Identity, Race or Otherwise, Is Your Lived Experience



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[*Heidi W. Durrow*](https://heidiwdurrow.com/)*is the author of "The Girl Who Fell From the Sky," a novel.*

JUNE 16, 2015

“Are those your eyes?” It’s a question I’m asked almost daily as a brown-skinned woman who has dark curly hair and bright blue eyes.

My father was African-American and my mother is Danish and I’m ethnically ambiguous. I look Dominican to Dominicans, Bangladeshi to Bangladeshis, Puerto Rican to Puerto Ricans, and Greek to Greeks. I’m a reluctant shape-shifter.

So I couldn’t help but celebrate when I saw the headlines last week that multiracial Americans are the country’s fastest-growing population. In the future, it’s possible that people who look like me will be the norm.

This past weekend some 700 attendees celebrated stories of mixed-race people and families at the [Mixed Remixed Festival](https://www.mixedremixed.org/) — an annual film, book and performance festival in Los Angeles. There was much discussion of the bizarre case of Rachel Dolezal, the now past president of Spokane’s N.A.A.C.P. chapter, who was outed by her family as passing as black.

What is most disturbing about the case is that Dolezal had a fundamental belief that claiming black blood would authenticate her to the black community. But your blood quantum shouldn’t define your identity rather your lived experience should.

I came of age in the 1980s and I learned that I should identify as black. I learned that black identity in America has always meant being mixed because it took just one drop of black blood to make you three-fifths of a man. I learned that because of the peculiar way that math and race work together in America, I was black. But those facts conflicted with my actual experience.

I spoke Danish at home. I ate Danish food. At Christmas we danced around the Christmas tree singing Danish carols. But when I went outside my home, I was black. It wasn’t until I was almost 40 years old that I proudly claimed my Afro-Viking identity.

As future generations are increasingly mixed, I hope we’ll be able to see race differently. I hope that in 50 years when someone sees a brown-skinned girl with dark curly hair and bright blue eyes, they’ll say: “You must have your mother’s eyes.”