

## The Henceforward Episode 29 Black-Indigenous Identity in Canada

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Eve: Aang aang. This is Eve Tuck, and this is The Henceforward, a podcast about connections between Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island. Here, we come to the table to discuss 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.

Kayla: Hello. My name is Kayla Webber.

Paige: And I'm Paige Grant. We have a special guest today, Denise Baldwin. Denise will be talking to us about Black-Indigenous identity on Turtle Island.

Denise is a health promoter in harm reduction at a local health center. She is over 20 years experienced working with Indigenous communities on and off reserve. Denise also has expertise in facilitating workshops around the effects on colonization on Indigenous health and harm reduction. Denise?

Denise: [*Anishinaabemowin Greeting*]. Hello. Thank you for having me today. I just introduced myself in Anishinaabemowin. I shared my spirit name which means moonlight woman. I come from the Chippewas of Nawash First Nation. I am part of the Turtle clan. Thank you.

Kayla: Thank you, Denise. Indigenous-Black and/or afro-Indigenous individuals who self-identify as so in Canada are needed to be discussed as to who we are firstly as a collective people together along with the dressing, the anti-black racism within Indigenous communities and Indigenous erasure in Black communities.

The histories, relations, and identity of Indigenous Black individuals has been thoroughly dismissed through literature, scholarship, storytelling, history, colonization, and we have become invisible, meaning our identity has, and still separated.

One is to either self-identify as Black or Indigenous. There's no such thing as being both. Inserting Blackness with indigeneity together is seen as a challenge and non-existing identity which is not possible.

Paige: Denise, what is something you find yourself repeating over and over again about being both Black and Indigenous?

Denise: Well, I'm constantly being asked to prove what I am, and even explaining exactly where I come from, and it always being either believed or not believed or people are like no, that can't be. Tell us where you really are from. When I say I'm a fifth

generation Black Canadian, they'll assume right away that I'm from Nova Scotia, and then I have to reexplain myself that no, the Underground Railroad had other stops, that's how my family came here.

My father's family comes from the Chatham Brentford area. But yeah, that's something that is constantly -- that I have to explain myself exactly where I come from all the time, and having to prove or even know and being tested about my Indigenous heritage, culture, and that sort of thing. That's a constant occurrence, yeah, definitely.

Paige: Where do you think that repetition comes from?

Denise: I think I feel like the reason why people are constantly asking is that they want to put people in siloes, and they want to label people and they want to know where can I exactly fit you in my mind, excuse me. I feel like that's where it's coming from. They just need to know, because I look so different maybe, and it's constantly just trying to label and trying to make sure that they know exactly who you are, where you're from so they can try to identify you.

It's not so much like something for me that I need to make sure that I know or like how I identify with, it's always that other person that needs to know for some dying reason, they just really need to know.

Paige: That validation is for them to understand even if it's your own labor doing that all the time.

Denise: Exactly.

Paige: What is something about your lived experience and political projects that you would like for people in your community to know more about?

Denise: Well, I do a lot of harm reduction work. I'm a huge advocate for harm reduction, for people who use substances. I also do -- or I'm a part of this project called Proclaiming Our Roots. That was developed a few years ago just through conversation with Dr. Ciane Wilson. We met actually over at the Native Canadian Center. I did a brief talk, identified myself as Black-Indigenous, and she made a point to come up to me afterwards and start a conversation.

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Her doing her research in Indigenous communities and me wanting to, or having that -- I wouldn't say an urge, I don't know the right word, but just a drive or a want, or to bridge both my communities together, and through that conversation, that's how this project pretty much started. It was just constant like kind of back and forth having conversations and then finally, she was like okay, we're going to

go for this and I want you to be a part of it, I was like great. It took off from there. Can I briefly talk about what -- ?

Paige: Yeah. You can.

Denise: It's basically a project where people who self-identify as being Black and Indigenous came together and developed their own digital story, and so what we did was even mapping locations of our heritages. We have like across Canada within our group just here in Toronto, people from Alberta, Nova Scotia heritage, Ontario.

We created these beautiful stories, acts of political stories, also just explaining exactly where we come from, very beautiful touching stories, and we also have another group out in Nova Scotia doing the same thing. They created their stories, both groups were about ten people. We had Anique Jordan come in and help us develop that. Yeah, I think that's the gist.

Kayla: Yeah. Do you feel like this project, Proclaiming Our Roots, is very important to do elsewhere in Canada and other parts?

Denise: I think it should be almost like an ongoing project at least. If we could expand across borders would be really, really cool. I think that Canada needs to know about us.

Kayla: For individuals who are both Black and Indigenous or afro-Indigenous, what challenges may rise from the lack of awareness of those intersections in Canada as they enter both Black and Indigenous communities?

Denise: Anti-black racism in native communities? I think that's one of the biggest hurdles. I don't know how we're going to bridge relationships when people hate, and you know, it's like just fear. It's just fear of what they've been taught. Internalize fear, internalize racism. I know a couple of older Indigenous people who are half Black that don't acknowledge their Black heritage, I've dated someone who was half Black and half native who hated being Black. I was like man, I can't be with you anymore.

Kayla: It's over.

Denise: It's done. I'll drop you off at the bus terminal. It's because of the shame whereas for myself, I'm very proud. I don't have any of that shame carrying with me. I feel like I'm doing my ancestors a great -- what's the word honor, I was going to say favor, but honor is a better word. Yeah, trying to build these relationships across communities is going to be really difficult just because of the plain simple fact of the racism.

I'm not saying that all Indigenous communities are like that and that sort of thing. It's just like within my experience, within the communities that I've worked in and been a part of that being a white Indigenous person is more accepted than being a Black Indigenous person.

Kayla: For people who are both Indigenous and white, do you feel that they don't have to talk about their whiteness? They can just self-identify with their indigeneity and not have to talk about being white?

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Denise: I think it depends because they may have to prove their indigeneity too, but it may not be so overt where it's like for myself, they're constantly asking me where I'm from, and then being not believed, and then reexplaining myself, whereas maybe a person who is half white and half Indigenous doesn't necessarily have to overly prove their existence or their heritage because perhaps, they're already belonging to that community.

Perhaps, they already grew up in their community on their reserve, and so people, family members know each other and that sort of thing, so it might be a little less, whereas maybe in the city, it might be a little bit harder, but yeah, I feel like there could be some white privilege at play. I'm not exactly sure, just because I'm not white.

Kayla: And also too, with Black-Indigenous identity, there's so many different types of identities, people with different -- mixed with like I said, diverse of Blackness and indigeneity. For example, as I was saying, there are individuals who are Métis from out west, and who are afro-Caribbean. There are people who are Black Scotian and Mi'kmaq so there's so much diversity within Black and Indigenous identity. It's not just, I guess, homogeneous. It's not one way. There's so many different stories, and histories to be told.

Denise: Where I come from, I'm a fifth generation "Black Canadian." My family came through the underground railroad, so both my grandparents on my father's side, their grandparents were escape slaves, like I've heard my dad say, even used to hear my grandmother say that there was like Indian blood you know mixed on their side as well, and so again, when people are asking me where I'm from, it's almost unbelievable that I'm fifth generation, and then it's almost unbelievable too that my family came from the underground railroad.

Kayla: It sounds like you constantly have to prove your Blackness and your indigeneity all the time.

Denise: Yeah, all the time. It's just a constant thing. It's probably a question I answer every day and it's really tiring, and I don't really need to answer people's questions really, but you know. Other Black people might ask me that obviously, I'm half and they'll

ask me where I come from, and when I say I'm half Ojibwe, it's like immediate acceptance and then a fascination and then talking about political stuff.

That's kind of where that conversation goes to, then whereas with the Indigenous side, it's not so open like that. There's not any kind of more or less real conversations unless the person actually knows me.

Kayla: It's almost like as you were talking about your experience, I'm hearing two words – romanticizing and exoticizing.

Denise: It's like I've had people, especially white people come up and being like, "Oh, what are you? You're so exotic." Even having white women saying I'm so exotic. "Oh, I love your hair. Oh, I love your curls. Oh, can I touch your hair?" I guess that's my white girl accent, but that constant being put on display. It's like no, don't touch my hair. I don't need to tell you where I'm from. "Where are you from?" "Oh, I'm from Canada." "No. You must be from somewhere else." "No, no, no. I'm from Canada." When I flip it, then they start to feel it.

Paige: Honestly, I feel that. I think you know, we've all had those experiences of having these fingers come right up to our face, like we don't know where your hands have been. I'm just here for your disposal, not going to happen at all.

Denise: Or even being like a mark on some dude's pedestal or what's that saying? A mark on their bed stand kind of thing, having to be a part of their checklist. I went on a date with this white guy, and he was a pretty well to do dude type thing. He was like, "I've never been with a Black woman, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." I was like, oh, man.

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Paige: Literally.

Denise: I can't do this. Sorry.

Paige: Yeah. There always has to be like some underlying motive to it.

Denise: Yeah. It's not because they're genuinely interested in you as a human being. It's because they're fantasizing about being with a Black woman, and then when they find out that you're half native, they're like oh, wow. It's gross.

Kayla: That's disgusting. As you were talking about that, I have a couple of sentences here.

Black and Indigenous and/or afro-Indigenous identities in Canada have and continue to be invisibilized and silenced for individuals who are from both of these communities that have experienced colonization, having our ancestors being

disposed and stolen from lands, oppression, hypersexualization, high rates of domestic and other forms of violence within and outside of our communities.

Also, some of us have been taught to dishonor our Indigenous and our Black ancestors who are part of us, and have made it possible for us to be here. Many of our ancestors hid their identity or did not want to openly discuss their stories because of being ashamed of who they were.

Some of the Black Indigenous people are trying to reclaim that identity, but more specifically talking about for people who are Black and Indigenous, our well-being or the hypersexualization that comes of being Black and Indigenous, of having to battle so many different institutions, systemic racism, having our bodies and our spaces being sexualized.

Denise: I feel that being Black and Indigenous is like almost a part of like a resistance sort of -- sometimes, I think about my parents getting married. They got married here in Toronto in 1957.

I don't think they felt that they were making a political statement or a political act, but when I look at it, I feel like as if they were, because for centuries, because of colonization, governments like the US government for example, like trying to constantly keep us separated Indigenous people and Africans, keeping us separated so we wouldn't resist and so we wouldn't form alliances and fight back, whereas there are examples of our communities coming together in resisting white supremacy.

I think -- I hate saying think. I mean I feel that it is sort of a political act and an act of resistance embracing and being open and acknowledging your ancestry and your ancestors. People are going to always constantly ask me what kind of Black I am or when I say you know, I'm half Indigenous. Oh, what kind? Where are you from? Do you know this person? It's non-stop and I don't feel like it's going to happen any time soon, or it's going to stop happening anytime soon.

The only thing that I really can do in my life is keep true to myself and teach my son, keep embracing my ancestry, loving my family, loving my family from Cape Croker, loving my Baldwin family.

I really feel like I wish we were more acknowledged and accepted in the greater scheme of things, but I don't know.

Kayla: Thank you.

Paige: I know that your work in proclaiming your roots, you wrote a letter, I believe, to your son throughout it. You were giving him this information, all of these stories about your family, your history, his history. I wanted to ask. What would you tell

him and other Black Indigenous youth who are in the process of understanding their Black-Indigenous identity?

Denise: Wow. I would have to say like if I was speaking to Black-Indigenous youth is you don't have to prove yourself to anybody. You really don't. As long as you're comfortable with who you are, that's all that matters. With my son, he hasn't come out really and said it, but I can kind of tell that he identifies more likely with his Indigenous side, his father's native --

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I feel like because he doesn't maybe physically look Black that he doesn't identify that way. Of course, I haven't outright asked him. That's just my observation and assumption, but I don't know. I'm his mother. I can kind of tell, right? He's always been interested in our family history, and very curious about it. Within that project Proclaiming Our Roots, that's what I did.

I wrote a letter to him and just explaining who his grandparents are, who his great grandparents are, who his great, great grandparents are, where we come from, how we ended up in Canada, the reasons why we ended up in Canada, and to show him that he's got roots across Turtle Island and Africa.

And just trying to instill that for him to be proud of where he comes from, and proud that he's a sixth generation Black Canadian technically, I guess, and to be proud that your super great grandparents escaped slavery, ran here, survived coming through the Underground Railroad and surviving the dogs, all of that and to find strength from his grandparents and then also the strength of Potawatomi people and having them being pushed all the way up here to Canada and imagining what our great grandparents had to go through so he can pull that survival and pull that strength from his ancestors when he might feel that he --

Maybe he feels weak or maybe he feels not strong enough in his day-to-day where he can draw on his ancestry to get that strength back. I guess I would share that with Black Indigenous youth, draw on that strong ancestry.

We come from kind of like two different worlds, but when they come together, it's like a huge force, and that's where I draw my strength from.

I heard that native people, Indigenous people had to use the Underground Railroad too to escape -- while they were being pushed off their lands. I just kind of wanted to like mention that too that we both had to like -- I imagined like I don't know if my family had to go through that, if they had to go -- but I like to imagine if they could've been running together. Who knows?

So yeah, I have this quote that I thought about the other night, leading up to this, and this is something that is just my own personal truth, I guess, and it's neither

right or wrong, but that's how I feel about things. I wrote down and I said, when you're white and Indigenous, it's okay, even when you're faking being white and Indigenous, you get buck deals, but when you're Black and Indigenous, it's a fucking crime against nature. That's white supremacy indoctrination, isn't it? That's almost like my day-to-day experience.

Kayla: Denise, thank you so much for sharing all your personal stories and having such truth and emotion. I would like to say that, as Black and Indigenous peoples, we are all diverse amongst ourselves from our Black ancestry, being from different parts of the world, and our Indigenous ancestry which defers from one another whether it be Métis, First Nations, Inuit, and within each of these Indigenous groups, there are multiple nations and settlements all over Turtle Island.

We all have a story to share. Thank you.

Paige: Thank you, Denise.

Denise: Thank you for having me.

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

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