

CROSSING RACIALIZED LINES: Mapping Academics' Responses To So-Called "Transracialism"

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Introduction

- In 2017, a young Canadian academic by the name of Rebecca Tuvel published an article in *Hypatia* entitled "In Defense of Transracialism" in which she reflects on the differential ways in which Caitlyn Jenner and Rachel Dolezal were received by the media and broader public. Tuvel argues that "considerations that support transgenderism seem to apply equally to transracialism" (2017, p. 263).
- This article led to a controversy within the academic fields of philosophy, race studies, and trans studies, as well as on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Within a week, there was an open letter with over 830 signatories calling for the article's retraction.
- Through this research project, I seek to unpack the academic controversy by addressing the following question: What were the primary topics of discussion that arose in response to Rebecca Tuvel's article "In Defense of Transracialism"?



"Rachel Dolezal: The You in You" by TEDx UIdaho is licensed under CC-BY-NC-ND 2.0

Methodology

- Goal: to trace a genealogy of the "Tuvel Affair" and academia's discussion of so-called "transracialism" by using Tuvel's article, subsequent responses to it, as well as other relevant works
- Extended literature review, organized based on the most prominent themes that arise within the literature

Problematizing Tuvel's Methodology

- lack of engagement with relevant academic literature**
 - particularly works from race theory & trans studies (Hom, p. 31)
 - discussions of passing & multi-racial identity omitted (Hom, p. 31)
 - In response, Tuvel argues that "relying on the language of passing to describe transracialism is potentially misleading" (2018, p. 73)
- problematic use of examples**
 - comparison of religious conversion with racial transition is flawed (Botts, p. 71; Singal)
 - "incorrectly cites Charles Mills as a defender of voluntary racial identification" (Singal)
 - focus on individual cases of racial transgression obscures the labour performed exclusively by POC to reproduce "racialized difference" within white liberal "multicultural" nations (Cattien, p.722)
- vocabulary and frameworks out of touch with relevant subfields**
 - use of term "transgenderism" (Russel; Singal), which some see as problematic as it suggests that transgender identity is an ideology
 - Julia Serano, a trans-bi activist, argues that it has a history of being used in neutral way, but was appropriated by TERFs and ∴ gained a negative connotation (Serano)
 - deadnames a trans woman (Russel; Singal)
 - premise of analogy between "race" and gender never established (Botts, p. 63)
 - use of "acontextual and ahistorical tools" (analytic philosophical tradition) rather than tools that take context into account (continental philosophical tradition) (Botts, p. 51)
 - In response, Tuvel argues that "both methodologies have their merits and drawbacks—and both are valuable" (2018, p. 79)

Debates

"Transracialism" within feminist philosophy

- Janice Raymond**, an anti-trans feminist, coined the term "transracial" in 1979 as part of a rhetorical question that intended to disparage gender confirmation surgeries by likening them to a hypothetical "transracial" surgery (Hom, p. 33)
- Christine Overall**, a Canadian philosopher, took up Raymond's hypothetical in 2004 and argued that if transsexualism and the providing of "medical and social resources" towards transitions is "morally acceptable", then the same should be true for "transracialism" (Overall, p. 183)

Social Context of "transracialism"

- increasing destabilization & policing of categories of "ethnoracial and sex/gender difference" over the past few decades (Brubaker, p. 416)
- Caitlyn Jenner appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair*'s June 2015 issue, representing a growing acceptance of trans identities (Tuvel, 2017, p. 263)
- That same month, Rachel Dolezal, then head of the NAACP, was "outed" as "white", leading to widespread discussions of so-called "transracialism" within the media
 - Dolezal's story was largely pushed by right-wing news outlets such as Breitbart (Hom, p. 41) & threatened to harm the still fragile gains trans folks had made (Brubaker, p. 430)

Problems with analogizing "race" and sex/gender

- obscures important differences**
 - biological factors, such as hormones, seem to influence sex-gender identity (Erdely), whereas "race" has no biological basis (Tuvel, 2017, p. 265)
 - Tuvel points out that some trans people don't have "ambiguous biological features" or don't see themselves as always having been their gender (2017, p. 265-266)
 - Tuvel also argues that this view unfairly makes the legitimacy of trans identities dependent upon biology (2017, p. 266)
 - gender identity is individual, whereas racial identity is relational (Heyes, p. 267; Botts, p. 66)
 - Hom argues that the link between "race" & ancestry is critiqued by race scholars (p. 40)
 - Tuvel argues that if the legitimacy of acts are held "hostage to the status quo", no social progress can be made (2017, p. 269)
- privileges comparison over intersectionality** (Mayeri, p. 1048-1051)
 - Cattien argues that "race" and gender are analytically distinct, yet constitutively interdependent (p. 713)

Impact & Implications for Anti-Racism

- marginalized communities & their institutions harmed**
 - Tuvel's article caused "imperial harm" (Russel, p. 176)
 - reactions were "vehement" from marginalized, queer/trans, and racialized communities (Cattien, p. 732)
 - "transracialism" was weaponized against trans folks by cultural right (Brubaker, p. 425)
 - institutions Dolezal was affiliated with were harmed (NAACP, HBCUs, and Africana Studies departments)
- cultural appropriation**
 - Russel argues that "Tuvel appropriated the experience of Others in order to experiment with a philosophical argument" (p. 193)
 - Ahmed points out how whites passing for black has historically functioned as part of the "white male's all-knowing, colonizing gaze" (Hom, p. 40)
 - Dreisinger argues that whites passing for black is often "dangerously stereotypical or appropriative and exploitative" (Hom, p. 41)
- destabilization / subversion of racial categories?**
 - Hom argues that relevant debates about the potentially destabilizing or subversive powers of passing are well established in race theory (p. 37)
 - She also argues that while subversion was part of the hope with the move towards multi-racial identification, if anything it has been "complicit with 'colourblind' racism" (Hom, p. 37)

White Privilege

- ease of transition**
 - whites passing for black is more accessible & easily reversible than blacks passing for white (Tuvel, 2017, p. 270)
 - In response, Tuvel argues that similar to "FtM privilege", white to black transition privilege should be of "minor relevance" to ethics. Instead, we should ensure equal access to resources for transitioning (2017, p. 271)
 - In response to Tuvel, Sealey argues that such resources aren't available right now, ∴ white people have an unequal range of agency (p. 26)
 - In response to Tuvel, Botts argues that exercising white privilege is never justified as it is reification of an unjust social hierarchy (p. 64)
- Dolezal's transition as a rejection of privilege?**
 - Sealey argues that the ability to reject privilege & bring about ends of your choosing without consequences is still based in privilege (p. 26)
 - While Dolezal did profit from her identification (position at the NAACP, professor of African Studies), she also faced many consequences (fired, social media backlash/shaming, personal relationships harmed) (Morning)

Arguments Supportive of Tuvel and/or "Transracialism"

- arguments against Tuvel's opponents**
 - critiques were in bad faith (Gordon, p. 12)
 - critiques lacked "intellectual generosity" (Taylor, p. 3)
- ethical responsibility of respecting autonomous choices of others**
 - Botts argues that non-normative personal identity claims should be respected because of an ethical obligation to "honour the autonomous choices of others (as long as no one else is being hurt in the process, of course)" (p. 68)

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