‘Trans’ examines how we now think about race and gender

By Dr. Glenn Altschuler
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On June 1, 2015, Annie Liebovitz’s photograph of a corseted Caitlyn Jenner appeared on the cover of Vanity Fair. Formerly Bruce Jenner, an Olympic gold medalist in the decathlon, Caitlyn became America’s most famous transgender. Ten days later, Rachel Dolezal, the president of the Spokane, Washington chapter of the NAACP, was “outed” as White by her parents.

These two incidents, Rogers Brubaker, a professor of sociology at UCLA, suggests, are indications that a significant reconfiguration of racial and gender identity is now occurring.

In “Trans,” Brubaker analyzes the ways in which classifications, previously understood as biologically based and fixed at birth, have been re-claimed as self-conscious choices; the conflicts over who controls – and “patrols” – them; and whether individuals can live between or beyond them. Lucid, sophisticated, and judicious, “Trans” is an important and timely exploration of the increasingly uncertain and unsettled boundaries of identity.

‘New’ gender vs. ‘new’ race

Brubaker asks tough questions. The public, he notes, responded differently to the Jenner and Dolezal stories.

An increasing number of Americans accept a change of gender (but not racial “passing,” especially from White to Black) as a legitimate choice, validated in social science research, popular culture, social and legal practices.

This new reality, Brubaker, claims is paradoxical. After all, sex is a well-established biological category, and men and women do differ, morphologically, physiologically, and hormonally, “with nothing remotely analogous about racial divisions.”

Why, he asks, is it more legitimate to choose and change one’s sex than one’s race? Why is altering bodily features (hormones, genitalia and secondary sex characteristics) to signal membership in a “new” gender viewed as affirming an “authentic” identity while operations on eyelids, noses, and pigmentation to signal membership in a “new” race isn’t?

‘Policing’ of identity continues

When “the putative objectivity of racial identity is grounded in social relations, not just the body,” Brubaker indicates, it constrains individual choice. Under this logic, people cannot lay claim to an identity to which they are not entitled by ancestry. Nor can they use “the born in the wrong body” narrative.

That said, Brubaker emphasizes that opportunities for choice in racial identity are expanding.

High rates of intermarriage and cohabitation, the discrediting of the “one drop rule,” and genetic tests that increase popular perceptions that “everyone is mixed” have undermined the authority of ancestry over racial
classifications and invited a process in which race is "constituted at the nexus of genetic science, kindship aspirations, and strategic self-making."

Insights about "the contingency and arbitrariness" of gender and racial classifications, Brubaker acknowledges, have only recently begun to filter into broader public discussions.

And the "policing" of identity continues, most recently with a North Carolina law prohibiting people from using bathrooms, in schools and other public buildings, that conflict with the sex on their birth certificates; but also with concerns about misrepresentation of racial identity by individuals seeking jobs and admission to college (prompting proposals for a strict regime of racial classification on birth certificates and an assertion by the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association that "belonging does not arise simply from individual feelings").

At this pivotal moment, Brubaker concludes, "the pairing of transgender and transracial in public discourse" has the potential not only to inform discussions of the former but prompt reflection on the artificiality and instability of race.

We may well be a long way from a consensus about "the trans of migration" (male to female, White to Black), let alone a consensus about "the trans of between" (challenging the either or logic of gender and racial classification) or "the trans of beyond" (stressing the uniqueness of one’s lived experience).

But one thing's certain: the times they are a’changing.

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