Growing up mixed heritage in the Fens: exploring identity, culture, and belonging

Growing up on the edge of the Cambridgeshire Fens in the ‘70s and ‘80s as a mixed heritage, melanated girl was a jumble of experiences. Born to a British white mum and Black Caribbean dad, I was one of two children of African heritage in my primary school, and one of three in my secondary school.

My childhood was largely happy. But inevitably, there were feelings of isolation due to my ethnicity. The lack of connection to my large Caribbean family throughout my young life compounded the issue, and contributed to confusion about my identity as I grew older in a rural setting.

At the age of five or six, I was too young to realise that I looked different to everyone else. I was just another kid knocking around the village. But one of my earliest memories of being ‘other’ was of standing at a checkout in a local shop with my mum; the cashier repeatedly asked if I was “really” her daughter. I remember wondering why the woman was so daft! As years went by, I understood that the cashier was racist and my mum was probably very frustrated.

But I somehow did not allow such ignorance to erase my spirit as a child. I suspect it had something to do with having a largely serene village life and extended family around me. I could cycle to my nan and granddad’s place in 15 minutes. They always welcomed me warmly and offered me as many biscuits as I wanted, and the opportunity to pick fresh cucumber and peas in the greenhouse. I still have a sweet tooth and am a keen vegetable grower.

I was a confident child in many ways, which helped when growing up in a tiny minority. Also, some of my allies were among the most boisterous in school; it was helpful knowing they were on my side.

Whenever I was abused – mostly name calling but I also was once spat at – someone always stuck up for me. I think being a girl helped – there was no shame in telling other girls how racism distressed me, and much-needed emotional support was freely available.

Staff at school did not seem to cared that much. This was in a time before legislative safeguarding, which kicked in with the Children’s Act in 1989. The conversations with the other Black kids happened, of course, but we were powerless at school, and had no local Black community to turn to, being in the villages.

Cut off from cultural influences

With no internet then, rural life meant I was cut off from information about other cultures unless I stumbled across the odd useful book in the secondary school library. Unsurprisingly, Judy Blume always trumped dull history books. As for Black fiction – no chance.

Of course, the void of Black history and cultural education affected me. But as a kid, I was happily distracted by the fun bits of village life: running through fields, jumping around on hay bales, tractor rides and village fetes. It was idyllic in many ways, and that freedom to play and explore served me well.

As I grew older, rural life started to lose its charm. To occupy my mind, I wrote stories. I would draw book covers and stitch the pages together using my mum's left-over wool and big darning needles.

I remember one book I wrote featured a Black family – I was inspired by the only Black family on TV at the time in the programme 'No Problem'. I had no other frequent cultural references in my life, but the sitcom was full of stereotypes - not a great way to learn about my heritage! But I am proud of that 11-year-old girl who, as the only person of colour in the class, wrote a book which she *thought* reflected her culture.

At 11, my mum and step-dad gifted me an electric typewriter that made my desk shudder when I switched it on.

I went on to produce a regular family magazine; my step-dad photocopied pages at work, and I distributed the product to friends at school. My courageous mum did not even sign off the copy. Local residents still remember the stories from our household.

Music and me

My main source of Black cultural input was music – that was one thing I could get my hands on relatively easily.

Back then, I had to travel to the nearest towns of Cambridge or St Ives with pocket money to buy records. My modest record and cassette collection was dominated by Black music artists.

I would don my walkman headphones, turn up the volume and walk along fenland roads and fields, or along the River Ouse. Taking in views across endless flat lands while soaking up Luther Vandross, Salt n Pepa, Sounds of Blackness, Prince and Michael Jackson.

The roar of low-flying military jets sometimes added bursts of excitement.

You see, I grew up close to three major US airbases. Back then, the locals and Americans lived integrated lives. We would visit the bases for the annual airshows. When I was old enough to go to gigs in Cambridge, I would stand alongside achingly

cool looking African American airmen. That all tailed off at the end of the Cold War when most bases closed down.

They US airforce was one of the reasons that Cambridge and other local towns had a pumping music scene in my teens. The record companies knew they had audiences there. The area was not *all* about sugarbeet and potatoes, you know!

A breakthrough in Black culture came with Soul II Soul in the late ‘80s. It was incredibly important on many levels for me. Firstly, they were British *and* exemplary music makers. Also, everyone from different backgrounds embraced their sound and their ethos of unity.

For the first time, due to their broad appeal, I could openly share the joy of Black music and creativity my white friends. It was an important moment in understanding my identity. Music is still very important to me.

Countryside (s)trolls

Since my village was surrounded by fields, walking into sprawling countryside was unavoidable. But as a teenager, when I become more aware of my appearance, I would worry about what white people, who did not know me, would think of me. I would imagine them wondering: “What on earth is *she* doing here?”.

I did get the odd glare that would shrivel my soul.

I wanted to scream, “I was born here – it's *you* who doesn’t belong here!”. Of course, I never did. I would have probably been told to stop making a fuss or something. So why bother?

At an older age, I would experience the same looks when I walked into pubs in Cambridge. My white friends rarely noticed, and I would never bother complaining. It was too exhausting to explain it all. Looking back, I lacked the education in racism and vocabulary to explain what I was feeling too. But often a night out would see me on high alert, and I eventually learned that this was normal for Black people in non-diverse towns.

I always avoided pubs with George Cross flags in windows – I still do. I opted for places where my music was played. I felt safer there – there was a chance that the people there would at least have some appreciation of Black culture. I guess I was clinging on to glimmers of belonging.

My sixth form college in Cambridge was a pre-cursor to Oxbridge. I felt like a spare part. Especially when one of the teachers would repeatedly confuse me with my Sri Lankan classmate. The culture was discriminatory, biased and divisive. I had a tough time there, and was thrilled to put it all behind me when I finished my A Levels in 1991. Their

attempt to integrate more state secondary school students with the public and private school kids was disastrous for me.

Becoming an activist

I left England for a working holiday in the Bavarian Alps in my gap year, then moved to London for university in 1992. There, I was confronted new challenges around my mixed-race identity. New friends were horrified by my stories from growing up in a village, and I quickly learned to modernise my language (I was still using outdated terms such as ‘half-caste').

I joined the Anti-Nazi League in London, and my university work was heavily influenced by my interest in anti-racism. Oddly, it was my urge to understand how racism happens, which attracted me to Germany during reunification, when fascism was resurfacing in eastern Germany. I learned that people from East Germany have very different attitudes to multicultural society – it was fascinating.

Coastal living

I currently live in coastal Suffolk. I love the beautiful surroundings, but part of me still feels discomfort. But that has never stopped me from exploring our beautiful countryside.

A rural childhood forced me to explore the racial dichotomy that I embodied. My rumination about why and how I was different probably prepared me well for life.

In writing this, I have found it curious how my life has come full circle. But this time round, I am able to share my inner thoughts publicly. I hope it contributes towards an accurate history of Britain outside the big urban centres. Such stories have been long overlooked, and it is time they were unlocked.