



Whose chosenness counts? The always-already racialized discourse of trans – response to Rogers Brubaker

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ABSTRACT

The Jenner/Dolezal moment, while it appears to provide a neat comparative experiment in gender and racial classifications, is itself the artefact of an invisible, already racialized gender system. If we take this question at the heart of Rogers Brubaker's provocative new book on its own terms, we find, like Brubaker, that very different rules, and indeed, different institutional architectures, govern the two categorical systems. Closer inspection reveals the ways claims to gender legitimacy are always strained through the mesh of racial legitimacy. What is more, the social forces at work in trans "recognition" politics may underwrite some of the most pernicious forms of racialized violence in the contemporary United States.

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When Caitlyn Jenner appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in June of 2015, and a mere 10 days later Rachel Dolezal was outed in a mainstream media frenzy, it appeared that the universe had indeed provided a neat natural experiment: If Jenner could assert and be recognized as female, might Dolezal also be recognized as black? If we are, as Rogers Brubaker asserts in his provocative new book, in a "broad moment of cultural flux, mixture and interpenetration" (2016, 5) is it one in which race and racial categorization will prove to be as mutable as gender, as subject to idioms of chosenness and volunteerism? Or will race remain ossified in an essentialist discourse of ancestral and bodily determinism?

If we take this question on its own terms, we find, like Brubaker, that very different rules, and indeed, different institutional architectures, govern the two categorical systems. Whereas racial membership neatly indexes ancestry, there is increasing space for a formulation of gender that accommodates individual subjectivity, through an intricate regulatory involvement with medical

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and psychiatric institutions as legitimators. Gender can be chosen; race is always a given. As Brubaker notes, “subjectivity is constitutive of gender ... [whereas] subjectivity is understood as an *expression of* racial identity, not its ground.” (2016, 37, emphasis in original).

One might argue, however, that the terms of the question set the parameters of the answer. That, in fact, racial forces themselves produce Brubaker’s “moment of vernacular sociology” (2016, ix), and that the players and issues were always already constituted by a racially determined discourse, one that propelled both Jenner and Dolezal into legible figureheads for public discourse on the distinction between gender transitioning and racial passing. We might argue that (1) the fact that both Jenner and Dolezal are white is an artefact of social process, not a precondition for studying it; (2) that gender is always racialized, and that claims to gender legitimacy are strained through the mesh of racial legitimacy and (3) that the social forces at work in trans “recognition” politics may underwrite some of the most pernicious forms of racialized violence in the contemporary United States, lending themselves to projects to ossify racial categories, rather than to disrupt them.

More than conclusions or critiques, these points are meant as provocations, steeped in literatures from queer theory and critical race analysis. They are offered as occasions to mark the limits of public discourse analysis for producing data on social process and to open some new questions for consideration by scholars of classification systems. They hinge on a more in-depth reading of the Jenner case, in its capacity to set the terms by which Dolezal finds herself outside the boundary of public legitimacy.

(1) Caitlyn Jenner is white

Caitlyn Jenner was neither the first nor the last transgender woman to adorn the cover of a national magazine, so why does it appear that she was the most impactful? Why not Laverne Cox, who less than a year before signalled a “transgender tipping point” to Time Magazine? Or why not any of the half dozen or so trans cover models who followed her? (Hari Neff on the cover of Elle Magazine, Amelia Gapin for Women’s Running, or most recently, 9-year-old Avery Jackson on the cover of National Geographic, or even Benjamin Melzer on Men’s Health?) Rather than a “lesson on identities” in flux, perhaps it makes the most sense to view the media spectacle that was her very public transition as a “diagnostic tool” (Plemons 2015), an occasion to pause and consider how certain people make possible questions and conversations that would be foreclosed if encountered in differently positioned others. The answer is, at least in part, that Jenner is white, aspires to normative femininity and claims masculine origins so unimpeachable that she epitomizes the most

normative model of trans, one which seeks recognition *as trans*, rather than as woman.

History has a tendency to repeat itself. Christine Jorgensen, the “ex-GI turned blonde bombshell” who incited a media spectacle not unlike Jenner’s in the early 1950s was propelled to stardom by a series of similar social forces. She had a ruggedly masculine military past, attained classical beauty and demonstrated an interest in prototypical femininity and openly transgender self-representation. Her public campaign is still heralded as the beginning of transgender visibility in the United States. And indeed, in 1953, no other individual garnered more words in mainstream news media than Jorgensen (Jorgensen and Stryker 2000). Far less known to even trans scholars, however, was the near simultaneous public trial of Ava Betty Brown, a black transwoman once dubbed “a Chicago version of Christine Jorgensen” by a local newspaper, whose gender fraud prosecution in 1957 was contemporaneous with Jorgensen’s stardom (Snorton 2016). “Measured against and made intelligible through Jorgensen’s spectacular popularity” (Snorton 2016), Brown’s subjectivity was as denigrated, questioned and regulated as Jorgensen’s was articulated, applauded and publicized.

We cannot attempt analysis of Caitlyn Jenner, a white, wealthy, hyper-visible, media savvy, hegemonically feminine, out transwoman as lightning rod for claims to trans authenticity without pairing her with and against the transpeople whose representations are unthinkable to popular media. The question of whether Jenner’s elite golf club will allow her to use their women’s locker room (which, we learn in the first season of her reality television show “I Am Cait” she would not even request for fear of making her fellow patrons uncomfortable) seems a profoundly different form of social incorporation than that faced by transwomen of colour like India Monroe, Noony Norwood or Crystal Edmonds, some of the more than 21 killed in 2016 alone (Advocate Editors 2016). Indeed, the entire run of “I am Cait” seemed dedicated to elaborating just how fundamentally different Jenner’s experience was from just about every other transwoman she encountered, mostly particularly the transwomen of colour on her show. As the following sections will hopefully demonstrate, it might be more productive to view the rhetoric around Jenner as much about whiteness, wealth, fame and hyperbolic femininity as it is about trans.

(2) Gender traffics in race

Can we compare gender’s subjective mandate to the “supra-individual objectivity of race” (Brubaker 2016, 37)? At the level of rhetoric, both race and gender are categorical systems, both invoke cultural tensions between biology and psyche, choice and essence. However, underscoring all conversations about psyche and choice is the issue of cultural legitimacy, and that is not distributed evenly on the

basis of rhetorical force or earnest desire. Conceptualizing transgender and transracial as mutually exclusive leeches the race out of gender. It produces a fundamental blind spot endemic to much identity politics, namely that it conflates or flattens out intragroup differences (Crenshaw 1993). A more intersectional analytic position reveals that the rhetorics of gender transition and racial passing are distinct and the difference self-reinforcing.

There are several distinct features of the discourse around trans gender and race that play out explicitly in the discourse Brubaker analyses. First, because there is already an intact cultural lexicon for transgender experience, there is an identity into which Jenner can “come out” that both encompasses her female subjectivity and the notion that her femaleness does not inhere in her body. Because no such transracial lexicon exists, the sole frame we have for Dolezal is mired in deception, something closer to the outmoded trope of “gender terrorism” (Bornstein 2008) that long-dominated trans representation. Such depictions are epitomized in films like *The Crying Game*, where the transperson is outed in a dramatic fashion, provoking violent feelings of revulsion in the observer. This is no longer the main media trope for transgender, but it is the sole way we can imagine transrace. If, however, the analysis ends here, we act as if all transpeople are accorded the same agentic self-expression and the same access to even public trans identity. That is most certainly not the case. Even a cursory intersectional analysis of the realities of transpeople’s lives reveals a starkly different picture.

Transpeople of colour’s lives appear quite distinct from those of white transgender Americans. A survey of over 27,000 transpeople in the United States found that people of colour experiences higher rates of homelessness, unemployment, suicidality, police interaction and street harassment than white transpeople. (James et al. 2016). Race appears to matter for just about every major form of social incorporation transpeople struggle to achieve. When Brubaker asserts that his “broad account” of “contemporary transformations of, and struggles over, race and gender as systems of social classification” remains “necessarily more distant from lived experience” (xi), he conditions trans discourse as white discourse.

One thing I am left wondering at the close of the book is whether the wholesale dismissal of Dolezal’s subjectivity as impossible might be understood as a byproduct of a racialized process in which non-white people are accorded less authority as self-knowing subjects. It is one way to understand the stark differences between idioms of gender crossing and racial passing, wherein the former references change while the latter implies duplicity.

(3) The transnormative subject of rights

The fact that Caitlyn Jenner became the polished spokesperson for trans inclusion is no accident. Indeed, she is in many ways the quintessential

transnormative subject of rights. By this, I mean two things: Jenner occupies a position of extreme privilege, even in the institutional context of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender politics. She has the means to transition medically, to sequester herself in a protected environment while transitioning, to come out in a spectacular way, scaffolded by a media apparatus that protects and cultivates her story for maximum impact. She even has a community of “girls” who surround her to teach her the toposes of living as a transperson. She is also politically conservative, interested in a normatively gendered existence and complicit in her own marginalization, at times. As C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn have written, this “universalized trajectory of coming out/transition, visibility, recognition, protection and self-actualization largely remains uninterrogated in its complicities and convergences with biomedical, racist, neoliberal and imperialist projects”. (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013, 47). Indeed, a read of critical literature reveals that trans legitimacy is inextricably bound to ossified notions of racial categorization. When Jin Haritaworn questions how certain forms of queer and trans intimacies, previously the subject of criminal sanction, come to be celebrated in idioms of freedom (or “chosenness,” to use Brubaker’s term), he links them to precisely the forms of neoliberal legislation, gentrification and policing practices that bear down the most heavily on people and bodies of colour (Haritaworn 2012). While a full exegesis on these connections is outside the scope of this brief response, one ready example is the very hate crimes laws that purport to protect transpeople, which never seem to arm the transwomen of colour most at risk for abuse while scaffolding the racist project of mass incarceration in America. The idea that such law increases positive visibility for transpeople (Spade 2015) misses the flaw in recognition politics. The “articulation of value” of transpeople of colour’s lives happens through their deaths, contributing to a “broader biopolitical imperative to manage poor people and people of color by channeling them into a massive carceral project” (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013, 68). This happens part in parcel with a white trans politics that trades in respectability, notions of benign essence and choice. The very aim of much of the micro-politics Brubaker takes as his subject serves to maintain the attendant privileges of whiteness within the transgender rights subject and fractures constructs of gender and race into apparent isolates, when in fact, their constitutions are fully intertwined.

Conclusions, or lack thereof

So, why does all of this matter? Taken in pure form, and on its face, the Jenner/Dolezal comparison masquerades as a neat juxtaposition of racial and gender categorization. But the moment we note Jenner’s racialization, effaced in its whiteness, as whiteness often is, urgent questions emerge about the ways in which subjectivity is rewarded differently on the basis of race. Gender

subjectivity, gender group membership, gender citizenship is a resource that is unevenly distributed (Meadow 2010), and thus the idioms of choice and essence that so constrained Dolezal's self-identification may have been the very forces that produce the Caitlyn Jenner moment as the moment of unimpeachable trans subjectivity.

Disclosure statement

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