

Burgeoning Biraciality:
What it Means to be a Young Mulatto in America Today
Senior Project by Via Perkins
2012-2013

INTERVIEWS: BEN KIRK

FAMILY AND CHILDHOOD

1. *How did your parents meet, and was there any racial tension between family, friends, or others when they decided to get together?*

My parents met in high school... My father was on the football team and my mother was an assistant for the football games, she was the girl who kept scores... They never really let my dad play, so he was always on the sidelines, and he was always really into martial arts, so he was always practicing his kata on the side. She just walked up to him and was like "Oh my god, you have the longest fingers!" Then they just started hanging out after that and were best friends, and then started dating, and fell in love. They were in downtown Pennsylvania, a pretty rural area. I'm pretty sure it's still the same now, but back then it was mostly white, mostly Italian. I feel like my dad wasn't given a whole lot of grief about it, he doesn't talk about it much, but my mom used to get mugged at school for dating my father, girls used to spray paint really terrible things around the neighborhood about her dating a black guy, and my mother's parents didn't really like the fact that she was dating a black man, but they let it happen. So they spent a lot of time at my father's house or at my father's aunt's house.

2. *Lenny Kravitz said of his childhood: "I grew up not knowing about race until I... went to school... My parents were the only parents that didn't match." (Guthmann) Were you always aware of race when you were growing up, or was there a moment you remember becoming aware?*

I forget how old I was – I was very, very young, maybe preschool, or before preschool. I got lost at the mall, and I was with my older brother and sister, and they were supposed to watch me while my mom got food. And I decided that I wanted to go find her... And I ended up getting lost, I was crying, and a black woman picked me up, and looked at me, and she said, "Oh, did you lose your mom? I'll help you find her," and then the question I remember her asking is, "What color is your mom?" And I answered red, because her favorite color was red. I didn't understand. That's the only thing that I remember. And I didn't realize what that meant at the time until I got older... But, I guess, once I got into elementary school, was when like, my mom would come into school and all my friends would be like, "Um, is that your real mom? That can't be your real mom! You have brown eyes, she has blue eyes. You're brown, she's white. She's blonde, you have dark hair. That can't be your mom." So I think, those two combined, I guess.

3. *As time passes and race relations change in America, have the ways others respond to your parents being an interracial couple also changed over the years?*

My parents split up when I was, like, one [year old], so I don't really remember seeing them together, but I remember hearing stuff from like the family and stuff; every now and then, my white side of the family would mention something about my father being black or me being black in a not-so-positive way I guess, and I never really heard much of it from my black side. But, from what I've observed it seems like things have moved along, but at the same time, you still get shocked at the things that people can say. We still have a long, long, long way to go.

4. How did your parents raise you and your siblings, if you have any, as biracial children; i.e., did they agree on trying to give you the benefit of both cultures, or were you raised in more of one culture than another, or was this perhaps a point of tension between your parents?

Since they were divorced, when I was with my mom I was with my white family more, and I guess, white culture, and when I was with my dad, a lot of his family lived in Virginia and South Carolina and stuff, so it was really just my dad to teach me black culture or whatever... I remember my mom telling me that there were times where my dad would like call my mom, angry, that he didn't think his children were getting enough, like, black education, and she was like, "Well, I'm not black, I don't think that should be my job." So, I definitely felt that I have missed out on a lot of black culture. I spent more time with my mom, and when I did – my mom's a very social person, so I was with my mom and thousand other white people. And I grew up listening to The Eagles, Janis Joplin, that kind of thing. And then when I was with my dad, he didn't really listen to much music, and it was really just like, him there, not really with anyone else, so I don't know. It was hard for him, I think. But I think it worked out.

5. Leona Lewis said this of when she would get teased as a child: "I'd go crying home to Mum and she would say to me, "You're a beautiful girl and you're a part of me and a part of your dad. You don't have to do anything but carry yourself with pride'." (Das) Were there any messages or values your parents instilled in you with regard to your mixed heritage?

The only time my father ever I guess, identified me as being mixed – I don't think he's ever called me mixed. He sees me as black, or he will mention that my hair is the way it is because I'm white, or my skin is lighter because I'm white. But like, that almost never comes up, so in his eyes, I'm black. And to my mom, I've always been mixed, I've never been just black. I'm either black and I'm white, or I'm mixed. But yeah, to my dad, the only time my mixed background has ever come up is when they're talking about my hair, my vernacular, and my skin complexion. That's it.

SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

6. Did you grow up in either an ethnically diverse, or non-ethnically diverse area, and was your school population mirrored by that town or city?

[In] elementary school, I had one black friend, and I think he was the only black person in my class. I remember seeing another black person in a year or so below me, and there were three in my sister's class. And we went to a very large school, so it was mostly white. And I remember, when I was in fifth grade, my fourth grade teacher saw me across the hall and called me over, and introduced me to a girl who was mixed, and they were

showing me pictures of her brother, and they said he looked just like me – he was mixed too. And other than my sister, it was the first time I ever saw another mixed person, so I was like “Oh, these people really do look like me, it’s crazy.” And once middle school came, it was pretty much the same thing, a few more dark, ethnic faces; Hispanic, Indian, I think one person from Pakistan, and I ended up... going to school with the who kid I was shown a picture of in fifth grade, so once I got to high school, me and my sister and this one other kid were the only mixed people, besides [another family] – so, four people... And, in elementary school, I feel like that’s where I saw the most, like, “Why do you look the way you do?” And then people sort of got used to it, and then middle school was fine, high school for the most part was fine.

7. Derek Jeter said this about experiencing racism at school: “Kids would say [the N word]; you’d hear it. It would bother you and annoy you, make you feel bad. [But]... It taught me how I didn’t want to be, that I needed to learn about different people as opposed to just judging them.” (ABC News) Did you experience any racism at school, and if so, what was it like for you?

There was a time in elementary school where a kid did call me the n-word, and I don’t think I realized the severity of it, but these two girls... came up to me and were like, “Ben, do you know what he just called you?” And I was like “Yeah, it’s okay though,” and they were like, “No, you should tell the teacher, that’s not a good word,” and it’s funny that these two white girls came to me and made me realize that this is not okay... and helped me go to the teacher, and it lead to a good conversation that taught me a lot at a young age. And after that, he apologized. He was my same age, so he didn’t really realize the severity of it either. And after that, growing up, I’ve never felt comfortable with the n-word, and I know my dad... never used the n-word, he was not a fan of it... Even when they tried to use it in a “We’re taking this word back” kind of way, it still makes me uncomfortable... It just doesn’t sit well with me... I’m going to put this in the best way, poetically. Like, a crown of thorns. That’s pretty much what it was. It was hurtful, and a word used to show everyone – like, when you were wearing a crown of thorns, people know it, you bleed, you’re in pain. That’s what people wanted to do with that word originally. And now that you’re taking it and placing it on your head again, it seems like you’re torturing yourself... Just leave that down. I just don’t like it, ever.

8. What is your education experience like now, attending Salem State, which is the second-most diverse school of all 20 Massachusetts state and UMass schools?

I found that out this summer. Coming in here even without knowing that information I felt blessed, because seeing how much more diversity there is here than there was in my town. The fact that I met Amanda [Cooper], who is mulatto, I met this other kid Dan Quinn and Rob* – there was one point where we were all in the cafeteria before Marsh cafeteria was made, and we were all sitting at different tables, but we were all sort of walking towards the same place, and I was like, “Woah, I’ve never been surrounded by so many mulattos at once!” And we all got together and took a picture of it... So like, seeing all these people with mixed backgrounds... And then finding out how, statistically, how diverse this school is amazing. I really do feel very blessed.

9. Did you know how diverse Salem State was when you applied to the school, and did

that have any sway in your final decision to attend? Do you think schools with a range of diversity are a better thing than a school with less diversity?

I didn't know how diverse it was, I didn't research that at all because I didn't even realize that was a thing to look for. I was like, "One place is going to be the same as everywhere else, the majority white people, whatever." (*I ask, "Why is diversity in a school good for you personally?"*) For me personally, growing up, my sister was the only person that I was able to relate to as far as my culture, basically, and so many mixed people experience very similar things, and it really is a separate culture from being white or being black. It's like, mixed culture... feeling a little bit more of a sense of community, or, like, there are people here who I can relate to who belong to my cultural group, which I've never had before. Having that makes it feel almost, safer. 'Cause, I've always had mostly white friends, and with them, unfortunately, the fact that I am different sticks out in my mind. They might not even notice it, but I always know, "Oh, I'm different from them." Or if I'm with blacks, African-Americans, or whatever, I'm still different. But like, mixed people, I don't have to act any certain way, it's just like "I'm mixed, you're mixed, we're all mixed." It's great.

10. Have you had any difficulty being accepted by certain groups here on campus, or the opposite - being automatically accepted because of your skin color?

I don't know if I've ever felt that way. If anything, I've felt less accepted by the black population here than any other population here. If I ever go to a Hispanic student event or something like that, they're very open, and I sort of experience the same thing – they try to bring me out and into whatever they're doing, and a lot of the African students here are very open and welcoming. But I guess the African-American students are the ones who I feel the least accepted by.

FRIENDSHIPS/DATING RELATIONSHIPS

11. Throughout your life, have you become friends with people of a variety of different races, or mostly one or two races?

My first ethnic friend was half-Puerto Rican, in elementary school... There was another friend I had in middle school... who was half black and half Puerto Rican I think, and then it wasn't until college that I started meeting more, and it wasn't until last year, borderline summer, that I started really befriending people that weren't white, I guess. Honestly, I made one new friend who is half-white, half-Arab/Lebanese, and I met a lot of really good people through him... People from Africa, other students from Morocco – I guess, a lot of international students, which was really good. And then I lived with another girl... who's mixed. And it's really weird how it happened, but after the summer, I just sort of surrounded myself with mixed people. It's really strange, because [the girl I live with] is half Irish, half Egyptian, and then [her] friend... who I work with now, and who I became friends with over the summer is half Brazilian, half Portuguese, and my [other] friend... who is half Arab half white, and then my friend Thomas* who lives in Atlantic who is from Rwanda (he's an RA), and the "face," so to speak, of my friend group has changed drastically. But, it's great because we've been able to have conversations that I've never been able to have before about being mixed and growing up in that way, and the challenges and stuff.

12. If you have friends who are also mulatto, do you feel like you relate to or can connect with them in a special way, or do you have different backgrounds and thoughts about race than they do?

I'm definitely always excited to talk to other mulatto people, and even if we do see things differently – I feel like this goes both ways, but just speaking from my perspective – even if we disagree on something, I still enjoy it and I love learning new things, just because it's rare, I guess.

13. Oprah Winfrey once said that she wished she could be light-skinned as a young woman, because the light-skinned women were always the ones that were most pursued by black men. Were you ever picked on for being a particular skin tone by any racial group? Do you think there is still a color-tone hierarchy?

I do believe that there is a color-tone hierarchy, I think more in women, unfortunately, than men. Even now, my two little half-sisters [who have the same father and different mothers - both are black] – [one] was born with slightly lighter skin and slightly looser hair, [and the other] was born darker skin, tighter hair. And already – they're nine and eight years old right now – and [the latter] is already sort of looked down upon for her darker skin and tighter hair, because in that culture, it's been going on forever. And actually, I feel... a movement trying to move away from that, but like, having the lighter skin and the most Caucasian hair is desirable, I guess. It's sad. But me personally, I mean, in high school, my friends used to – never really a bad thing – but it was still annoying, when I would always get called out with, like, "Oh... mocha skin," or, "Oh, I want my coffee that color." (*Points to his arm.*)It was... friendly teasing, but after a while it was like, "Come on. Settle down."

14. Have you dated whites, blacks, mulattos, or entirely different races from yourself? And if you have dated more than one race, how have your experiences differed in accordance to the meshing of both of your respective heritages and cultures?

I have only dated white. In my high school, that was pretty much my only option, and in college, I've only had like three relationships, and they've all been with white women. I don't think that I really have a preference, it's just, I don't know, sort of the way it's ended up. I've been attracted to women of every race, culture, whatever.

15. If you see yourself getting married or having children, do you see yourself most likely marrying a person of a certain race?

Honestly, I know you can't really choose this or anything, but I really feel like I would prefer to marry, like, an ethnic person, either mixed or not. For some reason, I just think it would be easier for my children. But... I don't know. It's a weird thought to have, but I've definitely had it...

SELF-IMAGE

16. What is it that constitutes being a particular race – is it more cultural and environmental than color-wise, more nurture than nature?

I think it's a combination, actually. It's sort of like the thing where, every now and then I'll be teased like, "Oh, you're not really black 'cause you talk like you're white," or "You dress like you're white." But what does dressing white or talking white or acting white, what does that mean? ... 'Cause, I've definitely met other mulattos who are

considered black and act black to their friend groups and to people around them, and then, like me, people say I act white and all that other stuff, and I'm like, more, I guess mulatto than I am black, so I don't know.

17. Throughout your life, have people ever been surprised when you told them you are mulatto? Did they ever guess any other variety of ethnicities that were wrong?

I've gotten many, many, many things. It's such a strange thing. More recently, I think since I've sort of become friends with other mixed people, and I guess other minorities, I am annoyed when I'm asked what I am, or when people try to guess what I am. Sort of recently, I was having a conversation with a group of people downstairs, and it was about something having to do with school or school subjects, and then one of them goes, "Oh, what are you?" Someone who wasn't even involved in the conversation! I was like, "Um, I'm a senior?" And they were like, "No, what ARE you?" And I was like, "Art education major?... What do you want?" And they were like, "Come on." And I was like, "Are you asking why I look the way I do?" And she's like "Well, yeah!" And for some reason it kind of poked me the wrong way, I guess. Once people find out I'm mulatto I don't think they're surprised, but I've gotten Middle Eastern, I've gotten Hispanic, many different things. When people do try to guess, they don't really guess mulatto, but when at some point I tell them "My mom's this, my dad's this," they're like "Oh, okay. Now you make sense."

18. Have you ever, or do you feel uncomfortable with either side of your black and white heritage (or in more specific terms of your ethnicity, i.e. Jewish and Haitian)?

I do sort of still regret not really having the black culture, I guess, in my childhood, but no... seeing where I am now, I don't think I'd change anything in my past... I'm happy that I'm befriending other minorities and other mulattos and stuff like that. And I definitely want to continue going through that, 'cause when I do have children, I want to be able to show them what culture I have, which is a mixed culture, and no matter what my children are going to be mixed... (*I ask, "What do you feel like having a mixed culture means – do you feel like there's a mulatto culture and other types of mixed cultures, or is there just like a general mixed culture?"*) I think, in my terms, I guess mixed is maybe what the majority would consider – I don't want to sound like a Nazi or something – like, not pure, do you know what I mean? I guess, if you're from like an Asian country, if you're half-Japanese and half-Chinese, you're mixed. If you're half-Japanese, half-English, you're mixed, if you're half-Irish, half-Egyptian, you're mixed. So, it can be anything, but in my mind, if you're half, I don't know, English and half-Irish – in today's culture, I feel like most people would just consider that being white.

19. Race-wise, do you feel like there might be a side of yourself that is hidden, either subconsciously or on purpose? If so, do you want to reveal it?

I notice that when I am with, I guess I want to say, black culture, I guess I do see something inside of me change a little bit. And... this sounds silly, but like I feel more black, and if I go back to my white friends with that same way of being, they kind of look at me funny like, "This isn't you, why are you acting like that?" And I'm like, "Oh, I don't know." And, even when I'm with my white family, I speak differently, I carry myself differently, and then when I'm with my black family, it changes, and I feel like

it's sort of been like that my whole life. I don't know, it's a little weird identity crisis or something like that.

20. *Bob Marley said this about being biracial: "Me don't dip on nobody's side. Me don't dip on the black man's side nor the white man's side. Me dip on God's side, the one who create me and cause me to come from black and white." (Lowney) Depending on who you happen to be around (i.e. a certain race or culture of people), does your self-image in terms of your race differ? Or, in your daily life, do you tend not to think about or notice your race?*

I tend to – I don't want to say forget – but, I am more one with my race when I'm with other people of mixed race. So that's when I feel most one with myself, I guess. Because, when I am with white people, like I said earlier, there are times where I sort of see myself from another vantage point, like, I'm the different one, that kind of thing...

AMERICAN CULTURE/CURRENT AFFAIRS

21. *Although we are coming up to a presidential election soon, America has now had four years with a mulatto president. What do you think his election and presidency means to American culture, and the often-controversial, often-shifting racial environment of our country?*

I have to say that I still get misty-eyed when I think... "My president is mulatto." That just makes me the happiest person in the entire world.

22. *Do you think that, in America today, it's still necessary to pick either solely black or solely white social groups to be accepted, or is it more complicated?*

I think it's way more complicated than that. I think there are definitely those that, I'm gonna say, pick sides, maybe because it's easier for them, maybe it's because they prefer or are more comfortable, but for me, I almost like the challenge of sort of sitting somewhere in-between. At times it's almost like a balancing act, or like, being pulled from either side, but I don't think I would ever want to be forced to choose a side. Well, my father actually has white in him. His father is half white. But in that time, he didn't have a choice. He was black, because back then – one drop – you're black. So my father was raised black, he was just black, that's it. And I guess that's why he sees me the way he sees me – I'm black. His heritage is very mixed, like many African-Americans that have been in this country for so long; he's African-American, Native American, Cuban, Irish, and Scottish. But... he's black. To him. And, if I ever had children, I would want them to know where they came from – I'm mixed, my children will be mixed, no matter what. And I think that once they start going to school and growing up and stuff, it will not be so weird. I don't think it'll be as big of an issue or surprise as it was when I went through the school system.

23. *When asked about her daughter Nahla's race, Halle Berry said, "I feel like she's black. I'm black and I'm her mother, and I believe in the one-drop theory." (Weiss) Although Halle Berry is technically mulatto, she sees herself and her mixed daughter as black. Does anyone in your family categorize you as one race or another? If you decide to have children, how do you think you would choose to handle your children's races? Well, my father actually has white in him. His father is half white. But in that time, he*

didn't have a choice. He was black, because back then – one drop – you're black. So my father was raised black, he was just black, that's it. And I guess that's why he sees me the way he sees me – I'm black. His heritage is very mixed, like many African-Americans that have been in this country for so long; he's African-American, Native American, Cuban, Irish, and Scottish. But... he's black. To him. And, if I ever had children, I would want them to know where they came from – I'm mixed, my children will be mixed, no matter what. And I think that once they start going to school and growing up and stuff, it will not be so weird. I don't think it'll be as big of an issue or surprise as it was when I went through the school system.

24. Lenny Kravitz said this about his parents' relationship: "[My parents] would walk down the street (and) people would spit on them... very disgusting things. My father lost his side of the family 'til I was born." (Guthmann) This memory Lenny related is well within living memory. How far have we come since then?

Sort of going back to what I said before, we've definitely come a long way, but we still have a very long way to go. I know my mother was disowned by her family when she got pregnant, and she had to hide the fact that she was pregnant, so when she started to show, she was never at family outings, because she was "sick." She came down with the flu or a cold so she couldn't show up, and when the baby was born, she had to go to Christmas parties pretending she didn't have a child. Eventually, my grandmother met my older brother and fell in love, and was sorry – and I know she, to this day, 28 years later, she still beats herself up about it. And out of everyone, my grandmother is one of the most supportive and nurturing people in my life about my mixed race heritage. So, people can change. Many people have changed, but certain things happen and you realize that there is still a very long way to go.

25. What is the most important thing you feel you have learned about yourself and how you fit into the world as a young American mulatto?

This is gonna sound sort of big-headed, but, this goes for you too – I believe that mulattos are the perfect image of what America is becoming – a melting pot – a mixed group of people. I'm not saying that everyone should be mulatto and look like us, I'm saying that everyone should be mixed in mentality, and I guess, acceptance. And, yeah, I think I've tried to give that off to people...

*Name changed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Guthmann, Laurie. "Lenny Kravitz: Growing up with Racism." *InAmerica Blog*. CNN, 22 Dec. 2011. Web. 10 Feb. 2013.

Das, Lina. "X Factor Superstar: Leona Lewis on Fame, Fear of Failure and the Pressures of Being Simon Cowell's Biggest Hope." *DailyMail.co.uk*. Mail Online, 23 Oct. 2007. Web. 10 Feb. 2013.

"Derek Jeter: Racism 'Taught Me a Lot'" *ABC News*. ABC News Network, 13 Dec. 2011. Web. 10 Feb. 2013.

Kelley, Kitty. *Oprah: A Biography*. New York: Crown, 2010. Print.

Time Will Tell. Dir. Declan Lowney. Perf. Bob Marley. Island Visual Arts/Gong Production, 1992. Videocassette.

Weiss, Shari. "Halle Berry to Ebony Magazine: My Daughter Nahla Is Black Because of the 'one-drop Theory'" *NY Daily News*. N.p., 8 Feb. 2011. Web. 10 Feb. 2013.

Guthmann, Laurie. "Lenny Kravitz: Growing up with Racism." *InAmerica Blog*. CNN, 22 Dec. 2011. Web. 10 Feb. 2013.