

In this paper I will reconstruct Jeffer's argument that passing is a racial culture phenomenon and present Haslanger's criticism that Jeffer's definition is too broad. I will then counter Haslanger by showing that she must accept Jeffer's point that passing is based on perception in order to not contradict herself. In doing so, I will first show that her socio-political account cannot address passing unless she redefines race to be, at least in part, defined by racial cultures. I will then prove that contemporary perceptions of race should not be reliant on the past, and that passing should not depend on racial membership.

In "Cultural Constructionism," Chike Jeffers claims that the origin of race lies in the European colonization like Haslanger does (pg. 57). Yet, unlike Haslanger, Jeffers believes the reality of race must be understood through cultural differences as well as political influences (pg. 54). He is also a conservationist, in that he believes that the death of racism would not imply the death of race, or that there is an intrinsic value to race (pg. 58). Jeffers believes this value to be in the cultural differences between races. Jeffers argues that racial cultures are distinct from ethnic cultures, though they are related. To support his claim, he presents the example of black culture. A black boy, whose origins do not link him to Zimbabwe (or he does not belong to that ethnic group), can feel pride in his Black heritage looking at the constructions built at Great Zimbabwe even if, ethnically, this is not his heritage (pg. 64). Black culture developed through social changes caused by racialization and race-based societal hierarchical oppression. Once oppressed and categorized, the ethnicities that the racialized carried with them melded into a new culture. By highlighting a single similarity, darker skin in this case, and oppressing those with that feature effectively dismantled the disjoint cultures that black people had and unionized them.

While the oppressors did not intend this unification, they inadvertently created it by placing the ethnicities in a single category called “black people,” which then formed a culture of solidarity against oppression. By constructing a definition of race by the cultural phenomenon that race causes, Jeffers can address the cultural phenomenon of “passing.” Passing is a phenomenon where a person of one race is assumed by others to belong to another race. Passing can be understood in the political/cultural sense that Jeffers presents, because passing is based on a misunderstanding of race, that is initiated by someone wanting to participate in another race's culture. Though there are socio-political effects of passing, such as oppression, those effects are not the desired effects of those who pass as another race. Instead, those who pass want to participate in racial cultures. Let's suppose there is a white person who wants to feel the black heritage of Great Zimbabwe, a cultural feeling. I highly doubt when they choose to pass, they do so in order to feel the oppression of being black. Without defining race as a cultural phenomenon, there are no grounds to define passing. Hence, passing is a cultural phenomenon.

Jeffers's argument provides grounding for passing, while Haslanger provides none due to her strictly socio-political account of race. There are some forms of passing that can be understood through socio-political accounts, one Haslanger notes is hypodescent that we will discuss later. However, due to her definition's lack of reliance on racial culture, she cannot explain other cases of passing, such as Rachel Dolezal (pg. 170). Dolezal and others were not passing only for perceived societal positions, but, and more importantly, they were passing to be a member of racial cultures. Without the foundation that Jeffers' provides for racial cultures, passing cannot be fully understood. This is not to say Haslanger does not believe in racial

cultures, instead they are not useful in defining race to her (pg. 29). What is key is that Haslanger sees racial cultures as a response to racism, which implies that once racism dissipates, race and its corresponding racial cultures must do so as well (pg. 30). If racism disappears along with race, then there does not exist passing. By the assumption of passing as reliant on race, if race is eliminated, as Haslanger believes would be so in a post-racial society, then so would passing. Thus, we see a reliance of passing on the racial cultures. Since there is importance of racial cultures, not only as a means of solidarity but as a culture itself, embedded into passing, Haslanger's thoughts cannot address the phenomenon. Thus, Jeffers can evaluate passing by his dual construction of race (political and cultural), while Haslanger cannot.

Haslanger rebuts Jeffers' definition by stating that passing should not be decided by "consulting our current intuitions, but by a reading of our past and normative commitments." (pg. 120). Her statement implies that we should further investigate how passing may fit into her socio-political account, with respect to the commitments her premises have and the history of race her account relies on. She further explains stating that a member must be socially positioned and accepted into the race by others. She says cases of passing likely will contradict one of the conditions. Her postulate that most will contradict one of the premises fails to clarify those who are accepted by the community. Take the case of Martina Big: a woman who was born white, then chose to physically become black, was baptised by an African priest, and renamed to reflect her transracial identity. Here we see a woman who is socially positioned as black, and is accepted by the community as black (by the baptism), despite the fact her ancestry links her to be identified as white. Since Big was accepted, this directly contradicts Haslanger's hypothesis that

those who are transracial will not satisfy one of the two conditions. By her conditions that a member of a race must be socially positioned and accepted into the race, Haslanger places herself in a contradictory position (pg. 170). There are two ways her claims conflict: Either her readings into the past lead her to find politically charged instances of passing such as hypodescent, or her premise in the definition of race as “bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links” (pg. 25) is flawed. If she were to choose past readings, it becomes clear that contemporary passing does not have a deep connection to passing in the past such as hyper/hypodescent. Though related concepts, we have an updated notion of systemic racism that does not include hypo/hyperdescent on an external level. A mixed race person in the past had society choose their race, but today a mixed person can choose to be perceived as any combination of races. We see that hyper/hypodescent does not play a role today due to personal choice. Hence, on a societal level these concepts fail as race today is based on determining ancestral links based on physical appearance. But this is exactly why hyper/hypodescent was created: to prevent presumed race and instead have race be based on known ancestry (pg. 15). From knowing the ancestry, those in power then decided which race they were. We can see there is no reliance on physical appearance. Hypodescent directly contradicts what we conceive of “passing” and thus is not relevant to contemporary passing talk. From here, we can lead to Haslanger’s second point of normative commitments which include presumed race from physical appearance.

In Haslanger’s essay, she defends the claim that race is the presumed ancestry by the perception of physical features. However, she rejects Jeffer’s passing and instead believes that

the idea is “apt for some cases, but not all.”(pg. 170) Her rejection of Jeffer’s passing seemingly contradicts her claim that race is the presumed ancestry by the perception of physical features. If one presumes a person that is white to be black and assigns their ancestral origin to them, as well as their corresponding societal position, then the said person has “passed” as black. In light of cases like Martina Big, it seems irrelevant to regulate someone’s race based on knowledge of ancestral origins. Instead, we should focus on the perception of one’s race and perhaps acceptance as a member of that race. There are two categories of which both categories consist of those who are perceived as a different race than they “are”: those who are accepted as their desired race, and those who are not. Most people who pass are both accepted and not accepted. Taking the temporal aspect, Dolezal was first accepted as a black woman, and then later “outed.” For the individual aspect, there are some in the race that accept Big and others who do not. However, those people who don’t accept her as black are doing similar to those who don’t accept mixed races. Let us take the case of Barack Obama as an example: if a black man were to say Obama is not black, thus making a strange hypodescent move (yes, hypodescent as he is putting him to a race that is not most “desireable” in this case) in order to disqualify Obama, then Obama does not become solely white. This argument could be done interchanging white and black, which seems to imply that the community alone does not determine race. Hence, we see Haslanger’s proposal for the phenomenon of passing boils down to perception. Perception dictates whether one is a member of a racialized group, and whether they are assigned a spot in the societal hierarchy. However, reliance on perception is exactly where Haslanger tries to counter Jeffers. If her counter is to not be contradictory, she must either accept passing as Jeffers

has presented and begin to reconstruct her political argument to address how passing exists, or reconsider what presuming race means in her definition of race. At any rate, passing is based solely on perception as I have shown, and as perception leads to presumptions of race, Haslanger's argument is contradictory.

Jeffers theory of race accounts for passing as a culturally explainable phenomenon. His argument resists Haslanger's criticism that in fact, passing is a deeper phenomenon than what it appears to be. Passing is just misguided perception that leads to false conclusions about others, whether they are accepted or not, and whether their ancestry implies their race or not. All is irrelevant to passing except for one's perceived race.