

Meyler Campbell Clear Leaders

MY DAILY EXPERIENCES OF BEING BLACK IN THE UK

Written by a Senior Black Female Executive in the Oil & Gas Administration

Being black is my favourite thing about me.

Being black is more than just the 'colour' of my skin and an identifying feature.

It's knowing I can have blue and purple braids which I can style a different way every day of the month. It is meeting another black person who is barely ten years older than me and knowing I have to call them Auntie or Uncle even though I don't know and will probably never see them again. It's taking a trip to the loo when I'm in the office and practising my carnival dance moves (even though I got caught that one time). It's waiting 364 days for carnival to come round because from the moment I wake up at 4am to have my make-up and hair done to the moment I slowly limp back to Holland Park Station, costume in hand, it's the one day of the year, I can be unapologetically black in England. It's having one day of the year where my blackness is celebrated.

BUT, being black and furthermore a black woman can be exhausting.

It's knowing that I can't afford to run out of shampoo because I can't just pop into Boots and grab another bottle; the high street doesn't cater for me that readily. It's knowing that I can still go to a make-up counter and be told that I have to buy two different shades of foundation to achieve something that's close to my skin tone, or even to be told there is no match at all. It's to live in a world where I constantly hear of people who look like me, doing things I do, murdered in cold blood in broad daylight usually by people who are supposed to protect them. Ahmaud Arbery was out jogging (something I do three (ish) times a week) when two people who decided that he did not belong in the neighbourhood, shot him dead in broad daylight. They then merrily went about their business for 72 days before being arrested. Breonna Taylor, an essential worker, was in her bed asleep (sleeping is my second favourite thing to do after eating) when police kicked in her door, didn't announce themselves and just started shooting. They fired 22 shots in her home, 8 of which hit and killed her. It's knowing that my 7-year-old cousin will at some unknown point, somewhere in the next few years, morph from the cute bucktoothed child he is now, to a perceived threat and will be stopped and searched for no reason.

These examples and the countless others out there are the reason why the hashtag Black Lives Matter exists. To be clear, it's not saying your life or other lives don't matter. It's just saying my life matters too. My life is not more important than anyone else's. My life doesn't matter more. I just want my life to matter. I want to feel like it matters. I want to go to the seminar I'm delivering and not be mistaken for the tea lady. I want to go to court and not be mistaken for the defendant. I want my mum, who works in a care home where she got COVID, to go to work and not have faeces thrown at her. I don't want to have to be grateful that the faeces only landed in her hair and not in her mouth like it did with her other black colleague. I want my mum to go to work just one day and not be called a fat black [insert offensive adjective here. Be creative, the residents are]. I want to drive my car and let an old lady cross the road without being called a f*****g stupid n****r. On another day, I might go to help that same old lady and see that flicker of fear in her eyes because she's worried, I'll steal her handbag. It's my mum being told to go back where she came from or being told by a resident that they don't want her kind touching them. This happens to my mum EVERY TIME she goes to work. It's being told "you speak English so well" when English is my first language. It's being told I'm too aggressive or too intimidating. It's reporting an incident to your manager where a colleague did or said something and being told "they didn't mean it like that". It's being told "you don't

look like a Megan" at a job interview. It's being told you're not bright enough to be a lawyer. It's feeling like you can't afford to get anything wrong because that might mean the company might not hire another black person for 10 years. It's researching a country's racism before you go on holiday. It's going on that holiday and seeing no one who looks like you for the whole time you are there. If you're exhausted reading this, it's exhausting living it.

You've seen the protests, news of looting and rioting and have probably thought how exactly is the rioting going help? I don't agree with the rioting, but I understand it. I understand the pain. I understand the frustration. I understand not feeling heard or feeling like I matter.

Not rioting has changed nothing. Every form of peaceful protest has seemingly had no effect. Unarmed black men and women are still being murdered in the streets, in their cars, in their homes, in the presence of their children. There is no right way to protest. It was illegal for slaves to try and run away for their freedom. It was illegal for Rosa Parks to sit at the front of the bus. It was illegal to march in apartheid South Africa. People criticised Martin Luther King for marching with children. Martin Luther King firmly believed in and practised peaceful protest. He was shot and killed anyway. Colin Kaepernick knelt during the American national anthem and it cost him his career.

The cause of the protests are 4,000 miles away so what does it have to do with us?

The personal experiences I set out have all happened in this country. As Stuart said, systemic racism is a problem in this country. I and every single black person I know have been 'Amy Coopered' at least once (the woman who called the police because a black man asked her to put her dog on its lead, where it was supposed to be <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3662COVmn8>). Amy Cooper is our colleague, our neighbour, the people we work out with in the gym, someone at the supermarket, someone on the train. People are tired. I am tired! That is why, despite the risks to them, people in the UK are protesting.

I am the "right kind of black" on paper. Even though I am an immigrant, I went to university, I've got a responsible job (actually four responsible jobs), I pay taxes, I've never claimed a benefit in my life, I vote, I donate to charity, I go on walks in the country, I think Nutella pizzas are weird but I still eat them. Despite all that I am, all that I have achieved, when I step outside of my front door, I am just another black woman. Every day, I must navigate a world I know was not built for me.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

A question I have been asked countless times in the last few weeks. Here are just a few things:

- (1) You are privy to spaces I am not. When you hear a racist comment or a lazy stereotype, challenge it.
- (2) If you're out on a country walk and see a black family, say hi. You'll probably be the first people who have acknowledged their presence that day. You might not get a hi back because they're so shocked, but they'll be grateful and feel visible.
- (3) When you're at a seminar or an event, don't go and talk to the people you know. Go and talk to one of the few, if not the only black person in the room. If you don't know what to say try "Hi, what company are you from?" or "Hi, what do you do?".
- (4) Show your children books written by non-white authors with non-white characters.
- (5) Be comfortable with being uncomfortable. I know its uncomfortable to have to confront issues of racism and prejudice. My life can be uncomfortable.
- (6) Don't worry about saying the wrong thing. The worst thing you can say, is to say nothing at all.

You work with me, you know me. We've had drinks and probably dinner together. We've been to all staff events and away days together. I've probably made you laugh at some point. You'd probably have me over to your house and let me play with your kids. The biggest thing you can do for me is to let #blacklivesmatter mean something to you the next time you see it. If only because it means something to me.