

Part One

The Trans
Moment

Chapter 1

Transgender,
Transracial?

From the beginning, the story of Rachel Dolezal's identification as black was intertwined in public debate with that of Caitlyn Jenner's identification as a woman. Within hours of the breaking of the Dolezal story, the hashtag #transracial had started to trend on Twitter. Deployed by some to provoke, by others to persuade, by still others simply to amuse, the pairing of transgender and transracial generated wide-ranging public discussion about the possibilities and limits of choosing or changing racial and gender identities.

Before transgender and transracial were joined in the Dolezal affair, the terms had been juxtaposed only occasionally. One set of juxtapositions was initiated by the radical feminist Janice Raymond in her critique of the medical construction of transsexualism. In the introduction to the 1994 reissue of her book *The Transsexual Empire*, Raymond asked rhetorically, "Does a Black person who wants to be white suffer from the 'disease' of being a 'transracial'?" She went on

to observe that “there is no demand for transracial medical intervention precisely *because* most Blacks recognize that it is their society, not their skin, that needs changing.”¹

While Raymond used the pairing dismissively, other feminist philosophers, more sympathetic to transsexual or transgender claims, have taken the analogy more seriously. Christine Overall argued that if one accepts the legitimacy of transsexual surgery, one should accept, in principle, the legitimacy of “transracial” surgery as well.² And Cressida Heyes—noting that there is in fact a demand for medical intervention to alter ethnically or racially marked bodies—analyzed the similarities and differences between changing sex and changing race as projects of self-transformation.³ More recently, Jess Row’s 2014 satirical novel *Your Face in Mine* turned on a white protagonist who becomes black through “racial reassignment surgery” in response to what he construes as “racial identity dysphoria syndrome.”⁴

In the decade or so before the Dolezal affair, juxtapositions of transgender and transracial were occasionally picked up by journalists and others. A few conservative journalists sought to ridicule transgender by associating it with what they took to be the obviously absurd idea of choosing or changing one’s race. And in the vast archive of ephemera that is the Web, one can find scattered—mainly humorous—uses of “transracial” (and “cisracial”) that are paired with or play on “transgender” or “cisgender.”[†]

Yet these earlier pairings of transgender and transracial had no public resonance. It was the Dolezal debates themselves that joined the terms in the public realm. I begin this chapter by characterizing the field of meanings associated

† “Cisgender” or “cis”—constructed by analogy to “transgender” or “trans,” from the Latin preposition meaning “on this side of”—designates a person whose “gender corresponds to his or her sex at birth” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

with transgender and transracial individually and then show how the Dolezal story brought the terms together to generate an unprecedented public discussion.

“Transgender” and “Transracial” before the Dolezal Affair

The term “transgender” has enjoyed a spectacularly successful career in the last two decades. As deployed by social movement activists to embrace all forms of gender variance, the term not only gained traction among activists but rapidly found broader public resonance, acquiring institutional recognition, legal weight, academic gravitas, media exposure, and popular currency.⁵

As an umbrella term, “transgender” conceals a key tension between *changing* gender (by moving from one established category to another) and *challenging* gender (whether implicitly, through gender-variant behavior or presentation, or expressly, through political claims-making). Those who seek to change their gender presentation and publicly recognized gender—whether or not they alter their bodies through surgery or hormones—do not necessarily challenge the binary gender regime; they may even reinforce it by subscribing to stories about unalterable, inborn identities. The difference between trans as a one-way trajectory from one established category to another and trans as a positioning of the self between or beyond established categories will be taken up and elaborated in the second part of the book. Here I simply note that while activist and academic discussions have highlighted the transgressive and disruptive potential of transgender and have addressed the full spectrum of gender-variant individuals—“encompassing transsexuals, drag queens, butches, hermaphrodites, cross-dressers,

masculine women, effeminate men, sissies, tomboys,” and others—broader public discussions have focused on transitions from one clearly and often stereotypically defined gender to the other, especially those that involve surgical or hormonal remodeling of the body.⁶

Claims for recognition associated with binary transitions like Jenner’s have greater public resonance, legitimacy, and visibility than claims that more directly challenge the gender binary. Transitions like Jenner’s are more easily cast in a culturally consecrated narrative form. They can be narrated as stories of a tragic mismatch between an authentic personal identity, located in the deepest recesses of the self, and a social identity mistakenly assigned at birth—a mismatch overcome through an odyssey of self-awakening and self-transformation, culminating in the public validation of one’s true self. It helps that these are framed as stories of individual alienation and redemption, not of systemic injustice, and that they are compatible with prevailing essentialist understandings of gender.

While the term “transgender” has come to enjoy broad public currency in recent years, the same cannot be said for “transracial.” A common reaction to the pairing of the terms in the Dolezal affair was that transracial, unlike transgender, was “not a thing”; the word was treated as a pointless or pernicious neologism. In fact, the term “transracial” has a longer history than “transgender.” But it has been used primarily in the specialized context of interracial adoption, where the prefix “trans” has had a quite different meaning and valence.

The formation of transracial families through adoption—in particular the placement of black children with white adoptive families—has been deeply controversial for nearly half a century.⁷ The most radical and consistent opposition has come from the National Association of Black Social

Workers (NABSW). The association’s 1972 position paper proposed a strict form of racial matching of adoptees and adoptive families; it rejected transracial adoption as an “unnatural” practice that prevents the “healthy development [of adoptees] as Black people.”⁸ In testimony to a Senate committee, the association’s president denounced the practice as a “blatant form of race and cultural genocide.” Black children raised in white homes, according to other NABSW presidents, would develop “white psyches” or “European minds” or would otherwise have severe identity problems and be lost to the black community.⁹

The argument for strict racial matching failed to gain broad political or legal support, but weaker forms of matching continue to be practiced by adoption agencies. Even where racial matching per se is not at issue, parents seeking to adopt transracially may be scrutinized for their “cultural competency” and for their commitment to “racially appropriate modes of parenting.”¹⁰

Thus while the “trans” in transgender has signaled an *opportunity* for transgender people, the “trans” in transracial has signaled a *threat* to transracial adoptees. The transgender community has celebrated the crossing of gender boundaries. But the transracial adoption community—adoptees, adoptive families, and institutional intermediaries such as adoption agencies and social workers—has problematized the crossing of racial boundaries, seeing it as portending the loss, weakening, or confusion of racial identity.

Both the scholarly literature on transracial adoption and the vernacular literature—memoirs by adoptees and adoptive families, advice by psychologists and social workers, and websites produced by and for adoptive families and adoptees—emphasize the importance of cultivating and strengthening the (endangered) racial identity of transracial adoptees. While transgender activists have sought to

destabilize and even subvert the gender order, transracial adoption activists have sought to restabilize and affirm the racial order. The transgender community is invested in a project of cultural transformation, the transracial adoption community in a project of cultural preservation.

The Dolezal affair wrenched “transracial” out of the adoption context and brought it into conversation with “transgender.” Given the antithetical commitments and concerns of the transracial adoption and transgender communities, it should come as no surprise that an open letter from “members of the adoption community” declared the description of Dolezal as “transracial” to be “erroneous, ahistorical, and dangerous.”¹¹ The idea that Dolezal could change her race by inserting herself in black networks and immersing herself in black culture suggested that transracial adoptees could change *their* race—a possibility the transracial adoption community strenuously rejected. Their rejection of the idea of changing race, to be sure, was more philosophical than empirical. It was precisely their concern that transracial adoption *could* lead to changes in racial identity—in particular to the loss of one’s authentic identity for want of social support for it—that underlay their commitment to strengthening and stabilizing racial identity. In a sense, Dolezal embodied precisely the danger they wished to avert.

One prominent scholar and activist in the transracial adoption field regarded Dolezal with greater sympathy. John Raible had earlier argued that transracial adoption may indeed involve a process of “transracialization,” insofar as white adoptive parents and siblings, for example, may “become immersed in wider social networks populated by people of color.”¹² As he suggested in an open letter to Dolezal, much of her own experience would seem to illustrate this process.¹³ Like others in the transracial adoption field, however, Raible insisted that Dolezal was confused when she claimed to

identify as black. Identifying *with* black people and black culture was one thing; identifying *as* black was another.

Members of the transracial adoption community, which had owned the term “transracial,” were offended by what they considered its misuse to refer to Dolezal’s experience. But they were not especially concerned with Jenner or transgender matters. They were responding specifically to the description of Dolezal as transracial, not to the pairing of transgender and transracial. Their response to Dolezal therefore stands apart from the main body of commentary.

The Field of Argument

In the broader discussion of Jenner and Dolezal, the pairing of transgender and transracial was deployed to stake out positions—and to attack competing positions—in a field of argument defined by two questions: Can one legitimately change one’s gender? And can one legitimately change one’s race?

Combining the two questions yields four positions, which are depicted in the diagram on p. 22. (The positions—the diagram’s quadrants—are numbered counterclockwise.) Quadrant 1, at the top left, represents the essentialist position that gender and racial identities cannot legitimately be changed. Quadrant 3, at the bottom right, represents the diametrically opposed voluntarist position, according to which both gender and racial identities *can* legitimately be changed. While essentialists and voluntarists emphasized the similarities between Jenner and Dolezal, and more broadly between gender and racial identities, others highlighted the differences. Quadrant 2, at the lower left, represents the combination of gender voluntarism and racial essentialism, and quadrant 4, in the upper right, the inverse combination of gender essentialism

and racial voluntarism (which, for reasons I discuss below, was conspicuously missing from the Dolezal debates).

		Can one legitimately change one's race?	
		No	Yes
Can one legitimately change one's gender?	No	1. Essentialism	4. Gender essentialism, racial voluntarism
	Yes	2. Gender voluntarism, racial essentialism	3. Voluntarism

The labels are shorthand simplifications. “Essentialist” stances include both the view that gender and/or racial identities are grounded in nature and the view that they are grounded in history. “Voluntarist” stances include those that assert that gender and/or racial identities can be chosen, as well as those that assert (particularly with respect to gender) that public, socially validated identities can be changed even if—on some level—the core personal identity is understood as unchosen. In either case, “voluntarism” highlights choice and agency: even where the core identity is understood as unchosen, voluntarist stances emphasize the choice of self-presentation and public identification.¹⁴

“If Jenner, Then Dolezal”: The Argument from Similarity

Essentialists and voluntarists used quasi-syllogistic reasoning to underscore the similarities between changing gender and changing race. If we accept that Caitlyn Jenner is a woman,

they argued, then we must accept that Rachel Dolezal is black. The syllogism cut both ways. Addressed to an audience inclined to accept the legitimacy of transgender claims, it could be used to legitimize Dolezal’s claim to identify as black, or at least to argue that her claim deserved a respectful hearing, not a derisive dismissal. But when it was addressed to an audience inclined to dismiss changing race out of hand, the syllogism worked in reverse; it served to undercut the legitimacy of Jenner’s claim (and of transgender claims more generally).

The latter, reverse working of the syllogism was much more common than the former. “If Bruce Jenner Is a Woman, Then Rachel Dolezal Is Black,” read the headline of a blog post on the site of the American Family Association of Pennsylvania, a branch of a national association devoted to “standing up for traditional Judeo-Christian values.”¹⁵ From the perspective of the association and others on the cultural right, Dolezal’s claim to be black was so palpably absurd that it needed no refutation; this assumed absurdity was then used to assert or imply that Jenner—and by extension others following similar trajectories—could therefore not be legitimately recognized as a woman.

Much of the essentialist commentary was expressly partisan. Commentators on the cultural right gleefully seized on the Dolezal revelations as a weapon in the culture wars; they lambasted the mainstream media, “liberals,” or “the left” for embracing Jenner while censoring Dolezal. Some added that Dolezal’s claim might well be considered more reasonable than Jenner’s, since differences of race are much more superficial than those of sex or gender. The conservative commentator Steven Crowder, for example, argued that “as opposed to sex, which differentiates humans by their organs, reproductive functions, hormonal profiles, bone-density, neuropsychiatry and physical capabilities, many of the

delineations surrounding race are merely cosmetic.” And a contributor to Glenn Beck’s website observed, “My whiteness is far less hardwired and far more difficult to define than my maleness.”¹⁶ If one rejects racial reidentification out of hand, these commentators suggested, one has an even stronger case for rejecting transgender claims.

Essentialists assailed the cultural left not only for its inconsistency and hypocrisy but also, more fundamentally, for its subjectivism—for letting “self-identification trump objective truth,”¹⁷ according to the *National Review*, or, more colorfully, for “solipsism” and the “end of reality,” as a website devoted to “traditional Anglicanism” put it.¹⁸ It was this climate of subjectivism that enabled both Jenner’s and Dolezal’s claims. To this anything-goes subjectivism essentialists counterposed a seemingly no-nonsense acceptance of “objective reality.” An article on the culturally conservative Charisma News and Christian Post sites, for example, argued that “skin color is verifiable. It is not based on perception. It is not based on feelings. It is based on provable data. The same is true when it comes to gender (. . . putting aside the question of how to best help those with biological or genetic abnormalities).”¹⁹

Everyday essentialism was even more prevalent outside the professional commentariat and the blogosphere. In response to a Spokane newspaper’s reporting of the Dolezal revelations, one commenter—among more than a thousand—wrote: “If we (not I) feel gender choice/identification is up for grabs, allowing anyone to choose and declare their gender (note, the current number of supposed genders is now over 50) . . . then why not allow one to chose [*sic*] their color/ethnicity? How can our society have it both ways? We either look for truth . . . , or we allow anything goes and deal with the fall out . . . which can be very destabilizing and tension producing.”²⁰ A similar sense of the

destabilization of the cognitive and moral order was expressed on a Catholic message board: “The world is upside down. If Bruce Jenner can claim he is female, regardless of the fact that he is not, then I don’t see why a white person can’t be black.”²¹

Some conservative Christian commentaries appealed directly to the order of creation. God “made us the way we are . . . for His purposes and His glory,” argued the evangelical pastor Scott Crook; self-identification in terms at variance with this created order—as in the cases of Jenner and Dolezal—is therefore “nothing more than self-deception.”²² A post on an evangelical website urged readers to “embrace the fact that a master craftsman has chosen both our ethnicities and our genders for his glory.”²³ And a reader comment on a conservative website observed that Jenner and Dolezal are “telling their Creator He mad[e] a mistake, and God being perfect, it is impossible for Him to make mistakes. . . . Why can’t we all be ourselves as God made us? Why are we always trying to be someone else?”²⁴

Conservative Christian churches and organizations made a few comments about Dolezal, but they were much more concerned with Jenner. The imbalance reflects their much deeper investment in preserving sex and gender boundaries than racial and ethnic boundaries. For conservative Christians, sex and gender are utterly central to the created order in a way that race and ethnicity are not. Dolezal was a mere sideshow; Jenner—and the mainstreaming of transgender more generally—commanded sustained attention.

In addressing Jenner’s claim to have always known herself to be a woman, some conservative Christian commentaries added a theological dimension to the cultural right’s critique of subjectivism. They interpreted Jenner’s claim, and analogous transgender claims, as a contemporary form of Gnosticism. A dualistic current of thought of the early

Christian era, Gnosticism denigrated the body and the material world and privileged a form of intuitive knowledge (*gnosis*) that would enable men and women to achieve salvation by transcending the prison of the body and the imperfections of the material world. Conservative Christian commentaries challenged the neo-Gnostic idea that gender identity is intuitively knowable independently of the sexual constitution of the body and, more broadly, the “idea that the ‘real’ self is separate from who one is as an embodied, material being.”²⁵ To divorce gender identity from the body is to turn one’s back on nature and the created order; in the words of the Catholic natural-law blogger Andrew Greenwell, it is to rebel “against creation and against creation’s God.”²⁶

The essentialists were mainly cultural conservatives, but they were joined by some liberal and radical feminists. Just five days before the Dolezal news broke, the *New York Times* published a critical reflection on the Jenner affair and transgender politics by the historian and liberal feminist writer Elinor Burkett, objecting to Jenner’s claim to have a “female brain” and to the reactionary ideal of womanhood suggested by the *Vanity Fair* debut.²⁷ Unlike some radical feminists, Burkett did not expressly deny the legitimacy of Jenner’s claim to be a woman, and she referred to Jenner using a female honorific and female pronouns. But she criticized attacks by trans activists on “women’s right to define ourselves”: “People who haven’t lived their whole lives as women shouldn’t get to define us. . . . They haven’t traveled through the world as women and been shaped by all this entails.”

Burkett’s appeal to lifelong history and experience as a criterion of authentic womanhood exactly parallels a prominent strand of the self-consciously progressive critiques of Dolezal’s claim to identify as black. And Burkett’s essay strikingly anticipated the Dolezal affair: “The ‘I was born in the

wrong body’ rhetoric favored by other trans people . . . is just as offensive, reducing us to our collective breasts and vaginas. Imagine the reaction if a young white man suddenly declared that he was trapped in the wrong body and, after using chemicals to change his skin pigmentation and crocheting his hair into twists, expected to be embraced by the black community.”²⁸ Burkett and radical feminists of course espouse positions antithetical to those of the cultural conservatives, and their “historical essentialism,” as it might be called, differs sharply from the naturalist essentialism of the cultural conservatives. Yet both articulate an objectivist critique of self-identification, voluntarism, and subjectivism.

Writing after the Dolezal revelations, the radical feminist journalist Megan Murphy made a similar argument. Like Burkett, she professed respect for Jenner’s identity choices. But she noted that many of the arguments raised against Dolezal could be applied to Jenner as well; she mentioned specifically Alicia Waters’s claim that Dolezal “presented to the world the trappings of black womanhood without the burden of having to have lived them for most of her life” and Zeba Blay’s claim that she “play[ed] into racial stereotypes and perpetuate[d] the false idea that it is possible to ‘feel’ a race.” Like Burkett, Murphy insisted that “those of us who were born and raised as female have the right to define and discuss that experience and our movement, as we have done for over a century now, as we see fit.”²⁹

The gender and racial essentialists, I have noted, were mainly cultural conservatives; conversely, most cultural conservatives adopted an essentialist stance. One might therefore have expected to find the cultural left defending the opposite stance of gender and racial voluntarism. The cultural right made this expectation explicit: given its attachment to a language of individual autonomy and social

construction, the cultural left *ought* to adopt a consistently voluntarist stance. And indeed a few representatives of the cultural left (as well as others on the left) defended gender and racial voluntarism. But the overwhelming majority accepted Jenner's claim while rejecting Dolezal's; they combined gender voluntarism with racial essentialism. Before considering this stance, however, I sketch the main lines of argument developed by the small set of gender and racial voluntarists (who occupied quadrant 3 in the diagram).

The "if Jenner, then Dolezal" syllogism, as noted above, worked primarily in reverse. If one starts from the unquestionable assumption that Dolezal could *not* be black, the syllogism led ineluctably to the conclusion that Jenner could not be a woman—and, by extension, to the delegitimation of transgender more generally. This is why the syllogism was wielded so gleefully by the cultural right. And it explains why the cultural left, committed to both gender voluntarism and racial essentialism, rejected the terms of the syllogism and denied that the Jenner and Dolezal cases were comparable.

A few contrarian voices, however, accepted the terms of the syllogism. Addressing those who acknowledged that Jenner was a woman, they argued that, by a similar logic, one should acknowledge, or at least entertain seriously, Dolezal's claim to be black. Writing as a black transgender man and as a scholar of race, gender, and sexuality, Kai Green challenged prevailing black and transgender commentary by defending the legitimacy of asking about the relation between "transgender" and "transracial." "It is not a stupid question," he wrote. "It is a perplexing question," one that is "important [to] wrestle with." Labeling the question "transphobic" or simply asserting that race and gender "aren't the same thing" is "not a good answer."³⁰

The legal scholar Camille Gear Rich, who has studied the cultural, institutional, and legal shift toward racial self-identification, challenged the prevailing framing in terms of "deceit" or "appropriation." In a CNN opinion piece Rich wrote: "I admire the way [Dolezal] chose to live her life as a black person. . . . I will not indict her for her choice to link herself to this community, and I would consider her claim no greater if she identified a long lost African ancestor."³¹ The sociologist Ann Morning, who has studied the identification and classification of multiracial individuals, endorsed the transgender-transracial analogy in a CBS interview: "We're getting more and more used to the idea that people's racial affiliation and identity and sense of belonging can change."³² And when the historian Allyson Hobbs, author of a book on racial passing, was asked by MSNBC's Melissa Harris-Perry whether, by analogy to the transgender experience, there might be "a different category of blackness, that is about the *achievement* of blackness, despite one's parentage," Hobbs replied that it was "absolutely possible. . . . Why not? . . . There certainly is a chance that she identifies as a black woman, and that there could be authenticity to that."³³

The anarchist philosopher Crispin Sartwell, while acknowledging others' discomfort with the prospect of gender and racial categories breaking down, envisioned the "wild and liberating possibilities [that] might open up" at this "excruciating and beautiful moment."³⁴ And from the perspective of queer theory, the sociologist Angela Jones celebrated Dolezal's "queering of race," stressing the possibility that Dolezal "*has* become a black woman," and that "maybe the only livable life [for her] is a black one." "Subjectivities are ours to craft," Jones wrote, and it is "an exercise of agency, empowerment, and queerness" to challenge the "hegemonic discursive power regimes that imprison our bodies." Dolezal's

“choice to fulfill her own racial destiny is her choice, not ours.”³⁵

The most sustained argument for embracing racial along with gender voluntarism was developed by the political scientist and left intellectual Adolph Reed Jr.³⁶ Like the conservative essentialists, Reed criticized the inconsistency of the cultural left for embracing Jenner while repudiating Dolezal. But rather than deploy this critique in defense of gender essentialism, he used it in opposition to racial essentialism. That essentialism, he suggested, rests ultimately on biology: it depends on the argument that Dolezal simply couldn't be black because she had no known African ancestry, which implies that she *could* be black if she *did* have some African ancestry. As Reed and others observed, this troublingly mirrors the essentialist logic of the one-drop rule.³⁷

Reed also challenged nonbiological, historical forms of essentialism that claim that Dolezal was “raised outside of ‘authentic’ black idiom or cultural experience.” Such arguments pose the question of “whose black idiom or cultural experience” would count as definitive. Nor does authenticity enable us to distinguish between Jenner and Dolezal: “How do we know that Dolezal may not sense that she is ‘really’ black in the same, involuntary way that many transgender people feel that they are ‘really’ transgender?” Reed rejected, finally, the condemnation of Dolezal for engaging in “cultural appropriation.” Following Walter Benn Michaels, he argued that this critique has force “only if ‘culture’ is essentialized as the property of what is in effect a ‘race.’”³⁸ Reed concluded that there is “no coherent, principled defense of the stance that transgender identity is legitimate but transracial is not.”³⁹

Why were there so few consistent voluntarists in the Dolezal debates? (As will be noted below, a similar question can be asked about the complete absence of voices

defending the combination of gender essentialism and racial voluntarism). Does this point to the robustness of essentialist understandings of race and to their imperviousness to decades of academic theorizing about race as a social construction? There is something to this, but it is not the whole story. The particularities of the Dolezal case in effect stacked the deck against voluntarism. Framed by the media in terms of deception and misrepresentation, her story was unlikely to elicit broad sympathy. Other developments, which I consider in subsequent chapters, reveal greater public appreciation of the openness of racial identities to change and choice.

Boundary Work: The Argument from Difference

Essentialists and voluntarists held antithetical views, but both embraced the terms of the “if Jenner, then Dolezal” syllogism and underscored the similarities between gender transitions and racial reidentification. Other voices in the debate, however, rejected any kind of equivalence between Jenner and Dolezal and underscored the fundamental differences between “transgender” and “transracial.” They did so, overwhelmingly, by accepting the legitimacy of changing one’s gender while denying the legitimacy of changing one’s race. In the terms of the diagram, they crowded into quadrant 2, defined by gender voluntarism and racial essentialism, while shunning altogether quadrant 4, defined by the inverse combination of gender essentialism and racial voluntarism.

The absence of advocates for gender essentialism and racial voluntarism is in one sense puzzling, given the widely shared sense that differences of sex and gender are deeper

and more fundamental than differences of race.⁴⁰ The avoidance of this quadrant—as of the consistent voluntarism of quadrant 3—no doubt reflects the fact that Jenner had a “good” identity narrative while Dolezal’s story was tainted by deception and misrepresentation.

Yet there are deeper patterns that go beyond Jenner and Dolezal. On the cultural left, race remains a much more closely policed category than gender: while gender voluntarism can fairly be said to be hegemonic, racial voluntarism is heretical or at best suspect. Transgender claims have been framed as a civil rights issue: as a response to exclusion, oppression, and violence. Claims to choose or change one’s racial identity—such as those advanced by the multiracial movement—have been much more difficult to frame in this way; they have even been criticized for weakening and fragmenting the black community and undermining the civil rights and racial justice agendas.⁴¹ This helps explain why the cultural left has endorsed gender voluntarism and racial essentialism rather than the inverse combination.

On the cultural right, by contrast, sex and gender—as categories central to both cognitive and social order—are much more closely policed than race and ethnicity. The destabilization of the sex/gender order is much more threatening than the destabilization of racial and ethnic categories to the core agenda of the cultural right, which is centered on the defense of the family. (This holds even more strongly, as noted above, for religious cultural conservatives.) Criticisms of multiculturalism, to be sure, are central to the message of the cultural right. But the perceived threat to nationhood from multiculturalism does not come from the unsettling of racial and ethnic categories; indeed, multiculturalism in a sense presupposes the stability of those categories. To the extent that the cultural right is invested in the ideology of color blindness or in the notion of a post-racial

society, it would welcome rather than resist the destabilization of racial categories.

One might have expected, then, to find commentators from the cultural right endorsing racial voluntarism along with gender essentialism. As I noted above, some did observe that Dolezal’s claim seemed on its face more plausible than Jenner’s, since differences of sex and gender are deeper than those of race. But this did not lead these commentators to argue expressly for racial voluntarism, at least not in connection with Dolezal, whose politics were antithetical to their own.

The flood of commentary defending the combination of gender voluntarism and racial essentialism can best be understood as a kind of *boundary work*. This concept was introduced in the sociology of science by Thomas Gieryn to highlight the efforts undertaken to demarcate science—as a prestigious form of activity commanding certain privileges, resources, respect, and authority—from non-science or pseudoscience.⁴² As Gieryn noted, the concept is easily applied to analogous attempts to distinguish medicine from quackery, religion from non-religion, art from crafts, disciplines and professional jurisdictions from one another, and so on; and it has since come to be used in a wide variety of contexts.⁴³ Here I extend the concept to the quasi-sociological rhetorical work undertaken to distinguish the (legitimate) practice of changing gender from the (illegitimate) practice of changing race.

The boundary work undertaken by defenders of gender voluntarism and racial essentialism rejected any equivalence between Dolezal’s identification as black and Jenner’s identification as a woman. Dolezal *chose* to identify as black; Jenner simply *was* a woman. Dolezal was living a lie; Jenner was being true to her innermost self. Dolezal was opportunistic; Jenner was authentic. Dolezal gained material benefits

from her imposture; Jenner gained only the satisfaction of being true to herself. Dolezal was guilty of appropriation and “cultural theft,” taking what rightfully belonged to others; Jenner harmed no one. But it was not simply the two cases that were distinguished; it was two orders of phenomena. Boundary work drew a more general, quasi-sociological line between changing sex or gender and changing race.

Boundary work in the Dolezal affair took two forms. Both sought to distinguish transgender claims as a socially legitimate form of identity change from transracial claims as a socially illegitimate form. But they were oriented to different threats and inscribed in different projects. Gender voluntarists—committed to institutionalizing and legitimizing transgender claims and identities—sought to prevent the policing of racial identities that was triggered by the Dolezal affair from strengthening the policing of gender identities. Racial essentialists—committed to preserving the integrity of racial categories—sought to prevent gender voluntarism (which had been strengthened by the Jenner debut) from licensing racial voluntarism and thereby encouraging fraudulent or opportunistic racial identity claims.

Gender voluntarist boundary work sought to protect Jenner—and the still-fragile public legitimacy of transgender claims—from “contamination” by association with Dolezal. The Jenner debut had marked an extraordinary moment in the mainstreaming of transgender identities. Writing in the *Economist*, the essayist Will Wilkinson declared the “social forces that brought us to the Caitlyn Jenner moment” to be “irreversibly ascendant.”⁴⁴ Two days later, however, the Dolezal affair—with its discourse of deception, fraud, and pathology—threatened to undo the gains made by the broad public acceptance of Jenner. As the writer, television host, and prominent transgender activist Janet Mock tweeted, “Trans folks’ lives should not be part of the Dolezal conversation. It’s

dangerous.”⁴⁵ “To conflate trans folks with Dolezal,” the media studies scholar Khadijah White wrote, “gives credence to the deepest, most malicious lie there is about transgender identity and queer sexuality—that they are deceitful.”⁴⁶ For Samantha Allen, a scholar of gender and sexuality, “Dolezal’s domination of public conversations around identity comes at a particularly inopportune time. . . . This lone woman from Idaho has the potential to do real damage to public perceptions and conceptions of transgender identity.”⁴⁷

Jenner thus risked being tainted by association with Dolezal, “transgender” by association with “transracial”—not to mention “transspecies” and other purported fruits of liberal solipsism and anything-goes social constructivism, conjured up by gleeful cultural conservatives. Faced with this attempted *reductio ad absurdum*, those who had cautiously embraced gender voluntarism as a result of the mainstreaming of transgender identities in the last few years might now revert to gender essentialism. Gender voluntarist boundary work was an effort to prevent such backsliding.

To forestall the delegitimation of Jenner and transgender by association with Dolezal and transracial, it was necessary to challenge the “if Jenner, then Dolezal” logic. This is the context for the oft-repeated assertion that transracial is “not a thing.”⁴⁸ The Dolezal story was cordoned off, marked as pathological, and treated as a case unto itself, rather than as an instance of the broader phenomenon of racial reidentification. This quarantining of the Dolezal case facilitated the contrast between the “non-thingness” of transracial and the legitimate, institutionalized social reality of transgender.

Gender voluntarist boundary work underscored the objective foundations of transgender identities, which were characterized as deep, stable, lifelong, unchosen, and probably grounded in biology. “Caitlyn Jenner is not pretending,” wrote Dana Beyer, the head of a Maryland gender rights

association. “Jenner has been a woman since birth—or more likely, before birth—like many, if not most, trans women. . . . And while there are variations in trans biology . . . it really is pretty clear cut: your sense of self as a sexual being, your gender identity, is rooted in your brain.”⁴⁹ Without appealing to brain differences, Meredith Talusan, a writer and transgender activist, made a similar point: “The fundamental difference between Dolezal’s actions and trans people’s is that her decision to identify as black was an active choice, whereas transgender people’s decision to transition is almost always involuntary. . . . Dolezal identified as black, but *I am* a woman, and other trans people *are* the gender they feel themselves to be.”⁵⁰

On accounts such as these, gender identity is at once subjective and objective. It is *defined* by one’s subjective “sense of self,” but that sense of self is understood as *grounded* in some objective—if at present still unknown—aspect of one’s biological being. The sources of subjectivity are situated outside the realm of choice and reflexive self-transformation, outside the realm of culture, and even, paradoxically, outside the self. In this way the defense of gender voluntarism is pushed onto essentialist terrain. This is of course not new. The claim to a deep, unchosen, biologically grounded gender identity at variance with the sexed body has long been a prominent strand of transsexual and transgender discourse, just as the claim that sexual identity and orientation are innate and unchosen has long been a prominent strand of gay and lesbian discourse.⁵¹

Gender voluntarist boundary work thus presumed the illegitimacy of Dolezal’s change of race and sought to explain the legitimacy of Jenner or others changing their gender. Racial essentialist boundary work, by contrast, presumed the legitimacy of changing one’s gender and sought to explain the illegitimacy of Dolezal’s change of race. And while

gender voluntarists faced an acute threat of contamination from the Dolezal affair, racial essentialists were oriented to a more diffuse threat: that the growing legitimacy of gender voluntarism—dramatized by the broad public embrace of Jenner—might cross over into the racial domain and encourage “racial fraud” and cultural appropriation. The ubiquitous “if Jenner, then Dolezal” trope—and the suspicion that Dolezal herself was seeking to ride the transgender wave—seemed to make this threat more concrete.⁵²

Racial essentialists’ explanation of the illegitimacy of Dolezal’s identification as black—in contrast to the presumed legitimacy of Jenner’s identification as a woman—pivoted on two themes: objectivity and appropriation. The term “objectivity,” unlike “appropriation,” was not used by participants in the debate. But it enables me to bring together a set of ideas sounded repeatedly in the Dolezal debates. The underlying argument of racial essentialists was that racial identity, unlike gender identity, is constituted by an ensemble of supra-individual facts: the biogenetic and genealogical facts of ancestry; the social facts of classification systems and categorization practices; and the historical facts of enslavement, oppression, and discrimination. Subjectivity is constitutive of gender: the “truth” of gender is found in the innermost feelings of an individual, and those feelings must be recognized and respected. But as many commentators emphasized, how one *feels* about race is irrelevant. Subjectivity is understood as an *expression* of racial identity, not as its ground.

The supra-individual objectivity of race, on this account, explains why it cannot legitimately be changed or chosen. Dolezal could change her appearance, style, and self-presentation; she could change her networks of social relations and activities; she could “feel” black and identify, no doubt sincerely, with black culture and history; and

she could exploit contemporary versions of the one-drop rule to pass as black. But passing, on the objectivist understanding of race, does not involve changing one's race; it involves successfully pretending to be something one is not. Passing intrinsically involves deception—justifiable deception, perhaps, for the many light-skinned blacks who have successfully passed as white, but deception nonetheless.⁵³ Passing is always trespassing.⁵⁴

The deception involved in performing an identity to which one has no legitimate claim underwrites the charges of appropriation and cultural theft.⁵⁵ In a context in which *who is what* can determine not only *who* (legitimately) *gets what* but also *who* (legitimately) *gets to do what*, Dolezal was accused of selectively indulging in “blackness as a commodity,” of “donning blackness” in order to “negotiate black spaces,” while retaining the privilege of removing her “costume” at will.⁵⁶ While gender transitions are understood to be undertaken at great personal cost and to bring no extrinsic benefits, Dolezal was asserted to have “capitalized on her fake blackness,” “building a career and persona off it”: she selectively “appropriated aspects of blackness” for her “personal benefit” and “occupied and dominated spaces ostensibly reserved for people who had life-long experiences of racial marginalization and disenfranchisement.”⁵⁷

The viscerally negative reaction to Dolezal’s “reverse passing” that informed racial essentialist boundary work drew on a politically and morally charged contrast between the optional and reversible donning of blackness by Dolezal and the involuntary and (for most) inescapable reality of the black body, understood as *the* or at least *a* primary meaning of blackness for black Americans.⁵⁸ Dolezal could “pick and choose [her] blackness.” But “those of us born into black bodies can’t do that. We can’t take our blackness off when the situation doesn’t suit us.”⁵⁹ This contrast was all the more

poignant in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, focused on police violence against black bodies.⁶⁰ “Michael Brown couldn’t be transracial,” the legal scholar Jody Armour noted. “When you walk into prisons and jail cells, you see cellblocks brimming with bodies that are conspicuously black. Those black bodies had no choice in how they were perceived.”⁶¹

The contrast became more poignant still on June 17, when Dylann Roof killed nine parishioners during a prayer service at a historic black church in Charleston. This marked the end of the Dolezal affair; further discussion seemed frivolous. As Jelani Cobb wrote in the *New Yorker* the day after the massacre: “A week that began with public grappling with race as absurdity has concluded . . . with race as the catalyst for tragedy. The existential question of who is black has been answered in the most concussive way possible.”⁶²

It is tempting to dismiss the Dolezal affair as an inconsequential, Internet-driven summer diversion, and on one level it was no doubt just that. At the same time, however, the affair revealed with striking clarity the tensions and contradictions in the contemporary politics of sex/gender and ethnoracial identity. It is to a broader analysis of these tensions and contradictions that I turn in chapter 2.