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1959 | Luanda, aunt Loló and nieces (photo from the personal archive of Verónica de Fátima)



# LOOK, I'M NOT WHITE

Verónica de Fátima

*The project MEMOIRS: Children of Empire and European Post-Memories, funded by the European Research Council (No. 648624) is based at the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra. As part of the fieldwork for the project, to date 169 interviews have been conducted to gather information on the memories inherited by the children and grandchildren of the generation that lived through the decolonization of African territories formerly part of the Portuguese, French and Belgian empires. The following interview with Verónica de Fátima was conducted on March 28, 2018, by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro.*

My story is different. People look at me and think “another daughter of a *retornado*”. I have to explain, “no, not quite”. I was born on March 12, 1959, in Luanda, Angola. I arrived in Lisbon in 1975. My father is Portuguese. He was sent to Angola as a punishment because he didn’t want to go to university. His very strict, wealthy family in northern Portugal sent him to Africa to work.

My mother had had a church marriage, but they had become separated. As divorce was out of the question, she was still technically married when she fell in love with my father and they decided to live together. She got pregnant, but my father’s family wouldn’t have their white son going to live with a *mestiça* woman. Around then my paternal grandfather died, which gave my father an excuse to return to Portugal. He never returned to Angola. When I was born, he was no longer in Angola.

On my mother’s side, they are all Angolans – Africans, black – except my grandfather, João. He emigrated from Brazil to Angola, where he set up a coffee plantation, and opened the first hotel in Uíge. He met my grandmother, who was Angolan. They lived together and had 4 children. He died when my mother was 8. As he was not officially married to my grandmother, she got nothing. We lived in a white colonial society, and she was black, with *mestiço* children who had no right to anything. My mother was raised by her mother and her stepfather, the second husband of my maternal grandmother. He was a black Angolan, a cobbler. I called him grandfather – grandfather Aníbal.

In Luanda, I grew up with my mother and my aunts, in a mixed context, of *mestiços*. Because she is from the north, other Angolans looked down on my mother and her habits. They called her Congolese. We always lived in neighbourhoods miles from the city centre, and even there we didn't get on with everyone. We were the daughters of the Congolese women and we had white skin. On top of that, my mother had been separated and had dared to live with another man and have a baby with him. And then she dared to be an independent woman, to live alone with her daughters, support the household and run things herself, with no man around.

From first to fourth years, I was sent to a private school because my mother thought it offered a better educational context. It was at that time that I realized that I was not like the others. There were no black children in the school; there were only 3 or 4 *mestiços* and the white children of settlers. One day they came to call me: "come along, your maid is here". I thought: "maid?". I was baffled. When I got to the school gate, it was my mother. I realized: for those white people, my *mestiço* mother could not be my mother. I was 6, 7 years old and I decided that, from that day on, the first thing I had to do when I introduced myself to someone was to say: "look, I'm not white. I'm the daughter of a *mestiça*". It was then that I started to understand that we lived in a colony, that we were colonized.

I remember the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1974. I was at school when we found out. We went out onto the balcony and cried "Angola! Angola! We are Angolans". We asserted our origins. We are happy to have had the 25<sup>th</sup> of April. I never considered leaving Angola. Much less to go to Portugal. I was 15 years old. I thought that it was the end of colonization, of colonialism. We were going to stop being discriminated against because we were white, black or *mestiço*. And we were going to become a new country, a new society. That was what I imagined.

I arrived in Portugal on October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1975 with my mother and sister. We didn't use the airlift because, according to my mother, we were only going on vacation and then we would go back. We each brought a suitcase with clothes and some bits and pieces, because it was temporary. My mother returned to Angola in March or April of 1976. She visited Portugal periodically to be with us. My sister and I stayed on alone. I was 16 at the time. My sister was 13. It was very difficult. We lived in an apartment, which my mother rented by paying almost the whole year in advance. She left us a little bit of money, but it ran out. We went to eat at places where there were people who had come from Angola. When they didn't have food, they came to eat at our house.

In 1976, my mother thought that, as I was the daughter of a Portuguese, I had the right to Portuguese nationality. So I met up with my father. It was the first and last time I saw him. My mother went to talk to him to see if he would recognize me as his daughter. He showed no interest in me. I decided that if I had lived 16 years without having my father's name on my identity card, I could live the rest of my life without him too. I got my Portuguese nationality through the nationality law of the time.

When I arrived from Angola, I wanted to be a doctor. But I ended up not being a doctor because I became a mother. I thought that if I was going to be a mother, I couldn't be a doctor. I arrived in Portugal in October 1975 and in December 1976 I was already a mother. It was all very difficult. I was not well-received by the family. It was a shock right away. I didn't make friends in school because I went to school pregnant. The girls all looked at me out of the corners of their eyes; "as if it's not enough to be a white *mestiça*, from Angola, no mother, no father... she's pregnant too". So I had to put up my defences. And I was surviving.

Interview edited by **Fátima da Cruz Rodrigues**

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