

It Didn't Affect Me
by Alex Da Matta

The first time I remember being called the N-word was when I was thirteen. I've always wondered what my reaction says about who I am.

It was during a soccer game. My teammate was about to step up to take a penalty kick when a blonde player, number thirteen, stepped toward me and hissed, "N-words like you don't belong here."

That was my first experience with the slur. The word that hurt most was "you". *You* don't belong here. It didn't cross my mind to hit him. But what to say? Which words were going to show everyone what I stood for?

I can't remember how many nights I stayed awake trying to think of a better response than what I said then:

nothing.

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My racial background takes one word to describe poorly ("mixed") and several more to describe fully (my father's ancestry is rooted in Africa, Europe, and Indigenous Brazil—he's very black—and my mother's ancestry is French-Anglo-Canadian—very white). I grew up in Fort Collins, Colorado, a university town. There, people try to be careful when they talk about race. Classmates, teachers, and friends have guessed I'm all sorts of Latino and Middle Eastern blends—or African. Many of them were polite enough not to get that far.

My hometown friend, Evan, has a Korean mom and a white dad. We've shared classrooms and friends since third grade. But we connected most when we were old enough to reflect on the circumstances that shaped us.

We called Fort Collins a bubble. A confined space where we benefited from great schools and plenty of distance from violence and poverty. Evan and I acknowledged that in many ways, our city was a blessing. But it was hard to find people who looked like us or shared even a fraction of our backgrounds. Eighty percent of Fort Collins is white, ten percent is Hispanic, and the rest exists in a chaotic jumble of melanin. Evan and I didn't belong to the same piece of this jumble, but we found other ways to connect. Like me, he was an only child. Our parents were professors, they brought us into the world when they were closer to fifty than twenty. And even though we didn't have the same racial background, at least we were mixed. We wondered how that affected us. Was being an "other" to our advantage? Or did our differences stand in the way? We questioned how our bubble shaped us.

There's a part of me that wants to admit that despite the discrimination I should've felt in my upbringing, it never hit like it was supposed to. People didn't often treat me with outward bigotry. Fort Collins offered safety because there weren't others with my particular multiracial background. I wasn't part of a group you could discriminate against. I was untouchable. Alone.

And while I didn't have white privilege, I could access it through my mom. I had plenty going for me. My parents cared about me. They paid for club soccer tournaments and saxophone lessons. I got to attend amazing schools. I was blessed with opportunities.

Maybe I'm imposing the issue onto myself. Maybe I'm not affected.

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Back in middle school, I had this friend group. We called ourselves "The Elements". Together, we spent time after school, competed in academic clubs, and shared family dinners. As young teenagers in 2017, we'd formed a group chat to text one another. It was most of what you'd expect: gossip about crushes, awful emoji usage, and lots of spam. It was wholesome.

One night, we had a conversation about American politics—this was normal. When I went to bed, I didn't expect the messages I'd see the next morning.

08:34

Reese

I just want to complement everyone but Alex on their discussion skills.

Alex did not see the other side and was not open to other people's opinions.

Sorry I just had to say that because I have experienced it a lot

And I thought now might be a good time for some self reflection



Don't think about responding Alex, I'm busy

Ok?

Ok

Jordan



Reese

Oh one more thing

If you hate America so much and love Brazil so much go back to your own country

No offense



Sorry

Strong opinions

Ok

This is the elements now

Not a debate

So

Yeah

Delete this and we'll start over

Where did *that* come from? I must have done something wrong. I had no reason to think Reese didn't like me. My dad was her volleyball coach. Her father was my school principal.

Teachers liked her, and so did her classmates. She went to church. She was respected. What did I do wrong? Back through the previous night's conversation I scrolled, searching. I couldn't find anything incriminating. Lost and anxious, I texted Evan. He told me what I already knew: that I didn't say anything out of line. Reese must've had this stored up for a while.

The stickler in me wanted to fire back at Reese's claims. "Go back to my own country?" I was born in the heart of South Carolina: the first state to secede from the Union. The state that kept anti-miscegenation laws in its constitution until 1998. That's to say, as an interracial couple, my parents technically wouldn't have been approved to marry only four years before I was born in 2002. That's where I come from. That's my country.

If Reese was eager to share these thoughts in a group chat where I was a core member, she must've said it before. Maybe with some friends? With her dad? Did they agree with her? The questions multiplied. How many of my peers saw me as Reese did?

Shortly after her tirade, Reese tried apologizing with a wave of "I'm sorry's" and "I didn't mean it's." But I know she was just backtracking because she thought these messages could jeopardize her future.

My response to her feigned apology, her condescension, and her bigotry was the same as when that blonde kid asserted N-words like me don't belong on the soccer field:

nothing.

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Throughout high school, I avoided social situations where I could face discrimination. I spent my time alone or with friends from elementary school like Evan. These friends didn't see me as a threatening young man. I was just the same old harmless, straight-A, goody-two-shoes kid with big curly hair.

I mostly enjoyed grade school. And I tried so hard. Sometimes I wonder who I was trying for. Was it for me? Or was I trying to validate what I thought I represented?

Back in fourth grade, I applied to be in the “gifted and talented” program. I’d failed to test in in second grade, meaning I didn’t have access to the accelerated learning track. I remember telling my mom, “My friends are in GT, and I feel like I’m GT-worthy.” I felt like I belonged there.

After a tedious application process, I was in. What little-me didn’t know was that being part of this club was a pipeline to the International Baccalaureate program. The IB pathway promised a great education, but it offered an even less diverse pool of classmates than regular high school. I remember being the only person of color in most of my classrooms.

If I hadn’t wanted to prove my capacity for education to my white principal, my white teachers, and the white kids who were selected for GT, maybe I wouldn’t have been the lone student of color in these classes. Maybe I wouldn’t have felt this urge to prove myself, my race, and my people as valid, capable, and strong. Maybe I would’ve spent more time learning about my culture instead of trying to fit into someone else’s.

I wish I could say a few obvious moments shaped me, like Reese’s texts or number thirteen’s insult during our soccer game. It’d feel so clean to sum up my experience as a multicultural individual with isolated instances of bigotry. But the racism I’ve experienced is murky. I don’t fit into the boxes that define America’s identities, so I presented a persona that would be acceptable to white people. Because they surrounded me. Because no matter what efforts I made, I would never fit in with them. It was the everyday otherness that shaped me.

I wish the reason I started cutting my hair short in high school was because I thought it looked good. A short haircut meant fewer curls. One less way to stand out. I wish the jokes I’ve

made about my race come from the comfort I feel in my own skin. I wish my anxiety about my place in the world didn't make me freeze up when discrimination was thrown my way. I'd like to say the culmination of feeling othered isn't important enough for me or millions of others to write, rap, and shout about. But it is. And we — I — won't be silenced into nothing.