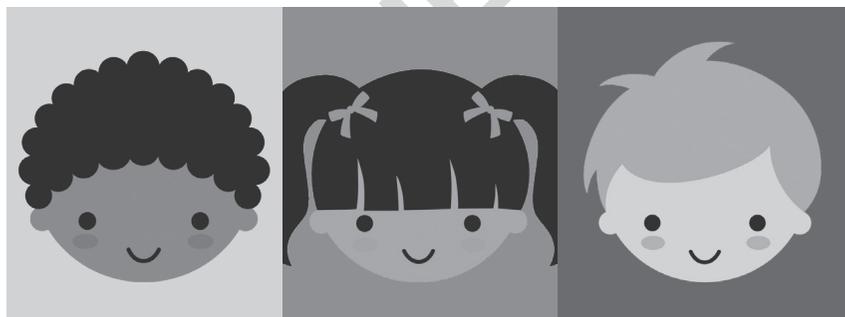


Let's Talk About Race *in* Storytimes

Jessica Anne Bratt

Foreword by Kirby McCurtis



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FOREWORD

Storytime is a key building block to school success. We, who are practitioners of children's services, know that library storytimes and programming for our youngest patrons (birth to age 5) help build social and academic skills that directly correlate to being ready for formal schooling. Using a variety of approaches, we work to ensure that children are learning and can express themselves while their parents and caregivers gain a deeper understanding of what we are doing, why this programming is important for their children's development, and what they can be doing at home to support growth. During storytime we introduce early learning standards in a fun and developmentally appropriate way that helps build language and literacy skills, social and emotional development, motor skills, and basic math concepts.

We live in a society that as a whole teaches children that race is a social category of significance, making informed awareness and regular conversation about race essential for all children but especially for white children who have privilege in the United States because of the color of their skin. Yet so many storytimes do not include this awareness as a concept or skill set that needs to be built and strengthened for children or their parents and caregivers. One of the biggest ways that racism shows up in our own institutions is through silence. Why? I can only guess that the answer is fear, because talking about race with children may not be easy or feel natural. But we know that children are not color-blind, and research shows that children recognize race from a very young age. In "Children Are Not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race," Erin N. Winkler, PhD, describes a study that followed two hundred Black and white children from age 6 months to 6 years and found that infants are able to nonverbally categorize people by race and gender at 6 months, toddlers as young as 2 years old use racial categories to reason about people's behaviors, and 3- to 5-year-olds not only categorize people by race but express bias based on race. This research disproves the belief that children only have racial biases if they are directly taught to do so. The need

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to help children make sense of their categorization, and what that means in a larger societal context, is so important. And not having conversations about race is an unearned privilege that not all people are granted in American society.

So where do we start? Sharing diverse books is a good step, as is bringing children to diverse spaces, but passive exposure is not enough. In *NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children*, authors Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman come to the conclusion that just being in a racially diverse environment is not enough for kids to have better racial attitudes. Children can grow to understand that everyone has a unique experience and that one's race will form their experience, but that understanding requires regular, clear conversation. For library staff who serve youth, storytime is a great venue to begin these conversations with children and their parents and caregivers.

Jessica Bratt is a librarian who has been leading efforts related to the work of talking about race in storytime for years, both in practice and in teaching other library professionals how to begin. In 2018, when I began coteaching a class for parents of preschoolers called “Talking about Race and Racism with Young Children” at Multnomah County Library, I knew she was the one person I needed to connect with. Not only has she been trying out different phrases and approaches for years, she has real-life experience with other practitioners. This was valuable information to share with parents in my class as they did their homework—actually practicing sharing books with their children and talking about race intentionally.

This book is designed to give you practical steps and scripts to ensure that you are talking about race in storytime. Throughout this book, Bratt explores how to approach talking about race with preschool-age children, reveals how you can use picture books as conversation starters, and shares resources that will help continue the dialogue. I highly recommend *Let's Talk About Race in Storytimes*; whether you are just getting started on your antiracism journey or you are a seasoned advocate for equity and inclusion at your library, you will learn something from this book that will help curb your fears about race talks and support self-reflection as you continue to battle the ways in which whiteness and privilege are normalized in our society.

—Kirby McCurtis

PREFACE

The World According to Whimsy

I was born to two parents who were very passionate about their community. They were members of the Black Panther Party, and they were also both teachers. They live on the South Side of Chicago and have stayed in a neighborhood that was nice but was ravaged by the crack epidemic of the 1980s. I grew up talking and learning about race. Our family doctor, Herbert Lerner, worked in the Black Panther Party free clinic and opened his own practice to help reverse the segregated practices whereby Black people could visit the doctor only on one day of the week.

I did not get to this work alone or in an isolated bubble. One thing that is true for me, but that I find is also the case for most of my colleagues of color, is that this work speaks to our families because the policies and laws regarding race affected us so deeply. I stand on my ancestors' shoulders. My parents are from the South, separately moving north as a part of the Great Migration. My dad had to flee the South because of threats to his life, all stemming from race. My maternal grandfather was born in 1898 and had twenty-two children (my mother is the youngest). My paternal grandfather was the only Black man in Grenada, Mississippi, who owned his own land. My parents were the first college graduates on both sides of their families.

My parents graduated high school in the 1960s, which meant that college was their first “integrated” experience. One of the research studies that had a huge influence on my mother and how she parented was the Doll Study (which showed that because of how Black people were portrayed in films and books, children associated darker dolls with being bad). She made sure to instill in my brother and me a love of our history and of our blackness in order to be able to move about in society comfortably in our own skin.

Much of the time, white culture portrays Black people who align or agree with the majority culture as the only acceptable “Black” role models. My parents wanted us to see all different types of Black people.

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They took us to museums and other places that showed all types of Black professionals. The DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago, for example, was highly influential in my learning about Black culture. My parents surrounded us with friends and family to give us positive experiences with a diversity of Black culture. Black people are not a monolith. More importantly, when I started private school and battled against coded words that portrayed Black people as “other,” these experiences helped build a foundation of support.

My mother also gave my brother and me dozens of books that showed the vast array of blackness and Black culture. We read about the popular African Americans in history such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Frederick Douglass, but my parents also made sure that we read about many more examples of Black excellence (including Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. Dubois, Elizabeth Keckley, Ida B. Wells, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nina Simone, Angela Davis, Fred Hampton, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and Shirley Chisholm, just to name a few). My mother told us that mainstream society would show us one thing, but that Black people can do—and have done—all things.

By the time my parents had me, they had slowed down a bit. They were in their 40s when I could make memories, and their activism came mostly through church. Thinking it would help, they also put me in private school. At my private school, I was one of the few Black kids. All my teachers were white. The nice way to say it would be that they were insensitive to race and diversity. The honest way to say it would be that they were racist. For example, my history teacher excluded me from the “Family History” project because he said there was no way I could know. When I told my parents, they responded that this was good training for me and for the world I’d be entering. This world wouldn’t solve my problems for me.

But they also wanted me to know my own history, which definitely wasn’t taught in school. To make up for what wasn’t taught in my school, my parents gave me books about African Americans being excellent in their work and used the summers for a different kind of education. We’d visit museums and examples of Black excellence around Chicago.

I am bubbly by nature, loud, passionate, and will (and often do) talk at length about libraries, equity, and race. Libraries are limitless

because they touch every aspect of society. They are the equalizer in a world where public infrastructure is quickly crumbling. Librarians can provide knowledgeable conversations rooted in science that can help conquer ignorance and fear. Books and libraries shaped the way I see and interact with the world, beginning when I was very young. I learned how to walk when I was 7 months old and would sneak out of my crib and eavesdrop on the adults. I wouldn't sleep and could never get my brain to stop moving. My mom, who needed a bit of a break, turned me on to books. There was a rule that during nap time and at bedtime, I didn't *have* to sleep, but I couldn't leave the room. So I'd lie there and read. I see now, as an adult, how foundational books were to my growth and to my understanding of the world, and the deep impact they have made on my views of equity, diversity, and inclusion (E/D/I). For me, this work is a natural outflow of my passions, skills, and areas of interest.

I loved libraries so much that I've always worked at them. My first job, at 16, was as a librarian. I started out as a page at the South Shore branch of the Chicago Public Library, which was about six blocks from my house. The librarian, Ms. Dorothy Evans, made a big impression on me. She seemed to know everything. She could answer any question I could think of. If I was curious about something, I could turn to her. There were books about everything! She took me under her wing. She is the reason why I'm a librarian. She did something so special, which I hope to replicate one day. She gathered all of her "best" library kids and brought us to the Coretta Scott King Book Awards Breakfast Banquet. She introduced me to a whole other layer of librarian work outside the building. She is the reason why libraries, to me, are limitless. Black professionals know how hard it is to navigate the workforce. Intergenerational mentorship is important in making sure that kids are able to see representations of themselves in a *big* way.

One other thing that played a major role in my development, and that I'd thought of as a sidenote until recently, is my love of music. After books and libraries, music is my number two passion. I have played the piano my whole life and took piano lessons and played in competitions throughout my childhood. (Before becoming a librarian, I actually thought I would do something with music.) In music, one thing that is of fundamental import is that you must practice in

order to succeed. Although that sounds obvious, no piece of music just appears. Anyone who plays an instrument will tell you that you don't get it perfect on the first try. You miss notes and make mistakes every time. The best musicians are very talented, but they're often the ones who have put in the most work. This is true of talking about race in storytime as well. When music comes together, each instrument brings its own flavor. In an orchestra, each piece is vital. Take one out, and you lose the benefit of the collective. It is a celebration of diversity in its purest form. Things that are different come together to make beauty. Each instrument is uniquely shaped and patterned to make that instrument sound the best it possibly can. This uniqueness matters. Music taught me acceptance, practice, and viewing my part as contributing to the collective. Most importantly, music teaches you that "feeling of belonging." You can have all these different, wonderful instruments that are able to harmonize as one beautiful sound. Which is something I've taken with me into the library world.

I tell you this to emphasize that this work is fundamental to who I am. Music and books and libraries are at the core of me. Being an activist was an expectation from my childhood. The goal was always to make the world a better place. So that's what I'm trying to do, in my field of choice, each and every day. We Have to Do More.

As a Black professional, I have always talked about race and diversity when planning and implementing my own storytimes. The work of E/D/I is very natural to me, and I thought it was something everyone did. I quickly found out it was not.

At the time, I was the branch manager of a library on the north side of Grand Rapids, Michigan. I was hosting two storytimes each week. I've always talked about race and diversity during storytimes and would celebrate them. I didn't realize this approach was unique. Patrons noticed and appreciated it and asked me how they could do likewise. I realized after talking with several white staff members that they wanted to help make the world "more equitable" but did not know how.

One example that always stands out in my memory happened during an early literacy committee meeting. One of my colleagues was near retirement, reflecting on her career, and she asked if there was something *more* that librarians should be doing. After all her years of

effort, she was seeing that the world was not necessarily changing for the better. We were watching our families struggle with the upheaval caused by misinformation, bullying, and a general lack of empathy.

I started experimenting with the storytimes, which came naturally to me, as a way that I could help my white colleagues feel comfortable engaging with race and providing tools to help disrupt bias at a young age. After dozens of people reached out to me for tips and information, I decided to take a bigger approach. I created the first *Let's Talk About Race in Storytimes* in the fall of 2016. I saw a need that was much larger than simply the branch I was managing at the time, and the need to talk about this subject extended beyond racial and other normal categories. That approach is what you have in your hands.

But since 2016, a lot more people have reached out to me about what to do. This deeply affects all of us and our entire community. Heather McGhee stated it best: "It costs us so much to remain divided . . . I believe it's time to reject that old paradigm and realize that our fates are linked. An injury to one is an injury to all." Talking about race is sensitive because of fear. I want to help people overcome their fears and encourage them to do the work themselves. Silence doesn't bring progress. So I created a tool kit that helps you begin wherever you are. I have a positive outlook on life, and at the core, I'm an optimist. I'm also a nerd. I love video games, fantasy, and fan fiction, and I have a wild imagination. Part of what attracts me to fantasy, science fiction, and everything nerd is the ability to create "new" worlds. Racial equity work requires curiosity and imagination, which translates to my love of all things nerd. So, the training I've presented incorporates those features. To be an agent of change for the world, you have to start with your own self. This includes using your areas of interest, but it also means taking care of yourself. It's hard to heal others if you're starting from a place of brokenness. To get the best results from this book and to do this work to the best of your abilities, you must be healed. We all have bias, we all come through life with traumas, and it is hard to do E/D/I work from a place of pain or cynicism. So join me, as we go through how to talk about race, which starts at home.

It quickly became apparent that people had not implemented, and did not know how to implement, E/D/I in their work. One of my librarians spoke to the fear in a good way. I was encouraging her

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to celebrate diversity in her storytimes. She had sat through all my trainings regarding talking about race in storytimes. Her anxieties were high, particularly if she had to talk about something sensitive and especially in the current political climate. Her fears were heightened by the fact that the families in attendance were diverse. Such fears are common.

She told me that the first time she made an effort to address diversity, an African American father was with his children, and she saw him tense up. Though she was afraid, she went ahead with her storytime. After it ended, he approached her and thanked her for talking about race in such a positive, informative way. Processing the event afterward, I joked, “He was afraid you were going to say something stupid, because that’s what happens so often!” After this experience, she got more comfortable. And once she got more comfortable, it only got better. I’ve found this is the experience a lot of white people have in mixed spaces. It is a truly beautiful thing to see all parts of society coming together around reading and learning. It is one of the ways that libraries are actively righting wrongs that we were a part of creating.

NOTE

1. Heather C. McGhee, “Racism Has a Cost for Everyone,” TED, video, 14:12, December 2019, https://www.ted.com/talks/heather_c_mcghee_racism_has_a_cost_for_everyone?language=en.

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Why I Started Talking About Race in Storytime

In the summer of 2016, with the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, the country was hit by the fact that things are unequal. It was not new, but these deaths were caught on film, broadcast around the world. They were all over social media, and everyone was adding their own commentary. There was a tension that you could feel and a conversation that had turned national. The tension took many forms, ranging from discomfort to rage. Many African Americans call this feeling “Black Pain.” I felt it very personally. Philando Castile reminded me of my brother, and what happened to him could have, and has, happened to my family members in the past. In the aftermath of these deaths, I could not sit idly by. I could not be silent in my own life and work space.

On the national level, the conversation centered on awareness. African Americans were all over the place sharing our experiences with police and jobs and authority, and the common theme was that things are not equal. It was very obvious that “the American experience” is very different for minorities than it is for the mainstream. As minorities, we know this. This inequity is part of life for us. From a very young age, we’re told to be “twice as good,” and we’re aware that any interaction with police could turn deadly. Consequently, African American parents have to have “The Talk” with their children, beginning when those children are very young. The Talk is about how to handle the police and what to do when you get stopped because—as Philando Castile and Alton Sterling showed all too clearly—any interaction *could* turn deadly.

The national conversation about awareness is a starting point, but what we want is equity. There had been some movement and progress on this front, headed by organizations like Black Lives Matter. The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013 as a response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer, with the goals of making changes in policy and making our society more equitable.

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In the summer of 2016, I waited to see if my industry would take a stand in defense of Black lives. After seeing nothing in my own industry concerning the issues of Black Lives Matter, violence against Black bodies, and issues regarding race and equity, I knew I had to act. One of the things I found inspiring with #blacklivesmatter was their call to use your own expertise to help the movement. So I and a few other librarians started an organization called Libraries4BlackLives. It was our response to the Black Lives Matter movement, our attempt to make things more equitable in the world of libraries. The goal was to help gather collective energy around helping people wake up to the call for a more equitable society, using the tools we knew: books and libraries. Or, as I like to think of it, trying to figure out how to best fight inequalities by using your own superpowers.

I am a doer by nature, so I found the approach of using your own expertise very empowering and realized that engaging in this work was my superpower. It felt freeing. For some people, the answer lies in organizing and protesting; for others, it may be seeking to change and advocate for policy. For me it was taking note of what we have yet to rectify by working in a public library. Throughout the years, public libraries have become more than just information repositories. We are now a community hub or, to quote Eric Klingberg, “palaces of the people” where everyone should feel a sense of belonging. In this case, *everyone* meant representation for all people. All too often in the library world, BIPOC are excluded from this representation.

I began a very personal introspection of how I interacted with the families in my storytimes and how race played a direct part in my creation of storytime sessions. For me, a focus on representation was very natural. I’d always done it—it had been instilled by my mother (an early reading specialist). As a youth services librarian, I knew that a sense of belonging begins at an early age, but so does bias. We need to combat this pattern. People wanted resources. They wanted to understand. They wanted to take action. But they also didn’t know where to look. One part of the problem is that in some ways, there is much information and many resources, while in others, there’s not enough. There’s also the question of what to trust. What to use. What is good? I realized that my knowledge is what I could contribute.

The process led to an action plan that led to lists and blogs and speakings and trainings. What I saw at my own library—but also

through conversations on Twitter, with family members, and at library conferences—was that though they knew there was a need and a desire to change the narrative, people didn't know how to do it. It was interesting to hear people process. They were afraid. They felt unequipped. A lot of white people didn't know if they *could* talk about race. But if fear is your narrative, then nothing happens. So I used my superpower and developed a training called “How to Talk About Race in Storytime.”

What you're holding is the book version of those training sessions. I intentionally crafted my trainings to be *facilitations* (defined as “the act of helping other people deal with a process”). I like to be interactive (which you'll soon find out), and I like to draw on my audience's experience. My goal is to create a space for reflection, growth, and change. I believe the best in people and think that with guidance we can all do well. In turn, this book is meant to be interactive. The art of anti-racist/anti-bias practices requires work. All the collected knowledge in the world will not help you move forward on your journey if you do not take a step. Self-work is the first step needed to engage in this work to bring it to the community around you. You will find worksheets and questions of reflection that are intended to help you talk about race in a way that is affirming and comfortable for children.

We're hearing more and more that the quest for equity and justice is still current news. Four hundred years of slavery did not end in one day. A more equitable world will not come about simply from reading this (or any) book, but we can help bring about a better world by talking about race with our children. Equity starts at home. We're all at different points of our journey, and that is okay. What you do is take a step forward today, another one tomorrow. By doing so, we can move the world forward, and inch the needle toward the arc of justice and equity.

The Time Is Now

In the summer of 2020, Black Lives Matter protests happened in all fifty states in response to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Talks from these protests centered on systematic oppression, which extended to many systems of society. With an election on the horizon, the protests carried an extra weight that summer. People were

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commenting about the events everywhere, but one Tweet really caught my eye: “Ruby Bridges is only 65.” Ruby Bridges is a civil rights icon who became famous for being the first African American to desegregate the public schools in New Orleans. The first. She’s only 65.

Not talking about race has consequences. One of them is that historic events can sound like they’re part of the past, rather than the present. Ruby Bridges is a great example of this. She and other students who also desegregated schools are praised in books in elementary schools and taught about in history books, which can have the effect of making the kids who hear about the events think they happened a long time ago. But the fact is that Ruby is younger than many of these same kids’ grandparents. Ruby Bridges is the same age as my mother-in-law. Ruby Bridges could easily be one of the grandparents at an elementary school grandparents’ day.

A lot of white people are facing what is happening and thinking it’s new. It is not. As author and activist Adrienne Maree Brown said, “Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered.”¹ A few hours and Google can show you countless stories of injustice. In Georgia, after historic turnout by African American voters, the state government is trying hard to suppress the vote. This response is what has always happened. We need action to counter this. Once you see, you cannot unsee, and the question is what do you do about it. That’s the much more important question. This is some of that uncovering.

This work is important because we are going to set up the next generation of public servants, law enforcers, and tech designers to either reinforce biases or get better at disrupting them. A *New York Times* video talks about implicit bias being “the fog we all breathe in”² and that can shape our split-second reactions rooted in tolerance or intolerance (why not root them in empathy instead?). If we want the next generation to be more loving, more kind . . . to be *actually diverse*, we need to teach those qualities. The truth is, not talking about race and diversity has gotten us to the place we are in now. I want to be like Fred Hampton, who wanted to fight identity oppression with identity solidarity.

The journey can seem overwhelming because of the amount of information out there. There’s so much to learn and take in that we can sink into inaction. But inaction leads to more death, more bias, and more inequality. This is why I found such inspiration in the Black

Lives Matter push to use your own area of expertise as the starting point for action. My personal action was to encourage people to believe that they can talk about race and diversity and do so without fear. I'm a positive, encouraging person. So when I take action, it comes from this place. As you go through this book, do not shame yourself for past storytimes or lack of representation. Start now, today. And if you have to atone for past actions, do so. Use the Anti-Racist Action Plan to start thinking about what will be needed to put your learning into action.

ANTI-RACIST ACTION PLAN

1 Think

How do you learn best? Is it by thinking, reading, watching, or listening?

2 Plan

Do self-learning about the identity of blackness.

3 Do

Ask your institution (supervisor, management, etc.) if there is support for learning more about equity, diversity, and inclusion. What programs could you or staff members attend locally or nationally regarding anti-bias practices for children?

One final example before diving in is that of Pearl Townshend. When she was 17, she lived in Raleigh, North Carolina, which had segregated libraries. Pearl had to study at the Black library. She needed a book that the Black library didn't have, so she went to the white library to find a copy. When she tried to enter the library, staff members told her she wasn't allowed inside. She explained her situation and was "allowed" to enter the library, but hidden in the basement. The experience was so traumatic for Pearl, and she felt so unwelcome, that she didn't get a library card until 2015, when she was 90.

Since Pearl's experience, libraries have stepped up to be a part of the solution. Libraries should be places of equity and help. That's what libraries have done. We used to exclude. But after the death of Michael Brown in 2014, when schools were closed down and children didn't

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have access to materials, the Ferguson (Missouri) libraries opened their doors to the students and were the place they needed. As you read, and throughout this work, pay attention to your emotional and physical state. I have included some helpful tips for processing stressful information.

PROCESSING STRESSFUL INFORMATION



✔ Tension in the Body

Oppression is felt in the body. As you work through learning or unlearning history and exploring race, keep in mind how your body is feeling and the emotions that you are experiencing.

✔ Strong Emotions

Identify the strong emotions you are experiencing. Unpack them. Is it shame? Guilt? Anger? Denial? Frustration?

✔ Breathing Techniques

Learning breathing techniques is essential for processing stressful information. You cannot do this work if you are not emotionally or mentally healed.

It Starts at Home

As an industry, we know how important representation is. Through studies by Lee and Low or the formation of We Need Diverse Books, fighting status quo publishing trends is finally making headway nationally. More libraries are now actively taking audits of their collections and seeing whether they are curating books to represent our identities. This is a good thing.

We know from research that white parents do not talk to their kids about race. Libraries can help combat this deficiency. We can provide tools and build confidence, but we can also model representation. How do we bridge the gap and help parents feel confident about having “check-in conversations about race”?

This discussion about awareness is important. Research has shown that bias begins at about 36 months of age. Humans naturally categorize things, which is very normal and doesn't have to be bad. But when they're steered in a way to categorize some things as better and some worse, that's where the problem begins. The problem plays out by saying that one group of people and their culture are inherently superior and that other identities are subservient or less than that culture.

E/D/I and representation are really important work that starts at home. Kids are resilient and inquisitive, and they notice differences in skin tone, gender, and levels of ability. When they ask questions, be honest. If you don't know, say things like, "I don't know," or "That's a really good question," or "Let's figure that out together." As a caregiver, you might begin this work by quickly scoping your books. Ask questions such as these: Do the characters in your books look the same, or do they look different? Are you reading stories that include different genders and gender identities, races and ethnicities, and cultures that are not your own? Doing so is a great way to start the process of talking about race and diversifying your storytime.

It shows up subliminally, right? When you went into the library, you could see and name the few Black authors published at the time. All those authors were on the Coretta Scott King Book Awards list. There were a few up-and-coming Black authors to be found in the newly created young adult section (Jacqueline Woodson and Angela Johnson), but throughout my schooling, all the characters in the books we read who weren't slaves or servants or workers were white.

As many of us were forced to discover while living through a pandemic, belonging is very important and is going to be more important post-pandemic. The beauty of this work is that it doesn't stop just because the world stops. I did a training session for a museum in Rhode Island wanting to better engage in this work and asked participants what compelled them to do this work when everything was shut down. They said they wanted to be ready to hit the ground running as soon as society opened up. This time is perfect to dig deep into practicing, learning, and getting ready to "hit the ground running" once you can start seeing your wonderful community again in person.

The book you have in your hands is adapted from live training I do on how to talk about race in storytimes. Step into this topic with me, and we can begin to do our part to create a more equitable society.

○○○ SELF-REFLECTION ○○○

Charlene Carruthers, one of the founding members of the Black Youth Project 100 and a well-known queer Black activist and organizer, says the work of E/D/I cannot be done unless you first are able to answer the following questions. Take a moment to answer them for yourself.

- ▶ Who am I?
- ▶ What are my self-interests?
- ▶ Who are my people?
- ▶ Who am I accountable to?
- ▶ What am I best positioned to do?
- ▶ How was I taught Black history? Black history is an integral part of US history. Black people have been integral to shaping the country in terms of the economy, culture, food, fashion, and labor. Often Black history is taught as a subtext or an afterthought. It is not. It is foundational. Knowing Black history enriches one's knowledge of American history.
- ▶ How was Black history taught to me as a child, as an adult, or both?
- ▶ What famous Black figures do I know?
- ▶ Thinking about US history from 1619 to the present, what enslaved narratives do I know? Harlem Renaissance? Reconstruction? Great Migration? Black Power?
- ▶ Within those narratives, what intersectionality exists?

NOTES

1. Adrienne Maree Brown, Twitter, July 9, 2016, 11:24 a.m., <https://twitter.com/adriennemaree/status/751799298791211008?lang=en>.
2. Saleem Reshamwala, "Peanut Butter, Jelly and Racism," New York Times, video, 2:26, December 16, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000004818663/peanut-butter-jelly-and-racism.html>.

THEY SEE RACE

One time when I was working at the public service desk, a coworker and I discussed our introduction to race as kids. I told her that I attended an all-white kindergarten. In kindergarten, the big deal was inviting people to your birthday party. I was invited to many birthday parties, and my mom drove me far into the suburbs and neighboring towns in Indiana to attend these parties. When it was time for my birthday, I went to the store with my mom, spent a long time picking out invitations I liked, and made one for each kid in my class. Excitedly, I went to school the next day and handed out the invitations to my birthday party at my house. Soon after, one by one, my classmates started telling me they couldn't come. Finally, one of my classmates let me in on the secret. He told me no one would be attending my birthday party because I lived in Chicago—"in a bad neighborhood." I remember staunchly defending (as kids do) the people on my block, telling my classmate that my neighbors were nice and that it wasn't bad where I lived. I could not understand. I had never seen a gun or heard gunshots. Every house on our block had a nice lawn.

When I got in the car after school, I was visibly heated. My mom asked what was wrong, so I told her what had happened and asked her what it meant that I lived in a bad neighborhood. I can still picture her grip on the steering wheel, as she tried to explain it to me. She had to explain that a lot of times when Black people live together in a city or urban area, because of how that area is portrayed on the news or in the paper, white people interpret it as a "bad neighborhood." It was my first introduction to the fact that because I looked different, people treated me differently. And also that—in their opinion—this

difference was not a good thing. I could not grasp the concept of being thought of as different because I thought that I was the same.

My coworker didn't have anything similar. She'd never thought about race. I've found that this disparity is not unique as I have navigated conversations about race at work. Often, coworkers are shocked when they hear this or other stories from me or other minorities. To us, race is something we're aware of from a very young age. It's something that we have to deal with and navigate constantly. A close friend of mine, Elon Cook Lee, director of interpretation and education in the Historic Sites Department at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, demonstrates this gap quite well in her facilitations. (I was able to attend the Cultural Heritage and Social Change Unconference led by Jon Voss.) She asks participants to write down their earliest memory of race and then line up by that age on a timeline. The results are always the same. People of color are lined up in the front, whereas our white counterparts are often in high school and beyond before they're ever aware of their racial identity.

A lot of this disparity is intentional. It's taboo to talk about race, and consequently the subject is avoided. Minorities are left to deal with it while society attempts to move beyond racial lines. A term often used for people claiming to be "woke" or "not racist" and therefore open to diversity is *color-blind*. The term is intended to convey that such people do not see race when they think about people. It can come with additional comments about being beyond race or post-racial. Their assumption is that being color-blind is a good thing because when you don't think in terms of race, you don't think *negatively* based on someone's race. But the problem with this line of thinking is that it goes against what humans do, while also unintentionally devaluing the person of color.

At the end of the day, a lot of "color-blind" talk is loaded with coded words for race. After the civil rights movement, politicians have used these coded—and often derogatory—words instead of explicitly mentioning race. Words like *urban* or *inner-city* are used to describe the specific parts of the city where minorities live. When a Black-issues protest is organized, the protestors are described as "thugs" or "illegal immigrants." Contrast these terms to the words *patriot* or *middle class* that white Americans use to think about and describe themselves. This

type of coded language has helped adults avoid having discourse and healthy conversations about race. According to Ian Haney López, author of *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*, “It allows people to say, ‘Hey, I’m just criticizing the behavior, not criticizing a racially defined group.’”¹

A lot of the time, because of the loaded term *racist* nowadays, white people are fearful of talking about race. As a result, problems that stem from race persist while some people think we’re beyond it. Other women in positions of power often demonstrate this situation quite well. “Do you face more discrimination,” one such woman asked me, “because of your race or gender?” “Race,” I responded quickly. “Really?” she said, genuinely surprised. “I thought it would be gender.” In her mind, society had moved past race, becoming color-blind, but had not moved past gender. This happens because you cannot avoid gender but can “other” race through coded language. Most people want to hear from someone who has had that lived experience, yet a lot of times when someone shares their vulnerabilities, white listeners may not affirm the experience of oppression but, instead, say that the speaker has a victim mentality from it.

For Black people, and other minorities, race comes into play very often in ways that white people do not experience. For example, when I was first hired as a youth services librarian, I was told that I was hired only because the administration liked Black people. Most of the time when Black people are in a predominantly white space, they have to stay quiet because they represent their whole community and do heavy lifting on defending cultural nuances of the ways that Black people think, act, or live. Many white people have few friends of color, so the one or two whom they know end up representing the whole group. Most of the time Black people *do not* get the privilege of being individuals. We are considered a group. This code switching is not unique to BIPOC. I remember my mom letting me know that when I went outside, I had to make sure to act a certain way and not be threatening to white people because I may be their only interaction with Black people.

Artist and entrepreneur Kenyatta Forbes got tired of being a “Black ambassador” in white spaces, so she invented a game called Trading Races to get adults of *all* races to talk through their biases, both

conscious and unconscious, about the identity of blackness. I really like the game, which deals with this issue quite well.

The game consists of a stack of cards with pictures of people of different races and genders. Each participant gets five cards. You ask a question like, Who's the blackest?, and each person goes through their cards, laying down the one they choose and explaining their reason, which is where things get interesting. At the end of the round, the group must come to consensus about who is the "blackest." The game is supposed to be fun, which a lot of people have a hard time leaning into. The conversations that come up are almost always interesting, especially because not all the cards picture people with black skin. There are a lot of controversial figures—Clarence Thomas, Tiger Woods, Eminem, Rachel Dolezal, Stacey Dash, and Bill Clinton, for example.

Let's take Bill Clinton as a case in point. Some people call him the first Black president. They talk about what he did for the Black community, *but* he also created the three-strikes law, which disproportionately oppresses Black people. To this day, there are people in jail simply for a third strike. What is worth more? What makes more of an impact? The group must decide.

I played this game with my coworkers before using it in training. A lot of people are nervous the first round or two because talking about race is uncomfortable. It highlights a lot of what we do badly and fear in our society. We will never as a society get better at discussing "taboo" topics, much less raise the next generation to be a tolerant society, if we cannot unpack blackness. First, the game shows others in the group whether you were taught any Black history or know Black pop culture. Then it adds layers as you engage with other players in trying to "out-Black" other characters. This conversation leads to discussions about physical differences, achievements, intersectionality, social inequality, power, and more.

Kenyatta Forbes was attempting to create a space in which people could talk about race. I love my Black peers across the nation because most have fun with the game. There will always be some Black people who take personally this attempt to identify "blackness" because of all the trauma it brings up, and there will be white people who want to use it as an excuse in this new culture to not "practice" wokeness because "they are not the experts on race." I point out that we are all

“experts” on race (a lot of time the wrong things about race). Whenever white people go out in society and have an interaction, or see a group of people coming into the library and do not give them the same experience based on assumptions, they are leaning into their expertise about race. Talking is the key to the game, and you cannot play without dialogue. When you play this game, you enter a space that is not black and white, literally and metaphorically. This game is not about winning; it is about how we are all losers because we do not have conversations about the malleability of race. When we do not know our full history that incorporates *all* Americans and our achievements and when we act as if only Black people need to know, then this ignorance affects all of us.

The game does a great job of highlighting that “race” is not clear or well defined. The concept has been shaped and modeled and used to oppress from the first caste system (which originated in Spain) to the science and laws in America. Race is tied into the very economics of our nation in the form of chattel slavery and in creating policies to pit Indigenous people, indentured servants, and the enslaved populations against each other. Race is many things, but one thing it is not is color-blind. This is because people are not color-blind. In our nation, opportunity has been doled out and defined and allowed *by* and *because of* race. People of color have been on the receiving end of the negatives of this opportunity. I’ve heard my husband, who is white and has ancestors who were immigrants, speak to this. When talking about opportunity, a lot of his relatives mention that they’re descendants of immigrants who have had to work hard and struggle to make it. He responds to them by saying that because of their Dutch heritage, they were able to blend in with the dominant culture. And he points out that the Indigenous people who were already here were pushed to reservations, while African Americans were brought here against their will. So when mainstream society says “color-blind,” it ignores all past oppression and essentially wants to wipe it clean. This is not helpful.

The main danger is that by being color-blind, we make all people the same. When we make all people the same, we assume that one set of norms works for all people. We think that one set of rules, one system of judgment, one system of evaluation is good enough to cover

the masses, but it's not. Different cultures value things differently. "Loud" to one culture is normal to another. Time is valued very differently by different cultures. When the dominant culture creates the system based on what *it* values, the result is systemic racism. What happens is that those in positions of power make the rules, systems, and evaluations, and it's up to the rest to assimilate or get steamrolled. Our modern society is now seeing that the system does not work for everyone. We ask, What do we do? How do we respond? But such questions have always been part of the conversation. Think of the famous Frederick Douglass speech: "What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?" Think about how, after the Civil War, Black liberation was allowed to blossom during the Reconstruction period and then the Black Codes and Jim Crow laws were introduced.

Sometimes it's easier to explain concepts with fictional characters than with real people, so I'll use my favorite superhero (other than Storm), Groot. I love superheroes and comics, and one of my absolute favorites is *Guardians of the Galaxy*. It's a blend of everything I like, and the characters make everything fun, especially as they're doing their part to save the universe—which is what librarians do every day! When we meet Groot in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, his first words are "I am Groot." His next words are "I am Groot." Same for his next line and his next line and his next. The other characters, like the audience, understandably are frustrated. They say to him, "Why do you keep saying that?" or "We heard you already." They're expressing what many viewers also wonder—why does this character say only this one thing? Does he not know how to talk? But then, very soon after, we find out from Rocket, who can understand Groot, that Groot is a tonal language and is, in fact, one of the most expressive languages in the entire universe, though it uses only three words. When you know this, you can recognize that *I am Groot* is much different than *I. am. Groot*. Which is much different than *I AM Groot* or *I AM GROOT!* and so on. Once we know how the language works, we can appreciate what the language Groot brings to all language.

Groot is a good example of the danger of color blindness. When viewed from the position that language functions only one way (color-blind), and that one way is only through words, it is easy to assume that a language of three words is very limited. Viewed from

the uniquenesses of the language, it then becomes about appreciation, which is one thing so many of us love about comic books in general. Sometimes superheroes are a good example of what society should look like *because* there is no stigma attached. No one can look at Drax, Star-Lord, Rocket, or Gamora and talk about their own ancestry, origin story, or political opinions. We just appreciate these characters. The diversity adds to the joy. For a lot of people, it's easier to appreciate this diversity in fiction, but it is possible to do so in real life, too. We just have to teach appreciation, and then life can be as fun as comic books!

Children Notice Differences

When I found out I was pregnant, one of the first things I got excited about was reading to my child. My spouse laughed at me the first time he saw me reading to our son, the third night after coming home from the hospital. The first book we read was Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon*. My mom, a reading specialist, had read the book to me when I was young, so I continued the tradition. *Goodnight Moon* is great for growth and development. The book begins with a two-page spread showing a complete room, before describing the specifics of what's in the room on the next two pages. This cycle repeats until you name every item in the room. Then, using the same pattern and repetition, you begin the process of saying good night to each of those items.

It was fun to see my own son begin unpacking the book at different developmental stages. As he developed, he noticed more on his own, including a (fun) mouse that appears throughout the book. Although the room stays the same, the mouse moves all around. It's on a shelf on one page, on the bed on the next. Our son started to point to the mouse on each page. Kids enjoy books like this because they help them observe the world around them. The mouse demonstrates that in the midst of the routine, children notice change. Our son is 3 now, so *Goodnight Moon* is no longer in his evening routine. But though the books have changed, the pattern recognition and processing of the world have not. One of the books we've been reading for the past year or so is Michael Tyler's *The Skin You Live In*. The book is a celebration of hues and pigmentation. At its core, the book is a celebration of diversity, with characters of all different skin tones. All children will

be able to identify themselves, which I've seen them do firsthand. We live very close to my son's cousins, who are white, and read the book together. When we read it to the children, they point to the characters in the story that look like them and call them their own names. The white boy is Anson, the white girl is Norah, and the Black boy is Everett. They also do this for the adults in the book. They'll point to the different characters and call them by our friends' and relatives' names, based on each character's skin tone. (Everett points to one and says "Aunt 'Nessa.") The children do this not because of us, but because they notice. Seeing the power of story and representation for my own child and his cousins, however, has only affirmed the importance of the work I do on E/D/I.

Children begin recognizing race at about the age of 3. I'd known this fact on an academic level, but seeing it in my own child reinforced how important teaching anti-bias is. Humans naturally categorize things. It helps to sort and order the world around us. We categorize by all types of things, including race. What cannot be emphasized enough is that children recognize the differences in skin and hair and eyes and noses and mouths. They notice differences in gender and ability. This is true in the books they read, the TV shows and movies they watch, *and* the real world. They notice when things are different, but also when things are the same. In a diverse society, such as the one we live in, we should teach appreciation of the differences, instead of forcing everyone into the same box. Too often, we attach bias to this recognition.

Although the United States has always had a lot of different people from a lot of different cultures, there has long been a drive to show only one. Consequently, this one story has been called "normal" and considered superior to all other stories. The exclusion of identities, especially identities that were not seen as a part of mainstream American culture, was especially true for young children. When kids see representation or, conversely, lack of representation, it helps shape the way they see the world. It molds the narrative of what is possible. Much of the public, and the public library, is waking up to the fact that representation has been pretty limited. It has taken social media (e.g., We Need Diverse Books, and Marley Dias's #1000BlackGirlBooks) to unveil how the publishing industry has abetted erasure in children's

literature. For too long, children have been shown only a single story in school, in books, and on TV. By not focusing on diversity, by being part of and primarily associating with the dominant culture, librarians can quite easily select materials with limited representation.

This is how bias prospers. A lot of times librarians do not realize that the books they choose consistently emphasize a single way of life. This focus can be unintentional, but it reflects a superiority that is rooted in white supremacy. Such librarians think that representation of other identities makes the quality “lesser than.” In order to begin the work of including all identities in our storytimes, we first have to do some self-work. In our modern era, the words *racist* or *racism* bring to mind very visual images of burning crosses, lynchings, or the beatings and dog attacks seen in documentaries. That’s overt racism. Implicit biases, on the other hand, are thought processes that are often unconscious but that hold negative judgments about race or about a certain type of representation. To stop radicalization toward explicit racism, we must develop tools to begin disrupting implicit biases at an early age. Not changing the narrative is harmful. In order to start, we must have some understanding of the history and policies and laws that have shaped racial exclusion.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has a policy statement about the impact of racism on child and adolescent health: “Children can distinguish the phenotypic differences associated with race during infancy; therefore, effective management of difference as normative is important in a diverse society.”² In a recent study of intersectional biases, researchers found that “preschool-aged children’s implicit and explicit evaluations of Black boys were less positive than their evaluations of Black girls, white boys, or white girls.”³ Early childhood educators have spent more than thirty years putting together an anti-bias curriculum to help provide tools to disrupt biases. In 1991 the Southern Poverty Law Center created Teaching Tolerance, which was one of the earliest resources for promoting anti-bias practices with young children. (In 2021 Teaching Tolerance was renamed Learning for Justice.)

Children’s perceptions about race were first launched into national attention when the NAACP asked two psychologists, Kenneth and Mamie Clark, to study the effects of segregation on Black children.

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