully.[49]

The Olympic officials understood this. Brundage, then president of the IOC, challenged Smith and Carlos's behavior, not because it was un-American, but because it was un-Olympic. "In the context between the principals, and the views they espoused, the remarkable Mr. Brundage appeared always to claim for himself a moral high ground. Tommie and Lee were the aggressors; they were the transgressors. They were the ones who attempted to blight the Olympic ideal."[50]

Note the importance of the athlete's body in the act of protest. Just as the athletic competition focuses on physical achievement within carefully prescribed parameters, the victory ceremony depends on bodily comportment that follows specific guidelines. The athlete holds her body still and erect, eyes on the flag, and voice occasionally uplifted in patriotic song. The athletes maintain a solemn expression throughout the distribution of the medals, the raising of the flag, and the playing of the gold medal

winner's national anthem. This careful attention to the body's activity is essential to mark the athlete as a cooperative participant in the overall Olympic Games (not just in his or her specific athletic event). This behavior is necessary for filling the role of a "signifier." The Olympic medalist is, in that medal moment, an incarnation of Olympism, carrying all the weight that the term "incarnation" implies. In a Western world infused widely with incarnational theology, the act of choosing *not* to incarnate successfully is felt deeply by others who have bought into an incarnational worldview. In refusing to deploy one's body appropriately in the Olympic victory ceremony, one has, in effect, rejected Olympism.

Note, too, how the concern with "fairness" or "unfairness" in competition shift to discussions of correct/incorrect or appropriate/inappropriate behavior when ritual disruptions occur. While criticisms of disruptive athletes are framed in terms of moral right and wrong, in reality the athletes have simply violated an artificially constructed code of behavior. In challenging this constructed code in the context of the medal ceremonies, the athletes draw attention to the fact that the standards of "fairness" that undergird the athletic competitions themselves are also artificially constructed. Barthes comments on this in his own discussion of wrestling:

> One must realize, let it be repeated, that "fairness" here is a role or a genre, as in the theatre: the rules do not at all constitute a real constraint; they are the conventional appearance of fairness. So that in actual fact a fair fight is nothing but an exaggeratedly polite one: the contestants confront each other with zeal, not rage; they can remain in control of their passions, they do not punish their beaten opponent relentlessly, they stop fighting as soon as they are ordered to do so, and congratulate each other at the end of a particularly arduous episode, during which, however, they have not ceased to be fair. One must of course understand here that all these polite actions are brought to the notice of the public by the most conventional gestures of fairness: shaking hands, raising the arms, ostensibly avoiding a fruitless hold which would detract from the perfection of the contest.
>
> Conversely, foul play exists only in its excessive signs: administering a big kick to one's beaten opponent, taking refuge behind the ropes while ostensibly invoking a purely formal right, refusing to shake hands with one's opponent before or after the fight, taking advantage of the end of the round to rush treacherously at the

adversary from behind, fouling him while the referee is not looking (a move which obviously only has any value or function because in fact half the audience can see it and get indignant about it). . . .

Sometimes he rejects the formal boundaries of the ring and goes on hitting an adversary legally protected by the ropes [protection not physical, but by social contract], sometimes he re-establishes these boundaries and claims the protection of what he did not respect a few minutes earlier. This inconsistency, far more than treachery or cruelty, sends the audience beside itself with rage: offended not in its morality but in its logic, it considers the contradiction of arguments as the basest of crimes. . . . what is condemned by the audience is not at all the transgression of insipid official rules, it is the lack of revenge, the absence of punishment.[51]

Similarly, observers expect punishment when an athlete refuses to follow the rules established to recognize victory. When an athlete fails to shake an opponent's hand at the end of a match, he is accused of being a poor sport; how much more so is the athlete who repudiates the awards ceremonies? In challenging the medal ceremony, an athlete is challenging the Olympic myth that underlies the ceremony. In so doing, the athlete draws attention to the fact that the Olympic myth is a constructed myth, not an idealistic system rooted in the natural order of things.

At a more fundamental level, challenges to any particular myth raise challenges to the nature of myth itself. In reminding onlookers of the constructed nature of Olympism, the athlete raises the possibility that *other* myths understood to be universal may, in fact, be human constructions. As Barthes argues, "We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature."[52] Challenges to myth raise ontological questions by highlighting the historicity, the contingent nature of human existence.

Spectator Versus Witness

Up until this point I have focused on the obvious active participants in the Olympic Games: the athletes and the IOC officials. Often the viewing public is characterized as a mere passive spectator. However, this approach to the Olympic audience contradicts the original vision of the Games. Segrave and Chu write, "the Olympics were devised by Coubertin as an educational model whereby *all* individuals through athletic participation

and competition 'may be led to understand their chief and proper concern, knowledge of themselves and the right way to live.' . . . The trend toward spectatorship as depicted by Loy may rightly be viewed with alarm."[53] If Olympism means anything, it means inspiring the event spectators to live a full human existence, not simply to admire victorious athletes from afar.

In the Olympic Games, even viewers have a designated role to fulfill. The Olympics asks viewers not only to be inspired beyond the Olympic arena, but to participate in the Olympics themselves, not as mere passive spectators but as witnesses. Ritual participants act when they bear witness to impressive human physical achievement. They authorize its recognition by their presence at the various ceremonies. Simply imagine the opening, victory, and closing ceremonies with *only* the athletes and Olympic officials participating. Olympism requires that nonathletes (preferably millions of them) represent worldwide humanity in acknowledging and honoring individual athletes' accomplishments. In fact, during the victory ceremony, the honored athlete is supposed to be passive, virtually immobile. Her job in that moment is to be seen and to accept being seen within a specific frame. Because of this, when the Olympics go wrong, not only the athletes but also the *witnesses* feel violated. Their roles as witnesses have been challenged, ignored, or abused when an athlete acts disrespectfully, when a political group terrorizes athletes, or when nations use the Games as a forum for political posturing. While an athlete participates in the Olympic Games, she is not alone. She is, and she *must be* witnessed for her achievement to count, for it to be incorporated into the Olympic mythology. And she must allow her witnesses to acknowledge her achievement in the prescribed manner for the mythic narrative to be complete.

In effect, the Olympics victory ceremony is a kind of consecration. David Freedberg states, "[w]hen we survey the history of images, we survey the history of consecration."[54] He goes on to characterize consecration: "Consecration is never an empty ceremony. It involves at least one process—like washing, anointing, crowning, or blessing—that brings about an intended change in the sacred status of an image. By its very nature consecration is a ritual act, and not merely a ceremonial one, even when it seems to be the simplest of performances. It is usually explicitly physical, but it can also be entirely verbal. The verbal and liturgical elements are never wholly absent, and they are often operative."[55] We tend to think of the consecration of inanimate objects (e.g., idols), but living beings, including humans, are consecrated as well. In these contexts, consecration marks, as Freedberg mentions, the move to a new "sacred

status." The Olympic athlete, once "medalled," holds new status in Olympic mythology.

In the act of consecration, the athletes and the audience members switch ritual roles. Those who have been in the audience, viewing the athlete as the ritual performer, become the ritual actors, investing the athlete (who is now largely passive) with her new role. The audience members alter the athlete through their act of witnessing. When an athlete refuses to participate in a ritual, or acts inappropriately, she robs the witnesses of *their* key ritual activity, the act of consecration. It is a jarring act of rejection, much like a beloved rejecting a prospective suitor's advances after suggesting that they would be welcomed. The visceral negative reaction to an athlete who steps outside of her prescribed ceremonial role arises precisely because the world's witnesses are being rejected, ignored, or dismissed.

We see, then, that a complex dynamic is at work in any Olympic awards ceremony. Multiple players—the athletes, the officials, and the spectators—flesh out established roles, contributing to the continuation of the Olympic myth. When all the players fill their roles as expected, an ahistorical, universalizing myth is perpetuated that carves out space, time, and an idealized human. The Olympics play out largely in a vacuum. However, when any participant steps outside his ordained role, the contemporary world comes crashing in, and the Olympics are reduced to the stature of any other sports event, contaminated by political, social, commercial, and personal factors. For this reason, athletes who intentionally misperform their roles are castigated, occasionally stripped of their medals and banned from the Olympics for life.

Olympics Gone Wrong

To this point, I have discussed discrete ritual events *within* individual Olympic Games, focusing on the officially recognized ritual ceremonies. However, one could argue that each Olympic Game constitutes an extended ritual. These extended rituals have been disrupted in serious ways themselves, largely in response to external provocations. For the remainder of this chapter, I will turn my attention to disrupted Games.

In 1936 the Games were held in Berlin, under the flag of the Third Reich. Hitler had not yet come to power when the IOC awarded these Games to Berlin in the summer of 1932. As the Games neared, significant international pressure was brought to bear on the IOC to relocate

the Games to another city. Once the IOC announced that the Games would still be held in Berlin, individual countries, including the United States, had to decide whether or not to participate. Olympic historians John Kiernan, Arthur Daley, and Pat Jordan write, "Where there were Jewish populations of any size in other countries there was a natural protest against the anti-Jewish campaign in Germany."[56] This posed a real challenge in the United States. Significant numbers of Americans called for a boycott. George Messersmith, the US Consul General posted in Berlin, challenged the AOC's assertion that sport is nonpolitical. He encouraged a boycott, claiming, " 'it would be one of the most serious blows which Nationalist Socialist prestige could suffer within an awakening Germany and one of the most effective ways which the outside world has of showing to the youth of Germany its opinion of National Socialist doctrine.' "[57] By contrast, Brundage, the AOC President at the time, worked to keep the Games in Berlin, stating "that organized amateur sport 'cannot, with good grace or propriety, interfere in the internal political, religious or racial affairs of any country or group.' "[58] Some have charged that this was due to Brundage's own antisemitic leanings, but it is also a statement in line with the officially stated preference of the Olympics to be apolitical.

Several groups in the United States at the time argued that the Games should not be boycotted. Some believed (or at least claimed to believe) that Germany was not antisemitic. Others noted hypocrisy: accusations of antisemitism in Germany rang hollow given the second-class status of blacks in the United States.[59] Jesse Owens's daughter noted that the infamous runner said, " 'I was glad I had put down the master race. But I was coming back to a country that didn't treat blacks as they should, either.' "[60] In the United States, America's black athletes could not stay at the same hotels as their white teammates, and when they did, they were often required to use the service entrance. Some argued that the athletes deserved a chance to compete and should not be robbed of that chance by politics. In the United States, not only were there substantial numbers of Jewish athletes, but Jews had contributed substantial time and financial support to the Olympic effort. The Olympics provided an opportunity to demonstrate on a world stage what Jews were capable of. Some (like Brundage) argued that the Games should not be used for political purposes. Eventually, the AOC claimed to have been convinced that Hitler was not promoting antisemitism in Germany and that Hitler would conduct Olympic Games that were not racist. Negotiations were conducted with Hitler, ostensibly to

assure equal treatment for all players. The AOC claimed that American athletes would compete "not under the Nazi regime, but under the five-ringed Olympic flag that stood for sport and sport alone, clear of political complications and without regard to race, creed or color."[61]

Once the Games came to Berlin, they presented a ritual challenge to Hitler. The opening ceremonies included the "Parade of Nations," which officially includes an acknowledgment of the host country's political leaders by the athletes as they enter the stadium. Some nations chose to acknowledge Hitler with the "Heil Hitler" salute and/or by dipping their flag as they processed by the platform party. The US team, who appeared next to last in the parade, did neither. The American flag was held high, and athletes placed their hands on their hearts as they passed the viewing platform. Some interpreted this as customary Yankee independence; others viewed the athletes' behavior as a direct insult to Hitler.

More problematically, Hitler had to determine how to recognize the winning athletes in the summer events. As part of the negotiations that brought the United States and other countries to the Games, Hitler had agreed to treat all athletes equally. It became clear early on that black athletes were going to win a substantial number of medals in the Games. Publicly, Hitler could not recognize the white athletes while snubbing the black athletes, but observers charged that he found ways to avoid being in the stadium when black athletes were recognized for their victories. He met with and congratulated many white athletes privately, while ignoring the black and Jewish athletes. Hitler managed to avoid formally receiving and congratulating the black medal winners, most notably the American track-and-field athlete Jesse Owens, who won four gold medals and set multiple new world records. There is some debate as to what Hitler actually did in response to Owens's victory and the victories of other black athletes.[62] At the time, Nazi spokesmen denied that Hitler intentionally avoided congratulating Cornelius Johnson, David Albritton, and Jesse Owens on the first day of the Berlin Games.[63] Owens himself denied that Hitler had deliberately snubbed him, and other witnesses agree. It is clear that Hitler never received Owens—or any other black athlete for that matter—the way he received white medalists.

If we accept the notion that the victory ceremony involves not just the athlete but also the audience as witnesses, and that the victory ceremony involves some consecration of the victorious athlete by members of the audience, then one can understand more clearly why Hitler and others like him would have difficulty publicly recognizing athletes from perceived

"inferior" races or ethnicities. To participate in an Olympic victory ceremony involves more than merely acknowledging the fact of a singular physical accomplishment. Rather, the official witness to a victory ceremony actively participates in that individual's consecration. As Freedberg, a scholar of images, writes, "People do not garland, wash, or crown images just out of habit; they do so because all such acts are symptoms of a relationship between image and respondent that is clearly predicated on the attribution of powers which transcend the purely material aspect of the object. These are acts that bespeak the transition from human product to sacredly endowed object."[64] Thus, for Hitler to have recognized a black or Jewish athlete as victorious in the Olympic Games would have meant that he acknowledged a black or Jewish athlete as a signifier for *all* notable human athletic achievement. This recognition involves establishing a relationship between all Olympic participants, a relationship between the athlete who achieves and the witness who acknowledges and consecrates that achievement. Hitler could not acknowledge the individual athletic achievement without engaging the athletes themselves—and this he would not do.

Threats to Other Olympic Games

Other Olympic Games have also been threatened by external political factors. In 1972 a violent international conflict imposed itself onto the Games. On the eleventh day of the Games in Munich (September 5, 1972), Arab terrorists invaded the Israeli compound in the Olympic Village, killing two Israeli athletes and taking nine others hostage. At 3:45 p.m. IOC President Brundage cancelled the Games for that afternoon, the first time that had ever happened.[65] A failed rescue attempt culminated in the death of all nine remaining hostages as well as several others, including one West German police officer and five terrorists. The organizers were faced with the unwelcome decision of whether or not to continue the Games. Goodbody explains, "Later that afternoon the Games were resumed after the International Olympics Committee Executive Board had met at breakfast to decide whether it was appropriate. But as David Hernery, the 1918 Olympic 400m hurdles champion, said: 'If something that is basically awful stops what is basically good that makes two wrongs. And two wrongs do not make a right.' "[66] The Executive board adopted the following resolution as they announced that the Games would continue after a day of mourning: " 'The Olympics Games are proceeding for the sake of the spirit

and sport only. All official receptions are cancelled. All ceremonies will be kept as simple as possible.' " The Israeli athletes accompanied the coffins of their murdered teammates back to Israel. The Olympic and national flags were flown at half-mast for the duration of the Games.[67]

There are debates as to how successfully the Olympic Games were able to move past the massacre. James Cook and John Goodbody comment, "The International Olympic Committee ordered a service of mourning for 7th September in which chairs for the eleven dead Israelis were left empty. It was not a well-documented ceremony. Brundage chose the moment to make an ill-timed reference to 'losing the Rhodesian battle against naked political blackmail.' Only Tunisia of the Arab countries attended."[68] Ultimately the Olympics continued after the day of mourning, but the subsequent victory and closing ceremonies were abbreviated and subdued. The remaining Israeli athletes left the Games to return to Israel with the bodies of their fallen teammates. Forty years later there were criticisms that the 2012 London Games did not properly acknowledge the fortieth anniversary of the Munich Massacre.[69]

National governments have also acknowledged that the Olympics offer a platform for political declarations. Over the years, Olympic participation has been used as a tool of political diplomacy. In 1968 (Mexico City) South Africa was barred from participation in the Games because of its policy of apartheid.[70] In addition, various countries have threatened to boycott the Olympic Games at different moments in history for political reasons. We have already seen that the 1936 Games in Berlin were threatened. In 1980 the United States participated in a multinational boycott of the Olympics after Soviets moved their troops into Afghanistan, successfully recruiting West Germany, Japan, and other nations to boycott as well.[71] The Soviet Union suffered substantial economic losses as a result of the reduced Western media coverage, and in 1984 the Soviet Union retaliated by refusing to participate in the Los Angeles Games. In 1988 North Korea, Cuba, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua boycotted the Games because North Korea was still officially at war with South Korea. Boycotts (or threats of boycotts) implicitly acknowledge the fact that the world of the Games is not completely separate from the world of politics. In addition, boycotts are implicit acknowledgments that the Olympics are exercised on a political stage, and that international messages can be sent by one's absence from this stage. Martin Barry Vinokur, commenting on the US boycott in 1980, wrote, "Although the Olympic boycott was only one of the economic and political sanctions taken by the United States, it provided the public

relations value that the other actions could not."[72] The boycott was effective precisely because the Olympics constituted a site of political negotiation.

A quick review of Olympic literature reveals deep concern that the problems in 1972, 1980, and 1984 were indicative of a systematic problem: the Olympics had clearly become inextricably entwined in aspects of international politics, despite efforts by its officials to keep the Games separate. (Vinokur notes, for example, that in 1980, "The U.S. Olympic Committee tried to insist that politics not interfere with sport, arguing that the best method to fight Soviet aggression was to beat them in the Olympic events.")[73] The Games had reached a crisis moment, and former athletes, scholars, IOC officials, and lay people all over the world offered suggestions on ways in which the Olympic Games had "gone wrong" and needed to be reformed (or abandoned altogether).

In these conversations, several factors were repeatedly identified as contributing to the crisis with the Games. As early as 1972, television coverage of the Olympics catapulted the Games to a new level, possibly prompting the attack on the Israeli athletes, since the Olympics offered an international stage. John Kieran, Arthur Daley, and Pat Jordan comment, "Through television coverage this most magnificent of international spectacles had become visible to millions on a scale that was at once intimate and larger than life. When the Arab terrorists perpetrated their monstrosity they intruded—by design—on a stage the entire world was watching. And the disputes that had plagued the Olympics in recent years, though by contrast unmomentous, mushroomed on the same gigantic stage."[74] In response to the Munich massacre, Brundage remarked, " 'The greater and more important the Olympic Games become,' he said, 'the more they are open to commercial, political and now criminal presence.' "[75] Thus, the event that had been born out of a desire to foster international cooperation became, with its success, a strategic site to play out international conflicts.

Over the years, the issue of nationalism has prompted the most conflicts.[76] While explicit acts of physical violence occurred relatively rarely, many other problems rooted in national identity have occurred more frequently. John Powell notes several occasions in which issues involving national flags have led to tension.[77] Flags are ubiquitous at the Games, featured prominently in virtually every venue. They are displayed as teams enter the stadium in the opening ceremonies, and they are raised as part of every victory ceremony. Unofficially, flags are waved enthusiastically by spectators, and in some sports competitors literally wrap themselves in their national flags when they win a medal. Given the prominence of

national flags, it is no surprise that they offer opportunities for conflict as well. In 1908 (London) American and Swedish athletes were angered when their national flags were forgotten by the organizing committee, and Irish athletes became angry when they were told to parade behind a Union Jack. It is worth noting that the closing ceremonies of the Games—which do not organize athletes behind their own national flags—were designed to be less nationalistic than the opening and medal ceremonies. Jean Leiper notes, "Medal ceremonies exhibit the most overt national elements of the Games. The winner's name and country are announced; the national flags of the three medalists are raised, and the national anthem of the winner's country is played. The closing ceremony does not in any way promote nationalism; athletes since 1956 have marched as one team, regardless of their country."[78] The website for the London 2012 Games provides more detail: "The flagbearers of the participating delegations enter the Stadium in single file, closely followed by the athletes. At the Closing Ceremony, athletes march together, not by nationality. This is a tradition that began at the Melbourne 1956 Olympic Games and is a way of bringing the athletes of the world together as 'one nation.' "[79] It is perhaps telling that no remarkable act of ritual disruption has occurred in the closing ceremonies.

In response to the disruptions rooted in nationalism, some suggested reducing the nationalism present in the ceremonies, most often recommending a severely reduced display of national symbols (e.g., flags, national anthems) and focusing instead on the international community of athletes and the athlete as human (rather than as national figure). It is clear that a natural tension exists between the stated Olympic ideal of celebrating the triumphant athlete as a universal "human," while other elements consistently emphasize the athletes' national status. The official position is that the Olympic ideal of international goodwill should trump nationalist loyalties or political goals. Certain figures have gone so far as to threaten to eliminate awards ceremonies in response to political disruptions. It is said, for example, that when Carlos and Smith protested during the 1968 Games, the Marquis of Exeter, "lost his cool, so angered by the impropriety of the demonstration that he obviously was not going to let the matter drop. 'I will not countenance such action,' he said. 'If anything resembling such a demonstration is repeated, I'll put a halt to all victory celebrations.' "[80] This gut-level intolerance for protest is shared by many.

In addition to problems generated by nationally driven concerns, the Games have been affected by commercialism. Certain rules govern the compensation that athletes can receive while competing, but it is well

known that the economic rewards that are made available to a gold medal winner are staggering. The promise of these rewards has led to cheating scandals. In addition, the Olympic Games offer huge potential benefits to sponsors. In 2012, for example, McDonald's secured sponsorship as the exclusive fast food vendor for the 2012 Olympics. Sponsorship is not inexpensive—in 2012, corporate sponsors paid "upwards of $100 million USD" to become an official sponsor.[81] Similarly, in 2014, major corporate sponsors, including Samsung, Panasonic, General Electric, Dow Chemical, and Procter & Gamble, spent about $100 million apiece as sponsors.[82] *PR* Watch states, "According to Dave Zirin, sportswriter and columnist for *The Nation*, the payoff [for expensive sponsorship] comes through 'corporate sin-washing. More than any other enterprise, if a company associates themselves with an Olympics, it really creates a positive feeling in the mind of the consumer.' "[83] This close affiliation with the Olympics can backfire, of course; in 2014, major sponsors suffered criticism for their financial backing of the Olympics Games by LGBT supporters, who charged these corporations with implicitly supporting Russian anti-gay policies by contributing to the Games.

In addition, certain sponsors have been challenged as unfit to participate in the corporate "sin-washing" the Olympics might offer. Just prior to the 2012 Olympic Games, doubts were raised about the propriety of having McDonald's as a sponsor: "Olympics chiefs have questioned whether it is right for McDonald's to continue sponsoring the games because of concerns about worldwide obesity levels and eating habits. The admission was made by the International Olympic Committee (IoC) president Jacques Rogge who said the growing financial demands of the event made it difficult for it to hold on to its values."[84] Some ask, how much has corporate greed shaped the Games themselves? Jeffrey Segrave and Donald Chu, editors of a 1981 volume focused on reforming (and thereby rescuing) the Olympics, note, "a universal condemnation of increasing nationalism and commercialism is emerging. . . . Consensus is also reached concerning a curtailment of Olympic parades, flag ceremonies, and national anthem playing."[85]

The Games themselves have the potential to generate huge revenues for the host country and city, for corporate sponsors, and for media outlets that broadcast Olympic events. All of these potential beneficiaries are affected in boycott situations, so past boycotts have not only acted as powerful political statements; they have created economic penalties on many Olympic stakeholders. Because of this, a decision to boycott Games is not

to be made lightly. Segrave and Chu state, "The implications of the 1980 boycott dilemma in the U.S., for example, not only divided athletes and upset the international Olympic Movement, but also aggravated a huge public, worried businessmen who had a stake in the Moscow Games, and threatened to isolate the U.S. from many of its allies."[86]

Nationalism and commercialism are only two of many problems that observers have noted with the modern Olympic Games. It is also easy to find charges of racism, elitism, and sexism leveled against the Games. In addition, there have always been questions about the role of professional athletes in the Olympic competitions (see, for example, the controversy that surrounded the US men's basketball "dream team" of 1992). Given all the potential problems with the Games—nationalism, too much commercialism, and so on—it becomes clear that the Olympics can be understood to have gone wrong at their core, in fundamental ways. Some scholars have argued that the Games' only hope of survival in any meaningful way is through radical reform. Segrave and Chu conclude their book by arguing, "both the Olympic Games and the Olympic philosophy have been seriously compromised by the new realities of commercialism, political events, and science. These corruptions of the Olympic ideal are in no small part due to differences between the time of Coubertin and the present era. The advent of socialism and the continued development of capitalism, the emergence of the third world, medical and communications breakthroughs, questions of women's participation, the black revolution, and concerns of the Palestinians are all problems of the modern era which have directly affected progress toward the realization of the original ideal of Olympism. The termination of problems resulting from present realities appears now an essential prerequisite to preserving the entire Movement."[87] What is most striking about this statement is the hierarchy of concerns. The authors seem to suggest that we must resolve problems of international economies, the third world, gender and race issues, and the Palestinian question *in order to* realize the Olympic ideal!

Concluding Thoughts

We have seen that if participants and observers in the Olympic Games play their roles, stakeholders can view ritualized events as somehow "normal," and thus beyond the reach of time, politics, and criticism. When the Games unfold so as to conform to a traditional paradigm, participants

and observers alike can focus on the issues that officially stand at the center of the Olympics: athletic ability, international cooperation, and fair play. When Olympic rituals are disrupted, however, the inextricability of the Games from international politics, race relations, nationalist identities, and other historical factors becomes clear. The "mythic" nature of the Games becomes apparent. Barthes argues, "myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things; in it, things lose the memory that they once were made ... In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences ... it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves."[88] We have seen, however, that when ritual goes wrong, the purported timelessness and otherworldliness of the ritual activity falls away. Attention is drawn to the historical, contingent, contradictory, and complicated nature of ritual.

As the individual athlete acts as signifier within ritual events such as the Olympic Games, so, too, do individual rituals act as signifiers for a community at large. When a ritual proceeds smoothly, functioning cooperatively with other cultural elements, the constructed aspect of cultural life goes largely unremarked. But when ritual events are disrupted, they draw attention to the constructed, imagined nature of community identity. Benedict Anderson notes, "all communities ... are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."[89] Rituals help to flesh out that "style," and ritual disruptions erode confidence in the inherent "rightness" of any particular style. In many ways, the Olympic rituals (and other highly valued sporting events) function like religious rituals in playing this cultural role. Segrave and Chu have commented, "Aside from religion, world sport represents the most comprehensive organization in social spheres."[90] Like religion, sport claims to offer a mechanism for the establishment of cooperation and peace. Yet we have seen that sport (also like religion) has also historically provided countless occasions for deep conflict. At the closing ceremonies of the 1948 Games, Sigfrid Edstrom, former president of the IOC, remarked, " 'The Olympic Games are not able to force peace, a supreme gift to which all aspire, but in the youth of the entire world being brought together is the opportunity to find that all men of the earth are brothers.' " While supporters tend to emphasize the athletic competitions themselves as

the place that provides "the opportunity to find that all men of the earth are brothers," I would argue that the opening and medal ceremonies were designed to offer that opportunity as well. These ceremonies were crafted to place the victorious athletes and their audience/witnesses in relationship to one another in such a way as to incarnate the Olympic ideals. Disruptions to these Olympic ritual events challenge this incarnation, and it is precisely at points of disruption that we as scholars come face-to-face with the deadly serious nature of the games human beings play.

