

Episode 31: Danielle

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

F:

What does it mean to be a Swiss woman of Bamileke heritage? In this episode, Danielle shares with us the various manifestations of racism she experienced growing up in the outskirts of Zurich, Switzerland, and living in Cameroon, Brazil, and South Africa. Her story is about how her experiences contributed to and shaped her understanding of the world we live in.

I'm Fumi, this is #OUR_racism, and this is the story of Danielle.

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D:

I'm Danielle Isler. I'm a native of Zurich. I grew up in a small village in the outskirts of Zurich, and I was the only Black person, like, anywhere, everywhere. Like, in school or in like the Meitliriegä¹, this physical sports group of girls. And when I grew up, I knew from a very young age that I was the other. But in fact, I was not the other, I was made the other. And this was really painful for a young Black girl. And I would say that a big part, or a major part of my life, I really wanted to *belong*. Like, to be Swiss with my Swiss German, with acting Swiss, and behaving properly in all possible spaces.

F:

Danielle recalls specific moments from school time when she was othered.

D:

I would go to a party, a birthday party of a friend of mine, and there's... It's a pool party, we're sitting in the garden. And then there comes the godmother of this child who doesn't know that [her godchild has a school friend who is Black] and she would like say, "Oh, she has... I don't know, Emily, just take a name... There's a Black child in Emily's class. Oh my gosh! Oh! I see that she's really well-spoken." And they speak about me, I'm like two meters away. "Ah, she's really... she behaves good! She's not like, you know, these African children." And they would talk about me as if I were a statue, for instance, and observe me like an experiment, like a mouse in a cage.

Another example of in class, where the teacher asked... I had a very racist teacher. And I was a child, I could not really understand that she was racist. And she would not give me any roles in the theater. I really loved theater. I loved the stage. And my hand was up, "Oh, this role! Oh, this!" She would give me the smallest role. And, you know, it was fun for her to see me suffering and it was very painful. Or once, I remember when she asked the class, "Who is Swiss here?" And then everyone was raising their hand. And she was like, "No, Danielle, you're not Swiss. You're Black." And everyone was laughing.

F:

It took Danielle years to unlearn and free herself from the dominant societal expectation that her existence would need to be justified by being "the good one" – quote unquote.

D:

I started to reflect on strategies, or my coping mechanisms, on my beliefs, or my belief systems and on all of that. And this was hard work, really, to unlearn, and also [to] forgive yourself. And I think that I

¹ A traditional sport's club for girls and teenagers in Switzerland.

then really started more and more to say like, "Hey, no, I don't want to belong. I just want to be me." And I remember when I really decided for myself, "Hey, I won't say anymore that I study, or... just to belong." Because I know that my status grows. Because I've experienced that, I've lived experience [that her status grows when she tells people she's studying and working at universities]. And I would not talk performatively, [but I would] just talk when I really want to talk because I'm an extrovert: I like to talk and discuss. And I really would just be like, "If you like me, then like me for who I am and not because I'm like the 'good one'." I don't want people to like me because of what I achieved. I want them to like me because I'm me. And if they don't like a Black person, then they should not talk to me. I'm not like "the good one". I don't want to be the good one.

Because I really used to have like... I have like many "ex friends" – not boyfriends but ex-friends – because I couldn't bear it anymore, this internalized racism and me being the exception, "Danielle, you're not like the others. You're a good Black person because you speak Swiss German, you know the culture, you studied, I'm not scared of *you*, but the others..." I used to be always the exception, like, *if* I would be included in a social space – because I also experience a lot of racism – then it was because I was "the good one", you know. Because they knew my bio or my CV. And then at one point in my life, I said, "No, no, I'm tired of that. I'm so tired." And I did the very opposite. Like, from zero to 100, or I don't know. And I would get to know new people, and after one year, because I made like a mistake [of telling them that she studies], they would know that I study.

For instance, we were at a barbecue. And then I was with our friends who... they like me, yeah, but you know, they were friends of friends. So we were a group of ten people or so. And then we were planning to go to Tel Aviv altogether. And I was very enthusiastic. I was like, "Yeah, I've never been there, and I've heard so many good things – also bad things – but I really want to see and to experience that. Also, like, because I'm in social anthropology, to see the conflict there etc..." Then, we were looking for dates [for] when to go. And then I was like, "Oh, no, sorry, I cannot go because of my job at the uni." And they were like, "Unispital [University hospital]?" And I was like, "No, no, university." And then they were like, "Ah, but... you're working there as... what?" And then they were like already guessing, like, I don't remember if it was like just in the office, like KV [Kaufmännischer Verband]² or... And I was like, "No, I study there, and I work in research." They were like, "Wow. Really... You... At University? Of Zurich?" And I was like, "Yes, I am a student assistant and I'm in a research project there."

So after this moment, I was very welcomed. And now, those people that asked me [where I work] were not anymore friends of my friends, they were *my* friends... or they see me as their friend. And yes, this is the story of my life, like one example, you know, that the moment I talk, they hear my Swiss German, my status grows, and then it [my status] grows and grows and grows. [My status grows] if I remove myself from Blackness, like there's your typical belief of blackness, because I speak Swiss German, I have a degree, and then I'm not "that Black", I'm "the good one".

F:

Danielle elaborates on the background and origin of the notion "the good one" in Switzerland.

D:

Switzerland, you know, there is "subtle racism", but they did like really... Switzerland as a country did really [horrible] things you know. For instance, some insurances insured ships with enslaved people. And it's not me inventing that, it's like proven. And Switzerland has a racist legacy, a colonial legacy, slavery, etc... And we see it also in the songs or in the games we played.

² A term used to describe a Swiss association for people working in commerce.

We played [in Switzerland] for instance "Wer hat Angst vor dem Schwarzen Mann?", "Who is scared of the Black man?" in Kindergarten, also in high school, like in the school *class*, in the *curriculum*. It was not like outside [of school], no. "Who is scared of the Black man" was this game, and then we had to run. And I didn't understand it – until maybe 20 – that it was [problematic]. And then, you could be contaminated. A person is on one side of the wall, and then when she touches you, you also become black. It was a game, you know, like children running, "Oh, no, I don't want to get touched, no..."

And there are the lyrics of the songs we sang in school. They were racist. They had these stereotypes, the Globi books³, all the, you know, the curriculum, like the culture is so... it's [racism] there. Pipi Langstrumpf (Pipi Longstocking), all these things, you know.⁴ Blacks, or in general People of Color, are seen as, you know, "We should help them," "They don't have knowledge," and "They are this...". And this is why, people who say [to me], "good one", they mean what they have learned. Because those people very often know *me* as a Black person. I'm the *only* Black person they really interact with, you know. Maybe they say, "Hello," to I don't know who is Black, but I'm the only Black person they interact with like more than 30 minutes or even longer, you know?

F:

Based on her own experiences, Danielle reflects on what it means to be Swiss.

D:

I think that to be Swiss goes along with many things. So it's the language, like in the German-speaking part, like Swiss German without accent, you know, with a Swiss German accent. And race, of course, being White. And surname. I think that these three things are the most important things, because you can be like... you're White, you speak fluently Swiss German, but your name is *Petrovic*, for instance, because you have heritage from Serbia. And this person could even like cheese, go hiking, but [they're still] not [Swiss] because the surname is also very important. And this is still the definition, I would say, like the broad definition when people talk about it, the discourse, you know. But for *me*, being Swiss is the person who identifies as Swiss.

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F:

During her university years, Danielle traveled to different countries and cities. There, she would experience and observe carrying manifestations and explicitness of racism and othering. She recalls one of her first trips when she went to Cameroon to pursue fieldwork for her bachelor studies amongst the Bamileke community, of which she has heritage from.

D:

This experience was also very hard for me because *there*, I was also the other. During my fieldwork, they called me "White," like a Fe'fe' name for "White", like "foreigner" or something – one of the languages of the Bamileke ethnicity is Fe'fe'. And that was also very painful. And small boys telling me like, "Why are you wearing hot pants [shorts]?" because Bamileke women wear long dresses until the feet, and I was in hot pants because I was... yeah, I didn't even realize that. And many times, [people] were criticizing me why I don't know this, why I only speak French, because unfortunately I don't speak Fe'fe'.

And that was also very painful, because for *me*, I looked like them, you know. I'm Black, I have the same hair, the same features, everything... and there, not to be welcomed and to be treated, you know,

³ Globi is a cartoon character that is considered as Switzerland's Mickey Mouse – many children in the German-speaking part of Switzerland grow up exposed to Globi's stories.

⁴ Danielle makes note of other examples of problematic books such as *Jim Knopf und Lukas der Lokomotivführer* (*Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver*) by Michael Ende and *Die Kleine Hexe* (*The Little Witch*) by Ottfried Preußler.

as... yeah. That was very painful. For instance, in the market, they would not triple but really, ten times the price. They would [also] talk about me in my presence... like small things like that, like exclusionary things, you know, and try to bribe me in a certain way, and not taking me seriously... But at the same time, I'm having so many expectations, like I should know this and that, and this food, etc... And I'm like, "I don't. I'm so sorry." Yeah, it was very difficult for me. At the same time, they see me as a White person, but they also see me as their sister and I should know everything about them. It's like, "Huh? What?" It doesn't make any sense.

F:

Danielle also went to Brazil to visit a friend who is married to a White Brazilian and lived in a gated community.

D:

I had learned or knew about Brazil from newspaper articles or so. And also, in social anthropology, some seminars... But to be there was very different. Just seeing people who look like me as gardeners or security personnel, and the light skinned ones, they were in the houses cleaning, it was... it's really a racial thing. Like from the skin tone, colorism, structural colorism, you can guess the position of this person, like skilled personnel or whatever. And there, I really saw, "Wow... crazy. This space is even worse than in Switzerland." Not that racism doesn't exist in Switzerland, but it's more covert. There [in Brazil], it's open. They call you things. They are not ashamed to do this, or they want you to know explicitly, "You don't belong," through some actions or through how they treated me.

And many times, they thought that I was working for the family because she had two little sons where one was like three years old and one maybe one year old. But it was still special because I was dark skinned. And it was still like a revolution that they took me as a nanny for their children [inside the house]. And I was getting very angry. I said [to my friend], "Hey, did you see that and that?" And she was like, "No, don't take it personal. You know, it's normal here. And, oh, I know why they mistook you for my worker: It's because you wore white." Because there are also black coats, you know, with dresses when you wear white [which makes it] clear you're working for the family.⁵

And then I visited her friends throughout the country, also in Rio and in Salvador de la Bahia. And in Salvador, where over 80% has African and South-African heritage there, really, I couldn't anymore, to see like these gated communities. And also, this racial spatial segregation in San Paolo, I was like, "Okay, maybe it's because of this and that, and it's the reason why I don't see any Black persons in the restaurants that I went with her and her family," like in all the social spaces she goes. But in Salvador, where I visited her friends and they took me also to a restaurant, to this, to that... it was like Sweden to me. It was not even Switzerland. It was like so White, so blonde. Not that it's negative, but it's crazy to see Black people who... yeah, in the streets it could be like Bamako or something, like an African city, but then you're in a restaurant and it's Europe. And everyone looks at you like you're a ghost because it's so uncommon to see a dark-skinned person also eating there.

And also there, you know, when they see me, of course, they could guess – because of the way I walk or something – that maybe I'm a foreigner. But they're not really sure, [so] my status still starts very low. And then I talk, and then it's like, "Oh, she's a foreigner," and then they know [I'm from] Western Europe, [and then they go], "Oh wow," and... it's always that I start somewhere and then maybe I grow [my status]. And I have to perform or do something. And doing nothing will probably keep me there or... yeah. Of course, I can also just wear expensive clothes, but this is also a way of performing a class or something.

⁵ According to Danielle, in Brazil, nannies (who are often Black) often wear white when they are "on-duty".

F:

Afterwards, Danielle went to Cape Town, South Africa.

D:

I went there to do an internship at the University of Cape Town in Michaelis Galleries – I was the intern there. And *there*, like, for me, it was even *worse* than in Brazil. I felt that Brazil was the peak of overt racism, like they want you to know, "I dislike you. I don't want you here. Please don't come again. It's a White space." They want you to know that, you know, overtly. And Cape Town is the peak for me. And *there*, it was crazy.

I had like a studio, I rented a studio. And as a Swiss person, I can, of course, because of how capitalism works, I can afford to live in a White area there. And it was crazy because I was the only person living there. It was near the Michaelis campus, very... yeah, it was not bad. Not very posh, but it was, I would say "proper". And then I would for instance walk with five liters of water on the left side, five liters of water on the right side. And I'm standing in front of the building, and there is a White person – he has seen me at least 15 times, he knows that I also live there. But he wouldn't let the door open for me. He's literally two meters in front of me. He could wait two seconds. But [instead], he looks at me, [as if] to tell me, "I've seen you. But I won't just let the door open [so] that you can go [and come inside]." And then I have to put the water on the floor, look for my keys, and then open again [the door]. This was [happening] regularly. Like small things like that, where I would say, "Hello," "Good morning," to a person in the building, and then the person would look at me and not say anything. They don't perform, "I didn't hear." They *look* at you [with the eyes], "I heard, but I won't respond."

Or what I also experienced very often, like I [would] go to a restaurant and they would give me the seat next to the toilet but the restaurant would be empty. And I wanted this restaurant because of the view, because I was a tourist there, and I wanted to see and it was very nice, the landscape was very nice. And I would fight with them to be able to sit at the veranda to have the view. And that was very crazy. They would be like, "No, it's not allowed to eat there." And I'm like, "But I *see* people eating there." [And they respond], "Oh no, because it's an exception. I have to ask the manager."

And [the] most important [thing to mention here] is, this is Black people saying that, or People of Color who work in these restaurants telling me, because it's not like they are racists or whatever, but it's their job. They can be kicked out or lose their job if they don't, because there are also studies [about] the White flight, in restaurants or in social spaces, that if they – the White people, the White community – see that Black people are coming often to this restaurant, they will change the restaurant because their identity is not any more the same, and because it's like, "These Black people can also afford to go here." [So] their identity is also connected with this [notion] to be far away from Black people.

Then I asked someone at the University of Cape Town, and he was like, "Oh, your observation is true. We do that [not allow Black people to sit in certain places]. I also used to work in a restaurant, and I almost got kicked out because I was resisting and seating the Black population and the non-white population where they wanted [to sit], and they [managers and colleagues] gave me warnings. And I cannot lose my job. I need the job to fund my studies."

F:

Danielle's exposure to racism in different contexts throughout her life, aimed both at herself and others, ultimately led her to pursue her PhD to better understand why the world is as it is today.

D:

I'm really highly interested in looking at Whiteness because I want to really reverse the gaze and [explore] what is the cause of my fears and of my experiences and of the experiences of people who look like me, or the others who don't look like me but are not White? And the pain, the trauma we experience from a very young age, that's... that's terrible. That's really terrible. It's not possible that a three-year-old knows that "This child doesn't like me because I'm Black. Not because my name is Danielle. But because I'm Black." A three-year-old can already see this. There are studies that show that children already from the age of two or three know, "Okay, this was because of my skin color, of my features, or whatever, not because of *me*."

And when I see Black children today, especially in some outskirts communities or villages, I still feel bad for them because I know what I experienced. And maybe it's a bit better in the city, the city of Zurich where it's more international, but it's still there. I also hear stories of Black children experiencing really hard racism, really. And it's traumatizing. It's really traumatizing. And the worst part of it is, it won't get much better. And you can pay yourself maybe out of this very hard racism only with [speaking] Swiss German, with your education etc... Things like that, you know, because you move away from "Blackness", but still, you will experience it. And it's also very hard that this is the thing that will save you a bit from this very overt racism.

And this is why in my PhD thesis, I'm really looking at the cause of these things and whiteness as a structure, and what is whiteness actually, and how is whiteness constructed? Because it's a construction, it's an ideology, but it's an ideology that we feel and we see and we experience. And people are traumatized. And there are studies that show that over the years, microaggressions lead to medical illnesses like heart diseases, a nervous system diseases etc... Because this trauma is not easy. And we still live in a capitalistic world, we have to continue [living everyday]. We experience this kind of microaggressions and then continue living because we have to. We have to go to work, we have homework, we have this and that, we cannot take our time to mourn, it's like very limited and there are so few safe spaces for us.

What I also wanted to say is, microaggressions are only called microaggressions, but actually, they are macro, or, I don't know... And we still think about it, you know. When something happens for one minute or ten seconds, we can still feel the pain ten years later. When someone calls you the N-word for instance, it's three seconds. But the consequence, like the pain you feel, can be lifelong. That's also the unfair thing. The things that happened for the oppressors were limited in time, but for the oppressed people, it can be a lifelong of unlearning, or healing, or whatever. A lifelong thing. But for them [the oppressors], it's like, "What? You're still talking about what happened in Kindergarten? It was only children, please, come on. They were eight years old, they didn't know better, they had racist parents. Come on, get over it." No! It's not that easy to "get over it" because the pain you feel, it can determine your life, you know?

F:

Danielle points out the importance of nuance and the necessity to think intersectionally when addressing issues around racism.

D:

What I said in this podcast, I often said "Blackness", or "Whites", or "People of Color". Of course, it's not like I don't want to... of course, there's also white trash, we shouldn't forget that, you know, and there's capitalism, there's gender, there's also homophobia etc... There is not one whiteness. And also, there are different shades, like shades in terms of hierarchies, and a lot of shades in terms of who is not any more White. [For example], a person from Iran going to South Africa is not White. But this person, in Iran, these persons also have blue eyes or something, or brown or blonde hair, you know. I also met people in Cape Town who have Iranian heritage, but they are not White there – they're Arabic.

But if they go to Brazil, they're White. Because I have friends in Brazil who have, their surname is *Abdallah*, for instance, or something, like an Arabic name, but they are White there. This also depends on the geography etc... It also moves, you know, it's not like a fixed category.

I'm also *way more* privileged than other Black people because of my surname, my diplomas, the languages [I speak]... also the skills I have, like the "Western" skills I acquired. I'm way more privileged. I cannot talk for *all* Black people. My experience is maybe one of the most privileged experiences in Switzerland. I don't know, I cannot say. Because in my home, I spoke Swiss German. I spoke French. We had a computer. I was "Western", the education was Western. Maybe I'm one of the most privileged Black person. Yeah, I just want to point out it's much more complex than we talked here.

F:

Against the background of her experiences, Danielle has the following to say on what she thinks it takes to be antiracist.

D:

Antiracist is not an identity. That's very important. It's a doing. It's the actions that are antiracist. It's not like, "I'm antiracist." My name, for instance, will not change: Danielle. But being antiracist is a doing. It's not like, "Oh, I'm now [antiracist] because I read 20 books, I know it." Maybe you know some things, but you're only an antiracist if you're acting. Or, the moment you act in an antiracist way, you're an antiracist. But then you continue walking, and you're still Danielle, or whoever. This is what I want to say, especially to the more privileged communities who are listening, that allyship is not an identity, it's a doing. *Then* you're an ally. And then, when you stop defending, for instance Black people in front of your family when they say something or I don't know, other communities that are marginalized, then you stop being the ally. It's a doing.

And it's a lifelong thing. It's not, "Oh, I defended so many people, I have given money to 20 organizations..." No. It's a lifelong thing. Unfortunately, it's a lifelong thing. Because for us, it's a lifelong coping and navigating with racism, for us Black people and yeah, non-White people, People of Color, all, also you, Fumi. You have plenty of stories, you can write books of your experiences. But we have to go on, you know. And this still happens every day. You never know when, where, how deep the... yeah, how painful the interaction will be, how racist. You never know. It's like a minefield. You [just] never know when will be the next time I will be seen as a threat or when will be the next time people will be surprised that I don't steal or I don't do whatever or I don't... yeah.

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F:

You can find more information about Whiteness as a construction, as well as other articles, books and videos Danielle recommends people to take a look at on racism, on our website, www.ourcontexts.org.

You can also find the transcript of this episode on our website in English, French, German and Italian.

If you have a personal story to share, reach out to us on our website, Instagram or Twitter – you can find us by typing in #our_racism.

This is Fumi, and #OUR_racism. See you next month, on October 5!

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This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

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