

New York Times bestselling author of **BE THE BRIDGE**

Latasha Morrison

BROWN

FACES



WHITE
SPACES

Confronting Systemic Racism to
Bring Healing & Restoration

BROWN FACES, WHITE SPACES

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Bring Healing and Restoration

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WaterBrook

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To my great-grandparents,
Willie and Gladys Nicholson and Clifton and Lilly Ray.

For all those who survived systemic racism
and those who are still surviving.

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Author's Note

Dear Reader,

I'm so glad you're here, especially given the weight of the topic. It's not easy to pick up a book about racial injustice, particularly when the book examines uncomfortable, often even painful, historical truths. So, thank you for engaging in this conversation with me.

Books like this one—books exposing the artifacts and lingering effects of racism in America—require a lot of humility from both the author and the reader. Both must start from the premise that our personal experiences are not universal. Both must be open to listening, learning, and lamenting as we explore history. Both are obligated to engage the material in search of transformation rather than from an entrenched position of critique. I hope we can do this as we journey through this book together.

Brown Faces, White Spaces explores how Black, Indigenous, and other people of color have intersected historically with systems of oppression in the United States of America, and how the effects of that oppression have an impact on our nation today. It's important to re-

member that Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC as used throughout this book) are not a monolith. We have different experiences within systems, and still, we have a collective story of systemic injustice that connects us to one another. So, as you read these stories, understand there are numerous BIPOC experiences, but there's still a certain connective tissue within them. We call that connective tissue *history*. As you read about the individuals whose stories help illuminate key truths about our nation's ongoing reckoning with our racial history, hopefully you'll see the connective tissue and how it ties into your story, the story of your relatives, or the stories of friends or acquaintances who have been on the giving or receiving end of systemic racial injustice. Maybe your story within this system produced different outcomes—maybe even more positive outcomes. We can celebrate those positive stories while at the same time not denying or deflecting the total impact systemic racism has had on groups of people for centuries.

Please note that systemic racism is a complex issue in the United States, and I didn't have the page count to delve too deeply into each system—the “white spaces”—addressed in this book. In fact, each system represented in these pages could be a book solely on its own. The important thing to remember is that each example of systemic racism—whether in one of the systems depicted in this book or in another system altogether—has a human face. Put another way, systemic racism causes very real harm to very real people, many of whom you know.

As I wrote, I labored over the terminology I used to represent non-white people. I vetted that language with others, both people of color and white people. Sometimes, we disagreed about the use of certain terminology because in the United States we seem to lack a common language and common view of history, even within our own ethnic groups. So know this: When I use the term BIPOC in the book, it is intentional, meant to connect the stories and specific discrimination experienced by Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color.

This term is specific to the United States and centers our experiences and demonstrates solidarity among communities of color. This term emphasizes the continued impact of systemic racism and how it presently oppresses and invalidates the lives of non-white people. But as I already mentioned, this does not mean that all people of color carry the same lived experience, especially when it comes to education, legislation, and systemic oppression, and neither is BIPOC a stand-in term for Black people.

There are also times throughout this book where I use the term Brown, referring to the experiences of Indigenous, Black, Latina/Latino, and Asian Americans. It's an equally permissive term for the shared classification of non-white people, a term that allows us to better frame the broader struggle against years of systemic oppression. And though you might not use these terms in your everyday life, consider the language and how it might draw you into a different understanding of the world around you. Through the lens of a BIPOC or Brown person, America looks very different than it might to white men and women.

Finally, the stories in this book are told from my perspective as an African American woman. Although this book is inclusive, it does not represent every marginalized community. Why? Because as a Black woman, I don't have the perspective needed to share the personal stories of every marginalized community. If you're in another marginalized group, I encourage you to tell your story of being a Brown face in white spaces. If you're a white person, seek to understand the stories of other groups of people and stand in solidarity against oppression.

Now, take a deep breath. In that breath, remember that if you are breathing, you have the agency to bring about change. The issues in this book are layered, painful, and uncomfortable. We didn't cause systemic racism. It's not our fault that unjust systems exist, but it is our collective responsibility not to uphold those unjust systems. And there is plenty of reason to hope. Change is possible if we exercise our shared

responsibility to be a part of the solution. We can call communities to a deeper understanding of empathy, love, compassion, and justice. We can build one another up and invest in restoration. We can work toward liberation, just like so many of the people in the pages of this book have done.

Thank you for locking arms with me. Thank you for caring about racial justice. Remember, transformation begins with you.

**BROWN
FACES,
WHITE
SPACES**

CHAPTER 1

Our Journey Toward True Emancipation

IN 1973, I ENTERED THIS WORLD AT CAPE FEAR VALLEY HOSPITAL IN Fayetteville, North Carolina. I was born fully American, and as a citizen, I'd have the right to free education, to free speech, to property ownership when I reached the age of eighteen, to vote (also when I turned eighteen), and to hold public office one day. But as obvious as all of that might sound (*Aren't all Americans born with those inalienable rights?*), I was the first person in my immediate Morrison family tree to be born under the full protections of the United States Constitution.

Those who know me might be shocked by this statement because I'm not that old. I look even younger than my driver's license says I am—forty-nine years as of the writing of this book. But as we'll see throughout these pages, African Americans born just a generation before me didn't grow up with the same set of rights and protections. And the effects of racism still linger today.

Black and Brown brothers and sisters, I see you nodding.

Some Americans may think of systemic racism as an unfortunate part of history, something that happened “back in the day.” It was a

fixture in the time of black-and-white television. But many Black and Brown Americans know through firsthand experience that systemic racism still exists today, because the systems were never truly dismantled in our country. How do we know? Because we've heard and lived the stories. We've had our perspectives shaped by both history *and* experience.

The stories of the past, and our experiences in the present, shape who we are and how we move in this world. They continue to shape my expectations, my fears, and my hopes for a better future for my nieces and nephews. I'll share numerous stories and experiences in this book, but let me start with the story of my parents.

My dad was born in North Carolina in a time when state-sanctioned racial apartheid was baked into the state's Jim Crow laws, laws that maintained strict public separation between whites and non-whites. As a young boy in 1952, he was shut out of the better schools in and around his hometown of Fayetteville and sent to Black-only schools in Black-only redlined districts drawn by white legislators. The United States Supreme Court had long since declared in the 1896 case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* that segregation laws were enforceable, so long as the facilities provided to ethnic minorities were "separate but equal." Yet the schools my dad attended were anything but equal. The facilities were run-down and understaffed, and the teachers—most of whom were Black—were underpaid. Students were not given current textbooks or other educational materials. These realities would not change for many schools in the American South, even after the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* ended school segregation. (See chapter 2 for more information on this.)

My mom was not a stranger to discrimination and systemic racism either, though her experience was very different from my dad's. She was a military kid, and her dad—my grandfather, whom I discuss in chapters 2 and 6—moved from one base to another. This gave her an international educational experience in military schools, which were

mostly desegregated.

When she was in high school, her class was the first to integrate at Seventy-First High School in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in 1968. Though integration wasn't easy, my mom navigated it, helped in part by the education she'd received in her earlier years.

Though my mom had better educational experiences than my dad, her family still felt the brunt of systemic racism. Many men of color fought bravely for their country in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, and yet a disproportionate number of them died for their country, often with little recognition. Though the military was desegregated in 1948 by President Harry S. Truman, equal pay for Black and Brown military members was little more than a pipe dream well into the 1980s and 1990s. Non-white service members were often given less desirable posts, which meant lower wages. Men of color didn't advance through the military ranks as quickly (or as far) as their white counterparts either. So, my mom and her family endured a military environment that treated men like my grandfather as if they were second-class service members, both in pay and in their assignments.

The stories of my immediate family's experience of racism were not the only thing that shaped me. Years ago, my aunt Len shared a story about my great-uncle Willie Junior (my mother's uncle), who passed away before I had the chance to know him. As a young man, he migrated to New York City sometime in the 1950s to escape the racial terror of Jim Crow laws. He'd had enough of pretending to be docile even when being called "boy"—or worse—by white people, so he was one of thousands who made the move in hopes of finding a better way of life and job opportunities beyond sharecropping or serving as a house servant. However, much to his dismay, he was greeted in northern states with what some called "James Crow" laws—laws that, while not as draconian as the Jim Crow segregation laws in the South, still disadvantaged non-white people. So, imagine the rage he must have felt when he realized the conditions in the North were not that much

better. Imagine his anger when he realized white systems are the same, no matter where you go.

After living in the North for some time, my great-uncle, whom we affectionally called Uncle Brother, returned home to visit my great-grandfather Willie Nicholson, an illiterate southern Black man who worked as a country sharecropper, port laborer, and railroad hand in an effort to create a better way for his children. My great-grandfather endured insults, being called every name in the book. I'm sure he took a beating or two along the way. He was trained not to look into the eyes of a white man, not to walk on the same side of the sidewalk, and to call every white person "mister" or "missus," regardless of their age, though my great-grandfather was a landowner. He had inherited twenty acres of farmland from his mom, who had received a portion of the land where her mother, Sally McQueen, was enslaved.

Over the years, my great-uncle had watched as his father (my great-grandfather) fought to retain ownership of his land. He saw white people pull out forged deeds for the property, hoping to steal it from his father. My great-uncle discovered that his father had to hire a lawyer so he wouldn't lose the land. The system was stacked against Black men, and my great-uncle knew it. So, while visiting his father, my great-uncle heard him call a white gas station attendant "sir," and he lost it. When they climbed back in the car, he exploded, telling my great-grandfather to stop being so polite to all the white men who'd mistreated him for so many years.

As the family story goes, my great-uncle tore into his father. "They ain't no sirs or misters!" he yelled. It's said that my great-grandfather didn't yell back but simply replied that a Black man living in the South has to make some concessions to get along and survive. That was that.

My great-grandfather learned to put on a polite face and call the white men of his community "sir" as his small concession for survival. By doing so, he'd gotten into less trouble than many of his other Black friends, and he'd enjoyed a little more prosperity too.

Times have changed—or at least they’ve been rebranded. Schools celebrate Black History Month. (Though as of the writing of this book, some public schools restrict the teaching of Black history, claiming that it’s “woke” or Marxist.) Companies have diversity and inclusion committees. But even so, as you’ll see throughout this book, there are still many spaces where people of color are silenced, underrepresented, and underserved. You’ll meet a Black military member who was told he was too intimidating, that he should tone it down. You’ll meet a professional athlete who was blackballed by the National Football League for standing against racism. You’ll read about people of color who were arrested for sitting in a restaurant. You’ll see the way systems of racism are woven into the modern fabric of American life. As a result, even in a modern America where slavery and Jim Crow have been abolished, many BIPOC continue to do just what my great-grandfather did—they go along to get along.

CREATED EQUALLY, TREATED DIFFERENTLY

The message of history as it has played out through American systems is clear: Though “all men are created equal,” they’re not all treated as equals. As we’ll see in this book, BIPOC—Black, Indigenous, and people of color—have been treated differently in systems created by white men: education, the military, commerce, and other societal spaces. The unfortunate truth is that the stories illustrating these forms of systemic racism are rarely taught in our educational system. Why? Maybe it’s because they cause too much shame for white people who’ve perpetuated the systems and for Brown people who’ve been subjected to those systems. Maybe it’s because there are men and women in power who’d just as soon maintain the status quo to retain power. Maybe it’s because we believe the lie that to move forward, we must stop dwelling on the past. Whatever the reason, the truth about our American systems has too often been swept under the rug.

To solve any social issue, we must take a holistic view of the problem. If there were a food shortage, we would look at what caused the shortage and how we might prevent it from happening in the future. Ignoring the problem wouldn't cure the food shortage, and simply talking about it wouldn't fill people's bellies. The same is true about issues of race. If we don't talk openly about the historical *and* current reality of racial bias and inequity, and if we don't act based on those conversations, we'll continue to suffer the effects across all segments of American society.

So let's talk openly about the unfortunate truth that the racist systems of the past continue to shape the systems of today. They shape the opportunities people of color receive, the ways we're viewed, and the ways we are treated by society. Every Black and Brown person I know has suffered some kind of discrimination, whether in a job interview, while applying for a loan, at a traffic stop, at a polling place, or at a hospital. At some point, each of us has felt like an outsider in our own country. This is precisely why I wrote this book.

Looking at America's history, there can be no doubt: Black and Brown people have found themselves on the outside looking in, making concessions to survive. Even today, many modify their behavior to fly under the radar, to make less noise so we won't be the targets of discrimination.

When we explore the Scriptures, as we'll do throughout this book, it's clear: God hates any form of partiality (James 2:1–13). And racism is nothing more than partiality based on skin color. God wants to root this out and tear down the structures and systems that perpetuate racism and racial partiality. He wants his people to prepare their hearts and dedicate themselves to the liberation of people and systems. So why haven't we?

In this book, we'll ask that question while looking at various systems of American society—education, economic, military, entertainment, judicial, religious, and others. We'll ask questions like:

What is the truth inherent in this system of power?

What role have people of peace played in paving the pathway to repair?

How might we create systems for all to flourish?

We'll also glean wisdom from the Bible, considering how it might ask us to dismantle racially inequitable systems. As we do, we'll examine how to prepare for change, how to dedicate ourselves and our systems to equity, and how that preparation and dedication will lead to true liberation for people of color today.

Perhaps you are wondering, when I use the term *liberation*, what do I mean? Good question.

LIBERATION FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

I approach liberation from a Christian perspective. Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian priest and one of the fathers of liberation theology,¹ wrote several books that influenced Black theologians, who in turn influenced the preachers I've listened to all my life. If we believe that God created all people with equal dignity, opportunity, and agency, shouldn't we dismantle the systems that are opposed to this freedom? This was the message I heard from my earliest days in church.

If you grew up in a Black church, maybe you've heard numerous sermons on the Exodus account. Though my parents weren't regular churchgoers, I attended services with my grandparents frequently. There, I heard the stories of liberation. The people of God—the Israelites—were enslaved by the Egyptians, just as African Americans were enslaved in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. For more than four hundred years (see Exodus 12:40–41), they labored under their oppressors, contributing to the wealth, infrastructure, and power of Egypt, just as my ancestors had for white Americans. But God heard their cries and chose Moses, an Israelite raised as

an Egyptian, to free his people.

Maybe you know the rest of the story. God sent Moses to pronounce a series of plagues on Egypt, each time informing Pharaoh that the plague could be avoided if he would simply liberate the Israelites from slavery and oppression. Since Pharaoh refused, he and his people suffered the consequences of nine plagues (see Exodus 7–10). After the ninth plague—the plague of total darkness covering the land—Moses announced the tenth and final plague:

“This is what the LORD says: ‘About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the female slave, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt—worse than there has ever been or ever will be again. But among the Israelites not a dog will bark at any person or animal.’ Then you will know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. All these officials of yours will come to me, bowing down before me and saying, ‘Go, you and all the people who follow you!’ After that I will leave.” Then Moses, hot with anger, left Pharaoh. (11:4–8)

Unlike with the other plagues, God issued special instructions to his people for this final plague. They were to clean their houses of all leaven on the first day of the month (see 12:15) and prepare a sacrificial lamb. On the fourteenth day of the month, each family was to sacrifice the lamb and dedicate their house to the Lord by painting the blood of the lamb on their doorposts (see 12:6–7). On the Passover night, as the Israelites ate their first liberation meal, the angel of death passed over the land of Egypt, bringing death and destruction to the oppressor while sparing the houses of Israelites who had prepared and dedicated themselves to their coming liberation.

On the following day, Pharaoh, who'd lost his own son in the plague, liberated the Israelites. This is a reminder to people of color today that just as the Israelites were liberated from systems of injustice, we can trust that God will do the same for us.

This theology of liberation also comes from Jesus himself. Jesus, we were taught, is the Savior, Redeemer, and Deliverer of all. I still hold to that truth. Through his death and resurrection, we are saved from our sin and restored to right relationship with God. And a natural outcome of that divine act of reconciliation is the liberation of humanity from *every* sin-filled system of oppression. That's why, when Jesus started his earthly ministry, he went into the synagogue and read from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

That's also why, in the gospel of Matthew, he preached a counter-cultural sermon, one in which he taught that the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted would all be liberated from the troubles of the earth and would take their rightful place in heaven with God (see Matthew 5:3-12). Later, in that same gospel, Jesus preached that those who liberate the hungry, thirsty, and oppressed are serving God himself. "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me," Jesus said (25:40).

Jesus practiced what he preached. Over and over again, he liberated

people from sickness, demonic possession, and religious oppression. In the ultimate act of liberation, he died, was buried, and was resurrected, breaking the bondage of sin and the chains of death.

As our congregation listened to those sermons, we came to understand that liberation was a primary theme of the Scriptures. The liberation of Christ gave us hope that we wouldn't always live in oppressive structures, that one day Christ would return and tear down every unjust system. We were also taught that we were agents of liberation, and so we were to be about the work of liberation. But that liberation doesn't happen overnight. Liberation requires preparation and dedication, a truth we also see throughout the Scriptures, both in the spiritual and physical contexts.

In my adult years, I've come to recognize other passages of Scripture as passages of liberation. For instance, in his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote about Christ's return to liberate his people from sin and death. In Romans 13:1–10, he encouraged the believers to be honest, to submit to governing authorities, to love one another, and to obey the commandments. He continued, calling the people to dedicate themselves to purity:

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh. (verses 12–14)

Paul encouraged the people of God to prepare their hearts—*put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light*—and dedicate their lives. Why? Because liberation and salvation were coming. As Paul wrote, “Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed” (verse

11).

Paul's message in the thirteenth chapter of Romans sums up God's plan of liberation from sin. We prepare our hearts, dedicate them to Christ, and as we do, we move closer to the spiritual liberation promised to us. But this message of preparation, dedication, and liberation can also be applied to the everyday liberation of Brown people from structures of racial discrimination and oppression.

PREPARATION, DEDICATION, AND LIBERATION: A SIMPLE FRAMEWORK

I am grateful you picked up this book. I've dedicated my life to the work of biblically based racial reconciliation, which is why I started Be the Bridge, an organization committed to building bridges between white communities and BIPOC communities. It's also why I wrote my first book, *Be the Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Racial Reconciliation*, and it's why I travel the country teaching others how to be bridge builders in a world that often leaves people of color on the outside of society looking in. The fact that you'd join in this journey means you want to be part of the solution for ending systemic racism in this country. That's a *really big deal*.

Those who've taken up the call to be bridge builders in a world of ethnic division know that some form of discrimination has seeped into every segment of society. In this book, we will examine nine sectors of American life, sectors that have traditionally been seen by BIPOC as "white spaces." In each chapter, I'll share a current story of systemic inequity or disparity, and I'll trace it back to its historical roots. In most chapters, we'll also look at what it means to recognize and confess the truth about inequities in the system (preparation), commit ourselves to changing the system (dedication), and move into true freedom as a society (liberation).

These days, there's a lot of baggage associated with the word *libera-*

tion. I think that's a crying shame. Many people associate the word with woke Marxists or liberal Catholic theologians. But when I use the term, I'm not associating it with a political ideology. I use the term in much the same way the Israelites who were liberated from Egypt by Moses might have. I use it in the same way the lepers who were liberated from their sickness by Jesus might have used it. I use the term in the same way most of the Christian church uses it to talk about liberation from sin and death. Liberation is a spiritual principle that is relevant to our daily circumstances. It is our process of everyday sanctification.

Many systems of American society have oppressed Black and Brown people for far too long. Though we're no longer enslaved, though Jim Crow laws have been eradicated, we're not completely free from the effects of racism. If we're going to change that reality, we must come together—white and BIPOC communities alike—and work toward true, holistic, Christian liberation. So, let's examine how our preparation and dedication can lead to liberation of these systems. Let's ask how we can reform historically white spaces and create systems that work for the good of all. Let's listen, learn, and work together as we strive for racial equity in our communities and our nation.

Finally, here's a quick word on how to use this book. This isn't a book to be read quickly and tossed aside. Instead, this book is meant to be read with reflection and consideration for how you can be part of the solution. That's why I've included a "Questions for Reflection" section at the end of each chapter. Please don't breeze by these. Instead, pause and consider them. These questions will help you take a closer look at the racial inequities in systems you may have overlooked. They'll help you identify areas where you can get involved, places where you can make a difference. Engage thoughtfully with the stories of those who've chosen to act in liberating ways in the "Voice(s) of Liberation" section at the end of chapters 2 through 10, considering how they might inspire you to action. Finally, if you'd like to meditate more on the chapter's topic, turn to the collection of prayers at the end

of this book and ask God to open your eyes to what you might need to see.

I believe it's possible to root out the racism in our country and to create better, more equitable and just systems. But it has to start with individuals aiming to make a difference in their communities. If enough of us engage this work, I believe we'll see change in our lifetime. I'm writing this book because I believe in our power to change things. I hope that's why you're reading this book.

Are you ready to work toward true equality, true liberation in your community? Are you ready to reflect, meditate, and act? If so, let's get started.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Before we move on, let's pause and consider the documents that lay the basis for our society. In the United States Declaration of Independence we read, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."² What's more, the Constitution directs us to "establish Justice . . . and secure the Blessings of Liberty."³ Considering these words, ask yourself:

1. In what ways have you witnessed people, organizations, or governmental bodies establishing justice for all citizens?
2. In what ways do you see American institutions missing the mark of establishing justice for all? List specific examples.
3. List the ways in which you've been involved in advancing justice in your own community. If you can't name any ways, be honest about that.

Now, before you turn the page, here's a brief meditation: Take a deep breath in, and as you do, say these words: *Liberty is a blessing*. As you exhale, say this: *Liberty is for all*. It is true liberation we all deserve.

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