

**Episode 37: Julianne**

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*This transcript is non-verbatim.*

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***What does it mean to be an Amazonian woman from Belém, Brazil, living in Europe? In this episode, Julianne shares her stories of pursuing her studies in Padova, a city in Italy, and Zurich, a city in Switzerland. Her story is about a growing understanding of racism and the discovery of her own identity.***

***I'm Fumi, this is #OUR\_racism, and this is the story of Julianne.***

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**J:**

I'm Julianne. I'm born in Belém – it's a northern city in Brazil, in the Amazon region area. And I really grew up in the suburbs of the city, like a bit far from the center. But there was still a lot going on and it was a really... a very fun time. I had my childhood friends there, we used to play in the streets and all this fun stuff that kids do. But yeah, I think maybe the city was too small for me, or I was always curious to know other places, other cultures, and to start a new adventure.

And [so] I moved from my hometown when I was around 22, right after my graduation in law, and then I moved to Rio de Janeiro. It's an eight million-people city and I was living there for five years. And my initial plan was to pursue my postgraduate studies, I don't know, to specialize in something. I did a specialization, but in the end, it didn't bring me what I thought I wanted. And then I suddenly decided that I wanted to do a master's degree. And what is funny is that I worked before as a lawyer for banks and for private clients, so let's say quite a corporate world. And afterwards, I just thought I could do something more social. So I started volunteering at a favela, Rocinha. And I was a volunteer there for around a year and I met people in the field and I thought, "Okay, I want to study human rights."

**F:**

***Julianne shares her reflections about northern Brazil.***

**J:**

In northern Brazil, most of the people are brownish, but not so dark skinned. So it's very common to see people there mixed like me, like it's very common to have mixed couples. So, of course, the baby is going to be mixed. And actually, in my home city, most people have very straight hair because of indigenous backgrounds, but with a dark skin. And this is very common for us. And actually, regarding physical features, I'm taller than the average. But the rest – the hair, the color [of hair] – are very similar to a lot of people. And also, my family is very mixed. So we have White people, we have more indigenous-like people – I don't know how to describe that – and we have mixed people. I even have a cousin with red hair.

And we are in general... we just come from a very diverse country. So I don't think color was a question in Brazil. But it turned out to be very important to question our colorism, as we say. And it has been growing, since, let's say five years ago, that people created awareness, and [so] we saw more cases of racism coming up on TV. But before that, we didn't hear so much about it. And now with the internet, Instagram, Twitter and everything, we can have more access to information. And then we started to think about our previous experiences and then we realized, "Okay, we sometimes were actually treated differently." But the racism is so structural that you don't even notice, you know. It takes a

while to notice. But of course, there are some events that happen and they're very cruel, and then you'll see pretty straightforwardly, "This is a pure case of racism." But luckily for me, I never faced something so bad like this, you know.

**F:**

***Julianne says that moving to Rio led her to express herself better.***

**J:**

We have a lot of differences, but there [in Rio], they have more Black people. So I really felt different about it there because I felt like, "Oh, I'm like everyone!" You know, like, "Everyone is like me!" And this felt good. And yeah, of course, they behave differently, they have completely crazy accents, and different foods and stuff. But it gave me also more freedom. They have more freedom regarding their bodies. In the north of Brazil, we are a bit more conservative, so you *do* show your skin, but you don't show too much. While in Rio, you can show whatever you want: you can be yourself, you can dress up how you want, and nobody cares.

So for me, this was amazing. Like in Belém, people there like to see what type of clothes you're wearing – if it's a brand or if it's not a brand – so you need to really dress up to go to work, high heels and everything, still nowadays, even like ten years later, it's still the same. But in Rio, no: it's hot, and if you want to use something more light, just like flip flops – not to work of course but yeah – if you want to, you can dress up as much or as little as you want. And for me, this was amazing. So there [in Rio], I think I discovered more about myself and to express myself more, and also understand more of Black culture, in a sense. I went to a lot of funk clubs and Samba and a lot of parties and met people from all over the world already there. It's an amazing city.

**F:**

***After Rio, Julianne moved to Padova, a city in northern Italy, to pursue her studies in human rights. There, she would experience things that would force her to think more about her physical appearances and roots, something she had never really thought about before leaving Brazil.***

**J:**

I moved to Italy, to Padova. And *there*, I met a lot of interesting people. But I was always the only Brown person in the room. And this I experienced it a bit in Brazil, even if we have a lot of more Brown and Black people, you still, like in some sectors, it's still not so common [to see many Brown people in the room]. So I felt it [being the only Brown person in the room], but I was in my home country [so] it didn't play a big role to *me*. But of course, for other people, it's a different situation. And I was already privileged to come and to have a scholarship and to be able to pursue this education.

But whenever I was meeting someone new – men, women, doesn't matter – they would always ask me, "Oh, why are you here? Are you dating an Italian man? Like, did you come here because of a boyfriend?" And this was a bit annoying for me because I'm sure they don't ask this to European women. I was like, "I'm here because I want to study. I'm a lawyer." And then they would change a bit the conversation and be all like, "*Oh*, so you have an education. So you're here studying!" For me, this was frustrating in the beginning.

Or whenever I was in a party, people would just randomly grab my hair. Like, they wouldn't know me, [but] they would just touch my hair out of nowhere. Sometimes I would be fine with that, and sometimes I would be like, "Okay, just don't touch me," you know, because they would be curious about it. And yeah, it's fine if you're curious and if you ask permission or something. But just don't grab my hair out of nowhere. So it's like, small things that with time, they became a bit big, you know, I was a bit stressed with this sometimes.

However, I didn't think this was something that I should pay more attention to. For me, this was just like random things happening. And [then], [when I started to] get to know more people from African countries, [that's when] I started to ask myself, "Is this racism? Is this because of my color? My country? What is this?" But I never really got the answer afterwards. And yes, also regarding my English, they would always be surprised somehow that I could speak English, which I think can be sort of a compliment, but it made me feel bad in the end, you know, I just want other people to have the same opportunity as me. But, yeah, sometimes it felt not nice to say that to someone. So I would say this was like, what bothered me the most there.

**F:**

***Julianne says that she initially could not pinpoint why exactly people were doing these things to her in Padova.***

**J:**

I think I first assumed it was because I was a Brazilian woman, and a Brazilian Latin woman in general. Like, they don't have a good fame [reputation], if I can put it like this, in Europe. So I assumed people were expecting me to be there because of a man, because that's what they were seeing. But I think after a while, I was like, "Okay, this cannot be right, because other women that are also Latin, they don't face the same, just because they're not Brown," you know? So then I realized this was... this was racism, probably. But it's hard also to conceptualize and to say, "Okay, this was solid racism," you know, when it's something more subtle, I would say.

**F:**

***Julianne reflects upon her time in Padova.***

**J:**

Padova is a great city. But I hated it in the beginning because it was too small for me and I didn't... I didn't know where I was going to. I just said, "Okay, I want to study this. There [in Padova] were the best courses I want to follow." And then I just decided I would go there. And they have a scholarship, so it would make things easier. And it's a very interesting city because it's very small but it still has a lot of political discussions within it. Like, we would go to buildings from the university that the students just occupied for awhile to have awareness workshops, and also parties, of course – it's a university city – and I liked to see it.

But at the same time, we had a lot of refugees, especially from Nigeria or other African countries, and they were always not inserted in the society. They would just stay in the streets, selling small things, small bracelets and stuff. But you never meet them in the school, for example, or in normal or usual contexts. So then it also played a big role. And actually, my first friends there, they were from Angola and we spoke Portuguese... I met them randomly in the square and we started talking and then they invited me to hang out, and I was like, *hearing* also their stories, you know, because they for sure experienced much more [racism] than me. And I was just getting angry... which was not good. And then I realized, "Okay, this is a racist city. Not everyone [is racist], but it can be tough if you're not Italian, if you were not White, it can be tough indeed." And just for your interest, they have around four fascist communities in this small city, and they glue posters around the city everywhere... it's crazy.

And you can also understand how important the city is, because it's the second oldest university in Italy, it's the first university to have a woman graduate in medicine, and Galileo lived there for 18 years to teach in Padova. So it is something. And when you realize the story of the university, they actually came from Bologna because they weren't very well accepted from the Bolognese community and professorship. So Padova was supposed to be a university that have all these people that were ousted from society [outcasts]. And the church also didn't like them. So they were the rebels of the era, you

know. And nowadays, even with this background, they're still facing such primitive problems, you know, racism, fascism, and all this refugee fear. So I wonder what went wrong.

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**F:**

***After Padova, Julianne moved to Zurich, a city in Switzerland, to continue her studies. There, again, she would experience something similar to what she went through in Padova.***

**J:**

In Switzerland, I lived in Zurich most of the time, like three years in Zurich to study. And in the first day of classes for the exchange students, they had a preliminary event to explain and to introduce everyone. I remember I was like, maybe there were 20% women, no Latin women, even no Latin student. And this was very shocking for me, like, *again*, being the only one in the room. So yeah, I felt also good because it meant something for me, that I was arriving in places that other people couldn't arrive. But at the same time, I was asking myself, "Why? Why? Why is this happening?" It's just boring after some years, like receiving comments regarding your skin color, your hair, or, "Oh, you're from Brazil!" It's just... it can be annoying. But I also think some of the people there are not aware, you know. They're not aware of what they're saying or how they're behaving.

And this happened also to me when I arrived [in Zurich]: I saw many different people that in Brazil I didn't have contact with. And I was just curious to know where they're from, like what happened that they're so different and cool, right? But then at some point I realized, "Okay, Julianne, just get a hold of yourself. Don't ask where people are from. Just... it comes if you have the opportunity, but just don't ask." But yeah, it can be... it has always both ways, right? So I always try to not be so judgmental with people that didn't meet people like me, with my features.

**F:**

***Julianne says that her understanding of her own identity and how she expresses it, evolved over time, especially after moving to Europe.***

**J:**

I think as soon as I arrived, I was purely Brazilian. "I'm Brazilian." But as I didn't have many Brazilian friends, especially in Switzerland – I had more Brazilian friends in Italy – I started to realize, "Oh, I have a lot of Latin culture." Because as I said, we are in north of the country, so we have a lot of influence from French Guiana, from Guadeloupe, the Caribbean countries, and the type of music we hear, it's different. We hear much more Latin music than let's say Brazilians from other parts of the country. So we are a huge country and we are mostly surrounded by Brazilian things, foods, music, whatever. But as my city is very in the north, we had merengue, cumbia and reggae, and all of these rhythms that didn't influence other people. So then I was starting to define myself more as Latin.

Nowadays, I think I'm an Amazonian woman from Latin America. So I added even more layers to this personality because I realized it's so much special to be from a region in the world that people think it's just a forest, you know. But we have a lot more than a forest there, and of course, the forest and all the richness of our culture is still there. And yeah, it's a constant battle, I would say, because I can identify myself with a lot of cultures, our culture, the Latin culture, but it's still... it's not *my* culture. And when I don't have anyone to share that [with], sometimes it's very... I get a bit lost, let's say. And [spending] a lot of the time with a Swiss person [her partner], then it gets even more blended regarding everything: food, language, personality... And it is difficult, now that I say it out loud, as I said before, it's like, "Oh my god, it's mind blowing." So many things, you know. Like a friend of mine [from Belém] was visiting, and I could talk about the music with her, you know, say the same slangs, she would understand me. Oh my gosh, this was so refreshing for my soul. This was really cool. Really really cool.

**F:**

***Julianne says that whilst she's happy to call herself Brazilian in Europe, she also feels that the Brazilian community in Europe is not necessarily representative of the country as a whole.***

**J:**

I feel happy because I think Brazil is a country that most people like. So it's great to say you're from Brazil and people instantaneously laugh, they give a smile to you. And this is great. But what I don't like is to see that most of the Brazilians here [in Europe] are White Brazilians with European citizenship and residence. I just want people that look like me to have the same opportunity. We are from the north and we don't have the economic means to come to Europe and to study and to arrive in Switzerland, which is another story within Europe, right. And I think this is sad, especially like, I don't know anyone here in Europe from the North [of Brazil]. Everyone I know [is from the] south, southeast. And sometimes it's just tiring because we don't share the same culture. It's like, it's similar, but it's not the same. Like, they don't know anything about my typical foods, my typical rhythms, and the words I use, my accent... Yeah, it can be frustrating. But there is nothing much you can do about it, you know, just expect more political activism and... yeah. It can be tough.

**F:**

***Julianne says she wasn't aware of what racism is until she started studying human rights as an adult.***

**J:**

Well, I think I started when I started studying human rights. Before, I was just like, "Ah, this NGO is working on racism. Okay. Good." I didn't read too much into it. I wasn't really aware, to be honest. But when you study human rights, then you need to go through all these issues, you know, inequalities, poverty, hunger, and everything. And then racism is a big topic. And then you're like, "Bam, you're Brown. You should know it." And I blamed myself, I was like, "Okay, I should know more about it."

And also, I felt like people expected it from me, you know, somehow, being a woman, Latin, and Brown, "Okay, she *got* to have something to say," which can be a burden sometimes because sometimes you just want to be yourself without having to be labelled and have to be talking about it all the time. Sometimes you just want to be yourself without the labels, like, yeah, "It is what it is, man. I don't want to talk about it." You know, there are certain moments you feel like talking [about racism], it's fine, and if you don't feel like talking where you are from, it's also fine. People need to respect it. But I understand that I'm somehow representative of this part of the society. So I would say I thought about racism when I started studying human rights, and this was a full enlightenment, yeah, definitely.

**F:**

***Julianne reflects upon her role and position in the discussion around racism.***

**J:**

Well, I wish I could be more representative of this voice that is not heard but I'm not as much of an activist as I wish, you know. I don't know if it's because I never experienced something very bad or it's just a matter that I leave to others. But I can understand if people want me to say more and whenever I'm asked for it, I speak from my perspective. And I'm not an expert in the area, even if I work with human rights. But I appreciate that other people do it better than me, for sure. And maybe someday, I will know more and have a clearer guidance in my head that I can share with other people. I think also sometimes it's just too much if you want to be the hero in every situation. It's already a lot to carry, to be a woman, to be Latin, to be Brown, so yeah... I don't know, it's still an unclear answer for me.

**F:**

***Against the background of her experiences and reflections, Julianne has the following to say on what she thinks is important to move the conversation forward on the subject of racism.***

**J:**

What I really believe is that awareness needs to be the foremost topic of your antiracist ideas and values. But I think we can do this easily by talking to our friends sometimes and to our family, and also in a language that we can understand. It's also very important just to reach the audience in the right terms, and hope for the best.

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*You can find more information about Belém and racism in Brazil, as well as other articles, books and videos Julianne recommends people to take a look at on racism, on our website, [www.ourcontexts.org](http://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 May 3rd!*

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*This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.*

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*A warm thank you to Julianne for her time in sharing with us honest, thought-provoking, and valuable reflections on this issue.*