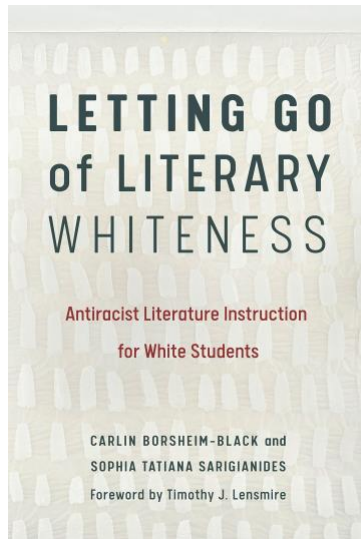


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**Review of *Letting Go of Literary Whiteness: Antiracist Literature Instruction for White Students*
By Carlin Borsheim-Black and Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides**

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As the cover art on *Letting Go of Literary Whiteness* (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019) powerfully demonstrates, seeing Whiteness against a white backdrop can be difficult. So, in classrooms where most students are White, teaching texts that continue to privilege Whiteness can make it difficult to see and elucidate Whiteness as a privileged racial identity marker. In his foreword, Timothy Lensmire states that the authors “make the straightforward argument that if we want to teach about racism, then we should teach about racism” (p. x). He also notes that Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides make it clear that “there is no magic required for teaching about racism with literature in White schools” (p. x), just hard and smart work.

Drawing from their own experiences and challenges in addressing race and racism in both their secondary and post-secondary classrooms, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides have written the book they felt they needed and wish they would’ve had when they started teaching. With the needs and interests of secondary and preservice English teachers in mind, they outline antiracist practices teachers can use to help students see and critically engage with depictions of race in literature to help them unpack and understand Whiteness as a privileged racial marker. They explain, “this book proposes *antiracist literature instruction* as a framework English teachers can use to carry out literature-based units that make teaching about race and racism a deliberate and systematic part of the curriculum” (p. 3). Using the experiences of “real teachers in real classrooms,” Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides offer theoretically grounded practical examples of and approaches to teaching texts in ways that center critical close reading, student voice, difficult discussions, and the construction and maintenance of race in the canon and society. The book is organized into six chapters with each one focusing on a different aspect or approach to antiracist teaching. Beginning with an example of

teachers working to include race in their curriculum followed by an asset-based deconstruction of that teaching, the principles that guide this kind of work, as well as how teachers could work to develop those practices in their own classrooms.

In the following sections, I will provide snapshots of each of the chapters, offer a critique, and conclude by discussing implications for teacher education.

Chapter 1: Teaching About Racism through Literature in White Schools

In their first chapter, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides outline their motivations to write this book, ground their work in Critical Race Theory (CRT), and define antiracist teaching practices. Here, they outline why they focus on White contexts, specifically addressing anticipated critiques that such a focus continues to center Whiteness. “Does a focus on White contexts center Whiteness and continue to privilege White students? Our response is that we understand White supremacy in the United States to be a White problem” (p. 3). They argue that while there are other pedagogical approaches that seek to affirm the experiences of students of color, there also needs to be curriculum aimed at disrupting curriculum and instruction for White students—a gap this book seeks to fill.

Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides note that “literature does not simply *reflect* race and racism in American society; literature has played a role in *constructing* race and racism in American society” (p. 7). That CRT assumes racism is endemic to society, challenges colorblindness, values the experiences and perspectives of people of color, prioritizes social action, and influences conceptions of Whiteness underpins the work that they do in the rest of the book. Defining and connecting CRT to antiracist teaching practices—making race and racism a “central and explicit part of curriculum and

instruction” (p. 11)—they offer examples of unit plans and antiracist teaching that uses literature and close-reading to expose and examine Whiteness.

Chapter 2: Designing Racial Literacy Objectives and Assessments for Literature-Based Units

In this second chapter, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides discuss how teachers can “ensure that we are addressing race and racism responsibly” by “designing literature curriculum that includes objectives and assessments that prioritize racial literacy goals” (p. 15). To begin the chapter, they offer the example of a teacher, Ms. McKinney, who explicitly addresses race through her curriculum and instruction, pointing out both things she did well as well as areas where she struggled. In their appreciative analysis of Ms. McKinney’s teaching, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides offer ways to overcome the challenges Ms. McKinney experienced by using backward design with race in mind.

One of the major difficulties of antiracist teaching practice is that race and racism are topics so large and unwieldy. To be effective antiracist teachers, having a “clear curricular roadmap” of objectives (p. 19) is crucial. In order to draw such a map, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides advocate the use of backward design with a focus on racial literacy, outlining three major principles teachers can use to guide their instruction: (1) articulate racial literacy objectives; (2) design essential questions focused on race; and (3) assess racial literacy objectives. Applying these principles to lesson design, teachers can foster and assess students’ racial literacy growth and development. Though such work can be difficult, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides argue that “identifying concepts and articulating objectives makes it possible to assess student learning and growth around racial literacy” (p. 25), moving racial literacy to the center of teachers’ curriculum and instruction as well as highlighting “which facets of the curriculum prove easier for students to

understand and which pose greater challenges, so that teachers can continue to hone their practices toward their goals” (p. 25). To wrap up the chapter, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides provide two example units designed around Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Chapter 3: Introducing a Racialized Reader Response

In this chapter, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides introduce the concept of racialized reader response “for engaging White readers in reflecting on the ways Whiteness influences personal responses to texts” (p. 33). As in the previous chapter, they begin with a teaching example that demonstrates the utility of the teaching and reading strategy outlined by the chapter. Describing Borsheim-Black’s experience teaching Kwame Alexander’s *The Crossover*, they highlight how the (mis)reading of race in literature can be a challenge for teachers and students. Though a text about Black characters written by a Black author, several of her students noted that “the book did not ‘seem Black’” while another student noted that though the book was “about a Black kid” that didn’t necessarily mean it was about racism (p. 34).

In the second part of the chapter, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides discuss how both text selection and Whiteness shape students’ reading of a text and thinking around race and racism. They examine how Whiteness as default, the dominance of Whiteness in literature curriculum, and the assumption that authors are writing to White audiences all contributed to Borsheim-Black’s experience with teaching *The Crossover*. Working together, these phenomena “position ‘literature’ as White and to position White racial perspectives as central and neutral” (p. 36). They also discuss how “single stories” of people of color often focus on racism rather than on topics such as “close-knit families, dating, or wanting to succeed at a sport” (p. 37) and

that many are set in the past, characterizing racism as no longer relevant and neglecting to “see’ people of color today” (p. 38).

At the end of the chapter, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides once again provide concrete examples of how teachers can address these issues in their teaching. Acknowledging that representation is not enough, they outline four principles for doing this work: (1) prioritize book-length works by and about people of color; (2) include myriad contemporary and empowering stories about people of color; (3) ensure that curriculum reflects texts by and about people of color throughout the year; and (4) racialize White readers’ responses to literature. Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides spend time explaining and demonstrating exactly what they mean by racialized reader response. Combining race and traditional reader response, “racialized reader response asks readers to consider: How does my racial identity and the racial discourse that dominates for me, together with the text and context that I am reading through right now, affect my literary interpretations” (p. 46). To close, they provide a chart of example questions a reader could ask while undertaking racialized reader response as well as how Borsheim-Black might have used racialized reader response while teaching *The Crossover* and a sample unit plan for teaching it.

Chapter 4: Unearthing Whiteness in Canonical Texts About Racism

While the previous chapter explores a different approach to reading, this fourth chapter, focuses on reading commonly taught canonical texts differently. The teaching anecdote/example for this chapter comes from Sarigianides’s experience reading and analyzing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a junior in high school. Her reflection upon how the novel was taught and why she came to love it underpins their critical examination of common readings of the book and

common ways of teaching it. In their discussion of how canonical texts—especially *Huckleberry Finn*—represent Whiteness and Blackness, they argue that “White-authored canonical text selections say more about Whiteness than about Blackness” and serve to highlight “the ways White readers want to see themselves” (p. 52). Instead of being designed with antiracist goals in mind, such texts are stories “about racism by a White person about White people and for White people, a story that makes Whites look—and feel—good about our racial selves” (p. 53). This is important to consider because it is possible that texts such as *Huckleberry Finn*, selected for antiracist goals actually work to reinforce problematic depictions of Blackness.

In order to help teachers avoid this particular pitfall, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides outline four principles for exposing Whiteness in White-authored canonical texts: (1) focus on depictions of Whiteness rather than Blackness; (2) pair White-authored perspectives of racism with counterstories; (3) help students understand how a text critiques racism; and (4) investigate canonicity with students. Through these principles, teachers can guide students in seeing and understanding Whiteness as a racialized identity and critically examine how it is represented in texts written about racism by White authors. Doing so can ensure that students are able to critique representations of racism in ways that don’t reinforce dominant racial ideologies and provide them an opportunity to think about how and why texts become part of the canon as well as how those decisions reinforce societal racial scripts. To close the chapter, they provide examples of activities that illustrate each of the principles in practice.

Chapter 5: Applying a Critical Race Theory Lens to Literary Analysis

Across each of these chapters, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides have worked to layout various entry

points to doing antiracist work for both teachers and students. In this chapter, they continue that by showing how reading literature through a CRT lens can facilitate critical racial literacy. Beginning with an example of how New Critical approaches to reading texts—often required by standardized assessments and the curriculum that teaches toward them—can reinforce racist stereotypes and beliefs. They suggest that using CRT as a lens to read canonical works can “provide rich ground for teaching students about power and oppression” (p. 73).

As in the other chapters, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides outline four principles to guide teachers in doing this work: (1) begin with familiar literary elements; (2) racialize literary elements; (3) consider racial implications of literary analysis; and (4) leverage complex race concepts to deepen literary interpretation. Using these four principles, teachers can scaffold and guide students’ use of CRT to consider the racial ideology of texts as well as how different levels of racism, colorblindness, and racial perspectives can inform their reading and understanding. To close the chapter, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides illustrate this practice by providing readings of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Once Crazy Summer*.

Chapter 6: Planning for and Responding to Race Talk

Facilitating class discussion is one of the most challenging and intricate parts of teaching—even more so when those discussions are about race and racism since they evoke strong emotional responses from teachers and students alike. However, “one of the central goals of racial literacy is to be able to engage in race talk, even when it is hard and uncomfortable to do so” (p. 88). In this chapter, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides discuss the difficulties of facilitating and engaging in these

types of conversations in the classroom to discuss potential pitfalls and strategies to avoid them.

Though “we cannot avoid the fact that race talk can be—understandably should be—hard and uncomfortable” (p. 91), we can identify common challenges and devise strategies for them as they arise. Because “many White students are not used to talking about race and racism,” (p. 91), it is likely and expected that they will say racist things (what the authors refer to as “race talk incidents”) and at times use strategies such as White talk (e.g., denial, avoidance, and colorblindness) to opt themselves out of the conversation altogether. Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides suggest several proactive strategies to establish productive spaces where race talk can occur so students can continue to grow and develop their racial literacy. They cite establishing discussion norms and learning about White talk with students as important steps to take before engaging students in discussions of race and racism. They also offer reactive strategies to guide teachers while during race talk with students. Embracing discomfort as growth, knowing your own triggers, expecting racist comments, acknowledging inappropriate remarks, using turn-taking to make sure marginalized voices are heard, and taking meta-moments are all strategies discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 7: Designing Assignments to Build Racial Literacy

In their final chapter, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides emphasize that race and racism “are more than curricular and concepts” (p. 107) recognizing the important role that critically examining aspects of one’s racial identity are to the process of developing racial literacy. Because Whiteness is often positioned as a neutral, normative non-race, “white students must engage in identity work to understand the ways they are constructed racially and the ways race and racial privilege influence their experiences, identities, and

worldviews” (p. 107). In order to guide students in this work, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides outline two principles: (1) teach complex race concepts and (2) use formative assessments to scaffold racial identity work. In concert with these principles, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides offer a wealth of practical teaching activities and strategies for working with students such as a collaborative glossary of race concepts and terms, critical race analysis of literature, reflection on individual racial identity, and analysis of race-based incidents. They also offer possibilities of racial identity work for White teachers, including lists of podcasts, documentaries, and films; antiracist teaching resources; and suggestions developing critical partnerships.

Critique

Though I read this book with a critical eye, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides insightfully and masterfully acknowledge and speak to many anticipated critiques of their work. In a subsection of the first chapter, they outline the motivations behind many of the authorial decisions they made in structuring and writing the book. Here I offer one lingering critique and one strength of their work.

While I understand that the book’s focus is race, I left it wondering how the strategies they offer could speak to intersectionalities of privilege. Coming from a working-class background, I’ve found that it is difficult to help my family understand their privilege in light of their lower socioeconomic status. In my work with low SES rural students as a secondary teacher, I found the intersection of Whiteness and class to be one of the hardest things to discuss and guide students in understanding. Perhaps in future work, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides could explore White intersectionalities and how to bring the experiences and nuances of class, gender, sexuality, religion, etc. into the mix.

Texts that address the challenges of teaching, especially those that feature real life examples, have the potential to discuss teachers’ failures from a deficit perspective. Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides clearly worked very diligently to avoid doing that. Acknowledging the ways in which this kind of teaching can make teachers and students vulnerable, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides take an asset-based approach to both. They write: “Our goal is to understand the complexities of students’ responses, responses that make perfect sense given the emphasis within this antiracist work is on *disrupting* racial ideologies that have been reinforced in White contexts” (p. 4) and that teaching in this way can be challenging and “risky” (p. 5). Rather than take a deficit view of the work that teachers and students are currently doing, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides acknowledge how difficult it is to come to an elevated critical consciousness, and advocate for support for both teachers and students in doing this deep and complex racial work.

Implications for Teacher Education

Because the majority of teachers are White women and schools are still segregated, preparing White teachers to use antiracist teaching practices in majority White spaces is crucial to the pursuit of social equity. This text provides a wealth of practical strategies, principles, and activities for White students to investigate and understand more about their Whiteness, how it positions them in society, as well as how it positions Others. However, the strategies they offer can be applied across other more diverse settings. While many of the teaching anecdotes they use to ground their chapters in real life events and practices come from secondary schools, they do use some examples from their own work as teacher educators, and all of their suggestions can be applied to the preparation of future teachers. As someone who began her career teaching in a majority White rural school, I wish I

would've had this book when I started out, and as someone who works with preservice teachers who

may end up teaching in similar spaces, I'm grateful to have it now.