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THE VALIDITY OF TRANSRACIALISM

A THESIS

PRESENTED FOR THE

MASTER OF ARTS

PHILOSOPHY DEGREE

THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

SAMANTHA PRIEST

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, the idea that transracialism could be a valid identity is considered. Standpoint epistemology presents the strongest case against transracialism as a valid identity because, according to Collins's, racial groups have a special sense of a shared history. However, arguments for race as a social construction show how transracialism could function the same way we ordinarily feel like gender functions in our society. The violent disapproval of transracialism highlights both that ordinary usage is being challenged and that it is changing. Ultimately, narrative views of personal identity, like those suggested by Asidair MacIntyre, and the ordinary function of race, show that transracialism should be considered a valid identity.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all my loved ones whose encouragements and support were tireless, and to my professor, Dr. Deborah Mower, who never faltered in effort or showing me why it was important to keep going.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my fellow grad students for all the long talks and feedback, my partner for his dedication and grammatical wisdom, and the professors in the Department of Philosophy and Religion for making sure that I had the tools necessary to succeed. This article would not be possible without all those that believed in me.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nkechi Amare Diallo, formerly Rachel Dolezal, was a prominent member of the black community in Spokane Washington for ten years, which entailed holding positions of leadership within the community including being the president of the Spokane chapter of the NAACP, chair of the Spokane police ombudsman commission, regional civil rights activist, and professor of Africana studies at Eastern Washington University. She sparked controversy in 2015 when it was found that she was not “biologically” black but was actually born to a white European family, and in fact while attending Howard University, Diallo sued the university on grounds that it discriminated against her for being white.<sup>1</sup> The controversy was revealed by her parents when they leaked the truth of her biological lineage to the media. Following the leak, Diallo resigned from her position as president of the NAACP, chair of the ombudsman commission, and was also fired from her position as an instructor for Africana Studies at Eastern Washington University<sup>2</sup>. Later, she published a book titled *In Full Color*<sup>3</sup>, and Netflix produced a documentary<sup>4</sup> detailing her claims and her critics’ arguments.

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<sup>1</sup> “Rachel Dolezal sued Howard for racial discrimination. Because she was white,” Susan Slvrluga, The Washington Post, June 15, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/06/15/rachel-dolezal-sued-howard-for-racial-discrimination-because-she-was-white/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.68db8c6e9175](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/06/15/rachel-dolezal-sued-howard-for-racial-discrimination-because-she-was-white/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.68db8c6e9175).

<sup>2</sup> “Rachel Dolezal book and released from jail for welfare charges,” published July 3, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2018/07/03/rachel-dolezal-booked-and-released-jail-welfare-charges/754042002/>.

<sup>3</sup> Diallo published this book in 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Brownson, Laura, Gilbert, Jeff. *The Rachel Divide*. Streaming. Directed by Brownson, Laura. Netflix Original, 2018.

Originally, Diallo claimed to be transracial. However, during an interview with NBC's Amber Payne on NBCBLK, she claimed to be "Trans-Black"<sup>5</sup>. She said she preferred this term because it supports the idea that she "wasn't born this way but this is who I am component" of how she feels. She changed the term because she thought that the term transracial elicits a feeling that she is "neutral on political and social issues" but she is not. She says she does not affiliate or have any political sympathies with any group which does not benefit black issues<sup>6</sup>. In fact, Diallo claims she has felt trans-black since very early in her childhood, and as early as four years old Diallo was using brown crayons to draw herself.<sup>7</sup>

Five years have passed since the controversy was sparked, and yet Diallo's beliefs about her identity remain constant. Despite the impassable negative consequences both her and her family have faced she stands strong in claiming that she is trans-black. She lost her job as a professor, her membership in the NAACP and ombudsman, and the ability to gain access to any type of work including entry level jobs in the fast food industry. She no longer benefits from claiming a trans-black identity. Therefore, not benefiting from this claim in any tangible way suggests that there is more to her claims than mere economic gain. Some key components of Diallo's case relevant to the philosophical concepts highlighted in this paper will be evaluated, but ultimately the focus of this paper will be on the potential validity of a transracial identity in general.

This case sparked philosopher Rebecca Tuvel to look at the differences between transgenderism and transracialism in an article published in *Hypatia*.

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<sup>5</sup> "Rachel Dolezal Says She Identifies As 'Trans-Black'," YouTube Video, 4:53, posted by "NBC News," March 28, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SfYliM\\_QmA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SfYliM_QmA).

<sup>6</sup> "The Rachel Divide," Netflix.

<sup>7</sup> "Accused of 'Ethnic Fraud,' Rachel Dolezal Says Being Black Wasn't 'Something That I Faked'," YouTube Video, 5:18, posted by "Dr. Phil," April 17, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeBdjRUIv\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeBdjRUIv_w).

In that article, she argued that if we grant that transgenderism is a valid form of identity, then the same philosophical arguments also extend to transracialism. Tuvel claims that in a successful (gender) identity transformation one has a self-proclaimed identity coupled with society's recognition of that identity "by granting her membership in the desired group".<sup>8</sup> Given that both race and gender are often considered mere social constructs Tuvel claims that arguments in favor of transgenderism should extend to transracialism. Her argument stems from the idea that as long as someone "genuinely feel[s] like or identif[ies] as a member of a race other than the one assigned to them at birth--so strongly to the point of seeking a transition to the other race--we should accept their decision to change races."<sup>9</sup> If it is the case that we should allow people to transition into the identity they feel most strongly connected to (like with transgenderism), then it is the case that we should view race the same way. Her argument tinges on the fact that race is a social construct, and the most important take-away from her paper is that it highlights the vagueness of race and the complexities of personal identity. The article was highly controversial and Tuvel was socially attacked, belittled, and ostracized.

The backlash both Diallo and Tuvel received for treating transgenderism similarly to transracialism highlights a major disparity in our beliefs about gender and race. In order to look more closely at these issues, I begin in section 2 by explaining Patricia Collins' arguments for standpoint epistemology and how societal conditions affect racial identity which provides an argument against transracialism which I will refute in the following sections. In Section 3, I look at how racial identity is socially constructed and works on a feedback loop as explained by Sally Haslanger.

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<sup>8</sup> In Defense of Transracialism Rebecca Tuvel *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*. March 29, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

In Section 4, I discuss the influence society has on personal identity as explained by Ann Ferguson. In Section 5, to understand how the social hierarchy and political structures influence racial identities, I explain Carol B. Davies' ideas about location and language within society. Finally, in section 6, I make a proposal that to adequately understand the controversy and to make future advancement, we must first analyze the ordinary language usage of race. Second, we must distinguish between three different forms or "camps" of personal identity: the biological, psychological, and narrative. The narrative forms of identity are championed by MacIntyre, who ultimately presents the strongest case for transracialism. Because the ordinary language use of race disregards personal identity, the common intuition that transracialism is invalid is incorrect. A deeper understanding of the mechanisms of race as a social construct and of narrative personal identity allows us to see that the concept of transracialism is valid and on par with transgenderism.

## SECTION II

### STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY: AN ARGUMENT AGAINST TRANSRACIALISM

The strongest, or most prevalent argument against transracialism, is the idea that one must share a sense of what it is like to be a member of any racial group. Diallo was mostly charged with this idea; she could not be a black woman because she does not share the experiences of black women across America; she was born and raised as a white woman. One epistemologist, Patricia Collins, discusses this very idea in her article, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought”. In this essay, she argues that black women have a self-identified standpoint regarding their oppression that is unique to that group; something members of other groups do not have access to<sup>10</sup>.

Epistemologically speaking, Collins is arguing that knowledge of the material world is shaped by one’s position, or societal class; their place in the hierarchy of society. One’s “political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiencers that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups.”<sup>11</sup> White men have a different point in society than black men, and white women have a different point than black women. These special standpoints are points of view that work to shape conceptions of reality.

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<sup>10</sup> “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought” Patricia Hill Collins. Taken from *Women, knowledge, and reality: explorations in feminist philosophy* 2nd edition. Edited by Ann Gary, Marilyn Pearsall. Routledge New York and London 1996. Page 222.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

It involves a criterion of meaning that involves concrete experience, and this experience is rooted in the understanding of the dynamics of “race, gender, and class subordination.”

According to Collins, black women share a “sense of enduring oppressions”<sup>12</sup> because they are members of the black community that are also women.

It follows from Collin’s argument that racial group membership depends on a shared sense of material reality. This fact would have interesting implications for any Trans identity; namely, transracialism. One could not simply feel as though they belong in a specific racial group without first sharing the groups’ view of material reality. It seems impossible to share the same view of reality as that of the black community, without being a part of the community; one cannot understand what it is like to be oppressed without actually experiencing oppression. So, Collin’s argument discounts ideas about transracialism. It would be completely impossible to achieve such an identity without meeting those necessary requirements.

However, standpoint epistemology is contentious. It universalizes the experience of all individuals in any given racial group. It claims that all black women face the same level, degree, and kinds of oppressions. Observantly, we can see that this is clearly not an accurate portrayal of life; one can easily imagine a case of two women experiencing very different lives.

It is not a necessary component of belonging to the black community that one experiences specific oppressions; nor is it a necessary component of belonging to any racial group. For example, imagine a black woman who actually never experiences any instance of racism, sexism, or oppression. Her material world view is not altered by oppression, and so she does not share in the sense that Collin’s finds integral.

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<sup>12</sup> Collins “Black Feminist Thought” 228.

Collin's arguments would suggest that this woman is not a member of the black community; despite being born as, and raised, in a black household.

Likewise, imagine a man born white, but raised in a black family household, who by chance experiences the same oppressions and resistance as his parents and siblings. This man would still not meet the necessary components of the standpoint argument, because he shares in the history of white oppressors, and not of the oppressed.

It is clear that race does not function the way Collin's describes because there are so many cases in the world that refute her claims. Although she does not argue it, her claims also point to a social construction of race. The "political and economic status" requirement on being a part of any race is necessarily socially constructed because the very nature of it depends on the social sphere of life. This social construction of race is mentioned by Sally Haslinger, of which will be discussed in the next section.

### SECTION III

#### RACIAL SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

In her article “Objective Reality, Male Reality, and Social Construction” Haslinger argues that social constructions work like artifacts. Artifacts are tools that humans use to function in ordinary practices. They are both determined by society, and affect an individual’s sense of self. Social constructions are “intended or unintended products of a social practice”<sup>13</sup> which “depend on a kind of feedback loop involving activities such as naming or classifying”<sup>14</sup> different things in the material world. So, social constructions are made by artifacts, and can be used to help humans determine things like groups of people, animals, and even food. When this classification is of societal things, it “may do more than map pre-existing groups of individuals.”

Classifying groups of people, in this way, establishes different groups of people; for example, one can easily group Americans in one category, and Britians into another based on the attributes that these groups share. Once established, these attributes can cause groups to “fit the classifications”;<sup>15</sup> an American will find herself seeking behaviors that are typically seen as American. This means that social constructions are tools that humans use to classify groups based on particular attributes, and to establish characteristics one must have to fit into the group.

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<sup>13</sup>Sally Haslinger, “Objective Reality, Male Reality, and Social Construction,” in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, edited by Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall, 84-107. Great Britain: Routledge, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.

Further, being attached to any group works to affect the individual via creating characteristics that one ought to display as a member of a specific group. This phenomenon is what Haslinger calls a “feedback loop.” Attributes are assigned to groups of people, and then those individuals seek to display those attributes. Individually, we both recognize that there are specific required characteristics for group membership, and alter our behavior to fit those characteristics.

An example of this feedback loop is found in media portrayals of the LGBTQ+ community. The media, for example, portrays gay men as flamboyant and effeminate, and portrays lesbians as masculine and quick to commit (something called Uhauling). When young LGBTQ+ members are forming their sexual identities they are shaped by these portrayals. This shaping both alters their behavior and their perceptions of others within that community. Then, society reinforces its own beliefs about this group based on the portrayal of behaviors group members commit to. This societal view in turn influences the way LGBTQ+ individuals are portrayed in the media, thus completing the loop. In short, societal views dictate the way LGBTQ+ individuals are represented in media portrayals; media portrayals influence the formation of identities and behavior of LGBTQ+ individuals, and the behavior of LGBTQ+ individuals reinforces societal views that dictate the portrayal of members of this community in media. The members of the LGBTQ+ community both internalize these perceptions and act out these perceptions. This is how the feedback loop works as an artifact. It is a tool used that perpetuates societal views and gives the individual something to resemble.

This same phenomenon applies directly to racial identities as well. Certain people with shared phenotypic traits (i.e. skin color) are viewed by society as members of a group based around these shared traits. Since society now views these people as members of a group they look for and expect to find shared behaviors or characteristics that members of this group exhibit. This can inform stereotypes, media portrayals, and general societal views of individual members of a particular “race.” Individuals born with these phenotypic traits will be informed by these concepts when learning how to communicate, behave, and present themselves to other members of their group and members of other groups, which in turn reinforces the societal views regarding members of this “race.” This completes the feedback loop of societal factors on racial identity. So in the same way that sexual identity or gender identity are constructed and shaped by societal conditions and can be explained in terms of a feedback loop, racial identity can be categorized in a similar manner. This idea of society causing altered states of the self is discussed by Ferguson, of which will be elaborated in the next section.

## SECTION IV

### SOCIETAL INFLUENCE ON PERSONAL IDENTITY

Ann Ferguson addresses the idea of how social constructions affect one's personal internal states in her article, "Can I Choose Who I am? And How Would that Empower Me? Gender, Race, Identities and the Self." She claims that "selfhood" should be viewed as a process "of thinking bodies."<sup>16</sup> Selfhood is "an embodied process of thinking, feeling, desiring, perceiving, judging, and willing."<sup>17</sup> So, the self is a process that involves a body "and the social meanings it has for others. . . [and] the meanings it has for [the body] and the social identifications [the self] make[s] to actual or imagined others."<sup>18</sup> In other words, Ferguson's conception of the self is one that is framed by a material body, a 'me', and the relations this 'me' has to any "actual or imagined others". This conception of the self necessarily relies on some interaction with others. Most notably, the conception of the self relies on the way the 'me' is perceived by those others.

Social constructs can affect identity by imposing meaning and roles to arbitrary attributes like race or gender. According to Ferguson, the self is developed throughout life, and "involves the development of one or more physical body images with which we identify."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ann Ferguson, "Can I Choose Who I am? And How Would that Empower Me? Gender, Race, Identities and the Self," in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, edited by Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall, 108-126. Great Britain: Routledge, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 112

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 113, the emphasis in this quote is original.

These body images are impacted by placing expectations of what it ought to be. For example, consider how historically women were expected to be feminine; to wear dresses, heels, and have minimal body fat. Women sought to alter their body to fit this expectation, and judged their personal self based on how well they fit. This idea is very similar to Collin's idea about feedback loops, and it highlights how societal beliefs are both affected by individuals and shape those individuals.

Social constructs affect racial identity in a similar way. There is an expectation for people to confirm a set of arbitrary stereotypical attributes, and often people try to meet these expectations. Often, these social forces are harmful because meeting the expectations means altering the 'me' image we form in a negative way. For instance, a woman may feel such a need to fit society's expectation that she be small so much so that she develops an eating disorder; ultimately, harming her body in permanent ways.

## SECTION V

### EFFECTS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS ON LANGUAGE

So far, I have established that social constructions work on a feedback loop; an artifact's function causes one to alter their personal self so they can fit into certain groups, which reinforces societal beliefs. Yet, there are multiple facets of personal life that social constructions affect beyond body image and group membership. Carole Davies wrote, "Other Tongues: Gender, Language, Sexuality and the Politics of Location". The article highlights that it is one's location within the societal hierarchy which "allows one to speak or not speak, to be affirmed in one's speech or rejected, to be heard or censored."<sup>20</sup> Her idea of location is that one's position of social class, economy, time period, gender, sexuality, age, geographical location, historical period, and educational factors all play a role in the ability to speak, to be affirmed in that speech, and to be heard or rejected in that speech. Basically, one's position in society affects how they literally speak and the way others interpret that speech.

This is important in any case of individual public relationships, but perhaps most important in cases where one might seek public acceptance of their inner self where that inner self is against what society might expect. The ability to express this unexpected inner self is going to depend on the language one has access to using. Davies explains that this language is

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<sup>20</sup> Carole B. Davies, "Other Tongues: Gender, Language, Sexuality and the Politics of Location," in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, edited by Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall, 338-352. Great Britain: Routledge, 1996.

dependent on one's place in society, and society is the factor of acceptance or denial about any expression of our inner selves.

So far, we have discussed Diallo's claims of transracialism, but there is another example that may highlight how societal position affects language and the personal self. Consider the case of Milton Mesirow, otherwise known as "Mezz Mezzrow," a jazz musician from New York from the 1920's-40's. Mesirow was born to a white Jewish family, however at a young age he became enthralled with the predominantly black jazz music scene and decided that he would be a jazz musician. In his autobiography, *Really the Blues*, he wrote that from the moment he heard jazz he "was going to be a Negro musician, hipping [telling] the world about the blues the way only Negroes can." At the time, jazz music was socially acceptable for the black community, and not so much for the white community. One could consider Jazz music a language specific to the black community at the time, a language that Mesirow became fluent in.

Jazz was considered "black music" and a genre that mostly black people played, but Mesirow fully embraced the black community and sought membership within it. Playing jazz in a band of mostly black men while living in Harlem, New York, which was a predominantly black community at the time, made him socially unacceptable as white man. Later he married a black woman, listed his race as negro on his draft card for WWII, and when arrested for marijuana possession insisted he be placed in the segregated black section of the prison.

By all accounts he sought to be considered black, participated in behaviors and culture that was associated by society at the time with black people including segregation practices, and importantly was accepted by members of the black community. He sought to make his position in life and society that of a member of the black community.

He used his clarinet to express his inner self by becoming a jazz artist; in his case, the black community welcomed his membership.

## SECTION VI

### PROPOSAL

The refusal, and violent disapproval, of extending arguments for transgenderism to transracialism would seem to suggest that our ordinary beliefs about race are distinctly different from beliefs about gender. Yet, philosophies that want to claim race and gender are culturally or socially constructed will need to explain why race and gender function so differently that extensions cannot be made.

Arguments for transgenderism ultimately have the consequence of maintaining that gender is not biological; we are not born with a gender, but rather we are born with a sex. This marks gender as not only a social construction, but also a personal identity; something of which we are not born with but develop over time. Yet, society's intuition is that race does not function this way, while at the same time philosophical arguments about race want to maintain that race is not entirely biological. In fact, it has been demonstrated in this paper that many if not all genuine components of race are socially constructed and function similarly to the components of gender, now the question that is highlighted here is whether or not race is a personal identity. If it is, then arguments of personal identity as they apply to gender and transgenderism must be extended to race and transracialism to be consistent. To answer this question about whether race is a form of personal identity, we must begin by examining the ordinary language usage of race. This analysis provides the key to the debate that race is most commonly determined merely by

perception, and disregards personal identity.

Ordinary language plays a key role in the types of things that become artifacts, and ultimately the types of things that become social constructs. As the artifacts in society change, so to do the words we use to describe the categories of people in the world. There are at least two connections between transgenderism and transracialism that are clear now. Namely, as the language of artifacts change, so too does the expression of the personal self to the public sphere. For instance, remember Mesirow; today jazz music is not considered something that only belongs in the black community. It is considered music that anyone who wants can play and enjoy regardless of their race. Today, Mesirow's affinity for jazz music would not be considered a transition from one racial community to the other. This is because society's ideas about the attributes of race have changed. We no longer consider words like “negro” or “colored” appropriate, because we no longer categorize those words as expressive of any real meaning.

This transition of language and belief, or of the attributes of racial groupings, have changed. Yet, Tuvel and Diallo were publicly shamed and ostracized for attempting to claim that one could be transracial. This problem is discussed further in the next section, where ordinary uses of race are defined.

#### **SECTION IV.1 Ordinary Language**

One of the most apparent issues behind the controversy is that race is unclearly and presumptuously defined. Currently, a careful Google search of race informs the reader that the definition of race is contentious.<sup>21</sup> Many definitions define race by certain shared physical

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<sup>21</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “Race,” accessed December 13, 2018, <https://www.merriam->

characteristics. Other definitions say that race is both a shared physical characteristic and a shared culture. Yet, others mark distinctions between race and ethnicity. Race is also defined as having to do with a certain biological lineage; like belonging to a particular tribe or family unit related by biology. Still others claim there are no interesting phenotypes that define any specific race. These disparities lend proof to the fact that it is clear race is understood in many different ways; making the topic a gray area.<sup>22</sup>

First, throughout history and in ordinary practice, race has a biological and historical lineage that has been very similar in kind to gender. By historical and biological lineage I mean that certain phenotypic expressions (like skin color and other physical features) which are passed from parent to child, and sequences of historical events (such as cultural practices or experiences of oppression/privilege) are thought to constitute race and these things are shared with other members of that race. For race, this historical lineage is a collection of shared experiences such as cultural practices, severe systemic oppressions, or a shared experience of oppressiveness (consider those people who murdered Emit Till-they shared in oppressiveness by committing this act). Consider those of a black race in our society; they have historically been slaves, given less rights, treated without dignity and respect, to say the least, because of their race. Gender was also historically conceived to be the product of biological and historical lineage. To be male or female corresponded to an individual's sex characteristics at birth which is biological lineage. Further, what it meant to behave and appear as a male or female was dictated by a historical lineage of social norms and expectations, cultural practices and experiences of oppression or privilege.

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webster.com/dictionary/race; and Dictionary.com, s.v. "Race," accessed December 13, 2018, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/race>.

<sup>22</sup> Kaplan, J. M., & Winther, R. G. (2014). Realism, antirealism, and conventionalism about race. *Philosophy of Science*, 81(5), 1039-1052. doi:10.1086/678314

Second, neither gender or race are mere choices, but the imposition of expected societal gender roles greatly differs from expected racial roles and these differences further highlight inconsistencies. It is unclear that one can choose to feel as though their sexual phenotypic expressions do not match their corresponding feelings of self (their personal gender identity). It is equally unclear that one can choose to feel as though their racial phenotypic expressions do not match their feelings of self. Obviously, we have abundant examples of people feeling as though their body does not match the way they feel on the inside. For starters, remember for a moment what it was like to be a teenager; whether you were overweight, had severe acne, felt ugly, were ‘too’ skinny, or what have you, the way you felt on the inside probably did not match the way you felt about your outside, and these feelings were entirely out of your control; no matter what your friends a family told you, you were convinced that your external characteristics defied your internal characteristics. Race and gender are not something that we outgrow the way teenage insecurities are, but rather have more significant influences. One of those influences is the imposition of racial and gender meaning. Often, especially in the past, men and women are expected to behave in particular ways and to value particular things that are seen as distinct from each other; for instance, women are expected to be meek and value care while men are expected to be strong and value power.

What roles or expectations does society place onto race? What particular roles do White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, and so forth hold? Any answer to these questions should quickly be recognized as very problematic. Can we say that any person holds a different societal role *because* of their race without committing an act of racism or falling victim to the problems seen in standpoint epistemology? We have already seen that universalizing experiences based on race

is problematic because experiences simply are not universal.

We can make assumptions, or expect, that someone from America visiting China for the first time will be shocked at the differences in culture (bathroom habits, food, institutional practices, religions, and the like are examples of things that are different in China). Immediately, this notion challenges the concept of race. For instance, could one not be Chinese without having an Asian biological lineage? Consider a person whose biological lineage is European but that was raised in a Chinese culture from early childhood to middle age. They would participate in Chinese practices, speak their language, go to their schools, visit their doctors and churches; they would consider themselves a part of China. This person could, in effect, be considered white and Chinese without being “mixed race”.

Yet, this would not be an obvious descriptor upon merely seeing the person. One could be fooled into believing the person was solely European; someone who participates in European practices and who believes they are European. This highlights the idea that the ordinary usage of race is not specifically tied to culture, nor specifically void of culture. Instead, our expectations about a person's race are initially formed by physical attributes, and like with the above example, challenged upon further knowledge. We might see the white Chinese person and expect that they enjoy a cup of tea instead of a cup of hot soy milk.

This expectation is formed based on the color of the person’s skin, and not on any real qualities that can be attributed to the person. The challenge to the concept of race is, directly put, that culture and skin color are entirely independent of one another, so any expectations of roles will have to give an account of what about a person (their physical phenotype, or their practices) is categorizable enough to prompt an expectation. In short, expectations about race are largely

going to be false and oftentimes carried by racist or uninformed beliefs about different types of people.

There is no expectation that is carried by race alone- reasonable expectations are best when *culture* is judged rather than mere race. The previous example highlights how neither race nor culture are easily judged without running into severe problems, and it alludes to the fact that expectations about race and culture are probably best when they are avoided.

### **Section VI.II “On-Sight Determination”**

Already I have highlighted an important distinction in our ordinary usage of race; race and culture are not necessarily equatable. One can have a culture that is not typical of their race like we saw with the example of the Chinese individual. One’s race does not predict one’s culture, nor does one’s culture predict one’s race. Yet, race and culture are often determined by on-sight determination. Namely, race is determined by the physical characteristics one displays, and their culture is determined based on the expectation of where those with certain physical attributes belong in society.

In Dolezal’s case, she altered the way she did her hair and kept tan skin to appear less white. She sought to make herself look and behave like she had the attributes that belong to what society expects the black community to display. Why do race and gender function so differently in social relations? The logical consequence of not being able to alter one’s public racial identity is that, where relations are concerned, racial identity is determined on sight. The racial identity one appears to belong to is the one they are going to be expected to be. They will be viewed as a member of a race closely resembling others with the same skin tone. If society

believed that race was more than skin tone, then one's racial identity would not be determined on sight; it would be determined through inquiry.

Yet, there are cases where one's race is ambiguous and so must be determined through inquiry, like in the cases of a child born of parents with different skin tones (what is generally referred to as "mixed race"); in the same way as there are cases where one's biological sex is externally ambiguous and also must be determined through inquiry. Consequently, the fact that there is nothing that can be universalized about race or gender, because of the ordinary social usage and societies practical use of the terms, proves that society views race and gender on sight, and the on sight perception of a person causes the perceiver to expect specific types of things from the one perceived; if one perceives another as female then they will expect to observe typical female behaviors; if one perceives another as possessing a specific racial identity then they will expect to observe the typical behaviors associated with that specific race. When one acts contrary to the identity others recognize they are often asked questions like, "Why are you different?" These types of judgements highlight the fact that social perceptions of one's identity disregard personal conceptions and beliefs.

It is this common practice of determining race and gender "on-sight" that is at least one major reason that transracial identities are socially unacceptable. Admitting that one can be transracial admits that one can have an internal racial identity that does not match their social identity; then it is necessarily the case that judging race "on-sight" (socially imposing a racial identity onto another based on their skin color) is as problematic as it is to determine one's gender "on-sight."

### **Section VI.III Personal Identity and the Case for Transracialism**

There are three camps to be considered in personal identity: the biological, psychological, and narrative camps. These three camps will need to make clear exactly where race stands as a personal identity. If one's personal identity is determined by their biology, then the specific genotypic expressions one is born determine who one is. This is clearly going to be inconsistent with personal identity in the psychological sense because genotypic expressions have no bearing on physical attributes. One is who they are regardless of what physical body they have. Most tricky is the narrative view, which maintains that who one is partially determined by historical lineage.

For example, you are the person who experienced falling off of a bike at 4 years old, and then taking the training wheels off at 6, and then reading this outline at 35. Essentially, the narrative view maintains that who you are depends on the particular sequence of experiences one encounters in the story of their life. So, genotypic expressions would only be significant on a narrative view of personal identity if those genotypic expressions caused, or significantly influenced, experiences. For example, being a racial minority would only be part of one's narrative if the society one lived within placed meaning on racial minorities which would cause them to experience things in a particular way because of their race. Clearly, these philosophical views for personal identity are inconsistent where race is concerned, and this needs to be addressed.

Alasdair MacIntyre's book, *After Virtue*, can provide some further guidance on the concept of narrative identity. Narrative identity, for MacIntyre, is directly linked to whatever traditions and practices are taking place at the time of an individual's life. MacIntyre calls a

practice:

“By practice I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.”<sup>23</sup>

These practices are part of the process by which a society's concept of the virtues is understood; then a narrative of a human life, and a moral tradition<sup>24</sup>. People are born into practices, and then they form an identity according to those practices (a narrative view of the self). To be part of practice is to have, “a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice.”<sup>25</sup> Because MacIntyre’s conception of narrative identity is shaped, first and foremost, by the previous successful practices of those that came before us, it would seem that Diallo does not seem to have a foundation for her trans-black claims.

However, MacIntyre also grants that individuals construct their own narrative identity through their interactions with the practices and institutions of their society. These interactions could be to adopt wholesale the practices and categorization of their historical period. The interactions could also take the form of attempting to change (or reject) those practices as well as the institutions (such as educational systems) that maintain them.

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<sup>23</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory” 3ed. *University of Notre Dame Press*. Notre Dame, Indiana 2007. 186-187.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 187.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 194.

He says, “the fact that the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighborhood, the city and the tribe does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of community.”<sup>26</sup> One may be integrally connected to the traditions and practices of history, but one need not accept them without challenge. He does not argue explicitly for a narrative view of the self, but his claims logically flow to that view. The self is allowed, under his conception of the narrative self, to challenge and alter ordinary practices. It is not just that, “individuals live in different social circumstances; it is also that we all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity.”<sup>27</sup> In line with narrative views of the self, he argues that we inherit practices and traditions, but it is up to the individual to perpetuate or change these practices.

Transracialism, like transgenderism, is a challenge to the ordinary traditions and practices we hold in America. Namely, it challenges the ordinary usage of race that we use today. The language used to mark Diallo’s personal feelings of transracialism challenges the meaning of race we use in America today. As I previously noted, race is mostly determined by on-sight determination, and transracialism directly challenges and refutes this idea. Skin color would play no part in a world view that allows transracialism. Narrative views of identity support this notion, and the backlash that both Tuel and Diallo experienced support the idea that major notions of meaning about race are changing. To use MacIntyre’s words, the stage from which future peoples will be born into is changing; namely, the language we use to determine social constructions is changing.

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<sup>26</sup> MacIntyre, 221.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 222.

## SECTION VII

### CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper has been to address the controversy surrounding the Diallo case and Tuvel arguments and ultimately to demonstrate the validity of a hypothetical transracial identity. I began by detailing the case of Nkechi Amare Diallo and Rebecca Tuvel's analysis of a potential transracial identity. Next, the strongest argument against transracialism, namely standpoint epistemology, was discussed in section one. In sections three through five the idea of race as a social construct, and the mechanisms at play in the formation of societal views of race were outlined. Finally, in section six it is shown that by the idea of transracialism challenges ordinary usage, because race is ordinarily determined by on-sight determination. Ultimately, since ample evidence has been provided that race exists and functions as a social construct in much the same way as gender, and narrative views of identity support the idea that transgenderism is a valid identity, then it must be concluded that transracialism can be a valid identity

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## VITA

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