

The Rachel Divide: A Netflix documentary on the identity politics uproar over “transracial” Rachel Dolezal

Nick Barrickman
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The Rachel Divide (directed and produced by Laura Brownson and currently airing on Netflix) delves into the uproar surrounding Rachel Dolezal, a white woman choosing to identify as African American, while also examining the effects that the negative publicity has had on her and her family.

In June 2015, Dolezal was “outed” by local news reporters as she drew attention to a series of alleged hate crimes of which she claimed to be the victim. At the time, Dolezal was the head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) branch in Spokane, Washington.

For the race-obsessed, sensationalist news media in the US, the story of a white woman who for years had successfully passed herself off as an African American was simply too tempting to pass up. The deluge of media coverage and commentary, including attacks on her personal character and the claim that Dolezal had appropriated “black identity” for her own gain, led to the 37-year-old woman resigning her position at the NAACP and being dropped from her seat on the Spokane police oversight board. She also lost her position teaching Africana Studies at Eastern Washington University.

The Rachel Divide details Dolezal’s devastating brush with the national news media and provides substantial background information about her life, her family and the factors that led her to identify as African American.

Dolezal discusses her traumatic childhood in Montana at the hands of her white parents, who are described as “borderline extremist” in their religious attitude toward family life.

Speaking of her childhood with adopted African-

American siblings, Dolezal explains, “I felt like I could bridge the divide, so I was allowed to check out a lot more black history books, novels ... anything that was written by a black author ... With my siblings... I felt I for the first time had a legitimate reason to pursue what spoke to my soul.” At some point after attending Howard University, the historically black college in Washington, DC, in the late 1990s, for an unusual combination of psychological, political and professionally motivated reasons, Dolezal began identifying as black.

Brownson’s documentary reveals that prior to her media exposure, Dolezal had been a key witness in the case of her adopted sister, Esther, who had alleged that Dolezal’s older, biological brother, Joshua, had sexually molested her while she was in the care of the family. In an effort to discredit Rachel as a witness, Joshua hired a private detective to investigate her and leak information to the press. The outing of Dolezal’s race was part of an effort to undermine her testimony in her sister’s case.

The Rachel Divide underscores various contemporary American realities. One only derives renewed contempt for the bourgeois news media from the documentary. Its treatment of Dolezal, the mother of two sons and legal guardian of a sibling, has been typically vile. Dolezal has been unable to land steady employment since her story first came to national attention in 2015. She is the target of despicable verbal threats on her social media accounts, the latter being “the only way I have a presence in the world right now.” The adverse publicity and social exclusion create a rift between Dolezal and her children and siblings, who find it difficult to conduct their lives under the constant social

pressure and media scrutiny.

The self-righteousness and hypocrisy of the various media pundits and commentators who appear in Brownson's film are staggering. Spokane television reporter Jeff Humphrey, who first confronted Dolezal about her race live on television, asserts that "we did what local TV news is supposed to do, we found out somebody was lying ... and dethroned somebody that had a lot of power." As if the lurid obsession over an individual's race moves society forward one inch, and as though Humphrey would genuinely take on people who "had a lot of power." The state of Washington has more than its share of tech billionaires and corporate thieves of one description or another. How many of them has Humphrey "confronted"?

Furthermore, the related notions that one cannot "identify" with a race or ethnicity apart from one's own and that the categories "whiteness" and "blackness" might as well exist on different planets are profoundly reactionary. As the WSWS commented in 2015, when the media hysteria over Dolezal was in full swing: "[S]uch... arguments mirror and lend credence to those of outright racists and white supremacists. Followed to its end, the outcome of such a political ideology is a return to conditions of racial apartheid."

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To her credit, Dolezal is unrepentant. In an appearance before a university discussion panel on race, Dolezal is told she has not "endured the initiation process" required to call herself black. She replies, "I have an entire life story that has led up to this point. ... I apologize if there is anything I've done with my life choices that have caused offense, but I can't cease to exist, I can't just go away."

The various claims by identity politics proponents that Dolezal has "appropriated a culture she didn't come from" or has "used blackness" to further her own success amount to a devastating self-exposure. To these layers, to "use" your racial background as a springboard for self-advancement is entirely understandable and even commendable. Dolezal's crime, from this point of view, was honing in on and threatening the lucrative marketing of the commodity "blackness."

The Rachel Divide is successful in its humane and objective depiction of Dolezal and her family. This is

all the more significant considering director Laura Brownson's own views on the matter. "I felt for two years that Rachel sort of stayed Rachel, and there was a moment where I felt that I really needed to confront her with, 'This is what I'm seeing in the world, and this is what I think the world would like to see from you and to see you do, and to, perhaps, watch you change.' And you know, the harder I sort of pushed Rachel, the harder she pushed back. She does not change," said the director in an interview with BuzzFeed News.

In numerous scenes Dolezal explains that once the media hysteria dies down, she hopes to resume the activism she had previously been engaged in. Dolezal's hope of reconciliation with the same forces currently slandering her is one of the more tragic elements of her story.

The documentary is moving and deserves a viewership.



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