Is Rachel Dolezal Black?

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The recently resigned President of the Spokane chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Rachel Dolezal, a woman born to White parents, says that she identifies as “Black.” But what does this mean exactly? Is this different from being Black? And what does it mean to be Black anyway, or White for that
matter? The answer is not black and white and differs based on the historical, social, cultural, and geographical context. Genetics and skin tone also play a very important role.*

What follows is a brief review of the differences of black and Black, as these designations of color and race have been used, with discriminatory intent and worse, throughout the world, and especially in the United States. In general, the stamp of blackness by one Black person onto another comes out of a complex equation that is idiosyncratically derived and applied throughout the Black community. And so, although President Obama has been accepted (or identified) as a Black man, regardless of his parentage, there are many Blacks who cannot embrace Rachel Dolezal as a Black woman. As the child of White parents, she will always have the ability to return to the White race, a privilege denied to most Blacks.

This piece will not discuss the terrible shooting in Charleston which took place during the time this essay was being prepared for publication. It may be noted, however, that these questions of color and race have, for Blacks, always been connected to White violence.

For all intents and purposes I am a (dark-skinned) Black woman but about year ago, well before this Dolezal controversy erupted, I entertained the idea of claiming to be White. Around that time, Country Wide, which has been bought out by Bank of America, had pled guilty to ushering thousands of Blacks into subprime mortgages that they had not offered to their White counterparts with comparable credit ratings. I decided that when I applied for a mortgage I would list my race as White, and if the banks contested that fact I would challenge them to prove that I wasn’t.

The first time I was introduced to this kind of logic was as a high school senior. At that time my White psychology teacher told a story of how her sister applied for a scholarship meant only for African Americans. She said her sister challenged scholarship administrators to prove she wasn’t African American. When my teacher told me this story I was at first appalled but also confused. What did she mean that scholarship administrators had to prove her sister wasn’t African American? Having recently gone through a graduate program in humanities, where the socially and culturally constructed aspects of race were constantly emphasized, I now understand the argument my teacher’s sister was trying to make.

Likewise, as a homebuyer, I thought to challenge the banks to prove that I wasn’t White. If they tried to base their argument that I am Black on the dark color of my skin, I would parade through the court a series of light-skinned, White looking, Blacks to make the argument that my race cannot be determined by my skin tone alone. If they wanted to go the biological route, I would point out the curious case of Sandra Laing, a Black baby girl born

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* Throughout this piece the terms Black and White will be capitalized when they refer to race. The colors will be lower case. Note, however, this exception: the capitalization will be left as is when quoting original text. The resulting complexity at least reflects the complexity of the discriminations that have been made regarding color and race.
in 1955 to White parents in apartheid South Africa, or White baby Nmachi born in 2010 to black Nigerian immigrant parents in London, or Black and White twin baby girls born to an interracial couple in 1997. In these instances, the children were deemed Black or White based on their physical appearances, but there is also research that argues that race can be determined by genetic markers. However, if the banks want the court to accept the argument that genetics determines race, are they also taking us backwards in time, reasserting the claim that one drop of Black blood makes a person Black? With the advent of DNA testing, which wasn’t around when this one-drop rule was invented, a good proportion Americans would be designated as Black. The genetics argument is a slippery slope that I am not sure the banks would want to start down. This argument does, however, exemplify the socially and culturally constructed aspect of race and how racial categories are determined within societies and within cultures.

The creation in modern times of five distinct racial groups according to color has been largely attributed to colonialism and the slave trade. Prior to these undertakings, race was based on nationality, among other determinants. Shakespeare’s Othello provides an example of how history, society, and culture have redefined racial boundaries. As time evolved, Europeans and White Americans came to question why Shakespeare ever envisioned a noble and respectable Black character like Othello. “Shakespeare critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge opined, “[C]an we imagine [Shakespeare] so ignorant as to take a barbarous negro claim royal birth,—at a time, too, when negroes were not known except as slaves?”

According to theater-history scholar Andrew Carlson, Othello raises a century-old question about race: “Was Othello the same kind of black person as those living in America, or was he a noble Moor with a distinct racial identity?” Traditionally, Moors, on the one hand, and Negroes or Africans (who later became slaves) on the other, were always distinguished from one another, even though they could be of the same dark skin color. In regards to Othello’s color or race, Carlson quotes scholar Henry Hudson who commented, “[T]he difference of Moors and Negroes was as well known in Shakespeare’s time as it is now [1886].” Moorish studies scholar Emily Bartels adds, “And although in the sixteenth century Moors were being drawn into a discriminatory discourse on blackness along with ‘Negroes’ from Africa’s western (‘slave’) coast, Moors were never New World slaves.”

Atlantic slavery did not significantly define England’s relation to Africa until well into the seventeenth century, however, “New World slavery and its legacy of racial prejudice continued to define the politics that early modern scholars imposed backward onto representations of the Moor.”

Even still, the Moors and other peoples of North Africa were, and continue to be, considered to be of higher caliber than the Negro “savage” that inhabited the southern parts of Africa. Categorically, North African peoples have been considered to be different either because of European and Asiatic influences or because (some believe) they are actually of European or Asiatic origin. In American media, people of North Africa are never referred to as African, rather they are referred to by their nationality—Moroccan, Algerian,
Libyan, or Egyptian. Furthermore, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, North Africans, regardless of their skin tone, are considered to be of the White race.

Moors and other people of North African descent were typically not discriminated against in the United States. According to Moorish-American studies scholar Susan Nance, “Black popular culture contained numerous stories of blacks escaping racial discrimination in the United States because they were North Africans.” Nance describes Malcolm X’s first-hand experience with this exotic privilege when a dark-skinned friend of his put on a turban and was served in a White restaurant. Similarly, she discusses an instance in Up from Slavery where Booker T. Washington writes of an incident in which a Moroccan visitor was mistaken for an American Black and denied service at a southern hotel for Whites. Once the visitor provided proof of his Moroccan citizenship, hotel staff apologized and offered him service. Nance argues this is because “Many Americans, black and white, might have associated the exotic turbaned visitor with respectable clichés about wealth and nobility.” Nance asserts that this association demonstrates that culture, rather than race, was the cause of inequality. “Many African Americans recognized that Americans had constructed blackness such that a black identity had specifically to do with being American, particularly if one was also from the South.”

The slave trade played a large role in whiteness coming to be equated with positive personal, social, and cultural traits like beauty, intelligence, superiority, morality, purity, and wealth, while blackness became equated with a host of negative characteristics and conditions. Black people (especially those of darker skin) were considered ugly, uneducated, stupid, inferior, immoral, impure, dirty, lazy, criminally inclined, dangerous, barbaric, and poor. The negative traits of blackness were imposed on Black Americans by Whites; however, it has been shown that Blacks have internalized and accepted these attributes of themselves. For example, some members of the Black community equate with Whiteness those Blacks who are educated, of the middle class or wealthy, live in a neighborhood outside of “the ghetto,” speak proper English, have lighter skin, or are of mixed race (Black and White). This carries a negative connotation that is seen as antithetical to Blackness.

Another example of how Blacks have internalized negative attributes of themselves is how some wealthy Blacks, especially those who have risen from the lower to the upper classes, speak about how they are “making White money,” implying that having money is a White condition. But having any of these characteristics alone or in combination is not enough to bring you into, or take you out of, the Black community. A rich athlete like Michael Jordan, who was a star in the Black-dominated sport of basketball, is still considered Black, while a rich athlete like Tiger Woods, a star in the White-dominated sport of golf, may not be. Nonetheless, many Black comedians joked that Woods’s fall from grace (when he began to be injured and not play so well, and when he and his White wife split up) taught him that he was still a Black man—as this is how he was treated.

In “Who defines what ‘black’ means” Ernest Harris draws the conclusion: “The bottom line is that there is no such thing as blackness, at least as a credential for who is justifiably black. The effort to define blackness is a reflexive, self-destructive impulse borne
out of frustration and is further fueled by self-doubt.” In “Barack Obama and the politics of Blackness,” Ron Walters criticizes essentialist concepts of Black identity. Criticizing or excluding someone from the Black community because they pursue a higher education, or because they didn’t grow up in the ghetto, or because they’re wealthy—such commentary and their politics limit the progress of the Black community as a whole.

In general, the stamp of blackness by one Black person onto another comes out of a complex equation that is idiosyncratically derived and applied throughout the Black community. Politically, socially, and culturally, Black or African American is taken to mean descendant of Southern American slaves. Being a descendant of slaves is still a source of great shame for many Black Americans with this heritage, and so Blacks who are not of this group tend not to personally identify themselves as Black. Similarly, some Black Americans don’t recognize members of this group as Black either. I’ve heard comments like “He’s Black, but he ain’t Black.” This typically means that the person is Haitian, or Jamaican, or Nigerian, or Dominican, or of some other nationality.

As the son of a White mother and African father, and given his elite education and his upbringing, Barack Obama was not readily accepted as part of the Black community. Stanley Crouch, an African American columnist for the New York Daily News wrote, “[O]ther than color, Obama did not—does not—share a heritage with the majority of black Americans, who are descendants of plantation slaves.” Moreover, unlike “traditional” Black Americans, President Obama can trace his African heritage to a specific nation—Kenya—and to a specific family lineage, a privilege denied almost all Blacks who are descendants of ex-slaves. And so during the 2008 presidential campaign Blacks initially felt that Hillary Clinton was easier to relate to and more trustworthy than Obama. They doubted his commitment to Black issues and were concerned about his hesitancy to speak out on racial issues.

As President, Obama has recognized his unusual position. Speaking about the government’s treatment of the victims of Hurricane Katrina, he said, “There has always been some tension between speaking in universal terms and speaking in very race-specific terms about the plight of the African American community. By virtue of my background, I am more likely to speak in universal terms.”

Regardless of his parentage, President Obama has not only been accepted, and elected and vilified, as a Black man; it is also an identity that he cannot shed. Rachel Dolezal, however, being the daughter of White parents, will always have the privilege of returning to the White race; therefore many cannot accept her as a Black woman. As the review above has indicated, although the terminology is complex and idiosyncratic, and though games may be played with the system, the term Black has a history, a history that Dolezal may well have observed with great compassion, but of which she has not borne the real burden.
Works Cited


