

Episode 26 : Christian

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

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What does it mean to be US-American and mixed race? In this episode, Christian shares what it was like growing up in different states in the US and how these experiences shaped him and prepared him for life. His story is about colorism in the US, about racism in West Point – the oldest military academy in the US – about the intersection of race and nationality when being abroad, and the role of everyone, particularly those in positions of privilege, in breaking the silence around racism.

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

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C:

When you look at my background, there is what, you know, W.E.B. Dubois calls it that "double consciousness", that external view or the perception of how others view you externally versus the way you see yourself internally. And so, let's start with external. Externally, you know, we look at... and I'm jumping in with racial background immediately, I'm not even talking about like professional or academic background yet, but you know, racial background, I've been seen as Black, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican, Brazilian, Thai, Mongolian, Filipino, Egyptian, you know, you name it, people don't know really what I am.

But if you're looking at it from internally and then from a point of genealogy and looking at my family, I am... given that I am from the United States, I was born in New Jersey, I am racially Black, but I consider myself ethnically completely mixed. So I have heritage from India, like in India, not Native American, but also I do have Native American heritage as well, but just making that distinction. Portuguese, Spanish, Irish, English, Czechoslovakian, I have family that had come from Jamaica to the US, Puerto Rico, the Açores Islands to the US. And then of course, there's that African heritage from both sides of my family that you don't really know because a lot of it is lost because of the history of slavery and chattel slavery.

Now, going back to the external side as well, the US government, every time... every time I have to get a student visa it reminds me because I got to do that background check. The US government sees me as race, "Black", skin tone, "medium". So, you know, according to the US government, I'm just that light skinned Black dude, which also, you know, when we start looking at it from that racial aspect, gets into that element of colorism, which maybe we'll touch on later. So that, getting into my background, racially is who I am from an internal view.

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Christian's father was an American football coach at the college level. For this reason, between the ages of 0 and 18, he moved on average of every year and a half. Starting in New Jersey where he was born, he moved to Lewisburg, Pennsylvania; Oberlin, Ohio; Dover, Delaware; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Morgantown, West Virginia; Winston-Salem, North Carolina; and Athens, Georgia. He says that with each move, he lived in, quote unquote, "more traditionally segregated" areas. He shares some of his childhood memories and reflections on them.

C:

In Lewisburg as well, I don't remember the specific case, but my dad always brought it up, where this woman – we were at a McDonald's and I was like, kind of, you know, running around and stuff, being a three-year-old – and she starts yelling at me using the N-word, like, “Someone needs to get this N in line, like blah blah, blah.” And my dad of course, my dad being my dad, yelled, and he got an argument with a woman. But he told me later on that night, he cried because he realized what I have to deal with. And you know, I want to pause it there and just say, going back to the FBI, I’m “light-skinned”. So if you can imagine like at three years old, I'm getting treated like that because I've got curly hair and Black facial features but light skin, the treatment for those who are of a darker complexion is much worse. And so... and keep that in mind, there is this element, like I said, I brought it up earlier, this element of colorism that you will always become aware of.

So I'm four years old, and I was in New Jersey with my grandfather, my father's father. He takes me to a playground in East Orange, New Jersey, where my dad had grown up, and I'm the lightest skin kid there. And I just climb up the ladder, and I want to go down the slide, and I get stopped at the top of the slide by these kids and they're like, “You can't go down because you white.” I'm like, “What?” And I'm like, I'm trying to comprehend this. I'm like, “No, I'm not.” And they're like, “No, you're white, you can't go down.” And then behind me of course, this line starts forming. And the kids hear what's going on and they get in an argument about the fact I'm Black [so] I can go down, like I'm on the playground with them, I'm one of them, so I could go down. So these kids are arguing back and forth. I just go down anyways, I see my opportunity.

But you know, that's something that's always stuck with me because here we are at this young age and we're differentiating between the physical features in a way that it exemplifies the structural racism that ends up becoming encoded within us because of what we learn in certain environments. So you know, just at those young ages, I ended up developing this way to kind of “code switch” as we say, and walk in multiple worlds, like, you know, we go into a Black church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and I'm a bit uncomfortable at first but then I'm feeling at home with the music and then I just become extroverted and start talking to people.

But then we moved to Morgantown, West Virginia after that, and it's nothing but like white people from West Virginia. And there's nothing wrong with white people from West Virginia, but they're... it's similar to Switzerland, like that's... when you live in this bubble and you don't experience people of another background, there are stereotypes or these things that you only pick up from media, from an outside world, that creates a judgement. So yeah, just starting at younger ages, there's always this hyper awareness, and you're always... it's a bit draining on your energy as well because you're always aware of how people perceive you, and how you perceive yourself. But then you're having to kind of create some type of coherence in reciprocation between those two views so that everyone is kind of seeing who you want to be seen as, and overcoming that.

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Christian shares one vivid memory from middle school that he remembers to this day.

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So I was in middle school in Morgantown, West Virginia. And there was this kid who just hated me, like blond haired blue eyed kid, who just hated me, because I wasn't white. And, I mean, the longer the school year went on, the more he would try to say things to me. And so he was proud that his grandfather had been a Nazi in Germany, and he ended up one day writing this letter to me and passing it to me in class, and it was like something like saying he'd hoped I died, and then signed it like “death” with his name. And of course, like, that pissed me off. And I internalized that anger, but it came out, like, I was writing this paper in that class – I don't even remember the class – but I just remember, I'm

pressing the pencil against the paper so hard that when I teared out the notebook to turn it in, the teacher started crying, because she was like, “I've never seen such anger.”

And, of course, I had already been labeled like this “problem child”, not because of my grades – like I had great grades – but because I'm dealing with so much BS from these other kids, especially this kid, that I'm just angry, like, I'm an angry kid, because if you're having to put up with racist nonsense from kids every day, it gets to you. So instead of really taking the time to articulate the issue and really be on my side, this happened in the army too, actually, where I had an issue with another officer harassing me. And I brought it up to my commander and of course, they just gaslight you and don't do anything about it.

But in middle school, it wasn't just gaslighting. So this teacher, because it was a private school but at this church, so the principal is also the pastor of that church. So this teacher goes and gets the pastor, and they pull me out – and I remember this, it was like a movie scene... if a movie is ever made about my life, I'm totally including this because I mean – they pull me out of this like double wide trailer where our classroom is, and I'm just there on the little awning by the door, and it's dark gray [with] thunder and raining terribly. And this guy has his Bible in one arm, and the teacher holds me, like standing behind me, holds my shoulders and he puts his hand on my forehead and starts praying that demons come out of me and this darkness leaves and all that stuff.

Like even telling you this, how absurd is this? But this is like... this is middle school. This is what people seriously believed. And so they they put me back in the classroom. And I was stuck at that school for two years. And I remember like, the teacher saw me again next... that kid that wrote me the letter ended up getting pulled from the school because I mean, I told my parents and I think my parents probably did some stuff behind the scenes in regards to speaking to his parents, who knows, pursued legal action? I have no idea, I've never really asked my mom. But um, yeah, I mean, that was... that was... that was a huge, huge thing.

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After graduating high school, Christian went to West Point, one of the world's most prestigious military academies. He would spend four years of undergrad there, then serve 5.5 years as an officer in the US Army, including 2.5 years in the Middle East. He shares his experiences around issues related to racism there, including the intersection of race and nationality.

C:

At West Point, you're completely indoctrinated in the military. I mean, it is the United States Military Academy. Their whole point of the first summer is to kind of break you down and build you back up. But there was still kind of like this rebellion in me and I only realized it after as well because I had a mentor at West Point who's Black who kind of pointed out like a lot of this stuff I was doing with, he was like, “Yo, your classmates are racist as shit.” And it was true, there were small things where people would try and get me in trouble or they wouldn't let me go fight at the All Army Combative Tournament, even though I was the captain of the jujitsu and combatives team there, they let some other guy fight. And it didn't make any sense.

And then you look at the dynamics of it, and they're trying to really prop up, you know, their white cadets, or, you know, those who adhere to this stereotype of patriotism and American exceptionalism, and then they're kind of putting me down. And actually, it happened to another West Pointer who I only met after I graduated, who was a phenomenal Black athlete, he was a mixed martial arts fighter, and the Army just kind of glanced over him to prop up these white athletes who weren't as talented, but they embodied what they saw as America.

And then getting out, you know, being a 21 year old and you're a lieutenant in the military and you have a diverse group of people from the ages of 18 and 44, and you have to bring them all together, was... was I mean, it's a phenomenal example in case study on inclusive leadership, but what was even more fascinating is the fact that here, you're having to kind of be that rebel again, to do what's right, because when I became an officer, that was still when the *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* policy was in place. And so, as an officer, you always have an enlisted soldier who has a lot of experience working with you, so you're supposed to be able to pair their experience with your book knowledge and make great decisions for the unit.

And here, my first platoon sergeant was a Black woman, and she was lesbian. And, you know, she couldn't really talk about it. And so we had to really build trust so she could be her authentic self and feel comfortable in the workplace, actually performing on a daily basis. And that made me so mad because here you have people just wanting to live life. And because of some general order or some political standard, they aren't able to, and it didn't make any sense. So, you know, *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* repealed, a lot of soldiers I served with are now able to be who they want to be. And you see it, like they're happier there. Some have chosen to stay in the military. Some have gotten out, but either way, they're able to have more agency over their lives.

Now, my time across the Middle East was eye opening as well, not just because I was seen as this racially ambiguous person, but just because it was the first time I really experienced discrimination not necessarily based off of race, but based off of nationality, where I would go out sometimes and I didn't have a beard and my head was shaved, and I was, what, like 20 kilos less than [today] so I looked like... because I was always training for Muay Thai fights or jujitsu competitions, so I was always keeping my weight down, and so I had a very different look in the face as well. And so all these people recognized me as Filipino. And so it was kind of cool. I was like, "Yeah, Pinoy power." And you know, we go into restaurants sometimes, and it'd be cool because I get, you know, some conversations and people call me "Kuya", but more often than not, it was actually negative, because I'd go out with friends and I will be discriminated against when I was in line at a bar.

There was one time I was pushed aside by an Emirati guy, and he blatantly just pushes me out the way to get a drink at the bar. I was like, "Dude, come on. WTF." He goes, "Hey, man, I'm getting my drink." I go, "Who do you think you are, man?" He goes, "What do you mean?" I go, and I had learned at that point, and I say, "Dude, I'm American." Because I had known that protects me. And he goes, "Oh, my bad man. I thought you were Filipino. Oh man. Let me buy you drink." I was like, "Nah, man. I'm good." [And the guy goes], "Oh man – I think his name was like Faisal or something and he goes like – oh man, let me invite you over to my house in Khalifa city, man, I am so sorry." And I was like, "Dude, you already exposed yourself so it's good."

But then I go out to eat as well, and Filipinos then would think I'm Filipino. And so they would put me aside. They'd say like, "Oh, you need to wait in line sir." And they'd allow like Emiratis to come sit in, or like other Americans. And then I pull out my passport when I realize that's why they put me to this side. [And then they go], "Oh, Kuya, come down, so sorry." I'm like, "No, no, that doesn't work, like you've exposed yourself there, I'm going to go eat someplace else and not give you any business." So you start looking at discrimination, and of course, there was an element of racism even among Emiratis, like the colorism, like darker Emiratis were seen as having African descent and so there were jokes made about them, and of course, the treatment of Black people and Black Africans specifically was atrocious.

But what really ended up mattering was nationality, more so than anything. It was like this nationalistic hierarchy where at the top you had like Emiratis, then you had like white Europeans and Americans, and then it was Australians, and then Asians from China, because you know, you have to separate within Asia, it was like East Asians, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and then you had other Arabs, and

then you had what they call the “TCN”, like the Third Country Nationals, who just basically meant like your Indians, your Bangladeshis, your Nepalese, your Malaysians, and then Africans.

And it was so terrible to see because you see the treatment of workers who are constructing these buildings, but then you also see the treatment of people who were just lied to, who, you know, I talked to people who had PhDs, master degrees, MBAs, and they get told they're coming to the UAE for, you know, certain types of jobs that match their professional profile. And then they end up getting stuck as a security guard or a waiter or a nanny or a janitor. And they're stuck. There was no way out of it. So you start seeing that and it's not to say, you know, that every person who's stuck in the structure at the top is bad, but there's a privilege there they have to be aware of. I mean, in most countries as well, there's a privilege they have to be aware of, and they have to use their own privilege to really overcome and fight the structure.

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After leaving the army, Christian studied and lived in different countries around the world, including Brazil, Columbia, and South Africa. He currently resides in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, Zurich, and is pursuing his Ph.D in St. Gallen. He says he experiences various manifestations of racism on a regular basis. He shares one instance from a train ride.

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It was just one of those things where I've seen people just work in the restaurant car or bring, you know, outside things on the restaurant car, and nothing ever happened. So I just, you know, without thinking about it, I just brought in a coffee and gipfeli [croissant] in the restaurant car. And the hostess there comes up and says something in German, or Swiss-German, I had headphones on at that point. So I take it out and I said, “Oh, sorry, can you say that in English?” And then she goes, “Oh, you need to get out. You need to get away right now.” I was like, “Excuse me?” She's like, “You can't have that in here.” I go, “Ma'am. I'm sorry. I didn't realize that. May I order something from your restaurant?” And in my rational mind, that should have ended it right there, like she brings me a menu, I order something, and then... Instead, she ignores me and walks away.

And so I'm looking around, and I'm the only non-white person. And I asked somebody at the time, I go, “Hey, it's cool if I'm here, right?” He went like, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's fine. Don't worry about it.” So she comes back to me saying, “Hey, I asked you to leave. You need to leave here.” I go, “Ma'am. I am trying to solve this. I would like to order something from your restaurant.” She walks off and this old white guy comes in from the first-class car and he goes, “Hey, man, you need to stop.” I'm like, “Sir. I don't know what you're talking about. I'm trying to resolve this situation with this woman. I would like to order something from her restaurant.” He goes, “You need to calm down.” I go, “Sir. I am being calm right now.” And of course, you know, talk about code-switching, I've been in enough situations inside the military, outside the military, and in personal life, to know how to de-escalate and so I know I'm not raising my voice at all, because if I do that, that's immediate escalation. In fact, I've been keeping it much lower than normal the whole time just to de-escalate. So this guy can't say anything to me. So he walks back and I'm just looking around at everyone and they're just watching. And I'm like, “So... it's okay, right?” And they're all like, “Yeah, yeah.”

This woman comes back a third time. She goes, “If you don't leave right now, I'm going to get the conductor or call the police and we're going to have you removed from the train.” I go, “Ma'am. I would like to order something from your restaurant. May I order something from your restaurant?” And that was the point, where I just see everybody, it was like a moment frozen in time, I see all these eyes just watching the situation. And she doesn't say anything, like she really... I'm just trying to order something. And she just walks off and says she's gonna go you know, notify the conductor. I'm like, I can't understand this at all. So then I just grabbed my stuff and go sit in a second-class car.

I get to St. Gallen – and this was the real kicker – I get to St. Gallen and I notice one of the guys from the restaurant car so I go up and asked him, “Hey man, were there people who didn't order stuff from the restaurant sitting there?” He goes, “Yeah, yeah, why?” I go, “So there's no issue with people – because I had seen people on their laptops, you know, not ordering, just working, I was like – so you can say for certain that there were people who didn't order anything from the restaurant sitting in the restaurant?” He was like, “Yeah.” I go, “And you saw what happened to me?” [He goes], “Yeah.” I go, “Okay, that... I don't think that's normal man.” He then said, “Oh she was probably just in a bad mood man.” I was like ah... that privilege, that privilege. I heard these responses like that so many times before. So anyways, yeah, that was what happened on that train. And, you know, you go through the internal process of thinking about, “Okay, was that really discriminatory?” And then you start asking friends and you tell the story, and they're like, “Yeah, I mean, it should have stopped immediately when you asked to order something from the restaurant.”

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Christian shares another experience that he goes through on a regular basis in Switzerland, which he wants to bring attention to.

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I preface it by saying, “Don't be afraid of Black and Brown men.” Like really, I mean, the amount of times...and we look at the 10th anniversary of Trayvon Martin's death this month, like he should have been 27 years old. And here's a boy who was demonized for wearing a hoodie, which had traditionally been something white athletes wore and they gave their girlfriends to wear as this sign of coolness. And that's, I mean, when *Champion* started the hoodie, that's how it became popularized, but I don't want to digress too much... But I like wearing hoodies. And the amount of times per week that I am on a street in Zurich – Zurich is safe, my neighborhood's safe – the amount of times I'm walking home, and a woman will cross to the other side of the street is incredible.

And you talk about that anger, I mean it does, it makes you angry, because you look at the Emmett Till's or the football players in Georgia that my brother and I knew who were accused of rape by white women and then thrown in jail like the white women crocodile tears and the white women fear being used to oppress Black men and women is too much. So I mean to your audience, that's why I say, don't be afraid of us. Don't be afraid of us. Talk to us, ask us, say, “What's up?” I'll give me a big smile and say, “What's up?” too, but even with that smile, it's what Robert Livingston calls the *teddy bear effect*. You know, I have to code-switch, I have to be much friendlier than a white guy that will probably have a similar demeanor as I would ask to be because of the imagery that has been used to construct this false idea that Black and Brown men are criminals, that they're super predators, that they're sexual predators, that they're rapists, that they're thieves, all this nonsense. So that would be the first thing I would say is, you know, because of those types of incidents.

And you can see when people look at you. I mean, I've been told, “I'm not as intimidating as I look.” That's not a compliment. That's not a compliment in any way, shape or form. What it's telling me is that someone's biases and stereotypes about the way I look led into this idea that I was some scary figure. And people say, “Well, yeah, you do jujitsu or you weight lift.” Who cares? There are people who go shooting on the weekends. Are you scared of people because they go hunting or shooting on the weekends? No. I mean, that scares me more than me doing jujitsu. You could shoot me from a mile away depending on what type of scope of rifle you have. My jujitsu, I'd have to run up, spend like, you know, six minutes running up to you, be... like, it's so absurd.

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Against the background of his experiences, Christian has the following to say about what he thinks it takes to be antiracist.

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I think so many people talk about all the time that there's this complacency, there's this white silence that occurs, and that's what allows young Black people to be killed. That's what allows discrimination to occur. That's what allows me when I'm being racially profiled on an SBB train on the way to St. Gallen for a Ph.D course, to feel the fear that I might die or be put in prison because there's white silence. I was being racially profiled, and no one stood up for it. I just saw white eyes just staring, watching, observing. And I mean, I've had other instances like that as well. That was my first time in Switzerland.

But when you realize that all it would take is somebody else to stand up, and that it doesn't take that much to stand up, you know that the problem can be solved. And so that is what I would conclude with in being antiracist. Being antiracist means speaking up against injustices when you see them, when you see injustices against people of an underrepresented group or a traditionally marginalized racial group. I know from a personal perspective, I've talked a lot about Black people or people of African descent, but you know, regardless of where people are coming from, be it they're indigenous to the Americas or indigenous to Oceania Australia or indigenous to Asia – and we could have a whole episode on Asia as well and the nuances there – but at the end of the day, stand up, speak out.

And those words, when you become comfortable speaking out, will segue into action because speech is an action, writing is an action. And when you do those things, you start to see, well, if I write and I talk in a way that's supporting or fighting racism and it has that impact, what more can I do? And when you start realizing those actions that build off of those words, you join together with others and you realize you aren't really alone in this fight, and that we can all ultimately change the world and make it a better place and eliminate the structures that have continued to oppress and hinder people.

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You can find articles, books and videos Christian 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 April 6!

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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 big thank you to Christian for his time and energy in going down memory lane for us, reliving for us some of his painful memories, and sharing with us valuable, honest, and timely reflections on this issue.