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Mapping Racial Literacies: College Students Write About Race and Segregation

Sophie Bell

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Reviewed by Angela F. Jacobs

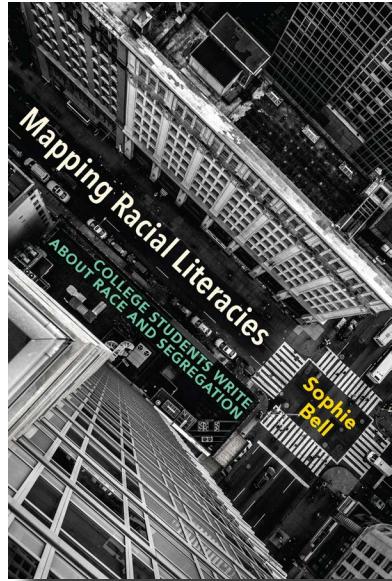
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As a multitude of writing scholars have noted, first-year writing courses (often referred to as FYC or FYW) cannot be taught without content, merely focusing on general writing skills. In Bell's text, *Mapping Racial Literacies: College Students Write About Race and Segregation*, she aptly carries on this ideology by noting how an FYW course can be used to help students grapple with important aspects of their daily lives. In her particular case, she utilizes her FYW course to help students grapple with racial literacies and the

racial geographies that govern their identities. In a mixed methods study spanning thousands of student texts from 2014 to 2018, Bell's text not only demonstrates the importance of lower division courses aiming for greater importance in students' lives, but also the idea that lower division courses, such as FYW, can better assist students in understanding their place in the world and the university itself.

In her initial analysis, Bell first seeks to position herself as a white woman teaching at a predominantly white school with a troubled history of conforming to calls, and legislation, for integration. Although Bell does not appear to have been instructed or required to teach or address race in her classroom, she saw a need for it, especially when students started demanding more racial equity on campus, in particular when students started protesting after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. To answer this demand, Bell structured her FYW course to address racial identity, focusing primarily on racial geography and language, to help her students grapple with their own ideas and attitudes regarding race.

In order to accomplish her goal, she used a variety of scholars specializing in aspects of race, society, and higher education to not only ground her endeavor, but also to guide her understanding of how her students were tackling the issues of race and racial identities she was asking for them to discuss in their writings. Throughout her teaching, she continued to learn more about the scholars engaging in racial identities in order to improve her courses and her understanding of her students. Each academ-



ic term brought with it a new challenge that Bell eagerly sought to address to better serve the needs of her students. While Larry Blum's "racial literacy" (19) research may have been a major curricular guide, the work of Beverly Daniel Tatum, an antiracist psychologist, and Lani Guinier, a Critical Race Theorist, served as the racial literacy sponsors for Bell's own racial identity development. In other words, rather than simply design a course on racial literacy, Bell did the work she expected of her students.

Each section of her text explores a different aspect of her FYW course that she seeks to disclose with her readers. Throughout, she uses a mapping metaphor for each section (Mapping Racial Geographies, Mapping Linguistic Geographies, Mapping Futures) to highlight how much racial identity and attitudes are grounded in real-world places, such as the various New York City boroughs from which some of her students hail. Although much of the discussion regarding race centers on the struggle between black and white America, Bell prominently features many Latinx and Asian American students (to include those from South Asia, as well) to demonstrate how their attitudes regarding race are just as important to consider, including the unique nature of their racial identities against the American backdrop.

In the introduction, Bell first explores the idea behind her class and how she started this journey. She includes student work and explores her methodology in order for her readers to understand how she went about her research, to include the scholarly underpinnings of her research and the importance of her findings. Bell notes several scholars who she credits with not only inspiring the impetus of her course, but also the scholarship she credits with being instrumental in her own racial identity journey as a white female teacher, a profession she states has often been "a relatively secure source of employment for white women" (7). The particular emphasis on this point denotes Bell's ethos in writing this particular text, especially considering her own experiences within the K-12 educational system. She feels it is important for white female instructors to be active in the recruitment and support of faculty of color, stating,

. . . we must do our own racial identity work in order to stay cognizant of [Sara] Ahmed's point that our whiteness protects us—as she puts it, our "residency is assumed"—and obscures from us the harmful practices in which we participate in educational institutions. (8)

To further assist in her own "racial identity work," especially in the classroom and higher education broadly, Bell reflects upon her own upbringing in a hypersegregated environment and how her desire to teach diverse students meant having to confront her own racial upbringing. For this particular course, Bell drew upon Tatum and Guinier, but also Ahmed's work on diversity work within the university, Laura Wexler's "sentimental imperialism" (7), Carmen Kynard's observations of the racial hypocrisy within American schools, Larry Blum's "racial literacy" (19), and Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz's work on racial literacy for education preservice teachers (19-20).

Bell closes this section by providing explicit details regarding her textual ethnography and digital archives, to include extensive note-taking techniques that not only took into account student texts, but also reflections on her pedagogy and institution-

al and national context that may have impacted a particular semester. Throughout her study, Bell is careful to note the backdrop of St. John's University, where she is full-time faculty. Despite it being named one of the most diverse universities in the nation, St. John's was a Catholic institution bent on avoiding the push towards the integration and more inclusive admissions practice of CUNY, to include relocating from its original location of Bedford-Stuyvesant to Brooklyn to further maintain de facto segregation. She notes the peculiar nature of this institution's eventual integration despite federal mandates which ultimately led to the institution integrating just as schools across the nation faced the resegregation efforts of the 1980s. It is through the lens of school resegregation that Bell ties her students' racial identities to their geographic locations, thus grounding her course with her students' lived experiences.

Beginning in the first chapter, Bell foremost lays out the context underlying the initial form of her first-year writing course, starting in 2014. Drawing upon the work of Nikole Hannah-Jones, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, and Aja Martinez, this chapter lays the groundwork for the guiding principles for her course. With the backdrop of the Michael Brown murder and subsequent national racial strife, Bell aptly links school resegregation and hypersegregated white communities as tools for understanding racial vision and dismantling the notion of colorblindness.

In chapter two, Bell explores how various students understood their neighborhoods and how peer review groups helped students to unlock their ideas. She focuses on a specific peer review group of three female students to illustrate how students through the years interpreted their racial identities by their environments. Within her analysis of student writings and peer review exchanges, Bell is able to explore the difficulties of subverting colorblind racism. Using Krista Radcliffe's "rhetorical listening" (71), Bell is able to develop the notion of the "emotional imperative," which she defines as the "call for telling stories with emotional impact on peer reviewers" (93) in order to increase the level of empathy she hoped students would develop as they read about another's racial experience. Although she noticed some resistance to moving beyond a certain level of empathy amongst her students as they grappled with racial literacy, this notion prompted her to overtly link racial geographies to colorblind racism in future assignments.

Within chapter three, which the author herself notes as being a seeming detour from addressing racial geographies, Bell explores how linguistic geographies can govern how a student may see their racial identity and understand race itself as she examines students who were, at one time, placed within the ESL program before attending college. In her exploration of student responses to their own linguistic resources, Bell utilizes scholars such as Suresh Canagarajah and his examination of Geneva Smitherman's work regarding Black language and code meshing. As she appropriately notes, the trope of using Black language "to mark the limits of acceptable academic discourse" not only promotes anti-Blackness, but also completely ignores the multiple dialects intrinsic across the English speaking world, setting the stage for multilingual speakers to disregard their language resources (108).

Chapter four explores how past experiences assisting students in understanding racism on a broader scale led to Bell creating a special research assignment into in-

stitutional racism, which had students linking institutional racism to their program of study. Bell also highlights the racial literacy journey of a white female student who, much like herself, sought a career in education and was raised in a hypersegregated environment, but who also had a law enforcement connection. Bell used this particular analysis as a reflection of the lack of racial literacy on St. John's campus, while also using this journey to better understand the circuitous nature of developing racial literacies. Bell comments on the general sense that people of color are seen as being obvious racial literacy sponsors, but she also describes the tenuous journey towards racial vision that she notices in her white students, especially the one highlighted in this chapter. Bell offers that these white students can make solid racial literacy sponsors, especially in her subsequent FYW classes.

Within the book's epilogue, Bell recognizes that she likely receives less resistance in teaching this subject matter because of her whiteness, noting that her colleagues of color were often met with resistance that stems beyond a student's difficulty in writing. This section also sees the author continuing to revise the course, learning from her students and their experiences with racial literacy development. Ultimately, it is her goal to be an active participant in aiding the university in being antiracist.

There are several aspects that readers should grasp upon completing Bell's interesting text. First, Bell is open regarding her own racial literacy development and the work she still continues to do, not only in terms of curriculum, but also in terms of grappling with her own racial identity. She also notes how important it was for her to not only learn how to properly ground and frame the course, but that it was also important for her to research the appropriate means by which to read student work. This distinction is important to note in that she asks students to tackle a sensitive subject matter that requires a certain amount of tact and sensitivity so that students understand she is not assessing their experiences but how they tackle the assignment requirements. This concept is important for all FYW teachers to keep in mind. Bell also guides the reader through her journey as she makes constant revisions to her course, keeping the overall goal of lifelong learning in mind, a common goal of FYW. While the chapters are long and can feel winding, Bell sufficiently guides the reader as she transitions from one aspect of her subtopic to another, insistent upon being with her reader every step of the way, thus making the text accessible. The subject she selected for her FYW course is not for the faint of heart or for those who simply wish to virtue signal. Additionally, the sheer number of scholars she draws upon can seem daunting, but what Bell shows is the importance of staying current in our scholarship in order to make a course that some believe is irrelevant into something worthwhile. Bell provides a way for the FYW course to matter in the 21st century, providing not only a blueprint for teaching a composition course on racial literacies and geographies, but she also provides copies of her assignments for those interested in following in her footsteps to support students in developing a deeper level of racial and social consciousness.