

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Open Letter to a Young Negro, A Courageous Stand, and The Eye of the Storm

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.63, 2002)

by Lisa Verner



JESSE OWENS (LEFT), RALPH METCALFE (SECOND LEFT), FOY DRAPER (SECOND RIGHT) AND FRANK WYKOFF (RIGHT)

THE USA 4X100 METRES RELAY TEAM AT THE 1936 OLYMPIC GAMES IN BERLIN.

"Open Letter to a Young Negro." Jesse Owens with Paul G. Neimark. In *Blackthink: My Life as Black Man and White Man. Morrow.*

"A Courageous Stand" and "The Eye of the Storm." Kenny Moore. In *Sports Illustrated*, Aug. 5, 1991, pp. 60-77, and Aug. 12, 1991, pp. 62-73, respectively.

These works recount two incidents of racism at the Olympic games of 1936 and 1968. At the Berlin games, the last before World War II, Hitler walked out on Jesse Owens, refusing to watch the African-American athlete compete in the broad jump. Owens, although rattled by the slight, won the event after having been befriended by his German competitor, Luz Long, the man Hitler groomed specifically to beat Owens. Owens credits Long's advice and support with giving him the strength and direction he needed to compete after such an insult. Thirty-two years later, African-American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the gold and bronze medal winners respectively in the 200-meter dash at the Mexico City games, raised black-gloved fists on the medal stand during the playing of the national anthem to protest racism at home and abroad generally and within the International Olympic Committee particularly. They were stripped of their medals and blackballed from professional sports and the military.

I assigned these readings for a compare/contrast paper in a first-year composition class at Tulane University, an elite private school in the Deep South, where I was studying for my doctorate. The majority of my students were white and middle- to upper-middle-class; the few students of color in my classes were usually either attending on athletic scholarship or were from the surrounding community.

I fashioned this assignment in response to encounters with student athletes as a writing tutor during my first year of graduate school and later as a composition instructor. My tutorial students often complained of their marginalized position in academia, and I noticed that when left to their own devices, African-American student athletes almost invariably chose to write on topics that engaged their identities and experience (e.g., the paucity of African-American head coaches at the collegiate and professional levels). Thus, this assignment resulted from my need to locate material that would both engage an often marginalized segment of the student body and empower them with a socio-political context for athletics. I also hoped that by studying two different and in many ways conflicting approaches to civil rights, students would achieve an understanding of historical contingency and culturally determined methods of social protest.

The first semester I assigned these readings, my class was composed entirely of white students and the assignment failed. All my students insisted both in class discussion and

in their papers that Owens's way -- transcending hatred to make friends with Long, who he admitted was "a Nazi white man who fought to destroy my country" -- was a morally superior and more effective form of political protest than Smith and Carlos's "divisive" and "shameful" gesture. "More dignified," "more patriotic," and "loving" were phrases repeated constantly throughout their papers. By allying themselves with Owens's "we must all see each other as individuals" philosophy, my students enabled themselves to ignore both their own complicity in maintaining racist systems of thought and the necessity of collective action and sacrifice in any form of social progress.

The next semester, out of eighteen students, three were African-American males, one of whom was a student athlete, and the assignment was much more effective, in large part because I was not the only one critiquing Owens. Rashi, one of the African-American students, immediately grasped the socio-political nature of the assignment and articulated the contradictions and shortcomings of Owens's approach for the class. Noel, the student athlete, assisted in this effort and on one occasion abruptly and eloquently silenced white apologists for Owens. In response to my query about why Owens would take such a conciliatory tone when he had to have encountered and been angered by racism throughout his life, in contrast to the usual student recourse to Owens's "nobility" of character, Noel replied, "He was scared." This response, spoken by a man who himself had to "perform" within a system of white privilege, who perhaps himself was "scared" of having his scholarship yanked by those in power, validated the critique of Owens in ways that no amount of intellectual interrogation from the white teacher could.

As a result, I believe, of the presence and contributions of my three African-American students, opinion as expressed in class discussion and in papers was profoundly affected. Fully half the class wrote papers defending Smith and Carlos's approach as more courageous or appropriate than Owens's and/or recognizing the historical contingency of the athletes' situations and responses to racism. In his paper's conclusion, Rashi wondered why, although he had attended an all-male, traditionally African-American Catholic high school, he had never heard of Tommie Smith or John Carlos before now; he then asked, "who decides what goes in our history books?"

I am glad I persevered with the assignment despite its dismal debut, and I believe it can be instructive and enlightening for all kinds of students. Its failure that first semester, however, points to the real and urgent need for genuinely multicultural classrooms. As a white female instructor, I am particularly vulnerable to white students dismissing my defense of Smith and Carlos as "bleeding-heart white liberal guilt." The presence and contributions of the three African-American students forced reluctant white students to confront an anti-racist perspective that was no longer theoretical and removed.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://d-scribe.org/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.pitt.edu/press/).