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Jeremy Hyler  
Central Michigan University, almaballer40@gmail.com

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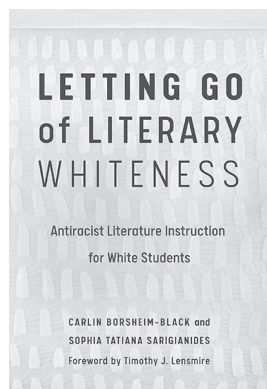
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# Book Review *Letting Go of Literary Whiteness: Antiracist Literature Instruction for White Students*

by Jeremy Hyler



More than ever, there is a need for change in the way literacy is delivered to our children. The pandemic has no doubt highlighted this more than ever. By now, *Letting Go of Literary Whiteness* by Carlin Borsheim-Black and Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides (2019), Teacher's College Press, Columbia University, ISBN:

978-0-807-76305-6, has had reviews discussing major themes outlined in the book associated with Critical Race Theory, white privilege, and colorblindness in literature. These are all crucial items for discussion and should be at the forefront of discussions in staff meetings, department meetings, and curriculum meetings. As a former educator myself, I know the importance of having teachers understand that the approach to how literacy is taught in the classroom needs to change to include everyone. In this review I want to focus on the “how.” The discussions I have had with other teachers through my professional networks has proven just what Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides provide for all of us to pay attention to, and that is the “how.” How do I as an educator shift my thought process and instructional approach to best address the issue of Literary Whiteness?

Both authors do a phenomenal job of providing ways for teachers to create a more diverse classroom. There are two strategies that come from this book that I feel can be very beneficial to helping educators that I want to highlight.

First, in Chapter Two, the authors visit a classroom where a political cartoon is being analyzed by a teacher



Jeremy Hyler

and her students. Though the teacher does a great job of addressing racism, she could have done a better job of analyzing race in the political cartoon they were studying. Out of this classroom observation, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides discuss the idea of backward design for constructing unit plans.

Backward design is the process of keeping the outcome of the unit in mind when beginning to plan the unit. Teachers plan the goals and objectives at the beginning to help them create the essential questions needed for engagement. Having used backward design myself, I can tell you not only does it create more thoughtful lessons, but helps teachers create more meaningful assessments for students to demonstrate what they have learned. When using backward design, the authors suggest focusing on three principles:

1. **Articulate Racial Literacy Objectives:** “Clear racial literacy objectives not only guide sustained and strategic instruction; they serve several other purposes as well” (p.23).
2. **Design Essential Questions Focused on Race:** “Good essential questions are open-ended rather than leading...” (p.24).
3. **Assess Racial Literacy Objectives:** “To be

clear, this personal work is imperative for helping students challenge deeply held assumptions and develop healthy racial identities...” (p. 25).

Each principle is described in more detail in Chapter 2 to help educators understand how backward design can help address the literary whiteness that can exist within our units and lessons. Each quote is written to provide an idea of the direction the authors want teachers going in with their lesson and units. Furthermore, the play, *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry is used as an exemplar to help the reader understand how a unit might look. Overall, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides want readers to understand that by using backwards design, more direct literacy objectives and assessments can lead to more focus on race and racism.

In addition to backwards design, the authors encourage teachers to design assignments to build student’s racial literacy and their racial identities. At the beginning of Chapter 7, the authors ask us to look at our own racial identities to develop a racial consciousness where we should reflect on our own beliefs, assumptions, and privileges. What is so important about the beginning of this chapter is where the authors discuss how our students or we as educators can have feelings of guilt, shame or just being overwhelmed by discovering our racial identities. However, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides encourage white individuals to not remain in this state of guilt or shame. We should push forward to develop a healthier identity.

From there, the authors outline two more principles for formative assessments that can help guide students and teachers with racial literacy learning.

### 1. **Begin by Teaching Complex Race**

**Concepts:** “We recommend that English teachers begin the work of bolstering students’ racial identity by helping students name and define race concepts like systematic racism, colorblindness, and White talk, for example” (p. 109).

### 2. **Use Formative Assessments to Scaffold**

**Racial Identity Work:** “...racial identity work also must include engagements foregrounding uncertainty, questions, and slow realizations” (p. 110).

These two principles help open the door for more in-depth conversations about race and racism that exists in literature. The authors even go further and provide some phenomenal resources including fiction, nonfiction, podcasts, documentaries, and films that can help engage in the ongoing learning that is racial literacy.

As the authors state at the end of their book, this is just the beginning, not the end when it comes to thinking about literary whiteness and how we can combat the racism that exists in literature and in our classrooms. It is not a book made to make any white teacher or student feel bad about themselves, but to begin the critical conversations in classrooms that are long overdue when it comes to the topic of racism. As the authors state in the opening of the book, “Our goal is to understand the complexities of students’ responses, responses that make perfect sense given that the emphasis within this antiracist work is on *disrupting* racial ideologies that have been reinforced in White contexts” (p. 4, emphasis in original). When I first read this book, I did feel that disruption, mostly as feelings of guilt and shame. Still, I didn’t linger in those feelings, as the book also made me take notice that we need to act and make a difference in our classrooms. By having more engaging conversations and giving our students a space where they can discuss openly the problem that has been plaguing our classrooms for too long, racism, we can reach beyond literary whiteness and provide better literature instruction for all.

Editor’s Note: Though the book in this review is that of a publication from current MRJ Co-Editor Dr. Carlin Borsheim-Black, Mr. Hyler selected the title himself and his submission was edited by other members of the editorial team, thus insuring an independent review.