

**Vitiligo**  
**Or, perhaps when people ask what I wish to do when I grow up,**  
**I could respond, “be Latina.”**

**By Alli Rios**

Vitiligo affects .5 to 1 percent of the world’s population, according to the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases. Its effects are usually noticeable – especially on those with dark skin. The melanocytes, or the cells, which create skin pigment, die, or perhaps weren’t even there in the first place, leaving blotchy patches of solid white. The causes are unknown, though there are several theories. Some say it’s an autoimmune disease and some say it’s the result of a really bad sunburn, or perhaps extreme stress.

Some notable cases include me and Michael Jackson. I’ve never felt much need to treat mine. Growing up, my parents explained that they didn’t ‘mix’ me well enough. It’s hardly noticeable anyway; my slightly olive complexion is paled and pinked out in blotches around one side of my neck during the summer, but in the winter even I forget the disease is something I have. I have what is called “Segmental Vitiligo,” in other words the melanocytes only die out in half of my body. Michael Jackson took the more extreme route when dealing with his affliction. He bleached himself.

Fast forward 8 years after Jackson died. I was reading an article one morning about his daughter, Paris Jackson who’s been in the news recently for several sad things, but this one happened to be her proclaiming something rather empowering for herself. *I’m black*, she said. The Internet was in a state. How can this blonde haired blue-eyed white girl be black?

But I understand.

No, she doesn’t look black. Not obviously. But how could anyone else say she isn’t? Is that really anyone else’s call to make? This isn’t a Rachel Dolezal situation; the girl’s father was black.

And in any case, if she isn’t black then I’m not Latina.

And where would that leave me?

Merriam Webster defines Latina as “a woman or girl who is native or inhabitant of Latin America.” I’m neither native nor have I ever inhabited Latin America, other than the few trips to visit family and a research trip to Mexico once. Am I, then, Latina? But then, Cambridge Dictionary defines Latina as, “a woman who lives in the US whose family is from Latin America, or a woman who lives in Latin America.” I suppose by that definition I am in fact Latina. And so is an expat who moved to Ecuador three years ago.

I’ve been trying my whole life to be Latina. My skin isn’t the nice, café colored skin usually associated with ladies from Latin America, nor is my hair the dark chocolate brown. My voice isn’t thick with the accent of my ancestors and I don’t have those, “JLo curves” Latinas are supposed to have. But I spent nine years of my life (so far) learning the language and I spent countless nights beside my father trying to perfect the recipe to make *arroz con gandules y sofrito*. I listened to the stories of my grandfather and my *titi*. I’ve spent summers at my *titi’s rancho* in Puerto Rico with her goats and chickens, danced along to *bombas y plenas* and played dominoes with the old men of my family.

Am I Latina?

Does half a Latina make for a whole? Some days I feel wholly Puerto Rican. Some days I feel rice and beans and *sofrito* and *reggeaton*,

And some days I feel mac and cheese and collard greens and kale.

Some days, I just feel like Goodwill and bad movies.

Do real Latinas, whole ones, do they always feel like rice and beans and *sofrito*? Or do they ever just feel like themselves?

I recently learned that a woman who came to one of Western's Literary Festivals died, and it hit a lot harder than I would have expected. Before her visit in the spring of 2016, I had never read any of Judith Ortiz Cofer's works, but as soon as I learned that this Puerto Rican author would be speaking on my campus, I took in as many of her stories and poems as I could. Her father, like my grandfather, brought his family to the mainland because of the US military. They each located to the south, though at different times in life, and they each felt connected to the Island in different ways. My father, unlike Ortiz Cofer, wasn't born in Puerto Rico. And I've always wondered how different that makes things.

When Ortiz Cofer spoke as part of the WCU Josefina Niggli Latinx Speakers Series, she mentioned how she hated cooking. I, as someone who had automatically formed a deep connection with her in my mind through her poems and short stories, found that funny. My father writes down his memories and connections to the island through his cooking, while Ortiz Cofer recorded hers onto paper. I've heard someone say once that it's usually the second generation of children who feel that they have more of a responsibility to hold on to their roots, and while I'm not sure how true that may ring in the Ortiz Cofer household, I know it's mostly true in mine.

My class read *Everyday Use* by Alice Walker the other day, a story in which the daughter, Dee, is so angered by the injustices her family dealt with that she (presumably) joins the Black Panthers with her black Muslim boyfriend. Though the organization is never explicitly stated, the reader can make inferences based on the time period, the clothing, and the sheer emotion that surrounds Dee when the topic of injustice is brought up. But the thing about Dee was, she seemed to "overcorrect," and used the old heritage, which was actually still a part of everyday life for her mother and grandmother, hence the title of the story, to do things like decorate her house.

Everyone hated Dee by the end of it for being so harsh with her mother, and so oblivious to what she was doing. Her emotion – her need to right the wrongs brought not upon her, but her family, was blinding her to the actual needs of her family. I think I get it though. She wasn't there to help carry the burden, and perhaps that feels wrong in some way. I think a part of me is Dee. I think a big part of Paris Jackson is Dee too. I wonder if as the privileged children of those who've experienced lesser forms of privilege, we might feel a certain duty to care more. To be more sensitive.

If I'm being honest with myself, no one's going to stop me and ask if I'm "documented," because of the color of my skin, or any accent. And even then, my family is from Puerto Rico, citizenship is an automatic privilege. I doubt any police officer will stop Paris Jackson because of the color of her skin, and even then, her father was Michael Jackson.

It doesn't go without saying that Paris Jackson's statement will have criticism. For as black as she is (half) and as black as she feels (half? Whole?), she's very light skinned, and that doesn't come without privilege. Whether she understands that or not, I can't say. But I think that part of the journey of mixed babies like us comes with understanding our privileges.

For as much as we feel and love and are a part of whatever (usually marginalized) culture we were half born into, we never completely look the part. And as frustrating as that can be

growing up – never really looking one thing, never really fitting in anywhere – it can also become our greatest privilege.

I once had a conversation with a stranger about my majors. He told me to be careful about majoring in Spanish, because he knew a woman who had majored in Spanish and had then married “some guy from one of those Latin countries, probably a Mexican.”

He could probably tell I was half Puerto Rican as well as he could tell that underneath my shirt’s neckline, half of my body was covered in patches of dead melanocytes. He probably found comfort in my light skin tone, as if my paleness meant that I would somehow agree that marrying Mexicans, marrying people from “one of those Latin countries,” was somehow a bad thing.

How would he feel if he knew I were mixed, but not quite well enough? How would he feel if he knew that my patches are significant of far more than placing me in the .5 percent of humanity?