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What Is Whiteness?

By Nell Irvin Painter
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Clergy members singing in 1965 at a police barrier in Selma, Ala., that became known as the Berlin Wall.CreditDan Budnik/Contact Press Images

THE terrorist attack in Charleston, S.C., an atrocity like so many other shameful episodes in American history, has overshadowed the drama of Rachel A. Dolezal's yearslong passing for black. And for good reason: Hateful mass murder is, of course, more consequential than one woman's fiction. But the two are connected in a way that is relevant to many Americans.

An essential problem here is the inadequacy of white identity. Everyone loves to talk about blackness, a fascinating thing. But bring up whiteness and fewer people want to talk about it. Whiteness is on a toggle switch between "bland nothingness" and "racist hatred."

On one side is Dylann Storm Roof, the 21-year-old charged with murdering nine people at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston on Wednesday. He's part of a very old racist tradition, stretching from the anti-black violence following the Civil War, through the 1915 movie "The Birth of a Nation," to today's white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and gun-toting, apocalyptically minded Obama-haters. And now a mass murderer in a church.

On the other side is Ms. Dolezal, the former leader of the Spokane, Wash., chapter of the N.A.A.C.P., who, it seems, mistakenly believed that she could not be both anti-racist and white. Faced with her assumed choice between a blank identity or a malevolent one, she opted out of whiteness altogether. Notwithstanding the confusion and anger she has stirred, she continues to say that she identifies as black. Fine. But why, we wonder, did she pretend to *be* black?

Our search for understanding in matters of race automatically inclines us toward blackness, although that is not where these answers lie. It has become a common observation that blackness, and race more generally, is a social construct. But examining whiteness as a social construct offers more answers. The essential problem is the inadequacy of white identity.

We don't know the history of whiteness, and therefore are ignorant of the many ways it has changed over the years. If you investigate that history, you'll see that white identity has been no more stable than black identity. While we recognize the evolution of "negro" to "colored" to "Negro" to "Afro-American" to "African-American," we draw a blank when it comes to whiteness. To the contrary, whiteness has a history of multiplicity.

Constructions of whiteness have changed over time, shifting to accommodate the demands of social change. Before the mid-19th century, the existence of more than one white race was commonly accepted, in popular culture and scholarship. Indeed, there were several. Many people in the United States were seen as white — and could vote (if they were adult white men) — but were nonetheless classified as inferior (or superior) white races. Irish-Americans present one example.

In the mid- to late-19th century, the existence of several white races was widely assumed: notably, the superior Saxons and the inferior Celts. Each race — and they were called races — had its characteristic racial temperament. "Temperament" has been and still is a crucial facet of racial classification since its 18th-century Linnaean origins. Color has always been only one part of it (as the case of Ms. Dolezal shows).
In the 19th century, the Saxon race was said to be intelligent, energetic, sober, Protestant and beautiful. Celts, in contrast, were said to be stupid, impulsive, drunken, Catholic and ugly.

The mass immigration that followed the Irish famine of the 1840s inflamed nativist, anti-Catholic bigotry that flourished through the end of the century. Then new waves of poor Eastern and Southern European immigrants arrived, inspiring new racial classifications: the "Northern Italian" race, the "Southern Italian" race, the "Eastern European Hebrew" race, and so on. Their heads were measured and I.Q.s assessed to quantify (and, later, to deny) racial difference. They were all white, members of white races. But, like the Irish before them, the Italians and Jews and Greeks were classified as *inferior white races*.

By the early 20th century, the descendants of the earlier Irish immigrants had successfully elevated Celts into the superior realm of northern Europeans.

Meanwhile, World War I dampened Americans' ardor for "Saxon" — given its German associations — and increased the popularity of a new term liberated from Germanic associations. The new name was "Nordic." Many German-Americans even altered their surnames during and after the war, but the notion of plural white races held on until World War II.

By the 1940s anthropologists announced that they had a new classification: white, Asian and black were the only real races. Each was unitary — no sub-races existed within each group. There was one Negroid race, one Mongoloid race, one Caucasoid race. Everyone considered white was the same as everyone else considered white. No Saxons. No Celts. No Southern Italians. No Eastern European Hebrews. This classification — however tattered — lives on, with mild alterations, even today.

The useful part of white identity's vagueness is that whites don't have to shoulder the burden of race in America, which, at the least, is utterly exhausting. A neutral racial identity is blandly uninteresting. In the 1970s, long after they had been accepted as "white," Italians, Irish, Greeks, Jews and others proclaimed themselves "ethnic" Americans in order to forge a positive identity, at a time of "black is beautiful." But this ethnic self-discovery did not alter the fact that whiteness continued to be defined, as before, primarily by what it isn't: blackness.

Ms. Dolezal seems to have believed that the choice to devote one's life to fighting racism meant choosing black or white, Negroid or Caucasoid. Black was clearly more captivating than a whiteness characterized by hate.

We lack more meaningful senses of white identity, even though some whites, throughout history, have been committed to fighting racism and advocating for social justice. In the 19th century, abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and John Brown helped end slavery. In the early 20th century, Mary White Ovington helped found the N.A.A.C.P. Lillian Smith depicted the South's nexus of "sin, sex, segregation" in her writings. White Communists, priests and rabbis stood beside the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights movement. Where would America be without these white allies of black freedom fighters?

Given that the monolithic definition of whiteness is antithetical to social justice, perhaps we should encourage a rebellion against it. Just as blacks and whites joined together as "abolitionists" to bring down American slavery in the 19th century, anti-racist whites in the 1990s called themselves "race traitors," believing that social justice for all demands treason against white supremacy.

Eliminating the binary definition of whiteness — the toggle between nothingness and awfulness — is essential for a new racial vision that ethical people can share across the color line. Just as race has been reinvented over the centuries, let's repurpose the term "abolitionist" as more than just a hashtag. The "abolition" of white privilege can be an additional component of identity (not a replacement for it), one that embeds social justice in its meaning. Even more, it unifies people of many races.

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