Thinking through Rejections and Defenses of Transracialism

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ABSTRACT: This article explores several philosophical questions raised by Rebecca Tuvel’s controversial article, “In Defense of Transracialism.” Drawing upon work on the concept of bad faith, including its form as “disciplinary decadence,” this discussion raises concerns of constructivity and its implications and differences in intersections of race and gender.

KEY WORDS: bad faith, Rachel Dolezal, disciplinary decadence, Caitlyn Jenner, methodological fetish, race, racism, reality, Rebecca Tuvel, social constructivity, transgender, transracialism, transraciality, trans discourse, will-to-power

Bad faith, I would like the reader to bear in mind, is an attitude that is ashamed of itself. Manifestations of the phenomenon thus often take the form of appeals to a variety of resources of evasion, such as the denial of its possibility, the hubris of the ascription, or, though not exhaustive, the rejection of evidence through demands for conditions beyond the sphere of reasonable criteria. No evidence, in short, is or, worse, could be good enough. I have, from these observations, found the concept of bad faith useful for understanding problematic dynamics of disciplinary practices. In Disciplinary Decadence, for instance, I show how this concern comes to the fore when proponents of disciplines abdicate a commitment to reality and instead fetishize their methods on a path to disciplinary solipsism. Along such a path, familiar problems of bad faith emerge, including the unfortunate shame of being bad. In its defense, some practitioners of their discipline retort that it is simply bad form to call what is at work in a disciplinary practice, or at least a particular way or set of commitments of a discipline, “bad.” The messenger of such offending offerings must, then, be eliminated.
I begin with this summation because of the context of this forum. Dr. Rebecca Tuvel’s controversial article “In Defense of Transracialism” stimulated an array of responses exemplifying many of the classic defense mechanisms of bad faith. This makes sense because Tuvel did something indecent from a bad faith perspective. She called it out. Although she did not outright argue such in her article, the conclusion is straightforward: If arguments supporting transgender identity and the social and political resources for it are of the same form for transraciality, how can one legitimately support the former but not the latter? The goal of the article, as I read it, was not to claim that one is legitimate over the other. It’s basically stating that one commitment, without a uniquely differentiating premise available, entails commitment to the other, which, on that basis, makes transracialism defensible.

It is significant that Tuvel refers to “transracialism” instead of, say, “transraciality.” The “ism” refers to a practiced attitude instead of the concept or notion of being transracial. Though the advocacy of one may presuppose the other, the task Tuvel has taken on involves addressing a multitude of concerns, including the ideological commitments or antipathy to a given identity and its ongoing practice or manifestation.

Now, once bad faith comes into the picture, a whole cavalcade of objections often follows. I won’t name the objectors here since I’m more concerned with the kinds of responses. Additionally, the harm people have received in this conflict is such that to name some people would in effect mean to throw salt on open wounds, as this is an issue some have expressed as such. So, for those reasons, I will speak in general (as opposed to over-generalized) terms.

Consider classic forms of ad hominem fallacies often obliquely offered as concerns for rigorous scholarship. A familiar one appeals to a lack of sources or a misinterpretation of those offered. I regularly read published articles in supposedly “first-tier journals,” in addition to monographs from prestigious academic presses, that fail to engage many of the classic works in certain fields often because of ideological or disciplinary prejudices without receiving rebuke from many critics who in this context decry infelicities of citation. In some instances of approved citations, it’s not necessarily the case that their contributions are the best available discussions of the relevant subject. Citation, as we know, is often loaded with homages to professional networks, as Randall Collins observes in his Sociology of Philosophy, and other factors. At times (hopefully most rather than some times) what I call the evidentiality of evidence comes into play, where the main concern is with arguments rather than the arguer. As these observations do not legitimate a shortcoming, the point here is why not, then, write critical articles making recommendations for improvement, as is often done with other published, scholarly work, instead of demanding retraction? I noticed, for instance, that the article’s proffering analytical philosophical sources suggests an effort at conservative citation, even though the leading and enduring research and schol-
arship on the subject matter stand firmly in writings from philosophers outside of the analytical tradition. As that didn't deter me from at least exploring Tuvel's main thought experiment, why, then, couldn't her critics make such an effort? If commitment to rigorous citations is the main concern, why, then, isn't that so for some of the venerated articles offered by such critics in protest of the piece?

An extension of the more or better citations argument is the claim of incompetence. An immediate case in point would, for example, be against my use of the word “transgender,” as some proponents prefer to use the word “trans.” They invest in the ambiguity or openness of the term and at times proffer it as an adjective. Thus it could refer to “trans-woman” or “trans-man.” And others may object to this term because they avow an ontological status to the noun being modified. This, the argument goes, offers fidelity to the lived-experience of the subject at hand. “She” or “he” is not a modified “she” or “he” but instead only she or he.

A theoretical consideration here is the catch 22 of constructivity and performance versus ontological notions of substance. Some proponents are, for example, poststructuralists, which means any assertion of being ontological subjects is problematic. Thus, the argument goes, no one “is” whatever gender she or he says, which is one of the reasons for the now preferred gender-neutral term “they.” This fluidity of possibility means, then, that those who locate themselves as the “real” she or he against the trans-“she” or “he” is suffering from a self-delusion about what physical markers mean. Put differently, anatomy need not entail destiny, and more, there is no inner meaning to anatomy but instead the constellation of rules governing meaning by which there could be more meanings premised on anatomy to come. This is familiar terrain from the work of Judith Butler and critical assessments of it among theorists from the global south such as Nkiru Nzegwu and Oyèrónké Oyewùmí. Though they disagree on certain details, these three theorists come together in their critique of notions of “the subject” and their understanding of the importance of politics in the production of human possibility.

Gender and sex, however, have not been the sole objects of study about which these arguments have been made. Other objects of study include sexuality and race. Since Tuvel’s article focused on race, I’ll do the same here.

Academic and philosophical discussions of race do not always match its lived reality. It is the prevailing scholarly position that race is a social construction and racism is its unjust manifestation. Though theorists may take different positions on the relationship of race to racism—some, for example, regard race as a manifestation of racism and it thus should be eliminated, while others argue it’s possible to have race without racism—most seem to avow that race has no reality or significance beyond its meaning as a social practice. It is, in other words, a social construction. Too many academics, however, do not spell out what they mean by this, which, unfortunately, often leaves their students bewildered. Take, for
example, the argument that race is a fiction and that it is thus not real. How could something that students “see” everyday and are able to identify with reasonable predictability—not absolute but in a majority of instances—not be “real”? And even more, when the explanation is that all meanings are socially produced because language, communication, signs, symbols, meanings, depending on what theory is offered behind them, cannot be produced “privately” or without in principle another to whom to communicate—if even analogically—then the inevitable question of producing different meanings or at least meaning differently emerges. Put differently, if race is sociogenic, as Fanon argued, why can’t a different social world, which he also reminds us depends on human agency, produce different manifestations of race and other ways of being human?

Though many could offer histories on the specificity of their group’s racial formation, the fact of the matter is that as a human science, the inevitable exceptions to the rules await their unveiling. My discussion at this point has been at the abstract level on purpose, since I don’t see the point of belaboring the plethora of literature on race theory, critical race theory, philosophy of race, and so forth. The basic fact is that people have been moving fluidly through races since the concept emerged in its prototypical form of raza in Andalusia into its Euromodern taxonomical race. Racism, where there is a hierarchy according to racial designation, has led to varieties of presuppositions about racial movements such as rationalistic notions of asymmetry entailing a logical expectation of fleeing blackness into the sanctuary of whiteness. Thus, although the phenomenon of people “becoming” white is well-known—and I’m not here referring to “passing”—what is not often spoken about are people who became black. Even more, the notion of becoming black is presumed so undesirable that such a path appears irrational, unless marked by special conditions of opportunism. There are also criticisms for such movements premised on insult to racially dominated groups; in the case of blacks, it could be interpreted as a form of “black face” or minstrelsy. And for others, it could be interpreted as a threat to a paradoxically privileged status of oppression. The white who becomes black is, in an ironic way, especially white where whiteness is interpreted as having to have it all—including oppression.

There is, however, something perverse about “owning” oppression. We’re here on the terrain of what existentialists have articulated as the will-to-power, ressentiment, seriousness, and a variety of other forms of desire for intrinsic moral superiority, all of which are manifestations of bad faith. Oppression, after all, is not something to own but instead to overcome or eliminate. What, however, should be said about people whose lived-reality isn’t a fetishized blackness but is instead a human paradox of simultaneous awareness of designated whiteness and existential blackness? What might some of this be socially and politically?

In some of my writings from the 1990s, I argued that black identification requires addressing certain political themes that white identification does not.
Groups who were once not white often exemplify, at least in the context of the United States, extraordinary bigotry upon achieving white identity. Antiblack racism among such groups is a testament to their changed status, as Irish Americans, Italian Americans, Greek Americans, Polish Americans, and neoconservatives among European Jewish Americans attest. There have, however, been members of these groups who, for varieties of reasons, taken different paths and their descendants are black in contemporary terms. Offspring of such racial mixing fit easily into old racial logic. What is striking, however, are the ancestors whose path into black worlds were not based on being a white who moved downward but instead as someone who was simply known as black. That there are black people who are discovering that the light-skin grandparent or great-grandparent actually did not emerge out of the history that marked the other light-skin relatives whose life stories emerged from plantations to migration already reveal a basic point: There have been in black communities black people whose recent origin stories reveal no black parentage. Think also of children born of unions in which both parents were, in such terms, transracial—for example, both parents met as blacks but who were born and initially raised as white. Or more, an already white couple who became black by virtue of migration to places where through habitation and socialization they became black, what is the status of their immediate descendants? Many black people know this. I know this. It’s so among my relatives and many others who have shared their stories with me in a variety of contexts, including those about whom I learned when I directed the Center for Afro-Jewish Studies at Temple University.

An important feature of the people about whom I am speaking is that the blackness they lived was such that it wasn’t brought into question among the black communities in which they lived. This was because none of them lived their blackness in a form of one-size-fitting-all. The many cultural manifestations of living black afford adaptability. What many share, however, is the conviction of there being something wrong with racism, though they may not do so in the most rigorous ways. Ordinary people after all often espouse ordinary ideas, and, as is well known, among those are negative black views of black people. In short, such categories of black people needn’t be romanticized as being down with the proverbial “cause.”

Returning to Tuvel’s article, there are, then, several observations to consider. The article compares Caitlyn Jenner’s and Rachel Dolezal’s reception by proponents of trans identities. Dolezal changed her name to Nchi Amare Diallo in 2016. Since she declared she’ll use “Dolezal” for her public persona, and that is how she is known in this controversy, I will continue referring to her as such for the rest of the article. Had she, however, declared otherwise, I would have chosen to use Diallo. Focusing on their political commitments, Jenner’s politics is right-wing and Dolezal’s is left-wing. Jenner is hardly a champion for social justice; Dolezal,
who also identifies as sexually fluid, was in the leadership of her local N.A.A.C.P.
chapter. The two trans individuals’ stories offer something that proponents of trans
identities may not like to hear—namely, that there may be nothing intrinsically
politically progressive about trans identification but instead a greater probability
embedded in the kind of trans one is. The gender model seems to mirror something
akin to what unfolded in the U.S. presidential election of 2016; white conservative
women voted conservative, and there were non-conservative ones who voted for
a repugnant white male presidential candidate. We needn’t stop there, however,
since, as is well known, gender never precluded white women from being mem-
ers of the Ku Klux Klan, Nazis, and other hate groups. Why, then, should trans
in gender terms be any different? Race, however, seems to tell a different story.
It’s not that there are no nonwhite sexists or racists. It’s simply that nonwhites,
especially blacks, indigenous, and First Nation peoples, are overwhelmingly on
the side of what in general are left-of-center political positions. Of course, neither
gender nor racial designations match up neatly, as they shouldn’t as human phe-
nomena. The fact of the matter, however, is that the cases thus far are not offering
what simplistic portraits premised on identity avow. Ironically, this is exactly what
Judith Butler argued in Gender Trouble and it is also what I argued, though from
an entirely different theoretical position, in Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism and
Her Majesty’s Other Children: neat, semiological formulations of human reality
don’t comport with lived manifestations of agency.

All this leads to more radical questions, which include not only the relation-
ship of the human being to reality but also the notion of reality in the first place.
It’s clear we, and by “we” I mean anyone reflecting on or living through these issues,
are learning something about reality as trans questions unfold. The proverbial
question, “What am I?” is, after all, not reserved exclusively to people who identify
as trans. And beyond questions of self-identity, the question of what is “really
real,” so to speak, emerges.

For those of us who take physical reality to be but a part of the story of what
there is, the complicated matter of explaining the many ways in which what is
real is manifested becomes the challenge. This forum is not the place in which to
spell out and engage the many debates on that topic, however. Instead, I would
simply like to reflect on the political stakes, since that concern is a fundamental
aspect of the controversy over Tuvel’s article.

First, data on how many black people originally designated white are in
their nascent stage. My guess is the number is not large. If that is the case, white
supremacists could decry a tiny decline in the number of whites; blacks, so will-
ing, could celebrate an insignificant increase in the number of black people. In
the case of Dolezal’s children, the first of whose father is black and the second’s
father’s identity is unknown, their lives would be no different, if the father of the
second is also black, from many blacks who already have white ancestry, which
in the United States is quite a large number. If the father of the second son is not black, other possibilities will no doubt unfold. Moreover, all kinds of interesting reflections about the fluidity of racial identity could come to the fore through thinking about transraciality. For instance, there are many whites in North America and the Caribbean who openly speak of their black grandmothers. They don’t hide their black ancestry. Yet they are aware of being white, and others know this without changed legal status ensuing. We could push this further and ask why they don’t speak about their father or mother as black since, according to the old logic, such parents are “half black” or “biracial” and thus, in a word, black. If so, how are such whites white? Yet they are. One could argue that to make a proper comparison, one would need to present a non-mixed black person who then identifies as white. At this point, however, there is already an appeal to a form of racial purity that belies the situation. There are, after all, black people who could “pass” for white. What is the status of a child born from two of such people and who then decides to identify as white? As many whites also have black ancestry, why would identification with that ancestry be implausible?

Imagine if many designated whites were to “come out” as black. One difficulty with such a thought experiment is that we often beg the question of social conditions by projecting them into the future. It doesn’t follow that such a future would have the same social meanings around these terms as the present. A blacker world may have a different valence for blackness than the current one has. The possibilities are many, since the many groups in regard to whom blacks function as such may also have changed and new groups may come about. If that is the case, then the dilemmas at hand may be false ones. On one side of the dilemma is worry about a population with insignificant impact. On the other side would be a population whose emergence marks a world so radically different than the one we live in that our concern may be irrelevant.

My sense on this matter is that the contemporary passionate concern with getting corporeal alignment “right” is connected to what is compelling a retreat into identity investment in the first place—namely, a decline in the capacity (power) of people to have an impact on political forces (power) affecting their lives. This is not to say that the struggle about and for the self lacks its own existential elements. It is to say that what may be animating a chorus of supporters for such a cause may also have less to do with what is lived and more to do with what is desired.

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REFERENCES


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