

## Introduction

On June 11, 2015, Rachel Dolezal, the thirty-seven-year-old president of the Spokane chapter of the NAACP, who had presented herself as black for a number of years, was “outed” as white by her parents. A reporter for a newspaper in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, where Dolezal had lived for a time, had been investigating her many claims—in Coeur d’Alene and later in Spokane—to have been the victim of hate crimes and harassment; when the investigation raised questions about Dolezal’s identity, the reporter contacted her parents.<sup>1</sup>

Dolezal had long been immersed in African American culture, networks, and institutions.<sup>2</sup> Her fundamentalist Christian parents had adopted four black children in quick succession when Rachel was a teenager; she played a significant role in caring for them and later became the legal guardian of one.<sup>3</sup> Dolezal left her native Montana, where she had been home-schooled in a Christian curriculum, to study art at Belhaven College, a Christian liberal arts college in Jackson, Mississippi. She was drawn to Jackson by a book about a small interracial religious community there that was devoted to “racial reconciliation.”<sup>4</sup> The chair of the Art Department at the time Rachel was at Belhaven later recalled her “interest [in] and, as I suppose she would frame it

now, her ‘identification’ with black culture,” adding that while she did not represent herself as black, “it was clear where her heart was.” Another teacher remembered her as a “white woman with a black soul” and an unusually sophisticated social awareness.<sup>5</sup> Her friends at Belhaven and at the Voice of Calvary, the church she attended, were black, and she was active in the Black Students Association. After college, she received an MFA from historically black Howard University;<sup>6</sup> much of her artwork features African and African American themes and subjects.<sup>7</sup> Dolezal was married for several years to an African American man and had one child with him.

After her divorce, Dolezal began to alter her appearance, darkening her skin and styling her hair in a virtuosic succession of braids, weaves, and dreadlocks.<sup>8</sup> The conspicuously “authentic” and “natural” hair—in 2013, she posted photos of her latest style on her Facebook page with the caption “going with the natural look as I start my 36th year”—would later win grudging admiration from her black critics.<sup>9</sup> With her new look—a striking contrast with the straight blond hair and pale skin shown in old photographs—Dolezal was easily taken for black, especially since the look fit well with her social relations, cultural knowledge, and political interests. She taught part-time for several years in the Africana Studies program at Eastern Washington University; joined Spokane’s police ombudsman commission as an advocate for black interests; and in 2014 was elected president of the Spokane chapter of the NAACP, where she organized Black Lives Matter protests and hosted a weekly online video show to raise awareness of black issues. But Dolezal apparently felt the need to reconstruct her biography as well as her appearance: she publicly identified an African American man as her father, discussed his life experiences, and announced on the Facebook page of the Spokane NAACP chapter, where

she posted a photograph of them together, that he would be coming to town to speak at an NAACP event.

Dolezal resigned a few days after her parents' revelations became national news. But she insisted in a series of interviews that she was "definitely not white" and that she "identif[ied] as black" (though not as African American), a stance she has continued to maintain.<sup>10</sup> The story prompted a flurry of commentary about passing, choice, authenticity, privilege, and appropriation. Dolezal was widely condemned—and ridiculed—for identity fraud, "cultural theft," and a racial "masquerade" that was the contemporary equivalent of blackface. Others, however, defended her right to identify as black, praised her commitment to racial justice, and underscored the fictitious nature of race.

Just ten days before the Dolezal story broke, Annie Leibovitz's photograph of a corseted Caitlyn Jenner for the cover of *Vanity Fair* had marked a new stage in the mainstreaming of transgender identity. Having been—as Bruce Jenner—an Olympic gold medalist in the decathlon in 1976, a figure on the front of the iconic Wheaties "Breakfast of Champions" cereal box, and, more recently, a regular on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (as the husband of the matriarch of the hugely popular reality TV show), Jenner was no stranger to publicity. The carefully orchestrated coverage of her transition—which included an April 2015 interview with Diane Sawyer, the glamorous *Vanity Fair* rollout of her new name and look, and the eight-part TV series *I Am Cait*—received massive public attention, making her easily the world's most famous publicly transgender person. Mainstream media commentary was strikingly positive, applauding her courage and validating her identity as a woman; even President Obama tweeted his support.

Given the timing, it's no surprise that the Jenner story, and the transgender phenomenon more generally, served as a key

point of reference in public discussion of the Dolezal case. If Caitlyn Jenner could legitimately identify, and be accepted, as a woman, could Rachel Dolezal legitimately identify, and be accepted, as black? If Jenner could be recognized as transgender, could Dolezal be recognized as transracial? The pairing of transgender and transracial was deployed in the debates mainly by the cultural right; it was intended as a provocation, designed to embarrass the cultural left for embracing Jenner while censoring Dolezal. And the pairing was taken as a provocation by the cultural left, which categorically rejected the “if Jenner, then Dolezal” syllogism and proclaimed that transracial was “not a thing”

In this book, I treat the pairing of transgender and transracial not as a political provocation but as an intellectual opportunity. Participants in the debates about Jenner and Dolezal were not just thinking *about* trans; they were thinking *with* trans. As Susan Stryker observed, they were using transgender narratives as a cultural model for thinking about “other kinds of bodily transformations that similarly pose problems regarding the social classification of persons.”<sup>11</sup> Yet they were doing so in a generally narrow and partisan way. Stepping back from the controversy allows us to think with trans in a broader and more fruitful way about the complexities, tensions, and contradictions in the contemporary politics of identity.

Reflecting in October 2015 on “the year we obsessed over identity,” the *New York Times* critic-at-large Wesley Morris situated the Jenner and Dolezal debates in the context of developments in popular culture that have shown us “how trans and bi and poly-ambi-omni- we are.” Morris pointed to video games and social media platforms that enable us to “create alternate or auxiliary personae” and to the ubiquity of makeover shows.<sup>12</sup> But the “sense of fluidity and permissiveness and a smashing of binaries” he described has deeper

roots. It is part of a much broader moment of cultural flux, mixture, and interpenetration, as suggested by the burgeoning discussions of hybridity, syncretism, creolization, and transnationalism in the last quarter century.<sup>13</sup>

In this landscape of unsettled identities, sex/gender and ethnoracial categories have ceased to be taken for granted and have become the focus of self-conscious choices and political claims. These choices and claims in turn have given rise to a series of questions. Who has access to what categories, and to the social spaces reserved for their members? Who controls—and patrols—the boundaries of categories? How do new categories—and new kinds of people named by those categories—come into being? Can one choose to become a member of a category that is generally understood as biologically based and fixed at birth? In a world crisscrossed by dense classificatory grids, is it possible to live between or beyond categories? These are not simply questions for scholars; they are questions for us all.

It is in the domain of sex and gender that these questions have been raised most urgently. Here, challenges to established categories have been spectacular, as indicated by the stunningly rapid shift toward social and legal recognition of gay marriage, the mainstreaming of transgender options and identities, and the gathering challenges to the binary regime of sex itself. But racial and ethnic categories have also been profoundly unsettled: by demands for the recognition of multiracial identities, by the increasing fluidity and fragmentation of the ethnoracial landscape, and by the proliferation of crossover forms of racial identification.

The unsettling of identities has substantially enlarged the scope for choice and self-transformation. The enlargement of choice, however, is itself unsettling. It has given rise to anxieties about unnatural, opportunistic, or fraudulent identity claims, and it has prompted challenges to questionable

claims in the name of authentic and unchosen identities. In the face of actual or anticipated challenges, many of those who advance unorthodox identity claims have themselves sought to justify the claims by appealing to nature rather than to choice. The language of “born that way” has been deployed to legitimize claims to nonconforming gender and sexual identities, the language of DNA to fortify unorthodox claims to racial and ethnic identities. Thus instead of a straightforward enlargement in the scope for choice and self-fashioning, we see a sharpened tension—evident in everyday identity talk, public discourse, and even academic analysis—between the language of choice, autonomy, subjectivity, and self-fashioning and that of givenness, essence, objectivity, and nature.

As I will show, this tension plays out in different ways in the two domains. Paradoxically, while sex is a biological category in a way that race is not, sex and gender are understood to be more open to choice and change than are race and ethnicity. The distinction between sex and gender—and the irrelevance of ancestry to definitions of sex and gender—has made it possible to construe gender identity as a subjective individual property that is uncoupled from the body. Racial identity, however, is understood to be tightly coupled to the body and to be grounded in social relations, specifically in family and ancestry. This holds even more strongly in North America, where racial classification has historically depended not only on phenotype but also, crucially, on ancestry.

Prevailing understandings of gender and racial identity thus make changing sex or gender much more thinkable than changing race.<sup>†</sup> Changing one’s gender need not be understood as changing one’s gender *identity*; it can

<sup>†</sup> Sex, of course, is a legally regulated identity, while race, in liberal contexts, is not. Yet race remains a *socially* regulated identity, and as the debates about Dolezal and Jenner showed, changing sex or gender is understood by a broad segment of the public to be possible and legitimate, while changing race is not.

be understood as bringing one's gender presentation—including, often, one's bodily shape and secondary sex characteristics—into alignment with that identity. (For this reason, some trans men and women, as well as medical practitioners and scholars, prefer to speak of gender or sex *confirmation* surgery than of gender or sex *reassignment* surgery.)<sup>14</sup> Changing one's gender also entails changing the way one is identified by others. There is no established vocabulary for thinking about changing race in this way, not least because there are no widely available cultural tools for thinking of racial identity in subjectivist and individualist terms.

But what makes subjective gender identity a socially legitimate basis for demands to reconstitute the body and change the way one is identified by others? After all, there is a history of characterizing subjective identifications that are radically at variance with prevailing classifications of sexed bodies as a sign of mental illness and as grounds for treating the mind rather than altering the body.<sup>15</sup> If subjective gender identity is today endowed with credibility and authority, this is in large part because it is widely understood to be grounded in a deep, stable, innate disposition. Thus while the sex-gender distinction allows gender identity to be disembodied and denaturalized, the “born that way” story allows it to be re-embodied and renaturalized. It is this asserted *objectivity of subjective identity* that makes it possible to defend choice in the name of the unchosen and change in the name of the unchanging.

The authority of ancestry over racial classification in North America explains why racial identity is not easily or legitimately changed or chosen. Passing as white is an old theme in American history, and the case of Rachel Dolezal, along with a few others, has shown that it is possible to pass as black as well. But passing is not understood as changing one's race; it is understood as getting others to *misperceive* that race. And while passing might be justified as a response

to oppression, Dolezal's "reverse passing" was condemned for appropriating a culture, history, and social position that legitimately belonged to others.

Yet today the authority of ancestry over racial classification is declining. The multiracial movement, increasing rates of interracial marriage, the erosion of the one-drop rule, and even the growing popularity of genetic ancestry tests all highlight the mixedness of racial and ethnic ancestry. For a broadening circle of people, ancestry no longer determines identity. Mixed ancestry licenses choice and facilitates change; it authorizes people to selectively identify with different ancestral lines in different contexts. Identity options are of course unequally distributed, but many people with racially mixed ancestry—including President Obama—can and do choose and change their racial identities.<sup>16</sup>

Identity options have expanded in other ways as well. The condemnation of Dolezal for her "imitation" or "impersonation" of blackness is part of a long tradition of criticizing—as a form of appropriation, domination, or stigmatization—the enactment of a subordinate racial or ethnic identity that is not legitimately one's own. The critique often extends to the adoption of cultural forms and practices—styles of music, dress, hair, or speech, for example—that are construed as belonging to a subordinate group. In the last decade or so, however, as crossover practices and identifications have proliferated, they have come to be seen in more nuanced ways: as potentially affiliative rather than appropriative, as sites of sympathy and alignment rather than modes of domination, even as ways of subverting rather than reinforcing racial hierarchies.<sup>17</sup>

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To the countless millions who are otherwise unfamiliar with transgender matters, Caitlyn Jenner has come to



represent the possibility of changing sex or gender. And to the broad public that understands race as inborn and immutable, Rachel Dolezal has come to represent the absurdity of changing race. Neither story, however, is representative in a sociological sense. Jenner's conventional performance of femininity—not to mention her wealth and celebrity—did not resonate with many transgender people. And the idiosyncratic features of Dolezal's story—especially the role of deception, which turned the story into a morality play that ensured broad public rejection of her claims—distracted attention from the increasing fluidity of racial and ethnic identifications and the limited but growing space for choice and change.<sup>18</sup>

Yet if neither story is representative, the intertwining of the two affords an unusual opportunity to analyze gender and race in relation to each other. Gender and race are of course “different differences,” but both are being reimagined, reconstructed, and newly contested in ways that are in some respects strikingly similar.<sup>19</sup> And the twinned debates about Jenner and Dolezal can be understood as a distinctive “trans moment” that provides a convenient point of entry into the subject.

Part One sketches the contours and contexts of this trans moment. Chapter 1 shows how the pairing of transgender and transracial in the discussions of Jenner and Dolezal was deployed to stake out positions in a field of argument defined by two questions: Can one legitimately change one's gender? And can one legitimately change one's race? I analyze the discourse of *essentialists*, who see gender and racial identities as grounded in nature or in a lifelong lived history and therefore as identities that cannot legitimately be changed; of *voluntarists*, for whom both gender and racial identities can legitimately be changed; and of those who combine *gender voluntarism* with *racial essentialism*. While essentialists and voluntarists stressed the similarities between

changing gender and changing race, advocates of gender voluntarism and racial essentialism sought to distinguish the (legitimate) phenomenon of changing one's gender from the (illegitimate) phenomenon of changing one's race.

Chapter 2 situates the Dolezal affair in its broader cultural and political contexts. I take as my point of departure the profound unsettling of the ways we think about cultural and bodily differences and the massive enlargement in the scope for choice and self-transformation. I show how anxieties about unregulated choice have generated efforts to police unorthodox choices—as well as to defend such choices *against* policing—in the name of authentic and unchosen identities.

Part Two starts from the premise that “trans” is good to think with: that we can fruitfully use the transgender experience as a lens through which to think about the fluidity of racial identifications. But what does it mean to “think with trans”? The sheer variety of transgender experience precludes a univocal answer. I distinguish what I call the trans of migration, the trans of between, and the trans of beyond, taken up in turn in chapters 3, 4, and 5.

The *trans of migration* involves moving from one established sex/gender category to another, often by surgically and hormonally transforming one's body and formally changing one's legal identity. The *trans of between* involves defining oneself with reference to the two established categories, without belonging entirely or unambiguously to either one, and without moving definitively from one to the other. The *trans of beyond* involves positioning oneself in a space that is not defined with reference to established categories. It is characterized by the claim to transcend existing categories—or to transcend categorization altogether.

Each form of transgender, I argue, can help us think about race and ethnicity in fruitful ways. Racial passing (including “reverse passing” like Dolezal's) exemplifies the trans of

migration, the multiracial movement illustrates the trans of between, and indifference or opposition to racial or ethnic categorization is an instance of the trans of beyond.

The concluding chapter ties together the strands of the argument about gender and race as embodied and enacted identities that are increasingly—yet in differing ways and to differing degrees—understood as open to choice and change. It seeks to explain why changing sex or gender is understood as more legitimate than changing race or ethnicity, even though biological differences between the sexes are deeper and more socially consequential than the superficial biological differences between socially defined racial and ethnic groups.

Analyzing race and ethnicity in relation to sex and gender is not without its risks and difficulties. Analogical reasoning has been criticized for neglecting the ways in which race and ethnicity intersect with sex and gender and other forms of difference.<sup>20</sup> Such intersections are obviously important. The transgender experience of Caitlyn Jenner, a wealthy, white Republican celebrity, has very little in common with that of Cricket Nimmons, a poor, HIV-positive African American ex-convict from the rural South, whose path to one of the first Medicaid-financed genital reconstruction surgeries was chronicled in a lengthy *New York Times* piece.<sup>21</sup> As theorists of “intersectionality” have argued, gender, race, class, and other dimensions of difference do not exist in isolation; they are mutually constitutive.<sup>22</sup> But gender and race are not simply intersecting differences; they are also systems of social classification with distinctive yet in some ways converging logics that can fruitfully be compared. Long understood as inborn, stable, and rigorously categorical, gender and race are increasingly open to choice, change, and blurring. The intertwined debates about Jenner and Dolezal afford a unique opportunity to explore both their similarities and their differences.<sup>23</sup>