Black Like Her
By Jelani Cobb
June 15, 2015

Rachel Dolezal is a white woman who has for some years identified as black. She wasn’t lying about who she is. She was lying about a lie.

Photograph by Colin Mulvany/The Spokesman-Review via AP

On June 7th, Elinor Burkett published an Op-Ed in the Times expressing what she portrayed as a feminist’s reluctant skepticism about aspects of the transgender movement. She argued, in part, that the notion of men simply transitioning into women was equivalent to a white person darkening his or her skin and professing to be black. The example was meant as a reductio ad absurdum—but, less than a week later, Rachel Dolezal, the president of the Spokane, Washington, chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and a professor of Africana studies, was unveiled as a white woman who has for some years presented herself and identified as black. On Monday, Dolezal resigned, in a statement that didn’t answer questions about what she referred to as “my personal identity,” though it did refer obliquely to “challenging the construct of race.” That answer is clearly inadequate; many people have
challenged the construct of race without lying about their lives. But there is something more worth discussing here.

The easy presumption about Dolezal, who has two white parents and light skin and eyes—and hair that has ranged from blond to brown, though she has worn it in ways that are culturally associated with black women—is that this is an instance in which someone finally pointed out the obvious: the emperor is naked. But, in truth, Dolezal has been dressed precisely as we all are, in a fictive garb of race whose determinations are as arbitrary as they are damaging. This doesn’t mean that Dolezal wasn’t lying about who she is. It means that she was lying about a lie.

Dolezal’s name has been added to a running discussion of racial appropriation. Two weeks ago, Chet Haze, the putative rapper and son of the actor Tom Hanks, took to Instagram with a questionable syllogism. Because hip-hop is, in his view, “not about race,” and because he so closely identifies with the genre, he should be allowed to use the word “nigger” (or its variant “nigga”) without recrimination. His comments recalled the feeble musings of John Mayer, five years ago, when he lamented to Playboy that his level of black cred was high enough, his standing within the race so unimpeachable, that he ought to be able to toss the epithet with the same sort of entitlement as Jay Z. And last week, the Washington Post published a timeline of the career implosion of Iggy Azalea, the white Australian rapper notable for her transparent racial affectations.

Among African-Americans, there is a particular contempt, rooted in the understanding that black culture was formed in a crucible of degradation, for what Norman Mailer hailed as the “white Negro.” Whatever elements of beauty or cool, whatever truth or marketable lies there are that we associate with blackness, they are ultimately the product of a community’s quest to be recognized as human in a society that is only ambivalently willing to see it as such. And it is this root that cannot be assimilated. The white Negroes, whose genealogy stretches backward from Azalea through Elvis and Paul Whiteman, share the luxury of being able to slough off blackness the moment it becomes disadvantageous, cumbersome, or dangerous. It is an identity as impermanent as burnt cork, whose profitability rests upon an unspoken suggestion that the surest evidence of white superiority is the capacity to exceed blacks even at being black. The black suspicion of whites thus steeped in black culture wasn’t bigotry; it was a cultural tariff—an abiding sense that, if they knew all that came with the category, they would be far less eager to enlist.

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But this is precisely what makes the Dolezal deception complicated. Artists like Eminem and Teena Marie, white people who were by and large accepted by black people as a legitimate part of black cultural life, nonetheless had to finesse a kind of epidermal conflict of interest. Irrespective of their sincerity, a portion of their profitability lay in their status as atypically white. Dolezal’s transracialism was imbued with exactly the opposite undertaking. She passed as black and set about shouldering the inglorious, frustrating parts of that identity—the parts that allocate responsibility for what was once called “uplifting the race.” It’s an aspect of her story that at least ought to give her critics—black ones, particularly—a moment of pause.
Dolezal is, like me, a graduate of Howard University, a place where the constellation of black identities and appearances is so staggeringly vast as to ridicule the idea that blackness could, or ever has been, any one thing. What I took from Howard, besides that broadened sense of a world I’d presumed to know, was an abiding debt to those who’d fought on its behalf and a responsibility to do so for those who came afterward. It’s easy to deride Dolezal’s dishonesty—to ridicule her hoax as a clever means of sidestepping the suspicion with which white liberals are commonly greeted—until we reflect on a photograph of Walter White, the aptly named man who served as the second black president of the N.A.A.C.P. Or one of Louis T. Wright, who served as the national chairman of the N.A.A.C.P. board during the Great Depression. In the nineteen-twenties, amid a feud with the organization, the black nationalist Marcus Garvey criticized the N.A.A.C.P. for being an organization whose black and white members were essential indistinguishable.

The spectrum of shades and colorings that constitute “black” identity in the United States, and the equal claim to black identity that someone who looks like White or Wright (or, for that matter, Dolezal) can have, is a direct product of bloodlines that attest to institutionalized rape during and after slavery. Nearly all of us who identify as African-American in this country, apart from some more recent immigrants, have at least some white ancestry. My own white great-grandparent is as inconsequential as the color of my palms in terms of my status as a black person in the United States. My grandparents had four children: my father and his brother, both almond-brown, with black hair and dark eyes, and two girls with reddish hair, fair skin, freckles, and gray eyes. All of them were equally black because they were equal heirs to the quirks of chance determining whether their ancestry from Europe or Africa was most apparent. Dolezal’s primary offense lies not in the silly proffering of a false biography but in knowing this ugly history and taking advantage of the reasons that she would, at least among black people, be taken at her word regarding her identity.

Race, in this country and under certain circumstances, functions like a faith, in that the simple profession of membership is sufficient. The most—possibly the sole—democratic element of race in this country lies in this ecumenical approach to blackness. We are not in the business of checking membership cards. In this way, Dolezal’s claim on black identity is of a different order than the hollow declaration of a Hollywood scion or anyone else who opted to be Negro for a season. They can plead ignorance. But Dolezal spent four years at an institution steeped in the delicacies of race. If nothing else, she understands the exact nature of the trust she violated.

Despite the interchangeability of the terms “African-American” and “black,” this is a community in which ancestry is one, but clearly not the sole or necessarily even the primary, basis for inclusion. Walter White was only fractionally more African than Dolezal, but black enough to be accepted as not only a member of that community but one of its leaders. There is also a disquieting notion inherent in this approach to identity—that if anyone can indeed be “black,” then we all are, that Morrison and Coltrane and Chisholm and Malcolm are both unhyphenated Americans and indistinct. (And yet, in circumstances where someone named Eric Garner or Walter Scott is looking nervously over his shoulder, they are still vulnerably intelligible.) It putatively means that Chet Haze is as qualified to utter the word "nigga" as anyone for whom dark skin and skewed life chances have given the word connotations Haze would never countenance. It means, most damningly, that black people are not distinctly bound to each other.
Yet both of these things—a community rooted in race and a deep-seated skepticism about the very existence of race—coexist.

Rachel Dolezal is not black—by lineage or lifelong experience—yet I find her deceptions less troubling than the vexed criteria being used to exclude her. If blackness is simply a matter of a preponderance of African ancestry, then we should set about the task of excising a great deal of the canon of black history, up to and including the current President. If it is simply a matter of shared experience, we might excommunicate people like Walter White, whose blue eyes were camouflage that could serve both to spare him the direct indignity of racism and enable him to personally investigate and expose lynchings. Dolezal was dishonest about an undertaking rooted in dishonesty, and no matter how absurd her fictional blackness may appear, it is worth recalling that the former lie is far more dangerous than the latter. Our means of defining ourselves are complex and contradictory—and could be nothing other than that. But if the rubric is faulty it remains vital. The great majority of Americans recognize slavery as a figment of history, interred in a receding past. But, for black people, that past remains at the surface—close at hand, indelible, a narrative as legible as skin.

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