

## Representation:

# The Meaning of Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson's Supreme Court Nomination



By Natalie Diaz, chief of staff at Time Equities Inc.

When I woke up on Monday, March 21 and turned on NPR, I was so excited that Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson's Supreme Court nomination hearings were to begin. The commentators remarked on the historic nature of her nomination, the only Black woman ever to be nominated to the highest court in the land. I immediately thought of my grandmother, wishing so badly that she could see this historic moment and that she could feel what I felt deep in my spirit: a rejoicing and pride, but that which cannot be separated from the underbelly of the pain of inflicted inferiority that Black Americans have always been subjected to in these United States of America.

My dad remembers fountains that were marked for whites only. He was 12 years old when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, which ended segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. It pains me to know that in those critical, formative years of his life, early and middle childhood, the society he lived in told him he was less than and a second-class citizen. It pains me to know that our society continues to tell so many of us that we are still less than.

Only 11 Black people have served in the U.S. Senate. President Barack Obama was only the third Black American to be popularly elected to the Senate; current Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey is the fourth. Only two Black women have ever been elected to the U.S. Senate. There is a perpetual, shameful lack of representation in the leadership of our country. Representation matters. As Elaine Welteroth writes in her memoir, "When you exist in spac-

es that weren't built for you, remember sometimes that just being you is the revolution."

The world doesn't prepare us all to dream big, to achieve and to occupy spaces and systems that were never meant for us. The world also doesn't really talk about the bruises and cuts that come along with breaking through a glass ceiling. There are not enough signals and words, especially within mainstream or dominant society or culture, that teach Black and brown children to believe in their inherent worth and the possibility of their achievement, that anything is possible and that they can play a role in changing the world.

It is never easy to be a first. It is never easy to step into a role or social position that was designed for the dominant group in society. It is never easy to then prove yourself in that role or social position — to prove your worth, competency and ability to do well despite the fact that many people could never even imagine someone like you in that social position. It takes grit, determination and a steadfast belief in yourself. It also takes the ability to push through conscious and subconscious conditioning to play it safe and to operate in a way that will please others and not disturb their comfortability. No one tells you how to handle others being made uncomfortable by your social position.

Judge Jackson's nomination hearings lay these struggles bare — the lack of representation in both the public and private spheres of power and influence that run this country, and the hard road of resilience, determination and perseverance that "firsts" like Judge Brown must

travel to achievement.

As we witness this historic nomination, we all must remember just how recently Black folks could only ride the train in a certain car, or drink water from a certain fountain. To know that just because there have been opportunities for some of the privileged few, lack of opportunity at scale is still mired by prejudice and the racist underpinnings of our society. To know that it is not easy to be a first, and the roads we travel to achievement are always more difficult than the roads of those that society was designed for — the dominant class.

As Booker said in his impassioned speech, Judge Brown is so much more than her race and gender, and we must never allow her or her legacy to be reduced to that. But for today, for now, let's rejoice in her nomination. *[Editor's note: Jackson was confirmed by the Senate on April 4.]* Let's rejoice in the power of representation — for little Black-brown girls to see her and believe the United States Supreme Court could be occupied by someone like them. Let's rejoice in the smile and dance I know my grandmother is doing in heaven as she watches the hearings and feels my spirit of hope.

Booker, at the hearing, said it best: "Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, you have earned this spot; you are worthy."

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