

Using *We Too Sing America* as a Conversation Starter

Here are some ideas to get you started using *We Too Sing America* as a conversation starter (*for discounts on bulk orders of the book, please contact deepa@deepaiyer.com*).

Three First Steps

- Commit! Decide to convene two race talks in a span of six months.
- Invite! You can convene a race talk with friends in your own home, as a topic for a general meeting of your campus group, as a conversation for an affinity group of professionals at your company, at a book club, as a brown-bag lunch conversation at your organization, or as a workshop at a conference.
- Homework! Ask your group to read a chapter or chapters in *We Too Sing America*, and to come prepared with questions that arose while reading (*for discounts on bulk orders of the book, please contact deepa@deepaiyer.com*)

Guiding Questions for Your Race Talk

- **What was your point of entry into racial consciousness?** *This is an opportunity for everyone to share incidents, events, or memories from their own lives and to identify any themes or trends that emerge. Follow-up questions include:*
 - What incident or event triggered your understanding that race plays a role in your life – in terms of situating your racial identity, or in influencing your understanding of racial inequity?
 - What about identities beyond race? In *We Too Sing America*, we read about the importance of a “race plus” framework that recognizes that we hold multiple identities that often intersect with one another.
 - What are some themes or trends that are emerging in our group about how

racial identities, solidarities, and complexities are constructed and experienced?

- Let's link **the post 9/11 environment** in *We Too Sing America* to what's happening today. *This set of questions enables the group to identify how the post 9/11 environment has affected their lives and communities, to tie in what's happening today, and to identify some steps for action.*
 - How has post-9/11 America affected you, if at all? What did you learn from the book about the decade and a half since 9/11?
 - How have your views of South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh communities changed over the past decade and a half?
 - *We Too Sing America* tells stories of activists such as Mandeep Kaur, Faiza Ali, Bupen Ram, Yves Gomes, Drost Kokoye, and Mustafa Abdullah among others. Were you drawn to any of their stories? What moved you about their experiences?
 - Since *We Too Sing America* was released in November 2015, Deepa points out in an article (<http://deepaiyer.com/2015/12/five-steps-forward-towards-addressing-islamophobia-and-xenophobia/>) that the climate of xenophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment in our country has worsened. What do you think? How should we be responding to the current climate? (*Note: the article linked in this bullet point contains five steps and examples towards addressing xenophobia and Islamophobia today. It might be a good secondary resource to have on hand to help with the generation of action steps*).

- *We Too Sing America* posits that the racial ladder in our country places South Asian, Muslim, and Arab immigrants in the middle of a **hierarchy that favors Whites and perpetuates anti-Black racism**. *This set of questions is particularly useful to explore how communities can address anti-Black racism.*
 - What do you think of the image of the racial ladder? How do you think race groups are placed on it?
 - In *We Too Sing America*, Deepa quotes author Toni Morrison who notes in her 1993 essay “On the Backs of Blacks,” that “the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens. Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his nemesis is understood to be African American.” How do ideas of anti-Blackness play out in your communities? How do they play out in laws, policies, institutions and systems? What is the collective impact on Black communities as a result?
 - Does your community receive the “racial bribe,” or the invitation to climb the racial ladder? How can we help community members decline the racial bribe?
 - How can we become interveners and disruptors of the dynamics – both external and internal, both structural and interpersonal – that perpetuate the dynamics behind the racial ladder?
 - In *We Too Sing America*, Deepa includes the experience of Sureshbhai Patel, an Indian grandfather in Alabama, who was assaulted by police officers when he was out on a walk (see pp. 148-51 for more information)

in his neighborhood. Mr. Patel's story is a point of entry to have conversations with South Asian families and community members about the persistence of anti-Black racism as well as about the importance of supporting the movement for Black lives. For example, you could discuss why the police were called to the neighborhood in the first place (*on a tip from a caller that he was alarmed by the presence of a "skinny, Black guy in the neighborhood"*); how the police officers responded to someone who is clearly an immigrant and not proficient in English; and the lack of accountability in the criminal justice system (*two mistrials have occurred in the case since the book was published*). How can we understand the broader context of police brutality - which disproportionately affects Black communities - through the lens of this particular case?

- **What does solidarity look like?** As our nation's racial landscape changes, *We Too Sing America* argues that it is important to center our own racial identities and solidarities to advance equity and inclusion.
 - Reflect on your workplace, company, campus or organization. How do different ethnic, faith and race groups connect with each other? Where are the gaps?
 - For true solidarity to emerge, *We Too Sing America* posits that we must develop practices of empathy and identify shared values with one another, across our various identities. Do you believe this to be true?
 - In *We Too Sing America*, Dante Barry – an activist with the movement for Black lives – argues that we must become co-conspirators in the struggle

for justice. What do you think he means?

- As we become a nation where people of color will become the majority population, *We Too Sing America* argues that we must be cautious about messages we will hear that our nation has become post-racial or color-blind. Here are a few of those messages – what do you think about them?
 - *Now that people of color are larger in numbers, racial inequity will not exist.*
 - *Now that people of color are in positions of electoral and corporate power, there is no need for policies such as affirmative action.*
 - *Diversity and multiculturalism will get us to racial equity.*
- Envision *your* multiracial America. What does it look like? The “it” could be your own campus or neighborhood, or a particular industry or the country as a whole. (*Tip: Ask participants to put together the cover of a magazine in 2043, when the country becomes a “majority-minority” nation. Encourage participants to draw or include cut-out pictures in order to create headlines and stories, and then share their visions with each other.*)

What’s Next?

- What are common themes that emerge among the visions that people identified? What is one step that can be taken now to move toward your vision, either individually or collectively? Set a time for your next gathering, and share a short summary of your race talk at www.deepaiyer.com or email Deepa at deepa@deepaiyer.com.