Surface Level Computation

Tuesday evening: I'm lying down on my bedroom floor, cushioned by my Deadpool-themed blanket, and holding a controller in my hands. I agreed to play my Playstation 4 with my virtual friends tonight because I finally completed my assignments. This experience- it's therapeutic. Although I usually come across as outgoing and confident, there's a part of me that so far I have only been able to express when I'm immersed in my games and cultural solidarity. We call our group "Church of Niggas." It was their idea, not mine. We're all outcasts, if I'm being honest, but these nights allow us to cope with our insecurities. The games bring us together. One input and one output. The relationship is simple.

It feels strange to be so attached to six other black men that I only get to meet in person once a year, if I'm lucky. We're scattered across the United States, so the only opportunity for us to see each other in person is through attending an annual international tournament, hosted in Las Vegas. It's where Fighting Game players like us gather to compete. Despite these infrequent encounters, our connection feels more genuine than most of my real-life interactions.

"What up, blackity blacks!" I announce obnoxiously to our group's voice chat server.

"What's good, nigga?" A gruff voice replies that I immediately recognize as Will.

This language empowers us; we're able to recapture the "blackness" that our own black culture frequently denies from us. The other five members greet me in a similar fashion, pleased that we can gather virtually again. Our current game of choice, *Under Night In-Birth (UNIEL)*, allows us to challenge ourselves without the restraints of judgemental outsiders. When we play, we're defined by our skill. The buttons we press on our controllers are directly reflected in the

actions our digital avatars execute. We wield a power that we're able to control, that others can't remove. It's a community.

I love these people, my people, but I often wonder if it's healthy for me to eagerly separate myself from my surroundings like I've done tonight. I've always considered myself to be fairly "boring" because I'd rather spend an evening at home playing video games than doing anything that other people usually find entertaining. Ironically, the outing I look forward to most is meeting up with these guys. While I always enjoy these evenings, my mind races relentlessly. The thoughts plague me and I wonder why we fail to integrate anywhere, but here. I think it's because we all understand the isolation. The tokenization. The alienation.

I'm unsure if these sentiments are self-inflicted.

I was a senior at Culver City high school and our lunch break was almost over. I wanted to be prepared for fifth period, so I left a few minutes early with Jasmine, a close friend of mine, to go to her locker. My primary interest involved succeeding in my AP classes at the time. Unfortunately, that meant that the number of people who looked like me in my classes seemed to dwindle.

"Can I call you Blackie?" Jasmine asked while she was gathering materials from her locker.

I paused, caught by surprise, but questions that teetered on the edge of racism and racial insensitivity were frequent. I was certainly just as guilty (young and ignorant is what I'd say, if I had to describe how I view my sixteen-year-old self, now). I often called Jasmine "Blondie"

because I was uncreative, and she had long, blonde hair. She was 5'6, unafraid to speak her mind, a prankster that found joy in corny jokes, and the embodiment of a tomboy.

I answered, "Sure! I guess that makes us Blackie and Blondie," then proceeded to laugh, "that sounds like the title of a really bad TV show."

She was careful not to mention it in certain settings, like around teachers, because we both clearly understood how harmful this could be out of context. However, the nickname stuck. I figured it was "only fair" for her to call me "Blackie" because she easily accepted her title as "Blondie." I thought the idea was amusing and she was kind enough to ask for permission first. Besides, we were close enough that I hoped she saw me as more than my skin color.

A few days later, I arrived at one of our usual lunch meeting spots a few minutes late. Jasmine was already there, gathered with the eight other people that filled out our group of ten.

"Blackieeeeeeeee!" she exclaimed once she saw me, separating herself from the group in order to hug me. Most of our friends were unbothered by the exchange, since this was typical for Jasmine. The only other black person in our group, Sam, made her discomfort explicit, though.

"Um… excuse me?" she asked, her voice thick with sass and disbelief.

Our mutual friends would often roll their eyes or give us looks of disapproval at our antics, but the tension after Sam's remark was palpable. No one really knew how to react, myself included. I couldn't tell if she was more upset at Jasmine for saying it, or me for allowing it. After a few strained moments, conversation picked up elsewhere and people laughed off the awkwardness. Jasmine didn't call me "Blackie" around Sam again.

Whenever I greet the others in my "Church of Niggas," I think back on that moment with Jasmine. A nickname that created tension between high school friends has become a source of empowerment for my black friends and I while we play together. Even though I allowed Jasmine to call me "Blackie," I often wonder if that exchange was some strange foreshadowing. I think I condone these insensitivities from my school friends because I want them to tolerate my "boring" personality. Perhaps my image of myself as boring has developed partly by measuring myself against stereotypes of black male bodies. I've been insecure in my "blackness" for most of my life and have had no real black friends, in both high school and college, to dispel my "outsider" mentality.

These consistent contemplations unsettle me, but the banter I share with my "Church of Niggas" helps settle me.

"You lucky I'm nice. I coulda stole yo turn!" I jokingly exclaim to Will after his attention lapse nearly causes him to lose a round.

"Nigga, we been knew!" His deep voice responds with a laugh.

This is Will's way of explaining that he already knows I'm kind to them. It's comical how colloquial our English becomes when we play together. Our interactions distract me from the expectations that the outside world imposes on us. I feel free. But, the further I go, the less of us I see.

It was the summer of 2018. 9:07pm. Friday. I was standing in an overcrowded line full of fellow college students waiting to get free food. It was Blaze Pizza's grand opening on Mission Street. I've never been particularly fond of their food, but it's hard to mess up pizza and it's free,

so who am I to complain? Regardless, I was surprised to be there in the first place. The culprits who dragged me out of the house were none other than my housemates, who I lovingly referred to as "my Asians." The name seemed to lightly grate on their nerves at first, but I'm a persistent person, so they warmed up to it eventually. Andy and Sabrina. An abrasive, 5'8'' lanky male and an opinionated, yet warm-hearted 5'2'' woman.

There usually isn't a place where one goes without the other, but I guess that's why this summer has been so strange. It has always been "Andy and Sabrina… and Taylor." However, with Andy spending his summer in Los Angeles rather than at school with Sabrina and I, our jagged puzzle pieces have failed to fit together properly at times.

Andy was back in town and surprised us with a visit. He claimed it was because he didn't want to be bored back in LA, but I think he secretly just missed us. Andy was always laidback and whimsical, allergic to wearing any plain t-shirt colors outside of white, black or gray because he was too unconcerned to put effort into the clothes he wore. This pattern contrasted his behavior towards his friends; while he was mildly lazy, he never failed to energize a dull environment with his humor.

While we were waiting, Andy turned to me and said something like, "Oh yeah! I found another Taylor at work!" I made the confusion clear on my face and waited for him to continue. "There's a black guy where I work! He sits in a cubicle kinda close to me."

I remember releasing a sigh and rolling my eyes to demonstrate my disappointment, as Sabrina berated him with a laugh, "Ooooookay, stop talking… you know what? You need to go back to LA." *I know you primarily surround yourself with other rich Asian people, Andy, but really?*

I remember laughing, too, once Sabrina contributed, to mask the frustration. Besides, it actually was funny to me at the time. I couldn't stop thinking about it that night though. Everything after the incident is blank in my mind because I was unable to stop the marathon that was racing through my thoughts. *Am I disposable? Would you like it if I called the next Asian guy I met a new Andy? Do you see what's wrong this? Do you even care? Should I even care?* I didn't know (I still don't know). What I *did* know, was that I was their only "real black friend." They told me as much while we were all in a car on the freeway, coming back to LA, after a trip to Santa Barbara.

I wonder if they know what those comments means to me. I wonder if they know me as well *I* think I know them. These remarks force me think about the fact that, even after three years, Andy still doesn't see *me*. He sees a black guy. One input (African American) and one output (Taylor). Something to generalize, not something to understand.

This "blackness" is inescapable. Andy's comments were harmless on a surface level, but this defining narrative has plagued my existence, just as it has for the others in my "Church of Niggas." While a part of me wants to be angry, I know Andy's heart is in the right place. He supports my quirks and finds ways to make me smile with his humor on difficult days. He fumbles frequently, like at Blaze Pizza that night, but it's not intentional, he's just unfamiliar with people that don't look like him. He might even believe that those actions are his equivalent to me calling him "one of my Asians." I think it's different because I don't define him by his ethnicity, and the world does not define him by it either, in the way that it defines me. Yet, I can't blame him if he feels that way. Besides, African Americans are only 2% of UC Santa

Cruz's undergraduate population, so, in the Engineering department where we both study, my existence is a rare commodity.

I'm no stranger to being the only black person in my Computer Science courses, or Game Design electives, or Literature classes. Our existence becomes especially scarce in the upper division variants. Because of this, there's a certain pressure I endure when I think of myself as the *only* one. Everyone stares. Everyone judges. I speak for the entirety of my race when this happens. The onlookers can't help themselves. If I mess up, they think black people don't belong here. Even if they don't mean to, I can see the calculated coldness in their eyes. If I thrive, they think I'm some sort of "exception." It's comical at times, really. As if being black and successful is dissociative, like water and oil. Unable to mix. Unable to compute.

My existence frightens them.

That's why I have a "white voice." It's a survival tool for most black people. It makes me sound less intimidating. That way, people might actually look past the melanin in my skin. If I were to speak the way I do with my community, I'd be blacklisted. Unable to exist within the confines of their predetermined filters.

It was the week after UCSC's spring quarter concluded. Summer of 2018. I went to visit my family back in Los Angeles because my brother finally had a few months off and he wanted to see me. I went to his pristine, three-story home in Westchester, wondering what he and his girlfriend were doing with a house that had nine different bedrooms. It was bewildering, but my brother was stubborn. This extravagant posturing was his way of demonstrating he could

financially pamper the people he cared about. It was just like that deep, sapphire blue credit card he gave me, so that I could fit in with my "bougie" Asians.

Despite this, discussions with him tended to be aggravating. I can't say I did a lot of talking, though (even now, I wonder why he wanted me to go to his home if he had just planned on insulting me). Navigating a conversation with him was like traveling barefoot across hot rocks, completely exposed, attempting to hop from one topic to the next and getting singed whenever I shared an opinion.

"You don't like this *ethnic* music," he told me while blasting rap. *An assumption.*

"Relaaaaaaax, stop being so soft, bro" one of his favorite lines. *Maybe you're right?*

"Nigga you *barely* black" he said another time. *What does that even mean? Could he tell that to the people at my school who still looked at me like I was a menace? Like I didn't belong? Or to the College Eight dining hall that accused me of stealing from them? They all seem to think I'm plenty "black."*

These mundane attacks on my identity were his twisted way of showing he cared. The banter allowed him to say "I missed you," in a barely recognizable language. My interests had never aligned with his (sports, and other stereotypical "black" things), so he frequently questioned my place in my own culture.

I knew he loved me (and I know he still does), but the comments ate away at me. It seemed like everytime we *did* speak, I was reminded of how he used that deep, sapphire blue card to replace the black card he'd revoked from me. I didn't want to appear ungrateful, though (and I still don't), so I refused to voice my opinion. I hated the silence. But the alternative, actually raising my voice, was so much worse.

My aunt once told me that I'm "extremely self-aware" for a person my age. I can't say I agree because I'm "too black" to leave, but not "black enough" to stay. But here, with my video games and locked away from the outside world, the facades have fallen; I can be myself with my "Church of Niggas." William. Elijah. Terrell. Robert. Gerald. Marcus. Us and the controller. The controller and the game. The relationship is simple. One input and one output, but *we* are in control of how we're perceived.

We're safe here. I'm safe here. I'm hoping in the future, I can take this complicated self on the road. Outside--I often think about ways to bring this safe space to more African American players.