The Rhetoric of Race, Culture, and Identity: Rachel Dolezal as Co-Cultural Group Member

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This essay analyzes the rhetoric of Rachel Dolezal, a biologically white woman who embraces a black cultural identity. Drawing from various mass-mediated texts, I draw on existing research on passing and co-cultural theory to provide insight into the rhetoric of race, culture, and identity surrounding the series of unfolding events of the summer of 2015 when Dolezal was "outed" as a white woman. Specifically, I argue that from her perspective, Dolezal understood her position in African American communities as one of cultural outsider which prompted various co-cultural communication orientations and practices geared toward specific preferred outcomes, namely accommodation and ultimately total assimilation. The essay concludes with a discussion on how Dolezal's rhetoric provides an excellent opportunity to explore issues of race, culture, and identity — an important element of the field of communication's civic calling to use their expertise to engage important socio-cultural issues.

Keywords: co-cultural theory, passing, post-racial, Rachel Dolezal, racial identity

In June 2015 Rachel Dolezal, President of the local National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NACCP) in Spokane, Washington, went from largely unknown to infamous when a local reporter discovered that the self-identified multiracial Black woman had no African ancestry. When a video recording of her being questioned about her identity, along with pictures from her youth provided by her parents, were posted online, #RachelDolezal quickly became the most trending topic on Twitter. Soon thereafter, she resigned and/or was terminated from several paid and volunteer positions in part because she had misled others to believe that she was biologically African American. Her case made international news¹ and "set off a national debate about the very meaning of racial identity." More specifically, her insistence that she was not African American, but culturally Black triggered critical dialogue around the social construction of race in the United States, the one-drop rule, and agency issues surrounding assertions of authentic identity.³

Historically scholars have regarded passing as tragic, painful, playful, subversive, and/or reflective of disloyalty, self-hatred, or efforts to improve one's financial and social standing.⁴ Most

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¹ Charles M. Blow, "The Delusions of Rachel Dolezal," *New York Times*, June 17, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/18/opinion/charles-blow-the-delusions-of-dolezal.html?_r=0.

² Kirk Johnson, Richard Perez-Pena, and John Eligon, "Rachel Dolezal, in Center of Storm, is Defiant: 'I Identify as Black," *New York Times*, June 16, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/17/us/rachel-dolezal-nbc-today-show.html.

³ Mark Orbe and Tina Harris, *Interracial Communication: Theory into Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015).

⁴ Elaine K. Ginsberg, "Introduction: The Politics of Passing," in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, edited by Elaine K. Ginsberg, 1-18 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

of the instances of historical racial passing involve African Americans whose physical and communicative features allow them to assume the public identity of a European American. Yet, several well-known instances of Whites passing as Blacks also exist. In her book *Passing Strange*, Martha A. Sandweiss describes how Clarence King, a geologist, passed as an African American Pullman porter so that he could be with the black woman that he loved.⁵ Jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow is another example. Born to Russian-Jewish immigrants, Mezzrow often passed as black in order to strengthen his musical credentials in the hipster culture.⁶

This essay seeks to provide insight into the rhetoric of race, culture, and identity surrounding mass mediated coverage of Rachel Dolezal. Specifically, it draws from existing research on passing: Instances whereby an individual from a less privileged group masks their identity in order to reap the benefits associated with a more privileged group. According to Catherine Squires and Daniel Brouwer, when an individual is accused of performing a false identity it generates critique from all of those who feel "duped," including "marginal in-groups who see a need to assert their identity and re-define the passer for their own agendas." Accordingly, uncovering someone who is passing draws increased attention to the invisible web of personal, social, and cultural identities – something that triggers fear in both dominant and co-cultural groups. In short, passing interrupts the dominant discourse of rigid identity categories and subsequently challenges understandings of how "identity—who is who, and who gets to decide—is directly linked to material outcomes."

Herstory: The Racial Journey of Rachel Dolezal

Rachel Dolezal was born on November 12, 1977 in Lincoln County, Montana to Ruthanne and Lawrence Dolezal who report having Czech, German and Swedish origins. Home-schooled for much of her life, Dolezal describes "drawing self-portraits with the brown crayon instead of the peach crayon, and black curly hair" at the age of five. While she asserts that her "self-identification with the black experience" began around this time, her parents describe this as a fabrication. Instead, they point to the 1990s when they adopted three African American children and one Haitian child. According to her biological father, Dolezal "immediately was drawn to them [and] ever since then she's had a tremendous affinity with African-Americans." In 2015 interviews, she recounts that she thought of herself as White at this time.

After graduating from high school in 1995, Dolezal began college at Bellhaven University in Mississippi. According to reports, part of her motivation to attend this small Christian school was related to its racial reconciliation programming. During this time, she frequently visited a multiracial intentional community and got involved with a ministry called Voice of Calvary – a "racial

⁵ Martha A. Sandwiss, *Passing Strange* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

⁶ Allyson Hobbs, "Rachel Dolezal's Unintended Gift to America," *New York Times*, June 19, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/17/opinion/rachel-dolezals-unintended-gift-to-america.html.

⁷ Catherine Squires and Daniel C. Brouwer, "In/Dicernible Bodies: The Politics of Passing in Dominant and Marginal Media," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 (2002): 283-310.

⁸ Squires and Brouwer, "In/Dicernible Bodies," 304.

⁹ Squires and Brouwer, "In/Dicernible Bodies," 287.

¹⁰ Kirk Johnson, Richard Perez-Pena, and John Eligon, "Rachel Dolezal, in Center of Storm, is Defiant: 'I Identify as Black," *New York Times*, June 16, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/17/us/rachel-dolezal-nbc-today-show.html.

¹¹ Johnson, Perez-Pena, and Eligon, "Rachel Dolezal."

reconciliation community development project where blacks and whites live together." Her undergraduate experience, according to 2015 interview self-disclosures, involved some racial tension in terms of associating with white or black students. However, Dolezal reports feeling at home with African American students, something that nurtured a passion for taking care of, and styling, black hair.

Dolezal's undergraduate studies cultivated an appreciation of African American art, something that lead her to apply for entrance into the fine arts master's program at Howard University, a historically black college/university. During the application process, she was not required to identify her race; however, some reports suggest that administrators assumed that she was African American based on her art portfolio (which contained art of African-themed images) and perceptions of her voice during a phone interview. Receiving a scholarship from the university, she began the graduate program in 2000. According to faculty and administrators, she was known as a white woman during this time. 13 While not the norm, white students at Howard—especially in their high quality graduate programs—were typical. "Immersed in black culture... [the] subjects of narrative portrait paintings" created by Dolezal were all black. 14 In 2000, she married Kevin Moore, an African American male medical student at Howard. During her second year of graduate school, Dolezal's scholarship was not renewed and, in 2002, she sued the university for discrimination. Her lawsuit alleged that she was denied scholarship funds, a teaching assistant position, and other opportunities (e.g., space in art exhibitions) based on race, pregnancy, family responsibilities and gender. The case was thrown out, and Dolezal went on to graduate with a master's degree in fine arts in 2002. Days later she gave birth to a son.

Following graduation, Dolezal moved with her family to northern Idaho. Shortly thereafter, she divorced her husband—amidst allegations of abuse—and moved into her uncle's basement in the largely white town of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. At this time, she is still blond, pale-skinned and identifying herself as a white woman. Living with a biracial child in the Idaho panhandle that once was the headquarters of a white supremacist group (i.e., Aryan Nations), is not easy, and beginning in 2005 Dolezal reports several alleged hate crimes. Within these early reports, she is identified as white. Between 2005-2013, she is employed as a part-time instructor at North Idaho College. According to her parents, this is the time when Dolezal began to identify herself more with the African American community. In 2008, she works as the Education Director for the Human Rights Education Institute, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. In this context, according to co-workers, Dolezal describes herself as "multiracial" and "part Black," descriptors that are included in police reports for various hate crimes against her and her family including nooses hung in her home, vandalized and stolen property, death threats, along with threats to kidnap her son while he was in the second grade. 15

¹² J. Freedom du Lac, and Abby Ohlheiser, "Rachel Dolezal ex-NAACP Leader: 'Nothing About Being White Describes Who I Am," *New York Times*, June 16, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/06/16/rachel-dolezal-i-identify-as-black/; Richard Perez-Pena, "Black or White?: Woman's Story Stirs Up a Furor," *New York Times*, June 12, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/13/us/rachel-dolezal-naacp-president-accused-of-lying-about-her-race.html.

¹³ Susan Svrluga, "Rachel Dolezal Sued Howard for Racial Discrimination Because She Was White," *Washington Post*, June 15, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/06/15/rachel-dolezal-sued-howard-for-racial-discrimination-because-she-was-white/.

¹⁴ Svrluga, "Rachel Dolezal Sued Howard."

¹⁵ Johnson, Perez-Pena, and Eligon, "Rachel Dolezal"; Shawntelle Moncy, "A Life to be Heard," *The* [Eastern Washington University] *Easterner*, February 5, 2015, http://easterneronline.com/35006/eagle-life/a-life-to-be-heard/#sthash.ZJ2j06Rp.dpuf

On July 28, 2010, Dolezal resigned her position with the Human Rights Education Institute citing a lack of fairness and equity after she was passed over for the Institute's top job. The same year she is hired as a part-time instructor in the Africana Education Program at Eastern Washington University (EWU) where she teaches classes and serves as an adviser to black student groups. EWU is located in Spokane, WA, a "super white city" with only 2.3% black residents. The same year, with the consent of her parents, Dolezal obtained legal guardianship of her adopted brother, Izaiah Dolezal who is 16 years of age. Right around this time, she becomes estranged from her biological family and begins to claim that Albert Wilkerson, Jr.—a black man that she met in Idaho—is her father. In at least one interview, she also refers to her biological father as her "step father." These incidents, coupled with her volunteer work in the African American community and shifting appearance, present a public image consistent with that of a multiracial Black woman.

The year 2014 marked a significant year in the life of Rachel Dolezal. In May, she is appointed as Chair of Spokane's Police Ombudsman Commission; on her application she identified herself as having several ethnicities: African American, Native American, German, Czech, Swedish, Jewish and Arabic. In November, she is elected President of Spokane National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter, an organization that has a long history of white leadership and involvement. Over the next year, she gained notoriety for revitalizing the chapter, raising its visibility, increasing membership in an overwhelmingly white region, and moving the chapter office from a low-income black neighborhood to a new downtown office. During this time, Dolezal describes herself as a black woman and includes herself when discussing black women through the use of "we" and "our" pronouns.

If 2014 was a year of accomplishments for Dolezal, 2015 was the year where the house came tumbling down. Her life began to quickly unravel in mid-June when an interview with Jeff Humphrey, a local television reporter from KXLY-TV, goes viral. Within this short video, Humphrey asked about the various alleged hate crimes reported by Dolezal, then moved to questions about her African American father, and ultimately questions regarding if she is indeed black. What Dolezal does not realize is that the reporter was in contact with her biological parents who denied any African American heritage and released pictures of her as a blue-eyed teenager with straight blond hair and pale skin. At this time, Dolezal avoided the direct questions and offered a clarification that remains consistent over time: "I wouldn't say I'm African-American, but I would say I'm black, and there's a difference in those terms." Immediately she became the top trending hashtag on Twitter which triggers a whirlwind of media attention. Following allegations that she had lied about her racial identity and other aspects of her biography, she is relieved of her paid and volunteer positions in Spokane (EWU, NAACP, Spokane Police Oversight Commission, etc.) and the police investigation into hate mail allegation is dropped. Within the next few days, Dolezal is consumed by international media attention and participated in several high profile interviews. On November 2, 2015, she appeared on *The Real* talk show and publicly stated for the first time that she was born white. "I acknowledge that I was biologically born white to white parents, but I

¹⁶ Leah Sottile and Abby Phillip, "How Rachel Dolezal Created a New Image and Made a Black Community Believe," *Washington Post*, June 15, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/amid-controversy-rachel-dolezal-resigns-as-head-of-spokanes-naacp-chapter/2015/06/15/b0ca8690-129c-11e5-9ddc-e3353542100c_story.html.

¹⁷ Perez-Pena, "Black or White"; Allyson Hobbs, "Rachel Dolezal's Unintended Gift to America," *New York Times*, June 17, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/17/opinion/rachel-dolezals-unintended-gift-to-america.html ¹⁸ Perez-Pena, "Black or White"; Hobbs, "Rachel Dolezal's Unintended Gift."

¹⁹ Christine Hauser, "White Former N.A.A.C.P. Leader Who Said She Was Black Still Does," *New York Times*, July 20, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/21/us/white-former-naacp-leader-who-said-she-was-black-still-does .html.

identify as Black."²⁰ On February 16, 2016, Dolezal gave birth to her second son, naming him Langston Attickus Dolezal after two African American history makers.

Co-Cultural Theory

Co-cultural theory, developed through the work of Mark Orbe and colleagues, explores how persons who are traditionally marginalized in dominant societal structures communicate in their everyday lives. Generated through phenomenological inquiry, the theory emerged from the experiences of a variety of co-cultural groups, including members of racial and ethnic groups, women, persons with disabilities, gays/lesbians/bisexuals, and those from a lower socioeconomic status. The initial work in co-cultural theory centered on the emergence of a co-cultural communication model; the focus was on specific practices that individuals from traditionally marginalized groups enact during their interactions with dominant group members. In 1996, Orbe identified 26 co-cultural practices included averting controversy, emphasizing commonalities, developing positive face, censoring self, extensive preparation, overcompensating, manipulating stereotypes, bargaining, dissociating, mirroring, strategic distancing, ridiculing self, increasing visibility, dispelling stereotypes, communicating self, intragroup networking, utilizing liaisons, educating others, confronting, gaining advantage, avoiding, maintaining barriers, exemplifying strength, embracing stereotypes, attacking, and sabotaging others. Over the past 20 years, scholars have identified additional co-cultural practices.

Once these communicative practices were established, the focal point of theorizing shifted to understanding how people came to select certain practices over others—with a particular focus on six interrelated factors that influence co-cultural strategic choices. ²⁵ Each of these factors, in italics below, is central to the core idea of co-cultural theory.

Situated within a particular *field of experience* that governs their perceptions of the *costs and rewards* associated with, as well as their *capability* to engage in, various communicative practices, co-cultural group members will adopt certain communication orientations—based on their *preferred outcomes* and *communication approaches*—to fit the circumstances of a specific *situation*.²⁶

²⁰ Susan Svrluga, "Rachel Dolezal Admits She Was Born White," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/11/02/rachel-dolezal-admits-she-was-born-white.

²¹ Mark Orbe, Constructing Co-Cultural Theory: An Explication of Culture, Power, and Communication (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998); Mark Orbe and Tabatha Roberts, "Co-Cultural Theorizing: Foundations, Applications & Extensions," Howard Journal of Communications 23 (2012): 293-311; Mark Orbe and Regina Spellers, "From the Margins to the Center: Utilizing Co-Cultural Theory in Diverse Contexts," in Theorizing About Intercultural Communication, ed. William Gudykunst, 173-191 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005).

²² Orbe and Roberts, "Co-Cultural Theorizing," 294-296.

²³ Mark Orbe, "Laying the Foundation for Co-Cultural Communication Theory: An Inductive Approach to Studying Non-Dominant Communication Strategies and the Factors That Influence Them," *Communication Studies* 47 (1996): 157-176.

²⁴ Gina Castle Bell, Mark Hopson, Melinda R. Weathers, and Katy A. Ross, "From 'Laying the Foundations' to Building the House: Extending Orbe's (1998) Co-Cultural Theory to Include 'Rationalization' as a Formal Strategy," *Communication Studies* 66 (2014): 1-26.

²⁵ Orbe and Roberts, "Co-Cultural Theorizing."

²⁶ Orbe, Constructing Co-Cultural Theory, 129.

Over the years, scholars have explored how co-cultural practices are associated with different communication orientations; this growing body of research has examined various social and cultural groups within a multitude of communicative settings.²⁷

Two contemporary extensions of co-cultural theory make it a useful tool to examine the rhetoric of Rachel Dolezal. First, scholars have argued that the theory can apply both to traditionally marginalized group members as well as majority group members whose localized context places them in the minority. Research on white students in a diverse interracial communication college class with an African American professor and heterosexual students attending a women-centered [lesbian] festival are excellent examples of how dominant group communication mirrors that of co-cultural group communication when they perceive themselves as minorities. Second, co-cultural research has extended beyond its initial focus on face-to-face intergroup communication. An important area of this outgrowth has been cultivated by rhetorical scholars interested in engaging issues of culture and power. For instance, co-cultural theory has proven itself an invaluable lens for rhetorical analyses examining public demonstrations, the oppositional nature of civil rights and immigrant discourse, comedic political revolutions, and video depictions of alternative music subculture. In the expansive context of co-cultural theorizing, this analysis seeks to enhance understanding in terms of Rachel Dolezal's rhetoric in terms of race, power, and identity.

Rachel Dolezal as Co-Cultural Group Member

At the core of co-cultural theory is the premise that the communication of underrepresented group members is one of strategic adaptation.³⁰ Within this section, I utilize a co-cultural theoretical lens to offer an explication of Rachel Dolezal's rhetoric regarding race, culture, and identity. Specifically, I argue that from her perspective, Dolezal understood her position in African American communities as one of cultural outsider. In this regard, she was a co-cultural group member whose preferred outcome was one of assimilation. My application of key theoretical concepts—co-cultural communication orientations and practices, as well as the factors that lead to particular forms of communication—provides significant insight into the logic of Dolezal's rhetoric.

My analysis of Dolezal's rhetoric is informed primarily through mass-mediated texts that came to represent her story in 2015. These included all of the media interviews that she participated in, as well as over 50 news articles that appeared in two major U.S. outlets, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. For this rhetorical analysis, I chose to focus specifically on data-based articles (while avoiding commentaries), and whenever possible, giving preference to texts where Dolezal was able to articulate her lived experiences in her own words. As such, I draw heavily

²⁷ Orbe and Roberts, "Co-Cultural Theorizing."

²⁸ Tina M. Harris, Ann Miller, and Alison Trego, "A Co-Cultural Examination of Community Building in the Interracial Communication Classroom, *Journal of Intergroup Relations* 31 (2004): 39-63; Laura S. O'Hara and Marcy Meyer, "I Never Felt More Uncomfortable in my Life': University Students' Discursive Constructions of 'The Lesbian Convention," *Communication Studies* 54 (2003): 137-153.

²⁹ Melissa J. Bridgewater and Patrice M. Buzzanell, "Caribbean Immigrants' Discourses," *Journal of Business Communication* 47 (2010): 235-265; Christopher Groscurth and Mark Orbe, "The Oppositional Nature of Civil Rights Discourse: Co-Cultural Communicative Practices That Speak Truth to Power" *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 14 (2006): 123-140; Steven Miura, "New Identity, New Rhetoric: The Native Hawaiian Quest for Independence," *Journal of Intergroup Relations* 28 (2001): 3-16; Kelly Opdycke, "A Comic Revolution: Comedian Bassem Youssef as a Voice for Oppressed Egyptians," *Colloquy* 9 (2013): 1-20.; Ruben Ramirez-Sanchez, "Marginalization From Within: Expanding Co-Cultural Theory Through the Experience of Afro Punk," *Howard Journal of Communications* 19 (2008): 89-104.

³⁰ Orbe, Constructing Co-Cultural Theory, 111.

from extended interviews that were accessible on-line, including five unedited interviews that were conducted by an Eastern Washington University student for her thesis in 2014. All of these texts were accessed, copied and/or transcribed into a Microsoft Word document, and analyzed for key points of insight.

My co-cultural analysis of Rachel Dolezal's rhetoric regarding race, culture, and identity features three sections: (1) Initial efforts: Co-cultural accommodation of African American cultural spaces; (2) Diverse co-cultural practices for total assimilation; and (3) Co-cultural deception in multiple forms.

Initial Efforts: Co-Cultural Accommodation of African American Cultural Spaces

According to multiple reports, Rachel Dolezal's exposure to African Americans in any substantial sense occurred during her teenage years when her parents adopted several children of African descent. This aspect of her *field of experience* appears to set in motion a desire to learn more about African American culture. It reportedly influenced her choice for college; Bellhaven College in Jackson, Mississippi provided opportunities where she, as a white woman, could participate in communities that valued interracial harmony. During this formative time in her life, Dolezal was able to interact with African Americans in an authentic, genuine, and open manner (*communicating self*) and learn more about their culture. An important aspect of this *assertive accommodation orientation* was identifying and working with other European Americans (*intragroup networking*) and African Americans (*utilizing liaisons*) who were interested in creating spaces where all races could maintain a harmonious existence. As such, her initial *preferred outcome* as a White woman was not to separate herself from Blacks, nor was it to fit in by losing her white identity. Instead, it was to work within existing structures to accommodate her wishes.

Dolezal continued her efforts at accommodation as she began her post-undergraduate education at Howard University, a historically Black university. Her educational experiences thus far reflected a common accepted truth across history: One does not have to identify as Black in order to form meaningful relationships with African Americans or engage in important anti-racism work.³² Unlike at Bellhaven, however, trying to do so at Howard seemed to come with some obstacles. While she continued to *utilize liaisons* – African American faculty, peers, as well as her new African American husband – she reported being the target of discrimination based (in part) on race. Her response was to continue with her accommodation efforts through the co-cultural practice of reporting the incident to authorities.³³ Dolezal's lawsuit against the university, from her perspective, reflects continued attempts at assertive accommodation. However, depending on perceptions of the truthfulness of her accusations (the case was ultimately dismissed), this strategic move can also be regarded as gaining advantage, a power move that attempts to check the efforts of the majority group.³⁴ This co-cultural practice, reflective of aggressive accommodation, represents rhetoric where Dolezal put her own rights above those of others in an attempt to negotiate the costs and rewards inherent with being a white student at a university created to educate students of African descent.

³¹ Freedom du Lac and Ohlheiser, "Rachel Dolezal ex-NAACP Leader."

³² Daniel J. Shartstein, "Rachel Dolezal's 'Passing' Isn't So Unusual," *New York Times*, June 15, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/magazine/rachel-dolezals-passing-isnt-so-unusual.html.

³³ Bell, "From 'Laying the Foundations," 19.

³⁴ Orbe, Constructing Co-Cultural Theory, 80-81.

The lessons that were gained from her experiences at Howard, coupled with her subsequent move with her African American husband and biracial son to Idaho, represented important shifts in *situational context*. Her desire to work within the context of human rights and anti-racism agencies appeared to motivate an identity that was more conducive to professional success. From her perspective, identifying as multiracial, and by extension as black given the legacy of the one-drop rule, allowed for greater accessibility to engage in professional work immersed in the black experience (e.g., African American hair stylist, Africana Studies instructor, diversity educator). Consequently, the *assertive accommodation* of *communicating self* was rejected over other co-cultural practices associated with the preferred outcome of total *assimilation*, or in other words passing as Black. According to Tamara Winfrey Harris, Dolezal's empathy for black culture evolved into impersonation.³⁵ From a co-cultural communication perspective, her new identity in the northwest U.S. represents a shift in communication orientation and preferred outcome.

Diverse Co-Cultural Practices for Total Assimilation

Over the course of her life as an adult, Rachel Dolezal enacted a variety of rhetorical strategies related to race, culture, and identity. The field of experience that she brought with her as she relocated to Idaho/Washington prompted a distinct shift in co-cultural communication. Carving out a professional, social, and cultural existence, as a mother of a biracial child in a predominately white space, prompted diverse efforts at fitting in with the small African American community; arguably this might have been the only community where she could find acceptance. Within this section, I explicate the complex ways in which Dolezal's rhetoric reflects an attempt at total assimilation into the local African American community, something that is seen in multiple co-cultural practices across nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive communication approaches.

Nonassertive assimilation co-cultural practices. One of the core co-cultural practices reflective of a nonassertive assimilation communication orientation is *emphasizing commonalities*. This rhetorical move involves focusing on human similarities and/or downplaying co-cultural differences. According to Lawrence Dolezal, his daughter's change in communication over time was something that naturally occurs when you are immersed in another culture. "You speak and sound and act and take on the mannerisms of the culture you live in," he said. According to reporter Susan Svrluga, it's not uncommon to see white people at Howard — or elsewhere in the black community — taking on black slang, fashions and hairstyles. This communicative shift doesn't reflect an identification as African American, but simply a natural progression where commonalities emerge over time.

Another form of *emphasizing commonalities* as a means to secure a place within African American communities can be seen in Dolezal's rhetoric. This co-cultural strategy is one that draws from her knowledge of Africana Studies, a scholarly discipline which recognizes that all human forms can trace their origins to the continent of Africa.³⁹ Dolezal uses this fact as a means to foster total assimilation within the Black community. During her November 2, 2015 interview on *The*

³⁵ Tamara Winfrey Harris, "Black Like Who?: Rachel Dolezal's Harmful Masquerade," *New York Times*, June 16, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/16/opinion/rachel-dolezals-harmful-masquerade.html.

³⁶ Orbe, Constructing Co-Cultural Theory, 58-59.

³⁷ Justine Moyer, "'Are You An African-American?' Why An NAACP Official Isn't Saying." *New York Times*, June 12, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/06/12/spokane-naacp-president-rachel-dolezal-may-be-white/

³⁸ Svrluga, "Rachel Dolezal Sued Howard."

³⁹ Moyer, "'Are You an African American?""

Real, she was asked about the boxes that she checks on different forms. Although initially evasive, Dolezal shared how the forms usually include a description with each box. For instance, the one she filled out for the police commissioner's position in Spokane had a Black/African American box with the following description: "Having origins in the continent of Africa." Citing her expertise as an Africana Studies professor, Dolezal then stated, "I checked the Black box because we all have origins in the continent of Africa."

Another nonassertive assimilation co-cultural practice that Dolezal enacts is *remaining silent*.⁴¹ This rhetorical strategy is useful in situational contexts where *communicating self* would work against attempts to blend in with the majority. Starting around 2005, Dolezal began to use her *abilities* as a hair stylist to adopt twist-outs, locks, braids and other hair styles associated with African Americans. This shift, and other visual cues like a darker skin complexion, prompted others to assume that she was African American. In her first national interview with Matt Lauer on *The Today Show*, Dolezal described how she never corrected the ways that others – including several police officers and reporters who were investigating alleged hate crimes against her and her family – labelled her racially. Lauer immediately cited the *perceived rewards* that came with *remaining silent*: "The critics and the cynics would say you didn't correct these reports because it worked for you, because it helped you meet your goals."⁴²

Assertive assimilation co-cultural practices. For most co-cultural group members, enacting only co-cultural practices associated with a singular communication orientation is not the norm; instead most rely on drawing from practices across orientations. 43 Dolezal's efforts to assimilate with Black culture are dominated by two co-cultural practices associated with assertive assimilation: extensive preparation and overcompensating. By all accounts, she engaged in a significant amount of groundwork (i.e., extensive preparation) in terms of her focus on African American art, literature, history, music, and hair. Over time, Dolezal's exposure to and growing expertise in Black culture provided her with substantial content that she could incorporate into articulations of "herstory." For instance, in her unedited interviews with an undergraduate student, she recounts a number of life events (i.e., reading Black History books as a child, experiencing early identity struggles as a bi-racial child, etc.) that seemingly position her as a credible source. These conscious attempts, however, can be understood as *overcompensation* for a person who is attempting to prove her place in the African American community. In fact, when Dolezal's identity is questioned, she defends her identity as a Black woman in light of her well-established "racial resume." For instance, during the Matt Lauer interview when she was asked to respond to criticisms that her darkened skin tone was akin to blackface, she asserted: "This is not some freak 'Birth of a Nation' mockery blackface performance. This is on a very real, connected level."44 Later she told MSNBC host Melissa Harris-Perry, "I have really gone there with the experience, in terms of being a mother of two black sons and really owning what it means to experience and live blackness."45 These quotes demonstrate Dolezal's right to identify as Black, something that is warranted given her extensive preparation and overcompensation.

Defined by Mark Orbe as "conforming to commonly accepted beliefs about group members as a strategic means to exploit them for personal gain," *manipulating stereotypes* is another assertive

⁴⁰ Rachel Dolezal, interview with The Real, *The Real*, BET, November 2, 2015.

⁴¹ Gina Castle Bell et al, "From 'Laying the Foundations."

⁴² Rachel Dolezal, interview with Matt Lauer, *Today*, NBC, June 15, 2016.

⁴³ Orbe and Roberts, "Co-Cultural Theorizing," 296.

⁴⁴ Charles M. Blow, "The Delusions of Rachel Dolezal," *New York Times*, June 17, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/18/opinion/charles-blow-the-delusions-of-dolezal.html?_r=0.

⁴⁵ Rachel Dolezal, interview with Melissa Harris-Perry, Melissa Harris-Perry, MSNBC, June 17, 2015.

assimilation co-cultural practice seen within Dolezal's rhetoric. ⁴⁶ Her assertion of black identity is situated within social constructions that define race in polarizing ways. During an interview on *ABC News Nightline* (June 17, 2015), Dolezal draws from societal views when she says "nothing described as white describes who I am." Within this line of thinking, she implies that she didn't do anything deceiving since others interpreted her identity as Black based on their own racialized thinking. Specifically, in a *Vanity Fair* interview, she's quoted as stating: "I just feel like I didn't mislead anybody; I didn't deceive anybody… If people feel misled or deceived, then sorry that they feel that way, but I believe that's more due to their definition and construct of race in their own minds than it is to my integrity or honesty." Dolezal's assertions of a black identity went largely unquestioned because she was able to rely on existing racial phenotypes and classifications based on the one-drop rule. As such, she "was able to trade on a racist element of history to pass believably as a black woman."

Aggressive assimilation co-cultural practices. Interwoven within her other rhetoric, Dolezal enacted more aggressive co-cultural practices toward the *preferred outcome* of assimilation. The most evident, and controversial, aggressive assimilation co-cultural practice enacted by Dolezal was *mirroring*, whereby she adopted African American cultural codes in an attempt to make her white identity invisible. Over time, she adopted hairstyles associated with black women, darkened her skin to that of a caramel complexion, and adopted Black verbal nuances to the point that it was easy to believe her when she identified as white, African American, Native American and two or more races. Osamudia James points to photos where Dolezal's white appearance was transformed to mirror those of African American women: Pictures of her feature large kinky afros or blond braids and locs, often pinned into intricate updos. Her nails are long and brightly colored; her jewelry large and chunky. In photos, she arranges her very glossy lips into a pout, as if to present them as more full."

According to her biological father, Lawrence Dolezal, her *mirroring* was so intense that it resulted in "assimilat[ing] into that culture so strongly that that's where she transferred her identity." While some might question how a European American woman's mirroring African American culture could be assumed as Black, Eastern Washington University professor Larry Cebula describes how *situational context* played a role. Spokane, with only 2.3% African American residents, is a "super white city...[where] someone like Rachel could put on blackface, basically, and

⁴⁶ Orbe, Constructing Co-Cultural Theory, 16.

⁴⁷ Rachel Dolezal, interview with Nightline, Nightline, ABC, June 17, 2015.

⁴⁸ Christine Hauser, "White Former N.A.A.C.P. Leader Who Said She Was Black Still Does," *New York Times*, July 20, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/21/us/white-former-naacp-leader-who-said-she-was-black-still-does.html.

⁴⁹ Harris, "Black Like Who?"

⁵⁰ Orbe, Constructing Co-Cultural Theory, 60-62.

⁵¹ Jonathan Capehart, "Caitlyn Jenner and Rachel Dolezal: Clash of Identity and Authenticity," *Washington Post*, June 15, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2015/06/15/caitlyn-jenner-and-rachel-dolezal-clash-of-identity-and-authenticity/

⁵² Osamudia James, "What Rachel Dolezal Doesn't Understand: Being Is About More Than Just How You Look," *Washington Post*, June 12, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/06/12/what-rachel-dolezal-doesnt-understand-being-black-is-about-more-than-just-how-you-look/

⁵³ Justine Moyer, "The Surprising Ways Caitlyn Jenner and Rachel Dolezal Are Now Linked," *Washington Post*, June 15, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/06/15/the-surprising-ways-caitlyn-jenner-and-rachel-dolezal-are-now-linked/

fool everyone." He adds, "in a place desperate for progress and aching for heroes, we wanted to believe it." 54

Part of Dolezal's success at total assimilation into the Black community – evidenced by her acceptance as one of its own – was made possible through another aggressive co-cultural practice: dissociating from other Whites. Her estrangement from her family, including denying the existence of her biological father, has been widely reported in the media. This dissociation from white family members, coupled with her own adoption of an African American adopted brother, were instrumental for her assimilation into the Black community. Evidence also exists that demonstrates how Dolezal used *ridiculing self* to cement her new socio-cultural position. In a series of raw interviews published online, viewers witness her invoking discourse filled with criticism of European Americans who remain ignorant regarding race, white privilege, and racism. Within one exchange, Dolezal ironically takes specific issue with Whites who think that they deserve a pass because they have black friends, black children, or know black culture. Such critical comments, contextualized within other rhetoric affirming her identity as a multiracial Black woman, solidified Dolezal's total assimilation to black culture.

Co-Cultural Deception in Multiple Forms

By all accounts, the life of Rachel Dolezal is unique in her identification **as** a Black woman – in contrast to other Whites that identify **with** Black culture – was played out at a time when technology provided a depth and immediacy of analysis not possible in previous times. Multiple on-line texts, from a variety of sources, also reveal discrepancies between Dolezal's statements regarding her identity and other facts and evidence. The extent of these often-cited discrepancies prompts many to define her identity journey as "an elaborate scheme of deception and denial." ⁵⁵

Multiple examples of deception exist within Dolezal's rhetoric depicting her life as a biologically White woman who identifies as Black. Several involve her upbringing: living in a teepee, hunting food with a bow and arrow, struggling over early self-portraits, living in South Africa, and being beaten with a "baboon whip" by her parents because of her skin color. In an interview with MSNBC's Melissa Harris-Perry (June 17, 2015), Dolezal admitted that some of her responses about growing up in past interviews were "creative non-fiction." However, she has stopped short of recanting other assertions (i.e., multiple hate crimes targeting herself and her family, multiple accusations of abuse, claiming an African American man as her father, etc.) that others report as void of any factual evidence. Many continue to speculate if Dolezal's mistruths and exaggerations are conscious and/or examples of self-deception. While this point of analysis is important, the focus within this essay revolves around deception as co-cultural practice.

Deception as co-cultural practice is implied within *gaining advantage*, a strategy associated with the communication orientation of *aggressive accommodation*. Within early theoretical conceptualization, it was defined as using the necessary aggressive methods, including those that

⁵⁴ Leah Sottile and Abby Phillip. "How Rachel Dolezal Created a New Image and Made a Black Community Believe," *Washington Post*, June 15, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/amid-controversy-rachel-dolezal-resigns-as-head-of-spokanes-naacp-chapter/2015/06/15/b0ca8690-129c-11e5-9ddc-e3353542100c_story.html

⁵⁵ Blow, "The Delusions of Rachel Dolezal."

⁵⁶ Johnson et al., "Rachel Dolezal, in Center of Storm."

⁵⁷ Dolezal, interview with Melissa Harris-Perry.

⁵⁸ Amy Ellis Nutt. "Black Like Her: Is Racial Identity a State of Mind?" *Washington Post*, June 16, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/black-like-her-is-racial-identity-a-state-of-mind/2015/06/16/765b5a42-142d-11e5-9518-f9e0a8959f32_story.html

seemingly violate the "rights" of others, to assert one's voice in attempts to change existing dominant structures. Some of Dolezal's alleged deception appears to fit this mold. Yet, her endeavors at "creative non-fiction" also were used to strengthen her attempts at assimilation, and not accommodation. In this regard, deception complemented her attempts at dissociating and strategic distancing. While honesty within her rhetoric might have achieved her goals, to some extent, creating mistruths allowed her to maximize her efforts at the expense of others. Without any deception, Dolezal's preferred outcome of complete assimilation within the Black community was impossible. Her deception, however, took many nuanced forms that remain largely unarticulated within existing co-cultural theorizing.

Concluding Thoughts

Utilizing a co-cultural theoretical lens, this essay seeks to provide insight into the rhetoric of race, culture, and identity surrounding mass mediated coverage of Rachel Dolezal. Specifically, I explicate her co-cultural rhetoric by describing her initial accommodation efforts, and diverse co-cultural practices – including different forms of deception – geared toward total assimilation into Black communities. This rhetorical analysis contributes to current theorizing through the discovery of nuanced co-cultural practices employed by Dolezal. For instance, her field of experience as an African Studies instructor allowed her to articulate a clear and logical rationale (e.g., tracing all human existence to the continent of Africa) as why she technically could claim an African American identity. Within this analysis, I describe this tactic as emphasizing commonalties, a nonassertive assimilation co-cultural practice. However, another interpretation could suggest a new, more nuanced rhetoric in the form of *intellectualizing*. This tactic could be described as attempts to use one's educational and/or professional expertise to make abstract (but factually accurate) arguments designed to silence critics. From its inception, co-cultural theory has positioned itself as a dynamic, fluid form of theorizing that seeks continued development and enhancement. As demonstrated here, engaging contemporary rhetoric situated in diverse contexts provides fruitful opportunities to do exactly that.

Beyond theorizing, a contemporary rhetorical analysis of Rachel Dolezal's articulation of racial identity prompts insightful questions regarding the classification, understanding, and saliency of race in the United States. Elaine Ginsberg argues that "when 'race' is no longer visible, it is no longer intelligible: if 'white' can be 'black,' what is white?" She also contends that passing creates a "category crisis" and "destabilizes the grounds of privilege founded on racial identity." As such, analyses of specific cases like Rachel Dolezal are important because they reveal implicit ways in which social constructions of race are not natural, logical, or irrefutable. Most news media coverage offers simplistic explanations of complex stories. Utilizing established communication theories to offer compelling interpretations of contemporary rhetorical texts can prove invaluable to providing explications that advance our understandings in nuanced ways. The rhetoric of race, culture, and identity continues to have significant saliency in the world today, whether consciously and/or unconsciously negotiated by different individuals. As John Sloop reminds us, cultural and social groups have a vested interest in identity categorization because it represents a means to

⁵⁹ Orbe Constructing Co-Cultural Theory, 80-81.

⁶⁰ Ginsberg, "Introduction," 8.

create and maintain solidarity, advance group interests, and ultimately establish personal security. 61

The case of Rachel Dolezal captivated the public's attention, in part, because of the extremity of her rhetorical attempts to assimilate into Black culture. Her argument, critiqued in the largely accepted notion that race is a social construction, was especially relevant within the context of other majority group members shifting their identities to co-cultural group status. The most notable was the transition of Catelyn Jenner, an identity journey that Dolezal referenced in several televised interviews as similar to that of her own. Comparisons between both women prompted nuanced terms to describe Dolezal's self-acclaimed identity process (e.g., being "transracial" compared to "cisracial"). The media attention of this issue increased public awareness and discussion of race as a social construction, the fluid nature of identity, and questions regarding identity politics. Comparisons of Dolezal and Jenner also resulted in contentious debate between individuals critical of the polarizing ways in which Dolezal's assertions were largely rejected while Jenner's public disclosures were embraced by many as living out her true, authentic self. Given this public discourse, communication scholars must embrace the civil calling to engaged scholarship and utilize their expertise to further inform public discourse regarding complex issues regarding culture, identity, and communication.

⁶¹ John Sloop, "Disciplining the Transgendered: Brandon Teena, Public Representation, and Normativity," *Western Journal of Communication* 64 (2000): 167-168.