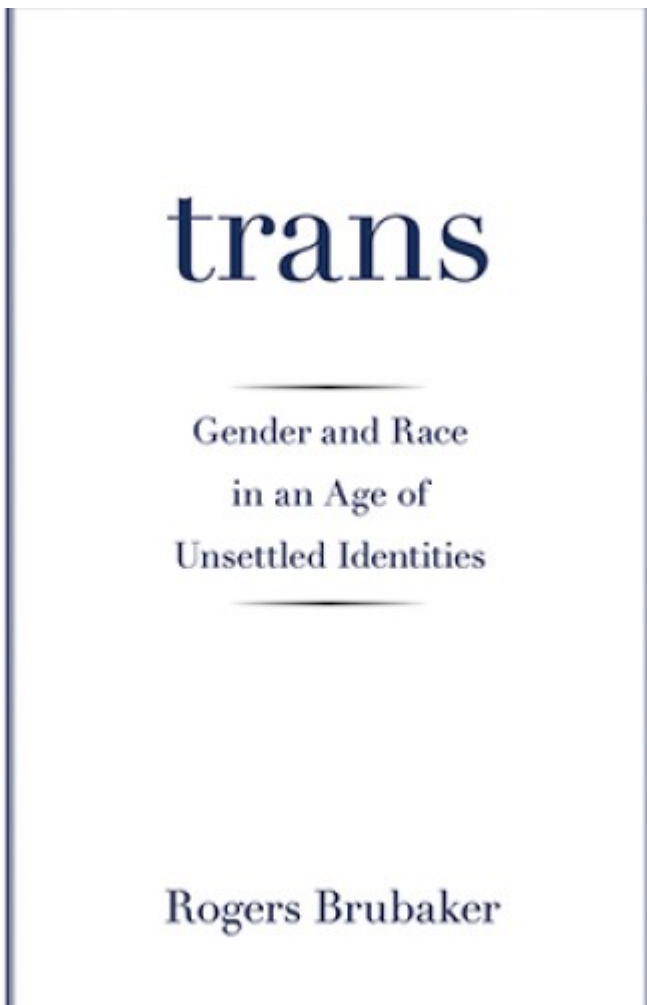


Thinking with trans

Rogers Brubaker considers transracial and transgender identities together.

by [Leonard Curry](#) in the [January 18, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Trans

Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities

By Rogers Brubaker
Princeton University Press

People who don't feel they belong within traditional fixed categories of gender and race daily face Ezekiel's heartrending question: "How, then, shall we live?" Rogers Brubaker doesn't attempt to answer that question on behalf of trans people, but he poses a related question for people who want to make sense of trans experience: How, then, shall we think?

Brubaker begins to answer this question by looking at media coverage and public opinion during the summer of 2015, when Bruce Jenner became a transgender woman named Caitlyn and NAACP chapter president Rachel Dolezal claimed the identity of "transracial" after being outed by her parents as white. The proximity of Jenner's transition and Dolezal's outing led many Americans to pair the two together in their thinking. A debate soon arose in the media, universities, and even popular conversation: If Jenner could be transgender, then could Dolezal be considered transracial?

Brubaker thinks pairing the concepts of transgender and transracial with one another in this way can be useful. He challenges readers to "think *with* trans" as a way to engage the tensions and ambiguities that undergird how we use racial and gender categories. Brubaker says the debates around Jenner and Dolezal show that Americans are more willing to "think with trans" when it comes to gender than they are regarding race. After Dolezal made news headlines, many Americans flatly stated that "transracial is not a thing."

Brubaker responds by pointing out that the development of transgender discourse has been gradual. Only slowly did transgender identity gain legitimacy. Eventually, transgender *became* a thing. Not everyone is in agreement about it, but there is at least a common vocabulary for talking about it. Brubaker hopes that the same will happen with the concept of transracial identity.

Transgender discourse applies to immensely varied experiences, but Brubaker organizes them into three different kinds. There is the trans of *migration*, which concerns persons who move from one established gender category to another. There is the trans of *between*, which involves persons who do not identify as fully or solely within either of the established gender categories. And there is the trans of *beyond*, which names the experience of those who want nothing at all to do with

gender categories.

Brubaker argues that this threefold trans discourse can be used to describe racial identities or experiences as well. The trans of racial migration is represented by the person who passes as a member of another race: for example, the black person who passes as white, or, as in Dolezal's case, the white person who passes as black. The trans of between names multiracial or mixed-race individuals and the political movements enacted in their name. And the trans of beyond represents those who refuse to identify with racial categories and seek to live postracial lives.

Brubaker's analysis is sophisticated, and it addresses subtle issues. For example, one might argue that transracial migration, or passing, cannot be the same as transgender migration because a transgender person *becomes* the opposite gender, whereas a transracial passer only continues to pass as someone of another race. But Brubaker argues that not every gender or racial migration is openly disclosed, so the logic of passing may apply in both cases.

Further, transgender migration could be seen as creating a new category (*transman* or *transwoman*) instead of moving from one established gender category to another (male to female or female to male). Brubaker notes that the corollary for race would be *transblack* or *transwhite*—terms that many readers have probably never considered, although they are increasingly being claimed by people whose identity - doesn't fit neatly into a simple conception of racial passing.

Brubaker maintains that we are living in "an age of unsettled identities." Of that, he convinces me. This book is necessary reading for anyone interested in the categories of identity and how they are being invoked or subverted.

A version of this article appears in the January 18 print edition under the title "Thinking with trans."