WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

In a time when teachers are feeling more constrained than ever, this book serves as a path forward to breaking free from the biases and social norms that hold us back. Ebarvia has created a comprehensive tool kit that marries necessary theory to practical classroom application, which is nothing short of amazing and will be one of the most frequently pulled books from your professional library.

—Susan G. Barber
Teacher, Author, and Consultant
MuchAdoAboutTeaching.com

Get Free: Antibias Literacy Instruction for Stronger Readers, Writers, and Thinkers hits that beautiful sweet spot between inspirational and practical. Through stories, real examples of student work, and artfully synthesized theory, this book provides reflections, tools, and tangible strategies for educators who seek to help us all get free.

—Sarah-SoonLing Blackburn
Educator, Author, Speaker

What does it mean to be free? And how can we, as educators, create conditions for students to answer that for themselves? Ebarvia asks the most important questions of the moment and guides readers on a journey to help them answer the questions for themselves. With every word, it is clear Ebarvia has a deep belief in educators to rise to the occasion and support students to become the critical changemakers we need for a more just society.

—Val Brown
Educator Activist and Organizer

Ebarvia has written for us a guide for how to use education the right way: how to invite students into freedom through literacy and classwork. This is genius and I'm so excited for it to be out in the world.

—Lorena Germán
Author of *Textured Teaching: A Framework for a Culturally Sustaining Practice*
Co-Founder of #DisruptTexts

Get Free is a powerful resource for teachers striving to improve literacy instruction while creating a just and inclusive classroom. It blends academic research with real-world experiences to provide practical strategies for nurturing stronger readers. The book shows teachers how to create classrooms that embrace every student's unique identities and experiences, making it a must-have for transformative educators.

—Britt Hawthorne
New York Times bestselling author
Raising Antiracist Children: A Practical Parenting Guide

Ebarvia's book *Get Free: Antibias Literacy Instruction for Stronger Readers* highlights the often overlooked and necessary aspects of the literacy classroom that truly centers students. Supporting educators to create bold, honest, and brave spaces for ALL students, this book is the one I'll be giving to all the educators I know. Freedom is the goal and Ebarvia will help us to get there!

—Tiffany Jewell
New York Times bestselling author
This Book Is Anti-Racist

This is the book I needed my teachers to have when I was a student, the book I needed as a teacher, and the book I need now as a teacher-educator. It is a gift and offering for educators interested in equity and social justice—one that centers the humanity of everyone on this journey.

—Jung Kim
Professor of Literacy, Co-Department
Chair of Education, Lewis University

This beautifully crafted, research based, practically minded book will help you to solve a whole host of problems in your classroom. Students not finding the work of literacy class relevant? This book will help. Are you only able to reach a group of students while somehow others don't click into your teaching? This book will help. Concerned (or not sure) about the ways in which power and privilege affect your school community? This book will help. By uncovering the subtle biases we hold that have dramatic effects on students, outlining ways to build real community in our classrooms, and then setting the table for some deep, vibrant teaching that develops both antibiased schools and relevant reading, writing, and discourse work, Ebarvia masterfully plots a journey we can and must all begin—today.

—Kate Roberts
Author and Consultant

What a gift Tricia Ebarvia has given us in the form of this brilliant book. Weaving together thoughtful scholarship and practical pedagogical tools, Ebarvia has constructed a must-read for educators. I can't wait to share this book broadly with my networks!

—Karen Scher
English Language Arts Lead, Facing History and Ourselves

Get Free: Antibias Literacy Instruction for Stronger Readers, Writers, and Thinkers guides literacy educators through the self-work required to effectively teach against historical and current inequities within literacy education. By providing practical examples and relevant lesson plans, the book empowers the reader to create inclusive, equitable, and transformative literacy learning experiences for students—*and teachers*.

—Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz
Professor of English Education, Teachers College,
Columbia University
Co-Author of *Advancing Racial Literacies in Teacher Education: Activism for Equity in Digital Spaces*

Get Free is a must-read for every teacher of literacy. In the book, Ebarvia reminds us that our personal identities cannot be separated from the work we do as teachers and that unpacking our experiences and biases is critical. Then she serves as mentor and guide on a journey to help us understand what it can look like in a classroom to be free as a teacher and learner.

—Franki Sibberson
Literacy educator, Past President of the
National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)
Co-Author of *Still Learning to Read: Teaching Students in Grades 3–6*

Built on decades of teaching and leading, *Get Free* provides key activities and concrete examples for how to create and sustain an antibias practice of literacy. These chapters, strategies, and key questions give educators the tools to see how identity shows up in our teaching and learning, and how to support deep learning to get free through literacy.

—Liza A. Talusan
Author, *The Identity-Conscious Educator: Building Habits and Skills for a More Inclusive School*

For Brian, Matthew, Toby, and Colin —
you make me a better human. I love you.

Get Free

Antibias Literacy Instruction for Stronger Readers, Writers, and Thinkers

Tricia Ebarvia

Foreword by

Sonja Cherry-Paul, Aeriale Johnson, Anna Osborn, Kimberly N. Parker, and Tiana Silvas

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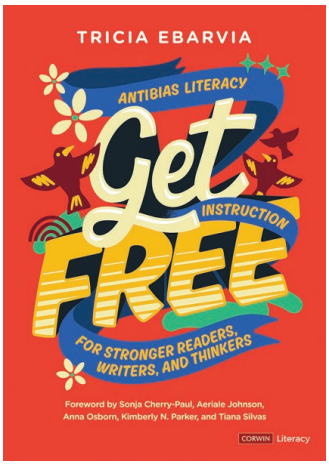
A NOTE ON ARTWORK



Writing is putting one word after another to make meaning—but the words on these pages are made more meaningful by the beautiful artwork of Gian Wong.

When I began to imagine how *Get Free* might look and feel in readers' hands, I knew I wanted the visual elements to reflect who I am just as much as my words did. I first encountered Gian's work on Instagram and then on his website (gianwong.com). While I loved the creative ways he brought colors and shapes together, it was the way he integrated Filipino culture throughout his art that resonated with me. Growing up, I didn't always feel like school was a place where I could share my Filipino heritage. To have that part of my identity reflected in these pages *means* something, everything.

Philippine history may be marked by colonization, but it is also one that has inspired resilience and liberation. On the cover, the ribbon element bearing the subtitle symbolizes freedom, the "ability to let loose and be liberated" (Wong) as does the bursting, contrasting typography of the title. Indeed, every element on the cover is a nod to Filipino culture: the red, blue, and yellow colors of the Philippine flag; three stars representing the three major island regions of Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao; the waves evoking Philippine beaches; the modern rendering of the sampaguita, national flower of the Philippines; and, of course, Maya birds, indigenous birds to the Philippines, breaking free in flight.

Likewise, interwoven throughout the book are patterns and imagery inspired by traditional ethnic textiles and Filipino culture, and the central theme of each chapter is mirrored in Gian's corresponding artwork. I am so grateful for Gian's time, talents, and understanding. May the words and images that come together in these pages remind us of the beauty that is possible whenever we come together in community.

FOREWORD

The Sampaguita, the national flower of the Philippines: symbolizes how, like a flower, we can be abundant and bloom through others

INTRODUCTION

The Philippine sun (“araw”): symbolizes the spark and light in each individual that makes them unique

CHAPTER 1: OURSELVES

A scene of the Mayon Volcano: symbolizes reflection and the self through a reflected image of the famous volcano

CHAPTER 2: COMMUNITY

The Maya bird (“mayang pula”), a common bird in the Philippines: symbolizes how a bird takes that first step to bravery that inspires others to take action

CHAPTER 3: IDENTITY

The Philippine Mango (“mangga”): symbolizes how we can open our different sides to people, similar to a mango having different sides that reveal what’s inside

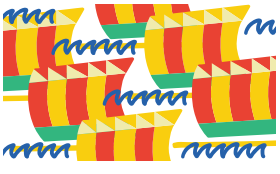
CHAPTER 4: CONVERSATION

Coconut trees: symbolizes different trees bent as if they are talking to one another

CHAPTER 5: READING

Philippine kalesa; symbolizes how literature transports and opens us up to different places, ideas, and perspectives

CHAPTER 6: PERSPECTIVES



Vinta boats, traditional outrigger boat from Mindanao: symbolizes how we can all be in different boats with different ideas

EPILOGUE

The Chocolate Hills, a geological formation in Bohol: symbolizes multiple small things can make up a whole wonder, like the Chocolate Hills

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A Philippine Jeepney road scene: symbolizes how everyone from different backgrounds can come together in one place, like in a Jeepney ride

FOREWORD

By Sonja Cherry-Paul, Aeriale Johnson, Anna Osborn, Kimberly N. Parker, and Tiana Silvas

The great storyteller Virginia Hamilton described herself as a writer of "liberation literature" which widens readers and their worlds, making it possible for them to see beyond their circumstances. In *Get Free,* Tricia extends a vision of educational liberation that is grounded in scholarship and rooted in love, challenging and changing the world before her by making it possible for educators to liberate themselves and their students.

The world is on fire. In this moment, we're all being asked to think about what we value, which struggles we are willing to lend our voices, time, and energy to, and where we can find community to keep going. This was not unlike when we first met Tricia. We were experienced educators working in different schools across the country, trying to figure out how to uphold what we knew was excellent literacy instruction for often the most marginalized children, how to navigate our complex practitioner identities, and, perhaps most importantly, how to find others who would walk beside us, and even carry us, on the days when we were exhausted, disillusioned, and troubled.

Tricia has guided us forward, putting into action the words of Toni Morrison: "The function of freedom is to free someone else."

Tricia has taught us that liberation is a complex mixture of reflection and action, of internal work and communal work. *Get Free* provides research and strategies that teachers can explore on their own and in their communities with students and colleagues. And in inviting us into the work she has done with her students, Tricia challenges us to be a part of a larger, global community of educators doing the work necessary to create the liberatory world we want and need.

From Tricia, we have learned to (re)examine not only the curriculum, but our instructional practices. She has taught us that a willingness to ask *why* opens up possibilities for identifying inequities, confronting them, and radically (re)imagining how things can be otherwise. We've learned to put these reimaginings into action and to hold ourselves accountable for evaluating the effectiveness of our work. We accomplish this by building relationships with children where power dynamics are fluid, by humbling ourselves to listen, being accountable for our mistakes, and addressing harm. We achieve this by working in community with one another—even and especially during times of tension.

To be in community with Tricia is to be deeply loved, continuously challenged, and called into a lifetime of deliberate action.

Tricia calls us to reckon with ourselves, asking us to interrogate our role in the perpetuation of injustice. She does not ask us to do it alone, though. Every time she challenges us to experience discomfort, Tricia invites us into her own journey with the vulnerability getting free requires of us. Most importantly, Tricia demands we do this work in community; otherwise, we cannot hope to dismantle broader systems of inequity.

As we have walked hand-in-hand with her toward freedom for all of us over the years, Tricia has often quoted Gwendolyn Brooks from her poem, "Paul Robeson," as her aspirations for our relationship as colleagues and sister friends:

> that we are each other's
>
> harvest:
>
> We are each other's
>
> business:
>
> We are each other's
>
> magnitude and bond.

Certainly, we are responsible for each other and for our world. *Get Free* is an urgent opportunity for us to realize liberatory educational spaces where all children thrive. May we accept this generous invitation that Tricia has provided and do the work for justice and liberation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tricia Ebarvia is a lifelong educator, author, speaker, and literacy consultant. She is an expert in curriculum design, culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy, and social justice education, as well as a teacher, consultant, and member of the National Writing Project. For more than two decades, Tricia taught high school English, including courses in American literature, world literature, and Advanced Placement English. In addition to teaching, Tricia designed and facilitated racial literacy leadership programs for students as well as district-wide equity initiatives for faculty and staff. Since 2021, Tricia has served as the director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at a Pre-K to 8 independent Quaker school in Philadelphia, where she continues to teach, coach teachers, and partners with families to support positive identity development and academic growth of students.

Tricia's deep belief in education as a vehicle for social change and justice undergirds and informs all her practice. Tricia is a cofounder of #DisruptTexts, an antibias, anti-racist effort to advocate for equitable and diverse language arts curricula and pedagogy. She is the codirector of the Institute for Racial Equity in Literacy, a professional development institute attended by hundreds of educators worldwide. Tricia is also the coeditor of the blog series, 31DaysIBPOC, which amplifies the voices and experiences of educators of color each May.

Tricia is the recipient of several awards, including a National Education Association Leadership Grant, the 2021 Divergent Award for Excellence in Literacy Advocacy from the Initiative for Literacy in a Digital Age, the Pennsylvania High School Teacher of Excellence Award from the National Council of Teachers of English. Tricia has also been recognized as an Outstanding Asian Pacific American Educator by former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf. Tricia's work has been published and featured in *The New York Times*, *Literacy Today*, *Education Update*, *The Council Chronicle*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Education Week*, and in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*.

A NOTE ON CONTEXT

Who You Are Is Where You Are

Context matters.

Who we are is where we are. Place matters. The land matters.

I was reminded of this when I attended the 2020 Wisconsin State Reading Association's annual conference. Monique Gray Smith, an Indigenous author of mixed Cree, Lakota, and Scottish descent, called on teachers to know whose land they stand on, to express gratitude, and to develop a literacy of the land and water.

For most of my life, I have lived on Lenapehoking, the occupied and ancestral lands of the Lenni Lenape Nation, who have been caretakers of this land for more than ten thousand years. I honor and thank them for their stewardship: past, present, and future.

But acknowledgment is not enough.

As David Truer, an Ojibwe author and historian, writes, "That Native American cultures are imperiled is important and not just to Indians. It is important to everyone, or should be. When we lose cultures, we lose American plurality—the productive and lovely discomfort that true difference brings." As an educator, I am committed to making sure the truths of Native and Indigenous peoples and nations are affirmed, that stories are taught responsibly and in solidarity with Native and Indigenous scholars and communities.

And I call on readers of this book—and all educators—to join me in doing the same.

INTRODUCTION

GET FREE . . .
GET FREE . . .
GET FREE . . .

A liberatory consciousness requires every individual to not only notice what is going on in the world around her or him, but to think about it and theorize about it—that is, to get information and develop his or her own explanation for what is happening, why it is happening, and what needs to be done about it.

—Barbara Love

To the extent that people reflect upon their lives and become more conscious of themselves as actors in the world, conscious, too, of the vast range of alternatives that can be imagined and expressed in any given situation, capable of joining in community and asserting themselves as subjects in history, constructors of the human world, they recreate themselves as free human beings.

—William Ayers

In high school, I read Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*—and I *loved* it. More specifically, I loved the romance between the bookish, humble Jane and the dashing, inscrutable Rochester. If social media was around when I first read the novel, I would have used #janechester in all my Tweets and Instas.

What I loved about *Jane Eyre* so much the first time I read it was that it was deeply *comforting*. Like Jane, I was bookish and quiet and insecure, and I could see myself reflected in Jane's character. And since I'm confessing things, I'll also admit that all of my first romantic crushes were reflections of Rochester—boys who were aloof, mysterious, and yes, "bad boys."

But when I reread *Jane Eyre* in college, my reaction was different.

I was taking a course on "Literary History." Instead of reading texts from various literary movements throughout time, my professor organized the course around key texts and counternarratives that "took issue" with them. For example, we read *The Heart of Darkness* and then analyzed *Apocalypse Now*. We read *Romeo and Juliet* and then studied *Shakespeare in Love*. And yes, we studied *Jane Eyre* and then a book that would forever change my feelings toward #janechester—*Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys.

ENGAGING A COUNTERNARRATIVE

Jean Rhys's novel reimagines the character of Rochester in this prequel to *Jane Eyre*. Why was Rochester so mysterious and melancholy? Who was he before he met Jane? Rhys's answer is that as "romantic" as Rochester seemed to be in *Jane Eyre*, that he was likely not the hero Brontë—and readers like me—imagined him to be. Instead, he was a British colonizer who would ultimately imprison his first wife, a Creole heiress from Jamaica, in the attic of his English manor.

After reading *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I could no longer take comfort in the false belief that being like Jane would result in a happy ending with my own Rochester. In my first readings, I willfully ignored the fact that Rochester already had a wife, a wife that he had locked up in the attic of an English manor and treated like a prisoner, even an animal. Bertha, the name used in *Jane Eyre* for Rochester's wife (Rhys gives her the name Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*), was simply an obstacle to be overcome so that Jane could get her happy ending. I had relegated Bertha to the role of "obstacle" and like Rochester (and Brontë herself), I did not see Bertha as a full person. In contrast, Rhys *humanizes* and *centers* Antoinette's experiences. Her character is more developed, layered, complex. Her voice is the **counternarrative** I needed.

A **counternarrative** is a story that stands in contrast to and challenges the values, beliefs, and an established dominant narrative. Often, counternarratives do this by focusing on the perspectives that are missing, marginalized, or actively erased from the dominant narrative.

Of course, when I reread *Jane Eyre* in college, I was a different person than I was in high school. In college, I took classes in multicultural American literature, I took Asian Studies courses, and I became an officer in an Asian American student organization. One of my mentors in college worked in the Office for Academic Multicultural Initiatives. I met Grace Lee Boggs who was a guest of honor at a naming ceremony of a student lounge in honor of Yuri Kochiyama. I learned what the word *diaspora* meant. Each of these experiences transformed me and in turn, transformed and *informed* my response to the books I read, including the ones I had once loved, like *Jane*.

To attribute the change in my reaction to *Jane* to maturity, however, is only half the story. Yes, I was a different person, but the more important question was not how I had changed—*but who was I before*?

As I look back, I realize that my initial response to *Jane Eyre* was tied to my upbringing. Jane was headstrong and practical, much like my Filipina immigrant mother, and despite the expected mother-and-teenage-daughter conflicts we often endured, I admired my mother's strength (still do). The ending of the novel, in which Jane gets her man, also fit neatly and securely in the traditional view of marriage and success that my Catholic and Filipino family subscribed to. The novel, then, affirmed many of the beliefs and ideals I'd grown up with.

As readers of Brontë know, a common interpretation of Jane's character is that she represents the dueling tensions between reason and passion—and resolving that tension with independence and grace and dignity was important and necessary. Putting reason above passion—otherwise known as "being practical"—was a core value for my first-generation immigrant parents, and yes, for me.

So the thought never occurred to me to think about the novel from anyone else's point of view, especially that of Bertha's/Antoinette's/the "other."

I was too invested in only seeing her through my own.

The more years that I spend in the classroom and the more teachers that I meet, the more I become convinced that my experience is not unique. As English teachers, we all have complicated relationships with texts. But we also have a responsibility to our students to consider how our own reading of a text might be problematic, maybe even harmful. Consider your own relationship with texts you read and loved. How might you open yourself up to seeing this text from another perspective?

WHO IS THE *I* WHO READS?

We know that reading is a complex and complicated process: there's so much that happens from the moment our eyes see marks on a page to the ideas and questions that take shape in our minds. And much research exists on these cognitive processes of reading. But this book isn't about that. This book is about examining—indeed, interrogating—the *I* who reads.

Who was the I who read *Jane Eyre* for the first time? When I think back to my experience reading *Jane*—and countless other texts—I was engaged in my reading, but I never stopped to think about *why* a particular text resonated with me.

Because human beings are social animals, **we cannot separate who we are from who we were socialized to be.** And for our students, this also means who they are socialized into *becoming*. How might this affect how they read?

When we read texts—a novel, film, advertisement, conversation, or, really, anything from which we can draw meaning—we bring the sum of what makes us who we are into that reading experience. As many teachers can attest, students can respond to texts with emotional, gut-driven reactions like "I love that book!" or "I hate that book!" While these reactions might be common, we often don't ask students to interrogate these reactions to reflect on what may have shaped them. If reading is a transactional, creative experience in which a reader and text meet, as Rosenblatt (1995) observed, then **how can we help students dig deeper and ask themselves, *why* am I responding this way?**

On social media, in the news, and around dinner tables, our reactions to current events and social issues are often just as emotional—and as critically unexamined—as the responses students have to the books they've loved or hated. But underneath these knee-jerk reactions are complex identities informed by a range of experiences and biases. Race, gender, and class are just a few of the identities that affect how I see and react to the world—but so are my passions, interests, fears, anxieties, family life, among others. Unpacking *who is the I who reads*—discovering the ways in which our identities can both clarify and limit our responses—is thus critical to our understanding of ourselves as readers, our understanding of the texts we encounter in English class, and our understanding of the world.

Because when we are better able to understand what informs our responses—when we can better understand who we are and why—we can start to *get free*.

WHAT IT MEANS TO GET FREE

What does it mean to *get free?*

I believe that through intentional, critical self-reflection, we can begin to free ourselves from the ways in which our socialization causes or maintains harm to ourselves and others.

In my own journey in learning, unlearning, and relearning about the legacy of activism in our country—especially the activism of women of color, and of Black women in particular—I came across the powerful work of the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black women activists who saw "Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face" (Taylor, 2017).

Indeed, historically and currently, it has been Black women who have led the fight for justice and equity and provided the blueprint for all activist movements. When I read about the Combahee River Collective's work in *How We Get Free*, edited by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, I could not stop thinking about the urgent need for all of us—especially those of us working in classrooms with students, day in and day out—to *get free*. Then, in 2019, I read a social media post by author Matthew Salesses, who is Asian American and was adopted by a White family. In his post, he shared how his White mother became defensive when he asked her to read books with people of color to his children, her grandchildren. Salesses attributed his mother's defensiveness to the racial bias she couldn't admit to herself, and he ended his post imploring his mother—and other White people—to "get free get free get free."

Those words—get free, get free, get free—kept pulling and tugging at me and would not let me go, especially as I interrogated my role as an educator.

Over the years, I've asked students to define what being free means to them. Among their responses: to be able to do what you want, to be able to make your own decisions, to be who you want without others telling you what to do, to be your own person, to not have anyone or anything holding you back.

When I've asked students what holds them back from being free, their answers are expected: school, teachers, parents, sometimes themselves, sometimes their friends. But almost always, students share that what often holds them back are unspoken rules, norms, and expectations that others—and *society*—have for them. When we dig even deeper, students almost always point to the ways that they've been socialized, often unconsciously.

What would it mean to "get free" as an educator?

Although I still struggle to define and redefine what being free could look, sound, and feel like in the classroom, my working definition looks something like this:

> To *get free* means that we are no longer burdened by the unexamined biases that get in the way of seeing ourselves and others more clearly.
>
> To *get free* means moving beyond our socialization to be able to think and act as more fully independent, critical thinkers, and compassionate, empathetic human beings.
>
> To *get free* means to develop a "liberatory consciousness."

In her essay, "Developing a Liberatory Consciousness," Dr. Love (2018) reminds us that "humans are products of their socialization and follow the habits of mind and thought that have been instilled in them." Thus, Dr. Love calls for "a liberatory consciousness [which] enables humans to live 'outside' the patterns of thought and behavior learned through the socialization process that helps to perpetuate oppressive systems."

Schools are active instruments of socialization; every pedagogical choice we make as teachers advances the social norms and values of the school and larger society. Schools can actively or passively perpetuate oppressive systems (and can be such systems themselves). For example, as teachers, our curricular decisions make clear whose voices and what issues are valued enough to be worthy of study. As Alexander (2016) wrote for the *New York Times*, "The mind of an adult begins in the imagination of a child." I think about the stories I've read, stories like *Jane Eyre*, and I feel a sense of shame—shame for the way I dismissed Bertha, how I refused to see her as less than fully human, not worth my attention as I instead centered Jane and Rochester's love story.

I can't help wonder—how often are we lulled into ignoring the "other" in texts like *Jane Eyre*? How often does our socialization—and the identities that emerge from this socialization—*limit rather than expand* our understanding of the texts we read, the issues we care (or don't care) about, and the people we become? I don't want to be the type of person who can ignore someone's suffering—even if that someone is a fictional character. After all, if reading literature provides us with what Kenneth Burke called "imaginative rehearsals" (Gallagher, 2009) what exactly was I rehearsing when I read *Jane Eyre* uncritically for the first time? What—and *whose*—ways of seeing the world was I absorbing?

Of course, it's not just traditionally canonical texts like *Jane Eyre* that can lull us into ignoring the perspectives of historical marginalized groups. In 2018, Slate magazine's Represent podcast produced a brief series called "Pre-Work Watching," in which Slate writers and editors revisited some of the media they'd grown up watching and discussed how problematic much of that media was. In an episode titled, "The Unexamined Privilege of Gilmore Girls," one writer admits, "Rory Gilmore was my teen idol. That sort of horrifies me now" (Matthews & Chan, 2018). In another episode titled "Friends From India," another writer shares, "I grew up watching the show in Mumbai. I worry about the damage its gender stereotypes still do there" (Soni, 2018). Consider your own media diet and a recent or favorite television series or film you've watched: What work is that media doing to challenge or perpetuate stereotypes and other harmful thinking? How?

As a. brown (2017) reminds us in *Emergent Strategy*, "We are in an imagination battle . . . and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free."

I believe that if we can *get free* . . .

> we can look beyond the rigid confines of our experiences and examine those intersections where our socialization meets our relationships to texts, others, and ourselves.
>
> we can get closer to living and acting in the world outside the racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, classist, ableist, and other bigoted ways in which we've been socialized.
>
> we can challenge the norms that threaten the most vulnerable fellow members of our society and interrupt the role we play in participating in that harm.

As Dr. Love writes, many of us "want to work for social change to reduce inequity and bring about greater justice yet continue to behave in ways that preserve and perpetuate the existing system." But if we can *get free*, we can individually and collectively take steps to ensure more equitable academic and *human* outcomes for all students.

To *get free* means turning the lens on ourselves as readers, writers, thinkers, and social beings and examining all the ways in which we are *not* free, all the ways in which we are bound by what society tells us who we are, who others are, and who we are to each other. To get free means being identity-conscious, socially aware educators, guiding identity-conscious, socially aware readers and writers. To get free means engaging in active and expansive perspective-taking. I hope that this book can serve as a starting point for readers to journey toward freedom so that we may serve all our students well.

Although we can never truly be free of the biases that we hold as social beings, by examining the *who is the I who reads (and writes)*, we can surface the ways in which our biases have worked and continue to work for and against us daily. To be *anti*bias, then, is not about completely eliminating our biases—a lofty and impossible goal. As Stanford psychology professor Dr. Jennifer Eberhardt reminds us, "bias is not something we cure, it's something we manage. There's no magical moment where bias just ends and we never have to deal with it again" (Chang, 2019). Instead, being antibias—to *get free*—is to act in a way that doesn't allow those biases to have power over who we are, what and how we teach our students, and how we respond to others and the world.

THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW

▶ "We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy." —Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Recent and ongoing events continue to convince me of our complicated and dynamic relationships to the texts we read in school and how we read the world. More and more, it feels like fear—as manifested through overt and systemic racism and xenophobia, along with all other forms of bigotry—has infected every part of our society and placed a stranglehold on our ability to communicate with one another honestly and responsibly. Political polarization combined with the echo-chamber effects of social media have made it almost impossible for us to hear each other. Worse, it's made it hard to hear—and understand—ourselves.

Unfortunately, schools have not done enough to address these issues. Teachers, fearing backlash, stay away from issues that "feel" too political (and yet what isn't political when it comes to schooling?). Meanwhile, our government continues to under-resource too many of our schools—a *political* decision—especially schools that serve primarily Black and Brown children (Black & Crolley, 2022). "Don't Say Gay" laws and book bans and challenges dominate school board meetings across the country (again, another political decision) (Meehan & Friedman, 2023). Students of color are suspended or expelled at disproportionately high rates, perpetuating a school-to-prison trajectory that devastates lives and communities (Chen, 2022). School curricula too often fail to reflect the diverse, rich, and complex experiences of marginalized communities (Armstrong, 2021), and this lack of "mirrors and windows" (Bishop, 1990) prevents all students from developing an understanding and empathy of others different from themselves.

Furthermore, as I write this, families and children in Flint, Michigan, a predominantly Black American community, continue their fight for clean drinking water after decades of neglect from the city government (Hudson, 2023). Twenty-nine percent of American Indian/Alaska Native children experience poverty, compared to 9 percent of White children (Azalia et al., 2021). Statistics show that Black boys and men are at least three times more likely to be shot by police than White men (Bunn, 2022). The number of hate crimes in the US has risen in recent years and hate crimes specifically against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Sikhs, and bisexual people have more than doubled (Li & Lartey, 2023). According to government released data, in June 2019, an estimated thirteen thousand migrant and refugee children were separated from their families at the Mexico-US border, and many of these families remain separated. Hate crimes against LGBTQ+ communities rose another 70 percent from 2021 to 2022 (Li & Lartey, 2023).

As I reflect, I cannot help wondering how the stories we read in school—and the ways we interact with those stories—have led us to this moment in time. **Are we—through our reading and nonreading, through our actions and inactions—socialized into people who care about others or who care only about ourselves?**

IN THIS BOOK

As teachers, we know that we do more than teach texts, plays like *A Raisin in the Sun,* and books like *The Great Gatsby, The Woman Warrior.* And while this book *is* about how we teach skills—deep thinking, informed perspective-taking, authentic writing, and critical self-reflection—this book is for teachers who know that we teach more than skills, too.

We teach kids.

We teach video game players, app designers, sports fanatics, Netflix binge watchers, Instagram photographers, sisters, brothers, oldest children, middle children, youngest children, dancers, critics, musicians, Native Indigenous children, Chinese American girls, Mexican American boys, cisgender and transgender kids, queer students, immigrants, citizens, undocumented citizens, activists, future CEOS, filmmakers, comedians, writers, readers, humanitarians. We teach young people—human beings who are complex and messy and brilliant.

Whether you are a new or veteran teacher, in this book, I invite you to come with me as we see our students in all their complexities, messiness, and brilliance; as we examine our practices through a critical, liberatory lens; and as we shine a light on the places we know our literacy instruction might fall short. And while we teach content and skills, we know we can always do more.

Let me be clear: the work I share in this book is based on the premise that the work of examining our experiences, identities, and biases is and never has been separate from the content and skills we teach; in fact, I argue that this study of *who is the I who reads* (and writes) is essential to the type of academic rigor we strive for in our classrooms. When we help our students apply a critical literacy lens to their learning, we prepare them for the type of analysis that is necessary to be responsible and engaged members of their communities. This is not an either-or (a fallacy I address in Chapter 6): **the work of critical literacy—and developing a critical consciousness—is inseparable from the work of rigorous academic study.** When we make important, intentional shifts in our pedagogy, we can get closer to the informed citizenry we need to imagine and effect a more just society. What I share are not lessons in isolation or units of study, but a window into a larger approach rooted in critical pedagogy. There is no meaningful literacy without a literacy of who we are as meaning makers.

▶ "We do not have to choose between rigorous lesson and a culturally responsive one. Our current political moment, and indeed our nation's history, demands both." —Clint Smith

In the following chapters, I welcome you into my classroom. And although I have been teaching for many years, in writing this book, I do not want to position myself as the expert. My teaching has always been in a constant state of revision as the students in my classroom change each year, and as I continue to reflect on and unpack my own practices.

In the spirit of transparency, I also think it's important for readers to know that while I have more than twenty years of classroom experience, teaching several courses at varying academic levels, most of the years were spent in a single school district. The suburban district where I taught for the majority of my career would be considered by many—based on traditional measures of success such as test scores, AP classes, and graduation rates—to be successful, competitive, and high achieving. The student population has changed over the years, but it is predominantly White and upper-middle class. According to the Office of Civil Rights, in 2017, enrolled students were: 73 percent White, 19 percent Asian, 3.9 percent Black, 1.3 percent multiracial, 2.5 percent Latinx, and .2 percent American Indian or Alaskan Native, and .1 percent Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian. The teaching staff and administration, too, is predominantly White. In 2021, I transitioned to a new role in school administration, and I am currently the director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for an independent Friends school that serves students from Grades Pre-K to 8 in Philadelphia. In my new role, I am thankful that I still get to teach, including classes with our very youngest four-year-olds and our fourteen-year-old eighth graders. The

students I work with and learn from daily are a diverse group that is 25 percent Black/African American, 14 percent multiracial, 4 percent Latinx, 3 percent Asian, and 50 percent White. The school has a long history of a commitment to racial and social justice, and 40 percent of students at this school also receive financial aid.

I share all this because context matters. The ideas I share in the book are borne from my day-to-day work with kids, and teaching in any context comes with its share of advantages and challenges. While one could argue that both of the schools I've worked in are financially resourced, neither students nor staff are necessarily better equipped to navigate issues of identity and bias—and in some ways, it can be more challenging. Racial bias and prejudice can show up in school as active resistance to more equitable practices, but it can also show up in the actions of well-meaning progressives. The same general measures—test scores, AP classes, and graduation rates—that label a school successful can also hide many inequities. Whatever context you teach in, whether you are a White teacher in a predominantly White district, a Black teacher in a rural school, or a Latina teacher in a bilingual education program, I hope you will find some strategies that can help you work with the kids sitting in your individual classrooms.

With that in mind, I start this book with a chapter on reflecting on who we are as teachers. It is one of my fundamental beliefs that *we teach who we are*. If we are not reflective and critical about the identities we as teachers bring into the classroom, we are ignorant of the ways in which these identities may impact our students (perhaps in some harmful ways). *Although you may be tempted to skip this chapter and get right to the lessons in the rest of the book, I urge you to resist this temptation.* Because so much of the work I suggest in this book focuses on students' sense of identity and socialization, as teachers, we too must be willing to engage with our own identities, to wrestle with the ways in which these identities have been socialized, to be the types of models for vulnerable, critical thinking our students need today.

The remaining chapters of the book include strategies and other practical ideas. As we all know, the key to any powerful learning depends on a classroom culture built on trust and risk-taking, which is the subject of chapter 2. Because I believe that any meaningful reading and writing is borne out of students' experiences, in chapter 3, I ask students to interrogate their own personal identities through powerful reflective writing and rich mentor texts. From there, students learn to listen to, consider, and unpack the perspectives of others through conversation strategies in chapter 4 and in their reading and writing experiences in chapters 5 and 6. I end the book with some final thoughts about how we can bring all this work together in service of our students.

In simple terms, the book breaks down like this:

- Self
- Others
- Together

Or, put another way:

- Understanding ourselves
- Appreciating the diverse perspectives of others
- Synthesizing reading and writing in ways that help us *get free*

While you may browse the table of contents and choose to zoom in on a specific strategy, I've organized the book in "chronological" order as the school year unfolds, with lesson suggestions and classroom experiences that build on each other. For example, the self-reflective critical thinking skills that students will need as they engage in discussion in chapters 5 and 6 are made possible by the reading, writing, and conversational experiences they encounter in chapter 4. While some of the strategies I share might be applied at several different points throughout the year, I encourage you to consider the scaffolding that will be necessary to make these strategies successful.

And while you'll find plenty of lessons and practical ideas, what you won't find are detailed unit plans, scopes, or sequences. None of this work is meant to be prescriptive; I hope to inspire teachers to think beyond what I offer. With each idea, I'll share my thinking process and rationale behind the moves I'm making and what I hope students might take away. I invite you to think about the purpose of these lessons and strategies, and then adapt them as needed for your context and students.

So let's get to work.

Let us, one page, one step, at a time—*get free*.