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Trainings and resources abound for library professionals who conduct storytimes for children and their caregivers. In one click, book recommendations, craft instructions, rhymes, felt boards, songs, and early literacy development tips shared by passionate storytime providers populate a screen. For all the resources that exist on improving storytimes though, how many librarians have access to guiding materials that specifically center discussions on race and cultural differences? Hopefully, there will be many more with the publication of Let’s Talk About Race in Storytimes by Jessica Anne Bratt. Bratt, the Director of Community Engagement and Outreach at Grand Rapids Public Library in Michigan, had previously created a training program for storytime providers on embedding discussions and celebrations of race into their routines. She has now adapted that program into a powerful instructional text and workbook that deserves a home on every youth services staff’s reference shelf.

The introduction, “Why I Started Talking About Race in Storytime,” and first chapter, “They See Race,” provide an overview on why Bratt began this work and prior research about the impacts of racism on children. Social identities inform how children move through the world from a young age, and “libraries,” Bratt asserts, “should be places of equity and help” (xxiii). She shares that, for this text, she has elected to focus on Black and African American ethnic identities (11), specifically, but it is readily apparent that the resources and suggestions provided throughout are easily adaptable to other racial and ethnic identities.

Bratt’s writing voice is clear and approachable, welcoming readers for the serious work of anti-racism. Readers should not mistake the hopeful tone of the book for simplicity. Optimism is bolstered with pragmatic steps and candor regarding the challenges of embedding anti-racism work in storytimes, and libraries at large. Bratt notes that fear often stops people from beginning the work of discussing race (46), and she acknowledges that fear without permitting it to stall
progress in developing the skills required to facilitate these discussions. She adds that challenging stereotypes, reducing bias, and fostering empathy in one’s community as a storytime provider is thoughtful, long-term work that need not be impeded by fear or guilt. It benefits no one to sit in shame over previous failures to incorporate anti-racism in their library work, Bratt states; instead, she recommends that energy be channeled to drive professionals onward (xxiii). Bratt lays out other difficult truths about anti-racism work unflinchingly, such as the hard truths that “It’s hard to heal others if you’re starting from a place of brokenness. To get the best results from this book […] you must be healed” (xv), as well as the fact that doing “work for E/D/I [equity, diversity, and inclusion] requires personal good health and well-being” (49). Bratt recommends resources such as bringing in an outside facilitator if possible (49). She also offers sample language for some situations such as: when making a statement that someone finds offensive, apologizing and adding, “I am sorry that I said _______. Thank you for letting me know how that made you feel. I will take steps to do better” (43). Though there are numerous challenges library professionals may encounter in this work, Bratt does not explore each scenario in depth, calling on readers to use problem solving and conflict management skills that they may already possess.

Individuals who have been unpacking internalized White supremacy culture (Okun 5) will not balk as they come across Bratt’s statements, or her work at large, but those who have not begun that self-exploration, however, may misunderstand or overlook their meaning. Bratt does not seem to be implying that library professionals without “personal good health and well-being” (49) are incapable of incorporating anti-racist values into storytimes. However, in work that should be centering and celebrating Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, Bratt warns that library professionals who are in a place of personal turmoil may react to criticism in a way that
perpetuates harm against people of color instead of accepting the feedback and making amends. Bratt never says the work will be easy, but her positive outlook about a future where discussion of race in storytimes is commonplace permeates each chapter. In the preface, Bratt explicitly states: “I have a positive outlook on life, and at the core, I’m an optimist” (xv). This comment bears out, with each chapter tackling different challenges; a positive undercurrent that the work is possible exists, along with recommendations for proposed course of action or for the appropriate language that can be used to discuss race. Terms like affirmation, curiosity, and possibility are sprinkled throughout the text, and her use of anaphora, “[y]ou can” is not merely applied as a rhetorical device but as a promise and a call to action for library professionals (12).

The second chapter, “They See You,” delves into the intersection of biases, erasure, and identity. Here, Bratt notes how singular narratives about people of color put into the world by the “dominant culture” (17) perpetuate hegemony and erasure. In the tradition of social justice advocates, Bratt, a Black woman, pays homage to her ancestors, in particular, her mother, who took extra care to educate her children on the broad range of Black lived experiences so Bratt and her sibling would see their full humanity. While they learned about hardship and oppression, they also learned about Black joy, innovation, and excellence through visits around Chicago and trips to museums “to instill in my brother and me a love of our history and of our blackness” (xi). The impact of these experiences on Bratt is manifested in the existence of this book. Bratt states throughout the chapter that encountering multiple narratives and listening to multiple versions of stories of people from different backgrounds not only combats the development of biases, but also helps in the development of empathy and self-worth in children.

In chapter two, Bratt also goes on to note that in storytimes, it may be an easy oversight to select books and authors that are familiar without being mindful of whose stories are being
shared and what narrative about their lives is being told. “Intentionality is essential” (30) Bratt states, and considering who is being represented racially and culturally, as well as how they are represented actively works against erasure. Bratt draws on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story” (18) to demonstrate the importance of sharing a variety of narratives in book selection. While useful as a jumping off point for this topic, it goes unmentioned that Adichie has made transphobic comments (Mercado), though Bratt’s work on including diverse stories is easily applicable to trans and other LGBTQ+2S communities. An essential piece from the second chapter explores micro-inequities in the physical space where storytimes are hosted and the library (29). Under the vocational awe-induced “freedom of access” (Ettarh) narrative that public libraries delight in, Bratt challenges library and information professionals to examine how biases may manifest, and to consider how library users of different cultural backgrounds and with different cultural values are treated in the library space. She asks, “Are you aware of how different cultures use the space?” and, does the library allow caregivers to be their “full, authentic selves in the library” (29)? This chapter encourages library professionals to embrace curiosity and vulnerability and to let go of the value placed on expertise (31). On topics of race, Bratt encourages a learning mindset, answering children’s questions on race honestly with “I do not know” (32) if the question falls outside of the provider’s knowledge base. Further useful applications in this chapter include examples of affirmations about variations in culture, skin tone, and language to sprinkle into storytimes such as “What beautiful skin tones! How are they different? Isn’t it cool that humans are so similar yet have distinct, wonderful differences?” (33) and “This baby on the cover has brown skin. Look! On this page a baby has a different shade of skin. Our differences are awesome!” (34).
Utilizing the phrases and book selections Bratt recommends in the book may not come naturally if these are entirely new to a storytime provider. However, they can learn from Bratt, who utilizes the analogy of music throughout the text to emphasize the importance of practice for success. She notes that just as one does not pick up an instrument for the first time and play a song perfectly, neither can individuals unaccustomed to or discomfted by discussions of race step into a storytime and speak perfectly on celebrating racial differences on their first attempt.

The third chapter, “Becoming a Coconspirator,” brims with an abundance of valuable concepts such as the need for practice, intentionality, and the distinction between the inertia of allyship and the proactivity in engaging as a coconspirator.

A salient concept in this section is the community aspect of racial justice, namely that this work cannot be done alone (43). Much like the concepts of practice and community, intentionality comes up throughout all aspects of *Let’s Talk About Race in Storytime*, but is given special attention in the third chapter. Bratt suggests that in a profession that is 88% white, there must be intentionality in embedding anti-racism in efforts taken up by white library professionals (44). The work should not be left to colleagues of color alone (48). If a library, as an organization, decides to embark on embedding equity practices, Bratt provides incisive questions around intentions to guide the work (47). The questions model thoughtfulness in planning over mindlessly charging into the work unprepared. Intentionality, and—though not stated using this exact language—emotional intelligence, are key to navigating racial equity work in libraries.

A frequently asked questions and answers section in the third chapter addresses the concern of making mistakes, which, Bratt assures, will occur, especially for newcomers to this work. A straightforward restorative justice process is also shared in this chapter in the form of three steps: “1. Admit responsibility. 2. Express remorse. 3. Make amends” with an example of...
Bratt’s first-hand experience in repairing mistakes (41). Sample language is included on apologies when errors are made, giving nervous readers the language of accountability that they will need in such situations.

The text is a wellspring of material for practical applications. Nearly every chapter includes reflection questions and, often, sample talking points. Other chapters include book recommendations as well as cautioning against specific books that would seem to be anti-racist, but that actually perpetuate harmful narratives. The fourth chapter, “Modeling the Work,” provides six complete storytime outlines for baby, toddler, preschool, and family audiences with tips for parents on discussing race and age-appropriate book recommendations. The titles selected incorporate Bratt’s recommendations of using books by authors from the racial/cultural group being represented and showcasing award-winning books such as Coretta Scott King winners as an entry point for caregivers seeking book recommendations.

The fifth chapter, “Building Your Practice,” and the concluding chapter, “Championing the Work,” harmoniously put all the previous concepts into action. To draw on Bratt’s music analogy, all of the notes on community, practice, and intentionality culminate into a symphony of possibility. She circles back to the significance of practice for a final emphasis on how it affects all components of communication. If discussing race feels uncomfortable, that discomfort will manifest in tone and nonverbal cues such as body language, suggesting to children and their caregivers that discussing race is something to be wary of (65). This dovetails with Bratt’s warning that the awkwardness due to lack of practice in talking about race can, in turn, result in speaking too casually and not honoring the importance of the issue of race (45). An assessment tool for selecting books through an EDI lens is provided in the fifth chapter, while the conclusion consists of a framework to develop a storytime action plan.
The sheer wealth of resources and sample wording for myriad scenarios in Bratt’s text throws into emphasis the few places in the book where those resources prove a bit thin, such as when addressing what a storytime provider should do if they do not have institutional support. If the library has not done any equity work, embedding the anti-racism practices that Bratt recommends into storytimes may prove to be even more challenging. For instance, one of her recommendations is to place emphasis on the library’s role as being “for the community” and seek language in values and mission statements to advocate for the library beginning EDI work (46).

One topic in the book that Bratt did not explore as thoroughly is libraries where leadership is reticent or spaces that are openly opposed to racial equity work, an issue that will be of necessary focus for many readers. However, she does offer advice on how to handle incensed caregivers who hear celebrations of race and then claim that an agenda is being pushed, in the frequently asked question and answer section. Bratt states that this is another instance where having practiced talking points will come in handy so as not to be hurtled into a patron’s “emotional hurricane” (45). Bratt recommends that institutional support would be valuable here, and that if de-escalation fails in addressing the patron, a manager should step in (50). Whether organizations support the work or not, on the topic of displeased patrons, Bratt demonstrates what good leadership should look like, advising, “… you do not need to take verbal abuse from anyone” (50). Shortcomings in organizational support lie with libraries as institutions, not Bratt, who as a Black woman has put an incredible amount of emotional and professional labor into creating this comprehensive guide for library staff. Not only does Bratt see the need for this kind of training, she developed one, ran the Let’s Talk About Race in Storytimes training, then translated all that material into writing this text. In drafting this book, she also mines from her
personal life, speaking about her lived experiences growing up, being tokenized on a panel and in the workplace, and even having her white husband write an insert in the coconspirator section about his journey from passive allyship to active coconspirator and how it impacted their relationship.

*Let’s Talk About Race in Storytimes* could be a quick read, but it is a book that invites deep contemplation and revisitation as one develops their own anti-racist storytime practice. Completing the reflection questions, using the evaluation tools, and researching the extra recommended resources in the book will benefit both the library professionals and their patrons.

Bratt has crafted an incredible primer for embedding anti-racism into storytimes. Newcomers to this work will find an accessible starting point on their journey and plenty to guide them further along the way. Library professionals who are already deeply engaged in social justice work will not only find ready-made evaluation tools useful but will also enjoy the connections to other racial justice practices such as Project READY and EmbraceRace (72).

Early in the text, Bratt quotes activist and author adrienne maree brown, who states: “Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered” (xxii). Brown’s concept of fractals from her 2017 book *Emergent Strategy* comes to mind while reading Bratt’s exhortations to begin this work in your library and your community.

Embedding discussions of race in storytimes and starting in small ways contributes to the visionary hope that this small-scale work, if replicated by many in their own part of the world, can grow into systemic change. In the hands of library and information services professionals, this book is a map of and for the future. Change can happen if we begin—and we can, we must—in the words of Jessica Anne Bratt, “start today” (xxiii).
Works Cited


