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## **A White? Cuban Woman Facing the Mirror**

Posted By [Mavis Alvarez](#) On March 20, 2009 @ 2:49 am In [Mavis Alvarez's Diary](#) | [7 Comments](#)

### **By Mavis Alvarez**

*I don't remember ever having asked myself what race I belonged to. I was born advantaged in a society that discriminated against non-whites.*

*So, am I white? The answer isn't so simple. On my identity card, it says my skin color is white. So, am I white? Let's have a look at my genealogical tree; since racial classifications don't work with me.*

*Contemporary science has penetrated the substance of the human genome, and it turns out that the theory of racial differences has been thrown out, because there's only one race: the human race, and people of all colors belong to it.*

*Leaving the genome aside, I'll continue with my genealogy.*

### **What I know about my family**

*The first trunk: a daughter of Africans, brought -we now know how- to this Caribbean land. She would end up with others like her in a group of slaves in the sugarcane fields in the eastern part of the island.*

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*This black woman had sex with another black person -we don't know who- and gave birth to a Cuban girl. The child grew up and crossed with no other than a Chinese man! He was also swindled into coming here, but from the Yucatan, and he too was semi-enslaved on the cane plantation.*

*There is a historical parenthesis: blacks, whites, Chinese, Moors, all went to war so that the Spanish settlers would be made to leave their homeland.*

*After thirty years of fighting, they won the war and freedom came - not as free as they wanted, but hey...we won't talk about that now.*

*Let me return to my great-great-grandmother, because that black woman who married a Chinese man was my great-grandmother's mother, who I actually met.*

*Named Alfonsa, though they called her Focha, there was my great-grandmother, an Afro-Chinese mulatta who died at 108, blind and strong, and who asked for coffee in the mornings without getting out of the bed because she had a "cold head."*

*I also met my great-grandfather, who passed for white but wasn't; this was because he descended from Canary Islanders. We also now know that European whites of the Iberian Peninsula were under the Arab domination for eight centuries, and some people must have crossed over -some with others, and others with some- during such a long stay together.*

*But the matter didn't stop there. My young great-grandmother Focha, was pretty and spirited, so that she and her almost white husband, who was as spirited as her, had eleven children, among them a male named Augusto. The boy's skin came out very white, but his hair short, hard and curly, reminding one of the African who was forcibly brought here.*

*Augusto was my grandfather. He was a "jabao," as we call them in Cuba - those who have that mixture of light skin and frizzy hair.*

*I forgot to point out that the entire family has lived and worked in the countryside, even up until today.*

*My grandfather Augusto was the first one who looked for a woman in the city.*

*I don't know the details of that encounter, nor how the facts occurred. But it turns out that my grandmother, Micaela, with white skin and straight hair, fell in love with jabao Augusto. She gave him two daughters, one of which was my mother, Petronila, better known as Nila.*

*Nila further whitened the family. She was a jabá, with skin lighter than my grandfather's, but with hard hair that betrayed her. She passed for white but had to iron her hair to straighten it.*

*My mother was pretty, truly, but she was poor, rural, and had only finished the third grade. Into her life appeared my father, Constantino, a Spanish emigrant of some economic means and twenty years older than her. He was an opportunist... How history repeats itself!*

*My mother gave birth to three females - all white with straight hair. We were born with advantages in a Republican but racist society.*

*In 1962, I -and millions of other Cubans- declared the end of racism in Cuba.*

*Years later we discovered that eliminating institutional racism doesn't guarantee eliminating racism from society, or from the conscious of each individual.*

*Racism has a very strong embryo; it comes from an egg fertilized under colonialism. It multiplies and grows strong in a leafy and malignant tree if the conditions are favorable, but hides, dodges and blends in if conditions are adverse. It is patient and waits; it waits and reemerges in a thousand other subtler but equally perverse ways when favorable conditions reappear.*

*I thought about all this yesterday, when returning from a talk between colleagues in a hall filled with diverse people belonging to the association of writers, of which I am a member.*

### ***Cuba and its racial problems***

*So are there racial problems in Cuba? Undoubtedly there are; why shouldn't there be, given our history?*

*I look at myself in the mirror, with my white skin, oriental eyes, curly hair, thick lips and a nose anything but straight, but rather flattened. It's not bad; I like myself as I am. But...what am I?*

*Me?, I am Cuban, daughter of Petronila, granddaughter of Micaela, great-granddaughter of Focha and great-great-granddaughter of an African black woman whose name we do not know.*

*I am Cuban, daughter of an Asturian Spaniard, granddaughter of a jabao, great-granddaughter of a Canary Islander, great-great-granddaughter of a black African whose name is unknown.*

*All these people are behind me, pushing.*

*I am Cuban, I am anti-racist. And yes, we do have racial problems. I will bring up the subject again in the future.*

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## **7 Comments To "A White? Cuban Woman Facing the Mirror "**

**#1 Comment** By [msday](#) On April 22, 2009 @ 1:52 am

What a wonderful post. It is wonderful to be able to acknowledge proudly acknowledge your heritage. I share your sentiments and commend you on being so accepting of the whole tree as opposed to a few branches.

**#2 Comment** By [isemilla](#) On April 14, 2009 @ 9:19 am

Dear Mavis,

i am so glad to stumble upon your blog - your kind personality come through every entry of yours, i really enjoy reading your wise textes.  
i have visited your beautiful country two times, recently i have been there for two monthes ( i travelled as far as Santiago as well), an now i am blogging on my experiences. in one of my recent post i wrote about the rassism issue in Cuba, and for that i linked your entry on this topic, too.  
thanks  
[2]

**#3 Comment** By [ron ridenour](#) On March 25, 2009 @ 3:57 pm

Mavis,  
You are so lovely to read.  
I add one comment to your piece. Racism can not be obliterated, nor can discrimination generally, until the entire people of any given society actually take and exercise political, economic and social power. Unfortunately no government, not even Cuba ´s, has allowed a transfer of power from the top to the bottom.  
That is what it will take before the people can make real decisions and become equal.  
Ron Ridenour

**#4 Comment** By [Cheryl Montgomery](#) On March 22, 2009 @ 11:10 pm

Maven, this is very brave of you to write so candidly about your family. I'm from south Louisiana where racism is still here, maybe not so overtly now, but covertly. Still, it is here just under the surface. Here, as in so many families, including mine, family members have left their African ancestored families passing for white in order to find financial security for themselves and their family. This makes doing family search challenging to say the least. Thanks for your thought provoking family story. I look forward to reading more about your family.

**#5 Comment** By [tomas belsky](#) On March 22, 2009 @ 6:19 am

thought provoking, indeed. Here in Hawaii we are an all mixed up society, and here too there are racial problems. what is different here and is true for much of the world in regions that have been in the cross currents of history, trade and of course colonialism, is that the people are so mixed up that the race issue is a prime subject of comedians. No one can launch an attack on another based on race because every family is extended (ohana) and includes numerous racial strains. The race card is played in America because the truth of the societal structure is revealed best through an examination of economic history and that smacks of Marxism which is still verboten in the USA. The recent conversation about the word "nigger" is indicative of the toxicity of of race relations. If one examines the meaning of that work one finds that nigger is an adjective and can be applied correctly to peoples of every color and ethnicity. And the word is also used as a term of endearment among intimates. But it is such a loaded term that used in the wrong circumstances it could be one's last utterance. Norman Mailer wrote of the "white Nigger" ; Lenny Bruce attacked the word fiercely and tried to defuse it. It's a helluva problem. Love is the answer.

**#6 Comment** By [mary](#) On March 20, 2009 @ 4:27 pm

I read this early this morning, and I have thought about it most of this day. My question is, is Cuba more advanced in diminishing discrimination or not? The U.S. election might lead us to believe there is hope and that ultimately it is the person and his/her ability to reach each of us individually is what counts. You are the most wonderful writer who I have read, so I find myself struggling with this topic, from you. I want to know where this will lead, this story, this tale about your life. I am fascinated. I was born in Canada, I come from a Scottish and Irish heritage. I have two daughters 23 and 21. I have given them this heritage, that is my side of the family. I am not sure though that they or I will question it quite like you are doing. So why is that? So Mavis Dora, I am ultimately fascinated with your writing, waiting for your next part.

**#7 Comment** By [Michael N. Landis](#) On March 20, 2009 @ 11:01 am

Who are we? What are we? We are still trying to answer these questions when the Grim Reaper arrives to lead us down to dim Dis! In a way, Mavis, you are fortunate to have known your great grandmother and great grandfather. My mother's parents were as far back as I was able to know. I am sure that who and what these people were have certain profound-and unknown-effects upon who we are. Imagining them is often the basis for historical fiction. If only we had a time machine, so we could go back and talk to them, or at least observe them in their daily lives. Failing that, books and articles of their period, at least the ones written by perceptive people, is our only consolation. In this matter, I would like to share one exceptional find, THE SARAGOSSA MANUSCRIPT, by Jan Potocki. Though written by a Polish nobelman of the 19th Century, it is the story of a Spaniard from the 17th Century who, on a journey across haunted mountains from one region of Iberia to another, through a series of dreams and encounters, as he is visited by a series of ancestral ghosts and daemons, discovers who he is. Thanks again, Mavis, for a wonderful story, which could be the outline for a future project. If not the whole many-generational panorama, then perhaps the story of one generation, or one ancestor.

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