

Prologue

I am a curious person, and I am particularly filled with wonder about things that veer outside of what we've come to consider as "normal." One of the things I enjoy most is reading about, listening to, watching, and learning about stories that center people working together in solidarity toward building awareness and liberation across racial differences—particularly Black and White people in the United States because I am a descendant of people who were enslaved in this country. In full disclosure, maybe it wasn't so much about solidarity and liberation at first. Perhaps my enjoyment came more from the rare opportunity to see people forming and sustaining friendships and partnerships across racial differences depicted in the media I consumed. There was something both curious and special to me about bearing witness to those relationships, especially in a society where those connections were more the exception than the rule.

The work of Emily Style of the National Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED) Project (Style 1988) and Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) regarding *windows and mirrors* provides us with a powerful frame for this book. "Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar, or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books" (Bishop 1990). The problem is that White students tend to have far too few windows and far too many mirrors. What's more, even the mirrors White students have, like funhouse mirrors, often provide them with a distorted view of themselves in relationship with others.

My parents were my first teachers, and it was from them that I first learned about Black history, with the books of W. E. B. Du Bois, Ntozake Shange, Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, and Eldridge Cleaver on the bookshelves my father put up on the walls of our Brooklyn apartment. When I was a sophomore in high school, however, the person who taught my African American history class was a White man

named Mr. McDermott. We read *Before the Mayflower* by Lerone Bennett Jr. (another book that I remembered seeing on a bookshelf in my home) as our text that year in addition to watching the *Eyes on the Prize* documentary series. Mr. McDermott was the first teacher to engage me as a student about Black history, including the fact that Black history long precedes enslavement. I didn't know the term *ally* then, but when I think back, especially as an educator, Mr. McDermott could have chosen to teach other subjects. He chose to teach African American history. And he chose to do it from a liberatory text and perspective. I wonder what compelled him to make this professional choice?

When I was in graduate school studying to become a teacher, I learned that Ezra Jack Keats, the author and illustrator of *The Snowy Day*, was a White man. What made him write this book featuring this little Black boy in 1962? I was also introduced to Ann Turner's book *Nettie's Trip South*, which tells the story of a young White girl's frightened and disgusted response to the horrors of enslavement. What compelled her to write this book?

When I became a teacher, I began to learn more about the abolitionist movement in the United States and to wonder about the White people who chose to offer safety, food, hiding places, diversion, clothing, rides to and for Black people who were escaping enslavement . . . those who lit lanterns and left out quilts to signal safe haven. I learned about those who authored newspapers like *The Liberator*, who spoke publicly about the ills of enslavement and the human violation of anyone attempting to own another person. I wondered about what inspired them to be who they were. William Lloyd Garrison said, in response to questions about his fiery approach to abolitionism, that "I have a need to be all on fire, for I have mountains of ice about me to melt" (Mayer 1998). What made him feel that way? What made him believe that he bore some responsibility to help melt the icy mountains of enslavement, cruelty, and oppression? What was it that compelled John Brown to organize the raid on Harpers Ferry? What made him and others like him persist in spite of backlash and scorn as well as potential and actual harm?

I went on to explore the Civil Rights Movement and noticed the light- and dark-skinned mugshots of the Freedom Riders, including White people like Joan Trumpauer Mulholland, Jim Zwerg, and David Fankhauser as they journeyed toward liberation together with Black people in the face of fear and loss. I don't believe that they were unafraid. I know their families must have been terrified for them and probably wondered why they would engage in this resistance despite the fact that they could have easily looked away. Maybe that was it. Maybe it wasn't really possible for them to look away. How did they develop the will to be courageous in the face of so many who did?

I have enjoyed reading historical fiction that explores the relationships of characters connecting across racial differences. One of my favorite examples is the

fictitious relationship between Hetty (Handful) and Sarah Grimké in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Invention of Wings*. Handful is given to Sarah as a gift on her eleventh birthday, and as they grow, they both embrace abolitionism—Handful as a follower of Denmark Vesey as he is planning a revolt and Sarah as she connects with William Lloyd Garrison and becomes an abolitionist in her own right. These two characters have extremely different backgrounds yet find common ground in their sense of justice and humanity.

While it's important to be aware of the harmful impact of books and movies that exemplify a White savior narrative, portray stereotypes, or show inaccurate, white-washed, and/or White-centered views of the world, I appreciate books and movies about people and characters who connect authentically with one another across racial differences in a way that honors the humanity, dignity, and agency of the people involved in interracial relationships. Examples of how we can work in solidarity with one another in the pursuit of liberation are powerful.

Doesn't the journey toward liberation involve people who have been socialized to believe that they are better, more deserving, more intelligent, more entitled to advantages, privileges, and access to resources beginning to see that there's something not quite right with this narrative? Doesn't transformation begin to happen when those who have been designated as the dominant group see the fallacies in the way our society has been constructed—who look beyond racialization, stereotyping, prejudice, xenophobia, and bias and begin to see those who have been othered for who they truly are? To see that there are people in the world whose lives, histories, thoughts, experiences, cultures, and interests are dynamic, brilliant, creative, beautiful, and worthy of attention—and to realize that this reality has been hidden, distorted, misrepresented, denied, suppressed, and lied about.

If you, reader, are someone who identifies as White, something has been taken from you, from your parents, from your grandparents, and those who came before them. Not only were you most likely not taught the truth about people who are racially different from you as a K–12 student but you most likely didn't learn about the parts of your ancestry, like family names and traditions that were erased at Ellis Island and surrendered in order to be considered White. You may not have had the opportunity to learn that people who look like you were not only colonizers and oppressors but that there were others who, somehow, though surrounded by false messages about people of other races, didn't believe what they were being told and dedicated their lives to the pursuit of liberation through ABAR ways of being.

I'm writing this book to you, reader, as you are presently and also to younger you. The you who wondered and asked questions, the you who enjoyed being curious and investigating. The you at the age when your two front teeth were missing, when you loved to play and make friends without boundaries and walls. The you who was unhindered, curious, and undaunted—your questions about other people

were not yet hushed and silenced out of politeness, or shame, or something else. The you who wondered why there weren't more People of Color in your neighborhood and schools. You deserved so much more than what was offered to you in schools and by society.

You deserved to learn to appreciate the beauty in difference.

You deserved to have your questions about racial difference answered.

You deserved the opportunity to become friends with people who were different from you.

You deserved to have neighbors who didn't look like you and to understand why there wasn't more racial diversity in your community.

You deserved to grow up unburdened and unencumbered by assumptions, stereotypes, and misinformation.

You deserved to learn how to stand up for those who are marginalized.

You deserved to know the truth about this country's history.

You deserved to grow up reading books written by people who are not like you.

You deserved to see accurate depictions in movies and on television shows of people who are different from you.

You deserved to grow up enjoying the song of the accents of languages and ways of communicating that differ from yours. The White children in our classrooms deserve the same. We have the opportunity to do things differently with and for current and future generations.

I have been an educator for twenty-three years, and during that time, I have enjoyed many amazing professional learning experiences. Some of my favorites are listed in the Acknowledgments of this book. All of these experiences were powerful and provided me with the opportunity to learn about things that were missing from my K-16 learning experiences and from my teacher preparation program. I had to pursue essential learnings like culturally responsive teaching and learning and ABAR instructional practices on my own. It wasn't part of what was required for me to be considered an effective educator, and there's still so much I need to learn. I can't help but wonder about the educator I could have been if the mosaic of learning experiences I've been able to create over time was part of my formal education all along. You may feel the same way.

I have envisioned this book to be an opportunity for me to gift back to you as a reader what I have learned from others over the years about the history of race, racialization, racial identity as well as what it looks like to work in solidarity with one another toward liberation. It is my sincere hope that it enriches your life and

teaching practice the way my teachers, guides, mentors, and visionaries have enriched my understanding by sharing their wisdom with me.

This book is not about shame or guilt but about honesty, vulnerability, and openness to growth. It is about discovering the role we all can play in recreating our learning spaces. It's an invitation to become an active ally, accomplice, and co-conspirator. It is also an invitation back to that version of you as a child who was filled with wonder and curiosity and who was unafraid to ask questions, take risks, and make mistakes. And this is a book for White educators who teach in majority-White schools. Your students may not know many People of Color. They may receive confusing messages from media, family, friends, and school curriculum, yet they are part of the most racially diverse generation in history.

You may already have a road map as you engage in this work, but if not, this book is designed to equip you to be the cartographer you've been looking for. Others will benefit from the road map you will create with the support of this book. On this journey, you will go from being *unaware*, to *becoming aware*, to *acting on your awareness*, to *becoming more aware*. And because of this, those within your sphere of influence will have access to the opportunity to do the same.

This journey will not be easy. You will encounter resistance. Some resistance will be internal, because change is hard as it involves loss. Some will come from those around you who have allowed themselves to become comfortable with the status quo. I am a fan of *The Matrix* movie trilogy (okay, in full transparency, I *loved* the first movie. The last two installments, not so much). If you're also a fan, you'll remember that the main character, Neo, was offered an option by Morpheus: to take the blue pill and remain in ignorance of the disturbing reality around them, or take the red pill and learn the uncomfortable truth about that reality. Neo chooses the red pill, yet there's another character, Cypher, who, after also choosing the red pill, comes to regret his choice and decides that he would rather be reintegrated into the system to enjoy what he sees as the benefits of ignorance. You're reading this book, though, because like Neo, there is a splinter in your mind that tells you that something is not quite right with the world around us, that there are truths we need to uncover, things we need to unlearn, challenges to overcome, and a world to reimagine and rebuild.

Here are my main hopes for you, reader:

- To see how you were harmed during your K–16+ educational experiences
- To see that it is imperative to keep students from continuing to be harmed
- To move through the process of being unaware to becoming aware to acting on your awareness all the way through to becoming even more aware and continuing this cycle throughout your life
- To see that you're not alone in your pursuit of ABAR teaching practices. You are part of a larger, often unseen community of educators around the country

who are engaging in this work. You will meet educators like Sarah, Leigh Ann, Sydney, Carly, Shannon, Michael, and Shawna in these pages.

- To examine your own racial identity and how it has been formed
- To equip you with strategies for decentering Whiteness in your literacy curriculum in order to manifest true antiracist teaching practice
- To find concrete examples of ways you can engage in ABAR instructional practices
- To be undaunted in the face of resistance

This book will help you to let go of the things that no longer serve you and to teach your students to do the same. In these pages, you will be wooed to a window you hadn't noticed before. Though the curtains are closed, light streams in at the edges, as light tends to do. In response to the call of the light's invitation, you will take hold of the fabric, pull it apart, and feel the warmth of the sun. You'll open the window, breathe in the fresh air, and smell the aroma of the unfamiliar and beautiful. You'll see things you've never seen before, and you'll invite your students to come and stand alongside you. Together you will gaze and behold, wonder and learn, and because of this, your students will begin to open windows of their own.