“You never feel so Black as when you're contrasted against a White background”: Black students' experiences at a predominantly White institution in the UK

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Abstract
“Old” universities in the UK are typically populated with White middle-class students who hail from White majority hometowns, whilst “new” universities have more diverse cohorts from diverse hometowns. Our research conducted with 17 Black students at a predominantly White university, examined the initial encounters in which Black students first realise their minority status on campus. We found that White numerical dominance combined with White students’ racialised place-based assumptions about who belongs where, had an immediate and powerful impact on our participants. Importantly, our findings suggest that for Black students coming from diverse hometowns, experiences such as being the only Black person in lecture halls, being told that you are the first Black person your peers have met, and being expected to use urban street slang and sell drugs constituted both a denial of their student identity and a misrecognition of their Black identity. Our analysis highlights the importance of considering the diversity within institutions alongside Black and White students’ place-based histories with diversity; and how these are consequential for Black students’ experiences of (mis)recognition and (non)belonging on campuses. Please refer to the
1 | INTRODUCTION

Black students in the UK are the least likely to be admitted to the older, high-status universities such as Oxford and Cambridge (Boliver, 2016) and they (as well as working-class students) are more likely to attend new, lower-status universities (Lessard-Phillips, Boliver, Pampaka, & Swain, 2018). Black students are also disproportionately more likely to leave their degree programme prior to completion (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2018). These patterns of racial inequality are common across Western higher education systems including the US, Australia, Belgium, and France (e.g., Byrd, 2014; Colak, Van Praag, & Nicaies, 2020; Ichou & van Zanten, 2019; Pitman, Roberts, Bennett, & Richardson, 2019). Recently, student campaigns, media commentary, and academic voices have insisted that our attention shifts from encouraging underrepresented groups through the door, to addressing the Whiteness of our institutions that signals non-belonging and may compromise Black students’ ability to thrive (National Union of Students, 2011; Richardson, 2018).

Research has long connected students’ retention and success to a psychological sense of identification and belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Social-psychological research informed by the social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) provides fresh insight into the identity processes that are consequential for educational outcomes. According to this perspective, when we belong to groups with which we identify (e.g., student), and when that identity is contextually salient, psychologically our values and behaviours become group-based. In the higher education context, research attests to student identity contributing to a willingness to give and receive help from peers (Platow, Mavor, & Bizumic, 2017), share knowledge and engage in peer-learning groups (White, O’Connor, & Hamilton, 2011), and employ “deep” (as opposed to “surface level”) approaches to learning, which in turn predict academic achievement (Bliuc, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2017, pp. 219; Mavor, Platow, & Bizumic, 2017).

The process of identifying with a group, however, is not wholly within our control. Group identification depends on other members of the group (particularly those who are prototypical) recognising us as belonging, as being “one of us” (Blackwood, Hopkins, & Reicher, 2013, 2015). Student-led social media campaigns such as #Itooam and #MyRacistCampus testify to Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students’ experiences of being “othered” at university and the perception that they do not belong. International calls to decolonise the curriculum too have shown that BME students are attuned to the Whiteness of their curricula and to the importance of a more inclusive learning, teaching, and social environment that signals belonging (Meda, 2020).

Even prior to arrival at university, research suggests that there is the anticipation of not belonging. Research by Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) on BME students’ university choices, found that the expectation of belonging affected their ultimate choices and that this expectation was explicitly linked to perceived student diversity on campus. When BME students perceived that diversity was low at a university, they were more likely to self-exclude; this was particularly the case for higher status universities. Similar processes of self-exclusion have been found to also be at work for working-class students who describe “better” higher education institutions as “not for the likes of us” (Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010, p. 120).

For all students, leaving home and attending university for the first time is an important transition and hopes and fears about fitting in and belonging will be paramount (Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001). But what of those
BME students who do not self-exclude but instead take their chances at a non-diverse university? What are their experiences when they arrive and how might those experiences affect their ability to identify (and presumably thrive) in a predominantly White environment?

2 | THE SOCIAL IDENTITY PERSPECTIVE

Our research draws on the social identity perspective – including Self-Categorization Theory (Oakes, 1996; Turner et al., 1987) – to consider the dynamic processes entailed in self-perception. According to SCT, how one self-categorises depends on perceiver readiness and perceptions of social stimuli within a context that render that identity salient. Perceiver readiness reflects a person’s cognitions (including past experiences, motivations, goals, needs, and expectations); for instance, a person who frequently categorises based on their gender identity is more likely to categorise this way in new contexts. Research has shown that marginalised groups (e.g., women and ethnic minorities) are readier to categorise based on their marginalised social identities (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Graham-Bailey, Richardson Cheeks, Blankenship, Stewart, & Chavous, 2019).

In addition, perceptions of social stimuli are also important to our self-categorisations. Perceptions of social stimuli are theorised in terms of comparative fit (e.g., am I more similar to the shared category of student or to the sub-category of Black student?) and normative fit which refers to the extent to which these perceptions align with group-based stereotypes. Thus, belonging (or in these terms, self-categorization based on a salient social identity) is a perceptual process that is socially and culturally situated. To provide a relevant example, van Veelen, Derks, and Endedijk (2019) found that women STEM graduates working in the STEM sector were adversely affected by being in an environment where women were underrepresented and that this was compounded by negative stereotypes. Thus, it was not merely the perceptual novelty of women that signalled their non-belonging and rendered their identity salient (e.g., Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Hamilton & Trolier, 1986), but how male dominance found expression in defining the normative culture.

3 | RESEARCH ON THE SIGNALLING OF NON-BELONGING

Considerable research shows the operation of normative assumptions about who belongs (or fits) where and on what terms (de Vreeze, Matschke, & Cress, 2018; Gray & Manning, 2014). For instance, research on “shopping while Black” details the experience of being perceived as deviant and out of place in retail environments (Gabbidon, 2003). More directly relevant to this paper, research in the US shows that Black students in elite (mostly White) higher education institutions are subject to differential and more hostile treatment on campus (Harper et al., 2011; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Such treatment would be expected to render Black identity salient and, indeed, there is support for this in a study by Graham-Bailey et al. (2019) who asked students to list and rate the importance of multiple social identities (gender, race, and social economic status). They found, in common with Ashmore’s (2004) research, that marginalised identities (women, ethnic minorities, working class) were rated as highly important and privileged identities (men, White, middle class) were rated as less important.

Social psychological research has long had an interest in how people are stereotyped and racialised and the consequences for identity and how one can act (Blackwood et al., 2015; Howarth, Wagner, Magnusson, & Sammut, 2014). The research described above, however, also draws attention to context, and there is an emerging social-psychological interest in the idea that places can be stereotyped and saturated with racial assumptions (e.g., Durrheim & Dixon, 2001). This concern with the social-spatial dynamics of race relations owes much to pioneering work in human geography (Daniels, 1993; Lowenthal, 1991). For instance, Kinsman’s (1995) account of the photographer, Ingrid Pollard’s work depicting a Black woman walking in the Lake District showed how place can be a powerful signifier of, in this instance, British national identity, and the representation and experience of not belonging in that place.
Work by Bonam, Taylor, and Yantis (2017) also builds on the idea of place-based racial stereotypes. An initial series of studies found that White American participants were easily able to list physical contexts associated with specific racial groups; inner cities were thought of as prototypically “Black” and suburbs were “White”. In addition, when participants were asked to generate characteristics of a context which either had a majority Black or White population, they found transference of racial stereotypes onto the contexts. Thus, participants described Black spaces as crime-ridden, poverty-stricken, ghettos (Bonam, Bergsieker, & Eberhardt, 2016) and White spaces were described as suburban, wealthy, clean, and safe.

4 | THE CURRENT RESEARCH: BRITISH UNIVERSITIES

The UK does not have the same history of racialised higher education institutions as seen in countries such as the US and South Africa. There is evidence in the UK, however, for racial (and class-based) clustering at universities with BME (and working-class) students more likely to attend post-92 universities which tend to be more diverse than pre-92 universities.

The current research was conducted at a pre-92 university where only 2% of undergraduate students were Black and 72% were White. The local population of the university city was 90% White British in the 2011 census.

5 | METHOD

5.1 | Participants

Seventeen self-identified Black undergraduate students took part in one-to-one interviews which inform this paper. Interviewees were 12 women and five men aged between 18 and 23, one interviewee was classified as a mature student as she was over 21 and had completed an Access to Higher Education diploma. Three participants were LGB identified with one student describing themselves as pansexual. Participants were from a range of disciplines and years of study (see Appendix for a list of participants). All but two of the participants were Black British. The research had ethical approval from the University where the research was conducted.

6 | PROCEDURE

6.1 | Interviews

Initial contact with participants was facilitated by longstanding members of the relevant Student Union diversity groups. A call out was posted on the social media pages of the Student Union diversity groups whereby a picture of the interviewer (a Black female) could be seen. Participants expressed that one motivation for participation was that the interviewer was a Black student with whom they anticipated feeling comfortable.

Once the first 10 participants had been interviewed, a snowballing strategy was used with students referring and recommending additional participants. Fourteen face to face semi-structured interviews took place on university grounds and three were conducted on Skype to reach those who had either graduated or were on a placement year. Interviews took place between January and March 2018 and were between 60 and 90 minutes long.

Participants were asked to share any experiences that were memorable to them during their time at university. The interviewer was careful to explain that those experiences could be positive or negative and that we were interested in the full spectrum of experiences. Where necessary, participants were probed for detail (e.g., What happened? Who was there? What did you do? Why?/Why not?).
All interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed verbatim by the first author, a Black female PhD student. Whilst there can be challenges in being an insider researcher (Ochieng, 2010) there are also benefits such as the easier establishment of trust. For instance, one participant commented:

I think more Black students would benefit from having these kinds of conversations because (a) I get to air out experiences that I have experienced and (b) talking to somebody who is actually gonna get what you mean, and you don’t have to be like I’m so sorry I’m not trying to attack you as a person... it’s just brilliant! (Jade, First year, Humanities and Social Sciences)

Participants are referred to throughout the paper by the pseudonyms they chose at the end of the interviews.

7 | ANALYSIS

7.1 | Analytic approach

Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted as set out by Braun and Clarke (2019). This form of thematic analysis acknowledges that the analytical process is situated and interactive and therefore themes are reflective of both the data, the researcher, and the context of the research itself.

Once all transcripts were transcribed, our analytic process involved data familiarisation, whereby the researcher read through transcripts and noted initial observations of the data. Based on this process, the research team was confident that there was sufficient and rich data to address the research questions (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018). Analysis was informed by the researchers’ theoretical lens but followed an inductive approach; the researcher created codes that related to single ideas relating to the research questions. Once codes were created across the datasets, the researcher constructed themes through an iterative process. Numerous readings and combinations of codes led to the development of themes that captured recurrent meaning across the data set. In line with the Qualitative logic of reflexive thematic analysis, which sees qualitative research as encompassing a philosophy and procedure, rather than merely tools and techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2019), we did not create inter-rater reliability measures or codebooks. Instead, coding and themes were shared with the second and third authors of the paper in a process of discussing and reflecting on assumptions and what may have been overlooked.

8 | FINDINGS

Our participants discussed a wide range of experiences. What stood out, and what is the focus of analysis for this paper, were participants’ accounts of the experiences and interactions which highlighted their Black identity, and the variety of forms that racialised stereotypes took in signalling that they were deemed non-normative. This is explored through two themes. The first – Recognising (non) diversity – speaks to the shock entailed in the perceptual contrast of Black and White; and the importance of where Black and White students came from for how this contrast was experienced and understood. The second – Black bodies out of place – speaks to the multiplicity of ways Black students were “othered” or “misrecognised” in the university context and how this made non-belonging salient.

8.1 | Theme 1: Recognising (non) diversity: The importance of where people come from

Describing a series of “firsts” – first day, first lecture, first time meeting flatmates – was commonplace in the interviews. During these ‘firsts’, participants pinpointed moments when they recognised the racial composition of the
university and the city. For Tellema, this moment came on open day as she sat in a packed lecture theatre with her friend:

Extract 1

Well, she said, “There’s only one more Black girl here, other than that everyone else here is White”. And, we were taught, “girls, London isn’t the true representation of England. You guys are an ethnic minority”. And I remember we saw the numbers, it was like less than, definitely less than 5%. And I’m like “yeah, yeah” but you never really deep it until you’re actually there and you’re like oh my God. (Tellema, Second year, Humanities and Social Sciences)

Through Tellema’s experience we see an example of the perceptual processes that are evident in the literature about the meta-contrast principle (Turner et al., 1987); when looking around she perceives the difference between herself and her peers. But, two things are of particular interest. First, implicit in the idea that “London isn’t the true representation of England” is the notion that there is a “truer” representation; one that she has now encountered in her White institution. Second, prior knowledge of England’s racial demographics was not enough to prepare Tellema for the reality of her status as a minority in her own country. Several participants spoke of how prior exposure to more diverse environments influenced their sense-making of their new environment. We see in the following extract from Kofi, how the visible Whiteness of the university might be rendered particularly stark by memories of a diverse home.

Extract 2

Growing up in London, I was never really conscious of my race because everyone’s diverse and everyone had their own little background… like my friendship group in London consisted of like Chinese and Bangladeshi and Jamaican and all these different people. So, coming to [university city] where everyone else is just like English, or French, you never feel so Black. You never feel so Black as when you’re contrasted against a White background. Because it really brings out the idea that you’re different. (Kofi, Second year, Humanities and Social Sciences)

Like Tellema, Kofi is struck by the visible Whiteness of the university and how this renders his racial identity salient; “you never feel so Black as when you’re contrasted against a White background”. But Kofi also juxtaposes this against his experience growing up in London where diversity and his multiracial friendship group rendered his racial identity less salient. We see in this juxtaposition the sharp contrast between a place where one belongs and a place that “brings out the idea that you’re different”. Importantly, Kofi’s reflections on the contrast of Black against White is not simply about the perception of stimuli in the present; instead, Kofi is engaged in an active process of sense making that involves reference to other times and places.

Whilst Black and minority ethnic students typically come from hometowns that are more diverse than the university they attend (Gamsu, Donnelly, & Harris, 2018) this is not always the case. For those participants who did not, the experience of coming to a White university was quite different. When discussing the Whiteness of campus, Margot also draws on comparisons to her home life:

Extract 3

There’s two parts to it like, (a) it’s something that I noticed but it’s something that doesn’t bother me because, like I said, bar my friend group, in my previous school like it was basically White and then even when I go to parties, I’m the only Black person there. Or if I go here, there I’m the only Black person there. So yeah, again it’s something that I noticed just as I’ve noticed like all my life, but it doesn’t affect me, in any way. (Margot, First year, Humanities and Social Sciences)
Margot, like Tellema and Kofi, notices the contrast and the visible Whiteness of the university. Interestingly, she is adamant that being the only Black person in the room does not “bother” or “affect” her “in any way”. She attributes this to her previous experiences and considers campus to be an extension of other homogenous social and educational settings (parties and school). Thus, all three participants recognise their minority status and draw on past experiences to make sense of their new environment. For Margot, there is a sense of preparedness, whilst for Tellema and Kofi, it is precisely the contrast between past experiences and the reality of being in the extreme minority which leaves them shocked.

8.2 | Encountering White students from (non)diverse places

Thus far, we have considered the experiences of Black students through their realisation of their underrepresentation at the university. In coming to terms with the realities of campus life, participants were also interacting with White peers from all over the UK, many of whom hail from less diverse hometowns. Here we have a conversation Michelle describes having shortly after arriving at university:

Extract 4

One thing I remember that I learned in first-year was speaking to one of my housemates who comes from the Lake District. She was talking about her experience of living in the UK and she said, “wow it’s so incredible to be here in [university name], it’s just so diverse”, and I was like, sorry… it’s so diverse? I was really shocked because for me it was quite the opposite experience, coming from where I’m from. (Michelle, Final year, Humanities and Social Sciences)

Here we see the same social stimuli appraised very differently and it is this difference in appraisal that is shocking for Michelle. For Michelle, diversity was the norm and the conversation reminded her of her ‘difference’, not just because she is Black and a minority, but because of the sharp contrast in beliefs about what constitutes diversity. Perhaps most strikingly, what is experienced by Michelle as signalling her minority status might be considered by White students as cause for celebration.

Encountering people who had quite the opposite experience of diversity particularly resonated with participants from London who came to realise in more ways than one, they had moved away from diversity. When asked about his experience of being the only Black person on his course, Tyrone describes interactions that crystallised this:

Extract 5

Tyrone: At first it was a bit of a shock, it’s something you had to get used to, cos for some people… I think for two, maybe three people on our course, it was their first time meeting a Black person. Interviewer: How do you know?Tyrone: They told me, they told me straight up! This was like the second week of, so the week after Fresher’s Week, basically the first week of study.

(Tyrone, Second year, Humanities and Social Sciences)

Like Michelle, Tyrone is shocked at being the only Black person on his course, and this is compounded by his recognition of the need to adjust to White students’ lack of experience of diversity. Like Margot, Tyrone also comes from a “majority White environment” and one could surmise that he would arrive prepared for the Whiteness of the university. But this is perhaps different to arriving in a context where some of your White cohort have absolutely no experience of Blackness and choose to point out your racial difference and novelty in the first week of study.

Finally, not all White students came from non-diverse places and this proved critical to Black students’ experiences. Some participants discussed using knowledge about where White students were from as a proxy for whether
they could assume shared understanding and easy interaction. Just as those from non-diverse hometowns were expected to treat Black students as novelties, those from diverse hometowns were judged to be “safe”:

Extract 6

There’s this one White girl that’s from Essex, so again, her demographic is a bit more similar to mine so she’s not as ignorant and I am really happy she’s not because it makes me feel a bit more serene (Adé, First year, Humanities and Social Sciences)

Here, what makes it possible to feel safe or in Adé’s words, ‘serene’ is shared “demographic” or place identity, such as London or “Essex”. Importantly, what this shared background brings is not being “as ignorant”; the inference being that in Adé’s experience, most White students encountered are ignorant. The implication is that both race and place of origin are important when establishing relationships with new people as one can assume shared experience, knowledge, and connection.

8.3 | Theme 2: Black bodies out of place and racialised places

In the previous theme we discussed how the visible Whiteness of the new environment and encounters with White students from non-diverse backgrounds made racial identities salient and communicated non-belonging. We now consider other ways in which everyday social interactions and experiences signalled White students’ perceptions of where Black students did and did not belong. Alicia voices the common complaint that White students do not know how to talk to Black students:

Extract 7

It’s just like people don’t know how to talk to you at uni. So like, a lot of people when they come up to me insist, they like must talk slang like… They’ll be like “wagwarn like how you doin?”; they try to like spud me up and I’m like we’re not… I’m like I speak fluent English. English is my first language, we’re not friends like that (Alicia, Final year, Humanities and Social Sciences)

White students trying to ‘spud’ Alicia up might be regarded as a well-intentioned extension of the hand of friendship. But for Alicia, this language violated her perceptions of what is normatively acceptable on a university campus; she is met with language that relies on racial (and class) stereotypes associated with non-educational contexts. White students’ actions here not only reveal their assumptions about what is normative for Black people in terms of speech (slang) but also their beliefs about Black people’s class backgrounds and where they are expected to belong (e.g., urban settings where slang would be appropriate). Importantly, Alicia’s experience deepens our understandings of the social processes involved in Black students’ othering. First, the issue here is not simply contextual and perceptual novelty; what is at work is White students acting on and reproducing stereotypes of where Black people do and do not belong. Second, the interaction is experienced as questioning or partially denying both her Britishness and her status as a student at a prestigious university as she is not met with the Standard English she speaks and expects.

Students also discussed their lives off campus, explaining that their peers’ behaviour changed depending on the environment they were in. As a result of these perceived behaviour changes, Black students mentioned the “places you go” and the “places you don’t” (Kofi). In concert with the Black urban stereotype (Bonam et al., 2017), nightclubs proved to be a particularly significant setting for experiencing differential treatment. One participant described how the notion of “Black cool” manifested in nightclubs with White students asking Black men “Are you selling anything?” (Derek). Kofi elaborates on this experience:

Extract 8

It happens crazy amounts like, once again, this drug dealer thing. It’s not funny cos it’s happened on multiple occasions. The first time I was like loooool, as in its cos I’m from London, and I’m using slang.
But then the next few times I didn’t speak! [laughs] You don’t know what my accent is, you don’t know where I’m from. And they’re like “Oh so what do you have on you today?”; they’re using terms I don’t know about all this. (Kofi, Second year, Humanities and Social Sciences)

Here, Kofi describes struggling to make sense of repeated solicitations for drugs in nightclubs, which is an unusual experience for him. At first, he attributes this to being from London, and he deliberately tests this by not speaking. In so doing, he is presented with the only other explanation; his treatment is predicated on a racialised stereotype of Black men in nightclubs. This further highlights the majority group’s assumptions about normative behaviours for Black men in particular and reveals how these processes are activated in different social contexts.

Finally, once at university, it is common for students to feel homesick and reflect on the people, places, and things that they miss. For Black students, however, there was the sense that what was missed (and missing) was the taken-for-granted products and services associated with being Black:

Extract 9

I've started learning how to do my own hair out of convenience [laughs] I was like I could go to [neighbouring city] or I could use YouTube and just suck at it for a few years and hopefully get better [laughs]. Erm, so, I guess that's it. It's those kinds of commodities like hair, food, I don't know what else I'd need. I'm probably missing something that I don't even know I'm missing [laughs]. It's just cycled out of my life, it's like, that's it. (Viola, Second year, Engineering and Design)

Viola's limited options to access commodities such as hairdressing services and food come as a revelation; she has not, prior to university, been confronted with the possibility that such commodities cannot be taken for granted. The availability of hairdressing services was particularly salient for our female participants who on the one hand experienced “othering” through White students drawing attention to their hair and on the other were deprived the opportunity to express what for some was an important part of their Black female identity. Thus, we have, in both Kofi’s experience of nightclubs and in our Black female participants’ experiences of hair, a reminder of the importance of intersectionality (how oppressive structures intersect to produce different experiences depending on social identities, see Crenshaw, 2017; Mitchell, Simmons, & Greyerbiehl, 2014) and how processes of misrecognition involve the communication of both who we can be and who we cannot be (Amer, 2020; Blackwood et al., 2013, 2015).

9 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We began by asking, what are the experiences that signal (non)belonging for Black students at a predominantly White university? What was striking was how soon after their arrival, our participants were made aware of both their minority status and their representation as “other” through being presented with stark contrasts both in terms of being vastly outnumbered and also confronted by normative Whiteness. What is perhaps more interesting, however, is the dynamic and complex nature of these identity processes which play out across time and place and are crucially shaped by interaction with White perspectives. Our participants’ sense making was oriented not just to their own perceptual field in the here and now (e.g., being the only Black person in a classroom), but to their perceptions (and meta-perceptions) of White students garnered in part through personal experiences of interaction (e.g., being made aware of White students’ naivety at best and racism at worst). This describes a more dynamic and nuanced process of self-perception than sometimes implied in research informed by SCT (e.g., van Veelen et al., 2019); one in which the nature of comparisons and normative assumptions in any given context cannot simply be read according to the preferences of an atomised perceiver in the here and now.

In this research we are reminded that minority groups are frequently and especially attuned to the actions and perspectives of the powerful (Lammers, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). This reflects a social reality in which the powerful can
define both the boundaries (who is included) and content of categories (what is normatively valued), and through acting on their definitions, (re)produce cultures of exclusion (Wenzel, Mummendey, & Waldzus, 2008). These theoretical insights have in recent years been associated with interest in how asymmetries of power can produce very different social construals (Saguy, Tropp, & Hawi, 2013; Talaifar, Buhrmester, Ayduk, & Swann, 2020) and the importance of attending to minority group perceptions and meta-perceptions (Stathi, Di Bernardo, Vezzali, Pendleton, & Tropp, 2020). For instance, from a White standpoint, expressions of enthusiasm for encountering diversity and the use of London slang might seem friendly and welcoming; indeed, according to the intergroup contact theory of prejudice reduction (Allport, 1954) and communication accommodation theory (Giles & Smith, 1979) there are circumstances where these behaviours are regarded as hallmarks of inclusivity. But, from the standpoint of our Black participants, the experience was of being “othered” both in terms of the denial of one’s student identity and in terms of misrecognition of one’s Black identity (i.e., being defined in terms of narrow cultural and place-based stereotypes and not as they see themselves). Thus, even in the absence of explicit antipathy associated with prejudice, seemingly innocuous behaviours are consequential when they signal that one cannot claim a shared or valued identity (McKeown & Dixon, 2017).

What adds further significance is that these interactions draw on cultural representations or stereotypes that attach to places; to where Black identities are imagined to be present and absent (Durrheim & Dixon, 2001). White students’ use of slang violates university norms and is a sharp reminder that Blackness and its expressions belong elsewhere; specifically, in urban environments (Bonam et al., 2017; Kinsman, 1995). Coincidentally, the White student struck by the diversity of the university hails from the same region featured in Pollard’s work as emblematic of British national identity; where the “intense visibility of being a Black person” is experienced through being confronted with “expressions of surprise and shock at her presence” (Kinsman, 1995, pp. 306). The broader point is that place is not merely a location where one may or may not be recognised; it lives in the imagination and carries cultural and social significance for how one is appraised and the limits to how one can identify and (inter)act.

Although our participants shared similar experiences, there were some key differences. For instance, present in our data was reference to specific experiences which resonate with stereotypes of gender and class: The threat of Black men in nightclubs, fascination with Black women’s hair, and notions of normatively acceptable language and dialect on campus. The presence of such intersectional experiences further underscores the importance of research that attends to the specifics of intergroup interactions and to place (Crenshaw, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2014); who is interacting and where. That is to say, whether one shares common identities within a given context (e.g., a Black woman interacting with a White woman on a Science course where women are in the minority) may matter a great deal to how one is defined (and defines oneself).

Our analysis connects with calls for taking our theories on identity processes out of the laboratory, and paying closer attention to minority perspectives on mundane, everyday interactions in the “messy world of reality” (Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005). This matters not just theoretically but practically. The attitudes, knowledge, and experience that the majority (White) students bring to universities tend not be considered by universities in their diversity recruitment strategies. Yet, Black (and White) students were not just perceiving in the present; they were interacting based on their representations of places from their past as well as wider racial (and racist) representations of who belongs where. Thus, our strategies for increasing diversity in higher education must take account of all students’ histories and the role of White perspectives in shaping Black students’ lives.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.
DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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**SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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**APPENDIX: List of participants**

| Name     | Gender | Nationality | Year | Faculty                      |
|----------|--------|-------------|------|------------------------------|
| Tellema  | Female | British     | 2nd  | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences |
| Antonia  | Female | British     | 3rd  | Faculty of Engineering and Design |
| Kofi     | Male   | British     | 2nd  | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences |
| Derek    | Male   | British     | 3rd  | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences |
| Margot   | Female | British     | 1st  | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences |
| Michelle | Female | British     | 3rd  | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences |
| Tyrone   | Male   | British     | 2nd  | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences |
| Adé      | Female | British     | 1st  | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences |
| Alicia   | Female | British     | 3rd  | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences |
| Viola    | Female | British     | 2nd  | Faculty of Engineering and Design |