

# Voices

VOLUME ONE



*Polite Warning*

Some people may find the content of these stories offensive. The stories told in this volume are students' own stories written in their own words.

**VOICES VOLUME ONE**

OCTOBER 2017



# *foreword*

I've always described myself as an "accidental activist". Like most people who end up fighting for change, it is often a small injustice which pricks your conscience into action and, before you know it, you are fully immersed in fighting to make the world a better place.

Many people have very interesting starting points and do many different things to fight for change, personally, locally, nationally and globally. For me, it was actually my School Council which gave me the first taste. Many school pupils have tonnes to complain about when it comes to their school and many opinions about how things should change. But for me, talking about it simply wasn't enough and, whilst what we were able to achieve was relatively modest (recycling bins in classrooms, antibacterial gel in the lunch hall, to name a few), it laid the foundation of what I was to do later on in life. Looking back, I often find it quite amusing how seriously I took it, but I would be lying if I didn't say that they were formative experiences in realising the power of standing up, pursuing a goal and affecting change.

When I arrived at Cambridge, the desire to be an active stakeholder in shaping my learning environment and experience continued. I was elected to serve as the President of the Students' Union. Studying in an establishment which was not used to faces like mine came with its own challenges and I made sure that at every level. I was working to break down any barrier to education, especially for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

And now, as the Vice President for Higher Education at the National Union of Students, that drive to effect is stronger than ever and my mission for this year will be tackling the Black Attainment Gap, which is stifling young black students across all our universities nationally.

Individuals locally, nationally and globally are fighting in their own ways to make the world a better place and yet far too often we fight over tactics without agreeing on the end goal. The challenge for our generation is to make sure that true progressives, fighting to improve the lives of others, can work together in a whole variety of ways, to achieve change and find solutions to the ever-changing challenges in the world.

**AMATEY DOKU**  
NUS VICE PRESIDENT FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

**W**hen I first arrived in Cornwall, I remember driving around Falmouth with my parents and not seeing a single person of colour. Even coming from Luxembourg — which wasn't the most multicultural place — I felt that Cornwall was a lot worse. We went into Asda to get some food; I almost wanted to run over to the other people of colour I'd see and introduce myself: "Hey, another person like me!"

The people I lived with were quite open because they were from fairly big cities, so I didn't experience any negativity and we all bonded quite quickly. Coming to campus was a big change for me because I actually changed universities — I was in Hull first, which is not exactly the most diverse place either. I felt very stressed and had quite a lot of anxiety, especially on my course where I was the only black person at first. Two other black people came two weeks later and that made me feel a lot more comfortable.

I am used to being the minority — I grew up in a place where, out of 5,000 kids, there were only 10 black

people — but I felt it a lot more when I came down here. There were a lot of students who weren't from London, so they had some preconceived views of what black people were like. It was also quite interesting to see that there were no lecturers of colour. I didn't really find it bad; if anything, I just felt kind of disappointed. A university should represent all people and I couldn't see much diversity at all. It was funny, the first thing I did was google the ACS page to see if there was one here and I saw that most of the members were Caucasian. It was kind of relaxing to see that the society was integrated.

Things have gotten a lot better since. I'm not someone who just sticks to having black friends — I'm used to being surrounded by white people anyway. With locals, however, it can be a different story. You go out to a restaurant and people stare at you, because they have this preconceived notion of black people. I've had a few unpleasant experiences just out in public. At first, I almost just wanted to run away, but I'm enjoying life in Cornwall a lot more. I'm happier now.






**W**hen you come from an area where there are so many different ethnicities around, it's a bit of a shock coming down here and only seeing three people of different ethnic backgrounds in the space of two days.

I know there have been some issues with black people and the wider community but I haven't had any personally. In a way, I suppose sticking out is almost an incentive for you to make sense of your own culture as well. It's a nice way to learn things about yourself through other people's eyes — like when you cook something a little differently to those around you and it tastes exactly like mum's.

I've had a good experience in Cornwall. Everyone has been so lovely and helpful.



*Sometimes  
I feel  
intimidated  
so I just  
stay silent*

**M**oving here has been a massive change for me. I thought it would have been difficult adapting to a new location and having to be away from my previous friends but overall I'd say it has been a positive experience. I get along with everyone just fine and I have friends and a support system in place, so I don't feel as isolated as I thought I would have.

The locals living here are very different to the people I was used to growing up in South East London, where there are many different minorities and lots of diverse cultures. Here, some people are quite open and friendly and that intimidates me because I don't really have many experiences of people being open to me — especially if I don't know them.

Sometimes it's quite difficult because some of the things I thought everyone knew about black people and black culture aren't really known around here — people don't seem to be aware of certain parts of black identity. Equally, I don't want to impose on people, so when I go out and someone touches my hair, I kind of just don't say anything at all.

## *that half of me*

**I** am mixed race, so I'm half Ghanaian and half Irish, which is an interesting mix.

I have natural afro hair from my dad's side of the family and in that culture hair is a massive thing. That is why I find that having a white mum can be really tricky when it comes to things like my hair — for example, all my cousins who have Ghanaian mums would know what to do with their hair. Even just deciding what you want to do with it was always like a bonding ritual for them: are you going to get it braided, are you going to get a weave, or are you going to get it relaxed? It was different for me and growing up around largely white people, my hair was something that I neglected.

I used to feel like my afro was an undesirable feature but when I took a gap year before coming to uni, I got to go to Ghana twice to visit my family over there and spend time with my aunties. They helped me feel

really comfortable about my hair: they actually made me realise that I should embrace it and that it is part of my heritage.

Since then, I've been getting my hair braided a bit more and, actually, I've come to really enjoy the ritual of taking my braids out. Recently, I got my boyfriend to help me take my braids out, which was really nice because usually I think of my hair as a real nuisance, but incorporating someone into the process of it is really therapeutic in a way. I'm sort of owning my natural hair now.

It has taken me a long time but having spoken to my aunties and having been around my grandma, I've realised how lucky I am to have Ghana as part of my heritage. Sometimes it is very easy to forget that I am half Ghanaian and that that is part of me, but I've grown to be really proud to say that it is a part of me.





## *not a bunch of savages*

**W**hen I first came to this country to learn English, I was living in York and my friends came from all over the world. One of them — a guy from Switzerland — kept asking me where I was from. I told him that I was from Angola, but he insisted over and over again. One day, when I questioned why he kept asking, he told me that he thought my points of view from when we had debated were very different and that I sounded smart and intelligent. That really shocked me because I think he had the perception that people from Africa are a bunch of savages.

A lot of people seem to think that Africa is just one huge continent where everyone knows everyone — that's just not the truth. For instance, my country, Angola, has a territory of around 1,246,700 square kilometres and a population of around 25 million. I don't know even a fraction of that whole population, so I don't really feel comfortable when people assume I might know their Zimbabwean or South African friends, just because I am from Angola. It's just very complicated to deal with these situations. I want people to know that, although we are from the same continent, we are from different countries. We eat different things and it's impossible for everyone who comes from Africa to know everyone from each and every country within it. That's the message I want to pass on to people.



**H**ere, on Penryn Campus, my race doesn't really matter. I think there is only one, cohesive student community where no one gets segregated. I feel part of that community and I never faced any difference in the way I am treated. I never felt different and I've never been in situations where I feel people think of me differently because of my race.

Everyone accepts you for who you are, not what race you are.





**N**o one has ever been really racist towards me but it could be that I've never noticed it, I feel like I've been quite lucky. I know a lot of people who have had racist experiences whereas I can't say I have.

My school wasn't very multicultural; it was mostly white people and I think I was the only black person in my class besides two other black guys in the school. When I went to college it was crazy because it was the first time I'd properly been introduced to such diversity, and gained many black and asian friends.

Coming to university, I now have quite a lot of white friends again but it's just a mixture to be honest. There's less black culture here and you find that you have less 'cultured' friends. But, there is the ACS and their events — I don't know how to describe it but it's hard for me to go and fit in straight away there unless I know somebody already and go with them. I feel like I've been raised more white than black I suppose, so I don't really know how to carry myself sometimes.

I'm studying Geology and I'm the only black person in my entire year. I don't really notice it that much because I'm used to it but there are times when I

feel I'd fit in more if there were other black people. I did find it quite hard to fit in during my first year.

I didn't really make an effort to speak to people because I didn't think they were my type of person. People had their own interests and they didn't share mine.

I try and avoid the news really because it just angers me I don't know how I'd act if someone was racist to me or if I saw it happening because I'd just get so angry. It's unbelievable how it happens all the time; I feel like not much can be done unless it's a unanimous thing where everyone is pulling together. Just to hear that there are still racist people — especially with everything happening in America — makes me angry because it's just a colour.

I don't think race should be a deciding factor in university applications because there shouldn't be any special treatment — but obviously there shouldn't be any discrimination at the same time. I guess some people wouldn't want to come to a university if they were aware there isn't much diversity but it would also look strange if you were recruiting more black people. It would be nice but we want to bring people together rather than singling them out.

*all the unconscious things*

**T**he first time I became aware of the wider issues of race would be when I was seven years old and I was in New York — I'm part American. A homeless man approached me and my mother on the street and started yelling: "Half cast! Half cast! You f\*cking half cast!" He then turned to my mother: "How could you let a n\*\*\*\*r do this to you? Half cast! Half cast!". It sort of went on and I was very confused because at that age you don't understand what the implications of that are. Obviously I don't know where that man is now or what was going on in his life but



I specifically remember turning to my mother and going: “Mum, what does that mean?” She kept on walking: “It means nothing, Joseph. It means nothing at all.” Looking back, I can’t imagine how sad she must have been — she was very aware that this was the first time I had asked about race. She is a white woman living in a predominantly white city in a white county and didn’t have the answers. I think she was aware that there was a lot of pain that I would go through over the next ten or fifteen years, maybe, and unfortunately a lifetime of pain that she really didn’t know anything about and couldn’t fix. I think that’s probably one of the great tragedies that you have to go through when you are a parent of a child of colour.

Another experience I can remember clearly is walking home from school in my home city of Norwich. It was the one day I was walking home alone, as I used to walk home with a friend. I was going through a park and someone on a bike came up, pushed me over, yelled “n\*\*\*\*r” and continued to cycle. I can remember the cuts on my knees just pouring with blood. I went home and told my mum it was an accident in PE. At the time I lied because I was so afraid of not being able to walk home from school by myself and that, to me, at that age, was the big problem.

The racial implications really didn’t get to me in that way. I never found the violent incidents or the name-calling to be the ones that really upset me, it was all the unconscious things. Like when my white grandmother introduced me to one of her friends and I was with one of my white friends, Archie, and my grandmother said, “This is my grandson, Joe”, pointing to me and Archie. The lady went over to Archie and said “Hi, Joe”. There was this sort of assumption that, because my grandmother was white, she would have a white grandchild. I think that played on my mind more than any other incident probably.

I think there’s evil and hatred in the world, there always has been and there always will be, but I think if someone comes at you with the idea that your race is less valuable, I can scientifically, socially and humanitarily prove that that’s not true. I know that if I am willing to talk to people who are racist — which I think is something that you really have to do — I can change their mind. But it’s the unconscious, it’s the cultural norms that have been developed that I think are significantly more damaging because they make you feel isolated and like you’re not a part of the system.

I think that a lot of people really want to be part of that system. There’s a privilege of not having

to worry. People always say I dress quite nicely but that started when I was confronted by the police in New York. It was the scariest moment of my life. I was in my Dad’s car, a 1982 white Corvette — beautiful. He had just asked me to go get something from the car. He gave me the keys and I went into the car and got the thing. That’s when I saw the police car pulling up. The officer told me to put the key in the ignition but I couldn’t hear because of his thick accent. I was panicking, I started hyperventilating, I had no idea what was going on, but eventually I sort of figured it out. I put the key in and turned it. The officers asked if I was foreign and in my pubescent accent I said I was English, muttering off into a trail of fear. They just drove away and ever since then I never wear hoodies because I’m so conscious of the idea that you can be criminalised for those little things that lots of people wouldn’t even think about. I don’t think it’s exclusively a black thing but I think it’s something that the black community has to deal with in particular. I’ve always had to challenge these awful stereotypes of black people and chicken and watermelon and stealing bikes. I think, you know, why don’t we have a wonderful tradition of loving literature? Why don’t we have a tradition of being erudite, dressing well, drinking coffee and all that normal stuff? But I think it’s much more applicable to the lives that we want to lead, perhaps.

I’ve always tried to challenge that in my own way, but when you do that you get a lot of people saying you act white, maybe assuming that since I am half white, I must be less black. Black culture is something we should be proud of and I think that’s a very real debate and a hard one to have. But, to think about it, no known racist has ever been nicer to me because I’m half white.

I remember when I was at school - my gang of friends there was a Filipino, a half black half Asian, a Hungarian, myself and a Brazilian kid who sort of tagged along with us sometimes. That was our sort of group: there was never a mixed race crew. As someone who is mixed race, your identity is much different — you can’t just rely on being British, Nigerian, Jamaican: you are a border in a sense. I am very conscious of the fact that I have family members who were slaves and family members who were probably slave owners and that’s again something very difficult to reconcile. This is why I think Black History Month has to be a time where we celebrate our heroes but we also remember the problems we still have to face, the legacies that we really have to be conscious of.

*“What an effort it was to  
smile at all.”*

**J**ust to make one thing clear: I am no writer. But an opportunity to speak up has arisen and I shall share my experience.

I arrived at university completely unprepared for the three years that would follow. Thankfully, mum had been buying my necessities throughout the summer, I was busy working, wasting my time texting a now-deleted-off-all-social-media f\*ckboy, buying clothes and trying to visit some friends before I moved to Cornwall. Before I became a Russell Group undergrad.

University was... very complicated. It feels weird to refer to it in the past tense. It certainly was not the amazing, adventurous delve into academia featuring meeting-potential-future-spouse it was made out to be. Again, thanks Will and Kate for that. A lot of students get stressed out during this period, that is not uncommon nor not to be expected. We knew we'd be away from home, family, etc. for long periods of times. Asserting and crafting independence. This is all to be expected, these are meant to develop us. I'm always here for development, I think.

What shouldn't be deemed as to be expected, or accepted, would be the particular isolation black students can and often do feel. I was the only black

person on my course, it came as a surprise and I think a lot of people, white people, do take for granted not knowing what that feels like. Something I had not experienced before. Now, being the only black student doesn't equal being on the receptive end of overt, racist abuse by one's peers. However, I wasn't prepared for a course where the entire syllabus was so centered around white culture. Uni was tough for a variety of reasons but this further academic isolation through lack of diversity in the syllabus as well as a general, ridiculous, lack of choice augmented how tough it was. There's a limit to how much one can bear reading about dead, old, straight, white men. They may be the majority, but they are not the default contributors to the world. Basing the majority on white men and their works and applying diversity to white women and their works sends a message out to black students loud and clear.

Make Baldwin compulsory reading. Please.

Perhaps the academic isolation is to be tolerated? Perhaps change is eventual and gradual and the professors teach what they know best and all of that rubbish.

What was unbearable was navigating through a sea of microaggressions for three years. Whether it was

cringing, grimacing and debating whether to act when any and every white kid thought they should throw the N word around carelessly, or outrightly ask you if they can say n\*\*\*\*r, or say it anyways, putting up a fight that their mother's aunt's co-worker's boyfriend is black and that automatically resolves everything. That racism is hundreds of years old, that things have changed and they deserve to say it. You get the gist. Girls said this, too. It's eventually how jarring it became that replying "London", never answered people's "where are you from", followed, if they pried, by "no, where are you really from", or "where are your parents from" even though everybody else's X-shire sufficed. It's having to declare I am not the representative of my race when you're in a room and whatever ignorant, bullsh\*t, nonsense spouts out from the nearest high white boy, whilst feeling deep down that actually in some capacity perhaps you are. Perhaps it can feel like you are, when you feel guilty you didn't smile back at that old person who's thinking God knows what — despite being from London, where no one smiles to strangers. Not to mention — towards the end of university's tenor, what an effort it was to smile at all. It was the frustration at being told from the beautiful boy from Eton, drunkenly, that I was the most beautiful black man he met, to which I replied how about man and he said no and walked off. Not before slapping my ass though. It's okay, I

kinda liked it. It made me embarrassed that when another black boy briefly transferred to our course and stumbled into our class, when everyone thought that he made a mistake in coming in to the class, that I was the subject of everyone's eyes and some voices when it came to telling him he's in the wrong place. I sat nowhere near the door he entered. It was putting up with all my new friends suddenly running their hands through my hair as if I was a pet at a zoo, in the name of friendship, because after all I needed friends. It was wondering if perhaps I should have said something after weeks of being called "Kwame" and "OJ" and not my name, again because after all they were my friends, friends have nicknames right? Of course it was a coincidence that they picked a random Ghanaian name and called me OJ Simpson. I am not Ghanaian, I did not know who OJ was except he had something to do with Kim Kardashian's dad, if I even knew that then. It was interesting seeing a particular corner where our friends and I frequently danced in Club I denoted as the "Twerk Corner" or something like that, in a uni newspaper, how one should dare not make eye contact when walking past... it was annoying being asked for drugs constantly whenever in town, because I obviously look like somebody who sells drugs. *As if I'd pay for weed.*

This notion of black people having closer proximity to drug use/sale literally contributes to detrimental effects on black peoples and communities when held by law enforcement and an indifferent general public. Both the US and UK have a tiny problem of disproportionately imprisoning black men, but y'know it's all in our heads this racism thing, we're the real racists for bringing it up et cetera, et cetera. It was difficult enough to have been navigating my sexuality for the first time, in the open and easier Cornish waters, that is easier than home, without having white, gay boys racially abuse me under the guise of sassiness and edginess. I lost a sense of myself when he called me "blacky", when he said I was "too dark". I was amazed at how he weaponised my identities for his twisted and vulgar humour. It was unbearable.

I'm sure many can relate with having to ask your friends "How should I reply to him?" but it was a bit of a twist, to say the least, on asking them "Why does he say racist things to me but carries on acting like he cares about me?". The real questions came from them and left me compromised: "Why do you carry on being friends with x when x says such things to you?". That made me feel a lack of integrity. I have always thought myself to have been self-aware. To know who I am, what I can and cannot do, what I would and would not take,

tolerate, toy with. Uni blew that ship out of the waters.

It was debilitating having to question myself at every turn, at every question, at every good morning ignored, at every room turned silent upon entering that I sustained. Do they like me? Oh god, they don't like me. Do they not like me because I'm black or because I'm me? Even the gay boy hates me what the f\*ck!?! If so what the hell did I do wrong!?! I withdrew, I halved myself, I smiled, I played polite, avoided confrontation, carried on greeting and asking nicely, complimenting, asking about their courses I could not care less about, all to no avail. In hindsight I wonder if I should have given them a reason to hate me, showed them *fire*. Instead I absorbed it all and it depressed me. The peak was the Christmas card addressed to all but me, left on the kitchen table for all to see. This followed the flat Christmas dinner I knew nothing about until I saw the pictures on Facebook. Funny how fitting that was 'cos the pettiness really encapsulates British racism. It is never in your face and blatant like the Americans and their supernatural hatred for n\*\*\*\*rs and n\*\*\*\*r-lovers. It's passive, subtle. Covert and polite. It creeps and hides and tiptoes and if you're sensitive enough like the 18 year old boy I was, it might just drive you half-mad.

I want to make two things clear: I am not a writer, nor am I pretending that the stay here was more unpleasant than it actually was. I suppose I should look at the positives, as I zoned more and more out of my course and into politics (suffice to say, the year was 2016), being increasingly interested in the politics of social justice, whiteness, and intersectionality. My black friends understood what it was like, they were the backbone, they were not perfect at all but my goodness were they life support. They offered an environment where I could be in peace, at least when it comes to my blackness. Making friends with the dreaded straight-white-male demographic was interesting. My dear boys whom I challenged and corrected and in return made me realise hey, perhaps all straight-white-men are not the devil. For the devil comes in many forms, after all. But they understood me, for the most part. They understood the dangers of whiteness, how they benefited from it, how I was not going to waver on being insistent that they dare not utter the N word again in their recitation of rap. Interestingly though, it was difficult being black in Cornwall. I, personally, found it somewhat easier to be queer in Cornwall: to explore that God-given side of me that was so long suppressed.

Anyways, white people have a problem with discussing race. As a community, a university, a

nation, we shall not be united unless legitimate grievances have been addressed and amends are made. Recently, a transgender model was hired by L'Oréal to star in their diversity beauty campaign. She was then quickly fired, making international headlines, for stating, in response to the white supremacist terror attack in Charlottesville, that all white people are racist on her personal Facebook account. Her point has been echoed by many, myself included, and is, as Munroe Bergdorf stated on GMB, "basic racial theory... look it up". We live in a society that institutionally oppresses and subjugates ethnic and sexual minorities (in housing, in education, in healthcare, in the justice system, the police, etc) ergo it is blatant that being white affords a certain privilege. It is not enough to be non-racist, one must be anti-racist. It is the only decent thing to do. If you want to know more, recommended reading would be "Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race" by Reni Eddo-Lodge. Morrison, Baldwin, Crenshaw, Coates, there are many. Find them, like I had to.

I just hope my time spent swimming through these microaggressions in Cornwall have somewhat helped to toughen me for the wider world, which I am now to embrace.



**O**n campus, I haven't really had many problems with being a mixed-race girl. Back home, I was the only black student in first school. In middle school, I was the only black female in my year. Then I got to high school and it was culture crazy! So I haven't really had an issue with that. When I was younger, we had a group called the Caribbean Roots Society — it was like a Caribbean group for children, where we sang and did other activities. They really helped me to keep connected with my black side: from the food, to the music, to the culture, the history and the role models.

I left that when I got to high school; it kind of broke down and I lost my connection with my black side. It's not as strong as it used to be and I don't really think about it. Even though brown people are definitely a minority in Cornwall, when I'm around people I don't think, "Oh, God, I'm the only brown person." Most of my friends are white — that's not through choice, that's just the way things have been. They don't look at me and think, "Loren's the only black person," and I don't look at the situation and think everyone else is white. They are people and I'm a person. I don't identify with, "I'm brown, they're white"; either we get along, or we don't. That's how it works with me.

I've been told loads of times to join the ACS but I haven't. They are an amazing group and what they do to bring the black community together is incredible — they bring such pride to the roots that they should be proud of. Personally, I just don't think I can go to them: it almost feels exclusive because it's all black people and, as I said, it's about being proud of your roots. I would feel like an outsider going into their group, even though they wouldn't see it that way and I am sure they would be welcoming.

I feel like, if you were to stereotype things as being "black" and "white" things to do, I'm quite white — if that makes sense. Although, at the same time, there are little things I can't relate to, like when my friends talk about their hair; obviously, my hair is different. It doesn't really bother me but you can start to see the difference when you have to talk about that kind of stuff. But I'm proud to be mixed — I have stronger DNA, so I get to live longer, which is great.

I've never had a bad experience being mixed race on campus. I've always felt accepted as a person. Maybe it is in Cornwall but, on campus, race isn't a thing. The campus is one big community. I want to talk to everyone, mingle with everyone, and I don't want to identify with one group over another.



**B**lack History Month is a good way to recognise other cultures and accept black people; it has a really positive purpose and I don't see any negatives about it.

I think diversity on campus is getting better. When I came here in first year I think I remember counting around ten black people. But as the university has grown I think the community of black people has grown as well. I've definitely noticed a growth but it's still obviously not as diverse as somewhere like London. It's still getting better.

I've had one racist experience that I can think of. I went out with my friends in Derby and I was the only black guy there. We went up to a club and I was dressed however normal people dress, but we got up to the door and the bouncer said "sorry mate, you can't wear your shoes in there." I was wearing black

suede shoes. I looked around noticing others wearing dirty Converse or something like that, so I felt like I was getting a bit discriminated against and all my friends did as well. We got another bouncer to come along and he let me in saying there was nothing wrong — apparently the first bouncer got fired for that like a week later.

I don't feel segregated on campus, I know people that did but I personally never felt that way. I didn't really care, if someone was ever racist towards me I would think they were being stupid and would just laugh it off. I noticed during Freshers that there was very little diversity on my course, which was a shock coming from London. Luckily I've never been discriminated against because of that but it was definitely the first thing that I noticed. Because we are the minority we do stand out but I would tell anyone to shrug off a racist comment and to try not to take it to heart.





Racism in England is more covert, it's in the little things and it's become so normal that even black people think it's normal.

*There are still people I know who would think that racism doesn't exist anymore here in England — are people still sleeping under a rock?*

I think Black History Month is very necessary. It's important because I feel like school and education systems do a good enough job of teaching white history, whereas all they tell people about black history is that we were slaves — there's a lot more to it than that. It's also good for our people to learn about themselves, so we should embrace the opportunity to celebrate our culture.

We have a very white campus, so ACS events are very important for black people. This is Cornwall, not London or Birmingham, where it's very diverse, so we need to stick together. It's always nice when you see someone that looks like you and is a part of your race; you can just nod at them across the hall and they know why.

There's a large diversity disparity on campus. For example, there aren't many Nepalese or Filipino people here, which is very different from back home where people from all different backgrounds are

able to connect. I grew up in a white community but there was a strong sense of multiculturalism from my Nepalese and Filipino friends. I was the only black person in one of my schools besides a teacher who left, which left me as the only one. It sounds really odd but it was something I didn't really notice. There was racism but it was something I didn't notice until I was a bit older and could look back on it.

On the first day at my new school I experienced racism. We were out in the playground and the games leader was pairing people up and the girl I got chosen to go with said no to being paired with me. My friend asked her why and she said it was because I was black. From then it all clicked; suddenly it all made sense and from then on I had to fight to be included with people in my class. Mostly I was only ever included if it suited their needs and I was always pitted against another black girl, so we ended up fighting for their attention and friendship.

We didn't get along until we got to high school.

Racism happens a lot, it's mostly microaggression. When someone sticks their hand in my hair, I wonder whether they'd do that to another white person — probably not. White people don't understand why that is wrong, just like they don't realise that if they use the n-word it's racist no matter what the context is.

Sometimes you'll be walking down the street and the white friends you are with will smile at someone. That white person will smile back but the moment you smile at them as a black person they look at you as if you are dirt on the bottom of their shoe. It's little things like that which all add up. People wonder whether you're being too sensitive about it but I'm not because it's all part of a bigger problem. Mostly I won't point it out because the moment that you speak up others will lessen what you are saying; they make these small incidents unimportant or question whether you are making it up.

It makes me question the point of saying anything at all because it's not going to change anything.

I think people are becoming more aware of racial issues because of current political situations. However, there are still people I know who would think that racism doesn't exist anymore here in England — are people still sleeping under a rock? Racism in England is more covert, it's in the little things and it's become so normal that even black people think it's normal. Until someone points it out to you, you will continue allowing racist culture to exist. You are living in it and accepting it, it's a widespread mind-set that needs to be undone at the roots. It's in the education systems, it's in the social services. It's worked so well that everybody is falling for it.

I think things are changing. But this is 2017 and it should have already have been done. I shouldn't still have to be protesting in the streets for black rights.



**T**o me, it's a shame that Black History Month is only a month, that we get to acknowledge all black history and everything that black people have done to get to this stage in such a short period of time.

I don't think my student experience should be defined only by my race because I could say the same for my gender. It's sad because it was one of the main things I was thinking about coming here; I was aware that it's not as diverse here as it is at other universities. I thought about my identity a lot and how I was supposed to identify with other people and students.

However, coming here has been great. At the end of the day we're all students and it's actually nice that we are all in the same position because we can relate to each other easily. You do find your own people to specifically relate to, but it's nice to speak to different people and move outside of your comfort zone as well. You can challenge yourself and challenge your beliefs in other areas. Ignorance is still present, so you get to teach people.

I've never experienced any students or teachers displaying ignorance or discrimination towards me, which is good. Even though the university is small, there's a strong vibe of everyone working together through things like FXU and ACS.

## *“You’re pretty for a black girl”*

**B**lack History Month is really interesting because you get to find out a lot more about your culture and heritage. I think normally when people think about black history they think about America, about the civil rights movement, or about slavery. Black History Month allows you to go beyond that and also allows you to look past British history to consider black history in times such as the 1950s. I think that it’s also a way of celebrating the culture so that other people can become informed about you, besides just building up your own knowledge.

For me personally, the history that I learned in school was very much centred around white people. I only really learnt about Europe and the concept of ethnic minorities was only really mentioned in the context of the civil rights movement or slavery. A-Level was the first time that I learned more about black history in America, and I learned about black history in England from the 1920s. I realised that there was so much that I didn’t know, such as how Notting Hill Carnival was created.

The moment I got to university I ran towards the ACS. I’m used to being around a lot of white people, in the sense that I’m used to being in places that aren’t very diverse. Coming from London, it

was like a culture shock within a culture shock. But everyone here has been really nice and really accommodating.

There are a lot of general assumptions about you that people have, preconceived notions such as liking Drake’s music just because you’re black. There are stereotypes that have been ingrained in people but I’ve never had any awful stereotypes towards me that have been particularly bad.

One phrase that I remember from when I was very young is “you’re pretty, for a black girl.” I’d never really thought much about it until I was about 13 — which was when I started learning about racism properly — when someone said it to me and I told my mum. She told me that it’s not a compliment, so I’ve realised now that it’s a backhanded compliment and actually more of an insult.

Identity is a very big thing, so even though I identify as Nigerian I also identify as British. A lot of people expect you to know a lot about your African side, very simple things like Afrobeat or the hair — people are always touching the hair. It’s one thing to generally want to know about things but people need to learn about being borderline offensive because that’s where the line becomes blurred.





I think Black History Month is necessary because racism is obviously still an issue and until it's not an issue we need a Black History Month. It's very much a time to celebrate cultures and become extra aware or conscious of history. This is a time we've allocated for black history, so it's a time for trying new things and celebrating the culture whoever you are. The ACS does an amazing job celebrating Black History Month and they have so much planned for us this year — there's always room for improvement but I do think it's celebrated on campus.

In the three years that I've been here I've seen diversity grow and grow. Obviously from an academic standpoint you do have diversity in terms of having both Exeter and Falmouth students on campus but we have so many different cultures and people from different backgrounds. With the university taking in more students this year there's a lot more diversity with different cultures being

represented. Difference is always a good thing provided that it's not over-emphasised.

I live in Amsterdam and there was one time when I went into a shop and walked out with three other people: an old white lady and two young white girls. Basically the shop alarm beeped and everyone turned back and looked at me. It wasn't very explicit - I wasn't being called anything out loud — but it saddens me to think of the unconscious ways our brain functions and how we're conditioned to act in a certain way. It saddens me even more because typically intangible things like that are harder to change. However, we are getting somewhere and there's always a silver lining.

As a black person, I feel like it's my duty to share my culture and show that we're just as valuable in society as anyone else. For me, really good positive experiences include being able to show that we are still a part of society. I feel like I'm a part of a really

strong community on campus; I can see a black person across the hall and even though I may not know them we can silently nod at each other; you know that you're consciously looking out for one another. You're more aware of the fact that you're representing a group of people.

Last year, as president of the ACS, I felt like it was my duty to recruit every black person on campus but this year there are way too many people to keep up with. It's good because it shows that the university in its own way is being diverse and opening its doors to more different kinds of people. The community is growing and growing, which is always a good thing.

What I typically say to people — particularly when I used to advertise ACS events — is that it's not just for black people. We already know our culture and we're already proud of that but obviously we want to share that with other people. ACS is open

for everybody, because in sharing our culture we're standing for inclusion. As much as we talk about racism, we're also going to talk about things like sexism and homophobia because we do have people in our culture that experience those issues. Whilst we do consider things from a racial viewpoint, it's also our duty to focus on inclusion overall and make the world a better place so that we can all move forward together.”

*“I’ve heard people saying that students of race only got accepted because the university needed to keep the numbers up.”*

**S**o, I've been at this uni for a while now and I moved down here from London which is, as you know, really multicultural. As a student, I wasn't expecting it to be this bad. I kind of knew Cornwall was a bit... well, not racist... but definitely less multicultural. To put it in a nicer way, there's less diversity.

My parents dropped me off and my parents are Muslim. My mum wears a hijab, proudly, but she got a couple of looks here and there, which wasn't that bad because she gets them in London as well. But, down here, we went into a shop and she accidentally bumped into this lady's car and then she mumbled something under her breath before turning around and saying "you f\*cking Muslim". I have never heard that in my life. I've never heard someone actually call me a f\*cking Muslim, or call my parents a f\*cking Muslim in my life. Even in London, I've never heard it. It was really horrible and straight away I didn't want to stay down here. I told my mum straight away that I didn't think this was a good place, it wasn't a nice place, I didn't feel that safe. I don't want to stay here.

After that, my parents left but they were hesitant about leaving me and when I started I didn't worry too much about people giving me really weird looks. But it's just small things like being the only black person in my class. I mean, it's a big class, like at least 70 people. Being the only black person in there is not a bad thing but also it shows that maybe the university should really step up accepting more students that are from different ethnic backgrounds to make the campus more multicultural or even a little bit more diverse. To learn about other people's culture, I think things like Islamophobia and racism are genuinely based on ignorance. It's just a blatant lack of knowledge. A lot of people who are Islamophobic don't know about the religion of

Islam which is a religion that promotes peace. I have read the Qur'an multiple times, I've read the translation multiple times and it doesn't say anything to me that the Bible doesn't say. It really doesn't.

The fact is that people are not going out of their way to just read it at their end to maybe understand and just accept, not even understand — I'm not asking you to understand. I'm asking you for a bit more acceptance. A bit more respect. Which is something that everyone of every race, religion, or culture deserves on this campus, because we all got in on grades that we worked hard for. I've had people saying that students of race only got accepted based on the university needing minorities to keep the numbers up which is absolutely horrible. The way you got your grades to get into this university, so did I. People are afraid to talk about it, to talk about racism, it's just underlying across our university campus.

I love my course, I love Cornwall, I love the people that I've met here. There's just the downside of a small minority being in a place where there's not a lot of multiculturalism or even just that there's not a lot of education based on race or religion. People just believe what they hear on the news and, of course, everyone believes what they hear on the news about Muslims and black people. There's not a lot of understanding.





**R**ace is such a contentious, broad subject and, in recent years it has no doubt come into the public eye. I think, for black people, it has always played a large part in our lives. I have only experienced one serious racist incident in my life — I was seven years old and lived in Liverpool. I had been born and raised in East London, a predominantly black and Asian area, so I had no preconception of race at this point; when you grow up in an area which is largely populated by people who look like you, it's hard to develop a sense of being different. So to move somewhere completely white was quite a drastic change.

I think the first time I experienced something was during my time at school. I had one particularly bad bully who picked on me purely because I was of a different colour, making fun of my skin, my hair — anything he could to completely ostracise me from the class. I mean, you can't blame children, but you can blame their parents for what they were teaching them, which was clearly coming out in how they treated me at school. I think that really opened my eyes to the fact that, "OK, the majority of this world is white and I am an outcast. Purely because of the way that I was born. There is nothing I can do about that."

The rest of the kids in my class were bystanders and I think that reflects the way politics is today. While you could argue that they were only kids, and that no child is going to step into a bullying situation and say "Hey, that's not right", something similar can also be seen in the adult world. In a similar vein, the majority of white people could be considered bystanders. That's not to say that every single person who isn't an ethnic minority is a racist, but rather that being complacent with the current societal structure is unacceptable. Institutional racism is everywhere: it can be seen at this university, other universities in the UK, within our governmental institutions and even global institutions. I think

that because we see the situation in the US and we say, "Oh, yes, there's clear police brutality and there are clear acts of racism", a lot of the time we get too comfortable. We sit here in the UK and think, "We're glad it's not us", but the reality is that systematic racism is as common here as it is over there, even though it might not outwardly seem that way.

In discussions that I've had with people about race, I've never tried to introduce the topic in an accusatory way, so it has always been quite calm. I don't think anyone really believes themselves to be racist until they're faced with certain attitudes they may disagree with, or opinions they might have on a particular topic. The majority of white people have always attempted to defend themselves by saying things like, "If I was a racist, I wouldn't be talking to you". But I think that contemporary racism is more than that; it is a complacency with the systems that exist in society today. So, if you are a white person and you're sitting there watching racism happening and thinking that you can't do anything about it: yes you can. One thing you could do is have discussions with black people to try and understand their point of view — it's really just about understanding our struggle.

On this campus, I feel fine; I think it's diverse enough that I don't feel like an outcast. I don't feel different. I am the BAME officer and I'm on the ACS committee, so I not only have my community, but I also feel integrated with people from a variety of different backgrounds. So, of course, I don't feel it — but I see the systems that are in place: from something as prominent as the excessive whitewashing in the media to more discrete concerns, such as the fact that commodities as simple as hair products almost exclusively target "white hair." Everything around us seems to be geared toward white people and it makes me feel like as much of an outcast as when I was called the n-word by that boy back in primary school.



**A**s a black woman, there is always the fear that people will view you through a certain socially-conditioned lens. There are people who impose their ideas and their stereotypes; they have a preconceived notion of what a black woman should be like and are surprised to find that you can't group all black people into one archetype.

But those people are the ignorant few. Most of the students I have encountered here understand that black people are just as multifaceted, complex and diverse as any other group of people. This gives space for people to be who they are without unproductive stereotypes limiting them.



**T**he first week I arrived here, I was very upset and called home pretty much every day just complaining down the phone, especially to my brother. We talked about me moving to a different university but in the end I decided to go to the Streatham Campus to go party with their ACS there. Seeing them made me feel a little bit more welcome because although they may be three hours away, there are people who are like me and who have been through the same experience as me. Then I actually started the course on the Monday and I met another black student who later became my best friend. Having her on my course and living close to me made my experience a lot better and then, eventually, I kind of just forgot about the lack of diversity and the fact that I'm one of the few black people here.

I wouldn't say that my academic study has been affected by my race; Politics is a very diverse course full of diverse opinions, and I think my opinion is welcomed as I'm coming from a marginal group as opposed to a white, male-dominated course. Grades-wise, I've never felt like I've been discriminated against, but then I know other people at other unis who will say differently. I ran for course rep in the first few weeks of September and then later on I ran for the Vice-President of Politics Society, so it was really nice knowing that there was some level of representation.

If I could change one thing about this campus, I would bring in more black and ethnic academics

because I was reading an article on the weekend and it said that, in this country, there are no top black academics in any university and that was really shocking.

Recently, I don't know if you've heard of him but, Edward Enninful has been promoted as the director of British Vogue. He's already started bringing in more diversity, he's been putting it on his Instagram; younger voices are number one and he's helping to give black women in fashion the platform to do what they want to do.

To those who support black people: you need to not tell me how I feel, to just listen and to give me and other ethnic students the same opportunities that you would give to a white man or woman. I think a lot of white people think that diversity means having one black person or one Asian person there. If there's 15 white people, there should be 15 black and Asian people too. And I think we need to change the meaning and the rhetoric of what diversity means and actually start celebrating it properly.

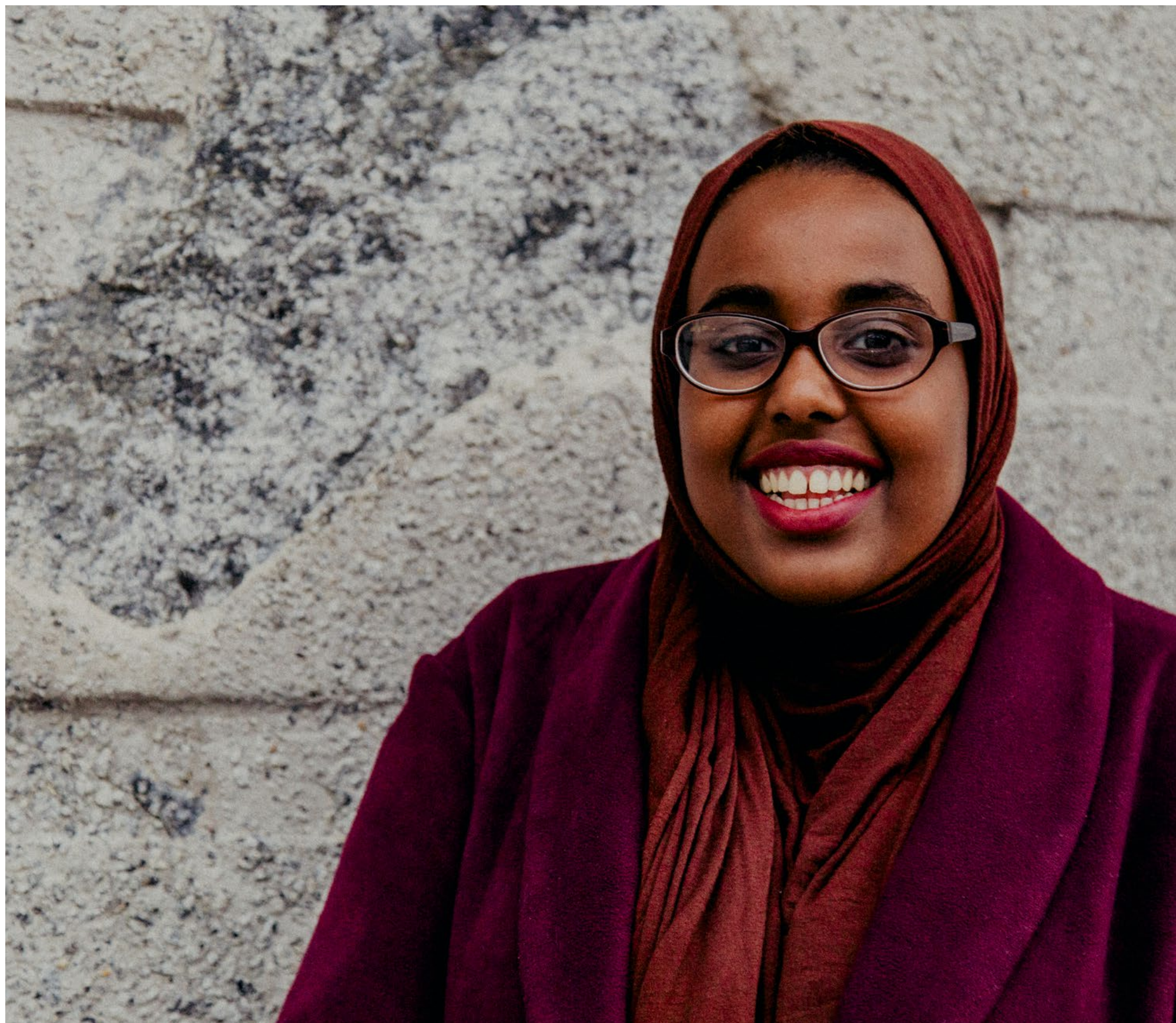
One take-away message I would say is don't ever think you cannot do something because of your skin colour. There is institutional racism in this country and there are microaggressions that you're going to face on an everyday basis, but as a marginal group we are understanding each other. Once you have that behind you, you can do anything if you put your mind to it. It's not impossible. Someone always has to start somewhere and it could be you. That's what I say.

**L**ast week I moved onto Penryn Campus. I'm from Birmingham and that's quite a diverse area; it's largely populated with Muslims and the first thing I noticed when I moved in was that I was the only veiled woman I saw, so I felt like I stuck out like a sore thumb. In a way though it can be helpful because I can be easily spotted so I think that's a nice way to look at it. Slowly I got used to the change of environment and it's been really good so far; I haven't experienced any racism, everyone's kinda chill.

I feel like my course is quite mixed and everyone is quite liberal and I feel like at times I'm playing devil's advocate by saying "Oh do you think religion should be banned?" because I just really want to see a change of thought from the ordinary. I feel like there are quite a lot of black people on my course as well, so that's positive.

I hang out with a lot of white people and I don't feel like I'm different; I feel normal and I'm just the same. My course is quite ethnically centered as we talk about a lot of different ethnicities and it's not focused on one point of view, the western point of view.

Locals are nice but I get funny looks at times but I feel like I am the only hijabi they've ever seen but no one is nasty, everyone is really nice.





**C**oming down here has been a difficult adjustment and being part of a black minority is kind of why I joined ACS. Once that happened I made more friends and I really started to feel at home especially because my mum's white and my dad's black and I don't usually get that involved with my dad's side of the family. I've grown up with a lot of white culture and it's sort of felt like a part of me is missing so when I came here and I joined ACS I instantly felt at home.

I always had problems when I was growing up. One of the biggest issues I ever overcame was when I

was in Year 9. We took a trip to Spain on a school trip and I had just cut my hair really short and my mum bought me a wig beforehand to see if I liked the length. Obviously, because I was on a school trip, I couldn't do my hair properly so on the last day I wore it and people were like, why's your hair different, and all the boys started trying to take it off my head. One of them tried to pull it off and I slapped his hand away and swore at him, so I got in trouble because I had sworn. Yet he'd been bullying me and taking the piss all day and yet I was the one who got in trouble. It took me about six years to build up the confidence to wear a wig again.



**JAMAL CLARKE**  
FXU PRESIDENT STUDENT EXPERIENCE

# *afterword*

**C**oming from London, which is a very multicultural city, has made going to university all the way down here quite interesting. You're going to a Russell Group university, so you have to accept that you will be studying in a very white place. Being in Cornwall really exacerbated that but I just got on with it really. I never made it a problem — that was just something I had to do.

When you're the only or one of the few black people on your course, sometimes you feel that you have to represent your whole race: you have to always carry yourself in a positive light. You want to be viewed favourably by your peers and lecturers and that sometimes adds to the pressure.

London feels a whole world away sometimes — it's just completely different. But I'm as happy to be here in Cornwall as I am being in London. It doesn't bother me too much.

In fact, I think being in Cornwall has been great. I have had a job for the three years that I've been here and I was elected into my current role as FXU President Student Experience, so I don't feel that being black has held me back in any way. Still, I feel that being the first non-white President is something that I can say I have achieved.

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