Transcript: *From her world*

SPEAKERS
Grace Channer, Yaniya Lee, Dzian

Yaniya Lee 00:16
When I think of Black girlhood, I think of Jamaica Kincaid's short story "Girl" that's all told in the second person of just these directives to this young girl. I think of Whoopi Goldberg in a skit that she did where she's acting like she's a little girl and she has a sweatshirt on her hair, which a lot of us did—to have that long, luxurious blonde hair, she explains in the skit. What else do I think of? The country, and the ocean, and make believe, and playing. I mean, I definitely have an only child vibe, but that's what I remember of my girlhood is books and being out in the open and being with nature, with trees, with flowers, with grass and fields. My name is Yaniya Lee, and to think a little bit more about Black girlhood, I decided to speak with my parents, Grace Channer and Dzian Lacharite. I spoke with them separately over Zooms, and then I brought everything together for this short audio piece. I was surprised to find—and you'll hear if you listen closely—that space, or a sense of personal space, and freedom within it, and also imagination were things that came up again and again. Hi Grace, thank you for taking the time to chat with me. You're my co-parent, my parent, my mom, you raised me. And I wonder if you are up for talking about your girlhood, and if you could say, like, where you came from?

Grace Channer 01:54
I was born in Derby (England), which is sort of middle-north, and then we moved to London. So I pretty much spent most of my childhood in London, in the north end, a place called Hornsey. I lived there until I was about 14—13. At 13, 14, we moved to Toronto, Canada, and then we moved to Mississauga for a stint. So yeah, most of my time in Canada was spent hiding.

Dzian 02:33
I was born in Sainte-Dorothée de Laval. I think the hospital they took me to be born, it was La Miséricorde on Boulevard Coin, and that's where I was born. And then that was basically the orphanage for a good while—two years. Then I went in foster homes. So lots of foster homes, two years with my mother in there, but mostly foster homes til 18. But the fact that I was the only Black kid, I was like, compared, I was representing Africa without having ever been to Africa. I haven't even hung out with Black people besides. When I was four or five years old and I was in one Black family where I spoke English, and I was accepted, and I was a part of the world. It's after that when I got to be in the white world, that it was always like a borrowed time. It felt to me like I was there until, there until...

Yaniya Lee 03:35
The first question I wanted to ask thinking about your girlhood—so when you were small—is: what was your connection to place?

Grace Channer 03:57
Okay, so when you say place, I immediately think of England where where I was a girl, and England was super freaking harsh. It was a harsh place to be a person of colour, but to be a little Black girl was harsh there. When I think of place, it reminds me of the story of these Black girl twins, Jennifer and June Gibbons, that lived in Britain around the same time as I, but I didn't know—like it was nobody I knew. I read about them years later, and so many images and feelings flooded back to me. These were Black girls who lived on an army base and they were twins and they did not speak to anyone—anyone—until they were well, well into like, pubescent or teen years. And then it was very, very few words. And I think of how they created space together by creating this world that was communicated through these tiny, tiny, tiny letters of writing. So they would write a lot, a ton, they were writers, right? So each of them write and write and write, but when you read their work the letters were so tiny. And I feel like, for myself as a girl, the space I could take up was so tiny. The place I had as a Black girl in Britain, it had to be imaginary, you have to imagine it. Because all you got was hate flooding at you—when you walk down the street to go to school, when you had to deal with people. I mean, we were supposed to be seen and not heard, but it's not seen and not heard as a child, it's seen and not heard as a Black child.

Yaniya Lee 06:27
When did you realize you were a girl?

Dzian 06:30
Well as a Black girl—because the thing about the foster kids, being a foster kid, I was the only Black kid in my environment, which does come in, I guess, in some ways, because I had to really sit back, as in not having permissions to interact with them accordingly to their standard rules. So I had to respond and respect it if I wanted to stay in good health, because some of them would ruffle me too, or threaten me—because I was threatened the first day of school, you know, "we're going to kill you if you touch us." So I got it right away: if you're Black you don't touch, or you don't get touch[ed], or you better better not get touch[ed]. Because otherwise it becomes problematic. So I stayed away from people and stayed away from even touching.

Yaniya Lee 07:19
You told me this story once about your first apartment that you had in the city.
Dzian 07:24
Well, I had gone through a lot of ordeal around the money in that year, going to college for the first year, to try to get a new loan and bursary. So from September to December, you know, a whole

bunch of things happened. But December is when I finally had the money to go and get my first apartment. So I went and I found the room and [it] was right beside the school. You could see the college from the window—I was that close. And the first night that I got in the apartment, I sat on the chair and I didn't move for five hours. I said, because nobody's gonna move me from here. I'm paying my $82 for the month and ain't nobody moving me from my chair, this is my place. [laughs] It was a very, you know, the shower was a little strange, I repainted it, but it was my place—that was the marvel about it, where nobody would be questioning how long I should be there.

Grace Channer 08:32
Well, for me, I think I had a very hard time seeing myself as a girl. I don't know if I ever really did. And then once I started to read and I think even when I came out, is when I realized, oh, that's why I don't see myself as a girl—much even less as a woman, because at that time I was a woman right? So it took a while. I would be the kid that would be the in-between, for instance, you know how girls in the classroom gossip? I would never ever gossip, but I'd hear it right? And then you'd find out this girl likes that boy or you know, this kind of stuff. So I would go and catch the boy to give to the girl because she was like, she was so afraid to talk to them and that kind of thing.

Yaniya Lee 09:30
Where did that place you then, like if you took that role? Where did that place you in the nexus of girls and boys and them—

Grace Channer 09:37
Not a girl, not a boy, I'm in between!

Yaniya Lee 09:41
Was there an end to that feeling of in-between-ness?

Grace Channer 09:43
No. Like I said, when I came out I realized that's why I feel this in-between because none of that stuff fits, those gender roles don't fit, and then I had the words to describe why I don't feel that. I don't feel that "girl" thing, I don't feel that "boy" thing. My mother, forever in a day—she's a girly girl, right?—she was constantly trying to make me a girl. I got high heeled shoes, really sweet dresses, and all of this stuff. It just felt awkward and nothing to do with me. But I realized at that moment that I was a feminist, like, I am not cooking and cleaning and washing and doing all of these things that these women are doing, ever! I'm never gonna do that, never!

Dzian 10:31
A girl? Well with my brother who would just make a deal of me being a girl, and having two brothers that they were okay but me, because it was a girl—hmm he had to think about this. So I

would spend my time crying [imitates crying sounds] just go and sniffle in the [inaudible] skirts. So I knew it was a girl then.

Yaniya Lee 11:03
What did it mean to be a girl then at that time?

Dzian 11:05
It meant that you had less advantages, that's for sure. You couldn't go here, you couldn't do this, you couldn't do that, you had to sit and have these curls and stuff put in your head and, you know, [inaudible] and put dresses that you couldn't move. All the boys could do anything they wanted to. Now I figured it out quite quickly, they had a lot of advantages. So I was four years old when I realized that. The limitation changed when you're in the country because women did so much what men did also, you know, that it didn't, it didn't, it wasn't the same as in the city. Because I moved from the city to the country, to the city to the country. You know, and that foster home, as many strange things might have happened there, they also taught me how to just be—be free, whether or not they accepted or not, they taught me to just breathe, in, out. And in that way I'm very thankful for, for what happened there, and I think being in the country has helped it for me. Had I been in the city it would have been much worse.

Grace Channer 12:18
What was I like as a girl? You see, I think you came out of two people who never really fully felt like girls [laughs]. And that's the problem, right? Like your mother, she grew up, you know, and being dismissed in Montréal, there's a kind of a dampening of her femininity or girlness, right? Your mother was gorgeous. She was such a beautiful young woman, and I'm sure when she was little, a young girl, I never saw her then but, you know? So no one sort of put that on a pedestal. And for me, my mother was always trying to put something on a pedestal though it wasn't me, right? So there was always something going on that kept us not being in that realm of femininity. We as women, our femininity thing, it doesn't come through—that gendered sort of component doesn't come through. So when it is coming through in some sort of a way, it's probably just a Black aesthetic, right? Like it was for my mother, it was her aesthetic about what it was to be a "girl." Anyhow, so for you—and that's where I was going [laughs]—I think you were allowed to explore, explore the feminine, explore the—you know, just jeans and just grubby clothes, you don't have to be any which way. It was entirely up to you. And that, I think both Dzian and I thought was good. And when you were with your mom, she would show me all these like girly things you would do, and we just have a hoot because you'd do whatever was around you. But you still had the possibility to explore it all if you want to. No one was going to tell you no, no, no, this looks better, right? You were always allowed to wear or do what you liked. And that's why for you, whenever I could see there was a change going on with you—like at seven years old, there was a change going on with you, and your mother noticed it too. And so, you know, we decided the African tradition

where you allow the child to explore what that actually means for them, is what we have to support. And I think it's a transition between being a little-little kid to a bigger kid—that was a transition between when you were around seven, right? So doing certain things on your own because you can, right? So all the way along your life, it was a consciousness that I think both Dzian and I had and developed and thought was important because we ourselves didn't have it, but we recognize that there were different things going on each step through your childhood.

Yaniya Lee 15:26
You've heard bits of Grace Jones throughout this recording from "The Crossing (Ooh The Action)," which was a track on her concept album Slave to the Rhythm from 1985. And now I'll leave you with the "Little Girl" skit from Whoopi Goldberg's 1985 TV special "Direct From Broadway":

This is my long luxurious blonde hair, [audience laughs] ain't it pretty? I could put it in a ponytail, wanna see? [audience members: yes!] No. [audience laughs] You do? Okay, let me get off my shoulder, wait. See look, see? And look, now it's in my eyes, and my mother made me go to my room because she said "is that a shirt on my hair?" And I said "nuh-uh, this is my long luxurious blonde hair." And she said "nuh-uh fool that's a shirt" and I said "you a fool this is my hair" and she made me go to my room. [audience laughs] But I don't care cuz when I get big I'm gonna get fit to marry a million-trillion-millionaire alphas and imma go and let 'im go by the house and trample on everybody and then she's gonna want me to make him stop but she ain't even gonna know I'm there because I'm gonna have blonde hair, blue eyes, and imma be white. [audience laughs] I am! [audience laughs] Uh-huh! Uh-huh cause they said on TV all you got to do is go to the 'tometrist office and he got blue eyes in the desk drawer. And then imma have a dream house and a dream car and dream candy and a dream horse and me and Barbie are gonna live together with Ken and Skipper and Malibu Barbie. [audience laughs] We are! And then we're gonna buy excitin' clothes cuz we want to go somewhere cool we're going to go somewhere excitin' cause we're gonna get on the Love Boat but you got to have long hair to get on the Love Boat. And I told my mother I didn't want to be Black no more. [audience laughs] I did! Cause she don't never do nothing excitin' she just go to work all the time, she work on Wall Street. That's all she do, work, work, work and she don't even know nobody excitin' and nobody excitin' know her. And she don't even look like nobody on TV—not even on the Justice League not even on the Smurfs. [audience laughs] And she says she don't wanna look like no damn Smurf [audience laughs] and then she said "even if you sit in a vat of Clorox til Hell freeze over you ain't gonna be nothin' but Black." And she were right because I sat in the Clorox and I got burned. [audience laughs] As she say I just have to be happy with what I got, but look, see? It don't do nothin' [audience laughs] It don't, it don't blow in the wind. And it don't casca-casciscidade down my back [audience laughs]. It don't! And I put that bouncin' and behavin' stuff in it and it didn't even listen. And I want some other kind o' hair to do somethin' else. I do.