

(Dis)Engaging with Race Theory: Feminist Philosophy's Debate on "Transracialism" as a Case Study

SABRINA L. HOM

ABSTRACT: Rebecca Tuvel's controversial "In Defense of Transracialism" has been criticized for a lack of engagement with critical race theory. Disengagement with salient material on race is a consistent feature of the philosophical conversation out of which it arises. In this article, I trace the origins of feminist philosophy's disengaged and distorted view of "transracialism" and racial passing through the work of Janice Raymond, Christine Overall, and Cressida Heyes, and consider some of the relevant work on passing that is omitted in the philosophy of "transracialism." Finally, I offer methodological suggestions to avoid such distortions and omissions in feminist philosophy.

KEY WORDS: passing, transracialism, race theory, feminist philosophy, feminist methodology

Rebecca Tuvel's article "In Defense of Transracialism" (Tuvel 2017) has been denounced for, among other things, "an insufficient engagement with the field of critical race theory" (Heyes 2017), while others, such as Sally Haslanger (2017) and Shannon Winnubst (2017), have argued that the controversy over this article is symptomatic of deeper and more systematic issues in feminist philosophy, such as "an arrogant disregard for the broad, well-established, interdisciplinary scholarly fields of both critical race theory and trans studies" (Winnubst 2017). In this article, I will consider the citation practices within Tuvel's, Heyes's, and Overall's related papers, looking at work on passing and multiracial identification that is left out and exploring how these omissions distort the discussion on "transracialism" in feminist philosophy. In the final section, I'll consider practices that can encourage deeper engagement in feminist philosophy.

Although my paper was ostensibly invited as a response to Rebecca Tuvel's "In Defense of Transracialism," I cannot consider Tuvel's engagement with race theory in isolation. I have chosen to consider her work alongside Overall's and Heyes's articles on transracialism because of the similarity of subject matter, which facilitates a deeper discussion of the salient work in race theory; because it is likely that Tuvel, as a junior scholar writing in response to respected senior academics like Heyes and Overall, took their citation practices as a model; and because of concerns raised by various commenters that Tuvel was unfairly targeted as a relatively vulnerable junior scholar, when more senior figures have made similar arguments and similar omissions. Most importantly, I fear that focusing on Tuvel's work in isolation will elide the more systematic issues in philosophy, since, on my assessment, other philosophy articles on the same topic fail just as egregiously to engage with race theory. In fact, these articles taken together provide a case study in how philosophical debates can develop in such a way as to structurally exclude relevant perspectives in race theory.

Although the criticisms of Tuvel's paper have focused on a failure to engage with "critical race theory" specifically, I have chosen not to limit my own assessment of salient work to the field of critical race theory. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a field that grows out of Critical Legal Studies (Delgado and Stafancic 2012: 4); its founders are legal scholars who are concerned with the social construction of race through the law (see López 1996; Harris 1993), the white supremacist basis of American law (Bell 1992),¹ and the ways in which analyses based exclusively on categories like race or on gender fail to comprehend the intersections of these categories (Crenshaw 1991). For many Critical Race Theorists, the goals of CRT have evolved into identifying the ways in which multiple apparatuses, not only the law, construct and maintain white supremacy. Despite its expanding scope, CRT is not an umbrella term for all areas regarding race per se. Work that aims primarily to voice experiences with racialization, to report on historical data, or to identify statistical trends, does not readily meet this definition. Activist work, performance art and fiction lie as always at the uneasy borders of that which is construed as "theory," treated as often as resources for theorization than as theoretical texts in themselves. And since CRT is of relatively recent vintage, the term also excludes foundational texts that predate it. Some of the most incisive texts on passing, for example, were written in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, long before the advent of CRT.

I am not sure why "critical race theory" is cited to the exclusion of other salient areas of scholarship in critiques of Tuvel's work. Some people may use the term "critical race theory" loosely, as a catch-all for all theoretical work on race. Others perhaps feel that the work done under the umbrella of critical race theory is particularly relevant to the issue at hand. I disagree, and I won't confine myself to using sources that can be strictly defined as CRT. CRT doesn't represent all of

the important work on race in academic and activist circles and, simply because of its recent coinage and origins in legal studies, a focus on CRT excludes some of the historical and literary sources that are especially helpful to an account of racial passing or "transracialism."

"Transracial" is a term that is rarely if ever used in the historical literature or memoirs of people who cross racial boundaries, but there is ample material—cases, memoirs, novels, and theoretical work—on people who cross racial boundaries; where this crossing is named and thematized, it is called *passing*. Another lively discussion about changing racial identities arises around multiracial/mixed-race identity and changes in formal means of racial classification. I will trace how these voices came to be excluded from the conversation over "transracialism" in feminist philosophy. Although I do not claim to make a comprehensive review of the literature on passing, I'll look at major themes and important texts to consider how they might illuminate the arguments not only of Tuvel, but also of other feminist theorists who have addressed transracialism.

RAYMOND'S TRANSSEXUAL EMPIRE

The term "transracialism" is typically used to describe adoptions across racial lines, but here it is used to describe a person who voluntarily changes their racial identity.² To the best of my knowledge, the first use of the term "transracialism" in the latter sense is in Janice Raymond's *Transsexual Empire* (1979), which draws the analogy as part of an *ad absurdum* argument: if people can change their sex, why not their race? Black people don't try to do any such thing, Raymond claims, because they understand the need for social rather than personal change in the face of racism.

Though Raymond treats passing or "transracialism" as a counterfactual, passing (purposeful and inadvertent, permanent and temporary, and in every possible direction) is an inextricable part of America's racial history. The fear and promise of passing shaped laws and practices around race from the 19th century (Gross 2010); courts wrangled over how to classify slaves who claimed to be white, while tales of white orphans sold into slavery as blacks titillated newspaper readers. The ability to pass as white enabled slaves like Ellen Craft to escape (McCaskill 2009), and tantalized some freedmen and women with the promise of a better life. The possibility of formally changing one's racial classification has been a legal and political question from the Prerequisite cases (López 1996), up to the recent debates over the addition of new racial categories to the census. The spectre of passing has shaped the laws that defined and policed racial identity in the United States. It also left its painful mark on communities of color, as families were divided by passing, and grounded a series of formative debates over the meaning of blackness, political solidarity, and collective responsibility during the Harlem

Renaissance. The history of racial passing demonstrates that the possibility of racial “transition” is not an absurd thought experiment that could undermine other self-transformations, but instead a consistent and constitutive part of the racial scene in the United States.

Raymond, evidently imagining all black people to have exaggeratedly obvious racial characteristics, treats such a transition as if it would require extensive surgery. In this, she follows a small trend of books like Griffin’s “Black Like Me,” in which white authors underwent physical transformations in order to “pass” as black and report back. But the vast majority of people who have passed have sought no such physical alteration. Most white-passing blacks were and are relatively light-skinned and skilled at performing whiteness. Due to the frequency of interracial sexuality in the US and the strict application of the one-drop rule, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century it was not unusual for African-Americans to have naturally light hair, skin and eyes. Charles Mills points out the example of Walter White, a blond-haired, blue-eyed black man who was president of the NAACP and sometimes passed for white in order to gain information (Mills 2015). White people who passed for black—a smaller but not insignificant population, often motivated by the desire to marry and live peacefully with a nonwhite spouse³—made use of the same racial ambiguity. The idea that racialization is a function of immediately obvious natural features is part of a false discourse of white purity, which imagines a pristine white body defined against its counterparts, stereotypically exaggerated nonwhite bodies. Passing functions precisely because of the reality of racial “impurity,” performativity, and racial ambiguity.⁴

Passing has, by necessity, always hidden from the white gaze, since it functions in part as a way for people of color to evade racial discrimination and for white people to evade the norms of whiteness (particularly, for those who marry nonwhite partners). But the realities of passing have not been hidden in the same way within the black community, where neighbors and family members know or suspect instances of passing and at times cooperate, albeit painfully, in the project of passing.⁵ Passing has been a theme of African-American literature from the start (in Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 *Incidents from the Life of a Slave Girl*, the protagonist’s uncle escapes by passing for white), and it has been discussed and debated in print ever since. The result is a rich collection of stories and a tradition of reflection on the politics and morality of passing, as well as the meaning of racial identity and selfhood. The elision of passing in favor of a fantasy of “transracialism” in Raymond’s work and the following debates demonstrate the extent to which some debates in feminist theory continue to start from the position of a white gaze.

In light of the long history of racial passing in the United States, it ought to be clear that a racial transition is neither absurd, rare, or necessarily the occasion for a radical physical transformation, but Raymond did not see the need to inquire

into whether such transitions happened and how. As such, she set the stage for our present debates, defining the idea of a "transracialism" as an extreme, unlikely physical transformation and politicizing it as a weapon against transpeople.

OVERALL'S "TRANSSEXUALISM AND 'TRANSRACIALISM'"

In "Transsexualism and 'Transracialism,'" Christine Overall asks whether, in analogy to transsexual surgery, "the use of surgery to allow individuals to cross" racial lines is morally acceptable. Overall considers eight possible arguments against transracial surgery and finds them all implausible. Overall wholly accepts Raymond's framing of "transracialism" as a form of surgical transformation in close analogy to transsexuality. Because of her arbitrarily narrow framework, Overall does not consider any examples of racial passing in history or look at moral assessments of passing in African-American philosophy. Her only example is Michael Jackson, whom, she says, she "suspects" of transracialism, and who "may or may not . . . have deliberately changed the color of his skin" (Overall 2004: 184).

Jackson, a famously private and enigmatic figure, left behind no comprehensive account of his racial self-image, and the details and motivations of his self-transformations are unknown. There are a few documented instances of radical physical alterations with the express purpose of passing as or "becoming" a member of another race: for example, the journalist John Howard Griffin, who darkened his skin to report firsthand on African-American life, or (more recently) reality TV personality Martina Adam, who uses injections to darken her skin and is reportedly seeking implants to create a stereotypically exaggerated posterior. However, most people who undertake these transformations are not necessarily motivated by a desire to change races *per se*. In many contexts, lighter and straighter hair, rounded eyes, and narrow high-bridged noses are considered not merely white, but normal and beautiful; conversely, racialized features are interpreted as unprofessional, unkempt, and undesirable. As a result, it is almost impossible to parse whether most people of color who pursue surgery, dermatological treatment, or altered hair textures are attempting to pass as white *per se*, attempting to meet mainstream, white-centered standards of beauty or professionalism, or somewhere in between.⁶ As Mullen points out, passing for white is "not so much a willful deception or duplicity as an attempt to move from the margin to the center of American identity" (Mullen 1994: 77).

Overall's elision of actual instances of racial ambiguity and racial passing also leads her to miss significant aspects of the debate regarding so-called transracialism. The third argument that Overall considers against transracialism is that it might amount to a betrayal of group identity; Overall responds that those who pass out of a group might still feel solidarity and that "people should not be excoriated for trying to escape racist oppression" (Overall 2004: 187). The fourth

objection is that transracialism might reinforce oppression (while Overall does not say as much, this seems to follow directly from her previous point—that racial transition might serve as a way for individuals to escape racist oppression without challenging institutionalized oppression). Overall's response draws heavily on the possibility 1) of white people passing as people of color and 2) that racial transition itself will serve to destabilize categories of race and racist practices. Overall's presentation of each of these objections is quite brief, as is her response. This is unfortunate, as each argument and response is part of a robust and longstanding debate in race theory.

The possibility that passing—particularly, passing for white—could do harm to the African-American community was widely discussed among African-American intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, an early landmark of African-American women's literature, lionizes a virtuous, light-skinned young woman who refuses to pass as white and instead commits herself to the uplift of her race. Authors like Harper and Langston Hughes aimed to make the case that passing was a painful form of alienation, whereas light-skinned and relatively privileged blacks could choose the meaningful and communal work of advancing the African-American community.⁷ Hughes's arguments against passing made no reference to some sort of metaphysical truth or blackness; indeed, in writings like "Who's Passing for Who?" he repeatedly undermines attempts to identify the "truth" of the characters' race and takes evident pleasure in the ludic confusion of racial identities. His commitment to what Overall calls "group identity" is entirely political, founded on a question that Overall fails to address: how can someone act in solidarity with black Americans while simultaneously struggling to disavow their own blackness?

The same question is raised again, far more recently, in the debates over "multiracial" identity and the shift toward "check one or more" racial categories on the US Census. This debate culminated only a few years before Overall's 2004 article, with the changes to racial categories on the 2000 Census. In this instance, a group of people—many of them racially ambiguous—sought the ability to formally transition from monoracial to multiracial identities. Some of the arguments made by Overall's imagined transracialists are echoed by real-life mixed race activists, who asked for racial categories that accurately reflected their experiences, relationships and self-image.⁸ Like Overall, some mixed-race advocates also hoped that increasing the visibility of mixed-race people would subvert racial thinking itself.

The prospect of people who had identified as black "transitioning" to mixed-race identification raised concerns for many African-American thinkers; some feared that large numbers of light-skinned black people would reclassify themselves as mixed-race, resulting in a precipitous drop in the numbers of blacks counted on the census and an attendant crisis for civil rights enforcement, since

formulas pertaining to everything from school equity to voting rights make use of such data⁹ (Sexton 2008, Spencer 2000). Others feared that the "escape" of light-skinned blacks into a relatively esteemed multiracial category would deepen anti-black racism and light-skin privilege (Gordon 2000: 109). Seventeen years later, we can observe that the possibility for multiracial identification did not shift trends in African-American demographics,¹⁰ but this debate draws out deeper issues about the material significance of individual racial identification for communities, and points out the anti-black racism that was sometimes at work in the move toward (multi-)racial transition. Overall would have done well to acknowledge the contemporary debate and the way it problematized her position.¹¹

Just as the introduction of a multiracial option did not lead to a mass transition out of blackness, nor did it usher in a post-racial future. If anything, it has been complicit with "colorblind" racism (Spencer 2010: 107). Anyone concerned with the possibility of racial transition would do well to look at recent, increasing options for multi-racial identification, which provide a real-life study of increasingly liberal racial classifications driven by self-identification. This model indicates that 1) racial "transition" is unlikely to cause significant demographic shifts; 2) it is also unlikely to "demonstrate the constructed nature of racial categories and thereby contribute to a loosening up of racial boundaries, taboos, and stereotypes" (Overall 2004: 188).

These perspectives do not undermine Overall's argument so much as they put into question her very definition of "transracialism" and her approach to the ethical questions it entails. Within race theory, questions of the moral and political debt of the individual to the group, concerns about individual identification and re-identification, and debates over the destabilizing or subversive power of transition are well-established. These debates are embedded in specific histories and social locations. It is impossible to address the concrete questions raised by racial passing so long as the philosophical conversation about it is grounded in an ahistorical white fantasy of radical surgical transformation.

HEYES'S "CHANGING RACE, CHANGING SEX"

In her article, Cressida Heyes seeks to distinguish "changing sex" from "passing," in the interest of answering the question "why is there an accepted way to change sex, but not race?" (Heyes 2006: 267). Heyes argues that changing sex is possible because sex is a category of personal identity and the individual body, and hence a matter of self-determination; race, instead, "is essentialized with reference to both the body and ancestry" (Heyes 2006: 267). Drawing this distinction is a pressing matter for Heyes insofar as for her, passing is "the phenomenon . . . in which one is read as, or actively pretends to be, something that one avowedly is not" (Heyes 2006: 266); for Heyes, passing is nothing but "pretending" to be something that

you evidently are not.¹² As a result, resisting the analogy appears as a pressing issue for trans rights, since it reduces transpeople, also, to mere pretenders.

Where Overall ignores the extant literature on passing, Heyes acknowledges the significance of the term “passing” and even shows some slight familiarity with it, but misses the gist of this research. As I have pointed out above, there is significant literature on passing in the African-American literary canon, much of it broadly critical of passing for white as a means to obtain social privilege and avoid racism; these critiques of passing are overwhelmingly concerned with the costs of passing for the African-American community and for the passing individual, and very little concerned with the morality of “pretending” to be something “that one avowedly is not.” Indeed, passing literature frequently makes clear that the authors are bitterly aware of the absurdity of the American racial system. In Langston Hughes’s “Who’s Passing for Who?” the African-American protagonist is visited in Harlem by some midwestern schoolteachers who may or may not be light-skinned blacks passing for white; he repeatedly interprets and reinterprets them on the basis of their changing self-presentation in the course of an evening. Both Hughes and his protagonist take an obvious, puckish delight in this playful indeterminacy. In Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, Irene, a light-skinned black woman, passes as white temporarily to take tea on the roof of a sophisticated hotel, and is shaken when a white woman in the tea room continually stares at her—“could that woman somehow know that here before her eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?” (Larsen 2007: 10). Ironically, this woman *has* intuited her secret, but only because she is a long-lost friend also passing for white. In these accounts, the essentialist pretensions of whiteness are mimetically collapsed, but the political and social solidarity enabled by blackness—seen in the “natural” way that Hughes’s protagonist and his seemingly black acquaintances “kidded freely like colored folks do when there are no white folks around” (Larsen 2007: 33)—is affirmed.

Following up on the anti-foundationalist presentations of black identity in Larsen and Hughes, most contemporary theorists of passing explicitly reject an account of passing as something that, in Michelle Elam’s words, “either . . . makes fake or . . . makes brave—that is that it either cynically violates one’s ‘true’ essential identity or heroically refutes social ascriptions of identity” (Elam 2007: 750). Samira Kawash writes that a passing subject’s “failure to be either black or white . . . is not . . . his personal, subjective failure; rather, this failure reveals the not-being, the ‘that which cannot be,’ at the heart of racial identity” (Kawash 1996: 73). Years before the ascent of performativity as a theory of identity, Cheryl Wall wrote of Larsen’s “authentically” black and white-passing black characters that “in one way or another, they all ‘pass’” (Wall 1986: 98). Harryette Mullen describes passing as a process by which passers “actually become white or function as white, which amounts to the same thing when their participation in the normal activities of mainstream America is enabled by the perception that they

are white" (Mullen 1994: 77). Drawing on a the reality that whiteness itself is an invention that consists only in privilege or "property" (Harris 1993), passing as white cannot be a pretense or lie about one's true being, but rather a repositioning in relation to dominant modes of racial meaning. Mullen, Elam, Wall, and Kawash all go on to develop nuanced analyses of passing that draw out important elements of construction, introjection, and institutionalization of race; typical of contemporary work on passing, none interprets passing as a form of pretense that obscures a fixed and "avowed" racial reality.

Heyes does not engage with the contemporary interpretation of passing, clinging to an account of passing as deception that was already disrupted within twentieth-century African-American writing and was in this century conclusively supplanted by more nuanced reflections on identity. The only text Heyes cites from this lively body of literature is Adrian Piper's brilliant "Passing for White, Passing for Black" (Piper 1996), which is anthologized in the same volume as Kawash's article. Piper delves deeply into the complexities of identity as a light-skinned black woman whose blackness is often challenged by both blacks and whites, and also as a member of a black family, descendants of a prominent white man, whose members have sometimes passed into whiteness. The very title of this article ought to give Heyes pause in her facile interpretation of passing, but the only thing she cites from this rich and insightful text is *the existence of the one-drop rule*—an especially astonishing takeaway from an article which engages with the ways in which colorism and the spectre of passing can result in the exclusion of light-skinned African Americans even as the one-drop rule indicates their blackness.

The literature on passing provides ample first-person and literary accounts of people who live in ambiguous relation to the color line.¹³ Heyes, however, engages significantly with only one example of passing:¹⁴ the story of philosopher Linda López McAlister's grandmother. McAlister's grandmother never tells her own story; instead, McAlister attempts to reconstruct a rift between them which resulted from her referring to her grandmother as Mexican. While McAlister's grandmother apparently considered this an unforgivable offense, McAlister and Heyes present her grandmother as a tragically deluded figure, whose appearance and accent ensure that no one else sees her as an Anglo lady. This example presents those who pass as fundamentally dishonest—here, both with others and themselves—and hopelessly condemned to failure, as the truth of their race will clearly "tell." McAlister's story is heartbreaking and there is no reason to doubt her account, but in light of the tremendous numbers of nuanced accounts of passing available in the literature, it is hard to understand how Heyes ended up placing such weight on this one, except insofar as it is one of very few accounts that harmonize with her simplistic account of passing.

Where Heyes's account of passing is itself troubled by a lack of engagement with other work in race theory, so too is her account of racial identity. In her

attempts to disanalogize gender transition from racial transition, Heyes argues that racial identity is unlike gender identity, which is personal, whereas “race is essentialized through ancestry” (Heyes 2006: 267), so one cannot change one’s race because one cannot change one’s ancestry. While Heyes is otherwise willing to challenge and critique normative accounts of racial essence and gender identity, she accepts the fundamental link of race to ancestry. Here Heyes misses a set of significant arguments in both black feminist thought and queer studies, which challenge ancestral and biological accounts of racialization. As Cheryl Harris points out in her account of the legal establishment of “whiteness as property,” the very idea of race as an evident fact of ancestry appears in legal discourse as a way to shore up the logic of segregation against challenge (Harris 1993: 1739–40), and the determinant power of black ancestry—the single drop of black blood—is inextricable from a racial imaginary in which “black blood is a contaminant and white racial identity is pure” (Harris 1993: 1737). Dorothy Roberts (2012) has traced the ways in which claims to the ancestral and genetic reality of race reinscribe scientific racism. A greater engagement with race theory would allow for a feminist critique of the equation of racial identity and ancestry.

While a great deal of work in contemporary race theory challenges Heyes’s dichotomy of fictive racial passing versus real identity, some resources would also support her attempts to distinguish gender transition from at least some forms of racial transition. Sara Ahmed (1999) emphasizes power relations that are too easily forgotten when all racialization is reduced to passing, asking “would one worry, would one fear being caught out, if one did not *already* perceive oneself to be passing for white? Would there be danger, would there be death?” (Ahmed (1999: 93)—in other words, even if all race is performance, performing across racial lines is distinguished from a normative performance precisely by the violence that polices the “color line.” Ahmed points out that white passing (that is, socially-identified blacks passing for white) and black passing are situated in different power relations and historical moments: while white passing can function as a means of self-protection, black passing has often functioned as part of the white male subject’s all-knowing, colonizing gaze, with its desire to fully know and possess the Other from the inside out (Ahmed 1999: 99–100). Passing can also be a legacy of racial and colonial violence, as in the case of Sally Morgan, who was unaware of her Aboriginal heritage as a result of Australia’s policy of separating mixed-race Aboriginal children from their families and assimilating them to whiteness (Ahmed 1999: 102–03). These three instances of passing have different relationships to white supremacy—one as a tragic result, another as a strategic evasion, and the third as an expression of a white supremacist worldview. In raising these varied examples of passing, Ahmed reminds us that acts of passing always take place in relation to relations of racial domination and power; to evaluate any individual act of passing requires attention to these power relations. Attention to

these relations would help Heyes to grapple with the racist and colonial overtones of both McAlister's example and that of Susie Guillory Phipps.¹⁵

REBECCA TUVEL

Although Rebecca Tuvel's article is the ostensible focus of the journal symposium in which this article will appear, there is little to be said in analysis of her article which has not already been said in response to Overall's and Heyes's work. Tuvel ignores extensive scholarship on passing in order to focus on a single, fashionable example of "transracialism"—in this case, Rachel Dolezal—but her work is no more alienated from work in race theory than that of the more senior scholars whose work she cites. Instead, it is typical of a philosophical conversation on "transracialism" that is fundamentally misguided and partial.

Due to the narrow, intra-disciplinary focus that Tuvel inherits, there are a number of relevant texts, published after Heyes's and Overall's work, that she fails to cite. Baz Dreisinger's *Near Black* (2008), a book reflecting on black passing, makes for a crucial counterpoint to Tuvel's argument. Unlike Tuvel and Overall, who pay little mind to the potential harms of passing, Dreisinger writes at great length of the pitfalls of whites passing for black, which is often dangerously stereotypical or appropriative and exploitative. These concerns ought to be fully integrated into Tuvel's analysis, especially since they are so commonly raised in regards to Dolezal. Dreisinger also provides examples of what she considers to be credible instances of black passing, such as jazz musician Johnny Otis, who claims that music and activism have provided a sort of embodied transformation.¹⁶ It is a shame that Tuvel does not engage with these examples, which provide a vivid account of black passing, and would also provide her with more complete and less contentious examples than Rachel Dolezal.

Even more than Overall's and Heyes's work before her, Tuvel does not acknowledge the extent to which her work is embedded in transphobic discourse and white fantasies of "transracialism." She adopts a controversial figure, Rachel Dolezal, as the exemplar of transracialism, without considering the ways in which the Dolezal case was manufactured by right-wing media (some of the earliest coverage was on Breitbart) and fraught with danger for trans and/or black subjects. Emphasizing the analogy between a notorious and demonized figure like Rachel Dolezal and an embattled and threatened group like trans people will obviously present a risk to trans people, especially since this analogy has already been established, by Raymond and a series of #transracial tweets, as one that degrades and delegitimizes trans identities.¹⁷ Doing so at a time when transpeople in the US are under particular attack by ascendant right-wing forces is all the more risky. Furthermore, the Dolezal story was weaponized not only against transpeople, but against black people and black institutions.¹⁸ A philosopher might justifiably

wonder if she was wandering into a trap, one in which the terms of debate had already been thoroughly determined by transphobic and antiblack ideology. Reliance on a variety of examples of passing would have helped Tuvell to avoid this trap; focusing *exclusively* on such an inflammatory example only amplified the transphobic and racist underpinnings of media coverage and online discussion of the Dolezal case.

THOUGHTS ON A MORE ENGAGED PHILOSOPHY

It should be clear from the above analysis that Tuvell's lack of engagement with race theory is by no means the result of the failings of an individual author, or of a malfunction of the peer review process. Instead, the article is typical of the methodological and citation practices of the feminist philosophical conversation on "transracialism." In what follows, I offer a few suggestions to maintain standards of rigor and engagement in feminist philosophy.

Interdisciplinarity

The debate between feminist philosophers over transracialism/passing has been severely hampered by ignorance of the myriad conversations on the same topic in other fields. This lack of engagement leaves commenters without the tools to understand the history and lived realities of racial passing; the longstanding debates in this area; or even the non-essentialist conceptual basis for theorizing passing that has developed among race theorists in literary studies. Seeking reviewers outside of philosophy is one way to remedy this problem, but changes to the review process can only prevent certain articles from being published—it is an unlikely and inefficient way to foster the writing of significantly more interdisciplinary work. In order to remove these disciplinary blinders, feminist philosophers will need to commit to reading, citing, and teaching widely in race theory and feminist theory, engaging with texts from many disciplines as well as from outside of academia. Reading relevant texts from outside of philosophy in undergraduate and graduate classes would help establish new norms for philosophy, and encourage students to gain the skills to find and appreciate relevant interdisciplinary work. It is also important to recognize and support interdisciplinary work by students and colleagues, whether it takes the form of seminar papers, dissertation projects, or articles as part of a tenure file. Philosophers should seek to learn some basic facts about how their topic is studied in other disciplines in order to work toward greater citation of work in other fields—both in their own work and the papers they review.

Reframing the Debate

Overall, Tuvel, and Heyes all undertook a debate over transracialism that develops as a reaction to Janice Raymond's polemic. In framing their arguments—all of which disavow Raymond's conclusions—all three would do well to mind Foucault's warning that we are often trapped by the very discourses we mean to resist. In this case, a discourse that is at least in part about the possibility of disavowing whiteness becomes one that reiterates white fantasies of the "transracial" body and the erasure of nonwhite perspectives. Trans studies comes into its own by refusing to relitigate Raymond's insulting arguments and launching new lines of inquiry that center trans subjectivity; similarly, philosophers who would write about passing or "transracialism" should create work that centers on the experience of those racially ambiguous individuals who—like Nella Larsen and her characters—find themselves in the turbulent crosscurrents of racialization, gender, identity, and kinship.

Tuvel's article in particular was shaped not only by Raymond's outsize influence but by the controversy over Rachel Dolezal. This controversy gained power, in part, because the case at least superficially challenged identitarian thought. If the analogy between Jenner and Dolezal holds, one cannot accept or reject Dolezal's black identity without challenging commonly held and deeply vested positions about either racial or trans identity, yet, as Heyes finds, it is difficult to conclusively reject the analogy without recourse to some essentialism. But this apparent dilemma is founded on a superficial and oversimplified account of racial and gender identity that omits histories of passing and the experiences of mixed and racially ambiguous people. Reframing the debate is necessary not only in order to escape the limitations of "transracialism" but to refuse the conditions of simplistic and politically overdetermined debate on racial identity.

Exemplifying Responsibly

Examples are frequently treated as a secondary concern in philosophical writing, serving to help explain subtle arguments or to emphasize the possibility of seemingly unlikely events. So little rigor is expended on examples in ordinary philosophical writing that Overall need only "suspect" that Michael Jackson may be an example of transracialism, Tuvel can imagine how Rachel Dolezal "may have felt" (Tuvel 2017: 274), and Heyes can choose an obscure and prejudicial example of racial passing, all without objection from their editors or reviewers. Given the well-established variety of memoirs and novels on the experience of racial passing—many of them written by people of color—there is no lack of salient examples. In choosing examples who do not tell their own stories, or do not do so on their own accord, philosophers render racially ambiguous and racially passing people as the objects, not the subjects, of knowledge. By choosing examples that are either inflammatory, prejudicial, or products of their own "suspicion,"

philosophers lose the opportunity to challenge white fantasies of “transracialism.” Tuvel’s, Heyes’s, and Overall’s careless approach to examples contrasts strongly with that of Sara Ahmed, who draws on a variety of self-reported experiences, including her own, to explore passing.

In conclusion, Rebecca Tuvel’s article contained significant omissions in the realm of race theory (and, no doubt, trans studies), but these omissions are typical of the previously published work on “transracialism” in philosophy. This philosophical work starts from a distorted definition of “transracialism” which segregates the philosophical debate from the lively conversations on passing and multiracial identity that have developed in other fields over more than a century. As a result, Heyes, Overall and Tuvel are ignorant of relevant moral and political debates on passing and racial transition and also of the useful conceptual frameworks that race theorists have developed to think through power, identity, and performance in the context of passing. The sedimentation of a partial and distorted view of “transracialism” over the nearly forty years since *Transsexual Empire*’s publication indicates troubling patterns in the way that feminist philosophers define the terms of inquiry, develop arguments and examples, and interact with other disciplines. Focusing on the failures of single articles, authors, or journals implicitly sanctions other, equally flawed work and distracts from the need for disciplinary and methodological solutions.

Georgia College

NOTES

1. Bell is focused on the American scene, as are most of the sources I cite. This is perhaps in part a function of my own nationality and location, as well as my current research. I notice that the principal figures in this paper—Tuvel, Heyes, and Overall—along with several other academics who were most outspoken in the Tuvel controversy, are Canadian, but I am not qualified to judge how or whether the Canadian context affects perspectives on passing.
2. This irregular usage has led some commenters to argue that transracialism, in the latter sense, is “not a thing.” These arguments are often rooted both in the idiosyncratic (mis)use of the term “transracial” and its total alienation from black people’s lived experience of racial ambiguity. See McFadden (2015), who roots her rejection of Dolezal’s “transracialism” in her family’s experiences with passing and “racial fluidity”; Biakolo, who cites Adrian Piper (1996) to point out the omnipresence of passing; Ajayi (2015), who also points to histories of passing, though she elides black passing. Disappointingly, many casual readers seem to have absorbed and adopted the rejection of Dolezal’s claim to “transracialism” without recognizing a further point of these texts—that the dominant conversation about racial transformation was constituted so as to completely ignore black experiences of passing.

3. James McBride's mother Ruth began passing to enable her romance with and eventual marriage to his father (McBride 1996). Henry Broyard, the first of a long line of black- and white-passing Broyards, passed for black in order to marry a mulatto woman (Broyard 2007). Hettie Jones notes how easily her identity as a white Jewish woman disappeared along with her maiden name when she married the black writer LeRoi Jones (later, Amiri Baraka) (Jones 1990: 85). Dreisinger notes that, in the majority of narratives about whites passing as black in order to marry black partners, "it is the white woman, not the white man, who passes for black" (Dreisinger 2008: 71). Mullen points out that "the institution of marriage, which customarily merged a woman's identity with that of her husband, could serve as a practical being for passing women who married white men" (Mullen 1994: 79), and marriage seems to have served the same function for black-passing women.
4. The obsession with Rachel Dolezal's racially ambiguous appearance, noted by Rebecca Kukla (Kukla 2015), recalls also the objectifying obsession with finding the "sign" of race on the mixed or racially ambiguous body. See Gross 2010: 38–41, 9; Elam 2007: 764; Ahmed 1999: 97.
5. This is dramatized in Hughes's short story *Passing*, where the narrator, who is passing for white, runs into his black mother in the street. Both attuned to the melancholy moral code of passing in the black community, he ignores her and she does not "out" him as black. See Hughes 1950.
6. Heyes's 2009 article on cosmetic surgery is a nuanced analysis of this phenomenon.
7. The pain and loss experienced by both passers and the kin they leave behind is also emphasized in Allyson Hobbs's more recent book, *A Chosen Exile* (Hobbs 2014).
8. Mixed-race advocates were also concerned with a number of other issues, including the treatment of mixed-race children and their mothers in the foster-care system. See Root 1995; Tizard and Phoenix 2002.
9. These fears were addressed in part by asking respondents to check one or more racial categories, rather than treating "mixed race" as a standalone category.
10. See Hobbs and Stoops 2002: figure 3-2 and analysis.
11. The discussion over mixed-race identification would be illuminating not only for Overall, but for many who have participated in debates over "transracialism." It is commonly argued that black passing (like Rachel Dolezal) is inauthentic because the passer can disavow blackness at any time, a privilege that real blacks do not have (Ajayi 2015). But very light-skinned blacks have long had precisely this privilege, and many light-skinned Harlem Renaissance figures thought deeply about what it meant to black identity (Hughes and Larsen among them). Gordon mentions the historic distrust and alienation of light-skinned blacks in the black community on this basis (Gordon 2000: 98, 112). Today, when "mixed race" is a widely accepted and often celebrated category, racially ambiguous people have a third option—they can pass for black, pass for white, or pass for mixed. Scholars working on passing increasingly take mixedness as a significant theme (Rummell 2007; Harrison-Kahan 2005; Ahmed 1999), as it complicates oversimplified analyses of passing and racial identity.
12. Laurie Shrage has astutely questioned Heyes's framing of this issue in online comments on *Daily Nous*. See Shrage 2017.
13. For example, James McBride's *The Color of Water*, consisting of his own memoirs as well as interviews with his mother, who passed for black. In addition to Hughes and

- Larsen, Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun*, James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Kate Chopin's *Désirée's Baby*, Mark Twain's *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*, and several works by Charles Chesnutt are well-known texts on passing in nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction (Chesnutt 1968, Wright and Glass 2010). Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (Senna 1999), Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (Whitehead 2000), and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (Roth 2000) are more recent examples. I am indebted to Michelle Elam for some of the latter examples.
14. Heyes mentions a few other examples, like that of Susie Guillory Phipps, but does not describe them at the same length and does not incorporate them into her analysis as she does McAlister's, which is treated as a demonstration of the implausibility of successful passing. Phipps lived her life as a well-off white woman and was "sickened" to learn that, due to a distant ancestor, the state of Louisiana classified her as colored under the one-drop rule. She went to court demanding the right to racial self-identification (Jaynes 1982).
 15. See note 14. Heyes mentions the Phipps example, though she does not analyze it in depth.
 16. Sunderland's research also focused on the Jazz community as a site that generates black passing; her research focuses on (socially identified) white women who identify themselves as black.
 17. Though it is unlikely that Tuvel had time to read it before publication, the political concerns that have shaped positions on "transracialism" are capably laid out in Rogers Brubaker's *Trans* (Brubaker 2016).
 18. The Dolezal story was used to undermine black-centered institutions with which she was affiliated, like the NAACP, HBCUs, and Africana Studies departments. Her biography was also used to raise questions about the veracity of hate crime reports at the same time a spate of nooses were discovered on college campuses (Svrluga 2015; Nelson 2015), to attack practices like affirmative action, and to mock identity-based activism. The same strategy was attempted less successfully against Black Lives Matter activist Shaun King a few weeks later, when he was accused of fabricating his black ancestry (Criss and Ford 2015) with obvious political motivation (Thomas 2015).

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