

## Book Review *Teaching Racial Literacy: Reflective Practices for Critical Writing* by Mara Lee Grayson

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In the introduction to her 2018 monograph *Teaching Racial Literacy: Reflective Practices for Critical Writing*, Mara Lee Grayson describes the tumultuous setting against which the book originated: the police murders of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice had captured national attention, and protests had erupted across the country in response, led by activists calling for change, accountability, and unambiguous recognition of the fact that Black Lives Matter. Grayson wrote then, “Racism is not new, and while it had perhaps been pushed beneath the surface of public discourse, it has not reemerged now so much as it has simply made itself more visible to the general public” (136). In the summer of 2020, racism once again made itself more visible following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police and the murder of Breonna Taylor by Louisville police. For many educators, the months of protests that followed were accompanied by a keen appraisal of our own complicity, resulting in a surge of interest in antiracist pedagogy. Instructors seeking guidance in implementing antiracist literacy instruction have an already significant body of work from which to draw, including texts by such scholars as Vershawn Ashanti Young, Frankie Condon, and Asao Inoue. Despite a few drawbacks, Grayson’s *Teaching Racial Literacy* is a worthy extension to this canon, providing both actionable strategies and a robust theoretical foundation.

Grayson began working to develop the racial literacy curriculum described in *Teaching Racial Literacy* after having observed how conversations around textual analysis of narrative song lyrics in her Writing through Literature course turned organically to conversations around race and injustice, and later noticing a correlation between these discussions and improvement in her students’ writing. Grayson approaches the resulting book as a teacher-practitioner, arguing that a racial literacy curriculum can not only increase students’ awareness of racial injustice but also improve classroom engagement. Chapter 1 lays out Grayson’s framework of racial literacy for critical writing instruction, but not before foregrounding an important rebuttal to the longstanding and still-circulating contention that composition can be taught from a neutral standpoint, one which need not take into account the ways that ideas about language and race are mutually sedimented. Tracing the long history of linkages between composition and work toward equity, Grayson situates racial literacy as a natural extension of literacy pedagogy, and it is from this orientation that she approaches the racial literacy framework. Drawing on previous racial literacy frameworks developed by sociologist France Winddance Twine and legal scholar Lani Guinier, Grayson’s version outlines practices that connect critical social awareness with foundational writing skills. The framework asks students to “decode race and racism, comprehend the historical and contemporary structures of institutional racism, interpret individual examples of racism and racialism, critique inequity, respond to injustice, and communicate with classmates of similar and different experiences and understandings of the world”

(7). Thus, Grayson argues, despite its prefix, racial literacy is less about incorporating new content pertaining to race or introducing new literate practices, and more about asking students to use the traditional tools of literacy in ways that allow for interrogation of racist structures and systems and help students better understand their own power in dismantling those systems.

Grayson describes the adoption of the racial literacy curriculum as a recursive process of “active, continual observing, interpreting, questioning, and communicating” (15), one in which instructors are just as implicated as students, and Chapter 2 offers useful suggestions for how to plan and prepare before beginning this process. Assessing instructor positionality and developing a practice of critical reflexivity are essential, as is remaining responsive to student needs throughout. Grayson also provides advice for navigating different institutional and geographical contexts, and guidance for adapting the curriculum to a variety of instructional contexts, including first-year writing, advanced writing, and interdisciplinary courses, even briefly attending to how the curriculum might be implemented in courses that do not explicitly teach writing. Anticipating potential problems, Grayson counsels, is key to successful implementation of the racial literacy curriculum.

The remaining chapters describe how the racial literacy curriculum looks in practice. Chapter 3 makes recommendations for selecting and writing about racial literacy texts, while Chapter 4 contains an in-depth look at utilizing narrative song lyrics in particular. Chapter 5 centers the embodied and affective dimensions of racial literacy work for both teachers and students, including an important section on navigating fraught emotional and discursive territory. Here, Grayson describes how including students in the process of collaboratively designing a framework for classroom discussions, then guiding them in building a foundation of emotive capacity through practices such as counternarrating and attentive listening, will better equip them to tolerate and productively engage with any negative emotional responses they may experience. In Chapter 6, Grayson explicates the importance of positionality in racial literacy, suggesting activities such as a positionality cluster and a racial autobiography to help instructors guide students toward greater consideration of how their and others’ situatedness impacts perspectives on and beliefs about race. Chapter 7 provides instructional strategies for navigating conversations about race, including dealing with white fragility and including the voices of marginalized students in safe and thoughtful ways. Finally, Chapter 8 discusses helping students move their literate practices beyond the classroom and into civic engagement, and Chapter 9 addresses obstacles specific to secondary educators, such as dealing with parental interference and the constraints of mandated curricula. The book concludes with an appendix containing additional references and resources for both instructors and students.

As literacy instructors seek out guidance for antiracist pedagogical practices, it is crucial to aim a critical lens toward any texts that are taken up in that effort, and while *Teaching Racial Literacy* is a rich and worthwhile resource, a few caveats must be put forward. First, while the book frequently notes the importance of helping students become aware of their own positionality, the implications of whiteness on instructors’ ability to implement the racial literacy curriculum are not fully addressed. The omnipresent microaggressions, resistance, and outright bullying met by BIPOC teachers arguing for curricular change or talking about race in the classroom are well-documented by Staci Perryman-Clark, Carmen Kynard, and many others. However, in *Teaching Racial Literacy*, the vast

differences in the obstacles BIPOC teachers and white teachers might face is elided into a relatively short section on instructor positionality in Chapter 2, which has the effect of downplaying the gravity of this problem. Given the degree to which whiteness functions as a barrier to racial justice, greater attention to its impact, and particularly to the need for white instructors to act as accomplices to their colleagues of color, would have been warranted. Likewise, the prevalence of antiblackness in literacy instruction is not given adequate consideration. As April Baker-Bell has since cautioned in her 2020 book on Black linguistic justice, “a transformative approach to the language education of Black students cannot acquiesce to whiteness or side-step anti-blackness. These approaches are not transformative nor are they antiracist” (31). Her call for an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy was amplified soon thereafter by the CCCC position statement on Black linguistic justice, which declares, “We cannot say that Black Lives Matter if Black Language is not at the forefront of our work as language educators and researchers!” (Baker-Bell, Williams-Farrier, Jackson, Johnson, Kynard, and McMurtry). The implications are clear: literacy instruction that purports to be antiracist must not only contend with antiblackness, but also center Black students’ rhetorical strategies, discursive practices, and ways of languaging.

Nevertheless, if complemented by other resources that address these concerns more extensively, *Teaching Racial Literacy* has much to offer. The potential hazards of discussing race and racism in the classroom have caused many instructors to avoid it altogether, and the strength of *Teaching Racial Literacy* lies in its wealth of actionable strategies for talking, reading, and writing about racial justice. Grayson anticipates and addresses many likely obstacles and concerns throughout, presenting the adoption and implementation of the racial justice curriculum as an achievable process, and the strategies she offers are thoughtfully designed to be applicable to anyone incorporating critical writing into their courses. For both new and experienced instructors, *Teaching Racial Literacy* is a worthwhile resource that goes beyond simple calls to action to offer instructors a comprehensive plan of action, one that has the potential to enact real changes in students’ awareness of the racist structures and systems in which we live.

## WORKS CITED

- Baker-Bell, April. *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*. NCTE Routledge, 2020.
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