

# Gender Boundaries, Race Boundaries

*by Sarah Mazouz*

---

**In his incisive, concise and stimulating book, the sociologist Rogers Brubaker examines the reasons why, in the United States today, social acceptance of transgender situations has no equivalent in “transracial” cases.**

---

**Reviewed:** Rogers Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016, 256 pp.

Conceived by its author as an exploratory essay rather than a monograph, this book is underpinned by an imaginative theoretical plan and clear, elegant writing.<sup>1</sup> Its point of departure is the different political, media and, partly, scientific reception given to two cases: the male-to-female transition of Bruce/Caitlin Jenner, and Rachel Dolezal's identification as an African American.

In June 2015, William Bruce Jenner, an athlete known for winning the gold medal in decathlon at the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games, and a member by marriage of the Kardashian family of celebrities, began his transition and became Caitlin Jenner. At the same time, the parents of Rachel Dolezal, then president of the Spokane (Washington State) chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), disclosed that she was not black as she had always claimed, but in fact white. This revelation caused a major scandal. Rachel Dolezal protested,

---

<sup>1</sup> This book review benefited from the discussions and scientific environment promoted by the Global-Race programme financed by the ANR and directed by Patrick Simon.

explaining that she had always felt black. However, she was forced to resign from her position at the NAACP. These two cases were immediately linked by the media and social media networks. The question was: if Caitlyn Jenner could be recognized as transgender, could Rachel Dolezal be recognized as transracial?

## Constructivism in question

Based on this analogical controversy, Brubaker sets out to examine the modes of differentiated functioning of these two identification regimes. He considers this gap to be all the more paradoxical given that racial categories are more broadly recognized as social constructions than either sex or gender, where a kind of bodily realism can sometimes persist, and should therefore permit greater fluidity and flow in identifications (p. 4). And yet, the opposite happens.

These two cases thus provide the author with an opportunity to analyze the social meaning of racial and gender identifications, initially, in the first part of the book (The Trans Moment), by reflecting on “trans” situations (“to think about trans”). The first chapter examines discourses on sex change and race change, focusing primarily on the way in which these discourses view the legitimacy of these changes. Three types of positions are then proposed: *essentialists*, who see gender and race as grounded in nature; *voluntarists*, who think that gender and racial identities can be changed; and those who combine *gender voluntarism* with *racial essentialism*.

However, the confrontation between these two cases also has a heuristic scope as demonstrated in the second part of the book, “Thinking with Trans”. Brubaker distinguishes three types of “trans” situations in order to conceive transracial in terms of transgender. “*The trans of migration*” involves moving from one established category to another, usually by means of surgery and hormonal treatment. “*The trans of between*” involves a wavering, or an ambiguous positioning, between the two established categories, while “*the trans of beyond*” rejects existing categories and calls for them to be transcended altogether. And yet, according to Brubaker, if the Jenner and Dolezal cases correspond to the “trans of migration” (even though Dolezal claimed not to have undergone any treatment to appear black), the limitations of the transracial/transgender analogy they reveal serve to demonstrate that an objectivist conception of race persists.

This is probably where the main weakness of Rogers Brubaker's argument lies. The Dolezal affair does not so much illustrate the persistence of an essentialist conception of racial categorization as it does the differentiated regime of legitimization of racial identifications in comparison with that which occurs in transgender cases.

Even though a constructivist position may logically be confused with an unconditionality of identifications (considering the fact that being racialized as African American is a social construct and not a biological given, it should be possible to define oneself as such), it does not, however, mean that any identification as African American is acceptable, as the Dolezal case highlights. In other words, taking a constructivist approach to race does not exclude having a substantivist conception of it, which strictly defines the conditions of belonging to a particular group. And the controversy sparked by Rachel Dolezal's identification as African American serves as an indirect reminder of the conditions - in the particular context of the United States - under which a person can legitimately be recognized as such. Incidentally, it is regrettable that on this occasion Rogers Brubaker does not specify that the concerns would have been at least partly different had Ms Dolezal claimed Latina or Asian racialization.

Caught in the confusion that the "could" sows between logical possibility and moral permission, Brubaker's reasoning allows these two frameworks to overlap. He thus mixes the logics of production of categories and the regimes of acceptability of identifications, or, to borrow philosophical terms, ontology and axiology.<sup>2</sup>

The Dolezal case therefore does not challenge the constructed nature of racial categories, but rather that of the legitimacy of an identification that does not fit in with the criteria produced by the history of social relations, in this instance between blacks and whites in the United States. And the fact that identifications are not absolutely fluid does not mean a return to a form of essentialism or realism in the production of categorizations.

---

<sup>2</sup> On this point, see Sébastien Chauvin, "Possibility, Legitimacy and the New Ontologies of Choice: A Comment on Brubaker", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40/8, 2017, pp. 1320-1329.

## Different regimes of subjectivity

However, Rogers Brubaker's main argument for distinguishing transracial identifications from transgender identifications is to reiterate that they follow a logic in which the question of choice, as opposed to the biological given, plays out in a different way. Indeed, in the case of sexual and gender identification, it is accepted that the choice is personal and part of an individual psychological reality that may be disjointed from the initial bodily presentation (p. 7). The transition from one sex to the other thus brings a person's physical appearance into alignment with their psychological identity. For this reason, some transgender people prefer to speak of gender or sex *confirmation* surgery rather than gender or sex *reassignment* surgery.

In contrast, racial identification does not come down to individual choice. As stated by the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association during the Dolezal affair (cited on p. 63), it cannot be carried out without the recognition of the other members of the group of which the person is claiming membership:

Belonging does not arise simply from individual feelings – it is not simply who you claim to be, but also who claims you [as a member of the group].

In the United States, in the case of a person identifying as African American historical heritage is the main criterion of recognition because, to be considered as such, it is necessary to have had slave – not just black – ancestors (which shows, moreover, that heritage, although linked, is not systematically conflated with heredity). This is reminiscent of the way in which this question was put to Barack Obama in 2008 during his first presidential election campaign. As the son of a Kenyan, he was black but could not directly claim to be African American, and it was only thanks to his marriage to an Afro-descendant that he was able to connect with that history. Thus, unlike sex and gender, racial identification requires a person to be part of the communal and collective history of the group in which one sees oneself.

In this sense, these two types of identity change are not legitimized in the same way because the authenticity of identification is not measured according to the same criteria. In transgender cases, only the word of the person concerned counts, because the driving force behind a sex change is a need for personal and psychological authenticity. On the other hand, it is not enough to identify *with* African Americans in order to be able to identify *as* such. Without prior recognition from the other members

of the group of which membership is being claimed and which, in this case, functions as an *authentication*, the physical transformation is taken to be a kind of deception. In Rachel Dolezal's case, however, the question of usurpation was all the more powerful given that the misleading nature of her identification and, therefore, of her physical appearance was revealed by a third party, namely her parents. It is surprising that Brubaker did not take the time to present the differential structuring of the two cases by further historicizing the issues at stake. The Bruce/Caitlin Jenner case functions as a confession that makes it possible to play on the themes of the frankness or sincerity of the person in question. In contrast, Rachel Dolezal's case involved a revelation or a particular form of outing. In her case, lying about her identity came on top of the moral reprehension involved in pretending to be a member of a minority group and a victim of U.S. history, while in fact belonging to the group that had been the oppressor.

Furthermore, it would have been interesting to resituate the distinct modes of acceptance of these two cases within the history of the thematisation of the trans question in struggles related to gender and sexuality and in anti-racist campaigns. The former – or at least some of them – have asserted the fluidity of categories and the possible flow from one identity to another as one of the main instruments through which a gendered social order and its hierarchies may be challenged.

However, racial change is not a core issue in anti-racist movements, firstly because, in historical terms, transracial situations have always been regarded with suspicion: African Americans passing themselves off as white are considered by their peers to have betrayed the cause, and are seen as usurpers by those who uphold the racist order; meanwhile, whites who identify as African Americans<sup>3</sup> are accused of redeeming themselves too easily or of opportunism. This is why anti-racist movements have focused less on movement between racializing categories and more on overcoming a social order inherited from a racist system by the use of policies of recognition aimed at promoting stigmatized and disqualified identities, and policies of justice that are intended to correct discriminatory treatment suffered by members of racial minorities.

---

<sup>3</sup> In history, cases of whites identifying as African Americans were almost non-existent, hence the decision to use this formulation in this specific instance.

## The limitations of the analogy

It is the structural homology between race and gender - particularly because both involve power relations that manifest themselves in hierarchized categories that are socially and historically constructed and which distinctly and variably affect the body - that invites us to question the similarity between the Jenner and Dolezal cases. However, and here lies the limitation of the analysis put forward by Rogers Brubaker, the fact that the analogy between a transgender situation and a transracial situation is conceivable in terms of the logics of categorical productions does not necessarily mean that the two cases are socially received as equally acceptable or legitimate. What is more, the whole point of such a comparison is to highlight the differentiated social and subjective effects that emerge when the register of category construction shifts to that of identification.

### Further reading

- “Symposium: Rogers Brubaker’s Trans: Gender and Race in a Age of Unsettled Identities”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 40, n° 8, 2017, pp. 1298-1329.
- Rogers Brubaker, “Thinking with Trans: Reply to my Critics”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 40, n° 8, 2017, pp. 1330-1336.

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), 20 April 2018. Translated from the French by Susannah Dale with the support of the Florence Gould Foundation.

Published in *Books & Ideas*, 19 July 2018.