

## On College

By Hanif Abdurraqib

In the story I have told a hundred times, I am the only black person on the soccer field. Or I am the only black person at the house party, or at the concert, or in the boardroom. And the joke, you see, wasn't *really* about me. It was about the *other* kind of black people. And in the story as I tell it today, I pretend that I didn't laugh, or I pretend I didn't say *I understand*, or I pretend that I didn't slowly become a bit more invisible.

I come from a neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio that was mostly black. During my formative years, I went to public schools that, until high school, were largely black. The thing about existing joyfully in this way during your youth is that you can convince yourself that racism isn't a palpable, or touchable thing. Even as police officers beat a man on camera, and a city burns. Even as your parents tell you of what violences they have survived themselves.

When I talk about the times in my past when I was asked to not see race in spaces with only white people, I only recently started to talk about being asked to not see myself. The whiteness always stayed. The whiteness consumed the room, or was the room itself. What is truly being asked of you is that you make someone else's experience easier. That you bend yourself into something more palatable, so that a joke can just be a joke. A night can continue with you, shrinking into every corner.

At my college, all of the black students sat together at lunch. I say "all" here and I mean "there were enough to sit at one table." Rather, I say "all" here and you perhaps imagine a small dark speck in an otherwise clear sea. I sat with my soccer teammates, who were all white, and who would sometimes joke about the table in the corner with all of the other black students. There, again, the idea of "other black," or "special type of black."

It is seductive, really, to want acceptance at all costs. To see, and love black people your whole life, but then enter a world where you imagine your survival rests on the welcoming arms of people who are not asking you to be yourself, but a muted version of you.

This is what colorblindness is, really: white people asking to be put at ease. If the radio static hums low enough, the show will go on, uninterrupted. I learned code-switching most effectively in my late teens and early 20's. How I could still sit around a table in my

old neighborhood and crack jokes over spades with my black friends. How I could go to soccer practice and talk about punk rock and reality television, until I was “just one of the guys.”

The truth is that, in practice, this type of performance is exhausting, and doesn't particularly save you from anything. At a party during senior year where I was the only black person, a wallet went missing, or was lost, or a boy got too drunk to remember where his things were and I don't need to tell the rest of this story except to say that I never saw or held the wallet in my hands. But my hands were, unquestionably, black that night. No matter how many punk rock songs I knew, or how much pop culture I could parrot, or how many jokes about the “other” black people at school that I had shoved into the pit in my stomach, now full after four years. I was still there, the only logical suspect in a room of many, *because, because, because* and then *I'm sorry dude* and then *you know this isn't because you're-* and then a word was said, I'm sure, but it vanished before it reached me.

In the story I have told a hundred times, I don't remember when I stopped being the tolerable kind of black, and began being the “other” black, or I don't remember when I decided that I wanted it to stop. Years ago, I became harder to digest when I learned that digestibility would not save me. This felt like a large shift, internally. But to the outside world, it was subtle, if noticeable at all. I was still as black as I was before this epiphany. It was a small movement of personality, a demand to be accepted fully and a request for people to join me, remain close to me while I fought to figure myself out, and where I fit into the world. This is something I still ask for today. When I demand to be seen by people who refuse to see color, what I'm really saying is *I want you to see me for who I am. I want us to appreciate each other for who we are.* I have, at this stage of my life, become comfortable not sacrificing anything. I write, and the lens is always unmistakably on blackness and the celebration of survival. I joke, I love, I read, I run. I do all of these things, now, and I do them with a renewed sense of comfort in my own skin. I feel poured back into my own body, committed to bringing as many of my people with me as possible. To silence the world around you so that it only meets you where you are is a harmful thing. It is harmful to ask of others, and it is harmful for the othered to engage in. If I am ever on a college campus where there are so few black students that it is noticeable, I look for the black students who trail their white peers, laughing, but never too loud. I hope that it doesn't take the something precious going missing at a party for them to finally be seen.