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The Year We Obsessed Over Identity

2015's headlines and cultural events have confronted us with the malleability

of racial, gender, sexual and reputational lines. Who do we think we are?

By **WESLEY MORRIS** OCT. 6, 2015

A few weeks ago, I sat in a movie theater and grinned. Anne Hathaway was in “The Intern,” perched on a hotel bed in a hotel robe, eating from a can of overpriced nuts, having tea and freaking out. What would happen if she divorced her sweet, selfless stay-at-home dad of a husband? Would she ever meet anybody else? And if she didn’t, she would have no one to be buried next to — she’d be single for all eternity. And weren’t the problems in her marriage a direct result of her being a successful businesswoman — she was there but never quite present? “The Intern” is a Nancy Meyers movie, and these sorts of cute career-woman meltdowns are the Eddie Van Halen guitar solos of her romantic comedies.

But what’s funny about that scene — what had me grinning — is the response of the person across the bed from Hathaway. After listening to her tearful rant, this person has had enough: Don’t you dare blame yourself or your career! Actually, the interruption begins, “I hate to be the feminist, of the two of us. ...” *Hate to be* because the person on the other side of the bed isn’t Judy Greer or Brie Larson. It’s not Meryl Streep or Susan Sarandon. It’s someone not far from the last person who comes to mind when you think “soul-baring bestie.” It’s Robert freaking De Niro, portrayer of psychos, savages and grouches no more.

On that bed with Hathaway, as her 70-year-old intern, he's not Travis Bickle or the human wall of intolerance from those Focker movies. He's Lena Dunham. The attentiveness and stern feminism coming out of his mouth are where the comedy is. And while it's perfectly obvious what Meyers is doing to De Niro — girlfriending him — that doesn't make the overhaul any less effective. The whole movie is about the subtle and obvious ways in which men have been overly sensitized and women made self-estranged through breadwinning. It's both a plaint against the present and a pining for the past, but also an acceptance that we are where we are.

And where are we? On one hand: in another of Nancy Meyers's bourgeois pornographies. On the other: in the midst of a great cultural identity migration. Gender roles are merging. Races are being shed. In the last six years or so, but especially in 2015, we've been made to see how trans and bi and poly-ambi-omni- we are. If Meyers is clued into this confusion, then you know it really has gone far, wide and middlebrow. We can see it in the instantly beloved hit "Transparent," about a family whose patriarch becomes a trans woman whose kids call her Moppa, or in the time we've spent this year in televised proximity to Caitlyn Jenner, or in the browning of America's white founding fathers in the Broadway musical "Hamilton," or in the proliferating clones that Tatiana Maslany plays on "Orphan Black," which mock the idea of a true or even original self, or in Amy Schumer's comedic feminism, which reconsiders gender confusion: Do uncouthness, detachment and promiscuity make her a slut, or a man?

We can see it in the recently departed half-hour sketch comedy "Key & Peele," which took race as a construct that could be reshuffled and remixed until it seemed to lose its meaning. The sitcom "Black-ish" likewise makes weekly farcical discourse out of how much black identity has warped — and how much it hasn't — over 50 years and across three generations. "Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt" turns selfhood into a circus, introducing us to a lower-middle-class Native American teenager who eventually succeeds at becoming a rich white lady, and to other characters who try out new selves every 10 minutes, as if they're auditioning for "Snapchat: The Musical." Last month, Ryan Adams released a remake of Taylor Swift's album "1989," song for song, as a rock record that combines a male voice with a perspective that still sounds like a woman's, like Lindsey Buckingham trying on Stevie Nicks's clothes. Dancing on the fringes of mainstream pop are androgynous black men like

Leif, Stromae and Shamir.

What started this flux? For more than a decade, we've lived with personal technologies — video games and social-media platforms — that have helped us create alternate or auxiliary personae. We've also spent a dozen years in the daily grip of makeover shows, in which a team of experts transforms your personal style, your home, your body, your spouse. There are TV competitions for the best fashion design, body painting, drag queen. Some forms of cosmetic alteration have become perfectly normal, and there are shows for that, too. Our reinventions feel gleeful and liberating — and tied to an essentially American optimism. After centuries of women living alongside men, and of the races living adjacent to one another, even if only notionally, our rigidly enforced gender and racial lines are finally breaking down. There's a sense of fluidity and permissiveness and a smashing of binaries. We're all becoming one another. Well, we are. And we're not.

In June, the story of a woman named Rachel Dolezal began its viral spread through the news. She had recently been appointed president of the local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. in Spokane, Wash. She had been married to a black man, had two black sons and was, by most accounts, a black woman. Her white biological parents begged to differ. The ensuing scandal resurrected questions about the nature of identity — what compelled Dolezal to darken her skin, perm her hair and pass in reverse? She might not have been biologically black, but she seemed well past feeling spiritually white.

Some people called her “transracial.” Others found insult in her masquerade, particularly when the country's attention was being drawn, day after day, to how dangerous it can be to have black skin. The identities of the black men and women killed by white police officers and civilians, under an assortment of violent circumstances, remain fixed.

But there was something oddly compelling about Dolezal, too. She represented — dementedly but also earnestly — a longing to transcend our historical past and racialized present. This is a country founded on independence and yet comfortable with racial domination, a country that has forever been trying to legislate the lines between whiteness and nonwhiteness, between borrowing and genocidal theft.

We've wanted to think we're better than a history we can't seem to stop repeating. Dolezal's unwavering certainty that she was black was a measure of how seriously she believed in integration: It was as if she had arrived in a future that hadn't yet caught up to her.

It wasn't so long ago that many Americans felt they were living in that future. Barack Obama's election was the dynamite that broke open the country. It was a moment. It was *the* moment. Obama was biological proof of some kind of progress — the product of an interracial relationship, the kind that was outlawed in some states as recently as 1967 but was normalized. He seemed to absolve us of original sin and take us past this stupid, dangerous race stuff. What if suddenly anything was possible? What if we could be and do whatever and whoever we wanted? In that moment, the country was changing. *We* were changing.

Before Obama ran for president, when we tended to talk about racial identity, we did so as the defense of a settlement. Black was understood to be black, nontransferably. Negro intellectuals — Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray and James Baldwin, for starters — debated strategies for equality and tolerance. Some of them asserted that to be black was also to be American, even if America begged to differ. For most of those many decades, blackness stood in opposition to whiteness, which folded its arms and said that was black people's problem. But Obama became everybody's problem. He was black. He was white. He was hope. He was apocalypse. And he brought a lot of anxiety into weird relief. We had never really had a white president until we had a black one.

This radical hope, triggered by Obama, ushered in a period of bi- and transracial art — art that probed the possibility that we really had transcended race, but also ridiculed this hope with an acid humor. During Obama's past year in office, those works of art have taken on an even darker, more troubled tone as we keep looking around and seeing how little has really changed.

When the Dolezal story broke, I was partway through Nell Zink's "Mislaidd," one of the four new satirical novels of race I read this year — Jess Row's "Your Face in Mine," Paul Beatty's "The Sellout" and Mat Johnson's "Loving Day" were the others. (I also read Fran Ross's long-lost, recently reissued "Oreo.") But Zink's was the only

one that felt like an energy reading of Dolezal. Zink's white heroine, Peggy, has run off with her daughter, Mireille, and decided to take the birth certificate of a dead black girl named Karen Brown and use it for Mireille, while changing her own name to Meg.

The next year, Karen was 4 years old going on 5 and still blond. Nonetheless registering her for first grade as a black 6-year-old was easy as pie.

Maybe you have to be from the South to get your head around blond black people. Virginia was settled before slavery began, and it was diverse. There were tawny black people with hazel eyes. Black people with auburn hair, skin like butter and eyes of deep blue-green. Blond, blue-eyed black people resembling a recent chairman of the N.A.A.C.P.

Zink's marveling description of what blackness looks like implies that it could welcome anyone. She draws a phenotypic loophole through which a sympathetic impostor or a straight-up cynic can pass.

Each of these books wrestles with the fact of race while trying to present it as mutable, constructed, obscuring. In Beatty's novel, a young black farmer in modern Los Angeles reluctantly takes on a vulgar former TV minstrel star as his slave. Blackness, according to this book, is as much a scam as it is a cultural identity; the undercurrents of tragedy keep lapping at the harbor of farce. Row's novel is also a satire, but an eerily calm one in which a white man has "racial reassignment" surgery and becomes black. Row, who like Zink is white, takes guilt to an astounding allegorical extreme: The surest cure for white oppression is to eliminate whiteness. Whatever else is going on with Dolezal psychologically, you can read into her proud reassignment a sense of shame.

But racial transgression works the other way too. "Hamilton" is a musical biography about the very white, very dead Alexander Hamilton, in which most of the cast is "other," including Lin-Manuel Miranda, the show's Nuyorican creator and star. Some of its audacity stems from the baldness of its political project: In changing the races of the founding fathers from white to brown, it pushes back against the currents of racial appropriation. It also infuses the traditional melodies of the

American musical with so many genres of hip-hop and R & B, sometimes in a single number, that the songs themselves become something new. Political debates are staged as rap battles. Daveed Diggs's Thomas Jefferson becomes the best good thing that never happened at the Source Awards. Artistically, Miranda has created a great night out. Racially, the show tags the entertainment industry status quo with color. It's obviously musical theater. But damn if it's not graffiti too.

Naturally, this new era has also agitated a segment of the populace that is determined to scrub the walls. That, presumably, is where Donald Trump comes in: as the presidential candidate for anyone freaked out by the idea of a show like "Hamilton." Trump is the pathogenic version of Obama, filling his supporters with hope based on a promise to rid the country of change. This incarnation of Trump appeared not long after Obama's election, determined to disprove the new president's American citizenship. On Trump's behalf, an entire wing of conservatism — the so-called birthers — devoted itself to the removal of a mask that Obama was never wearing. Part of Trump's appeal is his illusion of authenticity. His blustering candor has currency in a landscape of android candidates. Yet his magnetism resides in paranoia, the fear that since Obama's election ushered in this shifting, unstable climate of identity, the country has been falling apart.

It's a paranoia that pop culture captured first: In the last six years, Hollywood has provided a glut of disaster spectacles, armageddon scenarios and White House sackings. But the USA Network's "Mr. Robot," which ended its first season last month, might have gotten at that sense of social collapse best. Created by Sam Esmail, an Egyptian-American, the show pits technology against the economy and its unstable protagonist against himself. The plot concerns a group of anarchist hackers conspiring to topple a corporation; with it go the stability of world markets and everybody's financial debt. But it's also a mystery about the identity of its protagonist, a mentally ill, morphine-addicted hacker named Elliot. We think he's obeying the commands of the show's title character, the head of a hacktivist outfit, but it turns out that he has been commanding himself all along. Significant parts of this world are figments of his delusion. Elliot is at least two people. Some of the dark excitement of this show is that he might be even more.

"Mr. Robot" is worst-of-times TV, reflecting a mood of menacing instability.

Over the course of its 10 episodes, almost no one was who they appeared to be. A straight married man seemed to think nothing of his sleeping with a gay work underling (and neither did his wife). A character who seemed, to my eyes at least, to be a transgender woman at some point appeared as a conventional man. Was that a coming out? A going in? Both? This isn't a show I watched for what was going to happen but for who people were going to turn into, or who they wanted to turn out to be. It's a show about the way your online profile can diverge from your real-life identity, yes, but also the way you can choose a self or a self can choose you.

There's also the choice to ignore the matter of identity — until, of course, it starts to aggravate your complacency. Not far into the flap over Dolezal, another alarming story took over the news, a story that challenged the myths white America tells itself about progress. This story was about Atticus Finch, the protagonist of Harper Lee's 1960 classic, "To Kill a Mockingbird." Atticus single-handedly fought racism in the fictitious Alabama town of Maycomb, and he became a window through which we could see a version of tolerance, someone holy enough to put on stained glass or money. But in "Go Set a Watchman," the sequel to "To Kill a Mockingbird," published in July, Atticus was given a scandalous status update: He had been aged into a racist.

I can't recall the last time the attitudes of a single fictional character led the national news. But there was bigoted old Atticus, on the front pages, being discussed on cable. One of the most iconic white antiracists had grown fond of white supremacy. It raised an uncomfortable question: If you had identified with the original Atticus Finch, did his Archie Bunkerization make a racist out of you too? The public hand-wringing was a perverse refreshment because, even if only for a few days, it left white people dwelling on race as intensely as nonwhite people. This new Atticus was a betrayal of white liberal idealism, feeding a suspicion that that idealism was less than absolute — that it could suddenly, randomly turn against the people it purported to help.

It was almost as if Lee knew, in 1957, about the mood of the country in 2015 — about the way a series of dead black men and women would further cleave apart the country; about the massacre of nine black churchgoers by a young white supremacist in a South Carolina church, and the ensuing debate over the Confederate flag; about

the fear of inevitable, inexorable racial, gender and sexual evolution; about the perceived threats to straight-white-male primacy by Latino immigrants, proliferating Spanish, same-sex marriage, female bosses and a black president.

The yearning to transcend race keeps coming up against the bedrock cultural matter of separateness. But the tectonic plates of the culture keep pushing against one another with greater, earthshaking force. The best show in our era about that quake — about the instability of identity and the choosing of a self — has been “Key & Peele.” For five seasons, in scores of sketches, two biracial men, Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, became different women and different men of different ethnicities, personalities and body types. They were two of the best actors on television, hailing from somewhere between the lawlessness of improv comedy and the high-impact emotionalism of Anna Deavere Smith’s one-woman, zillion-character plays. “Key & Peele” granted nearly every caricature a soul.

The show started as a commentary on the hilarious absurdity of race, but it never fully escaped the pernicious reality of racism. The longer it ran, the more melancholy it became, the more it seethed. In the final episode, its anger caught up with its fancifulness and cheek, exploding in an old-timey musical number called “Negrotown,” which opens with a black man (Key) being arrested by a white cop one night while walking down a dark alleyway. He says he’s innocent of any wrongdoing and asks why he’s being arrested, intensifying the cop’s anger. Entering the police cruiser, he hits his head on the car door. Suddenly, a homeless man (Peele) arrives on the scene and offers to take the black guy off the cop’s hands. The cop gratefully acquiesces.

Taking the disoriented man by the hand, the homeless guy leads him through an alley door. They find themselves on the threshold of a sunny neighborhood. The homeless guy is now dressed in a three-piece suit the color of pink grapefruit meat, and he begins to sing in a camped-up, zero-calorie Paul Robeson baritone about this new place, “where there ain’t no pain, ain’t no sorrow.” Black people in bright clothes are dancing in the streets, singing in giddy verse about the special virtues of their town: You can get a cab to pick you up, have a loan application approved, even wear a hoodie without getting shot. Plus: “There’s no stupid-ass white folks touching your hair or stealing your culture, claiming it’s theirs.”

But it's clear from the start that the "neighborhood" is a studio backlot, and the dancers are costumed in the colors of Skittles, and their dancing involves a lot of grinning and spinning and stretching out their arms — shuffling. Black freedom looks like a white 1940s Hollywood director's idea of it. At the end of the number, the dancers stand frozen with their arms raised in a black-power salute, as if waiting for someone to yell "cut." No one does.

The dream melts away, and we're back with the guy being arrested, passed out on the ground. The cop starts shoving him into the cruiser. "I thought I was going to Negrotown," he says.

"Oh, you are," the cop replies, as the piano riff from the song starts to play and the car drives off.

The show left us with a dream of Edenic self-containment as the key to black contentment — a stunning contradiction of all its previous sketches. It was a rebuke to both racial integration and ghettoization. It split me open. I cried with laughter at the joke of this obviously fake place as a kind of heaven. I cried with sadness, because if you're in Negrotown, you're also in a special ring of hell.

The bitterness of the sketch made me wonder if being black in America is the one identity that won't ever mutate. I'm someone who believes himself to have complete individual autonomy, someone who feels free. But I also know some of that autonomy is limited, illusory, conditional. I live knowing that whatever my blackness means to me can be at odds with what it means to certain white observers, at any moment. So I live with two identities: mine and others' perceptions of it. So much of blackness evolving has been limited to whiteness allowing it to evolve, without white people accepting that they are in the position of granting permission. *Allowing*. If that symbiotic dynamic is going to change, white people will need to become more conscious that they, too, can be perceived.

It could be that living with recycled conflict is part of the national DNA. Yet it's also in our natures to keep trying to change, to discover ourselves. In "Far From the Tree," Andrew Solomon's landmark 2012 book about parenting and how children differentiate themselves, he makes a distinction between vertical and horizontal identity. The former is defined by traits you share with your parents, through genes

and norms; the latter is defined by traits and values you don't share with them, sometimes because of genetic mutation, sometimes through the choice of a different social world. The emotional tension in the book's scores of stories arises from the absence of love for or empathy toward someone with a pronounced or extreme horizontal identity — homosexuality or autism or severe disability. Solomon is writing about the struggle to overcome intolerance and estrangement, and to better understand disgust; about our comfort with fixed, established identity and our distress over its unfixed or unstable counterpart.

His insights about families apply to us as a country. We're a vertical nation moving horizontally. We're daring to erase the segregating boundaries, to obliterate oppressive institutions, to get over ourselves. Nancy Meyers knows it. Sam Esmail knows it. So, in his way, does Donald Trump. The transition should make us stronger — if it doesn't kill us first.

Wesley Morris is the new critic at large for The New York Times and a contributing writer for the magazine.

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“Identity politics” has really become a neopopulist-conservative buzzword meaning not very much. Yes, I suppose you have examples in the US where parties try to cater specifically towards the Latino community or the African-American community, but nobody really votes purely based on identity in the West. The idea that people vote purely on the basis of someone’s race, gender etc. is simply false. Reverse identity politics is when voters choose not to vote for a candidate based on identity. Is identity politics in the US really just obsessing over things that happened decades ago? How can left leaning ideologies in the West be saved from the grips of identity politics? Why are identity politics practiced by the left? Anonymous. Answered Jul 25, 2019. Wesley Morris wrote an article, which is [The Year We Obsessed Over Identity](#) to discuss about many people’s identity may have effect on their society through color, racial and leadership in recent years in order to remind us that the US is a vertical nation moving horizontally. (P11) Morris uses many examples in order to examine and support his arguments. We are experiencing the US presidential election, which is crucial for the Americans citizens and the world because the US president plays a main role of promoting the world’s economics. In the article, Morris insists that: “Trump”. [Subscribe The Year We Obsessed Over Identity. Who we think we are in 2015. Wesley Morris New York Times Magazine Oct 2015 10min Permalink.](#)