

The Henceforward Episode 15

More than a Bookstore, a Meeting Place

[0:00:00]

Eve: Aang aang. This is Eve Tuck, and this is The Henceforward, a podcast on settler colonialism and anti-Blackness, but more, to imagine shared features and the practices of theory and care that it will take to get there, to get elsewhere.

Sefanit: Welcome back. Here we are, The Henceforward, Season 2. This season of The Henceforward, promises to bring conversations, questions, interpretations, and interviews of Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island.

This season, we'll also bring a reoccurring statement called Kitchen Table Talks where we will listen in on Black and Indigenous folks thinking through various topics together.

Today, at the kitchen table, we consider the importance of representation, particularly because of experiences of being the spokesperson, the lonely only, or the voice for our communities. And then, we hear an interview with Itah Sadu, founder of A Different Booklist, an independent bookstore specializing in books from the African and Caribbean diaspora.

Itah will tell us more about what it means to see yourself reflected in different spaces, and about what it took to carve out that space into Toronto.

Sandi: I'm Sandi Wemigwase.

Sandy: I am Sandy Hudson.

Jade: I am Jade Nixon.

Cornel: I'm Cornel Grey.

Michelle: I'm Michelle Forde.

Megan: And I'm Megan Scribe.

Michelle: University of Toronto Faculty of Medicine launches a new application program to boost enrollment and reflected adverse population, and then you have the picture of the lonely only literally standing in front of the medical school.

When Dr. Lisa Robinson graduated from UT Medical School in 1991, she was one of two Black students in her class. Twenty six years later, Chika Oriuwa is the only one in her class of 259 first year medical students who identify as Black. Given the diversity of the GATA, she says she was taken aback by that fact that she only

discovered when she arrived in class. Then the university representative speak about "in this day and age in a city like..."

Sandi: I was thinking about reflecting and reacting to this. I was thinking about my own experience growing up where I was the only native student that was in -- that was like college bound. I was in more advanced classes while the other native students in my school were not.

I think that that was definitely something that was like an individual type of road, and it was one of those things of -- it becomes a question of how do you cope and change yourself, or do you change yourself in order to fit into the system because you're definitely the only one there.

Megan: One of the more dangerous and frustrating things about being the lonely only in a classroom is that you come to be the voice of the people. That is not a place or a responsibility that I necessarily want when I'm trying to learn myself.

Sandi: Not even just like your people, because you could be referring to like I'm the voice of Cree people, like no, you're the voice of everybody, especially if you're the only person of color in the classroom, then you're the voice of people of color everywhere in the whole world. What does that mean?

But it also I think is -- I was just reflecting on my experience here in Toronto, at OISE, and not being the only person of color in class, so that's happened before, but not being the only Indigenous person in class. That has never happened before.

That is something that is completely and totally new to me. It feels really, really different. I don't feel like the spotlight is on me anymore, and also being in a place where I have an Indigenous faculty member or that I know even more than one, I've never had an Indigenous professor before. That is something that is completely different from my experiences prior.

And then I think that is so valuable, and that I think it's so sad that it took how many years for me to be in a classroom where my instructor was Indigenous, or that I had someone else in class that was Indigenous, so like over 30 years of being in school, and that has never happened before.

I think that it's really sad and scary, but also, I was thinking about the med school student and how it has also become like instead of her just being the voice of like all Black students in that classroom, it's also then her responsibilities for some reason for her to figure out how to get more Black students into med school, and that is not something that should be her responsibility. She should be the one to tell them that this is wrong, like they should know that already.

[0:05:11]

Michelle: I think it's Simone Browne's concept of racial baggage, and originally, the context for that was as a traveler traveling through various systems of government control in airports.

But I think it translates to this discussion in so many ways because you think about the additional burden that it puts on your shoulders of being the lonely only, not only in having to speak for your homogenously lumped together community, but just in recognizing that everything you do is amplified in such a way that you can't just be a student going through your own learning process, but you're constantly thinking about how you're representing "the community" and it's important to find ways of ensuring that we don't have that one student bearing that responsibility that is just too much for one person to bear.

I know, Cornel, we had conversations earlier about being in high school, and going through the experience of learning the text, Huckleberry Finn, as the only Black person in class. I think there are so many levels that you can have violence in your experience, in your learning experience because of being a lonely only, so it's critical that we find ways around this.

[End of Kitchen Table Talk]

Cornel: Welcome back, listeners, to our second segment of this podcast. We are here at A Different Booklist with Itah Sadu, owner of A Different Booklist here in Toronto. She has graciously agreed to sit down with us for a few minutes for our conversation, so welcome to the podcast, Itah.

Itah: Hey, shout out to all the podcast listeners and podcast sites and podcast land.

Cornel: Great. Wonderful. Thank you.

I'm Cornel Grey. My co-host for this segment is Jade Nixon.

Jade: Hey, y'all.

Cornel: The first question that we wanted to ask you, Itah, since one of the things we're thinking about for this series of the podcast is thinking about geographies and identity and where we come from, so could you tell us a little bit about your biography or some of the work that you've been doing in the community in Toronto and so on?

Itah: Geographies and identity. I was born in Canada. I was born in Scarborough, Ontario. I had the good fortune to go to Barbados and be schooled and educated in Barbados because I am a Barbados ancestry, so that locates me then in the Caribbean. Because of that geography, like Derek Walcott said, I can be many things, and I can claim many ancestries in the multiple identities of Caribbean people. I'm an African Canadian. I'm also a Canadian. But I'm an African

Canadian. Here, in Toronto, I see Toronto as a home, and I also see Barbados as a home. They say, home is where your heart is. When I go to Barbados, I got a big heart, so that's home. When I'm in Toronto, I also claim Toronto.

The biggest word for me, and this is I'm going to reference the educator Enid Lee who always insist that we look at the world through the lens. Are we Christ or are we Columbus? How do we see the world? But the most important think that she argues is this, the biggest word in the world is the word, "And." In terms of where is my home? The identity and geography, I want to claim a lot of space, because sometimes, marginalized people, and people of color are asked to choose a space.

But the world that we live in, where we're going through a new growth of imperialism, it seems to me that the imperialists never settle on a space or location of geography because people's interests are worldwide.

But back to your question. I'm proud to have roots in the Caribbean, one of the most exciting regions in the world, and I'm also proud to be an African Canadian.

Jade: Itah, can you explain to our podcast listeners and us where you got the name of the bookstore?

Itah: The bookstore actually came from a professor called Dr. Wesley Crichlow. He started A Different Booklist in 1995, I believe. It was a space to celebrate the African/Caribbean/LGBTQ identity. When we took over the store, at the same time, there was another important institution and bookstore called Third World Books and Crafts.

[0:10:35]

That also was located on this street called Bathurst Street, the Bathurst Bloor district which is an area that has a very rich, varied, and long history of our people.

A Different Booklist at the time, with that operating name from Dr. Crichlow was very attractive, but we were desirous to of having this bookstore called Third World Books and Crafts because we wanted to build on that history, people who came to the city, Michael Jackson went there, they had study groups, two Black guys, the entrepreneurs who went on to incredible success, cut their teeth there like, "Booyah!" right?

For whatever reasons, they didn't sell their business at the end of their lives to anybody, so oh, my gosh. We felt kind of bad, we we're losing this thing called third world. Our thing was, we were going to call it Third World Books and Crafts, A Different Booklist, you know what I mean? Like tagging. We had tagging before there was tagging, #podcast people and podcast -- we're shaming you now back in the day.

Then an interesting thing happened. A Different Booklist in alphabetical order must always be first. One of the coolest things is explaining to one of our summer students that we were in the yellow pages, and that Black businesses were in the yellow pages, and the bookstore was in the yellow pages.

Also to it was the first in alphabetical listed. We had a summer student that one summer, I think that just like as podcast people, that just interrogated his mind, and he wasn't even in lockup, like look at that, that's how systemic racism and how we see ourselves operate where you don't even believe or think that your people's bookstore or an institution in the community could be listed even in the yellow pages and alphabetically listed first.

We saw the wonderful opportunity in terms of marketing that A is always first. Get that, right? And because we're A people, and that is not only the bookstore, the people who work at the bookstore, the staff that work in the bookstore, but people of African descent, then I hear podcast people say oh, my god, right? They're starting with the letter A. That's telling so much the correct information. There you go, so we realized.

Then increasingly, and this is great for scholars too to know, people talk less about the third world. We're talking about developing nations and emerging nations, and the third world was the letter T. Oh, my gosh, an alphabetical list. Right now, potties, if you were googling, search, check that, fact check, alternative check, you're going to be still like, surfing.

But if you went to A Different Book List, and I believe in San Francisco or somewhere in the United States, there's also another bookstore or an entity with the name A Different Booklist, it is different in that the people who come into the space like all independent bookstores, they get to imagine the space and reimagine the space.

It is not just simply a bookstore but it is a meeting place in the center of intellectual engagement for people to come find a place of belonging, for people to feel that they are not a number only in this society, but they are important somebodies even in this society.

Because every single in the world is connected with a book, every single thing is connected with a book, A Different Booklist has a job, a function to play and how we can advance working class people, the aspirations of a working society and how we can show them that they don't have to be locked into the same box of the same old, same old. But the things that have been planted in their spirits and in their hearts and into their intellectual psyches are things that are possible.

[0:15:03]

Che Guevara says, dream the impossible. We can even elevate that to say, we know that things are the impossible, so we're making the possible even more possible. That's where we are in that conversation.

Cornel: I know some folks who have been in Canada for 30, 40, going on 50 years. They've told me about their experiences in terms of like when they first came to Canada, they didn't -- it was hard for them to find books for the children as well as themselves, that talked about Black -- I wasn't necessarily in the curriculum, books about Black people weren't necessarily in the "mainstream" bookstores.

I guess one of the things that we wanted to ask is what does the bookstore mean to you and what has it meant or what it continues to mean for members of the Black community?

Itah: The oppressor, the imperialist, and the conqueror must always write the narrative so that the big lie is always maintained. Even in the Caribbean, we didn't see ourselves in books either, so people come in to this country and not seeing their selves. It's nothing new. If you saw yourselves in the Caribbean, you'll probably look like a tourist kind of thing -- woman tying she hair, ya got the basket on, heavy lifting -- right across the African diaspora, we always see people working.

My husband had a thing at one point where we couldn't sell anything even a card or a postcard or any kind of thing that had somebody carrying something in their head. His thing was where the other images of people working and engaged.

We had that absence to or the things then because largely in the Caribbean, we were using resources that came out of the UK, and then, you know, American want to sell these cheap things so we gone down to Disney World and so on. Then people came to Canada, and they didn't see themselves reflected.

In some spaces, we were reflected, and because we can never say that African-Canadians who have been here from '16 something and '18 something, didn't document. That is really a Caribbean kind of tra-la-la, little bit of ethnocentricity that we're looking at the world.

We come here. We serve document. But Dr. Carrie Best and Don Carty and individual people had newsletters, and had things that they were saying, so I also want to say that within the African-Canadian context, while it wasn't a mass dissemination, but I want to say for the public record, that people who were here before the Caribbean did document, did document. But in the mainstream of things, or images were largely absent.

And then as people came from the Caribbean and writers, and one of the things about Canada, Canada has an incredible pool of some of the senior Caribbean writers, Austin Clarke lived here, we have people like Olive Senior who lives here, Pamela Mordecai, on and on and on and on. Oh, my god. I got to say Christian

Campbell lives here. Oh, my gosh. You know what I'm saying? Melanie Newton lives here, all these kind of people. Alissa Trotz, we're waiting on you, everything. Don't kill us off with all the manuscripts one time, but there's room for that.

People then began to write their narratives, they began to -- like Austin Clarke began to question this place called home, Cecil Foster, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Ann Wallace can talk about publishing -- of Canadian publishing, and they'll talk about Ann Wallace and Ayanna Black and Dionne Brand and Tiger Lily. And they started with magazines and that kind of stuff, and journals, and then they morphed into books and people start to write their folks stories and folklore because you kind of start with that place.

Then you move into more interrogation of what is multicultural. Did they include we? Who am I? Oh, my gosh. I'm a Black today. Am I African tomorrow? Oh, my god. Am I just a regular -- you know, all of that kind of stuff.

Then people like Ann Wallace and all these people then started small presses, Sister Vision Press, and then we started to come because out of necessity comes invention and innovation -- *if you don't have horse, ride cow*. We were not seeking permission. At the same time, we're sending in manuscripts to the Random Houses and the Penguins.

But one thing about the publishing world is this. Publishing world is a kind of a door, it's a kind of a door that have a kind of spring, and when you open the door, they spring back and that door only allows one. It's like playing slot machines. It's only one at a time or two at a time. I'm still fascinated in the world that we live in, or in the country that we live in. I don't ever recall it any time or significant writers are ever in a room altogether at the same time.

You always see two to get advice, you know, two of them, and you know, three, but it's never all 12 together. We must observe these things within a society. That is a greater messaging of the society.

[0:20:24]

So then in the spaces when you're 1, 2, or 3, you feel grateful and privileged to be there, and then when you're 1 or 2 or 3, then the burden is on you to bring 2,000 more with you. You know that kind of way, right?

People then demanded of the school system to have more equity and more inclusiveness. So you have even these Letters to Marcia, then you have your Carl James again looking at difference and what is the making of Canadian and so on and so forth, and then you had scholars then started to think well, oh, my god, because even in academia, we never write any, writing novels, very few people writing in fiction, but now we're looking at academia, so here comes Carl James and Dr. George Dei, and we comment and we comment and we comment, and --

his name goes out of mind from the University of Guelph, and you're back to the Dionne's of the world.

So people, in addition to self-publishing, coming together as collective to publish with a label, people will also to jacking up university presses and saying to them, you got to walk the talk, you got to you know, document us.

Then kids too were asking and displaying behavior that needed to be impacted and affected, so kids were still playing with the white dolls and trying to comb the hair. That lack of imaging. I want to go to school today because I feel like a kind of way because what is my description of beauty?

Now, one of the interesting things, when we're describing Black beauty. It is so easy to say Black is so beautiful. The reason that I say that is one year, I went to Barbados, and my friend, the former great educator, Briggs Clark, he was tasked with a number of educators across the Caribbean to create curriculum for Caribbean.

One of the things was their notion of how do you describe Black people in the Caribbean cinemas? So you know, okay, yeah, we're Black. You're not really thinking of it, if you're thinking about it, it is not like North America where it's like, oh, god, you know did I have my Wheaties? You know what I mean? Shoot. I drink water. I'm going to live.

We get in the car, this group of women and, we're coming from the airport, he's really excited that these educators have come from all across the Caribbean region and they are writing this curriculum, and the question is what language do you put into a curriculum for the definition of how to describe Black? So he says my sisters, educated A game sisters. How do you describe Blackness, and tell me how you describe yourselves?

Now, podcast sites, there's no such thing as dead airtime, right? So I can't even stop right now talking. I got to keep talking because you would think like the technology gone wrong, you know something, you might just start to have a heart attack, because you're so addicted to social media, you might think like, Trump took you off the planet. But if I did any dead ear time, you really probably would think that Trump took you off the planet.

We struggle even in that moment to define and explain and describe our beauty, because you're thinking of a calypso, how we described in music, how we described in reggae, right? The DJ says *Black is beautiful* but is our hair curly? What does that mean? If the parallel is silky and flowing and all of that stuff, how we describe curly and cute and rah, rah, rah. Oh, my god. I have a big bum. Big bum is nice and rolly and like what?!

For seven miles, it was over silence that -- and every word that you think was a wonderful world because now you got to think yourself, if this is okay in our language to say it among us and parlance, how does it translate into the other world? Is it politically incorrect? Oh, god! What a ting! Just to say a beautiful boy, you can't even drop that. Seven women, top of the A game, we don't know what to say to this man. How do you describe yourself as beautiful? We're trying hard not to use the language toward the oppressors. It's like, you know, people just like suck up all the words in the world. Black speak, white speak. Oh, god. No pressure.

All of that has taken place in this new land where we have come by the rivers of Babylon where we sat down. How do we sing in a strange land, so this is the thing that we are presenting with, where do we see ourselves in the construction of literature?

[0:25:11]

Then we decided that that was a bigger world. We're going to self-publish. We're going to have a spoken word movement. The poetry movement will come with a ting. You know what? Two progressive publishers are going to take it. We're going to make money. You take them to coffee, and friend them up, and you got a little contract on you. You didn't try to explain to them that your friend need a hookup too, and perhaps to put a cover on -- blah, blah, blah.

Then you come to spaces that like A Different Booklist, where you have new and emerging authors, where you have people who have looked at the hip-hop revolution and have thought we don't really need to ask permission up mainstream. We can self-publish, we could get it right. We can come together as collective. I can work with an artist in Brazil that I have never met, but over the internet, I have a trust factor, and we can put this property together and others of like mindedness can build on the catalog.

Then you have the progressive voices in the mainstream who are producing books, Chimamanda, Edwidge Danticat, Robin Kelley. You come in and on and on and on it goes. We're the sum total of all that experience. We are not also to walk the past because it is very, very important. We see the past so that we can move forward. But right now, it is also important at A Different Booklist that we build on the efforts of what exist today so that we can also move forward.

Jade: You talked about the scholars and the intellectuals that fill the space and fill the shelves of A Different Booklist, what about the clientele? Has the clientele been the same since you opened or has it shifted overtime?

Itah: Canadians are readers. Our clientele are sophisticated people and readers. People come -- there's a man called Mr. Warner. Mr. Warner's a working-class man that worked in maybe Ford Motor Company or someplace like that. Mr. Warner is probably our biggest supporter. He buys a couple of hundred dollars of books every

week of all kinds of scholars and scholarship. He's probably going to give those books at some point in his life, maybe to the library in St. Kitts and Nevis. If you saw him on the street, or you saw him come in to see him come in to the space, he probably would even think like he's that engaged. He is very engaged.

When people come, I think when they come into a space and see the representation of themselves. It is not like one book or two, but multiple voices speaking at them. When they see themselves represented in a downtown location, right? This is not like Black street, Black neighborhood or whatever, but one of the main arteries of the city of Toronto, Bathurst and Bloor, next to the iconic Ed Mirvish empire. That's a whole different thing. You want to get engaged. You want to be curious. Oh, god. We're rich. We're next to a subway. Oh god it's our destination. It's a different conversation, it's a different thinking.

When you can come in to a space and see Austin Clarke sitting down, and you walk in and you think, who's that guy? And you ask that guy a question like, I know you. Great. And his responses, who you is? Right? And then three minutes later, he's like oh, my god. This is for you. You think like, that's who you --

Right now, we're having this conversation, Podites and this is a good podology right now. There are two senior men having a conversation. I would believe that they're both men who came out of the financial world as economists.

What is going to happen at some point today if somebody young was going to come in who is into economics, whatever. Meet these two people, and they're going to pop off a ton of information on them about their sector, and the world will be bigger.

Last week, we had the storytelling festival. Charlotte Blake comes from Philadelphia. She's a very top of the line African American storyteller. Two midwives, students, midwifery students comes from Ryerson to the store, and they come, and they start by talking about the oral tradition. Neh, call and response. And then she says, "So tell me, what are you doing? They go, we're studying to be midwives." She says, "Oh, the midwifery movement in Philadelphia, do you know as a storyteller, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. You need to look up this website and that website, and we got this whole project, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," and they turn into statues.

[0:30:00]

In that moment, are you not inspired to even go to the bookshelf and see what it is? Because you have to a moment, not only where the books are on the shelves, but the history is lived and in the present moment, and in the informal moment, and you don't have to go to a formal lecture, but you're looking at this legacy right this, talking to you, telling you you're part of it right now. Run with that.

Yesterday, Rich Brown came to the store. I don't know who Rich Brown is, but I know he's a Jazz musician because he's on now the wall in the exhibition of Carlos Ferguson. Desiree, who was the first person to book the space in A Different Booklist Cultural Center, okay, Podites, don't get a little confused now. We've just evolved.

If you are still sitting at the same table that you're sitting at when I started something wrong. I want everybody to get up now, take a little stretch, yes, little mango juice, very good, little coconut water, okay. Dr. Oz said that, and we are great to go. Everybody finish stretching. Back to Rich Brown.

Jade: Better host than we are. Itah's taking over our podcast.

Itah: So Desiree comes in and she's booking the space, and suddenly she looks on the wall and then she goes, "Ugh!" And I thought okay, and she starts texting. Rich Brown is her musical director who's coming to see the space to work out the music for her program. She looks on the wall and there's Rich Brown on the program on the wall. He comes in and he sees himself. He sees himself at like 10:00 in the day.

Now, that brother must have a really good day to think that here I am, a Jazz musician, and I'm in a Jazz exhibition in a space I've never been to, I've heard about. Will he be back? I can't hear you. Okay. Podcast people, little louder. Okay, yeah. A-huh. Give a shout out. To say all that to say this. Again, the rule of a bookstore in the health and wellness, and the location of the society.

But how are patrons engaged with the store? It is because not only the books represent a positive experience and a progressive experience but at any given time, those books open up, and the characters out of those books become alive and real people for you to engage with. We are now in a multipurpose space, A Different Booklist Cultural Center, the people's residence is an organic expression that came out of A Different Booklist Bookstore.

We're sitting, having a conversation. An hour before you came, I think it was an exercise area where a toddler came and she exercised on the carpet, and made me exercise on the carpet along with her. Yesterday, about over a hundred and something people came to a ribbon cutting ceremony. I see there's a brother right now who is a great photographer and he's lighting up because he wants to talk about his exhibition coming.

In this multipurpose space where you could hot desk, have functions, or any of these above things, that's what A Different Booklist Cultural Center is about; a place where people will come and express themselves.

We are desirous that this will be the community space that will have partnerships with the university. This is where community and academia can come together. Your podcast is the beginning of what we're desirous to see where community and

academia can come together in a space like this and speak to the world back and forth.

You're not here to do this moment because of anything that is tied in specifically to your paper or your work, or your degrees or any of that. You came today as our brother Grey and sister Nixon, yes? Sister Nixon, to show us that you are the first to come in to this space, to show us how simple it is for community and academia to be engaged, and to be engaged in a worldwide platform. You have come today to show us how we can be innovative even with the language and have fun of interactivity.

So that was your purpose. Your purpose was such that you are persistent, that's the good thing about it. It took you a little time to connect with us because it was your purpose to come to show us the thing that we think is possible, can be even more possible. Okay, podcast? We have to go to commercial now. Your girl's got game, but hey.

Jade: And that's like the truth.

Cornel: Yeah. All right. This has been Itah Sadu, owner of A Different Booklist, sitting here with us on this lovely afternoon teaching us all about geographies and identities as it relates to Blackness whether we're talking about the Caribbean, be that Barbados, or in Canada, whether we're in Toronto, we're in Bathurst.

[0:35:26]

Cornel: But again, we want to thank Itah Sadu so much for her generosity and sharing with us. I hope you enjoy this episode.

Jade: And come to A Different Booklist.

Cornel: Where can they find you, Itah?

Itah: We are at 777 to 779 Bathurst Street that you go, 777 is a jumbo jet, so you know we large.

Eve: The Henceforward, Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island.

[0:37:55] End of Audio