

Zine / Personal Journey
Mahnoor Sheikh

The Start of Navigating Invalidation

by: Mahnoor Sheikh



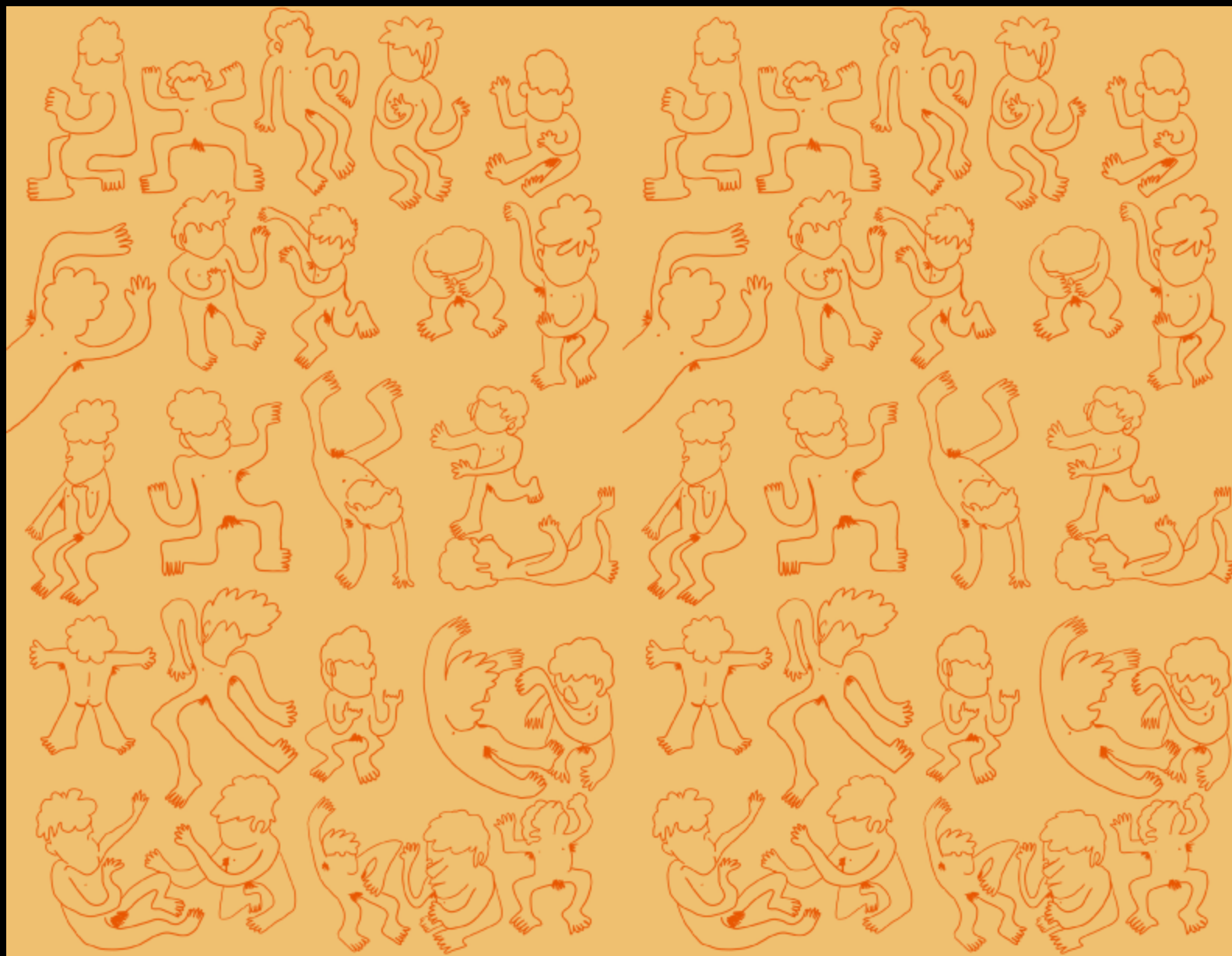




Table of Contents

People Tell Me Who I Am	6
All I Know is What I've Seen	22
Hey Mom & Dad, I'm Gay	32
Dear Fellow First Gen Immigrants	39

OOOOHHH EXCITING!!!



PEOPLE TELL ME
WHO I AM



"YOU'RE A DISAPPOINTMENT."

The immortal words of my AP Lit teacher that still haunt me. For context, I was behind on almost all of my assignments for her class and what I did hand in was not that good.

Yeah I was pretty much writing from outta my ass.

AW SIT ON IT!!!

The next thing she would go on to tell me is "You don't know how to write and you need to know, how to write if I want to be an artist." It was amazing how a woman, who had in the past said she "does not know anything about art" to in that moment tell me how to be an artist.

I am sharing this story for two reasons:
1. To serve as a Segway into how people feel entitled to tell me how to be a better person with limited knowledge of the aspect of me they are critiquing me on/ or even who I am.
2. But also to say...)

When new people meet me they tend to cling to my complexion and pre-plan what they think a conversation is off of it.



Now depending on if it is another South Asian person or someone who is not South Asian the conversation will go differently. Both are uncomfortable in their own special ways.



When talking to someone who is not South Asian they will start by asking the question that is my ultimate pet-peeve,

"Where are you from?"

To which I always respond "Brooklyn"

But no one has ever been satisfied with that answer so they will follow up with the,

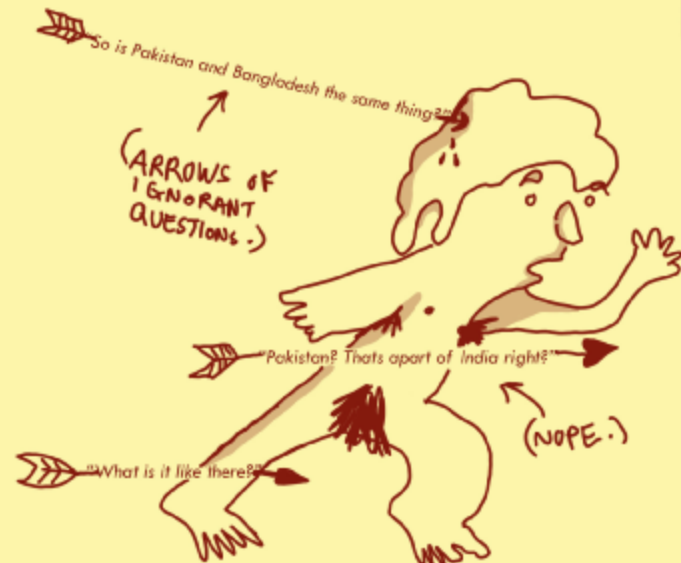
"No. Where are you FROM?"

Making extra sure to emphasize the "from"



I always give in and tell them what they want to hear, "Pakistan."

Then that person becomes this strange kind of excited because now they feel they can ask all of the questions they ever had in regards to MENASA¹ territories. Some have asked me a range of things including:



Oh and of course the choice few who have said in response to me being from Pakistan, "I would love to go to (INSERT THE NAME OF A BROWN COUNTRY) One day."

1. MENASA an acrynyms for the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia

When I have to answer a question with,

"I'm sorry, I don't actually know much about Pakistan."

I get smacked in the face with that person's fleeting interest in me and receive a disappointed,

"Oh..."

"Yeah."

"Thats alright."

"Yeah, I know."

"Cool, good."





When talking to someone who is South Asian it will start exactly the same way asking, "Where are you from?"
 I eventually respond, "Pakistan."
 And then they ask
 "You speak Urdu?"
 I tell them, "I don't."
 And then they start speaking Urdu at me while making direct eye contact. And I never have any idea what they are saying. So they end up laughing at me.

I MUST TEST IF THIS BROWN CHILD'S WORTHINESS.

Some conversations stop right there the person might continue talking at me in Urdu for a bit longer, continue laughing then get bored and finally lets me leave.
 Some people have changed the subject to ask about what I am doing in school or for work.
 While others have asked...

OH
 HHH
 SUSPENSE



"Why not?!"
 To which I don't have a satisfying answer.
 I used to point the blame at my parents.
 I'd say "My parents never taught me!"
 But they'd quickly turn the argument on me.
 "You should have told them you wanted to learn!"


What three year old do you know has the full awareness/ ability to eloquently express their desires in life?



Parent dearest, may I trouble you for a cookie?

NO.

Oh I see. Wah.



Just to interject really quick. Yes, I have in the past panicked and blamed my parents for why I don't speak Urdu. It was my response to being pestered by fully grown adults. But I don't actually hold any negative feelings towards my parents for not teaching me Urdu.


For reasons including:

A) Just because they speak Urdu it never held my parents to any requirement to teach it to me or any of my other siblings.

B) My parents were raising us in America where English is the predominantly spoken language.

C) English isn't my parents first language in the first place! And they had to teach it to their kids. That must have been frustrating in itself.

So please, refrain from criticizing the parents who were/are doing the best that they can to raise their children someplace that might be foreign to them.



Now back to conversations with judgmental Brown people, who I don't know.

Others have asked me,
"You're Muslim?"
To which I respond,
"No, Atheist."

If that person was going to continue talking to me, they immediately changed their mind the moment the word "Atheist" slipped out.

I occasional meet those people who say something really great for my self-worth like:

"You can't believe in nothing."

Or with conviction:

"Allah' is everywhere you can't ignore him."

1. Allah- Arabic word for God.



I'll say its funny that everyone especially strangers feel entitled to let me know I'm sucking at the whole brown thing.



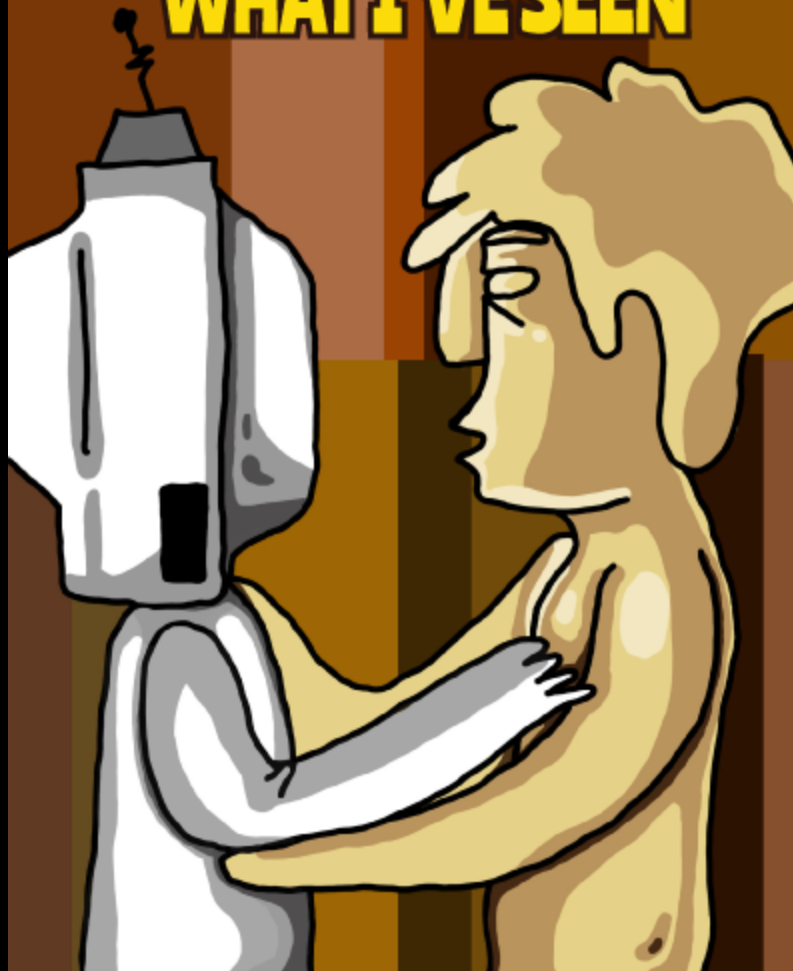
It really isn't funny but I really can't deal with heavy shit the way I'm supposed to.

Guess I can't do a lot of things like I'm supposed to.

And honestly its exhausting trying to.

I'm better off not listening to other people telling me I suck at being brown. Because like Mrs. Smith, fuck them, I know myself better than any of them ever will.

ALL I KNOW IS WHAT I'VE SEEN



My mom wore shalwar-kameez¹ at home. My dad would take my brother to the masjid² on Eid³. My whole family would fast during Ramadan⁴. We owned a Quran⁵.

Yes, I experienced those buzz-word brown^{*} things at some point in my life.

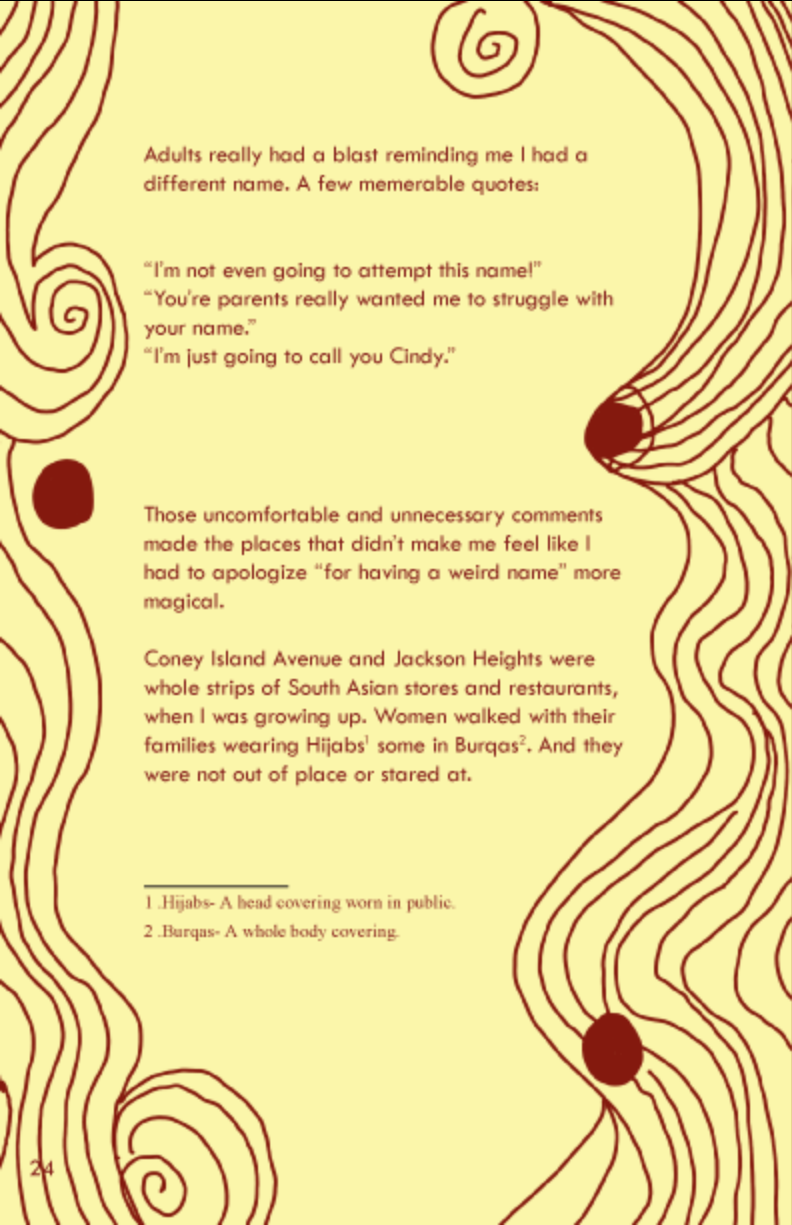
But within certain confines. My mom never went to work in traditional clothes and in elementary school the other kids thought that Eid was a holiday I made up to miss a day of school.

For a long time it felt like I had to hide these parts of myself, being one of the few South Asian students in my schools growing up. It did not help that kids made fun of my name.

"Manure? Like cow poop?"

1. Shalwar-Kamees- A light fabric South Asian type of suit.
2. Masjid- A place of Worship.
3. Eid- A holiday celebrated by Muslims consisting of a feast.
4. Ramadan- A month long holiday of fasting.
5. Quran- Holy text.





Adults really had a blast reminding me I had a different name. A few memorable quotes:

"I'm not even going to attempt this name!"

"You're parents really wanted me to struggle with your name."


"I'm just going to call you Cindy."

Those uncomfortable and unnecessary comments made the places that didn't make me feel like I had to apologize "for having a weird name" more magical.

Coney Island Avenue and Jackson Heights were whole strips of South Asian stores and restaurants, when I was growing up. Women walked with their families wearing Hijabs¹ some in Burqas². And they were not out of place or stared at.

1 .Hijabs- A head covering worn in public.

2 .Burqas- A whole body covering.



They weren't doing anything special just grocery shopping like us.

Honestly women in Hijabs look like badass super heroes to me.

I always thought they were just beautiful.
And I was me.

They were who I imagined when I'd hear "Pakistani". It felt like they were real brown people and I was something adjacent to them, not real. I had the complexion but nothing else. I believed there must be something more to being brown. But whatever that was I wasn't it.

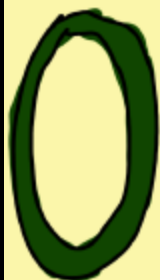
Any time I voiced an admiration for the culture it would some how be used against me. "If you want to learn Urdu you have to take initiative! Your baby cousin in Pakistan can speak it so well, already."

"You never read Quran! You need to make time to."
"I'll buy you shavar kameess for Ramadan because the pants you wear look dirty."



Now these words and actions weren't meant as insults to me but for some reason they made me feel guilty. Like I was not living up to what was culturally expected of me.

I made efforts. I remember one time when I was a kid. I was looking at fabrics with my mom. All of the patterns were nice. My mom told me to pick one to be made into a shalwar-kameez for me. But then I didn't want to. And she had to pick for me.



Then I found these chudiyans¹ that were black, green, and gold. Mom bought them for me, thinking I should wear something nice for Ramadan. And since I said I thought they were pretty I'd want to wear them.



The chudiyahs looked so great until I put them on. Then they looked wrong. Like they didn't belong on my body.

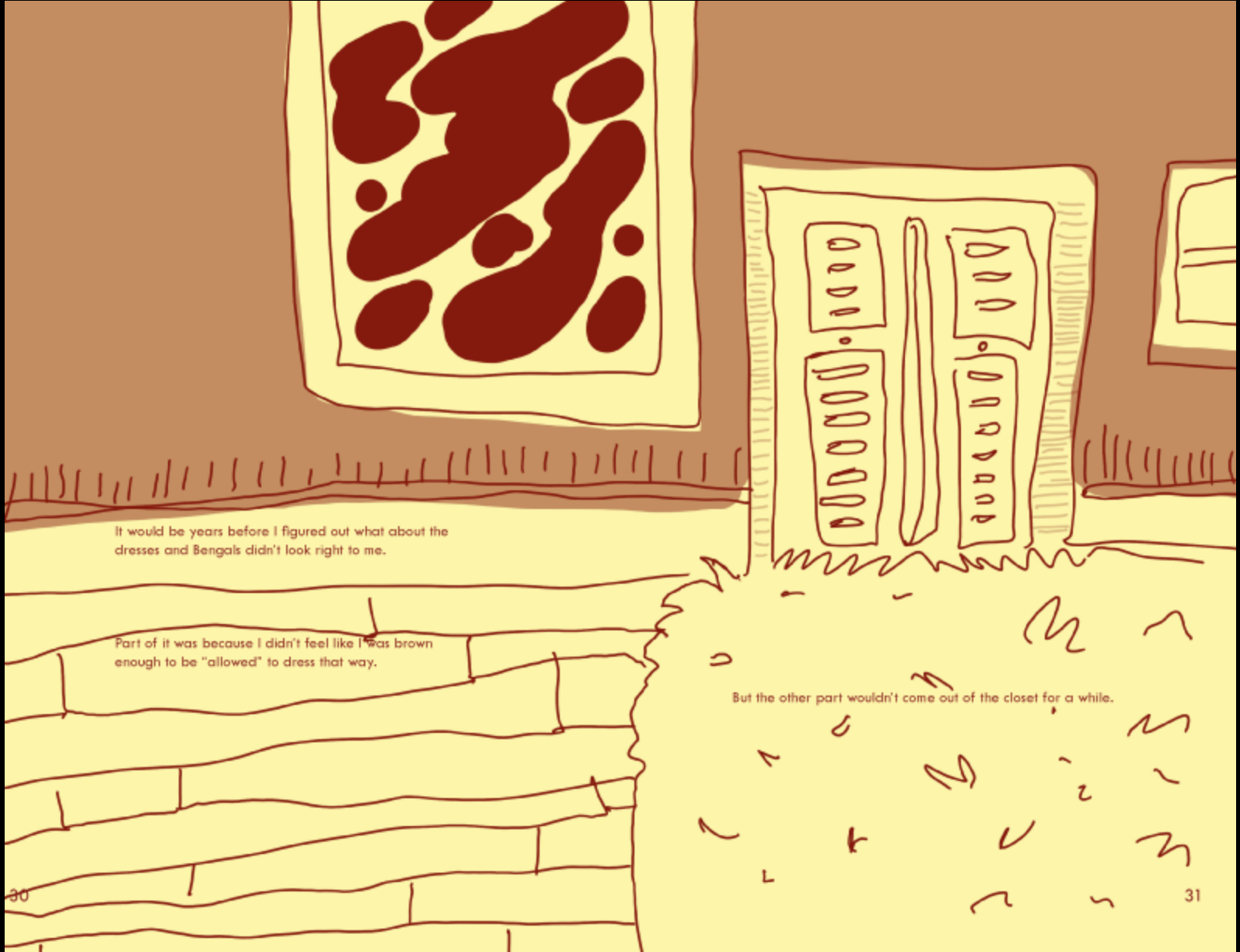
¹. chudiyans A type of bracelet, bengal.



I quickly took them off and in the process cracked one. My mom got pissed at me and took them away. I was relieved they were gone. But I didn't know why.

I hung onto the cracked one and felt bad. I wanted to like it. I want to wear it but it didn't make sense on me.





It would be years before I figured out what about the dresses and Bengals didn't look right to me.

Part of it was because I didn't feel like I was brown enough to be "allowed" to dress that way.

But the other part wouldn't come out of the closet for a while.



HEY MOM & DAD

I'M GAY

Well if I'm being politically correct I am a non-binary lesbian. And I'm proud of it. Trust me I was combative at first because I was scared of how my family was going to react.

Guess I'll find out if they ever read this.



A messed up thing is that for a long time I made an absurd connection between being queer and being brown that just is not true.

This idea that I had to choose between the two.



PICK!

Yeah... I was a dramatic teenager enthralled by LGBTQ+ movie premises. The need to make long winded proclamations of love, the concept of declaring that you're coming out of the closet, and thinking scissoring is a real thing. At the time I thought if I had to choose,

I chose to be ok with being gay.



I made LGBTQ+ friends who like most of the movies I was watching were all white.

Not a single one those movies was about a brown lesbian falling for another femme. To be fair I was just Google searching lesbian movies in 2013 and watching whatever I found.



In not a single one of those friend circles did those white gays understand what precautions I had to take with my queerness while growing up in a brown household.

As I got older, those movies related less and less to my lived experience. And those friends were not able to empathize with my situation. All that stuff became an aesthetic of "gayness" that didn't apply to me.

While all those white gays in the movies and real life could go home and be vocal with their families about being gay or just shoot them a text saying they were spending the night at their friends house. I was living a more monitored life.

My parents only talked to me about school and cleaning the house. I was not allowed to go out for anything that wasn't school or work when I was a teen. So if I wanted to hang out I had to lie.

I think the luckiest break of my life was when I became apart of an intersectionality program.

See my parents had no idea what intersectionality meant so I didn't have to lie to them about where I was.



It also gave me the chance to meet other BIPOC¹ queer youth. Which made me feel a lot better knowing there is a community of people willing to accept all of me instead of clinging to a choice few shared traits as a means of survival. I wasn't so much surviving as I was just living my damn life. The best part was that I learned by living that I don't need to code switch[®] around the people who really love me. They'll accept me for my entirety. And guess what, they do!

1. An acronym for Black, Indigineous, People of Color

I am older and I'm trying to repair my connection to my brownness/ overall acceptance of my multifaceted identity. This will not be instantaneous. It'll take time to unlearn misconceptions, part-taking in self-care, having open dialogs, research, and support from loved ones.



Dear Fellow First Gen Immigrants,



You don't owe strangers answers to why you are not as fluent in aspects of your culture

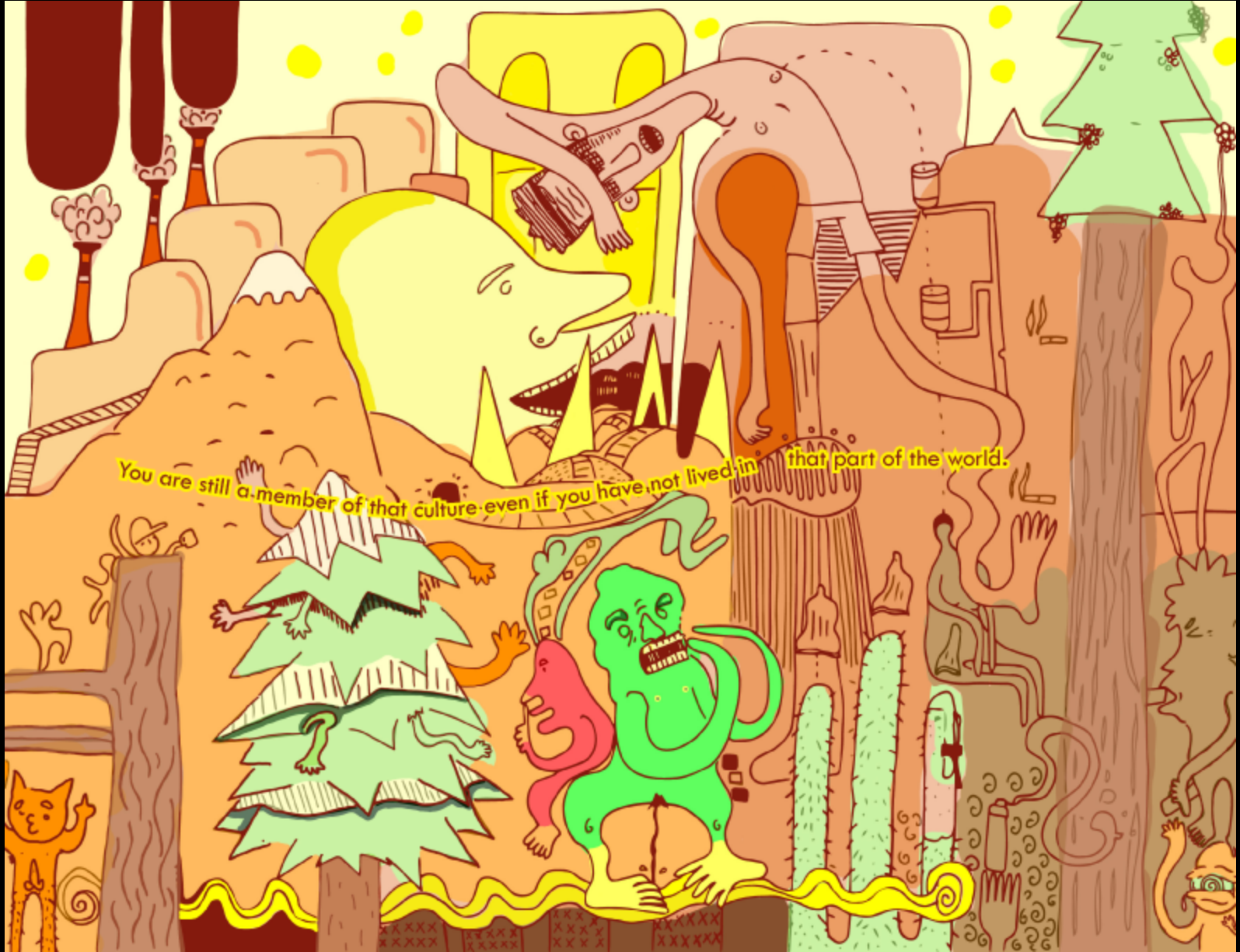
just because they ask.



Even if that person shares the same ethnicity as you, they have no right to criticize your authenticity as such.



You are not invalidated as someone of a cultural background if you have assimilated in some capacity to the place you are living.

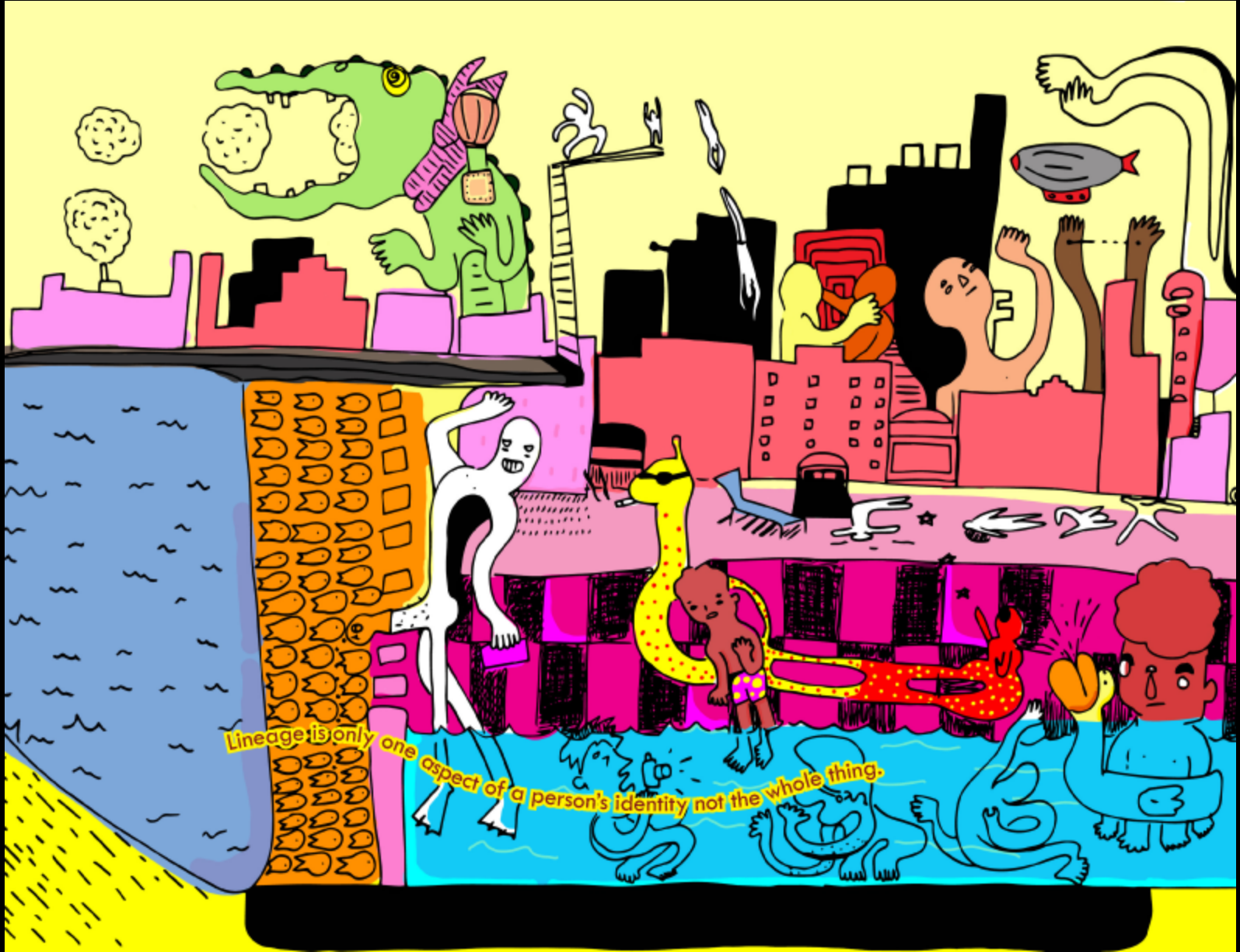


You are still a member of that culture even if you have not lived in that part of the world.

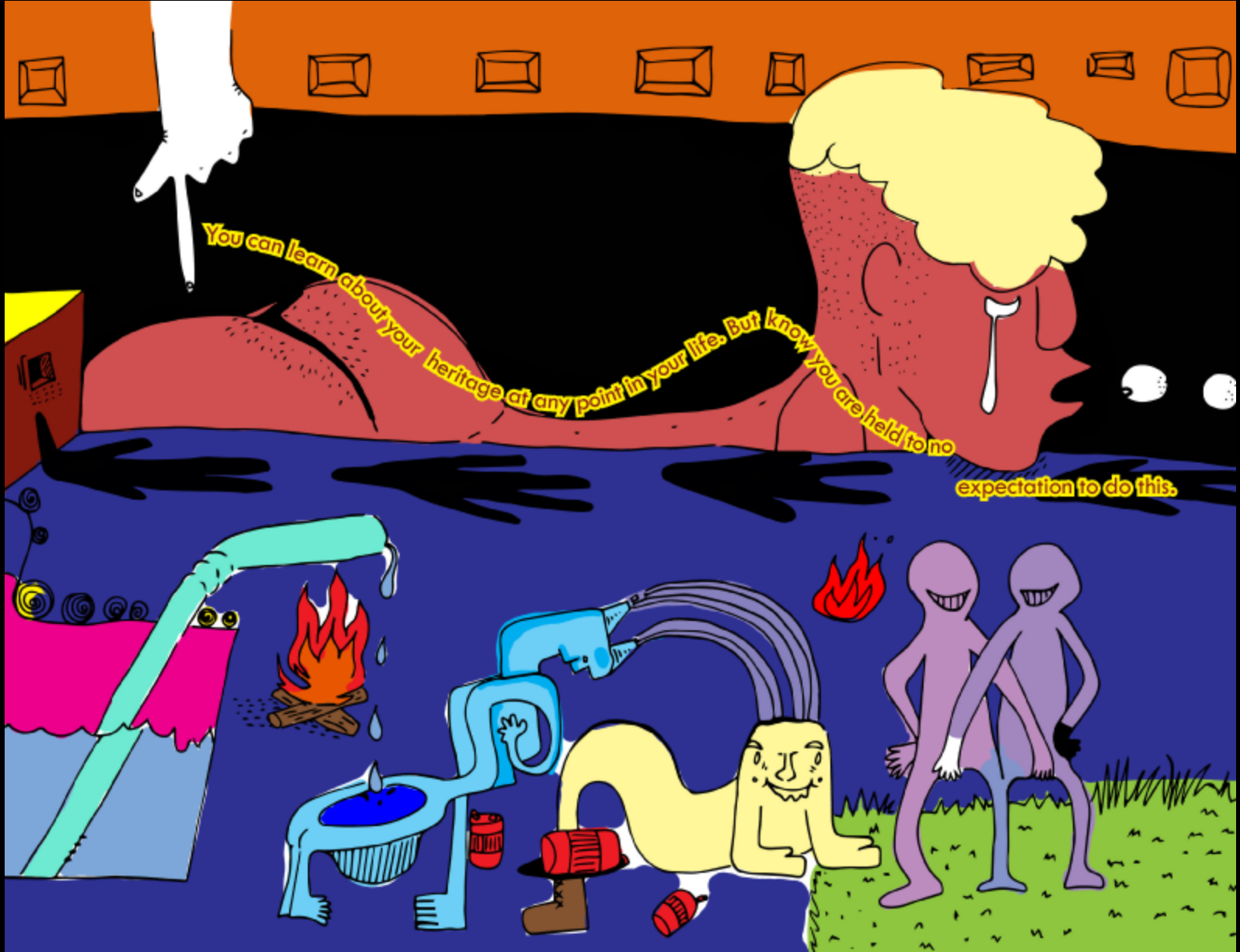


You are allowed to not be an expert of all aspects of your

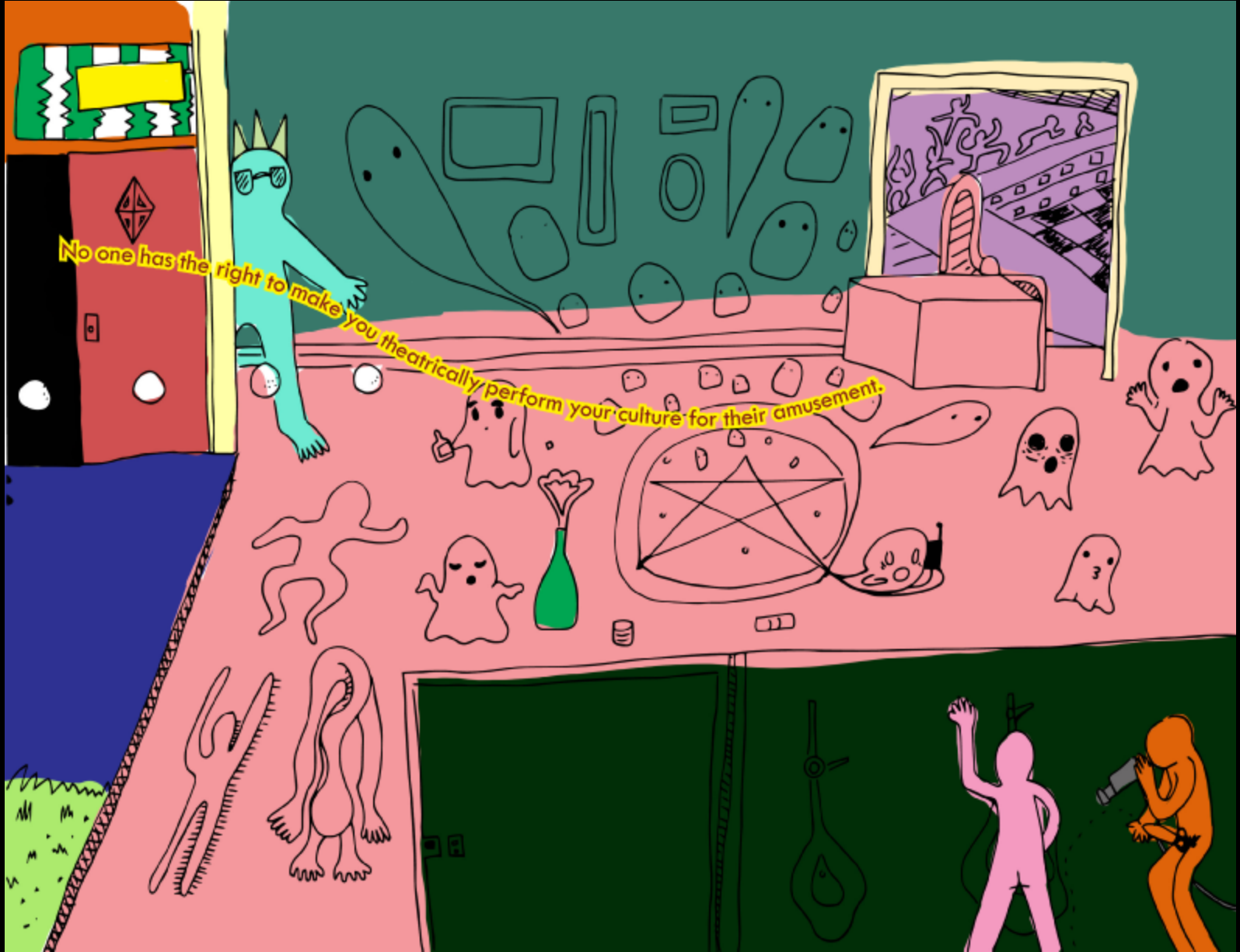
cultural identity.



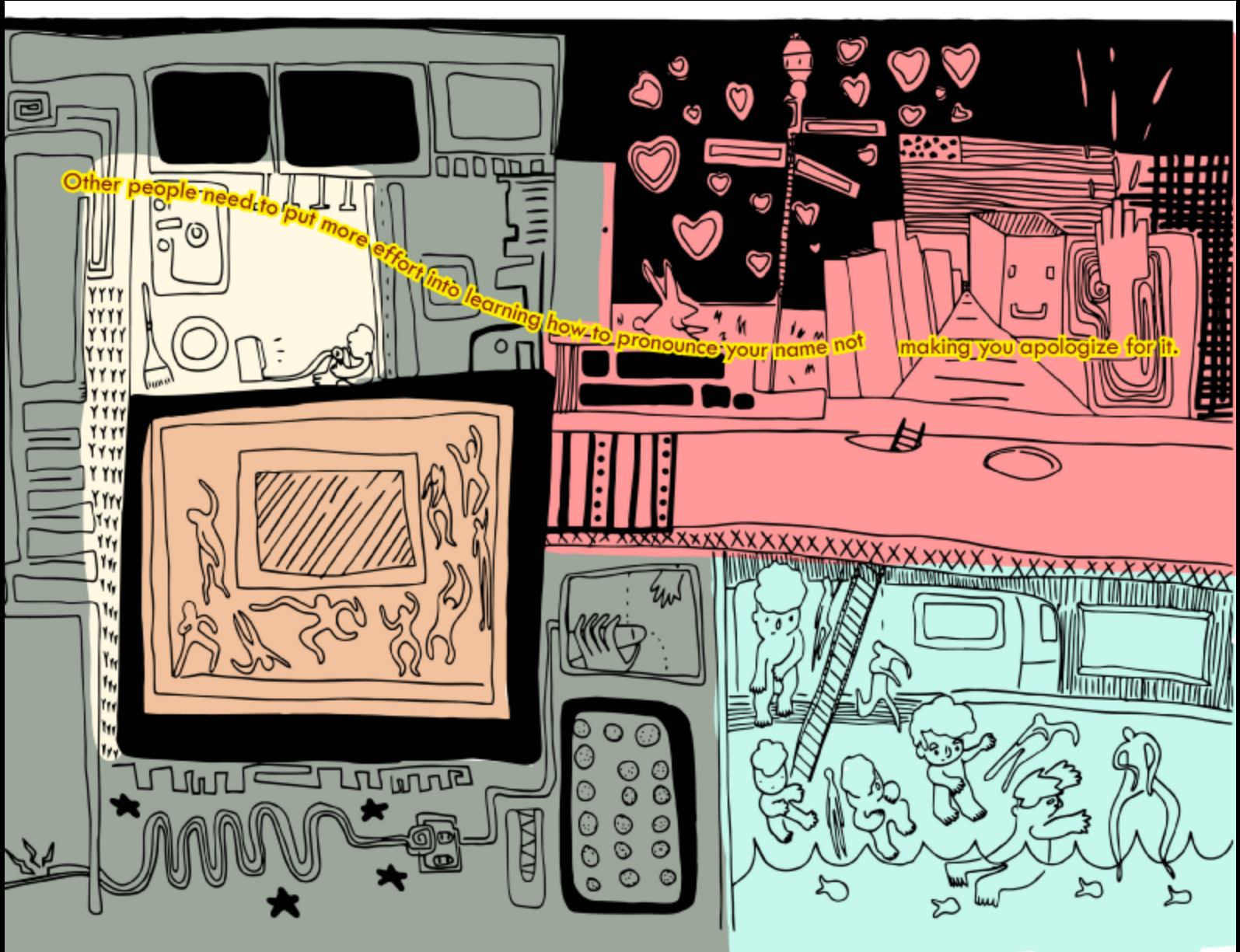
Lineage is only one aspect of a person's identity not the whole thing.



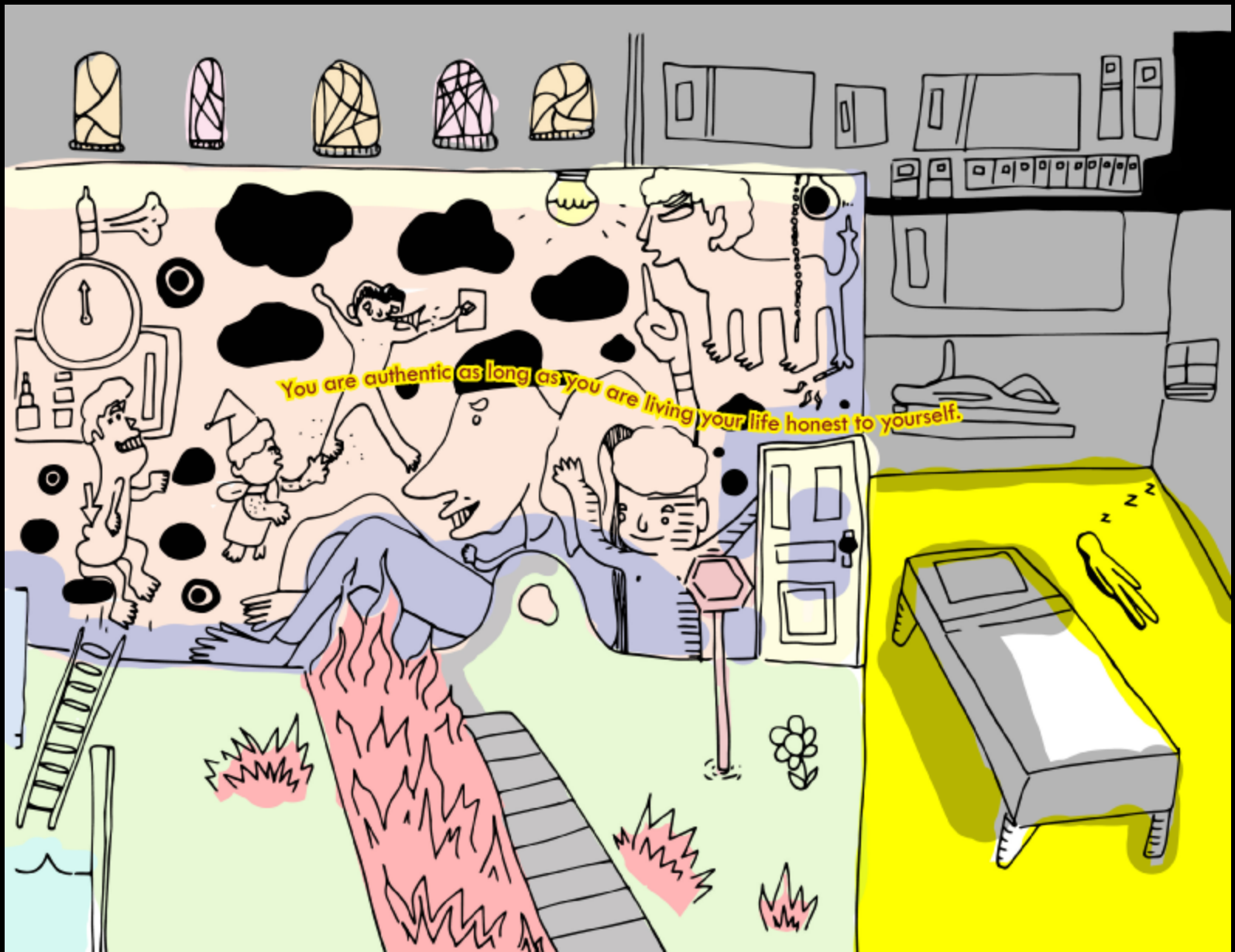
You can learn about your heritage at any point in your life. But know you are held to no expectation to do this.



No one has the right to make you theatrically perform your culture for their amusement.



Other people need to put more effort into learning how to pronounce your name not making you apologize for it.



You are authentic as long as you are living your life honest to yourself.



