

We're not black

Cassie Poirier and her mother, Lynne, are sitting in Mimo's Cafe, a Portuguese restaurant in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where they both grew up. They are ignoring the menus for a moment, too busy staring at a precious little piece of paper with scribbled notes on it.

The paper is another clue to the secret that Lynne's father kept from them his whole life, the secret Cassie and Lynne are struggling to understand.

It has been five years since they discovered the truth, and they are still trying to make sense of it. Lynne sighs and tells her daughter, "I don't know Cass. It's weird. I have no idea."

The pair suspected Cassie's grandfather was lying about their family's origins. Were they really Portuguese? They just couldn't believe it.

Growing up around Portuguese culture, Lynne always felt a disconnect from it. "I never felt like, oh, that reminds me of my grandmother." She didn't know why yet, but the Cosby Show was closer to what her family was like to her. "That's like my grandfather, that's like my dad—the mannerisms, the way they speak."

But Joseph James Sylvia would never, until his death in 2015, admit he was Cape Verdean—an African.

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That reluctance nagged at Cassie up until her studies at college today. Looking out the window of her college's cafeteria, two hours away from New Bedford, Cassie plumbs her childhood memories, slowly turning a Lepidolite rock in her hand. The pink rock is supposed to restore balance and harmony, she explains.

Early on, Cassie's childhood was hectic. Her mother was 18 when she gave birth. Her biological father, whom Cassie says was abusive, disappeared from the picture when she was still too young to remember.

Cassie spent a lot of time with Lynne's parents, Joseph James and Carole, growing up. She has fond memories of her grandfather, sitting on his couch while she put butterfly hair clips in his dark hair before she went to school.

Cassie remembers her grandfather as the perfect American stereotype. He watched football and baseball, and ate steak and french fries, cap always on his head. He was completely Americanized.

When Lynne and Cassie would try to question him about his Cape Verdean origins, he would close off instantly and get upset. He refused to eat Cape Verdean food. One time, Cassie recalls, he beat up a man who just wanted to introduce him to another Cape Verdean.

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The only answer his family members would ever get from him on the subject was, repeatedly, “We’re not black, we’re not black, we’re not black.”

Lynne never contradicted her father’s story until she discovered she had been lied to for years. She was traveling to New York, and happened to strike up a conversation in a Bronx cafe with an older woman. They sat down together, complaining that the place was yet another completely gentrified café in the Bronx.

“Instantly I noticed her,” Lynne said. “In my head I was like, I bet she’s Cape Verdean.” And she was right.

The woman was also from New Bedford. Even more bizarrely, when she first arrived in the United States, she used to live with Cassie’s great-grandmother Casilda.

The woman looked at Cassie’s mom and asserted, “You’re absolutely Cape Verdean.”

“She said, ‘Your family is from Brava and I grew up with them’.”

Lynne came back from New York, shared her discovery with her daughter and the two were determined to unveil the truth. From there, Cassie and her mom took DNA tests, which opened the door to their heritage.

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“For me there’s a lot of pride in it, I grew up in a Cape Verdean community, so I knew about the culture, I always loved it, thought it was beautiful, so knowing that it’s also mine is awesome,” Cassie explains, calmly. “It’s also this weird mixed feeling that I can’t take pride in it because I didn’t grow up in it.” She pauses. “I did, but removed.”

Cassie grew up in “The Whaling City.” getting its nickname from being one of the world’s most important whaling ports in the 19th century. After Portuguese explorers colonized the islands, Cape Verde became a notorious trading hub for slavery. Many Cape Verdeans have slave ancestors.

New Bedford is now a cultural melting pot built from immigration waves from Portugal, Azores, Madeira, Ireland, Poland, and Cape Verde, an archipelago off the northwest coast of Africa.



Cassie’s friends and neighbors were Cape Verdeans. Restaurants were Cape Verdeans. Yet she grew up appreciating this diverse culture from a distance.

When her mother's conversation with the woman in the Bronx proved her this community was also Cassie's, she wanted to know more. She needed to know more. But before she could get her answers, or the recipes, songs and anecdotes she wished she was given, her grandfather passed away. And her grandmother is still closed to this conversation.

"I want to know who I am. I don't want to continue this legacy of hiding parts of ourselves and carrying secrets intergenerationally," she explains. "I just think that, in a way, it's just a form of trauma to keep that part of yourself."

But she realized her grandparents weren't the only one in her family keeping secrets. Many of her other relatives refused to talk to her about any of it, or even come to terms with their identity. Cassie would have to get answers on her own.

She started spending hours digging through records in the New Bedford Public Library, which holds the third largest collection worldwide of American Whaling materials, early 19th century Quaker materials, art, and an extensive genealogy collection. If there is one place where she could learn more about where she comes from, it would be there.

On a Saturday in December, she walks in the library. She approaches the front desk and quickly checks, "The ancestry stuff is on the second floor, right?" The librarian answers with a smile, "Yes, second floor."

Today, Cassie tells the librarian more. "We're trying to research my Cape Verdean family's history," she explains. "I'm trying to piece everything together, it's really hard."

The two lower their voices as they get into more details. They realize they both have ancestors from Brava, an island in Cape Verde.

"Good luck," the librarian tells Cassie as she walks up to the second floor.

As Cassie sits down in front of the computer, she types her grandfather's name, "Joseph James Sylvia." Then she enters his birth year, 1941. As she slowly looks through the names on the list that pops up, she whispers to herself, "No, this isn't him."

She shakes her head as she scrolls down.

Next search, Casilda Reis, her great-grandmother. "171,390 results." She looks at the screen and says, "Here's the interesting stuff."

She has to dig deeper. She has to make sure her information is correct. She finds Amelia Reis, Casilda's mother. Here it is, on the screen, "Brava, Cape Verde."

She looks at Atlantic Ports Passenger lists. After carefully reading the entry of names of people who boarded on the Daisy, she says, "If this is the right one, then 1914 is when they came."

But there are so many Amelia Reis, and she wants to know the exact story.

“Oh, this is her,” she suddenly gasps. “I know it’s her because they lived on Water Street. Joseph Reis, that must have been her husband.”

The more she reads, the more she finds new pieces to the puzzle. She just has to know where to put them.

She bites the white beads of her long necklace as she finds details of the story she’s trying to recreate.

“Joseph Reis,” Casilda’s father, “he was a speeder tender at the cotton mill.” She continues reading and finds a World War I draft registration. “On this one, it says he’s white.”

She wonders if he lied about his race to enter the army. As she continues her research, other documents offer contradicting information. “On this one, ‘negro’.” She pauses and stares at the screen, “I’m so confused.”

She knows what she’s looking for, she knows their birth years, addresses. Yet, the more information she learns, the more confused she gets. She searches through everything, social security applications, federal census, marriage, birth and death index. As the names start getting mixed up in her head, she tries to draw an invisible family tree with her hands.



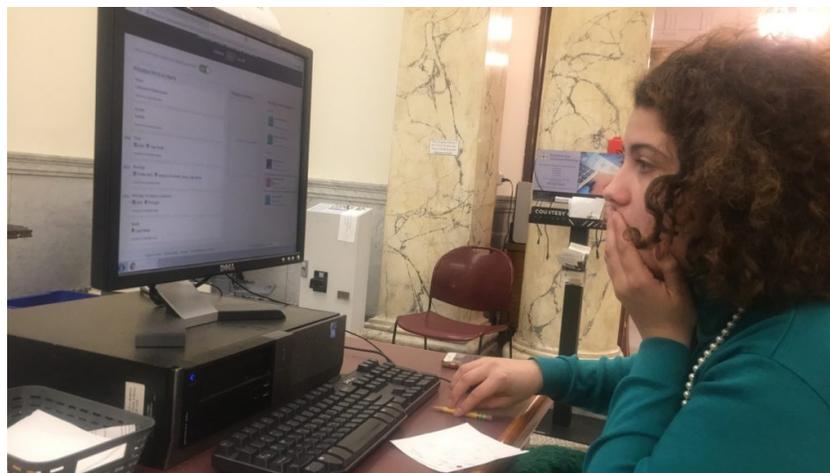
Cassie now types the same names over and over— Manuel, Joseph, Casilda, Amelia. She shakes her head more, “no, no, no, no.”

She grabs a pencil and a white piece of paper and starts drawing what she thinks might be her family tree. Taking every new discovery into consideration, she erases, whispers new dates and names to herself, and rewrites until it starts to make sense.

There are still blanks and question marks, but she is satisfied with the new discoveries of the day. She puts the pencil down, and sighs, “cool.” She has never gotten this far.

She now holds her homemade family tree next to the one provided by ancestry.com, and compares. The little white piece of paper is filled with names and lines. “I feel like I’m so close to finding things and I just don’t know what to do. I don’t know where to go.” She bites the beads more.

“Jesus Christ,” she says, “this is a lot.”



It's now dark outside, it's time to go. On her way out, she shows the librarian what she found. “We got pretty far,” she says. “I need to figure out what to do next. There's so many pieces.”

The family tree starts to make sense, but it's still all impersonal.

“There's no details. It gives me the facts. Yes, negro. Yes, Cape Verdean. But it doesn't give me the history,” she says.

No amount of research can top the stories that families pass down from generation to generation. Yet, Cassie did as much research as she could. She found the facts and understands what her family had to do to start fresh. But why are their origins still so secretive today?

Working at the New Bedford Whaling Museum for years helped her gain a better understanding of New

Bedford's history and therefore how her family moved to America.

In the beginning of the 20th century, when Cassie's great-grandparents immigrated to the United States from Cape Verde, their identification papers still indicated, "negroes."

Dreaming of a better future without racism, her ancestors decided to use the light color of their skin to hide their Cape Verdean origins and escape the labels already written in their papers.

From then on, they would be white. That is what they would say to their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

"It just demolished all culture that came with our family—recipes, songs, language, everything," Cassie says.

"I feel like this pain and sadness that my grandfather, who passed away, his sister and my great-grandmother couldn't be who they were. That is what sucks the most. Knowing that they had to assimilate to this country."

That Saturday, Cassie enters the museum. She arrives in the Cape Verdean section of the museum. She reads a sign, "New Bedford, the Cape Verdean Ellis Island."

She starts reading the explanation text out loud. “At least 70 percent of Cape Verdean immigrants to the U.S. between 1800 and 1921 arrived in New Bedford...” She finally finishes the last sentence of the text, “For many, the American dream began aboard a packet vessel such as the *Coriolanus*, *Arcturus*, *Amos Pegs*, *Savoia*, *Bradford E. Jones*, or *Ernestina*, each still fondly remembered as the route to a new life.” She pauses, then says, “This is how my ancestors would have come.”



The search would have been so much easier if her family accepted their origins and accepted talking about it, Cassie believes. But in a climate where racism and white privilege remain, even in a blue state like Massachusetts, Cassie’s discovery and search for answers didn’t please her relatives.

As soon as Lynne came back from New York with the certainty of being Cape Verdean and a new piece of proof in her hands, the doors started to close at her.

She tried to tell her brother about the woman she had just met, and what she told her about their family.

But her brother didn't jump at the news. He told her, coldly, "don't tell my kids. Don't ever tell my kids."

Last summer, Cassie received a memorable phone call from her uncle who still struggles with the fact that he is Cape Verdean.

Cassie says he told her, *"You know, I have no problem with our past."*

"But I just don't understand the need, or the concern, to try to call ourselves Cape Verdean, and talk about it online. Your Aunt Pat is going to be heartbroken, you just need to be careful with what you're saying. It was a different time. But I'm not racist though, but I don't care though, but..."

This uncle, she says, would put sunblock on his children's faces all year round so their skin would stay as light as possible.

"It didn't really work," she says in a dry laugh. And the clown-like white makeup her great-aunt Pat would wear decades ago didn't work either.



The efforts to erase and forget Cassie's heritage go back to her great-grandmother Casilda's choices, and seem to never stop, still today.

"All of my great-grandmother's children—so my grandfather, my great aunt and my great uncle—actively sought out the whitest people they could to marry. And they're just trying to whiten the blood with every generation," she says.



"My great-grandmother tried to whitewash things, my grandfather tried to whitewash things. And now," she

says, "I'm pretty white."

Cassie drives to the most decorated Christmas house on Maple street in New Bedford. It's called "the holiday house."

She rings the bell, and waits nervously.

Cassie knows some in her family are proud of their Cape Verdean origins. "We definitely have family members who embrace their Cape Verdean roots. But he [her grandfather] never did, and he never hung out with them."

That night, she decides to go see her grandfather's cousins and his aunt. She hasn't seen them in years, but they might have information for her. They won't keep secrets from them.

She peeks inside, but all she can see is a brightly lit Christmas tree. An old man then approaches, opens the door and looks at Cassie for a moment.

"You're a Sylvia," he then says with a smile, and lets her in.

Inside the even more decorated house, Cassie is greeted by Marianne, Casilda's sister, and Joey, Loraine and Cathy, her grandfather's cousins. Quickly, Cassie tries to ask them about her great-grandparents.

Casilda's sister, Marianne, tells Cassie, "You should have seen Casilda. She was so pretty."



"They were wonderful people," Loraine tells her.

"I would have loved to meet them," Cassie says.

"They would have loved to meet you too," she replies.

After sugar decorated cookies, apple cider, photo albums, and a few funny anecdotes, Cassie is on her way. She will come back, she promises.

Later that night, Cassie meets her mother in Mimo's Cafe. Cassie hands her the homemade family tree on the little white piece of paper. Lynne stares at it carefully, trying to process the new information.

Lynne asks her daughter many questions, "So he married her?" Cassie picks up the precious paper, "I

don't know, let me look."

As Cassie shares a few new stories that her relatives told her that day, her mother is hearing them for the first time. Her eyes widening as she listens to the words, she says, "See, I don't know that."

Lynne asks her, "So you didn't say, 'why didn't my grandfather acknowledge it?'"

"I didn't want to come off as a jerk," Cassie replies.

"It's weird that my dad was weird about it," Lynne sighs. "I still don't know, I don't get it."

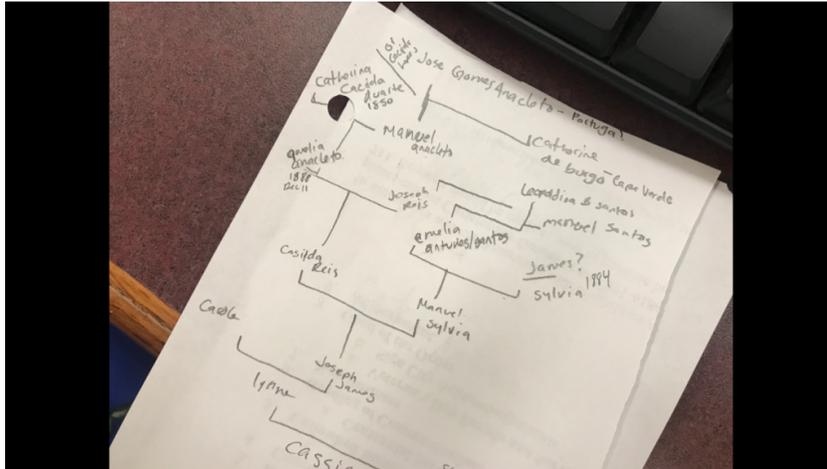
For tonight, the piece of paper is full enough. Either way, Portuguese or Cape Verdean, the two acknowledge that they're very americanized and there isn't much more they can do.

The hot plates of Portuguese food have now arrived on the table.

For now, Cassie decides to put the precious little family tree on the side, and grabs her fork, taking a bite of her favorite food.

There is a fine line between embracing and appropriating a culture, and they want to be careful about it. They don't want to offend members of the community.

“I think I became more timid in exploring. There was something to lose,” she explains, “all the sudden it wasn’t just me just enjoying somebody else’s culture and appreciating it, it was like ‘oh, this could be mine. But it also isn’t.’”



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