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The Other Side of Diversity

The prevailing narrative surrounding minorities in tech relates to how beneficial employing minorities can be for a company and/or how detrimental the lack of diverse perspectives can be. I've searched for, and have been disappointed to find that few studies have been done on the psychological effects of being a minority in a mostly homogeneous workplace for an extended period of time. (*Update: There have been [some very recently published studies surrounding this topic](#). I'm very appreciative of [Jake Van Epps](#) for pointing them out to me.*) Here I'll try to highlight how it has affected me, as I grew from a young black lady to a black woman in the predominantly white male tech industry.

Past

In consequence to the practice of tokenism, people from minority groups are assimilated or excluded; some token employees assert themselves as the exceptions to the rule, concerning their minority-group stereotype. Hence, in occupations and professions predominantly practiced by men, women join in misogynist male behaviours; and a minority-group token man or woman might intentionally mask his or her true character, in conformity to the majority group's perception of him or her as "the token employee". —

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokenism>



Early in my career. Circa 2001-ish. My cornrows did not last much longer after this picture.

I began my career in tech at the age of 21, as a Windows System Administrator for the University of Alaska. I was the only woman on my team and one of a few women in my organization. I was the only black woman, the only black person, on the entire floor. I immediately did not fit in, because I didn't look the part. My coworkers walked on eggshells in my presence, so I did my best to make them feel comfortable around me so that I would be included. I laughed at their terribly racist and sexist jokes, I co-opted their negative attitudes, I began to dress as they did, I brushed it off when they made passes at me. I did everything I could to make them feel like I was one of them, even though I clearly was not.

It worked. I was included. I began getting invited to team lunches. They let me in on the jokes they made about our only other teammate who refused to assimilate and was

ultimately ostracized for it. They shared their life experiences with me. I was “one of the guys.”

When I left that job and hightailed it across the country to Atlanta, I landed in one of the most diverse workplaces I’ve experienced to this day: The Home Depot Corporate Headquarters (Store Support Center). THD had diversity nailed. I suspect THD’s diverse environment had something to do with being in Atlanta, [a city that is 54% African-American](#). It’s hard not to be diverse when the local demographics force you to be.

Whatever the cause, in my first role at THD, in Network Operations, I was one of two black women and one of six black people, on a team of about 20. When I transferred to my second team there, Desktop Support, diversity lightning struck: I was a black woman reporting to another black woman in a technical role. Moreover, our team was predominantly black. I could relate to my teammates without having to conform. I didn’t have to be anything different than who I was and I flourished there. I was mostly happy at work, happy with life, happy in general. Ultimately though, the other stresses of working at THD (pay inequity, lack of mobility options) led me to seek work at other companies.

After The Home Depot, I took a position at a lottery/parimutuel company. I returned to being the only black woman, but the team there wasn’t very close knit so everybody did their own thing, did their job, and went home.

In 2006, I took an IT Field Technician job at Google in the Atlanta office. While there were black women in the office there (in sales) I was the only one on my direct team of two. Things between my teammate and I were strained, to say the least. It felt like he had some ideas about me that were based on really terrible stereotypes and wasn’t shy about sharing them. This was the only time I’ve ever experienced overt harassment from a coworker. He’d say things like “Did you get that bruise from your boyfriend beating you?” or “I bet your parents abused you as a child.” The comments weren’t always that blatant or overt, but they were constant and consistent.

Over time, we ended up hiring three more white guys for our team. I was the odd gender and race out, once again. I participated in the various team building activities with the local and larger team to fit in; I began playing first person shooters (not unlike the episode of *The Office* where [Jim learns how to play Call of Duty](#)), I went to paintball off sites (despite the fact that I have nightmares about being shot), and the like. I ignored the false assumptions that I was a single mother. I came to work when I was extremely sick to prove that I was a team player, that I belonged.

The negative micro-aggressions from my first coworker continued and I said nothing until I reached my breaking point. He not so subtly hinted that my connecting with the few other black techs in other offices (who happened to be male) was anything other than professional. That was my last straw. I tried to talk to a female teammate in a different office about the situation. She’d been there longer and was something of a leader. She didn’t want to get involved. I went to my manager about the problems, told him that I planned to speak with HR. It was decided that the best way to deal with the “tension” between that coworker and I was for me to transfer to New York, despite my not wanting to move there. I don’t believe my manager ever engaged HR about the problems and neither did I. I didn’t want to

make waves and isolate myself further from the team. I didn't want to be that stereotype, the black woman with a chip on her shoulder. I didn't want to make the rest of my team uncomfortable.

In 2007, I left the city where I felt less like an outsider than anywhere I'd lived previously, left my friends, left my love interest, left my life, and started over in a new city.



At work, circa 2007-ish, wearing the uniform. AP Photo/Mark Lennihan

On the team in New York, I was once again the only black woman. I did what I thought I had to do to survive in the environment. I once again donned the uniform to fit in. Jeans, "unisex" t-shirt, Timbuk2 messenger bag. I stayed late playing multiplayer Battlefield, I quickly learned a bunch of classic rock songs so I could play Rock Band and Guitar Hero with the team, I don't like beer so I went out to beer taverns and drank water. I remember asking if we could do other outings that didn't include beer and getting voted down. I continued to lose myself for the sake of being included amongst my coworkers. We worked a lot then, so my team became my social life and I never hung out with many others. When I left New York to move to Mountain View, I didn't abandon my life in the way that I did when I left Atlanta. I just put down the life I'd picked up from others.

I arrived in the Bay Area in August of 2008. Being in Silicon Valley has been simultaneously great for my career but bad for me as a person. I've been able to work on multiple different teams and really interesting projects. Unfortunately, my workplace is homogenous and so are my surroundings. I feel different everywhere. I go to work and I stick out like a sore thumb. I have been mistaken for an administrative assistant more than once. I have been asked if I was physical security (despite security wearing very distinctive uniforms). I've gotten passed over for roles I know I could not only perform in, but that I could excel in. Most recently, one such role was hired out to a contractor who needed to learn the language the project was in (which happened to be my strongest language). I spent some time and energy trying to figure out why that happened, if it was to do with [unconscious bias](#) or if it was an honest mistake.

Outside of work, I've lived several places in the Bay Area: San Jose, Sunnyvale, Santa Clara, San Bruno. All places I felt like I didn't belong. I walked around and saw scant few other black women. There was nowhere I felt like I could fit in. I spent many nights at home alone, just to avoid feeling different. The worst thing is that it didn't have to be this way.

Present

[en·cul·tu·ra·tion](#)

/enˌkʌlˈtʃəˈrɑːʃən/

noun

noun: **inculturation**; noun: **enculturation**

the gradual acquisition of the characteristics and norms of a culture or group by a person, another culture, etc.

I recently dated a guy who happened to live in Oakland and had severe reservations about going to visit him. In fact, before we began dating, I never visited the East Bay unless I absolutely had to, and always went in the daytime. I always worried that I'd be the victim of some crime. Despite the fact that I grew up spending summers next door to some of the "worst" areas of Richmond, Virginia, despite the only real friend I had in the Bay Area living there, I was scared to go to the East Bay. Many people were telling me in no uncertain terms that the East Bay was Very Bad. Crime happens there. It's not for Us. Definitely don't live there. The result was that I avoided the one place in the Bay Area I could go and feel not so different. It never dawned on me that the people who were telling me not to go there were the people who might go there and feel uncomfortable. It never dawned on me that I'd let other peoples experiences and cultural upbringing completely negate my own. It never dawned on me that I really wasn't in the set of Us.

When I finally started to visit Oakland regularly, after some initial skittishness, I fell in love with it. I couldn't really put my finger on why until my relationship ended and I went to therapy figure some things out. I realized that I've been searching for a community for the last 13 years and have been trying and failing to find that sense of community at work. When I visited Oakland, went to [First Friday](#), walked Lake Merritt, talked to the people at the corner store, that sense of community found me. I felt like I was home. I don't think it's coincidence that I felt that sense of belonging in a place that wasn't so homogeneous. Some part of me felt free to relax and breathe. It was ok to be me, there was nobody I had to make comfortable with my existence.

Being in therapy has forced me to process my emotions, to understand what is going on in the background cycles of my mind. This has helped to identify exactly what effect being a black woman in tech, being the outlier for 13 years, has had on me. For those who like bullet points, I'll provide those here:

- I feel alone every day I come to work, despite being surrounded by people, which results in feelings of isolation.
- I feel like I stick out like sore thumb every day.
- I am constantly making micro-evaluations about whether or not my actions will be attributed to my being "different."

- I feel like my presence makes others uncomfortable so I try to make them feel comfortable.
- I feel like there isn't anyone who can identify with my story, so I don't tell it.
- I feel like I have to walk a tightrope to avoid reinforcing stereotypes while still being heard.
- I have to navigate the expectation of stereotypical behavior and disappointment when it doesn't happen (e.g. my not being the "sassy black woman").
- I frequently wonder how my race and gender are coloring perceptions of me.
- I wonder if and when I've encountered racists (the numbers say it's almost guaranteed that I have) and whether or not they've had an effect on my career.
- I feel a constant low level of stress every day, just by virtue of existing in my environment.
- I feel like I've lost my entire cultural identity in effort to be part of the culture I've spent the majority of the last decade in.

The stress and isolation I mentioned have really taken their toll on me. [Long term stress is known to cause health issues](#). Not long after I started working in New York, I developed heart problems (PVC's). About 3 years ago I started to get acne, something I've never had in my life. I always thought it was hormonal but now recognize that it happens when I'm stressed. The [isolation and resultant loneliness have exacerbated the stress](#), leaving me in constant fight or flight mode. Running hasn't been an option, so I would argue with people for no reason at all, because the long term stress made every interaction a fight. The stress also caused some level of depression, which I wasn't really aware of until recently.

I'm working on fixing this, for the sake of my mental and physical health. Ideally I'd like to work in a less homogenous environment where I don't feel so different. Instead, I'm focusing on modifying my life outside of work and reducing the time I spend at work. I'm moving to the East Bay as soon as my lease is up, so that I have a respite from the homogeneity and I can have a chance to relax. I'm signing up for every MeetUp that is relevant to me that involves other black women. I'm volunteering with organizations that will help the younger generation get involved in tech, so we can change the ratio ([Black Girls Code](#), [Hack The Hood](#)) and those who come after me won't have to feel how I've felt. I've stopped trying to assimilate at work. I'm no longer trying to make people comfortable with my existence. I am trying to connect with other black women in technical roles. I'm [standing up for what I believe in](#) and standing up for myself, instead of sitting quietly by, so as not to not make waves.

Most importantly I am working on re-establishing my authentic self. This process is scary and difficult and will take some time and work. I have to search through myself and figure out what characteristics I've dropped in order to fit in. I have to sift through my personality and pick out the bits that aren't really me. I have to understand who I am without the detritus of the habits and behaviors I've picked up while trying to assimilate.

I know this: I am not my job. I am not my industry or its stereotypes. I am a black woman who happens to work in the tech industry. I don't need to change to fit within my industry. My industry needs to change to make everyone feel included and accepted.