

## Naomi Young

I've made being a Queens native a key part of my identity.

A typical introduction by me goes:

“Hello,

My name is Naomi,

I use she/her pronouns,

And I'm from Queens, the best borough.”

That last part usually gets a reaction out of people, especially if they're from Brooklyn or the Bronx.

Unfortunately, I can't say I'm Queens born and raised since I was technically born in a hospital in the Bronx (a fact I'm saddened by but have come to accept); regardless, a majority of my life, my memories and my heart remain in Queens.

It may come across as ironic that this immense love I have for my home borough is a relatively recent development. As a high schooler, although my allegiance remained to Queens, it was more out of obligation than a genuine love.

My friends and family were all in Queens yes, but so were school and work. Those were things I had to attend to, so my time would get stuck in the loop of school, work, the library to study, and then home. On occasion I would go out to hang out with friends or my cousins, but those occasions were spread out pretty far apart. I was intensely focused on getting to college so I could “better my life” (whatever that means). And the only way I saw myself doing that was by studying hard enough to get a scholarship and saving enough money to cover whatever costs came up. I was motivated by fear and that fear obscured my vision from taking in the life around me.

And then I got into Vassar.

My hard work seemed to have paid off and I had accomplished the goal I'd been working towards for so long.

It was the middle of the pandemic and after having spent the last half of my senior year of high school and the whole summer in quarantine, I couldn't wait to get to campus and really open up to the life experiences I had skirted over.

I'll never forget the first time I stepped foot on Vassar's campus. I have been unable to go on a tour so my move-in day was the first time I had seen the college with my own eyes. I was hot and tired from having to carry two suitcases, a duffel bag, and a backpack all throughout the MTA and Metro North. But what I remember the most about that day is standing in line, waiting for my COVID test, and seeing around me only white faces. It was a complete and utter culture shock.

This feeling of unsettledness followed me throughout my first year, as I was often the only black person in class. I felt hyper aware of my race, my origins and my income level.

Was the way I spoke too "ghetto"? Did I rise to conflict too easily, like the girls in my high school that would meet disrespect with physical violence? I missed home and for the first time, I deeply reflected on my roots.

On the diversity that has surrounded me, a diversity I had always taken for granted.

On the passion people at home expressed, although that passion would often take the form of yelling and fighting.

On the freedom offered by the MTA, to travel (relatively) easily and conveniently.

It took coming to Vassar and being deprived of these things for me to truly understand what I needed from a community. I need not only people who look like me, but people who understand where I come from and what it was like growing up in that place. I need people who understand that as far as we have come in this country, there are many inequities that need to be addressed. Although I may not find all of these things at Vassar, I'm grateful for the experiences I've gained here that have led me to understanding my needs in community.