

Book Review: Rogers Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0691172354 (Hardcover). 256 Pages. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Chauntelle Anne Tibbals¹

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In summing up overarching considerations of gender and race, Rogers Brubaker wrote: “Gender and race were long understood as distinctively stable, rigorously categorical, legibly embodied, and reliably decodable social identities” (page 131).

Race and gender were thought of as being *ascribed* – or, given and fixed – which is the primary factor that separated them from mutable, *achieved* foundations of identity – things like language, religion, or education.

Now, scholars, students, and every other sort of remotely thoughtful human have certainly been questioning these categories and distinctions for some time. During the summer of 2015 though, the stability of race and gender were put front and center on the Internet via two news stories gone viral: Caitlyn Jenner’s coming out and Rachel Dolezal’s claimed heritage.² Shortly after Jenner made her transgender identity public, Dolezal was outed by her biological parents as white. This touched off heated debates about the stability gender and race: If Jenner could legitimately identify as a woman, could Dolezal legitimately identify as black?

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² Caitlyn Jenner, Rachel Dolezal, and their respective stories were all over the media – media at every level – during the summer months of 2015 and beyond. Recently, Jenner was featured in *Vanity Fair* and Dolezal in the *New York Times*.

Using these stories as an inception point, their astonishingly coincidental timing alone makes them excellent cases to compare. Rogers Brubaker shows in *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities* how our understanding of the categories of race and gender have opened up in different ways -- and to different degrees -- during recent decades. And while sex (according to Brubaker) has a much deeper biological basis than race, choosing or changing one's sex or gender is currently more widely accepted than choosing or changing one's race. Put simply, transgender identities are more widely accepted than transracial ones, which are not really accepted much at all. In *Trans*, Brubaker attempts to rethink race and ethnicity through the multifaceted lens of transgender experiences. In so doing, he underscores the malleability, contingency, and arbitrariness of racial categories -- and thus, the possibility of transracialism.

Part One: The Trans Moment includes Chapters 1 and 2. In Chapter 1, "Transgender, Transracial?," Brubaker explores the paired discussions of transgender and transracial -- discussions which, according to the author, were deployed to "stake out positions" (page 9) within the context of two overarching arguments: Can one legitimately change one's gender; and, can one legitimately change one's race? Responses vary depending on one's alignment with *essentialist* discourse (neither race nor gender may be changed), *voluntarist* discourse (both race and gender may be changed), or a hybridized position of *gender voluntarism* and *racial essentialism*.

In Chapter 2, "Categories in Flux," Brubaker describes the unsettling of previously assumed-to-be-settled categories sex and gender to be "nothing short of spectacular" (page 41). Challenges to prevailing categorical frameworks surrounding race and ethnicity however, though profound, have not been nearly as dramatic (page 46). This is due to Brubaker's assertion that "racial and ethnic categories, in contemporary liberal societies, are not as clearly defined, deeply institutionalized, or pervasively implicated in the structuring of social life as are sex and gender" (page 46). The relative differences in understood, institutionalized categorical fixedness have contributed to wider society's very different responses to "unorthodox [identity] choices" (page 10).

In *Part Two: Thinking with Trans*, which includes Chapters 3, 4, and 5, Brubaker explores the assumption that "'trans' is good to think with" -- that the lens of transgender experiences is a useful lens by which to consider the fluidity of race and racial identifications. Chapter 3, "The Trans of Migration," considers moving between one established category to another -- from the category of woman to man, for instance. Chapter 4,

“The Trans of Between,” explores defining oneself between two established categories, without necessarily belonging to either one – from the category of woman to trans man, for instance. Chapter 5, “The Trans of Beyond,” considers positioning oneself in a space outside previously established categories – from the category of woman to genderqueer, for instance (page 10).

According to Brubaker, each modality of “thinking with trans” can help us consider contemporary race and ethnicity in useful ways. For instance, Dolezal’s claims exemplify the trans of migration; discussions of multiracial and multiethnic identities align with the trans of between; and eschewing racial and ethnic identifiers altogether corresponds with the trans of beyond. This then brings us to Brubaker’s big takeaway: The arbitrariness of race has long been understood, but this understanding has been largely trapped in the academy. Our rapid ascension into a society that understands gender as variable and arbitrary, thus, presents us with an opportunity to both extend and complicate our currently generally fixed understanding of race. By capitalizing on the ways in which considerations of transgender identities have made the theoretical lens of trans more accessible outside the academy, rather than simply thinking *about trans* (in terms of gender identities), we may now have greater access to utilizing trans as a lens to *think with* – in this case, utilizing trans as a tool to *think with* about race (page 151).

As a feminist, there were lines in *Trans* that caused me to bristle. As a sociologist, I was compelled by the notion that differently ascribed identity categories, within the context of institutionalized categorization, will in turn impact the ease with which we as a public may feel compelled to challenge them -- as well as accept the validity of said challenges. And as a person, I was bothered by yet another engagement of Jenner and Dolezal, both of who are, at their very best, highly fraught case studies of whatever it is they are being held up as representing. All of this and more, in my view, illustrate the importance of what Brubaker is attempting to work through in this text.

At just about every turn, engaging Jenner and Dolezal as case studies is tricky business. On one hand, these case studies embody an almost perfectly timed pair of examples. Further, we would be remiss to ignore the fact that, for many, Jenner and Dolezal may very well function as *the* examples of race and gender identity variability. As such, they are obvious examples to utilize. On the other hand however, both cases for various reasons stir negative responses in even the most critically minded of thinkers and activists. Consequently, working through these cases is exceptionally delicate and difficult. This serves to tighten the wires

around *Trans*, making each word chosen in the text both deliberate and difficult. As such, though I do not necessarily connect with every moment written, I commend Brubaker's efforts to engage what's an extremely challenging discussion.

Brubaker is correct in his assertion that both gender and race are arbitrary categories, but he never once attempts to suggest that the myriad impacts and inequalities felt when these arbitrary categories are assigned is in some way unreal or inaccurate. He acknowledges the charged nature of the subject of race, even going so far as to deconstruct why our exemplar case of transracial identity – Dolezal – may in of itself be powerful enough to cast a fog of frustration over the entire issue. Even simply writing on these subjects is to engage a multi-faceted minefield of theoretical proportions, with the potential for somewhat uneven attention from non-academic press,³ scathing peer review,⁴ and academic volatility with the topic of trans as a theoretical lens.⁵

Trans works through a complex and loaded subject matter in an even and fair manner. And though not perfect, *Trans* too has a dimension of practicality missing from so much of academic work written at this level. One completes the book with a sense of excitement – *I might be able to engage expanded understanding in one social realm to help illustrate concepts we as academics take for granted in another!* This connecting of theory and “real life” is something that is lacking in so much of the academy. For that alone, *Trans* is worth the read.

³ See Emma Green's “If Americans Can Be Transgender, Can They Be Transracial?” via *The Atlantic* on October 2, 2016.

⁴ See “trans: a response from rogers brubaker” in *Contexts* (September 11, 2017) written in response to Iván Széleányi's “The Politics of Trans Identities,” also in *Contexts* (June 16, 2017)

⁵ See various accounts of Rebecca Tuvel's “In Defense of Transracialism” published *Hypatia* (volume 32, Issue 2) 2017. Note that Tuvel's article was published after *Trans*, and it received a much larger response.