# Daniels Radio EP 1

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00:07 Kitsa: Hello, welcome to the very first episode of the Daniels Radio Podcast. This is exciting. So today, we have an opportunity to talk about race, and in particular, the Black experience in our current context. Today's podcast will feature students passionate about our school, our university, and the people who live in it. We understand COVID has been a very difficult time, but I believe a lot of good has come out of it. So our podcast today will feature three segments, each focusing on different aspects of the Black experience. We will be looking at the Black experience as a student, the Black experience in Daniels, and just the issue of race in the context of North America. The podcast features music by the Toronto-based artist Foley, among other artists, and is a by-product of a lot of help. It's gonna be awesome. I'm excited to dive into this with you, so let's get started.

[music]

01:28 Elvin: Hi, I'm Elvin. I'm an international student from Malawi, which is in Southeast Africa. I'm in my fourth year at Daniels and I moved to Canada when I was 16, and I've been here for six years.

01:39 Renee: And my name is Renee, and I'm a domestic student, also in my fourth year at Daniels. And I was born in Canada and I've lived here all my life.

01:46 Elvin: Today, we'll be speaking about the Black student experience, particularly our experiences in Canada and at Daniels, and we'll feature another segment on another Black student at Daniels.

01:57 Renee: Yeah, so I guess we can get right into it. So Elvin, what has your experience been like here since moving to Canada?

02:05 Elvin: Before moving to Canada, I was sort of sold into the American dream fantasy, which I think every immigrant can relate to. So even though moving here was really exciting, all these opportunities opened up, no one really talked about the struggles of fitting into a system that favors one race over another. And I was sort of quickly faced with the harsh reality of where I stand in society because of the colour of my skin. So in Canada, I'm Black, but in Africa, I'm just a person. I'm not defined by my skin tone because the majority look like me. I'm the norm. But I feel like being Black in the West means you're no longer an individual. Instead, you're grouped into a generalized idea of who Black people are. And I'm not sure about your experience being born here in Canada, what would you say it was like?

02:53 Renee: Yeah, so I have lived in predominantly white neighborhoods since I was born. I was born in Markham. And I faced racism head-on in school systems, I guess all my life, 'cause I hadn't really realized a lot of these situations were even deemed racist until recently, actually. When I was a kid, I'd stay up late watching TV with my sister and come to class the next day tired and have teachers asking me, "Oh, is everything okay at home?" And I thought it was just... I don't know, they're being polite, and I looked a mess obviously coming in with bags under my eyes. [chuckle] But I never really realized that the reasons they were asking me were not just out of curiosity. They're not asking Johnny in the corner why he looks so tired because, oh, he's playing hockey or whatever.

03:38 Elvin: And I'm assuming this was all based on the assumption that because you're a Black student, you're probably having domestic issues at home.

03:45 Renee: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

03:46 Elvin: Which is a terrible assumption to make, by the way.

03:48 Renee: No. Definitely, yeah. And I guess I've always felt different than those around me, but I kind of adapted to this feeling of misplacement over the years. My mother helped me develop an awareness to people who may try and treat me differently or poorly because of the way I look. And it's really helped because I have faced instances of bullying in school and was typically able to get over it pretty quickly because I became aware at a young age of the ignorance that some people have.

04:15 Elvin: And I think it's sort of a sad reality that instead of being young and enjoying our youth, we sort of have to learn about the issues of our society. And I would say I had a very similar experience as well because... I guess while in Africa, I never truly experienced racism but I was aware of it. And I always saw it on TV but never understood the extent of the issues until I came here. And so, I had to learn what racism was because unless it was explicitly direct, I couldn't tell what it was. I couldn't tell what was and what wasn't racist.

04:47 Renee: No, definitely. And especially what you said about learning about racism on TV. The racism that they show on TV is not racism.

04:54 Elvin: Yeah.

04:55 Renee: It's super gimmicky and it's always like some bully and she's like, "Oh, don't hang out with her." And the other girls are like, "Why not?" And she's like, "Because she's Black." And you're like...

[vocalization]

05:05 Elvin: That doesn't happen in real life.

05:08 Renee: That's not how it works. So you can't really see the signs because they're not... You don't know where to really learn them. I guess especially for you being an international student.

05:16 Elvin: No, yeah, it was definitely a learning process and a difficult one at that because I also had to learn that a lot of normalized things by society are not BIPOC friendly. So even in the little details. So for example, a security guard or even an employee just following you around the store, I was like, "Oh, they're doing their job, they probably wanna help." But it's like, no, they're following me because I'm Black. They think I'm gonna steal as a general assumption that people make about Black people.

05:43 Renee: Right, right.

05:43 Elvin: But it's like, they're not gonna follow that white lady, they're gonna follow me. And so it's like... Or for example, even band-aids. Black band-aids are now are revolutionary. So even though they should be commonplace, they're now just sort of being integrated into society.

06:00 Renee: Yeah, which is ridiculous 'cause black band-aids... Band-aids in general are supposed to be able to match your skin tone, so you'd think that generally, they'd come in different skin tones to begin with, but yeah, no.

06:09 Elvin: Yeah, and I feel like you kinda see the market take advantage of black band-aids and make money off the advantages of one race, which is really sad.

06:20 Renee: And the disadvantages of another.

06:21 Elvin: Yeah, exactly. But yeah, so I had to mature and grow thick skin very quickly at a young age and so, instead of enjoying my youth.

06:31 Renee: Exactly, no. I totally feel that. And I kinda think developing this thick skin helps us as Black women but I also believe that it allows us to almost ignore racist acts, and it allows these situations that we face to blend into everyday life, so we adapt to a lifestyle that we shouldn't even endure.

06:50 Elvin: And I'm not sure if it makes us ignore racist acts, but I think it definitely makes us endure things that an average person shouldn't endure. And yet we're still expected to function like the average person, right? So society makes these racist acts normal, so that we as Black women also think they're normal.

07:17 Renee: Yeah.

[music]

07:18 Elvin: Yeah. Moving to a new country and leaving everything behind was difficult, and I found myself trying to hold on to my Black history, but doing so in a system that's trying to erase it is challenging. I've been here at Daniels studying architecture for four years now. Why don't I know about any Black architects that shaped America's history? I don't know about... Maybe you have, Renee, I don't know.

07:40 Renee: I mean I... No. [chuckle]

07:41 Elvin: Yeah, right? But there's so many. And a couple of examples I have. Robert Robinson Taylor, the first academically-trained and credential Black architect in America, whose work made a great impact. Or another example, Norma Merrick Sklarek, the first major African-American architect that's a woman. These are pioneers for young Black people, they're role models. Why haven't I heard their names? But yet, in every class I've been to, I've heard either Le Corbusier's name or Frank Gehry's name.

08:11 Renee: Oh yeah, yeah. And it's funny 'cause, I mean not even funny, but I don't think I was explicitly aware of the absence of Black people in our studies in architecture until probably my second year at Daniels, like in JAV200, which everybody took, we both took, we were tasked with researching an artifact of our choosing, and a lot of students picked their favorite brand of shoes or a really nice handbag that they wanted, and I focused on the Black afro pick, just kind of randomly, because I saw it kinda lying around and I was like, "Oh, I don't have a topic."

08:42 Elvin: And I think it's interesting that you say that it's kind of randomly because I don't think it's random. I think as young Black students, we have this sort of pressure to express ourselves in our work because we can't do that anywhere else, and so I think it's actually, it was an instinct to sort of speak on something that defines you.

09:01 Renee: That's really interesting. I actually never thought about it that way, and it makes a lot of sense. Random or not, I was really appreciative that I did decide to focus on this topic because it led me to a lot of information about how the simple comb is still used often by Black people, like my little brother, and it was such a prominent symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement back when it first began. Black people were forced to perm their hair and damage the quality of their hair just to resemble that of white hair. So this comb was a symbol of their defiance to change themselves to suit the majority.

09:34 Elvin: No, and I can totally relate to that feeling pressure to include your Black experience in the work that you do, in your design work, and I think that sort of comes down to the fact that there's a lack of representation of people who look like us, and I feel like we're striving to create that narratives for ourselves. And it's a shame that we have to ask to be included in a narrative that we're a part of. And I think, especially as an international student, it really impacted my integration into society. I made it a challenge because I didn't have a support system. I didn't have anyone to have this important conversations with. I left my family back home, and so it was sort of trying to figure out how to make it an easy process to enter the Canadian community.

10:27 Renee: Yeah. No, I definitely get that. And I think that one way it could be improved is through teaching more about global architectural history rather than just European and colonial history. I wanted to learn more about the Black experience, and I'm really happy to have that opportunity in a course called The History of Architectural Knowledge, which is a third-year course and isn't even one of our mandatory courses, but I believe you took it?

10:50 Elvin: Yeah, I did. Yeah. And I would say it was a breath of fresh air for sure. And I think that course really shows what it means to decolonize the curriculum. I didn't just talk about third world countries in sort of colonial contexts, it actually showed that a lot of these methods and a lot of these practices that are so celebrated today, actually did come from all these countries that are looked down upon, and it came from Black people, from Asian people, from all sorts of people. And for the first time, I was like, "Oh, the world is not just created by white men."

11:32 Renee: Yes.

11:32 Elvin: You know what I mean? It was created by a whole bunch of people, and for the first time, I sort of felt like as an equal.

11:39 Renee: Yeah. No, I definitely get that. So I'm really happy I'm gonna be taking that next semester, and honestly, I think that course is one of the ones that should be one of our first year fundamental courses.

11:49 Elvin: Yeah, I agree.

11:49 Renee: Yeah? Yeah, I think it's really good that we're finally having these conversations 'cause these are definitely conversations that need to be had.

11:57 Elvin: Yes.

11:57 Renee: Yeah.

[music]

12:14 Renee: Okay, so now we are going to welcome Doryne, who is also a Black student at Daniels. Hey, Doryne.

12:20 Doryne: Hey, my name is Doryne, like you guys already just mentioned, and I'm currently in my fourth year of studies at Daniels and I'm double majoring in visual and architectural studies.

12:30 Elvin: That's great.

12:31 Renee: Amazing, very nice. And Doryne also happens to be my very first friend at Daniels.

12:36 Doryne: True, true.

12:37 Elvin: Really?

12:37 Renee: Yeah. It is so funny, I met her on the very first day of orientation. Me and my mom got there super early to defy the Black stereotype of being late and we just sat on the, just around the school for 15 minutes waiting, and I saw Doryne walk past and my mom was like, "Oh, look, it's another Black girl. Like go, go, go, go make friends."

12:51 Doryne: Well, I'm very glad that you were assertive because I was scared out of my mind and I was like rocking back and forth, like "Someone talk to me, someone talk to me." And thankfully, Renee came and sat beside me and said, "I don't know where to stand 'cause I'm gonna stand here," and the rest is history. [chuckle]

13:08 Elvin: Wow, yeah, we love to see it. Black students coming together, I like it. [chuckle] Alright, so Doryne, what has your experience at Daniels sort of been like?

13:18 Doryne: So if I were to describe my experience at Daniels in a single word, I'd use the word progressive. So I remember being 17, coming to the University of Toronto for the first time, and I wasn't only shy, but I was very timid, and looking back, I think that was my motivation for choosing to study art post-secondary education because I really found solace in painting and writing and saw it as a clutch in which I can sneak my ideas and my opinions into the world. And then after first year, I decided that I was gonna continue studying architecture because I really just fell in love with architectural history. I loved how in the Daniels Faculty, when we studied the history of architecture, architecture was used more as a lens to study the history of the world and to understand systems of thought around us and to dissect and interpret the world around us. And so continuing off of how I was very timid and shy and just growing up as a Black female minority in Canada for my entire life, I became very accustomed to micro-aggressions and prejudice.

14:20 Doryne: It's not that I didn't feel the pain of them, but I didn't know how to articulate them, so I just became accustomed to them and it became normal, and I never once thought to question them in the spaces that I grew up in my entire life, especially not an academic institution. The only other thing competing for your time when you're a child from your home life is school, you spend most of your time in school, and the school's job is to educate you. And so I came prepared to learn and I absorbed and readily swallowed the narrative they fed me, accepting it as the whole narrative, I never thought to question it, and so moving into U of T, going into Daniels, I really liked the courses we're taking, I saw it more as an extension of the art classes that I took in high school. A lot of the same European movements, we were learning about renaissance, cubism, all of those and the same names being thrown around, Picasso, and then the architects Frank Gehry, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright but there was mainly two moments in my undergrad journey that really challenged my perception of history and taught me that history in itself is not as linear as we think it is, and it's curated.

15:28 Doryne: So it's not that there's not prolific Black designers and artists, but they're curated out of the canon that is being fed to me and that I'm truly not being fed the entire narrative. And so this really began in second year. In second year, I feel like the professors had a wonderful mentality to it and to showing how we learn about history really from a Eurocentric mindset and that how we have to take off those lenses. They also talked about the complicity of some of the great architects that we learn about and the buildings that we reverence and look up to. The first one that comes to my head as an example is Thomas Jefferson, obviously and his plantation Monticello. And it was really the first time that I began to see more and more people that looked like me on the projector slides, but the problem was they weren't the designers themselves, they were tending to the agriculture, toiling the ground. They were slaves essentially. And while I really appreciated seeing the truth of it, the problem was, for me, is that I was ignorant to the people that Elvin you mentioned before, and I believed that that's where the narrative ended.

16:31 Elvin: Yeah, and I think it just shows that the European mentality of showing people who don't fit the norm in colonial contexts rather than in contexts where they have achievements.

16:46 Doryne: Exactly, and yeah, you begin to look down upon them and it really settles into you carrying a form of inferiority, and so as a result, I thought I had a lot more hurdles to jump and I guess it really begins when you're a child, at least for me, the way I can differentiate growing up is in the minority and in the majority, so I remember when you're asked the ubiquitous question, "What do you wanna be when you grow up?" What differentiated my answer is that it always began with the a prefix that I wanna be the first, and the truth is, in all honesty, I would probably by no means to be the Black anything entering into whatever endeavor or pursuit that I wanted to enter into, but the thing is that their faces weren't as disseminated as their European or white counterparts, and it's not that you still wouldn't be hammered to a glass ceiling after seeing these people, but there's so much comfort you get in knowing that there's already a numeral amount of cracks above you and that there's less work to do and that you're doing it together.

17:41 Doryne: And so I think it's important that we have this representation from a position of empowerment too, because if not, you're subconsciously raising people to think that they are inferior. I think the second turning point occurred in third year when I took this course called Global Modernisms, and I was really excited because it was the first time I was able to see my culture and myself reflected in the canvas of architectural history from a place of prowess, of skill, of erudition. And things that I formerly interpreted as rudimentary, crude and vernacular, suddenly I relearned to be these complex spiritually and environmentally advanced pieces of architecture that transcended our Western and Eurocentric perspective. And so when I began the... It's when I began the process of consciously trying to dismantle my own prejudice and biases, and it really even inspired me to look for artists in terms of visual art who weren't confined to speaking from a place of pain or trauma as I felt that I was.

18:50 Doryne: And so I came across artists and writers like Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi, Carrie Marshall and other people in the Harlem renaissance. And I learned that as an artist, as an aspiring artist, it is not my responsibility to ameliorate the way people see my race, to present myself in a better way. That I have the freedom to just be and not have everything I do be declarative.

19:15 Renee: I definitely agree with that. And I feel like that's such a popular way of how we feel just being at Daniels, you always feel like, "Oh, I don't know, there's not as many Black designers, so I just have to be really good." or...

19:26 Doryne: Exactly.

19:27 Renee: You have to be better than everybody else, you have to try and over-achieve just to make your face known.

19:32 Elvin: Yeah, and I guess it creates that... I don't know if you guys have heard of this mentality, sorry not mentality. I guess you guys heard the saying where it's like if you're Black you have to work twice as hard.

19:42 Doryne: Exactly, yes.

19:43 Renee: Yes, exactly.

19:43 Elvin: Right?

19:43 Renee: Exactly.

19:43 Doryne: I think we, whether we heard it or not, we all grew up with that mindset.

19:47 Renee: We all felt it.

19:48 Doryne: Yeah, because when there's only a select few of you, you become conscious that it's not just you, that you're speaking on behalf of other people. And so I feel like when you're young and you're going and you have all these aspirations, you had the conscious mentality that you're not just doing it for yourself, that you're doing it for other people behind you that everything you do is a stepping stone for someone else. And even in art, I felt like I was either suggested to perform from either two categories, one was from place of education, educating on people and systematic oppression and racism, and it was burdening, or they wanted me to present this...

20:28 Doryne: I say they, but a lot of this I feel was self-inflicted pressure. But from a place of a pre-colonial virgin African culture that I really didn't know of because my parent's native land, even though they were born in Africa, it's a lot more westernized than people think. So it really is something that I'm not accustomed to. And so for me, my experience at Daniels have been... Is really been an upward trajectory, it's been very progressive, and I think if we're gonna make change and continue on this trajectory of positivity, it's with representation and just doing it more vigorously.

21:05 Elvin: Yeah, no, I completely agree. I guess in my experience as an international student, school is my home away from school, I mean school is my home away from home, that's where I sort of build that community and spend most of my time. I don't have my family here with me, so I'm almost trying to build a second one, and I think without representation, there's a lot of doubt in everything you do, and it sort of removes the point of even doing anything. And I feel like we need to feel wanted and accepted, and we need to see more people who look like us, not just in our curriculums, but in our staff and our students as well.

21:42 Renee: Yeah.

21:42 Doryne: Mm-hmm.

21:42 Elvin: And we also shouldn't have to teach ourselves about the Black narrative, that's a part of American history. And I think we should also really focus on learning about Black people's achievements, not just tragic events, we're tired of hearing about Black people in colonial context. And I think if it's... We understand the bad is a part of education, and it's good and it's important, but it needs to be equal to the good, it shouldn't just be the bad, you know what I mean? And I think it's also in terms of creating safe spaces, it needs to be an institution not an individual effort, so there needs to be resources for non-people of colour to educate themselves. I've had a lot of ignorant conversations with friends because of the lack of understanding. For example, one of my friends was like, "Why do Black Lives Matter? Why don't all lives matter?"

22:37 Elvin: And it's like, "That's not the point of the movement." And it's like the institution can start to decolonize themselves, but if it is not providing resources for other individuals to also sort of be progressive, then I think that also still defeats the purpose.

22:54 Doryne: Yeah, and I really like what you're saying, because someone can easily say, "Well, there's so many courses at U of T that you can go and choose to educate yourself about in those courses. But it really needs to be a part of most curriculums, if not all, because it shouldn't be segregated. Some people won't take it upon themselves to go and learn about it themselves, and it's a part, like you said, of our world narrative, so it should be within the curriculum in itself.

23:19 Renee: It definitely should be yeah. I think my experience at Daniels has definitely had some overlaps with both of you. Like you were... You touched on Elvin how you said sometimes you have a feeling of being excluded, I don't think I ever felt particularly excluded, but I'm more often felt that I wasn't able to join certain groups or clubs because I didn't fit in, whether that be because of my race or just my experience or lack thereof in architecture and just me doubting my abilities. Like in first year, I didn't even attend office hours with my TA or my instructors because I felt that I would be shamed for the lack of knowledge that I had in this field, and in just the world of architecture in general. But it's really just a waste to miss out on an opportunity to learn and grow.

24:05 Renee: Even in secondary school, I didn't really have a specialized art programme, like all of our art courses were very generalized and basic, so whether I was taking an extracurricular vis course, or whether I was taking one of our mandatory courses, I always just felt that I didn't know enough, and therefore I maybe wasn't worthy to take this course, or I shouldn't join this club, or I shouldn't talk to this person who clearly has so much more knowledge than me. But it's good because I've since branched out and I've decided to be part of certain opportunities, and I found that, like you were saying earlier Doryne, a lot of our exclusion is self-dealt, to be honest, and I always make it a point to tell people like, "If you're interested in this club or in this class that it isn't too difficult to learn and adapt to new environments." And there's always gonna be a helping hand when I'm around at least.

24:50 Elvin: Yeah.

24:50 Doryne: Yeah absolutely.

24:50 Elvin: Yeah, and I think that's why it's also important to have those sort of spaces, such as Black Students at Daniels which is a new group that was created by Clara James, and it's sort of a space to sort of... If you don't know how to not exclude yourself, it's like this is a place where you're accepted...

25:11 Doryne: Exactly, yes.

25:12 Elvin: You can be yourself and you can come and ask for a helping hand.

25:15 Doryne: Exactly.

25:16 Renee: Yeah and I think I especially admire the Black Students a Daniels group, because it isn't just... It's not like an activist group where you're constantly trying to force the Black name into history and try to educate everybody else, like you were saying. It is also a place where we do learn history sometimes, but we also are just able to talk amongst ourselves about our problems or even just good things that happen at school, just whatever we want, and so a nice place to kind of relax.

25:42 Elvin: Exactly.

25:43 Doryne: Also why I appreciate it too, it's because we're learning more and more that it's not enough to just be not exclusive, you must be actively inclusive, and that's what the Black Students at Daniels really does.

25:54 Renee: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, no, I think it's really great to hear about both of your experiences, I think. I wasn't really aware of the toll that switching to a new society, like you did Elvin, takes, or a new system, like you have Doryne, since Daniels is... Aside from visual studies quite a stretch from your secondary school experience. So it was really interesting learning about that and talking to you guys.

26:20 Doryne: It's really cool getting... I feel like we're getting a huge spectrum because we have you coming in from the immigrant from South Africa, and we have Renee, a second generation Canadian.

26:30 Renee: Oh yes, yeah.

26:31 Doryne: A first generation Canadian. So there's a lot of overlaps that...

26:34 Elvin: Yeah.

26:34 Doryne: You see that even within...

26:34 Elvin: The Black community.

26:36 Doryne: The three of us, there's a lot of distinction and individuality between us.

26:38 Elvin: Yeah. There's intersectionality even within the Black community.

26:43 Doryne: Exactly.

26:43 Renee: Yes. Yes.

26:44 Doryne: Very nice.

26:44 Renee: Yeah. It was great talking to you guys.

26:46 Elvin: It was great talking to you guys too.

26:47 Renee: About these topics.

26:48 Elvin: Yeah.

26:48 Doryne: Thank you for having me. [chuckle]

26:50 Renee: Yeah, of course.

26:50 Elvin: Thank you.

[music]

27:25 Kitsa: You know...

27:27 Evan: Okay. Awesome.

27:29 Kitsa: This is the...

27:30 Evan: Great. This is the first podcast.

27:31 Kitsa: This is gonna be a tough one. Oh, this is not gonna be easy.

27:34 Evan: Yeah.

27:35 Kitsa: I'm looking forward to this, though.

27:36 Evan: Yeah.

27:37 Kitsa: First ever.

27:37 Evan: The first one.

27:38 Kitsa: Okay, cool.

[music]

28:08 Evan: Yeah, let's just introduce ourselves.

28:10 Kitsa: Sure. Cool, let's do it. So hi, my name is Guershom, most people call me Kitsa. I'm African, but I'm also Canadian, so I guess I'm Afro-Canadian.

28:23 Evan: And my name is Evan, and I am Chinese-Canadian.

28:27 Kitsa: And so today we're talking about Black Lives Matter, the topic, not necessarily the movement.

28:33 Evan: Yeah.

28:35 Kitsa: And we're talking about the experiences of Black people in America and why you maybe should care about that. So Evan...

28:43 Evan: Yeah.

28:43 Kitsa: What does race mean for you?

28:45 Evan: Yeah, I think race, as a whole, it also is to do with culture and the way and behaviour of different races. And how they are portrayed through other races.

29:04 Kitsa: Exactly.

29:05 Evan: So in a sense, the colour of your skin and the culture, the food, the music. And as a jazz drummer... That's something that I dip my feet in when I play African-American music.

29:22 Kitsa: Exactly.

29:22 Evan: Jazz. But yeah, there's so many things that I could learn more about race. And especially my own as well, because I grew up mostly... Or I was born in Canada. In Vancouver BC, same as my parents, but their parents were born in Hong Kong. So I never really got to know really where I was from originally. So I really grew up here not really knowing where exactly... Oh, where did my race originally come from. But being here and experiencing what it's like to be here with many races. It's very diverse here. But yeah, I think just my thoughts on the race is just in a huge thing and with this Black Lives Matter movement happening and everything, it's really, really important for at least me as another minority to really support other people like you and other folks like that. So.

30:30 Kitsa: Yeah.

30:30 Evan: Yeah.

30:31 Kitsa: You bring up an interesting point because you say that, being born and raised here, there was some level of disconnect to your cultural heritage, and what could be described as your original or the birth place of your culture.

30:53 Evan: Yeah.

30:53 Kitsa: And so I'm coming from the opposite extreme, where I am from the place that people would consider the cultural heritage of... I'm from Africa, and that's where African-Americans originally came from. And so for me, race, until very recently, has been a very foreign idea. I grew up in East Africa. I grew up in Kenya. And in Kenya, we had a lot of amazing people. We had Middle-Easterners, we had a lot of Asian people, we had some Caucasian people, but there wasn't as much... I mean, at least in the cultures that I grew up in, there wasn't that massive disconnect between people because of the colour of their skin. And I had a lot of Indian friends and we, our cultures was so intertwined, we were literally the same people. It wasn't like, this person is an Indian or this person is an Arab or this person is whatever." It was like, "We are all Kenyan."

32:02 Kitsa: And so transitioning from that to North America. I never could imagine that... I mean, I would see it in movies, I would see it on TV, but I never could imagine that my experiences or let alone my experiences, since I'm still very new to this. The experiences of anyone could be boiled down to what the colour of their skin is. So that's interesting. I guess there was a disconnect in my upbringing between race and culture, and so I did not connect the two. I think culture was very prominent, but race was nearly nonexistent idea.

32:51 Evan: Yeah, I think for me, that's like the same as well, because all of us are in Canada, we all... And my school, in high school was mostly Asians, but with a sprinkle of other cultures and ethnicities. But I really didn't know who was Korean, who was Japanese, who was Cantonese, who was Asian different from different places in Asia. And for me it's like, oh, they're Asian, but I really didn't know like oh, he's Korean, or like, oh, she's Japanese, or stuff like that. And I couldn't even... Sure I could tell through their last name, but that wasn't really a thing that I was really thinking about until in university and starting to realize that also culture and race is a big thing too, through that, so yeah.

33:53 Kitsa: Yeah, exactly. And so were are artists we're both creators and the way that we express ourselves is through our craft, through what we make you play jazz music, which is it has its roots in the African-American community. Can you talk to me a bit about that?

34:17 Evan: Yeah, well, it first originated through actually Black slavery in America down south, and basically jazz was an expression or that music, and it was basically what we call work songs. So there would be something called a call and a response, so someone out in the field working would say and sing like a phrase, and then everyone would call it back using a different melody or phrase, everyone else. So it would be like that one person is saying like a melody, and then everyone else responding to that, so that's what we call call and response, and through that, fast-forward to now that those work songs has now been integrated in American culture, through Black slavery and through just the oppression and how music was an expression of that oppression. So as me, as a Chinese-Canadian, I have to be able to respect and know where the music is coming from, so that I know what I'm dealing with and yeah, just on context and where the history of jazz originates from, and just hold a bunch of respect for that, knowing that now I'm studying that. So yeah.

[music]

36:02 Kitsa: I think this is where we get into the very heartbreaking deaths that have happened over the summer. It's been a lot, and they've all been just really, really bad, but the first one was, the first one that I recall that... And this was in a sense, my first, really direct confrontation with race, there's always been a confrontation with white privilege, there's always been that wrestle with white supremacy and there's always... There's always that struggle and I've always been aware of that, I've always been aware that I don't really want to esteem this one group of people higher than others, but I don't think I've ever really tried to empathize with the experiences of Black people in America. I have never really taken that time to actually ask what does it mean to be Black in America? And so when Ahmaud Arbery died, that's when I had that initial encounter and I was first asked, "What does it mean to be Black in America?" And like I was saying, I'm an artist. I am a creator. The way that I express myself is through making and producing and being part of the Daniels community that sometimes I feel like you can get lost in your craft. But when Ahmaud died, I curated three pictures on Instagram.

37:24 Evan: Yeah your response was through those pictures.

37:30 Kitsa: Yeah. And with these pictures, inspired by a music video by Donald Glover, I was trying to really reconcile three separate identities. I was trying to reconcile my African identity with the Black experience in America. I was trying to really wrestle with what the Black experience in America looks like, police brutality and whatnot. And with the final image I was trying to reconcile my Christian identity with oppression because the Christian faith has a very close relationship with oppressed peoples all over the world. And so I was trying to reconcile all of these ideas. But initially, and I think I made this comment, I said that I was not Black in one of those images. And that's an interesting thing to say because at that time I didn't know what it meant to be Black. And so in saying that, I was reflecting that the color of my skin doesn't define me, which can sound powerful, but after some reflection, I realized that that was me choosing to isolate myself from the experience of people who have taken a term that has been used to oppress them and have used it as a form of empowerment, and have chosen to say, “Hey, you call me Black? Yes, I am Black.”

38:53 Kitsa: And there's this poem that I heard from this South American poet. I can't remember her name off of the top of my head but she says that, "Why do you call me a person of colour? What colour? Black, that's the colour. It's not just... I'm not just a person of colour, I'm a Black person." And I think looking through Instagram, it's been amazing, the response. But this was... This was my first experience, and I remember seeing this post, posted by a friend of mine from New York, who's also in architecture and she was posting in response to something that happened with Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement. There was this relationship between Black people and Asian people and the... And the phrase was that yellow peril for Black power. And they're both terms that have been used to oppress. And so what did it mean for you to wrestle with this very new idea that you've never been exposed to? That no one has really confronted you with that question. Yeah.

40:04 Evan: Yeah. Well. That's really interesting. Just one thing that stuck out was like, "Oh, I'm not Black." Because at that moment, you didn't know what it meant to be Black.

40:15 Kitsa: Exactly.

40:16 Evan: That to me just breaks my heart. And for me as someone who is Asian, realizing that I don't know what it means to be Cantonese. I don't even speak my own language. And when I see that disconnect, there's a lot of me that kind of wants to find belonging through something else. And it's not through being Cantonese but it's through being Canadian. And that's where I found my identity for all of these years, throughout elementary school, throughout high school. And so I was actually proud of my white-washedness, or being a banana, and I would say, "Yeah, I don't speak my own language. I'm Canadian and everything." And I was proud of that. But in a sense, that kinda neglected the other part of me where I am Asian, too, and I come from, originally, Hong Kong. And so I was wrestling with my identity as Asian. How do I represent myself in a way that is both Canadian but Asian? And accepting that and not just accepting it, but also proclaiming that. And really accepting that, "Oh, I'm Asian, and this is a part of me, and I'm gonna be proud."

41:44 Kitsa: Exactly.

41:44 Evan: And that's where the pride should come from. Not necessarily the Canadianist of me, even though that's more about culture. For me, being an Asian, being Cantonese, being Chinese, I should be proud of that. I can't take my skin and change it into something else. In a sense, it's like having, switching that pride from Canadianist to Chinese, and creating this whole different identity of Chinese-Canadian. And so that's something that I've been wrestling with since last year actually. Since I took a course on it called Chinese-Canadian Studies. It talked about the history of the immigration and the head tax, when the people from China who were just trying to get a job, came into this... Yeah, the Canadian dream and everything. So just really digging deep into my personal identity and what it means to be an Asian.

[music]

43:11 Kitsa: I wanted to mention something that you explained really well. Education is the most powerful thing. And something that came up constantly through our Black Lives Matter was a lot of people asking, "Hey, how can we be allies? How can we be allies?" And that's a very important question to ask, because that was also a question I needed to ask. And for me, step one was really embracing this whole being Black in America identity, which you are also doing in a different way by embracing that you are Cantonese, but you're also in Canada. And I think step two... And this was a question that I had to reflect on for a bit longer. Allyship is listening. It's really asking, "Hey, let me hear your story." And so I think I... After I watched the video with Ahmaud Arbery and just seeing him being shot down. And then I watched the video George Floyd and the police officer just putting his knee on his neck for that long, I just stayed up the whole night on YouTube and consistently I was just listening to Black experiences in America. And not only was I listening to it, I was empathizing with that. And empathy, I think, is one of the biggest gifts that we are missing as a society right now. A lot of people...

44:36 Evan: Being empathetic, yeah.

44:37 Kitsa: Are quick to point fingers. And maybe that's the beautiful thing about COVID is that we start to see people collectively share this sentiment of empathy. And people coming together and they're like, "Hey, your story matters. Who you are matters, and we want to hear that." And so it's interesting to talk about education and how education can happen on many different levels, in friendship, but also in school and especially among us creators, personally as a designer. It's been so long. The only people I learn about in architecture are all sadly dead white men. Some women, but mostly dead white men. And how about the very talented architects who are from Japan or how about the innovation that's happening in Africa? How about the talented people, designers, artists, creators of colour who we never talk about because it just hasn't been the status quo.

45:35 Evan: Right. And it's like that white representative that has all that power. And in a sense, it's us talking about education and everything. It's a privilege to learn... For me, it's a privilege to learn, and have the... To learn jazz because it's from a different culture, it's from a different ethnicity, and those roots are not part of my culture's history. But me being able to learn about that and to be educated on that stuff is a privilege. And like you said, listening. In a sense, listening is a time for us to educate ourselves. It's not about us talking. Even though we are talking about... On this podcast, it's for other people to listen to. And yeah, just being able to hear both of our stories, and even though we won't have too much time to talk about that, it's just kind of dipping our feet into this conversation. And what race is, so.

46:45 Kitsa: Yeah, and so as a designer, just as a human being, the best thing you can do is to start those conversations, they won't be easy, but just get in there.

46:55 Evan: Just listen.

46:56 Kitsa: Yeah, let's call it a wrap. Sweet.

47:00 Evan: So this is one of the few podcasts. Thank you, guys, so much for listening.

47:02 Kitsa: For tuning in.

47:03 Evan: Yeah, for tuning in.

47:03 Kitsa: We are in Toronto right now. I mean, COVID is a thing but we're working around that. And we're looking forward to sort of going on this adventure with you. Awesome.

47:15 Evan: Yeah, great.

47:15 Kitsa: Yeah.

47:15 Evan: So we'll see you guys in the next one.

47:17 Kitsa: Yeah, awesome. Keep creating, bye. Peace.

[music]

47:23 Kitsa: We hope that you've been inspired, that you've been educated and that you've been encouraged by all of this. I would like to take this opportunity to recommend a few films that have inspired us. Three films in particular come to mind when I think about the Black experience. The first of these are Black Panther and Fences, movies which speak powerfully to the Black experience, both locally and abroad. Black Panther is especially an important film that celebrates the amazing Chadwick Boseman, a person who's inspired so many of us. May you rest in power. Another film, also played by Chadwick, is Get on Up. The movie chronicles the life of James Brown who rises to fame after overcoming so many trials and challenges and really tells a triumphant story full of hope. Thank you for joining us on this very first episode. Again, the music used in this podcast includes Kuzola by Pongo, Suite Haus is by Makaya McCraven, Tired Boy by Joey Pecoraro and Cola by Arlo Parks. I would also like to thank Foli for providing music for the last segment and helping put the final edit of this podcast together. We have curated a playlist on Spotify that you can listen to with all of the amazing songs that are included in this podcast and more. Thank you for tuning in. Stay safe and we'll see you in the next one. Peace.