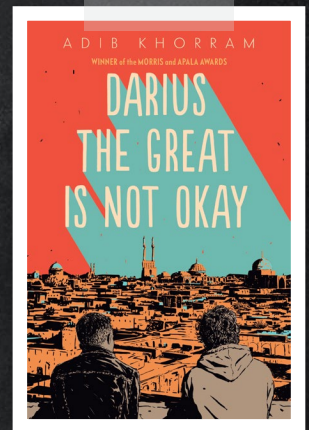
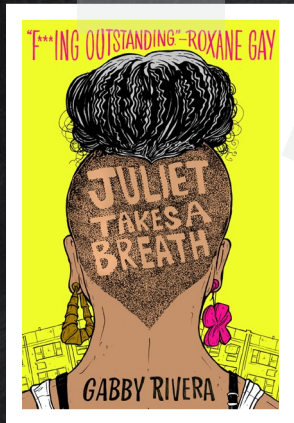
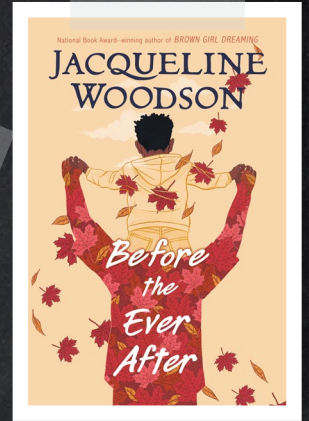


#DISRUPTTEXTS

IN YOUR CLASSROOM WITH THESE 8 TEXTS!



In partnership with #DisruptTexts, learning guides for eight individual texts and how they align to the #DisruptTexts pillars!



DEAR EDUCATOR,

We are honored to partner up with #DisruptTexts to bring you this resource to help you bring equity to your classroom or library! These are, by no means, the only eight texts to use; but we hope they provide a scaffolding to bring change and choice for your students.

SINCERELY,

Penguin Young Readers School + Library Marketing



WHAT IS #DISRUPTTEXTS?

Disrupt Texts is a crowdsourced, grass roots effort by teachers for teachers to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve. Co-founded by Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán, Dr. Kimberly N. Parker, and Julia Torres, #DisruptTexts's mission to aid and develop teachers committed to antiracist/anti-bias teaching pedagogy and practices.

There are four core principles to #DisruptTexts:

1. **Continuously interrogate our own biases and how they inform our thinking.**

As teachers, we have been socialized in certain values, attitudes, and beliefs that inform the way we read, interpret, and teach texts, and the way we interact with our students. Ask: How are my own biases affecting the way I'm teaching this text and engaging with my students?

2. **Center Black, Indigenous, and voices of color in literature.**

Literature study in U.S. classrooms has largely focused on the experiences of white- (and male-) dominated society, as perpetuated through a traditional, Euro-centric canon. Ask: What voices—authors or characters—are marginalized or missing in our study? How are these perspectives authentic to the lived experiences of communities of color?

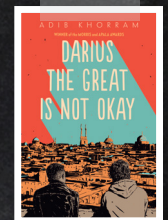
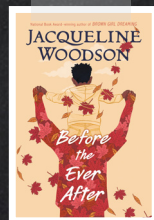
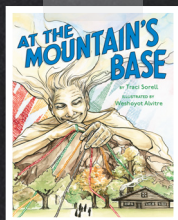
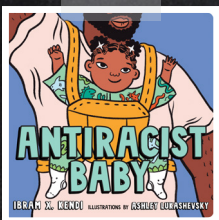
3. Apply a critical literacy lens to our teaching practices.

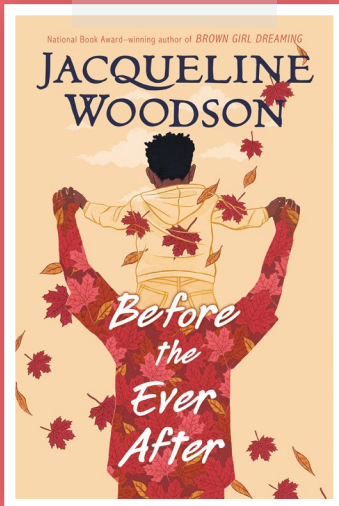
While text-dependent analysis and close reading are important skills for students to develop, teachers should also support students in asking questions about the way that such texts are constructed. Ask: How does this text support or challenge issues of representation, fairness, or justice? How does this text perpetuate or subvert dominant power dynamics and ideologies? And how can we ask students to wrestle with these tensions?

4. Work in community with other antiracist educators, especially Black, Indigenous, and other educators of color.

To disrupt and transform curriculum and instruction requires working with other educators who can challenge and work with us as antiracist educators. Ask: How can we collaborate to identify, revise, or create instructional resources (like this guide) that can center and do justice to the experiences of historically marginalized communities?

Each principle stands for actions that are culturally sustaining and antiracist. Through each principle, teachers aim to offer a curriculum that is restorative, inclusive, and therefore works toward healing identities and communities. As you read this guide, you'll see how each of these principles informs the approach recommended to teach *Before the Ever After*.





BEFORE THE EVER AFTER

by Jacqueline Woodson

ABOUT THE BOOK

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD WINNER JACQUELINE WOODSON'S STIRRING NOVEL-IN-VERSE EXPLORES HOW A FAMILY MOVES FORWARD WHEN THEIR GLORY DAYS HAVE PASSED AND EXAMINES THE COST OF PROFESSIONAL SPORTS ON BLACK BODIES.

For as long as ZJ can remember, his dad has been everyone's hero. As a charming, talented pro football star, he's as beloved to the neighborhood kids he plays with as he is to his millions of adoring sports fans. But lately life at ZJ's house is anything but charming. His dad is having trouble remembering things and seems to be angry all the time. ZJ's mom explains it's because of all the head injuries his dad sustained during his career. ZJ can understand that—but it doesn't make the sting any less real when his own father forgets his name. As ZJ contemplates his new reality, he has to figure out how to hold on tight to family traditions and recollections of the glory days, all the while wondering what their past amounts to if his father can't remember it. And most importantly, can those happy feelings ever be reclaimed when they are all so busy aching for the past?

Considerations for Teachers and Students

CONSIDERATIONS AROUND POETRY AND NOVELS IN VERSE

This novel has a unique structure in that it is a story told in vignettes in poetic form. In the same way that we remember events as snippets of time, an image, a scent, song lyrics, or the way someone's voice made us feel, this novel is made of poems that capture these moments. Readers should learn to examine each of the poems as snapshots in time, each with their own distinct elements, e.g. word choice, tone, imagery, rhyme (or the absence of it), and meter. Both individually and collectively they work to tell the story of ZJ's memory coming together as his father's breaks apart. Study the poems thematically, as the study of individual characters, or as a timeline of events. Readers may find it useful to use TP-FASTT—Title (significance pre-reading), Paraphrase, Figurative Devices, Attitude (or Tone), Shift (in tone, subject, diction), Title (revisit significance post-reading), Theme—to analyze each poem, or a series of poems, in order to make

Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

greater meaning. Additionally, some review of [common poetic terms](#) will help readers identify changes in word choice or syntax that may have important significance.

CONSIDERATIONS AROUND RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

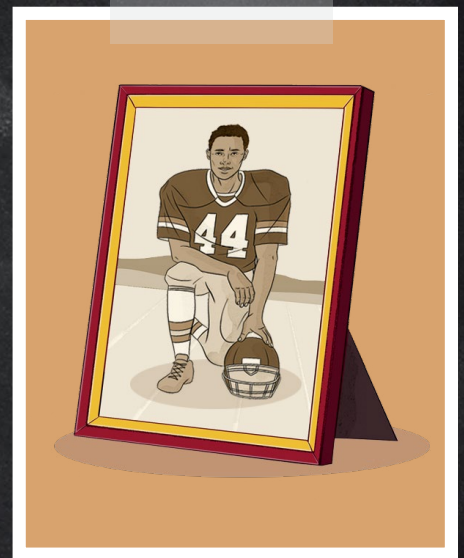
ZJ belongs to an African American family living in Maplewood, New Jersey. Some of the struggles that the family faces are due to the allure of economic mobility and social status associated with a professional sports career. ZJ mentions many times that he expects to have a career just like his father, until he experiences firsthand the cost of choosing to be a professional football player.

Around 70% of the NFL's players are Black. This overrepresentation is troubling because only 9% of league office managers are Black, and of the team CEOs and owners, 0% are Black. So, essentially, all of the risk and physical consequences of professional football fall upon the bodies of the Black players, while white team owners reap the financial and long-term professional rewards.

CONSIDERATIONS AROUND MENTAL HEALTH, ATHLETICISM, AND HEROISM

Some of the mythology constructed around professional sports includes the idea that professional athletes recover from injuries before returning to the game. In *Before the Ever After*, Woodson dismantles this by addressing the disconnect between dreams and reality. The reality is that professional athletes often do not recover from their injuries completely, but instead, they return to the game as soon as possible because the length of professional athletes' careers is often short. In fact, [the average NFL football player's career lasts just 2.5 years](#).

When society builds up and positions professional athletes as heroes, there is a difficult burden that ordinary humans have to carry, that of living an extraordinary life for a short period of time and then figuring out what to do with the rest of their lives.



Illustrations by Stephanie Singleton

Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

In the case of ZJ's father, his football career gets cut short after a series of traumatic brain injuries that change not only his life, but the lives of those he loves, especially the son who worships him. Much of the education that *should* happen around the serious nature of cumulative traumatic brain injuries, also known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), simply does not occur. In a capitalist society, the allure of fame and fortune connected with the pro sports world seduces many into risking their lives or long-term futures for immediate rewards.

If professional athletes are lucky enough to escape CTE or any other serious physical injury, many still retire due to the inevitable limitations of the human body. The facts are that even with helmets or rigorous physical therapy, most professional athletes re-injure themselves eventually; it's only a matter of time. The more severe the injury, the longer it takes to heal, and the greater the likelihood that injury will repeat itself once the player returns to the field. Fear of reinjuring, increased age, chronic pain, and the likelihood of permanent health issues are all factors that encourage athletes to retire early. In *Before the Ever After*, ZJ's father experiences life-altering mental-health issues that are a consequence of CTE. The premature end of his professional football career causes changes in his mental health, family structure, and relationships with those around him. Seeing the impact of professional sports through the eyes of one intimately affected by its long-term consequences offers readers a unique perspective on mental health, heroism, athleticism, and the very personal cost of professional football as a national pastime.

Additional Resources:

[Mental Illnesses: Terms to Use. Terms to Avoid.](#)

[End of Regulation: Why Are NFL Players Retiring Earlier? – PR News](#)

[What is CTE | Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy](#)

[Racism, pain two constants for NFL players according to Dr. Robert Turner](#)

[Racial & Gender Report Card | TIDES](#)

Key Concepts and Terms

Depression

Anxiety

PTSD

It is important to create structures in educational environments where students are accustomed to learning about and using these words because the ideas themselves (if not always the explicit vocabulary) do appear in the text. Other words, concepts, and ideas will occur throughout the text as well. Consider building a word wall of familiar and unfamiliar terms, and adding to the list as you read to co-create definitions. Using the list above, invite students to engage in pre-reading research mini projects. Through their research, you can have whole group discussions and talk about these larger social issues. You can use the questions below to guide the discussion:

1. What, in our society, inhibits conversations about these matters?
2. Based on your research, are these common issues in our society? If so, what are some healthy ways to engage in conversation about them?
3. Now that you understand these concepts better, have you ever read a story where characters were dealing with anxiety, depression, or PTSD?
4. Now that you understand these concepts better, can you think of someone in your life possibly dealing with these issues? If so, are you thinking of what you can do to support them?
5. What do you think might happen in this story considering this research and these conversations we are having?

After the discussion, invite students to keep these ideas in mind as they read. These conversations can build a helpful foundation for engaging thoughtfully in the Essential Questions, Journal Prompts, and Lessons we've outlined here.

Themes and Essential Questions:

Disillusionment of Dreams: What do individuals often discover about the relationship between dreams and reality as they grow older? What happens to ZJ and his father as a consequence of his father realizing his dreams of becoming a pro football star?

Family: How do families shape character? What relationships exist within ZJ's family? How do they change as the novel's events play out for each character?

Heroism: What typically heroic traits does ZJ's father have? Which, if any of the characteristics does ZJ share? How does ZJ's father embody the tragic hero? Does ZJ see his father as a/his hero? How is his view different from society's?

Love: How do individuals typically express love in families and friendships? What types of love appear in this story? How does the expression of love change throughout the events in the narrative? What stereotypes are dismantled by the love shared and expressed by characters in this story?

Loss of Innocence: What types of events cause individuals to grow up quickly, or move from innocence to experience? What causes ZJ to wake up to the reality of the life consequences caused by his father's injuries?

Memory: How do our memories of the past influence perceptions of present reality? How does ZJ remember his father? How does their relationship change as his father's memories begin to fade?

Survival: What are some traits of survivors? What obstacles or challenges do each of the novel's central characters have to survive? How does their survival shape their character?

Vulnerability: What are some societal attitudes toward physical or emotional vulnerability? What happens to ZJ's father, emotionally, once his disease starts to develop? How does he handle this vulnerability? How does ZJ's perception of his father change as a result of these physical and emotional challenges?



Discussion Questions







PRE-READING:

- What do you think is the difference between a physical disability and a mental health issue?
- What types of physical and mental challenges do you think athletes who participate in contact sports might develop over time?
- What hints about the plot might the title of the book suggest?
- What attributes and traits make someone a hero?

DURING READING:

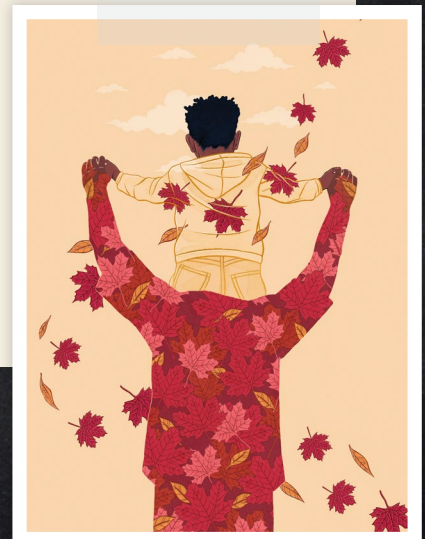
- ZJ is working hard to develop and build his own memory. Why?
- Trace the progression of ZJ's relationship with his father as the disease in his brain progresses.
- What are the ways ZJ is coping with his pain and loss?
- Who are the people in ZJ's life that he is depending on? How are they supporting him? What makes them a good support system?

POST-READING:

- What new understandings do you have about living with someone dealing with a physical disability?
 - What responsibility, if any, does the NFL have for supporting athletes who are physically suffering from injuries obtained during their NFL careers?
 - By the end of the story, ZJ has quit any form of football playing. What do you think about that decision?
 - When ZJ says "Good luck, bruh." to Everette, what do you think he means by that?
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Journal Prompts

- Do you know any professional sports players by name? If so, what do you think they are like in-person? Have you or anyone you know ever met them? How do the expectations of what they would be like match their reality?
- Do you play sports? Have you ever wondered what it would be like to play professional sports? What kind of aspirations do you have for the role of athletics in your life? If you aren't athletic, do you know any athletes? What role does playing sports have in their life?
- What is the relationship between ZJ and his father? Describe your relationship with your caregivers. What types of activities do you do to bond or connect?
- Have you ever experienced a time when it was difficult to communicate with your caregivers? If so, how did you overcome it?
- Describe how ZJ sees his father at the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. How does their relationship change? What events can you pinpoint that affect their ability to communicate with each other?
- ZJ loves music, and it's an activity that allows him both to cope with his feelings and connect with his father. Do you have any hobbies or activities you partake in that help you cope with difficult emotions?



Lesson Ideas

1. CONDUCT A COUNTER NARRATIVE STUDY

One of the strengths of this book is that it offers us a counter narrative to common misconceptions and stereotypes about African American men. These stereotypes are built through literary imagery, news, general media, and socialization. Through the power of literature, we can provide students with truth. In this story, Woodson offers us a gentle, loving, vulnerable, and emotional portrayal of Black manhood. Consider the following references:

“He’s my dad, which means / he’s my every single thing.” (4)

Revisit “You Love a Thing?” on pages 12–13

Read “Ollie” on pages 16–17 and pay attention to, “Ollie looks at my dad sometimes / with those bright green eyes like he’s deep / in a dream of remembering his own father living.” (17)

“I don’t remember how old I was, but / I remember my daddy’s smile.” (22)

Read “Tears” on pages 25–26.

Read “The Trail” on pages 114–116.

“My smile is the whole moon. / That bright. / That big.” (137)

Whether in groups or in a whole class setting, invite students to discuss or write about the following questions after reading the quotes and passages listed above:

- What imagery is Woodson creating through these quotes and passages?
- What words would you use to describe ZJ, his friends, and his father?
- What experiences do they go through, and how is friendship at the center of this story?
- What stereotypes do certain quotes and passages address?

2. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

What are some clues we get about each character based on the conversations they have with one another and the ways ZJ perceives them? It may be helpful to look at each poem and consider what it says explicitly, what readers think about the poem’s title and central message, and then what the poem reveals

Lesson Ideas (cont.)

about the character. Ex. "Wishes" (72). In this poem, ZJ reflects on the fact that his father got everything he wished for and how that affected his family relationships. What does the poem say explicitly with the phrase "careful what you wish for"? What can readers infer about ZJ as a result of this moment of reflection?

3. CONFLICT & TENSION ANALYSIS

Throughout this book, the characters face both external and internal conflicts and there is tension building. After defining these types of conflicts with students, and after explaining tension, revisit the text and find moments of each. Once identified, discuss these conflicts and tensions, and how they push the plot forward and also help develop characterization. Consider the document below for this analysis.

Name	Date			
	Conflict/ Tension quote and page #	Conflict or Tension?	Your summary of the conflict or tension	How it impacts plot or characterization
Example	"She tells me more about the doctor in Philadelphia. / <i>They are studying the connection, she says, / between concussions and what's happening to your dad.</i> " (100)	This moment in the story is an example of tension.	The lack of information and diagnosis from doctors is a tension building for ZJ. He is becoming frustrated at not knowing what is wrong with his father and he feels overwhelmed.	This rising tension develops the plot because it keeps the reader engaged. We want to know what the diagnosis is and what is wrong with his father.

Lesson Ideas (cont.)

4. SYMBOLISM ANALYSIS

Throughout the book there are many objects that symbolize ideas in the text that impact other literary devices. Invite students to explore what the following objects might symbolize.

- Dad's socks (after he is ill): Explain that the socks symbolize the father's deterioration and his inability to physically care for himself. It reveals how he is requiring more and more in-person support for daily activities. It offers the reader a representation of how the father is moving into a space where he will need more permanent and clinical help.
- ZJ's guitar: Explain that this guitar is a symbol for ZJ's peace, relationship to his father, and self-care. It's through this guitar that he continues to connect with his father, and music seems to be the main tool he's using to build his memory of what once was. The guitar is also what affords him peace as he struggles to watch his father's health spiral.

Then, in partners, instruct them to search for more objects and prepare a presentation, with citations included, on what those objects might symbolize and why. Some objects students can select are: a football, the trail, their house, the trees outside, windows, songs, and more.

5. PLOT ANALYSIS

Deconstruct the plot by plotting central events on a timeline. Plot the development of their father-son relationship with events before, during, and after the gradual deterioration of ZJ's father's memory. Match poems with events and create a timeline that can be chronological, or use reverse chronology to travel back in time to the earliest memories ZJ has with his father.

6. DECONSTRUCTING MEMORIES

One of the interesting things about memory is that it is subjective. Try to look at poems that capture both ZJ's and his father's perspective, such as "Day after the Game" (5) or "You Love a Thing?" (12). What details from plot events can you match to each character? Try to read the poem for details from one character's perspective, then "see" the events from the other character's perspective. What details are the same? What is different? Write short reflections on a few poems detailing how the memory of the event might be different depending on perspective. Use lines from the poems as text evidence to support your ideas.

Extension Activities

Study Woodson's Writings: Consider pairing this book with other books Woodson has published. Engage students in a study of language, poetry, word choice, and a general study of the author's craft. This novel can be paired with *Harbor Me*, *The Day You Begin*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming*.

Study CTE: Use this novel to engage students in an interdisciplinary (science-based) study of CTE and other physical disabilities connected to sports. After the research, students can engage in discussions about ways professional organizations can better support athletes. They can also discuss projects around creating awareness campaigns so more people know about these injuries and their potential for long-term debilitating effects. Consider exploring the following resources:

[End of Regulation: Why Are NFL Players Retiring Earlier? – PR News](#)

[What is CTE | Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy](#)

Art & Music Therapy: Once ZJ's father begins his decline, it is clear that music is a source of peace, connection, and healing for all members of the family. Welcome students into a study of art and music therapy to learn more about how that happens and why. Their research can include interviewing art and music teachers at the school, visiting websites that explain this topic further, listening to TED Talks on the matter, and reading articles that might explain some of the science and psychology behind art and music therapy. Once the research is finished, maybe they can create what they believe is a healing music playlist or a curation of artwork that is healing or leads to inner peace.



Illustrations by Stephanie Singleton

#DisruptTexts is not simply about replacing older texts for new ones; rather, it is a more nuanced and holistic approach aimed at offering a restorative and antiracist curriculum. #DisruptTexts requires that we as educators interrogate our own biases, center the voices of BIPOC in literature, help students develop a critical lens, and work in community with other antiracist and BIPOC educators. Together we will bring about change in society.

JULIA E. TORRES is a veteran language arts teacher librarian in Denver, Colorado. Julia facilitates teacher development workshops rooted in the areas of antiracist education, equity and access in literacy and librarianship, and education as a practice of liberation. Julia works with students and teachers locally and around the country with the goal of empowering them to use literacy to fuel resistance and positive social transformation. Julia also serves on several local and national boards and committees promoting educational equity and progressivism. She is the current NCTE Secondary Representative-at-large, a Book Love Foundation board member and Educator Collaborative Book Ambassador.

LORENA GERMÁN is a Dominican American educator based in Austin, Texas. A two-time nationally awarded educator, she works with middle and high school students, using an anti bias and antiracist approach to teaching. She's Co-Founder of [Multicultural Classroom](#), through which she supports teachers and schools, and is Chair of NCTE's Committee Against Racism & Bias in the Teaching of English, in addition to being a writer (Heinemann 2021), speaker, and professional development provider.

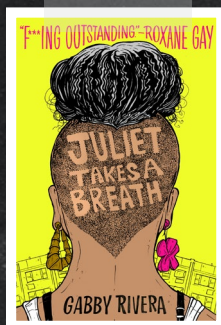
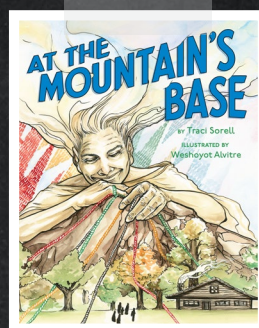
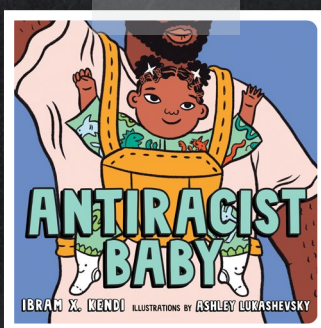
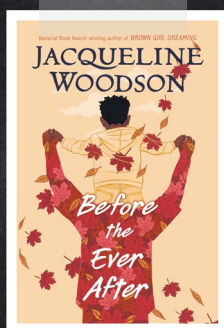
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DR. KIMBERLY N. PARKER currently prepares preservice teachers as the Assistant Director of the Teacher Training Center at the Shady Hill School in Cambridge, MA. She is the 2020 recipient of the NCTE Outstanding Elementary Educator Award and is a co-founder of #DisruptTexts and #31DaysIBPOC. Twitter: [@TchKimpossible](https://twitter.com/TchKimpossible)


TRICIA EBARVIA is a high school English teacher with almost twenty years of experience, a co-Director at the PA Writing & Literature Project, a Heinemann Fellow, and co-Founder of #DisruptTexts and #31DaysIBPOC. In order for students to become responsible, engaged participants in their communities, Tricia believes that educators must teach from an anti-bias, critical literacy stance and is the author of a forthcoming book on anti-bias literacy practices. Tricia can be found on social media [@triciaebarvia](https://twitter.com/triciaebarvia) and at triciaebarvia.org.

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