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**Rohit Bhargava and Jennifer Brown**

With: Andrius Alvarez-Backus, Chhavi Arya, Karen Dahms,  
Sandhya Jain-Patel, Kaleena Sales, Monika Samtani

**12 NON-OBVIOUS WAYS TO BUILD A MORE INCLUSIVE WORLD**

# BEYOND DIVERSITY

BECAUSE  
OF WHO  
YOU ARE!

# ADVANCE PRAISE:

“As a Black woman I have long advocated for organizations to address the systemic racism that Black and Brown people struggle with every day. *Beyond Diversity* lifts the lid on how bias and privilege have benefitted the privileged few at the expense of the marginalized many. It provides a much-needed directive for those in power to get educated and use their influence to finally break down the barriers that have left so many of us behind.”

—**MINDA HARTS**, Speaker, Founder, and Author of *The Memo*

“*Beyond Diversity* is an urgently needed, eminently practical book that every leader should read. Bhargava and Brown have taken on a tough topic with sharp minds and open hearts. In a dozen crisp and fascinating chapters, they show how to move past mere sentiment to bring genuine inclusion into action.”

—**DANIEL H. PINK**, New York Times bestselling author  
of *When, Drive*, and *To Sell Is Human*

“Successful women advocate for themselves. This wonderfully wide-ranging book offers a valuable look at the context of the world we all must live in today, and offers an eye-opening roadmap for how any of us can do that more effectively. For any woman of color seeking to unearth her individual power, this is an essential read.”

—**DEEPA PURUSHOTHAMAN**, Author of *The First, The Few, The Only* and  
Co-Founder of nFormation

“Thought-provoking, layered, and fresh. Each one of us has a part to play in creating a more inclusive world. Wherever you may be in your journey, *Beyond Diversity* is the weapon in your DEI arsenal. For the non-believers, bystanders, and uninitiated—be inspired to make better inclusion choices. For the believers, advocates, and experts—be rejuvenated in your fight for equity.”

—**MICHELLE KING**, Author of *The Fix* and CEO of Equality Forward

“With this important contribution, Rohit Bhargava and Jennifer Brown invite everyone to see themselves in the diversity and inclusion conversation. *Beyond Diversity* provides a roadmap to help all of us step into the conversation, however imperfectly, and to learn to take action and be a part of the movement toward a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable society.”

—**ERIN URITUS**, CEO of Out and Equal

“Really enjoyed this book! I loved the simple structure and use of storytelling to build empathy and understanding across all the different dimensions of diversity. *Beyond Diversity* is a must-read for anyone committed to a world where we all belong and contribute fully. Authors Jennifer Brown and Rohit Bhargava write with compassion and empathy, while giving us a little kick in the pants to get involved at the same time. The reality is, we can all do more to make our communities and workplaces more inclusive. This important book provides a pathway for making it happen.”

—**MICHELE MEYER-SHIPPI**, Chief People Officer for Major League Baseball

“Jennifer and Rohit have artfully used the power of storytelling to connect the reader with the lived experience of LGBTQ+ people and other marginalized communities that have been systemically discriminated against and ‘othered’ for far too long. We must build a society that is more inclusive of transgender and non-binary people and honors their contributions and realities. Their book opens eyes, hearts, and minds!”

—**AMBER HIKES**, Chief Equity and Inclusion Officer,  
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

“To embrace change and create a more inclusive workplace, we must tackle demanding questions that diminish opportunities for minorities and underserved groups. It will take bold action and uncomfortable moments. Yet, in this new era of hope and resilience, we will collectively navigate endings and embrace new beginnings. Now, more than ever is time to dismiss old practices and pivot to real, sustainable change. The progress beyond these breakthroughs will create a generational impact.”

—**JORDAN BABINEAUX**, Former NFL Player

“As a theoretical neuroscientist focused on the future of human potential, and the ‘tax’ so many of us pay on being different, this book educates the reader beautifully on what gets in the way of our ability to thrive. With real insights from real people, Brown and Bhargava document concrete ways we can together build the kind of world I want my kids to live in.”

—**DR. VIVIENNE MING**, Founder & Executive Chair, Socos Labs

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# BEYOND DIVERSITY

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**12 Non-Obvious Ways To  
Build A More Inclusive World**

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**ROHIT BHARGAVA  
JENNIFER BROWN**

**With:**

**Andrius Alvarez-Backus, Chhavi Arya, Karen Dahms,  
Sandhya Jain-Patel, Kaleena Sales, Monika Samtani**



**IDEAPRESS  
PUBLISHING**

WASHINGTON, D.C.





*For all the voices that chose  
to share their stories, and all of  
the stories yet to be told.*





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“There is always light. If only we’re brave enough to see it.  
If only we’re brave enough to be it.”

— **AMANDA GORMAN, AMERICAN POET**



## AUTHORS' NOTE

This ambitious book exists because more than two hundred people were willing to engage in difficult conversations. In January of 2021, we all gathered at the first annual Non-Obvious Beyond Diversity Summit. The ideas in this book are inspired by the themes we explored across that week-long virtual event.

Race, identity, gender, discrimination, equity, belonging and love are deeply emotional topics. To discuss them candidly in the company of others requires bravery.

Yet we know that creating a more equitable society has to go *beyond* conversation. Together with an amazing team of contributors, we wrote this book to imagine solutions and inspire actions. An inclusive world is worth making. Let's get started building it together.

— Rohit and Jennifer

# FEATURED VOICES

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**LEARN MORE ABOUT ALL THESE VOICES AT  
[WWW.NONOBVIOUSDIVERSITY.COM/SPEAKERS](http://WWW.NONOBVIOUSDIVERSITY.COM/SPEAKERS)**



# FULL LIST OF SESSIONS FROM THE 1<sup>st</sup> NON-OBVIOUS BEYOND DIVERSITY SUMMIT

## STORYTELLING

- Sharing the Stage: #manels and More Inclusive Conference Speakers
- How to Own Your Creative Vision – Interview with Aneesh Chaganty
- Casting Calls: How to Include Underrepresented Voices in Film & TV
- Flipping the Script: Monika Samtani with Meera Menon + Deniese Davis
- Backstage: Lifting the Curtain on Theater's Diversity Problem
- Changing the Narrative: The Fight for More Diversity in Book Publishing
- Bigger Stories: Supporting More Diversity in Journalism + News Media

## IDENTITY

- Just Be You: Embracing Our Bodies and Ourselves, Just as We Are
- Our Body is Power: Creating a Positive Representation of Ourselves
- Work It Out: Making Health and Fitness More Inclusive
- Shady Choices: Colorism and the Shifting "Face" of Fashion Brands

## FAMILY

- Cultural Confidence: Teaching Youth to Be Proud of Their Heritage
- Ending Gender Based Violence: Interview with Indrani Goradia
- Anti-Dad? The Persistent Bias Against Fathers in The Workplace
- Shared Parenting: How the Pandemic Shifted Family Life Balance
- How To Talk to Racists: Interview with Dr. David Camp

## LEADERSHIP

- Leading Diversity: How to Make Large Organizations More Inclusive
- Breaking Through: How to Mentor & Champion More Women at Work
- Lost In Translation: How to Lead a Diverse & Inclusive Team
- How to Lead Diverse Teams: Rohit Bhargava with Beth Comstock
- Supporting Female Executives – Interview with Deepa Purushothaman

## CULTURE

- How To Create a More Inclusive World: Rohit Bhargava w/ Maysoon Zayid
- Rethinking the Way Muslims Are Portrayed in Media & Entertainment
- Now United: How a Global Pop Music Group Brings the World Together
- New Flavors: The Role of Food in Creating a More Inclusive World
- Is Diversity Funny? How Comedians of Color Navigate a Sensitive Topic
- Remembering The Past: How Museums Amplify Diversity Conversations
- How Rock Stars Build Their Ensemble: Interview with Stacy Campbell

# WATCH THESE SESSIONS ONLINE!

[www.nonobviousdiversity.com](http://www.nonobviousdiversity.com)

## **EDUCATION**

- Starting Early: Why Creating Diverse Content for Kids Matters
- Diversity at College: How to Make Higher Education More Inclusive
- How To Teach Racial Literacy with Priya Vulchi and Winona Guo

## **RETAIL**

- Bringing More Diverse Perspectives into Marketing, PR and Advertising
- Diversity In Retail: Creating More Welcoming Experiences for All
- Visualizing Diversity: How the Marketing Imagery Is Changing

## **WORKPLACE**

- Master Collaborators: Leadership Lessons from Disabled Trailblazers
- Hire Equity: Transforming the Recruiting Process to Be More Inclusive
- Unique Talent: Neurodiversity in The Modern Workplace
- Never Too Old: Ageism + Integrating Older Talent into The Workforce
- How Men Can Be Better Advocates for Gender Equality

## **TECHNOLOGY**

- Women in Tech: How to Get More Women into the Tech Industry
- Everyone Welcome: Using Tech to Create More Inclusive Workplaces
- Technically Biased: Solving the Plague of Algorithmic Bias in Technology
- Safe Havens: What Gaming Communities Teach Us About Inclusion

## **ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

- Getting Funded: How Investors Support Diverse Startup Founders
- Main Street 2.0: Building Equitable and Inclusive Economic Engines
- The Rural Renaissance: How Rural Communities Get Connected

## **GOVERNMENT**

- Represented: How Politics and Government Is Becoming More Diverse
- Social Impact and Racial Justice in the Age of Diversity
- How Diversity Fuels Bright Ideas for the Federal Government
- Health Equity: Why Diversity Matters in Public Health

## **FUTURE**

- Toward the Future Normal: Futurists Share Diversity Predictions
- Diverse City: How to Create More Inclusive Cities of the Future
- Robot Citizens: How Artificial Beings Will Challenge Our Perceptions



## CONTRIBUTORS



**ROHIT BHARGAVA** (he/him) is on a mission to inspire more non-obvious thinking in the world. He is the founder of the Non-Obvious Company, a popular keynote speaker, and the #1 WSJ bestselling author of seven books on marketing, trends and the how to predict the future.



**JENNIFER BROWN** (she/her) and her team at Jennifer Brown Consulting are committed to building more inclusive and representative workplaces of belonging where everyone can thrive. She is a bestselling author and inspirational keynoter on leadership courage and change.



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**ZHARIA SHINN** (she/her) is a portrait collage artist based in NY. With a BFA from RISD, her vibrant collages defy pre-existing notions of beauty and promote inclusivity of the African Diaspora.

# Our Words . . .

The language we use to describe situations, people, and issues is important. It can signal judgment and fuel division, or it can offer empathy and create dialogue.

Throughout this book we have tried to be thoughtful about our words. Every term, capitalization, or label was chosen with intention and tested not only by our team of contributors but also with nearly a dozen sensitivity readers.

To learn more about our language choices, turn to the appendix at the end of this book.



# INTRODUCTION

“If there is a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, you must be the one to write it.”

— **TONI MORRISON**

On a cavernous soundstage in Denmark, groups of people file in one by one. They are clearly different from one another. One group walks in with tattoos. Another, all female, is wearing medical uniforms in various colors. There is an all-White group, right alongside one that includes people visibly from multiple ethnicities. Each group stands apart, staring uncomfortably at one another for what seems like an eternity.

Finally, a host comes in to explain what is about to happen.

“I’m going to ask you some questions today,” he says. “Some of them may be a bit personal, but I hope you will answer them honestly.”

The first question immediately reduces the tension. “Which one of you was the class clown?” A smattering of people from each cluster comes forward. They line up together on the far side of the room and stand in front of a screen posing for a group photo. The session continues with a range of other unexpected questions. Who among you are stepparents? Who has been bullied? Who has *been* a bully? Who feels lonely? After each question, people come together, embrace, pose for a photograph, and return to their group.

The point of the exercise soon becomes clear to every participant: they are celebrating their similarities instead of their differences.



Watch the TV2 social experiment video at [www.nonobviousdiversity.com/resources](http://www.nonobviousdiversity.com/resources).

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This social experiment was conceived and filmed several years ago to promote Denmark’s most-watched family of channels, TV2. Titled “All That We Share,” the campaign ran on Danish television and was later released globally on YouTube.<sup>1</sup> It quickly went viral, racking up nearly 300 million views and winning a prestigious Gold Cannes Lion award.

This focus on similarities is sadly missing in many conversations happening about diversity and inclusion across the world. It is a rarely spotlighted irony that so much of the dialogue about diversity ends up emphasizing what sets us apart instead.

You can see this splintered approach in the structure of many live and virtual events aimed at exploring the theme of diversity. There are conferences dedicated to racial justice, reducing gender discrimination at work, advocating for LGBTQ+ legislation, eliminating ageism at work, creating more accessible digital content for people with disabilities, making corporate boards more inclusive, and much more.

These conferences host important conversations—and they offer a safe space for people who have been excluded and marginalized to share their experiences freely and have their points of view heard and discussed. They play an essential role in our evolving conversation about diversity and equity.

And yet, they are not enough.

These often-insular conversations about diversity don't reflect the reality of our intersecting identities. As the TV2 viral experiment so powerfully illustrates, none of us fits neatly into a single category. We exist through intersections, but our conversations about diversity regularly push us to pick one dimension of ourselves at the expense of others. These dimensions are the lenses that shape how we perceive our place in the world. Being Hispanic, or female, or gay, or over 50, or disabled, or any combination of identities helps us zoom in on a unique perspective of the world. But while zoom lenses are helpful for focusing on details, they are intentionally designed to ignore the full picture.



If there is one shortcoming of the worldwide conversation about diversity and inclusion, it is this: focusing on only one aspect of our identities prevents the opportunity to better understand ourselves and others outside that one label.

Instead, there is a concept we will discuss frequently in this book known as *intersectionality*. The term, first coined by American lawyer and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, refers to the idea that none of us can be defined by a single label, but only through a combination of social identities.

Embracing the idea of intersectionality requires us to switch to a wide-angle lens. What if we had conferences, TV shows, or corporate recruiting programs dedicated to bringing people and perspectives together that might never otherwise share the same space? It is exciting to imagine the sorts of questions and topics that might arise.

How would someone fighting to end gender pay gaps relate to a disabled gamer demanding more accessible experiences? What would an advocate for racial literacy in schools say to a researcher studying how to end age-related biases at work? What might a local business fighting to expand broadband internet access for those living on Native American reservations ask a community organizer imagining how to transform a neglected local park into a vibrant urban garden? All of these people are pioneers fighting for equity, but they rarely (if ever) cross paths.

To truly create a more inclusive world, we need to move beyond the usual diversity conversations and break down the barriers between these topics.

---

“Sometimes the assumptions we make about others come not from what we have been told or what we have seen on television or in books, but rather from what we have not been told.”

---

*Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, Author and Psychologist*

Vernā Myers, vice president of inclusion strategy at Netflix, once said, “diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.” Her words are often shared by those who advocate for diversity, but for us, they inspired a question: what if everyone was not only invited to the party and asked to dance, but also left with a mixtape filled with music they would love, but had never had the chance to hear before?

In late 2020, we decided to try and host this type of party. It started with the idea of a one-day virtual event that would bring together a dozen or so diversity and inclusion experts from various fields. Over the next few months, that concept sparked a whirlwind of hundreds of conversations and 20-hour-days that would eventually result in the groundbreaking gathering of voices that inspired this book. It all began, as many great ideas do, with listening.

# The World's Most Ambitious Conversation About Diversity

In 2020, an app called Clubhouse started to take off. A real-time audio chat room where anyone can start a conversation, the app owed much of its rapid growth to early popularity with Black creators and musicians. As a result, users of Clubhouse were highly likely to enter “rooms” on the platform and hear conversations hosted by people whose diverse opinions and expertise were frequently missing from mainstream media.

Plunging into this never-ending stream of conversations, at any given moment you could hear struggling professionals grappling with bias in the workplace, while minutes later, you might join a group of parents talking about accepting their transgender kids. In a single afternoon, you could participate in conversations about neurodivergent education, hear immigration questions from refugees, experience the daily heroism of doctors working on the front lines to fight COVID-19, debate cultural appropriation and learn about income inequality.

These are topics many of us who have contributed to this book deal with every day in our work. To add even more authentic perspectives to our efforts, we augmented our daily conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) by dipping in and out of rooms on Clubhouse and listening to real people share their experiences and challenges. We also spent the past year participating in virtual conferences, professional webinars, and

training sessions centered on DEI. We read dozens of reports, books and magazine articles.

Finally we started putting together a list of topics for our virtual event. It grew quickly: Women in tech. Inclusive higher education. Colorism in fashion. Body shaming. Neurodiverse recruiting. Accessible gaming. Workplace ageism. Racial justice. Image bias. Pay equity. Gender fluidity. White fragility. Social belonging. Diverse casting. Representative government. The list goes on.

Along the way, we discovered meaningful conversations already happening about all these topics amongst experts and advocates. We discovered that most of them were happening in isolation, completely separate from one another. It was like seeing an entire relay contest of athletes racing side by side, with no one passing any batons. It became clear that creating a conversation where we connected the dots between these topics would necessitate something more significant than gathering a dozen smart people together for one day. So we sent out more inquiries to more people and engaged the help of additional experts to expand our vision.

By the time the virtual event was broadcast live in late January 2021, we had lined up just over 200 speakers who participated in more than 50 sessions. Over 75 percent described themselves as belonging to an underrepresented group. More than two-thirds identified as a gender other than male. The range of expertise and topics represented was equally diverse.

Our panel of experts included a widely loved news anchor, a world record holder as the heaviest person to complete a marathon, multiple chief diversity officers, the popular voice of an animated children's TV show character, a master puppeteer, a child abuse survivor, a former Miss India winner and two hundred others.



Watch all 50+ sessions from the summit at [www.nonobviousdiversity.com/resources](http://www.nonobviousdiversity.com/resources)

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We called the event the “Non-Obvious Beyond Diversity Summit.” It was *Non-Obvious* because of the types of conversations we hoped to curate. And it went *Beyond Diversity*, because we knew that if we were truly going to have an impact, we needed to focus every conversation on tangible actions we could all take to build a more inclusive world. Our tagline came from one of our speakers who remarked that the event sounded like “the world’s most ambitious conversation about diversity.”

Our “ambitious” conversation was a hit.

Thousands of people watched the event live and commented on the sessions in real time, and hundreds of thousands watched them on demand in the months afterward. But the day after the summit ended, we knew our work had only begun. To share the insights we heard with a wider audience, we started working on this book. The first step was to identify twelve themes that cut across all the sessions. Then we assembled a team of expert contributors and started writing.

The book you hold in your hands is the final product. It is a compilation of conversations that we hope will launch you into a journey to understand people unlike yourself. For us, and perhaps for you as well, it usually starts with a moment of awakening.

## **Where Every Diversity Journey Starts . . .**

You may be thinking that the path to experiencing this moment is someone else's journey to take. Maybe you come from a marginalized group yourself. Some of you might even be DEI experts. Or you may already consider yourself to be an ally and advocate for equity and inclusion through your actions or beliefs. Wherever you are on your journey, we hope this book and the stories in it will inspire and motivate you to learn more, speak up and take action.

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“The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people, but the silence over that by the good people.”

■ **Martin Luther King, Jr., Social Activist and Nobel Prize Winner**

The first thing you should know is that this book was compiled, edited and reviewed by dozens of people who believe in the power of standing up for others. The voices you will see spotlighted in this book regularly spend their days helping others to be more open-minded, inclusive and empathetic toward those from

different backgrounds. We all live and breathe this work . . . and yet for each of us, the process of writing this book has offered a moment of awakening that we very much needed.

No human is free from bias. What we all must try to do is recognize and overcome our biases and to see others as having equal potential.

In the fight for equity, there have always been three parties. Two are well understood. There are the *oppressors*, who benefit from inequity and leverage their power to maintain the status quo. And there are the *oppressed* who fight back—sometimes successfully and sometimes not. These two have been the participants in every social movement everywhere in the world, whether against racism and gender-based discrimination or ethnic struggles between majorities and minorities.

Yet there is, and has always been, a third regularly overlooked group: the *bystanders*. These are the people and institutions who remain on the sidelines by choice or ignorance. Many tell themselves that the fight isn't their fight. They may not be racist, but they are also not anti-racist. These are the bystanders, and their willful silence has also contributed to and shaped human history. It is time for that to change.

***This is a book about being more  
than a bystander.***

No matter what combination of ethnic, social, gender or cultural groups you belong to, this book aims to help you and the people around you achieve a moment of awakening. Perhaps it may help to start by sharing some of our own.

For Rohit, one of these moments came when he became embroiled in controversy just months before our summit. In 2020, he accepted an invitation to deliver a recorded virtual keynote at an event in Asia about the future of marketing. When the organizers shared an image on social media promoting the entire list of headlining speakers, it was obvious that every one of them was male. The social media backlash started instantly.

Some commenters called for a boycott of the entire event. Others noted the irony of having only male speakers at an event for an industry that, by most estimates, is more than 50 percent female. Dozens suggested that the speakers themselves be held personally responsible for their complicity in agreeing to speak on a #manel (a male-only panel).

Despite years of work supporting and writing about more inclusivity in business, Rohit hadn't thought to check if women were represented on stage at a conference he had agreed to speak at. He didn't realize his mistake—until someone else pointed it out. Rohit apologized and immediately helped the event organizers seek out female speakers to include. He also converted his solo session into a panel discussion by inviting two female trend researchers from his network to share the stage as co-presenters.



The moment reminded Rohit that no matter what work he may have done in the past, being a vocal ally is a constant challenge. Today, he is a popular keynote speaker and the founder of the Non-Obvious Company where he leads a team that produces content, workshops and signature events designed to help leaders embrace “non-obvious” perspectives and see what others miss.

---

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

**■ Lilla Watson, Murri (Indigenous Australian) Artist and Activist**

Jennifer recalls a similar moment of awakening to the reality that the identities we carry can marginalize and separate us from the mainstream. When she came out as a member of the LGBTQ+ community in her 20s, Jennifer downplayed this part of her identity in a series of professional roles, from opera singer to corporate HR professional to entrepreneur. She saw few people who shared her story—at least publicly—and she didn’t feel safe bringing her full identity to the workplace.

Discovering the LGBTQ+ workplace equality movement shaped the way she understood her own story of not feeling heard or respected. The sad reality is that today’s work culture remains ill-suited to people from marginalized communities.

When Jennifer founded her own consulting company 15 years ago, her struggle for authenticity continued in what was a largely male-dominated space. She initially built a traditional hierarchy with many of her mentors and key hires being White men. She felt vulnerable about her identity as a new entrepreneur and a queer woman, and feared prospective clients would hold stereotypes or biases that might hamper her credibility or impact.

At the same time she came to recognize the privilege and advantages she holds as a White cisgender woman. She understood that privilege isn't just about what you've experienced personally during your lifetime; it's also about what you haven't had to experience.

Today Jennifer describes herself as an “aspiring ally,” and taking action against discrimination and inequities has become the mission of her company. Jennifer Brown Consulting is a highly diverse company—led by a diverse team—and has become a recognized leader in diversity, equity, and inclusion, working with hundreds of companies. Jennifer has become a renowned speaker, has written several books on diversity and inclusion, and she continually uses her platform to amplify the voices of underrepresented communities.

We are each many identities at once, and each one can influence our actions. At the same time, we all carry some degree of privilege. In moments when that privilege is laid bare, we can choose to silently benefit and remain a bystander, or we can stand up and try to fix something that is clearly wrong.

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“To never think about race means that it doesn’t really shape your life, or more specifically, the race you have is not a burden to you.”

———— **Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Professor, Advocate and Author**

The ambition of this book is to inspire you to take action when that moment comes for you—or even better, to create that moment for yourself.

## **How To Read This Book . . .**

In the chapters that follow, you’ll read about twelve themes that are shaping our world today. For each topic, we will explore how it is, how it could be, what needs to change on a systemic level (imperatives), and what you can do today to help bring about this change (actions).

**This is not a research book. This is a do-something book.**

By spotlighting the conversations that are already taking place and celebrating those who are making strides in the world of diversity, equity and inclusion, we hope to amplify their work, provide concrete and actionable strategies, and give you a roadmap to becoming personally involved.

By ending each chapter with specific “Conversation Starters,” we are hoping to spark new conversations that offer opportunities to align these important but isolated efforts.

The journey to build a more inclusive world must involve all of us. Along the way we will need to better understand culture, identity and family. We will have to ask big questions about how technology, government, education and our workplaces are structured. Entrepreneurship, leadership and the retail landscape that surround us also must be part of this conversation. And it all starts, in our humble opinion, by reimagining the stories we tell and share with the world.

Our lives, ultimately, are lived through our stories. So let’s get started in crafting a better and more inclusive one together.

# Beyond Diversity ... The 12 Themes



**Storytelling**

Identity

**Family**

Culture

**Education**

Retail

**The Workplace**

Technology

**Entrepreneurship**

Leadership

**Government**

The Future

# BEYOND DIVERSITY IN STORYTELLING



“Diversity’ should just be called ‘reality.’ Your books, your TV shows, your movies, your articles, your curricula, need to reflect reality.”

— **Tananarive Due,**  
**Author and American Book Award winner**

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## **Chapter Summary:**

*Representation in storytelling matters. The characters portrayed in fiction and the way cultures are covered in news media shape our perceptions of everything. An inclusive world must therefore start by reinventing the stories we choose to tell, consume and share.*

## How It Is . . .

In the final days of December each year, thousands of competitors gather in Saudi Arabia for the King Abdulaziz Falconry Festival. Known as the “sport of kings,” the ancient art of falconry uses trained raptors to hunt and return prey to captivity. It is a millennia-old sport practiced by cultures across the globe . . . and usually by men.

But in 2020, there was one participant among the many falconers at the event who made international headlines—Athari Alkhaldi, the first woman to ever qualify.<sup>1</sup>

Alkhaldi herself recognized the significance of her entry: “With my participation . . . I proved I am here, that women can join this field, that it’s not only restricted to men,” she shared with global media while standing with her falcon, Ma’aned.

At approximately the same time, a British jockey named Rachael Blackmore broke another barrier by becoming the first woman to win the challenging Grand National horse race in England.<sup>2</sup> These types of barrier-breaking stories, once a rarity, now seem to be shared regularly.

A scan of worldwide media on any given day offers plenty of examples. A hip-hop musical from Puerto Rican musician Lin-Manuel Miranda passes \$1B in revenue. African American poet Amanda Gorman is selected to speak at the 2020 US Presidential inauguration. Fifteen-year-old Swedish climate activist Greta

Thunberg rises to international prominence, while referring to her diagnosis of Asperger syndrome as her “superpower.”

Taken together, these inspiring examples illustrate how storytelling can be the most potent way to celebrate progress, inspire change, and bring about a more diverse world.

They also raise an important question: what about the thousands of stories like these that remain untold? If stories shape our perceptions, then perhaps the stories we never hear shape our biases through the lack of awareness they perpetuate.

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“Storytelling forces readers to come in and experience this entirely new world . . . it’s a place where we connect with one another on a human level.”

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***Samina Ali, Author, Curator, and Speaker***

Beyond the stories we read, our worldviews commonly come from the movies we watch, the news we follow, or the events we attend (either virtually or in-person). We constantly surround ourselves with an ever-growing collection of stories. When told skillfully, they can offer us a sense of connection with others and a feeling of acceptance for ourselves.

All too often, however, the stories we hear aren’t being told by the people who have truly lived them. As a result, those same lived experiences can be marginalized or depicted in unrealistic ways.



When people's stories are told from the perspective of an outsider, they can reinforce negative stereotypes.

In early 2020, we saw an example of this in the literary world: backlash brewed when a novel about a Mexican migrant journey called *American Dirt* was selected for Oprah's Book Club.

It started with writer and podcaster Myriam Gurba calling out the book's White author for her self-described ambition of giving voice to the "faceless brown mass" of migrants at the Mexican border.

Writing critically about the novel's main character, Lydia, Gurba pointed out that she "experiences shock after shock when confronted with the realities of México, realities that would not shock a Mexican . . . she perceives her own country through the eyes of a pearl-clutching American tourist."<sup>3</sup>

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"As a Latina writer, I'm very often asked to make my stories more relevant . . . when the publishing industry is 80 percent White, what I'm really being asked to do is to make my stories more relevant to White people."<sup>4</sup>

**Julissa Arce, Author and Co-Founder of Ascend Educational Fund**

The portrayal of non-White, one-dimensional characters like Lydia by White storytellers is not uncommon, and the implications of these portrayals are serious for the groups they are intended to represent. The history of film is filled with similar examples.

Native Americans have been typecast as barbaric warriors or enemies in Westerns. Men with Eastern European accents frequently play villains. Our stories cannot become more diverse and inclusive if the characters inside them are reduced to stereotypes.

When these biased portrayals carry over from fictional realities into lived ones through biased representation in the news media, the ramifications for real people can be life or death.

Nielsen, a media metrics company that studies ratings and television audiences, conducted a study in March of 2021 titled “What You See Isn’t What You Get: The Role of Media in Anti-Asian Racism.”<sup>5</sup> The study suggests that the number of times we see minorities on screen, and the context of their roles, contributes to harmful beliefs that can lead to bias in real life.

**Only 18.8% of  
all print and  
digital newsroom  
managers are  
people of color.**

Source: 2019 ASNE  
Newsroom Diversity  
Survey

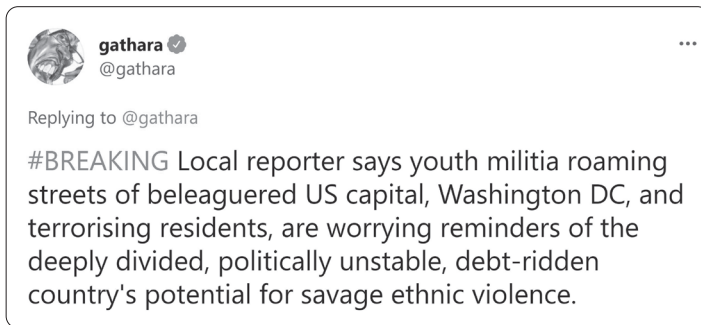
When vulnerable groups are scapegoated by the news media, it becomes dangerously easy to blame those groups for society’s problems.

The problem stems from who is reporting the news. When newsroom editors and writers lack varied perspectives, it impacts the way news is covered and reported. News stories can be incomplete or compromised by their gaps in understanding.

Or worse, they can actively promote harmful stereotypes about entire communities of people.

The impact of inadequate representation in news reporting can also result in biased headlines and coverage until they are exposed by someone with a more balanced perspective.

A perfect example can be seen in the tweets of Patrick Gathara—a Kenyan journalist who cleverly uses Twitter to rewrite the headlines for American news stories with the same inherently biased and judgmental language that Western media has used for years when reporting on Africa. Here are two examples:



The impact of bias in the stories we listen to is the same, whether it happens in the headlines of global newspapers or the filmed scenes of Hollywood blockbusters. In both cases, underrepresented voices do not see their stories reflected, and even when they *are* portrayed, they see themselves shown in a deeply problematic light.

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“Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation.”

■ **George Gerbner, Professor and Founder of Cultivation Theory**

To explore these issues, our summit brought together experts from a variety of fields, including journalism, publishing, film & television, and literary publishing. Their insights fueled our conclusion that it is stories above all else that offer us the best starting point to shape a more inclusive world.

## **How Things Are Changing . . .**

From the screen and stage to the books we read, story creators are beginning to prioritize authentic diversity.

To demonstrate both the issue at hand and how our responses to it are changing, consider the example of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon from the long-running American TV show *The Simpsons*.

Apu’s character is that of an Indian immigrant who runs a convenience store, and his exaggerated accent has been voiced for

decades by White actor Hank Azaria. The character's depiction on the show has been widely critiqued as a racist, harmful stereotype by the Indian American and greater Desi community. The issue was even highlighted in the 2017 documentary *The Problem with Apu*, written by and starring South Asian comedian Hari Kondabolu.

In 2020, Azaria responded to the public pressure generated by this documentary and other critiques, by announcing he would no longer voice the character of Apu. Alongside his announcement, the creators of *The Simpsons* pledged that they would no longer hire White actors to voice non-White characters.<sup>6</sup>

**66% of speaking roles in major Hollywood films in 2019 went to White characters.**

Source: 2019 USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative

This is not an isolated example. The entire casting process in Hollywood is undergoing significant changes both in how roles are cast and the opportunities afforded to talent from underrepresented backgrounds. Their right to audition and be considered for all types of roles, not merely those that minimize them into sidekicks or typecast them as villains, is being given greater attention.

The psychological thriller *Run* featured a disabled lead character played by disabled actress Kiera Allen. According to director and writer Aneesh Chaganty, casting a disabled actress in the lead role

had a huge impact on the authenticity with which her character's story was told and shaped much of the filming process.

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“Disabled people are still usually played by nondisabled people, and most of those roles are of White disabled people . . . society must take responsibility to work with us, and ensure that the media more accurately represents us.”

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**Judy Heumann, Disability Justice Leader and Author**

According to BoxOfficeGuru.com Editor Gitesh Pandya, the top-grossing box office hit when US theaters started to reopen after the height of the pandemic was *Godzilla vs Kong*. The film's popularity was driven by a racially diverse audience, with polling on the day of release showing more than 66 percent of the audience to be people of color.

According to a study by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, Disney's female-centered films and those featuring underrepresented lead characters were box office frontrunners,<sup>7</sup> with more than \$6 billion earned globally.

A similar hunger for diversely told stories is shaping the news media audience, as well. Blavity is one example of an emerging digital news platform focused on communities of color and covering issues ranging from news, politics, and social justice to travel, lifestyle, technology, and film. In May of 2020, as the Black Lives Matter Movement resurged and other outlets were

struggling to report meaningful stories, Blavity brought in 38 million pageviews, up 150 percent from the previous month.<sup>8</sup>

NBC Universal is also investing in supporting this shift across the news media industry with their 2021 announcement of NBCU Academy—a multi-year partnership to provide journalism training and development to 17 academic partners including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions and colleges with significant Latino, Asian American and Pacific Islander, Black, Indigenous and tribal populations. As NBC Newsgroup Executive Editor Leonor Ayala Polley shared at our summit, “we put our subject matter experts front and center to teach, to mentor, to help those aspiring journalists go from the classroom to the newsroom.”

The trajectory is clear. Stories which have been buried for so long (and those who tell them) are finding new homes, audiences, and fans, both inside and outside of the demographic groups they represent.

## **What Needs To Happen . . .**

In 2021, Netflix commissioned a study with USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative founder Dr. Stacy L. Smith on inclusion behind and in front of the lens. As a result of her findings, the streaming giant committed \$100M to help “set up underrepresented communities for success in TV and film industries” over the next five years.<sup>9</sup>

Commitments like this open the door a little further for more diverse storytellers to share their work.

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“Representation matters, on screen or on stage. We are seeing empowerment of underrepresented communities across Hollywood and audiences are demanding more inclusive storytelling.”

**———— Rohi Mirza Pandya, Producer and Co-Founder, SRC Partners**

So what needs to happen to keep this momentum going? Here are a few ideas.

———— **IMPERATIVE #1** ————

Systemic financial barriers that exclude diverse storytellers must be exposed and removed.

---

While the push for greater equity in all forms of storytelling is far from new, it has been gaining traction over the past few years. For example, in 2019, writers across the country began using the hashtag #PublishingPaidMe to share their book advances on social media and expose racial pay disparities in the publishing industry.<sup>10</sup>

Some White authors disclosed that they’d been paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for their debut books, whereas acclaimed authors of color shared that they’d had to fight to get even a fraction of the same pay for their second or third publications.



The posts soon grew into an industry-wide conversation around financial investment in authors of color.

In a similar example of collective dialogue, the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite went viral in 2015 as a criticism of the glaring lack of diversity in nominations for the Academy Awards that year. The tag sparked a hot debate over whose stories are welcomed in Hollywood (and by extension, American society as a whole) and which stories are left out.<sup>11</sup>

The #PublishingPaidMe conversation was started by L.L. McKinney, a Black author specializing in young adult literature; #OscarsSoWhite was launched by April Reign, a Black media strategist and DEI advocate. Neither McKinney nor Reign were major power brokers in their industries, yet their efforts to hold entire institutions accountable garnered global attention and galvanized hundreds of thousands of people to contribute their own stories to the conversation. The message from their fight to expose inequity is clear.

**76% of publishing professionals in America are White, 81% are straight, and 89% are non-disabled.**

*Source: Leeandlow 2019*

If you see certain stories being excluded or unfairly compensated, use your voice to call out the injustice.

Raising awareness of inequity on a systemic level always starts with the determination of individuals to make the problem known.

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## IMPERATIVE #2

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Entrenched biases in media must be **consciously** acknowledged and addressed.

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As humans, we all have subjective, ingrained beliefs that inform our decision-making, even if we aren't aware of them. The problem is that the one-sided media we consume can end up confirming our perspectives rather than challenging them.<sup>12</sup>

The growing reliance on social media as a news source makes this problem worse. Algorithms quickly calculate which perspectives you prefer, and then feed you stories that reinforce what you already believe. More diverse perspectives may be out there, but online personalization of news feeds through algorithms makes it highly unlikely you'll ever see them.

The best way to address this type of bias is by exposing it in real time. One tangible way this is already happening is through the fact-checking tools recently added by several social media platforms to limit the spread of fake and misleading stories. Aside from automated solutions, there are also a number of organizations doing important work to spotlight biases in the media and entertainment we consume, and to solve them.

In the performing arts, institutions like the Asian American Performers Action Coalition or the African American Artists Alliance are fighting to diversify the reality of who gets to be on the stage or screen telling stories.

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“I was reading tons of scripts every day and just thinking to myself, where are the brown people? Where are other people? Why aren’t there Muslim women?”

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**Sahar Jahani, Screenwriter, *Ramy*, *13 Reasons Why*,  
and *The Bold Type***

For the past 20+ years, BlackFacts.com has gathered tens of thousands of news articles and stories about Black history and aims to “change the way people find and explore Black history, Black culture, and soon, Black products and services.” The efforts of ambitious community-led initiatives like this website or coalition groups play an important part in helping to expose entrenched biases in all forms of media.

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**IMPERATIVE #3**

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Talent pipelines need to be restructured  
with equity as a priority.

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If people from marginalized groups are unable to advance in a homogeneous industry, organizations need to incentivize leaders to create pathways that make their industry more diverse and inclusive.

This might entail paid internships or externships, high profile mentorships and sponsorships, wage increases for underpaid team members, and/or professional development opportunities targeted to underrepresented talent to help them advance.

Proponents of inclusion often argue that simple diversity quotas won't get the job done. As Nielsen VP of Diverse Insights Charlene Polite Corley shared during our summit, "presence alone is not representation . . . it's also about the quality and context that diverse identity groups appear in the content that we view. This nuance is hard to achieve without the influence of representative talent empowered both in front of the camera, and behind the scenes."

The work of Inkluded Academy is another example of how this can be accomplished. Inkluded is a nonprofit committed to recruiting, training, placing, and retaining BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) talent in the publishing industry.

ColorCreative, a diversity-focused talent agency founded by producer Deniese Davis and writer Issa Rae, is another example. Their aim is to create a direct-to-industry pipeline for underrepresented writers in film and television.

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"In order to tell the most authentic stories, you have to give a little bit of leeway to the creators, and the artists, and the people of color who know those stories best."

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***Deniese Davis, Co-Founder of ColorCreative***

Each of these organizations provides a pathway to bring more diverse talent into industries that might otherwise be inaccessible.

## What You Can Do . . .

The stories we choose to consume—and believe—shift our worldviews. Our support can have a material impact on which stories get told in the future and which storytellers get funded to share their gifts.

With that in mind, we've outlined three actionable steps that you can take either as a storyteller yourself or as a consumer of stories produced by others.

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### ACTION #1

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Seek out more unfamiliar stories  
and expand your media diet.

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We live in a time of target audiences, where every story seems told for a predetermined audience. When stories are dismissed as only for some people, they fail to realize their true potential. Instead of accepting these artificial barriers, we all must make a choice to actively seek out stories told from perspectives other than our own.

One specific tactic Rohit has long suggested is buying and reading magazines not meant for you. Two of his favorites— *Teen Vogue* and *Modern Farmer*—both illustrate the point.

As a non-rural father of two boys who is well beyond his teenage years, he is not the target audience for either publication. Nonetheless, reading them offers him perspectives he might not encounter otherwise.

It's extremely easy to become stuck in a storytelling rut. We read stories we agree with. We watch films with characters we identify with. Social media algorithms serve up stories that reinforce our beliefs or fuel our existing sense of outrage. The only way to break out of the cycle is to stop letting algorithms dictate the stories you allow into your life.

---

“It is not just about making space for diverse stories in our media diets, we must transform the way that we discover, share and celebrate those stories as well.”

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***Maha Chehlaoui, Founder of Pass the Mic Media***

What would happen if you chose to consume just one unfamiliar story every month by going to a theater show, or watching a new movie or TV show, or reading an article from a unique news source, or picking up a book about a different topic? There are many ways to expand your media diet . . . you just need to make a decision to do it.

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## ACTION #2

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Be more intentional about the stories you share and consume.

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Beyond shifting what stories you choose to consume, it is also important for you to consider what stories you are promoting to others.

**59% of links shared on social media have never actually been clicked.**

*Source: Columbia University and the French National Institute*

What we choose to share, particularly on social media, can become a thoughtless reflex. Instead of quickly reposting an article based on its headline, stop for a moment and consider the bigger picture of what you are sharing. Research shows the majority of social media users share stories they have never read.

Being intentional with the media we spend time watching, reading or listening to—and later recommending—is a personal choice that has more impact than we realize. Each of us possesses the power to amplify stories that might otherwise remain unheard, or to share content that reinforces stereotypes. We are all better than that. We must be.

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### ACTION #3

---

Share your non-obvious story  
with the world, when you are ready.

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We all have a story to tell. This book is filled with examples of people who have bravely overcome personal reluctance, societal barriers, institutionalized discrimination or biased legislation to publicly share their own narratives.

Storytelling can be a struggle. At the same time, it can offer moments of redemption and profound self-awakening . . . not only for those consuming the stories, but also for those who speak up and tell them.

Perhaps you have a story of your own that you've kept hidden out of fear or shame. Maybe it hasn't felt like the right time, or it was simply too difficult to share. One of the biggest ambitions for this book is to offer a reminder that every individual story holds the power to change the world and inspire other people. Your story could do the same when you are ready to share it.

Our stories come in time. When you do choose to share *your* story, there will be people who are waiting to hear it—including all of us who gathered to write this book and share it with you.



# Beyond Diversity In STORYTELLING



## WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN:

- Systemic financial barriers that exclude diverse storytellers must be exposed and removed.
- Entrenched biases in media must be consciously acknowledged and addressed.
- Talent pipelines need to be restructured with equity as a priority.



## WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Seek out more unfamiliar stories and expand your media diet.
- Be more intentional about the stories you share and consume.
- Share your non-obvious story with the world, when you are ready.



## CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- Who is one under-appreciated storyteller that you know from your cultural background but whom others might be unfamiliar with? How could you promote them?
- Find two stories from recent news about the same subject that have opposing perspectives. Why are they different, and what biases do they show?

# WHAT IF WE COULD GO BEYOND THE CONVERSATION ABOUT DIVERSITY AND TAKE REAL ACTION?

In early 2021, more than two hundred widely respected experts gathered virtually for the world's most ambitious conversation about diversity. The dialogue brought together casting directors, bookstore owners, disabled leaders, healthcare professionals, students, VCs, standup comedians, chief diversity officers, pro gamers, archaeologists, government insiders, startup founders, a master puppeteer and many others.

The insights they shared are compiled into this groundbreaking volume that explores twelve big themes from multiple perspectives. For newcomers to the topic of diversity and DEI experts alike, this book offers a much-needed actionable blueprint for creating a more inclusive world for us all.



Rohit  
Bhargava



Andrius  
Alvaraz-Backus



Chhavi  
Arya



Karen  
Dahms



Jennifer  
Brown



Sandhya  
Jain-Patel



Kaleena  
Sales



Monika  
Samtani

STORYTELLING | CULTURE | IDENTITY | FAMILY  
RETAIL | EDUCATION | TECHNOLOGY | ENTREPRENEURSHIP  
LEADERSHIP | GOVERNMENT | WORKPLACE | FUTURE



[www.nonobviousdiversity.com](http://www.nonobviousdiversity.com)

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