

Rachel Dolezal: An Intersectional Analysis

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Abstract

This paper uses intersectionality theory and identity politics to analyze the transracialism of Rachel Dolezal. I establish the social construction of racial identity, and the basis of all identity construction in white supremacist settler colonial logics. Using concepts of essentialism and identity politics, I then investigate the ways in which individuals define and perform racial identity. I include analyses on how Dolezal performs transracial identity, and the implications her actions have on social definitions and meanings of blackness. I then expand on Dolezal's appropriation of blackness and her conflation of physical appearance with cultural and historical identity. I discuss Dolezal's fixation as a means to cope with childhood trauma and, using this trauma as a point of departure, briefly examine the intergenerational passing of trauma, implicating Dolezal in the erasure of the voices and experiences of black women. I provide a brief discussion on colorism and privilege before moving to a comparison of transracial and transgender identities. Finally, I engage the power of social constructions and use decolonial frameworks to assert that, while the concept of transracialism is not inherently at issue in the abstract, Dolezal's misunderstanding of racial identity in contextual and practical application creates tensions and challenges that are, in fact, quite problematic.

Author's Note

The term "transracial" has been used in academic, creative, and cultural writing as a signifier denoting people adopted across race, often across countries or continents, and sometimes without fully formed consent. It also describes a type of family unit and a form of parenting. The "trans" in transracial has not historically meant a change in racial identity. However, in this paper, in an effort to maintain consistency across existing scholarly research and popular media around the individual circumstances of Rachel Dolezal, use of the term "transracial" signifies Dolezal's racial identity "shifting" from white to black.

Introduction

"I would have these imaginary scenarios in my mind where I was really a princess in Egypt and [my parents] kidnapped and adopted me. I had this thing about just making it through this childhood and then I'll be OK." (McGreal 2015).

"She recalls choosing brown crayons to draw pictures of herself with dark skin and curly hair, like the Bantu women she saw in National Geographic. She would hide in the garden, smear herself in mud, and fantasise [sic] that she had been kidnapped from Africa." (Aitkenhead 2017).

Born in rural Montana to conservative Christian fundamentalist parents, Rachel Dolezal never identified with the family that raised her (Aitkenhead 2017). Amidst harsh punishments and alleged abuse within their religiously extremist household, Dolezal shaped a skewed and limited impression of black identity and began appropriating her creation in a myriad of ways (Aitkenhead 2017; Johnson, Pérez-Peña & Eligon 2015; McGreal 2015). At Howard, an historically black university, Dolezal found a new

chosen family; from then on, she began living her life as a black woman—eventually coming to accept the “transracial” identification ascribed to her by popular media (Aitkenhead 2017; Johnson, Pérez-Peña & Eligon 2015). The crux of Dolezal’s argument is in the fluidity of race as a social construction, which she uses to insist that her way of living is beneficial, rather than harmful, to the black women and communities she supported in various ways throughout her tenure as an Africana Studies professor and as President of the Spokane chapter of the NAACP (Aitkenhead 2017; Johnson, Pérez-Peña & Eligon 2015). However, inherent in Dolezal’s assessment is an abstractness which misunderstands the colonial roots of racial identity as it is defined and performed in the US and, in contextual and practical application, presents tensions and challenges that cannot be dismissed or obscured.

Race: A Tool of Heteropatriarchal White Supremacist Colonizers

“Her story has set off a national debate about the very meaning of racial identity, with some people applauding her message and goals,” (Johnson 2015).”

While debate continues within academic communities on the utility of racial categorizations (in biological research, mapping genetic diversity, and clinical settings), in the wake of the human genome project, most have arrived at the consensus that race as a biological concept is misguided (Foster & Sharp 2004). However, to acknowledge its social constructivity is not to say that race does not have powerful social and economic implications. The United States was created by colonial logics functioning in such a way as to enact racism through the very structures and institutions of society. The colonizer’s profitable extraction of value from indigenous land required labor exploitation, arranged through chattel slavery (Arvin, Tuck & Morrill 2013). Racial hierarchy thus became a foundation of the nation’s power and economy, and racism and other such institutions continue to actively perpetuate systematized discrimination and oppression of certain populations today.

The United States was built upon, and still exercises, laws that construct social categories to create vulnerability and subjugate marginalized populations. For example, US antidiscrimination law is narrow in scope, often basing outcomes in discrimination cases on sex or race, but rarely at the intersection of both

(Crenshaw 1989). As a result of this, gender discrimination is more widely recognized for white women and racial discrimination for black men; the experiences of black women are largely unaccounted for. Such laws, based on identity categories, including race, indigeneity, and national origin, effectively produce hierarchies and enshrine economic, social, and political vulnerabilities. These hierarchies serve to justify the exclusion of certain populations from what Dean Spade calls “programs that distribute wealth and life chances,” as the operations of neutral administrative systems (Spade 2011). Through this understanding of the colonial function of race, we realize that “who one ‘is’...is wholly relational to others, to culture, and to organizations in which one moves,” (Levine-Rasky 2011). Identity is created and performed in relation to power structures.

Defining and Performing Racial Identity

“I did work and bought all my own clothes...That’s not a typical American childhood life...I didn’t resonate with white women who were born with a silver spoon. I didn’t find a...connection with the story of the princess who was looking for a knight in shining armor.” (Oluo 2017).

“Nothing about whiteness describes who I am.” (McGreal 2015).

“I don’t believe in race.” (McGreal 2015).

With this historical grounding, we can examine how racial identity is defined and performed by both those who claim and don’t claim it as their own. Such definitions and performances may buttress or challenge dominant institutions and beliefs.

Identity Politics & Essentialism

Identity politics direct social norms, performances, and interactions and can be used as a basis for one’s political alignments. Multiple, varied, and at times contradictory individual and collective identities are tied to socio-historical meanings and structures of domination (Fuss 1989). With representation a critical factor in feelings of connectedness toward community and society, inadequate or discordant inclusion, as exhibited in Dolezal’s case, can generate in the individual a sense of displacement with regard to personal identity status. This displacement can go so far as to com-

pletely negate or destroy one's personal identity, even racial identity (Fuss 1989).

Dolezal's statements in interviews and in excerpts from her book, *In Full Color: Finding My Place in a Black and White World*, speak to her flawed understanding of whiteness as a racial identity and misapprehensions around the nuance of race--particularly that black and white are not the only options, nor direct opposites of each other. Dolezal inexorably links whiteness to silver spoons and princess fairytales, superficial expressions of privilege with which she does not personally identify (Oluo 2017). In an inversion, Dolezal's logic is one shared by other groups of disenfranchised white, working-class Americans who cling to a racial hierarchy that promises some chance of escaping the commodification of capitalism so long as one is not black (Smith 2006).

Her statement, "I don't believe in race," asserts a preference for colorblindness. As an adjunct professor of Africana studies, Dolezal may have encountered the critique that it reinforces negative connotations of color, hinders the tracking of racial disparities in research studies, and ultimately perpetuates racism. Dolezal also argues that claiming black identity allows her to exist as her true self. While the social constructivity of race might imply that blackness is more about a feeling or conglomeration of lived experiences, that Dolezal feels the need to perform this blackness through stereotypical means without acknowledging the cultural histories upon which they are built belies her claim of not "believing" in race.

Definitions and meanings of black identity are maintained through individual and societal performances and impacted by the internal and external reactions to such performances. What Dolezal does in argument and practice essentializes the identity of black womanhood to the performance of normative stereotypes: "When race boils down, it's like hair, skin color, and eye shape — those are the three identifiers physically of race as a construct. So yeah, I definitely prefer to not, like, stay out of the sun," (Nightly News 2015). Why does Dolezal associate these performances with black womanhood? Even if we disregard the "one drop rule" and examine black women whose parents and grandparents identify and are accepted as black (rather than mixed-race or biracial), many such women will have fair skin; straight, wavy, or loosely curled hair; and possibly even be "white passing."

Appropriation and Blackface

Dolezal's fixation with black hair culture--installing dreadlocks and box braids in her own hair, and becoming a hairdresser for black women in the wake of her public ousting--both essentializes and trivializes the historical and cultural experiences of black women concerning hair and beauty standards. A full analysis of these dynamics is beyond the scope of this paper, but taking into account the history of misogynist and white eugenic heteropatriarchal influences on the beauty practices of black women in the United States, Dolezal's choices and performances related to physical appearance ultimately prove to be an instance of both cultural appropriation and blackface. In interviews, Dolezal has been unable to express a fully-formed conception of this extensive and complex history, nor how, at the intersection of race and gender, black women's hair becomes a cornerstone of culture and personal identity, as well as a site of strategic resistance and activism.

Though Dolezal uses the term "glow," to describe the nature of her skin after she's spent significant time in the sun or used bronzer to darken her complexion, a quick Google search reveals the ubiquity of white women using blackface without acknowledging it as such. From social media influencers to runway and fashion magazine models (Lawler 2018; Rees 2013; Ward 2018), white women are consistently in the practice of "adopting" the features of black women for financial and social gain. Meanwhile, black women possessing the same features naturally are routinely left without the economic and social perks of having millions of Instagram followers or being on the pages of Vogue. Dolezal, whether she acknowledges it or not, is doing the same. In addition to her lack of critical understanding around superficial changes to hair and skin, Dolezal also lacks the intergenerational trauma and socioeconomic disadvantage of racist, misogynistic, and classist oppression experienced by black women in the United States (DeGruy 2005). Had Dolezal read the works of feminists of color during her time as an Africana studies professor, she may have considered whether her claim to blackness was ill-conceived. Many such writers discuss the need for unity while highlighting that this unity need not be identical --Audre Lorde even states explicitly, "we do not have to become each other in order to work together," (Anzaldúa 1987; Lorde 1988).

Colorism & Privilege

“Who’s the gatekeeper for blackness?” (Brownson 2018).

Even if Dolezal could move through the world “passing” as a black woman, eschewing the benefits of white privilege, she would still be doing so as a light-skinned black woman. Colorism remains a facet of racism Dolezal has yet to address. She does not seem to realize that she is actively practicing whiteness by creating social distance from the difficult circumstances of both the black women she emulates and the working-class white Americans she ignores. This practice of whiteness manifests in the denial of her own upbringing, as well as in her denial of the histories of whiteness and white privilege in the United States, and is cemented by her acknowledgement of white privilege and hierarchical superiority only after she shunned white identity and adopted blackness in its place (Hurtado & Stewart 2004).

Additionally, the idea of transracialism does not flow both ways; while light-skinned black women may be able to “pass” as white in certain instances—dark-skinned black women do not have the same privilege. The spectrum of colorism-related privilege is fluid, but still operates within definitive boundaries; performance of racial classifications deviate from whiteness as the default. The reason Dolezal is not and cannot be a black woman is that, though she can have pseudo-experiences of racial oppression (i.e. being racially profiled for a traffic ticket), and can have a real fear for the lives of her black children, she can only have these experiences and fears in the context of having grown up a white girl in a white supremacist society—a girl who at one moment decided she wanted to move through the world identifying as black. Conversely, women who grew up black in the same white supremacist society can never have the experiences she had as a white woman and, in many cases, can never even have pseudo-experiences. Black women who are light-skinned enough to “pass” likely also have to deal with light-skinned guilt, a burden with which Dolezal seems unaffected.

Comparing Transgender and Transracial Identity

Dolezal does not consider herself transracial. She considers the term reifying of white supremacy,

but has come to accept its application to her from others (McGreal 2015). She also rejects popular comparisons between her identity and transgender identity. However, within the context of this paper, it is worth briefly comparing Dolezal’s transracial identity with transgender identity.

Inherence of Identity

One assertion holds that the difference between Dolezal’s actions and those of trans individuals is that her decision to identify as black is an active choice, whereas gender transition is almost always involuntary (Talusán 2015). This is well-intended but misguided. In the context of the social construction of identity (by hierarchal, discriminatory, and oppressive norms), racism and misogyny are both tools of colonialism (Driskill 2010). In this regard, the concept that race is binary, or fixed within specific delineations of what someone is or is not, parallels the dimorphic construction of gender. Stating that transgender people have no choice in their gender identity reifies the heteropatriarchal notion of gender as static and dimorphic rather than fluid and multidimensional. Similarly, the assumption that race is rigidly definable leans heavily on white supremacist eugenics logics, such as the “one drop rule.” Had Dolezal been able to prove via DNA testing that she had even 1% “authentically” black ancestry, would critics have accepted her as a black woman?

Another argument differentiating transgenderism from Dolezal’s transracialism purports that transgender people have to go through counseling under certified gender therapists, undergo hormone replacement therapy, and live in the targeted gender for at least a year before a gender therapist will sign off on genital surgery (Roberts 2015). While these factors may be true in the acquisition of transitional surgeries or official government identification, they are not required for a person to experience or claim a transgender identity. They are requirements to living and being accepted as an identity within the confines of a colonized society. In this vein, transgender identity and transracial identity alike are non-conforming practices that go against normative social definitions created and perpetuated by heteropatriarchal notions of being.

Yet another argument holds that the social identity of race is passed from one generation to the next, while gender is specific to the individual (Ander-

son 2017). This, again, leans heavily on white supremacist and heteropatriarchal binaries. If we accept gender identity as individual-specific, and that some transgender and non-heterosexual people are not necessarily “born this way,” but instead actively select to live in ways that align with their chosen identities, it becomes irreconcilable to also accept the harmful logics permeating racial identity. To conclude that racial identity is based in genetic ancestry, and to require certain amounts of a specific genetic marker as indicative of such an identity, is based in dimorphic systems of belief grounded in white colonialism.

The arguments against the comparison of transracialism and transgenderism are invalid in the context of social constructivity, colonial-based dimorphism, and heteropatriarchal white supremacist eugenics. An intersectional argument against the comparison would necessitate questioning the claims Dolezal makes where the meanings and definitions of racial categorization have been shaped by forces other than colonial hierarchies and oppressions. By troubling colonizer tools and institutions, we can begin to consider whether racial categorization and racist power dynamics would be as consequential in a decolonized society.

The Structural Power of Social Constructions

Return to the Heteropatriarchal White Supremacy of Colonialism

Both race and gender are colonially-instituted categories that serve to promote and administer unequal distributions of power and wealth within capitalist institutions. Within these institutions, there are no benefits or privileges to declaring oneself transgender, whether one is a trans man or a trans woman; both carry social stigma and discriminatory oppression of varying degrees. While it may seem that the only benefits to declaring oneself transracial (or in the case of light-skinned black people, “passing”) would be those for someone shifting from black to white, Dolezal had much to gain by living and performing as a black woman. She worked for the NAACP and taught college courses in a specialized subject matter, financially gaining from an identity that was not hers to declare. By accepting these economic and financial advancements, Dolezal also took them from women with legitimate

claim to black identity. Furthermore, Dolezal did this in Spokane, a predominantly white city, which could have benefited more from a white ally uplifting the voices of its black community than it did from a white woman claiming a black identity. Through her decision and actions, Dolezal perpetuated the appropriation and stereotyping of black womanhood, ultimately adding to the devaluation of black women’s work and bodies.

Dismantling Social Constructs

Racial identity is not the root issue in Dolezal’s transracialism; rather, it is that her position and the critiques of it implicate the historical and ongoing imposition of colonial structures onto our society. The fundamental reason for discrimination against black women stems from settler colonial intervention in African affairs and the creation of the US chattel slavery system (Arvin, Tuck & Morrill 2013). The resulting identities and stereotypes “are the ossified outcomes of the dynamic intersection of multiple hierarchies, not the dynamic that creates them. They are there, but they are not the reason they are there” (MacKinnon 2013). Therefore, Dolezal’s fundamental misunderstanding of the United States’ legacy and perpetuation of colonialism via structural racism and heteropatriarchy aside, her desire to “be black” is not theoretically problematic. Where Dolezal’s transracialism becomes injurious is in her argument that a white woman claiming black identity helps dismantle race as a social construct. Such methods of framing race conversations only serve to improve the circumstances of those deemed “deserving”: light-skinned, feminine-presenting, normative women; the “least marginalized of the marginalized,” (Spade 2011). If Dolezal truly wanted to exercise intersectional politics toward the deconstruction of race as a social institution, she would need to acknowledge the importance of recognizing the inequalities that exist within collective identities, and realize that this work does not lie in the dismantling of such identities or categories themselves but, rather, dismantling the structures and institutions that use identity to selectively impose vulnerability onto particular groups of people (Spade 2011). Dolezal would also need to recognize that diverse groups must work together to dismantle the various interlocking systems that constitute oppression (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall 2013), and that black women need white women to be allies while remaining firmly white.

Conclusion

The existence of racial category itself is not the issue in Rachel Dolezal's claim of black identity. Even the bending or questioning of what it means to be part of a racial category can be thoughtfully examined and destabilized. The true contestation is in the meanings, values, and consequences of racial categorization, and the social hierarchies and oppressions these categorizations tangibly represent. In examination of these interlocking structures, we must employ a lens of native feminist theory to engage a resistance that contests the settler colonialism that continues to bolster heteropatriarchy and its white supremacist power dynamics (Arvin, Tuck & Morrill 2013).

It would have been more meaningful for Dolezal to "stay" a white woman and use her privilege to uplift the voices of the black women with whom she claims to identify. Instead, she co-opted an identity that was not hers to take, and in the process essentialized and embodied harmful stereotypes of black womanhood. "Native feminist theories...do not assume the permanence of settler colonial nation-states, but rather seek to explore and determine societal structures that do not rely on the maintenance of a nation-state," (Arvin, Tuck & Morrill 2013). The facts in the case of Rachel Dolezal ultimately call for implementation of such Native feminisms, through a dismantling of the white supremacist heteropatriarchal colonization we are currently and perpetually subjugated by. Without the constant enactment on and by society of colonial tools and tenets, it may be possible to envision a future that does not rely on racial categorization or racist power dynamics, one wherein Rachel Dolezal might be "transracial."

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