

I was walking down a street with Dad, when suddenly he stopped to greet a man with dreads that I didn't recognize.

He switched to patois briefly before they went their separate ways, so I assumed they were friends.

Dad laughed, "No, I've never seen him before in my life!"

I was confused, "then why were you so happy to see each other?"

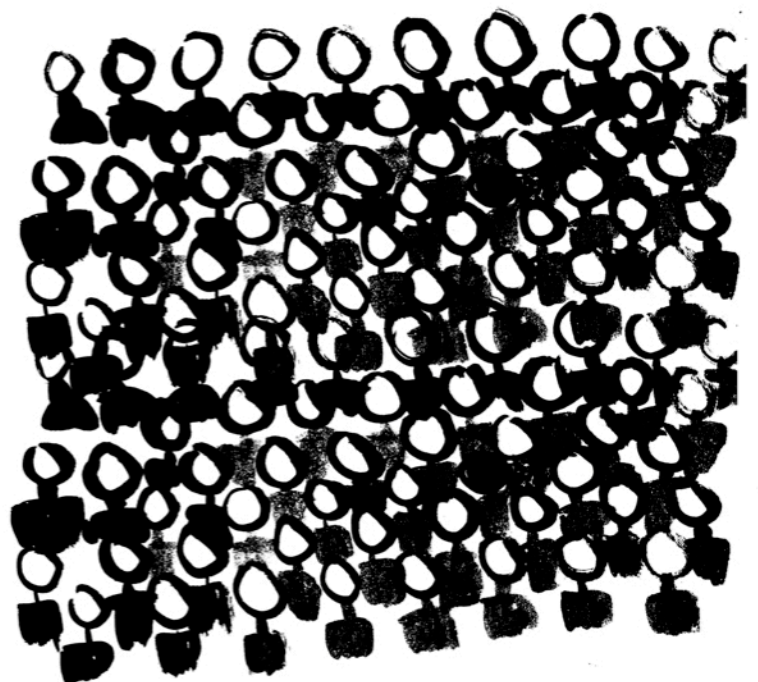


**Dad said,
"He's the first black guy I've seen in weeks!"**

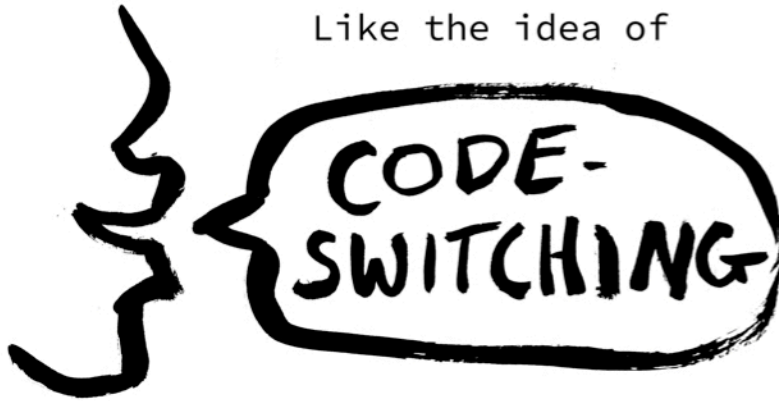
It was the first time I'd noticed the lack of black people where I grew up. Thinking back, I didn't know anyone else with Jamaican heritage throughout my entire English education.

Now when I hang out with my other Black British friends, we swap these 'only black person in a room' stories with relief.

Like many marginalized groups, from them I've learnt terms that qualify these kinds of experiences that have shaped my reality growing up.



Like the idea of



“the practice of alternating between varieties of languages in a conversation”.

Everyone does this to some extent.

Language connects us, so we switch it up with our colleagues, siblings, partners, depending on the person and the situation.



Like my Dad switching to patois when he meets a Jamaican.



Britain has a wealth of regional accents. When you meet someone from your hometown, you may slip into the local dialect while you're with them.

Code-switching is really just a way of ‘fitting in’ to your immediate environment. It's a testament to our innate adaptability and mutual empathy.

Of course, not everyone sees it that way.

When US representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez switched to and from her Bronx dialect in her speech, she got hammered with criticism from conservatives for 'pandering' to the audience.

It's not the first time a representative of a marginalised group has been accused of faking their natural way of speaking. Even Beyonce was accused of suddenly getting more 'Black' with her album Lemonade, and using it to sell her music.

AOC's Twitter response sums up the reality of the issue:

"Code switching is a tool communities learn when they're told their voice, appearance, & mannerisms are "unprofessional."

And I can relate - my family has a Black Country dialect, so I was raised to 'tone it down' and to speak 'properly' so that I wouldn't be penalised when going for a job. To local ears my neutral dialect sounds 'posh' for a girl born and bred in the DY postcode.



Code-switching by changing the way you speak can be used in job interviews, or to make friends in high places, or to be accepted by the larger, dominant 'in' group.

But for marginalised people, this type of social adaptation goes way beyond language.

When our appearance & behaviors deviate from a dominant group (as in, the majority in power), it leaves us in danger of being classed as "Other": which puts us at risk of being devalued, ignored, taken advantage of and feared.

Made to feel like we don't belong, that we don't deserve to occupy the space.

To protect ourselves and align with groups in certain settings,

We alter the tone of our voice,
The accent and words
What we talk about
We shape our bodies and hair
Our clothes
Wary of how we walk
Stand
Sit
Laugh
Or greet each other.
We even change our names.



We subconsciously switch not just how we speak, but how we think and act depending on the dominant culture we've found ourselves in.

So what happens when you have to code switch outside of your comfort zone?

When you have to mould yourself into an archetype to help others feel comfortable and respect you?

When you have to do this all the time?

What does that do to one's sense of self? How do you even get a grasp of your authentic self?

Again, AOC addressed it, "[I] can't tell you how many young people in our community don't have the confidence they should [because] they didn't grow up learning secondary speech," she wrote. "Their talents get stifled by 'respectability,' despite enormous gifts."

It's not just about respectability, either.

It goes deeper than that.

The reality of "us/them" mentality is hard-wired into our brains, and neuroscience supports what we've always felt ...that bias occurs on sight.



The prefrontal cortex can distinguish someone as being an "outsider" within 170 thousandths of a second from the moment we see them.

The neurochemical activity in the amygdala reveals the fear response people have when encountering what they perceive as 'other'.

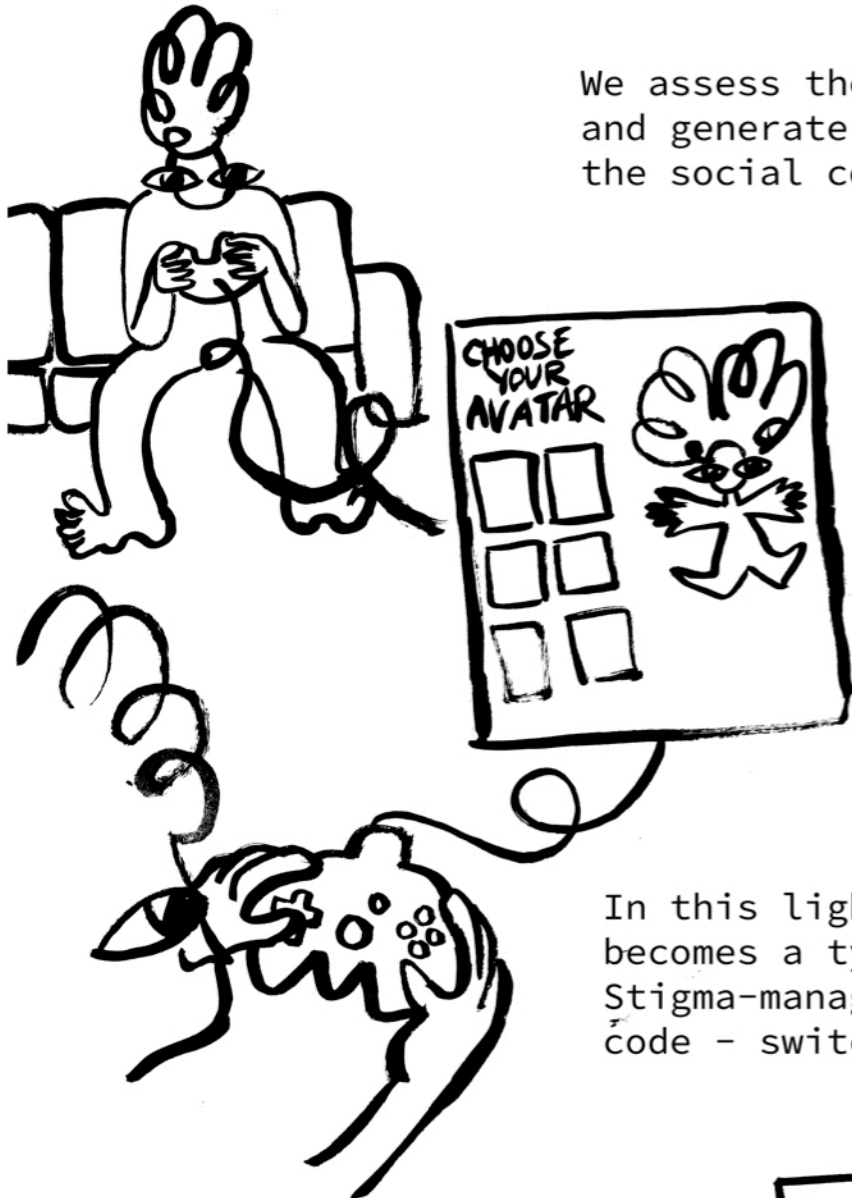
In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, belonging to a group is a basic human need.



But when something as fixed as our appearance comes into play, it makes it impossible to fit in, regardless of how adaptable we are.

We are the 'other', no matter what.

So to make our personalities palatable to the group's we find ourselves in, we've become master code-switchers.



We assess the situation and generate an avatar to suit the social context.

In this light, code-switching becomes a type of Stigma-management. In some cases, code - switching means survival.

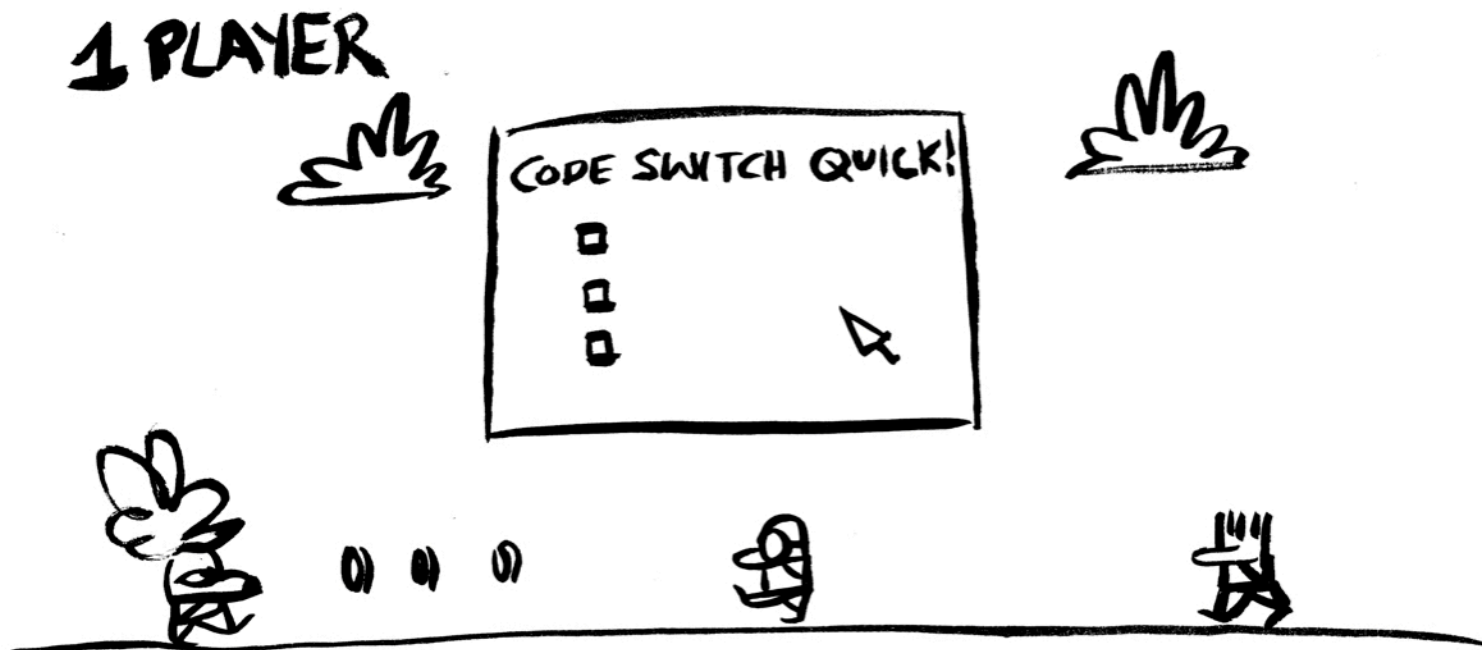
"Failing to appropriately manage racial stigma by reducing tensions in your interactions with white people could lead to your death."
(Professor Imogen Tyler essay "from Stigma Power to Black Power").



At what cost?

Everyone has different versions of themselves for every occasion: work, family, friends.

Constantly emphasizing the part of ourselves to align with different social settings is exhausting for all of us.



But think of the child growing up always outside of the most prominent members of the group.

When you're told that speaking like your parents do sounds 'uneducated'? That your hair is unacceptable? Your way of speaking too abrasive?

What does it do one's self esteem?

Sense of identity?

Mental health?

And all the time and emotional heavy lifting it takes to work through it?



“Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future.”

(Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays And Speeches*)

So now what?

Going back to the time when I first caught my Dad code-switching, I remember watching him speak patois made me and my sisters cringe. He was born and raised in England, why was he being so disingenuous? Pretending to be something he's not?

Now I see him as the master code-switcher.

It's just a way to authentically build bridges with others.

But sometimes you have to shapeshift in order to manage other people's stereotyping, and that's where problems start.

The real danger is that we do it without even thinking about it. We could lose sight of our authentic selves in the process, which is something I certainly recognise in myself growing up.

We need to be aware that we're doing it, and understand why someone else is doing it, so that we don't penalise ourselves or others for something that is not only instinctive, but necessary.

Better yet, we need to be aware of whether we're creating spaces where people can be their authentic selves without feeling like they'd be 'othered' if they didn't.

Like everything else, it's a balance, and it takes time.

We'll get there.