

# MIDDLEGROUND

A MAGAZINE FOR MIXED IDENTITIES, STORIES AND VOICES.

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# Middleground

## EDITORS' NOTE

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While this issue was being finalised, the world was rising up to demand justice for the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, as well as other victims of racially motivated crimes, and to fight for the acknowledgement and dismantlement of white supremacy and systemic racism.

This fight is one people of colour have been having for a long time, which is finally gaining the traction it deserves and needs. What you will find within these pages are stories inspired by a lifetime of discrimination, by a lack of representation, by the very concrete and long-lasting suffering of a whole community. No matter where these creators are from, or what their backgrounds are, or how they have decided to tell their experiences, their work has been gathered here to highlight struggles that have gone unseen for too long.

But we also wanted to ensure this issue would not focus solely on the pains that come from being people of colour. We wanted these essays, poems and visual pieces to remind us of our roots, of the beauty of our heritage, of what unites us all. Through these pages shine the love one has for their country, another for their family, another for themselves. Through these pages shines pride.

We hope the pieces you are about to see inspire you and remind you to educate yourself, question your position and privilege, and keep fighting.

There is still a lot of work to be done.

## TEAM

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**PAULINE JEREMIE**  
*Editor-in-Chief*

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*Poetry Editor*



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**KARI RITTOO**     *A Constant Duel*

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Seven-year-old me thought dirty was what happened when you didn't shower properly,  
turns out it's what happened when my Paki dad fucked my slut mother.

She thought her favourite packed lunch was a sausage roll,  
but she forgot she was Muslim 'til the teacher snatched it from her hand.

High school me thought I was from Manchester.  
Luckily, her music teacher remembered she was from Pakistan, you know...before.

She thought she wore jeans, sometimes skirts on a hot day.  
Thankfully, her drama teacher just knew that she'd know how to put on a sari.

Uni me thought I got into my first choice because I had straight As,  
until her friends pointed out it was (of course) positive discrimination.

She thought she was out to dance with her friends, she thought she'd said no to his hand up  
her skirt, she was brown enough to redeem his sins, western enough to be 'up for it'.

Adult me heard the vitriol spill as her step father used the word 'Paki' and  
she watched her mother's face not flinch.

So I must be the Paki with a Mauritian father,  
the Muslim atheist brought up a Hindu.

The woman with two cultures who's not welcomed by either,  
because if everyone else knows better

Then doesn't mother  
know  
best.

I remember getting a Pap smear a few years ago. For me the procedure itself, though necessary, is at times quite uncomfortable. A large, cold speculum is placed inside the vagina, spreading the walls apart for examination. An older cis man was my doctor for the exam, which already made me a little uneasy. I hate to have to wonder how professional cis males are while examining the “opposite sex”, and while I think there are some who truly believe in the work they do and would never do anything to take advantage of or violate their patients, you never really know anyone’s intentions. This cis male also happened to be white. He was not my first choice, but I didn’t have the luxury of waiting weeks for another doctor.

As he asked me to spread my legs apart, we delved into light chatter. He noticed that on the form I filled out asking for my ethnic background, I checked the box for ‘Native American’. You know how they make you check one box only? I almost always put ‘Native’, because I remember my mama telling me to since I was a kid, “so that they know we’re still here”. So he asked what tribe I’m from. After telling him my southern California tribe, he told me, fingers deep into my vagina, “Funny, you don’t look Native American.”

It’s hard to describe the exact feelings that this statement conjured up for me. Here I am, at one of my most vulnerable moments, spreading my legs open for a man I have never met in my entire life, sharing my ancestry with him. And he dares to tell me I don’t look like what I am. That I don’t fit into the perfectly delineated notion he has of what a true Native American looks like.

I felt like I had to justify myself. As soon as he told me that I didn’t fit the stereotype of what a Native person looks like, I quickly told him the rest of my ancestry to help him understand why I look the way I do. “Oh, I’m also Mexican and Jewish on my mom’s side, Cuban and Irish on my Dad’s,” I explained. He nodded, and didn’t say much after that because the exam was essentially over with. This is one of the instances of my mixedness that has always stuck with me, because it was latent with patriarchal undertones. Here was a white cis male, unaware of the social, racial, and gender boundaries he was crossing as he was physically engaged with some of the most private parts of my body, yet denouncing my ancestry with tremendous authority. It was a case of white, male privilege because he had no idea how offensive his words were pertaining to my mixed ancestry, and because he had the audacity to tell me these things as he was nonchalantly exploring my vagina.

Since then, I’ve tried to have a different mindset about my mixed ancestry. I realize I don’t (usually) look Native American/Indigenous to people at first, because I’m also so many other things. Truthfully, I don’t think I really look like any of my ethnicities.

But I’m learning to accept my racial ambiguity. People have told me I look everything from Filipino, part Black, Latinx, to a “straight up white girl”. Really, it just depends on who’s looking at me and what parts of society have influenced them. Even now, the statement from the white doctor doesn’t sting as much because I’ve decided his opinion does not define my existence as a mixed woman of color. On the contrary, my unique features do, as does the cultural knowledge that has been passed down to me from my respective predecessors. I know I can cook Cuban picadillo, which I learned from my Abuela to perfection, if need be. I know the

auburn tint of my hair is from my Irish ancestry, and my coarse waves from my Jewish one. I know my ability to weave plants into baskets comes from my Indigenous great-grandmothers, and so does my clay-colored skin. And I know I'll be damned if I give a white, cisgender man the ability to contrive his ignorant statement about my phenotype into my ethnic self-concept.





**HERA HONG**    *BODYNOTABODY*

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My body is not my body—  
not just my body—  
just a body.

He looks for me  
as he looks at me  
where he touches me—  
he cannot see what he wants to see.

My body is not my body—  
not just my body—  
it is my mother's and my father's.

When I stand with my mother's legs  
on my father's land  
I also stand with  
her jaw and her hair and her lips.

When I hug with my father's arms  
on my mother's land  
I hug with  
his eyes and his nose and his stomach.

My body is not my body—  
not just my body—  
parts of bodies, other bodies.

I am not quite—  
I am not entirely—  
*You know you kind of look like—  
but you know not really—*

My body is not my body—  
but it is my body—  
just a body.

**DEAN ATTA**     *Six Pounds and Two Ounces*

---

I watched you expand my sister's stomach  
And here you are expanding my idea of love

They could have put any black baby girl  
In my arms and said, *Here is your niece*

And I would have loved her the same  
For eight months I feared you might not

Make it but you are here and I have new fears  
Fear of your father leaving or staying

Fear of your father's criminalised body  
Fear of your father's God-fearing family

Fear of dropping you, fear of pushing your buggy  
Into traffic, fear of not securing your carseat

And we crash but only you die and though  
We hardly know you, it ruins everything.

*In the Beer Garden with My Boyfriend and His Family, October 2019*

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*But you're Italian, dad, says my boyfriend,  
doesn't that make me part-Italian, at least?*

My left hand rests on my boyfriend's right knee  
under the table. I squeeze it for him to stop.

Grey tufts of hair poke from his father's flaring nostrils.  
Is this how my boyfriend will look in 28 years?

His father responds: *No child of mine is giving up  
their British identity for a European passport.*

We are half pint glasses, coats buttoned all the way up,  
hats, scarves and frowns around a negotiating table.

On this side: my boyfriend, me, his aunt and mother.  
On the other side: his brother, father and Nonna.

Two steins of German beer have been poured  
between six of us, and a nonalcoholic bottle for Nonna.

His father takes us back to 23rd June 2016:  
a man in a white van yells at him, *Vote Leave!*

The next day at work: he is asked if the referendum  
result means he will have to return home?

His father takes us back further to his teens:  
his racial ambiguity is confronted with the P-word

and a bike chain wrapped around his neck. *I had to fight  
to be British, he yells, you should be grateful!*

I excuse myself and go inside to the toilet.  
When I return, my boyfriend sits alone at the table.



*House of Commons*

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After dinner, we remained seated at the table. My grandfather, who was to my right, grabbed my right foot and set it on the table next to the bowls that were previously filled with rice and miso soup. Then he went to the bathroom and returned with a shiny object in his hand: a pair of nail clippers. He sat back down, snatched my big toe, and started clipping the nail. We hadn't exchanged words this whole time, but apparently, he didn't like how I had been grooming myself. I was 23 at the time.

I was visiting my mother's side of the family in Henoko, Okinawa, Japan for the summer. I was born approximately 10 miles from there. Formerly fluent in Japanese, I gradually lost my grip on the language a few years after moving to the U.S. when I was 6. People often say that a language can come back if exposed to it later in life. I found that my Japanese "came back" as well as a stick dressed like a boomerang. I took two years of Japanese in college and scraped by with a 'C' in the final semester. Not my proudest moment.

Words can hug as well as punch. Language can bridge gaps or widen them. The tongue muscle is a fickle one. People go to the gym to bench press or do bicep curls, but a gym for the tongue can elude the best of us. People from multicultural and multiracial backgrounds often tie their identities to whether they can speak their "other" language(s) or not. This can cause a disconnect, a sense of shame or pride, depending on their skill level. But those same people can also connect on a deep and intimate level by embracing non-verbal communication.

I love telling the story from above. I don't think it would have held the same weight if we had been talking during that experience. I didn't know what was going to happen from one moment to the next. It was like a silent movie. It was the third time I had been back to visit since I moved to the U.S. and the first time visiting without my mother, who was always the translator.

I didn't need any translator to know that Okinawa hosts an annual tug-of-war that attracts approximately 275,000 people every year. With roots dating back as far as the 17th century, the Guinness Book of World Records crowned the tug-of-war as the largest one in the world in 1997. The rope, which weighs 43 metric tons and stretches 200 meters, is pulled across the heart of Naha, Okinawa's capital city. When my aunt told me that we would be competing in the event, I flexed my biceps and told her I would fight with everything I had. I couldn't wait to feel the burn of the rice straw fibers in my palms, to hold my heritage in my hands.

Needless to say, I was quite disappointed when my aunt ended up taking me to a fashion show for 16th century East Asian women's clothing. I am almost proud of how poorly I had translated the situation. I at least got the city right. In a moment of perfect, ambiguous, mixed race mistaken identity, I was approached by many people after the event. A Brazilian guy had played a traditional three string instrument called a sanshin during the show, and many of the attendees congratulated me afterwards, thinking I was him. Even my face had been mistranslated.

Later that summer, I met a girl at a bar. We hit it off right away, despite only conversing in Japanese. I'm not going to lie, I was quite proud of myself. It went so well that I asked her to go out the next night, and she agreed. She lived a few blocks away from my grandparents' house, so I walked over to pick her up. After I knocked, a little girl opened the door. Confused, I looked past her and saw the woman from the

night before cozied up with a man. She saw me and got up to meet me, but in no hurry whatsoever. I asked her what was going on, and she said she was hanging out with her husband and kids. Then she said good night and shut the door. The date had ended without me having taken a step. It was an experience I can laugh at now. Hell, I laughed then. I appreciated the fact that all these misunderstandings happened.

Mirrors, whether in carnival funhouses or household bathrooms, reflect multiple realities. Language is no different. Interactions can be straightforward or become distorted. Either outcome can be interesting. This isn't to say that people shouldn't attempt to learn their cultural languages if that's what they want. I just believe that people should enjoy the journey along the way and not feel any shame about their lack of knowledge. In fact, I wouldn't even call it a lack of knowledge. I would call it a wealth of innocent experience, as corny as that sounds. Gestures such as smiles, laughs, scowls, and frowns transcend many cultures, if not all, in some fashion. People should embrace the awkwardness. It is a rite of passage.

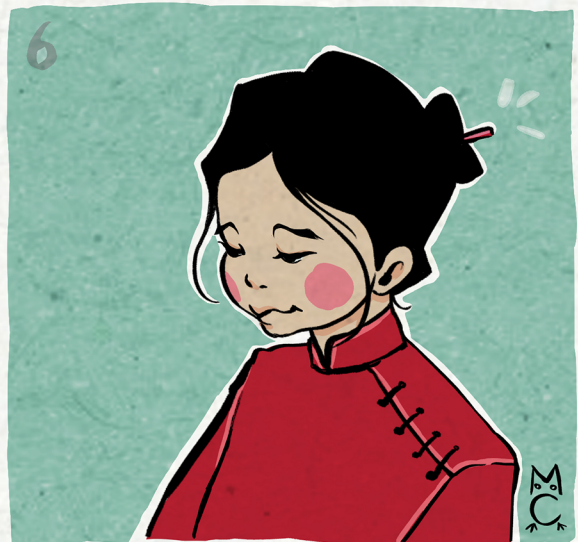
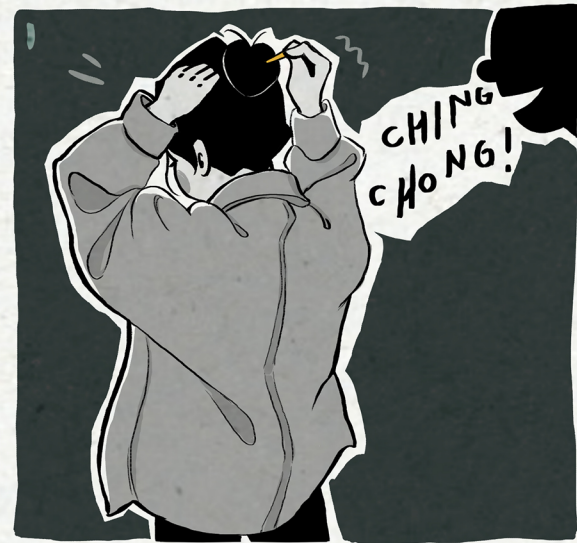
“*Obaachan*,” I whisper.  
I dream I had called you that.  
I wish I *had* known more.  
Scattered images mark my memory.  
Hallowed rooms of bubble wrapped dolls  
And books lined with saran wrap.  
A shadow of personal history,  
Impressioned upon your little bungalow.

“*Ai tai*,” I pray.  
As I prepare the curry rice,  
I had always called stew.  
It never tastes as good as yours.  
But it tastes of familiarity,  
And I miss that continually.  
I wonder if you longed for the same?

“*Arigatou*.”  
One of the few words I knew then;  
*Thank you*, you taught me as well as one, two, three.  
Words that formed a bridge;  
To the part of yourself that made you feel afraid.  
The part of yourself that made you different than your counterparts:  
Jap. *Nihon-jin*. Japanese.  
In a time when difference meant pain.

“*Ja matta ne*,” I pray.  
Thank you for your selflessness,  
For the nuggets you’ve left behind.  
The crumbs of identity,  
That wind and reach,  
To the endless possibilities of me.





**ROSHNI GALLAGHER**     *Cauliflower*

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Because of you, I twist my cauliflower in turmeric.  
Because of you and your declarative love  
For fat aubergines steeped in miso,  
For slow fried tofu, for crisp shining chilies.

I coat every white nook until it's bright brown.  
Brown women taught me how to love myself by loving.  
When you called out my name in the street last week  
It sounded like depth. Like roots stirring.  
Like a summoning within myself.

From the kitchen I look out at the bare trees  
And there, perched alone, is a brown breasted Sparrowhawk  
Held completely in the branches like she never had to arrive.

I think of the newly full tree.  
The striking fullness of your heart naming mine.

## *Parting*

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I watched the moon rise  
and the moon rise  
catching planes to Ireland  
just in time  
to find you alive

for a minute.  
Later at the church no one knew  
how I was related to you  
your secular, brown grandchild.

You should have died a day earlier  
they said  
you must have been holding on  
for the last one  
to arrive.

**HANNAH POLINSKI** *diptych*

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you almost look like you could be sisters



you almost look like you could be sisters



You are made of halves. You are made of two different people, continents, histories. You are white and brown, coloniser and colonised. The eternal desert and the blue lagoon. The whistle of ropes swinging into the harbour and the crack of bamboo while women dance. A shattered mirror with a million different splinters, each sliver a different facet of you. The interim between the swells of music. A fragment. A contradiction. An interruption.

Your father tells you about his childhood on the street that he still lives on. Fifty-four years on Alawoona Avenue, Mitchell Park. All of his friends are gone now, he says, pointing to the units that replaced them. George used to live two houses down. They walked home from school when heat radiated through their shirts, scuffing their second-hand shoes against the pavement. They went to the deli if they could manage to steal coins from their siblings. Fifty-cent paper bags filled with lolly snakes that were hidden under pillows. George and all the other kids are gone now. Moved all over Adelaide, Australia, the world.

He tells you about his brothers and sisters. Eight children – six no longer speak to him. Six that you have never met. They were poor, angry kids. A couch was a bed if you tried hard enough in that house. Your father does not remember when the baby bottles he drank from became glass bottles bubbling with alcohol. He does not remember exactly when he began to hate his family. Your father shows you the only scar that marks his body – a pale white crescent resting below his widow's peak. "I fell down the porch steps and cracked my head open," he says, smiling as if it were a fond memory. "Or I was pushed."

Your father tells you about his history. A distant impression of Europe that lives on in his skin and bones. The wars fought by your grandfather. Bullets that raked his skin and mud that tried to pull him under the earth. He fought his way home just to die in his own bed. An orphan at four-years-old, your father still has the rotten koala toy that his own father gave him before he left for the war. Unnamed, discoloured where button eyes once shone, and fluff reduced to matted clumps, the koala guards your father's bed to this day. It's only as big as your hand, the once soft fur stiffened into small, hard bristles. How many toys have taken the place of a father at war? Grown men with teddy bears in their beds instead of fathers at their side.

Your mother tells you about her childhood in a magical place. In that country, the sun is a pearl inside a blue clam shell instead of burning gas and molecules. The forests are mazes filled with ancient beings instead of rows of tree trunks. There was a small hill behind her home that beckoned to all the children in the village. She would crawl to the top, banana leaf in hand, brothers and sisters calling out to her. Your mother did not shy away from adventure. She leapt onto the leaf and slid all the way down, down, down, until she was a bundled heap of laughter at the bottom. Her family trailed after her, squeals cradled by the summer wind. Splayed on the grass surrounded by chatter, she reached out her hands and grasped the pearl in the sky, quivering like a bird in her small hands.

The magic of your mother's childhood could not protect her from loss. The creeks she played in as a child filled with glass, and she went home picking bits of it from her skin. The hill waited but only echoes of the children that once raced down it remained. For on those summer days, there was one little girl who could not go

outside to play. Your mother has only mentioned her once, when she picked you up from school. “She was always in bed. She was so sick,” your mother says, silence ballooning in the car. She turns down the radio. Brakes. A train moans past. “She was only 13.” Your mother has never told you the name of her sister.

Your mother tells you about the history of her people. The Spanish, the American, the Japanese: they all crushed and ruined. Before them all came the gods of the sun and sea. The rituals and dances of your ancestors. Skirts made of seagrass and black ink pressed deeper than skin. You meet your grandmother for the first time when you are four-years-old. You don’t remember the pearl sun or the canopy mazes. Or the children playing in the mud and the straw shacks that trembled in the wind. All you see is your lola and her crown of silver hair, twisted into a bun on her neck. You braid it, the strands of hair slipping through your fingers. She has the longest hair you have ever seen and each thread still shines like diamonds. Twist, untwist, weave, wind. A million different strands like a million different people, connecting to form one cord. It feels as if the history of countless mothers before yours are tangled around your fingertips.

“Mahal ko,” Lola says. “Teach me how to make that.”

The wisdom of generations inside her, but you can give her one thing: you can teach her how to braid.

You are the connection. The reconciliation. The answer. The bridge that spans across time. The path towards tolerance. The future of children. You are the conquered and the conqueror. The rain in the desert. The tourist shirts that state Philippines proudly on your father’s chest and the framed Australian citizenship certificate with your mother’s name on it. You are the product of two contradicting people, continents, histories, choosing to become a family. The love and trauma of a hundred ancestors, woven together to create one. You were always whole.



## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Adrian Coleman** is a British-born American painter currently living in London. His most recent paintings explore the paradox of his relationship to Britain, as a native and an outsider. He combines elements of the English picturesque tradition with themes of transplantation, belonging, and estrangement. In 2020, Adrian was awarded the Hopper Prize.

**Camaray Davalos** is of Indigenous (Payómkawichum), Cuban, Mexican, Jewish, and British Isles ancestry, and lives in southern California. She is an editor and public relations specialist with Great Oak Press. She is also a writer, basket weaver, and lover of films.

**Corinne Ladeinde** has always had a passion for drawing and storytelling. Pursuing her interests, she worked for a production studio before graduating from the National Film and Television School. She is now an animation director and illustrator working with NERD Productions to contribute to the representation of mixed, minority backgrounds simply by reflecting people who look like me rather than just the ideal.

**Dean Atta** was named one of the most influential LGBT people in the UK by the Independent on Sunday. His debut poetry collection, *I Am Nobody's Nigger*, was shortlisted for the Polari First Book Prize. His novel, *The Black Flamingo*, won the Stonewall Book Award 2020, is shortlisted for the CILIP Carnegie Medal, Jhalak Prize and YA Book Prize. Dean writes a regular column for Attitude magazine.

**Hannah Polinski** is a writer and photographer currently based in Paris, France. Approaching her subjects through the passage of time, her work explores familial memory, shifting landscapes, and the surreal. More of her projects can be found at [hannahpolinski.com](http://hannahpolinski.com).

**Hera Hong** is a poet and filmmaker based in Los Angeles. She centers her work on uplifting women and transforming the language around trauma.

**Jullian Nazzaro** is a biracial and bisexual artist who strives to break down arbitrary binaries. They describe much of the mixed queer experience as a feeling of “improper fit” and hope to address this by creating content that supports the voices of POC, the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalized identities.

**Kari Rittoo** is a primary school teacher from Oldham of White British and Mauritian heritage. After being inspired by the other female poets she met on her ‘Write like a Grrrr!’ poetry course, she is very much a newbie poet sending her work out into the world for the first time.

**Ken Taro Ward** is a writer living in Columbus, Ohio, United States. He is half-Okinawan and moved to the United States in 1993. His writing has been published in Wilderness House Literary Review.

**Ling Hsiu Tsai** is a Taiwanese fine artist and a motion designer. She lived in NYC for three years to pursue her master's degree in computer arts in School of Visual Arts. Ling Hsiu's passion for expressing her thoughts and feelings of love, death, and lives brings her work to a deep conceptual level. Ling Hsiu's first animated film See Me got officially selected in Love Story Film Festival in London in 2020, and it got the finalist in European Film Festival in Moscow in 2019.

**Roshni Gallagher** is a poet from Leeds currently living in Edinburgh. She is of Indo-Guyanese and Irish heritage. She has an MA from the University of Edinburgh in English Literature and History, with a focus on postcolonialism. Her work has previously appeared in Gutter and is upcoming in Butcher's Dog.

**Samantha Mylan** is a 20-year-old first generation Australian-Filipino, born and raised in Adelaide, South Australia. She specialises in writing about mixed race identity, family history, intergenerational trauma and LGBT issues. I am interested in the sociology of Filipino diaspora and the ongoing cultural colonisation of the Philippines. I am currently studying English and History at the University of Adelaide.

**Samantha Nichols** is a Nikkei living in Toronto. Living in towns and cities across Canada, she explored the complexities of Canadian history, identity and multiculturalism at a very young age. Much of her influence comes from her family's internment during World War II and the influence it's had for generations.

