

"Breaking out of the Labels"

Is it right to create an identity based entirely on how you are perceived and treated by a racist society? This is the question asked by Yasmin Alibhai Brown and Anne Montague in making a series of interviews for their book on mixed-race relationships *The Co/our of Love*. – Yasmin Alibhai Brown and Anne Montague, *New Statesman*, 17 February 1992, pp. 14f.

Vicky Phillips' mother is half-Sierra Leonean, half-English and her parents are divorced. Three of the family are very dark-skinned, the rest look white. "When we were kids we were aware of racist things happening. We would walk down the road and someone would shout 'Shit legs' at my sister who is much darker than me. In fact my father used to call us niggers when he was angry and call my mother a black bitch.

"It was when my mother took us to Sierra Leone that everything began to click into place. Being there made it much easier to realise that I was black, because I had the security of the family. So now if I meet another Sierra Leonean I feel completely relaxed and at ease. The thing is that it doesn't always work both ways, maybe because I don't look obviously black. It does bother me now because you feel like an alien to virtually everyone you meet. [...]

"There is a split in my persona, like I'm carrying with me two things which aren't connected. I don't see the white thing as negative but I don't have a lot of experience of being white. I was brought up by my black mother in an African country, so my appearance is something separate from myself."

Yvette Alexander has a white mother and a West Indian father. She lives in Coventry and runs a support group for mothers of mixed-race children. "From as early as I can remember, I was aware that my parents were different in colour from each other, and that I seemed to be a mixture of both. I didn't become aware of being treated differently until I went to primary school. All this made me think that it was really unjust that I was black.

"When I went home very upset and told my parents why I felt that way, my father was adamant that we were black and that we would have to work twice as hard as anyone else at school to get as far as them. On the other hand, my mother would tell us that we weren't black, we were brown, usually behind my father's back. So most of my experiences as a child were negative – they made me constantly wish that I wasn't me – and part of the reason for that was that the messages that were coming from my parents were incompatible.

"I really started to think things through at the age of 18. Until then I was blaming myself for my situation, which many black and mixed-race people tend to do. So then I could start to relate to myself as a black person. I came to the conclusion that I was lucky in lots of ways, that I've got two sets of culture. But at the end of the day I was a black person, that's how I would be treated in society.

"In retrospect, it would have been more valuable for me if someone had sat down and asked, 'how do you feel about what you are?' instead of just telling me what I was supposed to be.

"I think that mixed-race young people are a growing force. With that in mind, the whole issue needs to be addressed – of what mixed-race people are called and the kind of difficulties they sometimes grow up with in terms of their identity and the messages that go on around them. When I was young and I read things to do with black people, I thought 'there's more than that for me, there are other things which don't seem to be touched on here.' In the past, mixed race people have tended to get lumped in with the issues around black people. It's great if mixed-race people can identify themselves as being black, because in society's terms they will be treated as black and it makes it easier in terms of fighting racism.

"The last thing I would want is to start splitting people up. I'm not into making sure mixed-race children are black, full stop. I'm more into exploring where the child thinks they're at."

Vocabulary

bitch (n.): a female dog; used in an unkind way about a woman - **to click into place** (v.): to be seen in the proper way, so that everything can be understood - **persona** (n.): here: personality - **adamant** (adj.): firm and immovable in opinion - **at the end of the day**: when everything is considered - **in retrospect** (adv.): thinking back to the past from the present - **to lump in with** (v.): (informal) consider as if they were one thing - **to be into** (v.): (informal) to like, be keen on - **where one's at**: (informal) what situation one is in, what sort of person one is

Explanations

Sierra Leonean: from Sierra Leone, a country in West Africa near Liberia, formerly British. now an independent member of the Commonwealth

Comprehension

- 1 Why is the colour of Vicky Phillips' skin important?
- 2 Why did Vicky feel relaxed in Sierra Leone?
- 3 What made it more difficult for blacks to be at ease with Vicky?
- 4 What conflicting messages about herself did Yvette Alexander get from her parents?
- 5 What does Yvette see as the advantages and disadvantages for mixed race people of identifying with the black community?

Analysis

- 6 "My appearance is something separate from myself" (II. 18f.) and "They made me constantly wish I wasn't me" (I. 29) - to what extent are these phrases central to the problems described here?
- 7 For most black people, pride in being black, a central element in the Black Consciousness movement, is very important in affirming their identity. Explain what is problematical about this for mixed-race children.
- 8 Does the text suggest any alternatives, and if so, what?

Opinion

- 9 Do you think that it is an advantage or disadvantage for children to be brought up with two cultures, religions or languages?

Projects

- 10 Find out more about Black Consciousness and similar movements.