

## **TRANSCRIPT: More Talent Untapped**

### **EPISODE 4 – Jan Wong**

AK: This program is brought to you by RBC. In order to speak up for inclusion, we need to speak about inclusion.

AK: I'm Anna-Karina Tabuñar and this is More Talent Untapped. Conversations about unconventional, sometimes underestimated talent... and the differences that connect us.

Jan: I think that White women understand discrimination. They face it all the time. But White women might not understand racism because I feel they're different. I feel like sexism is awful, but it's like a slap in the face. Whereas racism is like a knife stuck in you. You never forget it and the pain goes deep.

AK: That's Jan Wong, a provocative Canadian writer. When we first met, she talked about her work as a newspaper columnist and her work-induced depression. This time, we covered a whole lot more: racism, isolation and some of the techniques she uses to keep her spirits up. Jan shifted careers from journalist to journalism professor. And now, she's managing another transition.

Jan: I finally decided to retire from my job teaching journalism. That was a big shift. I retired just as the pandemic was closing in. So, I think I have mild level, constant anxiety about the danger of the virus because I think it would really bad to retire and die. (Laughter). It's also that everything was cancelled and I looked forward to retirement to see my children. One is 27. One is 30. I can't go. One of them is in the US. I looked forward to travelling not during the hot months because as a professor, I used to get summers off. I wanted to travel in the fall. You know these things are petty given the terrible economic situation, the terrible pandemic spread. But this is very typical of mental illness. You have a problem, and then you know that other people are much worse off. But that doesn't mean you don't have a problem. And that's what people with mental health have to realize. Whatever you are feeling is very real. And so I know I'm angry a lot. I know I spend a lot of time obsessively trying to re-organize my house. And I beat myself up every day because I should be writing. This is ideal writing time and I'm not writing. And I'm angry all the time at myself. And I take it out on

everyone around me. I'm just mad. So you can relate, right? This lack of motivation.

AK: I feel like I'm in a funk some days. Especially once the Black Lives Matter movement started to take off and then hearing all those stories of anti-Asian sentiment. That was so hurtful. And I felt powerless. And for a good two weeks I felt like I was in a funk. I thought, well what's the point. What's the point of anything?

Jan: Well, I felt like I had to practice my lines in case someone attacked me for being Asian.

AK: Your lines, what do you mean?

Jan: I had to practice my comeback because when you get racially attacked, you're so shocked you don't have, you don't know what to say. It's a jaw dropping moment when you can't even speak. So, I was trying to tell my White friends, you know I live in a White milieu and they didn't understand what I was talking about. And so that was further alienating, like they don't get it. And I was just trying to practice my come back.

AK: So, can you give me some that I might be able to put in my back pocket?

Jan: Yes, but one of them includes the F word. So I would say 'F you, Adolf.' So that was my come back. I practiced it. 'F you, Adolf!' (Laughter).

Jan: I think that White women understand discrimination. They face it all the time. But White women might not understand racism because I feel they're different. I feel like sexism is awful, but it's like a slap in the face. Whereas racism is like a knife stuck in you. You never forget it and the pain goes deep, so people don't understand. They're not quite on the same level. One is actually worse than the other.

AK: The racism, you mean.

Jan: Ya, the racism... you won't forget it. I talk to people and they tell me about a racist incident that happened when they were nine years old. And they don't forget that. Whereas I don't remember every sexist incident I've

experienced because it happens. It's not to the depth of your being the way racism is. So, the racist stuff I do remember. The sexist stuff, meh. It's ok.

AK: What do you remember most in your career in terms of racist moments against you?

Jan: Well, the racist moments would include, well some of them are benign, but they still hurt. So a racist moment in my career would be when I was at the Globe and Mail and I would go for lunch on Spadina. We were at Front and Spadina, and I would go up Spadina and head to Chinatown because the neighbourhood was kind of like a wasteland, in those days, for restaurants. So I'd walk up Spadina and see some of my colleagues who were returning from lunch. And I would be really excited. And I'd go 'Hi!' and they would look right through me, because a Chinese on Spadina is a dime a dozen. And they had a filter.

AK: They didn't recognize you then?

Jan: No. They didn't hear me. They didn't recognize me. And I felt really stupid. If you've ever said hi to somebody and they walk right by you. You have this feeling. I was truly invisible. I was an invisible minority. The racist stuff? Well, once my editor asked me to write a column on Chinatown. She was all excited. She said, "Can you write a column on Chinatown?" This was well into my career. I had already been the Beijing correspondent, and I looked at her, and she didn't get it. She didn't get how offensive that was. So I said, "Yeah right. Let's call it 'Slant.'" And she was practically clapping her hands.

AK: She was serious?

Jan: Yes, she was serious. I said that was a joke. And she said "Oh." And I said, "No, I'm not gonna do that because you wouldn't ask a Jewish reporter to write exclusive columns on the Jewish community. So I'm not gonna do that." But she really wanted me to do it, so I said OK, how about six, I'll do six. And I think I did six, and then I said that's it. I mean it was like, it's what I mean when I say White people don't get it. Like I am not the spokesperson. I am a China specialist. I speak Mandarin because I learned it in university. I did not learn it growing up in my father's laundry, okay. They have this idea that I am sort of, I know about China because I'm ethnically Chinese. No, that was my major at university. I studied Chinese

history. I studied Mandarin. I am a China specialist. But no one can keep it straight. Here is another benign example. The Toronto public library asked me to give them my papers for their archive.

AK: So your papers as in your columns and...

Jan: My junk. It's a fancy word for all my garbage. Like all my notebooks, and all my files and my journals. Writers can do this, right. And then they put me in the Chinese Canadian archive. So, I didn't realize they were going to do that. They didn't tell me that. And I said, so would you put Nino Ricci — he's a novelist in Toronto — would you put him in the Italian Canadian archive? Would you put Margaret Atwood in the Scottish Canadian archive? Like, why am I? They were really embarrassed. And then I said, "Oh never mind. It's okay. I mean, a researcher will be able to find it." It's that idea that you could never be non-hyphenated.

AK: And mainstreamed.

Jan: You will never be mainstreamed because you look funny.

AK: I don't think you look funny.

Jan: (Laughter). But that's what I mean. Those are the little minor things. I'm not getting a cop's knee on my neck, okay. It's not the same. It's very different. I don't suffer that.

AK: So, you talked about frustration and helplessness and anger. How are you coping and managing all these emotions?

Jan: I go for walks once or twice a day. And one of the things I did when I moved back from Fredericton in a panic, I really moved as the borders were closing, as my classes were being canceled. I came back and I started tidying. And I think that's also a mental health thing, you want to make your nest comfortable. So what I found were all those books on Toronto that I had in my dusty basement. And so I look at a chapter, and we go for a walk, we meaning my husband and I, go for a walk. And I'm saying, "You see that house, that was designed by this architect. Do you see that house, this was owned by the man who supplied plutonium."

AK: So you're a new historian then?

Jan: Yeah, so I do these little mini walking tours. That's how I cope. And it does still get a little tiring after a while.

AK: So when you're at a really low point, what does it feel like? And what does it look like?

Jan: It feels like a funk. As you say, I get nothing done. I get up in the morning and I don't know even what day it is. So I feel like this must be what it's like to feel old. I think ageing has just sort of landed on me, without any warning. I don't know what day of the week it is, if it's a weekend or a weekday. And I don't have any plans because nobody can get together. I have a bunch of music groups that I love. And I was expecting to resume. And of course everything is canceled. I play flute.

AK: Yes, I recall that. Are you still playing?

Jan: Yes, and in an ensemble, the flute is a super spreader. It's the only instrument that you blow across. Not into like a trumpet, you blow right in. In an oboe, nothing comes out. A flute, we're just spitting right across. So it's very dangerous. None of my ensembles have recovered. Except for my flute group recently had a rehearsal. And we played outside. We distanced and just played outside. So, here's the thing I recently and maybe this is a message for people also feeling the, being in the doldrums, feeling the depression. I decided to approach a musician I know, a professional flautist. And ask him how he was doing because they've lost all their income. And he is the first flute of the National Ballet Orchestra of Canada. And I said to him, "Would you like to put on a concert? I have a big backyard, and we can sell tickets and you can keep all the money. 100%." And he said he had to think about it because he's scared of COVID too. He's not much younger than I am. And after about a week or two he came back and said, "Okay, I can do this. I've got a violin and a cello." So, this just happened and a week ago, we nailed down the date. And so, I sent out emails to my bands and my friends, and I sold out. I sold out within five days. And what do I mean sold out? I mean I measured my backyard and we figured out they'll be some couples, and we did a kind of rough estimate. And my point is I feel happy doing this. That's what's interesting. From a mental health perspective, I think if you can help others, you really are helping yourself. Like you just feel happy doing this. But my point is, one way to deal with a depression, a light depression, not a serious one.

I'm not talking serious. Serious you need medication, you need a psychiatrist. You need a doctor. I'm talking about funk. One way to deal with funk is to go out and do something that helps other people.

AK: That's so funny you mention that because you know what, that is how this podcast was born. It came out of me being in a funk, thinking what can I do that's going to make a difference. So I'm reaching out to you today to see how your story can help others in the workforce.

Jan: And by doing this, how do you feel? Let me turn just the questions around. Is it making you feel better?

AK: Oh, much. And it's giving me a greater sense of purpose. And I have a mission. And I have a timeline. And I work well under deadlines, as you know, as another journalist.

AK: You know what I found really interesting, Jan, is how this whole COVID situation is forcing people and businesses to reinvent. You've reinvented yourself over and over from writer, professor, retiree, historian, Toronto house historian, event planner.

Jan: I'm now a concert impresario.

AK: What's next?

Jan: Well I need to write. I need to get back to my writing. Because I think there's things I want to write and if I don't, I kick myself. What could be a better situation than to be retired, to still have my faculties, to have the time and not have my economic worries. I'm beyond that economic scrambling. So like, I need to write. And I'm just mad at myself, for not writing.

AK: So here's a question. Writers need to be inspired. If you're always in the same environment in your home, where can you go or how can you turn your home and this familiar surrounding that, for a lot of us, is still kind of oppressive, to find that spark of inspiration.

Jan: The first thing I did when I moved back was I redid my living room which is behind me. I didn't redo it with a decorator. I just moved furniture around. I wanted it different, and I wanted to cull some of the junk. I work in my living room. I work in the corner. I have a desk right in the corner. So, I

think if I create a space that's beautiful and clean and not messy, then I can think. So that's the first step. I think many writers, before they can write a word, they clean their desk.

AK: So what's your advice for the people who are now finding themselves working many many more hours than they're accustomed to because now they're actually living at work. So how do you create that boundary and be able to shift when you're in the same physical space?

Jan: So my advice to people stuck at home now: You've got to turn off your electronics. If you need to, put it in a drawer. Put your laptop in a drawer. Turn off your work phone. I mean, I am semi-addicted to social media and reading Twitter because of the news. But that's, I'm not working. So you have to just shut it down. And you might have to send a message at night on your email saying, "I'm now off for the night and I will look at this at 9 AM tomorrow." Because otherwise you are never off. And can't do that, you'll burn out.

AK: As you watch what's happening to our workforce now, more and more are going remote for an indefinite period of time, what's your prediction when it comes to mental health in the workplace, which for most of us is home now?

Jan: It's not perfect. It's not a good thing never to interact with your colleagues at work. An ideal situation would be working from home most times, but going in maybe once a week for interactions, meetings, brainstorming. I think it's important to have some workplace relationships. A zoom meeting is OK too. I think if you already know each other, it's not perfect, but you can do it. I think the answer though is that people have to cultivate relationships outside of work. I think so many of us when we were in the workplace, we only had work friends. So how do you make friends outside of work? Well you have to have some interests, like I play music. I made so many of my friends through music. But you can also do it through community service. There is so much need around you. And you don't even need to do it through an organization. Look around you. There's gonna be somebody within a two-minute walk of your house that could really use your help. And that, I guarantee, if you help somebody you'll feel really great.

AK: I so loved this conversation, Jan. Thank you so much for taking this pause for me and for More Talent Untapped. Let's check in real soon, OK?

Jan: OK. Great talking to you.

More Talent Untapped is a sequel to the documentary Talent Untapped. If you're interested in a special screening of the original film, send me a note through my website [annakarinatabunar.com](http://annakarinatabunar.com).

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The people who helped put together this show are: Lindsey Vodarek, Howard Sonnenberg, Ashley Wright, Colin Van Hattem and me, Anna-Karina Tabuñar.

I'm back in two weeks with another episode of More Talent Untapped.

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