

# Feeling Black, Reproducing Whiteness

## A Sensory Analysis of Rachel Dolezal's Identity Claim

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### ABSTRACT

When Spokane, Washington anti-racist activist Rachel Dolezal was 'outed' as white in June 2015, her identification as Black became the subject of national and international debate, centering on questions of identity categories, appropriation, and allyship. Much of the critical interrogation of her claim came from Black communities, who took to digital, print and social media to problematize her narrative. However, much of this debate – from both sides – inadvertently or explicitly fell back onto essentialist definitions of race, attempting to establish why Dolezal could not legitimately claim a Black identity. This project endeavors to break from this line of argumentation, and instead approach the case through the lens of revealing whiteness. Rather than working to prove that Dolezal is not 'authentically' Black, I propose looking at how racist ideology is at work in the discourses she mobilizes to validate her claim. By drawing on feminist and critical race scholars such as Sara Ahmed, bell hooks, and Linda Martín Alcoff, I will undertake an analysis of Dolezal's narrative of identification specifically through the lens of the senses in relation to her emphasis on 'feeling' Black. In conclusion, this paper will illustrate the way in which whiteness – and thus white supremacy – is reproduced in her desire to become the Other, and how this rejection of one's whiteness insidiously poses a threat to effective solidarity.

### KEYWORDS

Rachel Dolezal, Race, Identity, Whiteness, Materiality, Affect.

### INTRODUCTION

Until June 2015, Rachel Dolezal had been living in relative obscurity, but locally – in Spokane, Washington, U.S.A. – had a good reputation and was even held in high esteem. She served on the volunteer police ombudsman committee, representing the community's concerns about police violence and racism. She worked at the Human Rights Education Institute, in the beginning as a director of an art series and, in 2008, as the Director of Education. She taught courses like African American Culture, African and African-American Art History, Research Methods in Race and Culture Studies, and Black Woman and Hair at East Washington University (Dolezal, Reback 2017, 183)<sup>27</sup>. In January 2015, she became president of the National Association for the Advancement of

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<sup>27</sup> Storms Reback, himself a published author, co-wrote Dolezal's memoir.

Colored People, one of the country's oldest civil rights organizations, founded in 1909. Dolezal, by and large, was known in her community as a prominent anti-racist activist. She was also, by and large, perceived as Black. Yet two summers ago, the tides turned, irreversibly, when Dolezal was directly asked by a local reporter on camera if she was "African-American," to which she responded "I don't understand the question" and walked away (Dolezal 2015e). Soon after that incident, her biological parents came forward and claimed Dolezal as their daughter, and therefore, like them, as white. Overnight, what began as a local news item became a national and international debate about race and identity that continues to this day.

After being 'outed,' Dolezal actively participated in the public discourse that emerged around her — chiefly through interviews on news channels, talk shows and online publications, but later also in her memoir *In Full Color: Finding My Way in a Black and White World*. She has consistently argued that her claim to a Black identity is legitimate, and has done so by constructing that identity as authentic. As she told political commentator and television host Melissa Harris-Perry, "I, from a very young age felt ... a spiritual, visceral, just a very instinctual connection with 'black is beautiful,' you know, just the black experience, and wanting to celebrate that" (Dolezal 2015a). This paper will engage with this question of authenticity, looking at both the discursive and material means that Dolezal employs to position herself as Black. More specifically, what exactly does it mean to "feel Black?" How does the materiality of race — the way in which it becomes defined through what we can perceive — figure in the narrative that Dolezal produces about her identification? Which senses are involved in "feeling Black?" And when does this materiality dissolve into a metaphor? In the first section, I will reflect on the tensions that emerged around Dolezal's passing as Black for approximately a decade; that is, the tensions between discourses of (racial) identity as an inner truth and race as a purely visual schema. In the second section, I will approach feeling through sight and touch, specifically analyzing how Dolezal narrates her physical and affective proximity to her adopted Black siblings in relation to her identity formation. In the third and final section, I will briefly analyze how Dolezal authenticates her Blackness through the language of comfort. In each section, I will argue how the very mechanisms through which Dolezal claims a Black identity are in fact perpetuating whiteness.

This paper is not an attempt to definitively prove that Dolezal is not "authentically" Black, for doing so would be as reductive as simply accepting her claim, and would almost undoubtedly fall back on an essentialist logic that takes the existence, validity, and significance of racial categories for granted. Rather, by approaching this case via both the materiality and affectivity implicated in her claim to feel Black, this investigation aims to interrogate and problematize the terms through which Dolezal produces for herself an "authentic" Black identity. That is, where and how can we see whiteness at work in how Dolezal alleges to see, be seen, to look, to touch, be touched, and to feel?

## FEELING BLACK AS LOOKING BLACK

In the public discourse around Dolezal in mainstream media and on social media, race as an ontological category was often taken for granted — also, at times, in efforts to criticize her claim. Particularly for this section, but also for this analysis as a whole, it is therefore important to begin by offering a more constructive way to define race as an objectively determinable and static component of one's identity from birth. Doing so shall allow us to investigate more precisely how the senses are involved in constructing what we think we know about race, which offers a starting point for analyzing how Dolezal was able to discursively claim and legitimize a Black identity. That is, despite the fact that it was contended, how was she able to make her claim make sense?

Race as a visual ideology is a product of racism, which means not that it is some-*thing* that we see, that we are able to “pick up on” visually, but rather that it is *how* we see: race is not a way to categorize differences between people, but “a category of perception” (Juteau-Lee 1995, 3). The notion of recognizing someone as one race or another is in fact the process by which race is produced, and particular differences become constructed as already-existing or inherent; race creates the difference it claims to simply name. Danielle Juteau-Lee argues in her introduction to French materialist feminist Colette Guillaumin's *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology*, that contrary to popular understanding, race is a product of racism and therefore cannot be separated from it. Races do not exist as such but rather are a means of justifying the oppression of particular peoples: “It is not because your skin is black that you were enslaved, that you became a slave, but because you were a slave that you became black or more precisely that colour becomes significant” (1995, 6). To say that “visual markers of difference” le(a)d to racism is then to already take for granted the significance of visual markers of difference, and in particular skin color (as opposed to, say, eye color), as a basis for organizing groups of people.

Indeed, at least in Western society, “seeing is believing;” further still, as Linda Martín Alcoff stresses, “only what is visible can generally achieve the status of accepted truth” (2006, 6). While other modes of categorization like gender and class also operate in part visually, their signifiers — such as clothing, hairstyle, makeup, posture, accent or way of speaking — can to some degree be altered. The skin, the signifier for racial groups — which Stuart Hall called a “floating signifier,” as it has nothing to refer to or reveal — is less easily changed (Hall 1997). As British sociologist Paul Gilroy notes, describing Franz Fanon's concept of *epidermalization*, “the observer's gaze does not penetrate that membrane but rests upon it and, in doing so, receives the truths of racial difference from the other body” (Gilroy 2001, 46). In a similar line of thought, feminist and anti-racist philosopher Sara Ahmed notes that “skin in this way is seen to hold the ‘truth’ of the subject's identity (like a ‘kernel’) as well as functioning as the scene of the subject's memory and history”

(Ahmed 1999, 99). Through these processes, also referred to as racialization, race as signified by the skin becomes seen as a manifestation of something essential to that body.

The skin is the starting point of Dolezal's narrative of identification with Blackness. Within the first ten pages of her memoir *In Full Color: Finding My Way in a Black and White World*, she describes her love for drawing and self-portraits, arguing that "whenever it came time to shade in the skin, I usually picked a brown crayon rather than a peach one. Peach simply didn't resonate with me. I felt like brown suited me better and was prettier" (2017, 9). Her decision to color herself brown here is narrated as an instinctual connection to Blackness itself; crayon color, skin color, and identity merge, thus positioning the choice of crayon as indicative of an inner truth: "I could see my skin was light, but my perception of myself wasn't limited to what my eyes could take in" (ibid.). Dolezal goes on to describe other childhood activities that involved her self-perception as having darker skin, and connect them to fantasies of difference located in Africa:

Hidden from view by tall stalks of corn in what we called the 'long garden', I'd stir the water from the hose into the earth with a stick and make thin, soupy mud, which I would then rub on my hands, arms, feet and legs, as if applying a lotion. Covered in this way, I would pretend to be a dark-skinned princess in the Sahara Desert or one of the Bantu women living in the Congo I'd read about in copies of National Geographic (Dolezal, Reback 2017, 11).

Dolezal describes her childhood years as restrictive, preventing her from expressing her creativity, sensuality, and "true" (Black) self. However, attending college in Mississippi meant encountering both racial diversity and the opportunity for reinvention and self-expression that she lacked in her home environment of rural Montana. She aligned herself socially with Black communities through student organizing, and physically by adopting traditional African and African-American styles for her clothing and hair (having learned braids and other styles while caring for her adopted Black sister). According to Dolezal, around this time is when she began passing; the combination of her racial justice activism and "Afrocentric appearance ... led even more people, both Black and white, to assume that I was mixed-race or light-skinned Black woman" (ibid., 84).

In the narrative Dolezal produces of her identification, her passing is constructed as an indication of the authenticity of her Blackness: people simply began seeing what had always and already been there, as the truth of her identity was rendered visible. But considering the wide range of skin hues encompassed by Black identity — due to the one-drop rule, a remnant of slavery that legally defined anyone with "one drop" of Black ancestry as Black — the significance of a white woman passing as a light-skinned Black woman is worth interrogation. Rather, what is noteworthy here is how the ability to pass as Black is used as evidence of being Black. Doing so defines authentic Blackness through the visual stereotypes of Blackness (i.e., certain styles of clothing, hair, and presumably

speaking) that led others to read Dolezal as Black. The problematic nature of how Dolezal came to “look Black” without reproducing normative, exclusionary notions of Black people’s appearances goes unaddressed in her memoir. In some ways, Dolezal even positions herself as merely following other people’s expectations. For instance, referring to her mentor, an African-American man, she writes, “Nobody ever asked me if Albert was my biological dad. They just assumed he was, based on my appearance and his [...]. Visually, we made sense” (ibid.). Later, discussing becoming guardian of her adopted brother Izaiah, Dolezal again describes her change of appearance in passive terms, displacing the responsibility onto others: “I’d already been identified by the media and other people as Black or biracial countless times, so it wasn’t hard for me to go one step further and fully commit to a look that made visual sense to people who knew me as Izaiah’s mom” (ibid., 173).

Ahmed’s work offers a useful intervention here: she frames passing as an “ability” that “does not involve assuming that the ‘real’ or ‘natural’ body determines the encounter,” passing involves “techniques which serve to approximate an image” (Ahmed 1999, 101). This is, therefore, an active process: techniques are developed, put to use, and constantly refined. The appearance that Dolezal cultivated thus requires knowledge, intention, and effort not accurately described by narratives of how her appearance came to “match” or “reflect” her true inner self, as below:

Something else happened when I wore braids. People started responding to me differently ... I lost track of how many people said something to me that affirmed that my look perfectly matched how I felt inside, and every time, I felt even more at home, as if my light skin was no longer a barrier to being seen as who I really was (Dolezal, Reback 2017, 97).

The last clause concerning the skin is particularly intriguing, as it brings us back to the beginning of her narrative when being Black was a fantasy expressed through drawing self-portraits or the temporary use of wet mud on her skin. Now, the skin ceases to act as a barrier to Dolezal expressing her true self, i.e., being read as Black. As Dolezal learned more about Blackness during her adolescence – both from caring for her younger siblings and through reading – she developed an image of this ideal Other and the techniques to approximate this image herself. Once she achieves the desired results – no longer being read as white – the skin comes to figure as an arbitrary marker, overwhelmed by the truth of her identity, which spills over it: “Just as a transgender person might be born male but identify as female, I wasn’t pretending to be something I wasn’t but expressing something I already was. I wasn’t passing as Black; I *was* Black, and there was no going back” (ibid., 148, emphasis original).

While Dolezal emphasizes her individual identity, the image of Blackness that she adopts is produced in a relation between the self and the Other. In the next section, I will analyze this self/Other relation through touch (as physical and affective proximity) and look at how whiteness is produced within that frame.

### **FEELING BLACK AS BEING TOUCHED**

One can be ‘touched’ in two ways: to come into physical contact with another, or to be emotionally stirred by something, generally evoking positive or loving feelings (from gratitude to tenderness). In Dolezal’s narrative, the two become intertwined and interchangeable: physical proximity becomes affective proximity as she narrates her relationship with her adopted siblings, who are Black, and how their presence influenced her identity formation. The duality of touch and being touched surfaces in this ambiguity of “feeling;” how we “feel out” the world around us (through our senses) is indistinguishable from how we feel (through emotions) about this world around us. Though the terms “affect” and “emotions” are sometimes used interchangeably, I understand them to be differentiated in that emotions are particular articulations of affect, or rather, that which can be articulated. I will follow sociologist Deborah Gould’s definition of affect as the “nonconscious and unnamed, but nevertheless registered, experiences of bodily energy and intensity that arise in response to stimuli impinging on the body” (2010, 26). Furthermore, affect goes beyond the traditional mind-body dualism in which “emotions” function as the opposite of reason, instead of taking emotions as a form of embodied knowledge.

But rather than taking emotions as reflections of an individual subject’s inner psychological disposition, Ahmed (who seems to use affect and emotions interchangeably) proposes that it is “through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others” (2004, 10). That is, the circulation of affect is a mode of subjectivity that is necessarily relational. Through this circulation, bodies, both individual and collective, materialize: “The surfaces of bodies ‘surface’ as an effect of the impressions left by others” (ibid.). Affect, for Ahmed, is the way in which self/Other relations are produced and maintained. While it may at first seem difficult, unnecessary or even problematic to take Dolezal’s love for her siblings as an object of critique – as this section does – I follow Ahmed, who argues that “through love, which involves the desire to be ‘like’ another, as well as to be recognized by another, an ideal self is produced as an approximation of the other’s being ... as a self that belongs to a community” (ibid., 106). In part precisely because it is counter-intuitive, it is important, and also productive, to look for where, how and when iterations of love are produced through structures of power and dominant ideology.

The adoption and arrival of ultimately four Black children — three of whom are African-American, and one Haitian, all younger than Dolezal — in Dolezal's household signals the beginning of a new phase of self-development in the narrative she constructs in her memoir. Their bodies, presence, and touch provide Dolezal with a more material Other than the Black bodies in the National Geographic magazines she pored over (Dolezal 2017, 23) in relation to which she could form her self-image; these relations, in turn, are mediated through affect (she is touched by them). Love and empathy are emphasized as Dolezal narrates taking on a caregiver role for her siblings:

From the time Ezra arrived at our house, I was focused almost solely on doing my part to ensure his health and happiness. My already long list of chores expanded to include making cloth diapers out of bolts of flannel, changing said diapers, rocking Ezra back to sleep in the middle of the night ... in short, many of the things parents are supposed to do (Dolezal, Reback 2017, 47).

One night, unwatched, Ezra falls down the stairs, which Dolezal had also experienced as an infant: "After that night I felt like Ezra and I shared a special, albeit horrifying, bond. We'd both taken nasty falls, we'd both survived, and we'd both learned a painful lesson: in the Dolezal family, you couldn't always count on your parents to keep you safe" (ibid., 52). She also forms a special bond with Izaiah through touch, when she is quarantined with him after he catches the flu: "Izaiah and I lived together in my room for more than a month ... it was during this time that I began to form a deep and lasting bond with him" (ibid., 53).

A few pages later Dolezal begins to explicitly tie her physical proximity to her siblings to her affective constitution and self-image; describing learning to style her sister's hair as "doing something I enjoyed ... for those I loved," Dolezal adds that in those moments, "I felt like I was free, free from the confinement and oppression of the household I grew up in and free to be myself" (ibid., 68). The empathy produced by the touch of her siblings forms the foundation of her claim to take on a Black identity herself, which she also expresses in the language of sight and vision. As she took on a caregiver role, Dolezal writes, she "began to see the world through Black eyes" (ibid., 63). Here Dolezal is not so much constructing an image of herself as inhabiting the bodies of her siblings — embodying her empathy — but more precisely imagining herself as having a Black sensibility: seeing things as though she herself was Black. She then feels entitled to assert that by seeing the world through Black eyes, she can imagine what it feels to be Black. She writes, "When I'd read about the Rwandan genocide and the plight of the children caught in the crossfire between the Hutu and Tutsi groups, it touched my soul" (ibid.). Being touched — literally coming into physical contact with her siblings and being emotionally stirred by that physical bond — becomes seeing through Black eyes, which becomes being Black. In Dolezal's narrative, the experience of empathy does not depend on but rather blurs the self/Other boundary.

Eventually, Dolezal writes, “anything that had to do with Blackness or Africa always grabbed my attention” (ibid., 63). This flattening of “Africa” and conflation with Blackness is typical of a white gaze (Fanon 1967) upon the world, which lacks the desire or ability to pick up on the multitudes of difference within Africa (as well as those between African and African-American culture). Tying her love for her siblings to an interest in Africa is not an apolitical or neutral gesture, but rather a reproduction of a hierarchical self/Other relation, for “what one sees as the other (or in oneself, as one passes for the other) is already structured by the knowledges that keep the other in a certain place” (Ahmed 1999, 99). Dolezal claims that she grew up sheltered from racist ideology, in a TV-free rural household in Idaho, but writes about gaining her first exposure to Blackness through *Sports Illustrated* and *National Geographic* magazines, to which she also attributes an “idealized image of Blackness” which “never” faded: “I was enraptured by what I saw [...]. Their complexions, their features, they were all so captivating to me” (Dolezal, Reback 2017, 23). These images fuelled her childhood fantasies of Otherness that accounted for the way in which she felt othered within her household and family (recall the fantasies of being “a dark-skinned princess in the Sahara Desert” cited in the previous section) (ibid., 11). These childhood memories explicitly reveal the visual ideology of race, upon which Dolezal constructs a narrative of identification that uses the skin to signify an inner truth and an inherent difference. When questioned about the innocence of this memory in an interview for *The Stranger*, Dolezal gives journalist Ijeoma Oluo a “curious” look, and responds that her “gaze was more humanizing, and more of, again, black is beautiful, black is inspirational” (Oluo, 2017) than that of her (white) brother, whose gaze she describes as “fetishizing.” Thus, while Dolezal expresses awareness of the fetishizing gazes on Black bodies, she does not imagine herself to be complicit in such a gaze, and, consequently, perpetuates the idea of the white feminine subject as innocent. Furthermore, Dolezal justifies her exotification by invoking her vulnerability and victimhood: “Imagining I was a different person living in a different place was one of the few ways — drawing was another — that I could escape my oppressive environment I was raised in” (Dolezal, Reback 2011, 17).

Oluo noted of Dolezal’s current home that “other than the paintings of her children, most of the black people depicted appear to be dressed as slaves or tribespeople [sic]” (Oluo, 2017). To imagine oneself as Black, here, reveals a lack of imagination; the clarity with which she expresses her claim to Blackness necessarily involves a clear (i.e., dominant) image of what Blackness is. Dolezal is touched, but only by those stories which render her the possibility of becoming the white savior — a role in which, ironically, she feels Black. Her desire to become Black, then, is perhaps chiefly an attempt to escape precisely such accusations, to deny responsibility for the very thing she enacts.

## FEELING AT EASE

In this third and final section, I want to briefly propose a third way in which Dolezal constructs her claim to feel Black: as a lack of discomfort, a kind of ease. From the beginning of her memoir, Dolezal describes a discomfort with her home environment, a failure to fit in to her family as well as within their larger community: “Any hope that I’d fit in better [at kindergarten at the public elementary school in Troy] than at home quickly dissipated” (Dolezal, Reback 2017, 12) as she picks up on the class differences between herself and her more middle-class peers. These class differences are also rendered in terms of race: “Adding to my dismay, I was met by a sea of white faces” (ibid.). Repeatedly, readers are reminded of how Dolezal was made to feel uncomfortable with being creative or expressing anything remotely sensual, which she frames as essential parts of her authentic self and as somehow linked to Blackness (again perpetuating stereotypes of Blackness, in this case as hypersexualized). The discomfort she describes experiencing in her childhood and adolescence, when she lived in a predominantly white community and was perceived as white, sets up a sharp contrast to the second part of the memoir. After she moves to Mississippi, becomes involved with Black communities, and begins passing as Black, Dolezal characterizes her senses of self and relation to her environment in terms of ease, comfort and freedom: “I was breaking the color barrier by living in a Black neighborhood, but ... my decision to live there felt natural and organic. I was simply moving to where I felt most comfortable, a place where I could be myself” (ibid., 89).

However, after college, Dolezal married a man whom she describes as having internalized white supremacist beauty standards, for example pressuring her to abandon the Black style she had adopted and go back to blond hair:

Being forced to look white while wanting to be seen and socialize as Black was very confusing for me ... Lost in this confusion was any sense of personal agency I might have possessed. Instead of making me feel like I was a part of something, my appearance made me feel misunderstood, alien, other (ibid., 116).

In this way, Dolezal conceptualizes appearing and being seen as white as unnatural (“alien”) because it produces discomfort in her. This discomfort is implicitly understood as something with which she does not deserve to feel, something which can and should be remedied.

If Ahmed argues that, “white bodies are comfortable *as they inhabit spaces that take their shape*,” (2007, 158, emphasis original) it appears to be more the case here that Dolezal took the shape of the spaces she wished to inhabit. But the connections she makes between whiteness, comfort, and spaces remain useful here; Ahmed’s argument continues: “If whiteness allows bodies to move with comfort through space, and to inhabit the world as if it were home, then those bodies take up more

space. Such bodies are shaped by motility, and may even take the shape of that motility" (ibid., 159). Dolezal's entitlement to comfort, then, and her ability to take the shape that would allow her to move through certain spaces with comfort, can more accurately be regarded as a manifestation of whiteness rather than a transgressive act or queering (Jones 2015) of race. Comfort is "natural and organic" for white bodies; or, put another way, whiteness extends the surface of some bodies, making it "hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins," (Ahmed 2007, 158) but not others. Confirming rather than challenging this, Dolezal was willing and able to collapse the distinction between her (white) body and the (Black) world. Critical white scholar Shannon Sullivan calls this combination of willingness and ability to take up space "ontological expansiveness," defining it as "the habit, often unconscious, of assuming and acting as if any and all spaces — geographical, psychological, cultural, linguistic, or whatever — are rightfully available to and open for white people to enter whenever they like" (2006, 20).

Dolezal wishes to be seen as Black (a point this paper unfortunately does not have sufficient space to explicitly engage) and feels entitled to have her desires fulfilled; the fulfillment of her desires is what feels "natural" to her. It is important, then, to note differences between Dolezal's case and the narratives of identity formation of Black women, which Dolezal attempts to appropriate. In an article in response to Dolezal, entitled "I became a black woman in Spokane, but Rachel Dolezal, I was a black girl first," Alicia Waters explains that "to be a black young woman in Spokane was, for me, to be rejected, isolated and left to find my own way" (Walters, 2015). She elaborates: "Becoming the black woman I am today ... came from first being a black girl, from the trauma of rejection and isolation and its transformation into a kind of self-taught solitary pride" (ibid.). Dolezal uses this the same structure of childhood experiences of rejection and isolation that nonetheless forced her to embrace who her "true self" (ibid.). A key difference, however, is that Waters had to come to terms with the cause of her rejection (her Blackness) whereas the resolution in Dolezal's narrative is escaping that with which she did not want to identify (whiteness) and look for an identification with the Other instead.

My critique here is not based on an essentialist point of view that considers a particular set of childhood experiences — especially racist ones — the cornerstone of an 'authentic' Black identity. This is rather to note that Dolezal had the option, the privilege, to reject that part of her identity and upbringing that she felt held her back; most Black people, and people with dark skin more broadly, do not have such luxury when it comes to their racial identity. This is a fundamental inequality, and one not incidental but essential to Dolezal's cross-racial identification.

That Dolezal feels at ease around Blackness and as Black does perhaps lend itself to a more detailed analysis of the different kinds of whiteness that are produced by, in her case, a life-long proximity

to and positive affective relationship with Blackness. Ahmed, discussing the relationship between inheritance and likeness in relation to race, calls likeness “an effect of the proximity of shared residence” (2007, 155). Clearly, shared residence with and care for her siblings had an effect on Dolezal. But my suggestion here has been that her comfort with Blackness does not explain or justify her discomfort with whiteness and the steps she took to alleviate it.

## CONCLUSION

I hope to have illustrated that there is much more to Dolezal’s passing than the outward manifestation of a feeling (feeling Black), for the way in which this feeling is constructed and articulated reproduces the very structures that Dolezal claims to reject. Indeed, as Ahmed already warned in 1999, “there is a failure to theorize, not the potential for any system to become destabilized [through passing], but the means by which relations of power are secured, paradoxically, *through this very process of destabilization*” (99, emphasis original). Even earlier, in 1980, anthropologist Karen Blu predicted that the U.S. would see an increasingly “voluntaristic attitude about identity – that one can choose how much and in many cases whether to participate in an ethnic identity” (Blu 1980, 209). Though white adaptation of non-white identities is indeed not new — one needs to only think of Eminem in the early 2000s — Dolezal may mark the beginning of the era that Blu and Ahmed predicted, in which *becoming* the Other replaces mere association with the Other.

I have not undertaken this endeavor out of an eagerness to “prove” that Dolezal is not “really” Black, for I do not believe that such an analysis would be fruitful within a larger project of dismantling racism and white supremacy. Rather, I have explored this topic in an attempt to respond to the concerns that Ahmed in particular raises about how the desire to become the Other insidiously keeps the Other in their place; that is, in the excluded, submissive, inferior position of the hierarchy. Guillamin, writing in 1995, noted that “racism is characterized by blindness about oneself as much as by an obsession with the Other, two traits which it unites into a single system,” (Guillamin 1995, 52) and I have argued that Dolezal epitomizes this racism. Becoming the Other in a desire to escape one’s self is contrary to what hooks envisions as a “racial postmodernism” that would “call attention to those shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc. that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy — ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition” (Hooks 1990, 27). I too envision, hope and strive for a mode of finding shared sensibilities as a basis for solidarity. However, developing such a shared sensibility that does not implicitly draw upon colonial knowledge of the Other will perhaps then require a deeper, more careful and more profound reflection upon the Self

than Dolezal demonstrates. Solidarity, perhaps, requires white people to first of all see themselves as white.

Rather than projecting her desire for community and belonging on Blackness, Dolezal could have stayed with the trouble of being a white ally. Instead of denying her whiteness on the basis of her social class, she could have used that intersection as a fruitful beginning point for much-needed forms of solidarity. Ultimately, this is not about singling out Dolezal as an individual wrongdoer; rather, this can perhaps serve as a lesson to all of us engaged in racial justice that whiteness needs to be discussed in much more detail and nuance if we want to avoid more potential allies rejecting the reality of their whiteness altogether. Perhaps one day, the exotifying white gaze and the appropriating white touch will cease to exist; the white tongue that desires a taste of the Other and the white ears that hear the word “racism” as a personal attack, too. To ultimately dismantle whiteness, it first must be named, most urgently by those whose bodies are shaped and moved by it.

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