Episode 30: Paul

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

F:
What does it mean to be a French national of Afro-Caribbean descent and gay? In this episode, Paul shares with us his experiences of growing up in Paris and his journey in moving up the social ladder through hard work. His story is about the intersection between one's race, sexuality, and socioeconomic background.

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

P:
I'm 27 and I'm French but with Afro-Caribbean descent, which means that most of my family roots are based in the Caribbeans, the French parts. But concretely, my family, both my parents, were born in Haiti which has a really, really interesting history when you think about Afro-Diaspora and everything that is linked with slavery and colonization. But for my part, I was born in the French Caribbean, in Martinique, which is a department of France, so I was born French and so I'm French with Afro-Caribbean descent. So I identify as Black, I'm Black, I'm a man, and I'm also gay, so I'm part of the beautiful queer community and family, which I'm really proud of being part of. And yeah, just someone who tries to live by in this complicated world.

F:
Paul lived in Martinique and St. Martin – two overseas territories of France – until the age of six, when he moved to Paris. He shares his journey in exploring both his racial and sexual identities growing up in Paris.

P:
Something that's really interesting about my identity and my history, is the fact that I'm rooted in this colonialism, history, French colonization, etc. So something that kind of links a lot of people that are from this history is that we are French, but in France, we are not really considered as French because you're Black, because you're a "Métisse" – we are mixed with other ethnicities. With the colonization and slavery and everything that it entailed, you had a lot of mixtures in these islands during the centuries that it was happening, and until now.

So one principle that I've encountered when I was reading essays, etc, which was by W.E.B Du Bois, who was an Afro-American activist and he wrote a lot of essays on the condition of being Black and on slavery, etc. And he created the term "double consciousness", which is something that since I've been thinking about my condition as a Black, gay, French, man and individual, this is something that has really driven my thinking because I realized that since I was a kid, I encountered this double consciousness situation. And this is when I started to realize that I was not like everybody else, which was White, at that time.

Like I told you, I was born in the Caribbean, but I moved to France, "Homeland France", when I was around five or six. And so before that, I used to play and to grow with other people like me in terms of skin color, or not even just in terms of skin color, but it was just diverse because White was not the majority. You had obviously White people, but since the majority were Black or Métisse, mixed people with African descent, even Asian descent, there was not the sense of me being in a minority. And then

when we moved to Paris, this is when I started to realize, “Okay, it's not the same." And this is where the double consciousness theory takes part, is that I realized in retrospective, that there were a lot of instances when I was six onwards, where people were just pointing something that for them was a difference, but for me, it was just myself. And they made me realize that I was different from them. And the more I was growing up, the more I realized that I was not just different from my friend at school or whatever, but I was different from the society in which I was evolving.

So when I was younger, I used to have longer hair. So my hair, they’re Afro hair so they’re textured. I was doing corn rolls or some types of locks. And when I was eight, nine, ten, a lot of people were asking me about my hair, they were touching my hair, they were telling me, “Oh, it's so funny. It's so different. Oh…", asking really interested questions [like] “Oh, do you wash them? Doesn't it stink?" I had also parents from my friends when I was in primary school or in middle school, they were asking me these type of question, like the renown question for minorities, "Where are you from?" And when you have an adult that asks you that when you’re ten, eleven, and basically you know you're French, this is the only thing you know even though you were not born in the Homeland France, but since I did school, the “Republican school”, as you say, in France, I had the same curriculum as the other kids that were in Homeland France, to me, I was French. So there was *never* in my mind a question about my identity in terms of nationality. I was just French from the Caribbean.

But when I was growing up in Paris, and around Paris, when we moved with my family, I was confronted with that. Okay, so now I'm playing in school with kids that are mostly Whites, which was not a problem to me, but I started to become a minority not because I realized I'm a minority, but because people point to me everyday, you know, this type of micro-aggressions, and it starts to build, I don't know if you can say that it starts to build the rapport that you can have with your identity, but it starts to have an impact on yourself because it influences the way that you see yourself, the way that you react to other people. And for me, once I started to have these type of interactions when I was in a White majority environment, I did start to have a really complicated relationship with my race, with my history, because the only thing I wanted to do was to fit in, but even though I was trying to fit in, I was made to feel like I was different all the time. So it was, you know, in retrospective, I think this is when I moved from the Caribbean to Homeland France that this is where my racial identity journey kind of started.

And it's this tension that is so difficult to navigate when you're part of a minority, and let alone when you're part of multiple minorities being gay and Black. So I was talking about this aspect on being Black, but you can transpose this also on being a sexual minority, or when you're part of the queer family, is that you try to have a construction of yourself based on your experience and also you realize that you have so many things that are kind of expected out of you, or that people are attaching to you or what they think you are, and so you just try to find an answer. And that's this type of tension that's really complicated I think when you're part of a minority, and for me, it's been quite…

Yeah, I think quite a journey. And it's, I'm still in that journey, navigating in Black and queer, in terms of reconciling those two identities with myself, considering that a lot of Black cultures are quite homophobic, especially in the Caribbean, due to the importance of religion and really a social norms that are quite based on you know, really defined gender roles and identities that a man should be like that, a woman should be like this and etc., a very masculine type of society, actually. So me realizing that I was Black growing up in France, in Paris, then realizing that, "Oh, actually, I'm also gay," I was trying to really make sense of everything because I was already trying to define myself as a Black individual in a White society, and to be able to be respected as my own person, to respond to the microaggressions, to make people understand that it was not my skin color that define me, but *then* I had to do this also regarding my sexuality not only to in front of the society, but also inside my own Black community, which is… I don't know the right word to use, but which is also affected by homophobia, basically, that was also inherited by White society and religion.

F:
Paul reflects on France's relationship to race and racism.

P:
France has a really complicated rapport with race. Race does not exist in France. We don't talk about race. France is a colorblind country. I'm not afraid to say it because it's true, at least for me and the experiences of my friends. France doesn't talk about race because since slavery is over, the Caribbeans or departments… and because of this idea of the "Republique", under which we are one and indivisible, and we are the same, so we shouldn't make any differences amongst the citizens. So this is why, like in politics, a lot of parties don't even want to talk about race, because to them, if they talk about race, it's not "Republican". But by not talking about race, we don't talk about the issues that come with being part of the racial minority, of being part of a group or community of color.

Obviously it's linked with the history of France which was a big empire. So I think France has a lot of shame with that. And you know, for example, me, my family roots being from Haiti, you know, France imposed Haiti to pay for their liberation. I don't know if you know that or if people listening will know that, but when Haiti obtained their independence from slavery and colonization, it was in the beginning of the 19th century. France asked them to pay some type of fee annually, which is the fee of liberty because France lost its interest on the land. So they asked Haiti to pay for their liberty. And what's made, is now, Haiti is one of the poorest country in the world, especially because they had to pay until quite recently, actually, because I think they finished paying – like, I don't want to say a mistake but – really recently. So they had this, but also, what happened is that the country couldn't develop properly, since it had first to heal from the colonization and slavery, but also to pay a large sum of money to the colonizer. And so for me, being from this history, it's really hard as a French person, to see how race and the impact of colonialism and slavery is not taken into account by France as a country.

F:
After working hard throughout high school and entering a prestigious French university, Paul recognized another element that positions us in society: our socioeconomic backgrounds.

P:
I always knew that I should have good grades if I wanted to have the opportunities and possibilities in the future because I know that my parents, when they were still together, they went from the Caribbeans to Homeland France because they knew that we wouldn't have as many opportunities there than in France, Homeland France. So I realized that. So I always tried to study etc., and when I finished high school, I got into a really good university in France, which was really interesting to me because obviously I knew it was a great university, but because no one in my entourage did that school, I didn't even know the importance of the school and how it was renown etc.

And so when I started my studies, this is when I started to meet a lot of foreigners in terms of international students, etc. My classes were mostly in English, which was really hard for me since at 18, I had never been to an English speaking country, and so all my English was from school, and Beyonce, basically. So, when I arrived in that space, I realized that… firstly, one thing that was great is that because there were a lot of international students, I was a minority, but I was not the only one, in the sense that Whiteness was not the most common thing in my university since it was a really international school. So I had a lot of friends from Asia, from Latin America, and even if they were White, they were from a lot of different places in Europe, in the US, etc. So this was great. I was scared before going to this university that I would feel othered because of my skin color. But it was not the case.

However, I did feel a difference regarding my social economic background since you cannot detach, when you look at the country like France, its history and how the people… like the social dynamics and the economic dynamics that come with colonization, slavery etc., a lot of people from this history, we don't possess the economic means, I would say, because of this unbalance with that history of the access to education, the access to money, the access to literacy, to everything, a lot of people that comes from this history, but also from parents that are immigrants etc., we have to learn everything because we don't inherit from that. We inherit traumas, inequalities and other things like that.

And so since I was coming from a really humble background, it's true that for me, even though it was not directly linked to race, it was linked to my social economic class because of the racial history I was in. My family, my grandparents etc. are not able to amass a lot of fortune since they were working farms, they were slaves, etc. So I realized when I went to that good, really good university, that contrary to my friends that arrived, that lived around the world, that had parents that could pay their apartments… even [parents] that owned the apartment in the city or in Paris, etc., while I had to do everything my own and work, to rely on social aid for students, etc. But I was not ashamed of it at all. And luckily, the people I met were really open minded and they didn't care.

F:
Paul shares one vivid memory where he was reminded of his place in society, namely how he does not belong in good universities.

P:
It happened to me that people are surprised that I went to that university. It happened around the beginning, maybe like the two first years, because I used to go back to my mom's and to be in the little town in which we lived which is in the outskirts of Paris. And for example, I remember this really specific occasion, like I went to do a blood withdrawal. And I had the sweatshirt of my university. It was not for me to be like, "Yeah, I'm in this school." It was just comfy. So I had this sweatshirt. And so the nurse, she comes, she sees me, and she says, "Oh, where did you get that sweatshirt?" And I told her, "Well, at my university." And she looked at me and she said, "Oh, you *are* in that university?" [She was] shocked. And I looked at her and I was like, "Yes." And she said, "Well, my daughter, she tried to get into that university and she couldn't get it so I thought it was really hard to get in." And I told her, "But, well yeah, I worked to get in the university." And then she blushed, she took my blood and whatever.

And when it happened, you know, it often happens when you are in these types of aggressions, microaggressions, you don't realize during the moment how problematic it is. And so after that, when it happened and I realized I was like, oh, fuck. Because of the way I looked – at that time I had my long hair which were in a type of locks, so for a lot of people, it's seen as nasty or whatever – so she based her apprehension of me on my physique and who I looked as and also where I come from since it was in my town – which is not a rich town in the outskirts of Paris – she was confused on how *I* could get into that university but her daughter could not. She was White. So this is one instance where it happened to me and I was like, "Okay, this school is great. I worked to get in. I have good grades. I have my friends, everything is great. But people are confused on how I got into that school, how, why?", you see?

F:
Paul did what they call in France, "ascension sociale", or upward social mobility, meaning he climbed up the social ladder and is now living more comfortably in contrast to his childhood. Paul reflects on the spaces he now must navigate.

P:
Now, the places that I evolve in and the activities that I do and basically also what I like to do with my free time etc., can be a lot of times seen as activities or things to do for people that have a financial privilege, because they can afford going to vacation, they can afford going to the restaurant, they can afford all these things, you know. And so I have this privilege right now in my life. And it's very interesting to me because whenever I go out in Paris to the restaurant, to do some shopping – because I do like to have nice things – it's mostly White people. And even though I've made a lot of work on myself to be okay with my identities, it's still an ongoing work because now that I, on paper have done everything right – I went to a good university, I have a good job, I have good means now, I am a nice person and really polite etc. so I'm really "well-trained", let's say, for society, I'm not a menace, I'm a good person – but whenever I go to those places or do those activities, it comes back to me that, well, I'm still a minority because I'm the only Black person in that restaurant, I'm the only Black person in this bar, in this shop, in this area…

And what it shows me every time is that, well, I should not be special. Like, I'm not special in that regard. Most people should have the chances that I have. Why? Why are there not so many colors in these very White spaces and those very privileged spaces? Because I grew up with a lot of people of color. And we are great. We are smart. We are funny. We can do anything. There is no limitation. The limitation is what society and others let us have and let us do. So yeah, today, it's always in my mind. You can never really forget about this once you've started to have this consciousness about social dynamics, etc. And for me, France has a lot of work to do. Because I should not be an exception in those places because there are a lot of people like me.

So when I started to access more and more White spaces, the thing that struck me was that I was a minority, and most of those spaces didn't even think about that. There is no issue. They don't ask about why there are no people of color, like other than tourists; why there are no people of color, French people of color in museums; why we don't see people of color, like people from humble backgrounds and poverty in operas or theater and things like that. So even though there are aides for people to go to cultural settings, museums, etc… it's also something about being feeling like you're entitled to.

And when you're a person of color and person from a humble background, it's really hard to feel like you're entitled to some types of culture, or a subtype of spaces because you don't have access to them. Your family never brought you to the museum, to the theater, etc. So the only thing that you think when you see a museum or theater, is that it's for the rich people. And usually when you're a person of color, it is for the White people. So when I started to go to White spaces, or how I would define "White spaces", first, I had to deconstruct my shame and my embarrassment to be a minority there, but also because I didn't always have the social codes which I had to learn because my family didn't bring me necessarily to the museum etc.

So what was really surprising to me is that I realized that it was not diverse, but it seemed like the only people that was realizing that were the people of color. So I think there is a big, big, big topic on allyship. Because I do believe in allyship. To me, we do need allies. So I know that with my White friends, I talk about that often. I tell them for example, when we go to certain spaces, "Don't you that I'm the only Black person here?" I do ask them that. And usually they're surprised, they're like, "Oh, fuck, you're right." And I tell them, "See, this is a habit that I've developed in every space that I go to, especially White spaces, to check the surroundings to know, okay, am I the only Black person here?" Because automatically, I think that my brain is on a kind of defense mode, fight or flight, you know, like to prepare on how to behave or whatever, to see also the vibe of the place.

And so a lot of times my friends, they don't realize it and they realize it when I point it out. And when I point it out, they realize that there is a problem because they start to ask themselves, "Why are you the only Black person here? And not even the only Black person, but the only person of color in this

restaurant." And to me, it's important because it's for them as White people to understand that racial dynamics is not only police brutality or being called the racial slurs in the street, etc. It's also for people of colors and for minorities to have access, to have power, to the spaces, to culture, to dining spaces, to nice places, to any places actually, the places that they want to go in, to go to, to experience at least once, you know?

F:
Paul says that over the years, he has gotten better at picking his battles of "educating people" – quote unquote.

P:
Humbly, I educate people around me when I feel like it. Because I've been in situations, for example, when I have to talk about race with someone that… I won't say that the person doesn't want to learn about it, that they are not interested in learning, but their point of view is so restricted and they're not really that open to what I'm saying, that at the end of the conversation, I was going home, and I was feeling hurt. And I was feeling bad. Because it's not just a debate for me. It's not just a question. It's my life. And for the other person, it just remains a debate, a question, and something that they will say, "Yeah, I've talked about this with him, with her, it was interesting or not. But whatever."

So now I'm really clear with people around me. I talk about me being Black, me being gay, me being a Black gay individual from my socioeconomic background, only when I feel like it. So I've been in instances where people want to discuss it and I will tell them, "I don't want to discuss about that. It's not about you. It's not about you as a person, it's not that I would not like for you to learn. But I just don't feel comfortable right now to talk about this." Because at the end of the day, it's still very sensitive and personal topics for me. And for people to talk about it on the standpoint of debate and to feel legitimate in negating what you say because it's for the sake of the debate… but it's not that. It's not a negation. It's an attack on my personality and my identity.

And sometimes it's so hard to talk about identity. Sometimes I don't have the good words, I don't have the good theories to invoke at that moment. And so you feel guilty because you're not just thinking about yourself at the end of the day, you speak about your whole community. So that's why it's really difficult for me sometimes to talk about it. So I will directly tell the person, "I'm sorry, but I don't want to discuss that. You have Google, I can tell you to read that that that, but I'm not going to talk about it right now. Or maybe if you want to talk about it in a few days, in a few weeks, there's no problem." But we really have to… the past two years have been quite complicated for me mentally speaking, and I think that I've learned from that point, and I'm still doing it now to preserve my mental health and to preserve my mental energy and my emotional capacity etc. And I don't want to give it away to this type of situation, so… voila.

F:
Paul shares his advice on how people should approach sensitive issues, such as questions revolving someone's identity.

P:
You know, something that I try to remind myself when I interact with others is that I don't necessarily know your background, I don't necessarily know what you've been up to, I don't know what's been happening in your life, I don't know if you had an argument with your mom or father the morning before we interact, so I always try to talk with people with a level of respect. And when I ask a personal question, [I try] to make them feel comfortable, to make them feel like they have the opportunity to say, "No." Because it's not a request. It's a question. It's an invitation. And I feel like when we talk about these topics of race and more broadly of identity, there is no problem in asking the question, inviting

the other person to have the opportunity to give you an element on their life, on their outlook of their experiences. But you always have to keep in mind that it should not be a request.

For example, if you meet someone and you're wondering their origins, like cultural backgrounds, you can ask them, "Okay, I'm so sorry. I would just like to know if it's okay for you, can you tell me more about your cultural background?" You know, like "If it's okay, you are not obliged to respond, but I was just wondering because…" Because then it's a question, you see? But it's not, "Oh, where do you come from?" Because to me, it's way too direct. You don't have the opportunity to say no, or to say that you're uncomfortable with the question, you know?

F:
Against the background of his experiences, Paul shares what he thinks it takes to be antiracist.

P:
To be antiracist, to me it takes to firstly realize where you stand regarding those subjects. I say that because I try to deconstruct all those social dynamics that I've been growing up into and the society told me, "Okay, this is what love is, relationship is, heterosexuality is the norm, this is how you should behave as a man, as a woman. Oh, but actually, yeah, there is only a man and a woman." But no, you have to think about, "Okay, where do I stand first regarding those topics?" For example, about feminism. I'm a cisgender man. So my standpoint will be from being a cis man and try to understand the dynamics that come with being a woman in society, being a cis, a trans or non-binary etc. woman in society by knowing that okay, my standpoint as a cis-man and everything that comes with it influenced the way that I see those topics, like being a woman for example. Because I'm not a woman, so I didn't experience being a woman. So I have to accept that I'm not… [I have to] accept my position and educate myself from that.

And on racism, I feel it's the same for White people to realize, well, firstly, they're White, and that it's not a problem to say, "White". It's really interesting every time we talk about Black people, police brutality etc… like White people don't really identify themselves as White, which is to me really interesting because they don't have to identify, you know, in France, etc. They don't have to identify because it's the norm. So to me, there is no problem in identifying yourself as White when you talk about Whiteness or racism.

And yeah, just to accept that with that Whiteness comes a lot of history. Just like me, my Blackness comes with a lot of history. And based on your national history and the dynamics that occurred, well, just educate yourself and try to understand and to see where you stand there in that history. And try to listen and educate yourself. This is for me… you cannot be anti something if you don't understand. And to better understand, you have to educate yourself but also to be okay with the fact that, "Yes, I'm part also of that history." Maybe not for the good reasons [of which] my ancestors [did], but the importance now is the job that we do today.

F:
You can find more information about racism in France, as well as other articles, books and videos Paul 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 again in September, as we're on break in August!

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 Paul for his time and energy in going down memory lane for us, and sharing with us valuable reflections on this issue.