

In between identities

ISABELLE



There is a beautiful melange of culture found in many households: when there are saris, qipaos and tuxedos at the same wedding; when an English Christian and Yemeni Muslim family has separate frying pans for bacon; or, perhaps, the familiar summer visits to the country of your ancestors. We might connect with all, some or none of our heritage, but at some point or another, we'll probably be asked to define what nationality, ethnicity or race we belong to. Race, according to Cambridge Dictionary, is the *idea that people can be divided into different groups based on physical characteristics that they are perceived to share such as skin colour, eye shape, etc., or the dividing of people in this way*. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is unhelpfully defined as *being from a particular race of people*. This is where we meet an unfortunate inadequacy in the English language: the definition of race divides us into neat groups but should that be the case?

Connie Hoe was certainly well acquainted with the struggle of growing up between two cultures – born in 1922 to a Chinese father and English mother, she grew up

in East London. In the early 1900s, during the rise of the eugenics movement, children of multiple ethnicities were regarded as science experiments, and speaking on the documentary *Mixed Britannia*, she remembers how the British Eugenics Society would measure their forehead sizes or eye colours, trying to prove that mixed-race marriages only resulted in so-called 'lesser' qualities. Having been evacuated to the country during the war with a group of Anglo-Chinese children Connie felt she "became part of the village" in a welcoming community. But sadly, as her story exemplifies, there were people who still perceived her as not English enough or, perhaps, too Chinese.

In his TEDx talk, *Both Not Half*, Jassa Ahluwalia, a Coventry-born, Leicester-raised actor, writer and filmmaker, spoke of his struggles of not feeling British enough, nor Punjabi enough. After his Punjabi comedy sketch went viral in 2019, Jassa has been outspoken about his mixed-heritage experiences. His talk puts forward the idea that his Punjabi and British identities cannot and should not be separated, preferring to be of



Jassa Ahluwalia; "Not feeling British enough, nor Punjabi enough," in his TEDx talk, *Both Not Half*

"mixed heritage and one human race." As an actor, he also raises another issue: lack of representation and highlights people of ethnic backgrounds struggling to find roles, especially those without stereotypes or clearly only to check a diversity box. Having to fit in with these societal divisions is such a strange notion when we pause to think that nations and nationality didn't exist until around 200 years ago.

And when it comes to ticking boxes, some of us might find it easy to fill in the race or ethnicity section of a form without giving it much thought, but not everyone will comfortably fit into the limited choices. Of course, no survey is complete without the "other, please define below" box

as a convenient catch-all. While it does allow the opportunity for self-identity, is it really fair to group all 'other' identities – especially as they are likely to be diverse. Treating them as one homogenous category would ironically defeat the purpose of surveying race and ethnicity in the first place! In the 2021 Census, despite having a mixed-race section for ethnicity, the three pre-printed answers all included white as one of the ethnicities. In a 2011 BBC interview, a young Algerian-British woman expressed her exasperation at knowing she'd have to "go straight down to [the] other [box]." Though a fully representative race and ethnicity checklist would likely be too long to be practical, self-identifying with multiple

ethnicities has become one of the fastest growing groups in the UK (with likely more than 1.2 million as of 2011) it's going to be something we need to work on.

Perhaps an emphasis on traditional cultural identities and the consequences of past treatment of mixed-heritages as "other" has neglected the idea that to coexist does not mean be separate. London prides itself on being an international environment, fostering an identity in itself – being a "Londoner". Given that race can also refer to a *group of people who share the same language, history, characteristics*, could a day come where we define ourselves not by what country we are perceived to come from but where we decide we have come to belong?



Connie Hoe and her family.

The generation gap becoming closer?

JOANNA



There have always been gaps in our society between generations. The phrases "you're just a kid" and "you're behind the times" thrown around like insults with startling frequency. Britain has changed a lot since our grandparents were young. Our society is more diverse, and technology has improved vastly. But the recent coronavirus pandemic has isolated the older generations more than ever, with many elderly people being required to shield in order to protect their health, and their whole lives moving online at a pace that is difficult to keep up

with. This is where our generation, generation Z (born 1997-2012), is required to step up – and we have done.

Young people have been helping the elderly in their communities by doing their food shopping, walking their dogs, collecting their prescriptions and offering companionship via phone calls. All this has not been going unnoticed and is greatly appreciated by the elderly. Thanks to our young people, the generational gap finally feels much narrower. I know I have spoken more to my grandmother since the pandemic began as I cannot see her in person.

Hopefully, we are now emerging on the other side of this pandemic, with the vaccine rollout going incredibly well, and lockdown restrictions being lifted. However, I would urge all the young people not to give up helping the elderly, but to continue to help, so that we can keep narrowing the generation gap and build a more unified and connected community.

If you would like suggestions of how to help, I would recommend checking your local community network, or signing up to a website such as Adopt a Grandparent, which matches you up with an isolated elderly person with similar interests to you, so that you can chat and provide them with companionship.

So, whether you have been walking an elderly neighbour's dog, or spending (as I have) hours on the phone explaining Zoom calls to your grandparents, thank you very much, for stepping in to help the most vulnerable in our community, just as the elderly once looked after us.





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