

## Racial Transitions and Controversial Positions: Reply to Taylor, Gordon, Sealey, Hom, and Botts

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**ABSTRACT:** In this essay, I reply to critiques of my article “In Defense of Transracialism.” Echoing Chloë Taylor and Lewis Gordon’s remarks on the controversy over my article, I first reflect on the lack of intellectual generosity displayed in response to my paper. In reply to Kris Sealey, I next argue that it is dangerous to hinge the moral acceptability of a particular identity or practice on what she calls a collective co-signing. In reply to Sabrina Hom, I suggest that relying on the language of passing to describe transracialism is potentially misleading. In reply to Tina Botts, I both defend analytic philosophy of race against her multiple criticisms and suggest that Botts’s remarks risk complicity with a form of transphobia that Talia Mae Bettcher calls the Basic Denial of Authenticity. I end by gesturing toward a more inclusive understanding of racial identity.

**KEY WORDS:** transracialism, transracial, transgender, passing, racial essentialism, Rachel Dolezal

**M**y article “In Defense of Transracialism” argues that considerations in rightful support of transgender identity extend to transracial identity. The impetus for my article was the 2015 controversy over Rachel Dolezal—the former NAACP chapter head who self-identifies as black despite having white parents. My argument sought to name and challenge an underlying transphobic and racially essentialist logic at work in public discussions of Dolezal’s story. In my research on this topic, I found that preexisting philosophical literature failed to consider adequately the metaphysical and ethical possibility of transracialism. By exploring this possibility more fully, I sought to advance the philosophical conversation. If transracial and transgender identity are not ethically or metaphysically comparable, I wanted to understand why. If

transracialism is to be condemned, I wanted to identify non-transphobic reasons for that condemnation.

Although I knew my article's thesis was controversial, I could not have anticipated the response that ensued. Amidst online condemnation of my article, over 800 academics signed a letter calling for its retraction. *Hypatia's* associate editorial board subsequently apologized for its publication. Feminist colleagues and academics discussed and speculated about various aspects of my identity online, attacked me personally, and accused me of violence. I was called "racist," "transphobic," a "TERF," a "disgusting person," "Becky," and "Rebecky Tuvel." People offered to contact individuals on my tenure committee, and former feminist mentors emailed and called me in an effort to pressure me to retract my article. Amid the protest, a few tried in vain to create a space for intellectual exchange. My graduate advisor—feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver—suggested that *Hypatia* host a forum for critical replies to my piece. She was quickly denounced online, and told that a space for critical dialogue would only dignify my article. Throughout it all, the condemnation and ostracism from various parts of the feminist community took a significant toll on my psychological health.<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of the controversy over my article, I have reflected most of all on conversation. Like many, I see a worsening conversational crisis in our discipline and the political body at large—a crisis undoubtedly exacerbated by the dehumanizing and reactive dynamics of social media. The current climate betrays a growing tendency to view those with whom we passionately disagree as enemies to be silenced or ignored, rather than interlocutors to be engaged. I am thus grateful to Peg Birmingham for her brave willingness to host a much-needed space for dialogue in *Philosophy Today*. In a different academic climate, it might seem odd to call an editor's decision to host a forum of replies to a controversial article "brave." In this sense, the journal could not be better titled. As I believe is true for many philosophers, the *Hypatia* Affair has led me to think long and hard about the state of philosophy today. It has caused me to worry about social media echo chambers that perpetuate divisiveness and that engender fear and silence in would-be dissenters. Along with Chloë Taylor, it has led me to wonder how many philosophers today will avoid teaching and writing on controversial topics for fear of backlash. And it has caused me to fear that such a climate will turn more and more positions into dead dogmas, or positions whose truth is no longer contested (Mill 1978: 34).

It is accordingly with some trepidation that I wade back into the topic of transracialism. I do so not only because I am committed to philosophical discussion, but because the topic raises pressing ethical and political questions related to anti-trans antagonism and racial essentialism. In what follows, I first reflect on Chloë Taylor's and Lewis Gordon's remarks on the response to my article. Next, I explore Kris Sealey's and Sabrina Hom's concerns with arguments in defense of

transracialism. Finally, I respond to Tina Botts's remarks on the alleged problems with using analytic methodology to explore questions of race and racial identity. I end by gesturing toward a more inclusive understanding of racial identity.

### INTELLECTUAL GENEROSITY

I begin by echoing Taylor's plea for intellectual generosity. In her reply, Taylor shares a story about a Prison Abolitionism course she taught in which some students tweeted derisive and uncharitable interpretations of their classmates' contributions. Although mean-spirited denunciations are unfortunately common, their frequency in *educational environments* is especially disheartening. Educational spaces like the classroom and academic journals cannot function if participants are terrified of personal attack. After all, if we are reluctant to express our ideas, how can we learn if they are right or wrong? I do not publish ideas because I am convinced they are correct. Rather, I contribute my ideas to a larger dialogue in the hopes that we can learn from each other and make headway toward the truth. Inevitably this communal task involves the identification and correction of each other's errors. But if we do so without kindness and generosity, our joint endeavor will fail.

Why was there such a lack of intellectual generosity in response to my article? In his effort to understand the backlash, Lewis Gordon argues that the response is suggestive of a conflict on the part of my critics, who wish to defend transgender identity but denounce transracial identity despite background commitments to both. Gordon argues that in noting that "one commitment, without a uniquely differentiating premise available, entails commitment to the other," I "did something indecent from a bad faith perspective. She called it out" (Gordon 2018: 12).

Although I do not presume to have an answer to this question, Gordon's response invites readers to wonder how many critics participated in my online shaming because my article exposed a conflict among their philosophical commitments. In this context, it is apposite to consider Chloë Taylor's remarks on the work of Eli Clare and Judith Butler. Although Clare and Butler both signed the open letter calling for the retraction of my paper, Taylor suggests that both hold positions that might otherwise be taken to support transracial identity. For instance, Taylor notes that by reflecting on his experience as a trans person who had healthy breasts removed, Clare is able to extend compassion toward transabled individuals who wish to remove their limbs. She notes that Clare also extends compassion toward his friend who decided to have gastric bypass surgery. If Clare's own experience as a trans person enables him to sympathize with those undergoing other types of transition, perhaps Clare would extend similar compassion toward transracial individuals. Similarly, Taylor notes that Butler has written in support of genderqueer and trans individuals (Taylor 2018: 6).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Butler

passionately condemns the coercive social forces that make life unlivable for those who deviate from imposed norms. Butler likewise echoes Gordon's argument that the most vehement policers of identity are often acting in bad faith. She writes, "That culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity about gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated" (Butler 1997: 412). Yet one could say the same about those who fail to perform the illusion of racial essentialism.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, Clare and Butler would likely cite other reasons for their condemnation of my article. Perhaps they would invoke the most popular justification for retraction, namely a failure to cite relevant literature. However, other feminist philosophers writing on transracialism have, to borrow from Sabrina Hom, "made similar arguments and similar omissions" (Hom 2018: 32). As Hom and others have noted, critiques of my article apply just as forcefully to preceding feminist philosophical work on transracialism like that of Cressida Heyes and Christine Overall (Hom 2018: 41). Yet Heyes's article in particular has been anthologized in trans studies and cited approvingly. Gordon wonders, "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?" (Gordon 2018: 13).<sup>4</sup>

In sum, since their views do not—absent additional argumentation and clarification—plainly forbid the position I articulated, it is all the more difficult to understand why prominent feminist and queer scholars received my article as they did. If ambiguities in commonplace positions do not clearly exclude the view I offered, then the use of condemnation in place of conversation is all the more surprising—particularly if the offense prompting the backlash is not obviously unique to my article.

### RACIAL TRANSITIONS

Above I considered Gordon's suggestion that perhaps the response to my article was so vicious because it exposed a conflict in some of my critics' own commitments. Specifically, if some critics believe that both gender and race are socially constructed, how can they affirm the possibility and moral acceptability of gender but not racial transition? In her reply, Kris Sealey attempts an answer to this question. Sealey argues that it is crucial to acknowledge the *social* in social construction, meaning that it is as a social body that we construct the meaning of race. Thus, even if we were to grant that the social construction of race can evolve and shift, only a social collective—not an individual—can ever effect such change.

However, it is important not to conceive too great a rift between the individual and the social. Indeed, individuals pave the way for social change all the time. Heyes acknowledges this fact, noting that "the actions of individuals, now and

in the future, will be constitutive of new norms of racial and gendered identity” (2009: 149).<sup>5</sup> Sealey admits as much, but argues that social progress still “requires the collective co-signing of shared practices and customs” (Sealey 2018: 24). Yet it is risky to hinge the moral acceptability of a particular practice on a “collective co-signing.” After all, how many people will it take? And how do we assess whose opinion will be counted? The social body constructing race and gender has not been a body of all, and discounting those who deviate from the consensus has not worked out well historically. Relying too heavily on the current collective attitude toward a particular practice or identity is dangerous for this reason.<sup>6</sup>

Sealey further claims that I create space for “ahistorical roles for individual agency” (Sealey 2018: 24). Yet Sealey belies the fact that individuals throughout history have crossed racial boundaries and variously challenged the ancestral criterion of racial membership.<sup>7</sup> Both Gordon and Hom note as much. Gordon writes, “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 Euro-modern taxonomical *race*” (Gordon 2018: 14). And Hom notes, “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” (Hom 2018: 37).<sup>8</sup>

But despite her acknowledgment of the regularity of racial transitions, Hom suggests that the philosophical discussion on transracialism is distorted by its failure to engage relevant literature in race theory, and specifically the literature on passing (Hom 2018: 31). Situating her critique in reply to myself, Christine Overall, and Cressida Heyes, Hom argues that all our work on transracialism is guilty of this failure. But although I agree with Hom that literature on passing is relevant to an analysis of transracialism, I disagree with her stronger claim that a failure to engage this literature distorts my, Heyes’s and Overall’s discussion.

Hom writes, “‘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*” (Hom 2018: 33). Hom goes on to describe the painful history of racial passing in addition to literary examples of the phenomenon. Among other important questions, Hom’s reply invites reflection on the different types of racial transition, and whether the language of passing is suitable to describe them all.

Although Hom does not offer a concrete definition of passing, her comparison of transracialism to passing raises the question of how best to understand the concept. Often, an individual is said to pass when she is actively or passively taken to be other than how she self-identifies. Race theorists who refer to passing often echo this definition. For instance, Naomi Zack describes individuals who pass as those who “are (in some ‘deeper’ and more abiding sense) different from

how they represent themselves or permit themselves to be perceived” (2009: 68).<sup>9</sup> About Dolezal in particular, Ann Morning writes, “the term ‘passing’—with its connotation of masquerading—couldn’t quite capture the gradual and deeply-felt process of Black affiliation that she [Dolezal] underwent. In my view, she is *not* a passer” (2017). Rogers Brubaker goes so far as to state that implications of pretense are “central to the concept of passing” (2016: 91).<sup>10</sup> This latter understanding of passing is captured well in the (no doubt contentious) title of Claudia Mills’s paper “Passing: The Ethics of Pretending to Be What You Are Not” (Mills 1999)<sup>11</sup> Yet Hom notes that such an understanding of passing obscures the rich and complex ways the concept has been employed in much race theory. For instance, Hom notes that for theorists like Harryette Mullen, Michelle Elam, Cheryl Wall, and Samira Kawash, passing is not at all understood in terms of pretense.

I cannot in the space of this reply explore how best to construe passing. However, I suggest that in light of various competing understandings of the concept even within race and trans theory, relying on the language of passing to describe transracialism is potentially misleading. Although I agree with Hom that literature on racial passing is relevant to an analysis of transracialism, I resist attempts to collapse the two phenomena in every instance. It is important to maintain a distinction between 1) a self-identified X—labeled Y at birth—who is or seeks to be perceived as an X and 2) a self-identified X who is or seeks to be perceived as a Y. The latter characterizes several cases described in the literature on passing, where self-identified black individuals passed as white to escape oppression. Transracialism describes the phenomenon where an individual’s own sincere self-identification does not align with her ascribed race. It is not unlike the distinction between trans women—who do not pass as but *are* women—and some cis women who passed as men to escape gender oppression (see Stryker 2008: 34–35). Moreover, I acknowledge that the self-identifications of many passers are significantly influenced by the fact that they pass. However, not every instance of gender or racial passing can be so characterized.

But Hom’s concerns with the discourse of transracialism do not stop there. Rather, Hom suggests that all philosophical discussion of transracialism is inescapably influenced by anti-trans feminist Janice Raymond’s use of the term in her 1979 text *The Transsexual Empire*. Unlike myself, Christine Overall, and Cressida Heyes, Raymond draws the analogy of transgender to transrace as part of an effort to *discredit* transgender people. Yet Hom states, “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” (Hom 2018: 43). *Pace* Foucault, however, it is not obvious why we should allow Raymond to shape the terms of the discourse on transracialism. Indeed, the discourse on transracialism has already moved well beyond Raymond’s text and includes several scholars who employ the term in a non-derogatory manner

and in support of transgender rights (e.g., Overall 2004; Brubaker 2016). It is thus unclear why we should pessimistically believe that all discussion of transracialism is unavoidably “embedded in transphobic discourse” (Hom 2018: 41). To the contrary, the more transracialism is discussed outside of Raymond’s framework, the more disconnected from her original influence it will become. Similarly, contra Hom, that some have unjustly used Dolezal’s story as a weapon against transgender people does not imply that exploration of her story is misguided or irredeemably tainted by the existing narratives on offer (Hom 2018: 42).

### **ANALYTIC METHODOLOGY**

I am grateful for the opportunity to finally receive Tina Botts’s feedback on my paper. Botts’s response to my article is mostly an attack on analytic philosophy of race. Botts believes that analytic methods are largely “ill-suited” to the task of answering philosophical questions about race (Botts 2018: 54). Botts suggests that analytic work on race should be replaced by or at least intertwined with continental methods (54–55), since she doubts that analytic methods when applied to race “actually do any philosophical work” (61). This amounts to a methodological monopoly on philosophy of race. Unlike Botts, I think it unwise to advocate for a methodological monopoly on any important philosophical question. I agree with Botts that continental methods can shed light on complex questions of race and racial identity. Yet I strongly disagree that analytic methods cannot do the same. Both methodologies have their merits and drawbacks—and both are valuable. Moreover, no one author’s methodology dictates the methodology of others. Critics of my article commented often on how my paper should have been written, which seemed far too often to collapse into saying how they would have written my paper. But different philosophers ask questions differently; and different methodologies shed light differently. We owe it to each other to respect these differences and to resist the conviction that only one method can properly answer difficult questions. I myself am trained in both the continental and analytic traditions and have employed continental methods at times and analytic methods at others. Neither analytic nor continental philosophers are served by our field’s incessant methodological battles.

Moreover, Botts paints an exceedingly uncharitable and inaccurate picture of analytic philosophy as practiced not only by myself, but other analytic philosophers of race and gender. For instance, Botts suggests that typical of analytic methods, my paper fails to engage lived experience when relevant. She further states that “continental methods are better suited to addressing philosophical questions based in the lived realities of members of marginalized populations (in this case, African Americans and transgender persons)” (Botts 2018: 54). However, my paper is a philosophical examination of the metaphysical and ethi-

cal possibility of transracialism, not of the lived experience of African American and transgender persons (or African American transgender persons). Not to mention that Botts ignores the lived experience most relevant to an exploration of transracialism—namely that of self-identified transracial people. Insofar as it considers Rachel Dolezal’s story, my article is indeed attuned to relevant lived experience. As Chloë Taylor likewise notes, my article “reflects on whether Dolezal’s experience of growing up with adopted Black siblings, of having an older Black man in her life whom she calls ‘Dad,’ of estrangement from her white biological parents, of being married to a Black man, might be sufficient for understanding her experience of herself as Black” (Taylor 2018: 7). Botts remarks that the relevant populations for my analysis would have been African American and transgender persons, but she does not explain why engaging the lived experience of these populations would be methodologically sufficient. After all, by comparison, one does not rightly suggest that philosophical explorations of trans womanhood must necessarily consult the lived experience of cis women.

Botts further states that my analytic methodology leads me to “reject outright the testimony and concerns of many actual black people on the topic of who they think counts as black and why” (Botts 2018: 65).<sup>12</sup> Not only is it false that I dismiss such concerns,<sup>13</sup> but it is unclear what Botts’s imperative not to reject the concerns of many black people amounts to. All too often such imperatives border on an injunction not merely to engage sensitively and carefully but to *defer* to the concerns of black people—all the while essentializing them into a homogeneous group. Like any massively diverse group of individuals, however, black people are of many different minds regarding qualifications for black racial membership. Consider, among others, Adolph Reed Jr (2015), Camille Gear Rich (2015), and Ann Morning (2017)—all black scholars who have expressed more sympathetic positions on transracialism. Lewis Gordon’s reply in this symposium is another case in point. In the face of such epistemic diversity among black individuals, what exactly are we to make of the “testimony and concerns” of “black people” on the topic of transracialism? To defer to any one “set” of black people on contested questions about race will inevitably ignore the perspectives of those black people who disagree.

Finally, Botts argues that my use of analytic methods explains the key faults with my argument in defense of transracialism. According to Botts, my argument in defense of transracialism applies equally to a defense of “centaurism.” Centaurists<sup>14</sup> are people who claim to be centaurs, the mythical half-human half-horse creature. Botts maintains that one could substitute centaurism for every instance of transracialism in my paper and the argument would be identical (Botts 2018: 62). Therefore, according to Botts, my argument implies that centaurism is just as acceptable as transracialism. Botts’s analogy is meant to reveal the failure of my argument as well as the inherent problems with analytic philosophy.



Yet Botts's critique completely fails to address my article's own answer to precisely this sort of concern. In my article, I explicitly consider the objection that my argument could be taken to suggest that self-identification alone is sufficient for acceptance into a particular identity category. In response to this concern, I argue that self-identification alone is not sufficient. Rather, my article suggests it must at least be possible for one to be treated as a member of the relevant social identity category, the content of which can differ from one context to the next.<sup>15</sup> Since she was taken to be one, it *is* possible for Rachel Dolezal to be treated as a black woman. But unlike black women, centaurs do not exist. Since it is not possible for any human to access what it is like to be treated as a centaur, then, my argument quite evidently does not apply equally to centaurism. I am interested in human social categories like gender and race. Centaurs, however, are not an actual "human kind" (see Mallon 2016).

Despite this critique, however, Botts later states that she *does* in fact think we should respect people's genuine beliefs about who they are, presumably including so-called centaurists. Botts writes that she thinks people's genuine beliefs about who they are should be respected, but not for the reasons I suggest. Rather, Botts writes, "To my mind, the best argument in favor of the proposition that a person's 'genuine beliefs' (regardless of what anything on the order of the general public has to say about them) should be respected on the topic of personal identity has to do with an ethical requirement I believe exists to honor the autonomous choices of others (as long as no one else is being hurt in the process, of course) and *not* because a person 'actually is' what they claim they are, when what they claim they are conflicts with conventional wisdom on the topic" (Botts 2018: 30).

Although she levels the accusation against me, in this passage Botts clearly fails to grasp how out of step her own claims are with what she dubs the "received wisdom in contemporary transgender studies" (Botts 2018: 68). Botts writes that the obligation to respect people's genuine beliefs about who they are should apply to whoever makes claims against "the collective understanding of what he or she is," including someone who genuinely believes they are "male, instead of female" (Botts 2018: 68). But why should we respect people's genuine beliefs about who they are according to Botts? To repeat Botts, the reason is "*not because a person 'actually is' what they claim they are*" (Botts 2018: 68; emphasis added). Rather, we are obligated to respect people's genuine beliefs because we should honor their autonomy. I don't know about Botts, but "respectful" is not the term I would use to describe someone who believes trans women are not actually "what they claim they are," but treats them *as if* they were anyway in an attempt to honor their autonomy. One legitimately wonders how I can respect someone's genuine beliefs about who they are if I secretly agree with the "conventional wisdom" that says otherwise. Furthermore, any "conventional wisdom" that assumes expertise

of trans people's experiences violates what Talia Mae Bettcher calls their ethical first-person authority or "avowal of existential self-identity" (2009: 113, 115).<sup>16</sup>

In making these claims, Botts could be considered guilty of a form of transphobia that Bettcher terms the "Basic Denial of Authenticity," which denies trans individuals' authentic claims about who they are (Bettcher 2009: 99). In divorcing verdicts about who trans people are from particular contexts and practices within trans-friendly communities, Botts's comments are reminiscent of the following manifestation of the Basic Denial of Authenticity described by Bettcher: "As a child might approach her mother with a toy stethoscope around her neck and say, 'Look, mommy, I am doctor!' so, too, a transperson may be seen as confused about the difference between reality and pretense. While playing along, 'the adult' knows this person is confusing pretense with reality; she knows something the 'child' does not" (114–15). To call the child a doctor *anyway*, or a trans person a woman *anyway*, is condescendingly to participate in what Stephanie Kapusta calls a "pitying concession" (2016: 514).

Furthermore, and harkening back to my earlier response to Sealey, Botts is overly quick to defer to the "conventional wisdom" about race. Botts argues that because the social construction of race includes a commitment to externally derived ancestry, it follows that race is "beyond one's power to alter" (Botts 2018: 66).<sup>17</sup> Yet this is an overly fatalistic position that risks the sedimentation of pernicious racial norms. Indeed, in her reply Botts mentions the paragraph she emailed in response to my APA paper. Here Botts defends the conventional wisdom of the "one-drop rule" and states that "no matter how Black anyone feels, that person is not Black (in the United States, at this point in history) unless the person has at least one Black ancestor" (Botts 2017). Never mind that Dolezal has four black adoptive siblings. On this surprising view, if Dolezal could prove she has "one drop" of black blood somewhere in her lineage, her claim to blackness would be unproblematic. It would appear, then, that "the slightest tinge of black 'blood' has potent transformative powers" (Dreisinger 2008: 143).

### INCLUSIVE IDENTITIES

What should it take to qualify as a member of a certain race? In exploring the foundations of black solidarity, Tommie Shelby considers what it means to be black. Shelby critiques the idea that blacks must be joined together by a thick conception of black identity—be it racial, ethnic, cultural or national (2005: 209). Rather, all that is required for black solidarity to emerge is what he calls a "thin" conception of black identity. According to Shelby, the thin conception of black identity holds that blacks are either 1) persons who descended from sub-Saharan Africans and have a certain inherited phenotypical appearance, *or* 2) persons who—despite lacking the relevant physical markers—descended from sub-Saharan Africans

presumed to have possessed those markers (208). To be joined together, Shelby does not think blacks need to cultivate any further sense of identity beyond this thin conception. Indeed, he worries that any attempt to cultivate a thicker sense of identity threatens to infringe the autonomy of individual black persons (206). What is important for black solidarity according to Shelby is simply “the common experience of anti-black racism and the joint commitment of bringing it to an end” (ibid.).

Now, Shelby states that no amount of physical alteration or cultural assimilation can change one’s thin blackness (or presumably one’s thin whiteness) (Shelby 2005: 208). In this sense, Shelby would not regard someone like Dolezal as thinly black, no matter her self-identification or how committed she may be to the fight against anti-black racism. And yet, if Shelby seeks to found black solidarity on the basis of a “shared experience of antiblack racism,” then it is unclear why he should preclude anyone who experiences such racism by virtue of being perceived as black. In fact, Shelby’s own text equivocates on the criteria for thin blackness. For instance, he states at another point that thin blacks are either 1) persons who possess a certain inherited phenotypical profile and are sub-Saharan African-descended, or 2) persons “who are *generally believed* to have biological ancestors who fit the relevant profile” (208; emphasis added). Yet there is a significant difference between being generally believed to have certain ancestors versus actually having them. Especially since Shelby’s concern from the standpoint of black solidarity is to identify those individuals subject to anti-black racism (and committed to its end), this latter, more flexible formulation would seem preferable.<sup>18</sup>

Sealey and Botts both suggest that far from representing blackness, however, an individual such as Dolezal instead epitomizes white privilege. Botts states that Dolezal’s self-identification as black “is an exercise in white privilege for the obvious reason that [she] can turn around and be white again at will, at a moment’s notice” (Botts 2018: 65).<sup>19</sup> And Sealey writes, “the white person who attempts to shed her white identity becomes blind to the racial privilege that she cannot opt out of” (Sealey 2018: 27). Both Sealey and Botts seem to think that the idea that an individual like Dolezal could return to a white identity implies an exercise of white privilege—a fact that renders her identity claim unacceptable. Yet the fact that someone could ostensibly inhabit a more privileged identity than the one they claim does not imply the moral wrongness of their identity. After all, plenty of individuals can access privileged identities with more ease than others. Moreover, as I note in my article’s reply to this sort of objection, the arguments of both Sealey and Botts rebound against transgender individuals. In other words, the fact that a trans woman “could” ostensibly return to an exercise of male privilege under *some* circumstances should never be taken to imply that her identity is immoral.<sup>20</sup>

But Sealey elaborates, “the privilege that Dolezal *does not* refuse is the privilege to have one’s choice of identity respected as such by others, without taking on certain ‘unchosen’ consequences of that choice” (Sealey 2018: 26). This statement is rather remarkable in light of the astonishing backlash to Dolezal’s identity. As a person with white ancestry, Dolezal knew her identification as black<sup>21</sup> was fraught with risk and the possibility that she could be outed at any moment. Indeed, since the moment her parents outed her, Dolezal’s identity has been far from respected, and she has certainly had to take on many negative consequences for her identity “choice,” if that is even the right word. As Daniel Silvermint likewise notes, “Dolezal, if she is indeed passing as black, has apparently paid familial costs among others, and faces fresh costs now that she has allegedly been outed” (2015).

By way of conclusion, I realize that my proposal would modify the way we currently understand race, but I see it as an ameliorative proposal that could help pave the way toward a more accepting and inclusive society. An exploration of transracial identity reveals stubborn and conservative attachments to racial essentialism. Such essentialist logics must be challenged if the terms of our discourse surrounding gender and race are to improve. To avoid this essentialism, we should opt for more capacious understandings of social categories like gender and race. Minimally—and granting the possibility that my argument might be mistaken—justice considerations demand careful and patient exploration of these issues. By airing the possibilities, constructs, and concerns involved, we can better ensure that if someone is dismissed in their identity claims, the dismissal and the exclusion this entails have been carefully considered and found warranted against the full force of claims for inclusion.

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## NOTES

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1. Philosophers Kelly Oliver, Chloë Taylor, Alison Suen, and Julia Haas were my feminist mainstays throughout the ordeal. I thank them.
2. It is worth noting that in the spirit of intellectual generosity, Butler was provided an opportunity to respond to criticism by revising the trans-exclusionary aspects of her work.
3. See Ehlers 2012 for an application of Butler’s views on performativity to race. It is worth noting that on the possibility of transracialism, Ehlers takes a position similar to that of Heyes.
4. For some recent (though not exhaustive) discussion relevant to an analysis of transracialism, the ethics of passing and the category of womanhood, see Silvermint

- Forthcoming and 2015; Snorton 2017; Andler 2017; Brubaker 2016; Mikkola 2016; Jenkins 2016; Kapusta 2016; Diaz-Leon 2016; Bettcher 2013, et al.
5. Likewise, Gordon writes, “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?” (Gordon 2018: 14).
  6. Sealey insists her argument does not imply an inability to “cast moral judgments across historical epochs and social contexts” (Sealey 2018: 25). Yet I do not see how Sealey’s argument can avoid this relativistic implication.
  7. Leaving aside for the moment individuals who pass from one race to another, there are related (albeit not identical) stories of individuals labeled white at birth who later came to self-identify as black. Consider the case of Stockton, California, city councilman Mark Stebbins, who back in 1983 also claimed he was black despite having white parents (Brubaker 2016: 60). Stebbins’s second and third wives were black and he belonged to a black church. When he ran for city council in San Francisco, he stated that he had come to feel as if he were black. Stebbins’s black barber came to his defense at the time stating “he’s as Black as I am, some of my kids are paler than Mark. The man is one of us” (1984: 34). Stebbins insisted that although he didn’t identify as black as a young person, he realized later that he was black (Brubaker 2016: 61). Or, consider the example of Jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow. Mezzrow was born into a Russian Jewish family, but his experience in the African American jazz scene led him to identify as black. He called himself a “voluntary Negro” who believed he had become black (ibid., 87–88). When imprisoned for selling drugs in 1940 he identified as black so he could be housed with black prisoners (ibid., 88). There is also the story of Johnny Otis, who was born into a Greek family but grew up in a black neighborhood and married a black woman. He stated, “as a kid I decided that if our society dictated that one had to be black or white, I would be black. . . . I am black environmentally, psychologically, culturally, emotionally and intellectually” (ibid.). Otis further stated that America is “full of ‘Negroes’ who are much lighter than I, and ‘whites’ who are much darker” (ibid.).
  8. At odds with Gordon and Hom, Tina Botts writes, “While Tuvel argues . . . that so-called transracialism is both metaphysically possible and ethically permissible, from a perspective that factors in context and history, so-called transracialism is arguably neither” (Botts 2018: 51, Abstract).
  9. Philosopher of race Ron Mallon writes, “*Passing* occurs whenever a member of some category is perceived (and allows herself to be perceived) as a member of another, mutually exclusive category, for example a white person passing as black, or a black person passing as white” (2004: 646)
  10. Brubaker does acknowledge, however, that contemporary literature on passing attempts to complicate this definition (2016: 145).
  11. As Hom notes, Heyes likewise describes passing as “the phenomenon . . . in which one is read as, or actively pretends to be, something that one avowedly is not” (Heyes 2009: 138)
  12. She further writes, “What gave Tuvel the right to dismiss the concerns of *some* black people on this topic so summarily, I thought to myself?” (Botts 2018: 64; emphasis added).

13. For instance, my article considers the concerns of writer Tamara Winfrey Harris, a black woman who does not think Dolezal “counts as black.”
14. I briefly mentioned a case similar to that of centaurism in my paper’s discussion of otherkin. Here I explained why my defense of transracialism does not apply to such individuals—and would not, by extension, apply to people who think they are centaurs.
15. As I note in my original article, I lacked sufficient space there to defend an account of what it takes to qualify as a member of a social identity like “woman” or “black.” I am currently in the process of revisiting the account briefly discussed in my article. My thinking on this question will be reflected in my forthcoming book on the topic.
16. It is worth noting that Bettcher is not advocating an “‘anything goes’ or ‘because I say I am’ doctrine” according to which “persons may . . . declare themselves teapots and thereby make it so” (Bettcher 2009: 98). Rather, her account is intended to capture the way gender terms are employed in trans-friendly communities, and, she notes, “within such contexts, words have relatively fixed meanings” (ibid.).
17. Sabrina Hom’s argument that Heyes fails to consider black feminist and queer critiques of ancestral criteria of racial membership here applies equally to Botts. Relatedly, Gordon notes that racial identity and ancestry have often come apart historically. He writes, “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” (Gordon 2018: 17).
18. Similarly, as Gordon notes, “There have been in black communities black people whose recent origin stories reveal no black parentage. . . . 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” (Gordon 2018: 15).
19. It is further dubious to suppose that Dolezal could undo her former racial identity and return seamlessly to a white one. Thanks to Rhiannon Graybill for this point.
20. See Silvermint Forthcoming for recent philosophical discussion on the ethics of passing as privileged.
21. At one point Sealey refers to Dolezal’s identification as “African American” (Sealey 2018: 25). However, it is important to note that Dolezal does not identify as African American but as black. She writes, “I didn’t identify as African American; I identified as Black” (Dolezal 2017: 1)

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