

Our Ancestors, Our Voices.

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

~James Baldwin

We are Melissa Owen, Keisha Tassie, Kami Jogee. We are family. I am their aunt. I am her niece. I am her cousin. We are women of colour. We are Black, we are White, we are South Asian. We come from Jamaica, Zimbabwe, England, Afghanistan, India. There are decades between us, as we represent the age groups of 20s, 40s, and 50s. Our engagement with systemic racism stems from our lived experiences in England and in the United States. Our skin tones vary, our hair textures vary, our features vary. Our experiences, our identities, our understandings are as eclectic as our DNA.

We chose to lock arms and document some of our thoughts, memories, questions, hopes regarding the blessings and the challenges of being Black, and of being Black women, in White, Western patriarchies. The Black Lives Matter movement in England and in the United States has motivated us to question each other, to question ourselves, and to challenge the problematic ‘norms’ of society. We’ve spent months, over Zoom, discussing some of the various issues we’ve faced growing-up in racist systems that muted our uniqueness and challenged our sense of self. Through hours and hours of personal reflection and group discussion, each of us has explored elements of the evolution of our own identities, and we’ve used this piece to give voice to our individual and collective discoveries regarding the power and resilience of the Black spirit.

What follows are our individual, first-person responses to a set of questions we created. We hope that some of our reflections resonate with you, enlighten you, encourage you. Please, join us in responding to our questions, as well.

Brothers and Sisters, as you navigate the world...

“Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority, but to their inhumanity.”

~James Baldwin

Biographies

Kami Jogee: Kami Jogee is 24 years old, and a MA History of Art graduate based in London. Largely inspired by her diverse African, Caribbean, British and Asian background, much of her research focuses on the intersection between art and postcolonial theory. The exclusionary white, male footprint of the art world and its perpetuation of racial and gendered stereotypes are key themes she unpacks in her work. Her master's thesis examined Afrofuturism in the art of Chris Ofili and Black Audio Film Collective. In it, Kami was able to explore the cultural legacies of colonialism, identity and issues of representation against the backdrop of the cultural politics of the 1990's.

Keisha Edwards Tassie, Ph.D.: Dr. Keisha Edwards Tassie is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Morehouse College. She earned degrees in Communication, with emphases in interracial communication and media studies, from The University of Georgia. For over two decades, Dr. Tassie has explored the intersectionality of communication, race, gender, and mass media – presenting her scholarship through dissertation studies on intraracial skin tone bias within the Black race, mediated images, and perceptions of communicator competence; through numerous professional presentations in the fields of communication and sociology; and through peer-reviewed publications focusing on mediated images of Black culture, and of Black women in leadership. She is the recipient of various honors and awards in both teaching and scholarship. In recent years, an organic transition into focused-exploration and scholarship of the experiences of women of color living within multiple tensions of race, class, gender, and sexuality has positively transformed her evolving research agenda.

Privately, Dr. Tassie most-values enjoying and journeying through life with her precious husband and magnificent three sons; she is deeply rooted in her spiritual, social, and political ideals, and in her Jamaican heritage.

Melissa Owen: Melissa Owen is an educator, an artist, a Buddhist, a Black woman, and more. She is 55 years old; daughter to a Black, Jamaican father and a White, English mother who met and married in the early 1940s. This intercultural heritage has informed much of Melissa's work, and her cultural identity. Melissa's career has spanned publishing, education, and healthcare; applying her background in visual arts through mainly adult mental healthcare. As a person of mixed-race heritage, she developed a keen interest in disparities in service provision for Black and minority mental-health service users. Ms. Owen possesses undergraduate qualifications in Creative and Visual Arts and their therapeutic uses and benefits; Art Therapy foundation training as well as post-graduate qualifications in the Humanities, focusing on intercultural exchanges and the group process as observed in society. Melissa has participated in many training programmes analysing diversity and inclusion with organisations such as the NHS, The Royal College of Psychiatrists, MIND Mental Health Charity and other third sector organisations, devising and delivering a diversity training programme to the NHS as part of research for her Group and Intercultural Therapy Masters programme: applying the insights and knowledge gained from this work to all areas of her life spanning the last 15 years.

When did you become aware of your colour?

K.J.:

In primary school, probably around the age of 5/6. There wasn't really a stand-out moment; I wasn't racially abused or publicly shamed, yet, there was a sense of difference that I instinctively felt. My frizzy hair, darker complexion and unique name (I've still yet to meet another Kami) were signifiers of that difference. They separated me from what was seen as default: whiteness. My friends' whiteness, the predominant whiteness of the school, and the whiteness of what was largely represented on TV and in the media. I was detached from what was seen as the norm.

K.E.T.:

This is an interesting question, because it's not so much that I became aware of my color/race in a particular moment, as much as I became aware that my race/color was perceived as problematic. I remember being in gym class in fourth grade, I would be 9, and a white child called me "blacky". While I remember him sneering while using that word, as I reflect now, what stands out more to me is my reaction to the word. Somehow, beyond the sneer, I knew this descriptor was a reflection of my Blackness being perceived as problematic. In that moment, I completely absorbed that perception. I ran to my P.E. (physical education) teacher, a strong Black woman-- I still remember her name, Mrs. Thomas—and erupted with my voice and my outrage, "he called me blacky!!!" Mrs. Thomas calmly looked at me and said, "Well, you are Black. What's the problem?" I remember standing there dumbfounded, and enlightened. 'Why isn't she outraged? Why won't she punish him?' I thought to myself. Then I thought, "I **am** Black. That's right – I am Black." A calmness and dignity washed over me. I wouldn't have been able to articulate that at 9, but in reflection, that's exactly what I was experiencing. Some might disagree with Mrs. Thomas's response, but I'm thankful for it. My outrage in being described as 'blacky' had everything to do with absorbing America's racial prejudice and hierarchy. Yes, the child was intending to insult me, but what actually mattered in that moment was that I was buying into the narrative that Blackness was inferior, and should therefore be perceived as insulting (by whatever word/descriptor). Mrs. Thomas's response was exactly what I needed in that moment.

M.O.:

I believe when I was in junior school, so about 9-years-old? It was a new school I had joined and my mother, my nieces'/co-writers' grandmother, who was White, would take me to school. The kids started asking if I was adopted! Of course, I asked Mum and Dad about this and they reassured me that I wasn't, and actually explained that yes, I was 'different,' but that I should never think that anyone was ever better than me because of that difference. The term 'mixed race' was not in use in 1974 but the rather pejorative term 'half caste' was, and that is what I was known as. In fact, Black and Brown people used that term quite freely. From that point, Mum and Dad started telling me about how they met and about their own personal struggles as a couple of 'difference'. Over the last few days, I've been racking my brain wondering whether I really was the only child of colour at school during that time. I even checked with an old school friend and neither of us could recall there being another child of colour at that time. So, even though the palette at school was White, I was accepted in spite of the racial confusion of those who assumed I must be adopted. I didn't meet their tropes about what Black 'was meant to be'. I had soft, curly hair, 'European' features, and sounded exactly like them when I spoke! Not just accepted, **acceptable**. I clearly possessed some cultural capital with the way I looked. I never experienced being

taught by a Black or Brown teacher throughout my whole school career, there weren't any. I do remember being referred to as a 'dusky maiden' by the White, middle-aged music teacher! Of course, a comment like that today would not be accepted, and rightly so; I was 11 years old. Interesting to think that he felt it was OK to address an 11-year-old in that way, that he could exoticise my 'difference'. It might sound extreme, but 'master and slave' comes to mind.

When did you become aware that colour meant difference?

K.J:

Colour comes with many connotations. But for me, its most distinct implication is that of difference. The feeling and sense of 'difference' that colour infers, is what I noticed first, before really becoming aware of colour itself. As aforementioned, growing up, whiteness was the default. It was the status quo. So, if you diverged from that, a feeling of difference was made painstakingly obvious. This was heightened by the fact that my dad comes from a different culture. He's a Muslim and I was raised in an Islamic household, so growing up I wasn't able to eat certain foods. This again alienated me from my predominately white peers. It was at this stage that I began to associate certain religions with colour. My young brain created this kind of binary between Christianity and Islam, where I decoded Christianity as 'white' and the 'norm', whilst I saw Islam as 'brown' and 'different'. My understanding of colour, and the difference I felt it meant, was also shaped by my simplistic understanding of class. Of course, I was digesting all these issues through a child's eyes but even at an early age, the intersection between race and class was made abundantly clear to me. At the risk of sounding crude, I read whiteness as 'rich'. And in my young state, it seemed to me that 'colour' was excluded from this exclusive club. All my friends with the big houses and gardens were white, while, like me, my friends who didn't have a garden, or lived in a flat, were invariably of colour. Admittedly, this is a naïve reading of the complexities that surround colour, class and 'difference'. However, simultaneously, I think these are also profound observations for a child to be having. They speak to how I, rightly or wrongly, categorised people of colour and myself – always seeing us as somehow 'other' – as 'different'.

K.E.T:

What's so insidious about racism is that it's sometimes difficult to pinpoint when we were first 'taught' that race/color is equated with worth in the West. I genuinely cannot remember when or how I learned this 'lesson;' I can say confidently that I learned it well... along with everyone else in the West – without regard to position in the hierarchy. It's a cultural teaching so entrenched in the psyche of humans, especially those raised and living in the West, that the association of race and worth *is* the forest through which we cannot see the trees. My fourth-grade experience on the P.E. field is a prime example of this entrenched cultural teaching: two 9-year-olds; one weaponizing race, the other falling victim to weaponized-race – neither child truly understanding how or when they had been taught that race was a weapon to be used and to be feared. This is the insidious nature of a constructed racial hierarchy – that each person can 'successfully' execute his/her role in the hierarchy, from a very young age, without conscious understanding/identification of when or how the role was learned.

M.O:

As above, I suppose that experience of me being Brown, and Mum being White, meant to others that we couldn't possibly have the same blood coursing through our veins. I guess I didn't understand why I would be asked such a question. All I had ever known was Dad was Black, Mum was White, and my 11 siblings and me were various shades of Brown. That's genetics, right? It wasn't anything unusual to me. However, there was an issue of 'colourism' before we had a name for it; and that issue was with 'them' people outside of my familial group. It was making those people ask questions about 'race,' re-think their preconceived ideas, and making them uncomfortable. It wasn't just the kids, you could see the parents trying to work it out too. So, I suppose becoming aware of colour meaning difference came as a result of this experience, but the awareness was that colour meant difference to others, not necessarily to me. This subject is so nuanced and dense and contradictory because I'm 'mixed race,' self-identifying as 'Black,' yet not always perceived/accepted as Black by either Black or White society.

Have different environments and geographical locations in which you have lived impacted upon your life experiences as a person of colour?

K.J:

The impact that geographical locations and environments can have on people of colour is massive. Being born and raised in London, I was accustomed to being around a diverse range of people, so it's not ever something I thought too deeply about. The notion that 'geography' could have an impact on my life only became aware to me when I was choosing where to go for university. Like most of my peers, it was the northern universities, Manchester and Leeds, specifically, that I was instantly drawn to. Both are known as 'party' uni's and are favoured heavily by young people. When I was discussing my options with my parents, they were resistant to me moving up north. My mum grew up in Stafford, a small town in the midlands, and was concerned about the racial tension that she felt was alive more intensely in northern cities. She herself had studied in Manchester and been witness to racist incidents, which understandably had clouded her perspective. I ended up going down south, to Brighton, and studied at the University of Sussex. Brighton is considered to be a liberal city but it's also almost exclusively white. I wouldn't say this had a negative impact on me, but it's certainly something I was conscious of. It lacked a cultural imprint that I believe lives in most other major cities, particularly London. It's interesting how places can exist in people's minds. My mum saw Brighton as a place that would be more accepting of difference – I don't doubt this. However, both Leeds and Manchester are much more ethnically diverse. I think what this shows is how impactful location and environment can be on people of colour. It affects them in a way that it never would a white person. My mum's witnessing of racism whilst she was in Manchester became her lived experience of that place. It stayed with her, like it does with all people of colour: influencing how we move in certain spaces, how we view the spaces we're in, and how we feel those spaces see us.

K.E.T:

Yes, growing up in Miami, Florida I felt visible as a Jamaican person. Miami is incredibly diverse, and the presence of multicultural/ethnic communities is strong. So, my Jamaican identity was reflected in my community. Living in Georgia, life is quite Black & White – one or the other. Ethnicity isn't as valued or evident in Georgia. I miss the celebration of ethnic identity that I experienced while growing up in Miami. That said, I value the strength of Blackness in Georgia – a community in which Black people

occupy many of the most influential and powerful political, professional, and social positions in the state. Both states/communities have provided me with important lessons and examples for how to understand my own identity in an evolving racial landscape.

M.O:

Yes. My father was determined not to become 'ghettoised,' hence moving to a different area of our town when I started junior school. Our previous location had sizeable African-Caribbean and Asian populations. Also, for Dad it was about assimilation and just wanting to live; I think he and his compatriots were exhausted with the 'fight,' having been faced with racial prejudice since arriving here in 1941. They were told that they were English in colonised Jamaica, yet faced with a very different story on arrival. This challenge unfortunately limited what my siblings and I learnt about our Jamaican heritage, although Daddy was undeniably Jamaican – he always had a separate plate of rice and peas with every meal! I began to learn more about the different dimensions of my heritage as a young adult mainly because of who I was coming into contact with. I began socialising with other Black teenagers. Culturally we weren't catered for, Mum and Dad had to make trips twice a month to food markets in Birmingham 30 miles away to buy foods that would satisfy Dad's palate and were impossible to find in that small town. We lived more of an Anglicized life but we knew we were Jamaican. Our experiences were influenced by a generation who arrived pre-Windrush. I often wonder how it would have been if we hadn't moved and I remained immersed in what actually was a very multicultural school at the time. My three main friends were an Asian girl, a Black, Jamaican boy, and a White, English girl. I do remember lots of names like 'wog,' 'paki,' 'sambo,' and 'coon' being thrown about when we lived in that area but at that time that kind of language was on the telly and in newspapers – it was generally accepted. We were reading a book in class called "Little Black Sambo". These racial epithets were in print so even the all White teaching staff didn't question the language. I'm feeling uncomfortable right now and a bit angry at how desensitised we *all* were back then.

What do you love about being a person of colour? Specifically love about being Black?

K.J:

Now, the thing I love most about being black is the thing I hated most when I was younger – and that is 'difference'. Being from a mixed background (both in terms of race and religion), I enjoy being able to relate to different cultures. I find there is a vibrancy in blackness, specifically – a sense of spirit that is infectious. I also find there is a unification in being black, due perhaps to our complex history and oppression - there's an unspoken understanding between black people that I feel is innate. It transcends any difference in upbringing and exists as a common ground. It allows for a sense of safety to be felt, a knowledge that we are all in this together.

K.E.T:

I love the spirit of resilience that is the core of my African people. We have endured the most heinous, inhumane treatment, and yet we continue to live, continue to love, continue to thrive, continue to laugh, continue to forgive, continue to hope, continue to dream, continue to... The strength of spirit from our ancestors lives on in us – I feel incredibly proud of, and protected by, that fact. In the face of incomprehensible inhumanity, the unyielding, enduring humanity of Black people has not been compromised – and because of this beautiful resilience, I would not choose to be any other race.

M.O:

I love knowing that my very beginning started in Africa, the seat of civilisation. I love that Jamaicans are known as warriors and I am Jamaican! I love that even though I have brown skin and strongly identify as being Black, people, mostly White people, quite often don't see me as 'Black'. I clearly don't fit their stereotype; they become... well, I can only say 'shocked' if ever I speak out about issues concerning the disparities that Black people experience. It is, however, only fair to say that I have experienced that reaction from Black people on occasion, too. This is the insidiousness and divisiveness of racism but nobody can tell me who I am or what my experience is – I'm Jamaican! I love my rich, intelligent, vibrant, creative, culture full of colour, style, flair, spirituality and flavour that is so often hijacked by those who don't love our blackness but find it hard to resist because it contributes so much to society. They want our culture they just don't want us!

What are some microaggressions you have experienced? Or continue to experience? How did you respond? Has your response changed due to the global movement we're in? Do you feel empowered to respond strongly?

K.J:

Most of the microaggressions I've experienced have centred around my hair. Comments were often made about how 'black hair doesn't grow like white hair', or, when I straightened it, being told that my hair 'actually looks like hair'. It definitely affected my self-esteem and often left me longing for straight hair, or hair that was less frizzy. I think as a society, we are definitely more educated around the subject of microaggressions now, perhaps more than ever. I can't imagine someone making those types of comments so nonchalantly in 2020, which undeniably signifies a sense of progression. I definitely feel more empowered to respond strongly now – I'm compelled to! We've been made to feel lesser-than for too long. Looking back, I'm embarrassed at how passive I was, often agreeing with the hostile attitudes hurled my way, hoping desperately that if I denounced my own self-worth, the subject would soon be changed. It's upsetting to think I once felt like that, but I don't blame myself. Instead, I take comfort in knowing how far I've come. I'm no longer apologetic for the features that make me, me. They've been embraced, and I take ownership of them. Microaggressions work to slowly unpick the fabric of oneself. They must be called out and rejected – even when difficult. Self-acceptance and pride is the only way forward. The global movement in which we are living has highlighted this further, and for that I am grateful.

K.E.T:

The list of micro-aggressions is too long to recall, but they can be categorized under the title of 'audacity.' The audacity to pursue and earn a doctorate, the audacity to pursue and achieve tenure and promotion in a traditionally white organization like The Academy, the audacity to live where I choose, the audacity to question 'authority' or conventional 'wisdom,' the audacity to strategically position my family for success, etc., etc. Often the white response to my audaciousness is some form of micro-aggression – attempting (unsuccessfully) to delay promotion, questioning my questions, attempting (unsuccessfully) to stymie my family's success, attempting (unsuccessfully) to re-doctrinate conventional 'wisdom,' etc., etc. A general response that seeks to stop the questioning, stop the strategy, stop the audacity of self-worth. They're failing miserably with me. My response is a reflection of my people's resilience – I become more determined to exercise my worth, and the spirit of my ancestors strengthen me for the

journey. This response has been consistent for me, and I view our global movement as an opportunity for me to assist (emotionally and practically) my Black brothers and sisters in remaining resilient. We must empower each other.

M.O:

I'm often aware of being watched and followed around stores, it's annoying and insulting when misguided suspicion happens. As I've established in my previous answers, there is this dichotomy of only sometimes being seen as Black by both Black and White people. My point being, I am of a colour or hue that is 'palatable' to White majority, yet not enough to spare me from the micro-aggressions of racism. So, how do my darker-skinned, Black brothers and sisters experience this kind of crap if I, who is deemed more acceptable on the dimension of skin colour, encounter 'subtle' racism compared to their encounters with overt racism? I wouldn't normally challenge it but the current climate dictates a different response; if I don't challenge it then it will never stop.

I have also twice had people touching my hair, rubbing my head like 'touch the golliwog for luck'. Both times made me fume and I was very clear to the perpetrators (both White – one a man, one a woman on separate occasions) how offensive I found their behaviour. I remember that it embarrassed them both and confused them. Why should I have to do the work for you and spell it out? It's exhausting; and so is the contradiction and confusion of having to perform in a space that has been made very clear to me isn't my space. It's a White space; so, at times, I'm having to be a chameleon in order to just carry out quotidian activities in the workplace, or when having a conversation about race and colour whereby I'm, again, not seen as 'Black'. I self-identify as Black, they see my brown skin, and we once again revert to acceptability and preconceived notions of who I am, where I come from and how I should present according to those factors and the expectations of others. The current global movement is empowering, and I will call-out every micro-aggression because I must. 'Whiteness' automatically equating to superiority is a fallacy that is being deconstructed, and societal privilege being re-imagined. I also remember working in an inner city girls' school and my line manager a recent Oxford graduate was talking about how much she loved philosophy; I told her I was going to attend a talk being given by A.C. Grayling and she said 'how come somebody like you likes philosophy?' I was shocked, it made me feel as if I shouldn't know anything about this subject nor this scholar. It made me question my intellect. It bothered me for some time; I can't hold back that she was in fact the diversity and inclusion lead in the department! I'm not sure that can be classed as a micro-aggression rather than blatant racial stereotyping! However, it informed my research for my Masters dissertation and spurred me on to analyse diversity training, and how I, as a person of colour, understood difference and inclusion. I could only focus on what it meant to be different because of my colour; even looking through a different cultural lens wouldn't be comprehensive because of the multi-faceted, nuanced, complex nature of race. My research confirmed what I already knew, I could deliver diversity training through discussion of race, which I did, but I couldn't cover, for example, being physically disabled, deaf, blind, a gay man or a lesbian from a first-hand perspective. I've known other White people who have offered diversity training or worked in a role with the word 'diversity' in it, who possess little to no true understanding of my community, yet are very aware of the stereotypes associated with people of colour. Some can barely give eye contact to people of colour. I've witnessed this awkwardness in workshops I've attended where they seem not to know how to communicate with people of colour, as if *they* believe *we* have some kind of deficit. What else can I say about micro-aggressions....? Thankfully I've never been burdened by who I am; any issues lie with others.

Do you feel a sense of obligation to your race in fighting racism as a person of colour? Or to yourself?

K.J.:

Absolutely! Racism is an evil that continues to leave a stain on our world's history. I am totally obliged to my race in fighting this poison! We have to empower each other as a collective, as a force to be reckoned with. I equally feel an obligation to myself. I owe it to myself to know my own worth, to know that I deserve better than what has been 'offered' to people of colour. I admit, though, that I still have a lot to learn. I think we all do. We have to unlearn the lies racism has taught us. We owe it to ourselves, our race, and most importantly, we owe it to the future generations.

K.E.T.:

I absolutely feel a sense of obligation to my race in fighting racism. This is the spirit of my people – we are connected to each other. Our success and failure are inextricably tied, and I wouldn't have it any other way. And, yes, I feel a sense of obligation to myself, as well. That said, my obligation to self is ultimately tied to my obligation to my race. In my mind, the more progress I am able to achieve in my own life, the better equipped/empowered I am to contribute my strengths to our collective fight.

M.O.:

Of course! It can't be any other way. If for no other reason, I owe it to my parents and to their memory, and in fact, to my fourth-generation mixed-race great nieces and nephews around the globe. As I said earlier, calling every little thing out has to be the way forward because it's the little things that count. We can't continue to allow racist thinking and behaviour to be acceptable, normal behaviour. There's nothing normal about de-humanising a person because of their skin colour.

What do you consider to be a true ally? Can someone perform ally-work as an individual, or must the ally-work be systemic in nature?

K.J.:

By definition, ally-ship is 'the practice of emphasizing social justice, inclusion, and human rights by members of an in-group, to advance the interests of an oppressed or marginalized out-group.' For ally-ship to be effective, then, it *must* be performed both individually and systemically. For it to become universal, the onus is on the individual (particularly those from the privileged race, whose voices have been prioritised) to stand up and speak out in their daily lives: to take accountability for past mistakes, to educate themselves, and to listen to, and elevate, oppressed voices. This is what I consider a true ally to be. And when ally-ship is performed correctly, in its truest, most sincere form, I believe it possesses the power for serious change.

K.E.T.:

I consider a true ally to be someone who not only recognizes that his/her whiteness is valuable currency, but who ***strategizes in collaboration with people of color*** to execute that currency in service to racial equality (and equity). I think ally-work can and must be both individual and systemic. The day-to-day racial aggressions (both micro and macro) that happen at the corner shop, or in a restaurant, or during a

meeting require individual-level ally-work that calls out the injustice and holds accountable the prejudiced neighbor, or the prejudiced colleague, or the prejudiced restaurant staff. As well, systemic ally-work is necessary for law/policy change. Both ends of the spectrum must be tended to – from one-on-one personal interactions to laws and policies that radically deconstruct a racist system and radically construct a system in which all human beings can thrive.

M.O:

A true ally to me would be somebody White, to own that they are racist by default; and I'm directing this at some (not all), of my White friends and neighbours. To acknowledge that their life experiences and societal influences are so deeply entrenched in racism that they have to accept racism is something deeply ingrained in their lives. It is systemic. It is structural. It is not an event. It continues. It is **their** pathology. A true ally educates themselves and doesn't gloss-over racist issues by leaning on the fact that they know one and a half Black people! It starts with the individual, then systems can begin to change. Of course, a lot of people will be uncomfortable reading this. **I offer no apology because there is something perverse whereby calling out racism and people's racist behaviour is more offensive than people being on the receiving end of that behaviour.**

Since George Floyd's murder I've felt so disturbed about racism. I have been sending information daily about the current movement to everybody I know. Wow, my list of contacts has shrunk! Some Black and Brown friends did not want to acknowledge what has been happening throughout time and in some cases were in denial about ever having experienced racism at all – which was initially shocking to me, but then I understood that it was due to past trauma, shame, embarrassment, fear and complicated family dynamics. I also know people of colour who, by nature of their complexion, could be perceived as 'White' by both Black and White people. Some of these people, as a defence mechanism, choose to be 'White' – denying their heritage, never acknowledging it rather than embracing it. I believe in America the term 'passing' or being able to 'pass' is used. Is there a fear to be their authentic selves or just the weariness that makes them want to have a life less complicated? It brings to mind James Weldon Johnson's concept of 'the freemasonry of race' in his 'Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man' written in 1912 but as pertinent today over a century later as it was then. With White friends they were in denial for different reasons; they didn't think it was an issue and quite a few asked me outright to stop sending them this information! One friend sent this message: **'Melissa my dear, my phone is running out of memory. I am absolutely with you on the subject. You know that but please only send me personal messages here. Please don't be upset.'** What can I say? Why the hell shouldn't I be upset? The message is personal! 'Memory running out' became a common theme. There was also the refusal to see some images of abuse and enslavement of Black people. Who knew that I knew so many people with such delicate sensibilities? Disappointing to say the least. But then, another epiphany – this global movement is stirring up the sediment for everybody regardless of colour; not that I'm condoning the attitude of some, but as difficult as it is, we need to have dialogue and believe me there are quite a few individuals I find it very hard to speak to at the moment, but I know at some point that I have to communicate with them – if only to drive home that by ignoring those heinous crimes doesn't mean they didn't happen. I'm owning and processing my feelings - slowly. I wonder if they're even thinking about it? When/if we eventually engage it won't be easy but we all have to sit with that discomfort.

Do you feel aligned with the BLM movement? Would you change anything about BLM's process? Is anything missing?

K.J:

I most definitely feel aligned with the BLM movement; and there's nothing I'd change about it. From its inception, I think BLM have done brilliantly in showcasing, most potently, the injustices faced by black people. They've harnessed the power of protest and used it to generate, and push for, a yearning for change. They've created a worldwide momentum, that I feel has spoken to all people of colour. I initially understood BLM as an American movement, triggered by the epidemic that is police brutality, and the violence carelessly unleashed against the black body. Despite this, I immediately had an affinity for the movement and felt that the same kind of crusade was also needed here in the UK. Ideally, I would like to live in a world where there wasn't a need for BLM; a world where the topic of black liberation wasn't up for debate. Unfortunately, that haven ceases to exist and we live in a sphere where a BLM movement is essential!

K.E.T:

I do feel aligned with the BLM Movement. I'll confess that I was slow to adopting the name of the movement. To me, 'Black Lives Matter' as a name was making a case that did not need to be made. By virtue of my existence, I matter. I will not make that case; I originally found it insulting to do so. Intellectually, I understood the purpose of the name, emotionally, it took time for me to connect with the name/proclamation. Over time, I understood – unfortunately, the proclamation needed to be made. And, I realized that the need to articulate "Black lives matter" was not a question/argument that debated my value, it was a reflection of the chasm of emptiness in, or absence of, humanity of a white racist system. I think BLM Movement must take care to demand justice for all Black lives – that we not inadvertently reaffirm a hierarchy of worth among all (Black) human beings.

M.O:

Yes, I do feel aligned with the BLM movement in both the UK and the US. They're fighting for a common cause. There are cultural differences between the two countries but racism is racism and it pervades both societies. I don't know that I'd change anything specifically because the organisation, I believe, is strong and has a clear vision. I don't, however, agree with de-funding the police. America is made up of individual states, each with its own state laws, and whilst that may apply and work there, I don't see it working here. If anything, give the police here more funding to better educate and train their operatives about cultural differences, to unlearn racial bias, to stop racially-profiling and making assumptions about people of colour – specifically, Black men. There could well be things missing but the organisation is dynamic and will hopefully adapt and adjust to whatever events are thrown at them.

What is the role/responsibility of education systems in fighting racism?

K.J:

I'm a student of Art History, having studied it to the postgraduate level. History of Art is perhaps one of the whitest subjects, which I believe has something to do with the fact that it's taught predominately in private schools. I myself had never had a lesson in History of Art before starting university. During my undergraduate study, I was one of only three people of colour in my course. During my MA, I was one of

only two. All my lecturers and seminar tutors, throughout both degrees, were white. To me, this speaks to the larger issue of racism within our educational systems. As governing bodies, scholastic institutions, particularly in the West, have a responsibility to deconstruct the past and confront their racist histories head-on. To me, this is integral to their role as intellectuals. The lack of black and minority visibility in these academic establishments is problematic. For educational systems to effectively fight racism, and to be a beacon of hope for the next generation, their workforce *needs* to be diverse. If we hope to raise future cohorts of black critical-thinkers, then they need to see themselves reflected in these fields. This, again, boils down to the importance of representation. It's crucial for one's state of mind to see themselves represented positively.

K.E.T:

As a college professor, I believe the role of education systems in fighting racism is providing exposure, teaching critical thinking skills, and creating the space and expectation for true dialogue. Ignorance and lack of exposure breed prejudice; therefore, education systems must serve as a bastion for global education (not curated, selective education) and exposure to the histories and perspectives of all racial and ethnic groups; as well as exposure to the process and importance of critical thinking. The vast majority of people lack basic critical thinking skills to navigate the most common experiences, let alone those situations which are unfamiliar or new. If we focus on exposure, critical thinking, and true dialogue as our primary means through which we share our varied experiences, we position humanity for peace as an achievable goal.

M.O:

Gosh, history is number one. Teach our history in truth – both sides of the story, not just that of the victors and oppressors. It should be on the national curriculum and I can't quite believe that it isn't. That the government refused to integrate it into the curriculum is a disgrace and an embarrassment. What the hell are they thinking, and how can they get away with this given the history of this country and how it colonised, along with most of White Western Europe, most of the world? Its wealth was built on the backs of enslaved African people. It's a stain on the history of this country, which is why it's an integral part of this country's history. It can only be that they want to perpetuate division, and that it could open the flood gates to reparations. Don't say that word out loud... I can hear the whole of Westminster and the financial city of London quivering! Stop excluding Black kids, especially Black boys from the classroom. Teacher training should cover cultural issues fully, not through a tick box approach. It should be mandatory to learn about different races, cultures and ethnicities in detail, and not simply as an add-on in the form of 'diversity and inclusion' training, which frankly, has become a catchphrase. Anti-racism is the essential requirement.

How do you define white privilege?

K.J:

I define white privilege as a freedom. An undeserved freedom, one that is both knowingly and unknowingly enjoyed, often at the expense of the '*un-free*'. It is people for colour who continue to bear the brunt of this privilege; a privilege that continues to devalue our voices, our concerns, and our livelihoods. White privilege relies on the oppression of black people to exist – it is fuelled by our

hardship. But it is finally being called-out. It has been put on trial, exposed for what it really is: a thief of black liberation.

K.E.T:

I define white privilege as unearned privilege – luck. This unearned privilege is the primary currency of the West. This privilege is both consciously exercised as well as passively enjoyed in the form of various professional, social, economic, and political (and therefore generational) benefits of whiteness. White privilege is the power of naming others, while remaining un-named. White privilege is the thief of voice, opportunity, equality, humanity.

M.O:

My White neighbours having given me a ‘verbal lynching’ because I chose not to speak to them due to their support of another White, racist neighbour calling the police because I put protest posters in my windows calling-out all racists after the murder of George Floyd; the police actually responding to the complaint by coming to my home to investigate: this is White privilege. After the neighbours discharged their rage upon me because I had the ‘audacity’ to ignore them, one of them pointing at my protest poster and declaring, “I work for them lot” – telling me they work with young Black boys, verbalising their unashamed perception and description of Black people as a group; then believing that they can just speak to me as if nothing has happened; calling out ‘hi’ and ‘hello’ in mocking, shrill voices which I find extremely patronising and provocative, trivialising what happened: this is White privilege. Are these bad people per se? Unlikely. In most cases it’s their privilege that emboldens them to behave like this, their cultural capital and their White currency that they can, and do, so easily expend. They’re not even aware, they take so much for granted: this is White privilege.

I must share that when the Police visited my home for the above ‘offence,’ of course they said that no offence had been committed and actively encouraged me to protest; agreeing that I had every right to display posters in my windows and on my own property. They were in fact apologetic and uncomfortable. **Also the protagonist moved out unexpectedly and hastily on Windrush Day. The ancestors were with me!** However, the privilege came with them having no compunction about involving the Police and having the expectation that they would be given ‘assistance’ because they felt entitled. Neither did the police seek to investigate them and the four-foot stick they had threatened me with and kept propped-up outside their back door as a warning! I am of course pursuing this because we know the outcome if I’d been the one wielding the stick! I don’t have white privilege but I do have rights, human rights.

In recent days there has been reportage about the concept of ‘White Privilege’. A Government minister is of the belief that using the term ‘white privilege’ will have a negative effect upon White pupils in school and that it would be illegal for it to be taught. She is a Black woman and we are in the middle of Black History Month - disturbing. Yet again, I feel the presence of racism in our society is being minimised and trivialised. She is missing the point completely and clearly in denial about the treatment of Black and Brown people in history and how they are treated in society. The experience of one person, one family does not speak for a whole people.

Can you remember the first time you experienced racism and how old were you?

K.J.:

Rather than a singular event or incident, my experience of racism has been something of an endurance test. I personally don't have any horror stories of racial abuse or assault to recount, which I realise is a privilege (the fact that I see this as a privilege is extremely problematic – and speaks to how entrenched racism is within our society. However, I think it's important I acknowledge this. The terror of blatant racism, and its traumatic after-effects, has not been my experience; so, I can't fully-speak to how painful that must be). What I have endured, though, particularly whilst growing up, were onslaughts of daily microaggressions. On reflection, these microaggressions were often external: societal beauty standards or black stereotypes, based on the racial hierarchy in which we live. Because I didn't fit either, this authorised people to make ignorant comments that often left me feeling apologetic. Apologetic for failing to fit the archetype of beauty, apologetic for failing to fulfil my role as a 'black female,' apologetic, ultimately, for being 'other'. I think this is why I refer to my experience as an act of endurance; I just saw it as something I had to go through. Microaggressions are often covert in nature, making them difficult to pinpoint, or call-out. It's only now, in this time where the intricacies of racism are being exposed, that I realise how racially-charged they were.

K.E.T.:

I must refer back to my previous answer regarding the insidious nature of living in a racial hierarchy. I cannot pinpoint a specific moment; instead, my life has been, and remains, a journey through racism. Racism is a system – it is not an individual act. To my knowledge, I've never been called a "nigger," or passed-over for a job because of my race, or been accused of some type of infraction because of my race, or some similar incident that normally comes to mind when we think of what racism 'looks like.' That said, through years of both scientific and experiential analysis, I know that I am constantly victimized by a racist system – in ways I can see, in ways I cannot see; in ways I can feel, and in ways that have yet to resonate.

M.O.:

I don't remember a specific time. I have over time been aware that racist views however covert or subtle are deeply ingrained in the psyche of many White people. Although not the first time I experienced racism, there was an incident that happened when I was about 23 with a good friend who I used to go clubbing with, a Black man same age as me. After clubbing, it was about 3 o'clock in the morning and we were in the West End starting the journey home and I said, "forget about night buses, let's get a black cab." He stood half-hidden in a doorway. I asked him what he was doing and he laughed and said 'they're not going to stop if they see me'. I was bemused, but he was correct – three cabs with their lights on, which due to the licensing laws meant they were obliged to stop, just sailed past. He hid and the first one after he hid stopped! I felt really disturbed by this and I can conjure up that feeling just recounting the incident. That happened over 30 years ago, but in that moment, it opened Pandora's box and the detritus of that box has been an ever-present spectre. I had the realisation, in that moment, of all the racism, albeit subtle, and all the micro-aggressions that I had experienced growing up in that small town a decade earlier. From being told, "oh you're not really Black," for me, was the biggest insult. Being excluded from both White friendship groups and Black friendship groups at times – again, more contradictions. Having spiteful games played against me such as arranging to meet with those White

friendship groups, only to be given the wrong time or location. Was this racism? What else? Along with the complexities and contradictions of racism, I, as a mixed-race girl, was 'other' but *acceptable*, I was accepted by the White girls in their way, but only on their terms. I'm really only understanding it all now as an adult who doesn't really care that much about who does or doesn't find her acceptable.

Experiences help shape our character and inform our work – hence my on-going research into groups; analysing where the 'other' is placed in society; and how difference, living, and growing in a host society can impact our lives.

Have you ever been the only person of colour in a situation? How did it make you feel? Has it stayed with you?

K.J:

Being the only person of colour within a space is something I've become accustomed to; but I don't know if it's something that's stayed with me. Growing up, I employed the method of assimilation, to alleviate the feeling of difference I both consciously and subconsciously felt. Despite my experiences in further education also being exclusively white, questions around race and diversity were openly-confronted. This gave me the chance to explore the issue of race on a deeper level, which informed much of my future research. The inclusive nature of these conversations didn't permit for any feelings of isolation to seep through; instead, we were allowed the chance to learn and grow together.

K.E.T:

I am often the only person of color (or one of a few) within my profession. While Higher Education is certainly more diverse than Corporate America, we still have a long way to go. Before joining the faculty of the Historically Black College and University (HBCU) where I currently teach, being surrounded by both white colleagues and white students was my norm. Attending professional conferences/meetings in which the majority of attendees are white is my norm. I attended a predominately white institution for college and graduate school – sitting in a classroom as the only Black person in the room was my norm. These experiences make me feel empowered/obligated to represent for my people in that space. I do not perceive it as a burden – I perceive it as a duty/honor. It reminds me that I must do all I can to increase representation in all spaces.

M.O:

Many times, haha. I think though I'm desensitised to that these days and the lovely explanation of me being 'different' from Mum and Dad all those years ago, in spite of the many racist experiences I've been subjected to over the years, has actually brought me to a place of feeling good about my difference – to the point of sometimes feeling empowered when I've been the only person of colour in a situation. I do remember going to a Ball, in the Cotswolds with a friend of mine from art college. Of course, I was the only Black person there. I felt like a fish out of water but I didn't feel any hostility or hear any unsavoury comments which I've experienced in other situations when I've been the only person of colour, it was mildly amusing. It was actually a classic case of race and class being inextricably linked. It was a very middle-class, White, affluent demographic. I also remember holidaying on a private island in the Caribbean with my mother. All the staff were Black, and the general manager was White with a Black girlfriend from a neighbouring island whose complexion was almost White (she could pass!). My mother was White, of course, along with all the other extremely wealthy, mainly American guests, and I the only

person of colour as a guest was asked outright (by an American) if I was my mother's nurse! I knew it was going to come from somebody, and it made me laugh, but Mum was furious. She actually said to the offender... "I think it's obvious she's my daughter – what's wrong with you?"... rendering them mute and in subsequent meetings they were so unctuous. Embarrassed, I suppose. Interestingly, all of the Black staff realised immediately that we were mother and daughter. Another race/class dichotomy.

Do you ever feel vulnerable as a Black woman?

K.J:

I find this question particularly challenging to answer. In short, I would say I feel vulnerable as a woman, in general. But if I delve deeper and ask myself why it is I feel my blackness doesn't add to my vulnerability, it's because I don't perform the stereotype of blackness that is generally expected from me. My soft-spoken voice fails to connote images of the 'angry black woman,' or the 'matriarch,' that have for so long lived freely in our collective consciousness. This is both a confronting and uncomfortable realisation that once again reinforces the dangers of stereotyping. Because I don't fit the ingrained caricature of the black female, I don't feel my blackness endangers me any more than my womanhood does. I'm aware that this is a privilege, though – a privilege that fails to protect my black male counterparts. The policing of black masculinity is so entrenched within society it has become an accepted stereotype within mainstream culture. Popular personas such as Ali G have contributed to the denouncement of the black male; his aesthetic criminalises the black, male body – existing as the 'gangster,' the 'drug dealer,' and the 'criminal predator'. A black man's soul no longer belongs to him, but belongs to the governing institutions, the law enforcers, who have already predicted his future for him. I don't wish to digress from the question at hand, nor to dismiss black-female vulnerability, which absolutely exists, but I don't feel like I can answer this question truthfully without addressing the police brutality that disproportionately affects black males. While I, at times, feel vulnerable in society as a woman, my blackness does not contribute to this vulnerability in the same way it does for black men. Ultimately, the black body is burdened by biased representation. The only way to decrease our vulnerability is to dismantle the sinister stereotypes that continue to categorise us.

K.E.T:

Yes, I feel vulnerable as a Black woman. We have been put in a position (directly and indirectly) to be targeted, yet we must stand as a pillar of strength and support for the Black community – simultaneously. It is an exhausting position to occupy. To have to navigate both racist and sexist systems in our journey is a dangerous and demoralizing path not meant for the faint of heart. This also means that we possess a kind of internal power and strength that is unmatched.

M.O:

I feel vulnerable as a woman at times, and as a Black woman I feel like a target at times – depending on my location and who I'm with. At the risk of repetition, the preconceived ideas held by others, both Black and White, regarding my 'fit' with their stereotypes of a Black woman can add to my feelings of vulnerability.

Do you think this global movement will change things for people of colour?

K.J:

Yes. People can't ignore it anymore. A shift has happened - institutional bodies are finally taking a stand, and systems that have previously remained mute on issues regarding race are now speaking out. It is still unknown whether these are acts of sincerity, but BLM has conjured a noise that is louder than ever, and we must have hope in that.

K.E.T:

I pray so. I truly, whole-heartedly pray so. I hope that the first change is internal – that as Black people we will reject the narrative of worth based on race that has been taught to us, and in some ways, taught by us (as a horribly sad and destructive byproduct of living in a racist system of white supremacy). Our liberation must begin internally. The moment we, as a unified collective, call on the resilience and power of our ancestors, we will unlock the heaviest chains which have enslaved us – disconnection from each other, and from our ancestors; self-doubt; adoption of Western ideals vs our African ideals/culture; forgotten identity. When we break these invisible, yet tangible, chains we will harness the power from which we were borne. Our focus must be on internal changes which will empower us to thrive. We must embrace a renewed understanding of the importance of voting, protesting, demanding, and collectively strategizing for achieving the changes we need to live the life God intended for us, all. I believe that these internal changes must be in place in order to achieve the societal changes that are easy to identify, yet nearly impossible to achieve without the personal and social empowerment required for this journey to equality.

M.O:

I hope so. If not now, when? If not this movement, then what will it take? There are lots of organisations, institutions, news groups and publications that are making statements, and some, I believe, cashing-in on the movement. Black people en masse, I believe, are aware of this and we are more confident in calling it out. I'd like to think there is a growing confidence amongst Black people and within our communities. We are no longer prepared to just 'suck it up' when we're hit by racism; we're 'spitting it out'. The insidiousness of racism has caused some to internalise what they've experienced and to self-discriminate. I hope that damage can be undone. It takes time to heal and build self-confidence; especially when it has been eroded so subtly over such a long period of time.

We, as a people in our many hues, have to be united, educated and alert. My Buddhist practice teaches 'Many in Body, One in Mind'; in other words, we're stronger if we're united so we have to dispel the myths from the residue of slavery that have caused fractures and divisions amongst us as a people. The ignorance and lack of empathic humanness displayed by White racists cannot be the fuel to our flame. I am half-White, and my partner, whom I've known for over forty years, is White, yet I cannot ignore the historical and contemporary role of White people in the subjugation and oppression of people of colour around the world. Those who are racist, and many of those who benefit from a racist system are unlikely to take full responsibility for their actions but they must guide themselves and each other towards learning because we can't do it for them and hopefully come to understand that there is no such thing as 'race'. It is a social construct; an outmoded justification created by White people in order for them to absolve themselves of any guilt while oppressing people of colour. Scientifically, 'race' doesn't exist; it is

a means to divide and categorize. I hope this global movement will promote unity and provide healing for the injuries of racism. There's a lot of work to do. Personally, I'm currently battling with my feelings of anger and hurt induced by the racism I experienced decades ago and from a few weeks ago. Conducting this Q&A is unearthing all kinds of feelings too... it's not easy.