



## CASE STUDY

# QUESTION BRIDGE: BLACK MALES

*Question Bridge: Black Males* ([questionbridge.com](http://questionbridge.com)) is an innovative transmedia art project that uses media to facilitate a healing dialogue between a critical mass of Black men from diverse backgrounds, and creates a platform to represent and redefine Black male identity.

Through a robust web platform, a museum installation, a community engagement campaign, and curricula for high schools and universities, *Question Bridge: Black Males* aims to help create a paradigm shift in American consciousness around Black male identity that removes two critical obstacles limiting males' political, social, and economic advancement: exclusion from the other and estrangement from each other.

**Launch date:** January 2012

**Funders:** Open Society Institute Campaign for Black Male Achievement, Ford Foundation, Earned Revenue on exhibitions, Kickstarter, and individual donations. The team worked closely with funders and had funds earmarked for evaluation and nonprofit collaborations. Team members worked very closely with Rashid Shabazz from the Campaign for Black Male Achievement, which resulted in greater strategic planning, network optimization and leadership development.

### Production team:

- Chris Johnson, Artist
- Hank Willis Thomas, Artist
- Kamal Sinclair, Artist/Producer
- Bayete Ross Smith, Artist
- Jesse Williams, Executive Producer
- Deborah Willis, Executive Producer
- William Sylvester, Associate Producer
- Natasha Logan, Associate Producer

### Festivals and awards:

New Media Infinity Award from the International Center of Photography - 2015.

### Recent Exhibitions/Screenings:

- Power Plant Gallery (Duke University)
- Schomburg Center Fabric Workshop Museum
- San Diego African American Museum of Fine Art (San Diego, CA)
- Reginald F. Lewis Museum (Baltimore, MD)
- Maier Museum of Art at Randolph College CFAC (Syracuse, NY)
- Winthrop University Rochester Contemporary (Rochester, NY)
- Phillips Collection Wingnall Museum of Contemporary Art (Chaffey College)
- Deerfield Academy (Deerfield, MA)
- UMCA (University of Massachusetts)
- Flux Night (Atlanta, GA)
- Film as Protest (LA Film Festival)

### Museum Partners:

- Atlanta's Chastain Art Gallery, Atlanta, GA
- Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL
- Bloomfield College, Bloomfield, NJ

- Brooklyn Museum of Art Brooklyn, NY
- California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA
- Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- Chaffey College, Rancho Cucamonga, CA
- Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH
- Community Folk Art Center at Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
- Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- DuSable Museum of African American Culture, Chicago, IL
- Hey B. Gantt Center for African American Art & Culture, Charlotte, NC
- Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY
- Juxtaposition Arts, Minneapolis, MN
- Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI
- Missouri History Museum, St. Louis, MO
- Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, CA
- Papillion Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- Photo Center Northwest, Seattle, WA
- Project Row Houses, Houston, TX
- Rochester Contemporary Art Center, Rochester, NY
- San Diego African American Museum of Fine Art, San Diego, CA
- Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY
- Sumter County Gallery of Art, Sumter, SC
- Sundance Film Festival, New Frontier Park City, UT
- The Exploratorium Museum, San Francisco, CA
- The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA
- The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Duke University, NC
- Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, Salt Lake City, UT
- Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC
- YMCA Bridgeport, CT
- YMCA New Haven, CT
- YMCA Stamford, CT
- YMCA, Hartford, CT
- Zora Neale Hurston Foundation, Eatonville, FL

## TARGETS

**Engagement goals:** “My biggest hope for this project is that we will show that there’s not just one way to be a Black man. There’s as much diversity inside the demographic as outside of this demographic. That we are people. That we are not a caricature or stereotype. We’re not a monolithic identity.” – Hank Willis Thomas, Artist

*Question Bridge: Black Males* creates a new framework for Black men to own the Black male label without having to sacrifice their comprehensive and unique mix of identity attributes. Unfortunately, schisms within the black male “demographic” tragically divide people along geographic, economic, generational, educational, religious, cultural and political lines. These divisions tend to pit whole segments of Black men against others, limiting the healthy distribution of insight and support.

*Question Bridge* has proven to be a progressive and powerfully effective new model for resolving this estrangement. The convention of using media to safely mediate a conversation between Black men from diverse backgrounds has brought healing clarity to both participants and witnesses. This massive video exchange of questions and answers creates a platform for free expression and the broad sharing of previously isolated, or seldom shared, insights. This model builds agency in Black men who participate, because the very process of being asked to formulate questions and answers through media is empowering for otherwise alienated men.

*Question Bridge* recognizes that our society is interdependent and all Americans are stakeholders in overcoming the marginalization of Black men and boys from mainstream culture; as well as the healthy development of their identity and socio-economic condition. The exclusion of Black men and boys is not only a profound source of injustice, but it threatens the integrity and growth of our democracy as a whole. Part of this continued exclusion is a simple and malice-free lack of familiarity with arguably the most

opaque demographic in America. Individuals from other backgrounds have difficulty accessing Black men due to one or more limitations (e.g., geography, class, language, religion, education, or sexuality). This lack of familiarity creates voids in understanding about the intentions, behaviors, capacities, morality, and ideologies of Black men that are often filled with limiting assumptions and third-party accounts. This is a dangerous practice that can cultivate fear, bias, apathy, and prejudice that marginalizes Black men and stagnates collective advancement by hindering the creation of valuable social, civic, and business relationships across race and gender lines.

*Question Bridge* uses a unique mix of 21st Century circumstances and the magnetic power of art to create a tool for Black men to define their own identity in a dynamic, comprehensive, complex and perpetual manner. For the first time ever, a critical mass of people is indoctrinated into a social networking culture enabled by unprecedented access to technology. This project is uniquely effective at shattering stereotypes associated with "Black males," so both participants and witnesses are freed to recognize each Black man as an individual with limitless potential.

Individual Black men are able to express agency, which effectively releases them from the constraints of stereotypes that lead to low expectations. The witnesses are able to break from static 20th century thinking about identity and adopt a multi-dimensional logic for processing the bombardment of largely media generated data they receive about Black men.

The campaign has had a life-span of five years. The results of the campaign have been documented in a book and curriculum for high schools and universities, and the art, website and trademark will be donated to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American Culture and History.

**Target location:** The United States

**Target audience:** To achieve an impact, the team needed a significant number of Black American men to participate in the project, a significant number of the American public to witness the project, a significant number of thought leaders to include the project in their discourse, and a significant number of cultural workers and students to replicate the project.

**Events that opened up the projects to new user groups:** The project had robust coverage from many media outlets, which stimulated participation and awareness, but since the team's target was broad it didn't necessarily open up new user groups. The project had a notable amount of visibility and interest in the UK.

## USER ENGAGEMENT

**Platforms:** Online and mobile, 5-Channel & Single Channel Installations/Screenings, 10-module Curriculum

**Users:** 1.5 million direct users via all platforms. 3 million indirect users via amplification media

### **Social media:**

- Facebook: [www.facebook.com/QuestionBridgeBlackMales](http://www.facebook.com/QuestionBridgeBlackMales) (2500 fans)
- Twitter: [twitter.com/questionbridge](https://twitter.com/questionbridge) (3000 followers)
- Instagram: [instagram.com/questionbridge](https://instagram.com/questionbridge)

### **Efforts to reach particular demographic groups:**

The team created "street teams" with mission-aligned youth programs focused on helping "unwired" black men create a profile and contribute to the project.

## CHANGES IN AWARENESS/BEHAVIOR

**Goals:** Using a variety of media and community engagement strategies, *Question Bridge* aims to reach millions of Americans and directly involve several hundred thousand Black men and boys in an educational and social project aimed at radically

changing perceptions of Black males among themselves and in the population at large. *Question Bridge* aims to break through ways of understanding identity that can lead to exclusion and estrangement of the “other.” It aims to represent and redefine Black male identity in America and create a healing dialogue that breaks monochromatic stereotypes, replaces estrangement with familiarity among Black men, and moves them from exclusion to inclusion in American society at large.

**What happened:** Since launching the curriculum in 2011, the exhibition in 2012, and the website and street teams in 2014, *Question Bridge: Black Males* has been in almost 50 museums, festivals, galleries and public art spaces, gathered over 1000 fingerprint profiles from Black men reframing their identity in their own terms and had more than 3 million impressions via *QuestionBridge.com*, partner websites, social media and press. The project has used by influencers, academia and activists to increase Black male achievement, decrease systemic brutality on the black male body and consciousness, and deconstruct a narrow approach to identity framing in general.

In September 2016, after four years of development and five years of activity as a transmedia art project, *Question Bridge: Black Males* will find its permanent home within the distinguished brick-and-mortar and digital walls of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (SNMAAHC). This Institution is the perfect steward of this project and the many black male voices that contributed to its creation. Not only will they ensure that the work is available for future generations and scholars, but they will hold it as a living archive that allows additional black male voices to contribute and respond to this historic dialogue.

**Evaluation strategy:** The team tracked several milestones, including:

- Covered over 150 times in prominent national and local press. Highlights include

coverage from BBC News, *Time Magazine*, *the New York Times*, *Fast Company* magazine, Huffington Post, *Ebony.com*, Policy Mic, Global Grind, Upworthy, Complex, The Root, and Color Lines.

- As the project expanded, many industry leaders and intellectuals have referenced *Question Bridge* as a model for the future of interactive transmedia projects.
- The team participated as keynotes or attendees at various conferences and workshops, including the AVID national conference, iDocs Interactive Documentary Conference, the 99 U conference, NetRoots Nation, Brooklyn Historical Society, Impact Funders Convening, and countless other events.
- Team members have been invited to be included as a case study in a future iDocs publication surveying the field.
- In 2013, the team completed a successful Kickstarter campaign with the help of over 600 backers. It used the \$75,000 raised to complete the most recent launch of a beta website and mobile app.
- To date, over 450,000 people have seen the exhibition in more than 35 museums and cultural institutions throughout the country.
- The team has partnered with Aperture Foundation to publish a book surveying the project and its impact over the past three years.

Common themes that emerge in reflecting on the project include: partnership development, exit strategy planning, time management, and team capacity building. Since the project launched, the team has found that selecting the right partners is critical: strong partners increased the depth and impact of the project; weak ones resulted in lost time and resources.

The team also learned on-the-fly with regards to building technology. There are unique conditions to working with developers that impact timelines, promotional strategy, and financial resources. Having a deeper understanding of how to manage developers could have saved stress, time, and



personnel resources. The creators want the project to be sustainable even as they move on to new projects and pursuits, and they have learned that considering an exit plan at the initial stages of a project can be liberating and effective.

The team considered partnering with a research institution to see if it could find empirical data that people who viewed or participated in *Question Bridge* had a quantitative shift in implicit bias via instruments such as the Implicit Association Test. However, the team was never able to set that analysis structure in place. The project did garner a high volume of testimonials from participants and from witnesses. The common theme is that *Question Bridge* exploded stereotypes, humanized the participants, and exposed a diversity of thought.

#### Press examples:

- *Time*: "The Question Bridge Project: Redefining Black Male Identity"  
[time.com/75987/the-question-bridge-project-redefining-black-male-identity/](http://time.com/75987/the-question-bridge-project-redefining-black-male-identity/)
- *The Root*: "Corcoran Gallery Explores Black Male Experience"  
[www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2013/12/corcoran\\_gallery\\_explores\\_black\\_male\\_experience.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2013/12/corcoran_gallery_explores_black_male_experience.html)
- MSNBC: "Stories of the Black Male Identity"  
[www.msnbc.com/melissa-harris-perry/watch/stories-of-the-black-male-identity-44153411537](http://www.msnbc.com/melissa-harris-perry/watch/stories-of-the-black-male-identity-44153411537)

#### Notable social media conversations:

A series of Blueprint Roundtables around the country engaged black men in responding to the question from the hip-hop generation posed to the civil-rights generation: "Why didn't you leave us the blueprint?" Example: [youtube.com/watch?v=4\\_37slxpCeU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_37slxpCeU)

**Events:** The signature events were the Blueprint Roundtables. Additional events include Artist Talks, Educator Trainings, Curriculum Implementations,

Street Teams, receptions, and community screenings.

**Event goals:** The goal was to stimulate dialogue within a community about strategies that members can employ to see a shift in Black male achievement and community/family healing, to diversify media representation of Black men, and to build inclusive communities.

**Event attendees:** These events began earlier (2007) than the formal launch (2012). Attendees are estimated in the 50,000 range.

#### User participation in ongoing development:

Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (SNMAAHC) will open the *Question Bridge: Black Males* exhibition in September 2016 and will keep it on display for no less than twelve months (August 2017). After this initial exhibition, the Smithsonian has the right to display the work at their discretion, as they will be the formal archive partner for the project. During the 2016-2017 exhibition at SNMAAHC the *Question Bridge* team will design related programming, which may include roundtable discussions, field trips and other educational programming, docent training, artist talks and influencer talks.

QuestionBridge.com will continue to operate under ownership of SNMAAHC by September 2017. The *Question Bridge* team will design and execute a social media campaign to bring visibility to the exhibition and the archiving of this historic project at SNMAAHC; and to stimulate widespread participation in *Question Bridge* before it is archived. Beginning August 1, 2016, and continuing through New Year's Day January 2017, the social media campaign will drive visitors to the exhibition, support activism around black male achievement, and stimulate the creation of an additional 1,000 black male profiles on the website before it is archived.

Natasha Logan will continue working with CBMA to do a book tour for Aperture's book, which should end by December 2016. Chris Johnson will continue

to build an education organization to promote the curriculum to schools and youth programs.

**Other evidence of behavior change:** *Question Bridge* was part of activism movements in Flint, Ferguson, New York, and Los Angeles.

## POLITICAL IMPACT

The team was looking to change America's relationship to black men in terms of social relationships, institutional relationships, and political relationships (i.e. policing of black men, incarceration, education). The project was at the center of the larger movement of Black male achievement and Black Lives Matter.

## INNOVATION

**Platform innovation:** In 2007, when *Question Bridge* began, the idea of transmedia art projects, interactive documentary or transmedia activism was nascent. This project is revered as a critical one for defining interactive and transmedia storytelling, art and activism, and for using the emerging social media culture, data analytics and access to mobile/computer devices to create a participatory story of the black male experience.

The team created the first ever group-generated identity map of black men in America, turning traditional ethnographic and documentary storytelling methodologies on their heads. Removing the observer and interpreter has allowed the complexity, nuance, and diversity to exist in a simple accessible form.

**Replication:** *Question Bridge* was at the front end of a pioneering wave of media-facilitated dialogue projects, such as *The Whiteness Project*. Created by Whitney Dow, this "interactive investigation" is not a direct replication of *Question Bridge*, but launched subsequent to it.

## BUILDING CAPACITY

**Key strategic partners:** Key strategic partners included all the grantees in the Campaign for Black Male Achievement, the exhibition institutions, key school districts (New York City, North Carolina, Oakland, Los Angeles), film festivals, and research institutions around new media (such as MIT OpenDocLab).

**New collaborations or organizations:** The project resulted in new collaborations between partner organizations, and a new organization, Question Bridge Education, LLC, was established to bring the curriculum to education spaces.