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# A White Woman of Color

ESSAY BY JULIA ALVAREZ

Growing up in the Dominican Republic, I experienced racism within my own family—though I didn't think of it as racism. But there was definitely a hierarchy of beauty, which was the main currency in our family of daughters. It was not until years later, from the vantage point of the United States and an American education, that I realized that this hierarchy of beauty was dictated by our coloring. We were a progression of whitening, as if my mother were slowly bleaching the color out of her children.

The oldest sister had the darkest coloring with very curly hair and "coarse" features. She looked the most like Papi's side of the family and was considered the least pretty. I came next, with "good hair," and skin that back then was a deep olive, for I was a tomboy—another dark mark against me—who would not stay out of the sun. The sister right after me had my skin color, but she was a good girl who stayed indoors, so she was much paler, her hair a golden brown. But the pride and joy of the family was the baby. She made heads turn—strangers approached asking to feel her silken hair. She was white white—an adjective which was repeated in describing her color as if to deepen the shade of white. Her eyes were brown but her hair was an uncountable towheaded blond. Because of her coloring, my father was teased that there must have been a German milkman in our neighborhood. How could *she* be *his* daughter? It was clear that this youngest child resembled



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of knives and forks and on eating a little portion of everything served; my father, on the other hand, defended our eating whatever we wanted, with our hands if need be, so we could "have fun" with our food. My mother would snap back that we looked like *jibaritas* who should be living out in the country. Of course, that was precisely where my father's family came from.

Not that Papi's family weren't smart and enterprising, all twenty-five brothers and sisters. (The size of the family in and of itself was considered very country by some members of Mami's family.) Many of Papi's brothers had gone to the university and become professionals. But their education was totally island—no

had the smell of the earth on it, whereas my mother's family had money in Chase Manhattan Bank, most of it with George Washington's picture on it, not Juan Pablo Duarte's.

It was clear to us growing up then that lighter was better, but there was no question of discriminating against someone because he or she was dark-skinned. Everyone's family, even an elite one like Mami's, had darker-skinned members. All Dominicans, as the saying goes, have a little black behind the ears. To separate oneself from those who were darker would have been to divide *una familia*—a sacrosanct entity in our culture. Neither was white blood necessarily a sign of moral, intellectual, or political superiority. All one has to do is page

happened last year. The denial of the Afro-Dominican part of our culture reached its climax during the dictatorship of Trujillo, whose own maternal grandmother was Haitian. To protect Dominican race purity, Trujillo ordered the overnight slaughter of thousands (figures range from 20,000 to 4,000) of Haitians by his military, who committed this atrocity using only machetes and knives in order to make this planned extermination look like a "spontaneous" border skirmish. He also had the Dominican Republic declared a white nation despite the evidence of the mulatto senators who were forced to pass this ridiculous measure.

So, black was not so good, kinky hair was not so good, thick lips were not so good. But even if you were *indio oscuro con pelo malo y una bamba de aquí a Baní*, you could still sit in the front of the bus and order at the lunch counter—or the equivalent thereof. There was no segregation of races in the halls of power. But in the aesthetic arena—the ones to which we girls were relegated as females—lighter was better. Lank hair and pale skin and small, fine features were better. All I had to do was stay out of the sun and behave myself, and I could pass as a pretty white girl.

Another aspect of my growing up also greatly influenced my *thinking on race*. Although I was raised in the heart of a large family, my day-to-day caretakers were the maids. Most of these women were dark-skinned, some of Haitian background. One of them, Misiá had been spared the machetes of the 1937 massacre when she

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Mami's side of the family. Mami's family were *really* white, both in terms of race, and also of class. From them came the Spanish surnames, the pale skin, the lank hair. Her brothers and uncles went to schools abroad and had important businesses in the country. They also emulated the manners and habits of North Americans. Growing up, I remember arguments at the supper table about whether it was proper to tie one's napkin around one's neck or not, how much of one's arm one could properly lay on the table, and whether spaghetti could be eaten with the help of a spoon. My mother, of course, insisted on all the protocol

fancy degrees from Andover, Cornell, or Yale, no summer camps or school songs in another language. Papi's family still lived in the interior rather than the capital, in old-fashioned houses, which were decorated in ways that my mother's family would have considered, well, tasteless. I remember antimacassars on the backs of rocking chairs, garish paintings of flamboyant trees, ceramic planters with plastic flowers in bloom. Papi's family were *criollos*—creoles, expansive, proud, colorful—rather than cosmopolitans. (Some members had a sixth finger on their right—or was it their left?—hands.) Their money, kept in a wad in their back pockets, still

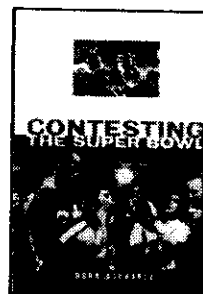
through a Dominican history book and look at the number of dark-skinned presidents, dictators, generals, and entrepreneurs to see that power has not resided exclusively or primarily among the whites on the island. The leadership of our country historically has been "colored."

But being black was something else. A black Dominican was referred to as a "dark indian" (*indio oscuro*)—unless you wanted to come to blows with him, that is. The real blacks were the Haitians who lived next door and who occupied the Dominican Republic for twenty years, from 1822-1844, a fact that can still so inflame the Dominican populace you'd think it had

chetes of the 1937 massacre when she was taken in by our family and hidden from the prowling *guardias*. We children spent most of the day with these women. They tended to us, nursed us when we were sick, cradled us when we fell down and scraped an elbow or knee (as a tomboy, there was a lot of this scraping for me), and most important, they told us stories of *los santos* and *el barón del cementerio*, of *el cuco* and *las ciguapas*, beautiful dark-skinned creatures, who escaped capture because their

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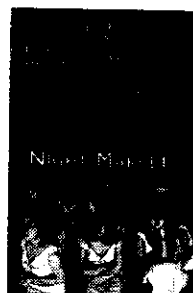
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feet were turned backwards, and so they left behind a false set of footprints. These women spread the wings of our imaginations and connected us deeply to the land we came from. They were the ones with the stories that had power over us.

We arrived in Neuva York in 1960, before the large waves of Caribbean immigrants created little Habanas, Santo Domingos, and San Juans in the boroughs of the city. Here we encountered a whole new kettle of wax—as my malaproping Mami might have said. People of color were treated as if they were inferior, prone to violence, uneducated, untrustworthy, lazy—all the “bad” adjectives we were learning in our new language. Our dark-skinned aunt, Tía Ana, who had lived in New York for several decades and so was the authority in these matters, recounted stories of discrimination on buses and subways. These Americans were so blind! One drop of black and you were black. Everyone back home would have known that Tía Ana was not black; she had “good hair” and her skin color was a light *indio*. All week, she worked in a *factoría* in the Bronx, and when she came to visit us on Saturdays to sew our school clothes, she had to take three trains to our nice neighborhood where the darkest face on the street was usually her own.

We were lucky to be white Dominicans. But white as we were, we still encountered prejudice. We found that our accents, our habits and smells

added “color” to our complexions. Had we been darker, we certainly could not have bought our mock Tudor house in Jamaica Estates. In fact, the African American family who moved in across the street several years later needed police protection because of threats. Even so, at the local school, we endured the bullying of classmates. “Go back to where you came from!” they yelled at my sisters and me on the playground. When some of them started throwing stones, my mother made up her mind that we were not safe and began applying to boarding schools where privilege transformed prejudice into patronage.

“So where are you from?” our classmates would ask.

“Jamaica Estates,” I’d say, an edge of belligerence to my voice. It was obvious from my accent, if not my looks, that I was not from there in the way they meant being from somewhere.

“I mean *originally*.”

And then it would come out, the color, the accent, the cousins with six fingers, the smell of garlic.

By the time I went off to college, a great explosion of American culture was taking place on campuses across the country. The Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War and subsequent peace movement, and the women’s movement were transforming traditional definitions of American identity. Ethnicity was in: my classmates wore long braids like Native Americans, peasant blouses from

Mexico, long diaphanous skirts and dangly earrings from India. Suddenly my foreignness was being celebrated. This reversal felt affirming but also disturbing. As *huipils*, *serapes*, and embroidered dresses proliferated about me, I had the feeling that my ethnicity had become a commodity. I resented it.

When I began looking for a job after college, I discovered that being a white Latina made me a nonthreatening minority in the eyes of these employers. My color was a question *only* of culture—and if I kept my cultural color to myself, I was “no problem.” Each time I was hired for one of my countless visiting appointments to teach creative writing, freshman English, introductory survey courses—never permanent “invitations,” mind you—the inevitable questionnaire would accompany my contract, in which I was to check my race: Caucasian, Black, Native American, Asian, Hispanic, Other. How could a Dominican divide herself in this way? Or was I really a Dominican anymore? And what was Hispanic? A census creation—there is no such culture—how could it define who I was at all? Given this set of options, the truest answer might have been to check Other.

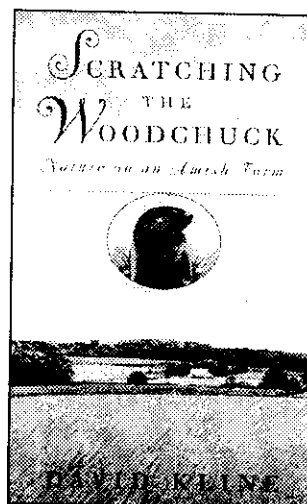
Adrift from any Latino community in this country, my culture had become an internal homeland, periodically replenished by trips back “home.” But as a professional woman on my own, I felt less and less at

where I could bring in the multicultural authors I wanted. But since I had been formed in this very academy, I was clueless about where to start. I began to educate myself by reading, and that is when I discovered that there were others out there like me, hybrids who came in a variety of colors and whose ethnicity and race were an evolving process, not a rigid paradigm or a list of boxes, one of which you checked off.

This discovery of my ethnicity in books was like a rebirth. I had been going through a pretty bad writer’s block: the white page seemed to resist whatever it was I had in me to say. But listening to authors like Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, June Jordan, and to that first wave of Latino writers—Lorna Dee Cervantes, Piri Thomas, Rudolfo Anaya, Edward Rivera, Ernesto Galarza—I began to hear the language “in color,” to see that literature could reflect the otherness I was feeling. A story could allow for the competing claims of different parts of ourselves and where we came from.

Ironically, it was through my own stories and poems that I finally made contact with Latino communities in this country. As I published more, I was invited to read at community centers and bilingual programs. Latino students, who began attending colleges in larger numbers in the late seventies and eighties, sought me

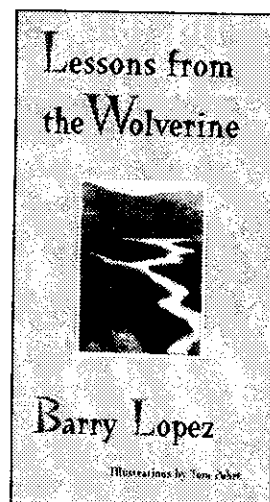
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home on the island. My values, the loss of my Catholic faith, my wardrobe, my hippy ways, and my feminist ideas separated me from my native culture. I did not subscribe to many of the mores and constraints that seemed to be an intrinsic part of that culture. And since my culture had always been my "color," by rejecting these mores, I had become not only Americanized, but whiter.

If I could have been a part of a Latino community in the United States, the struggle might have been if not easier, less private and, therefore, less isolating. These issues of acculturation and ethnicity would have been struggles to share with others like me. But all my North American life I had lived in shifting academic communities—going to boarding schools, then college, and later teaching wherever I could get those yearly appointments—and these communities reflected the dearth of Latinos in the profession. Except for friends in Spanish departments, who tended to have come from their countries of origin to teach rather than being raised in this country as I was, I had very little daily contact with Latinos.

I looked for company where I had always found it since coming to this country—in books. At first, the texts that I read and taught were the canonical works that formed the context of the bread-and-butter courses, which as a "visiting instructor," I was hired to teach. These texts were mostly written by white male writers from Britain and the United States, with a few women thrown in, and no Latinos. Thank goodness for the occasional creative writing workshop

out as a writer and teacher "of color." After the publication of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, I found that I had become a sort of spokesperson for Dominicans in this country, a role I had neither sought nor accepted. Of course, some Dominicans refused to grant me any status as a "real" Dominican because I was white. With the color word was also a suggestion of class. My family had not been among the waves of economic immigrants who left the island in the seventies, a generally darker-skinned, working-class group, who might have been the maids and workers in my mother's family house. We had come in 1960, political refugees, with no money but with "prospects": Papi had a friend who was the doctor at the Waldorf-Astoria and who helped him get a job; Mami's family had money in the Chase Manhattan Bank that they could loan us. We changed classes in America—from Mami's elite family to middle-class spics—but our background, education, and most especially our pale skin had made mobility easier for us here. We had not undergone the same kind of race struggles as other Dominicans; therefore, we could not be "real Dominicans."

What I came to understand and accept and ultimately fight for with my writing is the reality that ethnicity and race are not fixed constructs or measurable quantities. What constitutes our ethnicity and our race evolves as we seek to define and redefine ourselves in new contexts. My Latinness is not something someone could take away from me, or leave me

out of, with a definition. It is in my blood: it comes from that mixture of biology, culture, native language, and experience that make me a different American from one whose family comes from Ireland or Poland or Italy. My Latiness is also a political choice. I am choosing to hold on to my ethnicity and native language even if I can "pass." I am choosing to color my Americanness with my Dominican-ness even if it comes in a light shade of skin color.

As we Latinos redefine ourselves in America, making ourselves up and making ourselves over, we have to be careful in taking up the promises of America not to adopt its limiting racial paradigms. Many of us have shed customs and prejudices that oppressed our gender, race, or class on our native islands and in our native countries. We should not replace these with modes of thinking that are divisive and oppressive of our rich diversity. Maybe as a group that embraces many races and differences, we Latinos can provide a positive multicultural, multiracial model to a divided America.

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Julia Alvarez is originally from the Dominican Republic, but emigrated to this country with her parents at the age of ten. She is the author of three novels and two books of poems. Her new book of essays, *Something to Declare*, is due out from Algonquin Books at the end of the year. "A White Woman of Color" will be published in July 1998 in *Monkey in the Middle: Writers Growing Up Bilingual and Bicultural*, edited by Claudine C. O'Hearn (Pantheon).

