Towards an Ethical Whiteness

The Case of Rachel Dolezal

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Introduction

In June 2015, we found out that Rachel Dolezal was white. Until then, Dolezal had been living in relative obscurity but locally had a good reputation and was even held in high esteem. She served on the volunteer police ombudsman committee, representing community concern about police violence and racism. She had worked at the Human Rights Education Institute, beginning with directing an art series and by 2008 becoming 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, 183). In January 2015 she became president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, one of the country's oldest civil rights organization, founded in 1909. Dolezal, by and large, was known in her community as a prominent anti-racist activist. She was also, by and large, thought to be Black.

But two summers ago, the tides turned, irreversibly, when a local reporter—who, according to Dolezal, was tipped off by a private investigator, hired by the Chief of Police, who had spoken to her parents—while interviewing Dolezal about hate crimes she had reported over the years, showed her a photo of Albert Wilkerson Jr., Dolezal's long-time mentor and chosen family, and asked if it was her 'dad'. She answered, "Yeah, that's my dad." He repeated the question, as Dolezal became increasingly tense. Finally he asked outright, "Are you African American?" to which Dolezal responded, "I don't understand the question – I did tell you that yes, that's my dad".[1] The interview abruptly ended as Dolezal walked away, but this local news item was just the beginning of what would become a national and international debate that continues to this day; a debate about appropriation, exotification, whiteness, Blackness, anti-Black racism, passing, race, gender, authenticity, allyship, and solidarity. A few central tensions kept resurfacing in this debate: Why did Dolezal spark such fierce backlash, particularly from

[1] KXLY4. "Raw Interview with Rachel Dolezal". Filmed June 2015. YouTube video, 8:55. Posted June 2015. Video URL.

the Black American [2] community, when former Olympic athlete and Kardashian stepparent Caitlyn Jenner was, around the same time, supported for 'choosing' her gender? If race is a social construct, on what grounds was Dolezal's identification being rejected? Aren't we working towards a future in which everyone is free to express who they are and choose who they want to be?

These questions were the dominant overarching themes shaping the public debate and discourse around Dolezal's controversial case, reflecting contemporary tensions around the role of history in shaping our contemporary and future society, as well as the role of the ally (particularly white allies in anti-racist solidarity or activism), and definitions of race in comparison with gender. My own research question was born out of the latter tension, between how we understand gender and race. That summer of 2015, as I tried to put into words my own reaction to Dolezal, I found myself making arguments with a logic that could potentially be used to invalidate transgender identity and expression, or at other times, arguments that assumed a thinly disguised essentialist definition of race. In trying to define race, and specifically Blackness, I was left with more questions than answers. And so I became interested in what would come to light, what could be explained, if I approached the problem from the other direction: from whiteness. That is, rather than trying to define Blackness in order to 'prove' that Dolezal is not Black, in what follows, I am concerned with where, how, and with what effects whiteness manifests in and through Dolezal's body, her identification, and the narrative she has created thereof. In doing so, I follow an Irigarayan ethics, which require a respect for the difference of the Other that is also necessarily a recognition of the specificity of the self. In doing so, I hope to be able to imagine an more ethical whiteness than, I will argue, what Dolezal puts forth, and think through how we could put this whiteness to use in the project of dismantling white supremacy. This investigation

[2] I use the term "Black Americans" to refer to Black U.S. Americans. I am aware that the tendency to refer to those living in the U.S. as simply 'Americans' is part of the hegemonic dominance of the U.S. by using the term to refer to two continents (North and South America) for one country. However 'African Americans' is insufficient for my purposes here as it denies that not all Black Americans are of African descent (but also, for example, Caribbean).

departs from Irigaray, however, by taking as its premise the inextricability of ethics and politics in order to challenge the individualist notion of identity as an apolitical truth, epitomized by Dolezal's response when was asked if she thought she had done something wrong: "No, I don't. I don't think you can do something wrong with your identity if you're living in your authenticity, and I am."[3]

I undergo this investigation, consciously, at a political moment in which the continued perpetuation and therefore political urgency of racism is being recognized and grappled with. While I am sympathetic towards the criticism that Dolezal, a white woman, was garnering far more attention than the 'real' issues, my conviction is that the role of white people in dismantling white supremacy is a 'real' issue, in that it is a pressing question with material stakes and no clear answers yet. I do not suggest that I do have a clear answer, but I do hope to contribute to this already ongoing discussion, and to do so through the discourse that Dolezal has produced around her identification. What is at stake, then, is not Dolezal's individual identification, not simply trying to 'prove' that she is not Black, but rather, thinking through what we can do with whiteness, assuming that, at least in its physical materialization through certain bodies, it is here to stay.

Many white people want to know what they can do to contribute to anti-racism, how they can act in solidarity with people of color, how they can be in the world in a way that doesn't perpetuate the structures they are produced and privileged by but of which they are critical. To some extent I follow Sara Ahmed's critique of this impulse but I know there to be white people who are not only chiefly concerned with the performativity of anti-racism or the non-performativity of declarations of whiteness (Ahmed 2004) but with how they can usefully contribute to concrete change. And I want—perhaps even need—to believe that they can. These are the stakes, and it is from this belief, this hope, that I conduct my analysis of Dolezal's narrative of her identification as Black.

Given its relatively recent nature, there is little academic scholarship about Dolezal at the time that I write this: *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled*

[3] Aitkenhead, Decca. "Rachel Dolezal: 'I'm Not Going to Stoop and Apologize and Grovel.' *The Guardian*, February 25, 2017.

Identities by Rogers Brubaker (2016) and an article published in *Hypatia*, "In Defense of Transracialism" (2017) by Rebecca Tuvel. In his book, Brubaker focuses specifically on the comparisons made between Dolezal and Jenner, and from a sociological perspective unpacks how and why race and gender, while both socially constructed categories, have been constructed differently. "By treating trans as a tool to think with, not just a phenomenon to think about," Brubaker brings to light the underlying logics facilitating simultaneous support of Jenner and rejection of Dolezal.[4] Brubaker's project, then, is not to defend or critique Dolezal per se, but rather about encouraging reflection upon these differences and thinking through what we can learn from or do with them: he argues that "transracial is a productively disruptive *concept* because it can unsettle the taken-for-granted assumptions about the stability and naturalness of racial categories on which the reproduction of the racial order depends".[5] Tuvel, on the other hand, explicitly argues that the arguments used to explain, validate and support transgender identity can and must apply to so-called 'transracial' identity. This article received major backlash, including an open letter to the journal *Hypatia*, and sparked a debate that is not within the scope of this introduction to summarize (see: Brubaker 2017, Oliver 2017, Singal 2017, Winnubst 2017).

Thus in some ways this project is one of the first of its kind, that is, some of the first scholarship focused on Dolezal in the academic field. But while the specific subject may be 'new', the conversation itself—about the border and boundaries of identity, about cross-racial solidarity, about how whiteness works—is not. In what follows I work frequently with critical whiteness scholarship, a field which has come to appear in academic discourse as 'new' but is of course thoroughly indebted to a rich body of Black thought and scholarship, dating back to Sojourner Truth's impromptu address 'Ain't I a Woman?', often cited as one of the first examples of Black U.S. intersectional thought.[6]

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[4] Brubaker, Rogers. *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016, 151.
[5] Brubaker, Rogers. "The Uproar over Transracialism." *New York Times*, May 18 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/18/opinion/the-uproar-over-transracialism.html
[6] "Ain't I A Woman?" By Sojourner Truth. http://www.feminist.com/resources/artspeech/genwom/sojour.htm.

Black activists, writers and thinkers have already long been theorizing not only about race, racial identity, Blackness and racism but also, necessarily, about whiteness (DuBois 1903, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr 1963, Lorde 1984, hooks 1989, Toni Morrison 1992). Still, I find it important that white scholars themselves critically analyze whiteness, the system which produces their subject-positions and in which they are complicit; I share with Sara Ahmed "a sense that the project of making whiteness visible only makes sense from the point of view of those for whom it is invisible".[7] Further, I find that analyses of whiteness from Black feminist literature and theory tend to be carried out within the analyses of racism, and as Marilyn Frye writes, "I think that what I am after here is not one and the same thing as racism, either institutional or personal".[8] Though I do not propose to totally separate whiteness and racism—indeed, this is impossible, for the notion of the 'white race' is a product and essential component of white supremacy—I too am trying to get at what we might miss when we define whiteness and white identity as nothing-other-than white supremacy and racism. I make this attempt not to somehow 'redeem' whiteness but rather because I suspect that what we might be missing might contribute to the perpetuation of white supremacy and racism even within anti-racist pedagogy and activist practices.

This investigation begins in Chapter One with the question of identity, looking at how our contemporary understanding of identity is a product of modern notions of the (white) subject as an individual with an inner, self-same essence. I trace how Dolezal draws upon this discourse to legitimize her identification as both a choice and a life-long truth. Specifically, I look at how ethnic/racial identity has emerged as a choice, and the ways in which this choice is limited. In Chapter Two, I look at how certain affects circulate in and shape Dolezal's narrative, particularly in relation to her family and her proximity, starting in early adolescence, to Blackness. In this chapter I also take up the concept of white racial identity formation, popularized by Janet E. Helms, and tie the resonances and dissonances of Dolezal's narrative with such models to shame. In

[7] Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness: the Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism."
[8] Frye, Marilyn. "White Woman Feminist." *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism*. Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1992.

Chapter Three, I consider the ethics, politics and (im)possibilities of Dolezal's gesture of rejecting whiteness, situating it within the broader 'race traitor' approach to abolishing white supremacy put forth by the academic journal of the same name (ed. Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey). This critique of the 'race traitor' subject-position focuses on, but is not limited to, the way in which Dolezal's rejection of whiteness reproduces tropes of white femininity as moral or 'good.' In Chapter Four, I work with Luce Irigaray's concept of sexual difference to consider what could, then, be the ethical self/Other relation to form a basis for politically effective cross-racial solidarity, proposing that a 'positive' or productive white self-relation is an essential part of this ethical self/Other relation. Finally, I propose a shift from forming these relations through the figure of the ally to forming alliances.

In this critical discourse analysis, I am interested in how different kinds of whiteness are produced—different experiences and embodiments—and what we might stand to gain by recognizing and working with them rather than sweeping them under the rug of hegemonic definitions of whiteness as white supremacy and racism. While whiteness is, by definition, the product of white supremacy, I find other ways of looking at and analyzing whiteness relevant and useful, such as Nell Irving Painter's historical approach, which shows how certain immigrant groups, first racialized, became white in the U.S., or Marilyn Frye's distinction between whiteness as a physical attribute and 'whiteliness' as a "deeply engrained way of being in the world".[9] While taking whiteness and white identity purely as manifestations of white supremacy is to some degree accurate, and for certain political aims crucial, I propose that we must first dismantle 'whiteliness' and explore other, more ethical ways for white people to be in the world before we can dismantle whiteness itself; this approach does allow 'whiteness' to remain intact in that it involves people racialized as white, but I propose this is a necessary first step in the larger project of ultimately dismantling whiteness and thus white supremacy.

[9] Frye, "White Woman Feminist."

That is, how did it become possible for Dolezal to insist “nothing about whiteness describes me”[10]? In which ways, if any, does this statement hold, and in which ways is it itself a manifestation of whiteness? It is precisely in this gap between Dolezal’s understanding of whiteness (and of herself in relation to it) and the discursive-material presence of whiteness that serves as my starting point and object of analysis, and what is at stake is closing this gap for the sake thereof but to retrieve the urgent opportunities for effective cross-racial solidarity that fall through it.

[10] “Rachel Dolezal Breaks Her Silence: ‘I identify as Black.’” Interview by Matt Lauer. The Today Show. NBC. New York, New York, 16 June 2015.

Chapter One: Approaches to Identity

Introduction

Much of the public discourse around Dolezal frames it as an issue of identity. It seems necessary to begin, then, by asking what might be meant by 'identity' in this context, and what happens when we analyze this case through a variety of frameworks for understanding 'identity.' In this chapter, I trace what kind of 'identity' figures in and in fact produces Dolezal's narrative of her identification as Black, and specifically look at how racial/ethnic identity has emerged as a 'choice.' In situating her narrative this way, I will demonstrate that taking up Dolezal as white does not mean taking race as a given, for-granted, fixed or static category (and certainly not as a biological reality); rather, I take up (racial and ethnic) identity as a performative speech act, from a materialist perspective, and in terms of location or position. These various but also overlapping approaches allow me to problematize the concept of identity itself as it has been mobilized in the public discourse around Dolezal and by Dolezal herself, and show the ways in which whiteness is at work here.

To analyze this case from the perspective of whiteness is to take whiteness itself as a system of power relations that, among other effects, structures subjectivity, but—and this is crucial—is not totally successful in its hegemonic determination. Such an analysis allows me in later chapters to ask questions such as: what kinds of affects inform white racial identity formation? What kind of whiteness, in caring for her Black siblings, did Dolezal experience (and reject)? What kind of whiteness, as a relation to the (white) self and to others, is not only possible but also ethical if we find rejecting one's whiteness is an impossibility? At the core of my motivation for this thesis is the belief that the answers to these questions will not be the same. The aim of this project is partially, then, to prove its underlying assumption: that Dolezal is white, or more specifically, that it is useful and even politically urgent to take her up as a white subject. Dolezal had a point when she said in both a *VICE* interview and a *New York Times* live-video interview, "Part of me wonders are people actually saying you have privilege and

you've been privileged or are people more interested in just calling me white?"[11] It is not enough to take for granted that Dolezal is white—we must ask on what grounds, in which ways, and to which ends she has or can be taken up in this way.

Identity as Both Truth and Choice

Underpacking the unspoken assumptions about what identity is, how it works, and why it matters will help reveal some of the mechanisms which facilitated Dolezal's cross-racial identification as well as those which ultimately, following J. L. Austin's notion of performatives, led to its 'misfire.' Thus beginning with identity is a necessary first step towards bringing to light the specificity of race as an identity and understanding the contradictions and apparent paradoxes in the public response to Dolezal that follow.

In my approach to exploring identity as it relates to the particular case at hand, I respond to Stuart Hall in his take on modern identity in 'Modernity and its Futures.' Hall writes that the Enlightenment subject was "a fully centered, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness, and action, whose 'center' consisted of an inner core which first emerged when the subject was born, and unfolded with it, while remaining essentially the same."[12] Structural changes—industrialization, followed by globalization and late capitalism—caused "shifts in the process of identification," making them "more open-ended, variable and problematic" and producing "the post-modern subject, conceptualized as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity."[13] Social class ceases to function as an overarching 'master identity', and the post-modern subject "assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self'"[14]. Rather, identities emerge on "new political ground defined by social movements" such as feminist, black liberation and anti-war movements.[15][16]

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[11] Thomas, Dexter. "Rachel Dolezal wants to tell her side of the story." Vice News. March 28, 2017. https://news.vice.com/story/rachel-dolezal-wants-to-tell-her-side-of-the-story.
[12] Hall, Stuart, David Held, Don Hubert and Kenneth Thompson. "The Question of Cultural Identity*." Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies.* Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995: 596-632
[13] Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," 598.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid, 601.

I want to suggest that the moments that Hall pinpoints in identity are not, in fact, linear or separate, at least not in the way that Hall suggests. Rather, these various understandings work more as layers, simultaneously: this becomes rather clear in Dolezal's case. At the same time that she draws upon notions of identity as shifting and unstable to make her claim, her claim is legitimated by her narrative of a life-long affiliation with blackness that signifies authenticity, understood in relation to identity largely (though not exclusively) through continuity (have you always been who you now say you are?). Later in this chapter, I will discuss the how the notion of 'choice' shapes our understandings and experiences of race and ethnicity as identities, but first, I wish to address identity as coherent and self-same.

The notion of identity as an expression of an inner truth, which Hall seems to suggest has become irrelevant, functions in Dolezal's presentation of herself to and through the media as the foundation upon which she can then invoke identity as choice. And so her narrative begins, necessarily, with childhood. As she told political commentator and television host Melissa-Herris 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, and I didn't know how to articulate that as a young child, as kindergartener, whatever—you don't have words for what's going on"[17] Here, Dolezal implicitly makes a distinction within the concept of identity that upholds her narrative: identity is both something someone always has, their truth, and the moment or process of expressing (through speech or through making visible) that truth to others. Thus while Dolezal may have only later in life started identifying as Black, in the latter sense of the word, she maintains that she has also always identified as Black. Without this element of continuity, redeemed by her claim

[16] Here it seems Hall is describing what we now refer to identity politics, though, following my understanding of the use of the term, perhaps in reverse: political struggles leading to the formation of identities, rather than basing one's political priorities, actions and allegiances on one's identity.

[17] "Exclusive Full Interview: Rachel Dolezal Breaks Her Silence." Interview by Melissa Harris-Perry. The Melissa Harris-Perry Show. MSNBC. New York, New York. 17 June 2015.

that she was not able to express her 'true' self until adulthood, her claim would not even be considered a subject for debate or discussion.

The question of consistency was frequently raised in the public discourse around Dolezal, not only by Dolezal herself, but by others as well: most obviously, on each of her four major television interviews in 2015 (the TODAY show, MSNBC, The Real, and the Melissa-Harris Perry Show), she was questioned her about the fact that she sued a historically Black university on the basis of race (i.e. her whiteness) and gender when her scholarship was rescinded. This emphasis on the consistency of her identification with Blackness brings us to a limit of Hall's formulation of post-modern identity; race is perhaps the least post-modern of what have become considered the most important identities (including but not limited to gender, sexuality, and class). According to bell hooks, this is not a coincidence, but a form of resistance to the "problematic" ways in which the postmodern critique of identity is posed:

> "Given a pervasive politic of white supremacy which seeks to prevent the formation of radical black subjectivity … any critic exploring the radical potential of postmodernism as it related to racial difference and racial domination would need to consider the implications of a critique of identity for oppressed groups … I am thinking here about the postmodern critique of essentialism as it pertains to the construction of 'identity' as one example."[18]

Dolezal, by rejecting biological or genetic definitions of race can perhaps be said to embody the very postmodern critique of identity that hooks questions in relation to race. At the same time, her narrative relies heavily on notions of truth and continuity, and this is a contemporary tension around identity that her case illustrates. Dolezal constructs identity as both a coherent inner self *and* as a process of expressing and presenting that self to others. This combination negotiates or compensates for her visible whiteness during her youth: "the Rachel I was before Thursday [June 11th, 2015, the day she went viral] is the Rachel I am now and the Rachel I'm going to be in the future. So I haven't … switched faces back and forth. I think it can be read as I was socially conditioned to sanction this part of myself. I finally had the freedom to start

[18] hooks, bell. "Postmodern Blackness." Postmodern Culture 1:1 (1990). 92.

owning this and celebrating and reconnecting."[19] The use of the word 'reconnecting' is key, suggesting a return to that which was always already there, but not yet rendered visible or expressed to others. As these excerpts illustrate, the 'truth' of particular identities, even this identity changes, is contingent upon a consistency antithetical to Hall's notion of post-modern identity as continuously shifting and unstable (which Dolezal invokes when she repeats that race is a 'lie' and a 'myth') but central to her later insistence upon her right to *choose* (or choose to express) her identity.

In contrast to this ability and perceived right to choose Blackness, Dolezal expresses feeling disempowered by her white positionality, telling Harris-Perry that she "felt very isolated with my identity virtually my entire life—that nobody really got it, and that I didn't really have the personal agency to express it."[20] And indeed, "being identities in a way that lies beyond our individual control conflicts with individualist ideas, and illusions, about our autonomy", a fact that many people of color have necessarily come to understand and to some degree accept.[21] For most white people, on the other hand, "the forcible interpellations of their racial identity are more often a new experience."[22]

Further, that Dolezal earlier in her interview with Harris-Perry describes lacking the words, and now the personal agency, to express her identity is noteworthy: language, agency and identity become conflated, and when identity is reduced to the choice of a self-determining, self-fashioning individual, there is no grounds upon or language with which to contest identity claims. A sentence beginning "I identify as …" leaves little possibilities for denial or rejection. Identity has become reduced to a feeling, which the individual alone can name. The source of this feeling, further, warrants no explanation or investigation, and thus has no history. It comes, simply, from the inner and authentic self.

Dolezal's feeling of being Black is the grounds upon which she makes her claim to Blackness, and simultaneously what led her claim to 'misfire'. For race—particularly

[19] "Exclusive Full Interview: Rachel Dolezal Breaks Her Silence."
[20] Ibid.
[21] Alcoff, Linda. *The future of whiteness*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016. 21.
[22] Alcoff, *The future of Whiteness*, 21.

Blackness in the U.S.—has by and large not been understood as a feeling, but rather as a historically imposed category. Before elaborating on identities as claims (which can be rejected), a more detailed look at how race and ethnicity are constructed will be helpful.

From Race to Ethnicity

In 1999, Alcoff outlined three dominant approaches that remain relevant and useful for understanding and defining race: nominalism, essentialism, and contextualism. Where nominalism denies the validity of race as a meaningful biological category and so refuses to reproduce it by engaging with it, essentialism puts forth that "race is always politically salient" because "members of racial groups share a set of characteristics, a set of political interests, and a historical destiny", regarded stable across time and space.[23] Contextualism offers an alternative to these two polarized stances, taking race as "socially constructed, historically malleable, culturally contextual, and produced through learned perceptual practice."[24] Within contextualism are objectivist and subjectivist approaches; the former focuses on the structural and social constitution of race, while the latter, taking from phenomenology, incorporates experience and the everyday.

It is key to note that these approaches co-exist. Their popularity shifts in different contexts and at different moments; they are employed strategically and sometimes in a self-contradictory manner. While contextualism, more commonly known as the 'social construction' approach to race, was not long ago a dominant theory in academia (and is tnow gaining traction in public discourse as well), a materialist (re)turn has emerged in response, engaging with the material differences and effects produced by race without treating that materiality as fixed or essential. As Arun Saldanha puts it, because the materiality of race became conflated with a 'biologistic' approach and 'racist sciences' in which "races are fixed and history and oppression are irrelevant," it became more popular and deemed politically necessary to claim that "race is a social construction, full

[23] Alcoff, Linda Martin. "Towards a phenomenology of racial embodiment." *Radical Philosophy.* 095, 1999: 15-26.
[24] Ibid.

stop."[25] In short, "to criticize race, its materiality had to be disavowed."[26] The work of French materialist feminist Collette Guillamin, writing far ahead of her time in the late 1970s and 1980s, offers a useful intervention into Saldanha's narrative by making a distinction between the ideology of race and racism. Race ideology, Guillamin argues, is the specific organization of perceptions and the attribution of particular (arbitrary but permanent) signifiers (i.e. skin) as classifications of a particular essence, "the expression of a specific nature."[27] Racism, then, is the naturalization of this process of classification—groups produced through the ideology of race come to appear as always having been groups—and the hierarchical organization of those classifications: "a hierarchy among human groups, a system of biophysical causality underlying social and mental forms, are actually rationalizations of the ideology itself."[28] From Guillamin's perspective, then, there would be no way to 'criticize race' by 'disavowing its materiality', as Saldanha suggests, because the materiality of race is an effect of the ideology of race—to disavow it, then, would leave the ideology itself intact. Following Guillamin, it would instead by more accurate to say that to criticize racism, race was disavowed.

It is no wonder, given that "in the very midst of our contemporary skepticism toward race as a natural kind stands the compelling social reality that race, or radicalized identities, have as much political, sociological, and economic salience as they have ever had," Alcoff says, " we are confused about what to do with the category of race."[29] This confusion contributes to the conditions that produce a moment in which racial identity is increasingly becoming a matter of choice: as a (rather sensationalist) TIME article put it in 2014, "10 million Americans switched their race or ethnicity for the census."[30] A study by the Census Bureau in 2014 found that "only 48% of Hispanics

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[25] Saldhana, Arun. "Reontologising race: the machinic geography of the phenotype." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (2006): 9-24. 21.
[26] Ibid, 15.
[27] Guillaumin, Colette. *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology*. London; New York: Routledge, 1995.
[28] Ibid, 54.
[29] Alcoff, "Towards a phenomenology of racial embodiment," 16.
[30] Linshi, Jack. "9.8 Million Americans Changed Race or Ethnicity Between Census Reports." Time. August 7, 2014. http://time.com/3087649/census-race-ethnicity-report/.

who identified as white in 2000 [...] 'stayed' white in 2010" and that people who selected one of 10 biracial options in 2000 were also more likely to change their self-identification on the census, regardless of Hispanic origin.[31] It should be noted that the options for multiracial identification have increased from one in 1850 ('mulatto') to 57 in 2010. Further, a Pew Research analysis of the census found that "the number of Americans with two different racial ancestries has more than doubled since 1980, when the ancestry question was first asked."[32] This is one of the ways in which racial/ethnic identity can be seen as performative, in that the identities of the subjects being counted in the census can be seen as being produced by and in the answering such prompts, explicit or implicit, for self-identification, rather than prior to them.

The increasing normalization of racial or ethnic identity as a choice also stems from the conflation of the categories themselves. As Guillamin points out, 'race' used to be the "specific context of a family's line of descent"[33] but by the 19th century came to mean much larger populations, across space but static through time, defined by allegedly shared characteristics: "The aristocracy were not one race but many (the Xs, the Ys), whereas now we say in the singular 'the black race', 'the Jewish race' ... we have gone from multiplicity to singularity."[34] This shift can be attributed to the event of colonialism: "Categories such as 'Indians' and 'Negroes' were invented in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to justify the conquest and exploitation of various peoples."[35] Modernist, racist sciences produced knowledge that rendered these invented categories natural, a discourse that has lost credibility but continues to have effects in how we think about race to this day (for example as physically/externally determined). Ethnicity, following Karen Blu, is on the other hand "a classification of individuals as members of

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[31] Linshi, "9.8 Million Americans Changed Race or Ethnicity Between Census Reports."
[32] "Chapter 1: Race and Multiracial Americans in the U.S. Census." Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project. June 10, 2015. http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/06/11/chapter-1-race-and-multiracial-americans-in-the-u-s-census/.
[33] Guillaumin, *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology*, 53.
[34] Ibid, 54.
[35] Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *White supremacy and racism in the post-civil rights era*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001. 41.

groups that are distinguished from one another on the basis of 'heritage' or 'background' — that is, nationality of ancestors, language, race, religion, customs, historical events, or any combination of these."[36] 'African American', then, would be understood as one's ethnicity, referring to African heritage and the 'historical event' that brought African peoples to the U.S., and 'Black' to one's race as rendered visible through physical characteristics, particularly skin color. Blu adds that "the folk contrast between ethnicity and race might be characterized in Levi-Straussian terms, in that race is conceived to be a division 'in nature' whereas ethnicity is conceived as a division 'in culture.'"[37]

But this distinction, if it were ever clear, is becoming increasingly blurred. In 1997, Patricia Sunderland interviewed five white women involved in the New York City jazz scene who expressed identification with blackness, and noted that their interweaving of "the discourses of race and ethnicity in their constructions of themselves as black" was not anomalous but "completely in keeping with general trends."[38] She called this interweaving "a general phenomenon … quite evident, among other place, in the academic literatures."[39] But it was also, importantly, a new phenomenon:

> "Within our traditional conceptions there has been an element of choice in terms of one's ethnicity but not for one's race. It has been considered a matter of choice as to how much one identifies with and involves oneself with one's own ethnic (read: cultural) traditions or heritage. Race, on the other hand, has been conceived as a category in nature that one either is or is not."[40]

But "when conceptions of race and ethnicity become intertwined," as in the interviews with her subjects who identified *as* Black as opposed to, for example, expressing an affiliation with African American history and culture, "the possibility of being black as a matter of individual choice is opened."[41] In fact, Sunderland predicted that this would be an increasing occurrence. Similarly, Ahmed noted in 1999 that such

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[36] Blu, Karen. *The Lumbee problem: the making of an American Indian people*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001. 205.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Sunderland, Patricia L. "'You may not know it, but I'm black': White women's self-identification as black", Ethnos, 62:1-2, 1997: 32-58. 50.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

"shifts in forms of racism towards a fetishizing of cultural rather than biological difference" will mean that "passing for black becomes an increasingly powerful individual and national phantasy."[42]

Even earlier than Sunderland, Blu predicted that this shift from racial to ethnic classification, in which cultural aspects of race are added or stressed, would lead to "voluntaristic attitude about identity – that one can choose how much and in many cases whether to participate in an ethnic identity."[43] This option, according to Blu, can take one of two forms:

> "In American terms, in order for an individual to claim an ethnic identity legitimately, one or more of his relatively immediate ancestors must have possess that identity. If an individual has ancestors with several different ethnic identities, he may then legitimately choose which he will 'be' from among them, all things being equal"

— which, she adds, they rarely are: this 'freedom' of choice is most often restricted or influence by one's upbringing, social setting, and so on.[44] Indeed, Harris et al. found that some are more likely or able to choose than others: "gender relates to self-identification, such that girls are more likely to endorse multiracial/ethnic identities than boys, and … for instance, children and youth of Asian ancestry have been found to be more likely to identify with multiple categories than Black, Hispanic or Native American children and youth."[45] And, as I will come to later, many Black Americans still experience their Blackness precisely as a lack of choice, their Black bodies as immanent, as Ta-Nehisi Coates captures in his much-discussed book *Between The World and Me* (2015).

Blu adds that although there is not yet a "'right' to choose one's 'racial' ancestry ... if race and ethnicity become progressively intertwined in a new way, it is possible that being Black will, in years to come, be more a matter of individual choice and less a matter of assignment by others"—a possibility that Dolezal's identification and the

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[42] Ahmed, Sara. "'She'll Wake Up One of These Days and Find She's Turned into a Nigger': Passing Through Hybridity." Theory, Culture & Society. 16:2, 1999: 87-106. 100.
[43] Blu, *The Lumbee Problem*, 209.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Harris, Bryn, Russel F. Ravert, and Amanda L. Sullivan. "Adolescent Racial Identity: Self-Identification of Multiple and 'Other' Race/Ethnicities." Urban Education, 2015: 1-20.

conversations surrounding it make tangible.[46] But such a choice is itself is not a bounded and fixed moment: the expression of the choice, particularly with racial or ethnic identity, creates a space in which it is yet to be affirmed or rejected. What conditions for affirmation or rejection constitute this space? What conditions enable the claim to be made in the first place? And what does Dolezal's claim tell us about whiteness? To take up these questions, in the next section I will look at Dolezal's claim to Blackness as a speech act, specifically what Austin called a performative.

Identity Claims as Performatives

Rather than taking identity for granted as something that is determined inwardly by an individual and afterwards expressed to others, I am interested in how the articulation or expression of an identity itself—what I will call an identity claim—as well as the response to that claim is productive, bringing (or attempting to bring) a particular kind of subject into being. Taken this way, it is less a matter of if Dolezal 'really' is or isn't black, and more a matter of identity claims as processes of negotiations which are themselves productive and at the same time effects of power. There is no simple 'is', but rather, what materializes in these processes.

In "How to Do Things with Words", Austin proposes the term "performatives" for those utterances which "do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all, are not 'true or false'" but rather are, or are part of, "the doing of an action"—such as saying 'I do' in a marriage ceremony or naming a ship.[47] As Dolezal herself said, when asked by Today show host Matt Lauer if she had deceived people, "it's more complex than true or false."[48] So if we are to consider identity claims (for example, "I identify as bisexual" or "I identify as mixed") as speech acts, what can they be said to be 'doing'? In comparison with saying "I am bisexual" or "I am mixed", using the verb 'identify' suggests a certain

[46] Blu, *The Lumbee Problem*, 210.
[47] Austin, J. L. "Performatives and Constatives" and "Conditions for Happy Performatives" *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962: 1-24. 5.
[48] "Rachel Dolezal Breaks Her Silence: 'I Identify As Black'" Interview by Matt Lauer. *The Today Show*. NBC. New York, New York, 16 June 2015.

process undergone by the speaker, whereas 'am' connotes an inherent, static quality. Put another way, 'am' suggests that the object of the speaker's being is within and constitutive of the speaker; 'identify' suggests an object outside of the speaker to which they attach themselves. This language of 'identifying' results in the subject being constructed as an individual who takes their pick (chooses) from the available options of identities, and within this terminology, while these claims can be contested, they cannot simply be negated. But when taken as a performative, "I identify as X" does not merely *describe* the process through which one attaches oneself to an identity; such a claim is a *doing*.

Identity claims situate the speaker in a particular group and produce a relationship between the speaker and the listener(s). The nature of this relationship is, of course, context dependent: depending on who is speaking and who they are addressing, an identity claim can align or distance the speaker from the listener(s), or perform a range of other relational gestures. As Deborah A. Chirrey puts it in their discussion of coming out as lesbian/gay, the one who comes out "present[s] to the hearer the new, gay or lesbian subject position of the speaker. In so doing they have the potential force of altering reality for both the speaker and the listener."[49] The act of coming out can have "the force of causing the listener to change his or her perspective on the world in order to accommodate this new information" — and this is why identity claims are never solely individual or personal in nature; they are fundamentally social and political.[50] One of Dolezal's first public statements after she was 'outed' as white—"I identify as black", on the *Today* show (see fig. 1)—was rejected by so many Black Americans precisely because of how and where it located Dolezal within U.S. society at large. As Allison Samuels in her interview with Dolezal for *Vogue* magazine put it (rather generously) Dolezal was "bold and brazen enough to claim ownership over a painful and complicated history she wasn't born into."[51] But as Chirrey points outs, that there is

[49] Chirrey, Deborah A. 2003. "'I hereby come out': What sort of speech act is coming out?" Journal of Sociolinguistics 7/1, 2003: 24-37. 30.
[50] Chirrey, "I hereby come out," 30.
[51] Samuels, Allison. "Rachel Dolezal's True Lies." The Hive. July 21, 2015. http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/07/rachel-dolezal-new-interview-pictures-exclusive.

necessarily also a futurity to this claim: accepting it would mean accepting an alteration to the definition or understanding of blackness, changing its boundaries going forward. Though blackness in the U.S. has not been static, Dolezal's claim addresses the foundation of blackness upon which shifts and changes develop. To speak of identity as the possession of an individual, then, as something someone 'has', overlooks the crucial ways in which identity claims propose new subjects and new realities. Here is where the tensions and controversy around Dolezal emerge: as an individual's right to self-expression and self-identification, and the implications of that self-identification for the collective identity. This is why "an individual creating a new reality in coming out … need[s] the co-operation of their hearers to achieve this."[52]

Figure 1

So why, specifically, did the audience of Dolezal's claim—the U.S. public but particularly Black Americans—refuse to cooperate? And what does the refusal, the resistance to the notion of identity as choice, tell us about how race is understood and constructed as a particular kind of identity? And how does this understanding of racial or ethnic identity challenge the notion of an autonomous self, who defines themselves by their 'choices'?

[52] Chirrey, "I hereby come out," 30.

As Austin puts it, "besides the uttering of the words of the so-called performative, a good many other things have as a general rule to be right and to go right if we are to be said to have happily brought off our action."[53] Here, I suggest reading "happily brought off our action" as not only public acceptance or support but also, in Chirrey's words, the creation of a new reality (which requires cooperation from those who hear the speaker's claim). So what prevented Dolezal from successfully creating a new reality in which her claim to blackness—as someone with white parents—would be felicitous? Following Austin's logic of performatives will, I believe, bring to light the specific ways in which blackness is socially constructed, that is, brought into being, made real.

For Austin, the 'good many other things' (the conditions for a felicitous performative) are sometimes, but not always, other actions, such as smashing a bottle of champagne against the side of a ship while naming it. Dolezal's claim seems to be ~~a~~ such a "misfire" which occurs when "an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect" does exist and is invoked sincerely, unlike an abuse, but is botched somehow.[54] For example, the speaker is "not in a position to do the act"—then "the act in question … is not successfully performed at all, does not come off, is not achieved."[55] Dolezal's claim seems to be fall in line with a particular kind of misfire that Austin calls a misapplication, when "the procedure in question cannot be made to apply in the way attempted."[56] While there *is* apparently a procedure, at least, for identifying within a category as something other than what you were 'born as', as evidenced by the relative increase in felicitousness of transgender identity claims[57], no such procedure exists nor could be made to apply in relation to race.

So what are these conditions for choosing or changing one's racial/ethnic identity, but specifically claiming blackness, that Dolezal did not meet? By taking these questions

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[53] Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 14.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid, 16.
[56] Ibid, 17.
[57] This is not to ignore that such claims are not denied, violently, on social, discursive and structural levels, but rather point to how public discourse (e.g. mainstream media) increasingly legitimizes or supports some such claims.

seriously, I aim to neither dismiss nor defend these conditions. Rather, if we understand race to be socially constructed, a concept Dolezal herself is quick to cite, it is important to attend to the how and what of that construction, to also clarify that social construction does not mean *individually* constructed nor allows for individual deconstructions. Detailing this process of construction, then, is a method of critically interrogating Dolezal's claim without essentializing blackness, as well as understanding more specifically why her claim, and perhaps cross-racial identification claims more broadly, are unlikely to be felicitous.

There are, of course, a myriad of ways in which blackness in the U.S. is defined. As Dolezal herself told the hosts of daytime talk-show *The Real*, all of whom are women of color, "blackness can be defined as philosophical, cultural, biological, you know, a lot of different things for a lot of different people."[58] And indeed, blackness is as much constituted by W. E. B. Du Bois' description of black consciousness as "the veil"[59] as by black musical, artistic and literary traditions as by particular foods as by a particularly racialized body — yet it is rarely all of these things at once. That is, all of the things that constitute blackness in the U.S. are rarely simultaneously embodied by any given Black American. In this sense, Blackness functions hegemonically, and it is on these grounds that Dolezal's claim was sometimes, if not accepted, then defended: what is blackness 'really' anyway? Who are we to say someone isn't black—on what grounds, or with what singular and unifying definition? As Max Weber noted, "the concept of the 'ethnic group' … dissolves if we define our terms exactly", in part due to its erasure of differences within the so-called group.[60] It is, necessarily, a reductive concept—but it is nonetheless (perhaps even therefore) useful to trace how it is employed.

[58] The Real Daytime. "Race vs. State of Mind: Rachel Dolezal's Thoughts on Whiteness". Filmed November 2015. YouTube video, 5:18. Posted November 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKRj_h7vmMM&t=1s.
[59] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.
[60] Blu, *The Lumbee Problem*, 219.

Although defining race biologically has been widely discredited, largely due to its association with racist scientific practices such as eugenics[61], the notion of ancestry or heritage, which retains an implicit biological element, has taken its place. Blackness as ancestry figures as that which is passed on or passed down through genes that determine phenotype (namely, skin color), where 'heritage' tends to connote the passing down of generational knowledge, traditions, and ways-of-being (that is, 'culture'). Conceptualized in this way, blackness is the product of a collective history rendered visible, materializing on and through the surfaces of bodies. Mia McKenzie, founder of critical race and LGBTQ platform *Black Girl Dangerous*, noting that "people seem to be really confused [by Dolezal] about what blackness is", defined blackness as referring "to people who have African ancestry and whose African ancestry shows up on their bodies."[62] Thus following McKenzie, the visibility of the ancestry is as crucial as the ancestry itself: "You can be of African descent and not be black. There are people who have African ancestry and blackness doesn't show up on their body."[63] And just as some people cannot, following McKenzie, be Black on the basis of what 'shows up on their bodies' (or doesn't), those people whose African ancestry does show up on their bodies cannot *not* be Black: "There are people who say that they don't feel black because they don't feel black because they don't like fried chicken or they listen to Green Day [...] But they're still black." Her next and closing remark on the definition of blackness, "because blackness isn't about how you feel" thus swings both ways.[64] More broadly, then, race itself here is understood as immanent, material, and unmoved by 'feeling.' Affective ties to an imagined community and other members of that community of course play a role in shaping that community as well as how individuals relate to it and construct their own identity. But perhaps what McKenzie leads us to consider is the fact that, as Blu puts it in her analysis of ethnicity as a analytic category, "the kind of ties

[61] And in popular culture more recently through Human Genome Project, which revealed that members within groups had more genetic diversity than between different so-called racial groups.
[62] Black Girl Dangerous. "Blackface, Appropriation and Fuckery, Oh My!" Filmed June, 2015. Youtube Video, 3:54. Posted June, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1nRoaih-aE
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.

people *feel to be primordial* are those that stem from commonalities of blood ties, race, language, region, religion and custom."[65]

That McKenzie makes the distinction within those who share African heritage between those who are visibly recognized[66] as such and those who rarely or never are points to the role of experience in defining identity. This is especially true for racial/ethnic identity (we may here recall Alcoff's subjective contextualism); here, the experience of being seen—and thus responded to and treated—as Black. This experience, as DuBois argued, shapes the subjectivity of Black people: seeing how white people see them shapes how they see themselves and how they relate to others.[67] This process can also be understood as identity formation: for those who are seen and treated as Black, how one comes to know, understand and express oneself is be tightly interwoven with that experience of being-seen-as. Despite the fact that Dolezal passed as Black for about a decade, and also claims to have been treated as Black during that time—"the police mark 'black' on my tickets," she told the hosts of *The Real*—critics note that she has not acquired a Black identity through *life-long* experience.[6869] This is not just about consistency vis-à-vis authenticity, as discussed earlier, but about the weight attributed to childhood experience in identity formation: as Alicia Waters wrote in her piece "I became a black woman in Spokane, but Rachel Dolezal, I was a black girl first",

> "To be a black young woman in Spokane was, for me, to be rejected, isolated and left to find my own way. Becoming the black woman I am today was not about learning a performance, it was not about certain clothing or my hair texture; it 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, from learning to preserve my own sense of true self."[70]

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[65] Blu, *The Lumbee Problem*, 230. Emphasis added.
[66] Though it is helpful to recall Guillamin here, who would argue that this 'recognition' of race is itself the production of race.
[67] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.
[68] "Race vs. State of Mind: Rachel Dolezal's Thoughts on Whiteness."
[69] Colorism is also relevant here: although Dolezal claims to have been seen and treated as Black, she would still have had privilege as a light-skinned Black woman, critics point out.
[70] Walters, Alicia. "I became a black woman in Spokane. But, Rachel Dolezal, I was a black girl first." The Guardian. June 14, 2015.

Harris-Perry, too, told Dolezal that her show's producer could not accept Dolezal's identification because of the connections between Black hair and Black identity, specifically as experienced in childhood: "Even if race is not biological, the experience of being little black girls dealing with the physiological realities of the difficulties of black hair—man, they feel like core pain."[71]

Thus, to return to Austin, Dolezal is "not in a position to do the act" because of a series of causally-related layers: she has no African ancestry, thus she is 'recognized' as having a different (European) ancestry, and therefore she does not have the life-long experience of being seen and treated as having African ancestry (as Black). Here we can see that the conditions for blackness are no longer articulated as narrowly biological, but that there is a kind of causal historical chain tying Black people together (through the event of European enslavement) which is the source of how Blackness takes form (as embodied experience). The visual ideology of race is what renders the capacity for this embodied experience (having Blackness 'show up' on one's body) hereditary; the genes or phenotype that render this ancestry visible or not are 'passed on' by one's parents. Not all are as insistent on the visual as McKenzie, as "(1)ne Drop", a photography project documenting the physical diversity of people who identify as Black or African-American, illustrates (see figure 2). Blu found simply that "in American terms, in order for an individual to claim an ethnic identity legitimately, one or more of his relatively immediate ancestors must have possess that identity."[72]

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https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/14/became-a-black-woman-spokane-rachel-dolezal-black-girl.

[71] "Exclusive Full Interview: Rachel Dolezal Breaks Her Silence."

[72] Blu, The Lumbee Problem, 209.

Figure 2: "People of African descent reflect a multiplicity of skin tones and phenotypical characteristics ... (1)ne Drop literally explores the "other" faces of Blackness – those who may not immediately be recognized, accepted, or embraced as 'Black' in this visually racialized society" (http://www.1nedrop.com).

Given this hereditary understanding of Blackness, Dolezal's attempts to convince the American public that ethnic identity, like other identities, should be considered fluid, are largely unsuccessful; and thus we see her at the same tme emphatically distancing herself from her biological parents: when Harris-Perry points out that "for many people, for more people than I even expected, race is based is some kind of biological realities and it has everything to do with parentage," Dolezal replies,

> "I do acknowledge that the people who raised me are Larry and Ruthann. I do not feel like they are my mom and dad … I hope that people can understand that family is fluid. Those same people probably … have someone that they identify 'that's my family' but they might not be biologically family."[73]

Here, Dolezal attempts to shift the relation between family and race away from the biological kinship and appropriate the more flexible understanding of family that developed under slavery and use her ties to a chosen family to affirm rather than undermine her identification with Blackness. Though later in the interview, and in her interview on *The Real*, she even brings the biological connection into question: "I've

[73] "Exclusive Full Interview: Rachel Dolezal Breaks Her Silence."

never seen pictures of Ruthann being pregnant with me and the birth certificate is a month and half after I was actually born."[74]

Dolezal was thus unable to bring a new reality into being with her claim, "I identify as black", because the reality that this performative speech act proposed was a world in which the embodiment of a collective history (as 'heritage' or 'ancestry') would no longer be constitutive of Blackness. But as Blu puts it, "history… is at the heart of a symbolic structure of ethnicity in the United States."[75] And it is no shock, considering the persistence of institutional racism and institutionally supported racist violence—from the 'slow violence' in Flint, Michigan to the mass incarceration of Black and non-Black people of color to the consistently growing number of Black people killed by police—that this proposed severing of the history of Blackness in the U.S. from today's Blackness was widely rejected. For if this tie is dissolved, with which language and conceptual tools will we be able to address this institutional racism and illustrate that it is not random or individual, simply prejudice, in nature, that it is in fact a systemic pattern rooted in the nation's past and reproducing itself over time?[76]

While her claim misfired, for the reasons I have proposed above, the claim was nonetheless made, rendered legible by certain conditions to which we must also attend. In the following section, I will work with Butler to propose that the whiteness is not simply the site upon which Dolezal's performative failed, but also and perhaps more importantly, that through which it was able to coming into being.

The Performative Materiality of Race/Ethnicity

In this section I shift from looking at Dolezal's claim as a 'performative' speech act in Austin's sense of the word to looking at the performativity, in Butler's terms, of her claim. These concepts are of course linked, but the most important difference is the repetition of performativity, as opposed to the performative, which, although citational, is

[74] "Exclusive Full Interview: Rachel Dolezal Breaks Her Silence."
[75] Blu, *The Lumbee Problem*, 215.
[76] This question occupies prominent critical race thinkers like Paul Gilroy, who advocates for "radically nonracial humanism" (Gilroy 2000: 15) and maintains that we cannot address racism with, so to speak, the master's tools (i.e. the language of 'race').

conceived as an individual moment. Butler argues that "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names."[77] How does our understanding of Dolezal's claim shift when we view it not a singular act enacted by her as an individual, but as a practice that is at once citational and productive? What becomes visible when we attend not only to why her claim was infelicitous but also how it was able to be made in the first place, and what allowed it to at least be rendered a legible claim, in that it was heard and warranted a response? For indeed, analyzing Dolezal's claim – "I identify as black" – as a single act, isolated from any and all norms, allows it to take on a dramatic, theatrical effect: "to the extent that [performativity] acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition … its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated."[78] When Dolezal's claim is treated as an anomaly, and even more so when it is diagnosed as individual pathology, the material conditions of race-making and white supremacy in the U.S. that enable her claim – that produced the kind of body from which such a claim could be made – are rendered invisible.

Dolezal as a subject appears "as the author of [her] discursive effects to the extent that the citational practice by which [she] is conditioned and mobilized remains unmarked" in that she mobilizes the practices which have produced her body as white, a practice she obscures through her denial of race as biological.[79] In an interview with KREM 2 News, when she encourages viewers to "maybe think about W.E.B Du Bois that said race is usually biological, always cultural."[80] Framing race as biological in order to disavow its materiality situates that particular kind of scientific knowledge as the only legitimate mode of determining what is real, what matters. "Social construction,' then, as she uses the term (in opposition to the biological) comes to mean "nothing is

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[77] Butler, Judith. "Introduction." *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex".* New York: Routledge, 1993: 1-23. 12.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid, 13.
[80] KREM 2 NEWS. "UNCUT VIDEO: Rachel Dolezal elaborates on why she identifies as 'black.' Do you agree with her reasoning?" Filmed in June 2015. Facebook video, 0:35. Posted in June 2015. https://www.facebook.com/KREM2/videos/10152892685246301/

real, so anything can be", negating that what is 'real'—including the biological—is only ever constituted by social practices. Conflating the materiality of race with race as biology conveniently (to put it generously) misses the point given that the materiality of her body, racialized as white, is precisely what enables her cross-racial identification. Such a body has been historically produced as 'neutral', a blank slate devoid of any ethnic, racial or political origin. If for Butler "the heterosexual imperative enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identifications," then in Dolezal's case this white supremacist imperative—whiteness as immaterial and thus able to transcend race—disguises the production of whiteness which enables her identification as Black while making movement in the other direction nearly impossible.[81] As Ahmed comments of John Griffin—who temporarily dyed his skin to pass as black and write a book about his experience 'as black', *Black Like Me*—passing "is exclusive and exclusionary—it is not available to all subjects—as it depends on the relation between subjects and structures of identification where the subject sees itself, or is seen by others, as not quite fitting."[82] More specifically, "the very technique of passing for black is informed by access to cultural capital and knowledges embedded in whiteness and colonial privilege where the other is assumed to be both knowable, seeable and hence be-able."[83]

Thus to understand Dolezal's identity claim as an individual speech act that may or may not 'succeed' in having an effect is to obscure that her claim is in itself also an effect. To put it another way, it is to obscure the historicity of her claim and the violence re(enacted) by such a citation. Ahmed, writing about passing and specifically passing as black in 1999, argues that difference becomes incorporated into the sameness of the dominant self through appropriation, that "the face of the dominant self and nation expands through hybridity" and that "such individuated acts of passing legitimate the national phantasy of multiculturalism, in which one can pass for others by adopting or

[81] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3.
[82] Ahmed, "She'll Wake Up One of These Days..." 101.
[83] Ahmed, "She'll Wake Up One of These Days..." 102.

assuming their style" (Ahmed, 101, 1999). Appropriation is then a constitutive process through which whiteness is formed, rather than a process that fundamentally alters it.

Can it not be said, however, that Dolezal cites these practices in "in order to reiterate and co-opt [their] power, to expose the [white supremacist] matrix and to displace the effect of its necessity?"[84] Dolezal seems to believe herself to be doing just this in claiming to challenge and expose the 'socially constructed' nature of race. As the description for her memoir *In Full Color: Finding My Way in a Black and White World* puts it, Dolezal's story "forces us to consider race in an entirely new light."[85] This echoes what Dolezal said in 2015 on NBC Nightly News:

> "I've tried to find words that have been able to communicate my reality to people that I'm talking to, understanding what their perceptions of the definitions of race, culture and ethnicity might be … I do hope the dialogue continues to push against what is race, what is ethnicity [sic]."[86]

But as Butler remarks on sexual difference, "to claim that sexual differences are indissociable from discursive demarcations is not the same as claiming that discourse causes sexual difference."[87] In this case, Dolezal mistakenly reduces race and ethnicity to a discursive effects, and thus social construction to individual construction: "it's socially constructed as a world view, a people operate within it, but that also means that it can be reconstructed or deconstructed [...] it wasn't like the honest thing to do is say 'I'm white' because race is a social construct" (Aitkenhead). This individualistic definition of racial/ethnic identity by default denies its social and historical constitution. Rather than 'co-opting', 'exposing' or 'displacing' the white supremacist matrix, Dolezal illustrates "the paradox of subjectivation" which is "precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms"; one such norm here being the individualism that constitutes whiteness.[88]

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[84] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 15.
[85] Dolezal, Rachel, and Storms Reback. *In Full Color: Finding My Place in a Black and White World*. Dallas, TX: BenBella, 2017.
[86] "Rachel Dolezal: Being White Doesn't Describe Who I Am (Full Interview)." Interview by Savannah Guthrie. *Youtube*. NBC Nightly News. NBC, New York, New York, 18 June 2015. Television.
[87] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 1.
[88] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 15.

As Butler argued in response to critics of her first book *Gender Trouble*, performativity is not to be understood as the donning of a costume that a pre-determined subject can choose to put on or take off on a whim, nor as separate from or oppositional to materiality. Thus although we can imagine an observer saying, 'but Dolezal didn't just 'put on' blackness once, she's done it every day for years, it *is* a consistent and repetitive enactment', I have put forth here that Dolezal produces herself in her narrative of identification as a neutral body, unracialized, as a pure individual, as a subject who can know herself and the Other, as a subject who can choose — and that in doing so, her identity claim both cites and reproduces whiteness.

I would now like to briefly switch gears and take up the body in another way, focusing in more detail on the body as a site of materialization where identities become that which is rendered visible. In *The Future of Whiteness*, Alcoff writes that social identities are not only material practices "in which we learn how to interact with others and interpret what people say and do" but also, and relatedly, "that identities are often, though not always, visible features of our material and social worlds, producing a kind of visual registry organizing the interactions in social spaces."[89] Whereas gender and class are marked by signs which can to some degree altered—like clothing, hairstyle, makeup, posture, accent or way of speaking—the sign for racial groups, the skin, is less easily changed. Paul Gilroy describes Franz Fanon's concept of *epidermalization* as a

> "historically specific system for making bodies meaningful by endowing them with qualities of 'color.' It suggests a perceptual regime in which the racialized body is bounded and protected by its enclosing skin. 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."[90]

Ahmed, too, 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."[91] However, although the skin is presumed to tell the 'truth,' "skin is no longer privileged as the threshold of either identity or particularity… The boundaries of 'race'

[89] Alcoff, *The future of whiteness*, 48.
[90] Gilroy, Paul. *Against race: imagining political culture beyond the color line*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard university, 2001.
[91] Ahmed, "She'll Wake Up One of These Days..." 99.

have moved across the threshold of the skin. They are cellular and molecular, not dermal."[92] I would suggest that although sometimes this shift back towards genetic definitions of race (e.g. National Geographic DNA-testing kits) means that the skin tells a truth to be confirmed by the content it is intended to signify, there is also a way in which skin can still serve as the final disclosure: take, for example, the popular adoption of census definitions of certain populations from the 'Middle East' and South America as 'white' (Krogstad 2014a; Krogstad 2014b). Here, although ethnicity may tell another tale, the relative paleness of one's skin serves as the boundary and manifestation of the racial self.

In Dolezal's case, what does the fact that particular racialized hairstyles, tanning and makeup allowed her to pass as black for a decade mean, particularly in relation to my argument that it was the whiteness of her body that allowed her to make the claim in the first place? How can her body be simultaneously white and pass as Black? Does the fact that others read her as black even before she adopted these techniques render her body not-white?[93] I put forth that at the same time that Dolezal's passing relied upon a) the ways in which her body is white b) white subjectivity which experiences itself individually and c) as knowledgeable of self and other, therefore d) being in a position to make individual choices about oneself, it also relied upon her almost life-long proximity to blackness. This proximity produced a different kind of whiteness—as an embodied experience and way of being-in-the-world—than those of her white peers who, in Ahmed's terms, pass for white. Although the whiteness of her body is what allowed *Dolezal* to pass for Black, it does not follow that any white person could pass for Black—many of them lack the experience and perspective that Dolezal acquired through her proximity and affective ties to blackness. Dolezal's passing, then, does not negate her whiteness, but nor can her passing be reduced to whiteness: rather, it reflects one such a 'different kind of whiteness' that I argue warrants recognition and more detailed attention. That is, I follow Ahmed when she argues that

"Considering passing in terms of 'ability' then does not involve assuming that the

[92] Gilroy, *Against Race*, 47.
[93] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 90.

'real' or 'natural' body determines the encounter, but demonstrates that encounters between others construct and reconstruct the body as a signifier of difference … Bodies become reconstructed through techniques which serve to approximate an image."[94]

The point is not, then, is not that Dolezal's ability to Black means she 'is' Black. Nor is it to presuppose Dolezal's body as white 'before' she passed as black. Rather, it is to put forth *that passing as Black constructs her body as a particular (a different) kind of white body*.

In conclusion, then, I would like to reiterate Ahmed in her concern that passing is seen as inherently transgressive, that "there is a failure to theorize, not the potential for any system to become destabilized, but the means by which relations of power are secured, paradoxically, *through this very process of destabilization*."[95] While Dolezal's passing provides interesting and important prompts about different kinds of whiteness, it does not necessarily disavow the materiality of race; that is, her passing also prompts the question, "in what ways is 'passing' implicated in the very discourse around tellable differences?"[96] I hope to already have suggested that Dolezal, in passing as black, is not queering race (Jones 2015) nor is she illustrating how little it literally 'matters', nor that race is purely performative, that is, discursive. Instead, I repeat the question that I have aimed to begin answering here: what does her claim and her passing tell us about whiteness?

Conclusion: Race/ethnicity as Location or Position

Particularly since her return to the public eye in the promotional tour for her memoir, Dolezal has articulated her identification as Black in terms of location or position. She told AP News, "I unapologetically stand on the black side. Blackness better defines who I am philosophically and socially than whiteness does."[97] Slightly

[94] Ahmed, "She'll Wake Up One of These Days..." 101.
[95] Ahmed, "She'll Wake Up One of These Days..." 89, emphasis original.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Geranios, Nicholas K. "Rachel Dolezal struggles after racial identity scandal." AP News. March 24, 2017. Accessed July 21, 2017. https://apnews.com/229362044f10469f8563651968098af3/rachel-dolezal-struggles-after-racial-identity-scandal.

different versions of this formulation, which caught my interest, were repeated in video interviews with Vice, BBC News, and NBC BLK. This way of expressing her identification with Blackness marks a shift from expressing it only or chiefly as an inner truth (though she continues to express it this way as well, with an emphasis on 'authentic experience'), framing who one is in terms of racial/ethnic identity as a matter of where one positions oneself. In this sense, it proposes a radically unessentialist identity which reflects the subject's politics rather than any kind of essence, and thus can change.

In her interview on NBC BLK, Dolezal elaborated, drawing on DuBois' notion of the color line:[98]

> "[The U.S.] is still a very racialized society. And so there's a line drawn in the sand. And there's a Black and white divide and I stand unapologetically on the Black side of that divide with my own internal sense of self and my values, and with my sons and my sister and with the greater cause of really undoing the myth of white supremacy."[99]

But, as Braidotti argued in her conversations with Butler, "Feminism by Any Other Name," such an approach confuses the "different registers" of "unconscious desire and willful choice."[100] That is, to conflate identity with political subjectivity overlooks the fact that "identity bears a privileged bond to unconscious processes—which are imbricated with the corporeal—whereas political subjectivity is a conscious and willful position."[101]

In 1984, Adrienne Rich, in "Notes Towards a Politics of Location", theorized a different relationship between identity, position, and politics, in which the body plays a central role. Born in a segregated hospital, Rich notes, "I was defined as white before I was defined as female."[102] For her, the politics of location begins with the body: "this

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[98] DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.
[99] Payne, Amber. "Rachel Dolezal on Why She Can't Just Be a White Ally." NBC BLK. March 28, 2017. Accessed July 21, 2017. http://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/rachel-dolezal-why-she-can-t-just-be-white-ally-n738911.
[100] Braidotti, Rosi and Judith Butler. "Feminism by Any Other Name." Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies. 6.2 + 3, 1994: 27-61. 40.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Rich, Adrienne. "Notes Towards a Politics of Location." *Blood, Bread and Poetry*. New York: Norton, 1986: 215.

body. White, female; or female, white. The first obvious, lifelong facts … I was located by color and sex as surely as a Black child was located by color and sex."[103] A crucial difference, Rich recognizes, is that the 'mystifying' nature of whiteness, which allows white people not to perceive themselves as racialized, and further to see themselves "at the center of the universe."[104]

The politics of location for Rich, then, begins with taking account of the way in which her body positioned her in the world before she was even born—in Dolezal's terms, quite literally on 'the white side' in the racially segregated hospital. Rich is thus calling for a certain attention to the materiality of race largely missing from white feminist discourse at the time, though this article comes out of a larger shift in feminist epistemology towards 'standpoint feminism' beginning with Dorothy Smith's "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology" in 1974, Sandra Harding's 'The Science Question in Feminism' (1986), Donna Haraway's 'situated knowledge' (1988), and Patricia Hill Collins in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990). But notably, Rich was developing this epistemology as a critique not on society (Smith) or knowledge-systems (Haraway) but specifically as a critique on/within mainstream (and mainstream academic) white U.S. feminism: "*to come to terms with the circumscribing nature of (our) whiteness* … [to recognize] our location, having to name the ground we're coming from, the conditions we have taken for granted."[105] The political task for Rich here is not to 'stand on the black side', to relocate oneself in solidarity, but rather to recognize and take responsibility for one's own "objective social location," as Mohanty called it and the (white) body from which and where she speaks.[106]

Dolezal, on the other hand, frames it as her responsibility to do precisely the opposite: to relocate herself, so to speak, to the 'black side.' As she told NBC BLK, she stands "on the Black side of that divide with my own internal sense of self and my values, and with my sons and my sister and with the greater cause of really undoing

[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Rich, "Notes Towards a Politics of Location," 219. Emphasis original.
[106] Mohanty, Chandra as cited in Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 298.

the myth of white supremacy."[107] Narrating her identification as Black in this way, Dolezal suggests that identity and location or position are interchangeable, or more specifically, that the latter enjoys a privileged, subsuming relationship to the former: that to stand on the 'Black side' is to *be* Black, and is more important than whether one was born on that side. While this can be read as a gesture or enactment of solidarity, I suggest that by conflating identity and location (identity becomes a matter of choosing one's location) it is a dangerously individualistic construction. While the case of Dolezal may reflect the fact that there is no unifying definition of Blackness, no collective 'we' from which blackness can speak, her case also reflects the ways in which we can become seduced by individuality as a solution to structural sociopolitical problems—and ultimately, as Rich puts it, "there is no liberation that only knows how to say 'I.'"[108]

In this chapter, I have argued that Dolezal's claim illustrates the paradox of identity, in that she makes her claim through both framing her narrative in terms of a continuous core self, and in terms of identity as unstable, nonessential and shifting. In an attempt to critically interrogate this claim, and as an alternative to reiterating the binary framework of 'race as biology' vs. 'race as social construction' that frames the dominant debate and which Dolezal herself manipulates, I have taken up Dolezal's identity claim as a speech act, as performative, and as location. Following Austin, I explored the conditions which Dolezal's claim did not meet, or why it 'misfired.' These conditions do not presuppose an essential, fixed blackness, but rather illustrate precisely that and how black identity in the U.S. is socially constructed; without these conditions, there would be no Blackness for Dolezal to claim. And the differential material constitution of these processes show that there is no 'doing away' with them — most importantly, even the attempts to do so, like Dolezal, themselves rely on the very processes that they claim to overcome; for example, her passing reproduces the ideology of race as a visual signifier, as 'recognizable'. Further, as Butler notes, race is "partially produced as an effect of the history of racism, that its boundaries and

[107] Payne, "Rachel Dolezal on Why She Can't Just Be a White Ally."
[108] Rich, *Notes Towards a Politics of Location*, 224.

meanings are constructed over time not only in the service of racism, but also in the service of the contestation of racism."[109] The conditions that exist for a felicititous claim to Blackness, then, are not arbitrary, nor themselves 'racist', nor counter-productive: they exist for now as the necessary tools and languages for *contestation of* racism and white supremacy.

By tracing different approaches to identity—as performative, material, and location—in relation to Dolezal, I aimed not to 'prove' that Dolezal is 'really' white, but rather, hope to have shown how and why I will take her up as a white subject in the chapters that follow. While I have argued that whiteness materializes through her claim as the conditions that made it possible in the first place, I have also argued for the specificity of that whiteness—that is, I propose that there are 'different kinds of whiteness' which warrant our attention. In the chapters that follow, I will shift from discussing how blackness is produced and maintained to more in-depth analyses of Dolezal as a white subject. Whiteness is an area in which we still have much to learn, and which we must learn if we are to change how whiteness works, and how make it work better; that is, more effectively 'in the contestation of racism.'

[109] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 18.

Chapter Two: Affect and the Self/Other Relation in White Identity Formation

Introduction

Another approach to identity, not explicitly mentioned in the last chapter, is affect. I use affect at its most simple "to indicate nonconscious and unnamed, but nevertheless registered, experiences of bodily energy and intensity that arise in response to stimuli impinging on the body."[110] 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. It is in this sense that Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, likens emotions to commodity fetishism: as we express them, emotions become objects, not only in that they are bounded but also in that they are external to us. The notion that feelings are something we 'have' can only function "by the concealment of how [emotions] are shaped by histories, including histories of production (labor and labor time), as well as circulation or exchange."[111] But notably, in the differentiation between the common usage of 'emotions' versus 'affect' (which Ahmed seems to use interchangeably), affect goes beyond the traditional mind-body dualism in which 'emotions' function as the opposite of reason, instead addressing the "felt, embodied aspects of human life."[112]

Instead of taking emotions are reflections of a subject's inner psychological disposition, Ahmed proposes that "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."[113] That is, the circulation of affect is a mode of subject formation that is necessarily relational. Through this circulation, bodies, both individual and collective, materialize: "the surfaces of bodies 'surface' as an effect

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[110] Gould, Deborah. "On Affect and Protest." *Political Emotions* ed. Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, Ann Reynolds. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010: 18-44. 26.
[111] Ahmed, Sara. "Shame Before Others." *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburg: Edinburgh UP, 2004. 121.
[112] Sullivan, Shannon. *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class Anti-Racism*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014. 118.
[113] Ahmed, "Shame Before Others," 10.

of the impressions left by others."[114] Affect, for Ahmed, is the way in which self/Other relations are produced and maintained.

Taking up affect, then, opens new possibilities for tracing the process of identity formation as not only a political choice, as Braidotti put it, but also as occurring on simultaneously unconscious and felt, embodied registers. Further, taking Ahmed's approach to affect as productive and relational allows me to seriously consider the role of interpersonal relationships in identity formation in Dolezal's narrative: "Emotions *do things* and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments."[115] How did Dolezal come to be affectively aligned with Blackness, and against whiteness? What kinds of affects mediate those relationships? And what do her affective attachments tell us about how whiteness works?

In this chapter, I will address the way in which shame, love and empathy specifically surface in Dolezal's narrative about her relationships to whiteness and Blackness. Dolezal tells the story of coming to identify as Black by describing her childhood and specifically her relationship to her family and other (white) relatives in her youth through invoking negative affects (chiefly shame), while using positive affects such as love and empathy to illustrate her relationship to Blackness (in which proximity, specifically to her Black siblings, is central). Complicating this, however, I put forth that shame is also what can describe Dolezal's turn to Blackness at a moment in the identity formation process in which most white people turn back, affirmatively, to whiteness. In this turn, blackness comes to be desirable as an escape or relief from the shame that Dolezal defines her experience as white through. This analysis is thus very much concerned with the role of the body (both hers and of others) in Dolezal's narrative: how it (re)emerges continually in the circulation of affect between the self and Others, and how it becomes a site of transformation of the self.

However I am also interested in the ways in which empathy and love construct Dolezal's narrative of coming to identify as black. For this section her construction of her

[114] Ibid.
[115] Ahmed "Shame Before Others," 119.

family remains the site of analysis, but I will turn away from Dolezal's relationship to her parents to her own maternal role towards her Black siblings. How does this affective and material proximity to Blackness produce a 'different kind of whiteness' in and on Dolezal? How does empathy function in her narrative to produce Dolezal as particular kind of (white) subject? What is 'love' used to explain and what might that use explain to those of us concerned with whiteness?

In the third section, I will use the concepts put forth in models of white identity formation—which rely heavily, although in different terms, on affect—as a lens with which to look at Dolezal's case differently. I aim not to use these models as an equation which can give us a definitive statement about the 'truth' of Dolezal's whiteness, but rather to look for ways in which whiteness surfaces, as well as for noteworthy resonances and dissonances. As Linda Martin Alcoff has put it, "whiteness is not simply a concept, but a complex identity-formation [...] we cannot simply analyze the concept, but must consider the actual lived social identity in a full sense in all its varied permutations."[116]

By taking an affective approach to identity and identity formation, I hope to produce precisely such an analysis of whiteness; one which accounts for the psychic and affective experience and relations that constitute the 'varied permutations' of whiteness. I do not propose that these are outside of or separate from the structures of power that constitute hegemonic manifestations of whiteness; they are in fact likely to reproduce them, but they may also reveal particular forms of whiteness which cannot be fully accounted for through the functions of racism and white supremacy alone. Put another way, I take this affective approach in the hopes of not only illustrating how Dolezal came to identify with Blackness, but more broadly in the hopes that the results of my efforts here will both put the politics of her identification and self-transformation into question and lay a foundation for imagining more ethical ways of being white.

[116] Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness*, 23.

Shame as a Tie to the Other

In their 'phenomenological-psychological' study of experiences of shame, Gunnar Karlsson and Lennart Gustav Sjöberg identify three types of shame: a permanent or frequent feeling of what we know as shyness; a privately experienced shame "about not matching one's ideal self" and a collective shame, "based on the persons' identification or belongingness to a certain group."[117] The distinction (or, more specifically, the lack thereof) between the second and third types is of interest to us here. That is, how does this so-called 'private' shame relate to the 'collective shame' that Karlsson and Sjöberg describe? For it seems that they are impossible to separate: shame, even when experienced privately, always involves at least an imaginary witness. Shame is experienced when I see myself through another's eyes, even if that other is not physically present. And if I feel shame because I fail to uphold the standards of my ideal self, those standards originate from elsewhere, from outside, from the social norms of the group to which I wish to belong.

Further, while shame is one of the primary negative affects defined by Silvan N. Tomkins, it is fundamentally ambivalent: Tomkins gives the example of a child covering their face to avert the gaze of the Other, only to peep through their fingers in an attempt to reconnect[118], arguing that "the innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy."[119] Shame, a negative affective experience, is a kind of circuit or relation that is in fact constituted by my love, admiration, respect or affection for the one who shames me. Without this positive affective tie, there would be no possibility of shame, but rather anger or surprise, for example. Shame is born out of the desire and attempt to redeem that positive relation, to be greeted and affirmed by the other's gaze. Thus it is not only that "In shame I wish to continue to look and to be looked at, but I also do not wish to do so"[120] but also that in shame, I wish "to have the other look with

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[117] Karlsson, Gunnar and Lennart Gustav Sjöberg. "The Experiences of Guilt and Shame: A Phenomenological-Psychological Study." *Springer Science*, 2009: 335-355. 344.
[118] Tomkins, Silvan, ed. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Shame-Humiliatian and Contempt-Disgust." *Shame and its sisters: Silvan Tomkins reader*. North Carolina: Duke University, 1996. 137.
[119] Tomkins, "Shame-Humiliation," 134.
[120] Tomkins, "Shame-Humiliation," 137.

interest or enjoyment rather than with derision.[121] Put simply, "shame by the other is first of all a barrier to mutuality, to shared excitement and enjoyment."[122]

The example of the child is not coincidental—it is during childhood that we learn what the social norms and codes are through our shame for our behavior that does not (yet) conform to them; in childhood many of us learn shame for our bodies and for our sexualities. Hence Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that shame is constitutive of identity and cannot simply be excised from an identity (e.g. through 'pride'):

> "In the developmental process, shame is now often considered the affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop … Which I take to mean, not at all that it is the place where identity is most securely attached to essences, but rather that it is the place where the *question* of identity arises most originally and most relationally."[123]

Identity emerges from shame, then, not as essential or fixed but as "to-be-constituted" through misrecognition and being misconstrued, through the interruption of identification.[124]

The constitutive role of the Other in producing shame is also what distinguishes it from guilt: while guilt also involves socially upheld standards and norms, it "does not involve embarrassment that another person sees me failing to uphold those standards. Shame does… Shame connects my being the failed, inadequate person that I am to other people through their witnessing my failures and inadequacies."[125] Thus while guilt attaches to particular act (what one does) shame "is an experience of the self by the self" (what one is) and that self necessitates the presence of an Other.[126]

As a relation between self and Other, shame is a site of subject production. Not only do men and women "not generally experience shame for the same

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[121] Tomkins, "Shame-Humiliation," 138.
[122] Tomkins, "Shame-Humiliation," 158.
[123] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel." Gay Shame,* ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009. 37.
[124] Sedwick, "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity," 64.
[125] Sullivan, *Good White People*, 138.
[126] Tomkins, "Shame-Humiliation," 136.

transgressions", [127] but shame itself has been constituted as feminine: "Aristotle described shame as an emotion 'suitable for youth' and 'womanish'; centuries later Freud would characterize it as a 'feminine characteristic par excellence.'"[128] But shame not only genders, it also racializes, and the two processes are of course related. bell hooks has written about shame—signified to white Christians by dark skin, creating a racialized hierarchy that justified slavery before physical contact had even been made—as constitutive of the Black body, with particular bearing on the Black female body: "The most obvious internalization of shame that impacted on the self-esteem of black folks historically and continues to the present day is the shame about appearance, skin color, body shape, and hair texture."[129] In particular, and of particular relevance to the Dolezal case, "shaming on the basis of skin color is one racially based trauma retention that has been passed on from generation to generation." [130] The color caste formed by colonialism in which light-skinned black people came to experience particular privileges continues to be reproduced by white people and people of color alike, "advanced by the politics of shame," to this day.[131] As captured in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, 'white is right,' and this bears particular weight for women, who unlike men are attributed worth or value—as well as given access to jobs and other opportunities—on the basis of their appearance. But it should made clear that this shame is fundamentally different in its constitution than the shame that circulates in Dolezal's narrative of her identification as Black.; this is also what I mean when I say that shame is a site of subject production. Dolezal is produced as a white subject through the shame for her whiteness that makes Blackness *desirable* to her; for hooks and Morrison, shame is precisely how Black subjects learn to relate to their Blackness and learn to experience it—and themselves—as *undesirable*. Referencing at once her childhood with her sister and the construction of the Black female body under slavery, bell hooks wrote: "Ours is a history of shame. Written on the body we cannot erase ... We denied the presence of the body.

[127] Locke, Jill. "Shame and the Future of Feminism." *Hypatia* 22:4 (2007): 146-162. 150.
[128] Manion as cited in Locke, 148.
[129] hooks, bell. *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*. Simon and Schuster, 2003. 37.
[130] Ibid, 38.
[131] Ibid, 41.

Nakedness was forbidden … We refused to see one another's bodies. We worked hard to turn our eyes away, to dress in the dark, in half-life, to change when no [one] was there."[132]

Shame also functions to maintain class hierarchies by being associated in particular with the lower middle and working classes: discussing George Orwell's portrayals of the lower middle class, Rita Felski noted that "the lower middle class is driven by the fear of shame, tortured by a constant struggle to keep up appearances on a low income."[133] This world that Orwell creates "is almost completely lacking in spontaneity, sensuality, or pleasure," and this "peculiar joylessness is most vividly embodied in his female characters."[134] In the context of the U.S. this lower-class shame necessarily has a racialized component: the term 'white trash', for example, functions to differentiate the poor Black from the poor white and, within this relation, redeem poor white people from the shame of poverty. Shame does not function along these axes of power separately, then, but is rather a way of tracing the ways in which they constitute one another.

The question of shame has therefore become central in conversations about whiteness, anti-racism and allyship. This dialogue about the role of negative affect in raising awareness and building solidarity—for "some sort of negative affect is seen as needed to motivate white people to change"—began with a criticism of the inadequacy of white guilt.[135] The performance of white guilt has been criticized in many contexts (most often, perhaps, in the classroom, activist circles, or other spaces in with anti-racism on the agenda) as an affirmation of white innocence, as a strategy of re-centering the white self, and as becoming an end rather than a means (Steele 1990; Ahmed 2004; Sullivan 2014). As Ahmed has noted, "the very claim to feel bad (about this or that) also involves a self-perception of 'being' good.' Anti-racism may even

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[132] hooks, bell. "naked without shame: a counter-hegemonic body politic." *Talking Visions. Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, ed. Ella Shohat. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1998: 65-74. 65.
[133] Felski, Rita. "Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame and the Lower Middle Class." PLMA, 115:1 (2000): 33-45. 35.
[134] Ibid, 36.
[135] Sullivan, *Good White People*, 131.

provide the conditions for a new discourse of white pride."[136] Performances of guilt and admissions of racism, which Ahmed argues are non-performative in that they do the opposite of what they say, serve to justify a sort of stagnation or paralysis of the guilty white subject, and thus come to replace critical self-reflection or taking action. Some critical white theorists have begun to argue that shame, rather than guilt, can prove productive in that "shame involves the whole person and not a particular act, shame can help bring about self-transformation. Recognizing yourself as a self that you don't want to be implies a different kind of self that you do want to be."[137] While guilt quickly dissolves into a self-indulgent attempt to procure affirmation and redemption, shame "opens a potential space for thinking adequately about a constitutive relationship between self and other."[138] But realizing this potential first requires recognition of the self *by* the self; as we will see in the next section, this is precisely what Dolezal denies.

Not at Home in Whiteness

Karlsson and Sjöberg found that "the feeling of shame reawakens painful infantile experiences" and put forth that "the most important structural element of constituting this regressive movement is … the experience of time. More precisely the experience of a 'frozen now' seems to bring one back to early childhood."[139] In this section, I turn my attention to the narrative Dolezal constructs about her childhood and the role that she gives her childhood in her narrative of coming to identify as Black. In doing so, taking my cue from Sedgwick, I hope to investigate to what extent Dolezal constructs identifying as Black as an excising of the shame she experienced in childhood; as Dolezal told *The Guardian*, being 'outed' by her parents as white "felt like reliving my childhood trauma on a global scale."[140]

Dolezal, whose parents are Christian fundamentalists (specifically Young Earth Creationists), describes her childhood as one of repression characterized by the

[136] Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism."
[137] Sullivan, *Good White People*, 132.
[138] Shotwell as cited in Sullivan, *Good White People*, 131.
[139] Karlsson and Sjöberg, "The Experiences of Guilt and Shame", 344.
[140] Aitkenhead, "I'm Not Going to Stoop..."

'peculiar joylessness' Felski describes in portrayals of lower middle class families (though it is worth noting that Dolezal herself describes her family's socioeconomic status as, simply, 'dirt poor'). Dolezal describes being 'whooped' by her parents for expressing her creativity: "I was so creative and had this soulful way of being that was always being punished … I would just be me, and it was wrong."[141] But it is her body, specifically, that figures as the site and source of shame, restriction, and punishment: "You can't cut your hair, you couldn't wear make-up, you couldn't wear pants—which separate the legs of the woman and, you know, you're asking for [men] to rape you at that point," Dolezal told Mitchell Sunderland, writing for *Broadly*.[142] This policing led her to feel "increasingly felt guilt and dissociated from her own body."[143] Dolezal returns to this point in other interviews:

> "I felt like I was constantly having to atone for some unknown thing. Larry and Ruthanne would say I was possessed and exorcise my demons, because I was very creative and that was seen as sensual, which was of the devil. It seems like everything that came naturally, instinctively to me was wrong. That was literally beaten into us. I had to redeem myself … from being me. And I never felt good enough to be saved."[144]

Here, creativity, sensuality and the body ('that was literally beaten into us') together produce Dolezal's 'natural, instinctive self', which her parents rejected as evil and alien and attempted to (literally) exorcise. Repeatedly, Dolezal draws implicit causal connections between her parents disciplinary style—specifically the ways in which punishment was instigated by and inflicted upon her body—her life-long affiliation with Blackness, and her later transformation: "If I moved, tried to dance or something, that was not OK as a female … Basically if you're having fun, you're sinning, is what I learned growing up. If I was being me, it was probably wrong."[145] Shame is what circulates as these slippages between her actions and her being: "In shame, more than my action is at stake: the badness of an action is transferred to me."[146] And as

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[141] Sunderland, Mitchell. "In Rachel Dolezal's Skin." Broadly. December 7, 2015. Accessed July 21, 2017. https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/gvz79j/rachel-dolezal-profile-interview.
[142] Sunderland. "In Rachel Dolezal's Skin."
[143] Ibid.
[144] Aitkenhead. "I'm Not Going to Stoop..."
[145] Sunderland. "In Rachel Dolezal's Skin."
[146] Ahmed, "Shame Before Others," 105.

Sedgwick has pointed out, shame has been constructed as that which must be overcome for self-liberation, and it is against this background that Dolezal's identification with Blackness comes into focus as a *need* rather than simply a desire. While desire, especially of the white Western subject, is intrinsically tied up in structures of other-ing, exotification and consumption (see: bell hooks, Eating the Other) the language of 'needs' has been a means of legitimization for individual rights.[147] As such, Dolezal describes her years at Belhaven College, where she became actively involved in the Black community, as a time of freedom to finally express her true self. For the homecoming dance, Dolezal told Sunderland her "black girlfriends … got this dress with a split right up, did my hair, my makeup. I had red lipstick on. They were like, 'Damn, you're so hot!' I was feeling myself. I was dancing. They were like, 'She has rhythm!'"[148] Sunderland adds: "This was one of the first times Rachel wore sexy clothes. She remembers the night as an evening of belonging."[149] This belonging emerges as a kind of reconciliation with her true self, prevented throughout her childhood by the shaming of her parents: "I figured out, as a child, how to censor and repress myself by the time I was 13. I literally cried myself to sleep every single night. I'd lie in bed and cry into my pillow so that nobody heard."[150]

Indeed, as Thandeka put it in *Learning to Be White: Money, Race and God in America*, shame "is a pitched battle by a self against itself in order to stop feeling what it is not supposed to feel: forbidden desires and prohibited feelings that render one different."[151] Thandeka defines white shame, specifically, as the "deeply private feeling of not being at home within one's own community,"[152] which speaks rather directly to Dolezal's narrative of her childhood: Dolezal

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[147] For example, transitioning genders has, in pathologizing medical terminology, been framed as a necessary alleviation of gender dysphoria. See: The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)
[148] Sunderland. "In Rachel Dolezal's Skin."
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Thandeka. *Learning to be white: money, race, and God in America*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2000. 12.
[152] Ibid.

"felt disconnected from everyone in my life, including — perhaps especially — [Ruthanne] and Larry, who I felt were different from me in ways I was unable to articulate. I felt like no one understood me and I was stuck somewhere I didn't want to be."[153]

Learning to Be White is, in Thandeka's own words, a collection of "stories about children and adults who learned how to think of themselves as white in order to stay out of trouble with their caretakers and in the good graces of their peers or the enforcers of community racial standards."[154] This feeling of 'not being at home within one's community,' though regulated and reinforced by her parents on and through her body, is narrated as prior to their punishment, as that which more fundamentally than specific actions or behaviors was the object of their punishment. When Dolezal tells Broadly that her first memory is of drawing self-portraits in kindergarten and 'instinctively' using the brown crayon, she also describes her awareness that she was making the 'wrong' choice: "there were no black kids in the class. Everybody was drawing these white-looking faces, and you learn about peer pressure, [that] you don't do [the wrong color]. I remember people saying, 'Look, this isn't your skin color.'"[155] Again, I do not intend to echo Dolezal's own suggestion that she experienced a similar shame that of Black children; rather, I propose she is here subjected to the shame of being a white subject not performing whiteness correctly—what Thandeka calls white shame—and this is not the same mechanism that shames Black children for being Black. While shame in both cases produces racial differences and produces them as natural, shame here also works differentially in order to keep these racialized groups in their 'proper' and separate places.

This feeling of being different (experienced as 'wrong') and not belonging comes to define both Dolezal's home and school environments in her narratives of her youth. At home, Dolezal felt ostracized for her creative and spontaneous behavior and fantasized about the source of her not-belonging: when doing garden chores, she would cover herself in mud and "pretend to be a dark-skinned princess in the Sahara Desert or

[153] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 39.
[154] Thandeka, *Learning To Be White*, 21.
[155] Sunderland. "In Rachel Dolezal's Skin."

one of the Bantu women living in the Congo I'd read about in copies of National Geographic… in my fantasy, Larry and Ruthann had kidnapped me, brought me to the United Sates, and were now raising me against my will in a foreign land."[156] Her family's socioeconomic status also plays a role in constructing such fantasies of Blackness as 'instinctual' or natural. In her memoir Dolezal explains she had hoped she would fare better at public elementary school than at home, a hope which

> "quickly dissipated, when I arrived at school in my homemade clothes, with buttons carved from elk antlers and a sweater made from dog hair. The difference between me and my classmates were reinforced when they pulled out their beds of Doritos and cans of Coke at lunchtime, while I sat alone in a corner with a sandwich made out homemade bread and elk tongue and a thermos of raw apple juice. Adding to my dismay, I was met by a sea of white faces."[157]

As Dolezal tells Sunderland: "I knew I wasn't one of them. I was always on the fringe."[158] The 'them' to which Dolezal does not belong is ambiguous, referring to both whiteness and the middle class. Dolezal uses class politics as a way of describing and legitimating her feels of racial not-belonging—the sea of brand products and the sea of white faces are made to signify the same thing—but this is a reductive logic. I put forth that the source of Dolezal's feeling of 'being different' and 'not belonging' lie not in an essential Blackness, but at least partially in the way middle-class values and lifestyle have come to define whiteness. When, for her book *White Women, Race Matters*, Ruth Frankenberg asked her interviewees to describe white culture, "whiteness was often signified in these narratives by commodities and brands: Wonder bread, Kleenex, Heinz 57."[159] Further, she found that "often what was criticized as 'white' was as much the product of middle-class status as of whiteness as such."[160]

Shannon Sullivan has written convincingly about the ways in which lower-class whites have been strategically positioned by the middle class as embodying racism as a mode of excluding them from 'proper' whiteness. Being 'white trash' signifies then not

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[156] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 11.
[157] Ibid, 21.
[158] Sunderland, "In Rachel Dolezal's Skin."
[159] Frankenberg, Ruth. *White women, race matters: the social construction of whiteness*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1988. 199.
[160] Frankeberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, 201.

only a failure to live up to middle class values, but a discursive terrain through which "white class hierarchies" and "the production and display of white middle-class moral goodness" operate:

> "Lower-class white people supposedly are the retrograde white people who still believe and act in racist ways; they are the real problem when it comes to lingering racism in our enlightened times… *Those* white people (the lower class) are racist; we middle-class whites are not like them; therefore we are not racist."[161]

Alcoff, too, makes a case for recognizing and analyzing the co-constitutive and multilayered interaction between race and class when aiming to conduct an investigation into either, resisting both the notion of 'white privilege' as an essential and fixed characteristic or possession of white bodies and class reductionism in which issues of race and racism are subsumed under and explained away by class. That is, poor whites do not "exist outside a racist order, mere dupes or vessels of racism, without direct benefit" but they also experience a specific form of oppression, and therefore "both categories [of race and class] are needed to understand their lives."[162] But instead, in order to speak about her experience growing up in a poor white family, Dolezal resorts to comparisons with slavery and indentured servitude, a reductive and unconvincing way of narrating her 'instinctual' connection to Blackness. For example, following a detailed description of her chores (which were indeed extensive): "As I learned about U.S. history in school, I empathized with those whose free labor helped build this country."[163] She goes on to explain that in order to buy things like clothes that she hoped would help her fit in at school, she had to devise her own money-making schemes, and again slavery becomes a reference: "From food and shelter to hair care and clothing, ingenuity was a skill passed from one generation of slaves to the next. I developed a similar resourcefulness at a very young age."[164] When recounting the summer she spent in Washington D.C. working for friends of her parents, she draws parallels with *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*: "I certainly wasn't enslaved, as

[161] Sullivan, *Good White People*, 5.
[162] Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness*, 15.
[163] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 25.
[164] Ibid, 26.

Miss Pittman had been as a little girl, but it wouldn't have been too much of a stretch to call me an indentured servant to the Morgans (and to Larry and Ruthann before them)."[165] She continues:

"I knew what it was like to be a child and have to work as hard as an adult, and how it felt to be used and abused. I also understood the pain that comes from being treated like less than a full human being — mostly on the basis of my gender rather than my perceived race — and the fortitude required to fight this sort of injustice."[166]

Calling to mind the song 'Woman is the Nigger of the World' by John Lennon and Yoko Ono (words which occasionally reappear at women's/feminist marches, such as the New York City 'Slut Walk' in 2011), Dolezal here constructs her experience as a young, poor and white woman as interchangeable with that of enslaved Africans and their descendants; this not only violently denies the specificity of the latter, but also, with different but related consequences, discounts the specificity of the first. And the specificity of the social position and experience of that social position of poor whites—that is, whites excluded from imagined whiteness—is an intervention I want to propose in the dominant discourse about Dolezal, for I believe it will reveal something other than a straightforward manifestation of lifelong white privilege as the source and enabling factor for her identification as Black. Tellingly, when asked about her comparison of her childhood to slavery, Dolezal both denies and explains this comparison through the dissonances between lower socioeconomic status and whiteness in its hegemonic form:

"I never said that it was the equivalent of slavery, of chattel slavery. I did work and bought all my own clothes and shoes since I was 9 years old. 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 sentence of connection in those stories, or connection with the story of the princess who was looking for a knight in shining armor."[167]

Dolezal is far from the only person to define whiteness in this way—as a silver spoon—and many have described her case in particular in the language of inherited

[165] Ibid, 76.
[166] Ibid, 73.
[167] Oluo, Ijeoma, and Asher Bloomquist. "The Heart of Whiteness: Ijeoma Oluo Interviews Rachel Dolezal, the White Woman Who Identifies as Black." The Stranger. April 19, 2017. http://www.thestranger.com/features/2017/04/19/25082450/the-heart-of-whiteness-ijeoma-oluo-interviews-rachel-dolezal-the-white-woman-who-identifies-as-black.

privilege it represents. But, I argue, it is essential to recognize and understand Dolezal not only benefits from the racialization of her body as white but also how this process of racialization is inextricably tied to her family's—and indeed her ongoing—socioeconomic status. That is, to understand fully how whiteness is operating through Dolezal, her identity claim, and the public discourse it provoked, we must broaden our scope from common-sense, hegemonic definitions of whiteness (i.e. in terms of power or privilege) and be able to define in careful and nuanced terms *what kind of whiteness* we are speaking of. I suggest that Dolezal as a child and through adolescence did not lack an awareness or denial of race often attributed to whiteness, nor does she narrate a childhood in which her whiteness indexes the power or privilege it has come to be defined as. Rather, she experienced a whiteness already "excluded from whiteness proper," in Sullivan's terms: "White trash lie uncomfortably closer to proper white people, threatening the dissolution of hegemonic forms of whiteness from within… this murky point of contact is why white trash have to be forcefully expelled from whiteness."[168]

My point is not, however, that Dolezal experienced being other-ed from a young age and therefore could 'authentically' relate to black Americans in a way that explains and justifies her identification. My point is rather that the experiences she narrates as evidence of her 'authentic' and 'instinctual' connection to Blackness are in fact narratives about white poverty, and that perhaps one of the contributing factors to her identification as Black is the lack of a framework with which to make sense of and articulate her experience. Talking about whiteness only in its hegemonic form, only as a system of universal, undifferentiated privilege, I argue, contributes to the conditions that led to Dolezal's identification as well as our difficulty in engaging productively with this case. As Noel Ignatiev, editor of the journal *Race Traitor*, points out,

> "There are many poor whites in the U.S. In fact, the majority of the poor are white. Whiteness does not exempt them from exploitation, it reconciles them to it. It holds down more whites than blacks, because it makes them feel part of a system that exploits and degrades them. For those people, whiteness does not bring freedom and

[168] Sullivan, *Good White People*, 32.

dignity. It is a substitute for freedom and dignity. It is for those who have nothing else."[169]

Thus attention to the forms of whiteness that hegemonic whiteness expels, and the effects that this has in creating a multiplicity of white identities and white subjectivities, is not only necessary in analyzing this particular case, but that which we must incorporate into our anti-racist thought and practices as we work towards dismantling white supremacy.

Empathy and Love in 'Mixed-Race' Families

If class is one mode of differentiating whiteness, I suggest that a certain proximity to and affective ties with Blackness is another. Though fantasies of an increase in mixed-race marriage and mixed children that will naturally dissolve racism warrant skepticism at best, it is at the same time important to note how social landscapes have been changing: Alcoff notes that "more integrated public spheres in which whites work and go to school are slowly though noticeably altering the spectrum of family formation."[170] She suggests further that the shifts in racial makeup of predominantly white families is beginning to erode the "clear social, cultural and psychological boundaries" integral to the" paternal attitudes of white liberals in the 1960s."[171] In short: "white families are not always so white anymore"[172]; Dolezal's family is one such family. In her memoir she describes her parents' adoption of four Black children—three of whom were African-American and one who was Haitian—in a three month span, during which time her family went from white to predominantly Black. From a young age, then, the way in which Dolezal experienced whiteness was constituted by these intimate, material and affective ties to the Other—and I want to argue for the significance of this affective entanglement, and suggest that it was formative in her process of developing a racialized identity.

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[169] Ignatiev, Noel. "Abolitionism and 'White Studies.'" RACE TRAITOR. February 1998. http://racetraitor.org/whitestudies.html.
[170] Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness*, 25.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Ibid.

Dolezal claims that growing up in Montana, "about as far away from Black America as you can get and still be in the United States" and with no television in the house, she had no external information (including stereotypes) or prompts directing her on or towards Blackness. However, the first images of Black people she describes encountering were in magazines like *Sports Illustrated* and *Natural Geographic*: "To me, the images of the Black athletes I found on the pages the magazines were the very height of human beauty. Their complexions, their features, they were all so captivating to me."[173] She adds that this "idealized image of Blackness I'd developed while studying photographs of [black Athletes]" never faded, throwing the limited impact of the media on her perception of Blackness that she claims into doubt.[174]

Though there is much more to be said about the exotifying gaze that Dolezal takes up in relation to these images, I want to focus on what may set Dolezal apart from her average white peer at the time: having Black siblings, to start with, but more importantly actively caring for them as a 'mother-sister.' Dolezal describes bonding with Ezra over their shared experience of falling down the stairs in their home around the same age, which she attributes to her parents lack of concern for them: "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."[175] She also describes a particularly intense bond with Izaiah, with whom she was quarantined with when he contracted whooping cough: "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 an blasting bond with him."[176] And for her sister, Esther, Dolezal researched and learned to do black hair, which she recognized as central to Black female self-esteem. Particularly in relation to Izaiah and Esther, Dolezal sees herself as taking on the maternal role, caring for them not only physically but, as with Esther's hair, emotionally and psychologically: "As much time and energy as I devoted to my little brothers and sister, it rarely felt like work. It was,

[173] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 23.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid, 52.
[176] Ibid, 53.

in fact, true love. The bond we shared was much deeper than that typically found between a big sister and her younger siblings."[177] It was in this care, this 'true love,' that Dolezal describes finding solace, comfort, and a purpose for her difference from her family and peers:

> "Spending so much time with these four beautiful Black babies … I found myself drawing closer to something that felt oddly familiar. With Larry, Ruthann and Josh, I'd always felt distinctly other. We rarely saw eye to eye about anything. But now, for the first time in my life, I felt like I was truly part of a family, surrounded by people who loved me exactly as I was … I suddenly didn't feel so alone."[178]

It is worth briefly recalling Thandeka's concept of 'white shame' as not feeling at home in one's white community; Dolezal adds that "growing up in a house where guilt, anxiety, and occasional moments of terror were the norm, I'd never felt like I was home (and all that word implies: safe, loved, comfortable, relaxed, happy)"[179] until her siblings were adopted. But I would like to problematize the notion that the 'oddly familiar' things which Dolezal 'found myself drawing closer to' is an 'instinctual connection' to Blackness, but rather with the affects she associated with home (safety, love, comfort, relaxation, happiness) that until the arrivals of her siblings and, most importantly, her subsequent care of them, she had not experienced.

One of her few in-depth television interviews—and perhaps her most sympathetic—was with someone who shared the experience of a transracial[180] family, political commentator and television host Melissa Harris-Perry, who during the four-year course of her morning weekend program gained a reputation for addressing issues of race within U.S. politics and culture. Harris-Perry described her family in an interview with Vibe as follows: "My mother is white and my father is black and both my parents

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[177] Ibid, 59.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Though the term 'transracial' has now been used to describe the identity of Dolezal and others like her, it originally refers to a family in which someone of a different race then the family is adopted into the family.

were married before they met and had me. I have one sibling who has two white parents and three siblings where both parents are black, so we're truly a mixed race family."[181]

Precisely these experiences—motherhood, but more broadly, how families are formed and the effects of the family's racial constitution on the individuals in it—were central in her conversation with Dolezal, who shared that when her parents adopted her younger (black) siblings, "knowing some of the resistance to just my independent spirit and creative ways that I wanted to express myself, [I wondered] who is going to be the link for the kids in coming to the family?"[182] She added, "I really felt like a mother-sister from the beginning. And actually ended up doing my schooling at home and taking care of three babies in diapers at once."[183] Harris-Perry responded by pointing out that although her own mother is a white woman, coincidentally also living in Spokane, Washington, who raised black children "she doesn't herself feel black. She's a white woman doing the work of parenting black children."[184] Harris-Perry then asked Dolezal, with what seems like genuine curiosity rather than incredulity, how she came to see "a distinction between on the one hand being a white person raising and rearing black children … versus feeling in your own skin in your own personhood that you are yourself black?"[185] Dolezal didn't answer this question directly, but a logical extension of her narrative would be that becoming a mother to Black children—and thus, in her eyes, a Black mother—was an affirmation of who she had already been becoming; a final step in a process, rather than a sudden, giant leap.

But many white mothers of black children felt erased by and responded critically on social media to Dolezal's comment about Isaiah calling her his mom that "for that to be something that is plausible, I certainly can't be seen as white."[186] Harris-Perry received criticism from fans more broadly for her 'sympathetic' interview, or, as Chris

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[181] Golding, Shenequa. "Melissa Harris-Perry Talks Life, Career And Politics." Vibe. March 28, 2015. http://www.vibe.com/2015/03/vibe-league-melissa-harris-perry-interview/.
[182] "Exclusive Full Interview: Rachel Dolezal Breaks Her Silence."
[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid.
[186] "Rachel Dolezal Breaks Her Silence: 'I Identify As Black.'"

Hayes put it, for not being "sufficiently enraged."[187] Harris-Perry explained why she didn't feel 'threatened' by Dolezal: "What I experienced from her more than anything was a deep sense of familiarity."[188] She added that because she has a sibling with two white parents and black siblings,

> "I get how one could be raised in a family with black siblings and have two white parents and yet not experience your whiteness in the way that you believe that other people are experiencing whiteness … I don`t think [my sister] would ever say she was black, but it's a different kind of whiteness."[189]

In an interview on the podcast *Another Round*, Harris-Perry proposed that "if you are a white woman with black children it is actually easier to just be a black woman" in certain parts of the U.S.[190] She explained of growing up in the post-Jim Crow south in the 1970s that while there were still certain dangers for Black families in public spaces, their presence was normalized, and there was "not like a daily harassment just for being in the space."[191] On the other hand, she argued '"when you are a white woman with a black child you are the actual physical walking manifestation of miscegenation … there's a way in which there is actually greater invisibility if your family is mono-racial."[192] She concluded that she therefore understood how for Dolezal "passing into blackness might actually be a safer space in which to exist than to exist as a white woman with black."[193] In the same podcast, Harris-Perry acknowledges her own blindness, as someone who benefits from it herself, towards light-skinned privilege, which is operative in the claim that for Dolezal it was safer or easier to become a black woman: such a statement about 'safety' and 'ease' only holds when we consider the colorism that constitutes the contents of the black/white binary. Furthermore, Harris-Perry's logic—which resonates with Dolezal's adamancy in pointing out the history of light-skinned Black people

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[187] "All In With Chris Hayes, Tuesday June 16th, 2015." Interview by Chris Hayes. All In With Chris Hayes. NBC News. New York, New York. 16 June 2015.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Clayton, Tracy and Heben Nigatu. "The Yum Center (with Melissa Harris-Perry)". *Another Round*. Podcast audio, November 17, 2015. https://soundcloud.com/anotherroundwithhebenandtracy/episode-32-the-yum-center
[191] "The Yum Center (with Melissa-Harris Perry)".
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid.

passing as white in the U.S.—ignores the fundamental differences between passing for white, as light-skinned Black Americans used to do for temporarily increased flexibility and mobility to access jobs otherwise unavailable to them, jobs which they needed to support themselves and their families in a racist capitalist society, and Dolezal's passing for black as a mode of self-expression and an exercise of freedom. 'Safety' does not play a role in Dolezal's narratives, and it is also not convincing coming from Harris-Perry.

If Harris-Perry here is suggesting that proximity to Blackness significantly compromises the safety or privilege of a white person, the women interviewed for *White Women, Race Matters* spoke instead of what Frankenberg called the 'rebound effect' of racism. This term names the way in which white people affectively experience the racism that they witness their loved ones being subjected to. One interviewee, Donna, describes the inadequate response and treatment of medical workers to her Black husband after they had been in a car crash; "although the discriminatory practices of the health care system were not actually directed at Donna, they nonetheless had an impact on her."[194] Even when "Donna was, in effect, treated as a woman of color," such as when, due to her last name, she was placed in a maternity ward with Latina and Black women "these women's departures from their own racial positions and identities were symbolic or temporary: they were not permanently 'unwhitened.'"[195] While white proximity to Blackness may thus temporarily jam the cogs of the ideology of race, with material and materializing effects, that this jam can always be rectified means that power has not been fundamentally redirected in its flow. Was Donna 'treated as a woman of color' by the doctors and nurses who saw her body (not just her name) and saw her as white?

The impact on white people who live in affective proximity to Blackness in terms of social position and privilege feels difficult to measure and not the argument I am most interested in pursuing here. I am more interested in unpacking how Cathy Thomas described this 'rebound effect' to Frankenberg: "Even if our experience is secondhand,

[194] Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, 113.
[195] Ibid.

it's still our experience."[196] That is, I am more interested in proximity and the 'rebound effect' in relation to the experience of difference or distinction between self and Other in empathy than in the loss or diminishment of concrete privileges. How does the witnessing a loved one experiencing racism also become an experience of the self? What kind of white self is constituted in this process?

That is, does a 'secondhand experience' blur or reinstate the difference between self and Other? And what are the ethical implications of each? Harris-Perry seems to regard the former as ideal: she confesses on *Another Round* that the discourse around Dolezal led her to feel "distressed about our ability to imagine the capacity of human pain, love, all of that existing beyond racial lines."[197] As an example thereof, she described an incident when she was called the n-word at age five, when she was too young to know its meaning and thus also too young to experience being harmed by it at that moment. Her twelve-year-old white sister, on the other hand,

> "was absolutely harmed—she knew what that word meant, she knew the threat that it posed, the two of us alone together in that space were being called that word, and she didn't feel it as an ally towards *my* black experience, she felt it as the sister of a black sister … so the idea that she could not experience racial harm is odd."[198]

What Harris-Perry seems to be suggesting here is that her sister, as a subject constituted through her intimate ties to her black sister, does not take on the pain or harm experienced by Harris-Perry, but herself experiences harm. It perhaps what Cathy Thomas would call 'second-hand' harm, which is *her* harm (too) nonetheless, and not simply the recognition of the harm of another. Empathy, here, is not feeling as if one were the Other, as if one were in the place of the Other, but rather the position of affective proximity that makes one vulnerable to feelings and experiences that are an effect of something done to another; Harris-Perry's sister experiences the 'rebound effect' of the racial harm of the slur targeted towards Harris-Perry.

Similarly, towards the beginning of her narration of her identity formation in relation to the adoption of her siblings Dolezal identifies her role as that of a 'bridge' or

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[196] Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, 112.
[197] "The Yum Center (with Melissa Harris-Perry)".
[198] Ibid, emphasis added.

'shield', with both her age and her whiteness functioning as defensive and protective mechanisms for her Black siblings. She takes up the role of the protective older sibling as a white ally, much in the same terms that Harris-Perry explains her sister's position and experience: describing the "numerous threats to [her siblings'] dignity and self-worth that they needed help avoiding," like strangers touching them and stroking their hair without permission, Dolezal says, "I made it my duty to shield my siblings from such ignorance as best as I could and serve as a bridge between them and the all-white world that surrounded us for miles and miles."[199] She adds that these slights suffered by her younger siblings "were often so veiled no one else seemed to pick up on them but me," suggesting that she also perceived her siblings themselves to be unaware of the racial harm of which they were a target. This moment or phase of being more aware of racist dynamics than those who are directly slighted by it is a kind of dramatic irony that has a specific impact on Dolezal's—and Harris-Perry's sister's—whiteness, in that as the one who is aware, and loving towards and protective of those who are not, Dolezal must recognize and take a particular defensive stance towards racial ignorance (or what Gloria Wekker calls "white innocence"[200]) and racism, which in her environment became synonymous with whiteness.

Further still, Dolezal must process this racial harm in order to attempt to at least partially deflect it ("At times I felt like a ninja, as I whisked them away from hands that threatened to touch them inappropriately"[201]) and this process, I suggest, is an empathic one. But while Harris-Perry constructs empathy as relation across a distance between two different and differently positioned subjects—in which it is precisely the point that her white sister is and remains white despite the 'racial harm' she experiences in relation to Harris-Perry—Dolezal's narrative builds toward a identification not only with but ultimately as the Other, an affective relation that takes her out of her own place and into that of the one with whom she empathizes. When she says in her memoir, "I began to see the world through Black eyes," Dolezal suggests would not be able to see and

[199] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 60.
[200] Wekker, Gloria. *White innocence: paradoxes of colonialism and race*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
[201] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 60.

recognize the racial microaggressions her siblings faced if she were white; that the racial harm they experience only become visible to her as she starts to see from a Black perspective.[202] This is, then, a phenomenological issue: for Dolezal to see racial harm, for it to become visible to her, she must take a different position in relation to it—and that position is Blacknesss.

For Dolezal, then, the ethical engagement with the difference between self and Other is a collapsing of that distance, an annihilation of the Self in its empathy for the Other. For Harris-Perry, her sister's proximity to the racial harm targeted at Harris-Perry produced for her sister her own experience of racial harm, different than what Harris-Perry would have experienced if she had understood the word's meaning and different than what her sister would have experienced than if she herself were black; in this way, Harris-Perry gives space to not only the possibility but the specificity of white experiences of affective entanglements with Blackness. But for Dolezal, the difference in perception and perspective between herself and the white people around her leads her to conclude that she is not like them; she is not white:

> "Why was I aware of the microaggressions my siblings faced while everyone around me remained ignorant? I believe it was a combination of intuitive awareness, protective instincts that emerged from caring for my siblings, and the knowledge I'd gleaned from reading about Black history. I certainly didn't have a 'white' perspective. I was starting to think more from a Black one."[203]

If the circulation of empathy is at least originally facilitated by love (rather than, as occurs later in Dolezal's narrative, information or knowledge; 'awareness'), these channels opened by and for the flow of affect also facilitate negative affective experiences and relations: "With love came fear. I grew fiercely protective of my younger siblings. Having witnessed how they were mistreated within our household, I began to worry about how they were going to be treated by the rest of the world."[204] Her love for her siblings also produces shame for her white relatives: "I was a firsthand

[202] Ibid, 63.
[203] Ibid, 62.
[204] Ibid, 59.

witness to the cultural ignorance and racial bias they continually displayed."[205] The formation of intense, maternal relationships with her siblings, then, also marks a moment in which Dolezal shifts from being the object of shame—the one who is shamed—to the subject who shames others. Describing the Christmas newsletters her parents sent out, Dolezal writes,

> "They often used pictures of my siblings taken after they'd gotten dirty from paying outside in an attempt, I imagine, to generate more pity (and more money) from donors. As young as I was, I still understood that making money in this way was unacceptable and just plain disturbing, and I didn't want anything to do with it."[206]

Feeling ashamed of her white relatives on behalf of her Black siblings sets her apart from the former and reaffirms her love for and identification with the latter; whiteness becomes her Other, Blackness her self. What begins in her narrative as concern for or on behalf of her siblings leads to identification with Blackness, and ultimately, as Black—these shifts I will explore in more detail in the next section on identity formation.

I hope to have shown how the circulation of affect—in particular shame and empathy—is also a mode of producing the relation between self and Other. Of particular concern to me has been the ethics of empathy; taken a certain way, empathy risks eliding the differences between self and Other in imagining that one can experience and feel the world as if one were the Other, discounting the specificity and meaning of the experience one has in relation to the Other from one's own position. In the next section, I will shift to focus on the subject more individually and the affective (so still necessarily relational) process of identity formation in order to think through in more detail under which conditions the 'different kind of whiteness' that Harris-Perry describes emerges.

White Racial Identity Formation

While Janet E. Helms has been widely credited with developing a model of white identity formation in 1990, Rita Hardman first developed a model in 1982. Hardman's model consisted of the following linear stages: lack of social consciousness, when a

[205] Ibid, 55.
[206] Ibid, 58.

person is unaware about racial difference or its significance; acceptance, the stage in which white supremacy is tacitly accepted through logics of meritocracy and colorblindness (this stage can last a lifetime); resistance, in which a person realizes that racism exists and becomes angry, frustrated and/or guilty; re-definition, in which a person no longer denies the significance of their whiteness and engages with their own racism; and lastly, internalization, when this person is able to form a new social and person identity on the basis of going through this process.[207]

Though quite similar, there are a few significant differences between Hardiman's and Helms' models. The latter has been supported empirically (Carter, 1990; Helms & Carter, 1990). Following feedback Helms changed her terminology from 'stages' to 'statuses' to indicate that they are not necessarily linear. Her model also has more of theses 'statuses' than Hardiman's model has stages—contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independence, immersion/emersion, and autonomy—allowing for a slightly more detailed and nuanced understanding of the psychological shifts and processes that white identity formation entails. Contact is similar to Hardman's 'lack of social consciousness,' but disintegration and reintegration describe an inner conflict, usually prompted by an external event, in which a person is confronted with a racial moral dilemma, and through reintegration is able to resolve those conflicting emotions through a return to white supremacist ideology and values. 'Pseudo-independence' occurs when one has a personal encounter or painful insight which breaks them out of the 'reintegration' phrase; this experience leads them to gain an increased awareness about racism and attempt to empathize more with oppressed minorities—but this understanding "has not yet reached the experiential and affective domains," remaining rational or intellectual in nature.[208] During the 'immersion/emersion' status, the question of what it means to be white is explored, and the experiential and affective

[207] Hardiman, Rita. "White Identity Development: A Process Oriented Model for Describing the Racial Consciousness of White Americans." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst: 1982.
[208] Sue, et al. Multicultural Counseling Competencies: Individual and Organizational Development. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Productions: 1998.

understanding mentioned earlier is present. Lastly, in 'autonomy,' one accepts rather than laments one's whiteness, and develops a non-racist white identity. The first three stages describe the abandonment or rejection of racism, and the latter three the development of an anti-racist white identity—a concept first taken seriously by Hardiman in psychological literature, who developed her model in an attempt to understand why some white people and not others became involved in anti-racist activism or otherwise "exhibit a … nonracist identity."[209]

Sue & Sue have more recently developed a model which works from the same conceptual and political assumptions as the previous two models described—that racism is an integral part of U.S. society, that white people also gain a racial identity through socialization, etc. —and thus has may similar stages, steps or statuses: naiveté, followed by conformity, then dissonance ("an individual faces the inconsistencies in their beliefs"), a resistance and immersion phase ("guilt and shame towards oneself on account of one's role in racism… may also cause an individual to either serve as a paternalist protector or over-identify with another racial group"), an introspective phase, and integrative awareness phase and lastly 'commitment to antiracist action,' which, crucially is defined by what a person *does* rather than their values alone. While there are notable differences across the Hardiman, Helms and Sue and Sue models, they are not so significant that it is relevant to stick to any one in particular for this analysis. Using the basic concepts proposed throughout these models, I want to pose the question of what we may be able to understand about Dolezal by using such a white racial identity formation model. Particularly given the weight given to her childhood and family in her narratives of coming to identify as black, I am prompted to explore via these models whether we can conclude that Dolezal is, indeed, somehow 'outside of the norm' of identity scripts of whiteness, or if her behavior in fact counter-intuitively describes the experience of inhabiting whiteness and the process of developing a white identity.

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[209] Sue, Derald Wing, and David Sue. *Counseling the Culturally Diverse: Theory and Practice*. Hoboken: Wiley, 2010. 266.

While Dolezal claims both to have been sheltered from racist ideology and to have an instinctual connection with Blackness since her first memory (of drawing self-portraits with a brown crayon), Sue and Sue, differentiating themselves from Helms' model which is characterized in the first stage by 'obliviousness', argue that the 'nativeté' phase only lasts for about the first three years of life—already between the ages of three and five, "the young White child begins to associate positive ethnocentric meanings to his or her own group and negative ones to others. Bombarded by misinformation through the educational channels, mass media, and significant others in his or her life, a sense of superiority is instilled in the concept of whiteness and the inferiority of all other groups and their heritage."[210] It is not, then, that critically interrogating Dolezal's identity claim necessarily constitutes a skepticism towards the value, worth or beauty of Blackness, as Harris-Perry voiced in her conversation with Hayes: "I also think that the idea that wanting to pass into blackness as inherently crazy is something we need to question, right? Like the idea that oh, my gosh, only a crazy white woman would want to be Black, like should disgust us [sic]."[211] Rather, I advocate for skepticism towards the notion that Dolezal as a child was somehow immune to white supremacist ideology and anti-Black racism, particularly given that she emphatically describes being raised in a household that did *not* encourage or celebrate racial and ethnic diversity, to the point that her younger brother Izaiah petitioned for her to be his guardian on these very grounds.[212] While not having a television may prevent being bombarded with certain stereotypes of black people and implicitly or explicitly racist narratives (though other media, such as magazines, were around) that does not guarantee that the household as a whole will be without racism or white supremacy.

For Sue and Sue, the next stage is the 'conformity phase', in which white people "have limited accurate knowledge about other ethnic groups and rely on stereotypes to inform their perceptions. Consciously or unconsciously, whites believe that they are

[210] Sue and Sue, *Counseling the Culturally Diverse*, 278.
[211] "All in With Chris Hayes."
[212] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 170.

racially superior and thus that it is okay to treat people of color as inferior."[213] Given that from a young age, Dolezal was living with and caring for black children, and actively sought out more information about Black history and culture, this phase seems to bear little relevance to her experience; she in fact describes actively attempting to offend people treating her Black siblings as inferior. What Helms describes as 'disintegration' seems more fitting: "the White person becomes conflicted over irresolvable racial moral dilemmas that are frequently perceived as polar opposite" and "becomes increasingly conscious of his or her Whiteness and may experience dissonance and conflict, resulting in feelings of guilt, depression, helplessness, or anxiety."[214] Although Dolezal herself frames her narrative through racial and moral dichotomies, this is also not quite a perfect fit, however, as Dolezal describes quickly and with little doubt stepping into a particular role vis-à-vis her siblings, and does not particularly describe this as consciousness of herself as white, but rather increased consciousness of racism. Following the narrative Dolezal creates, then, she arrives quite early on at the 'resistance and immersion' phase that Sue and Sue describe—which I will return to in conjunction with a discussion of what Helms calls 'immersion/emersion'—skipping the 'dissonance' phase. Though Dolezal describes feeling dissonance with the racist values of society, she positions those values externally, viewing herself as non-racist from the moment that she gains an awareness of the racialization of society as a whole. The dissonance she describes on a personal or individual level is with the fact that she is *perceived as white*, not with viewing herself as white (because she didn't), *or* as racist.

Thus while Dolezal expresses experiencing discomfort with her own whiteness throughout her life, particularly during her marriage, this discomfort is not in relation to her position, privileges and power as a white person, but rather in terms of being limited in her self-expression (and thus being perceived as something other than what she felt herself to be). She experienced discomfort not because she didn't want to think of herself as racialized or as racist, but because she didn't want to think of herself as racialized as white, which is a crucial way in which Dolezal's narrative of her life story

[213] Sue and Sue, *Counseling the Culturally Diverse*, 278.
[214] Ibid, 270.

differs from the models laid out by the likes of Helms and Sue and Sue. She rarely describes an awareness of herself being white at all, but tends to describe her feelings of difference and specifically connection with Blackness. For example, she describes automatically choosing to sit at a table with only black students in the cafeteria at Belhaven college: "that I shouldn't sit there because I was born to white parents and all the table's occupants were black didn't occur to me. I gravitated to where I felt most comfortable."[215] Here, Dolezal emphasizes precisely this lack of awareness of being white at all, which in most white identity formation models is a crucial moment.

Where Hardiman, Helms and Sue et al work towards the possibility of developing a positive and anti-racist white identity, Dolezal, like many others, seems to define whiteness strictly in terms of racism:

> "On the white side I noticed hatred, fear and ignorance. And on the black side I noticed fear, anger and pain. I felt more at home with the anger and pain towards whites, because I had some anger and pain – toward not just my parents but also, even though I wouldn't have been able to articulate it then, towards white supremacy. I unapologetically stood on the black side. I was standing with my convictions, standing also with my siblings, standing with justice."[216]

Dolezal only recognizes whiteness when it is defined as racism, but emphasizes that this thus does not relate to or describe her—whiteness-as-racism is that with which she does not identify, and can choose not to 'stand with.' Following this logic, of whiteness-as-racism, there is further "nothing about being white [that] describes" her, as she has said in several interviews.[217]

Dolezal, it seems, has not yet entered any of the last three phases that Sue et al describe, particularly the 'introspective phase', in which "a person asks what it means to be white … Knowing that they will never fully understand the experience of non-whites yet feeling disconnected from other Euro-Americans, they may experience feelings of disconnectedness, isolation, confusion, and loss."[218] Dolezal does not appear to have recognized that she "will never fully understand the experience of non-whites"—rather,

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[215] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 79.
[216] Aitkenhead, "I'm Not Going to Stoop..."
[217] "Rachel Dolezal Breaks Her Silence: 'I Identify As Black'"
[218] Sue and Sue, *Counseling the Culturally Diverse*, 281.

she claims even in the presence of black women to have "walked the walk" and "gone there with the experience.""[219] And although she "sees … herself as a racial being, is aware of socio-political influences regarding racism, appreciates racial diversity, and is becoming more committed towards fighting oppression" as the 'integrative awareness phase' describes, she does not see herself as a *white* racial being—all of this is from the position of her identification with blackness[220]. These last three phases, which for Sue and Sue were meant to describe the formation of an anti-racist white identity, for Dolezal describe her formation of a Black identity. Sue and Sue describe the last phase, 'commitment to antiracist action,' as probably "a lonely and difficult journey as social forces pressure whites to return to a former phase of development" for a white person, but this stage is precisely where Dolezal finds community and affirmation, because she carries out anti-racist activism as a Black person within a Black community.

In the Helms model, the acceptance of one's own position *as white*, is definitive of the last stage of developing a non-racist white identity, diverging from Dolezal's status and from the Sue and Sue model which is ultimately defined by anti-racist action. But both the Helms and the Sue and Sue models discuss a stage in which someone actively refuses to accept themselves as white and may instead identify with another racial/ethnic group. In Sue and Sue, it is called the 'resistance and immersion' stage (more informally, 'white liberal syndrome') in which "the White person may devote his or her energies in an almost paternalistic attempt to protect minorities from abuse" or, alternatively, "the person may actually want to identify with a particular minority group (Asian, Black, etc.) in order to escape his or her own Whiteness."[221] Dolezal is a unique case, then, not in that she radically departs from theories on whiteness (I have been arguing that she does not), but in that she manifests her whiteness in *both* of the different styles Sue and Sue describes: both in her personal life as a teenager and professional life as an adult, she takes on this paternalistic relation to Black Americans, as their protector, but also identifies with and as the group she works to protect.

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[219] "Race vs. State of Mind: Rachel Dolezal's Thoughts on Whiteness".
[220] Sue and Sue, Counseling the Culturally Diverse, 281-282.
[221] Ibid, 281.

Helms describes this stage, which she calls the 'immersion/emersion' status, differently, in terms of an increased 'experiential and affective understanding' of the Other's experience; this provides a more specific language for understanding how a person 'may actually want to identify with a particular minority group' as Sue and Sue observe. This experiential and affective understanding is then something beyond knowledge or historical awareness alone, and rather speaks to an embodied understanding of the Other in which a range of affects are circulated between self and Other, tying them together in some way. But for Dolezal, this 'experiential and affective understanding' is not merely an understanding of the Other, but has come to stand in for her *own* experience, her *own* affective constitution. As Ali Michael, author of *Raising Race Questions: Whiteness and Inquiry in Education* and co-editor of *Everyday White People Confront Racial and Social Injustice,* put it,

> "The 'immersion' stage is typified by White people [...] experiencing high levels of anger and embarrassment for racism and privilege, which they sometimes direct towards other Whites. They sometimes try to immerse themselves in communities of color, as Dolezal did."[222]

Michael shares that she herself was at one point 'stuck' in this stage: after experiencing this intense anger towards and embarrassment for her whiteness and the violence committed by white people throughout history, she spent her junior year of college abroad in South Africa where she lived with a Black family, adopted local dress, shaved her head, and only read books by black authors: "I didn't want to be White, but if I had to be, I wanted to be White in a way that was different from other White people I knew. I wanted to be a special, different White person. The one and only. How very White of me."[223] Dolezal, says, similarly, of braiding her hair and wearing dashikis: "for me it was a political statement. It was me saying: 'I am renouncing the propaganda standards of European beauty being superior.' It was almost like cultural disobedience,

[222] Michael, Ali. "I Sometimes Don't Want to Be White Either." HuffPost: The Blog. June 16, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ali-michael/i-sometimes-dont-want-to-be-white-either_b_7595852.html.
[223] Ibid.

going the other way, to say, 'You know, this is actually beautiful to me."[224] This material, affective and experiential immersion, then, can allow white subjects to avoid recognizing and engaging with their whiteness and live an illusion that one can shed one's whiteness, particularly through the acceptance and approval of one's presence by Black peers. In the next chapter, I will discuss such attempts to reject whiteness further. For now, I would like to emphasize the divergence of Dolezal from the white identity models discussed here. In these models, the stage which may last the longest or a lifetime is typically the one in which a person tacitly accepts and finds ways to justify white supremacist values, neither engaging with their own whiteness or the existence of racism and superficially engaging with racial difference (e.g. through colorblindness). Dolezal, on the other hand, has lived in the immersion stage arguably since her siblings were adopted. And while in Sue and Sue's or Helms's model, there comes a decisive moment when a white person can return to the comfort and safety of racist and white supremacist ideology and values or begin engaging earnestly with their own racism and work towards developing an anti-racist white identity, Dolezal has never described her life as having a stage in which she actually engaged with her own whiteness; her life is described chiefly in terms of rejecting whiteness and identifying with Blackness. Rather than developing an anti-racist white identity, Dolezal conflated anti-racism with blackness, and thus frames identifying as Black, partially, as a natural expression of her anti-racism. A white anti-racist identity does not appear as an option here—a point I will expand upon in the next chapter.

This exercise reveals that such models are built upon a hegemonic understanding of whiteness, universalizing a particular experience. While still extremely useful for some purposes, I also find it noteworthy and telling that there are limits—such as these—to application of these models. Such limits tell us that there are different kinds of white identities, experiences, and subjectivities. Why, otherwise, would most white people linger in an early stage of such a white identity development model, while others, such as Dolezal and Michael, spend significant time in an 'immersion' stage? Conversely, how might the different engagements with and experiences of these

[224] Aitkenhead, "I'm Not Going to Stoop..."

different stages or statuses produce different kinds of white identity? For now, and in conclusion, I want to return to shame, and investigate the role it plays in Dolezal's identity formation.

Conclusion: Shame as a Turning Point

In conclusion, I want to link Dolezal's turning point in her white identity formation (away from an anti-racist white identity and towards identifying as black) to shame, and specifically shame as it manifests in and through the body. In doing so, I hope to begin laying the groundwork for my argument in the next chapter: that creating possibilities for and encouraging the development of useful anti-racist white identities is crucial for developing an anti-racist society. As long as whiteness is not only associated with white supremacy and racism but in fact defined as such, as it clearly was for Dolezal, we will be stagnated in counter-productive efforts towards cross-racial solidarity.

Karlsson and Sjöberg found that "shame occurs in a situation where one experiences that someone else's negative constitution of oneself is revealing an undesired self. This revelation is felt very strongly, including bodily experiences."[225] Crucially, also, "the other's (or others') constitution is linked to perceptual-visual elements."[226] Thus the undesired self is constituted by the view of others, and this being viewed as one's undesired self is an experience of the body, or a bodily feeling. Ahmed, too, wrote that "shame can be described as an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body."[227] Of particular relevance to our case, the skin, as the surface of the body, is where this feeling manifests: "The way in which the pain of shame is felt upon the skin surface, at the same time as it overwhelms and consumes the subject, is crucial ... the lived experience of being-itself depends on the intensification of the skin surface."[228] So the skin is not simply a physical boundary of the self, but rather, intensification on the skin becomes a way in which the self is experienced. In shame in particular, the self is

[225] Karlsson and Sjöberg, "The Experiences of Guilt and Shame," 344.
[226] Ibid.
[227] Ahmed, "Shame Before Others", 103.
[228] Ibid, 104.

in and on the skin. Following this train of thought, Dolezal's self-portraits at a young age with different colors, her desire to paint her face—"in her baby book, she shows evidence of an early identity crisis: picture after picture of a young blond Rachel painting her face different colors, particularly silver"—do not necessarily indicate trans-racial identification, but rather, the experience of shame that she describes in her narratives of childhood.[229]

Ahmed argues that "the very physicality of shame—how it works on and through bodies—means that shame also involves the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces, as bodies 'turn away' from the others who witness the shame."[230] This gesture of turning away forms a stage in the white identity models I have been discussing: in those models, the turning away is from the realities of white supremacy and white racism, a stage which must first be worked through in order to later be able to recognize and engage with oneself as a (white) racialized subject implicitated in those structures. While Dolezal does not turn away from acknowledging racism as the white identity models describe, she does turn away from her own whiteness. And so rather than reading her turn to Blackness as an 'authentic' of 'instinctive' self-expression, I want to argue that it can more usefully be read as a response to shame—the shame of being associated by proximity and through visual signifiers of the skin with the whiteness that her racist family embodied. It is this particular form of shame that produces Dolezal as white, even as she turns away from whiteness; responding to racism with shame is an affective relation specific to and constitutive of whiteness.

In her turn to Blackness, then, bodily transformation and self-transformation become intertwined: "I am ashamed of myself *as I appear* to the Other."[231] When Dolezal describes a photo taken of her shortly before her divorce she emphasizes her then "bleach blond hair […] I look so dead inside. I remember feeling like I was almost gone, like I had repressed and suppressed all of myself."[232] Here, blond hair and feeling 'dead inside' become synonymous, as her body—how she appears to the Other—is

[229] Sunderland, "In Rachel Dolezal's Skin."
[230] Ahmed, "Shame Before Others", 103.
[231] Sartre as cited in Ahmed, "Shame Before Others," 103 (emphasis original).
[232] Aitkenhead, "I'm Not Going to Stoop..."

positioned as both the cause and effect of her self-repression. Her body, when it was perceived as white, revealed an 'undesired self' in Karlsson and Sjoberg's terms.

I put forth, therefore, that the difference between Dolezal and the subjects described by white identity formation models is what triggered the shame response in the first place: while white identity formation models describe negative reactions to the significance of racial difference (i.e. racism), Dolezal's shame surfaces in response to being perceived as embodying a particular (the hegemonic) kind of whiteness. Though these response can overlap in the slipperiness between being perceived as white and being perceived as racist, the white identity formation models do not discuss subjects who experience dissonance with or resist being perceived as white—rather, these subjects resist the significance of this racialization. For the subjects of these white identity formation models, the acknowledgment of race is itself a "psychic burden", whereas Dolezal wants very much to be acknowledged to be Black; being perceived as white is her "psychic burden."[233]

In this chapter, I have traced the way in which affect—such as shame, but also empathy—surfaces in the way Dolezal narrates the causal connection between her childhood experiences and her later identification as black. Taking an affective approach to identity formation allowed me to explore the role of family and, in Dolezal's case, the role of affective proximity and ties to blackness in identity formation: the eyes Dolezal narrates seeing herself through (which is a way in which shame is experienced) were first those of her Black siblings. By focusing on her narratives of childhood and adolescence, I aimed to highlight the significance of the way in which shame manifests on and through the body, and suggest the connection this may have to her self-transformation. Further, by searching for resonances and dissonances between Dolezal's narrative and existing models of white identity formation, I hoped to have shown again the possibilities and relevance of different kinds of whiteness, and suggested that understanding white identity as a racist identity may be a logic which

[233] DiAngelo, Robin. "White Fragility." *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3:3, 2011: 54-70. 63.

contributes to the conditions of Dolezal's outright rejection of whiteness and her formation of a Black identity. That Dolezal's life experience as she narrates it does not perfectly match any of these models is less usefully understood as 'proof' of a particular racial identity, and rather a call for more nuanced understandings of the ways in which a white identity can be experienced and formed in reaction to the events of a subject's environment (which is simultaneously racialized, gendered, classed—to name the most relevant processes for our purposes here).

If this chapter has been focused on the affects circulating within the family in relation to identity formation, and concluded on the gesture of 'turning away' or 'turning toward' in the response to shame, in the next chapter I will investigate more deeply Dolezal's the politics of this turning away; her gesture of rejecting whiteness.

Chapter Three: The Politics of Rejecting Whiteness

Introduction

Noticeably, Dolezal's narrative of coming to identify as Black is much more focused on her relationship to Blackness than to whiteness, and her explicit references to whiteness are made only in order to distance herself from it. In the promotional interviews around the time of the release of her memoir, she took to describing her identification as 'standing on the Black side', in terms of her politics, philosophy, cultural affiliation and family, of a racially divided society. She does not, on the other hand, elaborate on the content of whiteness beyond racism is. As such I read the little she has said, in tandem with how she embodies her identification, to be performing a gesture not only of distancing from but rejection of whiteness—and in fact consider precisely this lack of elaboration on whiteness itself in her narrative significant.

In this chapter, I will unpack the ethics and politics of such a gesture. In conducting this analysis I follow Sara Ahmed's conviction that "to be against something is, after all, to be in an intimate relations with that which one is against."[234] I do not, then, take her rejection of whiteness, including her relative silence about whiteness and her relationship to it, to mean that she has no relationship to whiteness or that it is not relevant for her. Doing so would naturalize her identification as 'instinctively' other-than, whereas it is precisely my belief and argument that her identification as Black is situated in political processes that can tell us about a larger psychic 'crisis' of sorts within whiteness, one which can be guided in different (more, or less, useful) directions. I aim to read the silences as telling and having something to tell. This project, then, resonates with the idea that "there are unexplored layers of whiteness to examine because whiteness finds ways to hide 'even as one attempts honest efforts to resist it.'"[235] In Dolezal's implicit attempt to resist whiteness, I will argue, whiteness is in hiding, but manifest.

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[234] Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness."
[235] Yancy, George as cited in Applebaum, Barbara. *Being white, being good: white complicity, white moral responsibility, and social justice pedagogy*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011. 186.

I begin with the way in which Blackness becomes represented (and naturalized) as 'freedom' in Dolezal's narrative. This positioning of Blackness, I argue, is not free from structures of exotification, as Dolezal attempts to claim, but rather embedded in them. Exotification, I suggest, does not determine her passing-as-Black, but does inform it, as one of the discourses through which whiteness is operating. I then situate Dolezal's gesture of rejection in the historical construction of whiteness and specifically white femininity as a moral force or authority. Lastly, I take up Dolezal's case through the concept of the 'race traitor', in part through the academic journal, founded by Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey in 1992, of the same name. The 'race traitor' argument is that, particularly in the context of anti-racist thought and practice, there is no way to be 'good' and white; the only legitimate thing for white people to do is reject their whiteness and white privileges, with the ultimate goal of abolishing whiteness. What is the political potential of this subject-position, and what are its limits? In the last section, I conclude that Dolezal's rejection of whiteness also constitutes a 'white flight' from responsibility. Further, I put forth that Dolezal's rejection of whiteness through self-transformation is an illustration of the potential of shame. But here this potential is lost, for I find Dolezal's self-transformation not only ultimately unproductive for the larger cause to which she claims allegiance, but also, by erasing the specificity of the location of the subject who is responsible to others, presents risks to how we can conceptualize an ethical and politically useful form of solidarity.

The Exotification of Blackness

In his ground-breaking book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said defines orientalism as, to begin, "the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind,' destiny and so on."[236] This distinction serves specific political purposes: by representing the so-called Orient as the counterpart to the (unnamed) Occident—sensual, dark, mysterious, aggressive, passionate and

[236] Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Pantheon, 1978. 52.

uncivilized so that the Occident can be sober, rational, 'enlightened' and civilized—Western nation-states could (and still can) justify their invasions and interventions, particularly in those lands referred to now as the 'Middle East.' Orientalism, then, is a materializing practice through which the 'West' produces 'East,' its Other (but also therefore its Self), and this is also often a military project. That is, orientalism has been and continues to be an ideological tool of colonialism.

What is relevant for our purposes here is that Said's analysis of both the form and function of orientalism provided tools for discussing exotification, one function or aspect of orientalism, in different contexts. By exotification, then, I mean the way in which the Other is produced not only as different but specifically as 'exotic'—as foreign, sexual, exciting, a mystery to be discovered and consequently explored. To call the Other 'exotic' is thus to racialize and colonize the Other by projecting this fantasy (also then a fantasy of who the self is in relation to this Other) on them; this fantasy is an erotic one (Mascat 2015; Huggan 2001).

bell hooks has written extensively on the exotification of the Black body in the U.S. context, perhaps most famously in her essay 'Eating the Other' in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992). In this essay she notes that those with sexual fantasies of the non-white Other believe that "the most potent indication of [progressive] change is the frank expression of longing, the open declaration of desire, the need to be intimate with dark Others."[237] But hooks reads in these sexual fantasies "the assumption that the exploration into the world of difference, into the body of the Other, will provide a greater, more intense pleasure than any that exists in the ordinary world of one's familiar racial group."[238] Sex with the Other is a mode to enrich the self; even the fantasy thereof "assuages the guilt of the past."[239] Hooks concludes that this sexual longing for the Other "establishes a contemporary narrative … where the desire is not to make the Other over in one's image but to become the Other."[240] This notion has indeed

[237] hooks, bell. "Eating the Other." *Black looks: race and representation*. New York, NY: South End Press, 1992: 21-39. 24.
[238] Ibid, 25.
[239] Ibid.
[240] Ibid.

even made its way in anti-racism pedagogy: conceptual artist and philosopher Adrian Piper wrote, “The ultimate test of a person's repudiation of racism is not what she can contemplate *doing* for or on behalf of black people, but whether she herself can contemplate calmly the likelihood of *being* black.”[241]

The temporal aspect here, however, is of importance. In hooks, the desire to become the Other is through the sexual encounter; for Piper, it is a matter of contemplation, a momentary intellectual exercise. Dolezal did not only become the Other for a moment, and not only through intimate relations, but lived as Black for a decade. So does she ‘pass’ Piper’s test? I wish to argue against a simple affirmative answer here and for the relevance of exotification in this case. I put forth that Dolezal’s prolonged identification and self-presentation as Black does not constitute a mere calm contemplation, but in fact reflects a movement similar to an ‘uncanny valley’ in that by going further than contemplating being the Other, and actually attempting to become the Other, she returns to or approaches structures of racism, here in the form of exotification. In her memoir, Dolezal writes, “as soon as I was able to make my exodus from the white world in which I was raised, I made a headlong dash toward the Black one.”[242] Necessarily, then, we must understand the ‘Black world’ as desirable to Dolezal; as the object of her desire. This desire, I argue, cannot be understood as free from the structures of exotification. Exotification produces the self and Other in a way that not only maintains their difference, but more importantly produces their difference (and specifically the difference of the Other as desirable, erotic) in a way that perpetuates the unequal power relations between them. It is therefore useful to trace precisely how Blackness becomes desirable in Dolezal’s narrative, as this will bring to light her position as the white Self.

As I argued in Chapter 2, shame plays a formative role in Dolezal’s narrative of her childhood and constructs a causal relationship between her childhood experiences and her later identification as Black. It is against this backdrop that Blackness emerges, ‘naturally’, as both a site and an exercise of freedom. That is, for Dolezal, to be Black

[241] Piper, Adrian. “Passing for White, Passing for Black.” *Transitions* 58, 1992: 4-32. 19.
[242] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 4.

meant to feel free, but to identify as Black is also an exercise of freedom ('to be free to'). But I follow Karlsson and Sjoberg, who in their phenomenological study of shame, establish a different relationship between shame and freedom:

> "In a certain sense shame is the opposite of freedom. Shame expresses itself as a feeling of being restricted and imprisoned. Feeling shame does not give sense to a longing for freedom [...] but it is not a free and developing movement, but rather a search for disappearing."[243]

Thus while in Dolezal's narrative the relationship between shame and freedom is constructed in the first sense—in that her feelings of shame gave rise to a "longing for freedom"—I read her identification as Black as rather indeed a desire to 'disappear' her white self. The desire to 'disappear' this self, having experienced shame, emerges in relation to the idealization of the Other. Ahmed argues here for the role of love in shame, that "such an ideal is what sticks subjects together (coherence). 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."[244] Ahmed is not using 'love' here as an inexplicable, apolitical or somehow pure force, but rather as a manifestation of the circulation of particular affects that produce the relations between self and Other.

It is also precisely my point that what is felt and named as love is produced through structures of power and dominant ideology. Though Dolezal claims that she grew up sheltered from racist ideology, growing up in rural Idaho in a TV-free household, she remembers 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."[245] These images, she writes, fueled her childhood fantasies of Otherness that accounted for the way in which she felt othered within her household and family:

> "I would pretend to be a dark-skinned princess in the Sahara Desert or one of the

[243] Karlsson, Gunnar and Lennart Gustav Sjöberg. "The Experiences of Guilt and Shame," 346.
[244] Ahmed, "Shame Before Others," 106.
[245] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 23.

Bantu women living in the Congo I'd read about in copies of National Geographic… in my fantasy, Larry and Ruthann had kidnapped me, brought me to the United States, and were now raising me against my will in a foreign land."[246]

Not only does Dolezal abstain from critically interrogating her response and relation to the exotifying images in these magazines, but she in fact continues to regard her attraction to them as evidence of her genuine and instinctual connection to Blackness. When Ijeoma Oluo raises this point in her interview with Dolezal for *The Stranger* in April 2017 Dolezal gives her a 'curious' look, and responds that her "gaze was more humanizing, and more of, again, black is beautiful, black is inspirational" than that of her (white) brother, whose gaze she describes as 'fetishizing' (Oluo). Thus while recognizing the presence of fetishizing gazes on Black bodies, she does not imagine herself to be complicit in this gaze—this already reveals the tropes of innocence in the construction of white femininity, which I will expand upon later.

If the images of Black, exotic Others in National Geographic provided the content of her fantasies, their source lay with in the 'oppressive' environment at home: "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."[247] The act of fantasizing itself is already a mode of psychic escape, but Dolezal also literally fantasized of escaping *from* her home and family, and escaping *to* Blackness. By imagining that she was a 'dark-skinned princess' kidnapped from her original land, the fantasy of escape can come to appear as a fantasy of return; this 'return' then naturalizes her desire for Blackness as a desire to return to her original and authentic self rather than a desire for the Other.

Later in Dolezal's narrative, when her Black siblings are adopted, the theme of freedom returns, manifesting in a paternalistic relation to the Other through the performance of empathy. Dolezal describes that as she styled her siblings' hair, "I felt like I was free, free from the confinement and oppression of the household I grew up in

[246] Ibid, 11.
[247] Ibid.

and free to be myself, if only in those moments."[248] Here we see how there are two kinds of freedom operating here and becoming conflated: freedom from the oppressive conditions of her household, and freedom to express herself. Most importantly, in this conflation, Blackness becomes not only associated with but in fact representative of freedom. That is, 'those moments' when she feels free, in both senses of the word, are the moments when she is engaged with caring for her Black siblings. As these moments accumulated, Dolezal claims she "began to see the world through Black eyes, and anything that had to go with Blackness or Africa always grabbed my attention" (Dolezal, 63). The broadness of her interest (in 'Africa') reflects the flattening function of exotification, its erasure of complexity and difference in favor of an easily digestible narrative, and echoes what Sunderland noticed in her interviews with white women involved in the New York City jazz scene: "all that was African signified positive and desirable, and all that was non-African did not."[249] But despite giving the illusion of a (superficial) positive valuation of the Other, exotification works to perpetuate unequal distribution of power between self and Other. As previously discussed, this distribution of power can be eroticized, but here it emerges as paternalistic, for example through her growing interest in 'Africa' inspired by her siblings (despite the fact that none of them had been adopted from an African country): "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."[250] In her desire to know the Other (here, the child victims of the Rwandan genocide), the Other becomes knowable and relatable as a victim and as an object of empathy. Becoming the Other, then, is at once a response to the shame one feels about being in a dominant relation to the Other and an exertion of one's power over the Other: "passing as a phantasy of becoming the other involves an apparatus of knowledge that masters the other by taking its place."[251] This relation to her siblings facilitates for Dolezal a freedom from her own situatedness in whiteness even as she reproduces it, a process that comes to appear, insidiously, as empathy or

[248] Ibid, 68.
[249] Sunderland, "You May Not Know It But...", 36.
[250] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 63.
[251] Ahmed, "She'll Wake Up One of These Days..." 99.

love. This relation serves as a framework for the narrative Dolezal creates to justify her identification, such as later in her memoir, Dolezal explains her lawsuit against Howard University for discriminating against her as a white, pregnant woman in the revoking of her scholarship: "I felt I was surviving in order to protect other people. It was my financial aid package that Kevin relied upon, I was seven months pregnant, so you know, a black man and black child also needed this."[252] Apparently it is not enough to explain that the income was a significant part of their household income; that 'a black man and black child' needed her support is a point of emphasis. Dolezal emerges as a kind of white savior upon whom her Black family members are totally dependent; using their Blackness as corroboration, she positions herself as morally making the right choice.

Dolezal, I put forth, feels what she calls 'free' precisely within this paternalistic relation to Blackness; this is obscured by her exotification of Blackness *as* freedom. It is somewhat ironic but not contradictory that Blackness functions as both a sign of oppression or victimhood *and* of freedom, for the conditions of oppression can come to signify a kind of authenticity that the conventions of a more privileged position and life inhibits. Whiteness in the U.S. context has become associated with a lack of culture, or this 'culture' figures only when ridiculed as limited to "Wonderbread, fast food and daytime television shows."[253] The white women Ruth Frankenberg interviewed tended to describe experiencing whiteness as this lack of authentic culture, "yearn for belonging to a bounded, nameable culture, or … emphasize the parts of their heritage that are bounded over the parts that are dominant" which "run[s] the risk of romanticizing the experience of being oppressed."[254] Indeed, the very characteristics which may emerge out of conditions of oppression and then be attributed as defining characteristics of the oppressed group—such as community, the notion of a 'bounded culture', and in the case of African-Americans, humor—in the white gaze become signifiers of the 'authenticity' that white culture is seen to lack. As Linda Martin Alcoff notes in *Visible Identities* (2005), 'iconized white Beat prophet' Jack Kerouac wrote in a journal entry,

[252] Aitkenhead, "I'm Not Going to Stoop..."
[253] Sullivan, *Good White People*, 142.
[254] Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, 230.

‘‘the best the ‘white world’ has to offer [is] not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, music; not enough night.’’”[255] The ‘white world’ is rendered dull, empty and culture-less in contrast to the colorful (i.e. Black) world of jazz, “whose virility and capacity for feeling is larger than the sallow, impotent blandness the white world (in his portrayal) can afford.”[256]

The romanticized image of the oppressed can become difficult to distinguish from the romanticization of oppression itself; and indeed, the veracity of Dolezal’s claims of hate crimes committed against her has been challenged, leading to accusations that she desires not only to be Black but to be oppressed: “I think she understood that to be accepted as black, she had to share the pain. She wanted the public to see her as a target of harassment and discrimination.”[257] This conclusion is not so far-fetched when we recall the way in which particular groups, in this case Black people, were constituted as a racial, i.e. natural, group as a result of labor exploitation. That is, it is not that groups occur naturally prior to experiencing oppression, but rather that they are constituted by it, and thus a racialized group and the racialized oppression they experience are inextricable (Guillamin 1995). When Blackness is understood this way— as being constituted by the experience of racism— such experiences (in Dolezal’s case the particularly racist referent of a noose, hung in her driveway) then serve as evidence of the authenticity of one’s identity and of belonging to a particular group. And, as already discussed, desire to be a part of this group can result not only from the romanticized image of them, but also through a desire to deny or escape one’s dominant relation to them; as Alcoff observes of Kerouac’s journal entry, “he senses the arbitrariness of his dominant status, which makes it impossible for him to rest easy with it or relax in it. And thus he longs to escape it.”[258] When we consider the political consequences of this ‘romanticization’, of course, we can better call it exotification, in

[255] Alcoff, “The Whiteness Question,” 186.
[256] Ibid.
[257] Saletan, William. "Rachel Dolezal’s Most Disturbing Claims Are Over Her Own Victimization." Slate Magazine. June 15, 2015. http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2015/06/rachel_dolezal_claims_to_be_the_target_of_hate_crimes_the_former_naacp_official.html.
[258] Alcoff, “The Whiteness Question,” 186.

order to bring the embeddedness of this process in relations of power to light. As such, I have been tracing the way in which exotification as a relation to the Other begins in Dolezal's narrative of self as focusing on visible difference (in terms of beauty), shifts to associating proximity to Blackness with feelings of freedom, then to an paternalistic relation to the Other as victim, and ultimately manifests as a desire to be the Other. This analysis shows how exotification is a power relation: "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."[259] As Oluo noted of Dolezal's home, "other than the paintings of her children, most of the black people depicted appear to be dressed as slaves or tribespeople [sic]."[260]

I wish to emphasize that Dolezal is not unique in this relation to Blackness; this is in fact a very important point in the face of her insistence upon individuality and the individual freedom and right to self-expression. Her exotification of Blackness and desire to pass-as-Black is in line with a tradition of White ways of relating to the self. This is made evident by Alcoff's analysis of Jack Kerouac's journal entry about walking through Denver, Colorado's Black and Mexican neighborhoods and feeling "disillusioned with the pretensions of white culture."[261] Like Dolezal, Kerouac "thought of himself as having the aesthetic sensibility and temporal orientation of the other-than-white, in his irreverent cynicism toward the white world's self- presentations and declared intentions."[262] But, as is my point here, "even in his ''nonwhite' sensibility, he operates from within a white schema of signification (a paradox that can also beset nonwhite bodies."[263] By analyzing Dolezal's case through the lens of exotification, I hope to have shown, similarly, that she operates from within 'a white schema of signification' in which the Other can shift from signifying exotic beauty to authenticity to victimhood to maintain the power relations between the white self and the Other, even as the white self makes itself over in the image of the Other.

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[259] Ahmed, "She'll Wake Up One of These Days..." 99.
[260] Oluo, "The Heart of Whiteness.'
[261] Alcoff, "The Whiteness Question", 186.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Ibid.

Good White Women

As I have mentioned, exotification is about producing an Other, but also, importantly, about producing a particular kind of self; the self/Other relation is a dialectic. I wish now, then, to shift the focus to the self that is produced in Dolezal's exotification of Blackness that is fundamental to her identification with it, and I will argue that she in fact is only one of the more visible manifestations of a long line of 'good white women' producing themselves as such against the racialized Other. The importance of goodness here cannot be stressed enough; 'goodness', in the form of innocence, ethical and moral virtue, sympathy and kindness has particularly since the event of colonialism been key to constructions of white femininity in particular, and goodness as moral authority constituting whiteness more broadly.

To describe the constitutive role of this moral component, Marilyn Frye proposes a distinction between how a person is categorized as white through their physical characteristics (and the way in which this categorization positions them within society) and a particular attitude or way of seeing and being in the world; the latter she calls "whiteliness" or being "whitely."[264] As such "the connection between whiteliness and light-colored skin is a *contingent* connection: this character could be manifested by persons who are *not* 'white;' it can be absent in persons who *are*."[265] I find this grammar extremely useful for thinking about different kinds of whiteness, and the possibilities for developing a more ethical and useful whiteness beyond a) the good white liberal who does not 'see race' and is therefore convinced they cannot be racist or b) the self-loathing good white liberal who perpetually performs their guilt and shame (for they 'know' they are racist). The definition Frye provides of whiteliness reveals the shared foundation of these two seemingly contradictory subject-positions, which is that "whitely people consider themselves to be benevolent and good-willed, fair, honest and ethical" across gender, class and political lines:

"nobody admits to being prejudiced, everybody has earned every cent they ever had, doesn't take sides, doesn't hate anybody, and always votes for the person they

[264] Frye, "White Woman Feminist."
[265] Ibid, n.p.n. Emphasis original.

think best qualified for the job, regardless of the candidates' race, sex, religion or national origin, maybe even regardless of their sexual preferences."[266]

Further, following Barbara Applebaum, whiteliness "involves a belief in one's authority and in one's own experience as truth."[267] Whitely people do not doubt their own perspectives or experience them as subjective, which becomes especially troubling when it addressing and engaging with racism—for, as Robin DiAngelo has pointed out, "being a good person and being complicit with racism are mutually exclusive in the white mind."[268] The danger of this dichotomous thinking is that "in some progressive circles wherein it is understood that all whites are indeed complicit with racism, being white becomes bad and being Black becomes good."[269] The former can do or say nothing (or nothing right) whereas the latter can do or say nothing wrong. In this context, we can see Dolezal's rejection of whiteness as, in fact, a move that maintains her 'goodness.' As Ahmed has argued,

> "The shameful white subject expresses shame about its racism, and in expressing its shame, it 'shows' that it is not racist: if we are shamed, we mean well. The white subject that is shamed by whiteness is also a white subject that is proud *about* its shame. The very claim to feel bad (about this or that) also involves a self-perception of 'being good.'"[270]

Although a white subject who passes as Black was not the object of Ahmed's critique here, I propose that Dolezal does not represent a radical break from but rather a continuation of what Ahmed is discussing here. Ahmed describes such declarations of whiteness or of anti-racism as 'non-performative', in Austin's sense of the word, for "declaring whiteness, or even 'admitting' to one's own racism, when the declaration is assumed to be 'evidence' of an anti-racist commitment, does not do what it says" (Ahmed Declarations of Whiteness). Rather, such declarations are meant as evidence that the subject who makes them is not racist, for "insofar as we can admit to being

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[266] Ibid.
[267] Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good*, 17.
[268] Kirabo, Sincere. "The Myth of Transracial Identity." TheHumanist.com. May 19, 2016. https://thehumanist.com/commentary/myth-transracial-identity.
[269] Ibid.
[270] Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness," 4.

racist (and racists are unwitting), then we are showing that 'we are not racist', or at least that we are not racist in the same way" (Ahmed, Declarations of Whiteness). By declaring her *Blackness*, I suggest, Dolezal produces similar effects, and these declarations are then non-performative in that, rather than merely describing the 'fact' of her Blackness, they produce her whiteliness.

Frye's analysis of 'whiteliness' also considers how whiteliness is gendered, or more specifically how it works to produce gender. Frye argues that white women, as subjects of patriarchy and misogyny, learns that whiteliness may to some extent redeem her position and allow her to enter into a advantageous partnership with white men: "Adopting and cultivating whiteliness as an individual character seems to put it in the woman's own power to lever herself up out of a kind of nonbeing (the status of woman in a male supremacist social order) over into a kind of Being (the status of white in white supremacist social order)".[271] In this sense the relation of white women to this 'whiteliness' is nothing new: Ann Stoler has usefully shown how white women—and specifically, the notion of their virtue or goodness—was a key feature of colonialist discourse. White women themselves played an active role in maintaining racial hierarchies in colonized lands—often, for example, by promoting 'hygiene', but more broadly, by serving as role models of 'Christian' values like monogamy.[272] Colonialist projects have and continue to be perpetuated in the name of protecting white women from evil, lustful, violent brown men (positioned 'elsewhere'), or carried out by white women themselves in the name of helping their poor 'Third World' sisters, and "saving brown women from brown men."[273] bell hooks has usefully illustrated how white femininity was reconstructed in relation to the presence of enslaved Black women: "18th century white women… were extolled as the 'nobler half of humanity' … depicted as a goddess rather than sinner; she was virtuous, pure, innocent, not sexual or world."[274]

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[271] Frye, "White Woman Feminist," n.p.n.
[272] Stoler, Ann Laura. *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: gender, race, and morality in colonial Asia*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.
[273] Spivak, Gayatri. Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg. Macmillan Education: Basingstoke, 1988, 271-313.
[274] hooks, bell. *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1982: 31.

More recently, Sarita Srivastava has examined the role of goodness in white feminist movements, concluding that "not only feminine but also feminist moral identity has been historically focused on benevolence and innocence."[275] For example, the so-called 'first wave' of feminism in the U.S. was focused on charitable projects of 'uplifting' the poor, people with mental health problems, and immigrants; these benevolent feminists, then, functioned as "keepers of morality in the family and nation."[276] In her contemporary study on white feminists in anti-racist organizations, Srivastava found that the dichotomous poles of good versus evil so dominant in Western thinking—including Western feminist thought and practice—had in these settings been "newly interpreted as the fraudulent non-racist versus the authentic antiracist," bringing me back to my earlier distinction between the good white liberal who claims not to be racist versus the good white liberal who admits that they know they are.[277] Srivastava's point is that this desire to be 'good,' to be an 'authentic antiracist', often takes center stage (in the form of emotional outbursts, for example) and diverts time and energy away from the work itself. Dolezal, too, has placed her emotional vulnerability at the forefront, explaining the public criticism of her identification along these lines: "For [white liberals], being called racist is the ultimate taboo. By accusing me of being a cultural appropriator and a fraud, countless white liberals … were hoping to prove they weren't racists but rather white allies."[278] In doing so, of course, she positions herself as an authentic anti-racist: as, unlike 'them', not only being concerned with appearances; as, unlike 'them', not being afraid of taboos, which is how she refers to her 'crossing of the color line'. Positioning her critics this way, Dolezal emerges as the 'good' one.

Ahmed provides another take on the production of 'goodness' in the relation between the white feminine subject and her Other:

"The white feminine subject becomes re-created through her *sympathy* for the Other (the Other's warmth). The Other becomes a mechanism which allows her to know herself (as black), by providing what is lacking in herself. Passing for black [...] remains

[275] Srivastava, Sarita. "'You're calling me a racist?' The Moral and Emotional Regulation of Antiracism and Feminism." Signs 31:1, 2005: 29-62. 33
[276] Valverde 1992 as cited in Srivastava, "You're calling me a racist?"
[277] Srivastava, "You're calling me a racist?" 50.
[278] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 248.

tied to the narrativization of the white female subject's knowledge of herself through her sympathetic incorporation of others."[279]

Although Ahmed is speaking specifically of passing for Black, this sympathetic incorporation of the Other also speaks to those white feminine subjects who do not wish to pass for Black (Stoler's white women in colonialism, Srivastava's white feminists in anti-racism) but instead desire to redeem themselves and display their goodness through their relation to the Other. Here is it useful to recall how Dolezal narrates her relationship to her siblings early in her memoir, her sympathetic incorporation of the plight which she project upon them in order to take up as her own.

These relations—between femininity, white(li)ness and goodness—are also manifest in the narrative of victimization Dolezal has created around herself in the events of the last two years, and even retroactively in her memoir. The white woman as a vulnerable and innocent victim (Bynum 1992) is a trope that Dolezal manipulates with some success (in the sense of earning sympathy). Referring to herself as a "punching bag" for a topic that "needs to be talked about," she laments: "There's no protected class for me. I'm this generic, ambiguous scapegoat for white people to call me a race traitor and take out their hostility on. And I'm a target for anger and pain about white people from the black community. It's like I am the worst of all these worlds."[280] In a more recent live video interview on the Facebook page of the New York Times, she explicitly positions herself as a victim of stigmatization and compares her position to that of transgender people: "It sucks quite honestly to be stigmatized and degraded and mocked and ridiculed for the way that you identify. Sociologists have talked a lot spoiled identities which are stigmatized identities such as transgender or transracial or transblack."[281] I will not go into the comparison of race and gender here (see Brubaker, 2016) but rather simply note that Dolezal herself here is not only comparing the two experiences but creating a sort of 'oppression Olypmics' in which she ends up definitively last. Lacking the same public acceptance, Dolezal suggests that she is being

[279] Ahmed, "She'll Wake Up One of These Days..." 100.
[280] Aitkenhead, "I'm Not Going to Stoop..."
[281] *The New York Times*. Interview with Rachel Dolezal on Facebook Live video, 31:55. 28 March 2017.

punished for her individuality, the very hallmark of American values.

Dolezal uses the victim discourse retroactively to describe her experience of being white and wanting to identify and be perceived as Black, positioning herself as collateral damage of the restrictive understandings of racial identity of the people around her:

> "Being forced to look white while wanting to be seen and socialize as Black was very confusing for me. I found myself ping-ponging back and forth across the color line based on the perceptions of others … Instead of making me feel like I was a part of something, my appearance made me feel misunderstood, alien, other."[282]

Here is an instance of the romanticization of oppression that Sunderland discussed; Dolezal actively constructs her being white as a condition of victimization, and this subject-position as victim constructs her as Other. Using the discourse of victimhood, Dolezal transforms her whiteness into Other-ness. The notion of being 'misunderstood' is crucial here: the fundamental misunderstanding, Dolezal insists, is that we see her as white. Categorizing the reaction from white people and 'the white establishment' in terms of the threat she perceives herself to pose to white supremacy, she frames the true misunderstanding as that of the Black community:

> "even if I get evicted or get pushed to the fringe or some people don't see me as part of that group, it's still where I feel like I fit and where I feel at home, so that hurts, it's painful … if I could resolve one group's misunderstanding it would be the black community, for sure."[283]

The only way in which Dolezal can figure as a victim is because whiteness, and importantly white femininity, is at work, producing her and rendering her legible as such. We are to believe that Dolezal is innocent, and good, and that only by being 'misunderstood' by others has she (falsely) been portrayed as anything but.

Because of the way in which the production of moral goodness is inherent to the constructing and maintaining the white self—even as it shifts forms, from the 'die-hard racist' to the colorblind liberal to the 'authentic white anti-racist'—in the next section I will

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[282] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 116.

[283] BBC Newsnight. "Rachel Dolezal: 'The idea of race is a lie.' – BBC Newsnight.' Youtube video, 10:05. Filmed on March 27, 2017. Posted on March 27, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMeNwntrZr8

frame Dolezal's rejection of whiteness (through an identification with Blackness) in both ethical and political terms. By arguing that the 'race traitor' position, which Dolezal exemplifies, is unethical, I am not merely making a case about right and wrong, but tying ethics and politics together; that is, I will put forth that her identification is unethical because it perpetuates unequal power distributions and systems of inequality rather than challenges them.

Rejecting the 'Race Traitor'

Until now I have been focused on the way in which Dolezal's identification as Black operates through and as exotification, as well as how her narrative of this identification produces her as the 'good white woman', maintaining and re-centering her white self. In this section I will examine in more detail the gesture of rejecting whiteness, and argue that it is an unethical gesture in that it is politically not useful, even counter-productive. If Alcoff asks, "how can whites be disloyal to whiteness while acknowledging their responsibility for their own racial identity?", I contend that the 'race traitor' subject-position, constituted by a rejection of one's whiteness, is not the answer.[284]

In 1993, Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey founded the *Race Traitor* journal in the belief that being disloyal to whiteness is politically the only valid option; that is, rejecting one's whiteness is the right thing to do (the 'good' way to engage with one's whiteness) and doing so, they believe, has the power to fundamentally challenge white supremacy. The strategies they highlight are not outright identifying as or passing for Black as Dolezal has done, but rather what they call 'crossover culture.' For example, the authors discuss a group of female high school students in the predominantly white farming town of Morocco, Indiana, "who call themselves the 'Free to Be Me' group, recently started braiding their hair in dreadlocks and wearing baggy jeans and combat boots" and experiencing name-calling, spitting, punching and pushing in response ('Free to Be Me' 1994). Ignatiev upholds this example as an illustration of "the tremendous power of

[284] Alcoff, "The Whiteness Question", 197.

crossover culture to undermine … white solidarity."[285] The journal's approach is that through such 'crossover culture' white people can disrupt the visual schema of whiteness and thus disrupt white supremacy—for example, if within a given altercation, a police officer can not 'tell' who is white, or at least, who is loyal to white supremacy. This process necessarily involves surrendering some of the privileges that accompany being read and treated as white, which the editors suggest is akin to giving up membership to a club: "whiteness is about neither nature nor culture, but status. Without the privileges attached to the white skin, the white race would not exist, and skin color would have no more significance than foot size or ear shape."[286] The editors are therefore critical of attempts to "identify and preserve a white identity apart from white supremacy and racial oppression," a mission they attribute to whiteness studies and its scholars who seek to maintain (through investigation) precisely that which they seek to abolish.[287]

The abolitionist approach to whiteness has been taken up outside of the *Race Traitor* journal itself. On the website *RACE BAITR*, perhaps a play on *Race Traitor*, Kevin Rigby Jr. and Hari Ziyad already in the title put forth that "white people have no place in Black liberation." They argue that "Black liberation would radically necessitate the refusal of anyone knowing themselves as white," a departure from the growing calls to develop a positive white identity or white self-relation (Giroux 1997; Helms 1998; Kincheloe and Steinberg 1998; Gardiner 2009; Sullivan 2014). The 'white ally' is here a paradox, for "white people cannot exist as white and do anything to address racism, because whiteness in action is racism."[288] The only potential course of action for white people is "for them to successfully put an end to their own whiteness" through "the absolute absolving of their places and power. Their literal disappearance from the state

[285] Ignatiev, Noel. "Free to Be Me." Race Traitor. Spring 1994. http://racetraitor.org/freetobeme.html.
[286] Ignatiev, "Abolitionism and 'White Studies.'"
[287] Ibid.
[288] Ziyad, Hari, and Kevin Rigby, Jr. "White People Have No Place In Black Liberation." RaceBaitR. May 02, 2017. http://racebaitr.com/2016/03/31/white-people-no-place-black-liberation/.

and its institutions."[289] Rigby Jr. and Ziyad's approach is thus a more explicitly material and structural approach that Ignatiev and Garvey's crossover culture.

Given that whiteness was from its inception a project of white supremacy, it does sometimes feel fundamentally impossible to redeem (that is, find a use for it within anti-racist politics). Attempts to theorize the role of the white ally can feel like a re-centering of whiteness, and this can occur in activist practices as well—this phenomenon has been well documented within feminism, for example, both in academia and activism (Lorde 1984; hooks 1981; hooks 2000; Srivastava 2005). But I am more convinced by critiques of the 'race traitor' approach, which I will now outline and connect to Dolezal. If the 'Free to Be Me' group in Morocco, Indiana proves "the tremendous power of crossover culture to undermine … white solidarity", as Ignatiev claims, I am left with many questions. What are the long-term effects of undermining 'white solidarity' in this way? Particularly given that some of the few Black residents of Morocco were harassed and assaulted in the wake of these events, what does 'crossover culture' actually achieve for anti-racism.[290]

Even in cases where there is less or no evidence of increased racist sentiment as a direct result, I am troubled by the notion that 'crossover culture' fundamentally subverts whiteness, as my argument about exotification in the previous section should indicate. I find Shannon Sullivan's notion of the 'ontological expansiveness' of whiteness a useful intervention here.[291] She describes 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."[292] What makes this ontological expansiveness particularly insidious is that as a habit it tends to operate "in the well-intended name of promoting diversity and learning about other cultures in the hopes of eliminating white domination"—similar

[289] Ibid.
[290] Alcoff, "The Whiteness Question." 203.
[291] Sullivan, Shannon. *Revealing whiteness the unconscious habits of racial privilege*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. 10.
[292] Sullivan, *Good White People*, 20.

to what the *Race Traitor* editors describe.[293] While this habit "disguises itself as a challenge to white privilege"[294] Alcoff notes that "especially in a consumer society, the core of white privilege is the ability to consume anything, anyone, anywhere", naming "the desire to crossover" as "coterminous with a colonizing desire of appropriation."[295] Ahmed also connects this 'ontological expansiveness' to coloniality:

> "Colonialism makes the world 'white', which is of course a world 'ready' for certain kinds of bodies, as a world that puts certain objects within their reach. Bodies remember such histories, even when we forget them. Such histories, we might say, surface on the body, or even shape how bodies surface."[296]

That is, colonialism not only invented race and thus created whiteness, but makes the world white by putting certain objects within the reach of certain bodies, and in doing so extend the surfaces of certain bodies and not others. Whiteness is what extends the surface of her body and puts Blackness within Dolezal's reach. The history of race-making in the U.S is the history which enables the extension of the surface of her body to, in turn, become an extension of the Black spaces she moved in; this history includes the rape of enslaved women by white men resulted in a variety of shades among enslaved people, and the 'one-drop rule' established post-slavery to maintain the purity of whiteness by legally defining those with any' Black blood' as Black. The way in which one can be or become Black while having light skin in the U.S. today is the legacy of both this institutionalized rape and the 'one-drop rule', and this legacy explains why Black Americans "are not in the business of checking membership cards."[297] In this sense passing is a technique of knowledge, and Dolezal's use of this technique illustrates the ontological expansiveness of whiteness; whiteness can, in the right conditions, even become Black. This ability to expand, move, or to take up space is how whiteness works: "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

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[293] Ibid.
[294] Ibid.
[295] Alcoff, "What Can White People Do?"
[296] Ahmed, Sarah. "A phenomenology of whiteness." *Feminist Theory* 8:2 (2007): 149-68. 153.
[297] Cobb, Jelani. "Black Like Her." The New Yorker. June 19, 2017. http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/rachel-dolezal-black-like-her.

are shaped by motility, *and may even take the shape of that motility*."[298] To move through spaces with comfort because those spaces extend the surface of your body: this is a 'phenomenology of whiteness', an approach that provides a language other than 'privilege' for describing how whiteness is at work in Dolezal's desire and ability[299] to move through Black spaces comfortably.

The systemic and historical nature of Dolezal's ability to pass highlights that the abolitionist approach does not explain how individual actions will dismantle the ideology of race as a visual schema, which confers privileges to those who are read as white. Although Ignatiev insists that "abolitionism is not personal renunciation" and admits that "as a general rule it does no good for a person to move from the suburb to the ghetto, or quit one job for another," he is nonetheless is convinced that this project can "break up the institutions that reproduce whiteness, making it impossible for anyone to be white."[300] And yet the 'race traitor' approach relies completely on individual actions and behavior, hoping that if enough white individuals become 'race traitors', whiteness will no longer be able to function institutionally. As Foucault reminds us, "in actual fact, one of the first effects of power is that it allows bodies, gestures, discourses and desires to be identified and constituted as something individual."[301] That Dolezal has taken up this individualistic 'race traitor' subject-position reveals another way in which whiteness surfaces, for individualism "is a group characteristic of white people."[302] Take, for example, the racist phenomenon in which a Black criminal or Muslim terrorist is seen to reflect the 'tendencies' of the group they are seen to belong to, whereas a white perpetrator becomes framed in the media as a 'lone wolf.' Sullivan notes that

> "White people, especially those in the middle class, generally are not accustomed to thinking of themselves as defined by group membership — and especially not their racial group membership. They tend to see themselves as individuals and believe that

[298] Ahmed, "A phenomenology of whiteness, 159. Emphasis original.
[299] I follow Ahmed's critique of passing as an 'ability' and use it here instead as she uses 'technique' (Ahmed 1999). That is, in describing Dolezal's 'ability' to pass I do not assume a body characterized by an ability to pass prior to passing.
[300] Ignatiev, "Abolitionism and 'White Studies.'"
[301] Foucault, Michel, Mauro Bertani, and Alessandro Fontana. *"Society must be defended": lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. New York: Picador, 2003. 29-30.
[302] Borrie, Laila. Personal conversation. 23 May 2017.

they should be treated as such … white people might belong to various social groups, but that membership does not and should not determine what they are expected to do or how they are viewed by others."[303]

Indeed, to return to the Dolezal quote that spurred this inquiry: "nothing about whiteness describes me."[304] She does not believe that whiteness is relevant to her, and so does not want to be determined by it, and thus demands that she is not. Rather, her choice to identify as Black is the final word because she is an individual, not a member of a racial group, and in a modernist society such as the U.S., subjects become defined through their capacity to choose, and freedom defined and valued as the right for these subject as an individual to decide her own course in life. This self-image, structured by whiteness, extends to her emphasis on speaking only about her own person experience (speaking 'her truth'), which in turn has consequences for accountability. Writing about whiteness in anti-racist activism and pedagogy, Applebaum notes that "speaking for oneself may serve as a way of avoiding responsibility, of avoiding criticism, of avoiding being wrong and at the same time reinscribing the status quo."[305] Put another way, "If I speak only for myself it may appear that I am immune from criticism because I am not making any claims that describe others or prescribe action for them."[306] For this reason, it is difficult to imagine the 'race traitor' phenomenon catching on to the extent that it could significantly challenge white supremacy—for even in her rejection of whiteness Dolezal insists on positioning herself outside of larger structures or systems and instead maintains her individuality.

The final point I wish to raise about the 'race traitor' approach is that it overlooks how race is also an unconsciously embedded structure of perception and behavior; it defines whiteness and white identity as conscious racist attitudes or behavior, and implies that this is the only relevant definition. I agree with Alcoff that "if the collective structures of identity formation that are necessary to create a positive sense of self—a

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[303] Sullivan, *Good White People*, 73.
[304] "Rachel Dolezal Breaks Her Silence: 'I Identify As Black.'"
[305] Applebaum, *Being Good, Being White*, 97.
[306] Alcoff, Linda. "The problem of speaking for others." Cultural Critique, 20 (1991-1992): 5-32. 22.

self that is capable of being loved—require racism, then only the creation of new structures of identity formation can redress this balance."[307] That is, instead of "granting victory to white supremacist understandings of whiteness," I put forth that the development of 'positive' white identity (though the terminology of positivity is imprecise) is possible, desirable and even necessary.[308] We must take seriously Frye's skepticism that "the renunciation of whiteness may be an act of self-loathing rather than an act of liberation" and look further than the performance of rejection to consider critically how the desire to crossover is constituted and how it can serve to liberate Black and brown people – if at all.[309]

Conclusion: White Flight

In conclusion, I would now like to suggest that Dolezal, in her rejection of whiteness and identification with Blackness, not only exotifies Blackness and, moreover, reproduces whiteness by maintaining her 'goodness,' but that an additional set of ethical stakes lie with the specific responsibility she, as a white subject, has. I call this a 'white flight' from responsibility, which can take one of two forms: most commonly, a white subject's denial of their own racialization as white or their racialization of others (e.g. claiming a 'colorblind' perspective), or the 'race traitor' approach, an extreme form of which we are seeing with Dolezal: a white subject's denial not that she has a racial identity in the first place, as in the first case, but rather that she is white. I suggest that this is a rejection of responsibility, specifically, in three ways: in that it is inward-looking and individualistic instead of looking to Others; that it is a gesture that in fact reaps benefits (for the self) rather than making compromises or sacrifices (for others); and in that it side-steps the difficult but crucial work of allyship in favor of taking center stage. I trace Dolezal's neglect of this responsibility back to shame:

"One of shame's most poisonous consequences is the way in which it overwhelms the subject so that she is unable to think beyond herself. Rather than focus on changing the world in ways that might lessen her shame, the shamed subject

[307] Alcoff, "The Whiteness Question," 208.
[308] Sullivan, *Good White People*, 131.
[309] Frye, "White Woman feminist", n,p.n.

focuses on **changing herself** so that she might accommodate the demands of her milieu."[310]

Indeed, shame is transformative, and so if her identification constitutes a flight *from* responsibility, this movement necessarily has an object which it moves *toward*, as well: "because shame involves the whole person and not a particular act, shame can help bring about self-transformation. Recognizing yourself as a self that you don't want to be implies a different kind of self the you do want to be."[311] But rather than be moved toward constructing a more positive or productive white self-relation, Dolezal decided to become a different kind of self altogether (the Other). I read Dolezal's identification as a story of shame's positive and productive potential lost, resulting in a self-transformation that looks away from rather than engages with her whiteness, and thus also from her responsibility as a white person in anti-racist struggles.

[310] Locke, "Shame and the Future of Feminism," 151.
[311] Sullivan, *Good White People*, 132.

Chapter Four: Imagining an Ethical Self/Other Relation

Introduction

Up until this point, I have been highlighting the ways in which whiteness is at work in Dolezal's identification as Black as well as in the narrative she produces for the public through various media channels—including her memoir—that simultaneously explains, justifies and naturalizes her claim. This endeavor has, then, has not been intended to 'deny' Dolezal's claim based either a biological understanding of race nor the more contemporary understanding of race as shared heritage and inheritance, but rather to illustrate how whiteness operates to both materialize Dolezal as white and render her claim to Blackness legible.

I find the revealing of whiteness in itself important in this case, given that whiteness is what allows Dolezal to be positioned by some as 'pushing the boundaries' of identity or as a sympathetic anomaly, and her critics as race-essentialists or hypocritical (in their support for transgender people). Such claims, which I predict will increasingly appear within the academy (Tuvel 2017) as well outside of it, must be challenged, rigorously, by those of us committed to using theory towards—or at minimum in tandem with—social justice. Therefore I want this project to be constructive and productive as well as critical, and so I turn now to what we can do with whiteness. Particularly in my critique of the 'race traitor' approach in the previous chapter, taken by Dolezal to its most extreme form, the 'inescapability' of whiteness became evident. If no matter how white people try to engage in anti-racism or position themselves with anti-racist activism, they are in fact perpetuating and thus maintaining whiteness and often white supremacy, what can they do with whiteness? How can they make it useful in anti-racist work? Here I am taking up where Barbara Applebaum leaves off when she argues that "complicity does not preclude but, in fact, is the condition of white moral responsibility."[312]

I will begin with arguing for the need to construct what has been called a 'positive white identity' (Giroux 1997; Helms 1998; Kincheloe and Steinberg 1998; Gardiner

[312] Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good*, 170.

2009; Sullivan 2014) but propose framing 'positive' instead as 'useful' and 'identity' as a 'self-relation' to emphasize that this is the foundation for the self/Other relation. Although focusing on white identity risks an individualism counter-productive to the collective projects at stake here, I will make a case for why I find it an important place to start when we are concerned with anti-racist solidarity. From there, I will turn to what would constitute an ethical self/Other relation for anti-racist politics, using Luce Irigaray's concept of sexual difference, and specifically the interval. Taking up the political consequences of these theoretical investigations most explicitly in the last section, I will address the question of 'allyship' and suggest the self-emancipation or alliance model (which follows from the ethical self/Other relation proposed in the previous section) as being politically the most useful for the parallel projects of Black and Brown liberation and, as a first step to dismantling whiteness and white supremacy, dismantling what Frye called 'whiteliness'.

In this chapter the inextricability of ethics and politics should become clear, if this was not already the case. By ethics, here, I do not mean how white people can do or be good; as Applebaum points out, "being a good white is *part of the problem* rather than the *solution* to systemic racism."[313] Rather, I suggest that a thorough and sustainable transformation of unequal power relations would necessitate that white people form an ethical relation to themselves and thus also then to those others who suffer under white supremacy. What is ethical, here, is also what will be useful.

Beyond Positivity: Putting Whiteness to Use

If the aim of this project was to show how whiteness is not only present in but, in fact, actively producing Dolezal's claim to Blackness, it was also to think through what we can learn about whiteness from Dolezal's rejection of it. Particularly in the second chapter I focused on the conditions or circumstances which produce different kinds of whiteness which can not be fully described by hegemonic understandings of whiteness (as a metaphor for power, as James Baldwin put it in a letter to his agent) and suggested that Dolezal's rejection of whiteness may have resulted, in part, from her

[313] Ibid, 20. Emphasis original.

understanding of whiteness as limited to power, and specifically, power-over as racism.[314] I suspect that not only did Dolezal *not* experience her own whiteness this way (as a mode of power-over) in her formative childhood years, but that she witnessed her parents exercising racist power-over her siblings, and thus came to disidentify with whiteness on two levels: as what she was not, and did not want to be. Thus rather than going on to form an ethical relationship to her own whiteness and to others around her from her position as white, Dolezal took flight from it altogether (towards 'freedom,' an exotified Blackness) and in doing so, from her responsibility as a white subject.

Taking Dolezal as an extreme example of the counterproductive nature of white subjects getting 'stuck' in and even forming their identity around negative affects (i.e. shame), I argue that it is a worthwhile political project to invest energy in and encourage the development of 'positive' white identities. By this I mean a self-conscious and critical self-relation, which involves recognizing the position one is born into or the 'behind' that one inherits as well as how that position has been historically produced without becoming narcissistically involved with and thus immobilized by it (or fleeing from it altogether, as Dolezal did)[315]. As Sullivan put it, "what I am advocating is *not* that white people need to uncritically feel better about themselves … the relevant question is how does a particular affect animate a person? What does a particular affect move a person to do?"[316] Centering identity or white people's position in anti-racist activism through negative affect does not seem ultimately productive; this was part of Sullivan's critique of the 'race traitor' approach: "In effect, a traitor attempts to destroy the social fabric that binds people together. I do not have much confidence in the positive effects of building an identity exclusively on destruction."[317] While the answer is then not to construct an identity through positive affects (i.e. pride), I am more optimistic about the potential to dismantle whiteness through transformation than rejection.

But this must be a careful process; there is important critique to the focus on white identity, and particularly 'positive' white identity as a means of resistance to or

[314] Baldwin, James. "I Am Not Your Negro." Directed by Raoul Peck. 2016: Velvet Film.
[315] Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness."
[316] Sullivan, Good White People, 148.
[317] Ibid, 139.

solution for white supremacy. I am cognizant of Sara Ahmed's extensive analysis of 'declarations of whiteness' in which she makes the following observation about this trend in Whiteness Studies: "Here, antiracism becomes a matter of generating a positive white identity, an identity that makes the white subject feel good about itself … it sustains the narcissism of whiteness and allows whiteness studies to make white subjects feel good about themselves, by feeling good about 'their' antiracism"[318] For Ahmed, then, this is "not an anti racist action" but rather "another way of 're-turning to the white subject" rather than away from it.[319] She is further critical of the "progressive story" in which "the white subject, by learning (about themselves?) will no longer take for granted or even disavow their whiteness. The fantasy presumes that to be critical and self-conscious is a good thing, and is even the condition of possibility for anti-racism." I agree that this approach risks an elitism in which "'learned whites' are precisely 'given privilege over others" who are "unlearned", white or non-white, which we see in Dolezal's use of her educational background as a shield from critics who are 'not aware': "I've done my research, I think a lot of people, though, haven't probably read those books and maybe never will."[320]

I therefore propose framing the necessary shift in how white people relate to themselves in terms 'useful' instead of 'positive'. Ahmed, in her lecture "Institutional as Usual: Diversity, Utility and the University" draws an ontological but contingent relationship between an object and its function: "to use something points to what something is for. So some objects are made in order to be used ... What they are for brings them into existence" and as such the temporality of this relationship can be summarized as "for is before."[321] But crucially, "use need not correspond to intended function. Most if not all objects can have a use, or, more accurately by made useable by being put to use."[322] That is, an object's 'use' can be not a matter of intention and more

[318] Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness."
[319] Ibid.
[320] Olou, "The Heart of Whiteness."
[321] Ahmed, Sara. "Institutional as Usual: Diversity, Utility and the University." Lecture at Openbare Bibliotheek van Amsterdam, the Netherlands. May 9 2017.
[322] Risatti, "A Theory of Craft" as cited in Ahmed, "Institutional as Usual."

a matter of practice, of how it is used or put to use. And as Ahmed put it, "this 'not' is an opening."[323] Thus although the notion of 'white identity, the ability to conceive of 'white people' and for white people to conceive of themselves as such, was created with the intention to be put to use in service of white supremacy, I argue that white identity—how white people relate to themselves and thus also to others—is not fully determined by this intended use. But the different uses of white identity, or the extent to which the white self-relation can be used against white supremacy, need to be actively sought out, activated, and indeed, put to use.

In this light I would like to return to Ahmed's criticism of Whiteness Studies; we could read Ahmed as being critical here of the centering of white people in anti-racist struggles, the narrative that presumes that white people's active engagement is necessary for Black and Brown liberation. I would agree with this, and will return to this later. But I have difficult comprehending why it would not be favorable—as in useful—for white people to be critical and self-conscious, or why it is dangerous or problematic to consider this a condition of their engagement with anti-racism. (implicitly, then, I do see value in this engagement in the first place; this is perhaps where Ahmed and I differ). I maintain an optimism that this critical self-consciousness can be developed without creating "a new discourse of white pride."[324] and do not believe that doing so requires that "antiracism becomes a matter of generating a positive white identity, an identity that makes the white subject feel good about itself."[325] For the work that white people need to do does not stop here (at developing a 'positive' white identity), nor is it the most important or ultimate measure of their position in or commitment to anti-racism; it is rather the condition of the possibility for their *usefulness* in anti-racism.[326] I do not say there is no risk of solipsism, but rather that it is indeed a risk and not inevitable or inherent.

One way in which such critical self-engagement would be useful is that it would alleviate some of the educational and emotional labor demanded from people of color

[323] Ahmed, "Institutional as Usual."
[324] Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness."
[325] Ibid.
[326] Ibid.

by white people. As Ijeoma Olou recently wrote in a piece addressed to white people in the wake of Trump's election to the presidential office (described by many as 'shocking'):

> "as much as I'd like you to see me—as much as I'd like systemic racism to simply be a problem of different groups not seeing each other—I need you to see yourself, really see yourself, first. This is the top priority … Find yourselves so that you can know what whiteness is. Find yourselves so that you can determine what you want whiteness to be."[327]

James Baldwin even famously went so far as to argue that this lack of critical self-awareness or self-reflection was the core of American racism, a white problem deflected onto Black people: "White people ... have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this—which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never—the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed."[328] This is not to position white people as *victims* of racism (in that they are alienated from themselves) but rather suggest that this alienation *perpetuates* racism.

Still, this focus on identity or self-relation may still seem ironically individualistic in the face of systemic racism. The dangers of individualism can be seen in statements from Dolezal like, "I do feel like my identity actually challenges white supremacy, not reinforces it"[329] or "I feel like my life is the perfect metaphor for race as a social construction."[330] Dolezal sees her 'transracial' or 'transblack' identity as in itself productive for anti-racism, which disconnects her identity from her actions and privileges the former; furthermore, the second statement reflects a kind of individualistic exceptionalism, for how is her life a more "perfect metaphor" for race as a social construction than Black and brown Americans? Their racialization is no less an example of social construction than Dolezal's; the difference is that Dolezal has a choice and

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[327] Oluo, Ijeoma. "White People: I Want You To Understand Yourselves Better." The Establishment. February 07, 2017. https://theestablishment.co/white-people-i-dont-want-you-to-understand-me-better-i-want-you-to-understand-yourselves-a6fbedd42ddf.
[328] Baldwin, James. "An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis." The New York Review of Books. Written November 19, 1970. Published January 7, 1971.
[329] Payne, "Rachel Dolezal on Why She can't Just Be a White Ally."
[330] Sunderland, "In Rachel Dolezal's Skin."

perceives that choice to be a right. But more to the point, this individualism is not useful. That's why Applebaum, building off of Cris Mayo's (2004) work, maintains that "white complicity pedagogy shifts the focus from white identity to the system of racism is perpetuated and maintained by and through individuals. The focus is not on rearticulating a positive white identity but instead on how whites can be 'part of an alliance against racism."[331] As anti-racist educator David Leonard said in an interview with anti-racist activist Suey Park, "It is crucial to move beyond "I am an anti-racist individual" to see oneself as part of an anti-racist community."[332] I only insist on adding that the *usefulness* of the presence of white people in such alliance or communities is contingent upon how they relate to themselves and therefore also to others.

And as Sullivan maintains, "the best corrective for white solipsism is not necessarily for white people to do the opposite and focus only on people of color. White self-denial and self-hatred can be the flip side of the same coin of white solipsism and narcissism, after all."[333] For although I am not convinced by the 'race traitor' approach—chiefly because it does not explain how it would dismantle the visual ideology of race nor 'undo' deeply embedded unconscious racism—I am also not convinced that whiteness will somehow go away, disappear or be rendered inconsequential if we do not actively discuss, explore and question what form whiteness can most productively take as an identity or way of being in the world. Given that white supremacist society prescribes this 'whiteliness' to white subjects, it is particularly politically urgent that an alternative is developed, one that does not maintain the pretense of being able to reject whiteness entirely, and that we can put to use in anti-racism.

I find Linda Martin Alcoff's proposal of a white double consciousness informative here. The concept of the double consciousness, later taken up in the colonial context by Franz Fanon in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), among others, was developed originally in *The Souls of White Folk* (1903) by W. E. B. Dubois: "It is a peculiar

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[331] Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good*,183.
[332] Park, Suey, and David Leonard. "Challenging Racism and the Problem with White." {Young}ist. December 26, 2013. http://youngist.org/challenging-racism-and-the-problem-with-white-allies/.
[333] Sullivan, *Good White People*, 145.

sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."[334] Taking this up towards a white double consciousness, of course, necessarily looks slightly different, chiefly in that it would not involve a dialectic between white and Black perspectives, as the latter are largely suppressed from becoming visible or transparent to white people (often for material reasons, such as safety). White ways of seeing have materializing effects (i.e. race) which make the gaze's impact on its objects (Black people) knowable, to put it lightly. The world in which Black Americans live in is created in the image of this gaze; they cannot but know it, and by design the reverse does not hold. Rather,

> "for whites, double consciousness requires an ever-present acknowledgment of the historical legacy of white identity constructions in the persistent structures of inequality and exploitation, as well as a newly awakened memory of the many white traitors to white privilege who have struggled to contribute to the building of an inclusive human community."[335]

That is, the white double consciousness would be a perpetual 'double' recognition of both the historical reproduction of white supremacy and the ways in which white people historically have challenged or been disloyal to white supremacy and committed to anti-racism. This double consciousness could be used as a natural checks-and-balance system for the two extreme poles of white guilt or self-loathing and, as Ahmed cautions, white pride.

Such recognition for the specificity of the self is contrary to what Irigaray calls appropriation. Irigaray writes in the formative feminist text *When Our Lips Speak Together*: "Exiled from yourself, you fuse with everything that you encounter. You mime whatever comes near you. You become whatever you touch. In your hunger to find yourself, you move indefinitely far from yourself, from me."[336] She is here developing her concept of sexual difference, but the ethics that inform this process can also be used to

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[334] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 363.
[335] Alcoff, "The Whiteness Question," 223.
[336] Irigaray, Luce, trans. Carolyn Burke. "When Our Lips Speak Together" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 6:1(1980): 66-68. 74.

address the need for white people to engage in a sustained, critical self-reflection rather than taking self-exile in the Other. As I have already discussed, there have been valid questions raised about the potential of a 'positive' white self-relation to fundamentally alter structures of white supremacy rather then simply re-center whiteness. But the point is not that any particular kind of white-self relation in itself will make the difference; the point is that particular kinds of white-self relations can serve as a foundation for an ethical self/Other relation, in anti-racist organizing and society more broadly, in which solidarity can be practiced and put into action; this usefulness what makes particular kinds of white self-relations worth developing. In the next section I turn to the work of Luce Irigaray on sexual difference to think through what this ethical self/Other relation could look like.

Sexual Difference as an Ethical Self/Other Relation

First, I wish to briefly summarize Irigaray's approach to what she calls sexual difference. It is an endeavor unapologetically concerned with the relation between men and women, both within actual relationships in heterosexuality and on the symbolic level, but it can and has been taken up beyond these limits (Bloodsworth-Lugo 2007; Poe 2011; Johnston 2015); I am interested in doing so as well, beyond the 'trickle-down' effect that Irigaray herself suggests when she proposes that realized sexual difference would "permit all the various forms of alterity to be respected without authority or hierarchy, whether one is dealing with race, age, culture, religion etc."[337] The implications of her positioning of sexual difference as the original difference for thinking about race, racial difference and racism has been widely discussed (Hass 2000; Gedalof 2005). But I see her figure of the interval in particular as being applicable more broadly to the self/Other relation across various kinds of difference, and therefore find her work useful for thinking about an ethical relation of difference that can be politically productive.

[337] Irigaray, Luce. "The Question of the Other." *Democracy Begins between Two*. New York: Routledge (2000): 121-55. 141.

For Irigaray, the goal or vision of the project of sexual difference lies in "becoming beyond the one, beyond the phallic" and creating conceptual space for women as women.[338] That is, although there are certainly many roles for women—mother, wife, nurse, daughter, teacher, whore—these roles exist within a masculine culture that also not only dominates but defines ethics, politics, representation, and so on, both symbolically and in material practices. 'Woman' suffers from a kind of false representation, represented only as difference from the masculine norm, "that sameness for which, for centuries, we have been the other."[339] Because women have been historically defined and conceptualized only in relation to men, their true difference—their feminine subjectivity—is given no space or opportunity to develop itself. Irigaray thus views true sexual difference as preceding subjects, not as measure to differentiate already existing subjects.

There are interesting parallels to be drawn here between gender or sexual difference and race.[340] Irigaray argues that truly recognizing this difference (sexual difference) requires the recognition of *two* separate, different subjects, and thus rejects the idea of the multiple in place of the one, arguing that in such a model "the fundamental model of human being remained unchanged […] diversity was therefore still conceived of and lived hierarchically, with the many always subordinate to the one."[341] Two, in which "one is not the 'real' and the other, her imitation; one is not the original and the other, her copy" is her vision of a future with in which sexual difference is truly expressed.[342] This notion of the human subject to which she refers as conceived on masculine terms is also, of course, produced as white. But specifically, the relationship she focuses on between self and Other here, in which the Other is formed in relation to or as a mirror or copy of the self or the 'one' can, to some extent, also describe the invention of race, which as Nelson Maldonado-Torres has argued was

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[338] Grosz, Elizabeth A. "The Force of Sexual Difference." *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. 171-183. 174.
[339] Irigaray, "When Our Lips Speak Together," 71.
[340] I am limited here to exploring the parallels; the ways in which racial difference and sexual difference are in fact co-constitutive is a question for further research.
[341] Irigaray, "The Question of the Other," 122.
[342] Irigaray, "When Our Lips Speak Together," 78.

reliant upon Cartesian dualisms such as inferior/superior, dark/light, and so on: race, in this way, has been a dialectic, with racial Others being attributed with characteristics opposite to the unmarked, white norm.[343] One crucial difference is of course that this occurs precisely through 'the many' which Irigaray rejects: Orientalism, anti-Black racism, Islamophobia, and racism towards Latinx people, while they may have a similar structure of self/Other, differ in content even as they each function to maintain the supremacy and dominance of whiteness while also rendering it invisible in relation to the hypervisible Other. Race and racism, thus, cannot be described or remedied by a model of two.

Further, her insistence on the 'two' instead of the 'multiple' is a clear limit of applying her work to other kind of difference, as it clearly delineates the heterosexual male-female relation and posits this relation specifically as fundamental to society and inherently worthy of redemption:

> "The paradigm of this two is to be found in sexual difference. Why here? Because it implies two subjects who should not be situated in either a hierarchical or a genealogical relationship, and that these two subjects have the duty of preserving the human species and of developing its culture, while respecting their differences."[344]

Heterosexual desire, therefore, also plays an important role in her work, specifically when she discusses the danger of "appropriation" of the Other by the self in a "monosubjective culture."[345] This danger only exists because there is, in the first place, desire for the Other, to be with and close to the Other: "Today it is often claimed that there are no insuperable difference between man and woman. What is forgotten, in this case, is that difference is the source of desire and pleasure."[346] Difference is then the source of both desire and appropriation, and therefore, according to Irigaray, we should not strive to overcome or eliminate difference but rather, by allowing true sexual difference to grow and flourish we can avoid appropriation. Respecting the difference of individuals "who are linked together, particularly through sexed relationships" is for

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[343] Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. "On The Coloniality Of Being." *Cultural Studies* 21:2 (2007): 240-70.
[344] Irigaray, "The Question of the Other," 129.
[345] Irigaray, Luce. *Sharing the world*. London: Continuum, 2008. 2.
[346] Irigaray, "The Question of the Other," 113.

Irigaray key to "founding a democracy", that is, a society not constructed through hierarchical relations.[347]

While heterosexual desire also does not fully determine gender relations, it certainly for obvious reasons cannot encompass self/Other relations structured by race—although, as bell hooks has written about in "Eating the Other," performative practices of white desire for the racialized Other do have a specific role in contemporary racial politics (and is useful for analyzing the case of Dolezal's identification as Black). But while Irigaray is discussing desire to *be with* the Other, Dolezal desires to *become* the Other; this is also a crucial difference between the objects of hooks' essay and the argument I am putting forth about Dolezal. Hooks is describing a desire to be with the Other, appropriate the Other, "get a bit of the other", to taste the Other just for a moment to enrich oneself; this to some extent resembles the relation that Irigaray problematizes and aims to replace.[348] But a desire to shed whiteness and *become* Black, *become* the Other, is what is manifest in Dolezal's identification, encompassing but going beyond the desire to be with or close to the Other.

The spatiality of desire brings us to the interval, which for Irigaray is "both an entrance and a space between."[349] This 'between' is both the hierarchical relation between men and women but also what she envisions, in a world of realized sexual difference, becoming "the space of contact or meeting between two autonomous sexuate identities."[350] The distance created and maintained by the interval is what allow these two subjects to remain different and autonomous even in their desire for each other: "The *locomotion toward* and *reduction in* interval are the movements of desire."[351] And so "the problem of desire is to suppress the interval without suppressing the other," or, how to overcome the distance without denying the difference.[352] That is, the interval

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[347] Ibid, 118.
[348] Hooks, "Eating the Other," 1992.
[349] Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. London: The Athlone Press, 1993. 12.
[350] Johnston, Tim R. "Questioning the Threshold of Sexual Difference: Irigarayan Ontology and Transgender, Intersex, and Gender-Nonconforming Being". *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21.4 (2015): 617-633. 619.
[351] Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 48 (emphasis original).
[352] Ibid.

would shift from a relation to a space, a manifestation of absolute difference that prevents one subject from subsuming the other. For it is precisely desire *for* the Other that risks creating an unethical relation through appropriation; it is in these terms that I find Dolezal's identification with Blackness a form of appropriation and unethical: "The existence of the other, love of the other, concern for the other, etc. are evoked, without the question of who of what this other represents being asked… In fact, if the other is not defined in his actual reality, he remains another me, and not a real other."[353] The interval, which "would produce place"[354] and from their own places two subjects could better recognize and respect each other's differences: "Since I respect the other as other, irreducible to myself, I see him, listen to him, and perceive him better in the detail of his particularity."[355]

Such respect is precisely what is in Dolezal's narrative of her identification as Black and relationships to Black people. Take, for example, her comparison of her own 'racial fluidity' to the historical passing of light-skinned Black Americans as white for economic opportunities they needed to survive and support their families:

> "I think when people say, 'you have white privilege and that's why you can choose your identity,' [...] we're ignoring a massive amount of history, in which most often it's actually been the opposite where Black and biracial people lived a white life. So maybe there's again, light-skin privilege, white privilege, you know, there's a range of privilege for sure, for maybe ethnically indeterminate people who [...] have the option of asserting 'I'm this or that' or letting that person identify you."[356]

By placing herself on the same light-skinned spectrum of privilege to pass as Black Americans who were forced to pass to access job opportunities, Dolezal denies, among many others, the fact that she chose to pass out of *desire* to be the Other. Some have speculated that her desire to be the Other was a result of her desire for certain career opportunities (for example, leadership at the NAACP and teaching positions in Black studies) which would normally be given with priority to Black people, and in this sense that her identification is opportunistic. I have in other chapters suggested that

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[353] Irigaray, *I Love To You* as cited in Irigaray, *Sharing the World*, 124.
[354] Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 48.
[355] Irigaray, *Sharing the World*, 148.
[356] Payne, "Rachel Dolezal on Why She Can't Just Be a White Ally."

identification as Black could work for Dolezal to re-center her and make her more comfortable in the spaces she wanted to be and move in. But here I am more concerned with the narrative that Dolezal herself creates about her identification, and in this narrative, there are no ulterior motives, only desire to express her 'true' self (i.e. to be Black). This desire, focused on her (white) self, is blind to the Other at the same time that it moves towards it; the movement is more about moving away from whiteness than it is about Blackness, which is reflected in statements such as above which do not recognize the difference with or within Blackness. Dolezal does not make visible any "ability to relate to the self in order to perceive and contemplate who the other is, and also to be able to feel oneself as oneself."[357]

Further, Irigaray's criticism of Freud and Simone de Beauvoir, who Irigaray argues both do not "recognize the other as other and, in different ways, both propose retaining the man as the subjective model whom woman should, so to speak, try to be 'equal'"[358] resonates with Dolezal's humanist discourse, which functions a justifying logic for her denial of difference between herself and Black people: "At the end of the day, we are a human race. If we could come back to that point, if we even did away with the boxes on the forms and everything, maybe it would be better for people. Why do we need to keep categorizing people?"[359] She is here speaking the language of sameness, which facilitates the continued operation and dominance of whiteness while giving the illusion of making space for and appreciating (racial) difference.

An Irigarayan ethics, then, require a respect for the difference of the Other that is also necessarily a recognition of the specificity of the self; within this ethical relation, which both describes how white people would relate to themselves and how they would relate to others, whiteness can be put to use. In the next section, I turn to this practice of putting the ethical self/Other relation to use: through alliances, rather than allyship.

[357] Irigaray, *Sharing the World*, 111.
[358] Ibid, 127.
[359] Sunderland, "In Rachel Dolezal's Skin."

From Allyship to Alliance

In this brief final section, I will look more closely at how this ethical self/Other relation can be put into practice and used towards anti-racist ends. To do so, I want to introduce two different models of solidarity, as summarized by Stephen D'Arcy (*Languages of the Unheard: Why Militant Protest is Good for Democracy*, 2013; ed. *A Line in the Tar Sand: The Struggle for Environmental Justice*, 2014): allyship and alliance, or self-emancipation.

The question of the ally, so central in the discourse around activism, tends to revolve around how a subject less affected by or even directly profiting from a particular system—such as racism—can be a part of the struggle against that system. (Part of the question is, indeed, whether it is useful to position an ally 'outside' of or 'unaffected' by any particular system, and to whom ownership of a particular struggle can or should be attributed). This can be formulated as a question of what such a person can *do* or how they should *be*, that is, how they can or should occupy space within a specific movement or society at large: allyship, I suggest, can be conceived as *who* or *how* someone is, or instead as *what* they do; the former—the ally as an identity—has received much criticism, for example in the period following Trump's election when the wearing of a safety pin was proposed as a way of marking its wearer as an ally; this required no actual action on the part of the person wearing it but was supposed to reflect their character (their willingness-to-act). As D'Arcy puts it, "the starting point of the allyship model is that "privileged" groups are powerful, because of their many advantages, and therefore bear a special responsibility to offer aid to weaker groups" and thus can wind up privileging the agency of those already benefiting from a particular system of oppression, and erase or minimize the agency of the oppressed.[360]

Particularly with the rise of anti-racist discourse and activism, such as with the spread of the Black Lives Matter movement from North America to Europe, the white

[360] D'Arcy, Steve. "Two Models of Anti-Racist Struggle: Allyship and Self-Emancipation." The Public Autonomy Project. September 3, 2015. https://publicautonomy.org/2014/09/26/allyship-v-self-emancipation/.

ally has of late become a particular point of attention. While some have argued that "white people have no place in Black liberation" others, such as critical whiteness scholars, have attempted to redeem the figure of the white ally by incorporating critiques thereof[361]. The difference in these two approaches may be characterized as allyship and self-emancipation (or alliance), respectively. While the former sees the role of white people in anti-racism as integral, the latter does not position the attitudes or actions of white people centrally.

Understanding Dolezal as a white ally makes clear the mechanisms by which white people with a desire to be involved with and contribute to anti-racist activism can wind up actually reproducing oppressive elements of whiteness. By becoming Black, Dolezal was able to recenter herself, similar to the white women Sunderland interviewed who were "active members of an African American oriented community" in that they also participated "in a social context where white is not what's at the center."[362] Following bell hooks, Sunderland suggests that in this context, "it is certainly possible that constructing oneself as African American is a way to enhance one's status" and "may also enhance feelings of belonging."[363] Along these lines, Dolezal herself has said that while being perceived as Black made her a target of racism, nevertheless "living as a Black woman made her life infinitely better."[364] I follow Laura LeMoon, who argues, "an ally should be personally gaining NOTHING through their activism. In fact, if you are an ally, you should be *losing* things through your activism; space, voice, recognition, validation, identity and **ego**."[365]

Dis/comfort is another way to frame the question of the ally. Ahmed defines comfort phenomenologically as "to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins," noting that "white bodies are

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[361] Zainab and Rigby, Jr. "White People have No Place in Black Liberation."
[362] Sunderland, "You May Not Know It, But...", 43.
[363] Ibid.
[364] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 149.
[365] LeMoon, Laura as cited in Delgado, Didi. "The Caucasian Invasion Of Racial Justice Spaces – The Establishment." The Establishment. April 01, 2017. https://theestablishment.co/whites-only-the-caucasian-invasion-of-racial-justice-spaces-7e2529ec8314. Emphasis original.

comfortable *as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape*."[366] And comfort is a motivational factor in Dolezal's narrative of identification with Blackness, when, for instance, she discusses the benefits of allowing herself to erroneously being read as Black at college: "it became easier for me to let them make assumptions about me. I noticed how much more relaxed and comfortable Black people who assumed I was Black were around me."[367] But white supremacy is not disrupted when the white subject's comfort is increased—"white people should move comfortably in neither Black spaces nor white space"—by allowing or encouraging them to believe they are not white.[368] As Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman wrote of/to the white ally in 1990:

"You will … have to come to terms with the sense of alientation, of not belonging, of having your world thoroughly disrupted, having it criticized and scrutinized from the point of view of those who have been harmed by it, having important concepts central to it dismissed, being viewed with mistrust, being seen as of no consequence except as an object of mistrust."[369]

The point is not to put white people in a state of perpetual discomfort and alienation for the sake thereof, as a kind of redemptive punishment—the point is that important work can be done in that space. Sullivan uses slave-holders, many white people's ancestors, as an example of this productive discomfort: "rather than becoming lost or immobilized by the horrific aspects of white ancestry, white allies need to figure out how to use it," for "white people cannot simply disown or separate themselves from their white ancestors because those ancestors are a part of them."[370] Such a process would, of course, be ultimately in the service of anti-racist activism and not to make the white subject feel 'good' about or even necessarily at peace with their ancestry.

Dolezal herself attests to the effectiveness of her anti-racist work as a white ally:

"I helped create the first African American history course ever taught there, and it remains a part of the curriculum to this day. I worked with the college's president to increase the recruitment and retention of Black students, and by the time I graduated, the Black population on campus had increased to nearly 15 percent. And I helped

[366] Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," 158. Emphasis original.
[367] Dolezal and Storms*, In Full Color*, 100.
[368] Zainab and Rigby Jr. "White People Have No Place in Black Liberation."
[369] Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good*, 195.
[370] Sullivan, *Good White People*, 84.

organize a conference to discuss 'racial reconciliation' and got MLK Day recognized on campus."[371]

But her feelings about being (seen as) a white ally change, and I argue that this has to do with the de-centralized, supportive role of an ally; becoming Black, on the other hand, provided her with opportunities for leadership within anti-racism: "I didn't work for the cause from the outside as a white ally, but from the inside as a Black leader, someone who was eager to not only model the philosophy of a great activist like Angela Davis but sport similar textured hair as well."[372] Dolezal here is eager to model Blackness (literally, through a hairstyle similar to that of Davis) as means of becoming a 'great activist.' To be 'inside' the cause means, to Dolezal, to also be 'inside' a Black body; the Trojan horse that delivers the message is the message. But it is this desire to be 'inside', to be 'great', that attests to the way in which Dolezal's identification as Black constitutes a white flight from responsibility. The goal of solidarity is not for individuals to realize their potential as leaders, to become great, but to find ways to make our selves useful to one another.

It can and should be noted that the way in which Dolezal centers herself in the anti-racist activism on her college campus before she began presenting as Black has its risks, and I am not suggesting that white people can take center stage in such struggles as long as they do it as white. But I do suspect that Dolezal's whiteness facilitated the changes she takes credit for creating, and so that her identification as Blackness has less to do with 'the cause' and more to do with her own vision for herself within it. As such, her identification as Blackness can less usefully be read as an 'instinctual' or 'authentic' connection and expression, and rather as a re-centering of herself in spaces in which she felt comfortable, but more precisely still, making herself comfortable at the center of spaces which she had first occupied at the periphery, uncomfortably. I do suggest that the fact that these spaces, Black spaces, were desirable for her to be in that she wanted to feel comfortable in them indicates that Dolezal experienced her whiteness differently than many other white Americans; this difference is, again, not an

[371] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 80.
[372] Ibid, 148.

authentic or instinctual difference, but a difference produced as much by proximity to Blackness as exotification of it. I do not intend to romanticize this difference or present it as somehow 'pure' (as in, for example, racism-free), but propose that it may have something to tell us about those who reject their whiteness and take white flight from their responsibility as white allies.

Fortunately there is an alternative: the alliance or self-emancipation model. In the context of anti-racist activism in the U.S., Malcolm X is perhaps the most well-known example: he famously responded to one particular young white girl (of many other white people who asked the same question) who asked what she could do with "nothing."[373] But in his autobiography he writes of his regret and that he wishes he could tell her what he had begun telling other white people who presented themselves 'sincerely':

> "Where the really sincere white people have got to do their "proving" of themselves is not among the black victims, but out on the battle lines of where America's racism really is—and that's in their own home communities; America's racism is among their own fellow whites. That's where sincere whites who really mean to accomplish something have got to work."[374]

Malcolm X expressed his distrust for white people who seemed to crave proximity to Black people as a kind of affirmation of their own goodness, and explicitly stated that "at least where my own particular Black Nationalist organization, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, is concerned, they can't join us."[375] He advocated instead that white people organize themselves and work parallel to the Black movement—not within it—"to work trying to convert other white people who are thinking and acting so racist. Let sincere whites go and teach non-violence to white people!"[376]

As D'Arcy puts it, "in Malcolm's conception, once racialized people have organized themselves, autonomously, to fight for their own emancipation, they may indeed find it advantageous, from the point of view of maximizing the potency of their

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[373] X, Malcolm, and Alex Haley. *The autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York, NY: Grove Press, 1965. 383.
[374] Ibid, 384.
[375] Ibid, 383.
[376] Ibid, 384.

struggles, to seek out *alliances* with other movements or organizations."[377] Malcolm X suggested that "working separately, the sincere white people and sincere black people actually will be working together", bringing to mind anti-racist organizations for and by white people like Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) and AWARE (Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere).[378] There is neither an expectation nor invitation for white people to become involved as white people, but rather, in the model proposed by D'Arcy, the possibility for collaboration when it is beneficial for Black people and non-Black people of color and white people as members of another movement (D'Arcy gives the example of environmentalism). Thus it is not that white people 'have no place in Black liberation' at all, ever, but rather that "they participate, not as people with white privilege invited to sacrifice their own privileges on the basis of a moral duty, but in their capacity as people pursuing *their own* struggles."[379] The self-emancipation or alliance model is thus also based off of an intersectional understanding of struggles that will inevitably lead to alliances and collaboration, as movements that have different focuses are nevertheless inextricably intertwined. So white people here do have a role, "as participants in (macro-level) alliances with the self-emancipation struggles of people of colour", but they are not foregrounded or seen as central to the movement.[380] This does not mean that white people are completely excused of responsibility to act or become involved, but rather that "their contribution is not grounded in their whiteness or their status a privileged group."[381]

This approach, indeed, would avoid re-centering the (white) self, or what Irigaray would call appropriation. The following "Code of Ethics for Antiracist White Allies", written by JLove Calderon and Tim Wise (both white activists and writers) is an illustration of how this can happen: "though people of color are the direct targets of this system, we believe that white people are the collateral damage, and so for our own

[377] D'Arcy, "Two Models of Anti-Racist Struggle."
[378] X and Haley, "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," 384.
[379] D'Arcy, "Two Models of Anti-Racist Struggle." Emphasis original.
[380] Ibid.
[381] Ibid.

sake as well, we strive for a new way of living."[382] Here, white people are positioned as fellow victims of racism and fellow potential beneficiaries of anti-racism, the latter of which is a distorted view, to say the least, and the former of which assumes a need for personal incentive for involvement in the movement. Encouraging solidarity through a notion of shared victimhood is what hooks has called a "misguided strategy."[383]

Dolezal told NBC BLK, "I said I tried the 'ally path' in my earlier young adulthood. I did a lot of work but it wasn't as much in harmony with me being seen and understood for who I am, and that just kind of all synchronizing, in my life."[384] Here is a clear illustration of the re-centering of the (white) ally, in which her self has a privileged relation to the anti-racist work she does; the latter is a mere extension of expression of the former. Thus in her desire to be seen by the Other as *the same as* the Other, Dolezal stepped off of the 'ally path', across the interval, moved not by a respect for difference but by her desire for sameness in the shape of the Other. As Alcoff put it, drawing on Sartre, and less explicitly, Irigaray:

> "attempts by whites to assimilate wholly to blackness may be motivated by the desire to make the Black Look--or Black subjectivity, which is what the Look signifies--safely internal and thus nonthreatening to the self. The recognition of an irreducible difference, a difference that crossover tries to overcome, would maintain the Other's own point of departure, the Other's own space of autonomous judgment, and thus the possibility for a truly reciprocal recognition of full subjectivity."[385]

Crossovers like Dolezal's, then, are not only unethical in that they collapse the space necessary for 'a truly reciprocal recognition of full subjectivity,' but also counter-productive politically, in that they deny the very difference that would be the source of our anti-racist solidarity. I have argued that crucial work takes place (or doesn't) at the 'point of departure' that is the white self-relation, and so despite valid criticisms of some critical whiteness studies scholarship around 'positive white identity', I maintain that,

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[382] Calderon, Jlove, and Tim Wise. "Code of Ethics for Antiracist White Allies." In *Occupying Privilege: Conversations on Love, Race & Liberation*. Love-N-Liberation Press, 2012.

[383] hooks, *Black Looks*, 13.

[384] Payne, "Rachel Dolezal on Why She Can't Just Be a White Ally."

[385] Alcoff, "What Can White People Do?"

through Irigarayan ethics, this self-relation can and must be made useful for anti-racist activism and alliances.

Conclusion: the Whiteness Question

In this section, I have examined the useful options for white people in terms of relating to themselves and relating to others, and argued for approaching these questions in terms of ethics. I began a case for developing a useful white self-relation (shifting away from the terminology of a 'positive white identity') and used Irigaray and sexual difference to consider how an ethical white self-relation could be the foundation for an ethical self/Other relation, and why this would be useful for dismantling white supreamcy. Last, I contrasted two models of solidarity in anti-racist activism—allyship and alliance—and argued for the latter. While allyship has the tendency of re-centering the white self, perpetuating structures of whiteness in a way that is not useful for anti-racist activism, the latter does not assume that white people are integral to Black liberation, instead putting Irigaray's 'interval' into practice by using difference and distance as a basis for political organizing and solidarity.

Critically questioning Dolezal's identification, then, is not about reinforcing essentialist notions of race, nor about policing identity and the right to self-determination. It is about showing that her actions are not useful, that in fact, whiteness—the very thing we are aiming to undo—is (re)produced through them. Her identification as Black does not transform whiteness, and this may be in part because the narrative she has created to justify her identification to herself and others is steeped or 'stuck' in negative affect—it cannot move beyond itself and thus cannot be transformative. Rather than creating an ethical relation to herself as white and channeling her love and energy into recognizing and working to change the power relations in which she was embedded, Dolezal individualized what is a collective responsibility and joint struggle, alleviating herself of her responsibility to others, Black and white. The question 'what can white people do?' is a complicated one, but it is not avoided or answered by attempting to erase that upon which it is contingent: whiteness.

Conclusion

This analysis of Dolezal has been motivated by my personal (at once political) investments in and questions about the discourses in which her identification is situated. My aim was not to provide clear-cut definitions or answers, but rather to explore those questions in service of working towards a world in which difference is not met with the desire to appropriate. To do so, I have focused on the ways in which whiteness materializes through Dolezal's identification as Black and in the narrative she has produced thereof. That is, rather than transcending the power relations that structure race, and in particular whiteness, Dolezal and the discourse about her identity reproduces these relations.

However, at the same time, I have been concerned with showing what may fall through the cracks when white identity, in terms of the experience of white embodiment in relation to others, is thought to be exhaustively explained by the functions of white supremacy. I have argued, using Dolezal as an example, that there are different kinds of whiteness, to which we must attend in critical whiteness scholarship and recognize—more importantly, put to use—in our anti-racist activist practices.

Rejecting the potential usefulness of the 'race traitor' subject-position, I have also proposed—despite prior criticisms of this line of thought, which I take to heart—that it would be politically useful for white people to develop a 'positive' white self-relation, following Irigarayan ethics; attention to their own specificity, which would entail perpetual acknowledgement of the structures that produce their positions without becoming stuck in negative affects, is a necessary step in forming a useful self/Other relation in anti-racist organizing. Although there are risks to this proposal, a shift from allyship to allegiance in conceptualizing solidarity could mitigate the risk of white solipsism or re-centering white agency; and I believe that otherwise, the risk of appropriation, in Irigaray's sense of the world, is an urgent one.

I decided early on in this process to limit my references to the public discourse that summer in 2015 which compared Dolezal to Caitlyn Jenner, or more broadly 'changing' one's racial identification with 'changing' one's gender identification, chiefly because the differences, similarities and intertanglements between the categories of

race and gender is a project onto itself that I could not do justice here. However, these relations surfaced anyway, at some moments more explicitly than others; that is, my use of feminist theory, such as Butler, Irigaray and Guillamin, implicitly suggested that there are productive conceptual overlaps between what becomes constructed as two mutually exclusive approaches to both subject and knowledge production. That is, feminist scholarship includes modes of thought and analysis useful for critical race scholarship, and vice-versa, particularly when it comes to thinking through the material relations through which bodies materialize and proposing ethics for transforming those relations in the service of a more just world.

In this vein, I wish to briefly elaborate upon an affect, if we can call it as such, mentioned already in the second chapter: love. To call it an affect is precisely not to reduce it to a 'feeling', but rather to take it as a structure produced in the circulation of embodied relations. In her memoir Dolezal addresses the question of passing for particular benefits (as well as particular disadvantages) as follows: "Why would a white person ever want to pass for Black when doing so would involve losing social and economic benefits? One reason: love."[386] As I hope to have shown through Irigaray and hooks, desire, which here figures as love, is far from the pure, apolitical relation that Dolezal would like it to be. Love can lead to "fusion" (or appropriation), "submission" (or hierarchy), or, potentially, to an ethical relation in which "respecting the difference makes desire for the other possible without having to renounce the self."[387] Dolezal's identification as Black, I have argued, is the first of these three courses. The ethical self/Other relation could still involve desire or love, but also restraint and respect for the irreducible difference between the self and Other which also becomes "respect for myself, my life and my growth."[388] In this sense I disagree with Penelope Deutscher's reading of Irigaray: "When Irigaray condemns my appropriation of the other, she excludes the possibility of a politics that can recognize and deal more adequately with

[386] Dolezal and Storms, *In Full Color*, 148.
[387] Irigaray, *Sharing the World*, 12.
[388] Ibid, 112.

the fact that I must always have appropriated the other." [389] I do not think that Irigaray denies the constitutive relations between self and Other, but that she does not believe that see relations are inherently appropriative, using other terms instead: "there is a rhythmic pulse which beats between going out towards the other and returning to the self … this movement resembles that of the heart, of the circulation of blood, but also that of the cosmos itself."[390] Precisely this distance between self and Other is for Irigaray what also connects them and constitutes them respectively; she thus proposes a new syntax of expressing love to the Other: "'I love *to* you' is more unusual than 'I love you,' but respects the two more: I love to who you are, to what you do, without reducing you to an object of my love."[391]

Across the distance, which is also precisely a connection, desire pulses back and forth, creating an interval which enables rather than prohibits an ethical relation between self and Other, a relation which is also productive precisely because it requires respect for irreducible difference. This is what Ahmed calls ethical communication: "a certain way of holding proximity and distance together: one gets close enough to others to be touched by that which cannot be simply got across."[392] Being at a distance from the Other becomes a way of touching and being touched by the Other, as well as a way of getting 'in touch' with oneself. For this reason I see this relation as not only ethical but also useful: it does not reduce the Other to an image of the Self but is precisely a mode of respecting the other and recognizing both the connections and the difference between self and Other.

To return to Dolezal's explanation of choosing to be Black, despite its disadvantages, out of 'love', Irigaray, following Enrico Belinguer, argues that "we should not renounce love but educate it so that it can be faithful, even in passion, to our highest

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[389] Deutscher, Penelope. *A politics of impossible difference: the later work of Luce Irigaray*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002. 182.
[390] Irigaray, *Sharing the World*, 111.
[391] Irigaray, Luce. *The way of love*. London, Eng.: Continuum, 2008. 60. Emphasis added.
[392] Ahmed, Sara. *Strange encounters embodied others in post-coloniality*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013.

ideal."[393] In the same year, bell hooks published *All About Love: New Visions*, in which she critiques current models and abuses of love but also argues for its potential to be a transformative power. Love might also be productive in our discussion here, but not the love that Dolezal attributes her identification too; rather, a love which motivates the white subject towards action, critical self-reflection and engaging the white people around them in that self-reflection and action. Sullivan, describing *Memoir of a Race Traitor* by Mab Segrest, a white lesbian civil rights activist in North Carolina, observes that ultimately, for Segrest, "loving herself and her white family members is not something that conflicts with Segrest's relationship to whiteness. It's another crucial place where her critical, transformative love is needed."[394] This critical, transformative love, I propose, can help create and sustain a productive self-relation that is moved to action by positive rather than negative affect (i.e. shame and guilt)—and moves others to action as well. Love, in the context of whiteness and dismantling white supremacy, is not simply about uncritically loving or feeling good about oneself, but potentially about the process of seeking out how, from one's own position, one can be useful to others. I am not, then, suggesting that white supremacy will be dismantled if white people 'love themselves' and certainly not if Black people and non-Black people of color find ways to respond to the white people around them—particularly the whitely ones—with or out of love. I am instead suggesting that love is an embodied and felt structure of relations which we can put to use for political transformation. These relations may first require transformation themselves, which is where Irigaray, a sexual difference feminist, can be useful for critical race theory and for imagining more ethical racial relations.

I do not make these propositions lightly; this project has been a process which included ample self- reflection, doubt and criticism, but I found these doubts encouraging, as I hope that they indicate that my work here is constituted by an openness that will make it part of and useful in the ongoing conversation, within and outside of academia, about whiteness. In particular I can imagine (and welcome) critiques of the notion of an 'ethical white self-relation' especially as a first step towards

[393] Irigaray, *Sharing the World*, 108.
[394] Sullivan, *Good White People*, 145.

dismantling white supremacy. But I do believe that this relation runs contrary to what Frye calls whiteliness, and moving away from whiteliness is a first step towards at least changing how whiteness works, shifting the relations of power through which it is constituted—and these shifts may just be able to shake the foundation of white supremacy.

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