So on the surface, Troy is the kind of millennial that think pieces are made of. He's arrogant, self-centered and convinced that he is smarter than people give him credit for. His favorite topics of conversation are girls, sneakers and cars -- not a surprise for someone who was a teenager just a few years ago. But Troy's mannerisms -- they reveal the patterns of someone who is scared, troubled and unsure of the future.

Now Troy also embodies the many positive qualities his generation is known for. An entrepreneurial spirit, an independent streak and a dedication to his parents. He believes in hard work and has tried gigs in both the licit and underground economies, but he hasn't had any luck and is just trying to find his way and still dances between both worlds.
When I met Troy a few years ago, he had been employed as a golf caddy at a local country club, carrying bags for rich men and women who often never even acknowledged his existence. Before that, he sold sneakers on Facebook. He even tried selling candy bars and water bottles, but he wasn't making enough money to help his parents out or save up for a car any time soon. So Troy saw how hard his immigrant mother from Jamaica worked and how little she got back in return, and he vowed -- Troy vowed to take a different path. So he ended up selling drugs. And then he got caught, and right now, he's trying to figure out his next steps.

In a country where money equals power, quick money, at least for a while, gives young men and women like him a sense of control over their lives, though he said he mainly did it because he wanted stability. "I wanted a good life," he told me. "I got greedy and I got caught." Yet the amazing thing about Troy is that he still believes in the American dream. He still believes that with hard work, despite being arrested, that he can move on up. Now, I don't know if Troy's dreams came true. He disappeared from the program for troubled youth that he was involved in and slipped through the cracks, but on that day that we spoke, I could tell that more than anything, Troy was happy that someone listened to his dreams and asked him about his future.

So I think about Troy and his optimism when I think of the reality that so many young, black millennials face when it comes to realizing their dreams. I think about all the challenges that so many black millennials have to endure in a world that tells them they can be anything they want to be if they work hard, but actually doesn't sit down to listen to their dreams or hear stories about their struggle. And we really need to listen to this generation if we hope to have a healthy and civil society going forward, because millennials of color, they make up a fair chunk of the US and the world population.

Now when we talk about millennials, a group that is often labeled as entitled, lazy, overeducated, noncommittal and narcissistic, the conversations often swirl around avocado toast, overpriced lattes and fancy jobs abroad -- you probably have heard all these things before. But millennials are not a monolith. Actress Lena Dunham may be the media's representation of this generation, but Troy and other voices like his are also part of the story. In fact, millennials are the largest and most diverse adult population in this country. 44 percent of all American millennials are nonwhite, but often, you wouldn't even know it at all.

Now sure, there are similarities within this population born between 1981 and 1996. Perhaps many of us do love avocado toast and lattes -- I know I do, right? But there are also extreme differences, often between millennials of color and white millennials. In fact, all too often, it seems as though we're virtually living in different worlds.

Now black millennials, a group that I have researched for a book I recently wrote, are the perfect example of the blind spot that we have when it comes to this group. For example, we have lower rates of homeownership, we have higher student debt, we get ID'd more at voter registration booths, we are incarcerated at higher rates ... we make less money, we have higher numbers of unemployment -- even when we do go to college, I should say -- and we get married at lower rates. And honestly, that's really just the beginning.

Now, none of these struggles are particularly new, right? Young black people in America have been fighting, really fighting hard to get their stories told for centuries. After the Civil War in the 1800s, Reconstruction failed to deliver the equality that the end of slavery should have heralded, so young people moved to the North and the West to escape discriminatory Jim Crow policies. Then, as segregation raged in much of the country, young black people helped spearhead civil rights campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s. After that, some people embraced black power and then...
became Black Panthers and then the next generation, they turned to hip-hop to make sure their voices were heard. And then Barack Obama, hopeful that he, too, may bring about change. And when that failed, when we realized we were still brutalized and battered, we had to let the world know that our lives still mattered. Now, when technology allows more video of our pain and struggle to be broadcast to the world, we wonder, like, what is next?

Our country feels more polarized than ever, yet we are still being told to pull up our pants, be respectable, be less angry, smile more and work harder. Even the attitudes of millennials themselves are overdue for an update. Research done by the Washington Post in 2015 about this supposedly "woke" group found that 31 percent of white millennials think that blacks are lazier than whites, and 23 percent say they're not as intelligent. These are, like, surprising things to me, and shocking. And these responses are not that much different than generations in the past, and it shows that unfortunately, this generation is repeating the same old stereotypes and tropes of the past. Now, a study conducted by David Binder Research and MTV in 2014 -- it found that 84 percent of young millennials were taught by their families that everyone should be equal. This is a really great thing, a really positive step. But only 37 percent in that group actually talked about race with their families.

So I could understand why things may be confusing to some. There are definitely black millennials who are succeeding. Marvel's "Black Panther," directed by black millennial Ryan Coogler and showcasing many others, broke all sorts of records. There's a crop of television shows by creatives like Donald Glover, Lena Waithe and Issa Rae. Beyoncé is, like, the queen, right? She is, like, everything. Young black authors are winning awards, Serena Williams is still dominating on the tennis court despite all her haters, and there's a crop of new politicians and activists running for office. So I don't want to, like, kill these moments of black joy that I too revel in, but I want to make it clear that these wins are too few and far between for a people that's been here for over 400 years. Like, that's insane, right?

And most people still don't really understand the full picture, right? Our stories are still misunderstood, our bodies are still taken advantage of, and our voices? Our voices are silenced in a world that still shows little concern for our everyday struggles. So our stories need to be told in a multitude of ways by a range of voices talking about diverse and nuanced topics, and they really need to be listened to.

And it is not just here in America, right? It's all around the world. Millennials make up 27 percent of the world's population. That's around two billion people. And with countries like India, China, Indonesia and Brazil, along with the United States, accounting for 50 percent of the world's millennials, it's clear that the white, often male, heterosexual narrative of the millennial is only telling half the story. Now, there's many people trying to broaden the palette. They're fighting to get their stories told and bust the millennial stereotype. Whether it's students in South Africa protesting statues of Cecil Rhodes, Michaela Coel making us laugh from the UK, or Uche Eze, who's framing views about Nigerian life, online. But I want to make it clear -- I want to make it really clear to everyone that just because things look more equal than they did in the 20th century, doesn't mean that things are equitable at all. It doesn't mean our experiences are equitable, and it certainly doesn't mean that a post-racial society, that thing that we talked about so much, ever became close to being a reality.

I think of Joelle, a middle-class 20-something who did everything the "right way," but she couldn't go to her dream school, because it was simply too expensive. Or Jalessa, who knows she can't be mediocre at her job the same way that her white peers can. Or Trina, who knows that people judge her unconventional family choices in a different way than if she were a white woman. Or actor AB, who knows that the roles he takes and gets in Hollywood are different because of his skin color. And then there's Simon. So Simon, by all means, would be an example of someone who's
made it. He's a CFO at a tech company in San Francisco, he has a degree from MIT and he's worked at some of the hottest tech companies in the world.

But when I asked Simon if he had achieved the American dream, it took him a while to respond. While acknowledging that he had a really comfortable life, he admitted that under different circumstances, he might have chosen a different path. Simon really loves photography, but that was never a real option for him. "My parents weren't able to subsidize me through that sort of thing," Simon said. "Maybe that's something my children could do." So it's these kinds of stories -- the quieter, more subtle ones -- that reveal the often unique and untold stories of black millennials that show how even dreaming may differ between communities.

So we really need to listen and hear the stories of this generation, now more than ever, as the baby boomers age and millennials come to prominence. We can talk all we want to about pickling businesses in Brooklyn or avocado toast, but leaving out the stories and the voices of black millennials, large swaths of the population -- it will only increase divisions. So stories of black millennials, brown millennials and all millennials of color really need to be told, and they also need to be listened to. We'd be a far better-off country and world.

Thank you.

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Reniqua Allen is a journalist who produces and writes for various outlets on issues of race, opportunity, politics and popular culture. She is the author of It Was All a Dream: A New Generation Confronts the Broken Promise to Black America. This essay is a transcript of her TED Talk.

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