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In Defense of Transracialism

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[Correction added on May 04, 2017, after online publication: at the author's request, a parenthetical reference to Jenner's birth name was removed.]

Abstract

Former NAACP chapter head Rachel Dolezal's attempted transition from the white to the

black race occasioned heated controversy. Her story gained notoriety at the same time that Caitlyn Jenner graced the cover of *Vanity Fair*, signaling a growing acceptance of transgender identity. Yet criticisms of Dolezal for misrepresenting her birth race indicate a widespread social perception that it is neither possible nor acceptable to change one's race in the way it might be to change one's sex. Considerations that support transgenderism seem to apply equally to transracialism. Although Dolezal herself may or may not represent a genuine case of a transracial person, her story and the public reaction to it serve helpful illustrative purposes.

Ongoing controversy surrounds the highly publicized case of Rachel Dolezal. Until recently, Dolezal served as the head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter in Spokane, Washington. In June 2015, she resigned from her post after it was revealed that although Dolezal has been presenting as a black woman for some years, her parents are in fact white. Since then, the news has been rife with ridicule and condemnation of Dolezal for misrepresenting her “true” race. She has been called a deceiver, a liar, and a cultural appropriator, among other things. Meanwhile, that same month, Caitlyn Jenner graced the cover of *Vanity Fair*, signaling a growing acceptance of transgender identity.

It is not my task in this article to decide the Dolezal case one way or the other. Nor is it to discern whether she sincerely identifies as black, as she continues to insist, or whether she claimed this self-identification to mask what was really an appropriation of black identity to serve her own ends. I do not know whether Dolezal really drew self-portraits as a young child with the “brown crayon instead of the peach crayon,” nor do I presume to know what would follow from such a fact (Wolpow 2015). Moreover, I acknowledge at the outset that Dolezal may have been driven by ulterior motives that inclined her to pretend to be black, because it appears she may have lied about receiving racist hate mail, among other questionable assertions (Greenfield 2015). My concern in this article is less with the veracity of Dolezal's claims, and more with the arguments for and against transracialism. In exploring these arguments, I follow transgender theorist Susan Stryker's call for those of us thinking through the Jenner–Dolezal comparison to “hold open a space for real intellectual curiosity, for investigations that deepen our understanding of how identity claims and processes function, rather than rushing to offer well-formed opinions based on what we already think we know” (Stryker 2015). In keeping with Stryker's call for intellectual exploration, I suggest that Dolezal offers an important opportunity for us to think seriously about how society should treat individuals who claim a strongly felt sense of identification with a certain race. When confronted with such an individual, how should we respond?

In this article, I argue that considerations that support transgenderism extend to transracialism.¹ Given this parity, since we should accept transgender individuals' decisions

to change sexes, we should also accept transracial individuals' decisions to change races. I entertain and reject four objections that suggest a society should not accept an individual's decision to change races. I then turn to Sally Haslanger to argue for an account of race that allows for racial membership on the basis of social treatment, and, I will add, self-identification. I conclude that if some individuals genuinely feel like or identify as a member of a race other than the one assigned to them at birth—so strongly to the point of seeking a transition to the other race—we should accept their decision to change races.²

From Transgenderism to Transracialism

Generally, we treat people wrongly when we block them from assuming the personal identity they wish to assume. For instance, if someone identifies so strongly with the Jewish community that she wishes to become a Jew, it is wrong to block her from taking conversion classes to do so. This example reveals there are at least two components to a successful identity transformation: (1) how a person self-identifies, and (2) whether a given society is willing to recognize an individual's felt sense of identity by granting her membership in the desired group. For instance, if the rabbi thinks you are not seriously committed to Judaism, she can block you from attempted conversion. Still, the possibility of rejection reveals that, barring strong overriding considerations, transition to a different identity category is often accepted in our society.

In the case of transgenderism,³ social recognition, often (though not without controversy) in conjunction with a psychiatric diagnosis, grants one entry into a sex-gender category other than that assigned at birth. For instance, if someone slotted into the male sex at birth strongly identifies as female, this individual can take measures including surgical transformation to render her external appearance coherent with her internal sense of self. This was not always the case, of course. Trans individuals' claims to self-identify as members of another sex⁴ did not always receive societal uptake, and unfortunately many still struggle to receive it today. Oftentimes, then, trans individuals face a gap between 1 and 2: (1) their self-identification as a member of another sex is (2) not recognized by the society they inhabit, so they often experience isolation, confusion, and a feeling of not belonging. Thankfully, there is growing recognition that justice for trans individuals means respecting their self-identification by granting them membership in their felt sex category of belonging. Indeed, this is why it is considered an insult in the extreme to refer to a trans individual with their nonpreferred pronoun.

But what does this imply for race? Is it even possible to feel like a member of another race similar to the way one can feel like a member of another sex? I do not know whether it is possible to feel like you belong to a different race. Indeed, Dolezal's claim that she saw herself as black as a child and drew self-portraits with the brown crayon instead of the peach

crayon do strike me as decidedly odd. But I cannot say whether they seem odd because they are false, or because we are not routinely confronted with such claims. Indeed, I imagine it was once just as odd to hear people say they felt like they belonged to a sex other than the one that they were assigned at birth. Moreover, it is plausible that Dolezal's experience living with four adoptive black siblings since she was a young teenager coupled with her strong sense of dissociation from her biological parents, her later marriage to an African American man with whom she had a child, and her strong sense of familial connection to a black man named Albert Wilkerson, whom she calls "Dad," all impacted her understanding of her own racial identity (McGreal 2015).

In any case, it is not clear how one can affirm that it is possible to feel like a member of another sex but deny it is possible to feel like a member of another race. How might one hold such a position? One way would be to suggest that unlike race, sex is biologically based, and determines the gender with which we psychologically identify. And in the majority of individuals, sexual anatomy and sexual psychology are synced. But according to a 2008 study, transgender women have a genetic variation, according to which "their receptor gene for the sex hormone testosterone ... is less efficient at communicating signals," suggesting that "insufficient uptake of male hormones in utero contributed to a 'more feminized brain'" (Erdely 2014). So in these individuals, perhaps the truth of their sex-gender was lurking all along in their bodies. On this view, transgenderism enables individuals to give expression to what was their sincere biologically based self all along. It was in their brains if not in their bones, or at least in their hormones, so to speak. However, because race is not biologically based, there can be no such racial identity with which one can neuro-psychologically identify. This could differentiate Dolezal's claim that she feels she is black from Jenner's claim that she feels she is a woman.

This is a position that one could take up, but it comes at a steep cost. It holds the societal acceptance of transgenderism hostage to a biological account of sex-gender. This is problematic for several reasons.

First, not all trans individuals claim to have been "all along" the sex with which they now identify. This suggests that their sexed identity was not bio-psychologically determined, hormonally or otherwise. Nor do all trans people possess ambiguous biological features (hormonal, gonadal, and so on) that might suggest a different sex-gender identity lurking in the background. A bio-psychological account of transgender identity thus risks excluding these individuals. For these and other reasons, there is justifiable skepticism over exactly what we can conclude from studies that purport to offer a biological explanation for transgenderism (Erdely 2014).

Second, and most importantly, this view problematically implies that we must settle the debate over the biological versus social basis of sex-gender identity before we can know for certain whether transgenderism is a "real" phenomenon, and therefore acceptable. Not only is

such a basis widely disputed, but it would be decidedly unjust for the acceptance of trans individuals to turn on such knowledge. If tomorrow we discovered for certain that sex does not determine a certain gendered psychology, as many feminists are eager to show, would trans individuals' decisions to change sex suddenly become unacceptable? On what basis could we justify such a decision to frustrate the interests of so many people, interests they maintain are fundamental to living a good life? Rather, the biological or social basis of sex-gender identity should have no bearing whatsoever on society's acceptance of trans individuals.⁵ As Talia Mae Bettcher points out, "transsexual claims to belong to a sex do not appear to be metaphysically justified: they are claims that self-identities ought to be definitive in terms of the question of sex membership and gendered treatment. They are therefore political in nature" (Bettcher 2014, 387).

Moreover, it is worth highlighting the problems with suggesting that sex, as biologically based, determines the gender with which one psychologically identifies. First, even if there is a biological basis to sex, it does not automatically follow that there is something it "feels like" to be biologically female that grounds a shared experience of "what it's like" to be a woman. Rather, individual experiences of what it is like to "be" a woman are extremely varied, and feminists have long attempted to show how reductive and problematic it is to assume that all women share some core, let alone some biologically based, kernel of experience. Second, whatever criterion is offered to ground this similarity would inevitably disqualify many women, for not all women share the same hormone levels, reproductive capacity, gonadal structure, genital makeup, and so on. In fact, it is much more difficult than people suppose to isolate a core set of female sex features that captures all the people we wish to count as women. Therefore, anyone who suggests that all women share some biologically based feature of experience that sheds light on a shared psychological experience will have to show not only that biological sex gives rise to a particular gendered psychology, but that there is something biological that all women share.

But this is not the end of the story. Indeed, another way to justify transgenderism and delegitimize transracialism is not to take issue with the idea that one can genuinely *feel* like a member of another race, but with the idea that it is possible to change one's race at all. According to this view, if sex is a matter of biology, it is at least a matter of biological features one can change. However, so the objection goes, race is a matter of one's biological ancestry, and this is not changeable. If cogent, then changing race would be unlike changing sex. To change sex, we can change hormones, genitalia, and other bodily features. But to change race, we would have to change features *external* to one's body, such as the fact of one's genetic ancestry. As a biological reality not restricted to the body, but dependent on one's genetic heritage, changing race is thus impossible.

If the biological account of race were true, this might pose a problem for the possibility of changing one's race.⁶ However, racial groupings of people are arbitrary from a genetic point

of view. That is, they are no more genetically similar than random groupings of racially diverse individuals; indeed, we now know that more genetic variation exists *within* any one racial group than between racial groups (Lewontin 1972, 397). This means there is no essential, genetic “black” core that Dolezal violates when she attempts to change her race. And although some biologists insist there *are* genetic differences between human groupings, the human groupings they have in mind do not result from our current racial categories (Blum 2002, 143). If we were to follow these biologists’ racial groupings, then, it will turn out that many of us are in some sense “lying” about our races.

So what does this imply about the possibility of changing races? It implies that although ancestry is a particularly valued determinant of race in American society, it is no more predictive of one's “actual” race than any other determinant, because one's “actual” race is a matter of social definition. This does not mean that social constructs have no real force, but rather that, as a construct, race is *malleable*. Indeed, in communities where ancestry is a less relevant determinant of race, other determinants of race could push someone like Dolezal into the black racial category. Charles Mills identifies at least five categories generally relevant to the determination of racial membership, including “self-awareness of ancestry, public awareness of ancestry, culture, experience, and self-identification” (Mills 1998, 50). If ancestry is a less emphasized feature in some places (for example, in Brazil), then Dolezal's exposure to black culture, experience living as someone read as black, and her self-identification could be sufficient to deem she *is* black in those places. And because there is no *fact of the matter* about her “actual” race from a genetic standpoint, these features of Dolezal's experience would be decisive for determining her race in that particular context. The crucial point here is that no “truth” about Dolezal's “real” race would be violated.⁷

Given that one's race relies on features deemed relevant by a given society, then it is at least *theoretically* possible to change races. As race constructivist Michael Root notes, although race is real,

Our practice of racial sorting could change. We could conserve race and let go of biological transmission. Adopted children could be classified as the same race as their adoptive rather than biological parents. In addition, we could develop procedures for renouncing our present race and becoming a naturalized member of another. The change in race could proceed in steps. First, you become a resident alien in your new race, and then, upon completion of a course of study or work on behalf of your new group, you become a naturalized member. (Root 2000, S635)

Although race change is theoretically possible, whether it is *practically* possible will depend

on a society's willingness to adjust its rules for racial categorization to better accommodate individual self-identification. Accordingly, we must assess the ethical reasons that a society may have to reject an individual's decision to change race.

Ethical Arguments against Transracialism

I will entertain four objections that maintain that an individual should not be able to change races: first, the idea that it is unacceptable to claim a black identity unless one has grown up with a black experience; second, the idea that society's current understanding of race places limits on an individual's (perhaps otherwise) legitimate claim to change race; third, the idea that identifying as a member of another race insults or otherwise harms members of that race; and finally, that it is a wrongful exercise of white privilege for a white person to cross into the black racial category, and that such crossing is therefore wrong.

First, someone might object that a person like Dolezal cannot identify as black because she did not grow up with the experience of anti-black racism. As one commentator put it, Dolezal cannot claim to be black because she didn't suffer, "as a black girl, from the trauma of rejection and isolation" (Walters 2015). Or, as MSNBC contributor Touré put it, Dolezal doesn't share in "the one thing that binds black people," namely "the experience of racism" (Schwartz 2015). Accordingly, it is not acceptable for Dolezal to change races. Since Dolezal has never experienced what it is like to be black, she therefore cannot claim to be black.

Granting for the sake of argument that the experience of racism is what binds all black people together, it remains unclear why one's *past* experience with racism is required for one's current status as black. Racialized as black in her current life, Dolezal is presumably treated similarly to any light-skinned black woman. Dolezal herself suggests as much when she describes the humiliating experience of having her hair searched by the TSA and of being subject to police harassment as a black woman (Nashrulla, Griffin, and Dalrymple 2015). So why say she can claim to be black only if she was racialized as black her entire life? If she has been subject to racism for over ten years (McGreal 2015), is this not sufficient to expose her to an important element of what it's like to be black in a racist society? Moreover, if true, this objection would also apply to trans women who transitioned later in life but did not grow up knowing what it was like to experience sexism. Yet despite not having grown up with this experience, we do not rightly suggest that a trans person cannot, for this reason, now identify as a woman.

The second objection holds that Dolezal cannot identify as black because of the way society currently understands racial membership. On this view, regardless of whether ancestry actually reveals some biological reality about an individual's race, the fact is that ancestry remains an important marker of race in American society. What matters, then, is that *intersubjectively* we have all agreed that ancestry is relevant to the determination of one's

race. As Mills explains, ancestry is “crucial not because it necessarily manifests itself in biological racial traits but simply, tautologously, because it is *taken to be crucial*, because there is an intersubjective agreement ... to classify individuals in a certain way on the basis of known ancestry” (Mills 1998, 58; emphasis added). Because of this intersubjective agreement in our society, Dolezal remains just as subject to the ancestry criterion of racial membership as anyone else. Therefore, Dolezal does not simply get to decide that, for her purposes, *her* ancestry is irrelevant to *her* race. And this is the case even if ancestry turns out to be a poor criterion for racial membership. Dolezal cannot simply change the rules of the societal game, even if the societal rules of racial membership are problematic.

In her argument defending the moral permissibility of transgenderism but not of transracialism, Cressida Heyes makes just this point. Heyes suggests that arguments in defense of transracialism, like that of Christine Overall (Overall 2004), discount the fact that society's dominant belief structure limits the available resources one has to claim different forms of identification. As Heyes puts it, “beliefs about the kind of thing race *is* shape the possibilities for race change. In particular, ... the belief that an individual's racial identity derives from her biological ancestors undermines the possibility of changing race, in ways that contrast with sex-gender” (Heyes 2009, 142). According to Heyes, because sex-gender has been understood to be a “property of the individual's body,” the possibility of changing one's sex-gender through bodily modification is acceptable in our society. However, because race has been understood to be a matter of “*both* the body and ancestry,” one cannot alter one's body to become a different race (139; emphasis added).

The problem with this argument is that it dangerously appears to limit to the status quo the possibilities for changing one's membership in an identity category. Indeed, American society has not always granted recognition to those who felt their gender did not align with their sexed bodies. Would Heyes's argument imply that, during this time, a person born with male genitalia, but who identified as a woman, would not be permitted to affirm her self-identity, because the available social resources were not yet in place? Or, imagine a transgender person born in a country today where such forms of identification are not tolerated, because the understanding of sex-gender identity is firmly restricted to the genitalia one possesses at birth. Would that person be justly forced to renounce her felt sex-gender, because she was born into a society where “beliefs about the kind of thing [sex-gender] *is* shape the possibilities for [sex-gender] change” (142)? The implications of such a position for the normative question of whether one should be allowed to change race are more radical than Heyes might appreciate. Indeed, if we hold the legitimacy of a particular act hostage to the status quo, or to what Heyes calls the “range of actually available possibilities for sustaining and transforming oneself,” it is difficult to see how we can make any social progress at all (149). Accordingly, to say “this is how racial categorization currently operates in our society” is to provide a very poor reason to the person asking how racial categorization *should*

operate. And this type of reason is even more disappointing when it comes alongside Heyes's acknowledgment that “the actions of individuals, now and in the future, will be constitutive of new norms of racial and gendered identity” (149).

The third objection holds that it is insulting or otherwise harmful to the black community for a white person to identify as black. Indeed, several comparisons have been made between Dolezal and the nineteenth-century practice of blackface, in which white performers would blacken their skin and portray offensive, mocking stereotypes of black people. In fact, Dolezal's own adoptive black brother, Ezra Dolezal, leveled just this charge against her (Sanchez and Brumfield 2015). For many black people, Dolezal's actions recall a horrid history of white people pretending to be black, and are therefore wrong.

Certainly, there are myriad insulting and harmful ways one could assume a black identity. However, it is crucial to distinguish problematic from unproblematic forms of identification. Many forms of donning a black identity are insulting because they are just that—the *donning* of a black identity. I take it that those who don a black identity do not express a genuine identification with blackness. Rather, they assume a black physical appearance, or appropriate certain exaggerated or maliciously concocted features of black culture for a brief period of time, usually for questionable ends. Yet we are examining the possibility of a person who genuinely identifies as black. This is completely different from someone who identifies as white but who *pretends* to be a black person precisely for the purpose of ridicule and reinforcement of racial stereotypes. The latter is appropriately deemed pretense because it relies on the fact that this person's core identity is not who she publicly and permanently purports to be. Someone who genuinely identifies as black and *feels* that she is black is not pretending to be black. A person who genuinely identifies as black is thus not likely to don a black identity for a few hours or even days, weeks, and months, intending thereafter to resume a white identity. Instead, such a person is more likely to try to live as a black person, day in day out, year in year out, in perpetuity. Dolezal may well have been putting on a black identity for nefarious purposes. But the possibility that she was not is a reminder that we must keep these different ways of assuming an identity morally distinct. If we don't, then by parity of reasoning, transgender men and women are just pretending to be men and women. But surely we acknowledge a distinction between transgender individuals and those who pretend to be men or women in order to mock these identity categories or to serve some other questionable end. Moreover, someone who genuinely identifies with blackness could perhaps be viewed as *affirming* blackness instead of insulting it, insofar as this suggests it is desirable to be black. In a world where the worth and value of blackness is routinely denied, perhaps Dolezal's transition could therefore be viewed in a positive light.⁸

Finally, there is the objection that it is a wrongful exercise of white privilege for a white-born person, such as Dolezal, to cross into the black racial category. If so, such crossing is reprehensible. On this view—because it is easier for white people to darken their skin and

successfully be read as black and because a white-born person could return to being white—
individuals like Dolezal provide yet another reminder of the many privileges that attach to
being white. As Tamara Winfrey Harris puts the concern, “Ms. Dolezal's masquerade
illustrates that however much she may empathize with African-Americans, she is not one,
because black people in America cannot shed their race ... I will accept Ms. Dolezal as black
like me only when society can accept me as white like her” (Harris 2015).

Yet there are several problems with this argument as well. First, to the point that a white-born person could always exercise white privilege by returning to being white, I note that the same argument would problematically apply to a male-to-female (mtf) trans individual who could return to male privilege, perhaps especially if this individual has not undergone gender confirmation surgery. But the fact that a person could potentially return to male privilege does and should not preclude their transition. Next, let's consider the idea that white-black transitions are easier than black-white, and therefore an exercise of white-born privilege. Assume for the sake of argument that it is easier for a female-to-male (ftm) transgender individual to be read and accepted as male than vice versa. If true, we might say that ftm transgender individuals exercise an “ftm trans” privilege that mtf transgender individuals lack. If this seems of minor relevance to the ethics of ftm transitions, then it should also seem of minor relevance to the ethics of white to black transitions. However, perhaps an objector will insist that such an exercise of ftm trans privilege *is* unethical. In that case, I further note that the same argument would appear to rule out many practices we currently allow. For instance, men exercise male privilege when they get more jobs as philosophy professors. Yet we do not thereby suggest that we get rid of philosophy professors. Rather, we try to address gender inequality so that more women are represented in the discipline. Similarly, if it is decided that transracialism is morally acceptable, then we should work toward a world in which it is easier for all individuals who qualify⁹ to transition into their race of identification. Put otherwise, the problem of exercising privilege is an independent problem, not one germane to transracialism alone. In this way, we could respond to Harris's concern by trying to ensure equal access to the resources that permit one to change race. After all, there is no reason to think that transracial crossing can only ever, as a matter of empirical truth, go in the direction of white to black. Indeed, although Michael Jackson had the skin-lightening disease vitiligo, it is possible the disease was triggered by skin bleaching, suggesting that Jackson's black to white appearance might be an example of such a transition (Taraborrelli 2004, 436). More recently, rapper Lil' Kim has been in the news for having undergone a transition from a black to white appearance (Blay 2016).

The example of Lil' Kim invites a related concern about privilege. For many, Lil' Kim's appearance raises concern about colorism, or the practice of according better treatment to those with lighter rather than darker skin. Colorism explains why so many black TV and movie actors are often lighter-skinned. And, as a result of it, darker-skinned individuals may

try to take measures to lighten their skin. Colorism might prompt more concern over black-to-white racial transitions than vice-versa, for this transition could appear to validate the idea that black people are not beautiful, or that it is undesirable to be black, thus posing a real harm to the black community. For this reason, I think it is important to maintain a distinction between those who might desire to be white or male *purely* to gain access to white or male privilege, and those who have other reasons for transitioning.

As a second rejoinder to the idea that an individual like Dolezal is wrongly exercising white privilege, it is difficult to see how *giving up* one's whiteness and becoming black is an exercise of white privilege. Rather, it seems like the ultimate renunciation of white privilege, if by white privilege we understand an unearned system of advantages conferred onto white bodies. In giving up whiteness and taking on the lived experience of being black in a racist society, one might instead view Dolezal as refusing to benefit from an unequal system of advantages conferred on the basis of her skin color. Indeed, Dolezal herself has stated her belief that race is a “hierarchical system that was created to leverage power and privilege between different groups of people” (Timpf 2015). In this way, perhaps Dolezal is best understood as rejecting white privilege, not exercising it. As Noel Ignatiev put the point, “If giving up whiteness is a privilege, what do you call hanging on to it?” (Biss 2015).

Self-Identification and Social Treatment: Toward a Revised Account of Race

I have tried to show that reasons similar to those we accept with regard to individuals who transition to another sex extend to those who wish to transition to another race. In the case of sex, the recognition of transgender identity has involved a shift away from an emphasis on one's sexed biology toward an emphasis on gendered self-identification. In a similar fashion, the recognition of transracial identity might eventually involve a shift away from an emphasis on ancestral ties or skin color of origin toward an emphasis on racial self-identification. In both cases, I think we have stronger reasons to accept individuals' self-identities than to force them to feel beholden to an identity thrust upon them at birth.¹⁰ The argument for this point is broadly Millian; as a rule, we should encourage “different experiments in living” and not interfere with others' liberty unless doing so would prevent harm to others (Mill 2002, 47). I hope to have shown that harm to members of a race is not an inevitable or obvious consequence of transracialism and, importantly, no more inevitable or obvious in the case of race than of sex.

Still, one problem with an account of race based on self-identification is that it seems highly permissive. On this account, should we similarly recognize an individual's decision to self-identify as anything one chooses? Indeed, apparently there are some individuals, known as “otherkin,” who self-identify as nonhuman. Are we morally required, on my account, to

accept the self-identification of otherkin as well, and recognize their entry into a desired animal category of identification?

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I do not think so. Recall my earlier point that for a successful self-identification to receive uptake from members of one's society, at least two components are necessary. First, one has to self-identify as a member of the relevant category. Second, members of a society have to be willing to accept one's entry into the relevant identity category. At this stage, I think it is reasonable for a society to accept someone's decision to enter another identity category only if it is possible for that person to know what it's like to exist and be treated as a member of category X. Absent the possibility for access to what it's like to exist and be treated in society as a black person or as a man (or as an animal), there will be too little commonality to make the group designation meaningful. For example, if a cisgender white man fights for *his* rights not to be subject to anti-black police violence or to misogyny, yet never faces the possibility of having his rights so violated, we can reasonably expect allyship, not identification, from him. Elizabeth Barnes discusses a similar type of restriction in the case of “transabled” people, or people who “believe very strongly in some sense that their body *ought* to be disabled” (Barnes 2016, 35). One common manifestation of transability is individuals who believe one of their limbs is not part of their body. Such individuals may take dangerous measures to adjust their bodies to the desired disabled presentation. According to Barnes, such individuals are not properly considered disabled until they have undergone a body change that renders them disabled (36). On her view, then, self-identification alone is not sufficient to make someone disabled. For Barnes, “it would require a fairly extreme amount of conceptual revision to say that, pre-transition, transabled people really are amputees, really are paraplegics, etc.” (36).

Barnes proposes a “moderate social constructionism” inspired in part by Sally Haslanger's account of social construction. A brief turn to Haslanger's account will be helpful. For Haslanger, whether someone is a woman or a man, black or white, depends crucially on their social treatment (and, I would add, their self-identification). For Haslanger, S is a woman if and only if “S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is ‘marked’ as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction” (Haslanger 2012, 230). Notice that Haslanger's account accommodates trans women who are *presumed* to have female biological features. Similarly, for Haslanger, S is a member of a racialized group if and only if “its members are socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and the group is ‘marked’ as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region” (236).

According to Haslanger, then, the *presumption* of one's biological role in reproduction or the *presumption* of ancestral link, coupled with the relevant social treatment, is sufficient for

one's membership in a gender or race. Insofar as a transracial individual is presumed to have black ancestral ties and is treated accordingly in society, then such an individual could qualify as black on Haslanger's account. Haslanger argues that her account improves upon other accounts of gender and race for two main reasons. First, in comparison to other accounts, it better addresses what she calls the problem of commonality, which notes that if our account of "what woman is" seeks shared intrinsic features that all women have in common, "such as psychological makeup, character traits, beliefs, values, experiences," it will fail to capture all women (Haslanger 2012, 239). The same goes for race. Second, Haslanger's account better avoids what she calls the normativity problem, or the idea that the very act of defining "woman" or "black" inevitably engages a dangerous normative exercise according to which some individuals are deemed more "full" or "real" members of the category than others (239). On Haslanger's account, the only individuals who won't count as "real" members of category X are those who aren't oppressed by category X. In the case of the category "woman," then, the only people who wouldn't count are women who pass fully as men, or who aren't ever "subordinated in *any way* (emphasis added) linked to that recognition" (239).

Although I don't have space for a full defense of it, Haslanger's account helps allay concerns about the over-permissiveness of an account of race based on self-identification alone. Indeed, we need an account of race that does not collapse into a position according to which all forms of self-identification are socially recognized, such as one's self-identification as a wolf. The advantages of Haslanger's account are clear: it helps us identify groups that formed, and continue to exist, due to oppression. Haslanger's account is flexible enough to address the concerns of commonality and normativity, but restricted enough for the political purpose of identifying group-based oppression. In the same way that Haslanger's account accommodates transgender individuals,¹¹ I think it could similarly accommodate transracial individuals.¹² With such an accommodation, the presumption of ancestral link as a marker for race might start to wither away slowly. Over time, one's social treatment and self-identification as a member of race X might begin to take precedence.

Still, an objector might insist there are important reasons to *prefer* an account of race based on ancestry than one based on self-identification and social treatment. After all, ancestral ties *do* play a central role in the historical and ongoing constitution of races. Yet the insistence on ancestral ties still faces the normativity problem mentioned above. That is, it excludes many who should rightly be considered members of a certain race. For instance, consider the case of an American black couple who adopt a dark-skinned child from India. Imagine this child was adopted young enough not to develop an Indian accent. His parents raise him exactly the same way they raise his black siblings: as a full-fledged member of the black community. As he grows up, he becomes subject to the same discrimination and mistreatment that characterize the plight of his fellow blacks. He also attends a black church, participates in

black cultural events, and self-identifies as black. In short, when it comes to his race, this child is virtually indistinguishable from any other member of the black community. According to the ancestral account of race, however, this child *is* of a different race. His ancestry is Indian, not black. Or, to take a different example, consider someone like Dolezal who *did* turn out to have a black ancestor. According to a popular version of the ancestral account of race, this person would be black, given the ongoing and highly problematic use of the historically racist “one-drop rule” of black racial membership. Are we really prepared to allow the acceptance of someone like Dolezal to hinge on such a fact?

Perhaps the example of the adopted child can be taken to show that what might be relevant for transracial crossing are not only self-identification and social treatment, but a history or narrative experience that helps explain *why* one might feel such a strong sense of identification with a race other than that assigned at birth. In this sense, it might prove especially relevant that, as noted earlier, Dolezal's parents adopted four black children when Dolezal was a young teenager. Indeed, although Dolezal is unable to invoke a black ancestor to help justify her transition, one could reasonably argue that ties to four black siblings are much more significant than ties to an ancestor she may have never even met (Shrage 2015). Finally, it should also prove relevant that Dolezal experienced a strong sense of disconnection from her biological parents, whose identity—racial or otherwise—Dolezal may have felt less connected to than that of her adopted siblings.¹³

Haslanger writes, “rather than worrying, ‘what is gender, really?’ or ‘what is race, really?’ I think we should begin by asking (both in the theoretical and political sense) what, if anything, we want them to be” (Haslanger 2012, 246). I have taken it as my task in this article to argue that a just society should reconsider what we owe individuals who claim a strongly felt sense of identification with another race, and accordingly what we want race to be. I hope to have shown that, insofar as similar arguments that render transgenderism acceptable extend to transracialism, we have reason to allow racial self-identification, coupled with racial social treatment, to play a greater role in the determination of race than has previously been recognized. I conclude that society should accept such an individual's decision to change race the same way it should accept an individual's decision to change sex.

Notes

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- 1 Importantly, I am not suggesting that race and sex are equivalent. Rather, I intend to show that similar arguments that support transgenderism support transracialism. My thesis relies in no way upon the claim that race and sex are equivalent, or historically constructed in exactly the same way.
- 2 Christine Overall also makes this argument in “Transsexualism and ‘Transracialism,’” where she defends transracialism against eight objections (Overall 2004). Although our arguments advance a similar thesis, Overall and I consider and respond to a number of different objections to transracialism.
- 3 By transgenderism (or, sometimes, trans), I mean those individuals who experience a disconnection between their gender identity and the sexed body they inhabit. This includes both the subset of transgender individuals who have undergone such procedures as genital reconstruction and/or hormonal therapy, namely transsexuals, and those who have not, but who may take other measures to present as the gender with which they identify. Whereas many transgender individuals identify with a sex other than that assigned at birth, some transgender individuals identify beyond the male–female binary entirely, although such individuals will not concern me here. By sex, I intend the popular meaning of biologically female and male, understood in terms of the presence of such features as a vulva and breasts or a penis and testicles respectively (although it bears noting that just which criteria are deemed biologically relevant at any given time changes both within and across cultures). By gender, I intend the normative social categories woman or man, understood in terms of the social treatment, norms, expectations, or behaviors culturally associated with the sex “female” or “male.” When individuals undergo surgical transformation to alter their bodies, through such measures as “vaginoplasty, phalloplasty, testicular implants, mastectomy or breast implants, facial feminization surgery, hormones, or electrolysis,” we can say they have changed their sexed bodies to align with their gender identity (Heyes 2009, 146). In the case of race, we might say that purported transracial people would change their physical raced bodies (for example, skin color or hair texture) to align with their racial identity (that is, their self-identification with the social treatment, norms, expectations or behaviors culturally associated with a race). However, as Cressida Heyes notes, “the distinction between sex (biological maleness and femaleness) and gender (socially constructed masculinity and femininity) has no obvious analogy in the case of race, where both embodiment and social role are captured by the same ambiguous term” (152, n. 11). For simplicity's sake, throughout the article I will tend to refer to changing sex, assuming that what comes along with this is a correspondence in gender identity. When I say “sex,” then, it can usefully be read as the more cumbersome “sex-gender,” which I will also make use of at times. Although the very distinction between sex and gender and how best to understand

both terms is a matter of significant debate within feminist theory, I will leave such matters aside for the purposes of this analysis, albeit noting that, to borrow again from Heyes, “the kind of transformation I am discussing confounds the sex–gender distinction” (152, n. 11).

- 4 By “another sex” I mean a sex other than that you were assigned at birth.
- 5 Overall also makes this point (Overall [2004](#), 186).
- 6 Even if the biological account were true, I am still not convinced it would pose a problem. The reason is that, in the case of transsexualism, the fact that we cannot change an individual's basic chromosomal makeup is not relevant to whether it is acceptable to change sex categories. In other words, regardless of whether someone has metaphysically changed their actual sex chromosomes—a central component of sex according to the prominent biological account—socially we still accept transitions to another sex. Similarly, even if a biological account of race were true, it's not clear it should have any bearing on the ethical question of whether to accept someone's decision to change race.
- 7 Of course, many people who appeal to ancestral ties as the basis for racial categorization do not hold a biological view of ancestry, but a social one. However, my purpose here is to dispute the idea that one cannot, as a matter of metaphysical fact, change one's race. This is why I concern myself with the biological account of ancestry, for only the biological account of ancestry could purport to have such tight metaphysical restrictions.
- 8 Overall also makes this point (Overall [2004](#), 188).
- 9 It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss what criteria a prospective transracial person would need to fulfill to merit a transition. As it stands, the criteria for a diagnosis of “gender dysphoria” in the case of sex-gender transition remain highly problematic and controversial, and I do not have the space to enter a fuller discussion of this controversy here. For now, I would like to echo trans theorist C. Jacob Hale's call to think alongside “transsexual political objectives of breaking the medico-therapeutic-judicial power that enables our colonization,” and toward “a world in which there would be greater freedom to think and enact gender [*or*, I would suggest, race] as existential choice, made in accordance with moral and political principles” (Hale [2009](#), 60).
- 10 As Dolezal herself states, “how I feel is more powerful than how I was born” (McGreal [2015](#)).
- 11 Recently, Katharine Jenkins has argued that Haslanger's account of gender is trans-exclusionary because, for instance, it does not accommodate trans women whose gender presentation as women is not respected and who are therefore not

subordinated on the basis of being presumed female (Jenkins 2016, 400). I do not have the space to enter this controversy here. For now, I note that I am open to the possibility that there might be ways to know what it's like to exist and be treated as a woman without being so classed by others.

- 12 Haslanger does not draw this conclusion herself, though, stating at one point that “neither gender nor race is chosen” (Haslanger 2012, 246). However, Haslanger remains open to the contestation of race, sex, and gender categories, hoping that in doing so we “keep clearly in mind our political aims both in analyzing the past and present, and in envisioning alternative futures” (246).
- 13 In a line suggestive of the link between family and racial identity, Haslanger writes, “I believe my own racial identity has been substantially altered by being a mother of Black children, and although I am White, there are ways of thinking about identity on which my racial identity is better understood as ‘mixed’” (Haslanger 2012, 282).

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