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On whiteness, Rachel Dolezal and identity politics

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Questions about why Rachel Dolezal identified herself as a black woman have been flooding the internet for the past week. Interrogations seemed solely contrasted and compared with "blackness" as a concept and with our socially constructed understandings of blackness. We did not ask these questions from a place of querying whiteness. Yet how do we understand whiteness, and how our conceptualizations of whiteness manifest in relation to blackness, race and racialization, are also worthy of discussion.

If we talk about race as a social construction -- and this has been the academic jargon for the last many years as we moved from the lexicon of "visible minority" status to racialization, to particularly capture the processes that make race to be objectively marked as "race" -- why does it make sense to juxtapose racialization to an essentialized notion of whiteness? Not only we are holding the notion of whiteness as the universal benchmark of comparison -- and we are, as long as the move between races is ought to only go unidirectional, from white to black, and not the other way around -- but we also assume that whiteness exclusively conflates with privilege and that subalternity cannot exist within whiteness.

I am not talking about the washed-up argument of "degrees of whiteness" nor about the racialization of whiteness rhetoric, but rather about the otherness inherent to certain forms of whiteness. Let me further explain. In certain contexts, whiteness equals privilege, however, that is not to say that whiteness equals privilege across all social-political contexts; nor that racialization is always subaltern.

There are racialized people in powerful and privileged positions (e.g. Obama, for example, who, according to my friend Clinton, is the whitest man ever, I mean he "even lives in the White House for goodness sake"), as there are white people in subaltern subject locations (take the example of Romanians and Bulgarians migrants in the U.K.).



not have legitimate claims to vulnerability because they did not come from the top entry countries of family migration. What is it about whiteness that we do not want to give away? Is it an inverse logic of maintaining privilege? That even if you are included as excluded, at least you are part of the included? The hell with exploring white exclusion, when we can all pretend to be whitely included.

I am wondering if Rachel Dolezal's self-identification is related in any way to how we define whiteness. I have never met her in person. I do not know her, therefore I am not in a position to fingerpoint her intentions. People have been presenting her as a highly skilled con artist; however, I doubt that she created this contested self-identity to cash in monetary or academic rewards.

Of course, I base this assumption on intuition and a certain feeling that I have, and nothing else. And if we were to go back to the times of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke, why shouldn't we start from the idea that humans are good and well intentioned in nature? Instead of evil, crooks or some other adjectives we might be tempted to easily use?

I am wondering if Rachel Dolezal had a personal association with experiences of othering and subalternness. Perhaps misrepresenting herself as a black woman, because she could not appropriately represent herself as a white (subaltern) woman. Maybe she could not identify herself with being white in the way that we conceptualize whiteness within the North American knowledge production system. I am not trying to find excuses for anyone. And appropriation of culture, identity or fetishism of culture and ethnicities for that matter, have always seemed weird to me (I come from the Balkans, where culture and ethnicity are the root of all evil and the last thing one wants to do is to fetishize someone else's culture). But I cannot stop wondering if there was space in Rachel Dolezal's academic world for exploring subalternness from a de facto white perspective. Fetishizing the other is not the same with feeling as the other or with having the ability to situate oneself as the other within the societally constructed notion of whiteness.

The reality is that there is very little room within academia for engaging with social justice scholarship outside identity politics. At a practical level, this means that the scholar needs to identify herself as belonging to a marginalized and subaltern group. The more visible the better, of course, while ignoring that subjectivity is not at whole subaltern nor privileged. One can be marginalized on certain identity axes and privileged on others. We are all simultaneously implicated in systems of privilege and oppression.

It is why I believe the Rachel Dolezal story should be about identifying which is the overarching axis of privilege within specific fields, situations and socio-political contexts, and not about making universal



American to have to live one day as a gay person in Azerbaijan. We are all obsessively concerned with people racially 'passing' that we forget to problematize the very nature and foundation of this passing. If race is socially constructed, then racial privilege is also socially and contextually bound (i.e. not universal and certainly not essentialized).

Yet I am not Black myself, and this also needs to be acknowledged. I do not know how it would have felt to pick up a newspaper and read about Rachel Dolezal's story; I have written this piece from a place of thinking and not from a place of feeling.

Image: Facebook/NAACP Spokane

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