

## The Uses of Whiteness and Blackness

In 1924, Harlem Renaissance writer Jean Toomer declared that, due to his biracial heritage, he was “neither white nor black, but simply an American.” Nearly 100 years later, Ohio writer J. D. Vance recently claimed that “I may be white, but I do not identify with the WASPs of the Northeast. Instead, I identify with the millions of working-class white Americans of Scots-Irish descent.” In both of these cases, these authors rejected the usefulness of the black-white racial binary. Toomer rejected both in favor of a political identity, and since Vance rejected one subcategory of whiteness, he must have been rejecting *all* of whiteness. When Vance says, “I may be white,” he thinks that he must identify as white because he knows that’s how society will label him, but he’s wrong. What he should have said was, “Society might categorize me as white, but no matter what box society puts me into, I do not identify with the social category of whiteness.” Rachel Dolezal walked a very fine but nuanced line when she stated this past month that she was *not* African American, but that she *was* black. Very clever, indeed. She would have difficulty claiming that she had African ancestry since her family was from Sweden—it’s possible since we’re all mutts by now, but we would need DNA evidence. She *can* say she is black, though, because that means that she identifies with the culture that people of African descent created in the New World. And since she lived as a black person for a significant part of her life, you can’t even say she only took the good and skipped the bad. If she “passed” as black, believe me, she got discriminated against at some point.

Because Rachel Dolezal is part of a storied American tradition—“passing.” Light-skinned black people have been “passing” as white for generations, and always because it particularly advantaged a black person to live as a white person in America. You could receive significant job, housing, and educational advantages for you and your children. Conversely, it would not have advantaged many white people to pass as black for most of American history. This began to change during the Countercultural Movement of the 1960s. The Countercultural Movement brought the rich artistic, philosophical, and intellectual traditions of black culture into the mainstream, and the legal proscriptions lifted off of blacks with the 1965 Voting Rights Act meant that many more black people could live lives with a fairly reasonable expectation of human rights. At that point, anyone who found more spiritual resonance with black culture could adopt it without a significant dip in their quality of life. And many did.

And an interesting thing happened during that era—America’s mainstream racial narrative began to undergo a large shift. Whereas the narrative of whiteness had previously stood for “normalcy” and the narrative of blackness had previously stood for “other,” the mainstream narrative for whiteness during the 1960s began to stand for “oppressor” and the narrative for blackness began to stand for “survivor.” That is why today it is life-affirming to say “black pride” and sort of shitty to say “white pride.” It is because they espouse different historical narratives—not, in fact, neutral racial boxes. During that era, you began to see a rise in the number of whites, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans who would for periods of their lives or their whole lives pass as black, especially when circumstances made living in black neighborhoods advantageous. Every black high school in America had those kids where people were always asking “What are you?” That’s because they were mutts like most of us, but passed as black

to fit in. In the 1960s, blackness began to have social cache in America. And throughout the next few decades, blackness began to have social cache globally. Once an infrastructure of race-based civil-rights organizations became institutionalized, nonblack scholars of blackness who found that “passing” as black helped their professional and personal lives did so—thousands of them. We’ve heard of Rachel Dolezal, but she is only part of a vaunted American tradition of manipulating the messy and incompatible lines of the black-white racial binary. Since “blackness” and “whiteness” were created during the slave trade as oppositional categories of social power, anytime either one of those categories is vaunted, the other will be despised, like a see-saw. It is part of their messy historical natures, which is maybe why they have outlived their usefulness.