

7. Rachel Identity Disorder

A new Netflix documentary *The Rachel Divide* delves into the life of Nkechi Amare Diallo, best known by her former name, Rachel Dolezal. Diallo was the subject of much controversy in 2015 when it was revealed that her biological parents were white even though she claimed to be (and had passed as) black for ten years. While many resent any further attention being paid to someone accused of both exploiting white privilege and appropriating black culture, one aspect of the issue has sparked an especially incendiary and divisive debate: Diallo's claim that being transracial is relevantly similar to being transgender. On the one hand, philosophers and social scientists argue that both race and gender are social constructs, and it seems to follow that, as such, both concepts can change over time to be more or less inclusive. On the other hand, critics of the comparison argue that there are relevant dissimilarities between being transgender and claiming to be transracial that render the comparison a false analogy.

When asserting her sincerity about her racial identity, Diallo uses language that mirrors the experiences described by the transgender community: "I feel that I was born with the essential essence of who I am, whether it matches my anatomy and complexion or not...I've never questioned being a girl or woman, for example, but whiteness has always felt foreign to me, for as long as I can remember. I didn't choose to feel this way or be this way, I just am."³⁷ While no one except Diallo can know whether her claims are indeed sincere or true, it seems theoretically possible that a person could legitimately identify as a race different from the one they were categorized as at birth. If the types of feelings described in the above quote would validate a person's gender identity, then could they also validate a person's racial identity? Rebecca Tuvel, assistant professor of philosophy at Rhodes College in Memphis wrote a provocative, and ultimately divisive, article in the philosophy journal *Hypatia* where she argues, basically, that if we accept some of the arguments supporting transgendered people and identity and we confer rights and respect based on those arguments, then if the arguments supporting transracial people and identity are relevantly similar, "there's little apparent logically coherent reason to deny the possibility of genuine transracialism."³⁸

Tuvel and Diallo's critics argue that to compare being transgender to being transracial is to overlook or diminish the unique lived experiences, histories, and perspectives of both groups. Some appeal to the lack of parity in claims of transracialism. For example, while access to resources varies, there are still a wide variety of non-surgical options available to people who want to pass as a different gender or sex (but who may not want, or cannot afford, gender confirmation surgery). Such is not the case with race. It is far easier for any white person to pass as black or mixed-race than it is for a black person to pass as white; as Tre'vell Anderson states, "black people can't identify as white and move through the world as such. Our skin doesn't allow us such privilege and ability, like Dolezal's does."³⁹ Thus, some claim that transracialism is yet another expression of white privilege.

³⁷ Denene Millner, "Why Rachel Dolezal Can Never Be Black," NPR, March 3, 2017,

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/03/03/518184030/why-rachel-dolezal-can-never-be-black>

³⁸ Jesse Singal, "This Is What a Modern-Day Witch Hunt Looks Like," New York Magazine, May 2, 2017,

<http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/05/transracialism-article-controversy.html>

³⁹ Tre'vell Anderson, "Four takeaways from 'The Rachel Divide,' Netflix's new documentary about Rachel Dolezal," Los Angeles Times, April 27, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-rachel-dolezal-netflix->

Another objection to parity between identifying as someone from a different race or culture and identifying as a different gender claims that to be a part of a culture is to have participated in, or been affected by, that culture's lived experiences and historical roots. These arguments imply that if one has not, by virtue of their privilege, been a target of the oppression and marginalization of a culture, and if oppression and marginalization is a necessary (but not necessarily sufficient) criterion for membership in that culture, then one cannot claim membership in that culture. Thus, Zeba Blay writes, "[t]ransracial identity is a concept that allows white people to indulge in blackness as a commodity, without having to actually engage with every facet of what being black entails — discrimination, marginalization, oppression, and so on. It plays into racial stereotypes and perpetuates the false idea that it is possible to “feel” a race.”⁴⁰ And to those who argue that transwomen (male-to-female) are appropriating “woman-culture,” Evan Urquhart, in a blog on *Slate*, replies that while women will normally have lived an experience of oppression earlier in their lives, “there’s also the very real fact that being openly, visibly trans is a far riskier proposition than openly appropriating aspects of black culture is for a white person... Being identifiably trans, however, brings with it some of the most intense and unrelenting stigma, prejudice, and vulnerability to violence in our culture, particularly for people perceived to be dressing as women.”⁴¹

[documentary-20180427-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-rachel-dolezal-netflix-documentary-20180427-story.html) <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-rachel-dolezal-netflix-documentary-20180427-story.html>

⁴⁰ Zeba Blay, “Why Comparing Rachel Dolezal To Caitlyn Jenner Is Detrimental To Both Trans And Racial Progress,” *Huffington Post*, June, 12, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/12/rachel-dolezal-caitlyn-jenner_n_7569160.html

⁴¹ Evan Urquhart, “It Isn’t Crazy to Compare Rachel Dolezal With Caitlyn Jenner,” *Slate*, June 15, 2015, http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2015/06/15/rachel_dolezal_caitlyn_jenner_how_transgender_is_different_from_transracial.html