Lust and Disgust:
Reimagining Injurious Representations and Experiences of Black Actresses in the U.K. and U.S.

Appendices
Volume III: Interview Transcripts

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Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Josette Bushell-Mingo OBE (JBM), Professional Black British Actress, Olivier Award Nominee 2000

Interviewer: Samia La Virgne (SL)

Date of Interview: 10 March 2018

Interview Setting: Josette Bushell-Mingo's dressing room at the Birmingham Rep Theatre during the UK tour of her one-woman show *Nina: A Story About Me and Nina Simone* Birmingham, UK

The transcript of this interview has been edited for length and pertinence to my research topic.

(Start of Interview)
SL: So how did you get into Performing Arts? Acting and directing?

JBM: I started out as an actor. I'd like to believe that the arts found me. I didn't start as an actress. I wasn't an actress that woke up and went to a ballet dance or anything like that. I didn't have that kind of vocation. I come from a working class, quite poor background, and the arts very early on was a way to be free, at least in my head. I took drama classes, youth groups. I wrote a lot of poetry when I was young. I was also involved in athletics a lot, so I was quite prolific runner and jumper and stuff like that. So, I came into it via a way to escape. A way to, to fly higher, you know. From the everyday humdrum, of not having. And details of Blackness and the consciousness of that really came much, much later. I didn't equate poverty with class, or poverty, class, and race when I was twelve or thirteen. So, I'd like to say that it found me. I didn't start like that, but it sought me out.

SL: So how do you identify your Black female identity?

JBM: Exactly as you just said it Black female identity really. I have discovered I have one. I think I define it as ongoing. Finding out what that is and what that means and really taking in the expanse of it. Aligning myself to this particular path that I am now on which is that Black identity, which is my African heritage, which is my Black politic, which is my ethnicity, are all leading me down somewhere. And my identity, my Black, British woman's identity is now aligned to that journey. Before it was a lot of other things from, want to be an actress or to sing, I was interested in writing, but now there's been a focus of my work. And as a Black woman, finding myself growing into it more and more, and it's quite a delight. It really is. So, like I say, when I was young, I didn't identify with it at that time. I was Josette. Josette was black. But I grew up in an area that was very quick to use the N word, other races, working class, the East End of London. So that generation, I think, of Black women 20 from the United Kingdom that still reconciling themselves to stuff that they feel, feel they should have known, but didn't because there weren't any role models. They're, you know, they weren't I listened to Barbra Streisand before I listened to Aretha because that was what was around. Now, however, things have changed. Knowledge has come to me, including yourself, I'm surrounded and honoured to be in the presence of other Black women and go, oh, yes, it

smells all right. So yeah, that's how I define it. Activism. Consciousness. Peace coming more and more. Immovable. Bit naughty. Bit naughty. Yeah, yeah. That's how I would define it.

SL: So how do you feel about, when looking at film and television and theatre? I know that you spend most of your time in Sweden.

JBM: Right.

SL: When you do get a chance to see some of the things are coming from Britain or even from the United States, what are your thoughts about how Black women are being represented?

JBM: I think no one can deny at this point. And it's interesting that all the major movements like #metoo, Black Lives Matter, intersectionality, all started by the African diaspora people. I find it quite fascinating. In terms of the portrayal, and I'm not saying one can claim those movements, but it's just an interesting little track that I've seen myself. In terms of how black women are being portrayed, it has changed. I don't think you can ask that question without noting the change. And it *is* changing, and how is it changing? I think by more profile, more black women taking position. I think that the African descent communities, diaspora are galvanizing much more. I think social media has helped immensely. How much film? Netflix has helped. Luke Cage. I was like, 'Excuse me? Excuse me? What the fuck? Yes, that's me. That's me!' I think that's changed shape, that has changed the playing field. Of course. *Black Panther* shifted it again. But of course, we look at it in a historical perspective. There was shit that happened to be just racist, ignorant. Shit, in terms of blackface.

In terms of the portrayal of blacks, the portrayal of women was almost non-existent, really. And then we fell into those clichés, particularly from the United Kingdom. I'm thinking in the United States of you know, the mammy. The mammy, the mulatto. You know, the poor, stricken poverty child, all of these things. So, in terms of has that changed? In terms of women particularly, and girls? I don't think it's changed enough. But there is more awareness coming from the Black communities themselves to gay women. I think, and this is where I get a bit kind of sceptical because I think a lot of white people are latching on to that. It's what I call the get out syndrome. Is when white people step into our bodies, because the soullessness that exists for them at this point, because of lack of reconciliation between their journey, means that they are constantly having to live through us. So, that's why I mentioned things like #metoo. The Black woman who started that or at least lifted that profile, and suddenly, woof, oh that's gone. We know that that's not the case. We know that she was not speaking just on behalf of black women, but on behalf of many minority women; but a particular group of white women have now taken that I believe, moved it on. We're going to see if it's moved on. So, it's a bit of a long answer. So no, never satisfied. No justice, no peace. Until that's there, then you probably may be asking me the same question five years from now. But if it changes, then maybe things will change. So yeah, that's a very long answer.

SL: So, you mentioned it's changed but not enough. So, what would you like to see more of?

JBM: For me, one of my big concerns is education. I think that there is a terrible, if not terrifying, lack of education, in the school systems. I think there is an equally disturbing lack of education support for teachers. They are our second ally, in the movement of change. All academia is, I believe. But I believe that teachers and students are so ignored. So, I would

like to see better funding. Clearer education for teachers in terms of diversity, and issues of inclusion. Much, much clearer, these are very general statements now.

I would like to see…I think it's more about forgiveness, #metoo. I wanna know what happens after this because it's a long discussion. And nowadays that we're talking a lot, but I don't see anything. Of course, it has to be the first movement; of all these stores have to come out. But I'm also beginning to, you know, local aqua dive and go yes, but after this is anyone thinking about, after these discussions happen. I'd like to see more education, much better education. University schools, nurseries, better support for the teachers. I'd like to see a little bit, well not a little bit, I'd like to see much, much more infrastructure in finance in the suburbs to help. And I'm thinking very much of Sweden, where I am at the moment, to help continue the movement of education for minorities, and particularly Afro Swedes, because I'm also Artistic Director for the National Deaf Theatre of Sweden. So, I work on this side of it as well. And then obviously, working together with so many brilliant people in Sweden, and I found myself here.

But when I'm speaking to black women, and young black women, and the young black LGBTQ community, there's so much going down. That I realise what actually needs to happen is there needs to be much, much more lifting up of what is being achieved. This I think, is something that is really lacking at the moment. #metoo always was there. And I think that is also making it look like it's just happening now. So those would be the three areas for me really. Teachers, education, institutions, beyond that, because it's gone, it's been researched and I think you know this as well, that what students learn at school or university impacts on their daily life when they go home. The education doesn't stop at the door. They take it home to discuss it. Whether it's nursery, and that's why I'm seeing it and I know for my own sons that half of their knowledge was gained at school. And the next part of it will be gained in university. It won't be through me. And I'm a little bit scared as to what they're going to meet when they're there. They are the other parents. They are the ones that guide your children. My children are lucky enough that they have two parents who are active for change and knowledge. But I worry a little bit what will happen. It might be my oldest son is already saying he's gonna to come to England, to study, or go to the States to study He's even talking about one of the African countries. So, you've got a lot to choose from Sweetie, you've got a lot to choose. And I'm very proud of him because he's coming to that himself. He's coming to that himself. He just sent me on my, he just sent me 'I will conquer forever.' And I wrote back, 'How the hell did you get that?' he said, 'Mom, just scroll across and you'll find it.' He's finding it himself. He's finding that road himself and my youngest son to follow so yeah.

SL: And just within performing arts, because you're talking about, you know, there's education, that classroom and when you leave the classroom, there's also a lot that we learned from images, and media and performing arts. So is that...

JBM: That would be an area as well, but I'm a little bit confused as yet to offer up. We are still almost 80% white institutionally led in this country. This is United Kingdom, 2018. This is a huge factor in terms of data. If you go from the top, work your way through in terms of theatres; run by white men, or white liberal women, and these are equally dangerous. It's quite a lot. If not most of it, if not all of it. And the ones that are coming up are, I think living precarious lives, those who are of African descent or minority. Because I think they can be lived through, you know, but at the same time I think if there are any changes, I'd like to see more Black leadership in these theatres. How that happens is a much bigger question. Much

more aggressive question. I think you fire people. No. I think also as well, the stories being told. I think this is crucial. The black British stories being told, because I'm aware in my own piece of work that of course, there is a huge nod towards the United States, but I'm British, and that is the link. Because actually, by the end of my work, it is just me. I'm the understudy. I'm not Nina. And this I think is very important, is that black richer stories are lifted up. And you will find if you give enough space to them, that it's not all about racism. We have other stories to be told. But these people are not giving us the chance to do it. Really.

SL: My final question, one thing I find very interesting when I moved here and...

JBM: Where are you from again, remind me?

SL: I'm from California.

JBM: California. Oh, how beautiful. And how long are you going be here for? How long have you been living?

SL: I moved here in 2014.

JBM: Oh, shoot.

SL: So, I've been here for a few years, and I came for a masters acting.

JBM: Right.

SL: And the research I was doing on my master's was about Black women. How can we foster an environment where more Black women play lead roles on the professional Shakespearean stage?

JBM: Well, what do you think of the RSC with *The Duchess of Malfi*?

SL: I am eager to go see it. I'm eager to go see it because I saw *Coriolanus*.

JBM: Ok how was that?

SL: Troublesome.

JBM: Okay.

SL: I sort of feel that the RSC is doing the thing where, when you add colour, it makes things more interesting.

JBM: Yeah, there you go.

SL: And they're not using the natural talents.

JBM: There you go.

SL: And that's how I felt with Coriolanus.

JBM: Very good. I mean, very good. I mean, I absolutely agreed. It's quite rational to have Black people in stuff.

SL: Right. And it was troublesome for me, especially in the end when Coriolanus dies. It was a mob, and they had a large group for the ensemble, which had a few Black people in it. But the people that happened to get chosen for the end scene that came on were all white, and then one of the group hands Aufidius a chain, that he then put around...

JBM: Oh, no, no, no.

SL: And he got choked to death.

JBM: No, no, no, and it was directed by?

SL: I can't remember the name of the director, white British man.

JBM: See that, for me is the absolute interception of the lack of understanding of race and history. There, right there. Nobody went further, or people saw in that room, that performance and went, 'That's a rather heavy room. We'll just leave that one right, shall we? Yeah. Okay, let's go on.' The absolute intersection is there. Sorry, go on.

SL: And I wondered for the actor playing Coriolanus. I thought about him, you know. And I thought, what was the discussion? Was there a discussion?

JBM: He's a Black man, we're gonna choke him, you know what's been happening in the States today. How are we feeling about that? They weren't aware the resonance of that. Do you have a problem with it? How do you feel as a Black man?

SL: And did he feel that maybe he did he have issues about it, but didn't feel that he was empowered enough to say something when you're the only one that sees it? I'm very curious about that, and it troubled me. I'm still upset about that production because I just thought, how with the huge audience that comes in. Yes, it's a lot of British people, but people come from all over the world. All over the world. And how could they miss something like that? At the same time, they were doing another show in the Swan. And I got excited because I saw the lead, she's half Asian and half Black and I was like, 'Oh, this is great, a leading role.' And then I went to see it, and I thought, 'Oh, well that's why she believed,' because textually she was from Northern Africa.

JBM: Oh, isn't it *Antony and Cleopatra*?

SL: No, it wasn't a Shakespeare show. It was…

JBM: Oh, sorry. Okay.

SL: At any rate, I was excited, but then when I went and saw it, I was like, 'Well that's why they cast this woman of colour because the script calls for it.' So, I've seen a lot of shows at the RSC and my problem is I'm very rarely seeing Black women. Very rarely.

JBM: What about *Hamlet*?

SL: That's one of the rare times.

JBM: Okay.

SL: And the *Hamlet*, I haven't had a chance to see it but it's like, 'Okay, this is when it's in all Black cast.' I find it interesting. I feel with the Black female performers, okay, you can have a lead…

JBM: Because you're Black.

SL: Because you're black and it calls for that. So, the men, if doesn't call for that they'll still cast, but it's for…To add more spice to the otherwise probably somewhat boring production.

JBM: Right.

SL: So, *Duchess of Malfi* I'm definitely, definitely excited to see.

JBM: You know I'm only asking because I can't, I go back to Sweden, you see. So, I don't get to see anything. I really need to go on some sort of theatre journey or something back home and you spent a week you know just seeing shit. So, I'm just curious to hear. But I think that's very interesting. When I did *Two Gentlemen of Verona* at the Royal Shakespeare Company many, many years ago…and even *Romeo and Juliet* which is quite interesting to be back here and watch that picture me and Damian Lewis doing it. When I did *Two Gentlemen of Verona* at the RSC, I was the understudy and took over from the role from Saskia Reeves. It was a particular year when they had all the young guns in. I believe I was the one Black actress at that time. And I took over the role. It was directed by David Thacker. And the reason I mention it is because when the roles changed apart from all the kind of slightly drawn-out discussion within the casting department, because technically you're supposed to…Normally the understudy that takes over the role, but no. And of course, I detect one of the reasons of me taking so long might have been because my capacity to carry the role, was always acting. Or was it because I was Black and maybe there's resonance there. I was fine playing Lucetta because I was the maid. And me and Claire Holman had a whale of a time, and Claire Holman who was an actress in it as well, we both understood what that meant. The rest of the company, I don't think, thought about it. But then after I took over the role, two things struck me. One was the costume change that happened. Saskia was in sort of light diaphanous, pale colours, and beautiful. And then they changed me, and I had this shield, this chocolate liquid gold dress all the way down, with two holes here. I remember that.

But the moral of the tale was, is that when I took over the role, there was a huge upsurge because Showboat was going at the same time, with Clive Rowe. And they said, you know, Josette's performance, whatever that was, that really didn't work because how could she be the Black daughter of a white family? And that was I found very, very interesting. What was interesting is that David Thacker couldn't deal with…David Thacker was quite shocked by it at the time. So, I find it fascinating again, that fear has continued to tell these stories to fail to go down every labyrinth and known road, engaged…It's just an interesting reflection because he was, 'I don't understand what's the problem.' and even the actors, the actors were all a bit shocked by it. And I was like, 'Well yeah, okay.' I come from a performance art background so for me the roles I played were just roles, but it's interesting the resonance, but I'm sorry.

SL: That's interesting because for Coriolanus, who was played by Sope, he was Coriolanus, but for Volumnia, Haydn Gwynne.

JBM: Oh wow.

SL: Was his mother.

JBM: Okay.

SL: Who textually, clearly, biologically his mother. So, for me I was…It was confusing. I was like okay that's an interesting choice. I get that she's a well-known actress here. Then when it came to…There's talk of his son.

JBM: Yeah.

SL: And his wife was cast, I forget her name, but very, very pale white British woman. And then when they brought the son on at the ending scene where they're begging him not to attack Rome. The child that was cast was clearly cast to look as a mixed-race boy. So, I was like, okay, so we can we do that, but we can't do that, but we can't with the mother? We couldn't just go ahead and actually cast, when there were three Black women, dark-skinned Black women in the ensemble. One of them, she actually did get a few lines. She got to say a few lines and she was good.

JBM: Yeah, cause when we speak, we speak with power, cause it's like 'this ain't gonna happen again.'

SL: Right. It was *Dido Queen of Carthage*.

JBM: There you go. Yeah, we're also good at playing Greeks. We're also good at playing stuff that isn't real.

SL: So, the, the magical Negro in America kind of just that stereotype.

JBM: Yeah. Goddess, you know something to passes, somebody that doesn't stay. I mean, we see it more clearly in film. You know, we will talk about the Black…I think Black women are also caught in the intersection of gender. As well, for me this is huge, in terms of that stereotype of, you know we got, the mammy the prostitute, and today it's the hoe, it's the angry Black woman. It's the Black woman, and this is something that I brought up at another discussion, and people were very upset with me, but this is one I've seen, which is the Black woman that assimilates in. And she can look as Black as you and I, but she still carries an heir of…Actually I'll speak more with the white folk than I will with you, because if I speak with you, then they will put me with you, and I've had enough trouble trying to get where I am. That seems to be quite, still quite controversial. Not quite sure why? Because it's true. It's true. I've seen it happen. I understand why it happens and I find it quite disturbing, really. I don't know, and it's very interesting cause when I've been playing Nina here, in terms of a stereotype of Black women today, people don't know what to make of me, really. People have said they're afraid of me. And I keep saying, 'Why are you afraid of me?' You're afraid of me? You're afraid of what I'm saying? Because that's a big difference? Or are you afraid of the, or the violence? What is it that you're afraid? Is it psychological, mental? Right. What is it that you're afraid of? And often, it's their own fear. It's realised, articulated as Black,

particularly as white people in the audience that, this is just, this is an augmented weight. So, what the real stuff must be like God help me. A little bit, you know. And last question you asked me was about the images of women?

I think the change is there. I think, I don't think enough women, Black women own it, themselves. I think that narrative is still being handled by white people in some way. I think...Yeah. I think we are absolutely at the beginning of the pendulum swing. I always have this little image of this huge almost Edgar Allan Poe type blade that's been hung up at the side and have been roped off and there's all these Black people, I'm doing the rope. That's what it feels like, and it feels it's actually going to swing. What that swing means. I don't know I don't have words often but I'm much better at images and stuff. But that's, I will get this image in my head, you know, people trying with the teeth and unravelling it, but it is going. It is going and people will keep trying to put it back up, and it keeps going, and keep running up. It will swing. That's what I feel is happening. And that's what I think is happening for Black women particularly. I think definitely for Black girls. I think the next generation after us and the one after. They may be on their way. They really, taught to young black women I've met during this as well, it's also a passion of Nina. Was not only Black women, but also meeting young, young academics, young Black academics, she loved university campuses, she was never happier than being surrounded by, as she calls *intelligencia* of our people, as she would call it. So yeah, I think it's on its way. But it's about, it's at the beginning of being on its way, in terms of change for Black women and Black children, Black young women. Yeah. I'm not quite sure about the separation for young Black children, I'm talking about under the age of, let's say, five and six, I think there's something else that goes on there. Yeah.

SL: So just lastly, because you mentioned earlier in the interview, that you've come more into your Black female identity and loving that and figuring out what that means. So, if you could go back to your younger self, what would you say to her? You know, little Josette.

JBM: I'd probably say to her, 'You were right.' Because all the things you did when you were young, you always did them, because you never saw any barrier. You were right. And what you were trying to figure out at the time, that seems so lonely and so off the wall and seeking an alternative to the stereotype of the Negro and the N word and everything else was right. You were always right. And the times when you feel isolated because of it or got that feeling at the top of your spine going, this is…Which we will now call it white space. The way you navigated that Josette, you were right. I think I am much more, more holistic to my younger self. Because it would be easy to sit back and go 'You should've done this, this, this and this. You should have done that.' But actually, that you got this far Josette, that's what I said, I said, 'Keep going. You're right. You're right. That feeling is right. You've got to follow that.' You're right. There are white allies. They are out there. But you've got to be really…You've got to shine that light really hard as to who they are. And my best white allies were my coaches, were the ones who did athletics, who saw me as a brilliant runner. Did they see me as a brilliant Black runner? That would be for me to find out twenty-five years later what that cliché means. Always running. Running to running from, etc.

The training that I had, a lot of my training was northeast European so it's Grotowski, Lecoq, etc., etc. All of those groups and within them were allies, people who got it. Who recognised that I was Black, but didn't see that or saw it, but it did not stop them from doing what I did. And people like Fred Lloyd, that I work with. And then meeting all, and I say this, I mentioned this to my younger self because looking back now I'm conscious of how many

white people influenced my journey. And how I'm now understanding that actually behind them the whole, Wakanda of Blackness waiting for me. But actually, those white allies there, that still resonate with me now, some have passed away, I would say to my younger self stick by them. You're right. And also, you never did, you never followed the path. You did good girl, that's what I'd say, and you did good. But I also believe I was born at a very particular time. I was born at the intersection of 1964. Which possibly is one of the most important years for so many countries around the world. For us as Blacks, 1964 was an absolute meeting point. Birth of so many ideas and the combination of so many things. So, I would say to my younger self, not bad. Keep going. You're right.

SL: One more question I just thought about.

JBM: I could see it forming.

SL: I'm curious about…The one thing that was interesting for me to find out when I moved here and meeting Black British people, was that the Black, part of their Blackness, if they and when they saw the images and if they had those sort of influences…came from America. And I was very surprised to learn that there's a lot of African American History sort of taught here.

JBM: Absolutely.

SL: And I found that shocking because it's not even your, your country.

JBM: No.

SL: So, I'm wondering as a Black British woman, what…because you were talking about wanting to talk more about what the stories, of the narrative, the Black British narrative.

JBM: Yeah.

SL: So, within that what are the, what are the things that separate you from African Americans, and that we need to hear, and that needs to get out there because unfortunately, I feel that most Black people probably at this point in the world are assumed probably to be African American.

JBM: Yeah, absolutely. Some people think I'm South African. Mostly for the short hair and the nose, a likeness of skin and a high cheekbone. And I'll say, 'Yes, I am.' No not really, but I think, I'll work backwards. What's very interesting, I'll work even more further backwards, I'd be interested to you, to stay in touch with you. Because I'm also associate professor at Coventry University. And they've asked me to commission, asked me to do a piece for Capital of Culture.

SL: Oh, yes. Yeah.

JBM: That's in 2020, and I would be interested that you aligned yourself a little bit that I could introduce you to them. And I think you may have some very interesting perspectives, that one. Working backwards from that, there's a reason that that came into my head, but one of the things I think that separates us from our African, or the second answer to it would be, we look to the states because our own British history is hidden, and in fact, we have a vast British history. A vast British history from the beginning of time from the Scots, from the

invasion of the Romans here that were Blacks, all the way through. The slave movement which passed through Liverpool, of course, is just part of that journey. I think what separates us is our colonial history. The British colonial history of India, China, I think this is one thing. I think also as well the majority of African descent here. The African population's grown over the last twenty, ten or fifteen years, but before that it would have been West Indian. And I think their allegiance to the United Kingdom is controversial. What I'm saying to a certain extent, they're still deeply embedded. Which means that there is a seeking out of a kind of, we have in Sweden as well, with our Afro-Swedes who are also wrestling with being, coming from Sweden and being of the African diaspora, so there's attention there. But I think that there is still a reason why Black British culture isn't lifted up. Because we have a generation, of which I'm the child of I'm just learning, we have a generation of Blacks still allowing themselves to a particular image of themselves, which is African American. Majority of stuff is coming from there, and that the Black British colonial history was swept under the carpet, is seen as a source of shame.

You can reference any African descent child here will know the majority of African American films, etc., but they will not be able to tell you the Black British films. And so, there's also a feeling here that what separates us from our African Americans is that it's almost like half full, half empty. In the States, it's half full. Here, it's half empty, I believe. I think we struggle much, much more in the United Kingdom as Black Britons with coming into the fullness of reversing that cup. Bringing up, I think the same dilemmas are there of course about, you know, being the only Black person in the white room, how the Black body augments itself, how it moves, all of these things. But I think there is an intense and maybe unknowing, not support, but acceptance of the way structures, which to a certain extent have, we have no control of, are placed. So that the history that's taught, the colonial history that's taught is non-existent.

I think what separates us is culture of course, we drink tea then coffee, we say tomatoes. I think those are those cultural things there. I think there is also, and I don't know, I can't remember if this comes from us as Black people, but there's also the hierarchy of Blackness as well. So our family from the African continent are the real thing. They are the real thing. And they remind us too harshly about everything that we are forced to leave behind in the most cliched way. And the full circle that is Black Panther of course and now everyone is going, 'You know I wanna shaved my head.' And that's brought us back. I think then come the United States, African Americans. Where your movement actually galvanized, both white and Blacks across the globe. And I think this impact is still, is still a kind of, wow. So our greatest icons, like Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks still held up. And our equivalents here are almost filed away into nothing. And I think that may be the actual question, why is our Black British culture not lifted up, rather than what are the differences between us? And the difference is that our attitudes to ourselves are different. That's what I think. Will it change? Not in the foreseeable future. I'm really pessimistic. But there's a couple of people I should put you in touch with who are real forerunners of lifting up Black British History, really. I'm going to think of some names. You know, Barby Asante?

SL: That name sounds familiar.

JBM: Barby Asante, you can write her down.

SL: I must have heard her name.

JBM: She's great. She will and absolutely is far more learned than me about Black British history, names, date, times. From the Black British dandy, all the way through. And she educated me very much about that. So it brought, it emphasized a level of scepticism about my own piece of work, and why do you go there? Why are not going here Josette? What is it here? And so, I certainly got insightful as the next bit. And that's where the commission of Coventry comes. That might be the next part. I don't know how. It might be that I have to give a platform over to others. So actually, bring all these women over, three hundred of them, come gladly to Coventry, and they're gonna stay together a month. I mean, I don't know. But I think that is the right thing to do. It's not about me standing up on stage. It's actually about saying, now I have the possibility to do this, what would you do with that space? What would you do with that space? To bring this kind of discourse up? So that's what I'm thinking. I've got your email. So that's what I'm thinking. It's just been reaffirmed time and time and time again in our post show discussions and stuff. I sometimes use the image of the…presented through culture of course, but sometimes I use, you know, that history has divided us, you and I. We have to, what's happening, that pendulum I was talking about, and other images, pushing the plates back together. So, we walk towards each other, and have to go across waters, and how can we push the plates back together? Most of our life is about separating us. But they can't, they just can't. And that's one of the Black joys of Blackness. They can't separate us. There's no point. This is not, this is not possible. It's not possible. Whether we like it or not, or want it, that's another thing, but that separation cannot happen. So yeah, those are my ruminations for today.

SL: Well, thank you so much.

JBM: Thank you. What an exciting pleasure to meet you, wow.

SL: It's so great to meet you…I would also like to get you in touch with...so Birmingham City University this year, they started the very first degree in Black British, Black studies.

JBM: What do you feel about that? When you hear, when you see that?

SL: I was shocked. I was like, wait, what? They announced it, you know, in 2016. Starting in the fall of 2017 the first Black studies degree, you know, for Britain. I thought, how is this not already happening?…And I thought, well it's great it's happening in Birmingham, but also, why has it taken this long?

JBM: That's the difference. You know, it's one of the differences.

SL: It's sad.

JBM: Well, maybe that's one of the things because when I spoke to, although it wasn't the… The group of women I spoke to yesterday, were all teachers. And I, one of them may have been at the university. I don't know, but I know that we're all teachers of different. One was a teacher psychologist, but these were teaching, I didn't go, excuse me into detail, but I took their email and they got mine. Now I've met you. When I spoke to Coventry, they were like, what would you like to do? I'm like, hmm, and the brief at the end of this, excuse me at the end of this work is at the Arts Council that funded this tour said it has to be some kind of report. But also as well, what is it I want to do next? It's built on the premise of wanting to do something next.

So the idea is that one is thinking long term, one is it about these platforms, one is thinking of curators, one is thinking of other academic areas that can be aligned to this that can then continue it on. I mean, what you'd love really is to have a Black African Studies in every single university. They don't even have it at, they don't have in Coventry. Job number one is can we now put that together? So, wanting a bit to line up with Birmingham? How are they doing it? So that's what I'm thinking. How can I use my platform to create more platforms for other people? As fast as possible? And if they're going to give me money to do it, and a venue to do it. If we can get it, as you noticed, when you asked me what is it, and maybe because I had to find everything out myself. Academia and the people who hold who we all are, and this was something you asked about the difference.

I remember saying to my Swedish Afro Swedes, I did *A Raisin in the Sun*, and took it to Sweden, took it to their states. So, we did it in Sweden for the first time ever *Raisin in the Sun*, translated into Swedish, so yes, they were speaking Swedish, and then we took it to the States, and we met South Africa, Arena theatre, Washington and us. And we did a kind of amalgamation of you know, three mammas. All three sitting on the sofa. She spoke Swedish, she spoke Xhosa, and I tell you it was like whoa. It was absolutely extraordinary. We had Lindner come in, with two of them and then it was two, it was just off the fucking hook. Really, it was off the hook. And all the time I've said that the states, what sets us up, still connected is that the state's hold who we are. That's what your job is for us. No matter where we are in the world. You have us. Where I can go there and go, and they actually put *A Raisin in the Sun* into the Schomburg museum. Our program and the scripts have all gone in there, you know, but I think the role for the African Americans is to hold our stories for us until we can get there. Because we can't and we're not you know, the program that, you hold it for us because some of us don't make it. But that's what I said to the Afro Swedes, they've got us until we are there.

In Sweden, we are waking up literally, and the African continent waits to archive it for us. So that's my metaphysical metaphorical and in the United Kingdom in this? We're on the verge of making our own Wakanda. It's so close but undo that rope. Undo that fucking rope. So, a platform like this could help to do it. You know, the dangerous thing is to galvanize all universities across the country and not the theatres. That's the trick, I think, because this is where the fertileness is. Here. That's the power. Not coming to these proscenium arches…So yeah, more. More space, more platforms for you. That's what I can do. That's what I want to do. So, this hopefully, this will be able to do it. And it costs nothing.

SL: Yeah.

JBM: Because when we talk, we talk right?

SL: Yeah…When I started to do my, my research on my masters and I did interview, went to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. And I interviewed some women there, they were kind enough. And they were just like, thank you for asking these questions. You know, no one's ever really you know asked this. Thank you for caring. This is so important what you're doing, you know, keep going. I started to feel this responsibility. And I couldn't believe that there wasn't much scholarship out there in the academic world…

JBM: Nope.

SL: About Black actresses.

JBM: Nope.

SL: And I just couldn't believe it. There's so much out there and I was like, 'Man, that's a PhD for somebody. Not for me.'…And then I said, okay, here I am complaining saying there's a problem. There's something wrong over there. Hey, there's something wrong. When I'm the one who noticed it. I'm the one whose already on this journey.

JBM: You're the one who's going to do it.

SL: And if I'm already acting, who better to try to find the story and suss this out. And then I realised, you know what? This will give me a better platform. It'll give me more opportunities.

JBM: Consider yourself involved. Simple as that.

SL: I would love to.

JBM: Yeah, I've just got to find out, now having all these discussions, and I'm beginning to smell what people want, rather than what I need, I don't need anything else anymore. So, the idea is how to use Coventry University. Can I link the other universities?

SL: Yeah.

JBM: Can I keep a diaspora focus; an African diaspora focus on which to move outwards? And can I get it past 2020? Because I think that's the trick because we did amazing thing in 2020, and oh, that was it. Instead of 2020, and 2021. So that people are called to account, and are able to sign on the line, what happened after this. Because really what you don't want is to go back.

SL: Right.

JBM: You don't want to go back, you signed this, you said this, and you didn't do it. And then to bring as many curators from as many different African descent perspectives, who might not do anything with the African diaspora, but are represented. I think this is becoming clear. Clear, clear, clear. And my dream of someone who's completely uneducated and left with how many GCSE's too late in academia because I can only physically recreate myself. But you can hold me literally. Through pictures, and the words, and the stories, and that can be read, and seen, and filmed, and talked about in a way that my performance will, it will go.

SL: Which is why I'm doing the PhD. I want to capture…

JBM: There you go.

SL: And to be able to share that…

JBM: There you go.

SL: in my thesis which I then want to get…

JBM: Which is why I am grateful. Because somewhere in some important thesis by some famous girl who's had a double thyroid, my name was there. Which means I am not forgotten when I am gone. And all the others that you will capture, we need you to be where you are for a while. Just not so long, just to 2019 then you can be free. But that's the important thing. That's the important thing.
(End of Interview)

Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Yasmin Dawes (YD), Black (mixed-race) British Actress

Interviewer: Samia La Virgne (SL)

Date of Interview: 16 January 2019

Interview Setting: Private residence in Birmingham, UK

The transcript of this interview has been edited for length and pertinence to my research topic.

(Start of Interview)
SL: Can you please tell me what your ethnic background is?

YD: So, I am white British and black Jamaican, so mixed-race English.

SL: And where were you born?

YD: I was born in Birmingham, so the UK. Yeah.

SL: Do you personally identify as a mixed-race woman or a black woman?

YD: So, this has been like a thing like throughout my whole life. I've kind of always said I'm black, but I've never like, but I'm mixed-race. So, like I've never...like would never say I'm white. But like I obviously I'm half white, half black, but…I've said both really. I think now, I'd advise mixed-race, but I have said black in the past. And in certain situations I might say like, 'As a black woman.' But yeah, so it's kind of like a thing that goes through my mind quite a lot. It's been like a, recently, but mixed-race as of…I would never say I'm not.

SL: Why did it change? You were saying more recently you're identifying as mixed-race, but before it was black.

YD: I think…So I grew up in a white area, so I was different to them. So it wasn't, it's a whole one drop thing, isn't it? If you got some black in you people see you as black. So I just always kind of called myself black. Then, as I was, because I was in a white area, and I didn't feel like a I fully fit. I mean, I was fine in high school, in the sense of like, I was popular. I had a good time. I was happy, and I didn't really struggle too much. But if I could speak to fifteen-year-old me or thirteen-year-old me, there's so much stuff that I would not tolerate that people would say to me in jest. Or it's, it's the excitement of when people are kids, they don't actually realise the entomology behind the words that they're sayin', but they want to say it because they know it's wrong. They don't even know why it's wrong. They just want to say it because they know it's wrong. And it's excitement of being naughty and bad or whatever.

So, there's a lot of stuff that I tolerated from friends, which I wouldn't now. Which made me…As soon as I left school, I wanted to literally…I went to school in the city so I could be around people who were like me. That was for college. That was between the ages of sixteen

and eighteen. And so, I was in my head, or I could say I was black. And then when I did my semester abroad in America, I threw myself wholeheartedly into everything. I was a part of every group. The black culture, and I had the time of my life. But then I also realised that there was a lot of things within people who are fully black…I realised that there's certain things I couldn't identify there either. So, on both sides that, cause I'm obviously of dual heritage. So there's things that you may not understand from either. Then they would be lost.

And there was a time where I really almost denied my white side because I was, I was so pro-black. In the sense of…To me people used to be like, 'Oh, why you always going on about like, the rights of black people? And blah, blah, blah. And being so activist. You're such a Black Panther.' But my thing was, I haven't got a fight for my white side, they're doing fine. I have not got to do that. They're not the people who are struggling. So that was always a thing. Then I realised I was denying, almost, my white side and then that, to me, is denying my mom, and that is not okay. When I realised that, and now I'm happy I'm mixed-race…I have never really admitted this to a lot of people, but there were times that I wished I was fully black. Cause I knew where I felt like I fit in within music, and dancing, and, and food, and culture, and stuff like that. So, I just found it, I wasn't completely accepted because I was mixed-race. I'm either too white or too black, and I wished that…That actually hurts me now that I would wish that, because that is a whole part of me that I'm trying to hide. Which is, I should be proud, and now I am. I'm happy. So mixed-race.

SL: What are some things? Like you said, if you could go back to the younger you?

YD: Yeah.

SL: What are the things that you'd say?

YD: So I grew up in a white middle class area. So, people are…They come from money. They're in a bubble. Not everyone comes from money. That's a huge generalization, but there's a lot of rich people in the area. There is a bubble of, in my opinion, ignorance because they haven't had to deal with anything. Because you can literally live in my area and stay there, and you don't have to go out. You don't have to see real life problems that's on TV. Because they don't…I mean, of course people all experience their own problems. I'm not trying to say they don't go through or anything, but I'm on about stuff to do with…Stuff that effects the working-class community, or people of colour or disadvantaged background.

My area is privileged in a way. And I think they get excited. I'm talking along the way of like, between the ages of eleven and sixteen. Ok it started like, saying things that are just not right. So, there was this one song called 'The Nigga Song'. And it was, and it was on YouTube, and it'd be like, it'd literally just say nigga. So many times, and then go I'm 100% nigga. Nigga, nigga, nigga, and it would go on. It would be like, 'Why you eat so much chicken?' And it's just like, it's just a piss take. And they would play it. I would just sit there. Like I wouldn't…I didn't…Yeah, ugh, it makes me so mad. I would just sit there…I knew it was wrong. They knew it is wrong, and that's where the excitement comes from. It's not like they actually know anything to do with the history or whatever. They don't know any of that shit. So, they don't know, I don't know their mental thing, but they would just…They'd play, and it was jokes and in my friendship group there was only two mixed-race people, no black people, everyone else was white. Or a couple Asian people. And then in my school year group I think there was like four mixed-race people, no black people, and there were like eight Asian people.

So, it was predominantly white. So, we just kind of wouldn't say anything. So, everybody would always want me and this guy, the other mixed-race guy in my group to be together. Cause obviously that's the thing. We're both of colour, we must love each other. Like of course we'd suit each other. And eventually, like self-fulfilling prophecy, people tell you something so much I was like, 'Yeah. I like this guy.' I was really good friends with him, but it wasn't anything else. It was just kind of like, everybody, I wasn't kind of the person that people pick to. My friends were all smaller like petite white girls in this place. So, they were obviously first choice for like guys to go for like a white area. And I was, I mean, I was fine. I dated people, but I was always, I felt like the, the 'other' one. I remember one time; this is so random. I remember one time, me, and this guy, who is mixed-race, we kissed at a party. Everyone in the room started shouting, 'KFC babies.' That we're going to have chicken babies, whatever that is. It doesn't even, it's not even logical. Stuff like that, that at the time, in my head I'd be like, 'What? Like, what?', and I'd go away thinking about it. But, at the moment I wouldn't say anything. I just wish that I…I don't think it's that I was too scared to say anything. I think that played a part in it, but I think I didn't know enough about who I was and where I stand in certain situations, to even begin to articulate how it made me feel. like yeah, so it's just kind of easier to turn a blind eye to things that I was just, that affected me. Then once I did realise, and I was able to articulate and then now I'm okay because I can call people out on stuff. If somebody said that to me now, it would not go down in the same way. But I was just kind of mute and stuff like that.

SL: How did that make you feel?

YD: Honestly, confused. More than hurt or angry. It was more just like, 'What?' How does it go there? Because…Yeah, it just kind of, I was just confused. Why? I'd never, but I'm not into dark comedy, in any, I just…I think you can only really be into dark comedy if you come from a place of privilege and power. Because, I mean people might disagree with me, but like you, have the luxury of not being able to laugh at this sort of stuff because it's never affected you. So when it comes to any jokes about race, or rape, or sexuality and stuff like that, I'm kinda…Unless it's a witty comment that's, that we can all laugh at, as in like, it's not offending anyone, I'm not really part of this joke thing but you're a lot about. So when people would make jokes like, 'Oh KFC babies', or they'd play that song, or they'd be like, 'You're my favourite nigga.' Like what? I don't see the joke. I don't see where that's funny. I just know that you find it…'It's out of bounds. We can't say that.' That's why it's funny to you. You don't even see the joke, in my opinion. You just know it's out of balance. That's exciting to you. So, it just made me feel like…I think more than hurt and upset, it was more confusion and it just pissed me off. Or like, you don't even know what you're talking about so why are you? But now it's more of a, I mean, it infuriates me. I know I shouldn't be dwelling on stuff that happened like, six, seven, sometimes ten years ago, but it still just makes me like, 'Where are you hearing this stuff?' If you're the same age as me, and none of us have knowledge of this stuff. Where is, where have you got this from? Who's shown you that's older? That's what kind of plays on my mind now.

SL: Where do you think that these kids were getting these thoughts and these ideas from?

YD: The Internet. Maybe. I think stuff to do with like the 'N' word and stuff like that, it's, that's kind of common knowledge when you're pretty young, but that's an out of bounds word to say. Unless you come from a family who's inherently racist. Kids, especially at school when they're out with, of the control of their parents, and outside of that, they like to say stuff which they shouldn't. There's plenty stuff that you, I could think about to do with like

sexuality, that people would say in school that…Well, I'd like to think people would know that you shouldn't be saying it. So I don't know exactly where they get it from. But I think, in my generation, we were kind of like, I'd say were one of the first sort of generations that were quite on the internet. Maybe it was just a bit after me. I'd play out quite a lot, whereas some of the kids now literally just stay in on the computer. But I thought we were exposed to a little bit more than maybe some of my older siblings were.

SL: And how old are you? If you don't mind me asking.

YD: I'm twenty.

SL: And so, at what age did you become aware of your mixed-race identity?

YD: As in me identifying as mixed-race?

SL: Or just realizing that, you know, having…Because your mom is white British, and your dad is Jamaican. I'm curious to know, was there a point to where you noticed that you were different than other people?

YD: I think I've kind of, I think I've always been aware of that. I think maybe if I'd gone to a more diverse school or grew up in a diverse area, then maybe I wouldn't as much, but because I was literally…Everyone was white and then it was me and my brother. Then I think I've always been aware of my mixed-race identity from very little. Plus, my father was quite, quite strong about teaching us like Black Heritage and culture and stuff like that. So, I think I was pretty aware of it.

SL: At what point, if you can recall, you've been aware of it from a young age. Do you recall at what point that it started to become, when you started to feel the negativity of it?

YD: Probably. Oh, so my first kind of moment that I kind of remembered anything kind of racially discriminating against me was…It was actually when I was really young. I was in primary school and again, it was from another kid. So, it was the first time someone had actually said it to me. So, someone called me and my brother…I can't remember exactly the event, but I just remember, I remember the kid, who he was. But they, we were having like an argument. Like a little petty argument on the school field, and he called us the 'N' word. We were in, what year was that? We were really young. I must've been about eight or something like that. Seven or eight, but he said it. Then obviously that was kind of a big deal, because it was just like why is this child saying this?

So that was the first time I realised that it could kind of be used against me as such. It's more just like, urks. Little things that I would be like, 'That doesn't sit right with me.' I don't know 100% why it doesn't sit right with me, but it doesn't. I think being in the arts, you become kind of painfully aware of this sort of thing as well. Because I remember just little comments. When I was at pre-vocational training, when we're trying to get into a drama school, it would always be a thing of like, 'You're mixed-race. You're black. You have a look. You'll probably get in because of that', sort of thing. Or like, 'That everyone wants that right now, so that's why you'll get in.' That kind of used to get on my nerves because it's like who's to say I'm not talented enough to get in? And why is it just cause I'm of colour that's gonna get me a place in drama school. 'You have a look. You look different', and that was a thing. So that was kind

of like a thing that made me aware again. I think since being at Bruford, which again absolutely love, I have been painfully aware of my race.

SL: You've used the term 'painfully aware' numerous times.

YD: Yeah.

SL: Can you explain?

YD: Painfully aware?

SL: The difference between being aware and painfully aware.

YD: Okay painfully aware to me, I'm well happy being aware that I am mixed-race. I'd be bloody weird if it wasn't about that if you ask me, but like I think it becomes painfully aware when you…It's like people of colour can't just do mundane things, or live their life without everything being about that. That's how sometimes it makes me feel being at drama school, because it seems all, literally all the roles I get to do have something to do with trauma, or an issue in the black community, or an issue of the way I feel because I'm of colour. It's never, I rarely get to play roles where you're doing mundane things like being unlucky in love, or, cooking dinner, or I don't know, where it's not every day totally about that. So that's what I kind of mean of being painfully aware. It's like there's more to people than just that, if that makes sense.

SL: So, one could argue that being an actor, a lot of the good roles do involve the character being in some sort of traumatic situation or having gone through some trauma. So, when you say that you've played roles with characters that have been traumatized…I'm playing devil's advocate.

YD: Oh, no, no totally. Here's the thing. I wouldn't want to not play any of those roles that I've talked about. I've loved the majority of roles I've got to play at Bruford. That's not the case, and also, I want to talk about the issues that people in my community go through. Like people, they, their stories deserve to be heard. My issue is when that's the only thing I get to do. I get to see a bunch of my peers who aren't of colour doing pieces that are movement based, or a lot more music. Just things that don't, aren't…Or like comedy, stuff like that, just something a bit different. In the nature of my course, we get to pick a lot of the work that we do. Say there's five people who need a mixed-race girl. I'm the only mixed-race girl on the course. Then I'm going to have to be in that five. Which is fine. I want you guys to explore the work that you want to explore, but it means that a lot of the stuff that I do tends to be all about that kind of subject, when I think there's a lot more. I got to do, finally, a piece that was, there was a lot more movement and it was about…. Again, so you know in the workshop [RB 4-day workshop discussed in case study two] we talked about how if it's not default white, no if it's not stated why is the default white? We did *Wasted* by Kate Tempest. I don't know whether you're familiar with it. Kate Tempest, she's like a rapper poet theatre maker, and she's white. She's from London, and her plays are really cool if you like a spoken word kind of stuff. But it's from a white working-class background. and one of the guys who was in it was unable to perform the piece so they asked me whether I could be in it. I received the script pretty late because I wasn't gonna be in it, and we not only changed the sex of the character, so I played and it's a male role, but we change it to a woman. And it wasn't stated that it had to be a white person, so I did it. Yeah, that changed a lot of the nuances of the, of it

all, but I was able to just talk about things that I'd never got to talk about on stage and do other stuff. It was kind of refreshing to me. But that's not to say that I don't want to do the other stuff. It's just I don't want to only do that.

SL: So, when you were saying trauma, you mean trauma specific to being black?

YD: Of colour. Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

SL: Like, you know, survivor of domestic abuse.

YD: Yeah, I don't explore that. It's always to do with someone of colour. Yeah.

SL: Genital mutilation in Africa.

YD: Yeah, exactly. Always. Yeah, and it just means that you're not getting a lot of other things. I think a lot that has to do with the fact there's a lack of diversity. I mean, our course is better than a lot of courses at the school, and that's still not good. There's a lack of diversity to have enough people to spread roles between. So, I'm happy doing those roles so that everyone can get the work they want to do, but it does just mean that sometimes I'm just…I would love to explore something a little bit different.

SL: So, you mentioned about when you did your study abroad in America, and you just threw yourself into all the blackness. But then that's when you really started to feel more of this difference. You said something about not being able to fully identify with black culture, in a way. Expand on that, because I'm curious about…I would like for you to help articulate for me, someone who's not mixed-race, because I know being black, that I'm not black enough for black people, but obviously not being white at all.

YD: Yeah.

SL: For someone who does straddle both worlds, I'm wanting to get an understanding, a deeper understanding of what that feels like for you.

YD: Yeah. So, for me, I think…Just even socially, partying, stuff like that. I dance a little different to all my white friends. I listened to, I mean a lot of my white friends listen to my music, but certain things that they just wouldn't get. I was like, no, I feel so comfortable when I'm at a party and it is all black people around me. Because we are, we party similarly. Well, the parties I went to anyway, so I love black culture. I think it's beautiful. I think it's so rich. Obviously African American culture again is different to black British. There are a lot of similarities, but just like anywhere, in different countries, things are a little bit different. For me, going and doing my study abroad was not just about studying. It was throwing myself into experiences, and meeting new people, and just being in a completely different setting to, being outside of my comfort zone. So, I signed up to a lot of the different kind of involvement things. I was part of the Caribbean Student Association, and I would go to all the African Student Association parties, and not just parties. There was like this thing called 'Light On Ebony' where it was about women of colour talking, and there were segments called Understand Us. Accept Us. Just loads. There were loads at Syracuse. So the black community in Syracuse is, in comparison to how many white people it's not that big, but when you go to the events, it feels very strong. There's a lot of people. Sorry, what was the exact question?

SL: How did being amongst the African American culture…

YD: Yeah.

SL: Sort of illuminate things for you?

YD: Okay. Yeah, honestly in America it didn't really. I think I was fully, I felt…Really, really randomly, I was the most confident I've ever been in my life when I was there. I felt accepted in places. I was really quite comfortable socially. So it wasn't really in America, it's more when I got home that I was like…It's so hard to articulate. It's more just like a feeling than an actual thing that I can totally pinpoint.

SL: So how did it feel different going over there and then coming back here?

YD: I just thought in America you get treated if you're mixed-race as black, and that's how I felt anyway. Whereas here sometimes, I would hate to offend anyone by what I'm saying… Mostly with black females in the UK, there's still a little bit of a barrier between a mixed-race girl a black girl. That's how I feel sometimes. Like I'm not fully black, so maybe my opinion doesn't matter on this subject as much as somebody else. That's how I feel sometimes in conversation. I mean, I could totally be misreading what they actually believe, but it's more, I can only talk from my perspective. Sometimes we'll be in a discussion with a group of people and we're just talking about something in the black community. I feel like my opinion isn't as wanted, or valued, or as important as someone who is maybe fully black. I think that was when I got the realisation that in different debates and discussions I wouldn't be getting listened to as much as other people. I felt as though it was because I was mixed-race and not black, fully black, whatever that is. That made me feel like no, hang on a minute, I'm from both. I feel both. This one of my biggest things. A reason why I can identify more as black than, not more as black but, I could say, I'm a black woman, right? Whereas I could not ever say I'm a white woman, is because, if I walk in a store, and someone wants a description of me, majority of the time the first thing they'll say is, 'So there's this black woman.' They'll say that. I've heard people when they describe me in that way, whereas no one would ever call me white. You just would not. It's like mixed-race, black, like it just depends, the way people look at you, but no one's ever going to call me white. So I could never deny my black side because visually it's impossible. So yeah. And also because obviously complexion, there are some people who are fully black. Two black parents who are the same skin tone as me, like you, you can't, it varies. If you looked at my nephews…So my brother's mixed-race he's darker skinned than me, and he's married a white woman. And my nephew is, he is not gonna show anything, right? He is so white, like he is, and my nieces, they are, you would not believe that they had any black in them. So, it varies really, but then I've got other, other family friends who their kids are someone who's mixed-race and white, and they're a lot darker. So, you can't even, it varies. Yeah.

SL: Yeah. You never, you never really know.

YD: Yeah exactly. So, you can't assume.

SL: It's becoming very clear to me now that all these actresses, and even in my experience, that I'm interviewing…When they've finished shows and done things it's, it's very rare, if ever, that they've had the experience of being in a cast, where it was all black people, or just all people of colour. It's usually they are the only, or one or two in a cast that's mainly white.

So, I'm wondering have you had an experience where you've been in a cast where it's been mostly people of colour or all black? Or has your experience been the other where you've been…

YD: My experience has been the other. Box tickers. Yeah.

SL: That's about to change.

YD: Yeah, literally, this is gonna be my first thing [referencing the upcoming *In the Blood* production] that I'll be in that's not mostly white and being that person, that one person. Yeah.

SL: Can you talk to me about that experience? Do you ever feel the pressure to be the representative for black people?

YD: Yes. Does it have to be just when in acting or just in other things?

SL: Well, more about in acting but yeah, you can talk about other things.

YD: I think when you, so I think in college, we really didn't do much to do with race ever. So, I didn't really have to be the kind of spokesperson in that sense. I think it goes back to that in school. If you're talking about slavery, or if you're talking about Martin Luther King, or anything to do with civil rights, everyone tends to just look back to you, so on behalf of our whole race. I'm not even African American, I'm British, let's all remember that. Yeah. So, I mean, that happened a lot in school. A lot of the productions that I've been in prior to being at Bruford, I've never really, it's never been anything to do with race. So, I've not had that kind of pressure.

SL: Happy to hear it hasn't happened much already.

YD: Yeah, I really haven't. Before I got into acting, I was musical theatre and did a lot of dancing. So, it was a lot of stuff, but it was less talking, so before I came to drama school. I've noticed when you have a white director and you're talking about black issues, I feel sometimes you're there to give them a pat on the back. Like, 'Yeah, that research is right, well done.' It's like they're kind of waiting for validation of their script. Which, I think if you've done the research enough, and if you've actually made time and effort to actually look deeply into what you're talking about rather than just writing from your own point of view about someone else that you can't actually wholeheartedly get into the head of, then you should be kind of confident in it. And yeah, I will let you know if there's anything that I feel is a little bit off. If we're in that kind of working relationship you can do that. I sometimes don't need the treading on eggshells, and the waiting for me to validate your work because it's not from the perspective. If that makes sense.

SL: Yeah. I'm just gonna backtrack a little bit. You were talking about when you were growing up your father spoke with you and your brother a lot about your black cultural identity. Was the same thing done for your white side? Just I'm wondering, within your household growing up. Were both sides fostered with you?

YD: I'm the youngest of six siblings. So there's a lot of people before me. [laughs] I felt because I was living in a white community, and that was day to day for me, I was kind of in it. Whereas with a lot of my black heritage and cultural stuff it wasn't so…I mean, it was in

my household because my dad, but if I was out my friends, we wouldn't be going to things that are to do with that. So, I don't feel like I was necessarily taught about my white heritage, but I was taught more about my black, because it's not there, ingrained in the culture that I was living in. Apart from when I'm with my cousins and my family. Like I've still never been to Jamaica and waiting for that day. So yeah, certain stuff that isn't accessible to me to get to. My auntie and my dad, I still have a lot of those conversations with them. Particularly my auntie.

SL: Because you're mixed-race, was there ever a time when you were growing up, say hanging out with the Jamaican side of your family, or the white British side of your family, to where other family members or cousins or whoever, either teased you or made you feel like an outsider or 'other' because you're mixed?

YD: Within my family we're all pretty chill. It's kind of fluid. My family are black, my family are white, they all know each other. They're at family parties and stuff like that. It's fine. I think a lot of my white cousins just tend to think we're really cool. I love them. God love them, but they just think we're so cool. Like the music we listen to and how lively we got when my family were at the basketball club, and that's just so cool. So, I think I get that with my white family, but they are younger, as well. So there's that as well. So, I can't say that just because I'm black. Then for my black side of my family, it was more, that was posh. That we were posh because the area that we grew up in. They grew up inner city, Birmingham. And well, I'm talking about one specific, I've got huge family, but these are just some of my cousins. Again, really, really close with them, but they used to take the mick out of us for the way we speak, and just stuff like that. So that was, to do with more class sort of thing, maybe. I think again, that is still few, both sides are, even though one's to do with age, and certain things were involved in, and one's to do with where we live, and our accent, and stuff like that. I think both still have racial…

SL: Undertones?

YD: Yeah. In it. Yeah, but it's never in a, it's never been an actively like nasty thing. It's just jokes. Do you know what I mean? But, you know, you hear things.

SL: Yeah, that's good. So, now we get a little more existential. What does it mean to be a mixed-race woman? What does that mean to you? How do you define your mixed identity?

YD: What does it mean?

SL: I know. It's a big question.

YD: I wrote a piece of poetry about being mixed-race. I performed it at open mic at Bruford one time. That was the only time I've ever really been able to kind of articulate. I think a lot of it doesn't make sense, but a lot of it does make sense. People hear it and they kind of get it if that makes sense. I often say that I'm a paradox, in all, in every sense of it. I'm not just a paradox in the fact that I'm white and black, it's just in my life. I say and do a lot of contradictory things, not that are harmful. It's just that I notice it that a lot of one side of my personality really is a complete juxtaposition to the other side of my personality. Just stuff like, my family say I'm like a hippie slash…I'm a cross between a hippie and an activist woman because I'm very for what people want to do as long as it's not harming anyone and quite like just do what you want to do as long as you're not hurting anyone. But then also, I'm

very, quite active about saying this stuff. So I'm like that. Liberal and things like that, but then part of my personality, I will get dressed up to the nines, full face of makeup and go to bougie clubs with my friends and enjoy myself. They say a lot of the stuff you wear in the daytime, because I like to dress, look vintage and stuff like that, is so different to who people who know me from clubs, would just not know who I am in the day. They're like, 'You just have so many sides to your personality.' I don't personally think that's a bad thing. It means I can connect to a lot of different people, and I'm a people person. Yeah, for me it means I feel very blessed to be mixed-race because I can connect to a lot of different people in culture through stuff that. You learn through being around people like that, but then also…It's hard to articulate what it actually means to me. I've just been very blessed to be mixed-race because it means that I can, I feel like I just get to connect with more people. I am lucky to have two, a culture which is so rich in history and stuff I am so proud of. And then also, people are like what's white culture? I think white culture is less about white culture and more about Britishness, or like stuff like that. So, when I think of white culture, I think of the UK. What I get from that. So yeah, and I'm happy. [laughs] That's a really hard question.

SL: It is.

YD: Yeah.

SL: You talked about when you were growing up, of course you're watching TV and all that stuff. Did you ever see yourself represented when you were growing up? Any theatre that you had a chance to see, or anything that you saw on television, any woman that looked like you?

YD: The women that I felt represented by were the black women. It wasn't necessarily mixed-race women; it was black women. So, I do feel like I felt represented when I was younger. And still now, I still feel represented when I see a cast of all black people on the screen. But it's in the past couple years, maybe even just one year, that I'm like, 'Whoa, a lot of these roles I'm too light for. A lot of these roles I'm too dark for.' So, if we're looking at that sort of thing, then who's to say I'm too light? Who's to say I'm too dark for a lot of certain things because we said genetics. A whole new thing. So yeah. I do think that I felt represented growing up. Not when I was really little as it kind of gradually got better, and so not really growing up, and not necessarily through mixed-race people. Through black people. Like one. I know one person that I've always been obsessed with is Taraji P. Henson. Since I was little anything I saw her in. Why did I say since I was little? Still, not that young. I was just kind of obsessed with her. That's one person that my parents will always, if she's on tape everybody's like, 'Yaz! Come look!' Because I just immediately, just loved her, but there's loads of different actors that I've kind of connected to.

SL: What kind of stories are you wanting to see? What sort of journeys?

YD: I'm sure you've seen that video where Viola Davis, she's talking about *Widows*. She's like, I have never just been in film and laying next to my husband, who is Liam Neeson in the film, and it be a white man and it not be like my slave Massa, or someone who's the boss of me, or an abuse or something like that. Just have a man and a woman. Black and white. Just, they're together in the film and it's not addressed about the fact that they're interracial. So just kind of things like that. When I say mundane things, I don't necessarily mean, cause nobody wants to watch someone doing nothing, but to be a mixed-race woman, or a black woman, or a woman of colour, anything, and have the story, but maybe not the focus of the story being the fact that they are black. Or being the fact, they are mixed-race, maybe you'd get through a

whole film of a completely different subject. Yeah, so stuff like that. Also, I don't know many plays, films, shows, that are from the perspective of a mixed-race person. Like, I don't know what story. I don't know what plot or anything, but just literally from that perspective. I can't really name. I mean, I bought a play the other day called…I can't remember what it's called, but it's about a mixed-race person, and I'm gonna read that and get to see what that's saying. I just, I find that interesting because we exist.

SL: Yeah, you do. So, what would that perspective be? I mean obviously, if it's from the perspective of a mixed-race person, at some point that's going to be addressed. It doesn't mean that that has to be the full focus.

YD: Yeah.

SL: What do you think are advantages that you have being a mixed-race actress in this industry? And what are disadvantages?

YD: So, advantages I think one thing is like, if you tell me a story to do with something that would take place in a kind of very white space, or within the white community, then I feel like I'd be able to relate more, because I've lived in it. Then the same for the black community also, so maybe just having relatable things from both sides of you. That's an advantage. Meaning that you can tap into certain situations. Being mixed-race disadvantage wise? I think that a lot of the time the stories of mixed, like a mixed-race child can only be from the perspective of having a black father and a white mother. I think that's one thing that's only shown in the media. It's like there's never a black mother and a white father. I find that really strange because there's both. Also, I see a lot of people who have, and I know I'm not denying that colourism is a thing. So, a person who is mixed-race or lighter skinned, they might not be fully black but lighter skinned, gets a role and there's an uproar about it because they're like, 'Why couldn't this be a person who is dark skinned?' Which I totally understand, but then it's also like both people want to get roles and stuff. So there's that kind of situation.

I often think mixed-race girls get put in roles that are quite stereotypical, like always a girlfriend, or they're always a sexually appealing or, for example Meagan Good. She's not mixed-race, but she's, she's quite light skin toned. I went to a evening where she was the person, and I asked her a question. I was like, 'How do you struggle with…', I was like, 'I'm about to enter into the industry and I don't want to be put into a box immediately.' She was like, 'Well, you're gonna find that it's definitely gonna happen to you, but you have to have the agency to say what you want.' She said that she took a break from acting because she was always the best friend, or the girlfriend, or someone who is kind of like the hot one, or sexy and stuff like that. She was like, 'That's not all I can do. So, I need to take a break from that to realise what I can do.' So I can be like, 'No, this is what I've got to do.' Then loads of questions kind of flew out. Something like, 'Well, you have the luxury saying that because, you're rich already. Like you, you can afford to take a break from acting.' Sort of thing, whereas some people can't, but what her advice was very great. There's was a lot more to it. So, I think that there's a disadvantage of getting kind of put in a box and you're always kind of the supporting role rather than the main, sort of thing.

SL: Okay. So, you brought up colourism very briefly. Being a woman of colour, who is lighter skinned, do you feel that there are advantages to having lighter skin in this industry? For you?

YD: Probably. Yeah. I haven't ever experienced them yet, but from what I've read, and from what I see. I mean we know people bleach their skin. Do you know what I mean? Those people who think that lighter is be more beautiful, and I thought bullshit, but I'm not one of the people who are in charge. So maybe that will help me. I don't know. It's hard for me to say cause I haven't been in that situation. I also think when it comes to colourism the way we look at it is that the lighter you are, you have more privilege sort of thing. And whilst I agree, to an extent, I think sometimes it can work in, not necessarily both ways, but there's a lot of things that…Being lighter skinned, there were a lot of negative connotations to it, but I don't think people like to speak about it. So, I think that you are literally, or I know from my own experiences, that I am perceived sexually all the time. I can only speak of what I feel, that's the way it happens for me. I feel that, especially in the UK, I can't really say as much about America, but like, 'lighties' is like a thing. If you're light skinned, you're a 'lightie' and that's like a thing that guys want, apparently. But 'lighties' are, they're rude. They don't answer to people on the phone because they think they're too good for them. There's so much that I see. All the shit on Twitter, Instagram. I see it. People say it to me. Say if someone asked for my number it will quite often follow with a question. 'Yeah, but you're mixed-race. You're a 'lightie', so you're not gonna reply to me, are you? Are you gonna to take twenty-eight days?' It's like a joke, but it's also, it's a thing. People look at mixed-race girls are thinking their better than other people. Thinking that they are above them and that we're too good for so many different people, and it's fuckin' annoying. This has just been my own experiences. People look at you. I just feel objectified a lot of the time to do with my skin. My lighter skin and curves.

SL: You mentioned painfully aware experiences in the arts. Has there been a specific situation that has happened? That you've experienced thus far, where you've really experienced the racism or discrimination? That was very painful for you?

YD: Like within the arts?

SL: Yeah. You know, or a bit traumatic?

YD: No, I haven't really experienced it to the point where it's like, 'Ugh.'

SL: When you were getting into drama school and them saying, 'Oh, you're mixed-race, there's a better chance that you'll get in.'?

YD: Yeah, just shit like that just is just annoying. It's like, what does that even mean? Are you telling me that I'm not talented enough? Or are you telling me…It seems to be that because being of colour seems to be known as such a huge disadvantage within a lot of situations. Seems a lot of people that are trying to make out like it's a huge advantage at the moment, just because there's BAME calls on casting calls. Like, it's taken a long time for that to happen. Let's have a moment.

SL: Is there something that you have identified at this point in your life that is unique to your experience as a mixed-race person?

YD: I mean, I just think you just kind of end up being a little bit more like culturally diverse because you've got two cultures right in front of your eyes. Oh, okay. One thing is, I always thought that I would never end up with a white man because there's certain things that they will…No matter how much they'll try to understand, the sad thing is that they will never be

able to understand. That's not through their own fault of not trying, it's just they won't be able to, and that for me was a thing that I found. This is one thing that people won't be able to get. Is when you're talking to your own mother, and she won't be able to fully understand stuff that you go through based on race, and based on visual, she won't ever be able to understand either. I mean, I'm happy she won't have to have the hardships that come along with being a person of colour because I wouldn't want to change my mom, but that's a weird thing. I talk about race quite a lot. I talk about it a lot in my work. In politics. I'm very interested in that, so is my dad. My mom not so much.

SL: There's a lot of Brits who have expressed either wanting to go over American and act, or they've also expressed that they feel that there's more opportunity for work for people of colour. I'm just wondering, as a British woman in the performing arts industry, what are your thoughts when looking at America? Are you one that also wants to go over?

YD: Before I went to America I had a totally idealised version of America in my head, and I had the best time there. But also, it taught me a lot about why I wouldn't want to fully live there. I would go over for work. I would go over. I would love to do an MA over there, but I wouldn't go just to live, like indefinitely. I just find it a really strange place. I feel like I fit in there quite a lot because I talk a lot and so do Americans. Well, generalisation obviously, there's shy Americans. British people reserved. For me, I wouldn't want to live there indefinitely because I'm a family, girl. I want kids. Not that this system is the best system ever, but I wouldn't want to bring up kids in place where I feel the system's built against them. So that's why I wouldn't live there indefinitely. I would go there for me, for work, for something like, for short amount of limited time, because I had a great time there. I really enjoyed it. I do think there's more opportunity for work, but that's because it's huge. If we're talking about maybe if we're talking about a state, then I'd say, like, I don't know. But like, if we're talking about America, of course, there's going to be more work for people, but there should be more work for people in general because it's a bigger place. I feel like African American stories are told more. I think we get taught about civil rights before we get to about black British history. So there's a lot more stuff to do with that. People are beginning to hate on it aren't they? Some people hate that British people keep coming over and taking roles and stuff. Yeah, it's interesting. So, I mean, I probably would. It's not my main goal because I'm pretty focused on trying to get more black British history into the realms of the arts, but I would go over there because I would like to go to grad school over there if I can try.

SL: You're fairly young and you're just about to leave drama school and about to dive headfirst into this whole industry and arena. Being at that precipice, what is your hope for yourself, and what do you visualise for yourself moving forward? What would you like to achieve?

YD: I would love to get an agent upon leaving drama school for acting, but I think I've realised that a lot of my love is in writing for stage. So not necessarily plays, but I want my writing to be performed. It could be poetry. I want to do plays; I just haven't quite conquered that. So, I hope that I can continue exercising that, and writing, and performing things, and becoming more confident in sharing my own work. I'm very fearful of people hearing stuff about me that they've never really put with me. So, I shy away from showing a lot of my work because of how it might make others feel. I want to grow from that and learn. You don't learn, you don't grow in comfort sones. So, I'd like to basically start doing all the shit that I talk about. I talk a lot and I have so many plans. So, it's more about trying to gather up stuff into action and getting some solid ideas to actually lift off the paper.

SL: Well, thank you.

YD: Thank you.
(End of Interview)

Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Mara Huf (MH), Black (mixed-race) British Actress

Interviewer: Samia La Virgne (SL)

Date of Interview: 16 June 2018

Interview Setting: Private residence in Birmingham, UK

The transcript of this interview has been edited for length and pertinence to my research topic.

(Start of Interview)
MH: Thanks for asking me to be part of it.

SL: Thank you. At first, I just wanted professional, working actresses and then I was like, 'Wait a second.' After seeing you guys in *Closer*, made me think about a lot of things. I was like, 'Well, no. I should interview both you and Miyuwa because you're just about to leave education and go into that professional world. And it would probably be more rich material to use, having all thoughts and experiences.'

MH: All.

SL: Right, those who are just starting. Those who have been doing it for a while. So then I was like, 'Uh duh!' Also, later in life when you're super successful, it's like [laughs] Remember when? So, what is your ethnic background?

MH: Okay. So I'm half German, and then half American, but within that Native American. I don't know percentage though, but I know my great grandmother was fully. African American and Cuban, and then the smallest fraction, Irish but that's back from the slavery days. Yeah.

SL: Very cool. So where were you born?

MH: Germany.

SL: Okay.

MH: In a small village called Der Westliche Wald which translates to the Western Forest.

SL: Okay.

MH: Yeah, in the middle of nowhere. [laughs]

SL: How long did you live there before you…

MH: So, I was two when I moved to the UK.

SL: Okay.

MH: So, my dad lives, no he doesn't live, he works in Germany part time still. So, we fly there a lot, and we have a small house there actually. So, I always say I grew up part-time Germany, England, and then America for summers.

SL: Oh, that's so cool.

MH: Yeah.

SL: So, this is very interesting because you're mixed. Do you consider yourself to be a black woman?

MH: I never used to. Ever. Until I hit secondary school. Because I was home educated for about ten years. So, I lived a very sheltered life. And I was probably the most 'black' person within my group. Where I lived in my community was very white. Even in Germany, I was like the blackest person other than my mother. We went to Switzerland one time, everyone's like smiling. My mom also has vitiligo, which doesn't help necessarily because she has little white patches, but everyone would just stare at her. Mouth open. And I never understood why because I was so young. So going to secondary school, which was a state school in London. Very multicultural, which I loved. I realised that loads of people were calling me like, they're kind of like their brethren and kind of language. They just welcomed me within the group. I didn't realise it's because of my skin tone because they didn't do that to my friends were white. That's when I started realising that it actually made a difference. That I was just half, but it still made a difference that I had melanin in my skin. Which was crazy to me. So, I consider myself half black because I can never exclude the German side of me. But what I found really interesting that in in America, because I've never properly lived there, people would call me black. Like, CJ, actually. We were just talking after *Closer*. We were walking back, and he said, 'Yeah because you're black and this and this.' And that was one, not the only time, there were only a couple of times where I've just been called black. And it just struck me because I was like, 'This is part of who I am.' Which is really interesting.

SL: It is yeah. This is fascinating. This is the other reason why I wanted to interview you because, they're definitely, what I'm realizing from this conversation, In America, if you do have a noticeable amount of melanin in your skin, then, you know, you're going to be considered black. Whether you're fair skinned, or dark skinned. You know, if you have a drop, then you know...

MH: That's because of slavery.

SL: I was going to say, because of slavery.

MH: It actually taints you and then yeah. And it's because it's still in the language and the culture, that if you're like one eighth, like back…And this happened within my family, if you're one eighth, you're still considered black. And this happened to someone, this is like pre- historical records, where this guy was actually Irish. It's one of my, he was Irish, and he went, fell in love with this woman who black, they got married. Blah, blah, blah. He freed her. And then he, obviously because he was Irish, and back in those days, it was like the lowest low for white people. He was able to write black ride with the black people because

he, people thought he was black. And then you could ride in the white trains because he actually was Irish, and it was just really interesting. Yeah.

SL: How would you describe yourself?

MH: Honestly, I used to call myself a mutt. I used to say, 'I'm a mutt. I never belong anywhere. I'm still finding it out.' Which I still am. But I just don't know. I still don't know. I have such a strong problem, not problem, I have a weird concept of identity because for me living in three different cultures, and three different countries makes me…And ethnicities as well. People are like, 'But you're not white. You're not black, you know. Why you saying you're Cuban? Because you're obviously not.' And things like that, which is just kind of disturbing, because I'm just Mara. I'm not anyone else.

SL: So, this question is going be fun for you then. How do you define your female identity? Most of the questions I've asked black female identity, but I think for you, your cultural female identity?

MH: Right.

SL: How would you define yourself?

MH: I've never thought of that. Female? What do you mean by female identity?

SL: Well, there's different things. Obviously, between men and women, and my research is focusing more on women.

MH: Yeah.

SL: And usually, I ask, the actresses that I interview, how they identify their black femaleness? But being a woman of colour, what does that mean for you? I know that you said you're figuring it out, and you maybe never thought about it before.

MH: It's interesting because I've talked to people like Miyuwa and loads of times you hear people say that a lot of people don't regard black female women as attractive if they're not trying to whiten up with wearing the weaves and all that kind of thing. It was even more interesting, which was when I went to secondary school, that I discovered the word 'lightie'. I don't know what, if it means the same thing in America, but it's just it means that you're a lighter version of black. Meaning that you were a hierarchy to the black system. Which I thought was really disturbing, actually. That there was such a thing that being called, [in a Southeast London accent] 'Oh you lite-y. Oh yeah, you fam.' People shouting at me across the street. [in a Southeast London accent] 'Oh you lite-y come 'ere man.' And I'm thinking, is that, is that me? And so…Wait what's the question again?

SL: The question was, how do you identify? Your cultural identity, and also as a woman. What does that mean? For you?

MH: It means a lot because obviously, like, my hair is like my staple piece and things like that. Because I don't have necessarily African features. I don't have a very wide nose, and things like that, that people don't pick up on it, but the second I let my hair out, they're like, 'Oh, yeah, I can see that you're, that you're mixed.' But also, like Miyuwa, she thought I was

Mediterranean at first, and then I let my hair out because I normally just have my hair up. She was like, ‘Oh, you part African! You part my sister.' [chuckles] What does that even mean? So now I think I do. Because there's like a family involved as well, being from a certain area as others. As people calling each other brothers or sisters, you know, like the whole 'N' word is going around. Black people who call each other that, which I personally don't agree with, but it's that concept.

SL: Yeah.

MH: So, I classify myself as mixed because I can't ever dis-clude my German side, but I definitely would not want to exclude the African American side because that's who I am. You know?

SL: Yeah, yeah. So, because you are essentially ethnically ambiguous in a lot of ways. Do you feel that at this point, it has hurt you or helped you when it comes to acting?

MH: Both. In the good way because there's less of me out there. I can put myself forward for more stuff and probably get a role that there are less people in. But getting the role is another situation because people won't write necessarily for someone who's mixed or black. They first will think of white people because often they are white themselves. Or if the casting comes out, I remember, I talked to you a little bit about this. If it doesn't necessarily say black or mixed, I don't think I should go up for it. Simply because it's not who I am. They haven't necessarily said that. But then, why not? Is now what I'm starting to think more and more since we've had our conversations that I can just go for something because it fits my casting. Because it says young girl in her twenties, bubbly, whatever.

SL: Which is definitely you.

MH: Instead of I'm just gonna wait for something on Spotlight or wherever on casting or whatever that says, mixed, black, da, da, da, da. But also interestingly enough, I actually said this to my agent. It was a casting for someone who was black, and it said black/other as well, and I sent him a message being like, 'Does this mean me? Do I count as being black enough?' Because there's so many roles that go out nowadays for someone…Because there's certain specific castings, and I totally understand, because it has to be someone who is a black Nigerian man, because that's the role because this and this. That's absolutely fine. But when it's a role…I just never know what to go up for because I'm just so ethnically diverse really. Is the main crisis really. Yeah, I just never know. I never know, and it's hindered me, but it also helps for sure. Because I mean, honestly people get racist comments. Even I do. For, with *Closer* for example. People being like, 'Oh, well, why did I get this? Why are they trying to make it so special? Because everyone's mixed, ethnically?' It's just crazy.

SL: So, you said an interesting thing about casting. That it's helped and that it's hurt, but you said there's not a lot out there that's written for you. I'm not ethnically ambiguous in the way that you are. So, I've actually never thought about that. So you're saying that there's not much out there written for you. When looking at plays that you've seen, or television, or film are certain stories or experiences that you would like to see reflected in performing arts that's specific to what you've experienced as a mixed woman?

MH: What stories about mixed-race people you mean?

SL: Yeah.

MH: Well, it's starting to be better now because there's like that show called *Half Breed*, which was touring in all of England. It's a theatre show, and there's this program right now called *The Underground,* which is a Netflix show, which is, it's about the slavery trade and this girl who is in the house. She's mixed-race and she runs away and they're slowly things happening now because there's movement. But growing up I've never ever seen someone like me, but now I'm seeing models who are mixed-race because it's the new trend. Which is good that it's being put out there, but I don't know if it's for the right reasons necessarily.

SL: What is something about your personal experienced that I may not realise because I'm not mixed but that you feel that needs to be shared? Does that make sense?

MH: Sort of.

SL: With my research I'm looking at black women because I feel that oftentimes the representations of black woman right now very stereotypical.

MH: Oh yeah.

SL: We are mammies. We are whores…

MH: Or like a black sass queen.

SL: We are angry.

MH: Yeah.

SL: But there's more to that, and I'm wanting to get thoughts and experiences. When I've talked to other women who definitely identify as black, they're saying they want to see black women in more loving relationships. In actual relationships that are loving, that's not just like, oh, she's always a single mom, you know. So, I guess that's my question for you. Being someone who's mixed, you don't see a lot of you. When you do see?

MH: Often people like to categorise them. Like, 'Okay, they're black enough to play this.' So, for example, right now, have you seen *Atlanta*?

SL: No, I haven't.

MH: There's a character and she's mixed-race, but she's more portrayed as a black person. Which is interesting because I have done some research. She's an actress who's actually half German as well, but it's only ever referenced, is that she is black. Which I find very interesting. There's never really a point where there's a storyline, unless it's about being a mixed-race person, like that theatre show that I went to go see. Often, they try to categorise you as being an orphan, or work being black. There's not necessarily…Unless it's cast for someone who is mixed-race, and then they have to get someone, like a black mom or white dad. They normally try to make you more black. Which I find very interesting because I'm half.

SL: Right.

MH: Or I've seen orphans. Yeah, they often try blacking you up. Is that weird to say?

SL: No, no. So, it sounds to me like you're wanting to see a more fully rounded…

MH: Yeah.

SL: Character that encapsulates all of what it means to be mixed, which is the black side or, it should represent everything that goes into it.

MH: What I would honestly just love is having a storyline that's a great storyline and having characters that fit that. So, if you have someone who's a black girl, playing someone who's really shy and just wants to do hard work all the time, you know? Something like that, and then having an Asian person who just wants to party all the time, you know? Just have a good story, and it doesn't matter what they look like. Someone who's mixed-race is just doing whatever and it's just a good story instead of, okay, I need to have a black person who has got the sassiness. I need to have an Asian person who is studying all the time. I need this and this, you know? Just a good story is what I would just love to see, and something that doesn't necessarily reflect on, 'Okay, now what is your history?' Just someone who's an Asian person is not necessarily referenced all the time in the script that they are Asian, you know. Like what we said before about if it's just a play, just have a nice play with people who fit the characters instead of only white people. But if it's just written for a good story, often you see white people playing it because that's the first thing that comes to everyone's mind.

SL: It sounds like for you, up to a certain point, you had the privilege of just growing up and just being you and discovering who that was without feeling the intense weight of all of your cultural identity.

MH: Mm hmm.

SL: And then it shifted when other people…

MH: Judged me.

SL: So now that you're being made more aware of that from other people…

MH: Yeah.

SL: How does that make you feel?

MH: Okay. It makes me feel like I need to talk more and correct people more. Because I realise that there was a problem within what people say, like when using the 'N' word. Well, white people saying that isn't right, and they don't realise what they're saying is incorrect. I feel it's my job, not job, but I feel like I should tell someone, 'What you said is wrong and it is racist. And because you are unaware that it's okay because you don't know. But now you know.' And I feel like that's my place tell people that. Even though I'm only half, but I'm realising it more and more. Because growing up, I had a friend, who still as a friend. I didn't realise when she used to call me the colour of poop. She was like, 'Hey Poopy!' And I didn't realise that was my skin, but also that's something that comes out your ass, you know? That's

not [laughs] and I just didn't think. I was like [laughs] 'I'm poop.' [laughs] 'You'd be more like pee because you're lighter.'

SL: Right.

MH: I didn't think about that. So now, taking a step back and seeing all the slight racist comments that have been made throughout my life that I just didn't realise because I was so naïve and unaware, that I guess it was good going to secondary school and being called a 'lightie', and being called a nigger, and things like that. That made me realise what is right and what is wrong, so I can move forward and tell people that being called poop when you're eight years old is not right. For example.

SL: Yeah, yeah. So, let's go to something a little lighter.

MH: [laughs]

SL: Why did you get into acting? What, what drew you to it?

MH: So, it was, it was a weird journey actually. I did community arts first. I was always into dancing, and acting, and all that kind of stuff, and I was dyslexic myself. So I was always really frustrated with academics. So I went into a different outlet, and then I really didn't like how certain people were being treated within all walks of life. So I did community arts which is inclusive for everyone. So, I used to work with people who have very strong disabilities. Who are deaf, autism. I used to work one-on-one with people like that, and it was inclusive. Have you ever herd of Chicken Shed? They're an inclusive, look them up. They're fantastic. They're an inclusive theatre company who work with all races, all abled and disabled people, and they're fantastic, and I worked with them for two years. Yeah, write them down. They're great. Yeah, Chicken Shed, and I realised, it was kind of selfish of me, I realised that I wanted to be the person on stage, instead of helping people develop through theatre.

SL: Okay.

MH: So then I applied to drama school, so I went through a kind of a weird route. Then I was more aware from the get-go that people are different and need to be, but need to be treated the same, and so going to drama school made me a lot more aware, I think, when people said things that were wrong. But even at drama school, I don't think I noticed right away when people were racist, or homophobic, or said things like retarded, and spastic, and things like that. Which are incorrect to say. Like for example, I went to a specialist school for GCSEs which is first…Do you know what GCSEs are?

SL: Yeah.

MH: So, the first exams that you take, I had to go, because I was very dyslexic, to a specialist school that could cater for my needs. And I, it was the first one, I was aware of people who had a lot of disabilities. More so than I did, and it was like the nickname. Everyone called each other 'The Spazzes' because they were like, ‘Oh, we're at the spazzes.’ We're making it cool, and then I went to my next school, I realised that it was not a cool thing to say.

SL: Wow.

MH: At all.

SL: Yeah. Having your very unique perspective…Because I did interview someone else who, she's half Jewish and Gambian, but she considers herself black.

MH: Right.

SL: Whereas you're mixed and you're like, 'Well, I'm kind of starting to, but I consider myself mixed.' And from our conversations and with this, it's like okay, then I want to honour that because that is how you see yourself. And for me to just like, 'Oh, you're just black', is…

MH: Right.

SL: A disservice to you.

MH: Right.

SL: Right? So, a lot of these questions that I have are just like as a black woman, as a black woman. There's that, but also realising that you're my second mixed actress. I'm wondering if there's other questions that I hadn't considered because I'm not mixed in the way that you are. Right? You don't have the same type of stereotyping. Stereotyping doesn't happen for you the way that it happens for…

MH: Yeah.

SL: I think that's also where I'm trying to get with that question of, are there things that are unique to your experience? Of like, who you are being mixed that you've, you know...

MH: The most question I get is, 'Do you consider yourself more black or more white?' Which...

SL: Really?

MH: Yes.

SL: Oh no.

MH: Every third person, probably goes, 'Are, you more black or white? What do you consider? What do you think you are?' They're trying to put you in a box. Everywhere you go. Yeah, that's probably, most thing that anyone who is mixed probably always talks about is being ticked as the other box. Because you can never say you're, unless you're, I don't know Eurasian because that's like a saying now. Yeah, but everyone normally is like, I'm the other box. I'm always the other box, and it's never a nice feeling to be discarded because you are a mutt. You are not a purebred. You know? That kind of a feeling resonates I think with a lot of mixed people because they are mixed. You can ever say they're one or the other. And for someone to, is one thing, often will be like so, 'What are you?' Let me just get down to the to the core of this.' I think the question that they ask is, what do you feel the most side you are? So that I can relate to you, or I can't relate to you. So, someone who is black often is like, 'So, are you my homie because you, you're part of this?' And if I say 'No, I feel quite German.' I've tested this out. I said 'No, I sometimes feel very German because I was born

there.' And they're like, 'Oh. Okay.' They just discard it. Or if I say I'm more, I feel more black because of this, and I've tested it out. People's responses have been slightly different depending on what answer I give sometimes, and I normally don't do that. Just when I realised what was happening. I just tested it out. I just found that so interesting, that the reason, not often, the reason they ask is because they want to feel, they want to know what side you're on so then they can go closer to you.

SL: Find a way to relate to you.

MH: Yeah, yes. It's not always that, obviously, and I don't always lie, [laughs] but it's just really interesting.

SL: What's the difference in the reactions? You did say they were kind of like, 'Oh, okay', when you've told someone that you feel more German. How have people responded when you've said that you feel more black?

MH: So, some people find it interesting, and some people think it's like, 'Oh, well, why would you want? Why would you want to?' Particularly to white people. If I say that to someone who is white, they're like, 'Oh, okay.' Because in their mind, they're like, 'Oh, Africa. They need help. Yeah. They're all starving poor children who…' It's very interesting when you say things like that.

SL: Why would you want to identify with that essentially?

MH: Yeah.

SL: Wow.

MH: Just crazy. But then you got some people who think it's absolutely great. You see people who are trying to like dreadlock their hair, and they're not realizing where their origin comes from.

SL: So, moving forward. You're going into this professional world of acting. Where do you see yourself in ten years? Kidding. But what are your hopes for your next steps, for what your experience is going to be like?

MH: For being mixed?

SL: Or just being an actress. You just got out of drama school, and you're moving forward.

MH: What I would just honestly love is just land a role in TV that isn't, like token black character, because you often get that, where it's like the one Asian person in it, or one black person, or one mixed person. They're just thrown in there, and you get castings online often, which are like, 'Okay, we're just searching for one person to play this and this and this.' And you know it's just because you have melanin in your skin, or something like that. I would just love to go for a role that is, it suits me. Instead of something that comes up where it has to be a black person or a BAME person. Yeah, and also not to educate because, that's a bad word to use. Look, I'm writing a play right now about…A play about me. So, it's a one-woman show and I'm just dabbling right now because it needs to be talked about. Things that are happening in the world, and to me.

SL: There are more and more increasingly…More of the world is going to be mixed.

MH: Yeah.

SL: It's interesting you were talking about the whole pure breed versus being a mutt. So, I think your experiences and thoughts and, and what life is like for someone who fits into your category does need to be shared and talked about more. More from the perspective of, 'The world trying to put me in this box, but this is how I see myself.'

MH: Yeah. I think the main thing is trying to push yourself out of the other box. That it's okay to just not put people in boxes. At all. Particularly in acting because everyone, not everyone, loads of people see TV shows and theatre, and social media, so people need to be the influencers, because that's what people are going to see in the big screen. Like Disney. Loads of kids see Disney movies, but the only BAME character that's actually good is someone like Mulan. It's just shocking, and I think the entertainment industry, it's very important, going forward to keep making the changes that are already starting to happen, making it more. I think every person who is involved in the arts should be thinking of this. I think particularly people who are of colour, of a minority race often think about it more because it affects them directly.

SL: Yeah, yeah. Well let's leave that there.
(End of Interview)

Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Sarah Jeanpierre (SJ), Black (mixed-race) British Actress

Interviewer: Samia La Virgne (SL)

Date of Interview: 25 March 2019

Interview Setting: Private residence in London, UK

The transcript of this interview has been edited for length and pertinence to my research topic.

(Start of Interview)
SL: So how was your day?

SJ: It was good.

SL: So, what is your ethnic background?

SJ: As far as I know, my mom's my Caucasian parent. She's English. As far as I know, most of her family are from up north. My dad is my black parent. And as far as I know, it's all families from St. Lucia. In the Caribbean.

SL: Have you been there?

SJ: No, I have not. And I say that with that much force. [laughs] Because every single time I think about the fact that I haven't gone, I always think two things. One, why my dad hasn't tried to go, because we travelled a lot when I was a kid. But he never wanted to go. He never actually went to St. Lucia himself. And then the second thing I always thought was, damn, how are they gonna take me? Someone who is not completely heterosexual. Someone who has never had a husband. Someone who doesn't have kids at twenty-six. And all those questions. My sister's six years older than me. So, in terms of like, looking at us…I mean, we've already been told by our St. Lucian family that we would be seen as like aliens. They said we would be like aliens over there. Because they'll be so confused as to why we have never been married, and never had kids. They'd be like, 'What's wrong with you?', Sort of thing. So, yeah, that's it on the ethnic background.

SL: Okay. And where are you from? Where were you born?

SJ: I was born in Peckham. Peckham, Southeast London. Born and raised, and recently moved away from there in October. [laughs]

SL: Do you miss living in Peckham? I mean since that was your stomping grounds.

SJ: Yeah, hmm. So, where I live in Peckham, well lived in Peckham, was a very white area.

SL: Oh, okay.

SJ: So, whenever people think about it, they tend to call it the mini-Africa. Whatever that means. But because there's so many different, so many people from African descent, that they assume that it's more African based. Like if you go to Brixton, everyone assumes that it's like a mini-Jamaica. Stuff like that. That's probably where it comes from. So, where I lived, it was a very white area. Very, very white area. I think there was probably about two or three families that were not white for about five streets near me. But that's not to say that I…Because my primary school was right across the road. So not to say that I grew up specifically around white kids. But in terms of, you know, playing out, and all that sort of stuff with friends, yeah, no like…I remember one time when I went in the shop and my friends were outside sitting on the wall, as you do. [chuckles] I came outside, and I saw two black guys coming up to the people that were on the wall. They're all white. And the two black guys were like, 'Oh, who wants to get shanked at first?' So, I'm like walking up I'm like, 'Yo! I only went in for like a lucozade. Like, what the fuck's going on right now?' And then all of a sudden, these two black guys saw me, and then they were like, 'Oh, they are they must be safe because they're with her.' And I was like, 'Whoa. What? What the fuck just happened? Like, what?' I'm freaking out because one, because obviously I was friends with two of them. It's like one, I nearly saw my friend get stabbed, but then two, who these people? And three…What?! So that was the first time I was kind of…I was questioning things. As to like where I was living, my association with these people, and how I was perceived, as a young, mixed-race woman. So, yeah, it was, it was interesting, growing up around that particular neighbourhood. But then going to school in a very multi-ethnic school. I could…Just switch things up a bit for me. [laughs] For sure, for sure.

SL: So, you just said, being a mixed-race woman. I'm curious. Do you identify as mixed-race woman all the time? Or do you identify as mixed-race and a black woman?

SJ: Over the years I think, especially after I got box braids, a lot of my black friends were very nice about the fact that I had done it. They were just like, 'Wow, I wouldn't think that you would do something like that, because you have your hair. And I just always assumed that you're going to like shave it off, or like grow it out.' And all this sort of stuff. And they're just like, 'Why do you have braids? If you can grow your hair?' So, I was just kind of like, interesting, one, but two, I use to have braids all the time when I was younger. I guess it's a little bit different then. Because when I was around my cousins so often, from my dad's side of the family, it was just a natural thing. You know, you'd be in the living room or wherever, and then you know, your cousin would just be like, 'Oh, can I braid your hair.' And I'd be like, 'Okay.' it's just not a thing. And then once you get older, and you get box braids, especially if you get extensions, I think like for me, I had to pick. I kinda had to like pick out what my battles were going to be. I had to pick my battles. It was whether I was going to be looked at on the street. I did get looked on Brixton, and as soon as I left the hairdresser's. It was very interesting. Seeing people's reactions to me.

So, identify as a mixed-race woman? Yes. And I think more so because I'm lighter than most mixed-race people tend to be, apparently. But because I'm lighter skinned, people are almost shocked that I'm mixed-race. Which is interesting to me. And then, in terms of identifying as a black woman, I'm still kind of grasping that in itself. Because I always used to think, well, everyone must be mixed-race. Because if there's a race, that mixes. And it has for quite some time. So, me being a mixed-race woman, literally a black dad and a white mom…mixed-race. I mean, I used to be called 'half-caste', you know? That was my battle. When I was younger. Being called 'half-caste'. And it was only until like I read that John Agard poem. That still rings true to me every single time I hear it. 'What do you mean when you say half-caste?' So

being mixed is always like…Mixed heritage, love that. But I guess I've read an increasing amount of articles talking about how mixed-race people are more susceptible to having mental health problems because they don't know where to situate themselves in society. And at first, I was like, 'What do you mean? I'm perfectly fine.' But then at the same time, I was like, 'Oh, okay.' So that's where people tend to assume that it's like the best of both worlds in a way. Where we all like, let's say, like talking to other mixed-race friends. I've only got a few. I've only got like two or three other friends that are mixed-race.

SL: And are they mixed with black and white? Or…

SJ: Yeah.

SL: Okay.

SJ: Yeah. And then obviously I've got my sister, and I've got my cousins. It's really interesting because on my dad's side all the brothers except for one have all been with white women. So, there's a lot of mixed-race babies around. And my cousin is mixed-race, and he has blond hair. But he's darker than me and has freckles. So, I've been very used to thinking I'm mixed. That was just it. Then when people just like, 'Oh, no, but you're a black woman.' I'm just like, 'I will. I will own it?' It's like, is it a statement or is it a question? Should I own it? And like, of course, because there's my black heritage, but there's only so much I know, about my black heritage. So, as I'm getting older, I'm kind of distancing myself away from, this is how it's been. This is what I'm used to. But also, why have I never been to St. Lucia? Why is it that my dad never taught me how to speak patois growing up? That's always bugged me the most. Like that's bugged me the most. Just being able to speak a language with my family. That we can all find some common ground. But yeah, identifying as a black woman, I would say is subjective, depending on who I talk to. But if anyone ever said to me, 'Do you identify as a black woman?' I would say no. I would just identify as a mixed-race woman. I hope I've answered your question.

SL: Yeah, I mean, yeah, you answered it. So doing this research has made me realise that I need to be more sensitive and rethink about the language that I use when I am speaking to people…You know, mixed-race. It's interesting to me to speak…I'm thinking more about how, each person personally identifies. Because it's, you know, a very personal thing. And for some of the mixed-race actresses that I've spoken to, they are like, 'No, yeah. I'm black woman.' Some are saying, 'I'm mixed.' And some feel they're mixed, and they identify as being mixed and black. So, I've learned because going into it, I was just like, 'Yeah. You're black.' [laughs]

SJ: Mm hmm.

SL: But now realising, to say that could, inadvertently be offensive to someone depending on their background and how they grew up and whatnot. But also, there's a thing that even though you know that you're mixed, right? It's the whole one drop idea. It's clear that you're not white. [laughs]

SJ: [laughs] Yeah.

SL: The white patriarchal concept of it, looking at you, someone would potentially…I think things are getting better now, because there is this 'wokeness' that's happening. And a push

towards finding better terms, meaning like vocabulary, when talking about how people identify. Realising that things are fluid and things on a spectrum. So, I think now, probably there's a better use of words like 'people of dual heritage' and 'mixed'. Whereas I feel like, only ten years ago, it wasn't that way.

SJ: Yeah.

SL: It's like, okay, well, if you have any drop of black in you, then you're black. Versus, okay, you're mixed. So, when I first started doing this, and I was interviewing actresses that were mixed-race, I sort of have changed the way to ask my questions. Because I was like, 'What does it mean to be a black woman?' And they were like, 'Uh…?'

SJ: Yeah.

SL: Cause they don't see themselves that way. But there is this thing that to a certain extent the industry sees you that way.

SJ: Yeah, that was one of the things. That's the reason why I said it was kind of subjective. In terms of when I got my box braids, for example, I remember one of my friends said to me that, 'You know, back in the day, you would have been seen as a negro, so I see you as a black woman. So do what you will.' And I was like, okay, I've got a pardon for my hair. [laughs] So yeah, I mean, it's still something, I can't say that I'm 100% certain how I'm going to be as I get older. It's just because I feel like with my dad, he doesn't try to grasp his own black heritage. That's been a struggle. I remember when someone called my dad an 'Uncle Tom'. And I was like, they're not wrong, but at the same time, my dad has fought so hard to be the person that he is. Love him to death, all that sort of stuff. But the way we disagree, is how much I am going to be vocal about the things that I'm going through. I remember when he said, mixed-race girls are always going to be seen as they think they're too nice, and all this sort of stuff. And I was like, 'What do you mean always?' He was like, 'Well, you know, even when I was growing up, mixed-race girls were always seen that way.' I was like, "Right. Okay.' So, where's this conversation going? Because going through secondary school, they used to be so many times that I was expected to find it flattering when I was with my black friend, and then someone be like, 'Oh, yeah, you're 'lightie'. Can I talk to you? Blah, blah, blah. If I had to pick one, I'd pick you because your light skinned.' And I was like, 'Yo, this is not flattering. So why are you? What?' At first, I didn't even respond to it. Because I couldn't believe that that was supposed to flatter me. Like lighter skin makes you more attractive. And then it becomes a matter of the privilege. The privilege of the fact that this person wants to, excuse my language, fuck me as opposed to my friends? No, no, no. That's not a privilege to me. That's a freakin' problem. That is a freakin' problem.

But in terms of I guess like, in terms of the way beauty is looked at. I definitely can sense that, there is a level of…It's so weird for me to say I feel privileged to look this way. It doesn't feel right, it coming out my mouth. I feel privileged to look like this. And it might be because I'm so like naive to the idea that I haven't dealt with people looking at me. And being like, doing all kinds of crap. Just talking about my skin colour. Just talking about my hair in a negative light. I'm just like, it used to anger me so much. It still does anger me now. But I think now I know that if it ever does happen, I'm going to spend less time trying to contemplate what should I say? What should I say? I'm just gonna be straight out and say it. Bippity, bappity, back the fuck up. This is not that time. By all means, we could talk about what you mean by that. About how I'm more attractive than this person over here. Which by

the way is 100% wrong. But we'll talk about that in a minute. Go on, explain yourself. What the frick do you mean by that? And then, I totally do see why when people when people would just be like, 'You're black because you know you have black in you.' Like you said before. You're black because you have black in you. Sure thing, but I know that there's certain levels that I won't understand certain things. Absolutely not. I just wouldn't. Because I am so light skinned, to where I think about being around different people and then I don't think about my race. I just don't think about it. And then I think about it when I'm when around only white people and only black people. It's really weird that that's when I think about it. Because I'm there again as a minority. But it's just very different. To me, I think it's just like very different. How people pick out what they like what they don't like about you. I feel that people are way too honest about what they don't like when they look black people. It pisses me off. Beyond belief, how confident people can be saying things that they don't like about black people.

SL: Obviously that comes from colonization and Christianity. The way that the whites took things from Christianity and used it. It's been done lots of times, the using religion to oppress people. Yeah, it sucks. The whole beauty standards and the lighter the skin the better and that's an issue. So how did you get into acting and performing arts?

SJ: My first role was in nursery. So, I was about four or five. And I played Mary in the nativity play. I wasn't a very good Mary because Mary drug Jesus by his wrist and on the floor. So, I was pretty terrible, but I had a really cool teacher. She was pretty much our MD. She was our musical director. We didn't think of that back then, but she was. She did musicals every year. So, I was in *Cats*. I was *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. I was in *Willy Wonka*, same thing. We changed it to…I was an extra fairy.

SL: Okay.

SJ: So first I was the mom. Mrs. Bucket. And then I ended up being a fairy. So, *Wizard of Oz*, that was it. So, we do *Wizard of Odd*. That was it! It wasn't *Wizard of Oz*; it was *Wizard of Odd*. I was Blender. I was to confused fairy. Getting everything wrong, as I am now. How befitting I'm still that character. [laughs] And then what else did we do? And then obviously I went on to secondary school. I picked drama as a GCSE. Wrote a script for my GCSE final piece, and that was the first time I was like, 'This is cool.' Then I went off to college, and that's when it got serious. And then as you go into Bruford and it's kind of like, 'Yeah. Here's me.' As you getting older it's like, 'Oh crap. This is me. Hi.' What's going on? How am I? How do I be myself? And then it doesn't stop. After I graduated like five years ago. It just didn't stop. I just felt so much more connected to everything in my body. I was connected to words more. I was connected to other people more. So, acting started off as, this is fun. I get to be expressive. And then I was like, no. This has actually been a really good calling for me. Because there were so many times that I would perform in my bedroom. Put on my shows. I think I've still got the mic, but I made in my cupboard somewhere. But yeah, it's just like performance has been an outlet. It sounds so corny. [laughs] To say. But it's like, I've always been a performer. I've always been just me. But it's true. Like, I just feel so much better knowing that I can stick with music, or just like read a play, and just be completely transported into a whole different realm. And it matters so much to so many people that I know the way that they've seen me express myself on stage, versus how they see me express myself out in public. Which I find really interesting.

SL: So, what sort of stigma have you faced at this point in your career? That you feel has been specific to you either being a woman, or being a mixed-race woman?

SJ: So, when I was in Bruford, I got cast as a house servant. The way that they sold it to me was that 'You are going to be like the women in *The Help*.' When I first saw *The Help,* I was in Texas. Myself, and the only other person who wasn't white who came to Texas, with the cohort, with the Rose Bruford cohort, and I think there might have been one other person in the cinema, the whole cinema that was not white. And I just remember feeling so uncomfortable watching. Seeing it for the first few minutes. As the movie went on and on, I was just cracking up. So much at certain points. And then after getting the house…I got Birdie. Birdie for me was a character that I was given. And I based all my movements, the way I cared about these children, off of my nan. When my family came to see it, they were like, 'You like nan when you did that. Quite a bit. I saw it quite a few times.'

Then the second one…So for the Barn show, I was Birdie, and then in the Rose Theatre I was a woman who was a slave, but she had died. So, I was coming back to haunt my ex-husband who's now having an affair with a southern belle in the middle of the forest. I come to and fro to basically say to him, you know you're proper screwing in more pain even though I'm dead, but I'm here to remind you of something. You are a soldier but first and foremost, you are my husband. And now I'm dead. It's like, do you have the freedom to do more now? Sort of conversation. So, when I was given the script, originally, I think I've always been picked solely on my race. From when I was in Bruford, and I got picked solely on my race in third year. Now, first year, I was told that you need to take every role you can because you're not going to be able to get them once you out there. And I was like, 'What do you mean by that?' It was like, 'You know, people like Leona from *Small Craft Warnings*. Take it. Cause it's gonna be really hard for you to get it once you get out of here.' In my head I was like, 'Watch me.', but then I was like, 'Okay, fair enough.' Then we did group projects, and I was Dorothy Dandridge, and I completely just ran with that. Completely ran with it. Because I was handed it as a way of just being like, 'So we're going to talk about Hollywood. Here's Dorothy Dandridge, and I was so convinced that I just wanted to do my research. That would be it. I'll do my research and I thought that was going to be it. I was convinced that if I do my research, I could just get on with the rehearsals and it would be fine. No, no, no. It got cut. Cut down, cut down, cut down, cut down, because I didn't realise how much research I'd actually done. And the more over time, I started to be vocal about my experiences as a mixed-race, androgynous woman who just loves who she loves. It just, it got a lot more…There was freedom involved. Because I had women around me that I knew I could trust.

But then it got complicated because I was in a theatre company called The Vulvas. And we did a homage to events as *Vaginal Monologues* and called it *Vagina Dialogues*, where we'd have monologues. We would have skits. We would have dance pieces, and stuff like that. It was it was really good fun. But the first time we were set to Edinburgh, first of all, I was the only person in the group that wasn't white. And I was used on the poster. Now, it was great. You know. It was a great time. But then when I got back, I didn't realise just how much people thought I was the token of the show. So, then I was being told you know, who wants to see four white girls on stage talking about vaginas? You're the reason why people wanted to come. I was like, 'Oh, okay.' So, the second time, we had another mixed-race woman. Her heritage is South African and Irish. And then we had a black woman whose heritage is Swedish and Ghanaian. So, it was a great time for me, just to get to know these people. Then we wanted to do something that was similar to *Dear White People*, but just say *Dear People*,

that, you know, not every black person is going to know certain songs just because they're black. And mixed-race people might surprise you with the amount of knowledge that they have about their ancestry or so on and so forth. And then I ended up saying to both of them, once we get into rehearsals, do you want to just work on it together? So, what became a problem was the fact that we would then self-directing this puppy that we had come up with. And then once we were showing it, the things that were being said, may or may not've been, I don't know, I didn't ask them, but they might have felt uncomfortable hearing what we had to say. Because it has happened quite a few times. Where like, we've been out and then a song will come on, and then they will say the 'N' word in the song. And they just wouldn't think anything of it. Because they're with people who are black. And no one's really saying anything to them about it. So, I was like, 'No, no. No.' We all agreed that we don't like the word full stop. We don't call it our friends that. We just don't use the word. That was just our way of saying. And then once we got to Edinburgh the second time it got complicated, once again. Where I was like, 'I'm not feeling it this time. I'm not feeling it.' I'm not feeling like I'm saying something that hasn't been reshaped somehow, because they just didn't want to hear what we have to say. So, yeah.

Whenever I've been cast as someone, it has never really been specifically a mixed-raced or a black woman who is not how slave or servant. Anything that I've ever felt empowered by, in a way, has to have been written by myself. That's how it's been so far. *Spirit of the Pharaoh* actually, in all honesty, that was a turning point. Because when I got that casting call, I was like, 'Are you kidding me? They're asking for a South London? Who's also black? I mean, hello. Hi. Come on. What do you mean? You're asking for someone who's basically me. Hi. [laughs] When I went to audition, I did a piece by debbie tucker green, and it just felt so good. I felt like I'd take my time for a reason. And yeah, you know, I could have gone more into other sorts of work, but I don't know what would have been right for me. I really don't. Not right now. I think this is right for me. Definitely just writing and *Spirit of the Pharaoh*.

SL: When taking a look at the performing arts industry as a whole. Theatre. Screen. How do you feel that black women and mixed-race women are being represented right now? What do you see happening?

SJ: I see there is an increase of people who are getting their work out there. That's very exciting for me right now. To know that…Because my cousin is a journalist, and he's sending me so many articles from like the BBC, that are calling specifically for black writers. Calling specifically for black playwrights. And specifically for black directors. What he's noticed is that there needs to be more black women coming forward. Because he knows a lot of black women who are so talented at what they do. So talented at what they do. And he was like, 'Just go for it.' Regardless of it's like heavy metal…Like when I recently found out that Jada Pinkett Smith was a part of a heavy metal band, I was like, 'Hallelu!' I always used to get dragged into rock music. And then when I find out she was in a heavy metal band I was like, 'How do we all not know about this?' So, I feel like the representation in terms of things getting approved and all that sort of shit. I feel that there's just more stuff out there that people just need to grasp in terms of what people want to say, how they can work together, as well, and there is an increase of that which is so good. Which is why *Spirit of the Pharaoh* is quite important right now because it's a British representation. I remember when Terry was like, there is this massive misconception where only America only Hollywood can make blockbusters. Can make huge movies. And I was like, this is the time to prove them wrong, and what better else then to make it about Egypt and casting black people as Egyptians.

SL: Can you put into words what that experience was like coming from being slaves and servants, and finally feeling like there's this role that speaks more to the types of roles that you want to play, would want to play, and who you are as a person? Not being the cliche stereotypical, 'yes Massa' situation?

SJ: It's about frickin' time. That was my initial reaction. It's about freakin' time. But then I also wish that there were more opportunities like this. And it can, it will come along. Though I'm seeing it every day, there's more people just making work. It's just about it circulating. It needs to spread like wildfire the way that other things do. Because the experience of a South London person is very different than the experience of a North London person. That's a given. But how that's represented in the media, without putting in gangs, and putting in the fact that everyone's just trying to be a grime artist. There's something wrong with that. But at the same time, that's all that people get. 'Oh, you grew up in an estate.' 'Oh, you're urban.' Or 'We can walk down the street with you because you come from the ghetto.'

SL: So then when taking a look at the stories and whatnot that are being told on stage and on screen, what type of stories would you like to see being told that aren't being told right now? Particularly when talking about, dealing with black or mixed-race women?

SJ: Yes. I would say right now, whatever stories people are willing to tell. Just new writing is what I want. There's a book that I recently got called *Hear Me Now*. It's a book completely dedicated to audition monologues for actors of colour. More stuff like this.

SL: Growing up in southeast London when watching television or going to the movies, were you seeing yourself reflected? How did the images that you saw…Did they affect you in any sort of way?

SJ: The only representation I had was the girlfriend of the music artist or the sports player. That was my representation onscreen. And obviously we had Raven. *That's So Raven*.

SL: Right.

SJ: We had a lot of…I mean to be fair *Sister, Sister*. I thought that was a really good representation for me. I love *Sister, Sister* for the pure fact that me and my sister, my sister and I used to reflect ourselves off of them quite a bit. We used to like, redo their scenes and stuff like that. It was quite, it was fun. It was loads and loads of fun. Aa far as South London goes no. Not really. No. Always kind of like the girlfriend who's having a troubled relationship with the black boy. That was it. Really and truly. Thinking about it. Yeah.

SL: So, have you ever wanted…There's this big thing right now, a lot of conversation about all of the Brits coming over to America and doing the acting things. [laughs] Did you ever at any point think about that or want to do that? If so, why?

SJ: Being in Texas opened my eyes to how confused people were about where I stood on stage. Unless the part was as simple as like, Sure Thing. That play where like you're just sitting at a table. And you're having a moment, just like if a bell goes you start all over again. Simple stuff. But then going to America to play a mixed-race American woman…No. I haven't thought about doing that. I've thought of like, acting in shows as something that's not race related. Sure thing. If Maya Rudolph called me up and was just like, 'Girl, you want to play my sister or whatever, in this thing?' [chuckles] You ain't got to tell me twice. What kind

of American accent do you want me to have? [laughs] But then there's also the same thing that I don't really battle with, but, if I get a casting for a black woman I won't go. Because I'm like there's plenty of black women for this role. If it's very specific calling for a black woman I will not go. If it calls for a mixed-race woman, I'll go. So, calling for a mixed-race American woman like…I'm not there like, go frickin find them.

SL: So, what would you say is one of the most fulfilling experiences that you've had as an actress?

SJ: Probably the first time I ever performed my monologue. That was very fulfilling. Because then I realised, I like interacting with people. And it's really weird cause I'm the only person on stage. [laughs] And then recently *Spirit of the Pharaoh* honestly. Because I prepared that monologue in an hour. I was like, 'Crap. How am I gonna do this?' So then when I went to the audition, I thought it was, I thought it was terrible. I was like if everyone who trained me was here in this room right now, they'd be like, 'Get off. What are you doing?' Then I ended up getting it. I had fun at the audition. That was the thing. I knew that that was the most fulfilling one for me because obviously I'm getting to know people. I'm not kind of like sitting there getting jittery because I know that this may or may not be a big deal. I was just like, 'I'm here to do one thing and one thing only. To perform my thing and get out. That's what I'm auditioning for. [laughs] So do my thing and get out.

And then I met Matthew. I obviously knew that Matthew had worked in Bruford, but obviously he didn't know me because I finished so long ago. Then after he called me in, I was like, 'Damn. Let's have some fun.' That was my initial thought, and then once I got into the rehearsal room and then Aruna walks in. I was like, 'What the hell?' Then there were other actors around, and they're all black. And I was like, 'I've never had this before.' Never had this before. I was like, 'Damn. This is really sick.' This graphic novel is sick. What we're talking about is pretty cool. I was like, 'This is what I want to see.' I'm so used to watching Proud Family and like watching like really funny families, cause that's what I like to watch. I like to watch people having very real situations. Not necessarily I kitchen drama. Not really. I just felt more fulfilled knowing that I was doing something that was a representation of myself but, not myself because I am not a nineteen-year-old woman who is dating a up and coming DJ. And in the modelling industry, you know? Like that's where my acting chops has to come in. [laughs]

SL: So, what's one of the most disappointing or hurtful experiences that you've had? Acting-wise.

SJ: Oh, this is easy. So before I went on stage for the second show, so where I was playing Phaedra, the woman who's coming back from the dead to haunt her husband. I was told by a former peer, a former classmate of mine, that I was a waste of talent. Because I didn't want an agent. That was really like, it actually shocked me. When she came out with it, cause I was like, 'So what do you mean?' It's like well, you know, you don't want an agent and you're just wasting your talent. I was like, yeah, but you don't know what's going on up here.' You don't know just how much I need to work on myself before I can even think about working with someone else. I obviously didn't say that to her. Now I'm thinking back on it. I should have expected that from someone. At some point. Because they knew how, how I was. I always was a storyteller. When I was at Bruford. That was all I was about. I needed to tell the story. And I was good at it. That's what I got praised for, but I never got praise for the academic side of things. So, when I left, I don't know if it was because originally, I actually thought,

'Oh, what she's basically saying is that if I don't have an agent, I won't make it.' Whatever 'it' is. I won't get far if I don't have an agent. So then, you know, I was told that they don't have people like you in their books. You know, your mixed-race woman with a shaved head. You should totally just go get an agent. They'll snatch you up. Just like that. I was like, no. [laughs] No, it's okay. Yeah? And then eventually it had to be okay. It had to be. Because after I left Bruford, how long did it take for me to be in a show? I think it was like…It was quite some time before I was in a show again after Bruford. For sure. Yeah, it was quite some time.

SL: Was that by choice?

SJ: No. No. I don't think it was by choice. I think that's one of the things that I should have worked harder at, was to get to know a lot more people. In Bruford. Because I was always a bit, I was sceptical at the beginning when the amount of people that were at Bruford were black or mixed-race that were, you know, kind of latching on. I don't think of it was latching on now. But at the time, I thought they were latching on to me. Because it was just like…I don't know if they felt like they were going to save me or something. But I think there was a lot more to learn about that experience, rather than kind of like going home, and going home to my family. And then the only time I would ever go out is when it's with my year. With my class. That's the one thing I wish I did differently. And I didn't really get to experience that until I was in symposium. Which is the annual festival that they do. And by then I was like, 'Oh crap. It's too late now.' Because after symposium's finished, there were third year shows to do. I wasn't even thinking about it like that. So serious about everything. So serious. So angry.

SL: So, if you could go back in time and speak to your younger self, what advice would you give you?

SJ: Pick your battles girl. Pick your battles. Stop locking yourself in your room. Don't get me wrong, there'll be times that I do want to stay in my room, and I do want to do my own thing, but certain things are just such a crutch. Because I was comfortable. I was comfortable that way. I was so comfortable about not speaking up about things that I needed to speak about. Have a discussion about. I just didn't feel I was being listened to, so therefore I didn't speak. I was kind of just there just to be told what to do. So I'd be like, 'No. Actually, you are no longer eighteen you are now twenty-one. Do something. [laughs] Do something. Do something rather than latch on to the comfort of being at home, even though really, you're not really gaining anything there. Because it's been the same thing for so many years. Nothing's going to change so you can go. You know? You can go. So after coming back from America, after nine months of being away from my family, and I didn't, I didn't feel homesick at all. I think felt more homesick coming back to the UK that I did go to America. I definitely would say that to her. 'Sarah, girl. Come on. Feel uncomfortable at some point. Just blurt something out.' That's the reason I wasn't wanting to say stuff to people in my year. Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh. It's about how they viewed me and how they didn't want me to be a particular person. I guess they just didn't want me to, they didn't want me to speak about maybe where I was living too much. Because no one else lived where I lived. Not on my course. Everyone else was from all over the place. And I ended up getting along the most with the Norwegian gal. Because she just didn't give a shit. [laughs] Like, I'm a very respectable person, but if you want to come from my character, like my own personal character, so my own personal development, now we have a problem.

SL: So, what kind of things would they say to you?

SJ: They would saying stuff like, if I obviously told a story, for example, they'd just be like, 'Oh my gosh, you're so aggressive.' Like I just stopped doing that. And then I would be so wound up in myself. It was more me, than them. That's the reason why I would need to speak to younger Sara [laughs] as opposed to the people around me more. I just need to speak up and just being like, 'Okay, so if I'm…How am I coming off as aggressive?' Because I wasn't aware of my behaviour like that. I just thought that I was expressive. But I was I was coming off as this angry young woman. Almost like trying to get blood from a stone sort of situation. And so there would just be comments about that. And it's just like how to tackle anything outside of the words I was given on the script. So, whenever people are talking amongst themselves, I wouldn't be mingling with anyone. I'd just be looking at my script. But when really, I should be talking to whoever was directing me as student. Whoever was in the cast with me figuring out ways to work with scenes differently. Stuff like that. I just kind of took things. Like yeah, yeah, yeah, just take the note. Go away and be done with yourself. Whereas now, I need more of a discussion. If I get a note over something, I'm older now. I could understand the note and work with it. But if it's going to be something as general as just like, 'Oh, you're too aggressive.' What I need really is to be like, 'So can you say it in a way that is more connected to the character and the relationship?'

SL: Well, and could it possibly be that when you were being called aggressive, that you actually weren't aggressive? That's just a stereotypical thing.

SJ: Yes.

SL: Because you're a woman of colour.

SJ: Yes.

SL: And women of colour are aggressive.

SJ: Yes! And I never questioned it! I never questioned it? What the heck? Like I never questioned it. Yeah, and I was like what? I'm a cuddly person. I love hugs. [laughs] No, that's not what they mean Sara, like, what are you doing?

SL: Okay, so lastly, to those people who would tell you things like you're aggressive, and that it's a waste of talent because you're not getting an agent. What do you want to say to them? Because, you said you just kind of took things. But given the platform just to clap back, honestly speaking, if you had the platform to say to those people what we often have to hold back because of all the reasons.

SJ: Yeah.

SL: What would you say? What, what do you need them to know and to understand?

SJ: I'm coming from a place that you don't understand. I'm coming from a place that you don't understand. So, what's actually, what's the solution? Is the problem the fact that the way that I'm representing myself is #toomuch? But why would I want to be too little? So that's the conversation that I need to have with people that I care about and who care about me. Those are those type of conversations I'm wanna have that in a room. But I just honestly want to say

if I'm being directed by a middle-aged white dude, who wants to tell me that I'm being too aggressive on a line even though it's written for a mixed-race or a black woman, I'd be like, 'Come again?' So, you're understanding about this? So, you've written this mixed-race or black person to be what? Because I'm reading the line. I wasn't aggressive before; I might be a little bit now. [laughs] So what were you expecting? What were you expecting from me in this moment? Because this isn't aggressive. This is passion. I'm asserting myself. There's a difference, surely. I mean, I remember getting fired from a job. From a primary school, because I was acting as a teacher, as a supply teacher for a week, because the teacher wasn't around. I went into the office, and I basically said, you know, as you can see, I've been in the classroom acting as a supply teacher for the past week. So, is there any possibility that I can be paid a supply teacher rate? Just for the week. I got a phone call when I got home saying that they had to let me go because of aggressive behaviour. So that was enough to tell me. So it's about finding that balance for me. To have a conversation to assert myself and then also take a step back and listen. And also live in the moment as well. Totally live in the moment. Because I don't know how people look at me until they actually say it freely out of their own mouths. Thank you for this.

SL: Yeah, thank you. This has been nice.
(End of Interview)

Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Kimisha Lewis (KL), Black British Actress
Aimee Powell (AP), Mixed-race British Actress

Interviewer: Samia La Virgne (SL)

Date of Interview: 7 September 2018

Interview Setting: Dressing room at the Belgrade Theatre during the UK tour of *Freeman* before their performance. Coventry, UK

The transcript of this interview has been edited for length and pertinence to my research topic.

(Start of Interview)
SL: Thank you guys for doing this interview with me. Finally, we got a chance to sit down. I'm very excited. Since I'm interviewing both of you guys at once if you can do your best not to talk over each other. That would be great. 7th of September. I'm here with Kimisha and Aimee. The first question I want to ask is what is your ethnic background?

AP: So, I am mixed-race. My mother's side of the family is Jamaican, and my dad's side is white British.

KL: And my mom's side of the family, I'm Jamaican, and my dad is American.

SL: What part of America is he from?

KL: North Carolina.

SL: Where were you guys born?

AP: I was born in Birmingham. Dudley road hospital. Woo! [laughs] Yeah, born and raised in Birmingham.

KL: And I was born in Coventry, at Coventry university hospital. [laughs]

SL: And you're in your hometown performing.

KL: Yeah.

SL: That's exciting. Alright. So, for you, Aimee, I'm curious because you are mixed-race. Do you identify as a black woman, or do you identify as mixed?

AP: Mixed. I've always identified as a mixed-race person and woman. Yeah, I don't know. I've always been very aware of both cultures as well, I think. My mom and dad still together, and they do well in really keeping both the cultures alive in my family home. So that's why. I am half and half, so I feel comfortable being called a mixed-race person. I think as well because I'm so fair skinned I'd find it weird to be called a black woman. You know some, I

don't know, some people may see me as…Because I don't think people will ever see me as white. I'm aware of that. They'll always see me as something. I'm very fair, so I would find it a little bit strange. It wouldn't offend me. The woman who I love the most in the entire world is black. You know? Yeah.

SL: Kimisha, what does it mean to be a black woman? How would you define that? Your own personal definition of what it means to be a black woman.

KL: That is a very difficult question to answer.

SL: Right. There's gonna be some heavy questions.

[all laugh]

AP: That's a big one.

KL: It is. What does it mean? That was your question, what does it mean?

SL: Yeah. Your own personal experience. For you, what does it mean to be a black woman?

KL: I don't know how to answer this question. I guess, growing up…I grew up here. It's always been very multicultural in Coventry. But it's always, in my experience, been quite blended. So it wasn't until I went to drama school that I was very much more aware of being a black woman. I always knew I was, obviously always knew I was black, and I always knew you get the…Your mum tells you; you need to work twice as hard kind of scenario. I don't know.

SL: You said that growing up it was very, Coventry, very diverse. So you became very aware when you went to drama school. How did that present itself? How did you become more aware of your blackness?

KL: There weren't many other…Obviously I had a black female of my year. So, especially when it got to third year and it came to agents, it came around with like, 'Oh, well, you're only gonna get an agent cause you're black.' Not because of the hard work that I'd put in for the last three years. [laughs] Yes, so I was a lot more aware. I guess in this industry when it comes to casting and stuff, you have to fit into that box a bit more. I guess when I think of a black woman, I think about strength and dignity and pride. I think they're words that I associate with looking at the older black woman in my family. And the journeys they've been on. Yeah, and the inspiration that they have paved out for me.

SL: Which drama school did you go to?

KL: Rose Bruford.

SL: Oh, okay. Okay. Same question, except what does it mean for you to be mixed? Because you do have both sides to you, I'm curious to know what that means for you.

AP: For me, growing up, it was a little bit similar to what Kimii [Kimisha] just said. I wasn't aware particularly when I was in like primary school, I was, we were all just people. I was like the tanned one of my friends. But everybody accepted me no matter what. Because I

think kids...Prejudices are learned behaviours aren't there? And so, the kids that I was around at school, I was lucky enough that none of them had any of those prejudices forced onto them. So, to them, we were all just together as one. Then it was only until going to secondary school, that that's when I started to feel the divide. Kind of within myself as well. The primary school that I went to was predominantly white. I was the only ethnic, I'm doing air fingers when I say this. [chuckles] I was the only 'ethnic' kid in my class in primary school. In secondary school, it was way more diverse. So, I soon sort of found, and nobody explicitly said it to me, but it was it felt and then eventually became evident, that I sort of had to pick a side kind of. So, I think for a while, it was a little confusing to be a mixed-race woman, but not when I was at home. Only whenever I was at school, or in my social life, but whenever I was at home and with my family, I knew exactly where I stood. I knew who I was. Then I think you grow, you mature. I became way more confident in myself and sort of began to find out who I was. So now, I just I don't know. The things that I would say about being a mixed-race woman is the sort of things I would say about being a woman in general. To me it means being confident and strong, and not necessarily in like, in a hard way because I think strength can come in many different forms. Yeah, I think that's it.

SL: Which drama school did you go to?

AP: So, I went to a theatre school in Birmingham called the Birmingham Theatre School. I was only there for a year. Yeah.

SL: So, we're going to shift just a little bit and I want to know how you became actresses. How did you get into theatre?

KL: Okay, um, so I started my mom kind of tricked me into the youth theatre when I was like seven. They did like monthly classes. And then I also danced on the side, and I fell into a lot, I think I've pretty much been done the rounds of all the Coventry performing arts companies, and you get shared around quite a lot. It wasn't until, this is so cringy, I did a show here called *Cat and Mouse*. I did my first, it was my first professional, big set stage show funnily enough in the B2, and it was about the Holocaust. We had some Holocaust survivors come and watch it. They came up to us afterwards and were like, ‘How did you…? I'm moved that you were able to tell that story. How did you…?' I went, 'You lived through it. I just did it for an hour on stage.' But anyway, telling these stories and knowing how it made people feel, and could change someone's thought in the audience, and then I was like, ‘I quite enjoy doing this.' I was about fifteen at the time, and then I just kind of fell into it. And people pointed me in the right, I was very lucky, people pointed me in the right direction. And then I ended up here. [laughs] Back at the Belgrade. [laughs]

AP: Full circle. [laughs]

KL: Literally. [laughs] That's my story.

AP: My family had a circus. So, it was a, it was an all-human, family run circus. And we were based in the Midlands, and we would tour the summer season, so like while I was off school. We would tour all around the country We'd mainly get booked into events and stuff. We'd put the shows on, and we'd hire in acts from all over the place and come to do different things. So, I sort of grew up in in that. I'd always performed. One way or another. Then it got to the stage as a teenager I was like, 'This is so not cool anymore. This is so embarrassing. I hate it. I want nothing to do with it.' But I knew that I still really enjoyed performing. By that

point, being at secondary school, I got introduced to drama. So, we started having drama classes and things. And I was like, 'Actually, I really enjoyed this. This is something that I could get into. I'd like get into.' So we did that. It got introduced at school. Went to sixth form. Did performing arts there. Still was really enjoying it. My dad was like, 'Well, look, if you want to do it.'…My dad's always been the type of person like, 'Don't just say things. Just go and do it. Just have a go.' Be first. Jump straight into the deep end. Go for it. So I did. [laughs] So after sixth form I wasn't sure what route I wanted to take. I thought to myself, I don't know if I'm going to be able to afford to go to school. It's not going to be something that is feasible for me. So, I was looking at other options and I thought okay, would University be a better route? I went to various open days and things, and I was just like, this too academic for me. I've never been one to enjoy sitting down in a classroom, and reading, and talking, you know. I want to do. I'm really hands on. Then I found this course at the Birmingham Theatre School, and it was a year and it's super practical. You get experience touring and yada, yada, yada, and I was like, 'Yeah, this sounds like a bit me.' So I went, and it was probably one of the best years my life. Really, really enjoyed it. Learned a lot, and graduated, and sort of been doing it ever since really.

SL: In your experience thus far with acting, what sort of stigmas or prejudice have you experienced as women of colour?

KL: In the industry? In terms of casting? Or in terms of everything?

SL: Everything.

KL: Okay.

SL: Casting? Yes. Performing?

KL: Casting I get a lot of African women or American women who have had a broken life and are building strength, and getting over it, and overcome it, and find their inner strength. But yeah, I've had a lot of broken women that find their way through the play and become strong. I had one moment where I was doing radio, and it was the play *Noughts and Crosses*. Have you read that one?

SL: No

KL: *Noughts and Crosses* is kind of Romeo and Juliet. But it looks at a racial divide and a kind of twist in society. So, it looks at the idea that white people had come from slavery and built up and black people had always had this kind of privilege. So it's had a switch round.

AP: It's really interesting.

KL: I picked the play for radio and a professional woman in the industry said to me, 'Can you just up the black?' [laughs] At the time I knew exactly what she meant.

SL: So, what exactly did she mean?

KL: She meant like can you be more ghetto? That's exactly what she meant. But at the time, I was so set on the idea that this character would speak with a posh accent. Her dad's the Prime Minister. There's no…That's not the character. Before I even like fully processed but she'd

said, otherwise I think I would have just walked out. But I was like, 'No, no. This isn't the character.' Then she's all, 'Then it doesn't make sense for radio because we don't know what race you are.' So, I use that for my dissertation [laughs] and wrote a lovely dissipation all about it.

SL: Why does it matter?

KL: I don't know because I thought it was about the story, and actually in the book race isn't mentioned into like three quarters of the way through. So, you don't actually know whether it's about religion, or whether it's about race, or what this difference is between these two Noughts and Crosses. Yeah, yeah. So I had that experience. [chuckles] I was recently doing a play where it was a children's show, and the character was racially ambiguous. In the audience, we had a relaxed performance, so people with all sorts of disabilities can be in the room. The lights are up. They can leave the room and enter whenever they want. Really relaxed, and we were made aware that there was someone that would be in the audience with Tourette's. The producer said, 'This person has Tourette's. They might say something that offends people. It's the 'N' word, but just carry on with it and continue.' [laughs] I was one of two black people in the cast. [laughs] The other person had a disability. And it was kind of said out in the open in front of everyone. And the other person, I don't think really understood what was going on. I think he had to take that person to the side and say, this is the situation. So, I was in a situation of do I perform with the possibility that someone's going to keep shoutin' the 'N' word out…

SL: And did that happen?

KL: I kind of went away and thought about it. This was just before lunch. I was really upset at the way that it was presented. I thought it was quite considerate to not pull the people that it affects aside and say, 'How do you feel about this? Is there anything we can do?' Yeah, so I ended up crying. [laughs] Crashed into Corey out of nowhere. And had a little chat with him as well and then I went back into the director and kind of said, 'I can't do it.' I can't bring myself to…It just felt wrong. But also, it's a children show and there's children in the audience, so that also felt really wrong. They came up with a plan and they came up with a solution in the end, and they still went on. Yeah.

SL: Okay.

KL: [chuckles] That was, it was the hardest show I've ever had to do.

SL: Well. [exhales]

KL: Mm hmm. [laughs]

SL: What about you? Has there been any sort of similar prejudice that you have faced that you've realise? It may not necessarily be from the obvious places we might think it may be from. Like with Kimii, obviously from directors saying crazy things, but, even from other people that you have worked with, other actors?

AP: My experiences are not as extreme as that. It's really tough because thinking back on past productions that I've done and the people that I've played…Kimii mentioned the word racially ambiguous and that's a word that I do hear a lot. That people say about me, and I've

sort of…I've actually played more…[chuckles] I've actually probably played more, probably slightly more Arabic, people of Arabic descent, than I have actual mixed-race people. Where it's been specifically requested that a mixed-race person had to play that role. I find that people are really…That's a whole other question in itself really, because, well, I am not of Arabic descent. Should that be allowed? That's not my culture. Are we culturally appropriating? So, I find when I've done shows like, like that I'm wondering if I was that ethnicity, or people in the audience, or people who were in the rehearsal room, if they would take offense to what has been said there. It's a tough one really. I'm sort of a bit apprehensive when it comes to that if that makes sense. When it comes to playing those roles. I mean, that's a whole other discussion where, me and Kimii always have this chat. I have this chat with everybody, but it's like, 'Well, but if you look a particular race or particular way, why can't we?' You know. It still is acting at the end of the day. It's like, well, if there's plenty of actors out there who are of that particular right race, why not to get the real deal? Do you know, I mean? Get the real deal. It's never been in my professional experience; it's been stuff outside of a professional environment.

SL: Such as?

AP: So, stuff like being light skinned. And the privileges that come with that. But what really annoys me is when people make assumptions on me because of how I look. So they go, 'Well you're light skinned so you're gonna be like this.' And then they mistake confidence for arrogance or, you know, whatever, whatever.

SL: Because I'm obviously not light skinned. [chuckles] Can you share with me, rather than me trying to make some assumptions, what are some of the stereotypes that you have gotten?

AP: The biggest one, the one I can think of that's just popped straight to mind is…I was actually out. It was a night out, and there was loads of black actor people that I knew that just happened to be there, and it was lovely night, blah, blah. Then something kicked off, and this other actress that I knew, I didn't know her well. I literally knew her well enough to say, 'Hi. How are you?' We knew first names, terms, you know, acquaintances. So, this thing kicks off. This incident happened, and then we sort of had a difference of opinion. We were having a heated debate, shall we say. [laughs] Because it all kicked off, police were around, and they sort of came over. They were like, 'Guys, we're gonna have to ask you to, can you be quiet? If you carry on like this, we're gonna have to take you one side.' And out of nowhere, they were implying that we were both having this discussion, they had come up to both of us. They didn't single her out. They didn't single me out. They spoke to both of us. And then she was like, 'You're saying that to me because I'm the dark skinned one! You're ignoring her because she's light skinned, but she's shouting at me!' She's shouting this at a police officer. [chuckles] I'm standing there and I'm like, we've literally just been having a conversation. We were matching each other in volume. They were talking to both of us. They made eye contact with both of us. This isn't to do with this. This is to do with us disturbing the peace. But she shouldn't drop it. So, it's things like that a lot of the time.

I feel sometimes like I have to, and I shouldn't feel like this, but I think because of the whole light skinned, dark skinned debate, whatever you want to call, it goes on…Particularly online where it can be really nasty, I sometimes feel like I have to apologize for what I am. I sometimes feel like I have to water myself down a little bit. I don't like that because we're all people. As I've gotten older, I've sort of been like, no, just be who you are because that's all you can be. [chuckles] That is all you can be. And everybody's life experiences are different.

Yeah, that's definitely I used to feel, and I still do feel that sometimes now. I think I care too much about what other people think. I don't want people to think that I'm gonna be that stereotypical light skinned girl.

SL: Yeah. Alright. Kimii, I'm interested in those experiences that you had with 'upping in the black' and 'You may get racial slurs shouted at you, but you're going to be fine.'

KL: [laughs]

SL: [laughs] That sort of thing. You said, you know, you had a little cry. How do you navigate between the identity that's being forced on you from the outside and your own integrity of who you are on the inside? How do you find that balance?

KL: It's hard. Sometimes…A lot of the time I forget that those things are being forced on me. But then there's situations that happen that make you very aware that you're just a skin colour, I guess. Does that make you think of something? Go on.

AP: I've just remembered. This is going back to the previous question. Okay, so I remember, because you asked, and I couldn't think of one in a professional environment. I can't believe I didn't think of this. [laughs] It's last year, Christmas. I'm not interrupting your flow, am I?

KL: No. I promise.

AP: Okay. I was doing a show. Everybody went out after to socialise. It was a really lovely evening, blah, blah, blah. Someone had said something in the bar that really, excuse my language, pissed me off about of my accent. Anyway, so that sort of put me in a bad mood and a little bit later on in the night, one of my cast members was chatting to some guys who worked at this theatre. They were discussing using the word 'bird' in reference to women. She was like, 'Why do you still use it? It's derogatory. It's not a nice word to use for females. She's a woman. She's not bird, she's a woman.' Anyway, so they're talking about whys the way they use the word. So, I joined that conversation at that point. Then it was really weird, because suddenly she just turned to me and she went, 'Do people call you half-caste? And how do you feel about it?' And it shocked me. I mean, everyone had had something to drink, it's not an excuse, but I was like, oh, okay. And I'll happily have these conversations with people because I think to shy away from them is stupid. I think it's important that we have discussions. Anyway, yeah. So, she said this, and I was like, 'Oh, we're going there. Okay.' To be honest, it was a term that I heard a lot when I was younger, like growing up. People would still use it. They still use like coloured. Yeah, exactly. They still used the word coloured, half-caste.

SL: 1950 called and they want their terminology back.

[all laugh]

AP: It wasn't something that…It never sat right with me. But it's something I'm aware that some people still say. I said, 'I prefer to be called mixed-race because that's why I am.' I think more people should choose term. Then these two guys that were sat with us, bear in mind I've never met them before. They worked in the theatre that we were working at. They were like, 'Oh, yeah, but my son goes with the half-caste girl.' Then the other guy piped in, 'Yeah, my ex…half-caste.'

SL: Literally right after you said that you preferred mixed-race?

AP: Yeah, and I didn't I didn't know how to take it. I've spoken about this quite a lot after it happened. And it's like, when somebody is in my face, and he's calling me a half-breed bitch, I can deal with that. I know what that is, but when it's in that kind of, 'I'm not being offensive. I'm just…This is what we…This is how we…', you know. This is the word we use. I find that really difficult. I find it really awkward and really difficult to challenge. The actress that I was working with, she was trying to...I think she realised that it sort of hit a nerve and then she was trying to overcompensate. And she was talking, and they were talking, and I just kept hearing this word half-caste, half-caste, half-caste. I was suddenly so aware in this little pub. I am so different to everybody in here. Because I don't go around being conscious all the time of what I am and who I am, but in that instant I was like, I am very different to everybody here right now. I mean, I felt incredibly alone and incredibly isolated. I felt really comfortable in there, didn't have an issue, and then suddenly, I was like, completely on the back foot. I felt like I was backed into a corner. I was like, I have to get out of here, I can't. It was suddenly like everybody became Judas. [chuckles] Even poor little Billy, Johnny in the corner who hadn't said a word to me, I was like, 'He's aware of what I am, and he doesn't like it.' You know? And that was horrible. That was really horrible. I think the biggest thing for me is that everybody talks about the arts as being, so liberal and safe and everybody's accepted. You're all welcome, black, white, purple, green, yellow, gay, straight, bisexual, polyamorous, whatever, come, we're one big family. But in reality, it really…It's like anything else. It's just disguised a little bit better; I think. And that really hit home that night. I was like, 'Fuck, this is not, this isn't nice.'

SL: When you went home, once you were removed from that situation, how did you deal with it? That's a traumatic experience. And for you, the things you mentioned earlier…It's a form of trauma. How do you deal with that trauma? How do you overcome that, so that you can go into work the next day? Finish that job.

AP: Well, it's all because…like Kimii was saying, I got really upset that night. I was crying in front of the one of the cast members, and I felt really embarrassed. I just kept feeling really embarrassed. I went home and I didn't tell my mum. I haven't told her to this day. I can't. I feel too…I don't want to tell her. I feel embarrassed by it. I remember coming in the next day, and the girls were really, they were really lovely about it. My one friend, she was like, 'I wasn't in the conversation. I didn't hear it. I'm so sorry that I wasn't there, and I didn't say something.' And I was like, 'You know, it is what it is now.' I don't remember blaming her. She didn't say those things, and like she said, she wasn't in the conversation. I got upset again and we spoke about it for a long time. We all went and got food and we were talking about it for a while. They were like, 'Look, do you want to raise the issue with the theatre?' And I was like, 'No. Because I don't want to make a big deal, bigger deal out of it.' Because also I felt stupid. It's just a word. It's just a word two drunken men…Like, what's the big deal? So was like, 'I don't want to make a big deal out of this tiny thing.' Where in hindsight, I probably should have said something. Said, 'Look, this thing happened. It was inappropriate. I felt massively uncomfortable.' But it was hard. One of those things like it was outside working hours, and it was a social gathering, and stuff like that. So, it was a weird one. I just, I don't know.

SL: So, what about you? How do you continue to navigate through this? Because you came up with three examples right off the bat.

KL: [laughs]

SL: And I know it's not the only time these things have happened, that's just what happened to stick out right now because I've asked you. Probably, if both of you guys had more time to think. You already came up with something. You're going to think of other instances. So yeah, how do you…?

KL: It's nice to have people to talk about it. I met you [Aimee] not too long after it happened. and we had a nice little chat about it. But, well, that's what happens, and this is what happens to black women. So, get on with it. That's how I feel about that. And I shouldn't. And it shouldn't be what happens, and it shouldn't be okay, and it shouldn't be get with it. But it feels like it's the only way for me to progress in this career is to back those things off and keep fighting and climbin'.

SL: You [Aimee] mentioned feeling embarrassed and upset and feeling stupid. In the instances where those ridiculous things happen. How have you [Kimisha] felt?

KL: Again, very aware of being different. I mean they were very clearly thrown in my face then. But it's always some sort of negative connotation. There's never anything positive. There's nothing positive about the 'N' word. There's nothing positive about 'upping the black', and not being recognised as being able to be educated and well spoken. So, it makes you feel degraded…Just less.

AP: Less what?

KL: Well worthless in a little way. Yeah.

SL: Two more questions then we'll wrap this up.

KL: It's affected my confidence in myself as a person. Massively.

SL: Your confidence has gone down?

KL: Mm hmm. In like how I feel about myself. In secondary school I had a very carefree don't care what anyone thinks attitude. Then the more these kinds of things are built on, it's made me feel less positive about what I look like.

SL: And yet you still choose to be in a profession where you are constantly put on display.

KL: I know. It's bizarre, isn't it? I guess for me, like in the idea of being displayed, it's very much about telling stories for me. So, the most important thing at this minute is telling this story about these people. It's not about my insecurities, and they disappear for that hour. [laughs] I mean you click around on Spotlight, and it'll be a something on TV. And it will be like beautiful, this, that, and the other, and you click on the example of the picture and it's…

AP: White.

KL: White woman. Straight blonde hair and blue eyes.

AP: I don't know about you, but I get so excited when it says ethnicity any.

[all laugh]
KL: Yes! All the time.

AP: And then it gives you a picture of an example of what they want.

KL: And it's not…

AP: It's not you.

KL: [laughs] Yeah!

AP: You're like, 'So where do I fit in?'

KL: It opened it up to me, it comes up and then it's not. It's not someone that looks like me. It's the little things. It's little conversations that I think as a black woman, it's positive to be a sister and a mother. You're a queen then. But in terms of being attracted, you're never attractive then. It's only when you're a sister, or a cousin, or some sort of family. Then it's good to be a queen. A Nubian queen and the lioness and all those kinds of things. I think that's something that I've noticed in the last year, more so.

SL: It's a very interesting way to put it. I've never quite realised it in that sense. You put that perfectly and it's true. I've heard a lot of British actors say, especially those of colour, that they want to go over to America because there's not as many opportunities here. When it comes to acting, America is more accepting. What are your thoughts? How do you feel about it? Do you agree? Do you want to go over there? That was a lot of questions at once. Being British, looking at the American performing arts industry, do you as well want to go over because you feel like there would be more opportunity?

AP: I don't know. I really don't know. I think for a couple of reasons. I think in theory, yes. Because I think it's a huge step. I think when you're talking about going over to America and acting, I always think that's a different ball game, personally, I feel. My first love is theatre. I've always loved live performance. I think that's like from childhood. There's nothing better than being on stage for me, and I love the theatre industry in the UK. I think, it's a bit biased, but I think we, [whispering] we do it really well here.

[all laugh]

AP: Yeah, I love being on stage. I love watching theatre. And so, for me, when I think of going over to America, I think of screen acting. That's a different ballgame as well, which I'm slowly beginning to learn, well not learn. I'm still learning. We're all still learning but I'm slowly beginning to love…It's taken a bit longer for me to fall in love with it, but I'm getting there. When I think of America and screen acting, I feel like, perfect smile, perfect hair, perfect body, perfect everything, and I don't feel like I would fit in there. Do you know? Personally. Yeah.

SL: What about you [Kimisha]? America. Thoughts.

KL: I used to be like, 'I need to go to America to make it. Even with Hollywood. Same thing, you think of films and stuff, but then the more you watch it, the more you realise it's the same

people. So how much more opportunity is there? Other than the fact that…I don't know anything about the live theatre side in America. You just hear about films and TV programs.

AP: You do. You think of America you think of screen. You think of Hollywood?

KL: Yeah.

AP: I don't think, 'Oh, yeah. What play, blah, blah, blah.' Do you what I mean?

KL: Unless it's Broadway?

AP: Yeah. And even then, sorry to cut you off, but even then, you think Broadway. I think like *Lion King.*

KL: Yeah.

AP: Or some big musical. *Hamilton.*

KL: Yeah.

[they laugh]

AP: And that's not me.

[they laugh]

KL: Yeah, exactly. But also, with technology and self-taping. You don't need to travel anywhere anymore unless you get the job. Because we just auditioned on, we video ourselves and our friend, send it off to the other side of the world, and then if they give you the job, then you go. So, you don't have to relocate anymore, in the same way that you would have had to do five years ago. So, I no longer feel the need to go there.

AP: There's something to be said as well. Like people sort of go, 'Oh, well, if you go over there, we've made it.'

KL: Yeah. [laughs]

AP: If you break America, you've made it. And while that is, it's true. Like for example, John Boyega. Right? Of course. Yeah, that's true, but part of me wants to push against that. No! Why can't I have made it in the UK? Like, do you know?

KL: And you're still here.

AP: Exactly.

KL: And that's just part of me being stubborn.

[they laugh]

SL: What do you feel is missing? What types of roles would you like to see for mixed women? For black women? What other stories would you like to see? What's missing?

KL: It's hard. I could sit here and say I'd like to tell stories that are just stories. And about people and not specifically black people, just a woman living her life. But then I think it's also really important with shows like *Freeman*, that tell that experience about being, specifically Sandra Bland, being a black woman. So, I think it would just be nice to be seen for a mixture of things and, what am I trying to say?

SL: Something beyond broken?

KL: Yeah, that would be nice.

SL: As attractive, and not a sister or a cousin?

KL: [laughs] Yeah, that would also be lovely.

AP: Because like what you were saying, black women aren't seen as beautiful and attractive. If you go okay, I want a leading lady, and this man falls in love with her. Nine times out of ten that leading lady, the picture that people have in their head, is not going to look like you. Do you know what I mean?

KL: Yeah.

AP: Because that's the stereotype. You go, oh, well, white. Or European. With European hair, and blonde or brown. Not saying that that's all we are.

KL: Yeah.

AP: As women because then it's so hard because you've got the race thing, but then you've got the thing of being…

KL & AP: A woman.

AP: And going, we're more than just being objects and there for man's pleasure, but at the same time, it's so complex Samia.

KL: Well, it's like what we were talking about with this piece being really physical. *Freeman*, that we're both in at the minute. When people watch it, they say, 'Oh the strength. The strength on stage.'

AP: Yeah.

KL: And we automatically think, 'Oh, they're talking about the boys.'

AP: Yeah.

KL: But then this girl stopped and was like, 'No. You two hold your own on stage. As women, and you don't need the men. And it's really nice to see two women amongst these big guys that hold their own on stage.' And then we suddenly realised, actually…

AP: Yeah. [laughs]

KL: We exist.

AP: Yeah.

KL: And it was really nice to exist for that conversation. [laughs]

SL: Well, I thought, I mean from the first rehearsal, I was like, 'Okay, these folks are super fit and very strong. I could not.

[all laugh]

SL: I would have pulled 20,000 muscles.

[they laugh]

SL: And I wasn't thinking of the guys. I was thinking all of them collectively, especially the opening piece. That opening, moving sequence, movement sequence, just all of you guys, all of you guys are displaying strength. So, I'm glad that woman came up and said that to you. So, more diversity within female characters, but also seeing black woman as a love interest.

AP: Can I just say what I would like to see? I would like to see more period drama stuff, because hello, we existed.

KL: Oi! Downton Abbey! [laughs]

AP: Black people. Mixed-race people. Do you know what I mean? Stop whitewashing history. Seriously!

KL: It's true.

AP: Because they were there and not all of…We weren't all slaves.

KL: Yeah.

AP: You can't…

KL: There's more to the story.

AP: Yeah.

KL: It's almost like we appeared for slavery, disappeared. Came back in the 50s to help [Windrush], disappeared again. Came back in the 70s and were prostitutes and drug addicts.

AP: And disco fever and don't forget Motown.

[they laugh]

KL: Then that disappeared, and then we came back in the 2000s as gang lovers and gangsters.

AP: And also became what everybody was culturally appropriating the culture. [laughs]

KL: Yeah, and we're all into knife crime and guns.

AP: Yeah. Yeah.

KL: All that.

SL: Okay so last thing, finally. In those moments, when we have silenced ourselves, we made that choice because well, that's just how it is. If you could actually talk back to that person, and you could say something to those people who are misunderstanding you, misjudging you, and, frankly not seeing you, what would you say? If there was a message that you could give them about who you are as a mixed actress, black actress, what would you say?

AP: After I finished swearing?

[they laugh]

SL: What don't people know or understand about you that you wish they would?

AP: It sounds so cliche I'm more than my race. There's more to me than what you see externally.

SL: And what is that?

AP: What is that?

SL: Yeah.

AP: Aimee. And it's every one of my life experiences. All of the highs and the lows, and the funny anecdotes, and the sad anecdotes and the people that she knows, and how they've moulded her person. It's all of that. Yeah. There's more to all of us than what is here. [points to her skin] Stop being so bloody shallow.

KL: Yeah. I struggle with finding the words that would make someone understand.

SL: Okay, how about this? Who are you?

KL: I don't know. [laughs]

SL: If you had to describe you. Imagine that you are somebody else.

KL: [laughs]

SL: Like, you know what, I'm gonna tell you who Kimii is. She is…?

KL: I don't know. I don't know how to describe myself.

SL: Why not? Is it that you don't know how to describe yourself, or you're afraid to say it out loud?

KL: I don't know. I don't know how to describe myself. I think, you know, when I was younger, I would have said, I'm confident and I really don't care what anyone thinks. And I think I'm hilarious. And I'm a bit of a gossip. [laughs] I use to think I was so funny. sprinkles. And sarcastic. I'm still quite sarcastic, sarcastic humour. I don't know. I think it's that thing of constantly…I love to discover, and constantly discover new things about myself, and so I don't have the answer for who I am because I don't know. That's so cliche.

SL: Okay well you [Aimee] said that you're more than just the external, so how would you describe yourself?

AP: Oh. I was hoping you weren't going to ask me.

[they laugh]

AP: I think it feels a bit, sometimes it feels a bit big headed when you discuss…Because we always think of…

KL: Stay humble.

AP: Yeah. I like to think that I have a good sense of humour. I enjoy laughing, and I enjoy people who make me laugh, and I enjoy when I can make other people laugh. I like that. Can you come back to us in like…?

KL: Five years. [laughs]

AP: Yeah, exactly.

SL: I'd really like to challenge you guys to be able to do that for yourself. I think, for me, it's been a very long journey. And of course, you're always going to be learning, hopefully. If you do life right, you should be learning and growing and progressing. So, who you are is sort of changeable, but I think that there are certain attributes that are you no matter what age you're at. Even if it's just today, this is who I am, this is how I describe myself and tomorrow it may be different, but at any given moment, I think you should be able to describe who you are. It's not about being cocky. It's about being confident. And I think as women of colour…As women, women of colour, were not given that agency, but there are other privileged people that will do it in a second with no problem. I think that's been a thing that's been taken away from us. So, it's trying to find that and having the confidence to say it, and actually believe it. You said, 'Oh, I'd like to think that I'm funny.' You're funny. You are. You're hilarious. You guys are, and it's owning who you are. I think for me, I wouldn't have been able to really describe myself. But I'm at a point where now I'm like, okay, no. I'm very loving, very kind. I'm very giving. I'm a goofball.

[they laugh]

SL: Really goofy, I'm very sarcastic. I'm very optimistic and positive. I'm religious. I'm pretty damn amazing.

[all laugh]

SL: Yeah. I'm one of a kind. And I don't fit into a box, and I know that that's a problem for some people, but I'm realising that that's actually my strength because I'm very special and unique. And that's today.

AP: Awesome.

SL: You know, I would not have necessary been able to say that about myself before. So, I just challenge you guys to be able to find that. At any given moment whenever it is. Thank you for doing this.
(End of Interview)

Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Natalie Bailey (NB), Black American Actress

Interviewer: Samia La Virgne (SL)

Date of Interview: 6 July 2018

Interview Setting: Private residence in Birmingham, UK

The transcript of this interview has been edited for length and pertinence to my research topic.

(Start of Interview)
SL: Thank you for doing this interview with me. Before I get to some of my questions that I already planned out to ask. I'm curious, before you came here, did you have a lot of acting experience? Like actual professional acting experience, or not that much?

NB: In terms of professional, I've had like a smattering.

SL: Okay.

NB: In terms of just acting in general, been doing it since high school.

SL: Okay.

NB: Even before that, I had ideas of wanting to perform. I have two older sisters and second oldest, she definitely did some theatre. And you know, I saw that it was like, 'Oh, I love this. This is something I would like to do.' I do remember in our Catholic school that had both elementary and middle school encompassed in it, if you're in like elementary school, those sorts of age, actually any agent younger than seventh grade, all you could do was be like the course. Which you would just sit around the stage in like a show shirt, and just like, whatever. And I was like, 'I'm not doing that. I'm gonna be on stage or not at all.' [laughs] So I waited till like middle school and then I did a few productions, and then high school I did it. And ever since high school, I've been in something pretty much every year.

SL: Okay.

NB: Like, maybe excluding the year before coming here. But even those years in between undergrad and coming here, I was still doing workshops or apprenticeships and stuff like that. So, yeah.

SL: Right, right. And you just finished your MFA program. Congratulations!

NB: I did. Thank you.

SL: So, now that you, you know, doing theatre for you came, and now that you've got, you know, and your master's degree sort of what are your thoughts? And, you know, um, I don't

want to say what are your plans? I'd like to say just sort of what are your dreams and your goals for yourself leaving here?

NB: I really want to have a sort of low-key high-profile career. [laughs]

SL: Can you explain what that means?

NB: That means that people know who I am, and they respect me for being a good actress, but nobody's really interested in my personal life. I have not traded my personal life for any sort of stardom or whatever. Someone who shows up on stage a lot and shows up in shows and movies. And everyone is like, it's not, they know my name, so I'm not like, 'Oh that person', but at the same time, I may or may not be the headline person.

SL: Is there someone that's in the industry already that you, that sort of fits that definition? When you say, you know?

NB: Not so much they may or may not be. Well, I guess now he's only *now* kind of being headline person. And I know that he has a different career from mine because he's both a man and white. [laughs] But, generally, Adam Driver has a general shape of I want my career to be.

SL: I have no idea who that is.

NB: Adam Driver? Kylo Ren.

SL: Okay! Yes, because I know the face. Okay. Okay. All right. All right.

NB: So, he has a strong base in theatre, went into television a bit. Now he's in like, high profile movies, but maybe not everyone knows what his name is. But they know. [laughs] They're like, 'Oh, that guy! He's great. He's good actor. Love him.'

SL: Yeah.

NB: But no one's trying to stalk him. [laughs] Or anything like that, so.

SL: Right, interesting. Okay, cool. So, um, I may be asking you some things that we've talked about before, but it's just good to get it captured. So, what's your ethnic background?

NB: I am black Caribbean American. My parents, both my parents are from Haiti. My father's father is from Jamaica. And it's…their Haitian, just kind of point blank. But it's interesting because my mother looking at her you wouldn't think she was black at all. [chuckles] But I think we found out that like, her great, her grandfather was like full white, and her grandmother was like half black, half white. So that makes her father like one fourth, black. But then he, engaged with a woman that was Haitian, but my maternal grandmother, who I've met and lived with for quite a while, she had very silky hair as well, even though she was darker than I am. So, we have no idea where that genetic makeup comes from. So, like, so I just say my mother's Asian. Because they're Haitian, no matter what, you know, ethnic, whatever they are. And she, even though I'm darker than her and my hair is much coil-ier than hers, I kind of inherited that sort of ambiguousness for some people. So, that also kind of informs my experiences as well.

SL: And can you talk about that a little bit more that you sort of have an ambiguousness about you and it informs your experiences.

NB: I think in combination, too the fact that I grew up in a suburb in New Jersey, that didn't have a lot of, not a lot of black people. It was actually mostly Asian, and then white, and then smattering of Hispanic or black people that I came contact to. Also, I went to a private school. Private Catholic school because we're Catholic. For K through K through eighth, and then I went to a public school. And I guess I just, I mean, I grew up in a certain place and thus have a certain speech pattern, and certain cultural experiences that were being reinforced in school. Let's say. So, I remember a lot of times in like high school when I went to public high school, there would be black people like, 'Are you? Are you black? Are you like all black? Oh, I thought you were Indian.' [laughs] You know, something like that. Or you know, I've gotten like the Oreo moniker applied to me before and that kind of thing. And I did a showcase after college and so afterwards someone was like, 'Yeah, you know, you're kind of like, you know, you're kind of ethnically ambiguous, a bit. Like you could have different headshots that have like a different last name just for you to like, get some credits as you're starting out. So, you can have like a Natalie Perez headshot, like a Natalie you know, Williams headshot, like whatever. And so, I'm like, okay, but in my, in my head I'm just black. Like, I've never thought that it was better or had any sort of notion of just not being black or being in some sort of asterisk area, you know with it, because I don't know, just always apparent to me. Like, yeah, okay, so ambiguous, but like if I were to be transported on a road in the south in like 1830 something or another if some slave catcher rolled up on me, like, there's nothing I could say that would make them believe. [laughs]

SL: You're not that ambiguous.

NB: No, I'm not gonna make them believe, like, 'Oh, no, she's not one of them.' [laughs] So like, and, you know, there's nothing wrong with being black inherently anyway. [laughs]

SL: So, what does it mean to you to be a black woman? I'm interested in this answer because, as you've just mentioned, in your interactions with people or after they've seen you perform, they've sort of questioned or said, 'Oh, hey, you could possibly belong to this other ethnic group.' Although you've never really seen yourself as anything but black, like that's part of who you are. So, what does that mean for you? It's probably something you've never thought about before, and I understand that specifically. But yeah, what does that mean? If I say, what does it mean to be a black woman?

NB: Well, okay. See, when I think about it, I think of everything that like society puts on us, because…I feel like inherently, how I feel about myself is just not colourless, I don't want to sound like Raven Symone. [laughs] But like, you know, well you think of yourself as a person. Like you're living in your own body, so you know that you are a human being. First and foremost, but to other people is not necessarily the same thing. You know? So, I just think of, you know, the perceptions of us, or having to navigate the perceptions of us is part and parcel of being a black woman. I have to think about some people might project onto me, mass, more masculinity, then, perhaps I feel I actually inherently have. I have to think that, you know, some people might think I'm too loud if I'm just being a bit loud. Or that people will be shocked because I'm articulate, because they weren't expecting that. Or, you know, thinking that I'm hypersexual if I just mention sex at all, you know?
Then there's also the culture, which is interesting because I'm coming from a Haitian background that's not technically African American. So, there's differences in how I grew up

and what I was around. But at the same time, African American people who were mostly the black people that I would interact with outside my family. And, of course, if I'm looking for someone that looks like me, you know, in the media and all that good stuff. They are pretty much you know, black American, and I am black American. [laughs] So it's like, you know, so like, I have like a culture and a subculture. And then there's also the fact that I just didn't grow up around a lot of black people, so that's also my culture. But I also understand that that's not, I'm not who people would think of as they think of suburban American culture. So, it's all this like weird distinctions [laughs] of being like, I totally, you know, have, share a lot of things with a lot of people that look like me. But then I also have other experiences that they didn't have, for whatever reason. So, I that's why I guess I find it kind of like, nuanced to think about what it means to be a black woman. [laughs] Because there's all that involved in it. And at the end of the day, I'm just kind of like, I don't know, I just feel like me. [laughs] I just got me experiences and, you know, all that kind of stuff. So, it's, I don't know. Yeah. That's what I got for you. [laughs]

SL: Do you ever feel that it might give you a bit of an identity crisis? In a way because you're dealing with so many different things. You're dealing with being, your parents are from Haiti, but you're born in America. So, you're Haitian, but you're a first-generation child of immigrants, essentially, you know. But you look, and you are, you obviously are of African descent. But like you said, you have, you know, the American culture and the Haitian culture, but then when people look at you, sometimes they think that you could be something else. And then when they hear you talk, they don't, you don't necessarily fit into either what they have been exposed to, or what they expect you to be. So, do you find that sometimes that causes this internal identity for lack of a better phrase, identity crisis? Sometimes.

NB: Uh, yes.

SL: And how does it present itself?

NB: Uh, just…Sometimes I realise…I suddenly like kind of realised, 'Oh, what's happening to me?' Or like my interactions with this certain person could be coloured by race. [laughs] It's like a 'Oh. Oh, my God.' It's not, like I was thinking about it because I was in Barcelona the other day and I realised like, I wasn't consciously…I was trying to think, oh, wait, I have I've seen other black people here? And I think I did but I wasn't sure. And I realised that I guess I'm just used to being the only black person in an area, and so there's a certain amount of being comfortable with that. But also, I definitely do not like stake my identity on being the only black person in a room. Like some people can get territorial about that distinction. [laughs] I am not. And so, it in a way is not forefront in my mind. I guess, like my race and what that might mean for my interactions with people. But at the same time, I'm not ignorant or unaware. If some things start happening, it may take me a second. Whereas someone else might have completely like their defences up, and be like, 'Oh, this is whatever.' It might take me a little while be like, 'Oh, that might be an aspect.' [laughs] And then what it is, is kind of like, it's…disappointing is not quite the word because it's not something that I'm unused to or think is foreign, and I'm not in my head. Like, 'It shouldn't be.' Like, thinking so hard about how it shouldn't be this way that I'm not realising that this is just kind of how it is right now in the present moment. So, it's a bit of a like, 'Oh, god damn it. Now I gotta like, maybe I got to think about whether I make a sex joke. Or maybe I gotta think about a little bit if I'm being kind of loud.' Like, it's there. I have to have that moment of being like, 'Oh okay. Alright. I gotta be thinking about this. All right.' So, it's not so much an identity crisis as identity crisis in terms of, I'm remembering and being conscious of the fact that I'm not an individual when

it comes to race. Even though I feel like an individual and I am an individual. I do have to remember other people are bringing their experiences with race or whatever to this interaction. I have to be aware; you know.

SL: It's interesting that you bring that up. Do you feel that as a black woman, because you said you're used to being the only one, that you become the representative for all black women? The follow up question to that is, do you feel that that is the same for people who aren't? You know, for other ethnicities? What's the balance of that? Do you think that that is more of a burden that you have to carry as a black woman and that you become the representative for all black people versus other groups? Maybe.

NB: I, I think so. Definitely. I think you know, whenever slavery was talked about in history class, everybody like slightly started looking at me. [laughs] I was trying to do; I don't know what the hell I would be doing. But um, and yeah, there are times I'm like, 'Oh, I gotta step in and set some people straight about some things because other people are not gonna see that.' You know? Especially on like, one on one conversations or like conversations like…There is a thought of, maybe I should definitely speak up about this or that whatever. But at the same time, that's just kind of like how I am also like, I'm interested in these sorts of conversations. Not philosophical books, psychological, sociological, anthropological historical conversations in general. And I recognise that race is a part of that. Maybe more so than someone that didn't have to deal with the idea of race in their everyday life.

So, for me, it's like it's because it's also my interest in my wanting to share my experiences or what I've read and all that kind of stuff, it doesn't feel so much like a burden. If I start being like, 'Well, you know, from this perspective, blah, blah, blah,' because I'm generally kind of interested in talking about that sort of thing. And I guess because of that, in my head, it just doesn't weigh as heavy, if that makes sense. And like, I know my sister, I have a sister that works in, lives, and works in China. And she is conscious of the fact that she may be the first black person that some of these locals have ever seen before. And so, she does try to be... not um, what's the word? If someone does something that's slightly uncouth, she's very polite, in her way, polite, but firm and be like, 'No, you know, please don't touch my hair.' Or like, 'No, that's not quite how we do things.' Blah, blah, blah, that kind of thing. But then, I'm sure if I asked her because she's generally a polite person, you know. So, it's that weird thing where like, there is an added burden of having to be ambassador and having to be diplomatic and having to be polite in that role that's the forced upon us. But that's also slightly part of my personality in general. So, it doesn't feel as much of a burden as it might feel to others. If that make sense.

SL: Do you feel that that has become part of your personality because of the way you were born? And therefore, it was nurtured? Or do you just think that maybe it's just a natural trait that you have? Regardless of you know, if you were white. I know there's really no way to answer that specifically, but…

NB: Right. I think there were other more pressing environmental things in my growing up that probably foster that more, but that was an added I thing that when I went out into the world, and I just was polite, it was positively reinforced, you know. In that way so, yeah, had I had a different upbringing, different set of circumstances, maybe it would have been only because of outside, and only because I would act in a certain way and be like, 'Okay, now I gotta change the way I act outside.' And then probably would feel more of a burden because

it would feel less inherent. You know? If it was simply a reaction to how the world at large is interacting with me.

SL: So, it's, it's funny, it's just like how do I word questions sometimes. So, in your experience, when it comes to acting, how, what sorts of stigma have you faced? Do you feel that you've experienced stigma, or discrimination, or prejudice, or even racism as a black actress in the industry?

NB: I think that, um…I think that I have in terms of, I guess, expectations that people have certain expectations for me.

SL: Such as?

NB: Such as, I guess, being able to belt out gospel. [laughs] Like, you know, just at the drop of the hat, and I guess being able to pick up dance moves really easily, which I'm not necessarily able to do. My voice doesn't particularly lend itself to big belty type things. It actually veers more towards jazz, I'm learning. But I guess in the culture nowadays, it's more big, belty in general. So, they're looking for me to be singing *The Color Purple* versus singing Ella Fitzgerald. So, I feel like there's like maybe slight disappointment when I'm not able to live up those expectations. And, you know, I am more, pretty introverted. A little more mellow, I guess and quieter. Even though I don't think I'm quiet. I'm just quieter than what other people would expect, I guess.

SL: More reserved maybe? Is that a better word?

NB: Yeah, yeah. And so, I think that there's two, like, either you're the loud sassy Black woman, that's one stereotype, and then also you can just be ignored. And I think, perhaps because I haven't, I don't make my presence known in such a way that they're expecting all the time, they kind of just veer into that interaction with me and be like, 'Oh okay, she's nice. Cool. I don't have to think about, worry about her.' And I never would have thought that was like something to do with my race until we kind of were talking about studies about black women being…

SL: Invisible?

NB: [laughs] Invisible and being ignored. And, you know, in my own, you know, looking into things and looking at black women in the media and how it seems like representation… And I especially remember back in the 90s, like representation equals a group of white guys with one white girl and a black guy. Yay we did it. [laughs] We hit the diversity quota. And there's like, no real room inherent there for black women. So, and I do feel like sometimes I've been given a lot of supporting roles for partly that reason. Not all the time. Not every lead role is something that would be my casting anyway. But uh, yeah. If I stack up all of my, you know, rules that I have been given most of them supporting roles, most of them. Quite a few of them are servant-esque. [laughs] You know, so, yeah, it's there. And I feel like…yeah, and that's something to reconcile with, and what's interesting, reconciling with it, because I'm reserved by nature. And that's me. And then there's also this other societal thing about being invisible as a black woman. So, there's a temptation to just feel bad about myself for being reserved, because that helps, not facilitates, but like, you know, it coincides with something that could happen to me because of racism and all that stuff. And I'm in the process of kind of separating into being like, 'No. It is okay for you to be reserved. And it's also not okay that

people use the fact that you're reserved to ignore you.' [laughs] You can have, those two truths can exist at the same time. You know?

SL: And that they're separate from each other. It's not the same thing.

NB: Yeah.

SL: So, you know, you're talking about, you know, when looking at most of your roles that there have been, you know, aside from…Like you said, you're not meant for every leading role.

NB: Yeah.

SL: But looking at sort of your CV and saying, okay, it's mainly been supporting roles. It's mainly been server type roles. And you said, you know, sort of reconciling who you are versus how the world sees you. How does that make you feel? Like how, how do you, what's that reconciliation process? How do you feel about that now that you've sort of made that connection? Of, oh wow, I have played mainly, you know, supporting roles, or servant roles.

NB: It is complicated day by day process, I guess. Because one can veer into self-pity, or anger. And finding the equilibrium between is definitely what the process is. Because either you think to yourself, oh, I'm just generally, I'm just not good enough, you know. Or being like, fuck these people. Fate's against me. [laughs] You know? And neither, if you indulge in them, completely are actually helpful for moving forward. And I think, kind of what you were saying about identity crisis, like it is a process of kind of figuring out what is, what is truly my identity and being comfortable in it. And being comfortable to the point of just being like, I'm just gonna, I'm just gonna be me. And if that means in this situation that I'm not going to be talking a lot, or if I decide or I feel the impulse to be louder or whatever, either is fine. And either is, and it's all authentic. And not to worry about what people think, as long as it truly feels like it's not me trying to play a role. It's not me trying to make people feel comfortable. Comfortable when it comes, in terms of race, I guess. And that's another sticky situation. Of being like, 'I do want people to feel good, or comfortable around me. But I also don't want to feel like I'm doing it simply so that they don't write me off or shoot me.' Extreme but not a, not an unreality. [laughs] You know? So, I guess it's really looking into myself, and figuring out what things or stuff that I've learned, for many, many different reasons learned behaviour for many different reasons. And what I decide? No, I like that about myself. And truly being like sitting down and be like, 'No. I like this about myself, and I want to continue this behaviour.' And in that way, there's a lot more ease in I guess living, because you've truly made a decision to be living in this way, rather than it just being kind of a reactionary thing, based off of past experiences.

SL: So, who are you? Who is Natalie? You know, what sort of, when you think about who you are, and since you said you started to kind of do that introspection. How, you know, describe yourself. [laughs] You know, how do you see you? Because we've talked about how the world sees you. How other people put these things on you. But you're like, but I'm just me. So how do you see you?

NB: I see myself as intelligent. I see myself as someone who is very much... is empathetic, both intelligently and I'm sorry. Rather intelligent, intelligent empathy, and emotional empathy are both things I think are very strongly fostered in myself. So, I can understand

people's point of views, even if I don't necessarily agree with them. And I and I can put myself in other people's shoes, which is, yeah. I think sometimes I process things slower than others, I guess. Or I just don't feel the impulse, I don't feel the impulse to, I guess do other things while I'm processing stuff. So, I'll be very quiet. Or if directors give me something, I'll be like, 'Okay.' And it's not because I don't understand it. And I was wrong to say that I was slower. It's the same speed of processing that other people would have, but other people would have the impulse to, I don't know, repeat the question back at them or like, say it's or you know, I don't say something while they're processing because that probably helps them or whatever. I…what helps me is to not, and think about it, and they just do. And that's kind of how it happens. I'm not particularly math minded. I am very curious and interested in, I guess human nature and the way things are put together in this world. I'm very interested in history. I'm very interested in stories in general, which involves history as well, as much as fiction. And I'm very interested in the mechanics of storytelling, as well as the emotional experience of just being told a story. I'm not shy about talking about sex and I have my own thoughts about intimacy and all that kind of stuff. And I'm very willing to talk about things that I don't necessarily have a concrete answer to, I guess. And having discussions with people and being intellectually challenged in that way. I have a healthy dose of gallows humour. [laughs] That everyone appreciates and a healthy dose of just, you know, dumb humour, if you want to call it that. Lowbrow and highbrow, and yeah. [laughs] I guess that's who I am.

SL: So, when taking a look at sort of, you know, because you are very curious and about storytelling and things like that. So, looking at Black women specifically, and the way that we're represented in film and television and stage, kind of what are you seeing? You know, cause in the 90s you really weren't seeing any. [laughs] At least not with the, not with the white people. So, what, what have you noticed currently? Is there anything that kind of sticks out to you or that has made you think or that you liked or didn't like?

NB: I think we're being represented more. I think that representation has expanded beyond the kind of Halle Berry representation that we were getting before. Which is no shade on her. It's really shade on the colourism that permeates society.

SL: And so, when you say Halle Berry, you're talking about her…?

NB: Lighter skin. Still quite a bit of it, I would say, but, you know, you know, Kerry Washington's pretty, just brown skin. I see. I'm seeing a lot more of like Gabrielle Union in more mainstream things. And I think, especially since, with social media, and how sort of these conversations are more out in the open, and there's a lot more pushback against you know, for instance, what's the her name? Zendaya was cast as Aaliyah in like a Lifetime movie.

SL: Oh, okay.

NB: And…Aaliyah wasn't dark, but she was pretty like medium brown skinned, and Zendaya is quite a bit lighter than her. And people were like, 'Uh…?' [laughs] And some, and some people were rude with it. But other people were just like, 'Yeah, I don't know if that's quite… great. Because it's the reflection that one senses, reflection of a larger thing in Hollywood of them being like, 'Okay, let us find the lightness and brightness of black people and put them in and that's, that's diversity.' And I still think that it's happening a bit, but I do think that it's quite, they're quite a few incidences of it not happening. Enough to be encouraging. And I

think that since there's so much opportunity now between movies, traditional television, streaming television, web series, of course theatre, you know, all that kind of stuff, that in certain areas, people are taking more chances, I guess. Or just being open to…really open to colour-blind casting. And I see a lot of pushes that are just like, 'No, we specifically want to have black women, or a black woman play this or blah, blah, blah.' And that's happening a little bit more. And so, I am optimistic. I'm also knowing that it's moving at a pace. It's not done just because Zoe Saldana is involved with at least three different like billion-dollar franchises. Like doesn't mean this it's just done, you know. And I am seeing, something that I brought up at one of the workshops, the idea of a black woman, white woman friendship happening on screen that's actually equal partnership and equal in the narrative. I don't know if that has happened yet, really. So, in those ways, we still have a ways to go.

SL: What other stories do you feel, or representations of black women do you feel still need to be shown in the performing arts? You know, you just mentioned the black woman, a white woman, genuine, equally balanced, you know, you know, friendship. What else do you think is missing out of the way that we are being represented?

NB: I just think there needs to be more representation of brown to dark skinned black women being feminine or put in feminine roles. Because I think that…I guess, promotion of black beauty has been a certain thing. And it's being, it's reinforced if the few times that black women are put in the love interest role or whatever. A role that's explicitly supported by the narrative as being desirable. A desirable mate. Not just like sexually desirable, but someone desirable to be the girlfriend or whatever. It always usually is a light skinned black woman, if not mixed. Um, so, more promotion, I guess of brown to dark skinned woman in those explicitly feminine roles. Because there's nothing wrong with the love interest, or roles where people are like, 'Oh, she's beautiful or what a thing,' like that. There's something wrong with like, that role is dehumanized. Which is something that white wouldn't push against and all that kind of thing. But some narratives, and the problem there is that it happened all the time to them. Some narratives, it would happen once or twice every five narratives that would happen. I mean, all right, because for that narrative, that person, a woman might, necessarily be important, but they would like to have not just it be a sausage party, so that's okay. But that was all that was happening for those. So, like, I appreciate the pushback and all that kind of stuff.

SL: Yeah, they're like we don't want to be damsels anymore. We're not these.

NB: Like, all the time.

SL: We're not just the…Yeah, yeah.

NB: Um, but I would say all this to say that if there was a movie that came out, and there was one of those kinds of ancillary, okay, roles that just kind of like, the love interest.

SL: Yeah.

NB: Doesn't quite have anything to do with the plot, she's just there. Dark skinned woman doing that role, I mean, it's not ground-breaking for women, but for a dark-skinned woman to be promoted as being just super desirable love at first sight. Oh my god.

SL: To be the Juliet.

NB: Right.

SL: To the Romeo.

NB: To the Romeo, yeah, but that would be nice. Like the way I think about it is that…like black women's representation, if it's a tapestry, there's been only threads of a certain colour being used. And those colours are not wrong necessarily. Like there are many loud, sassy black woman in life. They should have representation too. But one, the quality representation should be something that has dignity attached to it. And two, there should be some other colours happening there. So, you can have those roles that they're not necessarily essential to the plot, they're just there to be pretty. Okay, as long as we have a lot of different other colours happening in the tapestry. All right, you know. So, I think we're moving towards that, but there's still a lot of this to be done, and all has to be very deliberate because the exclusion of black of representation was deliberate. So, including it has to be deliberate too. [laughs]

SL: And not just ticking a box, like for quota, but actually thinking it though.

NB: Yeah.

SL: Okay. Cool. I think we're gonna stop there. Thank you.
(End of Interview)

Interview Transcript

Interviewee: LaTanza Brits (LB), Black American Actress

Interviewer: Samia La Virgne (SL)

Date of Interview: 2 September 2018

Interview Setting: Stepney Green Park London, UK

The transcript of this interview has been edited for length and pertinence to my research topic.

(Start of Interview)
LB: Okay, I'm ready for this.

SL: Today is September 2, 2018, and I'm interviewing?

LB: LaTanza Brits.

SL: Can you tell me what is your full ethnic makeup?

LB: That's a really hard question. My grandfather was a historian, so I actually know quite a bit on my mother's side. So, what I'm going to tell you now is all on my mother's side. So black and white mixing, and then my grandfather's mother is actually half Blackfoot.

SL: Okay.

LB: Which is a Native American tribe, and half black. And then on the other side, my grandma on that side is Sioux, because her grandmother was Sioux. Sioux, black, and a little bit French. She calls herself a mutt because she's so many different things. That's what I know about my mother's side. We've traced our roots, the black roots, the blackness that we do have in us, which, I think I'm pretty black. I mean, I don't know. Everyone keeps asking me, 'What am I?' And I was like, that is such a hard question. It's such a loaded question, but we have traced it back to Ghana, and some free slaves. Then on my father's side, I don't know him. So, I mean, typical black woman, I guess. [chuckles] Sorry. [laughs]

SL: It's okay. I'm very interested in finding out with the woman that I'm speaking to, even though we've just been labelled black…

LB: Right.

SL: How do we really culturally and ethnically identify?

LB: Yeah. I mean, I don't consider myself African American at all. I feel like to call myself African American is negating everything else that I am in my ancestral heritage, which is very rich, and very deep, and very complex. I consider myself a black American, because black is the, or nice colour of brown, is the colour of my skin, but really, I'm just an

American. If you need to know what colour I am, I'll say,' Yeah, I'm black American.' But that doesn't mean I'm limited to whatever your box is for a black American.

SL: It's interesting, you just said you're just American. Have you always felt like you were American? And identified as, 'I am American,'? Rather than being black American, or African American?

LB: No. I think I have always tried to say that I'm just American so what does it matter? I feel like society has inevitably told me, 'No, no, no. You need to check that box.' The people around me are kind of putting me into a box when I think why can't I just be American? If you have to know what colour I am, I'm black. Okay, cool. Like, what does that have to do with…? I don't know.

SL: Okay. So, this may be a loaded question then.

LB: Sorry, am I not black enough? Cause I get that all the time. Sorry. [laughs]

SL: Well, I want to know, what does it mean to you to be a black woman?

LB: To be a black woman means to struggle. To me. For real. And always to exist with a double consciousness. Because when people look at me, they don't they don't see that I probably have…I mean, there's white people out there that have just as many cultural mixing as that I have, but they don't see it because it's not apparent. It's not something that's worn on their skin. For me, it's all over. They look at me and they're just like, 'Okay, you're black.' Or people are like, 'I don't know what kind of black are you, but you are black.' So, for me being a black woman is to exist in a world through eyes that other races will never understand. I'm a woman, so I face struggles, that of a woman, and then I also face struggles of somebody being black. I just feel like I'm always existing in this. I mean, I love being a black woman. I love who I am. I love my skin, and I definitely feel like my people have been through so much, and I'm so very proud of it. I am always proud to be a black woman. No matter where my ancestors may have come from, my skin is black, and I think it's beautiful. I don't diminish that either. I feel like when people always ask me, 'What are you?', and when I tell them, 'I'm this, this, this and that.' They think somehow, I'm negating my blackness, but I don't think that at all. I really don't.

I think acknowledging that you can be from multiple ancestral heritages…And you could still be black. I don't know why that's such a hard concept. I'm definitely very, very proud. I don't know. I think I'm twenty-five and I'm still figuring out what it means to be black. Because having recently moved to Atlanta, I feel like I constantly don't fit what it means to be black, but I am still constantly pushing. What is black? What is a black woman? I mean, I feel like I know, but I feel like I'm constantly being told, even by our own black people, that I don't know what it means to be black. Just by the nature of the way I speak. The way, how I present myself in the world. All the education that I have, which is…Fun fact, black women are the most educated women in the United States. So, you can hold that off on like, we're stupid or something like that. No, no, we're educated. But apparently, to be black and educated is trying to be white. So, I don't know. I hope I answered your question. I'm still figuring it out. [laughs] Hot me up in another ten years. Okay? [laughs]

SL: Okay. So, this past year you've been living in Atlanta trying to work on your acting career. So how has that…You alluded to the fact that it was difficult because you weren't

necessarily black enough in some ways. You want to talk about that a little bit more? That struggle with being in Atlanta, where there's a large community of black people and you trying to fit into that arena?

LB: Okay, so first of all, let me preface this. [in a Minnesotan accent] I'm from Minnesota. So yeah, yeah. Sure, ya betcha. Don't ya know? [drops accent] Yes, I say all of those things.

SL: I love that.

[both laugh]

LB: Yeah, it was…It was eye opening and almost shocking, in a way because I'd visited the South quite frequently. I was a former athlete, a basketball players. So, I used to go down there and play in the tournaments, and I used to love it. Because you get to play with all these black teams, and finally I wasn't in the north, where it's like, 'Oh, they're ghetto style.' You know? It's like everybody else is playing as rough as we would, and it was great. It was awesome, and then flash forward another what? Ten years and I'm back, and I'm actually living there, and I'm surrounded by other artists within the community, but also the South in general which is very different from the north. I feel like the racism down there is a bit more overt than it is in the north. But it was just this, it was a shock, because suddenly I'm auditioning for OWN, the network owned by Oprah. I'm getting all these auditions and I'm feeling myself. Then I actually go in, and I'm in the room now, and they're saying, 'Could you? Could you be just, you know? Could you be more like us? I'm like, 'What?' What? And actually, I did, got chosen to shoot something. And feel so bad because I was in there, and the episode was named, like Hot Fingers, and the way I was acting, they changed the entire name to Drama Queen, but they really liked it. They were like, 'Oh. That's so not what we were thinking.' They wanted her to be way more hood.

I just didn't have a good experience. To the point where I was on the phone with a man who was like, 'Oh, yeah, you're from Minnesota, right?' And I'm like, 'Yeah, I'm from Minnesota.' He's like, 'You're just so nice with all your fancy education.' And it was twenty minutes of him, telling me how nice I was, and I had so much fancy education. How smart I was, and I and had never even told him where I had went to school, what type of degrees I have. My master's didn't even say a word of that, but just because he knew I was from Minnesota, he just assumed. He said to me, 'Oh, you're a northern black.' So, he just assumed that I had all this education, and that I thought I was better than everybody else. You know, and I feel like there's always this struggle between northern blacks and southern blacks. I feel it, but it's existed since the dawn of time. When you have free blacks versus enslaved blacks, you know? So, it goes back. It's a struggle that goes back to even before I was born. Living in Atlanta for me, I just constantly felt like I didn't fit in. You know? With my crushed velvet top and my Doc Martens. I hope I answered your question.

SL: That's really interesting. What other sort of weird phrasings did you come across that was expecting you to be stereotypical in a way, in that process? I'm just shocked.

LB: 'Could you be more like, you know.' Which is different because when auditioning in New York, I expected that from white people when I was going in for a role. I showed up speaking the way I do and they're like, 'But could you just give more attitude?' And I expected that from them. Because I'm like, Well, what's attitude to you? I know what you mean, but I'm just gonna be an ass. Sorry, excuse my language. To you, because I know that's

what you want, but when it was coming from my own people, I was like, 'Really?' Really? it was just a lot of like, 'You know, could you be more about it? Or 'Just a little bit more, you know, rough.' So, I don't know, that's what I experienced.

SL: Why do you think it's so hard for, not just white people, apparently, Southern blacks as well, to wrap their mind around the idea that there's a wider definition of how we can act? Especially when it comes to film and television.

LB: I think it's the old crab in the bucket. Again. Still. We're still facing that. It's like I see you coming up, and I didn't have access, maybe, to some of the things that you had access to, and I'm trying to pull you down in the bucket with the rest of us. I don't understand why it's so hard. I really do think it's the crab in the bucket.

SL: So, having these experiences, has it made you feel like maybe you should change the way you present yourself at times when going into the audition room?

LB: Oh, yeah. Oh my gosh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I'll never wear Doc Martens to an audition again. Let's be real, okay? [laughs] I'm kind of like tomboy, I guess hipster-ish, but I guess that's only for white people. So, I guess I can't dress like that. I don't know. I kind of keep it more simple. I try to never say where I'm from, and I try to neutralize my accent as much as possible. I do try to code switch to the best of my ability. So yeah. I definitely have done some things that aren't naturally me for an audition. But I mean, who hasn't though?

SL: So how did your New York auditions and experiences compare to what you were experiencing in Atlanta?

LB: I feel like mainly in New York, I was auditioning for a lot of white people, which is very different to Atlanta. There's more black people on the other side of the camera, which I think is great, and we need to keep pushing for that, of course. I think they were just very different. In New York they want to know, where you've studied, who you've studied with. Like, what drama school did you go to? Do you have your MFA? Versus Atlanta, they didn't want to know any of that. They almost looked at me like I was trying to throw it in their faces. To the point where people actually was recommending to me to take off some of my MFA training, because it was too... like British people would say posh, you know. It was not the best experience in Atlanta.

SL: There's still this distrust there of white people in a since, in Atlanta because you're putting down that these are the skills and the training that I have to show that I'm qualified for the job…

LB: Right. Just like anybody would do.

SL: And their seeing it as…

LB: Like me trying to…

SL: Show you that I'm better.

LB: Yeah.

SL: Wow.

LB: Atlanta was not the experience that I was hoping for. I was really hoping for…. I mean all these black films, all this black art is being made, and I was really hoping to find my niche, and just be in this cultural celebration, almost. And I feel like the door was shut for me. It's actually a place that I'll probably never go back to, to be honest. And live there. If I get offered a project, like out of like New York, or LA or something, then I would go do it, but not to actually move there.

SL: So, let's go to something a little lighter, shall we? Why did you get into acting?

LB: So, I was an athlete, three sport athlete in high school, and I already chosen I was gonna be a basketball player. But I blew out up my knee when I was sixteen and all my division one offers fell by the wayside. I had kind of dabbled in speech. I don't know if you know what speech is, but there's all these little mini groups that you could participate in. I was in serious prose, which basically, you would take a piece of literature and then you would perform it. You had eight minutes to perform. Basically, like a one woman or one man show. Then you would go compete in these little competitions and I just had such a great time. And I always picked these black centric sort stories, and I always did really well. I really fell in love with it, and I was always really good at English. And I was like, 'Hmm, maybe I should write some more.' So, I started writing more poetry. Then I started writing short scenes, and getting interested in playwriting, and I just, I don't know. I kind of caught the bug. Then I just got more and more involved in the theatre work, and they were like, 'Have you tried acting?' I was like, 'No, I did speech a little bit. But I've only been on stage with myself.' From there, my sophomore year, I just started more and more acting and doing shows. Then my focus switched from the writing aspect to more acting. Then I went and got a fancy MFA, and now I'm here.

SL: It's always interesting to hear how we end up in this field.

LB: I feel like I didn't choose acting, I feel like acting chose me, in a way. I've always known I wanted to make a difference, and I always thought that it was going to be through basketball. I've always felt the sense that that's what I wanted to do. It's just something that has always been growing inside of me. I've always wanted to be like a positive role model for other little black girls, and it's always been inside of me. It's just funny how my dream is coming together in a different way than I thought it would. My same desire and what I've always wanted to do is still right there, it's just now through acting instead of basketball.

SL: Let's list your academic accomplishments so. So, you have a bachelor's degree in…

LB: In theatre and English. So, I double majored. I don't know how I did that.

SL: And you got that from…?

LB: University of New Haven. Then got into East 15 Acting School [in London], and I decided that I wanted to come here. So now I have a MFA in Acting International.

SL: Right. When thinking about what's happening with film, and television, and theatre, do you feel that we're getting better or worse when it comes to representation of black women?

LB: I don't know. I am not sure. Because there's a lot of things that I like, and a lot of things I cannot stand. A lot of things that I feel are perpetuating the stereotype of the angry black woman. Especially shows like, *Empire*, or even *Atlanta*. There's just some things that I don't like how she's portrayed. I feel like yes, we're moving forward in a way that there's so many more roles for black woman. So many more black productions specifically, but I just feel like we need to almost go back to the Cosby's and *Family Matters*, when it was just a show about a black family. They just happen to be black, and their added struggle is because they are black. But the whole show isn't about…I mean the Huxtables had quality education. Like, what is so wrong with that? I'm such a fan of *Black-ish* because that show is just educating. They're showing how hard it is to be black and successful. It's like, 'Yes! This is this is normal. They're just a normal black family. This is so normal, they have money. The dad didn't grow up from money, the mother did. She's mixed and her name's Rainbow, and that show is everything. This is why I love *Black-ish*. I think that show is moving us forward, yet…Yes. I do like that there's more roles, but a show like *Empire*, I feel like is taking us back. So, I don't know. I'm so conflicted.

SL: What are you seeing when you go to the theatre? Are you seeing more black women on the stage?

LB: Oh, I forgot *Black Panther*. That was for the people. Moving us forward, oh, and *BlacKkKlansmen* that just dropped? Yes honey.

SL: How many black women are in that?

LB: Zero, but it's moving forward our people as a whole. Sometimes you have to just look at it that way. [laughs] That's so sad to say. There's one. There is one. There's one. She was the love interest. The only thing is, I wanted to know, because his love interest was a black female, but she was very light skinned. And that's a whole other can words. But as far as on stage, as far as the shows, *Hamilton*? Let's just go with Broadway and West End. Let's go with, you know, where most of the money, and everyone knows about. As far as *Hamilton*, I cannot think of another play or musical that has black women as leads in it. I can't. We're always the token. We're never in the forefront of new musical. I feel like you could cast, I think *Phantom of the Opera* is old enough that you could just have…We had a black male Phantom, but you could have a black Christine at this point. I mean *Phantom of the Opera* is like how old? Come on. We know she's supposed to be French. She could have damn well been black and French. It's fine.

SL: So, we just saw *Emilia* last night.

LB: Okay. Yeah. Okay, straight fire.

SL: The end. [laughs]

LB: Literally, that show was mic drop. Like…

SL: How was that experience for you? Seeing a show like *Emilia*, with it being a brand-new play, with it being on the globe stage, with it being an all-female cast of about twelve or fourteen, but within that cast, there were six black women.

LB: Yes honey. I went in knowing that Emelia was Shakespeare's love interest that had pretty much been erased from history. And some of her words could have been copied by Shakespeare, and he passed them off as his own. Or something like that. That's all I knew. So, the drum roll starts, and I just see this…This black sister walk on the stage and just own it. Within the first second I was like, 'Yes.' And then she said, 'Speech, speech, speech. I am Emilia.' I said, 'What?!' It was like kid in a candy store moment. I was like, 'She's Emilia?!' It was everything. And especially watch her and watch her as a seasoned actress. She wasn't like, twenty, she was a seasoned actress. Then I just started thinking as the show goes on. How many opportunities does she get to walk out as a lead of a show and just own it? How many opportunities has she had like that throughout her career? I was just like, thinking about that. But she was just so, it was magical. I didn't even know who she was, but in the first few seconds, I was like, 'Oh my god. That woman just owned that.' She just walked out. She didn't say anything. She walked on the stage. Before she even opened her mouth I was like, 'Oh, she just owned that stage.' She turned around, her back was to me, and she's owning the stage. You know what I mean?

Then there was a moment in the show where she was right next to us. She had been sat there for a while on the corner of the stage, and so she had saw enjoying the show, and we are the only two black women in her sights. There was a couple others sprinkled around, but we're really the only two people, and she decided to…She had these really important lines and for the life of me I can't even remember them now because I just remember her reaching out and touching your hand. And I lost it. Because what she was saying in that moment…She could have touched anybody's hand around us. There was a bunch of females on the other side, but she looked at us, and she was like…The inspiration is all I can really remember right now, because she's just giving us, and literally telling us that, I'm passing this to you. I just lost it. I don't know if anybody else in the whole stage interpreted it the way that we did. But in that moment, I feel like as black females sitting there, we were just like, we know the struggle. It was the most magical moment that I've ever experienced in a theatre. Ever. It was priceless. I just started crying because I was just like, this is so powerful.' She is literally, she took your hand and was just like, 'Listen sister, I'm gonna pass you this wisdom. This knowledge that I'm telling you, I'm gonna give you this inspiration. This fire.' She didn't even know who we were. But in that moment, we were united just because we share a struggle, and that was enough for me. You're like, 'You're gonna cry.' I was like, 'I'm not gonna cry.' Cried there. I couldn't hold it, couldn't hold it. So, it was everything and seeing her out there. I was just like, 'Oh, yeah. It's our time now.' You know?

SL: It's our time. So how do we create more of that? How do we create more of those experiences for other little brown girls? What do we do? How do we move forward?

LB: It's a question I've gone back and forth, with over and over and over again, in my mind. The people who are oppressed we have to tell our stories, and we have to tell them authentic. We have to get out there. We have to write about this. We have to push for it and blah, blah, blah. And then I think, yeah, but sometimes you're screaming, and you're screaming, and you're screaming, and no one is listening to listening to you. No one is listening to you. You can only scream so loud. You can only make so many waves. You can only go out there, and you can only protest or whatever, you can only make so many shows, but at some point, the minority needs members of the majority to come down and be like, 'Hey, I understand that I'm a member of the majority. And I need to be levelling the playing field.' So, then I was thinking, well, maybe it's not the job of the oppressed to tell their own stories. Maybe it is the job of the oppressor to say no, I'm going to tell the story of the oppressed. Then I've been

seeing a lot of people who was like, the majority has been telling stories and they tell it wrong, like Nina Simone. So, it's a question that I have been wrestling with. I'm still thinking about that question, and I don't have an answer.

SL: So, thinking back on *Emilia*, the playwright, Morgan Lloyd Malcolm is a white woman.

LB: Right.

SL: But the director was a black woman.

LB: I think that was a smart move. I really think so. Because yes, the script was written, but when you put a black woman into the script, it takes on a whole new meaning. Like some of the things that they're delivering to you, you don't necessarily understand, because that's not your experience. Throughout the whole play I was like, 'Oh my gosh. Y'all know what she's saying, but y'all really don't know what she's saying.' Because as a black female, we're just on another level because we have this double consciousness that we're always living with. So yeah, she's speaking to you as a woman, but you don't know. When she was talking about the struggle that the past…I wear, what did she say? I wear the…

SL: I hold the muscle memory of all the past women…

LB: I was like, yeah, you understand that, but you don't understand our past women. You know what I mean?

SL: Yeah.

LB: I think it was a smart move. A smart collaboration.

SL: Why do you think Hollywood and the like are so quick to embrace the black British actor and not the black American actor?

LB: Because of the training. Because of the training. I will a hundred percent stand by that. That everyone thinks that if you train in London that you're just a better trained actor. I don't necessarily agree. But if you went to RADA, you're better than someone who went to...I feel like unless you're Yale, or Juilliard, or something in like in that realm, you're not, they'll take someone who's from Central. You know? I think that's the general consensus. If you're an actor from London, you're just better trained. I think that's all around. I don't necessarily agree with it. But that's exactly what I what I've experienced. But I don't know.

SL: Here a lot of the black actors and other actors of colour as well all say, 'I want to go to America.'

LB: They all say that.

SL: How does that make you feel? What goes through your mind when you hear that? Being a black American actor, yourself.

LB: I laugh. Because I'm like, you guys don't realise how many more opportunities you have here than there is over there, and then you want to get into a pool with what? Like ten times more people? How many more people do we have in the States? Across the nation? So, I just

laugh because I'm like, really? You want to go over there? When the chances are, especially if you want to do theatre, you'll be cast as Richard III here before you will in the states, so good luck. [chuckles] So, good luck. More power to ya. More power to ya. That's what I say to them. And it happens. It happens. I mean, we're all struggling. I don't know.
SL: So, let's circle back to this colourism situation because that was brought up a little earlier in our conversation. When we are seeing black women on stage, on TV, and film, how black are they? And when I asked that I mean literally melanin in the skin.

LB: Oh yeah.

SL: How black are they?

LB: Generally, when you see black women who are a love interest, they're Kerry Washington. Light skinned. Small. Halle Berry, you know? She can be a Bond girl. She's just light enough to be a Bond girl. You know? Generally, you just see, every single woman I see is super tiny and light skinned. [laughs] I literally think they take a brown paper bag and be like, 'Oh, you're too dark.' I think sometimes I just squeak by, and I think I know that. I do. I know that I just squeak by. Especially some of my headshots. If they're in the studio, the lighting makes me look a little bit lighter, but I have to be very careful about…If I know I'm gonna go to an audition, and I've been in the sun a lot, I generally avoid it so I can look, I can pass more. I know it's disturbing. I know, but I have to. I just know that the lighter I am more, the more castable I am.

SL: And how does that make you feel?

LB: That I want to look however I want no matter where the sun is. Just freakin' hire me because I can do the job. Because I'm good. [chuckles] Point blank. I also always keep my hair in a weave. Always. Like right now I have twists in my hair, and I will never walk into an audition like this. It's just not gonna happen. I always keep a weave in when I'm auditioning because it gives me a more ethically ambiguous look. I've always been told I look a lot Native American. So, it just makes it more…It's easier for them to digest, I guess. Yeah, more palatable with my weave in. Pin straight weave. Yeah.

SL: How do you reconcile that within yourself? As far as you essentially changing things, or masking certain things about yourself so that you are more acceptable within the performing arts world?

LB: I guess I've never really thought about it. I feel like a lot of actors are out there just trying to get the job, and you're willing to do whatever you do just to get the job. I don't know. I guess I've never looked at in a way that I was masking who I was. Although when I was in grad school, I stopped relaxing my hair, and it's funny because I feel like in grad school, I really found myself. I was experimenting with twists and braids, which I had never had before. I always had a relaxer in. It's funny as I felt like I ended grad school freeing myself, I went back to following the standards, that I'm again more palatable to the industry. I guess I just never really thought about it in a way that I was masking my identity. So, I think maybe I need you take some headshots with some fros and stuff. No, no. That was a joke. That was not supposed to be negating anything I was to say…That's a really interesting question. Yeah, that's so sad. Yeah, I do that. God. But I guess we're all trying to get the job. We really are.

SL: What would you like to see more of? What is missing when it comes to representation of black woman in the performing arts?

LB: I think right now we're seeing a lot of stereotypes of black woman. Especially younger black woman. We're always the single moms, no, baby daddy, or like three baby daddies, you know? I would like to see some stronger black women. I think the only show that I can think of right now is where she's going to college, she's got her life, and she's struggling. I think is the show *Grown-ish*, which is a spin-off of *Black-ish*. The only positive female influences that I'm seeing, apart from *Black Panther* because that dropped and our whole world was shook, is I see older black females. I think of roles that Viola Davis is in, Octavia Spencer again. I would like to see like, roles for early twenties or nineteen-year-olds or something like that. That shows them in a positive light. In a positive upbringing. I guess more roles, again, for my playing age group, because I feel like I'm in this weird playing age group. It's like, either I have to be the hot mess that has like five children, or I'm not gonna get cast. Does that makes sense? So I would like to see more representation, positive representation from black woman. That spans a wider age bracket. If that makes sense. That's what I'd really like to see.

SL: And when you say positive representation can you be a little bit more specific? You said less stereotypical. What else? What do you mean by that?

LB: What I mean by positive images is I don't want to see the woman who is drunk on the street, or drop out of high school, or she's the ghetto fabulous person. I think a lot of a lot of young women in like Tyler Perry movies are always depicted as super ghetto queen, and her outfits are kind of like outlandish, and things like that. By you constantly saying this is all we are is perpetuating a stereotype that I just don't agree with. I would love, love to see a show where the black girl is the emo girl. And she is walking around with like, punk rock t-shirts, and maybe her hair's in a fro, but she's wearing funky blue makeup, and she's just really into awesome rock bands. I would love to see you just like a strong ensemble show maybe. She doesn't even have to be the lead, which is sad. That's sad. But in an ensemble show a black, nerdy girl who is all about her books, and is just super smart. Or maybe has, I don't know, a touch of autism or something. I don't know. There's so many of us out there that you can choose from. Pick one. Pick one that's not your stereotypical…I just want to see something different something. Off the beaten path because we're not always in this box that everyone keeps trying to put us in. We're so much more than that. What I would love to see, is as many, as diverse white women that you have made, I would love to see all that reflected in not only black women but like Pinos [Filipinos] and Asian woman as well. If you can make all those characters for white women, you can make it all for us. You know? You can make *She's All That* with a black girl, and it could be an amazing movie.

SL: So, for all those people that have put you in a box or tried to put you in box. For all those times where you felt some type of way, because of the experiences you've had, in those audition rooms. In phone conversations, and regular conversations. If you had the chance to say what you really wanted to say. To really express who you are. If you were given that platform, what do you want to say to those people who are continually trying to put you in this box? This is what a black woman, and that is all. Knowing that you don't fit into that.

LB: Nobody puts baby in a corner. No. [laughs] The thing is, if I could clap back the way I wanted to, it would be a very angry clap back. Thus, perpetuating the stereotype that black women are always angry. And you know what? Fuck it. I have a lot to be angry about. I have so much to be angry about. I have so much to be angry about that I just hold it inside of me,

and it's like festering. Literally pouring out of me, and one microaggression could just let it loose. I don't even know where I would start with these people because, oh my gosh.

SL: Okay, so I'll put it to you this way. You've been told, 'Be more like 'us'. Have more attitude.' And you're like, 'Well, that's not who I am.' So, I'm looking at you and I'm gonna ask you, who are you?

LB: Who am I?

SL: If you're not that stereotype, then who are you?

LB: I am LaTanza. Brits. That's who I am. I am a multitude of things that makes me who I am. I'm someone who loves rock music. Loves reading and learning about things. And I love history, I'm obsessed with it. I love historical documentaries, everything. That's who I am. And just because I don't fit into your definition of black doesn't mean that I'm not black. I think you can go fuck yourself. [laughs] I just feel like there's so many different identities of the people that came before me that are running through these veins, and for you to just take away everything that I've accomplished, all the education that I received and just stripped me down to one thing, is absolutely ridiculous. I wish people could just take walk a mile, not even a mile, just two steps in my shoes, so they could see what's it like to be not the stereotypical black girl. I think they would see that black people come in, just like white people, all different types of personalities. All different types of interests and things that we like that we, we don't like, you know. Some of us are really good at this, and some of us aren't good at that. I wish those people would open up their eyes and just look around them. The world is a lot bigger than your own little way of thinking.

SL: Thank you.

LB: Yeah, it was great.
(End of Interview)

Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Nemuna Ceesay (NC), Black American Actress

Interviewer: Samia La Virgne (SL)

Date of Interview: 12 August 2017

Interview Setting: Hay-Patton Rehearsal Center, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland, Oregon USA

The transcript of this interview has been edited for length and pertinence to my research topic.

(Start of Interview)
SL: It is Saturday, August 12. And I'm with Nemuna Ceesay yep. And so, can you please tell me what your ethnic background is?

NC: Yes, I am biracial. My mom is white, Jew. Jewish woman, from Chicago and my dad is from the Gambia in West Africa. Yeah.

SL: And do you? Do you identify yourself as a black woman?

NC: I do identify myself as a black woman. But you know, day to day it kind of changes depending on circumstances, or situations, I guess. You know, some days I identify as biracial, and other days I very strongly identify as being a black woman.

SL: So, what does it mean to be a black woman?

NC: Yeah, that's a really hard question. I think there's two different sides to the coin, right? There's, there's being a, deciding that I am identifying myself as a black woman. And this is why I feel like a black woman. Then there's the other side of the coin where it's like, other people are saying that I'm a black woman. And what does that come with? Yeah, yeah.

SL: So, with that in mind, that dichotomy between your personal definition and what other people define black women being, how would you define the black female identity?

NC: Yeah, you know, the black female identity…I think for me, I've had to really kind of grapple with what does it mean to be like a black, an African American person in this country, that comes from, or a black female, African American that comes from like slave roots here in America, versus my situation, where I'm a first-generation Gambian on my father's side. And what does that mean? To carry, literally carry Africa with me day-to-day. You know, I visited Africa in 2009. I visited the Gambia for the first time and the only time so far, when I was twenty-one. And you know, the black female identity in Africa is both very different, and also very similar to what I have noticed in terms of the black female identity here in America. You always hear the kind of the statistics of the black woman is the lowest on the rung kind of thing, in terms of hierarchy. That's so interesting to me. I'm sure that that is true in terms of like statistics and payment, right? Employment, and things like that, but also, I don't think I've ever met anybody stronger. And, what's the word I'm looking for? I'm just gonna say magical, than the black women that I have met, both in my career and

outside of my career. I think black, the black female identity has a lot to do with struggle. Which is sad. I think that we've had to struggle so, so, so much, in terms of the way that people outside of our community view us, and also people within our community for us, I think sometimes. I think that having to get over that struggle and fight eight times harder than anybody else has to fight to get the same things has created these amazing otherworldly creatures in black women that I really, really appreciate. They talk about black girl magic and goddesses, right? I really feel that in terms of black female identity, but I think that it comes with a really high price.

SL: You are fortunate enough to be first generation with your father being from Gambia. You travelled there, which is really cool. What would you say is the difference that you've noticed between black women that are born in America and don't have a strong connection to their African roots, versus you growing up with a father whose from Africa, and really having more of, when you're around him, that African upbringing? What sort of differences have you noticed?

NC: You're saying between the black African female versus the like black American female?

SL: Yeah. You know, especially with you being first generation.

NC: Yeah.

SL: In your household, I'm assuming it was more Gambian traditions or whatnot.

NC: Yeah, yeah, yeah. People from all over Africa, or all-over West Africa, at least, because my dad, kind of hung out with everybody. The black African women that I know, and one of them being my stepmom, who was Gambian as well. When I was in Gambia, I really noticed, and I remember my mom talking about this too, because she was in Peace Corps in Africa, which is how she met my dad. And she's white, right? I remember her saying they're all these incredible things about Gambia specifically, and I'm sure other places in Africa. In terms of the way that they view family. In terms of the way that they take care of each other, even when they have nothing. All these great things. I remember her saying one of the hardest things for her though, was the way that women are treated, or this hierarchy of how men are so much more powerful than women there. That is something that I experienced in Gambia, but there also is this idea, or this feeling of everybody knows exactly what they're supposed to be doing when, right? There's a lot of rules, or not rules necessarily, but the tradition of the women cook all the meals, and they take care of all the children, and then the men kind of sit around and they tell stories all day, and they drink tea, and they laugh, and whatever. But there was never, as far as I could tell, as far as I could see, this idea of I wish that I had more, you know? The family dynamics were very, very clear, and whether that's a good thing or a bad thing I don't know.

People could argue that if they knew that they could have more, then maybe they would want to have more. Versus here, I feel like there's a lot more of a feeling of black women continuing to be kind of pushed down in a way that they're aware of the fact that that's not what should be happening, you know? The black women, which is most of the black women I know, pulled themselves up by the bootstraps or whatever that phrase is, and are incredibly successful people. There's still this feeling of like, no, no, no, you're supposed to be down here. You're supposed to do this thing, you know? So, there's an ease and a contentment with the African women that I know, because they are working. You know what I mean? They do

they have their jobs, and they're very clear and nobody questions them about what they're supposed to be doing or what they're not supposed to be doing. Versus here, I feel like it's just so much more…I don't know muddy, right? Yeah. I don't, and again I don't know if it's what's good or what's…There's no judgment in terms of that's bad or that's good, or they should have more da, da, da, da. It's just that's what I noticed in terms of those different relationships.

SL: Right, the differences?

NC: Mm hmm.

SL: I understand that. That makes sense. I mean, I grew up in America, but now I've been living in England for about ten years, and I have definitely noticed a difference between black British people, and African American.

NC: Interesting.

SL: But also in Birmingham, where I live, there's a very large African community and Afro-Caribbean community and seeing that dynamic, and I'm often jealous.

NC: Right, right, right. Yeah.

SL: I think it is something about when you're closer to your roots, you know? A lot of them are first or second generation, if they are black British. Or they've recently come over from Jamaica, or Ghana, or Nigeria, and so there is this…You know, it's interesting, you're saying there's a sort of ease and contentment, and that's a good way to put it, and maybe that's what I'm seeing.

NC: Yeah, but it's like they are appreciated for the work that they do. When you talk to housewives here that are like, 'I am a housewife and I'm proud to be a housewife. I work my ass off.' Excuse my language. You know? Like I take care of the kids, I do the whatever, and that is my role, and I am content with that role. You know what I mean? I never felt like, and I didn't have very, really deep conversations with my African family there about this specific thing because, you know, it's kind of a…

SL: Right.

NC: So, are you unhappy in this? You know? No, I'm not gonna do that, but they seem to really, really know this is what I do, this what you do, and that's fine. Which was interesting. Hard for me as an American. I could never, I could never be content doing this. I could never be happy.

SL: Very, very interesting. So, do you feel, as a black actress, and being a professional working actress, that there's a stigma that you've maybe come across or felt like you've experienced?

NC: A stigma in terms of people look at me, as a black female and assume?

SL: Assume yeah. Stereotypes, racism, discrimination, any of those sorts of things.

NC: I mean, yes, definitely. Every day. Yeah. It's interesting because right now I'm at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Which, it is ahead of the curve in terms of really pushing for equity, diversity, and inclusion. It's like a 61% acting company of colour this year, which is, they're very ahead in a lot of ways. I remember coming here last season and being like,' Oh my God, I've reached the Mecca of regional theatre.' I don't have to worry, they're so woke. What I've started to realise, especially this year now that some of the magic of first year is gone, that we're just, we are really just living in a system. Everybody, you know. Even if you're pushing forward in terms of I really gotta try to do this EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) work or whatever, we just have so far to go. Even with all of this amazing stuff, which is amazing, I'm not like discrediting that, but there's still always, especially being in Oregon, right? There's always something and it creeps in, in all these different ways, you know?

We've been learning all this terminology of like microaggressions and macroaggressions, all this stuff, right? It's my every day. It's like, half my day, every day, is dealing with microaggressions. [laughs] It's crazy. So yes. I mean, there's so many examples I could give. Like one of the main things that happens here is, I am one of maybe four, youngish, say like thirty-five down, black actresses here. All of us look very different. We're all in different shows. We all do very different things, are very, very different actresses. And it's like, every day somebody thinks I'm another one. You know? Like, 'Oh, that black actress who I just saw in *Odyssey*.' I'm like, 'No. I'm not in that.' Nope, and we look totally different. She's six foot tall, but okay, you know. So, like little things like that. You really, you sat there and watched me for three hours, or watched this person for three hours, and looked at my face, and yet, you can't differentiate? So, there's little things like that.

Then there's bigger things you know? Last year, I was in *Great Expectations*, and I played the female lead, Estella, who is the love interest of Pip. The guy who was playing Pip, who I love, love dearly, is this beautiful, what society would consider a very attractive white man. Right? And I was his love interest, and people could not…It was like, 'How could he be in love with her?' You know what I mean? I heard it in ways that weren't that blunt. Like, 'Oh, well, that's so interesting. You wouldn't really be in that time period. So how did you figure out how to get there?' Then some of my other colleagues would do talk backs and people would literally be like, 'I don't understand why Estella was black.' Right? Things like that. Suspension of disbelief, right? You know that you're coming to the theatre. Also, get rid of that because there's nothing that you should disbelieve about this. Right? So, lots of things like that in terms of, we really do have to work so much harder to really just be believable. I knew stepping out onto the stage for the first time as Estella, that the immediate reaction of the audience was going to be, 'What? She's black?', and they were going to be taken out of it, right? Then I would have to work, work, work, work, in order to get them back into the story by being the best actress that I could be. By having the best chemistry, I could have with the guy playing Pip, right? It's everything all the time, right? Even when they really love you in a role or whatever, there's always a little comment or a little, 'Wow! You were so great.' As if you shouldn't be, you know? Things like that. So yeah, every day all the time. It's exhausting. [laughs] Like, really guys? Yeah, and it happens all over the country. Yeah, it's hard.

SL: Which is part of the reason why I'm doing this research. I think there's a lot of talk about diversity and inclusion and representation, but a lot of times the examples being used or the people that we're holding up and praising tend to be black men.

NC: Yep.

SL: And somehow, us as black women have gotten lost in the shuffle.

NC: Right.

SL: I'm trying to capture more of, I want to hear the black female voices, because the black male experience and the female experience are very different.

NC: Mm hmm. Totally.

SL: So, you were mentioning about you being Estella in *Great Expectations*. What would you say was the ethnic makeup? How many other non-white people were in that cast?

NC: Yeah, you know, they do a pretty good job here of that. There were, I don't know the number exactly, but I would say probably at least half of, maybe a little less than half of that cast, and it was a pretty big cast, were people of colour. If you think of like, Estella, it's very easy to make her the villain, right? The other person that was black in it was the actor playing Magwitch, who was incredible, but he's a criminal. The first thing you see is him coming out with shackles on his legs. He has an incredible arc where he then kind of becomes the father figure and he's amazing and you love him, but I'm like, that's a very strong image. You know what I mean? It's the same with like *Henry IV* this year. I mean, you'll see it, but the rebel camp, who to me when I read it on the page, I'm like, I'm for the rebels, I'm on their side. The rebels are primarily people of colour. So then when they lose a battle, lose it. It's like okay, so what are we saying there? You know what I mean? That's the thing that I think American theatre needs to step up. Not even just the theatre, TV, everything needs to step up. Cool, so you're casting people of colour, or females if you want to talk about women of colour, but then what are you casting them in? What story are you telling by casting this person as the villain? Or casting this person as the best friend, but not the romantic lead. You know what I mean? Like, things like that, and that's something that I still feel is a little bit lacking. Even here, where it's like, we're kind of the leaders. We need to have, and you need to start having conversations with these people in order to know what, what it, how we're feeling within this, right? Start talking to your actresses of colour, and being like, 'So what are you seeing? What are you feeling in this? What kind of patterns have you been seeing?' Right? I don't feel like this industry is quite there yet in terms of that.

SL: Definitely. Touching upon interracial relationships being depicted onstage, more often than not, in my personal experience, where I've gone to the theatre, it's usually a black man with a white woman.

NC: Mm hmmm.

SL: I think it's great that you've had the experience of it being the opposite way around.

NC: Yeah.

SL: But you still got comments and microaggressions and things like that. Do you think it's happening in that same sort of way when there's a black man with a white woman?

NC: In terms of the like, the…

SL: The reaction and the way that that relationship is perceived and received by the audience?

NC: I think it's switches. So, I think in my case with being the black woman to the white man, I think all the comments were to me. I think, a lot of times when it's the other way around, people can't understand it. It turns to the white woman to be like, 'Why would you? I don't under…How did you do that? Like, how did you…?' You know what I mean? So, I think that I think there's still disbelief probably. But I think also, like you're saying, in media and whatever, we're so much more used to seeing that, you know. So, I think there's, it's a lot less jarring for audiences to see that. I still think that they're kind of like, 'Okay, sure, I guess I'll believe it, since, I always have to believe that since people are trying to do this diversity thing.' You know what I mean? But it's a lot more jarring the other way around? I think. And I think that's primarily with black women. We also start to see, white, white man, Asian woman. White man, I think, black women specifically, white audiences cannot, they can't figure out why this white man would be with this black woman.

SL: One of the things I'm very curious about within this research, really trying to delve into the thoughts and experiences of Black actresses. I'm trying to touch upon taboos, questions that we're afraid to ask, or we don't really talk about as much. So, I hope that you take this in the spirit that it's supposed to be in.

NC: Yeah.

SL: As a lighter skinned actress.

NC: Yeah.

SL: What are some thoughts or experiences that you've had that are more unique to, that have to deal with your skin tone specifically? I don't think we talk about that as much. Because personally, I find that when I do see black women in more supporting or lead roles, they usually are mixed-race.

NC: Yeah.

SL: Or very light.

NC: Totally.

SL: I'm curious, what that is like for you and how does that make you feel? Knowing that there's possibly other black women who are out there who are darker skinned that may love it or may hate it?

NC: Right. Yeah, I've thought about this a lot. A lot. We talk about privileges all the time, right? And I am very aware that at least in this industry, my lighter skin is a privilege that I have over a lot of my friends, a lot of fellow actresses that have darker skin, right? I always think that I've noticed through a lot of my casting that I feel like I'm always the safe choice. If that makes sense, right? It's like we really, we want diversity, or we don't want, but we really recognise that we have to move towards that. This is the theatre speaking. And we don't want to go too crazy right? We'll do it. We'll do it easy for our audiences, so they don't all get too freaked out.

For example, I don't want to talk about *Great Ex* the whole time, but with Estella, would they have cast a dark-skinned person in this role? I don't actually really know the answer to that, but I would guess that probably not. You know? I think there was a reason why I was cast in that role. I talked to a lot of my, a lot of my best friends are dark skinned, and they are often cast in those stereotypically black roles, right? The funny best friend, or the baby mama, or the drug addict, and it's kind of like, really? I am often, my casting comes from this role is usually played as a white person, but we're trying to diversify. Most of the things that I play are that. Also, I play a lot of ambiguous…Last year along with *Great Ex* I was, I played a Puerto Rican. Who, because they cast me, they were like, 'Well, she's half Puerto Rican, half black. Kind of ethnically ambiguous.' We can make her play a Latinx role, too. You know? I try really hard not to take those roles from other people. Right? I want to make it very clear that I am not Puerto Rican. This is not, I'm not playing this as a as a Puerto Rican, but I've noticed I've been pushed into that category of, okay, our first try at diversity category. You know what I mean?

I also want to play like black roles. You know? Like August Wilson, and Dominique Morisseau, and Lynn Nottage. I want to be able to play those things. I've had the opposite of the coin where I'm not dark enough to play that African. I am African though. [laughs] Like literally I am, that's my blood, right? A lot of that, oh, but you're not dark enough. I'm like, but what is that? What are you…? So, I think that there's just a lot of confusion right now about what does it mean to be black? Kind of like going back to one of those first questions that you asked. What are you? What does it mean to be black? Or what does it look like to be black, right? What kind of a black person are you, kind of a thing? I've kind of had to finagle that in my career a lot. A lot and having to talk to some of my best friends who are, 'That's so cool that you get the opportunity to play that role. Nobody would ever cast me in that.' You know, and it sucks. It sucks.

SL: So why did you become an actress? Lighten up the questions a bit.

NC: Yeah. I don't really know the answer to that question. I really do believe it's like something that chooses you. I started as a singer, or started as loving to sing, and in sixth grade, just randomly decided to audition for *Annie* because I love to sing. Then I did and then I did my first show, and it just, the theatre bug bit me, if you will. I like attention. [laughs] I like it when people clap for me. You know? I really do think it's been very therapeutic for me. I think it's my therapy, in a way too. Not saying I don't need real therapy too, but it lets me grapple with things about myself. Honestly, until I hit grad school…So I was what twenty-one? I had no black friends because I grew up in a very white community. I went to schools that were primarily white. I wasn't comfortable with my identity in that time, right? I was like, I don't know how to be black. Not that I didn't want to, but I was like, I really don't know how to do that. I don't speak that language. This is the things that I thought, right?

I came to grad school and, I started to find myself, right? I started to have to grapple with, I remember having this whole conversation with my acting teacher. The first thing she cast me in, or the first scene I did was with one of my best friends Latetha, who's a dark-skinned black woman. It was *Our Lady of 121st Street* by Stephen Adly Guirgis. It's a black play, not a black play, but that scene, those characters are, and I had this whole breakdown because I was like, 'I don't know how to do this. I don't know why you cast me in this. I can't. I don't…', and she was like 'You need to, you need to do it. You're gonna do it.' It was the opening of finding out who I am. Having to grapple with, that part of me and figuring out what it means, who I am as a black woman, you know. And so acting has been so helpful to

me, and also in helping other people. Then, telling my story is…I get it, it was really hard for me. I still struggle every day to try to, to deepen that piece of me. So, I don't think that's why I started acting, but that's kind of what I've, a piece of what I've gotten out of out of acting.

SL: Interesting. Where'd you get your masters?

NC: American Conservatory Theatre.

SL: Okay, ACT.

NC: Yeah.

SL: In that program, how many other black students were there in your cohort?

NC: There were ten in my class, it kind of depends, year to year. There are ten of my class. There were four black people, including me, an Asian man and five white people.

SL: So that's pretty diverse.

NC: Pretty good, yeah. They do fairly well, better than a lot of other places, in terms of casting, at least for the conservatory, at picking students.

SL: I got my master's degree in England. It is an MFA program, so it is for Americans. Americans can come over and specifically study the British tradition of acting.

NC: Oh, that's cool.

SL: So, Shakespeare, Restoration. So, yeah, I'm a classically trained actor.

NC: Yes. Love it.

SL: There were nine people in my cohort. I was the only black person, and the only personal colour. So, you mentioned having to work on that scene.

NC: Yeah.

SL: Really kind of pushed you, and made you start to grapple, and figure out more of who you are as a woman, and as a black woman. Would you say that having other people of colour going through that journey with you helped as well?

NC: Oh, my God, immensely. Immensely, because everybody falls into the stereotypes, right? So, all the casting and stuff that happened, we were very lucky to have five of us. In that we rotated through the like, the person of colour role, and got to do other things, right? We were all, if nothing else, we were just there to hold each other up, you know. There were lots of issues that came up, you know, either within the conservatory, or within ACT as an organisation or with other classes. There were lots of race things that came up, you know, but at least if nothing else had each other to talk about it, to back each other up when something happened, you know. We really got the opportunity to playthings all over the gambit of theatre and plays, versus always having one person who always falls into the character role or the person of colour role, or yeah.

SL: Yeah, you're very lucky.

NC: Sorry, you had to deal with that. It's hard.

SL: Having been the only one it was extremely difficult. I did deal with…Now I can say it outright. I can say it was stereotypes. It was discrimination. It was racism. At the time it was happening, I think, especially if you happen to be the only person and you're surrounded by white people. There's this voice that it's like, 'No, it's not.'

NC: Because you have to survive or I can't, nobody is going to help me.

SL: Right.

NC: If I say this, then I'm alone trying to deal with this.

SL: Right.

NC: Yeah.

SL: And no one wants to be called racist. I think a lot of people do have a bit of discrimination and prejudice and sometimes even racism within them, not knowing because it is so institutionalised. And so, they think it's something else.

NC: Totally.

SL: It's hard if you're the only person to look them in the eye and say…

NC: Yeah.

SL: This is what it is. Are you still in touch with some of your…?

NC: Yeah, actually my two of my best friends, two of the black people that were in my class, that were my best friends, literally just left yesterday. They came visit me. So yeah, I mean we all were in an incredibly close class. And especially the people of colour have really kept in touch.

SL: That's good. So, I want to talk a little bit about the images of black women that we see on TV, media, or even theatre.

NC: Yeah.

SL: Do you think that there's a shift happening to where we're starting to see a little bit more actual realistic, black female characters, that are starting to get away from stereotypes? Or are we still falling into the same old rut?

NC: I think we're taking baby steps forward. If you think of like Viola Davis and Kerry Washington, we're starting to see at least images of strong black women who are successful. We're still not seeing enough of black women in love, you know. We're not seeing black women as even if you look at…You know *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, right? Yeah sure, the President wants is obsessed with Olivia Pope, right? But for most of it, I

haven't watched it a long time, for most of it, he's married. She's, his mistress. Even with like, *How to Get Away with Murder*, right? You like see this guy cheated on her with whatever, right? I want to see black women. I want to see black women who are desirable. I want to see not only a strong black woman, but somebody who isn't villainized all the time, you know, because even then it's questionable. You're like, well, you're still kind of doing shady things, right? I want to see that, and I still don't feel like we're seeing that. Like you said, I feel like most of the time when you do see a black woman in a romantic lead, it's somebody who's biracial or really light skinned, right? I mean, I just watched *Loving* the other day for the first time. Yeah, and it was good, but Ruth Negga, who's, she's Ethiopian. She's beautiful. She's incredible. She was so good. She's real light skinned and the woman who actually Loving's wife, I forget her name. She wasn't that light skinned. I'm like, why are you casting somebody that's that light skinned then? You know what I mean? That kind of a thing. Where we're still trying to keep it safe and comfortable for the white audiences.

Or we're doing black movies that you know, it's like these, this black person is in love with another black person and they're desirable and they're just this great person or whatever, but it's all black people. So, it's a black movie, right? How many white audiences are going to actually come out and see that? See that version of black love or whatever? I do think that we're taking baby steps, but you look at award shows and stuff like the Tony's. This year was the saddest thing ever. It was so white. The Oscars after Lupita won, which was like the best thing ever, that year was incredible. Then the next year, it was all white people again. It's like throwing us a bone and being like, 'Here. Stop complaining. We'll give you some black awards or whatever.' Then the next year they're like, 'Well, we already did that.' And it's like, no, because white should not be the default. You know? I think white is still the default.

I do think it's going to take a really long time for it to change. So, I guess it's good that we're, I feel like we're kind of taking baby steps, but they're a real small baby. That's like a preemie baby. Tiny little steps, you know? That's how I feel. I think in the theatre it's hard because I've been here for two years. They're taking such strides in a way that other theatres aren't. I'm scared to leave, you know. I'm not going to be here next season. I'm a little scared, because I've been really, really spoiled in a lot of ways here, because even when problems come up, I feel like I can talk about them. You feel like you can say something. Like you were saying, when you're the only one…And I'm scared to go to these other regional theatres and be like, 'Wow, I've really been living in a bubble for two years. This is still really sad.' I know that that's true, you know. So it's happening. You know, I've met a lot of casting directors. Artistic directors and things come here and meet with us, and I've met a lot of them who've said, you know, we're doing a lot of ED and I work. We brought in a diversity consultant; we're really trying. So, a lot of theatres are starting it, and that's great. I hope that it continues to keep things moving forward, but it's hard. You start to feel sometimes like I don't know if this is ever gonna get better, at least not in my lifetime. You know? How long do we, are we going to have to deal with this?

SL: I agree with you. I did, for my master's, did research specifically into black women playing lead roles on professional Shakespearean stage. Very specific little niche.

NC: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SL: I had to compile a lot of my own statistics, because of course, if you're calling theatres, and I didn't tell them, that's what I was researching. I told them I was looking just at diversity

on the Shakespearean stage, right? But even then, they said, 'Oh, we don't keep these numbers, or we don't do these sorts of things.'

NC: Of course, they don't.

SL: Basically, everyone that I called said they didn't really keep any statistics, or they don't have any numbers. Which I believe is a lie, especially in places like, and even OSF, anyone that has their mission statement about how diverse and how much inclusion they have…

NC: Right.

SL: They have to be keeping some sort of numbers somewhere.

NC: Yeah.

SL: So, it was really interesting. What I found, because I did have to compile my own statistics for theatres, and I was looking at a few big ones in the UK and few big ones here in the US. I can say that, yeah, OSF is ahead of the curve, and they are doing better than pretty much everyone else in the United States, which is nice. When I was doing those statistics, it was from a couple seasons ago. It has been nice to see that there has been a huge growth in the people of colour, and the women of colour, and the black women.

NC: Right, right, right.

SL: So that's been really great to see, but at the same time, I was still saddened by it, because I felt like, that's still not enough.

NC: Well, that's the thing, right? Because you get into this idea of like, 'Oh they're doing it. They're doing it!' Then for a second feels like, 'Oh, well, we don't have to keep working. Right?' It's like what I was saying about the Oscars. They trick us into being like, 'Look, we're doing it.' And we're like, 'Yay, it's happening.' Then you get distracted, and all of a sudden, you look back and you're like, 'Wait. That's not enough. What you're doing?' Just because you're taking a step forward doesn't mean that you're doing enough. Look at what you're doing with all the white people, right? For example, here, I feel bad talking about OSF, I love them and they're amazing, but a lot of the shows of colour, and not just black shows but the Latinx show that they do each year or, an Asian show that they do, a lot of times they're in the short slot in the season, right? So, you're like, wait, so *Oklahoma* or whatever can be all year long, but then you take the Latinx show, which is an incredible show, which audiences would continue to be buying tickets for, and you put it in the short slot. Why? You know. Why is that the pattern year after year, after year, after year, that the show of colour is the shorter show? Then you replace it with another short POC show. It's just things like that, right. Where okay, you're doing it, but what are the details of how you're doing it? I think that's, what's kind of keeping us back in terms of American theatre and everything else in the industry to.

SL: Knowing that there are all these barriers against you as a black actress, is there anything that you're personally feeling that you're doing to push against that? Or to help forward the movement if you will?

NC: Yeah. That's a good question because I asked myself this all the time, I'm like, 'Am I, am I doing enough? What am I doing?' Is it enough to continue to keep being on the stage and keep doing good work? I don't think it's enough. I'm now starting to, I think what really needs to happen and this isn't all just on me or on us, but we need to start being in leadership roles, right? We need to start and that's hard because somebody needs to let us be in a leadership role. I think that I'm starting now to be like, I really want to be a director. We did a Juneteenth celebration this year, and I was one of the directors on it. Continuing to talk about the issues but also continuing to walk through the world as…I am a black woman and I'm proud to be a black woman, and this is why I'm proud to be a black woman, and I'm going to be in your face and show you how proud I am to be a black woman, right? Go to talk backs and talk about the issues, right? If something comes up, that's the thing I'm really working on right now is when somebody says, 'Oh, great job in the *Odyssey*.' Not just being like I can't deal with this thank you and walking away, but being like, 'Oh, actually, that wasn't me in the *Odyssey*. That was another black actress named blah, blah, blah, and she's fantastic, but I'm in these shows.' So, like the calling people out on stuff, right?

There's another black actress here who has these really long braids, and she's like, 'People always be trying to touch my braids.' She's now, I will be like, 'No. Stop. You don't want to do that.' People are like, 'What? Huh?' They get all flustered, right? She's like, 'No. You don't want to do that. Do not touch my hair.' Right? I think that's a huge step in that direction, is being able to, because we've been so silenced, right? Continue to be silenced, and I think it's important to use our voices. To be like, 'Hey guys, this is what's going on. We're aware that this is going on, and you should be aware to.' You know? It's hard to because I don't want to have to educate people all the time. You know? I'm tired. That's not, we shouldn't have to do our job and have to educate people all the time. So, finding that balance is really hard, but I think that's the thing that I'm really trying to focus on right now. Is, how do I become a leader in this? What are the skills that I can provide, in order to keep working on this fight?

SL: So, when we were walking over, there were people who congratulated you on your show last night. Were you actually in a show last night?

NC: I was in a show yesterday. A matinee, so I don't know. So, this is the problem, and this makes me really, I talked to my friends about this. It makes me so sad because I can't even get compliments anymore because my immediate reaction is they're not talking about me. Right? It sucks, right. Then I'm like, I don't know what she was playing last night, but they could have thought I was any. You know? Maybe they did see my matinee and they just went to last night. Maybe, but I don't know. My immediate reaction is, I'm sure they're not talking about me. They must be talking about one of the other black actresses, and that is so sad. We can't even take a compliment about our work. Yeah.

SL: Well, just me being here the past couple days and walking around, and my friend that came down to visit me, he is black as well. People are always waving at us, cars are honking and waving at us, and I've been taken aback like what's going on?

NC: Yeah.

SL: He said, 'They probably think you're one of the actors in the shows.'

NC: Yeah. For sure. For sure. I hear that with any POC that comes to visit Ashland because the only POCs that are here, mostly, all, other than maybe like two that I've seen around, are

actors here. They're the only people that are brought in. We're all brought in here. So anytime a POC comes to visit, people are like, 'Oh my god, that must be…'Or like, 'Great job in the…', and it's like what? What are you talking about? It's so ridiculous. I'm like, come on guys, you got to do better.

SL: Yeah. I mean one of my dreams is one day to be performing here.

NC: Yeah, it's beautiful. That's great. Then hopefully people are honking and being like, 'Yes, great work', but now it's like, 'Please guys, it's really weird.'

SL: Just two more questions and then we'll be done.

NC: Yeah.

SL: You were mentioning every day you get microaggressions. What are some of the microaggressions or some of those little statements that people have said to you that have been super racist or prejudice without being obviously racist?

NC: Right, right. Well, there's two things. In terms of microaggressions, one of the biggest that I get every day is them thinking I'm another black woman. Little things like, 'Wow your Shakespeare is just, it's so clear.' Right? Or little things about how I speak. I actually personally did grow up with all white people, all the time, and all my classes, and all my whatever and I'm from California. I think before I open my mouth, and somebody looks at me and they're like this is a black woman. They think I should speak like a black woman, whatever that means, you know? Then talking people are like, 'Oh my god, you're so articulate.' I'm like, what the…? Whether you grew up with white people or not, we're all educated, articulate, what are you talking about? So, stuff like that. The other thing that I get, and this is another term that I just learned which I really didn't know is micro-inequity. So microaggressions are as far as I understand, microaggressions are things that people say to you that you're like, that's a little shady, and then a micro-inequity is when you walk into a room and you feel like, 'Oo,' and that happens to me a lot in Oregon. Especially here, everybody's looking all the time. A) Because they probably think I'm an actor, and B) Because they're like, 'Oh my god, there's a person of colour here.' When I go to Medford, which is like thirty minutes away, and it's a lot more conservative, right? Ashland's kind of this little hub of liberal people. I walked into an ULTA, and no one would talk to me, or they're following you. Things like that too, where you're…A micro-inequity like you say something and you're in a room discussing something and they don't listen to what you're saying, right? They skate over what you're saying and go to what this person said. So, I get a lot of that too. Just being really aware, and those are the things where you're like, 'Maybe I'm crazy. Maybe it's…' Right? It happens all the time. So, it's like okay, I'm not crazy. Or people will say, 'Great job in the *Odyssey*,' and I'll be like, 'Oh, I wasn't in that.' And they're like, 'Oh my god, but you look exactly like her.' No, I don't. You know? [laughs] Like trying to justify, their mistake. It's like, 'Wow, but you look exactly like that other girl.' So, stuff like that, you know?

SL: Yeah. Assumptions.

NC: Yeah.

SL: I hate that. I hate that.

NC: I know. It's just yeah, it makes your skin crawl.

SL: It does. It really does. So, for the final question, if you could go back in time, and speak to your younger self, what advice would you give to the younger you about being a black woman and being an actress?

NC: Being black woman and being an actress. I would tell her that it's important to find mentors. [laughs] I would tell her that she needs to go find some black women. Whether they're in arts or not, and befriend them and talk to them, and have people in her life that remind her that she is a black woman. Right? That it's okay that she's a black woman. I would tell her to spend more time embracing her African roots versus trying to push them away because she's gonna have to deal with them at some point, so might as well deal with them now. [laughs] In terms of being a black actress too, I don't think there's anything, I think all of that stuff that I just said is helpful in terms of the work too, right? I think just knowing, being very clear at, well as clear as you can be, about who you are is important in life and is important in the art. I don't think there's anything more to it than that, you know. You figure out the acting thing as you go along, but all the BS that comes with being a black actress stems from just being black. So, yeah.

SL: Well, thank you very much.

NC: Thank you. That was so fun.
(End of Interview)

Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Margaret Ivey (MI), Black American Actress

Interviewer: Samia La Virgne (SL)

Date of Interview: 18 April 2018

Interview Setting: Private residence in Brooklyn, New York, USA

The transcript of this interview has been edited for length and pertinence to my research topic.

(Start of Interview)
SL: You were saying about *Les Mis*…

MI: I find it striking that with *Les Mis* and with Shakespeare, there is so much diverse and colour-blind casting that happens. Okay, so we saw *Winter's Tale* when we were at BADA (British American Drama Academy). Still incredible. I need to get tickets to *Cursed Child* just based on my love for Dumezweni. But my point is, and don't get me wrong, flawless. I love her in that role. But I've also seen another production at the Theatre For a New Audience, which is just down the street, where there was also a woman of colour and it's Paulina, right?

SL: Yes.

MI: And so, what is that about? The strong tough advisor, who speaks truth to power always has to be an Indian woman or black woman? Cool. But why? Why can't Hermione be black? Why can't Perdita be black? Or like I was saying with Les Mis, Eponine is always Asian or, Fontine is sometimes black, but normally she's blonde. And Cosette is never anything other than really, really pasty, and black-haired white girl. I'm like, why can't the girl who just gets to fall in love and be taken care of for two and a half hours of this musical also be a woman of colour? Why did all the really miserable ones have to be people of colour? So, we just dove go straight into it apparently.

SL: So, you think that it's still stereotypical when there is that representation there?

MI: Yeah, I feel like it can be. I feel like it's a lot of people trying to do the right thing, but because of the nature of our business, and that people fall into types, or they see that thing worked. Let's just do it again. That's why what's happening with *Hamilton* is really cool. to watch the difference between the original cast and then the cast that are going on tour, and just how they are not taking the original cast as a blueprint for how you have to cast this musical. You know, the Schuyler Sisters that went out on tour were all different shades than the ones that started. So, they're not falling into these tropes of colourism or anything like that.

SL: I just saw *Hamilton* in London.

MI: Okay.

SL: It was fantastic. I wasn't sure because sometimes there's big hype over shows. And I loved it, and I have to see it again. Besides *The Winter's Tale* that we saw, it's one of the most perfect, close to perfect productions I've ever seen.

MI: Yeah.

SL: All of the elements worked so nicely together. It's good storytelling. I thought it was really good casting and, great music. I thought it was a good balance. The ensemble work was insane. Insane. The choreography. It just was everything.

MI: Yeah. And even with this show, and this is not really my story to tell, but I know someone who is in one of the companies of *Hamilton*. And this actor talks about the challenge of being a person of colour and playing people who own slaves every night. Even though we are doing this great diverse cast. Even though we are rewriting the American story through the bodies of people colour. You're still knowing that these people owned other people.

SL: Yeah.

MI: It's a heavy burden. Even when you're making bank in one of the most successful musicals ever. And when this actor said that to me, it kind of took my breath away. But you think you're good. You're in *Hamilton*.

SL: Yeah, that's really interesting. I guess. I never really thought about it that way. I wonder if there's some sort of empowerment that comes from finally being allowed to play a character that oppressed, who you were? It's this weird switch on it if that makes sense.

MI: Yes.

SL: You know, being able to, in a sense, find the empathy really, of someone…This whole group of people that oppressed…I think about how, us, as people of colour, we always want to be able to play roles that were just like, 'Man why is it always white folks?' But on the flip side of that, I have a few white actor friends were just like, 'Yeah, I can never be in Hamilton really. Unless I'm like the token…'

MI: The one white girl.

SL: The one person in the ensemble if I'm lucky. But for them, they're just like, that's an amazing show, and I could never play it. You know? And my response is, welcome to my life.

MI: Yeah.

SL: So, I think it's very interesting that your friend talks about having to deal with playing someone that was a slave owner, but what sort of empathy is it creating within them?

MI: Sure.

SL: Or empowerment? Is it creating an understanding? If maybe, we started to do more of that switching around if that makes sense.

MI: Yeah.

SL: Within the performing arts, could that help us sort of mend you know, the pain that it comes from?

MI: But the switching really only goes one way right now.

SL: Yeah.

MI: With good reason.

SL: Yes, yes.

MI: Excellent reason. I don't think we're quite there yet.

SL: Yes.

MI: Yeah. But I should probably let you get to the questions you actually have. [laughs]

SL: It's just kind of interesting what comes up you know? It's related. It's definitely related. So, let me just back it up a bit. This is Margaret.

MI: Hi. I'm Margaret.

SL: So, Margaret, what is your ethnic makeup? Your ethnic background? If you know.

MI: That's such a complicated question. I'll get around to the answer, but you just made me think of someone I work with, who is European, asked me, kind of out of the blue, 'What are you?' He didn't say…He said, 'What's your background?' Or one of those ways that white people say it. Or he said flat out, 'Are you mixed?' And it made my stomach do this thing. And it turned out that he just wanted to talk eventually about the show, *A Movie Star Has to Start in Black and White*, by I believe Adrienne Kennedy. He wanted to talk about that play. But the question came so out of place that I didn't know whether to be offended or not. And it's so nice to be asked that by a friend, because I feel like I want to answer it with a friend, and I don't want to answer it with strangers or when we don't have a basis. You know? And people just like jump to it.

SL: Yeah. And I'm trying to find ways to be sensitive about asking that.

MI: Yeah. When I first got here to New York, I got that a lot when I would go in for Equity Principal Auditions, EPA. I'd get a lot of, 'Where are you from?' And I didn't know what that was code for. So, I'd be like, 'I'm from Atlanta. I just moved here.' And they'd be like, 'Okay.' You could tell they wanted to follow up but knew that that would not be appropriate, so they just didn't. Anyway, to answer your question, I'm black. I'm the people who hear this can't see this, and I'm very light skinned. So, it's worth noting that both of my parents are black. And that is, normally people don't expect that. They expect because of how I looked at half is white, and half is black. But that's not true. And I have Cherokee and Blackfeet Indian, and some German and Irish that we know about, but that's all going back much farther. So that's part of it, but I don't know more specifically than that.

SL: What does it mean to you to be a black woman? How do you identify your black female identity?

MI: Wow. You're just going in. I don't know if I've ever been asked that. I know that it is central to me, but I don't know necessarily that I've ever had to explain what that means. It ties a lot to growing up in Atlanta. It ties a lot to my mother, who knew that I was fair skinned, and knew that I would probably be going to prep school with predominantly white other students. So, she really worked hard to make sure, as she put it, 'That I knew who I was.' She put me into an audience black private school when I was younger that required us to drive an hour and a half in the morning. It was way far from where we lived. So that I had two years there of being surrounded by all black students. And we were growing up in Atlanta, and in the 90s, so taking me to the King Center and having the Olympics there. I just really got this whole school outside of school cultural immersion. Especially steeped in the civil rights movement and the history just living in Atlanta. So, it's, it's also tied to be as being a southern black woman. I think is part of how I would define it. I don't know if I'm giving it a definition of being a black woman is this but what I can say is, it is the lens which I view the world. It is the lens through which I view social interactions. There's always a little feed running through my head of, especially when moments of conflict come of, 'Is this happening because I'm a woman? Is this happening because I'm black? Is this…?' It informs the way I'm on the subway. I'm aware of my strength from being a black woman and I'm aware of my vulnerability from being a black woman. It affects consciously or unconsciously, my interactions with…Most of my interactions on a daily basis, and that's not a bad thing. Sometimes it's like a superpower because you're always kind of aware of what it is to be other. I think I grew up in a very unique position where I did not come from privilege. Not that privilege is synonymous with skin colour, but you know what I mean. I grew up not privileged but in privileged circumstances. I grew up black but moving in white world, so it feels like this multiplicity. This awareness of different perspectives. That has been very helpful in making art. Does that make sense?

SL: Yeah, yeah. Why did you get into acting? How did that happen?

MI: Alicia Glover was a childhood friend of mine, and she did a play, and I went see it and I was like, 'Mom, I can do that.' [laughs] And, yeah, I did *Annie* like every kid does, and I just kept doing things. I love the feeling I got. I love telling stories. And I just kind of never stopped doing it. I realised somewhere along the way that oh, I can do this for a profession, and I just kept going. It was really cool growing up in Atlanta at the time that I did. Kenny Leon was the artistic director of the Alliance Theatre, and he gave me my first professional job. And there is such a huge black community in Atlanta that goes to the arts and supports the arts. Musicals world premiere there because they know there is a refined audience for that. And so, I always had role models, which I don't think is everybody's story. I always had excellent artists of colour to look up to, and to be like, 'Oh, there's a place for me to do this.' Which I think is really cool. And I should probably remember on rough days more. [laughs] Just to see black people being awesome on stage, and black people dressing up and going to sit in the audience, and enjoy the art. That was really formative for me. To know that there was a place on stage and an audience.

SL: So that's really interesting. You're talking about having the black audience come and support you. So, what would you say is the difference, now that you're reflecting on how you became an actor? Because of course, now you've worked with audiences that are mainly white.

MI: Yes.

SL: So, why is it so special when there are black people in the audience?

MI: The story that jumps to mind is, I did a production of *Christmas Carol* this winter. And it was a very, it was a very difficult production for me. It was a show I'd been in as a child, and I got to come back as an adult in the role I always wanted to play. I'd always wanted to be Belle, Scrooge's love interest because she gets to wear the pretty dress. Basically, the only reason. And then as an adult walking into that role in a show that is so choreographed, it's done every year, year after year. It was artistically very challenging to me, to not be able to originate as much as I'm used to, and to really have to move in a track that is well carved. So, I was frustrated and, and it was very challenging. But one particular performance, my mother sat behind a family where the husband was white, and the wife was black, and the daughter was about my complexion. She couldn't have been more than six and she had the American Girl doll with her dressed up like she was to come to the play.

SL: That's so cute.

MI: [chuckles] I know. She's sitting there and everything. She was engaged the whole time. But my mom said the moment I walked on stage, she turned to her mother and said, 'Mom, she looks at my doll. Wait. Mom, she looks like me.' And I'm getting teary just hearing it. Because I remember my mom told me this, I was having a particularly rough two show day and I just felt like, 'Well, that's the point.' You know? Is that she got to see something that was real and in front of her. TV is great too, and that's a medium I want to be in more, but someone living and breathing the same air in front of her, speaking words and taking up space, and standing in the spotlight, and wearing the pretty dress, and that she recognised it. It engaged her and said, 'You're here and you matter.' And that doesn't happen as much now that perform for more majority white audiences, but when it does, it's really special. And there are actresses who all I don't know by name, and I'll never get to thank who did that for me when I was a little girl with the doll on my lap. So, it's really great to be a part of that for someone else.

SL: What sort of stigmas have you faced do you think? Because there's a lot of things that happened and it's hard to be able to say 1,000% that it's discrimination. It's because I'm a black woman, but sometimes you get this feeling that it might be. So, I'm just interested personally, in your experience, what sorts of stigmas have you faced?

MI: That's what makes it so hard, isn't it? There's so many times that I wish I could have my time back. All of the time that I'd go home after rehearsal and think, did this happen because I'm black? Did this happen because I'm a woman? There's times where I feel like I have lost precious minutes, hours of my free time. Or wasted, not wasted, spent conversations with my loved ones that should be about more positive things, having them hash through moments with me that some of my counterparts in this industry will never have to do. And I'm very hopeful that I will not grow bitter about that. But there are times when, when it's just exhausting thinking about that. I'll get to more specific, anecdotes. I'll probably think of more as we go along, but…It's not going to be like a story of the time someone said something disrespectful. It's more of the emotional labour that I have to do. So I did *Jane Eyre*, and that was awesome. But I did a lot of press for that, and a lot of interviews, and did not really have media training but I'm savvy enough. I took marketing in school. So I kind of know what to

do, but I felt very alone and knowing how to navigate, should we be talking about the fact that I'm black? Or should we not be talking about the fact that I'm black. Anytime a reporter didn't bring it up, I felt the need to navigate into it, and anytime they did bring it up, sometimes it would be in a jarring way. Such as, 'Well did the director give you any insights of what it was that got you the role?' Or, 'Were they trying to make a statement with you being in it?' You know, just things that were so well-meaning, but their versions of asking, did they just want to cast a woman of colour in this role? Things that were consciously or unconsciously implying, 'Were you the best person for this part? Or were you the black person for this part? Are you the black Jane Eyre? Or are you Jane Eyre?' And that was not a burden that I expected. And to feel so alone in it. And to not know if I was getting things, right.

There's just this extra pressure of being the lead in a show, but also being a woman of colour carrying a company. This burden I put on myself to get things right. That whole you have to work twice as hard to get half as much, feeling. I don't know that I ever…Towards the end, I started to figure out…To learn the things that actors know of, you never really have to answer the question that's asked, which is not what I'm doing here. [laughs] But in interviews, you can have your talking points and I started to find my own power in how I wanted to talk about it because I never wanted…I was trying to chart this middle course. I never wanted to, for my race to be the only story, but I never wanted it to be ignored. I never wanted it to be the focal point, but I also wanted people to realise this is not a thing that happens every day. A black girl playing the lead in a period piece that is not about race, and being allowed to be seen as the every woman.

Yeah, so I spent many a nights kind of sitting at home and trying to think. I write a lot to think, and trying to get my words together to figure out how do I talk about this thing that I'm excited about, and chart this middle course? I don't know what form this takes for theatres without seeming like they're trying too hard, but I think there should be a conversation about what support actors of colour need. When especially when playing roles that are not traditionally played by actors of colour. I learned very quickly not to read the comments on social media. People would write things that they overheard, and they'd be kind of out of context about something about like…I just remember one thing that somebody posted about like, 'Oh, it's almost as bad as having President Obama.' Or something like that, and that was all she had overheard in the lobby. I remember seeing it quickly on social media being like, 'I don't think I can do my job as an actor and even read the discussion about that.' Even if it's just people being like, 'Oh, that's so ridiculous.' I think the term self-care gets overused, but I did have to learn a certain amount of self-preservation in order to not worry so much about what people were thinking of me in this role. Because it's weird what we do, right? It's weird. I'm not selling a widget. I'm the thing.

SL: Yeah.

MI: So, it's personal. If you're talking about my body inhabiting a character. It's not separate. And to do this, well, you have to have a thick skin, but have some amount of heart open to do this well. So, all that shit hurts.

SL: So, what do you do? You know? What are some of the self-care? You told me you do the writing.

MI: Yeah. I called a lot of mentors. I called a lot of women of colour in the profession who I look up to. There were other women of colour in the production, and so talking to them. I wish we had talked about it as a company, and I don't know what the space would have been for that. This is I think, where the institution could have come in. This is probably something I should talk to them about too…To let the straight white men of the company share that burden. You know? So that if there's multiple of us in an interview, I don't have to answer all the questions about it. What else did I do? Try to focus on the work as much as possible.

SL: Not just with *Jane Eyre*. In other productions in addition to that.

MI: Yeah.

SL: Because that comes up. There are times that you do need to have that self-preservation for whatever reason. So, in other productions, what are some of the other tools that you've utilized to help keep you sane and focused on the job?

MI: Yeah. You mean beyond race? Or just specifically…

SL: Specifically when it comes to race or gender.

MI: Yeah. Having people to talk to about it. Having an outlet. Doing my best to speak up about something in the moment. There was a production I was in, in which…An actor spoke very sharply to me during a rehearsal in a way that I found unwarranted, and no one did anything about it in the room. This was an actor of colour, but it became more of a gender thing, of the way he was speaking to me. And so, I spoke to stage management, it became clear that they were not going to do anything. Stage Manager was also a female. t was I was listened to. I was heard, but there was no action that was going to happen. And I could feel my relationship with to this actor…I could feel the cold war, and I'm someone who just wants to talk about the elephant in the room. So, I pulled him aside privately at one point and I said, 'Hey, I feel like there's some tension here.' And I did the thing we women do of, 'I'm sorry if I was sharp with you, but I really don't appreciate the way you spoke to me yesterday. And I'd appreciate it if you would act professional when we're in professional setting.' I could see his face cloud, and what he said to me was, 'Just understand if you come from me, I'm going to come for you.' [laughs] I don't really know if I'm answering your question but that was just such a stunning moment for me of it not being about race because we are of the same race, but really being about power and masculinity and femininity. And him feeling…This is where my abilities to see multiplicity of viewpoints comes in. I knew that he was feeling like he had been offended and so he was reacting, but the thing that I had done initially was not anywhere near the level of response that it got. It was something I thought was benign to that provoked this explosion. The story doesn't have a pat, happy ending. Our relationship was really never the same after that because I felt like I had seen this really ugly side. And this really…I don't know. It was just strange to be in a room that was run by women, that had a female stage manager, a female creative team and it still not feel like anybody had my back. So how did I deal with that? I tried to confront it head on. When that didn't go so well I kind of realised, okay, well, at least now I know who I'm dealing with. And I'm going to do my work and just kind of keep quiet. Is that the best way to deal with it? I don't know. But it was the way that I could get through that process and try to keep the peace.

SL: I'm gonna shift a little bit. Earlier you mentioned colourism. You're a little bit fairer than I am.

MI: A little bit.

SL: Not much, but a little bit.

MI: Yeah.

SL: From looking at you, just sheer observation, most people, one would be like, 'Well, she looks like she's part black.' But you said people ask you if you're mixed.

MI: Yeah.

SL: So, do you feel that the fact that you are a little bit lighter, and that you are somewhat ethnically ambiguous in ways, that that has affected your acting career? And if so, in what ways?

MI: Oh, I love the delicate way you asked that. You didn't say has it helped? You didn't say has it hurt? You were like has it affected?

SL: Yeah, I'm trying to not ask leading questions. I'm really curious to see in what ways you feel it that it's affected you.

MI: I wonder about that. I think it would have been very different if I'd been born in the 60s. Or 50s or 60s where, I watch all those old classic Lena Horne or Dorothy Dandridge movies, and I love them. But at that time, like skin was huge and it still is. It's interesting living, even just in this past five years with what's happened in TV and film, theatre, I think is still catching up, in terms of this explosion of diversity in the media. There are times when and this is the main struggle with my whole life. There are times when I don't know if I'm black enough for this new wave of 'Black Girl Magic' pro-black that is happening. The girls we see on the Target commercials. [laughs] So that's something in the back of my head. Do I think that it has helped in terms of my theatre career? I think there's something interesting, that I don't know it sits quite well with me about me being, what I'll call palatably ethnic, for lack of a better term. Acceptably ethnic.

SL: I like that.

MI: In that, you and I can arrange a subject and a verb eloquently. And that I know how to move in white spaces. In passing the paper bag test. I feel icky even as I say these things. I think it would have been even harder for a woman of darker skin to play some of the roles I've played where race was not a part of the narrative. I don't think that's in anyone's mind actively when they are casting me. But yeah…So in some ways, I think it's probably helped. In some ways, there are times when I feel like I might fall through the cracks casting-wise. Like, 'Well we need someone black, but like, you know, like really black.' And I might not be 'really black' in the definition. So, I go back and forth. Sometimes it's really a breath of fresh air. It's a wonderful confirmation of my identity when I get to play a black person on stage and where it is part of the narrative, and sometimes I don't want it to be all about that. I just want to play, like you said in *Closer*, I just want to play a role. It goes back and forth. The scales tip. I think after I finished doing a play that is heavily about race or being black in America, I'm like, 'Cool, I just want to go do something where the story is not about that.' Where my being on stage can be about that for an audience member, but where that is not the narrative than I'm…Although, I guess the argument we're making hear is that it's always part

of the narrative, isn't it? Let's look at what I did last year. I did a play called *The Niceties* in which I played a college sophomore, who is black, who goes to office hours with her white liberal Gloria Steinem feminist professor, and they get into this battle of ideals about race, and class, and gender, and who has the right to the American story. And blackness is very central to that story. I did that for a couple of months and had these heavy arguments about race in America in a theatre in West Virginia. And then what did I do after? I did *A Christmas Carol*? It was like, let's just not talk about race for a second. So, I think that that is probably the dichotomy that I explore. A lot of my work is going fully into it and then going not into it. But the way people see it, it's still going to be on their minds, even if that's not the headspace that I'm living in.

SL: What kind of toll does that take on black actresses do you think? Thinking about white actors, they usually don't have to deal with the whole ethnic and race issue in that way.

MI: Yeah.

SL: It's rare when they are in a play that is dealing with more Caucasian issues. Unless it's like the Holocaust. That's terrible, but usually it's not as entrenched as the black issue, if that makes sense. Because being an actor is hard period.

MI: Yeah.

SL: So, what extra toll do you think that has on us? As women? As women of colour?

MI: Yeah. I had a an actor friend once who liked to say that our bodies don't know that we're acting. Her argument was you're re-enacting all of these traumatic things and that's why you're so tired after show. Your body doesn't know that it's not real, because you're imagining yourself in these circumstances and you kind of have to come back and remind yourself, 'Hey, I'm okay. That horrible thing did not just happen really.' I think about the stories that get written for and about women. If you have to play someone who is going through sexual assault, or any kind of trauma, or the times that…It hasn't happened as much for me, but the times that black actresses have to play slaves, or anything like that, you know. That having to re-enact that trauma. What is the cost of that? I think I think the cost is time, like I said. The time that I have conversations with loved ones and friends about did this happen because I'm black? Did this happen because I'm light skinned? Did this happen because I'm a woman? How should I have navigated that talk back when that person said that thing? I hope this will come with age, that I'll just get better about not caring, and also feel like I have the right thing to say. That's the cost. Is always feeling like, 'Oh, if I could have just said this, they would have understood everything. And I would have moved the needle forward in some way.'… Yeah. That that's it. Is the burden of representation. Of sometimes being an audience member's only black friend that they've ever gotten to experience. But yeah, that whole thing of performing blackness for white people and performing blackness for black people. When you move between. Making sure the group knows like, 'No, I am black.' BADA was so great. I don't think we put each other through that. I don't remember putting each other through that.

SL: No, I remember us being like, 'Oh okay, we got some black people here!' We celebrated that. I don't ever recall feeling like I wasn't black enough for anyone that was there. We just all accepted, I think because we are from all different places in the US, and there was a wide range of ages.

MI: Yeah. We were all nerds anyway. We were at Shakespeare camp. [laughs]

SL: [laughs] It's true. It's true.

MI: If you think of it like lenses. I think there's a stack of woman, and black. So, it's like you've got these two prisms, these two lenses. And that's the constant question. Is what's happening because I'm a woman? Is happening because I'm a black woman? So now you've got me thinking about, what are the differences? Or is there any additional burden of being not just black on stage, not just being like a black man, but being a black woman? Something I don't quite know how to talk about is, I've had these moments in rehearsals, and I don't know if it's because I'm a black woman. Where I will get a direction that is essentially something like, 'It looks like you're mad at him, but you're supposed to be in love with him.' When I think I've just been listening. I remember in one show I was in, and I talked to a fellow black actress about it. Just as kind of a gut check, and I was like, 'Do I look angry?' I know this is the scene where I'm falling in love with him. And she said, 'No. That just happens. Because that's how our faces look. Because we're actresses colour.' She had worked with this particular director before and she was like, 'That's just how it goes. They'll say things like that.' I just remember her being like, 'Don't get frustrated by it. It'll steal your soul.' And it, it just…I still don't know. I still sit up and think about that at nights because in a couple of different productions this has happened. Where I've gotten that note of something like, 'You look angry.' And I'm like, 'But I was just sitting here listening.' Having to feel like I'm consciously performing. Lifting my cheeks, a little bit and opening my eyes and, you know. Maybe that's just me. Maybe I need to go to grad school. Maybe that's some Margaret-ism. Or maybe it's the 'angry black woman' stereotype. Can I specifically say without a doubt it's one or the other? No. I've never spoken to these directors about it. It's something I was left to process on my own and try to produce the result that they wanted. Because I'm being paid to do my work. But it's bothered me.

SL: Do you think even if you were able to sit down with them that they would know that that's what was happening?

MI: No. I don't. I don't because these are people who are very well-meaning. Who would not…Who would consider themselves allies, and woke, and aware. Who would think that they carried unconscious biases like that.

SL: I mean, honestly, when I was in my MFA program, I dealt…I almost dropped out.

MI: Wow.

SL: And there's really no way for me to go back and have the conversation, but I wish that I could. Because there was a lot of things that were happening that I'm like, 'No. That was racism. That was discrimination. Although all of these people think that they are further ahead than they are. I think it's so institutionalised, and so woven into the thread of society that we don't even realise. I'm starting to realise, for me, there's a lot of things that I have just bought into unconsciously. Without even knowing.

MI: Can you be more specific?

SL: Well, believe it or not, although I have a bachelor's degree, have a master's degree and I'm working on a PhD, it's just now starting to dawn on me that I might be a smart person, and I will not kidding.

MI: Wow.

SL: When I thought about doing the PhD…I was like, 'PhD? I don't know. I'm not smart enough to do that. I'm not a super scholarly person. I don't know all these big words with six, seven syllables. I'm not that scholarly academic. That's not me. I'm not smart enough to do a PhD. That's some other person. You know? I can't do that.' And that's exactly how I felt about it. But then I've come to realise, with things I've read about racism, that I've been conditioned my entire life too think that I less than. I have been conditioned to think that I am not smart. I can point to specific times in elementary school, in junior high, in high school, in undergrad, where I was questioned. Where papers were returned with bad grades. Them saying, '*You* couldn't have written this.'

MI: Wow.

SL: It's rough. It's really rough and the fact that you can't name it out loud because nobody wants to be like, 'I'm a racist.' You know what I mean? Right. So, there's a lot of that. So, when you're saying, you know, working with the plays and stuff and thinking…It doesn't matter. At grad school or not. Professional or not, it's there. A lot of people they don't mean the harm.

MI: Yeah. I had a dresser who, we were putting on my wig one day and I said something like, 'Can you believe they didn't want to wig me for this show. They wanted to just use my actual hair. That would have been so difficult with two show days, like everything they would have wanted me to do.' I was more anecdotally talking about I don't want to have the stress of that. He was like, 'Yeah. Would your hair have even done this style? I mean, is it, is it a relaxer? Is it, what…? And he just…I don't know how to explain how problematic that was. Because just in recounting story it doesn't sound problematic. It sounds like just an innocuous question, but it was just more of the fact that, you've been touching my head for weeks and you don't know what my hair is like? You're just assuming something because I'm black and I happened to have hair that is not, for lack of better term, good Caucasian kind of hair. And I'm like, have you not been paying attention to me? You've been touching my head for weeks, and you're asking me if it's a relaxer? First of all, do your job better. Second of all, this is weird now. And that's like at fifteen minutes to places and I have to go to a show that's not about that…There's an actress in town, Nikiya Mathis. She is an actress but also does hair very well, and she's starting to be hired as a hair consultant on shows so that black women can figure out a style that's going to be healthy for their hair for a long run. Whether it's just having a wig as backup or figuring out what is going to serve the story and serve them. Having people know how to not be unintentionally offensive would be just such a great skill, but I don't know how we teach that. I don't know, we teach you not to offend me.

SL: I think it starts with having the uncomfortable conversation to begin with, but it's about creating a safe space to say, 'Okay, 'Let's sit down and let's have those conversations. Those things that you've always wondered about, but didn't quite know how to ask or say, this is the environment where we can have that conversation. As long as the aims are clear.'

MI: Yeah.

SL: It's like, 'Our intention is…' This is what it's about. So, now's the time to ask those things, but I think there's a lot of fear. But also, I think there's just a lot of assumptions.

MI: That's the thing. It's assumed that I already know this, like, 'Oh, you must have a relaxer.' No, I don't.

SL: There are things that I'm starting to realise, because I happen to be on the less privileged spectrum, that just don't even cross minds of people, because they don't ever have to think about it. And for me, I'm like, 'What do you mean, they don't have to think about it?'

MI: Yeah.

SL: But literally, they don't have to think about it. So, it's, you don't know what you don't know. So, I think there's a lot of that. It's just ignorance. And they don't realise that they're uninformed about things. Whereas if that space was created and you have that conversation, it's like, 'Oh, okay.' Now we can move towards being less offensive. Finding better ways to ask things [laughs] and being culturally sensitive in a world that caters to white people.

MI: I was just thinking that one of the hardest things about being a black actress is worrying about being hired again. If I speak up about this, if I rock the boat, if I push back, will I be hired again? Yeah, and also, when you're being pushed by a director and feeling frustrated…I like to speak my mind, but I feel a very strong need to be polite, and we are in a very impolite art form. We air out our dirty laundry for a living in a way. [laughs] We show the ugliness of humanity. So that has always been just a personal struggle for me of how to be pulled together as a professional, but then how to let everything out in my work. I remember going into a process, having just come off of a process that was very difficult. Where I felt like the director, and I clashed a lot. We were two very strong personalities, and that it started off well, but then devolved. I remember going into the next process for a play where I knew I would have to explore anger and rage and righteous indignation. Not as an angry black woman, but a person who has had a lot of rage pent up. And I remember saying to the director, I pulled her aside day two of the process and I was like, 'Look, I need to be honest with you. This is where I'm coming from. I'm coming from a rehearsal room, where I was having to explore rage and sometimes being the young actor that I am, it would, I couldn't…I would say things that were perceived as rude to the director and being blunt, and sometimes I would blur the line between character and self.' Like on a five-minute break, I would still kind of be in that space. And I said, 'I'm feeling a little bit gun shy from that process, and I want to have a good relationship with you. I just want to know that I'm safe here to take the kind of artistic risk that you are demanding of me. And what I mean by that is, if you're pushing me towards rage and anger, and some of that spills over during tech, I want to know that I'm not gonna be smacked for it.' And fortunately, this director was big enough to say, 'I really appreciate you saying that. I think I'm enough of an adult to handle that.' And then it was never a problem, just because I was able to say, 'Look, this is what happened. I'm scared of this happening again.'

SL: Yeah, yeah.

MI: That's part of me still learning and growing up as an actor, and figuring out how do I, how do we go to the ugliness of humanity, but still be the kind of human we want to be to other people? How do we as black women, who want to be hired again, and want everyone to

like us, and all that stuff, how do I free myself with this idea of who I need to be for people to like me? Especially when that's getting in the way of good art?

SL: I'm shifting the conversation a little bit.

MI: Okay.

SL: When black women are being represented, let's start with stage, are you seeing, still, sort of stereotypical roles? Or do you feel that that is shifting? I know in some cases, like with *Christmas Carol* and *Jane Eyre*.

MI: I have a really crazy, unique body of work, which has everything to do with my talents, but I also recognise that I could have some leg ups due to colourism or whatever, you know. Which is always strange talking to people. Especially non people of colour. Especially white people. I cannot tell you the number of times in the past two years that people have said something like, 'You're so in right now.' I did have a woman from some training program, I don't know. It was somewhere where there were a lot of theatre teachers around, and she said something like, 'Oh, you're so lucky. That's why you work so much, because of the way you look.' And I was like, 'No, I work so much because I'm trained and I'm talented.' [laughs] It just came rolling off my tongue. I wish I could always talk like that. But do I see stereotypes on stage, in the roles that I'm going in for?

SL: Not just what you're going in for, but maybe when talking to friends or colleagues.

MI: Yeah.

SL: Do you feel that percentagewise, it's still more stereotypical roles? Or do you feel that it's…?

MI: I think we should not pat ourselves on the back too much yet. I think there are…I have done readings of too many plays where I am the black friend, and I am serving the journey of this white character. I think that's playwrights trying to take a step, white playwrights trying to take a step of, let me write roles for people of colour. Let me specify the races of everyone, not just the person of colour. But, if the first two lines out of my mouth are about being mixed, it just feels…I don't sit around talking about how black I am all the time. It informs my identity, but I also watch the news, and watch baseball, and watch *American Idol*, and don't talk about race and just have life. So sometimes that feels a little forced.

SL: What about with black playwrights? Do you feel that with white playwrights it feels like a tokenism thing? Do you feel like with what's happening with black playwrights it feels like it's on the other end of the spectrum? Like it's very black? Like, it's gonna be set in Africa or…[laughs]

MI: I think the women are doing a better job than the men. It's a couple instances this year where there have been…Where I felt disappointed. Where I felt like I'm safe because a black dude wrote this. Then I'm like shit, a dude wrote this, so we're still getting into stereotypes of womanhood. Did you follow at all the whole controversy surrounding the play, I think it's called *Thomas and Sally*? Out at Marin Theatre Company?

SL: No.

MI: Black male playwright. I auditioned for it, and I'll go on record to say this, later regretted it. I just turned it down. A lot of actresses apparently turned it down. This audition. Because he was writing a very, almost bedroom romp version of the Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings story. And taking the stance of her…You know, an adult actress playing Sally Hemmings. Never mind the fact that she was actually sixteen and making her seem like a person who had full sexual agency, and choice, and enjoyment of Thomas Jefferson. To the point that, there's a line that's still, it was at least in the draft that I read, about, he does this thing where he goes down on, or not he goes down. He does this thing where he puts his mouth on my privates and it's the best thing ever. Or something like that. Yeah, so that, so the greater point I was making is that, I feel safe in the hands of black women playwrights in a way that I used to feel safe in the hands of black male playwrights. And this is overly generalizing, but even as I talk, I'm like, 'Oh God. If anyone ever hears this, I'll never work again.' But it's like fuck that because I'm also talking to figure out what I think. I think that I feel safer in the hands of black female playwrights. I feel like they are going to write the complexity of what it is to be a black woman. I think that's part of the greater point I was making of like. So many other people who are in my field, at least on social media, I feel are a lot braver about just being like, 'Fuck everything. This is what I think.' And I am still growing into my power in that way.

SL: Yeah.

MI: I'm often disappointed by the ways that black women are depicted when a black man is writing. I just auditioned for a play recently that is about a slave woman. It's written by black man and there are four people in it. It felt like…She's light skinned and light enough to pass, and so many of the lines felt like she hates her blackness. Justifiable at that time, because she wants to just be free and envies the one drop of separation between her and free white woman, but I couldn't help but think we're doing this play in 2018, for probably a majority white audience. What does it mean for them to hear a woman talking about how much she hates the black aspect of her identity? Is that the story we need right now? I don't think it's the story that we need right now.

SL: Right. Because it feels like it reinforces everything that's already been going on.

MI: Yeah. There's just so much more. The thing I am a little bit sad about and nostalgic for is the days when it felt like everyone was watching the same show. I think I'm in the minority here, but I love network television. I love the lowest common denominator aspect of it. The way it's aimed at middle America. And I love that there was a time in this country where like everyone was watching *24*, or everybody had seen *Lost*, or even for a while there everybody was watching *Scandal*, you know? Which ends tomorrow and I am a little sad that it's become so niche now that you can choose your own bubble. I would really love to be in my career on a network TV show. Netflix is fine. I'll take HBO and everything, but like something where you don't even have to have cable when it comes into your house. Where you are forced to reckon with my complexity, and I think we're getting more of that. What I love about TV now, is that there are enough shows with black people on it that I don't feel like I have to like it just because it's show with black people. Same what theatre. I remember even just ten years ago when I was in college feeling like, 'Are we going to do a show with black people in it?' Just feeling like I don't know where to go for monologues, and now there's so much material that you don't have to like everything. Which is nice. I used to feel

like as a black person that I can't say I don't like that play because, especially around white people, because I have to like it. Because a black person wrote it.

SL: What do you think are the differences between African American actresses' experience and in black British actresses. What do you think? I mean, it's not about what you know.

MI: Yeah, because I don't know much at all.

SL: What do you think…

MI: I know I really wish that y'all black British girls would stop taking our jobs. It's hard out here being an African American actress when you got Carmen Ejogo is that how you say her name, playing and Coretta Scott King. Girl! I'm sure I could play Coretta Scott King! You were great. You were so good. But it's fascinating to me how there's this influx of black British actors in America who are, from my perspective, treasured by, and welcome with open arms, when they're still…Which I'm still so bitter. It's just what I see. It's real and it hurts. There's so many talented black women in this country who are who are fighting hard for chance.

I talked to a friend of mine who's a black male actor, and he's on a TV series here. But he was doing a play in town and, and we were talking about…We went to high school together. We grew up together, and we were talking about his working on the show and the actress who is playing his wife in the show and everything. He said something like, 'I know that she can act circles around me, and I know that she is making me a better actor.' He said, 'I know for every one of me, there are a dozen black women who should be on TV show and who are more talented than I am and who…There just aren't as many spots.' He said, 'I know now that it's easier to be a black man in this industry than it is to be a black woman.' I want to say that motivates me to work harder, but it really just makes me sad, because I don't want to entertain the possibility that I could work as hard as possible, and never have that break, or never have a vehicle, or never have a shot.

I think that black men, I'm coming back to your question about black British women, but I think black men are just valued in general, more than black women. I know it's changing. I know it's improving, but it just feels like there are fewer spots. The women I know, we all work so really damn hard, and that's why there is so much pressure when you do get a spot. To do it right. Black British actresses versus African American actresses. I don't know much about the canon of roles, written with black British women in mind. I know a lot about a canon of roles written for African American women. So, I wonder what that is like. The cast of *Hamilton* for example, playing American heroes, but you are British. So, there's the, the jumping…Well, there's the jumping first of I'm a personal colour playing Thomas Jefferson, and then there's also that I'm playing an American and not a Brit. I just know they tend to do our accents better than we do theirs. [laughs]

SL: For those who aren't black women, when it comes to being a black actress, what would you like to say to them that you feel hasn't been able to be said? Or is a misconception? If that makes sense.

MI: Don't assume that I only want to play black roles, or that I only don't want to play black roles. That I can say multitudes. That sometimes I want to lend my talents in service of a story that is about my race and the complexities of being black in America or black on this

planet, and sometimes my just being present in a story that is not about that is enough. Does the work without talking about it. Both are valid art forms. Also saying, after ten minutes, 'I forgot that you were black', is not a compliment. That is something that has been said to me during a talkback or show where…Did a production of *All My Sons* with an all-black cast, and that was the compliment. I think I managed to do this. I think I'm not editorializing or rewriting history. I think I said to this man, 'I don't ever want you to forget that I'm black.' We shouldn't be rounding me to white or translating me to whiteness to understanding my humanity. You can see the colour that I am and recognise my humanity at the same time. That's always going to be a factor in a show I'm in because I look this way. Sometimes it's the focal point and sometimes It's not, and I think both things are fine. As long as no one thinks they have to see past how I look to see that I'm a person. That's it.

SL: All right.

MI: [laughs]

SL: I think we'll stop that there. Long conversation, but great stuff.
(End of Interview)

Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Asia Mark (AM), Black American Actress

Interviewer: Samia La Virgne (SL)

Date of Interview: 11 August 2017

Interview Setting: Hay-Patton Rehearsal Center, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland, Oregon USA

The transcript of this interview has been edited for length and pertinence to my research topic.

(Start of Interview)
SL: Okay, this is Saturday, August 12. And I am interviewing Asia. So, my first question for you is, what is your ethnic background?

AM: Ethnic background, I just go by just black. I know that my grandmother's father was Asian, but I've yet to do ancestry DNA and all that, so I don't really know the ins and outs of that. But I just go by black.

SL: Okay. So, what does it mean to you to be a black woman?

AM: There was a documentary by Tim Wise, and I don't remember what it was called, but the documentary had a white woman. And she was saying what it meant for her to be a woman, and what it meant for her to be, her identity, to be a woman. It was just really interesting because she said, 'When I look in the mirror, I just see a woman.' That was the first time that I really thought, I've never looked in the mirror and just seen a woman. I'm a black woman. And that means so many different things. I think it's struggle. It's perseverance. It's my mother. It's my father. It's literally, it's everything. It's really interesting to imagine going around the world just identifying as a woman. And what that means, and as a young woman, I'm only twenty-five. I've been trying to figure out and explore what that means for me. What it means to be a woman. I can't, it's like no matter how hard I try, I can't separate being a woman from being a black woman, and I'm still trying to figure out exactly what that all means. I've never been a person to try to separate my blackness from my womanhood because I don't really know how to do that. Being a black woman, it's strength to me. It's a very deep beautiful thing that I really…Being among just a few black actresses here, being around them, we all have this connection. Even if we don't know the ins and outs of each other's lives, we all have this connection through our strength. Through our ancestry. Strength is one of the words that really comes to my mind when I think about what it means to be a black woman. And not trying to separate being a woman and being a black woman because I don't really know how to do that.

SL: So, it's really positive, your definition and your idea of a black woman. Has it always been this way? It's always been a positive…

AM: Oh, yeah.

SL: So, with that being said, we talked about your own personal definition of what it means to be a black woman, do you feel there is such a thing as a black female identity? And if so, how would you describe that? You've you described a lot of positive things for what it means to be a black woman. for you personally.

AM: Yeah.

SL: Do you think that those qualities can be an overall definition for what the black female identity is as a whole? How long have you been actively working as a professional actress outside of your schooling?

AM: Eight months.

SL: Eight months?

AM: Eight months. I am baby. I just finished my degree. So, this is all very, very, very new. This is my first year in the rep. This is my first year being done with school. So, it's a major blessing to be exactly where I am right now. I've been training as an actress since I was thirteen years old. So, I'm twenty-five now. So, it's been a nice amount of my life that I've been training to do this. So, it's a blessing to be here for sure.

SL: That's great.

AM: Yeah.

SL: That's great. So, you mentioned earlier your ideas about being black woman has all been very positive in the way you grew up. You had a very great community that fostered that positivity. But you did mention that if there was negativity, it was coming from outside forces. I'd like to talk a little bit more about that. What sort of stigmas have you faced? Whether in your training as an actress, or in the eight months that you've been here? Has there been negative stigma as being a black actress, or a black woman that you've noticed? You also talk a little bit about stereotypical roles and how black women are portrayed on television or even on stage, depending on the show.

AM: Yeah.

SL: Do you feel that there has been any shift and that is changing at all? Or do you feel that we're still stuck in that rut? Are we still playing mainly stereotypical characters?

AM: I do think that there is more of a shift. I do think I am grateful to be in the world of theatre right now, as opposed to ten years ago, where you just didn't see it. I don't recall seeing myself on TV. I don't recall seeing myself on stage, you know. So, I think it is a shift with all of the progression that's going on. With Black Lives Matter and with the progression of black people as a whole, what we're trying to do anyway. So yeah, I think there is a shift. I think it's slow, but I think that it's happening. Yeah.

SL: You've been acting since you were thirteen, what made you decide this was the line of work you wanted to go into?

AM: So, I was doing it forever. With my Barbies, I was directing. I had full sets of things that I would just gather. I grew up with really young parents. My parents had me when they were nineteen and twenty-one, so we didn't have that many toys. I would just pull from my own imagination, pull different things from the house and I would create these huge sets. At the time I didn't know about theatre. I was just doing it. I started dancing when I was three. I've always been a part of the arts. My mother is a poet. My father used to be a DJ. All of my siblings are artists. So, art has always been a part of my life. Sixth grade I had a teacher named Jamie Swagman. Every Friday, she would allow whoever wanted to come up in front of the class and perform. I had a few friends who I would always at recess...I would write scripts at home, and then I would bring the script. I would write out the script for each person. So, I would sit, I would do my homework, and then I would write out the scripts. So I would come in, I would pass out the scripts. Then when it was time to really rehearse, I would bring in costumes, which were just my clothes, my sister's clothes, and then Fridays, we will go up and we would do these shows. It was just the best thing ever. Recess was directing time, and my friends, they were down for it. I can't remember any resistance. They really were very supportive.

One day my teacher was just like, 'I really hope to see you in film one day. Or I really hope to see you on stage.' And because I hadn't seen myself really on TV, and by myself I'm saying black people, I was like, for the first time, 'Oh. I can do this for a living. Oh, okay.' So when High School came around, the Detroit School of Arts. I went to that art school. I came in as an artist, and I had my drawings and things like that. So, I do a lot. I do all the arts, I don't discriminate. I came in as an artist, and then I eventually found my way into the drama program. I was also a part of the Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit for my full four years of high school. I did the broadcast team, broadcasting, performances, forensics, a lot of different things there. And then right after school, I would go straight to Mosaic, which is an internationally known Theatre Company, and it's amazing. It's for youth. Yeah. It was really intense, that four years, and then I went straight to get my BFA at Western Michigan and the rest is history. So yeah.

SL: Wow. What is one of the biggest challenge Is that you have faced in the industry would you say?

AM: Because I'm so new to it right now, my own anxiety is my biggest thing. The anxiety comes from, I know that my purpose is huge in this world, and so because of that, there's this underlying fear to step into that greatness, you know. I'm only twenty-five, so with aging with years I'll continue to step into it, and hopefully that anxiety will subside. That's been my biggest challenge because in Mosaic we learned how to be an artist. Learned how to cultivate. I learned how to cultivate myself as an artist. What that really means is that you don't go thinking that everyone is your competition because you're your own person, and you're your own artist. And so, I don't have this whole, she's competition. No, it's like, wherever God wants me is where I'm gonna be. The universe has not put me in any situation that I'm not supposed to be in. I literally asked the universe or God, please don't give me anything that I'm not supposed to have, and that's just the mindset that I have. Like OSF, for example. I didn't get called back to come back next year. So right now, I'm figuring out what my next thing is. Of course, I had my moment of like, 'Ah, I really like it here.', and that doesn't mean that I can't come back in the future, but it's just not for me next year. I think that that has been so helpful for me, but my own anxiety, and I guess getting in my own head is what has been my own biggest challenge. I think.

SL: Good for you for figuring that out already.

AM: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

SL: I wish I had come to that conclusion much earlier in my life. So, I think it's great that you have figured it out.

AM: Thank you. Yeah.

SL: Cause once you do, like you said, it does make things a little bit easier.

AM: You just continue to step into it and breathe. Breathe into it.

SL: So then, on the flip side of that, what's one of the most fulfilling experiences that you've had?

AM: Just period? As an artist? Or…

SL: Yeah, as an artist.

AM: I'm a teaching artist as well, and a youth development professional. So all while I was getting my degree, I was working at foster homes, at after school programs because mosaic is a youth theatre that not only teaches you how to be an artist, but when you're when you grow up in arts education, naturally, not everybody but most people I know, continue on to teach and to pass that on. So, the youth are so important to me. Just knowing that every time I step on stage, if there's a black person in the audience, or just a child in the in the audience that can look at me and say, 'Man, I can do that one day.' That is so fulfilling for me. It's all about how are you giving back? You know what I'm saying? Through your art and through your purpose because I am a healer first, and I heal through my art. Because that is what matters, the youth and inspiring others is what matters because we have to get by. We all have to get by somehow. I think that it's so much bigger than just, I want to be famous, or I want to be a star, and that's actually terrifying for me. Being famous or being a star. But the youth and being an inspiration for others is what really, really fulfils me for sure. I don't know.

SL: Do you ever feel that having your skin tone has ever held you back in any way, shape, or form?

AM: I've had the thought, 'Do they find me less attractive because of the colour, because of the shade of my skin?' That's a thought that I've always wondered. I've been very blessed to get cast a lot, and in college, I was cast a lot. So, to be honest with you, being cast a lot…It's still subconscious for me. I haven't been forced, really, deal with what it means. Yeah. Not yet anyway.

SL: The roles that you have played even before coming here, have a majority of them fallen into the stereotypical servant, or mammy type role, or very sexual, prostitute role?

AM: And he cast me as the maid of honour to the woman who's getting married, Tina. So that was interesting. I didn't know how to play it; I didn't know what I was supposed to do. When you get cast as a role that's not already a black person, nobody ever talks about, okay, you've been cast as someone who's not written as a black woman. Figure that out. Like

nobody ever talks about that. It's just something that I think we all get to this point of like, 'Okay, so she's Italian, but I'm black. So, what do you want me to do with this character?' Yeah. The shows that I got cast in were mostly the black shows. *Tony and Tina's Wedding* was the first time that I was cast in something that wasn't a black show. No, *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*. I played an Iraqi woman, and those two shows were the only two shows that I did that were not the black show. So, it probably did hold me back because if there were no black shows, would I be getting cast in these other shows? You know what I mean? So probably. Probably so. Being held back. Yeah.

SL: Interesting. That's great that you've done black shows because I never have. So that's great that you've had that experience, but it also makes you think.

AM: Yeah.

SL: Were they keeping you in your place? Per se.

AM: And we were very vocal about that. We all knew. It was very obvious that…Even here at OSF, most of the black people are not coming back next season. And if you look at the season, there are so many culturally inclusive shows right now, next semester, there's not and most of us are leaving. So, yeah. Yeah.

SL: Interesting. How would you say black women are being represented right now?

AM: What I mostly have been watching where there are a nice amount of black women is *Orange is the New Black*, and there are moments where I get frustrated because I feel like we are being…I don't know. I was gonna say, I feel like we're being portrayed as angry, but we do have a lot of anger because there's a lot of bullshit. You know what I'm saying? So, it's like, I'm glad that our anger and our hurt is being put on television because it's real. It is real. But I personally want to see more black joy being shown. I've seen a few episodes of *Black-ish*. Have you watched that?

SL: I have not. Just clips.

AM: I've seen a few episodes and I do like that concept. I really do need to get more into that show. I hear it's amazing and that it does portray black people in the black family in a really good light.

SL: You said you would like to see more joy. What else would you like to see more of in terms of how black women are being represented in the performing arts?

AM: That is such a hard question because there's so much. There's so many layers. I feel like there are so many things that black women experience that people just really have no idea that we experience. Just with our men and the things that we go through with our men. The narrative of black love and what that means. Black women loving other black women for themselves. I feel like there is a lot of love in the black community, but there is also a lot of self-hate, self-doubt that I think that we could express more. Because when you go to see a play, especially a good play, it says something that, it brings things that you have in your subconscious to the forefront. Things that you haven't really thought about you start to think about. There's so much hate within the black community because we are taught to hate ourselves, and I think that someone should say that you know? I think that should be said so

that people can look at that and heal from that. The black community is hurting a lot. I think that that needs to be put on stage more.

There are a lot of August Wilson plays that get done. A lot of older black plays, but I think that there's so much new pain, and so much new guilt, so much new joy. That should be put on stage. It's almost not fair because it doesn't feel like our narrative is spoken, or seen, or heard anywhere. Truly, truly what we're going through, it's like it's in this little box that nobody is willing to open. You know what I mean? It hurts. It's not fair that white people can go to the theatre and see their experiences, and heal in whatever ways that they need to, but we can't do the same. There are black artists that are trying to do that, plays like *Unison* really put…And that's still, that's a very human experience, *Unison*. I think we could go even further, and go even deeper, and really start to put what black people are really, truly going through right now. I really think we need to see that on stage so that we can start to heal from that because where is it? Who's doing it? I don't know. I feel like that's why I'm a black artist right now. Because I'm also a writer. I'm busy doing this right now, but I'm gonna sit and I'm gonna write my plays about whatever things I feel like I need to write about. But they will be about the black experience because who else is writing? Yeah, a few people are, but just a few people. And black people are not coming to the theatre. I rarely see black people in the audience, and it's because why would I pay $100 to go see someone else's experience on stage?

SL: So that's a little bit what I'm trying to do. Tell that narrative and unlock that box. Specifically with black women, and more specifically black actresses because I think there's a stigma to being a black woman. And a whole other layer when it's black woman portraying black women, or just women.

AM: Totally.

SL: Can you help me name some of those things or tell me what's inside of that box? What's part of your narrative? What you feel, you want people to hear, or they just don't know about being…

AM: Yeah. I think our bodies as black women, there's such a…Being skinny, I've always been ashamed of being skinny. Because being a thick woman in the black community has always, from my age group anyway, has always been huge. It's always been what the men want. I remember being in the mall one day and this guy passed my friend and I, and he was like, 'Oh, she's cute, but she too skinny.' You know, and it's always been big butts. You gotta have a big butt. You have to have this. You have to have that. That hurts. You know what I'm saying? To be a black woman, and to not feel appreciated for just who we are in the beautiful very various colours, shapes, sizes, that we come in. For a lot of black men to secretly want, or blatantly want something other than what they see in their mothers.

Black love and what that means. That's a thing and my husband and I have been exploring that just because a lot of people say that we inspire them as far as black love goes. I love my husband and we're a young, beautiful black couple, and we're both out here. He works at OSF as well. He does audience development. A lot of people say the black love is dead and it's not but it it's, it seems to be dying, and it sucks, and I think that that's another thing. Motherhood. Single black motherhood. I've noticed just recently, being twenty-five, a lot of my friends having kids now, but they'll be with the man and then the man is gone. It's so rare that you see black women and black men staying together after having a child. I don't have

any children and it scares me. I mean, I've been married already for three years. I think it's important to really get to know your partner before having a child because to figure out a whole other person is a whole thing, along with having a child is difficult. But that's the thing. There are a lot of things. Daddy issues. That's a thing. Daddy issues are so deep. I have my father in my life and so my whole life I never thought I had daddy issues until this year, when I realised that my dad was so mean. He was so strict. He would literally come home, yell about how the house wasn't cleaning, go into his room, and then come out and be on a conference call for the rest of the night. So, I have daddy issues. Because I'm looking. I still find myself looking for validation through my mentors or through people that I probably shouldn't be looking for validation from but it's like, oh, I have daddy issues. So, daddy issues, you know. Fathers being there. Fathers not being there. Yeah. There's a lot of things that we can unpack.

SL: What I find really interesting with you is that it seems like in so many ways, your experience, and your personal connection to being a black woman, and being an actress is so positive.

AM: Mm hmm.

SL: Very, very positive, which is so good, and yet when you're talking about other things from the outside, and hearing things that you've talked about that it hurts. How do you reconcile that? How have you been able to maintain the joy that you still feel within yourself and not allow that negativity or weirdness to seep in?

AM: I think it's because I've always seen myself as an artist, and I've always identified as an artist. So, I'm a woman. I'm a black woman, and I'm an artist. I'm all of those. A lot of different things, but I'm those things. My artistry is so important to me and it's so special and valid to me, that I think maybe there's just a protection. A wall that I've built to protect myself as an artist. It's hard enough to be an artist, and I just feel like maybe I've built up a wall to protect that part of me. If I separated the artists from the black woman, I hurt as a black woman. As a black artist I heal. I don't just hurt as a black woman, but there are lots of things that we go through as black women that, it's difficult. Lots of things that people don't talk about. Things that we just have to suppress and deal with. As an artist, I think I use all of that to heal myself in whatever way that I can. I guess.

SL: So, is that the advice that you would give to other black women who are trying to figure out how to find that self-love? How to find that joy in being who they are as black women? To find some sort of artistic expression?

AM: Yeah. Some sort of purpose, you know what I mean? For me, I've always felt that my purpose and my art are one in the same. And through my art, I'm gonna to heal. Through my art, other people will heal. And so, I want to heal others and I want to heal myself. When I'm really in the space as an artist creating, I really try to heal myself. There are lots of moments where it's like, I could be angry about a lot of things, but with my anxiety I just, I can't, you know? It's like I have to really protect that space as an artist, because it's already hard enough. So, I guess I use my art to heal the woman. If that makes sense.

SL: Art therapy.

AM: Yeah. Yeah, for sure.

SL: Great. That about sums it up. Thank you very much.

AM: Thank you. That was really, really good.
(End of Interview)

Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Kimberly Scott (KS), Black American Actress

Interviewer: Samia La Virgne (SL)

Date of Interview: 13 August 2017

Interview Setting: Hay-Patton Rehearsal Center, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland, Oregon USA

The transcript of this interview has been edited for length and pertinence to my research topic.

(Start of Interview)
SL: So, it is Sunday, August 13. And I'm sitting here with Kimberly Scott.

KS: Hello.

SL: Thank you for sitting down with me for a second time to allow me to interview you.

KS: Very, very, very pleased to do it.

SL: Face to face.

KS: I'm interested because I've been through so much since then. I'm interested to know how my answers may differ.

SL: The previous interview we did, we talked a lot about Shakespeare and your love for it, and how you got into that. This time around, as you just read, I broadened my research. And it's because there's not much written about black actresses, and we talked about this last time. With PhD it's much bigger, so I have the chance now, to delve into that. I'm really curious about the way that people react when black women are at the forefront. But more importantly, what that does to the actress personally. Those who are playing the roles. Who are stepping in doing this day to day. Film, television, and stage. I'm curious about what that does to us, and I'm really wanting to get our narrative, and capture those voices, and first-hand accounts of what it's actually like to be in that position of playing these roles. So, it's a bit of a shift.

KS: Yeah. It is.

SL: So first of all, I am curious to know what your ethnic background is.

KS: Oh, well, as far as I know, I'm African American. And I know that I'm part Native American because I have a great grandmother, who was, we think full-blooded Choctaw. But I have not done the whole, you know, take my blood, take my spit, do the thing. Right? Which I'm actually thinking, I want to do that soon as a gift for my mother who's turning ninety next month.

SL: Oh, that's fantastic. So as far as you know, you're African American.

KS: Yes.

SL: So, is it safe to assume that you identify as a black woman? Or do you ever identify as anything else?

KS: No. I mean, you know, I identify only as a black woman, as I said, I know, grandma, great grandmother to me, Grandma Susan was we think full-blooded Choctaw. We have a picture of her and she's absolutely Native American. She's absolutely the Native American or biracial something, you know. But I'm, I'm black. I'm a sista. Hello. From America. I'm from Texas. That's where, that's who I am.

SL: Right. That's what I see, but I think it's important, especially with this research, there's a lot of times when people look at people, brown skinned and like, 'Oh, you're just black.'

KS: Yeah.

SL: So, what does it mean to be a black woman?

KS: I think you have to have a really thick skin because there are people who are going to question your...Whether or not you deserve to be there, you know? Whether or not you deserve to be in the job or in the gig, you know. There gonna be people who say extremely offensive things and they do not know that they're saying extremely offensive things. [chuckles] Sometimes they think they're absolutely complimenting you; you know? You have to be a great politician as well as go forth with really good humour, 99.9% of the time. Because stank gets you nowhere. I've learned that the hard way. Even when you're unhappy. No stank. No stank. I think that we do best going forth in joy. Always. That doesn't mean we have to be you know, laughing and kissing anybody's, you know, hind quarters all the time. It just means that we have to be positive sometimes when we don't want to be. Now, there are people who will say, 'Well, I'm angry when I'm angry and I deserve to be anger, and sit in my anger and blah, blah, blah.' And, you know, I agree with that. I don't want to take away anybody's anger. I don't want to take away anybody's right to be upset, but I do want to understand and want people to understand that I think we do best when we leave the stank at home.

SL: So that's what it means to be a black woman to you. How would you define the black female identity?

KS: Let me keep going. Because I was like, 'To be a black woman.' Let me just keep going about…

SL: Yeah, sure.

KS: Sometimes I feel like I'm representing all of black woman when I feel like, I am not. I don't feel like I am 'the' everybody, you know what I mean?

SL: Mm hmm.

KS: I'm odd. I'm very odd. [laughs] I have a deep voice, so people call me Sir on the phone. I'm unmarried. I have no children. You know, and I'm odd, and I work in a business where I go all over the place and travel a lot. I think that sometimes I feel pressured to represent all

black women and I'm so not all black women. So, sometimes I give in to the pressure, I think. I think, was it 2014? I think I bought twenty wigs. [chuckles] And I did that for business, but also it was a little bit of, 'Okay, I gotta look pretty.' Instead of kind of just sitting with my own sense of who I am, what's my own sense of beauty, and what's okay to look like? I felt that was a capitulation. It was fun. And sometimes I still wear them, sometimes, but I haven't worn them in a long time. Me being a black woman means sometimes people assume that you're something that you're not. Or someone that you're not. They lump you in, and we're all so different. We're so different. You know? So far as just the way we feel about femininity, and gender, and all that stuff. It's such a range within the scope of who we all are. And I think that the biggest challenge is just being, staying with who you are. Staying with who you are.

SL: Yeah.

KS: And trying to stay joyful. I really try to stay joyful.

SL: How do you find that joy? How do you keep that joy when there are forces make you want to be a little stank sometime?

KS: Yes. I have a Buddhist practice. I think I've talked to you about that.

SL: I don't think you did actually.

KS: Yeah, I practice the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin. I chant Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō. And I've been doing that for thirty years now, over thirty years. This is my thirty-second year of practice and that's my joy machine. That's how I find joy. That's how I find the value of my life every day. You know, I'm not great. I don't I feel like I'm a perfect Buddhist. I do my best to practice as best I can. And there are days when I chant more and days when I chant less, and sometimes there are days where I really feel like I'm plugged into that joy, even when crap is going on. Even when madness is going on, you know? I find that I love my work. So that's the main thing. That I feel like, even when I'm not working my practice helps me to create value in my life and find that daily joy. But, you know, my work. I love my work. I love my work. I love doing what I do. It's not easy. Especially now, you know. Everybody's pissed off in the United States right now. We're all tired and pissed and acting out and overwhelmed. I think that it's harder to do the work in this climate. In this social climate we're in right now. But joy is, you know, is the key. Joy opens the door. Joy gets me out of bed. Joy starts the car in the morning. Joy gets it done. Joy gets the job done; you know.

SL: What are some of the stigmas that you faced as a black actress? [laughs] I know you've been doing this a while, so there's a lot, but…

KS: I remember this audition where; it was an audition for a commercial. I don't even remember what it was I was selling. And she kept saying, 'Just, make it more sassy. Just, can you…just sassy. I want it even sassier than that.' And I kept giving her sassy without giving her black, which is what she really wanted. She wanted to say, just be more black. You know? I was like, I'll give me sassy all day long. I'm not gonna give you black. She wanted my neck to start working. And I was not gonna give her that. Because it's a commercial. I didn't want to give that. No! No. I wasn't gonna give it to her. I was young. I was stupid. I should have gave her the damn sassy. I should have gave her black sassy, because I'd have made that money and then been able to get on with my life. You know? Because somebody

else came along and gave her black, sassy! I saw the commercial, they gave it to her, you know. Somebody's gonna do it. You might as well make the money and keep on going and then use it to be able to do something that's transformative. You know? There's always times where you do stuff, or you see auditions for something and you go, 'Really? Seriously? Come on, man.' You know. Less so now, but still. The whole thing of getting compliments for every black woman on the street who was an actor. They find out you're an actor. You know. I had braids for a long time, and everybody thought I was the Pine Sol lady.

SL: Oh, yeah, I remember her. [laughs]

KS: Yeah.

SL: You guys look nothing alike.

KS: Nothing alike. At all. I was bigger at that time, and they're like, 'Oh, yeah, you the Pine Sol lady.' Okay. This is a kid who said it and he knew what he was doing. He used it as a pejorative. And he was somebody that was judging and evaluating for scholarships. 'Kid, you really don't have a clue, do you? What's going on here?' You know, it was fascinating. That whole thing of getting everybody else's compliment. Sometimes we're walking around, we all get each other's compliments. It's gotten better. You know what I mean? Staying calm when it gets crazy. Staying on an even keel. When people assume that you sing gospel. [chuckles] You know, 'Oh, you black woman. Of course, you sing gospel.' I do not say gospel. I really don't. I have more, when I sing, I have more in common with Angela Lansbury and Ethel Merman. I'm sorry, there's no Jennifer Holliday there. Sorry. The assumptions. That whole thing of identity. We find who we are, and then you have to fight, constantly fight what people assume you are. That's the hard part. Especially in TV and film. You walk in and they want something specific, and if you can give them that specific idea, never mind that you could go in and tell your own truth, you know. That's very frustrating. It's like, I know this is truthful, and I know that this straight down the line works, but it's not what they're looking for. It doesn't fulfil their idea of a black woman in that situation. There's this whole thing of if you're black, you're not allowed to be angry. You can cry. You can be disappointed. You can be distressed. You can be you know, beleaguered. You can be with your fan on the pew. You can be everything but angry.

SL: And yet there's a stereotype of 'angry black woman'.

KS: Hello. Drop mic. It's just unbelievable. It's crazy. It's craziness. I'm not allowed to be angry. It's the pretzel that twists my brain and my heart [chuckles] into this book. It's like you'll write a scene that pisses me off and then I can't be pissed. Come on, man. Give me a break.

[both laugh]

SL: Yeah. What are your thoughts and your feelings about what you're seeing today? We talked a little bit last time about if things are shifting, but it's been a couple of years. I would like to know what you think about the black woman that you are seeing on television.

KS: We are in a golden age of television, but a lot of that does not include us. There's a few little crumbs. If it's set in Westeros [chuckles] you gotta be biracial. You gotta look like, you know, you can't be *black,* black. You gotta be some kind of exotic thing. If it's set in the

hood, you better be black enough. You know? I know I'm never black enough for that. The, set in the neighbourhood. I'm never black enough. I'm pronouncing consonants that they don't want to hear. It's like, really? Seriously? Okay. Whatever, you know? The only way that I can interpret it is, I'm not black enough. I don't feel like our stories are really there except Viola [Davis]. Viola is killing it. She is showing the full range for a change. I get to see a black woman be pissed off. I get to see her be in charge. I get to see her be pissed. I get to see her be a villain, instead of…Because they're never the villain. You're either a victim, or you're a victim. [chuckles] You know what I mean? You're either the Madonna victim, or you're the whore victim. It's very rare that you get to be a villain, you know. Sometimes they let you be a perpetrator that gets their comeuppance, but you get to be a fully fleshed out villain. Or complicated, not just a villain, but you see this person in their full, with all their warts. Good, bad, otherwise. Seriously. She's breaking the ground like nobody's business. Bless her. Bless Shonda. Bless them. Its glorious. She's allowed to be flawed. That's new ground for black women on TV, which is kind of amazing.

SL: Since you do watch *How to Get Away with Murder* and talking about seeing warts and all. Seeing the good, seeing the bad, she's being the villain. How did you feel about that scene when we saw her take her wig off?

KS: I was just about to mention that. That scene made me so happy. That scene made me so happy. And then when Cicely Tyson said, 'Anna Mae!' I said, [whispers] 'Oh shit. She changed her name.' That made me so happy! Oh my god! Cause it was like, that's what, you know...It showed what she did. To do what she thought she needed to do, to be the person she needed to be to succeed. You know? And to show that I was...First of all, the fact that she was up for it. I have no doubt. It was probably even her idea. You know what I mean? The fact that she was up for it shows that she's the real damn deal. Excuse me. She's the real damn deal. That she's not all about vanity. That she's willing to be ugly. Quote, unquote, ugly. I should say, ugly, according to them. But the fact that she did it and did it so well. I just feel like that was a watershed moment in in television history.

SL: Do you think it was a watershed moment just for black women? Or do you think it was more universal than that?

KS: I think it was more universal than that, and I think that it won't be recognised as being more universal than that until the future. It was a big deal. It was a *big* deal.

SL: Why was it such a big deal?

KS: Because the facade came off, and she goes back and forth. You know? She's gained weight in the most recent season. Her character gained weight, and she was eating. I mean, you haven't seen it yet.

SL: I haven't seen it yet.

KS: Her character's like eating sweets in the middle of night. Eating like nobody's business. Drinking too much. She gained weight; you know. The character gained weight, I should say. And it was glorious to watch. I was like, 'God dawg! Not only did they show her without her hair and makeup, they let her gain some weight! They let her get thick!' It was amazing to see them let her, let that character be thick. Also, what's so interesting, she had that walk. You know, it's not a pretty walk. [gets up to demonstrate] Kerry [Washington] had that walk.

[walking around the room] You know. In her heals because she's in heals. But Viola's just [demonstrates by changing the style while continuing to walk around the room]

SL: Yes.

KS: She is rooted to the centre of the fucking earth. Every single time, and it's beautiful. It's absolutely beautiful. To see her not put on a walk or put on something that she feels like is more lady like. She's being authentic. I'm in awe of what she's doing on that show. I'm really in awe of it.

SL: So, did you hear about the whole *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*?

KS: Oh yes.

SL: What were your thoughts? How did you feel when you saw that this black woman is going to be playing Hermione?

KS: Let me show you what I did. [re-enacting the experience] 'YYYEEEEAAAAHHHHHH! OH MY GOD! Oh my god.' Literally, it wasn't just like, 'WOO!' I had to say a prayer just for her. Cause I was like, she is about to step into the shitstorm of all shit storms. And bless her for being so good. For being so talented. You know, the other thing about being a black woman is that we're held to a higher standard. And the other thing that I noticed; we hold each other to a higher standard. Now, I know I do it, and I know sometimes I'm wrong. But I always want us, black people in the business, to be better.

SL: Yeah. That makes sense.

KS: You know? It's like, 'Man, come on. Kick ass.' Is that right? Not always. Is it fair? Not always. Fare is what you pay on the bus. The fair is in August. [chuckles] You know? I do want us to kick ass all the time. I do. That's just what I want. I'm starting to learn how to let go of that. It's like, we all have our own journeys. Don't worry about somebody else's work no matter who they are. If they want you to mentor them, then they'll step up and ask that. I've had that call, and I've done it. People have asked for a mentor. Sure, I'll mentor. I think that encouragement is much, much more useful than criticism. Criticism comes all the time for us. We will get criticized. You bet that. Most of the time we will get criticized. Encouragement has more value. Always, always, always encourage. No matter how frustrated. Encourage. Encourage. If they want to know something they'll come to you. Encourage. Encourage. When I say criticism will always be there, sometimes one of my frustrations is feeling like we didn't get the criticism we needed in training. We didn't get the criticism we needed in the beginning of our career. I know that there were times where I got shined on in class. 'Yeah, that's great. Next.' Then they spent a whole lot of time on the white boy. Because they know he's gonna play *Hamlet*. They know he's gonna play Hamlet, and about fifty-five dozen other great, great roles in Shakespeare, and get a series and all that stuff. They know that that lottery ticket odds are better than my odds. That little shine on. That little thing of, 'Good luck.' I got a bit of that in undergrad. 'Who do you think you are wanting to be a classical actor?' I just want to get trained man. Just let me be trained.

SL: Why did you become an actress?

KS: Because I'm nut. Cause I'm crazy. Mad as a hatter. I did it in high school and junior high and it was like, 'Ooh.' I had a great experience in high school where I did production of *The Shadow Box*. And I remember looking we were kids so, before the show we're looking through the curtains. And the girl that I had the scene with said, 'Look, there's my dad.' This guy, huge cowboy, this is Texas, south Texas. Huge cowboy. He was all, you know, boots and hat, and belly over the belt buckle. He was the full nine yards. He was the full monty. Truth. He sat down in the auditorium seat. Barely fit in it. I'd seen him before and he was taciturn. He was the single syllable guy. And I remember a curtain call looking out, and this guy had tears going down his face. It's a show about death and dying, you know. And the stages. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross Kubler Ross stages. You know, anger, denial, bargaining, acceptance, all those stages. Anyway, I was like, this is a guy I couldn't have a conversation with, but we just had a conversation. It touched him to his core. Like this is some serious stuff, theatre. This is real serious. This is some serious shit. So, I went and started undergrad as a prelaw major and I was on a debate scholarship. Me and my partner were ranked in the nation in the values debate. I used to spend every Sunday in the government documents room. Every Sunday. Especially before tournament. Writing out briefs and getting ready, and one Sunday, I couldn't concentrate because I was trying to figure out whether or not I wanted to audition for a Cole Porter review. And then this big light bulb went on. Huge lightbulb. *Huge* lightbulb. If this is distracting you now, it's going to distract you for the rest of your life. Pack it up. Go home. Change your major. Get on with it. Literally. It was a light bulb and like words scrolling in the air. I was like, 'Okay.' [chuckles] I packed up my briefcase, went home. And I told my parents, I can't remember whether I told him before after, this possible audition, but I said, 'You guys, I have to talk to you about something.' 'Okay. Are you pregnant?'

SL: [laughs]

KS: So, I sat them down and I said, 'You know, I think I want to be an actor. I'm going to be an actor. I want to do theatre. I want to go and change my major and go to University of Texas at Austin.' There was silence. Beat. Beat. Beat. My dad got up, kissed me on the forehead and said, 'Whatever makes you happy boo.' [reminiscent and teary eyed] It's my favourite memory of my dad. Especially recently. My mom said, 'Can we talk about this for a minute?'

[both laugh]

KS: Can we talk about this? Cause she had the shingle hung. Kimberly Scott, Attorney in law. She was ready. I know she probably had it someplace in the garage. She was ready. She says, 'I just, I mean, it's so hard.' I said, 'Ma, I think I can do it. I think I can. Let me, I just want to try. Lemme try.' 'Just, you gotta have a backup plan. What's gonna to be your fall back? What are you going to fall back on?' I was like, 'My ass.' She says, 'Well, I just...' 'What mom? What's the matter? What is it?' 'I just don't want you to end up in porno movies.'

SL: [laughs]

KS: Oh my gosh. She was like dubious until she came to the opening of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* on Broadway. That was my first job out of school.

SL: Wow, I love that show. What would you like to see more of? In regards to the representation or portrayal of black women on stage and on film and television that you feel is missing.

KS: I want to see black woman able to do more roles like Annalise Keating. Where they're not, don't have to be perfect, and their hair doesn't have to be perfect. And they can be differently beautiful. They can be themselves. They can be beautiful as they are. I want to see more women play roles where gender is not an issue. I want to see more, Epatha Merkerson on *Law & Order*. That role was great. That role was great. That was ground-breaking, you know, in its own way. Really great. And she gave no quarter in that role and it was wonderful. And she could be pissed, and she could be tender, and she could laugh, she got to show range. I want to see more roles where women get to show range. Like men do, you know. What else do I want to see? I also want to see black woman get to do stuff like... I want to see black woman in Westeros. I want to see black woman on fantasy shows. I want to see black woman be able to do, my goodness, do things that we haven't been able to do up to this point. You know? Stuff that that white boys take for granted.

I love being able to play Worcester. Makes me so happy. I love playing the roles that I'm playing. In these two Henrys. I want to see a black woman play Hotspur. You know? I want to see a black woman play so many things. I'm really enjoying getting to see black woman play roles that they haven't. Getting to see Nemuna [Ceesay] play Lady Percy. Getting to see her play Vernon, my cousin Vernon. Getting to see all these women, all of us in our BDUs [battle dress uniforms], ready for battle. Cause I feel like there are women who are who are veterans. Who we honour by doing that. I think we honour that. I think we honour women who know what it is to serve. We honour them. And it makes me really happy to be that representative, and to hopefully get it right. To be able to stand up and speak truth to power. I want to see black women speaking truth to power more often. You know, [in a Maxine Waters type voice] 'Reclaiming my time. Reclaiming my time. Reclaiming my time!' I think it's time for black women to reclaim my time. In the media. In all media. It's time. We gotta reclaim our time.

SL: I love that. I love that. I love Maxine Waters. If you could say something about your experience…What are the unspoken words and thoughts that you've carried with you for a while, but you feel that it would be helpful for those two hear who don't know, what this experience is like? Does that make sense?

KS: People assume what I can do. And that's hard. People assume that my intent, when I'm criticizing work, or when I am standing up for the work, they assume that my intent is Machiavellian. And it is not. When I stand up for the work it's because I believe in rigor. I *believe* in rigor. As much as I'm a Buddhist, my religion is rigor. And I don't always practicing well, but when I am in that church, because I feel like a good rehearsal, rigorous rehearsal, is church, I feel like anything is possible. And I feel like I can tell any story. And I feel like we can overstep the bounds that we've seen for so many years. Not only for black women, but for women in general. Just for the culture in general, for human culture. We have put ourselves into these little corrals. You know? Fenced ourselves in. And I believe that when we, we apply rigor to the storytelling, and we apply it with joy, and encouragement, and apply it with us, to some degree, a sense of awe…Because it's big, it's large, and it's not to be taken lightly. Not everybody understands that it requires a degree of sophistication in the work to apply rigor. And not everybody has it. But I believe that a good rehearsal room that's rigorous, and joyful, and encouraging, and easy, that's church. That's as good as it gets

because that leads to performance. Being able to be open in performance and have that golden triangle between you and the other person on stage and the audience. If you're just alone on stage between you, and the text, and the audience. This triangle. It's really important. And I have a great deal of respect an awe for that. I'm so emotional. It's been a long week.

SL: It's beautiful. It's beautiful. I think that's all I need. Thank you.
(End of Interview)

Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Brenda (Brennie) Tellu (BT), Black American Actress

Interviewer: Samia La Virgne (SL)

Date of Interview: 18 April 2018

Interview Setting: Office space located within 550 7th Avenue, New York, USA

The transcript of this interview has been edited for length and pertinence to my research topic.

(Start of Interview)
SL: So Brennie, can you please tell me what your ethnic background is?

BT: I am West African, actually African American. First generation Liberian and Sierra Leonean.

SL: First generation? Wow, I didn't know that.

BT: Yeah, my mom was born in Liberia. My dad was born to Sierra Leone. They had my sister in Africa and then came here and had me. I was literally their first kid in the states.

SL: So, what's it been like for you being first generation African American? Because a lot of African Americans, a majority, I would say that live here are not.

BT: It's been interesting because my mother raised us in the culture. So, it was literally like growing up in Africa, but in America. Which was good and bad. You know, it was great because we have a very strong sense of self, and of heritage, and of culture. But then it was bad in the sense that obviously things that our friends were able to do, you know, it was very strict. So, we couldn't always do what everybody else was doing and it was just kind of like, I wanna go outside and play, everybody is else outside. I gotta be in here doing chores and you know very traditional. Yeah.

SL: Do you speak any other languages?

BT: I wish my mother and father spoke two different dialects. So rather than teach us both they were like, well, we speak two different dialects. So they taught us nothing. So, I know little words here and there from my grandmother. I can understand a little bit, just hearing it, but the stuff I know is basic like, come, go, you know, that sort of thing.

SL: Okay. So cool. It's just like something I never knew about you. And then, where were you born? Were you…?

BT: I was born in Brooklyn in a Kings County Hospital. We used to live on Bushwick Ave. I actually had the address. So, I like drove past it when I first moved to New York, and I was just like, 'Wow, this is where we lived.' Up until I was like, maybe four. We moved like before school. They were like 'She will not do school in New York', you know, so they moved down to Morrisville, Pennsylvania.

SL: So, for you what does it mean to be a black woman? How do you define your black female identity?

BT: It's definitely changed, you know. Had you asked me that, you know, half of my life ago, it probably would have been different in the sense that…not that I didn't love being a black woman, but I think then I focused on the downside of it. You know, the disrespect, and especially being a dark-skinned black woman, you know. All of the things that come along with that, you know. The identity like the colourism and the negative things around being dark skinned, you know. People telling you, you're cute to be dark skinned, and people calling you Blackie. And then because I was African, African booty scratcher. So, it was not a pleasant thing. And I initially was like, I didn't like the fact that I was dark, and I was just like, I'm so tired of that being the first thing people see. Then you know as I got older and I started to like, learn more about myself and, you know, started to love myself and just love being black period; then it became kind of like a thing of power. And I found strength in the fact that I was a black woman. And I made it a point to, you know, hold my head high, like, you know what, I'm a queen. I come from royalty. And you're going to know it every time I walk in the room. You're going to know it every time I'm involved in something, you know, in the way that I handle myself, in the way that I, you know, deal with people. You're always going to know that I'm proud of who I am and of being a black woman. So now, there's like this sense of pride and I can't imagine being anything else.

SL: So how did you find that love for yourself as a Black woman in the midst of all that sort of negativity?

BT: You know, it's funny, I've thought about that so long, and I don't…I try to like pinpoint where did the change happen? And honestly, you know what it probably happened in college. Actually no, at the end of high school. It got to a point where, literally, I think Junior High was kind of like the climax of the negativity. And I remember leaving Morrisville, Pennsylvania, which was like lily white, and I was always either the only black girl or one of two black girls or you know, whatever. And we moved to Trenton, New Jersey, which was black, black, black. Everything was black. The whole school black, the whole nine. And I was so excited because I was like, 'Oh, this is great. I'm gonna be around all black people. I can't wait.' And I get to school, and don't you know, they start teasing me, and bullying me, five minutes in. And I said, this is not what I expected. I was like, I was looking forward to this.

I remember there was a boy that used to torture me, torture me, torture me. And one day I was like, you know what, I can't beat them. I can't argue back with them. But I can write. So, I went home, and I wrote a limerick, and you know, we didn't have like copiers. So, I literally wrote enough copies of that limerick for everyone in class. You see I knew what a limerick was because we were like way ahead, the school district I came from, which is, you know, that whole educational disparity. But they were literally about two grades behind the school I came from. So, they put me in gifted and talented, but really, I just came from a better school district. I wasn't any more gifted than them. I just had a better head start. So, I wrote this limerick, and it was like Dante Dupree was very poor. His house didn't even have a door. And it was, it was pure comedy. And people laughed at him all day, that boy never teased me again. We got to high school. He tried to talk to me I was like, no, I did not forget you tortured me in sixth grade. We will not be friends. We will not be dating. Let's just keep ignoring each other like we've been doing.

That was like the beginning of like, my you know what, no, I'm going to turn this around. And at that moment, I realised, you know what? If I can't join them, I'm going to beat them. And so, I started becoming like, involved in everything, and trying to be like the leader of everything. So, like, I was president of my class for all four years. I was captain of the varsity cheerleading team. I was yearbook editor. I was newspaper editor. I ran track. I was on softball team. And it became like, hyper drive to like, always, you know, lead and be in front, and that was kind of like the beginning of my empowerment. But it's a dangerous thing to tie your self-esteem, to achievements. So, I think like once I got to college, it kind of started to shift a little bit. And then I joined my sorority, and I was like, surrounded by all these beautiful black women that just like, wanted to do stuff and felt empowered and it was like being in that company. And I just kind of never looked back.

SL: So how or why did you get into acting?

BT: You know, it's funny. I think I was always an actor. My mama threw away our TV when I was like nine or ten. Like we came home one day, and we were like, 'Mom, where's…Mommy, where's the TV?' [in a West African accent] ‘No more TV, go find a book.' And she was dead serious. She was like, go find the book. So, we started reading all the time because what else was there to do? So, we would read if we weren't reading, we were outside and like literally, my sisters didn't always like to read. So sometimes I would read all the books, and then I would act them out for them. So, it would be like, [in an animated voice] 'And then he did this. And then she said…and then…', you know, all that kind of thing. And then at one point, I was like, you know what we should put on a talent show. And we should charge people. So, I got all the kids in the neighbourhood, and I was like, okay, you're gonna sing. You guys are gonna dance. You're gonna do poetry. You're gonna do this. I was like the producer, and the headlining act. So I assigned stuff to everybody. We had an order. We you know, we sold tickets. We made little tickets, twenty-five cents a ticket. We went door to door because you could go door to door back then. But we went door to door sold tickets to all the neighbours. Set up the date, everything. We got chairs from our house. We all brought like one or two chairs, set it up. Had the show. We had refreshments, girl, we had cookies and juice for people. It was serious. This was a real show. And people actually showed up and we performed. I was a mess. I was the producer, the MC, and the headlining act. And we had routines and the whole nine. And I was just like, I mean of course at that time, it was just something to do. But as I look back at it now, it's like oh, I was a producer.

SL: How old are you when you put on this show?

BT: Maybe ten.

SL: Did you guys make money?

BT: I don't think we did because I think we spent the money we made on refreshments and then whatever money we had left we bought candy. So that was kind of like you know, we bought candy, and we ate the candy. So that was kind of like our payment. But that's kind of where like, my imagination and my creativity kind of started from was just having to find something to do to replace television. And then by the time TV came back, I was like, so-so interested in it. But then when I went to college, my mom was like, actors don't make money. And she was like, you will not be majoring in theatre. So I was like how can I major in something that's close to theatre, but not theatre? So I picked radio, TV film. Girl, I got to my

intern day one at a cable station and the woman was giving us our orientation. And she said, 'At the news station, you know, we try to have the more prominent news first, and what we kind of think about is if it bleeds, it leads.' I said, okay, that's my cue. And literally, that was my first and last day on the internship. And then I ended up like, in my last year, leaving school. I had my son, and I literally did not go back to school, until a year before I came back for grad school. And that's when I finished my degree.

SL: And it was in theatre?

BT: No, it was I mean, at that point I finished in Radio, TV, film, but I just needed to finish it to go grad school. Crazy. You know?

SL: Interesting. But that's always sort of been…at ten years old. That's so cute.

BT: Girl, you couldn't tell me nothing. We had a whole show. You know, Broadway in Morrisville.

SL: So, in your acting experience thus far, what sort of stigmas have you experienced as a black actress?

BT: Oh, a million, for days. Them not seeing us in Shakespeare, you know. Being in a graduate class and watching the difference in the way the professor coach the white children. Or the white students who he saw in Shakespeare versus you know, the black and the students of colour who he just couldn't quite in his mind see in Shakespeare. Unless of course we were playing…what's her name? Desdemona's maid, Amelia, unless we were playing…or Paulina. He could see us in that, but we couldn't be Lady Macbeth. We couldn't be Lady Percy, you know. And I just watched the way he handled people. And I remember being in class one day, and one of the Latino brothers did his monologue. And when he was giving him his notes. He told a story, and he like, 'Yeah, so I'm on the subway and there's this big, filthy black guy.' And I just kind of froze and I was like, where is this going? And the man was homeless, and he told the story, and every time it came back to the man, he was filthy, he was dirty, he was black, he was homeless. And there was just such disdain in his voice for this homeless man whose only crime was that he was homeless. And I literally got up in the middle of him talking and I walked out of class. And I was supposed to work that day. It's a three-hour class and I literally stayed outside because my blood was boiling so bad that I was like, if I go back in there, what's coming out of my mouth will not be pleasant. Because it was such like a micro aggressive story. And the black man was a villain for doing nothing other than being where he was and being homeless.

So, I think my time came up to work and I wasn't there. And they were like, 'Oh, she might be outside prepping.' No. I was literally sitting outside the class trying to calm myself down. And he walked out. He was like, 'Hey, you're up.' I said, 'Actually, I want to talk to you.' And he was like, 'Oh, what's up?' And I said, 'Let me ask you a question. The black man on the subway.' I said, 'Did he attack you?' He was like, 'Huh?' I said, 'Did he attack you? Did he rob you? Did he approach you in any aggressive manner? Did he do something that gave you an indication that he was going to bring you harm?' And he was like, 'No.' And I said, 'Exactly.' I said, 'You took all of your, you know, negative stereotypes and you know, preconceived notions about him and you projected them on to him.' I said, 'And then you brought that into the classroom, which is supposed to be a safe space. A space that I paid for, to be able to work.' And he was like, 'Oh wow, I'm so sorry. Like, I've read about microaggressions.

But…' I was like, 'And now you, you've had the experience of actually doing it.' And I was just like, you know, I said, 'We go through this every single day, but I don't expect to come here and have to deal with it. It would be nice not to.' I said, 'Of course, it happens all the time.' I was like, but it's just like, why? So, he apologized, whatever. I ended up leaving because I was like, I'm not working because my energy is not in that place. Then I find out a week later, a week after I talked to him in the other class, he compares my black cohort who's doing a monologue, and we're…We had two Shakespeare classes. I wasn't in this class, but I heard about it. Compared him to, said he reminded him of a little monkey when he was doing monologue. And I was like, I'm actually done. But because I wasn't physically present for that one, I couldn't really address it. I was just like, I'm done. And nobody said anything. They let it go in that class. So, but yeah, that was pretty much a lot of the times. The experience. Or submitting a thesis proposal for *Dangerous Liaisons*, and being told that, you know, the other young ladies, you know, we're both black, that we couldn't play those characters. Even though in my research, because I knew they would say that I submitted to them pictures, proof, documentation of black French nobility, during that time period, who enjoyed all the luxuries because they had money. And they just disregarded that and said no. I said, 'Okay, okay.'

SL: Okay, so when taking a look at what's happening currently, as far as representation of black women; I want you to talk about what's happening, what you see or have experienced as far as stage, but then also film and television. Do you, when looking at the representation of black women, what sort of representation are you seeing?

BT: It's very specific and it's funny because, I was talking to a co-worker the other day, we both happened to be AEA. So, we were looking at EPA breakdowns. And I told her, I said, I want to ask you something I said, because sometimes you know you, you see something you're like, maybe I'm just being extra. Maybe I'm putting something on it that's not there. But I started to notice in the breakdowns that there would be certain characters that would say, African American woman or any ethnicity. But then there were certain characters that wouldn't list race at all. Those characters were defaulted to white. And it was just understood even though in the play itself, there was no reason the character had to be either or, those characters defaulted to white. So, if you didn't see anything listed, when normally you would think okay, they didn't ask for anything specific. Let me submit myself. They're never going to contact you for those submissions. And they're probably never going to call you back when you go in because in their mind, the default is this, but they don't want to say that because they know in the context of the script, that character doesn't have to be that that's just a preference. And so, they let you know very directly.

Okay, so like, literally every theatre company in America is doing *Sweat* this year. So, you know, the black woman in that I think is Cynthia. So, you know, of course they're all seeing everybody for you know, Cynthia you know, what have you and that's fine. The playwright is a black woman of course it makes sense. But then when you look at the rest of the plays they're doing, it's that same thing. Either no ethnicity or Caucasian. And you're like, well, I've read the play. It doesn't really have to be anything there's no…But I just noticed that there's a very specific kind of character. And it's usually like, you know, the poor hard working single mom. The maid. The angry aggressive, you know, person. The mean boss. The bad detective like it's…There's always, it's almost like the characters that are soft, that are ingenue, that are…We can't play those. Not that we can't play those, but that's not what is seen, that's not what they're looking for. And I just…I find that interesting and I'm just like wow, still, you know. Even though when you look at film and TV, Viola Davis killing it. Kerry Washington

killing it. Heading shows. Empire when it, you know, first started, Taraji P. Henson killing it. We're not even going to talk about movies, you know, Black Panther and everything. Like you see all this evidence of the fact that A) black woman can carry a series. Can carry a movie, you know. Can lead, whatever it is, but that representation is still like in this little hole. And it's so hard to get them to see past it. You know that, you know, we can play Katniss Everdeen, whatever her name is from *Hunger Games*, we can play all these different things too.

SL: Apparently, I haven't read the books, but in books, she is a person of colour. She was just cast as white.

BT: Really? And they were so angry, that Rue was black. But it said very clearly in the book that the people from that district were dark skinned. It's just funny because it's like something we were talking about, there's a play called *Snow Angel*. And it's in the canon for my school. Like they have plays that are in the canon, where if you select those, you're just, you're good, they're not going to challenge you. They've been done a hundred times. So, you know, whatever. That play's in the canon. I'd seen it done twice in the two classes before me. And it was always, it was a white woman playing the role of the prostitute. It's like a, set in like, whatever, earlier times. And it's a man who comes to visit this prostitute, and you know, she makes him feel good, whatever the case is. But there's a scene where at one point, I guess he's making her feel bad for being who she is. And she's never been anything but honest. He wants her to pretend to be something she's not that's what he pays for the fantasy. So, she's like, fine, but then he like gets on her so she drops her knees, and she grabs and goes, 'Oh Massa. Something, something, something.' And I remember watching it the first time and I was like… 'Hm, that's interesting.' Then I saw it the second time and I was like, let me go read this play. Go read the play and don't you know that character is black? But yet on the flip side, they will not, they do not bend in that way. On the flip side. There was even there was a young woman from China in the program, and she wanted to do a British play. And they were like, 'There aren't Chinese people in…I mean are there Chinese people?'

SL: There is a huge Chinese community. A massive Chinese community.

BT: Is there?

SL: Yes, there is. Huge.

BT: Because the way they turned her down so quickly you would think there were no Asian people in the UK, and I find that very hard to believe.

SL: Especially in Birmingham where I live, there we have a Chinatown.

BT: Wow. And I just remember thinking to myself, I know there's Asian people in the UK, I know it, I know it. I would stake my life on it, ain't been there, but I would stake my life on it. But so, it's that thing where there's so much flexibility and there's so much open mindedness, you know, for them to be the default and to play anything anywhere. But we're still relegated to this little, little piece of this. This is what you get right here. And don't try to step out of line because they'll scooch you right back in.

SL: So, you mentioned, you know that television is a little bit more flexible than theatre. You mentioning things like *Scandal* and *Empire*. Are those characters that like Kerry Washington is playing and Taraji, are those not just new incantations of stereotypes?

BT: Yes and no. The Taraji Henson character? Yes. The *Scandal* character is a little different because she's based on a real person. But if I lean into Annalise, that's a character that I would absolutely expect to be played by white woman. Absolutely, because, you know, black women don't get to be sexy on TV. They don't get to have you know, fluid sexuality that you know that they're still trying to figure it out. Like they don't get to figure things out. They don't get the grace to make mistakes and come back. They don't get to be soft, and that character gets to be all of that. And that's what makes it, so you know, unique and so beautiful that Shonda Rhimes created it. And the thing is, and if I'm not mistaken, I think even when she created it originally, I think Annalise was supposed to be white. I'm not mistaken. And oh, also on *Grey's Anatomy*, Bailey. Bailey was supposed to be a blonde woman. And she went in there and owned it, and they changed their mind about who Bailey was. So, I'm like, it's like, given the opportunity, like, we can do it. But, you know, it's like…and everybody always says create your own work. And that sounds good in theory, but you need create your own work money. And if you don't have create your own work money, then…like then what? And it's like you're in a holding pattern because it's like, you know, we can all write a million web-series for days, but now that there are a million web-series you really have to stand out. You know, it was different when…*Awkward Black Girl*, there weren't that many. And she created something unique. Now there are two thousand *Awkward Black Girl* web series. So, it's like, you know, you're trying to get a deal or something, you really have to be like, you know, over the roof. Because it's just like, everybody is trying to do that same thing, because everybody's fighting for these one or two roles that all of us can't have. But that shouldn't be when there are other roles we could play, but we're just not seen for those roles.

SL: So, what are the types of roles or things that you would like to see as far as representation of black women? What do you feel that's missing? What do you want to see more of on stage on screen?

BT: I want to see us be allowed to be soft. Be allowed to be fragile. Allowed to be protected, you know, because that exists. There are black women that are not aggressive, are not angry, are not, you know, trying to be the boss of everything. We are awkward, we are nerds, we are geniuses, we are scientists, doctors, like, we're all of that in life. And I just feel like on TV we have…if we're that, we're that and angry, we're that and aggressive, we're that end of it. It's like we can't, we can't be complex, is what it feels like. Like we're very one dimensional, a lot of times the way that were written and the roles were allowed to portray. So, I would love to see us be allowed to experience like, our full range of life, you know, to be able to have breakdowns and to not have to be strong because guess what? Strength is vulnerability. So, when you can see us be vulnerable, to me that seeing us be strong. We don't get to do that.

SL: So, one of my questions is, what's one of the biggest challenges that you've had in the industry? Obviously, from what you've already talked about, you know, your recent master's training was difficult. Was that sort of one of the biggest challenges? Is there another?

BT: That was a big challenge. And I think too, it opened my eyes a lot like I had, I had very different expectations going in. I think I had rose coloured glasses to a degree.

SL: So, what did you expect going in?

BT: I guess, you know, the funny thing is, I had friends that were in graduate school, and they were always one of the only. So, I went in expecting to be like, the only black woman in my program, or to be like one of two. And when I walked into orientation and saw twelve other black people I was like, 'Oh, this program is about to be lit! They took thirteen of us. Oh, this is great. We're going to be…Oh. Oh. So, it's just thirteen of us marginalized instead of two. Got it.' So, I was disappointed in the fact that they…We were the largest class of African Americans they've ever taken, but they didn't prepare for us. You know? I guess you were trying to step out and actually take people based on talent and not this, 'We need…', you know. Not Noah's Ark. We need one dark skin, we need one light skin, we need one man, we need one woman. So, I appreciate that, but you didn't prepare for us in the work. You didn't prepare for us in the faculty. They had several opportunities while I was there to hire a staff person of colour. Never. Never even tried. Never attempted. Nothing. So, it's just very disappointing.

What made it interesting is I took a black Theatre Arts intensive with Stella Adler. Literally Stella Adler teaches undergrad NYU Tisch, they go and take their, their acting and everything there. And one of the young men walked into the head of Stella Adler's acting program, Tom Oppenheim, and basically told him that he feels marginalized. He feels there's not anything there to represent him. And Tom actually took that to heart and was like, oh, and he's the grandson of Stella Adler. So, he's long in the tradition. And he was like, 'Oh, we need to do something about that.' Picked up the phone called Stephen McKinley Henderson and was like, 'You know, what can we do?' And just so happened that Steve McKinley Henderson, Michelle Shay, Phylicia Rashad and Ruben Santiago Hudson had just partnered with the Billie Holiday Theater, and they were going to start this black Theatre Arts Intensive. And they were like, oh, we can partner. So they did a week as a trial. Girl, we got our whole entire lives. Whole. That week changed my life. And I remember sitting there thinking, 'This is what white people feel like in a graduate program.' You look around and all the professors look like you. The work you're studying reflects you. You see yourself in everything. And we left there feeling like, like superheroes. And I was like, we should have this.

SL: So, can you try to put into words what that's like because I know for me and you know, pretty much all of my acting training, it's always been by white people and more specifically white men. So finally having the opportunity to learn and train with accomplished people of colour. What you know, having been in both worlds, how is it different? You know; besides the fact they look like you can you put into words what that was like?

BT: The thing is that you get to explore. We got to explore the work in the context of our own background, our own history. He brought in Bill Sims who was like a musical legend. Who has done music for Broadway for everything you can think about, TV the whole nine. And Bill Simms talked to us about how the music interacts with, you know, the art. And we went over songs like how the blues would be, versus, you know, not folk music or jazz, like, if you're singing a song with a character comes from jazz, how you sing it differently than you know, how the words come out. He broke it down. You wouldn't get that in the program. They just say, 'Oh, sing the song, make sure the notes are right.' No, it's different. Billie Holiday is not Etta James is not Ella Fitzgerald. It's different. The way they sang and the area they come from. Then he brought in Camille Brown who is like, choreographer extraordinaire. She just did *Jesus Christ Superstar*, I think, if I'm not mistaken. But she came

in and did the history of dance. Like culturally from Black perspective and brought it to modern day. So, we saw where it started off with the African dance and literally took us through history. And I mean, like everything was just literally tied back in some way. And it was like…and August Wilson.

They don't teach that in programs, but they need to. They need, the same way you teach Shakespeare, August needs to be taught for us. Because you don't just walk out and do August. August writes in triplets and couplets. August writes in blues, iambic pentameter and if you don't understand what that is, you're never going to get him right. But we need to learn this, it's not osmosis, you know. There should be training for that, especially if you're planning on taking African American actors under your wing because guess what? August is being done everywhere all the time. You've essentially not prepared us for the world that we're going to be auditioning in. Because nobody's gonna to cast me and Chekhov. I'm never getting cast in Chekhov. I'm never getting cast in Ibsen. I'm never getting cast in Strindberg. Ever. And if I'm lucky to get cast in Shakespeare, depending on where it is and who it is and what they're looking for, chances are I'm playing Paulina, Amelia, you know, what I mean? Like so it's just this idea of how different it would have been if the training, you know, if there was something for us. Or, not saying you have to centre the whole training on us but offering us an elective I don't know figure it out. The same way you figure out Chekhov and everything for them because you know, as well as we do, you're making us do Chekhov and all this and you know, nobody's ever gonna cast us in it. So, offer Chekhov, and Strindberg, and Ibsen as an elective, and then offer August Wilson, and Lynn Nottage and whoever else as an elective. So, this way we're getting what we're actually going to work in.

SL: So, you know, it sounds like it makes sense but then, you know, thinking about, institutions where its mainly white people teaching, and you know, asking them to tailor things…

BT: Which means you need to hire people colour.

SL: And then it also opens up the thing of, you know, possibly white people wanting to do these things that are for black people. What are your thoughts and feelings about that?

BT: No. And the reason I say no is because *everything* is primarily centred around them. If we were statistically to look at the plays that are getting published and the casting, statistically hands down, it's still more them. Probably 75% them you know what I mean. So, it's not like there's a need or there's a hurt there that they'd be missing out on if they don't do August, which first of all is written in August's rights anyway. That ain't happening. You know, so I know there's been some funny stuff with the directing because I know there, it was originally set that a black director had to direct August. But I've heard that there have been some ways that people get around that like having an AD (artistic director), that's black or you know, whatever. But those roles, that context, I don't even…they wouldn't get it to begin with, but I say no, because it's different. And those are characters that were written to be like the people in Pittsburgh in that hill district. And that's specific. And that's why I say like, I look at, I wouldn't expect to do really, I wouldn't expect to do Chekhov or Ibsen because I look at how they're set and where they're set. I just, you know, I mean, that's just me. I'm not. I've never really been interested. I know they're actors that are interested. And that's fine too. Because I have seen actually, the very best production I've ever seen of *Uncle Vanya* in my life was NYU graduate acting 2016 and Uncle Vanya was black. What's Vanya's, what's the professor's wife's name? I can't remember.

SL: I'm not super familiar with that one.

BT: But she was black. I mean, like, literally it was it was an 85% black cast. And that was the first time I realised, 'Oh, Chekhov is a comedy. This is supposed to be funny.' Because typically when you see it done here, people go they go dramatic, ‘Oh what are we're gonna do?’ And really, a friend of mine said if you go into Russian and see it, it's a comedy. People are laughing the whole time. But they go, you know, the bluesy thing here, but that was the first time I saw done, and saw it done that way. And I was like, ‘They killed it!’ I was like, ‘Come on!’ I was like that's all you need. But it was so good. So, I get that we can play that too. But yeah, I don't think they need to do August. I don't think they're hurting, and they don't do August. I mean, they got everything else over here on this side, you'll be alright.

SL: So, what's one of the most fulfilling experiences you've had? It sounds like that course that you just took was but…

BT: Child, and they have a summer one, but I couldn't swing that money, if I could. Lord Jesus, I was like, 'What can I sell? My TV, my left leg, cause whoever the people are next summer, they're going to their whole life for the summer. That was extremely fulfilling, that's probably been training-wise, the most fulfilling training experience I've had. That and probably my Misner training, which was really the beginning of me having any formal training. And that was significant because that was when I moved from being the silly to being shook. And I came out of this idea of you know, people always talk about, you know, character versus reputation. And I say that in the sense that I walked into that classroom as the person that people thought I should be, and I left as myself. And that came out of Misner training. And that was life. That wasn't just the acting. So that was probably the beginning of a fulfilling experience. And that made me want more training. But then this Black Theatre Arts intensive, just kicked it up a notch. And I'm like, this is training I actually wanted.

SL: Is there any school you think in the US that has that sort of thing going on?

BT: Not in the US? I heard and I don't know how true this is, that the, is it the Identity school? There's something like that maybe in London. It's the school that Daniel Kaluuya and I want to say it's Daniel Kaluuya maybe Leticia Wright. But there are two actors, maybe Cynthia Erivo, but they went to this particular school in London, and I'm hearing that it's a lot of black actors from, you know, the UK, that are working here are coming out of that school. And they said, it's fire. I don't know what they're doing there. But I think identity is in the name if I'm not mistaken. But um, yeah, they said that they are coming out of there on fire, whatever they're doing there. And whatever they're getting there is like, as obviously, as you can see, they're working. Working a lot. I'm like, maybe I should go to the UK and stay there for a little while, come on back, go get some what they got come on back here. Because they are killing it. Literally.

SL: So, what do you, you know, think, from your own sort of personal perception is the difference between like African American actresses and black British actresses?

BT: Okay, well, let me, I got to do that in two ways. So, the difference to you know, the people here that are casting, is the accent. And for some reason, I feel like they think that, you know, if they cast some actor from the UK that they're better trained. That they're, you know, they're getting a different calibre of actor. And I think they gel on to the accent because it's closer to something that's closer to them that they think they can relate to. And

that may or may not be the case, you know, because they could very well be better trained or what have you. But I think it's the perception and that's that little bit of bias. Like if I'm going to have to hire black, I'd rather hire British black because it feels safer. You know, whatever, um, as opposed to just like, you know, 'Mimi', who's been, you know, here, all her life, you know, training or whatever. And I think that's *their* perception. As far as the difference between us. I think the experience culturally is different.

I mean, I don't know exactly how racism is shaped there. I know with this, the whole Brexit thing, it kind of came a little closer to us. But I don't know if it's as blatant in your face ridiculous there as it is now. That probably changed the experience a little bit because I think to a degree, we take some of that into the room with us. Some of that gotta be twice as good, work ten times as hard. You know, because I've literally walked into auditions and you know, you could see we've been prepping for hours and we're like, you know, we trying to hold all this emotion. Other people are walking in laughing. I'm like, but we're in there serious. We're like, you know, we're in the mode. We're trying to hold our place, our circumstance, you know. Working on our inner life, trying to keep that emotional life juicy until we walk in. And they are just like, not a care in the world. 'Oh my god, that's so Bobby, and let me tell you what Bobby said.' And I feel like we, we go in with that thing. And sometimes it works. And of course, sometimes that thing is, you know, too much. And it, it's that like, kind of that you want it so bad that you want it too much that you overdrive. And you know, I don't know, I don't know if the actors from the UK are necessarily taking that in there, or it's just like, let me go in. I don't know, I'm just, I can't speak to it. But that's just my outside. What I think.

SL: Yeah. And I'm very curious about what the perception is. Like for, you know, African Americans what they think it's like, and vice versa.

BT: Yeah, I do think that, you know, to a degree that that gives them a little more meat. Like, I think it's attractive to casting people here. To cast someone from the UK that's been trained over there. Like, I really do think they feel like oh, they're getting a better quality of training and discipline from the actors there, as opposed to American actors. And it's not always that. Sometimes the fact that we really cannot afford the train. I mean, it is…I ain't even gonna talk about these loans. LORD JESUS! Sallie Mae, she owns me. But yeah, I understand why people don't want to go back to school and burden themselves with these loans. I get it. For me, I'm wanted the training more than I was concerned about worrying about how I'm gonna pay the loans back. Because guess what? You know Sallie Mae, she can expect payment when she would like but you know, when I booked that job, she could have it. I just ain't booked that job yet. You know. So, it's, it's that thing too, and I know so many actors here of colour that want to train but they legit can afford it. Especially if they live in New York. Because half your job in New York is trying to live in New York. So, you know, and I don't know what that experience is like in the UK. I don't know, you know what the cost of living is like, or if that level of like, desperation and hustle kicks into it. Because like most of the people that work here are actors, and they're in the struggle, you know, I mean? This is not a high paying job or whatever, but it's flexible. And if you have an audition, you can get somebody to cover for you. So, people keep this job because everybody's trying to book that job. That's going to be the job to take some out of here. So, girl. Le struggle, le real.

SL: So, you know earlier you kind of mentioned about you know, being darker skinned black woman how do you feel? You know and the colourism, and that's the thing. So how do you

feel colourism has affected you being a dark-skinned black woman, as far as your you know, within your acting. Has, you know…just how has it affected you?

BT: The only role I remember not getting for a fact, it was a film that I auditioned for. And I made it to the final callback. And it was for the mother of a young South African girl. And I mean, I'm African. I can pretty much do damn near all the African accents like, you know, no problem. And I knew I put a lot of work and effort into it or whatever. And they ended up telling me I didn't get the job, which I get it. The little girl was light skinned and they didn't feel, they felt it was better to hire a light skinned actress who wasn't as good, they actually said this to me, who wasn't as good and didn't have the accent as well, but she looked more like the complexion of the little girl. Because obviously a light skinned child could never have a dark-skinned mother. Which I was just kind of like…

SL: They don't understand genetics?

BT: And I just said, 'Okay, thank you.' And they really thought they were like, you know, doing me a big favour by letting me know that. And I was like, actually, you just like…I was like, 'Okay.' I mean, like, what else could you say? I was just like, that just literally made no sense. At all. You're going to give yourself more challenges in terms of the dialect acting, whatever, but the complexions match. So, I was like, okay, I mean, you know, that's something I can't change. So hey, you know, go with what works for you. You know what else you got to say? And it's like, it's an interesting thing now because it's a combination of things. It's, it's the dark skin, it's the pressure to be like five pounds, and I'm not five pounds. I'm not gonna be five pounds ever again. You know, and that perpetual like dieting to try to…It's, it's a lot, and you, you literally have to fight all of that. Like fight to leave all that at the door when you walk in the room, and some days is easier than others. You know what I mean? It really is. And I just, it's hard not to get in your head. And not to wonder, well, you know, did it have to do with this? Did it have to do with that? And it's almost like, I remember, there's a book called *One Less Bitter Actor*, and I read it years ago. I always go back and reread it because it's just like, it's that idea that you can't control anything but your level of preparation, your work, that's it. Can't control the people across table. You can't control their biases. You can't control anything. I just have to try to remind myself that when I walk in the room that I can't change the skin colour. I can't change my weight. Can't change any of that. I can go in. I can give the best audition I can give. I can be prepared. After I walk out the door that's it. And so, it's like trying not to let all that get in my head.

You know, this whole thing of like, ethnically ambiguous, and then, you know, wanting this certain kind of look of, you know…Prime example, I was an associate producer on a film. An independent sad film. And I remember the producer, the line producer, who I was working with, who hired me, being very frustrated because in the auditions they had, it was, the role was a reporter. And there were three black actresses that made it to the callback, and the two other actresses were darker, and she said they were excellent. Like they were really, really, really, really good. And she was fighting for them, and it was her in a room of white men. But the other girl was like skinned with curly hair, and she was very thin, and, you know. She looked more like what they would like, and they kept saying, 'But she's so pretty, and she's so this.' And she was like, but the other two were better. The other two are better. And she fought and fought, and they went with the girl anyway. And then, it was just like a mess. It was like, this is what you wanted, this is what you get. But I was like, wow, it's just interesting that that's how it played out. It's, it's what's more visually attractive to them, because it's closer to the standard of beauty they have in here. And when she told me that I

was just like, this is me seeing it on the other side. So sometimes I'm not imagining it. Sometimes it is a factor. But you know, what are you going to do? You'll drive yourself crazy. I'm not about to be bleaching my skin. So, you gonna to take all this melanin or you won't. And at the end of the day, I can't do anything about that. I'll move on and do the next audition because that's what I control. Girl.

SL: So, with all the turmoil and struggle and frustration and questioning, why do you still decide to continue to be in this industry?

BT: Because I love it. And when I do get to work…and Samuel Jackson, I think said it, he said 'Your job is to audition, and every now and then if you're lucky, you get the work.' And that's what it is. I'm like, I gotta do the work. So, I can do the part I love. And so, I keep pushing myself into these auditions because then when I get the job, and I get to like jump in this character and do it, like I live. And so, it makes it worthwhile. And I remember my movement teacher saying to us, 'You better find something about this that you absolutely love. Because if you don't love something about it, whatever you're doing, it won't sustain you.' And that's what I love.

I love like the process. I love being at the table and doing the work. I love doing my research, and building my character, and my backstory, and doing all of that before we come to the table. And then figuring it out and making choices and like, even in the struggle in the days that I leave rehearsal like, did I go to school? Was that me? Do I know what I'm doing? Even that. There's something exciting about like, finding it all over again, and then getting there at the end of the process and you're like, 'Girl, see you did go to grad school. Girl, look at you. You do have a master's degree. You better use it Girl!' You know, finding those moments where you're like, 'I got it! I'm there.' But like that whole process of like, starting all over, because it's almost like every time you start a new character, it's like the first day of grad school all over again. And you have to relearn, unlearn, whatever and relearn everything all over again. Because every director is different. Every production is different. So literally, it's the first day of school. And that's what it feels like, and I love *that*. So, I'm like if I gotta go through all this other stuff to get to that, then okay, that's the price I pay. But when I get to that, it's worth it. Yeah.

SL: So, if, what would you say to…if there was a forum. A time and a place where you could say the things that are kind of deep inside that maybe you haven't even really said to yourself to, you know, the white people that just don't understand. What would that pearl or that gem be that you would want them to know?

BT: Don't put me in a box. Don't put me in a box. Don't assume anything. When I walk in. Let me play. See what I can do. I would rather you throw a million things at me and test my range and see. Like I love nothing better than off the wall adjustments. Let me play. Don't assume that, oh, I'm this type, or I'm that type or, you know, let me read for the character that maybe you didn't think when you look at me, I should play. Because you never know, I might surprise you. Because I feel like your mind is more open and your mind is more flexible when you're not looking at people of colour. Give me that same level of possibility and range as an actor. Especially when you see I'm trained, I've been trained. That's why I don't even like to call myself an actress because an actress is gonna play female parts. I can play anything you give me; you know. And let me, just let me play. Let me try it. Don't make any assumptions about me based on what you see when I walk in the room. And I know that's

hard to do, because obviously, yeah, our physical does come into it, but I'm just saying be open to the possibility that I have the range. Yeah.

SL: And finally, if you could go back in time to young little Brennie. What would you tell her in regards to being a black woman? Knowing what you know now.

BT: I would probably share with her…I wrote affirmation for my daughter for the very same reason. And it was basically just saying, 'You are because you should be.', you know? You are a queen. Carry yourself like royalty runs through your veins. Don't forget that. Don't let anybody else define you. *You* define you. You define you. You own you.

SL: Thank you.
(End of Interview)

Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Yhá Mourhia Wright (YW), Black American Actress

Interviewer: Samia La Virgne (SL)

Date of Interview: 23 April 2018

Interview Setting: Private residence in Brooklyn, New York, USA

The transcript of this interview has been edited for length and pertinence to my research topic.

(Start of Interview)
SL: Thank you so much for meeting with me. Can you tell me what your ethnic background is?

YW: I'm African American.

SL: You mentioned you're from San Jose originally. You've been here [New Yok] for five years. So, what does it mean to you to be a black woman? How do you define your black female identity?

YW: I am still trying to…That has evolved and changed. My parents are from Gary, Indiana. So, my parents, my family's from the Midwest and the South, relatives included. So, growing up in Cali, that was very hard for me. It wasn't until, I went to Santa Clara University for undergrad, and it wasn't until then that I really began to see myself as a black woman. It was because I began to get treated differently, and I realised like, 'Oh my gosh. It's because I'm black.' So, a lot of what my experience of black womanhood has been, it's been an experience of almost being forced into different corners and positions. It's almost…If you can like imagine a ping pong or pool balls. It's just been like ping pong-ing or ricocheting off of one way to another. That's how it kind of has felt. So, in the midst of that, I've been trying to really search for that identity and define that. It's been challenging. I don't know that I have settled completely into what that means to me. I know that I'm proud to be a black woman. I know that I'm proud of the strength and vulnerability that I think we hold. And I'm curious if there's more vulnerability among other black women, including myself, because I feel like we haven't had the agency to do that. But it's been a lot of like, 'You're black!', and you'd be like, 'Okay.' You know. [laughs] I'm trying to figure out what that means cause I've been in a lot of white spaces. I've also…I'm always a token. So, I even more so have that experience of being told what I am versus being able to…Now I'm in that place in my life where it's like, 'No, I am this.' And being comfortable asserting what I know about myself. So yeah, long answer. [laughs]

SL: You talked about being forced into different areas and different positions and being the token, versus asserting what you feel that you are. So, can you expand on that a little bit more? On what spaces you've been forced into, versus how you're defining yourself now that you've delved into that a little bit more?

YW: Yeah. So, in high school I was definitely just Yhá Mourhia. I was myself. People were like, 'You're gonna be the future Oprah.' Because I was always running for student council

and all of that. I didn't register it being I'm a certain type of black woman. Not really. Maybe subconsciously, but on a conscious level, as a high schooler, I just felt like it was a lot of pressure and I wanted to…I was well known, but I wanted to also be cool. But I never did anything that you needed to do to be cool, so it was always like that. What I've kind of discovered over the years for myself, is being okay with code switching. I actually saw an article saying the days of code switching are done and we're just being ourselves, but I'll use that term for lack of better words. I've become okay with being able to move with language how I want to, expressing what I feel about the world. So, in those token spaces, like I have for my nine to five job right now, I am no longer holding back about what I feel or what I know to be right and wrong when it comes to the treatment of the 'other'. I feel as a black woman, that's something I wouldn't necessarily say that I woke up and said I wanted, but it is something that I feel like when I look at little black girls, that I have to do. Because if I can make it easier for them, or if I can at least set that example, then, it'll all be worth it, I feel.

SL: So, in regards to acting and being an actress, what sort of stigma have you faced?

YW: So, believe it or not, I have faced the other stigma. That I am almost like very wary to speak about because I think that it's not…You know who was just spoke about it? What's her name? Oh, gosh, Maxine.

SL: Maxine from *Living Single*?

YW: Yes. She was talking about it on The Breakfast Club interview she had a couple weeks ago. She kind of breezed over the fact that because she was dark skinned, she was kind of cast as like the rough like hip hop, blah, blah, blah. But that wasn't her because she's from like Arizona. For me because I guess brown-skinned, in between, I'm shorter. There has been actually a perception that I had in both undergrad and especially grad school, where it's like, you don't have that depth. Because of the way I speak a lot of people have assumed that I don't carry the weight of a black woman. So even roles that might be compelling, they'll pick someone else who feels blacker. Or I walk into a room, when I've walked into a room and classrooms, there's an assumption that I'm not a good actress. I might be okay, or I'm here because of the way I look versus like my talent, and that was really placed upon me in grad school. It took only doing the work to kind of begin to get out of that. But always the assumption of, 'Oh, you're pretty. You're funny. You're perky. You're from California. You're not like really going to have the black woman roles cause you're not like a *black* woman. You're just like, Yhá Mourhia.' [laughs]

SL: So almost being not black enough. Wanna talk about that a little bit more?

YW: White kids would say things to me that were racist or prejudiced things, but it didn't register to me at that time. I think I was just happy to be the safe black girl. When I got to college, when my friends, all my friends were, then, first generation African, their parents were from all over Africa. Majority west and east, then all of a sudden, I think I became more okay with being a black woman, and I didn't have to be the token there. Then I got to grad school, and it was all about being safe, and being like, 'Oh Yhá Mourhia, you're not like that Yhá Mourhia.' Or opening up to me about how the other black girls were kind of mean. Not saying because they're black girls, but you know, sassy, and that kind of thing, and me hearing this like opinion about women. As I grew older, it was like, 'Wait, you're saying that because they're black. And you're telling me because you feel like I'm safe.' It's an extra burden that I think that can cause internal…You can internalize it. At a time in my life, I

think I did because it was like, 'Oh, the black girls are mean.' and I internalize it. It becomes…You can get very angry at white people in general because you feel like they're stereotyping your people. It was a lot because you end up hearing things and being proxy to things that maybe other black people who only attract other black people aren't really around. You know? So, it's interesting. Even in my workplace, it's the same thing. The things that I have even allowed as a token, I know most of the black people I know would be like, 'No way.' [laughs] So yeah.

SL: So, what's your coping mechanism for dealing with, being this intermediary, for lack of a better word, between the real black people, the non-black people? It seems like from what you're saying, you've been this comfortable go between.

YW: Right.

SL: How do you not internalize some of the statements and comments?

YW: I will say that, how do you not internalize? Because when I got to grad school and as I pushed my way through undergrad, there was a lull. So, after undergrad, I graduated 2009 from undergrad, and then I did four years of working. The last two years of that was doing regional theatre in which it propelled me straight into grad school. So, I did not for four years after undergrad have that experience of being the black girl, it was fine. I was around a lot of mixed people of colour, and I just was fine. But when I got to grad school, it was almost reminiscent of undergrad. And it actually began to stop because of how I was being treated by staff and faculty, in both undergrad and grad, that I actually did not internalize hate or anger about being black, because I started to realise, they were treating me like that because of who I am. If anything, I started to become insecure about not being black enough. But I never began to be upset with other black people. I was just upset with like, why can't the white people see me as black enough? It was a really weird like…I'm letting these white people tell me how black I am and scale me. [laughs] It wasn't the black people doing, it was just white people in power. it was like, 'Oh, you're not that kind of black actress, you're this kind of black actress.' You know? Very confusing and was very chaotic for me mentally. Yeah.

SL: So how have you pushed past that since? You finished school obviously.

YW: Yeah. I graduated 2016 so it's almost been two years. It's a three-year program and I think that, and I've been open with my friends from school about this, I think that it's taken... The first year? Messed up. I mean my psyche going auditions, insecure, extra confused, when I had a very a strong sense of self before grad school. Honestly, the way that I've overcome that is going back to myself. Reading, praying, meditating, and being around my family and being around people who knew me before, or people who are okay to get me get to know me after. No one who thinks I am what they said. If you treat me the way that you did in grad school, we probably don't talk. We're just social media friends. [laughs] And that's what I had to do to recover from it, because otherwise it was always triggers and trauma. And that's what I had to do. I think it's gonna take another, one more year. To like literally match, you know. It'll be three years in, three years out. That third year, next May, I think I'll be completely clear of it, or have reconciled it, I guess, in a better way.

SL: So why did you decide to become an actress? How did you get into acting?

YW: I've always loved it! I'm a middle child. My brother is three years older; my sister is six years younger. When I was in fifth grade, I wrote Burger King because I loved the Burger King kids club commercials. So, I wrote them a handwritten, probably pencil, letter on lined paper, introducing myself, asking them how I could be on commercials, telling them why, and I mailed it to them. I got back like a whole year subscription to the Burger King kids club for free. [laughs] That's how passionate I was. How can I be in commercials? I was so hungry. As a little girl. I loved it. I loved writing. I had imaginary friends. It's just always been who I am. When I got into undergrad, I was a poli-sci major. I had plans on going to law school, and when I went to undergrad, it was liberal arts, and I just kept taking theatre and business courses. And I eventually got offered a theatre scholarship my mid sophomore year and then I was just like, 'Okay, that's it.' Yeah, yeah. [laughs]

SL: Do you do you think being the middle child has something to do with your very outgoing personality and being this actress? Because there's this perception that middle children sometimes get forgotten because they're in the middle. do you think that has anything to do with it?

YW: I mean, it might. It definitely might. I do stand out from my brother and my sister. We're very close, but I definitely have the more like, 'Oh my Gosh!' personality. They're like, 'Yhá Mourhia calm down.' Yeah. [laughs]

SL: It's great. I love it. So, thinking about you know, when you're watching TV or film or even when you're going to the theatre, are you seeing black women represented? And when you do see them, what sort of representation do you feel you're seeing?

YW: I am starting to see black women represented. I don't think that I feel that there's this weird thing where it's like, if you are dark skinned and you are usually thin. Or if you are light skinned and you can be bigger. There's this weird thing that's going on where I notice, but they don't always exactly look like actresses I know. And it's not bad. We attach ourselves, like they're black and maybe we attach ourselves to a complexion. When I think about actresses I know, they don't actually always look like that. I see people morphed to look like that. I don't think that they always represent what I'm actually seeing, and sometimes it gets confusing because I'm like, 'Well, what does a black actress look like?'

SL: So, what you're saying is, things that you're actually seeing represented on film and stage Does not match who you personally are?

YW: Yeah.

SL: And your other friends who are actors, they don't look like that?

YW: Yeah! But yet, I do believe that the fabric is changing. I'm seeing all these different types of black women and complexions, and it's flavourful and all this stuff. But then when I look at the black woman I know, it's this weird thing where I'm like, most of us aren't looking like that. It's still very interesting. I don't know. I don't know if that makes any sense.

SL: Seeing what's being represented right now, does that discourage you a bit? When thinking about your career?

YW: Well, I should say also, the way that I reconcile post grad school is when I was in school, after my first semester…I got my MFA in acting. But after my first semester, there was an opportunity for actors to study playwriting full time because there was only two playwrights and my cohort, and one of them has to defer. So, there was gonna be one. So, I applied, and I got into a playwriting track. So, the entire time I double mastered in playwriting, flash screen writing and acting. I had to do all the same curriculum, all the same stuff. You can only get one masters, but I double mastered. [laughs] So, I have written a lot of plays and stuff, and I had produced and did directing in undergrad. I didn't know that it was called producing, I just knew I was making mainstage work for our BSU. Our Black Student Union, and I didn't know…Like you produced shows. In September 2016, a couple months after graduating, I founded my production company and I've been creating my own.

I stopped auditioning in March of 2017. So I stopped auditioning, because I felt that as hard as producing is, and creating your own, I'm creating digital content. Part of that is, I felt like the doors were opening there. I really just felt this call, this pull there, and I could tell my stories in that way there. I still write plays, too, but it was there. Then the auditioning I stopped because I felt that again, that representation. they didn't exactly know. It was like, 'You're so pretty. Can you lose fifteen pounds?' Or 'You're so pretty, but you're kind of like Mindy [Kaling], but what casting directors do you know?' And it was too much. I was hustling. I three part-time jobs at the time. It was just entirely too much on my psyche. I decided if I have this content, I had already started producing myself and when I stopped auditioning in March 2017, so year now. I was like, let me just continue to create my own work. I just took a step back from it. I'm starting to miss auditioning, believe it or not, but I think I could step back into it with a lot more reassurance and just like, 'Here I am. This is who I am.' But it was starting to take a toll on me. Again, I still had a lot of the toxic residue from school. Yeah.

SL: You mentioned that you're seeing more representation than before. In the past. Do you feel that they are more full-bodied characters of what black woman are? Or do you feel that they're new incantations of stereotypes?

YW: Ooh, that's tricky. [laughs] Wow. I was actually thinking about this today when I was thinking about my series. I edit it too, and so I'm consistently seeing it, you know. Literally the last thing I want to do is create one-dimensional characters or any incantations of stereotypes, literally. Then I was like, wow, such pressure to create these people that are full, and it feels like extra. I think that…Yeah, I don't know that they're stereotypes. I think that a lot of what we see are, these women exist. If anything, I just don't think we're seeing everybody yet. I still don't think we're seeing everybody.

SL: So, who else do we need to see? It's great that you create your own content because maybe you'll have a different sort of insight because you're in so many different facets of creating the work. So, what are we missing? What would you like to see more of?

YW: The mind thinks in images. We recall in images. Everything's images. All the more reason why what we see on stage and what we see on film and television is so important because this is actually, literally imprinting what we think. So, we need to see women who… Black women, women of colour who are dealing with mental health issues. We need to see them dealing with body issues. We need to see them overcoming that. We need to see them with their friends. We need to see them loving their friends. We need to see them being in healthy relationships. Whether it be with a woman or a man. We need to see them being

nerds and not fitting in. We need to see them looking like they fit in, but not feeling like they fit in. We need to see them be people. Not these goddesses who are just here to entertain you and give you a suspension of disbelief. They need to still be able to live and be people. Because that's part of what black women…What is hurting us and what has hurt us, is the lack of being able to be a person. To be human. At the end of the day, I feel like what's painful about what we're experiencing in higher education is a lack of letting us experience our human dignity, and assuming that we are just one type of way. Or that we cannot be capable of being the lead or someone with sex appeal unless you look a certain way. All of these things, they're hurting us, and I feel then we internalize it. The last thing I want to see is it being used to pit us against one another. Especially as actresses.

SL: Do you think it's harder for black women than black men?

YW: Yeah.

SL: Why?

YW: Black men have a lot of struggles. Are we talking about in the entertainment industry, though?

SL: Mm hmm.

YW: Yeah, in the entertainment industry, black men are…I'm not saying being sexualized is okay by any means or even like tasteful, right? But they are sexualized. They are sought after by everyone. especially when they make money or whatever they're in starts becoming a hit, or they're a hit. They are afforded a certain humanity once they move their way up and their renown. I think that black women are just so disrespected by so many different facets of the world. Whether it be our hair, makeup, because we're women too. So, there's an added layer of, if white women are feeling this, black women are feeling it more. Your skin. Your complexion. If you have a European nose. If you look like this, it's just added on to that, and it actually is contributing to how they value us, and it contributes to how the media spins our stories. I'll say it. People have said that if Monique looked a different way, perhaps people wouldn't have attacked her. I'm not saying what she's done is right or wrong, but I'm saying that the way that you look, if you were perhaps more petite and maybe a little bit lighter, maybe this or that, and you weren't so vocal about how you felt, perhaps people would treat you differently. That's the kind of thing that black women are up against.

Black men…Yes, I'm sure, I'm positive, they have horrible things said to them. And horrible treatment, but I think that black women are still being treated like objects. Like pure objects. And I'm seeing it. Even the way that they will choose one of us that's the ideal. Especially in grad school programs, or a couple of us, and use…Like objects, just like they're playing chess with actual human beings. [laughs] When you're trying to move to through academia, you're managing expectations. You were always in management. You're in management. No wonder why we're good at being in charge and we can fall into that easily. It's not because, 'Oh, you're a black woman. You're strong. You're powerful. It's because I've been managing. I'm managing all these different things, as far as managing the stereotypes and the sexism. I'm always managing and mitigating anyway.

SL: It's true. How do you view black British actresses? What do you think their experience is?

YW: I know that it's probably so, so hard for black British actresses, but I think that their experience is one right now of buzz. I think that they have, it seems their training in general is stronger, and I feel like it's giving them a leg up in this industry. This is just perception, I don't know. I also know that there are only so many. It's so funny because you can speak of them like, 'They, they, they.' And there's like six. You know what I'm saying? Like how many are there really? In comparison to a white British or white European actress, you know. Their experience seems, I know their experience is very challenging. It just seems that when they come here, it's easier for them to get quality work. That's what I'm going to say, not they get work. To get quality work.

SL: And you feel it's probably mainly because of the exoticism of their accent?

YW: I think that, but I think the training is on point. I think the training is like…

SL: That was gonna be my next question. You mentioned stronger training. So, can you go into that will do more? What is stronger about their training over there?

YW: I think that a lot of their training is training. It seems to be less about, and I'm speaking specifically to London, to be quite honest. Here, you're always African American, you're always black. A lot of people don't even know African American doesn't mean every kind of black person. They use it to describe British black people, it's ridiculous. So, you're African American, you're black, and you're grouped in, and you either sink or swim in that grouping. I think that it's a lot more contemporary work, it seems. It's easier to do that to people. I think it seems that people who are focused more on the classics, I think that there's still a certain amount of like you cannot play this role. But it seems that training is not something that people can take away from you. It just seems that the capitalistic racism that fuels our country is always glazed over the training. There's just an extra layer of something that seems to exist over the training. Extra layer. [laugh] Added layer that seems to just be off putting. Only studied there [in London] five weeks, so what do I know? But I will tell you that was the one time that I was American.

SL: And how did that feel?

YW: I was, I didn't know how to process it. I was like, 'Is this white privilege? What is this experience? What is this?' I'm American. It was a profound understanding. Being there it's like, you're American. I wasn't black. Not readily. You know? I got to at least be American. Here I don't get to be America. I don't even internalize that patriotism. I used to when I was younger. Then I got older, and I realised it wasn't really about me or for me, and it just felt like it's kind of not mine. You know.

SL: Yeah. So clearly, you've dealt with a lot of discrimination and racism. Sounds like particularly in your training.

YW: Mm hmm.

SL: You mentioned that you were doing some regional theatre and things like that before you went into training. Did you encounter any difficulty with discrimination or racism there?

YW: California, the Bay Area, San Jose. I was one of the very few, at that point, trained actresses, as far as had my BA in theatre. So even when I was doing regional theatre…Let's see. The doors opened for me. It was *Raisin the Sun*. First show. Beneatha. From there, it went into *Finian's Rainbow* because somebody saw that. And then from there, it went into *The Tin Pan Alley Rag*. Propelled me into *The Color Purple*, the musical as Nettie at Stanford, but they cast the people outside. It was a really blessed two years of just like working. A lot of what I did was for black people. I always had black role. I didn't have a role that wasn't in for black person. So that was part of it. I was privileged in my short two years of doing almost back-to-back shows. Of doing work that did not make me feel less, I was doing a lot of black work. [chuckles] You know. *Finian's Rainbow*, a musical, yeah, but it's about black and Irish sharecroppers and they're overcoming racism. So, I was privileged in the work that I did. I didn't feel that. No. Not doing regional theatre. Felt that in undergrad, and I felt that in grad school. And it's just right now that I'm like, 'Oh, no, I felt that when I was studying acting. Not when I was actually doing it.' [chuckles]

SL: You said they were all black characters and working mainly with black people. Was there less competition, as far as less actors in that area that you're at for those roles?

YW: Not at Stanford. Not for *The Color Purple*. I think maybe for *Raisin the Sun*? I don't think so. *Color Purple* was, I mean again, they cast the people from outside. So, I think they had pretty lengthy auditions. I did feel a pressure, when I was in *The Color Purple*, to rise the occasion, but not a pressure of she's not good enough. Just to rise. Because it was a lot of talented Stanford students. I applied to Stanford, I didn't get it and so there was a stigma of like, [takes a deep breath in and out] You know? There was that added, but that was just based off of I've always idolized this school. Stanford and Harvard, I idolized those schools, but no, not competition. That was in grad school. [laughs]

SL: If you think about the filter, it's like there's an innocence. I was in my early, early to mid 20s. And then when I go to get my solid education, it's like that is such a key time. So that toxic feeling of competition and not feeling good enough, that's the kind of stuff that can create crazed actors in the professional world. That filters you out as this person. That's not how people started. That's not what their heart was necessarily always when they went into the program, you know?

YW: I needed to just create my own narrative. I was just tired of being told who to be. It was too much. I think after three years of that I was like, 'I need a break from this.'

SL: What would you say to those haters or disbelievers out there? What's something that is on your chest that you wish that you could explain to them about who you are as a black actress?

YW: What would I say about myself?

SL: Yeah, if you had that audience.

YW: I would just say, how dare you think that you have the right to tell someone who existed most of their life before meeting you, who they are based off of your prejudice of them. It doesn't have to be racial prejudice, just your prejudgment of them. How dare you think you have the right to do that to people. To young women. To me, who came here seeking to do something that she was and is so passionate about and loves. I would just say, you have no

right. And you don't have the right to continue to do that to people. It's not your right. You might have the privilege, but you have no right. [laughs]

SL: I like that. And finally, knowing who you are today and where you're at today. If you could go back to young Yhá Mourhia watching the BK kids club commercials. [laughs]

YW: Yes!

SL: If you could go back to your younger self, where you are now, knowing who you are now? What would you tell her?

YW: I would honestly tell her to continue making purses out of jeans. To continue writing. To continue being a weirdo. [laughs] Whatever that means. And to not play small. To not play small about who she is because a fear that who she is too big for those around her. I did a lot of playing small. I did a lot. For years. Yeah. [laughs]

SL: Well, that's about it.
(End of Interview)

Actress Interview
Consent Forms

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CONSERVATOIRE

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- I understand that you will be discussing the progress of your research and details of this interview with others. **YES / NO**

I freely give my consent to participate in this interview and have been given a copy of this form for my own information.

Natalie C. Bailey
Participant's Name *(please print)*

Natalie C Bailey
Participant's Signature

06/07/18
Date

ROYAL
BIRMINGHAM
CONSERVATOIRE

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LaTanza Britts

Participant's Name *(please print)*

Participant's Signature

9/2/18

Date

ROYAL BIRMINGHAM CONSERVATOIRE

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Josette Bushell-Mingo
Participant's Name *(please print)*

Participant's Signature

10th March 2018
Date

BIRMINGHAM CONSERVATOIRE

BIRMINGHAM CITY University

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Nemura Ceesay

Participant's Name *(please print)*

Nemura Ceesay

Participant's Signature

8/12/17

Date

ROYAL
BIRMINGHAM
CONSERVATOIRE

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YASMIN DAWES

Participant's Name *(please print)*

Participant's Signature

16/1/19

Date

ROYAL BIRMINGHAM CONSERVATOIRE

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Mara Huf
Participant's Name *(please print)*

Mara Huf
Participant's Signature

10/10/18
Date

ROYAL BIRMINGHAM CONSERVATOIRE

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Margaret Ivey
Participant's Name *(please print)*

Participant's Signature

04/18/2018
Date

ROYAL
BIRMINGHAM
CONSERVATOIRE

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SARAH JEANPIERRE
Participant's Name *(please print)*

Sarah Jeanp
Participant's Signature

25/08/19
Date

ROYAL BIRMINGHAM CONSERVATOIRE

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Kimara Lewis

Participant's Name *(please print)*

Participant's Signature

7/9/18

Date

BIRMINGHAM CONSERVATOIRE

BIRMINGHAM CITY University

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Asia Mark

Participant's Name *(please print)*

Asia Mark

Participant's Signature

8/11/2017

Date

ROYAL BIRMINGHAM CONSERVATOIRE

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AIMEE POWELL

Participant's Name *(please print)*

Participant's Signature

7/9/18

Date

BIRMINGHAM CONSERVATOIRE

BIRMINGHAM CITY University

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KIMBERLY SCOTT

Participant's Name *(please print)*

Participant's Signature

8/13/17

Date

BIRMINGHAM CONSERVATOIRE

BIRMINGHAM CITY University

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Brenda Tellu (Brennie)

Participant's Name *(please print)*

Participant's Signature

4/18/18

Date

BIRMINGHAM CONSERVATOIRE

BIRMINGHAM CITY University

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Yhá Mourhia Wright

Participant's Name *(please print)*

Participant's Signature

April 23, 2018

Date