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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.
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> 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.