

Fanshen Cox: I might choose how I identify myself, but that other one in the equation has everything to do with geography, with class, with all these other intersecting identities that go into how other people read me and see me. I'm proud to say that today, I proudly identify as a black woman who has a white mom and I have white adjacency and light-skinned privilege, but that most importantly, what I have learned is that my blackness does not need to be performed, because that's what I was doing-

Yvonne Lee: Oh, I'm going to snap to that.

Jason Lee: We're Jason and...

Yvonne Lee: Yvonne Lee. Wife.

Jason Lee: Husband, father.

Yvonne Lee: Mother.

Jason Lee: Actors.

Yvonne Lee: Producers and seekers.

Jason Lee: Educators, explorers of identity.

Yvonne Lee: You're listening to Lagralane Spirits, a delicious podcast where we invite you into our living room for a family spirit symposium, a real talk meeting of the minds over reverend cocktails.

Jason Lee: Join us as we dive back in time to examine the legacy of our ancestors that have shaped the stories of our shared cultural history. You can find all of our cocktail recipes and show notes on lagralanespirits.com. And, as always, please enjoy.

Yvonne Lee: Responsibly.

Jason Lee: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard distorting glass. When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination. Indeed, everything and anything except for me," Ralph Ellison.

Yvonne Lee: From the places where they came to the places where they were going, they re-identified. They dropped I's from their names, turned Z's to something other, adopted one syllable for many. Some took the names of the people who owned them, only to lose their own forever and ever. Some stopped speaking the language they were born with, genetically modified, erased, yet they existed, all with a story to be told that has lived on to become the legend from which we all come. We are the descendant's identity.

Jason Lee: We are the descendant's identity.

Yvonne Lee: Hello. I'm so excited. Welcome to our very first episode of the Lagralane Spirits podcast.

Jason Lee: What's up, friends?

Yvonne Lee: This season, Jason and I are exploring all things identity, my husband and I will revisit moments in American history through the lens of our own family's roots and the legacy of the generations that have come before us. Tonight, we will be exploring the definition of identity, what makes us who we are, who makes us who we are? The when, the why, and the how?

Jason Lee: I suspect we'll be asking more questions than getting answers tonight, which has been a big part of life lately, whether from an ancestral, biological, metaphysical, emotional, social, or spiritual poke in the proverbial ass, I think a lot of us have been asking ourselves, who am I?

Yvonne Lee: A poke in the proverbial ass?

Jason Lee: Whatever that means for us, right?

Yvonne Lee: Okay.

Jason Lee: Yeah. Through the decades, centuries even, people have been asking, "Where do I fit?" Right? How do I fit? How do I fit into the big picture of this whole life on Earth thing? Where do I belong within this historical timeline that never ends? Where does my plot point begin? We can even ask how do I belong? And I think that all relates back to identity. I think there's an awakening going on. People are questioning their identity, their heritage. That I suppose this isn't anything new, really, but with websites like ancestry.com and 23andMe, and family tree DNA, you can do a lot of research now online. Sometimes answers died with the dead. But now we have access to more and more information that helps us get to the DNA root of the who am I question, right? A lot of deep dives going on. And as you know, I've been doing my own spelunking, which got us to creating this podcast.

Yvonne Lee: This journey for you has been totally-

Jason Lee: Insane?

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. Yeah. And not just for you, my husband, but questioning is what gets us to new truths and new truths are what we all need right now. I see this culturally transforming time as not just informational, but also healing. This is why I'm excited to explore this topic with our good friend and equity inclusion queen, Fanshen Cox. She has some super insightful things to say about identity.

Jason Lee: But first-

Yvonne Lee: But first...

Jason Lee: Our cocktail. So this podcast also exists because we love sharing a good cocktail while having spirited conversations.

Yvonne Lee: We'll be indulging in what we have coined a spirit symposium with you all tonight. These days, we think of a symposium as a meeting of experts around a specific topic, but the actual origin of the word comes from the Greek word sympinein meaning to drink together.

Jason Lee: And tonight's cocktail is the White Negroni.

Yvonne Lee: Negronis make me think of Europe. When we went to the Locarno Film Festival with our film Lucky, and we sip them all day long. Delicious, it was so hot there.

Jason Lee: It was blazing.

Yvonne Lee: It was one of the hottest summers ever.

Jason Lee: Didn't they call it El Diablo?

Yvonne Lee: I think it was called El Diablo in Locarno. They decided to start speaking Spanish in Switzerland. Anyway, it was delicious and refreshing.

Jason Lee: It was the Italian, I believe it was [crosstalk 00:06:56] remember-

Yvonne Lee: Italian. Well, it depends on what side that you're... Yes.

Jason Lee: Yes. We flew into Milan and drove from Milan to Locarno.

Yvonne Lee: It's gorgeous.

Jason Lee: Stunning.

Yvonne Lee: I wanted to find George Clooney's house.

Jason Lee: I think we drove by it.

Yvonne Lee: Oh, did we?

Jason Lee: I think we did.

Yvonne Lee: Okay.

Jason Lee: Lucky was a great film. You were incredible in that movie.

Yvonne Lee: Oh, thanks babe.

Jason Lee: It was a very important film for us. I served as one of the producers on it, Lagralane was one of the producers on it, and you were incredible in the movie, starring Harry Dean Stanton. Harry Dean Stanton, rest in peace, his final movie. You got to do several scenes with the iconic actor's actor, Harry Dean Stanton. What was that like?

Yvonne Lee: Oh, my gosh, being on set with someone who is not trying, who's just a living breathing storyteller was pretty amazing. All you had to do was be present and

breathe and listen to him. Part of it was autobiographical for him even though sometimes he didn't remember that it was actually his story. But it was really beautiful, and it felt very special for someone who was as iconic as him. Especially for those who really understand either like the big movie scene or even like the independent film scene, it was really great to... I didn't take it for granted to be on set with him.

Jason Lee: I think Lucky as an absolute bookend to Paris, Texas. I just love the slow meditative walking through the desert, thinking about what we're talking about in here, identity, who am I? Where am I? What is my place while I have this time on this earth to explore? What am I about? It was incredible. The film was nominated for the Golden Leopard at Locarno, but Lucky actually won a pretty amazing wild award honestly.

Yvonne Lee: The Ecumenical award.

Jason Lee: The prize of the Ecumenical Jury award, which is an award that is bestowed upon a film at major international film festivals. The award honors films of quality which touch the spiritual dimension of our existence.

Yvonne Lee: Which goes so well with our conversation about identity. I love it.

Jason Lee: Speaking of filmmaking, we should also mention our company Lagralane. Yvonne, you want to talk about that while I whip up this here libation?

Yvonne Lee: I would love to, I would love to. I would like to begin on my second one, just letting you know guys that I'm on my second one. Yes, Lagralane. The Lagralane group began maybe about five or six years ago, and we started because we wanted to figure out how we could contribute to making a difference and giving women and people of color a bigger platform to be able to tell their stories. So I mean, as you know, we are actors, but we figured in order to be part of the solution, we should help the people who actually create the stories who are the voices, so we created our company Lagralane. And truly, Lagralane is based in creating legacy. So the name is a combination of our two names, Lagralane. Lagramada, my middle name, and my husband's name, middle name, Delane. So we took the first part of the Lagra and the last part of his name, Delane, and it became Lagralane. And we did that because Lanelagra doesn't sound as good.

Jason Lee: It could have, though, if we gave it more of a chance.

Yvonne Lee: A few more seconds?

Jason Lee: Yeah, of thought.

Yvonne Lee: So that is the Lagralane group. And this love of revealing shared cultural trues became a catalyst for conversation and makes this podcast a personal extension for us as filmmakers.

Jason Lee: Well done, my love, well done. And now the co star of our show, the White Negroni-

Yvonne Lee: The White Negroni.

Jason Lee: The ingredients of this drink are 1.5 ounce gin, pour, one ounce Dolin Blanc vermouth, three quarters ounce Suze or Cocchi Americano, served on the rocks. On the rocks, stirred. Now there's a blasphemous social media presence being perpetuated by the phenomenal actor Stanley Tucci, who says that you can shake a Negroni. Now I truly, truly honestly adore Mr. Tucci's work as an actor.

Yvonne Lee: He can come on the show and defend himself if he wants.

Jason Lee: He could absolutely, we welcome you, sir. We would welcome you. However, you do not shake a Negroni, you stir that bad boy, you stir that about 20 times, you mix that ice up in there, and you give it a solid, solid stir. You don't shake a Negroni.

Yvonne Lee: Shaking, as I have learned, is only if it has citrus in it. Delicious results if you shake when appropriate and stir when appropriate. Babe, if people want to have the drink, what do they do?

Jason Lee: If any of you listening are at home and want to join us, pause right here and jump over to lagralanespirits.com where you can grab the recipe. So what do you think, Yvonne?

Yvonne Lee: I love it. I love the color. I love the freshness of it. Wherever you are, if you're in the spring, if you're in the summer, you're transitioning, it's something that helps transition you into the new season.

Jason Lee: It is a refreshing cocktail, right? The traditional Negroni, with its Campari is a bit more on the heavy side, but the Suze element brings in a very refreshing element to it, right?

Yvonne Lee: Which is my favorite style of cocktails, something super refreshing.

Jason Lee: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: Aren't there like 50 million different types of Negronis?

Jason Lee: Absolutely. You can swap out the gin and create... In a Negroni line, you can swap out the gin with whiskey, it makes it a Boulevardier or an Old Pal. There are several distinct cocktails that come out simply. With mezcal, it becomes basically a Wahakin.

Yvonne Lee: I love all those drinks, everyone that you've said, we've tried them.

Jason Lee: They are fantastic. They are fantastic drinks. They all are.

Yvonne Lee: Does a Negroni know its true identity?

Jason Lee: Oh, that's a great question. Like the character of the drink, right? That's a good point. Little history of the Negroni itself. The Negroni was basically invented, created in 1919, by an Italian, Count Negroni, who had asked his friend, a

bartender, to spice up basically his favorite drink, the Americano, and the bartender responded by swapping out the soda water and putting in gin. And that's basically how the Negroni was created. But in 2001, it got a little British put on it by the bartender, Wayne Collins, at the VinExpo in France, in Bordeaux, France.

Yvonne Lee: Bordeaux, France.

Jason Lee: Bordeaux, France. Bordeaux, France. He basically wanted to create a Negroni riff that featured gin, but not Campari or sweet vermouth. So he added the Suze and also, he actually added the Lillet blanc. I'm using Dolin blanc. And it was a hit, it won every award, it's on the recipe of every bar around the world. So Collins created the White Negroni in 2001. So it is, as a drink, the character of the drink is basically half Italian, half British.

Yvonne Lee: Aha, so it's biracial, multiracial, like us.

Jason Lee: Like us.

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jason Lee: Cheers.

Yvonne Lee: Thank you. Oh, my God, it's delicious. So, Jason, cocktail identification, cultural identification, we're bringing it all together in one place. Jason, how do you identify?

Jason Lee: For the listener out there who doesn't know me, I was adopted, my family is wonderful, and they are white and I am not. I had a hard time at first, really, for the first about 20 years of my life, really understanding anything else outside of being black and white. So I identified at first, mostly as being adopted. And what I mean by that is, every time I would meet somebody else who was adopted, everything else would stop, and we'd launch into a big conversation, big almost metaphysical conversation about what it is to be adopted, what's that like for you? Full stop of conversations would happen whenever I came across a fellow adopted individual. So I always identified at first as being adopted.

Yvonne Lee: I would say, too, I think it's so interesting that you say that, because I think when you think of black and white, when you talk about race as this construct, and that's how this country asks you to identify, there's almost something much more human about the identity of being adopted or not being adopted, it actually gets more to the core of who a person is, than identifying by black or white in these kind of artificial constructs that have been created by sociologists back in the day. That's what that made me think of.

Jason Lee: So how do you identify I mean, you're black and Filipino. Do you see yourself half black? Half Filipino? What's your-

Yvonne Lee: No, absolutely not. No, I don't, and I never say half. And I remember there was a very distinct... I can't remember exactly what happened. But I remember there

was a distinct moment in my life where I was like, "I am not going to say half," because if I'm half, that means I'm not really whole. And somehow I'm not whole in one identity, or the other if I'm half. And I remember having that experience. And I remember it making me feel less than, and I just did not like that. So I've always hated this idea of half because I come from a black parent, and I come from a Filipino parent, and that somehow I'm not whole in one identity or the other. In the end, I don't want to identify my wholeness. And when I hear even other people identify themselves as half I go, "Okay, well, if I had to draw a line somewhere, what part would be half and why does it matter?" My experience is Filipino, and my experience is black American, and I have them both.

Jason Lee: Dig. Yeah. I think that what's interesting about that for me is that you have the Pacific Islander, your mother's Filipino, and you have the African. I have the African and the European. And I think the North American experience has been so locked in on in the black and white space of creating these mathematical terminologies. Mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, right? You're three fifths a citizen, you're this and you're that. We've been, especially in the black and white space, so segmented and regimented into a numerical equation that has almost insisted upon taking yourself in as either half, that is almost like an imasculinization of your wholeness as a person. So I really appreciate when you explore it that way.

Yvonne Lee: Growing up in Arizona, sometimes, yeah, it was difficult to kind of figure all of that stuff out, but I love being both. People look at me and I can see them start to question who I am and try to figure it out. And I'm not going around identifying with how the world sees me, I'm identifying with how I see myself, and I get to tell you who I am. And then I can't choose between the two, I can't say half, I am both, I am all things. I'm also an artist, a woman, an actor, a mother. Just so many things. But I have to tell other people what how to orient themselves around me. But for Jason, for you, which culture do you identify most with?

Jason Lee: You have to tell people who you are, right? From the adopted space, I always say I've always known who I am as a man, right? I've always known who I am, I've never known what I am made of. And so my recent ancestral research has really filled in that information for me, even in meeting my birth parents and getting an idea of their heritages, and where they both are from and how that created me. My research has really introduced me to really some extraordinary peoples, right, some extraordinary locations that I would never have thought that I would have come from, on both sides, really. I never knew if my biological mother was white or black, I always knew I was black and white, I didn't know which sex was which, right? I didn't know my biological mother was white. I didn't know my biological father was black. And then to specify to get out of the whiteness, and the blackness and really to go to locations that these websites like ancestry.com can provide for you.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah, like actual countries, cultures.

Jason Lee: The countries, yeah, the locations. So I have found that I'm a West African... To answer your question, Yvonne, what culture do I identify with most? I am a West African, European adopted black man. I'm half white and half black. I do still say half. I think that might be Americana hitting me as a light skinned black man walking the streets here, but I know, in my search, I feel like I've found my wholeness.

Yvonne Lee: Oh, yes.

Jason Lee: But I do feel also half black, half white.

Yvonne Lee: Great. We get to wholeness in all the different ways that we get to it.

Jason Lee: Yes, I'm Nigerian, German, Russian.

Yvonne Lee: You are the White Negroni.

Jason Lee: Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding. Hence, the name of the cocktail we are drinking to night. The White Negroni. I've actually also used the White Negroni as a fantasy football team name, which was a lot of fun that season, even though I didn't win the league that season. But that's a story for another day. But that's why I started my search for my biological parents to discover the racial part that was missing from me, right? Adoption early on in my life was my sole identity and I wanted to know the black side of my family. I was surrounded by whiteness, by a loving family of Scandinavian and German descent that raised me. But they didn't have my Afro, and so I wanted to go out and find out what-

Yvonne Lee: They wanted your Afro though.

Jason Lee: My Afro is pretty awesome. I call it my splendiferous Afro. So Yvonne, you don't know much about your roots on your dad's side of the family, which makes sense, respectfully, I suppose, right? Why you're so connected to your Filipino side, your mom, right? Have you wanted to try to connect more with the other side of your cultural identity?

Yvonne Lee: Well, I mean, I think that it's not so much a cultural identity that I wanted to connect to. I do think it had something to do with family. I mean, it's exactly why I invited them to our wedding, as you remember. I thought it was the perfect opportunity to kind of connect all these different parts of myself in this symbol of us joining ourselves. I guess, when my aunt and my cousins came to the wedding, one thing that they did that was just so beautiful was that they... because there was this disconnection with that side of the family, so it's about familial history, and then it's about your cultural connection and how some of that was lost through my not having the connection with my dad's side of the family, but the beautiful thing that they did was present this gorgeous album of all of the people that I had never met before, because my dad went into the Vietnam War. And then we didn't live in Georgia, we lived on the west side of our country in Arizona.

Yvonne Lee: So that was the first time where I thought, "Oh, okay, this gives me some kind of grounding," because she introduced me to who all of my... I found out that, oh, my name is Yvonne because I have an aunt Yvonne, which I never knew. We were in our 20s when we got married, and so it's such a strange thing to have that piece of information. So it is interesting, you're adopted, but even if you're not adopted, there are pieces of your history that are still missing. There's still pieces of your identity that you're still trying to figure out and when you're a child you don't know that you need them until you get to a point where you go, "Oh, God, I need to know the history of that."

Jason Lee: That photo album that you received, [crosstalk 00:24:54] we got married in 2006, right, it's 2021. That was a gift to you.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah.

Jason Lee: That same gift is what I'm finding on ancestry.com with my biological family, with my biological roots.

Yvonne Lee: Jason, I have a question for you. As we talk about that and talk about identity, what advice or thoughts... It's certainly from like a adopted point of view, where maybe you're not giving... There's nobody there to give you this album, right? What advice or thoughts do you have for people searching for their own identity?

Jason Lee: From the adopted space, or from a space of not knowing a biological parent, that's not necessarily adopted, right, that doesn't always just land in the adopted space. You might not know your biological father, you might not know your biological mother. The power of these tools online are extraordinary, because they track censuses, birth certificates, death certificates, land deeds, all sorts of different... You plug in a name, and if you are right in the age range, and the year, you can gain access to a whole bunch of information about that individual. And so tools like ancestry.com, 23andMe, FamilyTreeDNA, a lot of people have issues spitting in a vial and sending it off for moral reasons, and also possibly for political and religious reasons as well, and I understand that.

Jason Lee: But my advice would be for anyone who would want to search for a deeper understanding of who they are, and where they come from, the tools are online to really kind of... If you can interview a grandparent or a parent, the tools are online where you can explore all of that, and in a safe and well informed area. But I have a question right back for you. At this stage in your life, you seem to know who you are. Talked to your mom about... We've been to the Philippines together a couple of times now and met your Lagramada family in [inaudible 00:27:07] and Homonhon and Manila. My question for you, Yvonne is, has anyone ever straight out asked you? Taken a look at you and then asked you like, "What are you?"

Yvonne Lee: I think that I get the look, what are you? But because I grew up in Arizona, and nobody has been bold enough to be like, "What are you," which is totally offensive and... There would be a certain point in my life where I would go, "Well, I'm a girl, this is when I was a girl, because now I'm a woman, but I'm a

girl, I'm Filipino. I'm black." Later on in life, that's when I began to understand it's about their perception, it's about their lack of interaction with the rest of the world. But sometimes people would think... they would think that I'm... "Oh, you're Hawaiian." And there was a part of me that was like, "Oh, I think Hawaiian people are beautiful." And I would be just so excited that they would think that about me. And then of course, I did some research on Hawaii and I went in, okay, that's why they think that, because of the history of Hawaii and how it was created.

Yvonne Lee: I mean, there would be people who would go, "Oh, you're Chinese and you're black." And I'd go, "No, I'm Filipino and black." And then you begin to understand that there was so many people who did not understand, to this day, even with the Asian American and Pacific Islander hate that's going on today, nobody totally... You see that people, that this community is lumped into one kind of monolith. But there's so many beautiful different cultures. The same thing in Africa. It's not just people who are African, they come from all the countries within Africa, and our American experience with that is just so limited. And then to have your name Lee, then it messes up, they get all confused. It's almost like because they don't know who I am, they don't know who they are. And it doesn't matter whatever person, whatever cultural ethnicity that particular person comes from, but-

Jason Lee: Historically, we've been so quick to just say black, white, yellow, red, [crosstalk 00:29:35]

Yvonne Lee: That's how it's structured from the beginning.

Jason Lee: That's how it's structured. Yeah, I'm remembering our trip to the Philippines in 2007, and your mother has a house on Homonhon, and we went to a fiesta festival.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. And Homonhon is a small island off of-

Jason Lee: Eastern Samar?

Yvonne Lee: Yeah, it's off of Eastern Samar that you have to take a tiny little boat to get to and then if it's low tide, you have to stop and you have to take all this stuff and walk up to-

Jason Lee: Your brother and I literally carried the luggage-

Yvonne Lee: Yeah, take your luggage and put it on... If it's high tide, then you just get to land [crosstalk 00:30:10]

Jason Lee: I think I fell a couple of times. So I apologize-

Yvonne Lee: You did.

Jason Lee: ... 15 years later for wet clothes.

Yvonne Lee: Totally fine.

Jason Lee: But I remember going to... We went to a party and this DJ was... It was a family party because everyone... a lot of people there were Lagramadas, right? And the family DJ was giving shoutouts throughout this dance party that we were at to various people who were dancing, and he pointed to me. And he pointed out and he said, "We have no idea what you are, or where you're from..." People have often confused me as being Puerto Rican or Hispanic.

Yvonne Lee: I was one of those people, I'm sorry, I was trying to figure it out.

Jason Lee: I'm a very light skinned brother, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that either, right? I'm very light skinned. And he said to me, he said, "We have no idea who you are or what you are." He said he used the what. And he said, "But tonight," and this was the welcoming, it was his attempt to welcome me and he said, "Tonight, you are Filipino." And I was like, "I'm in the family now."

Yvonne Lee: Yes. You were in the family. I think what we should do is that we should call up Fanshen for a cocktail confession, because she is somebody who has deep dived in identity, she is the diversity equity inclusion specialist in my world, to kind of get her perspective on all of this.

Jason Lee: Absolutely. Her one-woman show, One Drop of Love explores all of that we are touching upon in our conversations right now. I am extremely excited to have the chance to chat about all of this with our good friend Fanshen Cox.

Yvonne Lee: You guys listen to us for a while, so let's bring in another perspective.

Jason Lee: Yes. Cheers.

Fanshen Cox: Hello?

Jason Lee: Hey, Fanshen.

Yvonne Lee: Fanshen.

Fanshen Cox: Hey.

Yvonne Lee: I am so excited that you're here. We are honored to have on our very first episode, miss Fanshen Cox here with us, who Jason I go years back. And we're just so excited to have her here. The stars align that we would get to speak with each other, work with each other.

Fanshen Cox: On national cocktail day, and most importantly-

Jason Lee: On national cocktail day.

Fanshen Cox: Yes.

Jason Lee: Yes. Yes.

Yvonne Lee: Cheers to that. I'm just going to give everybody a little clink without getting my microphone wet. Before we get started, we love this part of the conversation

because Jason and I will kind of talk about where we come from, and how the conversation wraps with us personally. And then we like to bring another person on who we feel also has something to offer to the conversation in a macroscope, and then also in a microscope. So I just want to tell you a little bit about Fanshen. Fanshen is an award winning actor and producer and educator. And she has just recently... And this is how we met Fanshen, she did a beautiful show called One Drop of Love.

Jason Lee: Fantastic show.

Yvonne Lee: Fantastic show. Oh, gosh, we could do a whole podcast just on One Drop of Love, and I think actually your show is one of the reasons why you're so perfect here. The idea that where are we? I remember that your show started with looking at the census, and then journeying from there about how you find your identity. And so she toured that one-woman show for seven years. She's also a producer and development executive at Matt Damon and Ben Affleck's company, Pearl Street Films. And she's the co host of the podcast, Sista Brunch. And Sista brunch is a podcast about black women thriving in entertainment and media careers. And if you'd like to check that out, you can subscribe and listen on Spotify, Apple, Google podcasts or whatever your favorite podcast app is, along with listening to this one of course, you're going to listen to them both and be empowered.

Fanshen Cox: That's right and tell everybody about it and that you enjoyed it and look at this beautiful family that we have here and keep listening.

Yvonne Lee: Yes.

Jason Lee: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: She serves on the board of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative and on the Kennedy Center's Turnaround Arts' equity advisory committee. She is also, which is so amazing, Fanshen is one of the co authors of the inclusion rider. And for those of you don't know, the inclusion rider is something that those who have the power... I'm going to put it as the most simplest terms. Those who have the power agree that they are going to make sure that in front of the camera and behind the camera that they, at a certain percentage, are including all different types of folks, so that they are intentional and not just in word but in intention and action actually making sure that all of the stories that come to us have full inclusion from a wide variety of people, and it is changing the landscape of how we tell stories. She did that with Dr. Stacy Smith and Kalpana Kotagal. Did I say that right? Kotagal?

Fanshen Cox: Kalpana Kotagal. Yes.

Yvonne Lee: Kalpana Kotagal. Beautiful. We all had the honor of Frances McDormand talking about it of the 2018 Oscars, it was amazing. So other than that, she is a beautiful friend, and is dedicated to all the work in diversity, equity, inclusion, anti racism and making sure that adults and children have the skills and the language that we need to make this a better world.

Fanshen Cox: I'm working on it.

Jason Lee: Fanshen, thank you for being here with us.

Fanshen Cox: Come on, now y'all are family.

Yvonne Lee: Fanshen, are you ready-

Fanshen Cox: I don't know.

Yvonne Lee: ... for cocktail confession.

Fanshen Cox: Cocktail, okay. Taking a deep breath.

Yvonne Lee: Jason? Oh, he has to take a sip. Well, let's take a cocktail sip first.

Fanshen Cox: Yeah, let's all take a sip.

Yvonne Lee: I'm just going to...

Jason Lee: [crosstalk 00:36:00]

Fanshen Cox: Yes, let's do that.

Jason Lee: ... little dramatic license and a dramatic pause. Cheers. So Fanshen, here's the question. If we are all in equation, how do we solve for identity?

Fanshen Cox: Okay. So I think of the equation piece as like, let's say one plus one, where the first one is our own internal needs and wants and hopes and dreams for who we are and who we want to be. The second one is how everybody else perceives us. So especially when it comes to race and our racial identity, as an example, and I think this is true for other identities as well, you look at transgender identity or non binary identity. But for race when you have this one, which is I should have the right to have full agency over how I identify myself racially. But then you bring this other number into the equation, the other one, which is just because you choose to identify in some way does not mean that that's how other people treat you. Because we've all come to believe in this hierarchy based on a lie, right? Race is a lie. I always like to say that racism birthed race, not the other way around.

Fanshen Cox: So there is no such thing as race. And yet, racism means that we, all the time, are walking around looking at other people, and even ourselves in the mirror often and determining who we are on this hierarchy of race. And so those two numbers, the one plus one there is what comes to equal our identity. And I think that we have to constantly be thinking of both of those things. And it's not enough to for example, polar Rachel Dolezal and say, "I feel like a black woman, and therefore I am one," because that's that first one. But that second one says to Rachel Dolezal, "But you get to live in the world as a white woman." And so you may want to identify as black and in some ways, I want to embrace that, I want to be glad that folks want to love blackness, yet, you have to acknowledge

that the world treats you as a white person. And that's okay, but that means you have certain privileges based on that, how the world perceives you.

Fanshen Cox: One of my favorite memes, Yvonne I've shown this to you, is a young black boy with a hoodie on and his hands up, and a police officer is pointing a gun at him. And the boy says, "Don't shoot, I identify as white." So that first one, we'd love to all be able to say, "You know what, I'm going to identify how I choose to identify, and I'm going to live that way." But then we've got to acknowledge that not everybody gets to, so where do we constantly walk that balance of acknowledging both of these things? I think that's how I think of it, and that's the equals identity. Identity is both of those numbers together.

Jason Lee: What your response there, Fanshen, brings to mind is your show, One Drop of Love, and the census taking. To go historical with it, we've been having to mark and check boxes for the longest time.

Fanshen Cox: 1790, right.

Jason Lee: Yeah. And the boxes keep expanding.

Fanshen Cox: And speaking of that, too, from 1790, so what I do at the top of the show is I become a census worker, and I tell the audience, "Right now were in 1790." And in 1790, the only racial categories that were available to anybody were free white male, free white female, and slave. And so I tell the audience, "We're here right now. That means I'm going to go around and tell you each person here, which of only these three options you are." And from 1790 until 1970, the census worker would look at you and mark down your race. Not until 1970 did we fully start to have our own agency around how we identify ourselves. Right? So again, we could all day say, "I'm proud to be..." I can say all day, "I'm proud to be black." But I have to acknowledge that when I walk into a store, people don't look at me the way they would look at my family members who are darker skinned or have different features. So I have this very different experience of blackness, and mixedness as well. There are mixed people who are mixed with, what in the critical mixed race stylistic scholars call, dual minority. So you have mixed folks who have two parents who are black and Asian as an example-

Yvonne Lee: That's me.

Fanshen Cox: If you are dual-

Yvonne Lee: Dual minority. I have never used that word before. Wow. I just absolutely love that you brought that up. Because Jason and I had probably been... We had just moved into this house, we probably had been married for, I don't know, three or four years. Grace was maybe three years old. And so we've always had this conversation where I've always claimed being African American and Filipino. I've always spoken about I'm not saying I'm half this or half that or any of those things. And it was in conversation with Jason, where I realized his journey is really different than mine, we're both biracial, but he says, at that time, he was saying, "I identify as black." But I was like, "But you're also white." And he said,

"No, I'm a black man." I'm like, "But wait a minute, you were..." And so it made me really understand that... Now I know his new word, dual-

Fanshen Cox: Minorities. Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: Dual minority, is that your journey of being biracial is completely different from mine. It's a harder journey in terms of identity. It's very interesting.

Jason Lee: The dominant culture, when you represent both, to go historical with it, the the enslaved, and the slave owners, when you represent the dominant culture and the other in America, you're in a bit of a conundrum, right? You're in a bit of a pickle.

Fanshen Cox: All the time.

Jason Lee: And you add in on that for me in my search, it's coming in... I have always, before... I was adopted, I always identified as an adopted kid, more so than who was black and white? And I was raised in white environments. So of course, I was black, right? Given though I'm fairly light skinned. Yvonne often said that I'm the... What do you say, Yvonne, I'm the lightest black man-

Yvonne Lee: You never get it right.

Jason Lee: I never get it right.

Yvonne Lee: You always say it, I have to correct you.

Fanshen Cox: There's a lot of trauma there with this naming, that's partly why we forget. Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: You were the darkest light skinned man I know. That's what I say.

Jason Lee: There's one thing about... When we name it, when we write it, when we spell it, it's literally a spell. It's literally called spelling. I heard this recently, and I think that's really dope. Yeah, come on now. Come on now.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah.

Fanshen Cox: Absolutely. That's the other thing is that I learned that a lot in researching for One Drop around the lie of race, because not only has it changed 24 times on our own US Census here, these racial categories that are supposed to be based in science are real, but any other country you go to has completely different terminology for it, so anything that changes so much... But I'll say to Yvonne, I don't necessarily consider it a kind of an easier experience, [crosstalk 00:44:55]

Yvonne Lee: Of a dual minority?

Fanshen Cox: Absolutely. I mean, listen-

Yvonne Lee: Well, definitely not today. I mean, I'm a Pacific Islander and African American.

Fanshen Cox: But at all, right, I mean, white adjacency is what buys you resources in this country. The closer you are to being considered white by others, the more resources you have had access to. And that's something that light skinned people, especially people like me with blue eyes, that I could pass, white people want me to pass. I've literally had folks, "Just please, just say you're white." You know what I mean?

Jason Lee: Yeah, I've had the same thing happen. Absolutely, yes.

Fanshen Cox: So that they-

Yvonne Lee: When they're asking you to pass.

Fanshen Cox: Encouraging it.

Jason Lee: Sometimes almost insisting, it will make us feel much more comfortable if you just avoid the blackness.

Fanshen Cox: Forget about that. No, come on. But you really... Oh, yeah. And so yes, emotionally, that is tough, right? It's when you love who you are and you love [inaudible 00:46:04] that's tough. But we have access to resources or access to just getting around every day in the world and being... And I will say, I do find sometimes this is different for light skinned women or mixed women than it is for men. So Jason, I'm sure you have different [inaudible 00:46:26]. But we were seen, for a long time, up until very recently, this was the exotic... We were fetishized. And that was both horrible on an internal level, but it also meant that we got the acting jobs that are supposed to go to black women, but it went to all light skinned black woman as an example. So I wouldn't use easier either way or more difficult or not.

Jason Lee: I found out in my DNA testing that I'm part, it's a small part, but Ashkenazi Jew is in my DNA. And I've had Jewish individuals tell me that I'm not Jewish because I'm black. We were never even allowed to be white, to claim a whiteness. And that's what I love about Johny Pitts, who Johny Pitts wrote a book about... He calls it Afropean, I have it here on my desk right now. He explores all of this and that type of... that name, that branding in itself, Afropean has given me a sense of identity and a sense of self, African and European in a way that I never had before. But I'm wise enough to avoid the complications of as a man of the femininity [crosstalk 00:47:46]

Fanshen Cox: Very good. What you were not wise enough to avoid was naming this episode White Negrani. I feel like you owe the listeners a little explanation.

Jason Lee: Absolutely. And I will, as I am pouring another White Negrani right here.

Yvonne Lee: Excellent. Well, we explained it a bit earlier, a bit more. But now under the context of having Fanshen here, we need to revisit.

Jason Lee: I wanted to make sure that we didn't offend sister Fanshen here within the exploration of the White Negrani. I have a pretty wild sense of humor and what

that does for me when I first heard of the White Negroni... When I first heard about Negroni, of course, I went Negro.

Yvonne Lee: Oh, I totally did.

Jason Lee: So when I heard White Negroni, and I'm like, "Well, of course, that is-

Fanshen Cox: That's me. You were like, "That's what I am."

Jason Lee: It's a more perverse way of saying Afropean, right? White Negroni.

Fanshen Cox: Pretty much. That's a Jasonism, we're just going to go with it.

Jason Lee: We're just going to go with it, we're going to walk [crosstalk 00:48:58]

Yvonne Lee: There are many Jasonisms.

Jason Lee: ... a little bit. And we're going to explore a lot of them because I think through the exploration, using humor, using love, using the ability to laugh at self and to laugh at the madness that we're faced with is how we've been able... We, the global we, have been able to survive in this kind of mad house that historically the States have been. It's how we've gotten through, and the resilience of us all to maintain to attempt to create to show our humanity in the arts, whether that's through acting [crosstalk 00:49:43]

Yvonne Lee: That's to be celebrated. Resilience, for sure.

Jason Lee: Resilience, [crosstalk 00:49:46]

Yvonne Lee: 100%.

Fanshen Cox: I love that, and a conversation I often have in kind of DEI workshops is... And especially with mixed folks is grappling with, okay, I'm told to be... Let's say, for biracial, black and white, and I might talk about why I rarely use that terminology. But we'll get there. But when you have a black parent and a white parent, and the question is kind of I'm proud of my black identity, is it okay to be proud of my white identity? That's one of those questions that those of us with white parents have to really think about. My response having kind of dug into the invention of whiteness, because it's an invention, right? And it's an insidious one, there was literally nothing positive about the invention of whiteness in and of itself. That doesn't mean Ashkenazi Jew, or it doesn't mean Danish, like my mother is-

Jason Lee: Or German or... Yes.

Fanshen Cox: Or German, right. Irish. It means-

Yvonne Lee: It's just how you look.

Fanshen Cox: ... whiteness. Unfortunately, there's actually nothing to be proud of in that.

Jason Lee: True.

Fanshen Cox: Whereas with black then, and then people say, "Okay, well..." And I say, "Really, we don't even know what it means. We haven't even told the truth of what whiteness or white identity means." We're starting to because they stormed the White House on January 6th, that's in the name of whiteness. Versus blackness is something that exists, it is resilience, as you just said, it's also struggle. And that's kind of hard about black identity is that it always comes along with struggle, but it's also joy, and it's tradition, it's cultural traditions. But what happens is, you were saying, Jason, when you've got both of these things in you, an identity that was created only for nefarious means and another one that is created out of resilience.

Yvonne Lee: What about white people who are allies? Is there something to celebrate about in terms of that?

Fanshen Cox: Not as their whiteness, but as their Europeanness-

Jason Lee: As their [crosstalk 00:52:09]

Fanshen Cox: As their Irishness, as their... White people in this country need to dig in and understand their roots. By the way, a lot of white people-

Yvonne Lee: I agree with that.

Fanshen Cox: ... in this country were not white when they first arrived here. So Italians did not immediately, on the census, they were not immediately counted as white, neither were Mexicans. And Mexicans then, the category switched into white and then switched into what we have today, which is Hispanic or Hispanic origin. So I'm talking specifically about white, right? White identity, you can be an ally, but part of your ally ship has to be digging in, and understanding the historical context of how you got to be named white in the first place, and that is nothing but nefarious. And part of why the category of white/at the time Caucasian got established was because freed African peoples were getting together with white or at the time Caucasian or really immigrant, let's say Irish indentured servants, they were starting to come together and say, wait a minute, we don't like how we're being treated. They were starting to come together and rebel against the wealthy, white Caucasian class. And that's when laws started to be created that said, that if you were considered white or Caucasian at the time, you could eventually work your way out of your indentured servitude. But if you were black or a slave, you were that in perpetuity.

Fanshen Cox: And that's when the divisions began between poor, white indentured servants and African slaves because the indentured servants says, "We're out, because we want to work this off and get to where you are." And that is where those tensions began. So we have clear historical context of where this division of white identity began. And so those of us who... I'll say now why I avoid terms like biracial or multiracial, I avoid terms that have the word race in them, because I feel like we're perpetuating the notion that it's real and therefore determines where we are on a hierarchy. Instead of, I tend to use more like mixed roots or

just mixed. None of it is good because it all refers back to these lies that we were all told.

Fanshen Cox: But if we can get more towards, and Yvonne, to your point, it's not that white people are all nefarious because whiteness is nefarious, it's that white people and others who look white and can pass is white need to examine why we were called that, why we call ourselves that?

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah, I love hearing you say that because I remember two things, I remember just a lifetime of being... I'll speak from terms as we're trying to get away from the words race, black and white, but identifying as black and Filipino growing up. And then asking people who appeared to me to be white and to ask where they came from, and how they would kind of posh, posh, "Well, I'm a little bit of this, and a little bit of that, and a little bit of this, but I don't really know. So I'm just white." And there was nothing for them to hold on to. And I-

Fanshen Cox: Absolutely. They've been cheated. They've been cheated of their history as well in this country.

Yvonne Lee: The people who cannot identify that, who say that they're Russian or Hungarian or Irish, or any of these things. It's like, "Well, I don't just know it. I just do this." And they take for granted, right, what did their family give up in order for them to get there? I mean, I think that's probably one of the reasons why I love New York so much, because they still hold on to it. Like no matter where you go, they're still holding on to that. They use the white privilege when they need to, they go into the city, they get their thing and they go back to their [inaudible 00:56:29], they are who they are. You know what I mean?

Fanshen Cox: Yep.

Yvonne Lee: So... Oh, I forgot the second thing already, because that was so much fun.

Fanshen Cox: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: Just to put that out there is like what has been given up? If those who are saying that they're white... And oh, the other thing was, is that my own internalization as I tried to move away... Like at our school, we called it Black History Month. And there was a moment when all this planning was happening, where I wanted to say to all these women, "Can we call it African American History Month? Can we call it something other than black?" That's what I wanted to be able to say.

Fanshen Cox: I will say this, though, that black is different from white. So black does not refer only to race, that's what we were just saying, right? Black refers to culture, it's dance, it's music, its food. It also refers to resilience. So black does not directly refer to race. And so I'm okay with using black-

Yvonne Lee: Oh, really?

Fanshen Cox: ... because it refers to all of these other aspects of an identity. White only refers to race, it's not a culture, there's no white culture. I mean, we make jokes, mayonnaise is white food, right? But if you examine what's connected to white identity, it is only bad, it is only supremacy. It's-

Yvonne Lee: Wow, I just learnt so much from you just in that bit of looking at it from that perspective.

Fanshen Cox: It's a lot.

Jason Lee: [crosstalk 00:58:15]

Yvonne Lee: And I will say, for anybody who's listening right now, part of your job is to listen to what's happening, and then part of your job is to go out and find out. So this is not the end all be all of your learning. The one thing-

Fanshen Cox: [crosstalk 00:58:30]

Yvonne Lee: ... you should walk away from listening to this entire series is to have questions. It's not meant for you to... So our goal is as many questions as you can have about how we historically put things and how we personally talk about things. It's about you to go on your own journey and begin to ask questions and kind of wake up from whatever you've been taught, whether you know it or not. Last question, and then we'll... Oh, my gosh, we'll have you back maybe, perhaps in another episode, so we can talk about that.

Fanshen Cox: Yes, please, because I got to get my cocktail sent to me at home on the next...

Jason Lee: We're going to do that.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah.

Fanshen Cox: Can I just say, Yvonne gets to determine the name of the drink next time. I'm just saying.

Jason Lee: Lagralane's a little bit of us both. So-

Fanshen Cox: I do like [crosstalk 00:59:14]

Jason Lee: ... as a smart man, happy wife happy life. So [crosstalk 00:59:19]

Fanshen Cox: There you go.

Yvonne Lee: This is kind of a loaded question. But I just want to say, and we'll end with your answer to this, how has your identity evolved... This is a big one. How is your identity evolved over time, till now?

Fanshen Cox: Early on, I just knew that I had two parents that the world looked at differently, that I just had these two parents, but I could tell, I knew I got messages from early on that the world said that there was something different about my two parents. My dad is Jamaican, he immigrated here from Jamaica in the '50s to go

to school, my mom is white and she says, "I am Blackfeet Indian and Cherokee and Danish." And she doesn't want people to see her as white, and yet that's how the world sees her. So I think early on there were already questions about what this would mean in terms of identity, but I wasn't thinking of embracing anything. But then I spent my early years in Washington DC and at that time, DC was Chocolate City and I was definitively a high yellow, as they call us in DC. I was definitively-

Jason Lee: Light skinned high yellow.

Fanshen Cox: ... a light skinned high yellow black girl, there was no question about it, that's what I was. After my parents divorced, my mom moved us for about a year to Strong, Maine. And the population of Strong was about 400 people, tiny place, all white, except the black population, there was exactly one and that was my half and my brother Winston's half. We had to deal with a lot of things there where I started to try to hide my black identity because I needed to survive through that year. We then moved ultimately to Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is where I met Matt Damon and Ben Affleck. And we grew up together in this very progressive city where we all patted ourselves on the back for being progressive around everything. In hindsight, I see how the white folks in Cambridge really kind of ran things, and the rest of us did what they said.

Fanshen Cox: But in Cambridge, there were lots of other mixed people, although at that time, this was the '70s and early '80s in Cambridge. I can't even get the words out of my mouth, but I'm going to say it, I proudly identified as mulatto or mulatto. Have you been there, Jason?

Jason Lee: Oh, we were talking earlier about the mathematical equations of things, right, the mulatto, quadroon, Octoroon. That has been part of the discussion here and [crosstalk 01:02:08]

Fanshen Cox: Yep, the lexicon.

Jason Lee: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: I actually couldn't figure out if I was actually a part of that word. Then I realized that I-

Fanshen Cox: The dual minority [crosstalk 01:02:17]

Yvonne Lee: Yeah.

Jason Lee: Dual minority. There's métis-

Fanshen Cox: There's métis.

Jason Lee: ... which is native, indigenous European, there are all sorts of different ways-

Fanshen Cox: Exactly. You go to Louisiana, there's Creole there, all these other ways. But in Boston, we were mulatto, biracial and mulatto. And then I get to college, I went to the University of Michigan, and I noticed that on the first day, within the first

week on campus, I'm getting these looks and these nods. And I'm like, "Why y'all... Who? Me? You're nodding at me? The high yellow."

Jason Lee: When I first started getting the black man head nod, I was like [crosstalk 01:02:59]

Fanshen Cox: You get the nod.

Yvonne Lee: Oh, I mean, I felt that too, even though I didn't know whether I could use that word or not, I do remember, in college was where I was like, "Oh, if you're black, you're supposed to acknowledge people."

Fanshen Cox: You're supposed to do this, this is part of the thing. And listen, y'all, I became the most militant, gum smacking, fight the power.

Jason Lee: Did you-

Fanshen Cox: The leather, Africa-

Jason Lee: Yeah. The [inaudible 01:03:27] red, black [inaudible 01:03:29].

Fanshen Cox: Yes. Big [inaudible 01:03:31] relaxer came all out the hair. I gave my mom a real hard time when I'd come home from school. And then I joined the Peace Corps, and I lived in West Africa for two years. I get to West Africa, and I think I'm going to be embraced as a black sister coming home and they're immediately like, "White woman, thank you." So there's dealing with that. So this constant understanding is that one plus one. I might choose how I identify myself, but that other one in the equation has everything to do with geography, with class, with all these other intersecting identities that go into how other people read me and see me. I'm proud to say that today I proudly identify as a black woman who has a white mom and I have white adjacency and light skinned privilege, but that most importantly what I have learned is that my blackness does not need to be performed. Because that's what I was doing-

Yvonne Lee: Oh, I'm going to snap to that because I totally identify with that.

Fanshen Cox: I don't owe any kind of performance to anybody to own my blackness.

Jason Lee: We identify with what we know, while often searching for that which we cannot, or will never know. While identity may leave us feeling invisible in the eyes of others, we must show our descendants we are not.

Fanshen Cox: That's it.

Jason Lee: Hashtag boom. Mic drop.

Yvonne Lee: Fanshen, it has been so beautiful learning from you, I learned so much just now.

Fanshen Cox: I love you both so much.

Yvonne Lee: So I just want to thank you for being here with us.

Jason Lee: Me sister, love you too.

Fanshen Cox: My pleasure.

Jason Lee: Listen, thank you for being with us. Like we said earlier, we could have these-

Fanshen Cox: [crosstalk 01:05:46]

Jason Lee: We could have a podcast episodes... This could go on and on-

Fanshen Cox: Go on and on.

Jason Lee: It's so rich and so deep and so important in this time, in this case zeitgeist we're living through right now, we're living in right now to be able to communicate about these issues, these themes, the general question, the micro macro question of who we are and how we are walking through time and space on this earth, embracing our power, stepping into our power and claiming it.

Yvonne Lee: The one thing that we can take away is that the more sure footed we are in understanding our identity and the more that we go back and we look at our identity through humanity at the things that really affect our everyday life and-

Fanshen Cox: That's that one plus one.

Yvonne Lee: ... understand the powers that be that try to shift that understanding, the stronger that we're going to be as a community.

Fanshen Cox: 100%.

Yvonne Lee: Thank you.

Fanshen Cox: Thank you.

Yvonne Lee: We're going to figure out where we're going to talk to you again in our six episode series here.

Jason Lee: Yes.

Fanshen Cox: Love it.

Yvonne Lee: All right. Yay.

Jason Lee: Much love.

Fanshen Cox: Much love. Yes.

Jason Lee: We identify with what we know, while often searching for that which we cannot, or will never know. While identity may leave us feeling invisible in the eyes of others, we must show our descendants we are not.

Yvonne Lee:

This podcast is produced by The Lagralane group. We would like to thank Lagralane Spirits' co producers and writers, Courtney Oliphant and Peppur Chambers-Soraci, co producer Matthew Soraci, podcast coordinator, Amanda Dinsmore, sound designer David B. Marling, The Launch Guild and Tobi Gad from his original piano improvisation.

Jason Lee:

We'd also like to thank Podcast Haven and our special guest on tonight's episode, Fanshen Cox. Remember to grab our White Negroni recipe and show notes by going to lagralanespirits.com. We'll catch you next time, and if you love the episode, make sure you rate, review and subscribe on Apple Podcasts, or wherever you listen.