

Belonging and A Sense of Place

Wally Jiagoo

When you fill out an application form and get to the diversity monitoring section, which box do you tick? I've been filling out application forms since 1996. The diversity segment back then was simplistic. White? Black? Asian? Or Other? (Note to all you Gen Z-ers: what you know as South Asian, back then was just Asian.)

Born and raised in London, my formative years were spent alongside other fresh-faced children of newly arrived immigrants in the UK. Which box did they tick? Wouldn't we all be British by being born here? An obvious box for me to tick would be the one that said Asian, but was I actually Asian? My people are brown-skinned, Indian-looking; we eat a lot of curry, we watch a lot of Bollywood. So based on stereotypes alone, I'd argue that yes, I was Asian... But we're from the island of Mauritius, which is in Africa. So wouldn't that make me

African?

As a confused teen, I'd ask my mum. Hers was always a characteristically terse Mauritian response: 'Don't be stupid, garçon, of course we're Asian'. 'But then, why is Mauritius in Africa?' Annoyed that I was interrupting her during an episode of *Coronation Street*, she'd snap: 'Because it is, okay?'

I was in my twenties before I finally got a definitive answer from my Nana, my maternal grandfather. This was before Google and Wikipedia really took off, so we had to find stuff out the old-fashioned way. Nana told me that Mauritius had no indigenous people, that we're all imports, indentured labourers and slaves from other countries, brought in to work on the sugar plantations. My Nana's dada (his paternal grandfather) had come over on a boat from Bihar in India, as had most of our brown-skinned Mauritian folk.

I was, indeed, Asian. So why did I feel othered by the very same people I shared an Asian tick box with? Was it because I didn't speak a word of Urdu – like when I went to Maktab (aka Islamic Saturday school) where all my teachers and peers were Pakistani and so only conversed in their mother tongue? Or was it that time I applied to join a South Asian Writers' Group run by a prominent theatre company, only to be told that I didn't meet their criteria, because as a

Mauritian I come from Africa? I still have the email and it smarts. Or is it the umpteenth number of times I've been approached by kindly, elder South Asian women, and they excitedly ask me if I'm one of theirs – Indian, or Pakistani, or Bengali, or Tamil – and I always reply, 'Sorry Aunty, no. I'm Mauritian', and I'm given a blank look of confusion?

Growing up in the 80s and 90s as part of the Mauritian community in London, my memories are of an insular people, never really socialising with anyone from outside our own tribe, which frustrated me because at school all of my friends were from really interesting places across the world. Us Mauritians probably got tired of being othered, so we felt safer among our own.

Now, I no longer feel confused about my identity. I'm a child of the Indian diaspora, so I will forever feel culturally and spiritually rooted in the subcontinent. But for me, my home will always be London. A melting pot of cultures, it's where I feel most comfortable. I realise now what a privilege it was to spend time in so many different homes – from Mauritian, to Indian, to Pakistani, to English, to Irish, to Jamaican, to West African, to Vietnamese. Growing up together, it was our differences that connected us as we leaned on and learned from each other, forging our own sense of identity in relation to each other. To quote the wondrous poet Salena Godden, from her essay

'Shade' in *The Good Immigrant* (2016): 'We have learned to belong in the un-belonging. Spirited and colourful souls, of all shades. We tick: Other.'

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Born and raised in London, Wally is a writer of Mauritian heritage. An alumni of Soho Theatre's Writers' Group, he's previously had work performed at Soho Theatre, Theatre Royal Stratford East, Trafalgar Studios, and The Albany Theatre. He's also an alumni of the prestigious Channel 4 Screenwriting Course, and BBC Writers Workshop.

Wally's pilot script *Rasheed/Rasheeda* won the BAFTA Rocliffe New Writing Prize for TV Drama in 2016.

For TV, Wally has written episodes for *Malory Towers*, *The Dumping Ground*, and *Phoenix Rise*.

His essay *Glass Windows & Glass Ceilings* is included in a collection of 'essays on the working class, by the working class' called *Know Your Place*, published by Dead Ink Books 2017.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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