

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

INTERVIEWS: AMANDA COOPER

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 at a bar, one of them was singing, my dad was with his ex-wife at the time ([my mom and dad]... were friends [at the time]), my grandfather on my mom's side didn't like the fact that he was black, there was some tension there. It was only that grandfather that had a problem. My dad tended to date white women.

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 knew my parents were different races, but I don't think it ever really "hit" me - it was just normal. All of my friends had white parents, or black parents, and none of them were either/or, but I was just like "Whatever, that's normal."

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?*

I don't think so. A lot of people who [have] just met my dad are surprised he's married to a white woman (but they are also surprised he's married at all). The reactions are from no one specific - just people in general. And I think it's the same way for my mom, but I just haven't encountered it. My dad will show photos of his family of people to his work, and it's like, a white woman, and me, who's not even tan at all, and my sisters, one of which is tan, and the other of which is kind of tan.

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?*

I don't think it was a point of tension, but I have definitely been raised in more of white culture. It just kind of happened that way, it wasn't like my dad wasn't trying. He'll make "soul food" - greens, cornbread, ribs, stuff like that. But partially it was the neighborhood [in Framingham, Massachusetts] I grew up in, which at the time was all white people, and now everybody lives there. I was mostly brought up by my babysitter, because my mom

worked and my dad was traveling for music, so they were both there – my dad took care of be during the day if he was home, but [our babysitter] took care of us, and she didn't have any black kids besides us, just because of our neighborhood. And then in high school, we all branched out into which culture we liked better.

*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?*

I don't think so. I mean it's just the same old shit that everyone says – "be who you are, be proud of who you are," stuff like that, "don't let anyone tell you any different," not like, "you are half and you should be proud of it and stuff like that. It's never really like that. It's more about humanity things, not like "Hey, you're half black. This is how you should feel."

### 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?*

My whole time in school it's been like everything at once. Because Framingham is like, the melting pot. There's Spanish people, there's Brazilian people, there's black people, there's Asian people... It wasn't a big deal for me to see race or for race to be taken into account because everyone was just thrown together... In my high school, there was a ton of black people. It's so weird, when I hear people say, "Oh, yeah, there was like two black people at my school," I'm like "How?"... When you cross the border, I'm like, "How is Natick so fucking different than Framingham?" It's like, "Bye black people, bye ethnicity, see you later..." It's so confusing. I came up here and I went to Gloucester or something. This happened this weekend. I drove [my friend] to work and we stopped at Dunkin Donuts, and there were white people working at Dunkin Donuts... It's normal to see a few, but not like the entire staff. And I was just like, "I don't like any of this, this is not normal." I'm used to seeing everything everywhere, so I was like "This is just weird."

*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 black teacher from Jamaica, who was racist against black people. And as soon as she found out I was half-black, she was like "Uhh." And I was like, "How does this even work?" She just thought we were all lazy. She's like, 'You don't do your work, so clearly you're not gonna know this answer.' And I was like, "What does this even mean? Have you looked in the mirror? You're way darker than I am!" ...She would change her wig in the middle of classes. Black women wear wigs all the time, she would literally go to the back of the classroom, change her wig, and come back. But I didn't see any other really real racism, I haven't experienced any yet, which is really lucky... I could pass for just white. Although people tend to think I'm Hispanic. And I'm like "Sorry, I'm not Hispanic, I'm black." And they're like, "What?"

*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?*

Salem State doesn't seem that diverse to me. Compared to Framingham, I don't see that many black people here verses Framingham. There are a ton of Asian people here, but that's because a foreign exchange program to Japan and stuff, and I'm just like "Gah, they travel in packs." Although black people here travel in packs, too... My sisters go to school in Rhode Island and Connecticut, and my sister..., who moved me in this year, was like, "You have black people!" And I was like "Yes... I go to school in Massachusetts. Not white-ass Connecticut where you can't see anyone ever of ethnicity." I'm really surprised that we're one of the most ethnic places ever. My mind is blown.

*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?*

Duh, school with diversity is so much better than school without diversity. It makes you meet more people, and cooler people. Whether or not you like them or not, but they all come from different backgrounds. It definitely had no impact on my school choice, 'cause I had no idea. I think this would be mad fun – go to school with all black people. I thought about going to an all-black college, but I thought I'd probably stick out like a sore thumb. But I feel like it would be so much fun because they have so much culture. At black college you talk about it, you talk about culture... When you go to a plain old white Catholic school, it's like "Yay, Jesus." And I'm like, "This is boring!"... If you go to Gordon, you're supposed to be married by 21. What is that? Okay, you can love Jesus, but you don't have to rub it in my face. I love Jesus but I'm not like "JESUS!" And I'm gonna get married by 21!... Definitely diverse places are totally better than bland fuckin' places.

*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 look black, so white people tend to flock to me. I tend to flock to white people, I don't know why... I'm not boogie or hood or nothin', and when I hang out with black people, sometimes I feel out of place, because I don't talk like them, and I listen to the same music as they do, but not all the time, and stuff like that. Like my sisters, they're like black. All of my sisters (six, including halves), they act black, they talk black. Even [my two full sisters], they were raised in the same household and in high school, we found people who we flocked to, and I didn't flock to black people. I had black friends, clearly... but I just tended to flock to white people, I just didn't have the same personality. Sometimes when I tell black people that I'm half black they're like "Aw yeah that's so cool," and they like start talking to me more, and I'm just like, "Alright, did you not want to talk to me when I was just plain white? Was there an issue?" And then there's Melissa\* (*our mutual friend*) who's like, "I'm the blackest person ever!" And I'm like, Melissa, you're literally more black than I am. I don't understand how it happens. She grew up in Hamilton, with white people. I'm like, "You're not even the race, damnit!"

## 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?*

I'm friends with everyone... I literally flock to anyone and everyone, if they want to be my friend, I'm your friend, that's how it works. But I feel like if you lined up all of my friends together, most of them would be white, and then there would be black people, Hispanics... I have a diverse group of friends, it's just that, because I did theatre in high school, I think that's where all the white people were, and so, then my friends became white people and stuff like that.

*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've never actually talked about the race thing to any mulattos. I got the term "haffrican" from Rob. It's never come up – it's not a big deal. I feel like because we are mixed race... whatever. It's like, whatever.

*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 still think there's a color-tone hierarchy. And the funny thing is that the only people who have brought up my skin tone are my sisters. Because they tan and I don't, no matter how long I'm in the fuckin' sun. But there's totally a color-tone hierarchy, because the lighter you are, the more you can pass as a white person. Like, I can pass as being a plain ol' white person. My younger sister Tamera cannot pass. I feel like most people think I'm Hispanic... I never get black. People either think I'm white or Hispanic, and when I'm in Framingham, people think I'm Brazilian... When I first met you (*indicates me, the interviewer*), I knew you were black. I thought you were just black, I didn't think you were mulatto, because I'm just used to it, because in Framingham there are so many different skin tones... I could tell by your hair and by your face that you're just black. And then you were like, "Oh I'm mulatto," and I'm just like "Really? What? I'm confused... Well, that's cool!" ...I get Spanish people who talk Spanish to me first, and I know enough Spanish to be like "I know what you just said, but I have no idea how to respond to you because I'm not Spanish." It happens at my job all the time. I work at a clothing store, and there's only one person there who... speaks Spanish and they automatically just start speaking Spanish to me and I'm like wow, I have no idea... New York and Company - it's a rich, white people clothing store.

*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 dated multiple races. I tend to lean towards the Hispanic. I tend to lean towards ethnicity. I've only had two white boyfriends out of six. And three of them were either Hispanic or half-black half-Hispanic, and so, I don't know. The only time I've ever experienced meshing of family or like cultures is with Ryan\* because I had to go to his

sister's birthday party, and that was terrifying. Within a week of us dating, he was like, "Want to go to my sister's birthday party and meet my entire family at one time?"... Ryan is Puerto Rican and Dominican, and the party was his whole Puerto Rican side. And they're like, cool people. They remind me of black people. They're loud "like we're supposed to be," there's music going all the time... I feel like Hispanic people are the most like black people. If you go to a black household, they're all about culture and family and food, and you go to a Hispanic household and they're all about culture and family and food. Like, literally, I feel like they're like the same thing. I don't know if that's why I'm like attracted to Hispanic men. I think that could be part of it...

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

I just want little tan babies. I feel like with what I'm predisposed to liking, I guess, I'm probably going to marry a Hispanic man. I would not be surprised, and neither would my family. I've never imagined having a white child. White kids are so ugly! I say that all the time. Little black babies are so cute. Black babies are adorable, whether they're Hispanic or black, children that have a color are just cute. So I'm pretty sure I'll probably marry a person of color. Not that I'd be like, "Uh, you're white, I can't marry you," but I don't see myself marrying a white guy.

#### 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 don't know, I mean it's nurture above nature. Because you could be adopted like Jimmy\* (*our mutual friend*), and everyone's like, "You're white, right?" And he's Columbian (although he [has said] "I don't even know [for sure] if I'm from Columbia"). But literally, he doesn't like Spanish food, he doesn't seem like he's Spanish. You think he's a white kid because he's been adopted by a white family. But he also doesn't look Hispanic. Like, a black kid who's raised by a white family could be... I don't know. I feel like they would be more predisposed to try to be like their culture because they feel so out of place sometimes. But with me, I don't know. I literally tell people, like, "No, I am, I'm black." Because people are like, "You're not black," and I'm like "Yes I am, want to see pictures of my father? He's dark as night. I am black." And I think the only reason they do that is because it's part of who I am and people can't see this. And I'm like, "This is part of who I am, even though you can't see it."

*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?*

People are always surprised that I'm black.

*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 don't think so... Why would you feel uncomfortable with it? It's who you are. I feel like if you had grown up with your dad around it would have been totally different, especially since you grew up in Natick.

*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?*

Yes, actually, a little bit. I tend to suppress my black side. Like, when I get angry, I get black. That's the best way to describe it. You know how black people move their hands? This is literally how I talk. I start head-swerving, and I don't care about my grammar anymore. The stereotypical black girl, that's how I get when I'm angry, and I don't like being angry, because it's terrifying when I get angry, and I tend to suppress it. No one has actually seen me naturally be black. Last year, I played in Vagina Monologues as Angry Vagina as a black person, and my black side, but no one's actually seen me act black because I'm actually angry. I tend to suppress my black side a little bit more. I think that's because I look so white. I think it kind of bothers me a little bit, because when I do get in a situation where I should be more black, or whatever – even in my family I feel awkward, because I'm not like this, so I feel awkward, because my sisters are all loud – they're black people, they really are – and I am not like that. I can be loud, especially with them, but it's not to the same degree, like, I don't talk the same way that they do. I don't speak slang... even when I text, and my sister will write the number four, and I'm like, "I can't deal with this, write English, that's not English!" It can make me a little uncomfortable when I'm in that situation and I don't know what to do.

*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 be pretty comfortable with it. Everyone changes their personality depending on who they're around, just to fit in better. When I'm with black people, I don't tend to act super black. This is an interesting question that I've never thought about before, because it just happens. I agree with what Bob Marley said – I don't really change that much, but like, you naturally just change a little bit to just assimilate... 'Cause some people are just night and day, and that's just fake. I guess what I do to change is change my vernacular. I'm like, "You're mad fake," you can hear it in my voice. If I'm around my sisters and stuff I kind of tend to talk like that, but when I'm around white people, I tend to talk like I'm talking to you now.

#### 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?*

Well, I know it definitely changes the fact that... there's never been a black president... And the thing I hate is that black people are like, "Oh, we have a black president, we can do whatever the fuck we want." And I'm like, "That's a damn lie, because he's still the fucking president." And he's not an asshole, and people use it to their advantage; they're like, "Oh yeah, we finally got a black president, we can be whatever we wanted to be," And I'm like, "You could be whatever you wanted to be before, you asshole." 'Cause I

feel like with black people it's like, you're predisposed to be like, "Well, I can either be a rapper, or a drug dealer to be really successful, and then I'm not going to get very far, I'm not going to be super successful... I could be a manager of a store," and stuff like that. Like, my dad is a smart man, but he's just stupid. He does stupid shit to get himself fired. And I'm just like, "Why?" He's a smart guy and he could do whatever he wanted, but he fucks things up for himself and I'm like "Why do you do these things?" The only thing that really changed is that if [Obama] does get re-elected (please, dear Lord), I think black people just have more respect for themselves, you know what I mean? Wow, I just sounded really negative toward black people! I mean, they're smart and intelligent, I think they'll try harder. I think they won't, like, settle into that form that everyone thinks they're supposed to belong to, not settle into stereotypes... I think they'll strive harder to work to their potential... Because they assume that people are always going to think of them in a certain way and I'm like, "Break out, be whoever you are, instead of being the form."

*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?*

It's more complicated than that. I think growing up in Framingham makes me feel this way – everyone will accept you for who you are. It doesn't matter what your race is. They might be wary of you in the beginning – (*I ask about what it might be like down south.*) Down south is not America! Down south is like back in like 1800s, because they're all like racist bastards! ...Down south then, I feel like you have to choose a side. You have to branch out, like, if a black kid wants to be friends with a white kid, you gotta be really careful. You have to make sure that family isn't racist, you can't do anything wrong because they might think that it was your fault, and you fucked up their kids because black people are a bad influence and stuff. I've been down south a little bit, but from people I know who've been down south more, like my family's really close friends, she says they're nice folks, but white people down there... They'll be nice to your face, but at the same time they'll be judging you and watching and make predispositions about you. Up here in Framingham, you're friends with whoever. Unless you're like the rich white people of Framingham, in which case I can see that they're all basically white together, like, they don't branch out... They rarely bring in a couple of black kids. It's not that their racist, it's just that they've known each other all their lives and stuff... But literally, in Framingham, I don't know one single person there who's not friends with somebody of another race. I think it's good that I grew up there. I'm lucky. If you want to learn about race and how different races interact, just go to Framingham. They interact like every other human being on the planet. It's not like "Oh, well you're black, so I have to change everything or dumb things down." It's just like, "Oh, you're black, that's awesome." That's it.

*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? My sisters say that I'm the "white" one out of the group. They all think I'm gonna marry*

a white man – I’m like “No!” But, I feel like when I have kids I’ll be like, “You’re mixed. I’m mixed.” I’m not gonna be like “You’re black,” unless it becomes an issue, like if they have a problem with a black person, I’ll say, “I want you to realize that you are black. You might not look it, but you are black, so don’t forget it – don’t say stuff about other people when you are them.” I think that’s what happens when you get mixed so much, you don’t realize it. And it’s just like, “You are the same people, you came from the same place.” I’m gonna be like, “You’re partially black. You are. If you ask me, if you want to get technical about it, you’re this, this, this, and this.”

*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?*

I think we’ve come pretty far. My parents don’t get spit on when they’re out together, which is a good thing. I mean, I’ve gotten some slurs thrown at me... When I was young, in Framingham, by ignorant people. I’ve been called “dirty blood” and stuff like that... It bothered me, but not to the point where I would fight back, because I’m just like, “You’re ignorant, that’s what you are, and I’m going to treat you like an ignorant person, that’s how it is...” They just think that being pure is one thing even though literally nobody is pure anymore. There is no just one race anymore, because if you go back far enough, you’re mixed somewhere, definitely. I’m just like, “You’re not pure white, there’s a blemish somewhere in your life if you want to think of it that way.” But I still think we’ve come a long way.

*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?*

You’re just there, you’re here to exist and you’re just you. And you shouldn’t think of yourself as being weird or strange, or anything, because everyone is mixed... Even if you’re Hispanic, like Ryan is Puerto Rican and Dominican... [and] one of my [other] exes... is black and Spanish. You’ll find it if you look for it. You’ll find your mix. And to be honest, you should think of yourself as being like everyone else. If you think of yourself as being special – you are special as a human, but when it comes to race, you are just like everyone else. Everyone’s special in their own way, and yeah, being mulatto makes me special, but it doesn’t make me extremely special, because I’m like everyone else. It’s not like I’m literally cut in half and one side of me is black and one side of me is white – that’s special... I just feel like you need to live with what you have and use it to your advantage. When I applied to college when they asked for race, I put white and black on everything. I was like, “If my [being in] a minority [group] can help me get further, help me get into college, I’ll use it.” I did that for the Disney program – they asked if you were mixed, and I said “I’m definitely mixed.” And I would use that – if you want diversity, I’m here for that... But you shouldn’t rely on it, you’ve gotta rely on yourself. Like, if you want to use it to maybe tip you up a little bit, I get that, but don’t rely on it, like, “Yeah, I’m gonna get this job because I am half black, and they need diversity...” It could help you, everybody has something that could help them. Some people have a higher GPA, some people have the advantage of getting into a better school because they can actually pay for it and stuff like that. So why don’t you try and use



yours to help you get somewhere?

\*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.