Introduction

Chelsea

'*Cheers*!'

One summer night in 2015, I came downstairs to find my dad and five men I had never met before having a party in my dining room: bottles of whisky and schnapps, laughter and a lot of chatter. My dad was celebrating the fact that I had got into the University of Cambridge. It was an important night for my parents. After years of hard work and sacrifice, I had *made it* – for all of us. I poked my head around my dining room door to find out what was going on, and was met with congratulatory applause. I joined the party, was reminded every ten seconds that I shouldn't take the opportunity for granted, and accepted

a £50 note from one of the men (thanks uncle). We celebrated what was meant to be the end of something. Really, it was just the beginning.

My mum and dad came to the UK from Ghana during the Margaret Thatcher years with only 70p between them. After moving around in East London for a while, by the time I was born they had made a conscious decision to settle in Chingford, East London (or Essex). In comparison to inner-London's concrete jungles, Chingford was green and leafy, and despite being small, has raised the likes of David Beckham and Blazin' Squad. Growing up as the youngest child, I absorbed influences from all directions. I would sit wedged between my mum and dad eating banku and pepper, trying to follow the Twi that rolled off their tongues. Through them, I developed a strong sense of what it meant to be proud and Ghanaian. From an early age they made sure I never lost my connection with our mother country's

food, culture, language or customs. Respect your elders, never use your left hand to receive *anything*, and when you enter a room, always greet people from right to left.

By the time I reached the age of eleven, I had started begging my older brother and sister to take me to garage raves with them. I would wait until they got home from nights out, and screw my face with envy when they both came home late boasting about Jay-Z and Kanye West's 'Watch the Throne' concert. But once I was old enough to realise that they weren't just being mean siblings and I was actually too young, I saw just how much they were my idols (and still are). I spent the next few years calculating the steps it would take to be *exactly* like both of them. They were both elite athletes, so I planned to be an elite athlete. Jeanette liked house and garage music, so I started listening to house and garage music. Louie studied sports science at Loughborough University,

so naturally, I would also do the same.

For as long as I can remember, I've loved the fact that no one could pin down my identity. I never wanted to have one defining characteristic. I wanted people to see that I could be all of them at once. I wanted to be complex, be able to change my mind, have opinions and interests that didn't necessarily make sense all the time. My identity was never just me: it was the perfect distillation of everyone and everything around me.

So when university finally came around, a few weeks after my dad's party, I was excited. Maybe a little bit too excited. I imagined it as the perfect opportunity to explore whether I had any other interests to add to my mélange of a personality. Once I got there, I drank red wine from a cow's horn while shouting Anglo-Saxon phrases to others as part of a college initiation; regularly wore a gown to eat dinner; was hospitalised for a potential heart defect brought on by

eating too much pasta; and almost ran over an old lady while learning how to ride a bike on the road.

But throughout my whole experience, something my dad said to me after my first term at Cambridge stuck in my head: '**If I was walking past a bus-stop and I saw you sitting there, I would never believe that you went to Cambridge.**' Still tinged with a sense of disbelief, he never failed to remind me: I still look very young, and there's something about me that doesn't seem quite Cambridge. We both knew that I didn't fit the typical narrative of Oxbridge: privately educated, middle-class and, of course, white. In fact, I was a walking conundrum – black, a woman and working class. My university experience was never going to be 'normal'. There was a constant feeling of being a burden, and that my identity forced people to 'tolerate' or 'accommodate' me. If it wasn't a pity-party for 'poor black students', it was someone attributing all your successes

to tick-box quotas.

More than anything, it was a stark reminder that I had no control over my identity. As an eighteen-year-old, it was hard to grapple with the fact that I had entered an environment which meant that I was black before I was anything else. Not only black in being, but black in theory, stereotypes, principle and reality. It would soon become my most defining characteristic, in a place in which I had thought I would have the licence to explore every facet of my identity.

Ọrẹ

My name is Ọrẹ. Not ‘or-ray’ or ‘or-ee’ or ‘or’. It’s Ọrẹ. With a short ‘e’, like the first ‘e’ in elephant.

A teacher at secondary school once told me that she struggled to pronounce my name because it sounded unfinished, like something should come after it. Well, she was

half right – my name is actually Oreoluwa Hannah Ngozichukwuka Oluwafunmilayo Ogunbiyi. But I let everyone call me Ọrẹ, as long as they at least *try* to say it right.

I was born in Croydon. I went to school here until I was seven. For my first few years of school, everyone called me 'Or-ee'.

Then my family moved from Croydon to Nigeria. We stayed there for six years. For six years everyone pronounced my name the way my parents did. For once, my name was not something that immediately cast me into an outlier category – if anything, it did quite the opposite. I now knew what it felt like to be part of a norm, and not made to stand out due to my racial and cultural identity.

We moved back to England in 2010, and I told myself that I wouldn't let anyone mispronounce my name any more. I came back surer of who I was, who I am: Ọrẹ and not Or-ee. I had

reached a stage where my name was no longer a source of insecurity but one of pride, and a story in itself. But what I couldn't bring back to England with me was that sense of inclusion and normalness that came with being part of a community where almost everyone had long names with deep meanings – more explicitly, where almost everyone was black.

When I moved back, I was black. I came back with a sense of security in my identity as a Yoruba woman, and as a Nigerian woman, but equally, I had to come to terms with what it meant to be black in Britain. I went to a very diverse boarding school, and although I loved it, it fooled me into thinking that everywhere would be just as diverse, just as readily accepting of my Nigerian-ness, my blackness and all the intricacies that come with those traits. In my final year there, I gave a lecture to the other sixth formers and my teachers on the history of Pan-Africanism, I interviewed the Nigerian

Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka for my school's magazine, and I would spend the weekends cooking Nigerian food in our boarding house kitchen – but at no point did I feel that I was being 'too black'.

University would change that for me. As soon as I accepted my place, I felt the return of the identity crisis that I had not felt since I had reclaimed my name. The closer I got to Cambridge, the clearer it became that my blackness would mediate my university experience. I wish that I had been better prepared for what that would actually mean.

Cambridge put 'being black' into new terms for me. My blackness became something I had to protect, fight for, defend and explain. It isn't news that Cambridge, like most of the UK's other top universities, is particularly white. I was one of three black girls in my year group at Jesus College, a group that comprised some 150 people, and time and time again, black students at other

colleges would tell me how lucky I was because they were the only black person that their college had accepted that year. I got used to the questions about 'where I'm from'; and got used to the follow-up question about 'where I'm *really* from'; I got used to the attendant confusion of me saying that I was born in the UK. Being a black girl at Cambridge left me with no hope of blending into the background.

As a minority in a predominantly white space, to take up space is itself an act of resistance.