Episode 1: Fumi (Intro)

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Hi. I'm Fumi, your host of this podcast series. I'm 27, Asian, a Japanese national, a cis woman, privileged, and racist…

Yep, you heard that right. I just straight up told you I'm racist.

In this first episode, I'm going to tell you how I came to the realization that I'm racist at the age of 27. It's also my story of how I came to embark upon this podcast series.

But before I begin, I want to point out two things.

First, if you were expecting to hear abstract concepts and theories on racism, you're listening to the wrong podcast. This is a podcast where you'll be hearing people like you and me sharing personal stories and reflections on the everyday manifestations of racism from around the world. Everything you will be hearing is first and foremost our subjective opinions, feelings, and interpretations. None of us are certified experts on racism – our degree on racism is our identities and our lived experiences themselves.

This leads me to my *second* point: Whilst listening to all the stories, keep in mind that there is no right or wrong story. There is also no hierarchy of experiences. We *all* have a story to share, and every story is equally valuable no matter how small or irrelevant you think it is. This is because experiences can't be compared like the temperatures in two cities or the height of two mountains. All experiences are context-specific and depend on an individual's position and subjective interpretation in a given moment and time. I'm saying this, because to discuss about issues on racism, it's important for all of us to listen and put into each other's shoes.

Now that being said, let's begin with the first episode.

This is #OUR_racism, and this is *my* story.

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I never *really* thought about racism in my life.

I knew racism existed, but I don't remember it playing such a big role in *my* life because I thought it had nothing to do with me. I thought it had nothing to do with me because I grew up being taught that racism is an issue of and for Black people.

I also grew up with a very specific image of what and who a racist is. A racist in my mind was someone, a far-right extremist, almost always White, who throws ethnic slurs at Black people, beats them up, or kills them … pretty much what you'd see the Ku-Klux-Klan, an American White-supremacist hate group, doing in the movie BlacKKKlansman.

And since I've never called a Black person with any ethnic slur, or killed someone for that matter, I thought I was not racist.

But then, 2020 slapped me in the face.

No, I'm not talking about Covid-19. I'm talking about the killing of three African Americans – namely the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd – that sparked the Black Lives Matter protests around the world, and flooded news outlets and social media with #BlackOut Tuesday posts and testimonies from Black people of what it means to be Black in this world.

I was overwhelmed.

It was certainly not the first time I heard Black people sharing their stories of being Black. Well, actually, I take that back. It was not the first time I heard testimonies from Black people *in the US* sharing their stories of being Black. But it was the first time I properly started hearing stories of what it means to be Black *outside the US* such as in Switzerland, the country I was based in at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests.

But it was also the first time it *really* made me reflect about my own actions and inactions when it comes to racism, specifically as an Asian person towards Black people.

I remember asking myself all these questions: *Do I feel uncomfortable when I walk in a neighborhood at night with Black guys dealing drugs because they're dealing, or because it's dark and I'm uncomfortable in general walking alone at night as a woman, or, is it because they're Black? Would I feel any differently if the persons dealing drugs were White?*

Do I also move away from Black people when I'm walking in the streets, or avoid sitting next to them on public transportation?

The easy answer would have been "no".

But the more honest answer to all these questions were, "I don't know."

And that's when it hit me… Could I possibly have said things and done things unconsciously in the past that made Black people conscious of their race? Could I possibly hold racist beliefs too? Am I… racist?

The more I started thinking about this possibility, the more I began to think that I am racist. That's because I realized that I was socialized and conditioned in a family and homogenous society like Japan that holds specific prejudices against Black people rooted in racism. I know I'm not the only one who grew up being told not to date Black people, or to avoid empty streets when I'm with a Black friend because the police will suspect us of drug dealing.

I'm certainly not proud of being racist. But I know that the first step to solving an issue is recognizing the issue. And for me, that meant acknowledging my own role and behavior that is feeding into this thing called structural racism.

The second step is to actively unlearn my racist biases. Or, in the language used by American historian and anti-racist activist Ibrahim X Kendi, "How can I not only be less racist, but actively anti-racist?" And it sounds silly, but I started to pay attention to my unconscious biases by holding a straight line when walking past a Black person, or paying attention to which seat I take if I see two empty seats on the bus, one next to a Black person and other next to a White person.

But there was something puzzling about this personal revelation. How come it took me so many years to realize that I was racist?

So I asked myself for the first time in my life: *Where does my understanding of racism come from?*

You may have already realized, but the references I've been making so far on racism are mainly from the US. Yes, my understanding of racism as an issue between Black and White people, of racists as the Ku-Klux-Klan… that all came from the US, which is funny, because I'm not American, and I never lived in the US. My only relation to the US comes from consuming American pop culture, spending some holidays there and having American friends, and to some extent, studying in an international school in Tokyo where I was exposed to the American school culture of bake sales, varsity jackets and prom.

The reality is, whether we like it or not, our world is consumed by US-American hegemony. By US-American cultural hegemony, I mean the omnipresence of US-American influence in almost all spheres of culture: everywhere one goes, we're influenced in one way or another by something from the US. Go to any country, switch on the radio or go to a club – pre-Covid, of course – and you'll probably hear one or two music from the US. Most children grow up being exposed to at least one Disney film. No one *really* follows or cares about the presidential elections of any country in the world, besides that of the US, because apparently, it matters.

And often, what happens in the US is used as a reference point to discuss similar issues in different countries and benchmark them against the US. I told you earlier I thought I wasn't racist because I don't kill Black people. It turns out I wasn't the only one who thought this way. I recently came across a tweet saying, "We don't kill our Black people so we're not racists." The tweet was made by a White German … and mind you, Germany has *a lot* of racism issues not only towards its Black population, but also to its Turkish, Asian, and Arab communities, just to name a few… not to mention their problems with anti-Semitism as well. Germany also has serious police violence issues. But because they use the US as a yardstick, they think their police brutality is okay because they don't shoot people on a day-to-day basis.

Using the US as a reference point is not okay because every country is different and has its own context-specific issues. But because what makes the global news often times tend to be these extreme manifestations of racism, other degrees and forms of racism in other parts of the world are forgotten. They're forgotten because they're painted over with an image and understanding of racism that comes from another country. In other words, the experiences of racism in another country dictates the experiences of racism in another.

Take the example of Japan. On the surface, Japan may look mono-ethnic, or a country with only one ethnic group. Over 98% of the population is ethnically Japanese, a number that was achieved through, amongst others, the 200 years isolationist policy which shut off Japan from the rest of the world and as result limited migration. A lot of Japanese people believe their country's mono-ethnic nature is "natural", so they don't think they have problems with racism… and that's certainly how the political class likes to sell it.

But that's painting an inaccurate picture, because Japan has a lot of minority communities that have been oppressed for centuries. There's the *Ainu* in the north of Japan, and the *Ryukuans* in the south of Japan. There's the *Zainichi-Koreans*, or ethnic Koreans and their descendants who came to Japan before the Korean peninsula was split into two in 1945. They're permanent residents of Japan, many of them born in Japan and having never lived in Korea. Some of them also have Japanese citizenship, but they still face discrimination because "being Japanese" is seen as a "biological" and "mono-ethnic" attribute. So anyone who doesn't tick all the boxes of what it means to be 100% ethnically Japanese, experiences racism.

But most people don't talk about issues related to race and racism in Japan. And when they do in rare occasions, it usually revolves around people who are Black or have relations to the US, such as Ariana Miyamoto who was crowned Miss Universe Japan in 2015, or Naomi Osaka, the first Japanese tennis player to win a Grand Slam singles title. Both of them are *Hafu*, a Japanese term referring to someone

born of one ethnic Japanese parent and one non-Japanese ethnic parent, but many in the public would deny them their "Japaneseness" as they do not conform to the "mono-ethnic" image many hold.

I know the Black Lives Matter protests was picked up and started some conversation around racism in Japan. But in many ways, Japan is just freeriding on what's happening in the US to avoid discussing existing issues of racism by the majority against its minority communities. Particularly because some argue that the situation in Japan is "not as bad as in the US". I know I'm clearly oversimplifying a complex issue, but I just wanted to give you an idea of how this overt focus on the US by the Japanese public is really illustrative of how local manifestations of racism can be crowded out and are left unaddressed.

To be clear, I'm not against the US in any way. In fact, I admire Americans for being outspoken on so many issues beyond racism, such as mental health, sexual harassment, sexuality, you name it. And I do think other countries should follow suit. But it's important for the rest of the world to not use developments in the US as a *reference* point, but instead, as a *starting* point to start conversations at home by taking into consideration their own context. Because every context is different, and context matters.

I now know that one of the reasons I failed to see that racism was not my issue, that I'm not racist, is because I was using the US as a reference point the whole time.

But as I was reflecting more about this issue, I realized that my own life experiences played an equally important role in shaping and reinforcing this idea that racism was not my issue.

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I was born in Tokyo in 1993 to two Japanese parents. When I was three years old, my father's work took my family to Strasbourg, a cozy, beautiful city in the East of France, bordering Germany.

Most Japanese expat families place their kids in either a local Japanese school or an international school. My parents, for whatever reason, decided to put me in a local public French Kindergarten.

Now, I don't remember every single detail because I was too young. But I do remember being bullied. A lot.

My mother tells me how I'd come home from Kindergarten with bite marks on my body and blocks of hair stuck to my jacket, a sign that the other kids were cutting my hair and yanking it off. I would be called "dirty", because my skin was darker than everybody's. One kid even punched me in my face and knocked my two front teeth out. *This* I remember clearly because (a) it hurt a lot and I remember going to the dentist to get them removed, and (b) I have many pictures of me smiling with my two front teeth missing. To this day, I have a dent on one of my front teeth which I try to hide with fillings.

My mother tells me how she went to the principal at one point and told them about what the other kids were doing to me. And the principal would only respond, "Well, we know what's going on. She just has to learn to protect herself in French." I was three years old. I had just moved to France. And I couldn't speak a single word of French.

I may have been little and had no concept or understanding of the world around me, but I knew one thing: I *looked* different from everyone else. I was, after all, the only Asian in the Kindergarten... Besides one Black student, the rest were White.

When I turned six, my parents moved me to a private French elementary school. There, I don't remember being bullied… though I do remember the occasional moments where some of my friends

would pull the edges of their eyes to "look" Asian and say, "Ching chang chong" or pick me on their team when playing table tennis because they assumed I was good at it… which, by the way, my friends can confirm with absolute certainty that I am the worst at.

Other times, my friends would point out at Asian tourists in the streets and say, "Regarde, tes cousins!", "Look, your cousins!".

I remember feeling annoyed and angry at these moments because by the time I had turned eight, I identified myself as French. After all, I'd been living in France for almost the first decade of my life. I spoke French and acted French. I was even the only one in my grade full of French kids who could sing the whole French anthem by heart.

So, you can imagine why I felt so offended when my friends would point at Asians in the streets and associate me with "them", never mind whether they were Chinese, Koreans or Japanese or any other Asian. Today, I know that this was an act of "othering me". By "othering", I mean my friends were categorizing me as someone different from them. They simply didn't consider me as part of "them". I won't ever know if they were doing it intentionally or unintentionally. If it were unintentional, it may even be more forceful because it shows how these perceptions are ingrained in them so deeply and at such a young age.

Before my 9th birthday, my father's work took us back to Japan and my parents put me in an international school – an all girls' Catholic international school to be precise.

Now, before I talk about my years at the international school, I want to share with you another life I led simultaneously.

Soon after arriving to Japan, I was luckily able to join a local public horseback riding team so I could practice my Japanese and continue a hobby I had picked up when I was in France.

My time there was a crash course on Japanese society. I learned about *keigo*, or Japanese honorifics and how to use them. I learned about Japanese hierarchy and the importance of respect and obedience for those older than you.

I also learned about Japanese bullying.

Yup, I was bullied again. But this time, I was bullied by kids who looked just like me.

At the beginning I was confused. I had just come back from France, where memories of bullying were still freshly imprinted in my mind. My young and simple mind had registered that I was bullied in France because I looked different. With that same logic, I thought I wouldn't get bullied in Japan because I *looked* like everyone else.

I was wrong.

Very quickly, I realized that I was bullied not because I *looked* different, but because I *acted* different. I didn't speak perfect Japanese yet, because French was my forte. I spoke too much and smiled too much for Japanese standards. In other words, none of what I said and did conformed with Japanese standards. In my teams' eyes, I was a foreigner, or as we say in Japanese, a "gaijin", a word which literally translates to "outside person".

There's a Japanese saying that goes, "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down." The bullying was exactly that: I was the nail sticking out, and the Japanese kids were trying to hammer me down.

The bullying I experienced the first decade of my life in two countries taught me two things. In France, I learned that people identify you based on your looks. In Japan, I learned people identify you based on your mannerisms, even if you look like them.

Now here, you might be thinking, "Well, you *can't* change your physical appearance, but you *can* change your mannerisms. So as long as you learn the social codes of conduct, it should be easy to fit in, right?" That's what I thought too at the beginning. But it doesn't work that way in a country like Japan, where again, as I mentioned earlier, being "Japanese" is seen as a biological and "mono-ethnic" attribute. So it doesn't matter whether you look Japanese, speak Japanese or act Japanese. If you don't tick the boxes of what it means to be "Japanese", you will never be *fully* accepted in society.

Remember I told you about *Hafu,* people who are born of one ethnic Japanese parent and one non-Japanese ethnic parent? I have many *Hafu* friends, and I know they face all kinds of discrimination on a daily basis. I sympathize with them, but I sometimes envy them too. Because whatever quality they have that is not Japanese will be attributed to their other nationality. In this sense, Japanese society is more forgiving to them than they are to someone like me, someone who is considered fully ethnic Japanese but doesn't act Japanese. I'm obviously not saying this to undermine any *Hafus'* experiences in Japan, because I know they've had to experience things that I didn't because I don't look like a *Hafu*. I'm just sharing this to show you how our lived experiences in the same space can be equally difficult, but these difficulties manifest themselves differently.

But at the end of the day, bullying was bullying. And my ten-years old mind merged these two bullying experiences as one.

It wasn't until last year when I was reflecting about racism that I started thinking, "Wait a minute. The bullying in the French Kindergarten… that was racism, wasn't it?" Teachers were letting kids tear my hair out, bite and punch me because I looked different… because I was of a different race from them.

So how come no one ever told me that what I had experienced was racism? How come it took me 27 years to realize upon reflection that what I went through was racism, that it was something beyond my control, but I for years thought that something was wrong with me?

I confronted my mother about this. When I asked her if she knew at the time that I was a victim of racism, she said, "Yes, we knew."

I don't know if it's because she said it so matter of factly, but I felt really stupid. It's like everyone knew it was racism but me.

So then I asked her, "Well why didn't you tell me, ever?"

And she responded, "Everyone knew it was racism. Racism is just something everyone is expected to know what it is when they see it and not talk about."

When she said this, the first thought that came into my mind was, "Wow… so Japanese." I don't know how much you know about Japanese culture, but it's a very implicit, read-between-the lines sort of culture. You're always expected to "kuuki wo yomu", which literally translates to "read the air". And to me, this act of seeing racism unfold before you and expecting everyone to understand what it is without explicitly stating what it is, was the epitome of the Japanese notion of "reading the air".

But what's striking about this, is that apparently, everyone around me, including the White people, were playing this Japanese "read the air" game with racism.

And that's when it hit me.

The reason I knew so little about racism was due to silence. Silence surrounding the *topic* of racism. Silence around the *word* 'racism', making the word so tabooed and unspeakable like the name "Voldemort" in Harry Potter, that people, including victims of racism, avoid the topic altogether even though they know it exists. And this silence is a great way to keep people from developing the words and language to identify racism when they see it. It strips us away of the tools that we need to address racism, to recognize and call out racism when we see it aimed at others or ourselves.

I feel like this is one reason why I come across the words "discrimination" or "xenophobia" on the news more than the word "racism". It's like journalists use these terms interchangeably either because they're uncomfortable labeling something as 'racism' because it's so strongly connotated, or because they themselves don't know how to differentiate between these words.

But words matter because they shape our individual and collective experiences.

Take the word "xenophobia". It comes from the Greek word xénos which means "stranger" or "foreigner". Earlier in 2020, there was an attack on a Shisha-Bar in Germany. This attack was motivated by racist beliefs. But the press coverage called it a "xenophobic attack". Now, the victims of this attack were German. They were born in Germany, held German citizenship, and spent their entire life in Germany. By calling it a "xenophobic attack", it implies that the victims don't belong to Germany, which is simply not true in this case.

Racism is ultimately rooted in power structures and relationships. And not using the right term leads to silence, and this silence is the product of exactly those power relations which enable racism in the first place.

Now I know people around me used the word "bullying" to describe my experiences because it was a more widely accepted term in a school setting… I mean, let's face it, if parents had to pick a term to associate their kids – a racist or a bully – I'm quite sure they'd resort to the latter.

So I started reflecting on the various instances in my life where I learned to be silent about racism.

It turns out it happened at every point in my life.

But for the sake of my contribution to this podcast series, I want to focus on one aspect, which is my ten years at an all-girls Catholic international school.

I can only speak for my school because every international school is different. But in those ten years, I don't remember *ever* studying explicitly about race or racism. What I *do* remember learning about, is the importance of respecting and loving each other despite our differences, the importance of embracing diversity. This teaching was drilled into us through our religion classes and teachings we heard in our weekly Mass; through our music classes where we listened and sang to music from different parts of the world… We also had a yearly festival called "Festival of Nations Day", a public event where anyone in the neighborhood could come watch students share their talents from different countries and indulge a variety of national dish prepared by parents and teachers alike, be it pancakes from Canada, Paella from Spain or Adobo from the Philippines.

I realize now that through learning about diversity, I learned to be silent about racism. That, this process of constantly, year after year, being told to respect and celebrate our differences, I was

learning to be colorblind. And let's remember: being colorblind is not something you should be proud of, because it is *not* the opposite of being racist. The opposite of racist is anti-racist.

Of course, growing up in such an environment made me open-minded and culturally sensitive from an early age. But at the end of the day, I grew up thinking that because I have friends from all over the world, that because I embrace diversity, I cannot possibly be racist, especially, because again, my understanding for the longest time about racists was of White supremacists. I suppose it's the same argument White people use when they say they're not racists because they have Black friends.

There is nothing wrong with embracing diversity. But diversity implies a false sense of equality. That we are all equally important, that we are all equally talented, that we all have equal opportunities.

But this notion is false because it neglects the reality that society is structured in a way that privileges some people over others. It neglects the existence of power structures and relationships that shapes our everyday life. It pretends that we all live in the same world. And it assumes it can address the evil and violent implications of racism by simply denying its existence.

The fact that contexts such as international schools nurture this colorblindness is really problematic, because students who attend international schools are privileged, and racism is ultimately about the maintenance and abuse of power. As privileged children are more likely to end up in influential positions, they're very unlikely to transform these power structures, but instead *maintain* them – either intentionally or unintentionally – because they're just not attentive to it.

Talking about diversity is like popping a painkiller when you have a headache – you're not *healing* the symptom… you're *silencing* it. And without knowing, I was taking part in this pill-popping culture, and by default, *I* was an active participant in silencing racism, aimed both at myself and others.

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My own reflections on racism made me see three things.

First, that you can be both a victim and perpetrator of racism.

Second, that being racist is not just about insulting people with ethnic slurs and harming people. That being silent and complicit makes you just as equally guilty of participating in racism. And in many ways, I think it's worse to be silent, because by being silent and failing to reject injustices, you may not be actively upholding them, but you are going along with them.

And *third*, racism is a gradient. That racism exists in so many forms, sizes and colors but this gradient is currently empty and overly simplified due to the silence around this issue.

The first thing we need to do is fill this gradient. And that's what this podcast serves to do.

In every episode, you will be hearing people of different backgrounds sharing their personal experiences and reflections of racism so we can see the various forms and ways in which racism manifests itself around the world. You might be surprised to hear that many people on this podcast had never really thought about racism or considered their daily problems as a manifestation of racism until I approached them… even though they have clearly been othered in many occasions because of the way they look, or because of their names.

I hope this podcast sheds light to the complexity of racism, the danger of painting over certain understandings of racism in different contexts. And I also hope this podcast encourages all of us to

reflect on our contexts and surroundings, and most importantly, our individual roles in upholding and reproducing systems of oppression through our daily actions and inactions.

After all, if you're listening to this podcast, you're probably someone who wants to learn about racism, someone who wants to learn how to actively be anti-racist… so I invite you to join me on this journey.

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Most of the episodes will be in English, because whether you like it or not, English remains the dominant language. But rest assured, the transcripts of each episode will be available on our website in French, German and Italian at www.ourcontexts.org.

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.

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This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

Introductory score by Luca Nioi. Other music by Pete Morse, Crescent Music and Fugu Vibes.

A huge thank you to all those who provided feedback on this episode, as well as those who were there for me since the very beginning when this podcast was just at its infancy. All of your support made this happen.

This is Fumi and #OUR_racism. See you in two weeks!