



Black History Month is a pilgrimage; a recounting of the past and a wish for all time. It represents a symbolic journey to a sacred future where Black People can be whole, seen, and loved; both by ourselves and the human universe, at large. It is a place of devotion to the history we have overcome, the events we have survived and the people we are destined yet to be and to become. Black history is, at once, a triumph and a consolation prize. Black history did not begin in the early seventies with this celebration, our stories span, literally, the entirety of human history. We are here, today, to show you a piece of it and a part of all of us.

Humans of Black@ pays homage to the complexity, the depth and the beauty of who we are as a people. It highlights the delicacy and the tenderness of alluding to our injuries as well as the restoration, healing and redemption we have bestowed upon ourselves. We wanted to show how different we all are and *still* belong together. Members from all levels of the company have participated, offering us a view into what moves them and drives them.

The personal narratives you'll read about are a glimpse into how we are all connected, into how we have cultivated a community that has us safe enough to want to trust a much larger audience with our stories. We are bonded in this experience and by being a part of an identity that has had to reinvent itself constantly. We hope that these stories will tug at the parts of other Black People in the world that feel familiar. We hope that these stories bring respite and grounding to those of us who feel like they are "the only one." We wish that you see yourself reflected, recognized and at home in this beautiful, global, Black community. Our VP of Design, Tim Allen, said "there is so much undeniable power in representation - it's hard to be what you can't see." So here we are representing, showing you who we are, telling some of the innumerable stories of Blackness and demonstrating a few of the immeasurable ways of claiming it. We want you to hear the invitation that if you choose to join this company, you will also join us, and you will have a place here, with us.

Your Black@ Global Co-Leads,
Simone & Benny



CARMEN HERNANDEZ

BLACK X GUINEAN X SPANISH X CAPE VERDEAN



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I was born in Guinea and grew up in different countries in Africa and then moved to Europe. Growing up I've realized that I was a citizen of everywhere but at the same time of nowhere. I identify more with some countries that I have cultural ties with vs countries that are part of my background. Also I've realized that wherever I was, I was usually judged by the color of my skin.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

As I was born in Africa and I'm mixed it's actually interesting to note that I've noticed, first, that I was also white. I would be called out as "white" in native languages that I understood. This was quite painful as I've always identified myself as Black as I grew up with Black and African cultural education and heritage. Weirdly, I started to separate myself from mixed or white kids that I knew as I didn't want to be seen as "white" (due to the slave and colonial history in Africa). When I moved to Europe I realized that this wouldn't be an issue anymore as I'm identified more as a foreigner and associated with "exoticism" there.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

I've always been proud of my Blackness and the challenge was to actually embrace intersectionality and find a sense of belonging while growing up. Over time I've learnt to embrace my intersectionality, leveraging my diverse cultural background and the fact that it brought me a lot of knowledge and more perspective on the world and people. This helped me build a large network and meaningful relationships with people across the world. I've found out that people are really approachable when they realize that you understand their reality and cultural values.

How involved were you in the Black community growing up?

A lot, I've always rooted for the African diaspora and wanted to build bridges with people. When I moved to Europe I would cook African dishes that I've had during my childhood for white friends, also showing them pictures and telling stories about how African countries are great and how I had a beautiful childhood living there. I've wanted their perception to shift from "Africa is poor and needs Western countries" to "Africa is a continent of abundance and diversity with unique countries and their own history and successes."

Who were your role models growing up and why?

My grandmother because she's Fulani which is an ethnic group that has the largest nomadic pastoral community in the world. My grandfather, her husband, was an alcoholic and didn't provide for the family. She decided to settle in a village in Guinea where she started two businesses to build a better future for her 5 children, making sure they had education and food on the table. Her 3 daughters including my mum became doctors thanks to her struggle.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

I feel the most myself when I'm surrounded by Black people, especially African people. Even when I don't know their country of origin or their cultural specificities there is a sense of brotherhood and I just love the richness and diversity of Black culture.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

Embrace and be proud of your complex background, it's your biggest asset.

What do you think is the future of Blackness?

The future of Blackness is promoting the true rich history and diversity of what it means to be Black and its realities may it be beautiful or ugly. I hope

as Black people we can break free from the white gaze and the constant desire to defy it and prove "ourselves". I hope for a future where we can just embrace the full breadth of who we are as human beings — rather than be Black with a western capitalist society filter on us.

SABRINA TELEMAQUE

BLACK X HAITIAN



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I felt this would be a great way to get to know more about Black@ members. I am a young Haitian woman passionate about advocacy, finding her way through the world.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

I became more aware of my Blackness, when I moved to the US around the age of 13. Growing up in Haiti, mostly everyone is Black so I never felt out of place. Moving to the US, even the smallest of things in one way or another was pointed to my Blackness.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

The complicated part of my Blackness would be intersectionality. I found myself in situations in the US where I did not feel Black enough because I grew up in Haiti and had a "foreign childhood" and I could not relate to a lot of things. But yet, when I went back home to Haiti, I felt like a foreigner because I lived outside the country and had formed different opinions and ideals. What has given me relief is that these are all part of who I am and I embrace it.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

The women in my family. They were all strong, grounded in who they were and very accomplished.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

Surrounded by my friends and family at home.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

There's no such thing as an impossible dream. You can and will be whatever you set your mind to.

JAMES HOOKS

BLACK X AUTISTIC



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I see this project as an opportunity to create greater awareness of our shared humanity and that Blackness is not a binary concept. I am visibly and unapologetically Black - I am also unapologetically and unexpectedly Autistic.

I am at once Too Loud and Not Loud Enough. The things I want to say aren't articulated as quickly as some would hope, yet when I have spoken bravely and boldly, I am then judged for being unworthy of the authenticity majority groups proudly navigate.

Being a member of both groups (one defined as a minority, the other labeled as a disability, neither accurately expressing the fullness of our humanity) means being fully aware of the perceptions other groups have of me. Learning to verbally communicate and move with intention, in the far too often vain hope of not being another target for others' hate. It's a battle; both sides have fought to express I am worthy of life.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

As long as I could remember.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

My Blackness is my humanity, my existence, my reality. I could not turn off the gift my ancestors gave me any sooner than the sun will reveal what awaits me tomorrow.

How involved were you in the Black community growing up?

There was not a very large Black community where I grew up. My family was my community, and I always yearned to learn more about my heritage beyond the small amount of information private schools provided for me.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

I read a lot of James Baldwin growing up. He had a level of intention with every line he wrote, bridging inconvenient facts with undeniably beautiful poetry. He was comfortable in his skin, clear in his speech, and despite his small stature, he left behind him the footprints of giants.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

I am often comfortable the most when I am alone with my thoughts, uninterrupted by the world around me. Beyond that, when with close friends and loved ones, I know there will be no judgment in how I show up, and let my soul sing deeply and truly.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

Don't let others define the direction you want to go. Mistakes will be made, and that's okay, because that is where you will learn and grow and climb any hill that the world may put in front of you.

What do you think is the future of Blackness?

No longer having others compare the excellence of being Black to the proximity of being white.

ALEXANDRIA MULLINS-GRANT

BLACK X ITALIAN



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I wanted to participate in this project because it is important that everyone who is Black feels comfortable expressing their identity regardless of their appearance or skin tone.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

At birth.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

My most complicated relationship with my Blackness is that I am relatively light skinned in comparison to the rest of my family members. I am 75% Black and 25% white however based on my skin tone the majority of people assume the opposite. My mother is fair as well but all other members of my family have darker skin tones than I do. This often causes people to assume I am not related to my family. This can be frustrating at times and was particularly hard when I was younger and people thought my brother and I were not related at all. What has given me relief is accepting that just because I may not look like the rest of my family, does not make me any different from them.

How involved were you in the Black community growing up?

I was quite involved in the Black community growing up through volunteering, however, the majority of my friends were white because I lived and went to school in a predominantly white neighbourhood.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

As cheesy as this sounds, my role model growing up was my father. He started a charity to help support underprivileged families in Montreal. We did not exclusively help Black families but my father explained to me from a young age why people of color often had a more difficult time escaping poverty for many generations. He believed in a world where anyone could be successful and prosper regardless of race/ethnicity. This is what his foundation aimed to do: support single parents and underprivileged parents who could not afford food, sports and education for their children. He worked hard to raise money to support Black families and white families alike. He didn't believe in division but in unity. These morals have been a big part of who I am still to this day.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

I feel most like myself when surrounded by close family and friends. They know who I am and I can be my complete self when I am around them.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

I was naive at 12 years old, and I thought that most of the world didn't care about color and that Black people didn't have much of a harder time experiencing life than white people. I thought it was exaggerated but I know now that this is unfortunately not the case.

What do you think is the future of Blackness?

I believe that the future of Blackness is bright. I don't see the state of the world getting any worse than it is now. Things are slowly moving in the right direction. 2020 was a major year for learning and I think many non-Black people started to understand the true root cause of racism. BLM got tons of attention worldwide and although many say it was a "phase" I do think that people are talking and learning more about Black history than ever before.

LUCIUS DIPHILLIPS

BLACK X NATIVE AMERICAN X PUERTO RICAN X ITALIAN X IRISH



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I want to participate to share my journey. Adversity builds character and it is all about hope and hustle. Hopefully it helps others persevere and reach their personal and professional goals.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

In second grade, walking home from school a car full of teenagers drove by yelling out the window to "Run, N-word, Run"... my Mom was white but these bullies made it clear that I wasn't.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

It is complicated for me because I never felt accepted by any of the many races and cultures that make me who I am. I find relief in teaching my children (Lucas 12 & Giavana 9) to respect and value every piece of who they are. Unique is beautiful and I try to instill confidence in them where mine was lacking.

How involved were you in the Black community growing up?

I was not involved in the Black Community growing up. I was raised in Upstate New York (in Hudson Falls) in a predominantly white community with very few Black people. I became much more involved in the Black Community in College at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI). The RPI campus was diverse with students from all races, from all around the world. However, it was also organically segregated...not by design. I began to build bridges, connect and unite, and champion Diversity and Inclusion efforts on Campus.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

My Mother first and foremost. I am an only child and was raised by a single parent Mom. We were poor but that never defined us. My Mom took over 10 years to get her college degree while working odd jobs. We actually graduated from college around the same time. I learned to work hard, appreciate everything, never take things for granted, and that you can do anything with hope and hustle.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

I have never really thought about this question. In general, I feel most like myself all of the time in any environment. However, it is heightened when I am alone, with family, or with trusted friends.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

Love and respect Mom more. Grow up and not be such a defiant punk. Build that relationship and cherish the time spent together. Mom and I didn't have the best relationship and we argued a lot. As a single parent, I now realize how difficult it must have been to raise me and be "all things". Mom chose discipline over friendship and our relationship suffered but I was being molded into the man I am today. Fast forward, Mom was diagnosed with Early Onset Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease in 2008. She was never the same and deteriorated severely and quickly. She passed away on May 19th, 2019 and I will never get that time back. Huge regret!

TAMEKAH EBANKS

BLACK X JAMAICAN



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I'm big on representation and dispelling the idea that all Black people are the same. Have you ever seen a white American, in another country, refer to a Black person in that country as African American? (cringe)

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

I think, in the truest sense, maybe high school/college. Before then I identified as Jamaican. When I moved to the states as a child we were in Caribbean communities. It wasn't until I left that space that this grouping of all 'Black' people became a thing and later on the reference to me as African American which I reject.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

I love being Jamaican...but I struggle with the imposition of the Black American identity that is placed on me in the US. The Caribbean culture is strong; the history of Jamaica and our relationship to the colonizer is much different from Black/African Americans who are (ADOS) the American descendants of the enslaved. I was born in Jamaica. In no scenario was I ever the minority there. However, America seems to have 3 categories: white, other, and Black when you

land on their shores. These types of classifications did not exist before America/ The Europeans that came to this 'new world'. Before you were classified simply based on where you were from.

How involved were you in the Black community growing up?

I lived all my life in Black communities. I am a classic Jamaican. I moved from Jamaica to NY; lived in Brooklyn surrounded by islanders. Then moved to Florida to a predominantly Jamaican community. When I was in college I was part of the Caribbean student union (CSA). I then moved to LA and, most recently, to the Bay and again, I have found my people (hey Black@ and all my Caribbean and African friends).

Who were your role models growing up and why?

Air Jamaica flight attendants (if you know, you know). My oldest sister - still is - she started out in radio, moved to tv (both as an on air personality) and then moved to being comms director for the UN and currently the EU. I've always liked the self-confidence and freedom in which she moved about life. She's also the family historian and storyteller (as big sisters usually are).

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

With other Caribbeans and, most recently, Africans, with oxtail, jerk *anything* and plantains on the menu and good music. Laughing and having fun. It's safe there. We understand each other. We don't have to explain ourselves, the way we talk or interact. We don't have to put on the white friendly personas a lot of us are forced to take on in parts of our lives.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

Go natural...the perm/relaxer ain't it. You're going to spend a good chunk of your life in forced assimilation so enjoy every bit of who you are and your culture, get to know it, so you won't ever forget. And lastly, God makes no mistakes and so he didn't make one with you. You'll be tall with big brown eyes and big hair...you were born to stand out, don't worry about fitting in.

What do you think is the future of Blackness?

Our future is always bright. I love our people. We will make a way out of no way. Just look at all we've done with what little

we've had and every hurdle put in our path. We drive business, culture and create fashion, just in our being. Once we finally break free of systematic oppression and release the divisiveness they have brought into our community the world is ours.

BRANDON SIDNEY

BLACK X QUEER



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I love being Black and queer so any opportunity to display my identity is a win for me. I identify as a Black Gay Man, it's important to me to display my queer identity as visible as my Black identity. As proud as I am to be a Black man, we can't overlook the gay/queer as I believe those identities are to be addressed simultaneously to really see Brandon.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

I've always had an awareness that I was Black, I grew up with a large Black family in an all Black neighborhood. Attended all Black schools until my college career. I had the opportunity to see Black business owners, creators, educators, scholars,

community leaders as figures in my life to balance the opposite representation that I also witnessed through my childhood. So Black identity and culture was all around me. I was aware of the creativity, resilience, pride and excellence of my Blackness.

But I became aware that this perception of Blackness, the very qualities I've grown to love about my Blackness, wasn't reciprocated outside of this bubble of Blackness I was privileged to have. That bubble was burst via my first interaction with discrimination at a summer camp in 3rd grade.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

Owning my Blackness has developed over the years. Throughout my career it was being the "representation", so just "being" Black was the movement. It's progressing from "representation" to "advocacy". Being sure that my layer of queerness is included in my display of Blackness.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

My grandparents. They taught me the meaning of selflessness. How to care for people beyond self, causes that may not impact your personal journey directly. They were my representation of the true meaning of community.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

With Family.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

Don't be afraid of who you are. The truth of your identity is not a burden but would be the key to freeing your life's purpose.

SIMONE HARVEY

BLACK X AMERICAN X SWISS



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I am one of two global co-leads for Black@ and while I do not represent the experience most Black people have in the U.S. I very much identify with the idea of being a steward of this community. It is a privilege that I get to do this and I take it very seriously. I don't have any *one* community that represents me but Black people have made room for me, have loved me, have seen me, have supported me. The questions asked here are questions I wish someone would've asked me earlier in my life; they are questions I wish I would've asked of myself. I am hoping that all of us participating in this project, answering those questions, can provide a sense of connection; a reminder that all of us belong to a larger, global, complex, beautiful Black community.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

I grew up in Switzerland and I was always the only one. Beyond the skin-deep, I was aware that I was wired differently because it was hard to find common ground with other kids. But the moment that I realized that I was different in a way that could hurt me was, in first grade, when my classmates started calling me "chocolate bread" and "bush woman." In typical Simone fashion, I was most focused on how illogical and stupid it was what they were saying but I also could feel that there was something deeply insidious and specific to their

insults. They had not yet discovered the n-word yet; that came later.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

I grew up with almost zero representation anywhere in the culture or in any other, personally, meaningful context, aside from my immediate family. I convinced myself that I had been displaced, that I had ended up in Switzerland by accident, that I would eventually get out. My childhood was marked not so much by my Blackness, per se, but my conviction that I would overcome all of its negative consequences through sheer willpower and intellect. I've grown into my Blackness like a piece of clothing that eventually fits to your body and hugs you in all the right places. I have learned so much from my own complicated experience and from other Black People around me. I would never want to give that up. I want to live in this Black place of self-love and appreciation forever.

How involved were you in the Black community growing up?

Tangentially. I grew up in a co-op. A property managed by a group of Swiss hippies; a community of like-minded families. They renovated a former hotel and restaurant called "the eagle" in the image of their own vision and with their own hands. I lived 19 years of my life in a renovated attic. No glass ceilings, just a lot of room and lofty ideas. My parents actively tried to participate in Afro-Suisse, a collective of mixed families of African descent. I didn't really connect. It was too early to have a grip on what being Black was about and I was still very much, culturally, Swiss. My Black American family was far away and very abstract.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

I don't know that I've ever had any role models. There's lots of traits and qualities that I admire in many people; aspects of them that impress me and that I want to become. But it is not any ONE person. Who I want to be is scattered across the planet in a variety of people and maybe even in collections of molecules and tissues across the universe.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

The context where I feel most grounded is with other Black immigrants and first-generation Black Americans. We all share this split in our identities and having to make peace with the fact that we'll never quite fit anywhere completely; this

knowledge that some tension will always remain. It's with these folks that I can temporarily set my Blackness down and live wholly in other parts of myself. Suddenly, there's room for the complexity of my experience without all the strain. But I have to say I just love Black people, in general, even if I don't share being raised in Black American culture in the US and had to make sense of all that from thousands of miles away. I am grateful that you all have still kept a spot for me to come back to.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

Your emotional sensitivity and the speed of your intellect will eventually become your most valuable assets. Don't question their purpose, face your anxiety head on. There are people in the world who fit with you, there are places where you make sense; they're just not all in one place. Be patient, it'll all come together somehow.

What do you think is the future of Blackness?

Radical self-acceptance and a continued pursuit to become our most self-actualized selves free of tyranny and oppression.

KAODI DIKE

BLACK X NIGERIAN AMERICAN



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

This project is a great way for me to actively express my Blackness, especially as a first generation Nigerian-American.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

In elementary school I observed pretty quickly that people were treated differently based on skin color and a number of other socioeconomic factors.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

My Blackness is the reason why I am who I am today. The ability to be comfortable and confident in my own skin is a relief in itself.

How involved were you in the Black community growing up?

Growing up, the Black community was not as present as it is today. Constantly being surrounded by family and friends made up for that.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

Allen Iverson was one of my biggest role models growing up. I never had braids or tattoos but he showed me that I didn't have to be like everyone else - I could do things my way and still succeed. Through him, I also saw how the world treated Black men when given the opportunity.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

When I'm spending time with close friends, watching or talking about current sport events.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

Always bet on yourself. You are in complete control of your own destiny.

BETI GATHEGI

BLACK X KENYAN AMERICAN



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I love saying I'm all of the above and acknowledging and reveling in the multiplicity and the complexity of our identities. I'm Black, I'm Black American, I'm Kenyan American, I'm Kikuyu/Kumba/Maasai, I was born on Ohlone land, I'm from California, I'm from the Bay and there's so much more. Each of these things has a story and is powerful in its own right, and I'm the result of all that magic put together.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

I always knew I was Black, but what Black meant to me changed when my uncle took me to Freedom School at Downs United Methodist Church in Oakland. I grew up in a predominantly white and Asian community and my parents and extended family members made sure I was embedded in the Black community through church, social gatherings, and play-family since they were immigrants and I grew up away from my extended biological family. So I loved and always knew love from the Black community, but Freedom School was the first formal instruction I got that explicitly taught me that Black was wondrous and wonderful to be.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

It took me a while to understand that a lot of people are invested in making people feel bad about being Black or even being the "wrong kind of Black" (too dark, too queer, too whatever) but when I finally realized that that said a lot more about them and what they were afraid of versus anything inherently wrong with me, I was released to love and lean fully into who I am. And I LOVE being Black. In this and any other lifetime, I'd want to come back as Black, as Black, as Black.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

Grace Jones because she was stunning and irreverent. Ida B. Wells because she was brave beyond measure. Mumbi and the Nine daughters of Gikuyu because the origin myth of my people is one based on a matriarchy.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

Cutting up with people I can code switch with. I love switching it up fluidly and going from 0-100 with friends. All of the dialects are me, and playing in between them feels like my most authentic self. Being relegated to just one is the most draining thing.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

Because everyone is highly invested in letting you know you do not conform to the traditional standards of beauty and not deserving of romantic love, you're convinced you won't care because you would rather have swashbuckling adventures anyway ...(and you'll totally get the adventures, you rascal), but you should really try for both. I'm telling you, you deserve both.

What do you think is the future of Blackness?

Radical acceptance and love. Loving each other like we were born to do it. And taking off our capes, admitting to ourselves when we're vulnerable, and hurt, surprised, and human.

JOHN AUSTIN

BLACK X PUERTO RICAN X IRISH



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

Many times the Black community is thought of as homogenous. This project to share Airbnb's Black community's multi-layered identities I see as a way of illuminating how false that concept is. I'd identify myself as being multi-dimensional. My family emphasizes intersectionality - in fact all of my extended family is comprised of different ethnicities, locations and nations. Of 12 cousins none of us share the same ethnic background other than our grandparents. Our ethnicities span across Black, French, Puerto Rican, Irish and Pakistani. I think this has influenced me to view my own identity as a celebration of heritage while being unbound from any necessity to conform to societal tropes.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

I grew up in a very diverse / multiracial family starting with my grandparents (Irish X Puerto Rican on my mother's side and Black X Native on my father's side). Moving constantly as a kid, being Black was always a defining characteristic (especially in places like Vermont and Iowa). This forced my awareness at an early age. I think the shock was when I began to identify my other pieces of heritage. I originally wasn't afforded the opportunity to associate with multidimensionality in broader America because of the forced 'one drop' ideology of America. Understanding in college that I could embrace my additional dimensions was an awesome homecoming experience.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

I feel a tremendous sense of pride and responsibility around my Black identity and sharing my family's story. On my father's side, my family comes from Albany, GA which is a historically Black city. We've been in that particular area since slavery and the majority of my family still lives there. Like many Black families in the South, my family picked cotton (my father as a child, my great uncle until he died in the fields). We now own the sharecropping farm that we worked on and several of my family members continue to farm there. I share that context because I feel a great sense of pride around the resilience of my Black family and the history of their survival in America. I also feel the immense weight of not participating in that locality and instead living outside of that world. Instead I follow the non-localized traditions of my mother's family (my grandfather and grandmother met in Venezuela and moved across 3 states before my mother left for the military). I think sometimes I question the evolution of my Black identity outside of Albany and whether those rich Black traditions will fade with my father's generation.

How involved were you in the Black community growing up?

My father and mother split when I was young so I spent time between my mother and father's communities. As mentioned before, my father lives in a historically Black city so when we would travel (my brother and I) there once a month we were in the center of a Black community. Once we began moving (15 times before I was 15) we didn't get to see my father or that community regularly so I felt cut off from the Black community. I think I rediscovered my community again in college. One of the things that I discovered rejoining is how much I missed the sense of belonging and ease.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

My grandfather definitely! He was part of the first integrated class at Kings Point and a ship captain in World War II. Always curious, he constantly had a book or National Geographic open. He was also kind of an old school gentleman - always thinking of others, had a strong voice but always listened. I can still picture him sitting with my grandmother telling us stories about being a ship captain and the strange, wonderful things he'd witness out at sea.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

Ideating / day dreaming - I definitely get into a flow state imagining something new. Although I'm not a designer, I love building new things physical or conceptually. You can usually find me under a car or next a motorcycle reassembling or trying out some new add on that I built.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

Always lean into what you're passionate about and don't worry so much about the future.

What do you think is the future of Blackness?

I'm hoping that it holds a larger voice and recognition of how complex our community is. One of the things that I realized in

the past few years as Black representation becomes mainstream is how much it was lacking in the past. It's hard to picture yourself in a new space without the representation being there - telling you that it is a possibility. I think we live in debt to those people who came before and dared to be in the spaces where we weren't immediately welcomed. I hope the future will continue to expand that representation and give our community more voice. With new avenues to share our stories I think we'll be able to show how complex our communities are.

TIM ALLEN

BLACK X AMERICAN X FATHER



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

Black people are underrepresented in the tech industry yet there is so much undeniable power in representation - it's hard to be what you can't see. I want to be a part in creating more awareness and normalcy around Black representation in tech.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

Among many things, my Blackness is a tremendous source of creativity for me. More often than not, my greatest asset when designing is my unique way of seeing the world. What makes it complicated is that my unique way of seeing the world has been driven by numerous celebrations of Blackness during my lifetime as much as it has been sculpted by numerous assaults and aggressions toward my Blackness throughout my existence.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

My father was a huge role model for me growing up. He worked his way up the enlisted ladder as a Master Gunnery Sergeant in the Marine Corps and he used to take me to work with him a lot. All of the Marines on the base called him 'Top' because he had reached the highest enlisted rank possible. That made him so proud and that made me extremely proud as well. As I grew up, my father outlined the facets and behaviors that he used to get to the top of his profession and every single lesson is etched into my brain.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

I feel most like myself when I'm designing.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

You never know how tall you are until you're in over your head.

EVAN DROMMOND

BLACK X WHITE X ADOPTED X PROUD HUSBAND



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I found a unique connection to my own individual Blackness in Airbnb thanks to the opportunity to participate in Black@. If anything I can do or say can help others feel more connected then I want to help.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

Simultaneously right away and very late. I was adopted at birth by white parents, raised in an area with very little diversity so, in one way, I was known early on as "the Black kid" since the world around me was completely white.

When I was in college and my freshman English professor remembered my name after the first or second day I was talking to one of my best friends who is white about how the professor had no idea who he was. I, without putting much thought into it, was like "interesting she remembers me" despite not being a person who liked to talk in class. He just looked at me and said "Ev, I don't mean this in any way negative but you don't look like anybody else in the class." For whatever reason, despite being called "the Black kid," or "the Black friend in the group" it just hit me differently. When you spend your life surrounded by people that look one way,

regardless of the same or different to you, it impacts how you see yourself.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

Extremely complicated. By the time I was in an environment where at least a few other people were Black I was told I was too white. It's like I didn't belong in either group and nobody around me had the slightest idea what that was like. It made me wish when I was younger that I lived somewhere else, or had different parents who were Black and could have raised me differently. At the same time my parents are amazing people, they offered to do anything they could to help me understand who I was but they just couldn't. It's interesting now, I'm very light-skinned so people are hit or miss on whether they have the slightest clue that I'm half Black. It can create some interesting conversations. At this stage I feel incredibly proud of my Blackness but also know I have a long way to go in my own journey of understanding myself in relation to my individual Blackness.

How involved were you in the Black community growing up?

No involvement. Being adopted at birth with such a little Black community of any kind nearby it's something that I always desired but never understood how to find.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

I didn't have a specific individual role model. There were many people who influenced my life - teachers, coaches, athletes, but no individual role model growing up. I'd say now it's my parents. They're incredible people that I admire more and more as I get older.

They adopted my sister and I (years apart from different sets of birth parents) after they could not have kids on their own. My parents raised us to be open-minded and care for all things and people in the world. I wasn't appreciative of that growing up but as I've grown I've come to value these traits they've instilled in me.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

At home with my wife watching stupid shows on Netflix or any of the other streaming channels. Part of why I fell in love was because she found out who I was in every way and is unrelenting in her support and acceptance.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

Stop worrying about whatever everybody thinks so damn

much. It's really not worth the energy and you'll be fine, mistakes happen.

What do you think is the future of Blackness?

Empowerment.

ARIEL AJAGU

BLACK X WHITE X NIGERIAN AMERICAN



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I love that this project provides us the opportunity to step outside our "work selves" and further into our authenticity and vulnerability. I am a Black biracial Nigerian-American, a native Californian, an athlete, an artist, a daughter, sister, and aunt, an idealist, a humanist, and a dreamer. I feel that by sharing more of our true selves, we may begin to facilitate greater empathy across groups as colleagues, compatriots, and global citizens which will enable us to do the work of building a world that works for everyone.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

My parents were intentional about how they spoke to my brothers and me about our heritage from a young age. I always knew that I was mixed, but first realized I was Black -- and therefore "different" -- in preschool when a girl said I had "hamburger hair" (I used to wear my hair in an afro puff).

I remember relaying the comment to my mom when she picked me up, fully confused as to why that girl felt the need to comment on my hair.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

Growing up in a predominantly white city and attending PWI's, for a long time I felt Blackness was not something I could claim. Biracial, sure, but somewhere along the line the messages I received were that there was one way "Black" was supposed to be -- and that wasn't me. My dad is an immigrant and my mom is white, so I missed out on a lot of the cultural and social mores typically associated with American Blackness. As I grew older, I came to realize that Blackness contains all of our experiences, and I had a right to claim myself as anyone else. Now I am proudly, joyfully Black, and I'm very glad that representation nowadays is inclusive of so many different experiences.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

My older brothers. They were my heroes. I was always tagging along with them as my mom had to work, so they played a pivotal role in my growth and development.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

When I'm on the volleyball court or sitting in a cafe with my best friends from childhood.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

Keep being your weird, nerdy, awkward self. I promise everything will work out -- you'll see.

What do you think is the future of Blackness?

Freedom.

RICO CURRY

BLACK X (INVISIBLY) DISABLED



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I feel that advocacy and diversity efforts in tech as a whole, never stop. I constantly struggle internally and ask myself: am I doing enough to pave the way for other brilliant Black folks to follow behind me and ascend to greater heights? My participation is me living in the ministry of taking action and becoming a voice and a guiding light for more inclusion in tech. Also, showcasing that professionals in Black come in various forms with different stories to tell.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

My recognition arrived in various forms during my early elementary years. On a social level, being one of 2-3 Black boys in the Catholic grade school I attended in highly segregated Cincinnati, Ohio. During this same time overhearing my parents during dinner discuss all the -isms they experienced at their workplaces, introduced to me to the idea that the WORLD saw me as Black. My aunt, a proud AKA, who attended Tuskegee University during that time, introduced WHAT truly being Black was by showing me the lineage of greatness I came from: the advancements from ancient Africa (medical and civil), discoveries of George Washington Carver, the empowerment efforts of Mary McLeod Bethune, the prose of Langston Hughes and much, much more.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

Being Black is a great yet complicated existence for lack of better words. I resonate most with W.E.B Dubois' concept of "Double Consciousness", where Blacks in America are always living 2 experiences simultaneously: Our own unique perspective and also the perception being had by the outside (read: white) world. My convoluted experience is even more nuanced as a Black man with an invisible disability, given my hearing loss I incurred through a childhood sickness. Being Black in this scope is both scary and anxiety inducing. Operating with (silent/subtle) pressures of having to be 50x better than my non-Black counterparts at the workplace/school to prove myself or even the fear of not being to hear a command from a police officer and becoming the next victim to what feels like an infinite list of Black brutality victims.

What's given me relief is the confidence, drip and swagger that comes with being Black. By nature and DNA, we are creators, architects, pioneers, leaders in every industry and business space. My own personal accomplishments have fueled this as well, proving to myself and other Black people that we can achieve whatever we want. I also know that my Black presence, alone, when I walk in the room will turn heads. You see these shoes on my feet paired with this jacket?!?! No one can do it like us!!!

How involved were you in the Black Community growing up?

I've always been super active in the community by default. My mother and my aunt always signed me up for activities, committees and summer clubs aimed at skill building for African American children around the Greater Cincinnati area. I was in the junior National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) as a high schooler which shaped my perspective towards Blacks in tech. Being an active Nupe at the University of Toledo (YO YO!) which gave me the platform and focus to empower other Black folks in the community. My involvement from day 1 has led me to believe that one of the key drivers of Black improvement, as a whole, is through financial empowerment which is why I've been in recruiting for over a decade.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

My mother and father were my true role models. My mother because she taught me empathy for others, kindness and the

power of self-visualization. My dad because he led by example in showing me what getting out of the mud looked like. He grew up super poor and in the foster care system as a child. b performance.

Sean "Puff/P.Diddy" Combs was another because he showed me that you can get to the bag in a major way and do it in a fly manner and create the rules as you go. Also Malcolm X due to his passion for building his brothers and sisters and the fearlessness he displayed in speaking his truths.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

This would be a tie: With a small group of my well humored friends, laughing endlessly and/or in front of people I care about helping them through mentorship, business/career goals and fashion suggestions and advice (smile).

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

There is literally nothing that can stop you from being who or whatever you want to be. Learn how to be a futurist and make moves with your telescope zoomed out at 5 years at a time. Also, don't be afraid to fail and self audit at every chance you get.

TARA SWEATT

BLACK X WHITE X CHRISTIAN



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

There are so many different stories and identities within the Black community and I think it is powerful to showcase that.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

My relationship to my own Blackness is definitely complicated. It was confusing growing up in an area of New Mexico that was predominantly white and Latinx, where my Blackness made me feel very "other" and then getting to college in LA where there was a Black community but I didn't feel like I fit in

or belonged there either. Personally, I have found relief by centering myself around my Christian identity first and my Blackness becoming part of my strength, my story and my beauty but not something I am trying to fit into or live up to.

How involved were you in the Black community growing up?

I didn't grow up around a Black community, so the first time I got involved was during college when I joined the African Student Union.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

My dad has always been my role model and picture of Black strength. He was always so confident and sure of who he was and what he had to offer. Powerful but in the most loving, humble and honest way. He could make anyone laugh and instantly feel at ease with all of his amazing dad jokes and wisdom. Whenever I struggled with any insecurities he would always say calmly, "Remember, the world needs you to be you."

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

I feel the most like myself with close family and friends, the people who know me best. In terms of a broader context, I feel most comfortable when surrounded by diversity.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

You don't need to prove yourself to anyone.

MUSAAB AT-TARAS

BLACK X SUDANESE AMERICAN X MUSLIM



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I think it's important for all of us to share our stories. There is so much we can all learn from each other and I wanted to share my story as well.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

My family is originally from Sudan which in Arabic means "Land of the Blacks." My parents raised us to be very proud of that heritage. I've always been comfortable with that, but I found out as I grew up that being Black in America was not what I expected.

One of my clearest memories of being discriminated against was when I was followed around a store when I was about 9-10 years old. When my mom and I left the store, a store employee stopped me and asked me to open up my jacket to make sure I hadn't stolen anything. I was shocked and stood there stunned at the accusation. Although that was my first experience being targeted for just being Black it was not my last.

Over the years, I've been followed around stores, followed by police out of rich neighborhoods only to have them make a U-turn when I left that part of town. One of the scariest

moments for me was one week before starting my first job after graduation. I was in Chicago walking with my brother and a friend of mine to celebrate my graduation one night, when suddenly we were surrounded by police with hands on guns telling us to freeze. Luckily, none of us flinched and it turns out, according to them we 'fit the description' of people who had broken into cars in that neighborhood.

Having been in the technology field for the last 20 years I can tell you the discrimination is much less visible, but the undercurrent exists. I've gotten used to the term, 'not a cultural fit' almost the same as I got used to 'fitting the description.'

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

I love being Black. I wouldn't change any of it. I am unapologetically, Black, Sudanese American and Muslim.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

I didn't have a specific individual role model. There were many people who influenced my life - teachers, coaches, athletes, but no individual role model growing up. I'd say now it's my parents. They're incredible people that I admire more and more as I get older.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

I feel most like myself when I can find any one or more of how I identify (Black, Sudanese, Muslim) present. When all three are present I am at my happiest for sure. I feel like I can express myself in a way that's effortless and it energizes me!

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

I would tell my 12 year old self not to be concerned about 'failing' at something. I would actually encourage trying, failing, trying and failing over and over again until it was no longer a bother. You miss out on too many opportunities if you're too afraid to fail.

IRINA AZU

BLACK X GHANAIAN



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I embody diverse interests, perspectives and experiences. I am Black, an African, a Ghanaian, a problem-solver, a former mechanical engineer turned data story-teller, a foodie, a DJ, a highly cerebral woman, an avid podcast listener, and a casual yoga practitioner. I'm participating in this project because of its focus on intersectionality. I find that in America, Black people are usually seen with a singular lens, and often one that is connected to mediocrity. I believe that one way to dismantle such notions is to build a profusion of countervailing diverse Black stories. Sharing a little bit about myself here is my small contribution to this.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

I first became aware of my Blackness when I moved to the US, several years ago. I grew up in Ghana and in fact had never been on a plane until I came to MIT for undergrad. In Ghana, I was female, and aware of my ethnicity, Ga on my mother's side and Krobo on my father's side, but my Blackness was never a unique part of me because everyone around me was Black. Coming to America, opened my eyes to what it means to be Black in America, which is deeply rooted in the expectations of a society that believes me to be less than, solely based on the color of my skin.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

I love my Blackness, every single piece of it. I love my skin, which is smooth and dark and beautiful. My 4C hair, parts of which are now graying, is thick and coily and twisted into locs. I love my ability to bring mirth to all situations (even serious ones) no doubt a cross over from my Ghanaian culture where comedic relief is a critical part of coping with broken systems. The only thing I perceive to be complicated about my Blackness is what it means to be Black in America.

How involved were you in the Black community growing up?

My entire community growing up was Black, so this is an automatic yes. :-) I didn't grow up in an environment where there was a distinct Black community, because everyone around me was Black. But I grew up being very connected to my identity, to my ethnicity, and to what it means to be Ghanaian and to simply to be proud of being me. Once I got to college in America, I became involved in the African Students Association and the Black Students Union, and was very active in organizing events that expose Black and African culture to the larger non-Black audience. This continued even during my MBA, and as I have moved from the east coast to the bay area, I feel very fortunate to work in environments where ERGs such as Black@ allow me to connect with other Black people.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

My parents were my role models growing up. They taught me among other things to value and respect people. To give of myself to others who have less than me. That having integrity and a moral code far exceeds riches. Everything they had, they invested in my sister and I to ensure that we had a better life than they did, and what they taught me I carry with me every single day.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

I feel most like myself when I'm standing behind my decks, headphones cupped over one ear, mixing tunes, and sharing my love of music with an audience. DJing allows me to tap into my non-conformist sensibilities to take on a male dominated art form and share with others sounds that bring me joy.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

I would tell her not to take herself so seriously, not to worry about the future, and not to bother too much about what others think of her. I would tell her to embrace taking risks, trusting herself to land on her feet. I would tell her to go down

the unbeaten path if she feels like it, and know that her path is one that no one else has walked so she need not be swayed by what others are doing. I would tell her to embrace the experience over the outcome and focus on growth and adaptation, and to take leaps, when the moment calls for it and remember that even if she falls, she'll get right back up.

What do you think is the future of Blackness?

My hope for the future of Blackness is captured in the song Glory by John Legend & Common and featured in the motion picture SELMA. Quote: "One day when the glory comes it will be ours, it will be ours". My hope is that one day the concept of being Black itself is not one that riles up so much debate and

angst. That it becomes a part of society that is simply accepted, embraced, and given space like every other identity, to be, to breathe and to thrive. My hope is that we as Black people collectively thrive, in this society that tells us that we are less than, that seeks to define what Blackness is and what it means. That we reject the very basis of that narrative that was required to justify slavery, and has persisted for more than a century after slavery's abolishment. That we love and embrace each other, encapsulating all forms of Blackness and get to live in a society where all forms of divisiveness are dismantled.

MELISSA THOMAS-HUNT (MTH)

BLACK X CARIBBEAN X BLACK SOUTHERN HERITAGE X CATHOLIC X
NEW YORKER X PARENT X ACADEMIC



What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

It's just a given. Inextricably part of who I am. I wouldn't want to be anything else.

How involved were you in the Black community growing up?

I had Black friends, loved seeing them, mostly didn't live near lots of Black people or see them in school. Saw the rest of my family on holidays. As a teenager I switched schools, in large part, to be around more Black people.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

My parents.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

With friends broadly defined. In environments with visible cultural and racial diversity.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

Be Bold.

What do you think is the future of Blackness?

I'm really not certain. I think it may become more diffuse.

What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

I'd love our non-Black colleagues to know and understand more about the nuanced identities of their Black colleagues.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

I always knew I wasn't white. I grew up surrounded by mostly white people beyond my family.

PORTIA KAREGEYA

BLACK X UGANDAN X RWANDAN X SOUTH AFRICAN



What made you want to participate in this project and how would you describe yourself?

Anything to support my people.

When did you first become aware that you are Black?

The first time I noticed that Blackness meant something 'other' or 'negative,' in some places, was definitely when I was introduced to cable television, probably, around 7-8 yrs old.

What is your relationship to your own Blackness? What's complicated about it, what's given you relief?

Day-to-day, my relationship to my Blackness goes largely unexamined. It's just a part of me that I wear with as little thought as I do my nose. It's only when it suddenly becomes relevant because of the social situation that I'm in that I feel like a 'Black me'. Unfortunately, sometimes that's followed by having to decide what version of 'Black me' do I need to be in this space and that's complicated and challenging. What's given me relief is knowing that Black people have never given up on fighting for a future where that doesn't have to be a challenge anymore.

Who were your role models growing up and why?

Oprah, because she was so publicly curious about everything and everyone which resonated with me.

Where or in what context do you feel the most like yourself?

In bed/on the couch in my grandma's robe with a cup of tea yapping away on the phone to a friend.

What advice would you give to your 12 year old self?

It's definitely a little delusional how deeply you believe that you are one of the Independent Women that Destiny's Child is singing to, but don't worry, one day you really will be.

What do you think is the future of Blackness?

Joyful.

