

What's in a Name?

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I arrived at BNA on a snowy night at precisely 4:00 am. After spending a not-so-wintery break with my family back home in Brazil, I had just landed in Nashville for my second semester at Vanderbilt. Barely keeping my eyes open, I called an Uber, mentally counting down the seconds before I could dive into my warm bed on the Commons.

It took the driver over thirty minutes to arrive. He immediately went on to apologize, explaining that he had gone around the airport twice and hadn't recognized me because I "didn't look like a Pedro." I was too tired to say anything: my two flights had been delayed for a combined total of eighteen hours, and I hadn't slept in almost two days. I nodded and replied halfheartedly with the single word that conveyed best what I was feeling: "hmm."

That "hmm" was not meant to be sarcastic or mean; it was what my exhausted brain used to express how uncomfortably intrigued I was by the situation. Maybe it was the fatigue speaking, or possibly the gallons of airplane coffee I had recently ingested, but I found it the weirdest thing being told that my name—the name my parents chose for me, the word I have been referred to as for my entire life—was not an accurate depiction of me.

Obviously, that was not the first time it had happened. Ever since moving to the U.S. six months before, I had listened to multiple variations of the same comment, but only on that night did I start giving it more thought. Did people think "Pedro" was not a name white enough to describe me? Or, worse, did they think I was not Latino enough to take on the name "Pedro"? Even the thought of it seemed preposterous to me. No, I thought. My name has nothing to do with my racial identity. "Pedro" is just as common a name in Latin America, Portugal, and Spain as "David" or "John" are in English-speaking countries. Fun fact: it just so happens to be our version of the English name "Peter."

Yet what bothered me most was not the comment itself, but the fact that it reflected my own doubts about race. Ever since coming to Vanderbilt, I had felt awkward when these discussions came up. I never seemed to know where to place myself racially. I was born and raised in Brazil, living there for the first eighteen years of my life, a descendant of European immigrants and a hodgepodge of indigenous populations, which I suppose technically makes me a Latino. Yet I am not Hispanic—yes, those are two different things—because Spanish is not my native language, although (not to brag) I actually *do* speak it. It gets even more confusing: I look white and have been treated as such for my entire life in Brazil. So how would I define my race? Am I Latino simply for being born in Latin America and raised around Latinx culture, or is there more to it than that? Am I white, too, or are those two identities mutually exclusive?

My name tells me so much about who I am. It has been on every document, test, email, Starbucks order, and Uber ride I have ever had. It is the daily reminder of my native language and country I love dearly. It is a cultural badge I wear with pride in the face of ignorance, but also just five simple letters. It is a word I have mulled over for years, dissecting every stereotype and implication that comes with it. Despite all my efforts, to this day I have not been able to decipher what it means to "look like a Pedro."