

# Transracialism and White Allyship: A Response to Rebecca Tuvel

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**ABSTRACT:** My reading of Tuvel's defense of transracialism focuses on her critiques of three main objections to a transracial identity. Tuvel attempts to show how her defense of transracialism stands in the face of these objections. However, I argue that her position is not sufficiently immune to them. In other words, my response delineates the ways in which all three objections remain, and effectively undermine her argument in favor of transracial identities. Additionally, through the question of white allyship, I ask about the moral and political consequences of choosing to identify as transracial. I show that, without a clear account of what an existential choice of racial transitioning implies for allyship across race, Tuvel does not sufficiently establish the differences between the historical constitutions of racialized and sexualized identities. In failing to engage with these moral/political implications, Tuvel's position does not address the complex relationship between individual agency and collective accountability.

**KEY WORDS:** race, social construction, allyship, white privilege, transgender identity, ontology of the social

Rebecca Tuvel's defense of transracialism begins with the claim that "considerations that support transgenderism extend to transracialism."<sup>1</sup> In January 2017, I was invited to respond to this argument at the meeting of the Eastern APA. Below are my comments from this conversation, edited so as to engage more closely with the published version of Tuvel's work in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*.

In staging her argument, Tuvel notes that her claim does not rest on the assumption that "race and sex are equivalent, or historically constructed in the same way."<sup>2</sup> However, it is difficult to think of the differences between the historical constructions of race and sex without asking about their implications for allyship. Though Tuvel does not address these implications, I find them pertinent to the

conversation for which her argument calls.<sup>3</sup> Hence, I have crafted my response to her work with the specific intention of bringing the notion of transracialism to bear on conditions for the possibility of white allyship. To be clear, Tuvel's defense of transracialism identifies transracial identity as an existential choice, the possibility of which we ought to at least entertain.<sup>4</sup> The thoughts I offer on white allyship are not to negate the possibility of such an existential choice, but rather to raise the question of the moral and political consequences of such choices. In other words, we might grant that it is possible to change one's racialized identity in a way that it is now acknowledged as possible to change one's gendered identity. But without a clear account of what this existential choice of racial transitioning implies for allyship across race, it seems as though we do commit the error of at least implying that race and sex are historically constructed in a similar way.

Because my comments are so oriented, I focus on Tuvel's responses to what (for simplicity's sake) I name (1) the "experience" objection, (2) the "social understanding" objection, and (3) the "privilege" objection. These are described by Tuvel as follows:<sup>5</sup>

- 1) "[It] is unacceptable to claim a black identity unless one has grown up with a black experience" (the "experience" objection);
- 2) "[Society's] current understanding of race places limits on an individual's (perhaps otherwise) legitimate claim to change race" (the "social understanding" objection);
- 3) "[It] is a wrongful exercise of white privilege for a white person to cross into the black racial category, and that such crossing is therefore wrong" ("privilege" objection).

### THE THREE OBJECTIONS

Responding to objection (1), Tuvel argues that it should be sufficient that a person's *current* experience is that of another's race, even if her *past* experience was not. She holds that "it remains unclear why one's *past* experience with racism is required for one's current status as black."<sup>6</sup> My response to this would be that it is only in light of my past experience with being racialized in a particular way that my current experience can be categorized as such (namely, an experience of being racialized in that particular way). Said differently, the past (my past) is never "past," since it is always implicated in (and informing) the present. This seems to be particularly the case for questions of identity in general, and racial identity in particular. So if it is the case that someone like Rachel Dolezal is "racialized as black in her current life," then this presupposes that she comes to this "current life" with a compartment shaped by past experiences of being racialized as black. Without this organic relationship between past and present (such that "past" is

always-already here, with and in the present), one's current experience counts as something other than being racialized as black.

In moving to her response to the "social understanding" objection (objection 2), Tuvel is rightly critical of a position that requires biology to ground the legitimacy of the cultural naming of identities. This idea of a "sincere biologically based self" is problematic, since (1) it reduces all legitimacy to nature, or what is natural, (2) it potentially misrepresents the relationship between what is natural and what is social/cultural in the human condition, and (3) it unjustly produces gate-keeping mechanisms that require a biological first premise to all (gendered) identity claims. Tuvel locates these critiques of the biological in the role that ancestry typically plays in racialized identity constructions. She points out that, within these constructions, what gets named as ancestry is biologically (or genetically) ambiguous, and insufficiently robust to qualify as an actual biological component of racialized identities. In other words, she is correct in her synopsis that "racial groupings of people are arbitrary from a genetic point of view."<sup>7</sup>

It follows from this that, yes, "there is no essential *genetic* 'black' core that [someone like Rachel Dolezal] is violating" when she attempts to transition from white to black.<sup>8</sup> But there does seem to be some core that is misrepresented (if not outright violated), in a case like Dolezal's. This "core" (I'm not sure this is the right word here, but we'll stick with it), while not genetic in the strict sense, does unavoidably inform what it means to be (and to *not* be) black. In Alain Locke's 1924 essay, "The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Culture,"<sup>9</sup> he shows us that what is understood as the ancestral (bloodline, genetic) core of a racial group is really the socially constituted appropriation of that ancestry. Said otherwise, the biology of race is really about a *relationship*—namely, a relationship between actual genetic ancestry (on the one hand), and the cultural and social signification of that ancestry (on the other), which then allows ancestry to mean certain things, in certain contexts, for certain groups of people. Hence, the role and predicative force of ancestry, in my racial identity, is not biological at all, but rather, *social* (or cultural).

It is sometimes tempting to read, in the sociality of social constructions (like race and gender), its availability to change and adjustment.<sup>10</sup> To be sure, when cast alongside formations that are natural, or biological, this "readiness for change" is precisely what shows up in constructions that are social in kind. However, I want to push back against this, for at least the important reason that this move continues to privilege the biological/natural. What I mean is this. Yes, relative to those biological "givens," social constructions are "malleable." But this is to gauge the malleability of a social construction in biological terms—it is to retain the primacy of the biological (a move that Tuvel herself claims to resist). Beyond this prioritization of the natural, the proposed malleability of social constructions shows up as something entirely different. In other words, conceptualized

*in themselves* (and not relative to the “givens” of biology), we enter into a more productive understanding of the ontology of the social (of social constructions).

Hence, alongside the claim that racial (and gendered) identities are socially constructed, we might ask ourselves: What, exactly, are social constructions? Or, to echo Linda Alcoff’s question in her June 2015 interview with Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzales on *Democracy Now*, what does it mean to say that race is a social construction?<sup>11</sup> For starters, it means that it is a *social* construction. When, instead, we approach race as a social *construction* (an emphasis-shift that, to my mind, returns primacy to the biological), to then use this to argue for alternative and ahistorical roles for individual agency, we seem to incorporate a misconstrued ontology of what is social in kind. I find this misconstrual to be at the center of Tuvel’s criticism of “[limiting] to the status quo the possibilities for changing one’s membership in any identity category.”<sup>12</sup> This status quo captures (among other things) “beliefs about the kind of thing that race *is*.”<sup>13</sup> To my mind, the weight of this criticism depends on what we want to imply by “status quo.” In one sense, that which is “status quo” points to the arbitrary mores, conventions, and sensibilities that govern our communal lived experience, not necessarily because it *should*, but because, most contingently, they do. But then there is another sense for which “status quo” stands—the mores, conventions and sensibilities that, though contingent, come out of a complicated and heavy history, and that possess a reality that is *really real* (that participates in the ontology of the social). The first sense seems to emphasize the malleability of the status quo (seeing it as a set of social *constructions*). The second sense, on the other hand, emphasizes the status quo’s relative imperviousness to individual agency (seeing it as a set of *social* constructions).

To be sure, both senses organically relate to each other. That is to say, what we mean by “individual agency” necessarily manifests itself in the context of the “status quo”—who I chose to be (and why) are always materially situated, shaped in terms of the context given to me by social and historical forces. That context is not totally independent of me, because the collective “we” (of which I am a part) moves the dial of that context at the same time that it materially situates us. In other words, the social and cultural possibilities available to us do change. But their mode of change is *social* and *cultural* in nature. What this means is that, for all the social transformations we’ve witnessed (nationally and globally), communities participate in the aporetic play between (1) negotiating the context against which they must live and (2) calling the rules of the game to task for the sake of human liberation. Such “social progress” (in Tuvel’s words) happens as a social, communal endeavor, and requires the collective co-signing of shared practices and customs. What determines that collective co-signing is not a matter of disparate individuals exercising their individual agencies in an ahistorical way, but rather the much more complicated negotiations between individual agency

and the histories out of which they signify, all the while shouldering the collective implications of exercising that historically-situated individual agency. From my individual vantage point, this context shows up as really real, a brute and heavy given which I must take into account as I choose myself.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Tuvel makes a compelling point with the following question: Would all this imply that “during a time [when sociohistorical context foreclosed the possibility of transgenderism], a person born with male genitalia, but who identified as a woman, would not be permitted to so identify, because the available social resources were not yet in place?”<sup>15</sup> We live with a sociocultural context that would make most (if not all) of us aghast with horror at this scenario. And our current context, supported by collective (though not unanimous) agreement, is a consequence of the social transformation (let’s just call it social *progress*, since this is what it is) that moved the dial of our shared practices around gender identity. But Tuvel’s question seems to stack the deck at the outset, to suggest that this assessment would have, or even *should* have been possible prior to that collective change in context. In other words, though her question is compelling, the abstraction from context, which the question implicitly asks her readers to perform, seems fraught. This is not to argue that we cannot cast moral judgments across historical epochs and social contexts. But it is to say that we decide, together, those social transformations that are morally required and/or legitimate. To be sure, there are actual individuals staking these claims throughout such social transformations. But such individual decisions are always against a backdrop of transforming *social* practices and customs.

Lastly, I want to address objection (3), or what I’ve named the “privilege” objection. The objection holds that “it is a wrongful exercise of white privilege for a white-born person to cross into the black racial category.”<sup>16</sup> I want to respond to the second part of Tuvel’s response to this objection, and so I will quote her here: “[It] is difficult to see how *giving up* one’s whiteness and becoming black is an exercise of white privilege. Rather, it seems like the ultimate renunciation of white privilege, if by white privilege we understand an unequal system of advantages conferred onto white bodies.”<sup>17</sup> She then goes on to say that if, indeed, someone like Dolezal represents this renunciation of white privilege, society should “view [her] as refusing to benefit from an unequal system of advantages conferred on the basis of her skin color.”<sup>18</sup>

Let’s assume, for the sake of the argument, that Rachel Dolezal’s presentation of herself as an African American woman was a success. In other words, there was not a moment in her life that others questioned her claim that she was, indeed, a black woman. On this account, we might say that hers was a refusal to benefit from *some* of the advantages conferred to individuals on the basis of all that a white phenotype includes. She chose to do all she could to mask her white appearance, and in so doing, chose to refuse those benefits that come along with

such an appearance. However, the very choice to mask her appearance in this way, to bring about certain ends of her own choosing (and no other), is a choice that comes out of a position of privilege. In other words, 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. She doesn't refuse this privilege, since the consequences of the ontology of the social means that she cannot.

The "privilege" in white privilege is a relational term. That is to say, if white privilege exists (and I think most readers of this forum will agree that it does), then it both produces and is a product of non-white *under*-privilege. The benefits enjoyed by persons occupying positions of white privilege make sense only alongside the benefits *denied* to persons occupying positions of non-white under-privilege. To bring a case like Dolezal into this relational context is to ask about the implications of a black person race-transitioning into someone white. Can this black person have this choice available to her, to mask, to the best of her ability, her phenotypically black appearance, so that she can then claim a white identity, without unintended implications/consequences?<sup>19</sup> This cultural phenomenon has a name (we used to call it passing, and it wasn't pretty). The phenomenon of a black person being (mis-)recognized as white is loaded with an insidious history, and therefore makes this nowhere near the equivalent to Rachel Dolezal's case. Tuvel mentions rapper Lil' Kim as someone who "has been in the news for having undergone a transition from a black to a white appearance."<sup>20</sup> This is only a partly true account of Lil' Kim. She does seem to have transitioned from a black to a white *appearance*, not to a white-*identifying* person. Were it the latter, Lil' Kim would be called to shoulder the historical implications of passing (a consequence that, I'm sure, she would not be choosing, even if her intentions were to transition into a white person, which they are, undoubtedly, not).

Hence, the range of agency made available to someone like Rachel Dolezal, to transition from a white to black person, supposedly without unintended consequences, is just not the same as the range available to a black person. Our shared practices and customs produce a sociohistorical context that is an unequal power terrain. And this is what privilege is—the privilege you have to do what I cannot do, to be what I cannot be, to choose in ways that I cannot choose. Tuvel's response to this is that we ought to make such ways of choosing available to a black person (to someone like Lil' Kim, for instance). But we don't yet live in that kind of social universe. But in *this* one, someone like Dolezal *does* have such ways of choosing available to her, which a black person unequivocally does not. It is for this reason that Dolezal's decision to reject her privilege comes from a position of privilege, and ultimately affirms that privilege in her very decision to reject it (the privilege lies in having the option to say "yes" or "no").

### THE QUESTION OF WHITE ALLYSHIP

Granted, the question I now raise about the possibilities for white allyship in the fight for racial justice would apply to white persons committed to that fight. Given that it is precisely Rachel Dolezal's racial identity that is up for debate, it is difficult to bring this question to her case without effectively deciding the outcome of said debate. Nonetheless, there is much room for the claim that Dolezal is, indeed, a white person who (given the biographical details of her life) has been committed to racial justice. It is within that space that her particular case allows us to pose the question of white allyship (a question, the pertinence of which certainly transcends the Dolezal affair). And so, I ask: What happens to white allyship in a world that permits transracial white-to-black identities?

My earlier assessment of Tuvel's treatment of the "privilege" objection shows that a white person does not intentionally opt into her racial privilege. Consequently, she cannot intentionally opt out of it either. This is the real limit of her individual agency (an agency that is shaped through past experiences, and that is never completely divorced from its sociohistorical constitutions). To be clear, there are ways in which a white person can be critical of that privilege, or be sufficiently vigilant of how our shared cultural practices are set up to facilitate it. But a comportment that claims to be able to fully opt out of racially-constituted privilege seems blind to the privilege upon which this comportment rests. I find this disconcerting for white persons claiming solidarity with persons of color in the fight for racial justice. Such solidarity can certainly rest on alternative (more vigilant and critical) performances of whiteness. But we seem to put this allyship at risk when, instead of performing whiteness differently, white persons aim to shed their white identities altogether. This is because the white person who attempts to shed her white identity becomes blind to the racial privilege that she cannot opt out of, and therefore runs the risk of perpetuating the very structural racisms against which an ally ought to fight.

Hence, the white ally is the person who, in solidarity with communities of color, fights systemic racism *always and only as white*, always from a historical and embodied location of whiteness. In his second edition of *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, George Yancy effectively demonstrates that, from this historical location, one can certainly perform whiteness differently—denaturalize white over-privilege, un-center white culture, white epistemology and white aesthetics. But all this happens in white skin and through white bodies.<sup>21</sup> As they engage in anti-racist practices, bound to communities of color, white allies are nevertheless *also* bound to systems of white power. The effectiveness of one's anti-racism depends on an understanding of this "double bind," and an understanding of this "double bind" depends on ownership (and not disavowal) of one's white identity.



I will end with these thoughts on the condition for the possibility of white allyship. To my mind, this question is of high priority as we determine the moral and political consequences of defending an individual's choice to transition races. If such a defense is at odds with conditions that facilitate an effective white allyship in the fight against racial justice, then (I hold) that gives us reason for due pause. As a mode of identification, transracialism must enact itself in a world shaped by racial violence and systemic racial injustice. In such a world, we must couple considerations that pertain to individual agency with considerations pertaining to historical and collective responsibility. There need not be violation of the former for the sake of the latter. Rather, through realizing the "ethically corrupt relational ontology"<sup>22</sup> that is racism, we might move beyond this fraught binary, toward something more productive and meaningful, like a path toward liberation for all.

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## NOTES

1. Rebecca Tuvel, "In Defense of Transracialism," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 32(2) (Spring 2017): 264.
2. *Ibid.*, 275.
3. On my reading, allyship comes up once; *ibid.*, 272.
4. In footnote 9, she cites trans theorist C. Jacob Hale's work on gender in order to call for an account of racial identity as an "existential choice in accordance with moral and political principles" (*ibid.*, 276).
5. *Ibid.*, 268.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 267.
8. *Ibid.*; emphasis added.
9. Alain Locke, "The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Structure," in *The Idea of Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lott (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 89–99.
10. Tuvel notes this, quoting Charles Mills's identification of five categories that pertain to racial identity formation. She writes, "If ancestry is a less emphasized feature in some places (for example, in Brazil), then Dolezal's exposure to black culture . . . could be sufficient to deem that she *is* black in those places" ("In Defense of Transracialism," 267). Here, I read Tuvel to be making—erroneously—the case for racial transitioning from the fact of racial malleability. That is to say, though the meaning of racial identity (and how it is prescribed) is context-specific, we cannot imply, from this, that an individual is in a position to change the criteria for racial definition within a specific context. It may be true that Rachel Dolezal's racial identity would signify differently in a society like Brazil. But that does not mean that she can deploy Brazilian criteria for racial formation while remaining in a society like the United States.
11. In her *Democracy Now* interview, Dr. Alcoff notes roughly three components to how racial identity (and identification) works: (a) lineage, (b) cultural assimilation,



- and (c) appearance. Any of these can trump the others, depending on the cultural, historical and geographical contexts that are available. But in the United States, it is arguably lineage that trumps the other two. As Alcoff correctly points out, Dolezal's position was not at all that ancestry should be irrelevant in a case like hers (a case in which an individual freely determines her racial identity). To the contrary, the particulars of Dolezal's life (or at least what we, the public, came to know of her life) demonstrates that hers was an implicit acknowledgement of the relevance of lineage and ancestry. As Alcoff puts it, Dolezal "was relying on the fact that people around her were assuming that she meant lineage" when she identified herself as African American. Even though she seemed to be claiming that her assimilation of black culture was enough for her to be black, "she had to have known" (Alcoff's words) that the collective "we" of North American society took her to mean that she had black parents (who were also black by the "lineage" criteria). All to say Rachel Dolezal was not "simply [changing] the rules of the societal game," to then implicitly claim that appearance and cultural assimilation was sufficient to make legitimate the choice of racial transitioning. Instead, her identity performance conceded to societal rules that would call into serious question the legitimacy of that identity performance (of a white person, born of white parents, claiming that she/he ought to be recognized by society as black, because "being black" is her preferred racial category).
12. Tuvel, "In Defense of Transracialism," 269.
  13. Ibid. Here, Tuvel quotes from Cressida Hayes's work.
  14. This (I would say) is precisely what Dolezal does as she avoids discussion of the racial identities of her biological parents, as she lives her own life as an African American woman. Her acknowledgement of lineage as the primary ingredient in the context (the "status quo") through which we (North Americans) become racialized is there, throughout her choosing of herself, as it is with all of us. There aren't any attempts, on Dolezal's part, to shift the dial of this context of racialization. And on this, she doesn't seem to be alone. We all continue to implicitly adopt the shared practice of lineage trumping both appearance and cultural assimilation, when it comes to assigning racial identity to others, and to affirming the racial identity of ourselves.
  15. Tuvel, "In Defense of Transracialism," 269.
  16. Ibid., 270.
  17. Ibid., 271.
  18. Ibid.
  19. Tuvel discusses this comparison. However, she focuses on the *possibility* of such black-to-white transitioning, at the expense of a more in-depth account of the historical implications of such a transition (and how such implications compare with that of a case like Dolezal).
  20. Tuvel, "In Defense of Transracialism," 271.
  21. George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, 2nd edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017). My review of this second edition is forthcoming in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*.
  22. Ibid., xiv.

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