My name is Leigh-Anne Pinnock. I would say I'm best known for being a member of the biggest girl band in the world, Little Mix. You might think you already know a lot about me, but there's something new I want to share with you. Over the past three years, I have been on a life-changing journey that's been an alchemy of self-love and self-belief. It has led me to find my power, my purpose and my Black joy. In 1979, my parents, John and Debbie, met at a party in Edmonton, London. They got together and later decided to buy a house in High Wycombe. They married in 1990 and a year later I was born – the last of three girls. I can honestly say I was blessed in regard to my upbringing. If I wanted something, my parents would work extremely hard to make it happen. We traveled abroad at least once a year and we were enrolled in everything from horse riding to stage school. My dad even turned our garage into a dance studio. Where I would say my upbringing differed from many other mixed-race children is that both of my parents are mixed race too. Both my grandfathers were part of the Windrush generation. My paternal grandfather, Steve, journeyed over from Jamaica, and my mum's dad, Martin Luther, came from Barbados. They settled in England and married white British women, Norma and Doreen, my late grandmothers. It's hard to put into words how being a second-generation mixed-race woman has impacted the way I identify, but for you I'll give it a go. Having two mixed-race parents and being raised within a household where Caribbean culture sat at the core, I never struggled to understand my identity. I know I am essentially mixed race but, in essence, I've always identified as being Black. For as long as I can remember, we've travelled to Jamaica as a family at least once a year to visit our relatives. Jamaica is like my second home and there is nowhere else on earth that gives me that sense of belonging. No matter how busy my schedule is, I still make time to ensure I can keep up the trips, and every time I leave a bit of my heart and soul there. Besides our visits to Jamaica, our household was shaped by my mother's childhood traditions. Every Saturday we would have Saturday Soup, a delicious beef soup with thyme and dumplings, and on Sunday we would have a roast with rice and peas. Traditionally my dad would always want my mum to cook the rice and peas with kidney beans, whereas my mum's Barbadian roots meant she would prefer gungo peas. Both were equally tasty. But while I was clear on my personal identity, the way I was brought up didn't quite equip me with the strength to deal with the experiences I would later face. Experiences that, for a while, meant I struggled to find happiness. I can't remember ever wanting to be anything else but a popstar. My sisters and I were told by our family that we could be and achieve anything. Our motto, preached especially by my Grandad Steve, has always been, 'We're Pinnocks.' There was a pride and strength that came with being in the Pinnock family. But, despite this, as a child I was the shyest little thing you'd ever seen. I'd cling on tightly to my dad whenever anyone I didn't know tried to interact with me, and I used to always say, 'I hate peoples.' It's probably not a surprise to learn that I was never the confident stage-school kid, despite being enrolled in one from the age of seven. Nevertheless, something drew me to the spotlight, leading me to enter every talent show in school. I was always so nervous and would sing to the floor, avoiding eye contact with the judges and the audience and playing my backing track way too loud – so you couldn't even hear my soft little high-pitched voice. But I still loved every second of it, and as I got older it was apparent that I actually had a good voice. The more people complimented me, the more my confidence and desire to become a popstar flourished. I believed it would happen and I remember being so inspired by shows like Cleopatra and Sister, Sister . Seeing young Black girls shine made me feel like my dream was accessible. The dream lived within me right through to secondary school. It never felt out of reach; there was no other option. I was manifesting without even knowing it. The whole X Factor experience was surreal. We all auditioned as solo artists originally, but

during the boot-camp stage the judges decided to form us into a girl band. I had never imagined myself in a group, but from the moment we sang together it was so clear that it was meant to be. More importantly, we clicked in every way and formed a strong friendship from the outset. Every week we overcame the girl-band curse, went on to reach the final and then became the first group to ever win the show. I couldn't stop pinching myself. I felt like I was living in a fantasy and at any moment I would wake up and realize it was all a dream. But it was very real – I'd done it! Just like that, my life changed. After winning, everything happened so fast. I started to live what was my dream: the life of a popstar. Overnight I went from being a part-time waitress living with my mum to being part of a highly anticipated girl band that was set to be as big as the Spice Girls. I moved out of High Wycombe within months and rented a swanky penthouse apartment in London. We went on to travel the world and break records, and I bought my first house, met the man of my dreams and later was able to pay off my dad's mortgage and buy my mum a house too. To the outside world I was living the dream, but inside I quickly began to feel lost. As the months and years went by, I felt like every other girl in the band mastered their identity and that they were all loved and embraced for it. They built their own fan bases and this was often highlighted at concerts and events where fans would stand and queue to take a picture with their favourite. I didn't feel that love. I felt like the toy that no one wanted to play with, the orange creme left in the Quality Street tin at Christmas, not quite to the taste of the majority. It was hard to speak up about this feeling because I still didn't quite know how to articulate why I felt like this. I would try and speak to my family and friends, but their response was often along the lines of: 'You're all paid the same, get on with it.' I kept telling myself, 'It's OK, Leigh-Anne. It's probably going to take some time to build up your personal fan base, just keep smiling, keep working and putting on a brave face.' No one in the band or within management really understood the magnitude of how this weighed me down. I became more conscious of things that justified why I felt so out of place. At live events I would pick up on the fact that my name was not screamed as much as the other girls', and I would get anxious about meet-and-greets because I would often be ignored. As time went on, the feeling of not belonging grew to the point that I started to doubt my capabilities and thought that the world viewed me as the least talented band member. We have been together touching ten years, so I would like to think by now people are able to identify me by my name as opposed to 'the Black one', 'the mixed one' or, worst of all, 'What's that one called again? Jade?' When this happened the first few times, I wasn't affected by it because it could have been a genuine mistake. But after a while it takes its toll. I've lost count of the number of occasions where I would walk on set with my bandmates, and the photographer or journalist would forget or mistake my name. I would often be the only Black person in these spaces too. Years went by and I continued to struggle. I then reached the point where I knew I had been having this feeling for far too long; I needed to stop putting it to the back of my mind and start dismantling it. I thought back to something said to me by the American director and choreographer Frank Gatson: 'You're the Black girl, you have to work ten times harder.' In all honesty, at the time I was taken aback – I just didn't get it. But in recent years Frank's comment has begun to make sense: throughout my whole career I have felt that I needed to work that much harder in order to have the same acceptance and acknowledgement as my peers. I started to read more, including Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race by Reni Eddo-Lodge, which will stay with me forever. During this journey of discovery, I came across a quote that really resonated with me, though I'm at a loss to remember who said or wrote this: 'When a Black woman walks into a room of white people you would expect her to stand out, when really she is overlooked and disregarded.' It helped me

understand why I had felt all these emotions about our Little Mix fan base. And in understanding them, I learned how to overcome them. I accepted that the reality was this: I was a Black girl in a girl band trying to make her mark within a white-dominated industry. I was therefore treated and looked at differently. I was experiencing racism. At this point, I started to build friendships with more Black creatives. It was healing to hear about their personal experiences within white-dominated industries. I found great comfort in learning that I wasn't alone. My Nanny Doreen raised five mixed-race children in the 1960s and her mantra was: 'Teach your children love and the world will teach them to hate.' It meant that my dad wasn't given 'the talk'. He was never told that the colour of his skin might mean that he'd be subjected to racism. He lived by this and raised me and my sisters the same way. While we were educated on Black history and grew up thinking we were very in touch with our culture, we were unaware of the depths of racism or that we could be subjected to it. Growing up and nurturing my dream, I never for one second thought that my experience would be different to that of white popstars. Mel B was my favourite of the Spice Girls, but I didn't wonder if she experienced racism until I walked in her shoes. I won The X Factor and started my Little Mix journey never for one minute thinking that because I was a Black woman standing next to white women I would be the least valued, the least loved and the least desired. So what could I do about it? Keep quiet and use what I had overcome only for the benefit of myself? Or speak out with the knowledge I had acquired? I chose the latter. In 2018, an opportunity came along to be interviewed, during which I was able to touch on my personal experiences within the group. For the first time, I tried to speak out publicly about how being seen as 'the Black girl' in the group had impacted me. At this moment, it felt like the entertainment world wasn't ready to talk about race, so what I said didn't grab the media's attention. I was relieved to have articulated my experiences for the first time publicly, but I still felt like I was carrying pain. I wasn't done. Having now learned that what Frank Gatson said was in fact true, I knew I could either embrace and showcase my Black identity or carry an underlying sadness around and allow it to continue to fester. At this point in my life, I understood that being the Black girl within a pop band meant that I would always cater to the minority, not the majority. I understood that I wouldn't be everyone's first choice or favourite, and I was able to finally embrace my position within the group, not doubt it. Then came the most joyous moment of my Little Mix career: a trip to Brazil. None of us were prepared for the reception we were about to receive. The airport was heaving with fans of all ethnicities, something I had never seen before while on tour. Our arrival went viral and we were flooded with messages from fans pouring out their hearts and thanking me for being such an inspiration. When we got to the hotel, we found fans queuing outside. I had to go and meet them. Stepping out into the street to screams, I found around four hundred people all lined up behind barriers. They were waving handmade posters and holding gift bags. I remember one gift was a Brazil football shirt with my name on the back. I started at the top of the line and worked my way down to the bottom; I wanted to ensure I didn't miss a single person. The fans thanked me for staying true to myself and choosing to use my platform to educate my followers about police brutality; racism runs deep in Brazil and heavily impacts the Black and brown communities. Speaking up about my experiences and choosing to use my platform to raise awareness resonated with them. There was a particular fan I spoke to whom I will never forget. He thanked me for being an advocate for the Black community and told me that I gave him strength and hope. I remember feeling so overwhelmed that I just couldn't hold the tears back. I wiped my tears away and the lady next to him called me a queen. I felt embraced for being myself, for being the Black girl, for the first time. The following day we had our performance at the GRLS! Festival. It changed my life. I took a

moment on stage to express my appreciation for the welcome we had received and the crowd started cheering ‘LEIGH-ANNE! LEIGH-ANNE! LEIGH-ANNE!’ Never in my whole career had I been given such a reception from a country next to my bandmates. Brazil welcomed me, they loved me, and thanks to them I came home more confident than ever.

Two months later, on 25 May 2020, the world learned about the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement accelerated. Everyone was talking about race. I have always seen my personal experience within the music industry as a reflection of how the world can view Black people, but I also understood that what I faced was tiny compared to the racism that exists elsewhere. I knew it was important not to make the conversation about just me because the reality is that being light-skinned brings its own privilege, and I’m conscious that dark-skinned women in the industry face even more barriers to success. But, even so, I knew I had to speak out. I hoped I could relate to people and restart the conversation I had tried to ignite before. I decided to upload a video to my Instagram touching on my experiences but more importantly talking about systemic racism. The support was mind-blowing and I took great comfort in knowing I wasn’t alone. Other celebrities decided to follow suit and I had so many people reach out to thank me for giving them the inspiration. Not only had I overcome my own insecurities but I had also found a way to empower other people who had been subjected to racism. Nothing can prepare you for the feeling you may have as the only Black person at the table or at the party, but what I have learned is that loving yourself wholeheartedly before you wish to be loved by others gives you power. Overall, my journey to becoming the woman I am now was emotional and painful – unbearable at times – but the one thing I managed to find and hold on to was my power. I am no longer the girl who gets anxious before fan events. I am no longer the girl who questions my position and purpose. I have found my voice and I choose to use it. When I look back at recordings of me performing in the early days, I no longer recognize the girl desperate to be appreciated. It’s OK to not be to everyone’s taste – just ensure you are your own favourite flavour. What I needed to believe ten years ago was, yes, you’re the Black girl, so embrace it, own it and be an unapologetic representation of your culture. I found my power when I realized it was within me, within my skin and within my soul the whole time. It just needed to be set free.