
A life of liminality: my story

By Kyle Adams

The writer is studying towards a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina in the United States. He is currently a visiting intern at the Institute for African Alternatives.

During his childhood, IFAA intern Kyle Adams gradually learned that constructing a personal identity would prove difficult in an American society that is typically defined in terms of black and white. As the offspring of a brown Mauritian woman and a white American man, Kyle's phenotype was unfamiliar to many, and he was perceived as "racially ambiguous". He writes about his struggle to find personal security and belonging.

When I was eight weeks old, I flew nearly 15,000km across the world to a tiny island most Americans have never heard of – Mauritius. This country, inhabited by a mere 1.3 million people, is what my mother calls home. I've visited Mauritius ten times over the course of my life, and I'm still taken aback by the country's sheer beauty every time I land in Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Airport. Palm trees, blue ocean and towering mountains are everywhere. Even more, I cherish the opportunity to travel home to half of my extended family. My Mauritian roots are difficult to connect with when in America, so these trips have a profound

impact on my sense of identity.

My father is a white man from Decatur, Illinois, which is the soybean capital of the world. Decatur is almost entirely white. The city epitomises the Midwest feeling of being in the middle of nowhere. Flying into Bloomington Airport in a 24-person plane is quite a different experience from the Airbus we take from Dubai to Mauritius.

Growing up, I thought nothing of my parents' dissimilarities. I did not think it was strange to have both Christian and quasi-Hindu relatives. I was not confused by eating steak and mashed potatoes on Monday and chicken curry with dal makhani on Tuesday. That was just the way my family operated, and my parents never hinted that our household was different from the supposed American ideal. None of this seemed relevant until I reached elementary school, when my peers started asking questions. "Can you pass the skin colour crayon," one would say, pointing at the crayon labeled as "peach." The naïve questions eventually turned into jokes, and then the jokes turned into insults. Often I was told: "Go home and eat your curry."

Phenotypically, I probably look closest to those of Indian descent. This presumption is not entirely off-base since my mother's ancestors were in fact Indians who immigrated to Mauritius four generations before her. However, I do not identify as Indian in any capacity, nor do I know much about Indian culture. Yet I still often have to deal with the startling question: "Are you

Indian?" Although not usually done with malicious intent, this question is incredibly frustrating. I would not be ashamed to be Indian, but it's infuriating to feel as though someone has already determined my identity for me. The question does not ask what my heritage is. It asks: "Is my assumption of you correct?" Consequently, I am reduced to a singular identity and stripped of the opportunity to explain my heritage, a part of my identity of which I am extremely proud. Instead, my two options of reply are "yes" or "no".

In elementary school, I saw myself as the standard white kid living in a Richmond suburb. I was just slightly more tanned than everyone else. Even so, I dealt with the stigma of being an Indian kid during my elementary and middle school years. Fitting the cliché, recess was the most revealing time for these encounters. When picking teams for football or basketball, the two captains first picked the few black kids in our class. Of course, they were viewed as the "natural athletes". Once they were off the board, the captains would pick the scrawny white kids who remained. These were the kids who had the best houses for sleepovers and consistently brought extra Little Debbie desserts for lunch. Their parents also served on the PTA and were the "team moms" for all of the recreational sports teams. The opportunity cost of picking them made the decision easy. Meanwhile, little Kyle did not have exceptional athleticism or compensatory social capital to warrant a pick. I wasn't white enough; I



wasn't black enough. Little did I know that when I entered high school and met a large Indian community, they, too, consider me insufficient to their standards of "Indian-ness."

I tell this story – my story – because it explains why I am so passionate about one specific realm of social justice: race. In pre-school, my two best friends were a boy with white skin named Michael and a boy with black skin named Alex. I intentionally describe their skin colours in this way because that's how I thought of them at that age. They were two boys who just happened to look different. I wish I still saw people that way. My skin colour is darker than others' simply because my ancestors lived closer to the equator and thus evolved to have increased melanin levels; we're all the same under the gift-wrapping we call skin. However, my reality is that I've been heavily socialised to accept and internalise this social construct we call "race". I habitually buy into this social construct that was established hundreds of years ago when European explorers on the continent of Africa needed an explanation to enslave native Africans for economic efficiency. The difference of skin pigment seemed like the most logical way to explain this to the elites back in Europe, so they created a social construct that could be hegemonically reinforced by biological criteria.

Race ensnares us all, and the automatic differentiation of people based on their skin colour is a learned

behaviour that feels unshakeable. I grew up hugging and kissing family of both white and brown skin, yet I must continually fight to unlearn the innumerable stereotypes and biases that were planted within me and recreated by me for almost two decades. Like the vast majority of Americans (and people around the world), I also internalised the concept of whiteness and its cultural superiority. Although I had family of diverse roots, I was brought up in a Western education system that drilled the history and culture of whiteness into me. I was led to believe that the default languages, music, clothing, skin colour and overall way of life were those of white-skinned people.

Growing up, I never felt completely comfortable or accepted in any group outside of my nuclear family (I still don't). Again, I was not white nor black enough for my classmates. But I also was not the correct colour for my own relatives. In Decatur, I was clearly too dark to fit in, to the point that at my paternal grandfather's funeral I was asked if I was adopted. When I visited Mauritius, my slightly lighter skin tone and my lack of fluency in Créole Mauricien excluded me from being accepted by my own cousins as one of them. Living in this perpetual state of liminality as a child was toilsome and exhausting, and it continues to be as I grow older. For much of my childhood, I subtly resented my parents for creating me as a mixed child, and I continually

thought about how easy life would be if I had purely white or purely brown or purely black skin pigment.

However, the ubiquitous tension and frustration was turned on its head when I realised the unique opportunity my mixed identity granted me. I had the opportunity to have a hand in several communities without having to fully commit to a single one, thus becoming a "floater" among the ethnic groups I encounter. I learned to code switch with the many people from whom I hoped to earn the very slightest acceptance. I was able to talk about both hip-hop and country music in order to gain credibility and connect with people who would not have otherwise trusted me. I also began to recognise how I could use my own experiences of marginalisation to empathise with others. And towards the end of my high school career, I became very familiar with the condescending, reductive gripes that I was accepted by colleges like Georgetown, Duke and Stanford simply because of affirmative action quotas. Essentially, my uncomfortable childhood gave me a wide vantage point.

My story is one in which the social issue of racial marginalisation is impossible to ignore. But I do not share my story as a means of complaining or seeking pity. I tell my story because it illustrates the many ways in which the social construct of race taints the lives of everyone. Even the privileged white person is negatively affected, in that his/her life is reduced to a single "lived experience". The concepts of race and racism are unlikely to fade for a very long time (if ever), yet we must work to persistently problematise the recreation of race and its power over people's identities. Individuals are stripped of their autonomy if they are instantly reduced to stereotypes every time they're approached by others. It's imperative that race is publicly deconstructed. Because of my childhood, problematising and rethinking the concept of race is what I hope to do as my life's work. This is my story. 