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When We Enter: the Blackness of Rachel Dolezal

MARQUIS BEY AND
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“You won’t read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don’t know how to. Maybe one day you will learn.”¹

—Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*

“... when and where [do] I enter ... [?]”²

—Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*

“Can you read?” Toni Morrison asks on the very first page of her 2008 book *A Mercy*. Morrison does not allude to mere literacy here—an understanding of phonemes, syntax, lexicon, and other linguistic structures that concern the minds of grammarians. Rather, Morrison is concerned with how we read the world, how we interpret and discern what the world means to us. Moreover, we read not only an abstracted World, but also *bodies* in the world, complex bodies that are raced-and-gendered in the world. In this sense, Morrison’s question initiates a rapid and manic succession of other questions—what are you reading, whom are you reading, where and when are you reading? Or, perhaps most succinct, can you read *me*?

Americans asked similar questions when Rachel Dolezal was “outed” by her white parents, Larry and Ruthan Dolezal, as a white woman masquerading as Black for close to ten years. Dolezal was raised in a family of four adopted children, she being

the only white child among her Black brothers and sisters. According to Dolezal, she considered herself Black as young as age five; she was even “drawing self portraits with the brown crayon instead of the peach crayon.”³ This physical identification with Blackness as a child morphed into something far more complicated in later years, when as an adult she claims to have actually “experienced and lived Blackness,” primarily through being the mother of two Black sons. For Dolezal, Blackness seems to be something that is achieved; it was not only an identity she sensed a strong “spiritual and visceral connection to,” but also a lived experience she attained through her unique set of personal and professional circumstances.⁴ To this day, even in the face of national criticism, Dolezal continues to “read” and see herself, quite unapologetically, as Black.

The rage that many Black folks (and white allies) had in response to Dolezal’s “outing” is real and consequential. Her case, for many, ultimately hinges on deception, dissemblance, and a fallacious and unearned claim to a racial identity that was used to her benefit. Indeed, as Tim Wise incisively writes, “Mimicry Is Not Solidarity.” It is passé to merely point to race’s social construction, for we know, in George Yancy’s terms, that “to believe there is nothing more to say about race because it is impossible to reduce it to a naturally occurring object in the spatiotemporal world is to engage in a form of disciplinary hegemony.”⁵

Of course Blackness is a contingent social category, but the “lived intelligibility and reality of race (as it is socially and ontologically lived) exceed what is deemed ‘real’ within the framework of a physicalist

ontology.”⁶ Blackness—despite its undeniable constructedness—carries a very real and lived visceral history that cannot be overlooked. As some have noted, this visceral history is sidestepped, bypassed, and cheapened when a person of racial privilege such as Dolezal attempts to disavow their privilege and thus their complicity/responsibility *in* that violent history. For her critics, Dolezal’s decision to enact Blackness is eerily similar to a Blackface performance that hollows out the historical and genealogical significance of Blackness.

History aside, social justice advocates remarked that Dolezal’s choice to enact Blackness even indirectly hindered and silenced the real, important narratives of Black women in the here-and-now. For instance, Dolezal’s “outing” distracted the nation from a disturbing news story that aired just days before, about a 12-year-old Black girl mishandled by a white cop at a pool party in Texas.⁷ In light of frequent disturbing incidents of police brutality in the US, such a story clearly warrants immediate attention. A reasonable criticism would suggest, then, that the news of Dolezal’s façade eclipsed this event, and disrupted a much-needed discourse about race, violence, and a corrupt criminal justice system. A conversation about one of the realities of being a Black American woman was silenced by a louder, more scandalous story that was ultimately about whiteness. Or, put more cynically, one of Dolezal’s many online critics said in a popular Tweet, “Black folk cant decide to be white when the cops raid their pool party.”

While the former example was not Dolezal’s direct doing (since she did not choose to be “outed”), there were nonetheless other

undeniable attempts to capitalize on her enactment of Blackness vis-à-vis *the rejection, occlusion, and disavowal* of her whiteness. Dolezal’s failure to reveal her whiteness forced many to ask, What was her motivation? Why hide it? How did she, to use Kendrick Lamar’s useful phrase, “pimp” the butterfly of Blackness for her own gain?⁸ For instance, she objected strenuously to Tim Wise’s talk on race and whiteness at her collegiate institution of Eastern Washington University because, in her estimation, a white person cannot speak legitimately about racism issues concerning Black people.

One can read this objection as perhaps a method by which Dolezal felt she could “Blacken” herself, authenticate her Blackness by saying, essentially, that Tim Wise—esteemed anti-racist activist—wasn’t Black enough. Similarly, she filed a lawsuit against the historically Black Howard University, where she received her MFA, for “reverse discrimination,” claiming that her white racial history prevented her from obtaining a faculty position, and relegated her art to positions of less prominence than her Black colleagues. And further still, a former female student of Dolezal’s has revealed that Dolezal “said I didn’t look Hispanic ... [She] doubted that I could share experiences of racial or ethnic discrimination because I didn’t have the appearance of looking Hispanic.”⁹ For many, the seeming hypocrisy of these events only further discredit any social justice cause or racial sincerity she has heretofore proclaimed of herself, and rightly so.

Certainly Dolezal’s “outing” leaves much social justice work to be done. Jason Perez is correct when he claims that

on the micro level the beginning of [transformative justice] looks like Rachel admitting, apologizing, and making amends for the harms she has done—in particular to Black women (cis and trans), acknowledging the place of privilege and power she came from in what she did and the violence it caused.¹⁰

In short, Dolezal is urged by many to “fess up.”

But despite the criticism that Dolezal has received, much of the conversation surrounding this issue has been sloppy and sensational. She became the subject of national attention within barely a day of her parents’ announcement. One could not browse a single news site or blog without seeing a picture of Dolezal, overwhelmed and almost teary-eyed as she faced reporters’ questions and interrogations. The attention she received isn’t surprising. America is obsessed with scandal, particularly when it pertains to matters of race and gender; in fact, identity issues undeniably garner greater attention when they are associated with the scandalous or outrageous. Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda speak directly to this proclivity to scandalize race:

[I]t seems a lot of us here when asked to talk about race are most comfortable, or least uncomfortable, talking about it in the language of scandal. We’re all a little relieved by scandal. It’s so satisfying, so clear, so easy. The wronged. The evildoers. The undeserving. The shady. The good intentions and the cynical manipulations. The righteous side taking, the head shaking. Scandal is such a helpful, such a relieving distraction. There are times when scandal feels like the sun that race revolves around. And

so it is hard to reel conversations about race back from the heavy gravitational pull of where we so often prefer them to be.¹¹

The scandal that is Dolezal’s decision to enact Blackness is arguably not generative; like most scandals related to identity issues, it is merely an easy lob to swing at, making us homerun hitters of racist fastballs. Surfeit claims that Dolezal was and will never be Black, or something like the humorous photo-shopping of her face onto a pancake box reading “Ain’t Jenima,” reveal, quite blatantly, that the current discussion surrounding Dolezal is lacking. The questions occupying much of the public conversation—“Is she Black?” or “Can she *be* Black?” being the most popular—are worn and ultimately futile, for they only fix Blackness in (no) time. This is not to say, however, that a conversation about Dolezal is unimportant. To the contrary, we as scholars of race and feminist studies do insist that Dolezal’s story is consequential, and *does* warrant a discussion—albeit one that significantly differs from current popular discourse.¹² We argue that what ought to be of greatest interest here is how Dolezal’s actions speak to the volatility—and the fugitivity—of race, and what can come to be known of Blackness because of her racial inhabitation. The question is how has the way we have (mis?)read Dolezal subverted rigid, dichotomous, and most interestingly *atemporal* logics of racialization, and Blackness in particular.

How Fantastic It Is To Be a Fugitive: A Note On Blackness

To begin, it is useful to move away from the worn discourse of racial authenticity, or

even racial sincerity as John L. Jackson has proffered as an alternative.¹³ Blackness extends beyond the epidermal; it is not merely “surface.” While those who are read as phenotypically Black (or, as many Black folks have chosen to say, *born* Black) indeed have a privileged position to inhabiting and enacting Blackness, it does nonetheless exceed skin color. Blackness is fantastic and fugitive. Drawing on the work of Richard Iton, the fantastic is

the kind of cultural expressions that destabilize “the distinctions between ... the proper and improper ... by bringing into the field of play those potentials we have forgotten, or did not believe accessible or feasible.” The fantastic counters the dominant ways of thinking that structure our world.

On this score, Blackness, too, destabilizes the realm of what is possible through its always already underdevelopedness. Blackness “does not have a definitive content ... Rather, it is the interpretations, visions, and practices given to it by subaltern populations and a ‘category of underdeveloped possibilities.’”¹⁴ Similarly, commenting on Fred Moten, who says that Black lived experience is

fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic—a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said ... to break every enclosure. This fugitive movement is stolen life ...

Erica Still says the following about Blackness: Already figured as pathological, black social life exists beyond the boundaries of

normative social constraints—“whatever externally imposed social logic”—and through its very existence interrupts all such logic. “This movement is stolen life” precisely because it results from the agency of the black subject, an agency already pronounced impossible and illegal. Nevertheless, “attained in this zone of unattainability” is the fugitive movement that gives evidence of the black subject—evidence that demands an alternative understanding of blackness itself.¹⁵

Fugitivity is an ontological modality that is best described as

that desire to be free, manifest as flight, as escape, as a fugitivity that may well prove to veer away even from freedom as its *telos*, is indexed to an original lawlessness ... an inability both to intend the law and intend its transgression and the one who is defined by this double inability is, in a double sense, an outlaw.¹⁶

Drawing from Moten, Black feminist Tina Campt articulates a notion of fugitivity that is not simply an opposition to power but a refusal to even accept the validity of the terms of power. Campt makes clear that this refusal is not merely an act but part of a practice. She distinguishes “practice” from “act” insofar as “practice” “encompasses a whole set of everyday actions and strategies which marginalized subjects learn and live in order to survive.” To be Black in an ontological sense and thus fugitive is to refuse to stay in one’s “proper” place; it is to live the possibility of an unbounded life. In short, yet quite pithily, fugitivity for Campt is not simply an act of

rebellion, but “a quotidian practice of refusal.”¹⁷

What detractors of Dolezal’s “claim” to Blackness enact is a kind of hegemony, a fixity that attempts to freeze the volatility of Blackness in time, place, and skin, effectively rendering it purportedly an *a priori* axiom of racial identity. As the cultural theorists Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy cogently write in *Different: A Historical Context*, “Black” does not index a particular fixed group, the members of which being essentialized and static across time and place. Black is not determined, or reduced to, skin color, genetics, or biological inheritance, though these do indeed factor into how one understands oneself, and how others understand racialized people, as “Black” or not. Blackness “does not invoke an essentialized cultural identity, frozen in time, which is automatically transmitted into the work, and can thus be held to ‘represent’ collectively all those who belong to a particular ‘race,’ ethnic community, or tradition.” Rather, in the words of Hall and Sealy, Black ought to be defined as “a politically, historically and culturally constructed category; a *contested* idea, whose ultimate destination remains *unsettled*.”¹⁸ As Roland Barthes has tersely put it, “one must pluralize, refine, continuously.”¹⁹

Blackness has a history, a volatile and shifting and unsettled/unsettling history. It is a porous entity. Blackness, because of its volatility, unfixes; Blackness is a marauding outlaw kicking up a cloud of dust as it rides off into the dawn on its stallion. An outlaw, yes; a fugitive. Blackness escapes into a territory other than itself, and it is precisely this movement, this escaped air from the

enframing vestibule Moten might say, that makes it what it is: *Black*.

When They Do That At?

As previously noted, this essay will not argue whether Dolezal is “really” Black or can ever *be* Black. Instead, we take up some of the same questions posed in one of the most insightful pieces among the dozens inundating the internet after Dolezal’s “outing.” Kai M. Green, a Black trans man, put it quite succinctly in his post:

We are all responding to the question: Is she black or nah? We have too easily answered this question with a resounding NAH! But I think that’s the wrong question. The question we should be asking is when was/is she black?

To begin, it is important to understand how Blackness has heretofore operated—primarily as a static, fixed, rigidly “known” thing, deviation from which yielding claims of un-Blackness. From Black Nationalist rhetoric that extends contemporary notions of (myopic) Blackness back in time, undifferentiated and characterized by sameness, to biological or “blood quantum” understandings of Blackness—too often do we garner what it means to be Black as something akin to “I know it when I see it” or “From day one Blackness has been X, is still X, and will always be X.” Those who juxtapose Dolezal as “fake” and “pretending” to “real” and “actual” Black people, while certainly understandable and perhaps in some ways justifiable due to Dolezal’s prevarication, do not (feel the need to?) articulate what characterizes “actual” Black

people from Dolezal's ersatz Blackness. What is it that "actual" Black people have/possess/do that Dolezal is missing? If she is not "really" Black, who is? And how do we know they are? One might immediately say that it is because she was not born Black, which is a rationale that is in most ways sensible. But, how do we know that the "real" Black people we know were also, if you have not known them since birth, born Black? And, is Blackness as lived and known able to be reduced to a natal epidermal hue? If one is born with white skin, but at a year old magically catches a case of "revitoligo," would that child still be white since technically she was "born" white? These questions are not asked sarcastically, nor are they meant to nit-pick angered reactions; rather, they ought to nuance and interrogate our understanding of what "Black[ness] Is, [and what] Black[ness] Ain't."

Michelle Wright's *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* seeks to articulate a response to the question "What does it mean to be Black?" by arguing that although we often explicitly define Blackness as a "what," it in fact always operates as a "when" and a "where." As cogently argued by Wright elsewhere, we are "Black in time"—Blackness is temporally and spatially contingent, meaning that one's Blackness is contextual, subject to volatile change depending upon the time and place in which Blackness manifests. Blackness is best conceived of as a "phenomenology of Blackness," Wright says, "that is, *when* and *where* it is being imagined, defined, and performed and in what locations, both figurative and literal." In this sense, the fixed and either/or Blackness that many have alluded to in the

case of Rachel Dolezal can be read as being stuck in time.²⁰

Wright understands Blackness as both constructed and phenomenological, by which she means "our *constructs* of Blackness are largely historical and more specifically based on a notion of spacetime that is commonly fitted into a linear progress narrative," and

phenomenological manifestations of Blackness happen in what I term *Epiphenomenal time*, or the "now," through which the past, present, and future are always interpreted ... "Epiphenomenal" time denotes the current moment, moment that is *not* directly borne out of another (i.e., causally created).

What is crucial to note is that Epiphenomenal time does not preclude all causality, only linear and direct causality. Ultimately, Wright argues,

The only way to produce a definition of Blackness that is wholly inclusive and non-hierarchical is to understand Blackness as the *intersection* of constructs that locate the Black collective in *history* and in the *specific moment* in which Blackness is being imagined—the "now" through which imaginings of Blackness will be mediated.²¹

So if Dolezal is to be read closely, we must ask, as many scholars have of Black women in history, not *if* Dolezal can enter into Blackness, but when and where did she enter?

Race is (re)produced in different moments and at different times, tugging it in multiple directions, recalling Stuart Hall's denotation of race as a "floating signifier." Kai M. Green focuses primarily on the distinctions and

parallels between trans-raciality and trans-gendered identity, a topic addressed in a later section of this essay, but he notes the history of race and the feeling of Black ownership over that history, a history saturated with trauma but also pride, pain but also ebullience. This racial history is itself at times a circuitous and complex proliferation of contradictory moments, but they have all contributed to the making of race's—in this case, Blackness's—meaning. They are moments, tinged with the Derridean “trace” of their contexts and surrounding and competing racial (and gendered, classed, sexed, etc.) identifications, that shape what, how, why, and when Blackness means. To be remembered as well, though, is that surely while these histories are manifested on racialized flesh, they are also manifested elsewhere. To be “read” phenotypically as Black is not the end, though it is important. Indeed, as Green says, “These folk look black like me, but there are other black people who don't look black like me, some who look white like some other (dare I say) ancestor, but they too are black.”²² Blackness is also housed in one's speech, one's proclivity to subvert racial logics, one's gait, one's politics, one's *ipseity*, and a multitude of other areas of being-in-the-world.²³ All of these other identificatory areas have interpretive texts. The question, then, is can you read them?

(Un)Doing Race

Race not only *is* but is *done*. We must part slightly with performance studies scholar Vershawn Ashanti Young's somewhat unparalleled argument that race “is *nothing but* an identity, *entirely* a function of who we are

rather than what we do,” but, he says, it has also “developed into a mixture of the two, an identity to which is added to the burden of an approved (or disapproved) behavior.”²⁴ We maintain that race is not merely a static, entirely “known” identity, unmediated and extricated from actions, but a performative identity that always carries with it a set of behavioral practices that are cited and reiterated. One *is* a particular race because, at least in part, one *does* the “race-ness” of it. And this doing is necessitated by the instability of race. Race is a point of crisis, and as such it is constantly insecure, in need of regulation, thus implying the performativity of race. As a volatile, performative race, then, Blackness must be constantly negotiated and rearticulated, patrolled, policed, navigated again and again.

Because we do race as well as “have” race (though this can and has been debated by performance theorists, and certainly debunked by most biologists), racial identification can perhaps be said to be able to be “achieved” at least in some capacity. Allyson Hobbs, a historian who literally wrote the book on racial passing (*A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*),²⁵ remarks about Dolezal that there's “certainly a chance that she identifies as a black woman and there could be authenticity to that.” Responding to Hobbs, Melissa Harris-Perry asks quite seriously, and rather keenly, “Is it possible that she might actually be Black?” Harris-Perry nimbly navigates Blackness as something that extends past “being born Black” and muses “I wonder ... [if] there is a different category of Blackness that is about the *achievement* of Blackness despite one's parentage. Is that possible?”²⁶ Might Blackness be something one can achieve, which

is to say, something one can work toward by doing? Is it, as Dolezal seems to suggest, something that can be obtained through a series of opportunities or experiences? Something that one can “live,” and therefore attain?

We can think historically about Blackness as exceeding the visual and corporeal. Bodily features, historically speaking, were never a guarantee of a specific racial identity, thus, with the fragility and paranoia of whiteness, Blackness had to be judicially determined and stratified through blood—believed to be a determiner of “true racial essence.” Gaining steam in the nineteenth century, this “Black blood” was thought to be made evident through the skin, so the combination of the surface (skin color) and depth (blood) became the sites for racial “truth.” Blood was conceptualized as the “principle of life” and the carrier or determinant of race. Blood was conceived of as the very “essence” of one’s racial subjectivity, genealogy believed to determine racial “truth.” In reconfiguring “social practices as biological essences, the discourse of blood established the individual as possessing racial blood.”²⁷ And this still seems to be the consensus when speaking of Dolezal. Because her “blood” isn’t Black, she is believed to not possess the crucial component of Black racial truth. Blackness is thought to elude her skin because her blood is not coding the surface as legibly Black. Therefore, she is not Black and never will be Black. Dolezal’s successful masquerade, one might say, throws Blackness into racial crisis because she unmoors it from its perceived fixity and absolute knowability. Dolezal “crisisizes” Black identity; she is “the subject [who] is

seen to have defied or evaded this supposed [Black] ontology;” she has “failed to announce racial truth and, thereby, to have accessed an identity from which he or she is prohibited.”²⁸

Perhaps this is all to underscore two things: first, that Dolezal’s Blackness throws into crisis fixed understandings of race and questions, generatively so, what constitutes Blackness; and second, and perhaps more obliquely, that we are all “passing.” This second point, of course, must be explained. By stipulating the performativity of race, the *doing* of race, it necessitates, then, “that there is no internal ‘truth’ to race,” says scholar Nadine Ehlers.

Rather, through being read as “belonging” to a particular racial category—that is, visually appearing and conducting one’s acts, manners, and behaviors in accordance to disciplinary racial demands—all subjects are passing for a racial identity that they are said to be.²⁹

Someone who has never been mistaken for anything other than Black, still, to some extent, “passes” for Black because there are scripts that govern what qualifies as “real” Blackness. In this way Blackness can be in some sense “achieved.” Compelled by a recitation of Black norms, one is not Black, but continues to *become* Black.

Transrace *With* Transgender

This is not a competition, nor is it a bellicose fight for legitimacy. Hence the “with” rather than a “vs.” Inevitably conversations have spawned surrounding whether being transracial is the same and as acceptable as being

transgender. The discussion is a fruitful one, but one that has often resulted in a pitting against rather than a generative discussion of constricting logics that dictate how people can or should identify.

Dolezal has been hailed as a “transracial hero” by some sites, which has generated a significant amount of backlash from Black women in particular, both cis and trans alike. For instance, Kat Blaque, a Black trans woman, calls Dolezal out for her “fake ‘trans-racial’ identity” and avers that transgender is “nothing like” being transracial. Arguing from the discourse surrounding Caitlyn Jenner’s transgender identity and Dolezal’s transracial identity, Blaque first says that the very term “trans racial” is being misused, it being more properly used to describe adoptions in which the parents are a different race than the child. Blaque grounds the differentiation between gender and race in biology, noting that “gender is not a biological trait passed from parent to child, whereas race is.” Gender does not hold the same biological basis as race, she claims. She goes on to give an argument that sounds like the often misinterpreted understanding of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity:

If I turned to you tomorrow and said I was white, would you believe me? See, this idea of transitioning into a race, is something that’s only available to certain people. Rachel Dolezal, got a tan and a perm. And apparently was able to fool people for about a decade. Now, I realize that to many ignorant cis people, there’s no difference between that, and me wearing a little bit of makeup. The difference is, that, while

my gender has changed, my race will always remain the same. She can go home and wash off her self-tanner, and wash out her perm. I can’t wash off my gender, and that’s something that isn’t defined by my makeup.³⁰

Concluding her argument, Blaque says that she never decided to be a trans woman, that it was “simply a statement of the reality of my life,” and that “part of being a black woman in this world, is coping with anti-blackness, and the self hate that comes from living in a Eurocentric society.” There is, on her account, “absolutely no parallel between Caitlyn’s story and Rachel’s story,” and thus no parallel between the trans-ness of gender and the trans-ness of race.³¹ LGBT allies and supporters of Jenner latch onto this kind of argument; it’s reassuring, and challenges the conservative notion that we can conflate these terms.

Kai M. Green provides a cogent and detailed response to this type of critique, the very title of his piece combating the mutual exclusivity believed to be between race and gender: “‘Race and gender are not the same!’ is not a Good Response to the ‘Trans-racial’ / Transgender Question ...” First, however, we would like to clarify how we are deploying the operative identificatory terms “transracial” and “transgender.” Etymologically speaking, “trans” denotes the sense of moving across, through, over, to or on the other side of, or beyond one place, person, thing, or state to another. Coupled with the identity categories “race” and “gender,” what is being highlighted is the blurring or destabilizing of racial and gender categories. Transracial and transgender name subjects

that deconstruct the stability and certitude thought to be inherent within hegemonically ascribed identification categories. Transracial and transgender, in a sense, speak to the volatility of race and gender.

Responding to the separation of race and gender, Green asserts that the answer to the “Transracial/Transgender” question is often transphobic, remarking that, “the answer that one arrives at, if you hold on to a historically situated notion of blackness and a presentist (gender is not only socially constructed, but historically naturalized) notion of gender, is transphobic.”³²

Surely race and gender are not the same, but it is equally reductive and simplistic to say, as Blaqué does, that there is “absolutely no parallel between Caitlyn’s story and Rachel’s story.” There is, especially for the intersectionalist, most certainly a parallel between these axes of identity and difference. Race and gender, while not the same, have significant overlap, namely that they are both bio-social-historical constructions that are constantly reproduced and remade in the interest of some but not others. As Simone de Beauvoir has said of womanness —“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”—so too is this the case with race. We can and have “become” Black. Green asks poignant questions that give one pause:

Many black people who feel angry, harmed, and uncomfortable with the idea that someone who doesn’t possess the *right* historical and biological blood lineage is claiming blackness. But don’t we already know that the one-drop rule is a problematic one? And didn’t we all at some point originate biologically in Africa? How far back

do we have to go to prove our racial allegiances?³³

Though his comment that we all originated in Africa reeks of the obfuscation of shifting social meanings and creations of race, as well as the incredibly social—not ancestral or genetic—meaning of Blackness (not to mention it being a bit improper and presentist to say that the “African Eve” was “Black” as we understand it today), Green’s questions reckon with significant ideas. How “biologically Black” does one have to be in order to be a valid Black person? How close in the genetic lineage does a Black ancestor (and *their* Blackness must also undergo scrutiny) have to be? What is the “right” historical lineage to have, and not to mention how this seems insincere and selective since we do no such extensive research into the genealogical history of every other person we do or do not deem Black.

Also surrounding the discourse between transrace and transgender is the performativity—or, as some mistakenly imply, the performance—of the two. Blaqué’s block quote above sees Dolezal’s case as a performance, a donning of a (“Blackface”) costume that Blaqué cannot do with her race, and did not do with her gender trans-ness. Dolezal’s is a chosen identity that she can rid herself of at any time; Blaqué’s, however, is inescapable. She claims, “this idea of transitioning into a race, is something that’s only available to certain people.” But, one must ask which people? Does this mean that these people cannot be the transitioned race? Has there not been a history of, largely Black women, bleaching their skin to become lighter and white? Do not some Black people have

features designated as “white” (aquiline noses, straight hair, etc.)? In short, why does the ability to shift one’s race invalidate the multiplicity of their racial identity? But, Blaque insists:

Rachel Dolezal, got a tan and a perm ... The difference is, that, while my gender has changed, my race will always remain the same. She can go home and wash off her self-tanner, and wash out her perm. I can’t wash off my gender, and that’s something that isn’t defined by my makeup

—this can be countered with Judith Butler’s demystification of performativity as opposed to a performance. It is vital to clarify this distinction, thus we quote at length:

The bad reading [of *Gender Trouble*] goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender: stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism ... When my whole point was that the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons, presupposes gender in a certain way—that gender is not to be chosen and that “performativity” is not radical choice and it’s not voluntarism. I just finished writing another manuscript in which I spend page after page trying to refute the reduction of gender performance to something like style. Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender

norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in.³⁴

Performativity is the reiteration of policed norms that consolidate into an identity. In Butler’s terms, the repeated acts are completed within a fixed system, “a highly rigid regulated frame.”³⁵ Performance, as a production, presupposes a preexisting subject, whereas performativity calls into question the very notion of the subject at all. Detractors of Dolezal’s performance of a kind of Blackface, they say, set themselves up as arbiters of the boundaries of Blackness. They allude to a kind of mutilation of the realness of Blackness and how their own Blackness, as real and actual, is not a matter of choice or construction. This, of course, has some merit. But these detractors imply the extreme constructedness of Dolezal without acknowledging the very constructedness of all bodies. We are all

in the active position of figuring out how to live with and against the constructions—or norms—that help to form us. We form ourselves within the vocabularies that we did not choose, and sometimes we have to reject those vocabularies, or actively develop new ones,

Butler says of trans exclusionary radical feminists.³⁶ Racial identity, as performative, is a series of acts—speech, bodily, visual, political—that culminate into an identity. It is not something one *is*; it is something one *does*, over and over again. It is the perennial becomingness of identity.

Furthermore, identities are of course policed and normalized. Dolezal bucked those policed

boundaries of “normal” Blackness—though admittedly under false pretenses and seemingly for self-gain—and perhaps therein lies the contribution with which we are concerned: the highlighting of Blackness’s fugitivity, its volatility and openness, its unfixing. Race and gender are both policed and it is key to note the policing—predicated on negotiated and constructed histories and power dynamics—of race in this situation. “I have heard arguments,” Green remarks,

that she is purporting to take “our oppression” or she is pretending to be a black woman and her actions are disrespectful to *real* black people. These ARE the same arguments that people make regarding transgender bodies: “These men want to be women;” “They want to be oppressed and in so doing they distract from the real oppression *real* women face.”³⁷

Hence, race and gender *do* have a lot in common—namely, their policing.

Green states that “Dolezal reinforces and reiterates that black is a category that we all have the ability to move in and out of to a certain extent.” His words might be nuanced by stating instead that Blackness is the undoing and shifting of that category, and is ever-fluid and ever-porous, historically contingent, and messily situated. Blackness is both a state of being as well as a choice, and to choose to be Black is a political act. To choose unapologetic Blackness is a decision to make one’s Blackness *mean* and *matter* in a fugitive way. Dolezal’s choosing to continue to identify as Black despite being “outed” as white is, indeed, a political act to make Blackness *mean* something uncharacteristic and forceful. Dolezal’s Blackness

unsettles hegemonic Blackness; her Blackness undoes rigid racial logics, and that—the unfixing of categorical hegemony—is what might be called the Blackness of Blackness.

Ultimately we would agree with Green on his concluding point: “I will not be joining the chanting chorus line of, *Rachel Dolezal AIN’T black (no more)*. I am more concerned with whose blood is spilling on the sidewalk than whose blood is running through Dolezal’s veins.”³⁸ What is Dolezal *doing* with her Blackness; how is she “Blackening” racial categorizations? Dolezal allows for something new to be learned of race, of Blackness, and it is this contribution that preoccupies us. In what ways does dislodging fixed notions of Blackness speak to aims of social justice: does Dolezal’s Black fugitivity question the underlying assumptions generating police militarization and assaults on Black bodies? Does her enactment of Blackness add to conversations of the consequentialness of a legacy of Black criminalization? What does Dolezal’s situation say about ontological Blackness, or the historical positioning of Blackness? Popular discourse has demanded that we never judge a book by its cover, the lesson of which is that the words on the pages within those covers say much more about the book. But what happens when we read the pages and find a different story than what we expected?

Notes

1. Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2008), 160.
2. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 31.

3. Rachel Dolezal, "Rachel Dolezal: As a Child I Drew 'Self-Portraits with the Brown Crayon instead of the Peach Crayon,'" *National Post*, June 16, 2015, <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/world/rachel-dolezal-as-i-child-i-drew-self-portraits-with-the-brown-crayon-instead-of-the-peach-crayon>.

4. Ibid.

5. George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 33.

6. Ibid.

7. Catherine E. Shoichet, Ashley Fantz, and Holly Yan, "Texas Pool Party Chaos: David Eric Casebolt Resigns - CNN.com," *CNN*, June 10, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/10/us/mckinney-texas-pool-party-video/index.html>.

8. Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Santa Monica: Aftermath Entertainment, 2015) In talking to Tupac, Kendrick says this in reference to his cryptic album title: "The caterpillar is a prisoner to the streets that conceived it. Its only job is to eat or consume everything around it, in order to protect itself from this mad city. While consuming its environment the caterpillar begins to notice ways to survive. One thing it noticed is how much the world shuns him [sic], but praises the butterfly. The butterfly represents the talent, the thoughtfulness, and the beauty within the caterpillar. But having a harsh outlook on life the caterpillar sees the butterfly as weak and figures out a way to pimp it to his [sic] own benefits. Already surrounded by this mad city the caterpillar goes to work on the cocoon, which institutionalizes him [sic]. He can no longer see past his [sic] own thoughts—he's [sic] trapped. When trapped inside these walls certain ideas take root, such as going home, and bringing back new concepts to this mad city. The result? Wings begin to emerge, breaking the cycle of feeling stagnant. Finally free, the butterfly sheds light on situations that the caterpillar never considered, ending the internal struggle. Although the butterfly and

caterpillar are completely different, they are one and the same."

9. Tim Wise, "Mimicry Is Not Solidarity: Of Allies, Rachel Dolezal and the Creation of Antiracist White Identity." *Tim Wise*. June 14, 2015, <http://www.timwise.org/2015/06/mimicry-is-not-solidarity-of-allies-rachel-dolezal-and-the-creation-of-antiracist-white-identity/>; "Former Student Says Rachel Dolezal Dismissed Her as 'Not Hispanic Enough,'" *Fox News Latino*, June 15, 2015; "NAACP Imposter Sued School Over Race Claims," *The Smoking Gun*, June 15, 2015, <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/documents/bizarre/rachel-dolezal-discrimination-lawsuit-786451>.

10. Jasson Perez, "The Blackface Politics of Rachel Dolezal," *The Feminist Wire*, June 17, 2015, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2015/06/the-blackface-politics-of-rachel-dolezal/>.

11. Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King Cap, eds., *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, 1st edition (Albany NY: Fence Books, 2015), 13–14.

12. The authors, Marquis Bey and Theodora Sakellarides, are a Black male scholar of Black Feminist Thought and transgender studies, and a white female scholar of Blackness, gender, and the visual, respectively. Further, neither of the authors are trans. It is necessary to make our own identities known in order to allow for the limitations of our knowledge to be evident to readers, and to acknowledge our own epistemological limits as we cannot draw on experiential Black womanhood or trans-ness, racial or gendered.

13. John L. Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 15, 17–18. Of sincerity, Jackson says it "presumes a liaison *between subjects*—not some external adjudicator and a lifeless scroll. Questions of sincerity imply social interlocutors who presume one another's humanity, inferiority, and subjectivity. It is a subject-subject interaction, not the subject-object mode that authenticity

presumes—and to which critiques of authenticity implicitly reduce every racial exchange.” He etymologically differentiates sincerity from authenticity in the following way: “Sincerity ... comes from the Latin term *sincerus* (originally applied to things, not people), meaning without wax, unadulterated, not doctored. Authenticity, however, derives from the Greek *authentēo*: to dominate or have authority over, even to kill (implying quite a bit more intersubjectivity than its present Antiques Roadshow incarnation—and also a nice analogy for what authenticity testing does to people’s sense of individual agency). Sincerity was once about things, and authenticity about relations between people. In the present, their connotations have been reversed.”

Ultimately, then, “Authenticity attempts to domesticate sincerity, rein it in, control its excesses. It demands hard, fast, and absolute sure-footedness, whereas racial sincerity wallows in unfalsifiability, ephemerality, partiality, and social vulnerability. Sincerity highlights the ever-fleeting ‘liveness’ of everyday racial performances that cannot be completely captured by authenticating mediations of any kind. Where authenticity lauds content, sincerity privileges intent—an interiorized intent that decentralizes the racial seer (and the racial script), allowing for the possibility of performative ad-libbing and inevitable acceptance of trust amid uncertainty as the only solution to interpersonal ambiguity.” So in Dolezal’s case, Jackson would be concerned with whether she was being sincere in her embodiment of Blackness, which, by her account, is the case. Though a critique of Jackson is useful: how does one externally and, one might say, more objectively determine another’s intention? Must we simply take them at their word, letting them have 100 percent of the say in discerning whether they’re being sincere? One cannot rule out deception, of self and others; dissemblance; intentions that do not at all parallel the resulting consequences; and

so on. One wonders less about whether Dolezal was sincere, if she was offending the vast majority of a race of people and had the intent of uplifting and glorifying them, how much does her sincerity matter?

14. Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16, 289–90; Greta Fowler Snyder, “On Post-Blackness and the Black Fantastic,” *Souls* 16, no. 3–4 (2014): 334–5, doi:10.1080/10999949.2014.968952.

15. Erica Still, *Prophetic Remembrance: Black Subjectivity in African American and South African Trauma Narratives* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2014).

16. Fred Moten, “Preface for a Solo by Miles Davis,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17, no. 2 (2007): 223, doi:10.1080/07407700701387317.

17. See Emma Schuster and Tina Campt, “Black Feminist Futures and the Practice of Fugitivity | BCRW Blog,” 2014, <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/blog/black-feminist-futures-and-the-practice-of-fugitivity/>; Tina Campt, *Black Feminist Futures and the Practice of Fugitivity*, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ozhqw840PU&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

18. Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy, *Different: A Historical Context* (London: Phaïdon, 2001). Emphasis added; see also Henry Louis Gates, *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the African Diaspora* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2010).

19. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes* (Berkeley and Las Angeles: Macmillan, 1977), 69.

20. Michelle M. Wright, “Black in Time: Exploring New Ontologies, New Dimensions, New Epistemologies of the African Diaspora,” *Transforming Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (April 2010): 70–73; Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 3.

21. Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 4, 14.

22. Kai M. Green, "'Race and Gender Are Not the Same!' Is Not a Good Response to the 'Transracial' / Transgender Question OR We Can and Must Do Better," *The Feminist Wire*, June 14, 2015, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2015/06/race-and-gender-are-not-the-same-is-not-a-good-response-to-the-transracial-transgender-question-or-we-can-and-must-do-better/>.

23. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper, 1962).

24. Vershawn Ashanti Young, "Compulsory Homosexuality and Black Masculine Performance," *Poroi: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Rhetorical Analysis & Invention* 7, no. 2 (2011): 7.

25. For other texts on racial passing, see as examples: Marcia Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity* (Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2012); Kathleen Pfeiffer, *Race Passing and American Individualism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, c2003.); Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century US Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

26. Josh Feldman, "Melissa Harris-Perry on Rachel Dolezal: 'It Is Possible That She Might Actually Be Black?,'" Mediaite [website], June 13, 2015, <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/melissa-harris-perry-on-rachel-dolezal-it-is-possible-that-she-might-actually-be-black/>.

27. Nadine Ehlers, *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles against Subjection* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 30; see also Winthrop D. Jordan, Christopher Leslie Brown, and Peter H. Wood, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812*, 2nd edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

28. Nadine Ehlers, "'Black Is' and 'Black Ain't': Performative Revisions of Racial 'Crisis,'" *Culture, Theory and Critique* 47, no. 2 (2006): 152,

[doi:10.1080/14735780600961619](https://doi.org/10.1080/14735780600961619). In a footnote, Ehlers writes: "Following from this, the subject is able to access the privileges associated with that identity. This is the primary point of crisis represented by the pass-for-white executed by the legally defined black subject: in acting white (defying racial truth) this subject is seen to have passed-into prohibited entitlements." In Dolezal's case, she passes into a de-privileged racial identity, giving up white-skin privileges (but nonetheless demonstrating skin privilege in her ability to pass). What might it mean, then, for Dolezal to not pass into a race of privilege but a disadvantaged one?

29. Ehlers, *Racial Imperatives*, 6.

30. Kat Blaque, "Why Rachel Dolezal's Fake 'Transracial' Identity Is Nothing Like Being Transgender – Take It From a Black Trans Woman Who Knows," *Everyday Feminism* [blog], <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/06/rachel-dolezal-not-transracial> accessed June 16, 2015/.

31. Ibid.

32. Green, "Race and Gender Are Not the Same!"

33. Ibid.

34. Judith Butler and Liz Kotz, "The Body You Want: Liz Kotz Interviews Judith Butler," *Artforum* (November 1992): 83.

35. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Thinking Gender (New York: Routledge, 1990).

36. Judith Butler and Cristan Williams, "Judith Butler Addresses TERFs and the Work of Sheila Jeffreys and Janice Raymond," *The TERFs*, May 1, 2014, <http://theterfs.com/2014/05/01/judith-butler-addresses-terfs-and-the-work-of-sheila-jeffreys-and-janice-raymond/>.

37. Green, "Race and Gender Are Not the Same!"

38. Ibid., emphasis in original.

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