Contradictions of Belonging

What is it I am meant to belong to?
From where you’re standing where does it look like I belong?

In primary school assembly one day the teachers decided to play a game where other teachers had to match siblings together across year groups. I knew instantly me and my brother would “win”. I was right, we were the last two left stood in front of our whole school, my white-passing brother and I. Maybe next time we can play this game with our parents too I thought, white middle-class parents always addressed my mum as the nanny - I’m sure we’ll win.

But what would be the pr(c)ize?*

When I think about the contradictions of belonging I think about the contradictions of my own mixed heritage, Jamaican and Indian - (specifically Anglo-Indian)*
Both communities a production of migration forced or free
I think about not where my belonging is rooted but the routes it has taken. And where it may continue to go. I am a rest stop on a journey with too much context to articulate succinctly. Sharing is messy but fruitful.

When we share the soil new routes grow, relations take hold, contexts arise.
Britain both the mother country and the fatherland in imaginaries of colonial subjects from Jamaica and India but can I ask, who bestowed Britain the right to enforce gender upon the earth? What happens when an oppressive, capitalist force both genders and others the soil as something to be conquered?

Their own aspirations to whiteness and intergenerational transmission of inaccurate family histories become complicit in making the Indian maternal ancestor, native women and miscegenation invisible.

Where then can you belong?
Must we only choose one thing to belong to?
Believe in?
Come from?
Go towards?

In my family, the matriarch rules. You’re drawn to her; whether she’s holding court in the living room, cooking curry goat or brown stew in the kitchen, or tending to her bountiful garden.*

They call us children of the soil.

When I think about the contradictions of belonging I think about W.E.B. De Bois’s double consciousness, Stuart Hall and second rate simulacra, a disjointive imaginary relation to the white world.

In the absence of documentary proof of origins, no caste designation, the quotidian performance of identity becomes all important. But their habits gave them away as merely “Upma”* Like all Caribbean peoples, dispossessed and disherited from a past which was never properly ours. Caribbean social complexity derived from colonisation and the era of plantation society.

One of Britain’s most violent powers is its ability to colonise and disconnect the multiplicity of existence into 1 dimensional binaries. As I understand nothing is codified in a correct space/time. Is there are a correct space/time?
Simultaneously dispossessed and disherited from versions of past that are historically verified in archives, museums, text books but differ always from the versions of histories that parse through lips.

Colonial was not something you chose to be. It was an attribute of being, formative because it framed your very existence. Positioned you as Subject-author as well as subjecting you to its discourse.

Possession. Possessed.
How do you truly possess time, history? Where?
What legitimises a sense of ownership other than the body?

Her body’s non reference to Britishness disenfranchises her from possession of the archive.

When I asked my granddad where he was born he said the jungle, alongside a railway colony. I took the details he gave me to search for a copy of his birth certificate. The GRO responded with “A search has been made in our indexes but no trace has been found of an entry with the details you supplied. We suggest you contact Asian & African Studies at the British Library.”

I have tried to possess my identities through passports and ID cards but we remain:
Traceless, non existent, unreadable, unrecognisable.

I have sent my saliva in a test tube to a lab, to tell me where I am really from.

If saliva is 99% water then surely that’s the answer right there?
I am from the water.
The map I contain within me is made of water, salt, blood and memory. Shouldn’t that be enough?
What happens when we look at water as something that connects us rather than a border that separates us?
I am trying to recenter the ocean/sea/water and look outwards towards the sea in me from before.
From beyond the Door.

When I think about belonging I think about the difference between possession and embodiment. Possession as a kind of performance of identity, a second rate simulacra.

To possess feels like being in a constant state of stress and anxiety, sleeping with one eye open.
No agency. Possessed by that which you must possess in order to be readable.

Up until 1927 the East Indian Railway determined job roles for employees through inspection by a medical officer. Their nationality – European, Anglo-Indian, Indian Christian, Domiciled European or Caste was discerned by their appearance and demeanour.

Anglo-Indians were uncertain about what it was about their bodies, behaviours, memories, and histories that could prove their identity.

At the mercy of the institution that has positioned you as subject, whilst subjecting you to its discourse/violence.

In response to the Anglo-Indian deputation of 1925, Lord Birkenhead was eager to make clear wholesale emigration to Britain was out of the question and their identification with Britain was misguided.

Eleven Labour MPs delivered a letter to Attlee warning that “an influx of coloured people” would “impair the harmony, strength and cohesion of our public and social life and cause discord and unhappiness among all concerned.”

Embodiment is something different entirely, it doesn’t sit in the palm of someones tightly clenched fist.
It travels, moves, changes shape, it is liquid or air. Or both.

My grandparents on my mother’s side left Jamaica and came to England in the 50s and brought with them music, food, laughter and light. Now that they’re gone that light has diminished, but it has awoken in me a longing to pass on that same message of welcoming and acceptance, and this feeling has only grown all the more since my mum was also taken from us.

Their love runs deep, and when I doubt my place in the family as a mixed heritage woman, I hear my Grandad in my uncle’s laugh, I see my Nan in my aunties’ smiles, and I recognise my Mum when I look in the mirror.

When displacement moves to the centre of things space/time splices into limitless fragments of past, present and future.

When we can move from possession towards embodiment, we become lighter whilst simultaneously more grounded.

This reminds me of the mantle piece, gas fireplace come shrine in my grandparents house that nurtures space(s)/time(s).
I visited the house in the winter of 2020, a the nine nights ritual for the passing of my auntie.
I hadn’t visited my grandparents house for over 15 years yet I was there, above the fireplace, with my cousins.
In that moment I realised the power of that space above the gas fire bringing us all together even when we were apart.
Knowing me when I didn’t know you.
I wonder what we spoke about?
What you told me and what I heard.
Can I tap into that version of myself in my primary school photo?
Frozen in time yet watching life unfold.

Calling forth and holding space for disparate moments.
Inherently connected by something much more complex than linear time.
I am working on how to become spider. Like Sister Nancy the trickster is not simply the product of a hostile environment, a hostile history, but a generative mode of becoming. Interrupting public histories and fictional myths. Instead rendering bodies and identities with the ability to shapeshift, to play with the instability of identity and find solace in belonging to both worlds and neither.

The past was already missing, the origin permanently deferred, the future unfixed. What are the Ananse stories we embody through existing? How can we choose when to become visible and readable? To who? For what?

Anancy embodies the right to opacity. Ambiguity as a tool to disturb totalising powers. Shapeshift to disrupt post-colonial amnesia, To pass and not pass simultaneously. Weaving and reweaving our sense of being in the world, a place, a community, a family. Weaving and reweaving our sense of being in multiple worlds, places, communities, families.

The “past” has often been a place I have travelled to to make sense of myself. And I forever arrive at more questions than answers. Gradually I become less concerned with proving being from somewhere and more energised in an ongoing process of becoming.

References
*Anglo Indian* is a native person of India with Indian heritage and European ancestry (through the paternal line). When the British colonised India they created a second-tier system of population control by initially subsidising men to marry Indian women and orphans. Though the Company had earlier officially encouraged unions between its seamen and Indian and mixed race women as a way of grounding them in India, the increasing population of the offspring of such unions had come to be regarded as potentially dangerous in light of the behaviour of mixed race populations in leading insurrections against colonial rule. The community was distanced from the levers of true power, serving in an intermediate position between the British and Indians. Over generations Anglo-Indians became one of many native Indian communities gaining recognition as an official mixed race community in 1911.