

Burgeoning Biraciality:
What it Means to be a Young Mulatto in America Today
Senior Project by Via Perkins
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INTERVIEWS: ZOIE LUCAS

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?*

No, because my mom and my dad both grew up in Lowell. My mom's white and my dad's black, and my mom's best friends with his sister, and my mom used to play basketball – and my dad – she used to play with the guys and stuff like that – my mom's very tomboyish, and the only reason why they didn't get together in the first place was because my mom was, like, a thicker girl, and so, he didn't want to get with a thicker girl. There wasn't any racial tension, because my mom pretty much grew up with his family. (*I ask, "Did he come to a point where he was okay with her body image?"*) Yeah, like, they just – you know, when two people hang out enough, you know what I mean?

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?*

My mom grew up in Lowell, and it's such a diverse community, and my mom was aware of the racism – she said you're going to be black for people's convenience, and you're going to be white for people's convenience. And I find that a lot when I work. It's like I'm white to them because of the way I speak and stuff like that, but I'm black to the people at my college, and my high school or whatever. But my mom always said, "You know what, you're beautiful..." And I remember, there are two separate instances where that stood out to me, one was when a white girl my age or whatever – I got really insulted though, I was really young though – she held her arm up to me and said, "Your arm's different than my arm..." But I remember going to like Kimball's in Westford next to Chelmsford, and it's a really white neighborhood as well, a very white community, and there are upper-class people there, and I walked in, and then people were staring at me a little bit, and that's when the first time I realized that I looked different than other people. I was probably, like, 12. 'Cause when I was younger, I knew I was different, but that was the first time I actually felt different. 'Cause you walk into a place, and like I walked into there, and people were looking at me. And then I realized that I was the only black person there. And it's sort of weird, because I'm not looking at myself – I don't view myself as a color, I don't identify myself as that, I just see myself as a person. And that was one of the first times I realized, "Wow, they're seeing me as something that I don't see myself as."

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 are divorced, but my dad's mom, my grandmother who had passed away – she didn't have a problem with it. But my Yia (I'm half Greek, so my Yia [is] my mom's mom) had a problem with it, and she's very racist – just very sly things... And when my mom was pregnant with my brother and I, she would be like, "What color will they be like? They won't have an identity," stuff like that. She had a problem with it. I remember times I used to get in arguments with my Yia, because she loves us, but she's racist, you know what I mean? My stepdad now, he's Jamaican, he's black Jamaican, and my Yia would say things like – one time, this conversation got into an argument about how black people came from monkeys. And I was like, "So you're saying – you believe in God right? So you believe God made every single white person, but they left the black people to the monkeys – do you know what I mean – to evolution?"

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?

My mom always told me that I'm Greek, who just happens to be black. So, I remember my freshman year, people would be like, "Zoie, you're black..." [It would be] these were black people saying it, like, Haitian, or whatever... And I'm like, "No, I'm Greek who just happens to be black..." And yeah, I'm black, but I feel like my culture is Greek. And they said, "Zoie, look at your skin color. People are going – see, you're black, you're black." And I was like, "Yeah, I know, but I'm Greek." And they would get really insulted that I identified [as] Greek, because they didn't see me as Greek, they saw me as black, and I don't see myself as black, I see myself as Greek more as a culture, and black as a color.

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?

My mom would drill home the fact that just because I'm dark or whatever compared to the white community that I'm still beautiful and things like that, and in general, she always says "Act like you've been there before, carry yourself with confidence" and things like that, and she'd always say "You're a strong Greek woman," and stuff like that. But she would also say, "But sometimes, you have to act like you're a big, black, b-i-t-c-h!... Go for it!" My dad never said anything, he wasn't really like that. 'Cause he grew up in a black community with blacks, and he just... I don't think he felt the need for confidence.

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?

I grew up in Chelmsford which is a white town, and I grew up in a trailer – the very low-income side of town, near Westford, so it's that weird thing that goes socioeconomically

low as well as black, and the majority of people in Chelmsford were upper-middle-class to upper-class, and white. And I went to predominantly white schools before college. And I always had contact with my dad and his family, and they are black and they live in Lowell, which is ethnically diverse... so I always had that dichotomy of living in a white community but living in a multicultural, diverse community too. So my views on different people – I knew that colleges were going to be different – like, I wasn't culture shocked.

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?

Racism is everywhere. You can't avoid racism. And if I got offended by everything that someone could perceive as racist, then I'd just be an old witch. But, I just take it as a joke... I take it as a learning experience. I realize now... a lot of people get offended, like, "Oh, can I touch your hair?" And they respond, "No, no, you can't touch my hair! I'm not a Chia Pet!" And stuff like that, but I just take it as... I'm different to somebody. I am new... I don't want to be judged for asking questions of other cultures. That's how you learn and grow, and I know people are racist... I just take it as satire. I get more offended when people who are black or whatever are racist. Because, I don't know, maybe I just expect it from people who are white, because of... curiosity, stuff like that. But when somebody's black and within the black culture, and you're lighter skinned, or – the worst thing, I don't like when people, not white, not black, just in general, they say, "Zoie, I like your skin color, but if it was a little lighter, it would be way better," you know what I mean? They would compare, being like, "Zoie, I love that you have, like, a tan, but I would just want to be a little lighter than you. Just a little lighter, and that'd be the perfect skin tone." And that is the stuff I get really insulted by. I don't really get insulted by general stereotypes of, "Oh, black girls do this..." whatever. I don't care about that, but I care about the specifics, like light skin is better than dark skin, or, I hear people say, "Oh, you talk white." 'Cause I think that a lot of black people say – I don't want to say black people, but a lot of... not educated people, they'll say that to me. And, what is that supposed to mean? And you'll run into a white girl, and we'll have this big conversation, that's like, "She talks blacker than you." And I was like, "What do you mean? Because I can read a book? I don't understand, like, what are you talking about?" And they couldn't vocalize what it is they were trying to say. And I'm trying to get the point across that, I'm not talking like this because I'm trying to act white, it's because you're prejudiced. The most racism I have ever received outwardly is from people of color.

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 don't think of it differently. I think it's cool that it's a diverse school... because I'm a diverse person, so, maybe it was just the best fit, in a way.

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 grew up in a family where they didn't go to college, so I didn't know about colleges, but I looked online, and I saw that some people are black and that made it... diverse, and that did make me feel more comfortable. But I didn't want to go to an all-black school, because I felt like, I don't know why, but that my identity as a black person would be... it sounds bad but, I felt like I would be just another black person instead of standing out, in a way. Because I grew up in a white town... and I was individual because I was black, but going into a black school, I would just be another black person. So I wanted to go to a diverse school for the fact that there are different races. But I wouldn't want to go to the south, though, or anything. (*I ask, "Do you think schools with more diversity are better than less diversity?"*) Yeah, definitely.

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?

Because of my personality, I'll talk to anybody, I don't care, and so I've never had really a bad experience getting accepted anywhere... I had a group of friends, and I didn't join any groups and clubs, and then I became an RA (*Resident Assistant in one of Salem State University's dorm halls*)... that sort of thing...

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?

A variety of races. My sister-in-law is Asian, and my stepdad is Jamaican. My roommate my sophomore year was Asian, and I have black friends and white friends. It's like that, so I have a good chunk of people who are diverse. I don't care who you are, as long as you're a nice person.

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 don't really have friends that who are mulatto except, like, Ben Kirk, so, I joke, like, people at work or whatever will be like, "I'm black and I'm Haitian," and I'm like, "Well, I'm mixed, I'm evolution!" I always say that, and I'll make a mulatto sign (*She makes a sign language "m" with her hand*). And that sort of thing, and I think people who are mulatto can relate in a lot of ways, and I just think it's funny, like, when you see somebody who's mulatto, you're like, "Oh, cool," and I think I can connect with somebody like that on that level, but I don't know a lot of people like that... I never see somebody and try to judge them on what they look like in the sense that it's like, "Oh, they're dark-skinned, so they must be black, or they're light skinned so they must be white." They'll tell me what they tell me.

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?

Yes, there is a color-tone hierarchy, definitely. And I feel like I'm judged because I'm lighter-skinned in a way. I'm not dark and I'm not light. Like I said earlier, I'm black to some people, and I'm white to some people. I hear this a lot – a lot of black women, from what I hear from them telling me, they'll be like, "Zoie, I love your hair, you have good hair – you have good hair because it's curly or whatever. They'll say, "It's nice, and I want to marry a white man, or I want to have babies with a white man, so I can have lighter skinned babies." And, I'm like, "That's racist! That's racist to yourself, because you're seeing yourself as lesser because you're dark-skinned." I was like, "You're beautiful the way you are," but people don't understand that because of their culture, because white signifies wealth and status, but to me it's not a big deal. And to other people, my skin color is a big deal, and that sort of racism. Like, "Oh, Zoie, you're really pretty, you're light-skinned," and stuff like that. And that sort of racism, that experience with my skin color, like, maybe they just assume I'm snobby because I'm lighter-skinned, or like that.

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've never dated. I know, specifically for me, I don't date because I know I'm not comfortable. Like, I want to give myself fully to somebody, and I don't want to be... awkward and self-conscious and stuff like that, and I want to get to a point in my life where I'm okay with myself, and that I can actually be myself with somebody.

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

It's completely open, because I find different people attractive – I'm not settled onto one idea of a husband. I always say, ambition. If you have ambition, if you have a goal, then that's attractive.

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 took the race, class, and ethnicity course that all social work majors have to take, and one of my favorite things ever that I didn't even think about and that made me appeased about me getting offended by people saying that I talk white – because I seriously get offended, because they are racist, because they think it's a privilege to talk white, but race is a social construct – so, one of the phrases in the book noted that a black lady in Africa doesn't consider herself black. And, that was a moment where I was like, "That's definitely true." Like, somebody who's around everybody who's just like them, they're just a person. And so, western culture, with the fact that they have white privilege... that's like saying, like, "Oh, she's light," or whatever... People who are white set the boundaries for people who are of color.

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?

Yeah. Some people are like, “Oh, I thought you were just black,” or they say, “No, you’re not white,” because I grew up in a white town, so they’ll say, “You’re not half black,” because they saw me as black. And then when I get into Lowell and places with a lot of dark people, they’ll try to figure me out. They’ll think I’m Spanish, and I’m like, “Sorry, I took French. I apologize.” They look disappointed. I like when people try to guess, like, “Are you this? Are you this? Are you that?” And someone threw something out last year that I was Cape Verdean, and I was like, “I didn’t even know what that was!” So I just think it’s funny, I don’t get offended.

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 feel uncomfortable around people normally, but I feel uncomfortable when they start talking about race and their ideals on race, because it’s like I’m sort of stuck in the middle like, “Oh, white people, blah, blah, blah...” “Nope, they don’t.” Or it’s, “Oh, black people, blah, blah, blah...” And I’m like, “Nope, they don’t.” I have both sides, so all the prejudices they’re saying, it’s like – with people who are stuck with their ways, who don’t see themselves as racist because they said this, it’s just really hard to change their mind...

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?

The reason why I say I’m Greek is because I’m black, and I said black’s a color, but I know African-American, and specific parts of Africa – that there’s a culture within Egypt, or South Africa, or whatever – there are different cultures associated with that, but African-American isn’t associated with any part of Africa. And so I don’t have any culture to hang on to. And yeah, black people come together for different things like that, but what is it specifically, what are their traditions? Do you know what I mean? So I consider myself Greek because Greek is a culture. It’s something definable... like, “Oh, I’m having Baklava tonight.”

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?

In my daily life I don’t notice my race at all. I guess it really just depends on the people in general... Because I’m biracial, I don’t really see race as a barrier as some people see it – I’ll talk to anybody, like I said. And when I’m around white people, it really depends on whether you’re lax in your words whether I can be more upfront with you, and if I’m around black people, and they’re more uptight – like, I’ll base on the social aspect of it... I’ll change the way I am, but not because of the color of your skin, because of who they are.

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, because maybe you'll relate to people who are lighter skinned, more just based off of, not because of their skin, but because you're more for that, and you feel unaccepted by the people who have your color skin... I think it's good to know people who are black, and to be around people like that just so you feel like you're not going through anything that's really odd. Like, people who are black will be like, "I don't feel pretty, because I'm not light skinned or I don't have straight hair and I'm not like everybody." I feel like if I'm around people who are like me, I feel more comforted, in a sense. I see myself as just part of a population instead of just sticking out, which is weird because earlier I said that I don't want to go to an all-black school.

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?

I think a lot of people see me as black, and like I said, I'm Greek, but because they see me as black, therefore I see myself as black, in the sense that – I think you have to expect the worst, because if you don't prepare your child for the fact that they might face racism based off of because they're different, saying, "Oh, you're black, and blah, blah, blah," it's just preparing them for all challenges.

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 I see a lot more interracial couples, and that's good... And that's really cool, but again, that also breeds more racism in the sense that, it's a status thing – like, I was on the elevator just a month ago, and they were these two guys, these two POCs (*She explains that this means "people of color"*), and I was in the elevator with them, and they were just like, "Yo, I asked her, 'Can you hook me up with a white girl?' And she hooked me up man, she hooked me up." And on the train, there were... some POCs together, and this white girl walked off the train, and one was like, "Oh, yo, if I had some it'd be like blah, blah, blah," and they were like, "No, white girls are snobs, they wouldn't want you." So in a way, it's sort of a status thing. And me being an African-American, like, a black person, a darker-skinned person, that's insulting in a way, because you can't catch a break. (*I say, "All of our mothers are white and all of our fathers are black. That seems like such a trend, it's so common, and it's directly related to what you said. Why do you think that is?"*) I think it's because... people think that people who have lighter skin are beautiful. I'm not saying everybody does, but I'm saying, look the magazines – it is what it is. Because society sets the point of, "She's light-skinned, and she's beautiful." And everybody wants somebody beautiful, and that's the norm.

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?

That I'm what people want me to be. Like I said before, I'm black for people's convenience and I'm white for people's convenience. I can't change that. All I have to be is me.

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