



# BOOKS AS RESISTANCE: A LOOK INTO AN ANTIRACISM FOCUS IN AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

Caroline B. Rabalais

“WHY DOES EVERYTHING have to be about race?”

As I sit in front of my students providing them a glimpse into our newest unit—where we will read about and discuss topics like police brutality, the role of family, and what it means to be American—a student asks me this question with a hint of frustration, and I pause. Putting aside the exciting interdisciplinary implications that this student is having critical conversations about race and power dynamics in today’s social climate in all of his classes, I know that how I respond to this student is important. But how do I show this child—who may see no merit in these topics—that reading a book about a Black high school junior who is a victim of police brutality should not be boiled down to just race, but about striving for justice? How do I show them that this is not a partisan issue, but a human rights issue? Also importantly, how do I answer this student in a way that protects my job? When these discussions arise, I want to always emphasize to my students that the work we do in class is meaningful and crucial to their own growth as learners. But at times, part of planning lessons that focus on social justice issues is preparing oneself for pushback and fierce conversations.

I am among the seventy-nine percent of teachers in the United States who are white, non-Hispanic women (U.S. Department of Educational Statistics, 2020). Education in the United States privileges white, Western thought, which historically ostracizes those who are “other” from whiteness (Wynter, 2003; Coles, 2021). There is a pervasiveness of white hegemony in education that threads itself in each classroom,

despite many calls for antiracist ideologies and a “racial reckoning” (Goering, 2021, p. 68; National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2020; Sharpe, 2016). White hegemony’s pervasiveness becomes a harmful rhetoric that says whiteness is the right and best way of thinking and that racism is a thing of the past. This privileged position of whiteness and Western thought in the United States’ education system, then, excludes BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) populations and forces them to conform to epistemologies that may invalidate their ways of knowing and being. Especially in predominantly white institutions (PWIs), this pervasiveness is an extreme barrier to building students’ racial literacies.

Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) argue, “These narratives rely on ideologies that masquerade as common sense. Often, the people or institutions who have the most power are the ones who get to write or determine the master narrative” (p. 28). Being white, I know there have been instances in my own life and career where I have been blind to the grievances that our system of education commits against BIPOC individuals. This cluelessness is also often reflected in white students’ experiences that they bring to the classroom. Unfortunately, this ignorance is not an isolated occurrence in education but is more than likely the norm. Regarding schools as sites of oppression, Coles (2021) argues the following:

[Schooling] does not acknowledge the structural regime of antiblackness, the living legacy of slavery, which is responsible for the marginalization and

exclusion of Black lives. Thusly, curriculum is a site of antiblackness, characterized by the ways it structurally decenters blackness, positioning it as less than. (p. 36)

Anti-racist, justice-oriented education thus becomes an ethical imperative for all educators, and specifically in my own content area of language arts and as a white educator who previously taught in a PWI, I endeavor to learn more about the ways that privilege, power, and oppression are actors in the word and the world (Freire, 2012). As Dunn et al. (2018) argue, “justice-oriented pedagogical choices [are] not about partisanship or controversy but, rather, [are] reflective of an overarching commitment to equity” (p. 3). In this article, through a series of vignettes of my experience teaching at a PWI, I explore the ways that I have tried to increase racial literacy in my students through reading, how teaching books with challenging topics can provide an opportunity for change, and how I work to let go of literary whiteness (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019).

### Theoretical Foundations

Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides’s (2019) framework for antiracist literature instruction serves as a call to action and support for white teachers to implement antiracist teaching into their classrooms, especially when their students have primarily been exposed to experiences of white men in their learning thus far. Their framework assists teachers in deliberately and systematically teaching about race and racism through literature by disrupting the current curriculum using evidence-based practices such as critical close reading, reader response, and student-centered discussions. This framework is designed so that even teachers whose curricular choices are restricted by issues outside of their control can still attend to antiracist literature instruction through changing the lens through which a book is taught.

Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) emphasize that implementing their framework for antiracist literature teaching is not something that teachers can do in just one isolated lesson or unit and then mark as complete on a checklist of standards. Rather, they argue that the “temporal positioning

of texts speaks volumes to students ‘studying’ the ways value is signaled by text length, curriculum order, and timing” (p. 45). Embedding the curriculum with voices outside of the dominant majority is important in validating epistemological and ontological plurality. Centering these voices throughout the school year influences how students value this plurality, too. For example, centering the voices of Black Americans during Black history month is important for uplifting the experiences of this marginalized group of people. However, if this is the only time of year teachers touch on Black voices,

there are problems inherent in the curriculum that the teacher needs to disrupt.

The Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) framework further details ways for literacy educators, especially in PWIs, to make their pedagogical choices more inclusive and social justice-oriented. This framework is grounded in critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012). Critical race theory informs the antiracist literature instruction framework by tracking the theoretical underpinnings of marginalization in education that manifests in the ways that race, power, and privilege operate in the world. These underpinnings often affect the available texts teachers can select to teach in their classrooms. Additionally, culturally sustaining

pedagogy informs the antiracist literature instruction framework by emphasizing the value in an asset-based approach to education that centers and reinforces students’ cultures, communities, and identities.

Finally, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides’s (2019) framework for antiracist literature instruction builds on Morrell’s (2018) concepts of *different reading* and *reading differently*. To support students in *different reading*, teachers select texts that center on BIPOC individuals and address the misunderstandings of white readers. Morrell also encourages teachers to support their students in *reading differently*, through approaching canonical literary texts from a critical stance by pairing them with counternarratives.

For my purposes, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides’s (2019) framework supports my inquiry into my own teaching choices when I worked to disrupt the fallaciously neutral

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approach to teaching and reading found in the high school English language arts classroom. This study centers my attempts to challenge those predominantly white and western perspectives and explore my own antiracist literacy instruction in the 2020-2021 school year. I use Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides's (2019) discussion on race talk and building assignments to support racial literacy to frame this inquiry into my teaching.

## Context and Methodology

### Positionality

In this piece, I work through an autoethnographic reflection (Hughes & Pennington, 2017) of how I taught the novel *All American Boys* (Kiely & Reynolds, 2015) in a 10th-grade World Literature class in the 2020-2021 school year. As a white high school language arts teacher in the Southeast of the United States, I have faced virulent censorship to book choices in my classroom and have witnessed colleagues facing these steadily mounting challenges in more recent years. At the time of this study, I was still a novice teacher, only in my third year of teaching. I was hesitant to question my department's book choices and felt restricted by the ever-present threat of losing my job should the right parent complain. Further, while my school's population had students of many racial and ethnic backgrounds, our students and faculty were mostly white. While these white students and faculty thus did not live in an insular community, their schooling to that point had not worked to support antiracist, inclusive ideologies. Following the Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020, I felt it was more imperative than ever to cast away cowardice and read books that could be a mirror, window, or sliding glass door (Bishop, 1990) for all of my students. As Goodwin (2010) contends, "schools have been instrumental in maintaining a hegemonic legacy via a variety of structures and mechanisms, especially curriculum" (p. 3110). The school where I was teaching was no different from this observation. Therefore, breaking from this hegemonic legacy felt risky.

While I was concerned about the potential negative repercussions of making this curricular change, I believed in the power of the novel *All American Boys* to provide my students with the learning they needed. Teaching this book about an incident of police brutality and its ripple effect to a student body pushing for social justice made me worry about a few things: Losing the trust I had built with the community if they disagreed with this book's message; receiving a bad

teaching evaluation if my administration deemed this book not 'academic' enough; and, worst, possibly losing my job for rocking the boat too much and losing the access to build students' racial literacy at all. However, despite the risks, I knew that taking this risk was what I needed to do as an educator.

Coasting by with the plans I had cultivated in my first three years of teaching would have been easy, especially knowing that surveillance is ever-present in modern schools (Page, 2017; Skerritt, 2023). With the knowledge that teaching a book which features an instance of police brutality could put my job in jeopardy if my intentions were twisted, I worked to get support from my administration, my co-workers, and my students' parents before even mentioning this text to my students. This support was essential to my teaching before the unit began, so I carefully crafted messages that connected our learning objectives to English language arts standards as clear academic justification for reading this text. Hseih, et al., (2023) argue that literacy learning must be "intentional, intersectional, critical, humanizing, and responsive" (p. 402). Especially in times of polarization and dehumanization, embodying a pedagogy that is humanizing and liberating is important for English language arts teachers to accomplish. This can include informing all stakeholders of the purpose of an upcoming unit, working to pave as smooth a road as possible for that critical antiracist literature instruction. Questions I worked to answer in this piece include the following:

1. How can English language arts teachers, especially of PWIs, increase their students' racial literacy?
2. How can the English language arts classroom become a space that embodies antiracist literature instruction?
3. In what ways can white educators combat dominant, hegemonic discourse with young adult literature?

### Data Collection

Autoethnography allows researchers to construct a narrative of their own making to analyze as they reflect on their experiences. In conducting this self-study, I am able to reflect on my teaching from early in my career and consider how other educators can begin to enact antiracist literature pedagogy and interrogate their own teaching practices. As previously mentioned, the school year that I am referring to here occurred during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of a summer where the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was met with chants of #AllLivesMatter, which dismisses the realities of systemic injustice of BIPOC individuals

in the world. During this year, I pledged my own pedagogy to be one that is social justice-oriented and antiracist; however, as a white, middle-class woman, I recognized the importance of acknowledging my privilege and sought to use it to answer the calls for antiracist teaching practices. The complexities of schooling, though, work as roadblocks to this type of teaching, and the negotiations that I had to make and must continue to make when creating lessons must adhere to state standards and community beliefs.

With these tensions in mind, I began to journal during the Spring of 2020 about my experiences learning to teach online. These journal entries slowly shifted to focus on increasing unrest that my community was facing. I even wrote about attending a Black Lives Matter protest, where I was cautioned to cover my face with a hat and sunglasses in addition to a mask to prevent identification if images were posted to any public outlets. My journaling continued into the new school year, where I reported feeling frustrated by the lack of productive change happening in our school. Not only did there seem to be no productive change in my school, the only difference I noticed that school year was the ever-present shine of new surveillance cameras in each classroom, signaling to teachers to not step out of line. Nevertheless, weekly, I would write about my experiences, positive and negative, and the changes I saw in my students and my learning. This experience of journaling has become a valuable source of data as I reflect on and make sense of that year of teaching. My lesson plans, too, have helped me to triangulate the presentation of my findings as I endeavor to answer how books have challenged perspectives in my classroom and socially-constructed realities.

### Data Analysis

I conducted a narrative analysis to piece together my data and to encapsulate my experience. Narrative analysis is “a tightening and ordering of experience by explicating an intrinsically meaningful form” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 20). Thus, after analyzing my journals for “events and happenings...crucial to the story” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 16), I restructured these reflections with the support of my lesson plans to build my data into a series of four vignettes. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) highlight that *story* is “a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (p. 375). As I questioned literary whiteness and worked to let go of it in my teaching, I inductively coded my words to make sense of the

data and to help approach an answer to my overarching inquiry. Then, re-storying my data into four separate vignettes made the most sense to yield understanding of the breadth and complexity of the situation. Cross (2017) reflects on her own experiences with whiteness in education and the censorship in which white faculty engage in and face. Following Cross’s (2017) use of vignettes to reflect on her position in education as a white woman, I, too, utilize vignettes as I dig into how I may have perpetuated western ideals and its insidiousness in education. Cross (2017) argues that in these systems, which are “cloaked in whiteness,” one can use vignettes “as a tool to uncover whiteness in the academy” (p. 886).

### Findings

The purpose of this investigation was twofold: 1) To at once examine my experience as a white English language arts teacher in implementing a unit centering on social justice and antiracism; and, 2) to promote reading young adult literature with challenging topics as a way to resist what Coles (2021) calls the curriculum of antiblackness. With Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides’s (2019) lens for antiracist literature instruction in mind, I revisit instances of white hegemony in my attempts at implementing an antiracist curriculum in my past high school language arts classroom. Through a series of four vignettes named after ideas presented in Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides’s (2019) text, I explore two themes present in my stories: *Nesting of Whiteness* and *Opportunities for Change*. For each person who appears in the following vignettes besides me, I use pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

#### Vignette #1: Changing the Topic and Silence

I’m sitting in my classroom on a professional learning day, thinking about how boring the last unit I taught was. I really believe that I can do good work as a teacher. I want to *reach* children, not just teach them about themes and rhetorical appeals in literature. There are real things happening in the world that we need to talk about. How do I know my mostly white students aren’t hearing regurgitated prejudice-laced garbage each night?

“Rabalais?”

I hear my last name, which is how we all refer to one another at this school. I’ve never been very comfortable taking the leap and calling my colleagues by their first names; this is only the first year that my classroom is even in the same hallway as another English teacher and, before this semes-

ter, I only saw my colleagues in meetings. I break out of my thoughts and say, “Oh, hey, I’m sorry, what’s up?”

Johnson leans into my empty classroom and tilts his head. “I was thinking about teaching a new book this year. We have access to the full text online,” he said, waving his hand in front of his face as he says “full text.” “Do you know the book *All American Boys*?”

My eyes widen before I open my mouth to speak. “Well, yeah! Wow, yes, that book is super great. It’s all about...well, you suggested it, so I’m sure you know. Yes, let’s do it!”

Johnson smiled and pulled the physical copy of the book from beside him. “Great! Yes, I just thought with everything going on, it’s so important that the kids get to understand what the reality is. Plus, this isn’t some all cops are bastards book, like, my wife’s a cop, you know?”

“Yeah, totally!” I think of a million things at once: We’re finally teaching something contemporary and that matters! Also, is Johnson a Blue Lives Matter guy? Does he remember George Floyd? His wife’s a cop? Has she ever abused her power? What will the kids’ parents think? How do I approach teaching a book about police brutality carefully to keep my job? How can I slip into the conversation that I’ve met the authors of the book? Should I assign reading certain chapters as homework?

I continue the conversation on a different line of thought: “The kids are going to love it. Especially all of the cuss words.” Johnson agrees.

### **Vignette #2: Silence, Agreeing, and Supporting**

Everything was going too well. My colleagues and I sent our emails telling students’ families about our new unit. My co-teacher, Ms. T, and I received a total of three positive replies to our notice, and the rest of the time in the week between our sending out the email and beginning our unit, we got nothing. In education, I knew that no parent contact can often be a good thing.

So today, the morning we were starting our new unit, of course our administrative team informed us that a parent went to the board office about us, and of course Ms. T missed a call from that parent twenty minutes before class began.

“Goodness gracious alive,” I complained as Ms. T. Who does this parent think he is questioning our professionalism and going over our heads? We sent out emails to create a line of communication with families, not to create a line of communication with the board of education.

Ms. T finally reaches the parent, and we tell him good morning. “Good morning, ladies. Now I just wanted to talk about this book y’all are reading—”

Ms. T keeps the conversation going. She’s a jovial teacher, and a really wonderful partner in the classroom: “Yes, absolutely. Well, we’re happy to hear from you. We know you might be short on time, so we’ll just go ahead and tell you about this important book.” Ms. T reiterates the main points we outlined in our initial email to families: The book discusses family dynamics, racism, police brutality, multiple perspectives, and what it means to stand up for something you believe in. The parent’s immediate response is to ask if his son can have an alternate assignment. I’m frustrated he’s asking this twenty minutes before class begins.

“Yes, sure, of course he can,” I reply. I’m nothing if not a people pleaser. “The alternative assignment option is to read the nonfiction novel *The Other Wes Moore* because it fits our current unit like *All American Boys* does.” It does, I think to myself, but this book is nonfiction, while our class novel is fiction. We’ll be hitting different standards, which is complicated, but I can make it work.

I continue the discussion: “But really, I just want you to know that we do our very best during this book to hear from all sides of the equation. We understand that you’re just trying to advocate for your son. Completely get it.” I don’t have kids, so I don’t really get it, but Ms. T, a mother, nods in agreement, and the father on the phone “hms” appreciatively. “We’ll give you some time to consider what we’ve talked about, but we’re totally on board with what you and your son decide. How about we let him participate in our anticipation guide today, and y’all tell us by tomorrow what y’all would prefer?” The father agrees, and we three end the call amicably. I feel a little odd at the end of the conversation, but I’m not sure why. Maybe it’s because he never mentioned how he went to the board office to complain about us.

### **Nesting of Whiteness: Changing the Topic, Silence, and Agreeing and Supporting**

Shown in vignettes one and two, my teaching ultimately worked in tandem with the oppressive regime of schooling, and my mind was always on how I could cushion any possibility of critique I had for police or for whiteness. This endeavor was simple enough. After all, I am white, so how could my students, colleagues, and community assume that I’m critiquing the privilege that I am wrapped in each day? As Bor-

sheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) caution, it can be so easy to engage in white educational discourses, which protect and nest whiteness “in [w]hite-dominant educational settings to subvert, avoid, and resist productive race talk” (p. 96). In vignette one, I follow the move of *changing the topic* and *silence*. The move of *changing the topic* according to Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) “shift[s] the focus of power and oppression away from the topic of race and racism...to distance ourselves from racism” (p. 97). In my discussion with Johnson, we both stop short of really discussing why we want to teach this novel. Johnson says he wants to teach this book because of “everything going on,” and he immediately moves to say that this book “isn’t some all cops are bastards book.” In this conversation, he redirects any attention from the topic of racism and instead presents the book as an “all sides” story.

My *silence*, where I do not “engage in or participate in race talk,” and show “body language or other nonverbal cues that indicate resistance or discomfort” (p. 97), is present in this conversation, too. Namely, I do not say to the contrary when he says that the book does not critique power structures that the police force keeps in place, and I do not provide my own interpretation of the text when he asks if I know the book. I instead allow his understanding of the text to fill the space. Further, this white colleague had a wife who was a police officer. How could we, two people nested in the root of the antagonism of the very novel we were teaching, perpetuate the idea that police or white people were instigators of continued racism in the world? I chose *silence* over interrogating the structural powers at play in this novel.

In vignette two, I similarly engage in *silence* when on a call with a parent and community member. However, I also engage in *agreeing and supporting*, which is “helping white individuals rather than pushing them to deeper examination of our own racism; used to make everyone feel comfortable and support the status quo” (p. 97). Instead of pushing my student’s father to question why he did not want his child to read about the experience of a Black child who faces police brutality, I placate his worries and offer a different book. This choice was one I made because, ultimately, if a parent wants an alternate assignment, I am required to provide one. However, had the restrictions of the educational space not been in place, this would have been a golden opportunity to resist white educational discourse and support this parent’s racial literacies.

I recognize white educational discourse’s presence in my and my white co-worker’s teaching. My teaching itself tip-

toed toward antiracism, but systems of oppression still infested my teaching. I approach breaking out of my own hold on literary whiteness in my initial vignette where Johnson and I begin plans for our unit. However, in vignette two, I move to placate the frustrated parent and tell him that our unit is strictly about differing perspectives and critical thinking, careful to not mention anti-racism or social justice. My plans were for the unit to be transformative for my students, but in talking to the parent, the reality of this unit appeared. This parent’s fears, though not voiced exactly like this, were to prevent his son from experiencing what DiAngelo (2018) calls “white racial trauma in response to equity efforts” (p. 111). I compromised with the parents and claimed to understand what he was telling me. In doing so, I protected whiteness for the comfort of this white parent, and I engaged in silence.

### Vignette #3: Racial Identity Work

Our School Resource Officer (SRO) approaches me in the hallway one day.

“Hey, Rabalais,” he begins, “How’re you doing?”

Smiling as I pack up for the day, and because I like Officer Brad, I tell him that I’m good. “And how are you doing today?” I’m also smiling because my students have really been taking to *All American Boys*. We just finished reading a short nonfiction article about what racial profiling is, and my students were open to discussing ways that profiling operated in the first chapter in the novel where Rashad is brutalized and arrested after going to a gas station after school. My students have been doing an awesome job being respectful of each other, too, and I was so proud of them. But right now I’m thinking, what brings our SRO to my classroom?

Officer Brad gets to his point quickly: “Well, you see, I heard y’all are all teaching a new book and everything about the police. I just wanted to come here and tell you that I’m glad you are and that, if y’all needed, I’d be happy to come speak to your classes about what it’s like to be an officer.”

Still smiling, I wonder if that’s the best idea. In the book we’re reading, the police officer brutalizes a Black teenager and attempts to justify this action by claiming he saw him stealing something. What could Officer Brad, a man who wields a weapon around the halls of the school each day, tell my students? But also, the situation is complex. Officer Brad is Black, so maybe he also wants to speak to the experiences of being a Black man in the United States? Despite my hesitance, I know that my colleagues would be excited to have

him, and my students would think it was neat to hear from a man they only ever saw roaming the hallways.

“That’s generous of you, thank you! I think it’d be great to bring in all of the tenth grade ELA classes if you’re willing. When could we get together to plan this?” I accept his offer, thinking of the email I’d need to now send out to parents about this in-house field trip.

Officer Brad smiles excitedly. “Awesome, thank you, Rabalais. I know y’all are doing good work here. All this stuff, the kids can handle it. They can hear that the world is harsh. I’m just glad I can come in and help too. How about they just write down any questions they’ve got for me, who I am, and what I do, and I’ll answer them?” We get to planning, and I look forward to the productive class period it’ll be.

#### **Vignette #4: Embrace Discomfort as Growth**

We’re wrapping up our reading for the day, and my students are mostly eagerly chatting about what’s just happened in the book. Rashad is finally about to get out of the hospital, and Quinn, the book’s other protagonist, is planning to go to the town protest in support of Rashad. Quinn has been a character a lot of my students have been eager to hear from. He is a white teenager who is close to the police officer who brutalized the book’s other protagonist, Rashad. In fact, Quinn describes the police officer as his pseudo-dad since his own father died in war a few years before. Students often wonder in the beginning of the book if he will ultimately side with the police officer or if he will be on Rashad’s side.

As I ask my students their thoughts on the latest chapter, one of my students, Caleb, speaks up: “You know Ms. [Name], I actually like this book. I wish we had more of Quinn’s perspective, but I think I get where Rashad is coming from.”

This was the breakthrough I was looking for. Caleb was a unique case in my classroom: Four years prior, in 2016, I was a student teacher in his sixth grade reading classroom. I recall that the day of the 2016 election, he came into school with a hat promoting the Republican candidate, chanting excitedly, promoting ideologies that he did not quite understand. Somehow, perhaps serendipitously, he moved to the district I was now teaching in four years later in 2020 and was placed in my tenth grade world literature classroom.

“Caleb,” I start, “that is really great. Rashad really isn’t that different from all of y’all, is he?” We continued on with our conversation, exploring how Rashad’s family’s perspec-

tives have changed and how Quinn, despite having a personal connection to the police officer who brutalized Rashad, makes the hard decision to forgo that relationship to instead go to a protest and support Rashad.

“So Caleb,” I ask, “What has changed for you in how you’re thinking about the book?”

He answers, “Well, really I think I just get Rashad. He was just a kid buying chips. I think that the officer was within his rights to do his job, but, like, he didn’t have to go that far.” I nod thoughtfully as another student chimes in and counters him. She says, “Yeah, but, he didn’t deserve that, period. Even if he was stealing, that officer didn’t have to hurt him so badly that he was in the hospital for a week.”

I hum and say, “That’s fair, I agree. He didn’t have to just resort to violence like that. I mean, have y’all ever had someone get onto you because they assumed you were doing something you weren’t?”

Other students contribute and explain various times they’d been accused of something they didn’t do, like cheating on a test, cheating on their romantic partner, faking an injury in a sport, etc. Caleb even gives his own experience in answer to this question, and I feel like I can practically see his worldview expanding.

The bell is about to ring, so I ask one last question before the kids go: What do you hope happens to everyone? I leave this question purposely vague because I want my students to choose to talk about a character who is most engaging for them. Caleb raises his hand to answer: “I hope Rashad can get some good therapy and that he and Quinn become friends.”

#### **Opportunities for Change: Racial Identity Work and Embrace Discomfort as Growth**

In the third vignette, I illustrate a conversation with our School Resource Officer. Officer Brad is a large yet quiet presence in the school. My students knew who he was, but most of them had never spoken a word to him prior to his presentation to them. This opportunity he brought to me and my students made me hesitant at first, but I wanted to give him a chance to help broaden my students’ thinking and grow their racial literacies. Officer Brad was well aware of the sociocultural context of the moment we were in, and he used this opportunity to layer his experiences with my students’ reading. This vignette shows our SRO working to humanize himself and benefitting the students’ learning all because of a book they were reading. While one man cannot make right

the atrocities that occurred the previous summer, Officer Brad offered to talk to students, and his claim that he is “just glad that he can come in and help” shows an opportunity for community-building that this book provided. This encounter reflects a guiding principle from Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) where they outline the need to *use formative assessments to scaffold racial identity work*.

For this in-school field trip that Officer Brad spearheaded, students in world literature classes throughout the school wrote anywhere from 5-10 questions for our SRO about their wonderings regarding the life of a police officer, the intersection of being both Black and an officer, what his thoughts were on the protests the previous summer, and if his wife ever worried for his life while on the job. The students were able to showcase their own curiosity through this avenue, and while some students wrote questions which deviated from the topic about drugs and school fights, Officer Brad provided a new perspective for the students on topics related to our text. Some students even asked questions about *All American Boys* (Kiely & Reynolds, 2015) itself because they knew he had begun to read the novel. Through this opportunity, I created a writing and listening assignment for students. This was a “low-stakes, recursive” formative assessment, which was “ideal for scaffolding students’ white racial identity work with practice” (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2015, p. 110). We offered a space where students could ask their own questions without judgment, encouraging their intellectual curiosities and developing their understanding of race concepts.

Vignette four is where I feel like I am approaching a breakthrough with a student I worried would shut down while reading *All American Boys* (2015). Caleb, a white, male student, showed hesitance in the beginning stages of our reading, but he gradually became more interested in the plot and the characters themselves, showing growth that I had hoped would emerge during this unit. This student, whom I had admittedly thought of as pretty close-minded, was shifting his opinions because of a book. He first embodied color-blindness, what Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) say “describes the various rationales white people use to distance themselves from being perceived as racist while still uphold-

ing racist beliefs” (p. 77). He would often minimize the experiences of youth in the nonfiction supplementary texts we read whose experiences were unlike his.

However, Kiely and Reynolds’s (2015) book, discussion with his peers, and the conversation with our SRO all helped Caleb to change his mind. I worked to disrupt and not reinforce his prior knowledge, challenging his thoughts and leading him to think more critically. With Caleb and my other students, I engaged in positive race talk. We often would *embrace discomfort as growth* in my classroom, whether this was

**The reality, though, is that despite my initial foregrounding of antiracism and social justice in this curriculum, parts of my teaching still operated as a cog in the machine of oppression.**

interrogating our own racial biases through an online quiz or opening the floor for discussion on our thoughts about racial stereotyping. This new understanding of the world allowed Caleb to learn to humanize the experiences that were different from his own. While this was a struggle for him at first, for he related more to the white protagonist than the Black protagonist in the book, I endeavored to help Caleb see “discomfort as a meaningful part of the experience [of supporting racial literacy], rather than something to be avoided or ignored” (p. 98). In turn, he was able to better learn

from the novel and our class discussions and activities, supported by his new understanding of the word and the world.

### Implications

The vignettes above are meant to signify how I, a white, female educator in the Southeastern U.S., experienced teaching a realistic fiction novel where a young Black teenager is brutalized by a police officer. Three years ago, I taught a unit about social injustices in the world to highlight antiblackness in the United States, and I initially thought that it went very well. I had new community connections, and my students were able to better practice their discussion skills and increase their reading comprehension from reading a lengthier text than was usual. They even got to have their SRO speak to them in the lunchroom, and while most were just glad to get out of class, it ended up being an educational experience. The reality, though, is that despite my initial foregrounding of antiracism and social justice in this curriculum, parts of my teaching still operated as a cog in the machine of oppression.

As Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) highlight, it is not easy to admit you are not doing a great job addressing anti-

racism in your teaching (p. 1). For my teaching, I had instances of striving for justice, where I helped my students “to reach the depth of understanding necessary for fully grasping the complexities of systemic racism” (p. 13). However, I also hesitated in my teaching, choosing to retreat to my white privilege to avoid discomfort with others, shown in vignettes one and two. This choice, though, was one that prioritized my comfort over my BIPOC students. With these thoughts, it is important to keep in mind Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides’ framework for antiracist literature instruction. Especially in school systems which have majority populations of white faculty and students, this framework and other guidelines and frameworks—such as Ladson-Billings’ (2021) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy; Muhammad’s (2020; 2023) framework for historically responsive literacy instruction; Baker-Bell’s (2020) principles of linguistic justice; and, Love’s (2019) framework and guidance for abolitionist teaching—serve as foundations for supporting students’ racial literacies work.

Further, it is important to question the power and control at play in a school system where many restrictions to teaching are already present. Had I taught in a state where divisive concepts legislation (López et al., 2021) were not becoming a concern, I likely would have felt more comfortable addressing more liberatory topics with my colleagues and students. The reality, though, is that my job and my livelihood are at stake when teaching a topic someone may deem divisive. This indicates a need for coalitions of like-minded teachers working together to support and protect each other’s teaching. A coalition of teachers would not only support teacher autonomy but could also benefit student learning and work to balance joy and intellect with skills-acquisition. Further, protections for teachers at the level of unions in right-to-work states, like my own, would provide a better stronghold for educational professionals. It is undeniable that the curriculum in English language arts courses needs to reflect the diversity of experiences in the world, but some teachers’ curricular decisions to deviate from normative, white-centered ways of teaching are restricted from the national, state, or district level (Krebs, 2022).

Because this study focused on the researcher’s experience in a Southeastern state where restrictions to teaching are becoming normalized and whose pedagogical orientations already were centering social justice, this study is not generalizable to all English teachers. However, this work could inform other self-studies or studies of teachers undergoing in-

creased restrictions because of “divisive concepts” legislation (López et al., 2021). This study could also serve as a model for formalized reflection that white teachers can engage in to critically assess their own teaching through an antiracist lens. Further, because this experience details a unit where I taught in my third year as a lead teacher, this work could support preservice and other novice teachers’ preparation for a pedagogy which fosters an antiracist literacy instruction. With more stories of white teachers’ successes and failures, the field can better understand how to build preservice teaching programs while adhering to the many complicated layers that exist in the educational space.

### Conclusion: Why Does Everything Have to Be About Race?

While steps toward a more just, intersectional educational system have taken place, the U.S. education system is built to uphold eurocentric ideologies. With so many students living insular experiences where they can ignore the realities of racial discrimination, it is paramount to provide students with “an education that is inclusive of the rich diversity of the human experience” (Ebarvia et al., 2021). With my reflective vignettes, I was able to better examine my own experiences in engaging in antiracist literature instruction.

As educators in the K-16 sphere battle with policy, politics, and community concerns, it is ultimately important to break through what Bissonnette (2016) calls the “culture of niceness” present in so many schools for the good of an antiracist society (p. 10). Love (2019) explains, “Recognizing and acknowledging white privilege is cute, but what does it mean without action?” (p. 121). In my work, I tried working against white hegemony, which exists and flourishes in U.S. K-12 public schools. Despite some wavering, I found moments of connection where I felt more successful. I close this piece by continuing to reflect on how my whiteness functions in and outside of the classroom and how I continue to endeavor to let go of literary whiteness. Moving forward, I am committed to promoting critical consciousness and racial literacy in my teaching practices and to working in solidarity with BIPOC individuals to dismantle systemic racism in educational contexts. •

**Caroline B. Rabalais** is a Dean’s Research Doctoral Fellow in the College of Education and Human Development at Georgia State University in Atlanta, GA. Email: [cbedingfield1@student.gsu.edu](mailto:cbedingfield1@student.gsu.edu)

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