

“Kneeling to Stand”: Examinations of Athletic Activism Approaches as Performative Actions of Race in African American Sports History in 1968 and 2016

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i. Abstract

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in athletic activism ever since former San Francisco 49ers football quarterback Collin Kaepernick, manifested “kneeling” to abstain from saluting the American national anthem in 2016 while over two hundred athletes followed by fashioning “raised fists”, and “bench-sitting”, prior to the NFL playoffs in the same year, and for several seasons after. Since then, African American activism has adopted an erupting pattern of racial representation by reiterating and re-producing manifestations that were historically demonstrated by Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the Olympic Games in New Mexico in 1968.

As a result, African American activism has attracted considerable attention, both scholarly and popular through substantial research undertaken on the role of African American athlete activists in devising their athletic platforms as escape tunnels to channel their voices on racial oppression and police brutality in less politically controlled spaces. Although athletic-oriented protests have attracted conflicting interpretations of what is known as a ‘racial crisis’; which have been paradoxically perceived as both “rebellious” and “effective” for racial progression in the U.S. society, there is, however, a relevant paucity of studies in examining how athletes’ experiences of activism have played a role as performative actions of race to construct counter-practices of resistance for advocating racial equality and social justice in the academic field of American sports history.

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study is to examine the relationship between the representations of activism of prominent African American athlete activists with respect to the historical repercussions of their approaches as performative practices of resistance to manifest the issue of race in national and international athletic events.

The study comprises an analytical perception of athletic-based manifestations of two case studies representing the 1968 Olympic Games protest and the 2016 national anthem kneeling protests during the context of the first and second wave of the civil rights movement. Given the angle of examination, this study adopts the theoretical framework of Judith Butler’s performativity with a specific focus on Nadine Ehrler’s model of *racial performativity*, which characterizes the socially constructed notion of “race” as the performative, to explore the strategies of resistance against hegemonic structures of power and to create new visions of culturally oriented activism, in an attempt to gain discursive power in social domains.

The outcomes of this dissertation can contribute to a better understanding of the possible shifts in racial relations with regard to the significance of engaging in culturally oriented practices of resistance in African American athletic spheres by presenting and representing counter-hegemonic motions to manifest the calls for action for equality and justice that are ought to be expressed and narratively shifted in the American society.

Keywords: athletic activism, racial performativity, race, sports