

# MAPPING RACIAL LITERACIES

*College Students Write about  
Race and Segregation*

SOPHIE R. BELL

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Logan*

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To my students

*For sharing this work with me and—wherever you could—making it your own. Thank you for your patience, insight, humor, and risk-taking. Thank you for making every possible use of the opportunities offered in our classroom, in particular when you have been able to push my thinking, and that of other students, in new and productive ways.*

To my mother, Claudia Swett Gwardyak

*For her unequivocal support of every attempt I've made to write, since the days when she sat at the typewriter and transcribed my youthful ideas. For her own work against racism and sexism. For her unshakable faith in education as a tool of liberation, and the work she does to put that faith into action.*

To my late father, Michael Davitt Bell

*For his love of teaching and writing and his commitment to racial and gender justice. For his excitement about passing that love and commitment on to the next generations of our family.*

*In essence, meaningful opportunities for cross-racial contact are diminishing, especially in schools. What effect is that having on students, both White and of color, and their teachers? What are the implications for classroom performance and academic achievement? Interpersonal relations? Our evolving democracy? What can we as educators and citizens do to ensure that the arc of the moral universe continues to bend toward justice in our society?*

Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Can We Talk about Race? And Other Conversations in an Era of Resegregation* xi

*Racism is a structural phenomenon that fabricates interdependent yet paradoxical relationships between race, class, and geography. [Countering it] requires a new racial literacy, meaning the capacity to decipher the durable racial grammar that structures racialized hierarchies and frames the narrative of our republic.*

Lani Guinier, "From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma," *Journal of American History* 117

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The premise of this book is that teachers can and must continually learn alongside their students. I am extremely grateful to my students for teaching me so much over the years. In particular, as a white teacher exploring the role of racial literacy and racial geography in my students' lives, and my own, there have been many things I have struggled to understand and process in the conversations and writing that take place in my classes. I have appreciated the opportunity to learn with and from my students during this process. However, expecting to learn exclusively from my students in these areas would be irresponsible. I have also benefited enormously from the insights and generosity of other people who listened to these stories, encouraged me to theorize and write about them, and helped me move this account of my teaching out of my classroom and into this form. This process has been exciting, nerve-wracking, and error ridden, and I am grateful for many forms of support and correction along the way.

This book was written during a semester's leave and three semesters of course release. In the teaching-intensive field of composition, supporting classroom research is crucial to fostering pedagogies conducive to student learning and teacher growth. I thank St. John's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences for providing this for me, and Dean Jeffrey Fagen in particular.

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cover design captured the spirit of this project in a delightfully unexpected way.

The editorial collective of *Radical Teacher* has provided a decades-long home base for critical analysis of educational politics, attention to the complexities of classrooms, and warm fellowship for embattled teachers. Dick Ohmann in particular has encouraged and supported my writing about schools since I taught high school in the 1990s.

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Writing about institutional change is good, but changing institutions is better. While I developed this curriculum and wrote this book, people on the campus where I teach began to undertake the difficult task of improving the university's culture and practices of equity and inclusion for students, faculty, and other community members from marginalized and minoritized groups. Student activists—in particular, the members of Spectrum, Students of Consciousness, the Black Student Union, and the NAACP—displayed courage, clarity, and leadership in imagining and demanding concrete, positive changes. Many administrators and faculty members put themselves on the line when students called for institutional change, doing deep work on many levels to create conditions to make it happen. In 2020, several faculty have founded the Critical Race and Ethnic Studies Program. At the university level, Nada Llewellyn, Manouchkathé Cassagnol, and Monique Jernigan have stepped forward to offer creative, transformative, engaged leadership. I acknowledge their inspiring work and also acknowledge others who are changing my institution in ways I don't know about. I hope the classroom work I describe in this book contributes to building capacity for such institutional change. However, the entrenched inequalities my students report will remain unchanged without the leadership of courageous students, faculty, and others.

This is a book about my own position as a white woman invested in teaching in ways that challenge whiteness. While white teachers need to do this work, our ability to do it has many limitations. I am grateful to people of color who have honestly challenged me and/or collaborated with me. I appreciate and value the feedback I have received from colleagues of color at St. Johns and beyond. I am also grateful to other white people for the opportunity to learn alongside you as we share our struggles to see, understand, and address racism, especially our own.

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