

Erika Alexander: Everything that seemed to come to me, including the Mahabharata with 28 different cast members but from 17 different countries, started to tell me that narrative and storytelling and mixing and diversity, we should be the norm not the exception. I started to be an activist but I realized I was born one, it's in me.

Jason Lee: We are 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 reverent 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. In 1791, they revolted.

Speaker 4: Dreadful slaughter of 300 whites, damage to plantations.

Speaker 5: Enslaved Africans did this.

Speaker 4: Innocent blood spilled, slavery render the slaves cruel savages. Any uninformed brute can become a ferocious monster. White slaveholders have to account for the savages' barbarity.

Speaker 5: Black resistance is dangerous.

Yvonne Lee: In 1791, they revolted with weapons drawn and with a fervor upon which their very lives depended. They massacred those who massacred them and emerged victorious. Enslaved Africans did this. In Saint-Domingue, now known as Haiti, they were victorious. They changed the course of history. Yet, history books don't want to tell us so.

Jason Lee: We must know our history so that we may retell it, just as the Grills do. We must pass on the truths, take responsibility for them, treat them as our children, be thy the author.

Yvonne Lee: This is-

Jason Lee: The author's of history.

Yvonne Lee: Hello and welcome to tonight's episode of Laglarane Spirits podcast.

Jason Lee: What's up friends?

Yvonne Lee: This season, Jason and I are exploring all things identity. We'll revisit moments in American history through the lens of our own family roots and the legacy of the generations that have come before us. Tonight, we're asking ourselves, who are the authors of history? Who reserves that right? But before we get too heavy into that, let's sink into our drink. What are you making, babe?

Jason Lee: Yes, yes. Tonight I'm making a variation of a Daiquiri that's called the Boukman Daiquiri. There's a Boukman rum, that I'm going to swap in and use in this recipe. The Boukman rum is named after Dutty Boukman, who was one of the Haitian priests involved in the 1791 religious ceremony that ignited the Haitian Revolution. Alex Day is an East Coast bartender, he created this drink.

Jason Lee: He was I believe, at a bar in Philadelphia, but he got really famous at a bar called Death & Co. on the lower east side on Manhattan. His ingredients are an ounce and a half of rum, half ounce of cognac, three quarters ounce lime juice and a half ounce of simple syrup. For this drink tonight, I've included a couple of dashes of bitter ends jerk bitters.

Jason Lee: What I love about the cocktail is that it tells its own story, similar to this exploration of the Haitian Revolution. It includes the French cognac, and the Caribbean rum with the Caribbean rum taking the lead. As I said earlier, Dutty Boukman was one of the religious priests that led this ceremony that ignited the Haitian Revolution. They say, actually a thunderstorm occurred during this religious ceremony. Thousands of slaves had gathered in this area to hear this ceremony and this call to arms for freedom and they were so terrified by the storm and so inspired by the words that were being expressed.

Jason Lee: I just can't... Can you imagine being there? The impact of what that... In fact, let me check my Google because our listeners can't quite see me, but I actually have a bottle of Boukman rum, Boukman botanical rum and on the back of it, and shout out to Boukman rum, on the back of their bottle it says it's wildcrafted in Haiti and imported through Park Street imports in Miami. On the back of it is etched in the bottle, it says, "It began in 1791 at a secret ceremony where Dutty Boukman swore an oath to liberty, sealed it with rum and sparked the revolution that freed Haiti."

Yvonne Lee: Did you know that the 1791 revolution led Great Britain to stop participating in the Atlantic slave trade?

Jason Lee: Did you know that the recent assassination of the Haitian president is also tied into this couple of centuries old exploration of what has occurred through imperialism on the island of Saint-Domingue?

Yvonne Lee: Well, I found it interesting that the Louisiana Purchase occurred in part because of this slave revolt and if you look at history books, in fact, I googled Louisiana Purchase and went to britannica.com. It says, "There a good reason to believe that French failure in Santo Domingo, the island of Hispaniola, the imminence of renewed war with Great Britain and financial stringencies may have all prompted Napoleon in 1803 to offer for sale to the United States, the entire Louisiana Territory." French failure?

Jason Lee: This is why I love history and why I love what we're doing, exploring history through our various lenses and also through various cocktails. I wonder who wrote that Britannica entry. Why and how is that person and that source, the goddamn author of history, right?

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. It's incredibly disturbing to me. We know the answer has to do with who has majority power. Me as a black and Filipino woman, my intention goes to the slaver revolt because I identify with it. I want to scream to the rooftops about what really happened.

Jason Lee: This is why as storytellers and creatives, I think it's imperative that we take responsibility to tell the truth, sincerely to the best of our ability to tell the truth.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah, because if we don't do it, who will? It's crucial that black and brown and LGBTQ and so on and so on and so on. Whatever is your identity, that you have the power, resources and opportunity to tell stories that matter to you and to make art that reflects truth and perspective.

Jason Lee: That's why we started our respective film and theater companies, right Yvonne? Laglarane and Lower Depth Theater, to give a space to power for others and ourselves.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah, I mean, we started these two, our companies, Lower Depth, our theater company and Laglarane, our film company because we want it to be the answer to why... We wanted to support and be an answer to and a place where people could come to to tell their stories and provide the answer by providing a platform.

Jason Lee: And also to tell our stories, to help support filmmakers, theater practitioners, to tell stories that were important to them and also for these platforms to be a launching pad for us to tell our own stories in intimate and important ways.

Yvonne Lee: We love to acknowledge too that both storytelling ways, both art forms deliver a different kind of experience and then do it in completely different ways where you're doing it in community and everything is live on stage or if you are in also in community, but it's in these moving images that would be... You wouldn't be able to do that also on stage. Look at the play that Lower Depth commissioned in 2018, Safe Harbor.

Jason Lee: That's a perfect point because Yvonne, we got to a point in our acting careers in our own individual acting careers where we got interested as citizens of the world and as artists to take on issues that were and are important to us on deep

levels. As you mentioned, the play in 2018 that we commissioned, part of our cycle of violence series for Lower Depth Theater, Safe Harbor grew out of that. Babe, do you want to talk about that?

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. Yes, absolutely. Just like we were questioning authorship, representation and accountability, with Safe Harbor, it all started with a conversation around the table with the members of our theater company asking what is something we see in our community, being Los Angeles that literally thrives in the dark and needs to be brought into the light?

Yvonne Lee: One of those answers was child sex trafficking, which we learned was tragically thriving in our own backyard, not in some other country. It was right here. That's why we hired our dear friend, Tira Palmquist, to investigate and write truthfully from multiple, different perspectives. In the process, we educated Angelenos and ourselves about sex trafficking. We became accountable for our community and we provided a platform where we could actually talk about hope, how do we find a pathway to hope even while we're talking about young people being taken advantage?

Jason Lee: And, but, and to play devil's advocate, what if sometimes I just want to write a story or tell a story about a shoelace? I remember when I had the opportunity to play County Colin in a play in Chicago when we first met Yvonne at Victory Gardens. I remember I also had the opportunity to play Langston Hughes and so I remember kind of a creative struggle that those two awesome poets of the Harlem Renaissance had whereas Langston Hughes was the voice of the poetic voice of several generations. County Colin just wanted to be a poet.

Jason Lee: He wanted to write poems about flowers, still art on a shelf. If I don't want to get deep all the time with each and everything we're doing, again, I'm playing devil's advocate here, but am I being a disservice to the arts, my people, my opportunity, my platform?

Yvonne Lee: You know what? Sometimes I just want to be able to watch a comedy and just laugh like everybody else.

Jason Lee: But we don't get that opportunity though-

Yvonne Lee: I don't want to think about how hard it is.

Jason Lee: Yes, yes.

Yvonne Lee: I don't want to think about diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging. I just want to think about... I want to enjoy a nice breakfast just like all the other people who don't have to think about this stuff.

Jason Lee: Yep. Yep.

Yvonne Lee: Doesn't that sound nice? That's why you've got to drink a cocktail while you have these conversations.

Jason Lee: Yes, yes, I remember when grace, our oldest child came to us when she was about six years old, first grade, and she was having nightmares. We listened to NPR in our house and she came to us and said, she's having nightmares because her skin is kind of dark and she had the cops chasing after her in her dreams. We took that to school at a parent conversation.

Jason Lee: We told them and we were listening to parents debate and complain about how their kids just don't get along or having a hard time just kind of settling down and focusing or just settling down for dinner. We were like, "Well, our kid is complaining about racism in America and she's six years old. What do we do about this? And how do we prepare her, as she said, a child whose skin is kind of dark, to face a life living in this zeitgeist, in this world that we live in." We don't often get the chance to just sit and write a play about [inaudible 00:13:43]. Right?

Yvonne Lee: Right. But that being said, here's the question, if a Black artist tells a story about a shoelace, is it inherently political? Some would argue, yes.

Jason Lee: Yes. And others would argue yes too. One of the projects that we're exploring in Laglarane is an adaptation of another Harlem Renaissance novel, Infants of the Spring. Wallace Thurman wrote Infants of the Spring in the 1930s and what I've always loved about his exploration in that book is he takes on what they called, it was a manor, a boarding house in Harlem in the 1930s, where these artists lived and some just wanted to drink gin and others wanted to write the novel of their time, the next great Black American novel.

Jason Lee: It seems like this type of conversation, babe, is what they were having 100 years ago and we're having it now, "Can I just be an artist or do I have to uplift the race?" I am wanting to believe that Black art is innately and inherently political because there are individuals out there who do not see the humanity in "others". So every time we do express our own humanity, it becomes a political act.

Yvonne Lee: It is interesting because you want to be able to... You want to be able to choose one way or the other, but for a person of color, it could be that it has to be both at the same time, but you want the privilege of being able to choose. You don't always get that. Yes, in Harlem to have been a fly on a wall there... By the way, this Boukman Daiquiri is so delicious and I think I really appreciate the nod to the French influence. The French and Napoleon were basically no kind of good for Africans. But to deny that existence in the story is also to erase a part of the story. [foreign language 00:15:58].

Jason Lee: [foreign language 00:15:59]. I hear and I think you've been waiting this entire episode just to break out your French Yvonne.

Yvonne Lee: [foreign language 00:16:09].

Jason Lee: I love you, babe.

Yvonne Lee: Some French person is going to come. Somebody from the academy is going to come and be like, "Listen, you said that all wrong."

Jason Lee: Just have got to say to bring it back to the cocktail. We could just be drinking a Daiquiri. A simple Daiquiri, Ernest Hemingway, sipped on his Daiquiris in Cuba and a simple Daiquiri that he sipped on is a wonderful cocktail, bringing in the Caribbean element, bringing in the Boukman element, the Boukman Daiquiri story to a Daiquiri pour just innately brings in, inherently brings in richness of history and also a richness of color because I know our listeners cannot quite see the coloration of our cocktail and there is a kind of a deep, brownish hue to it with the cognac and the rum kind of colliding. That really is spectacular. It's kind of a light brown, kind of like my skin tone.

Yvonne Lee: I love that. Because I remember the first time you made me Daiquiri and I was like, "That's delicious." But to actually look at how we are color obsessed, even within the Black community. And that now visually, we're able to see how we can influence a drink and in a way, whether it be a drink or food or any of those things and take back or influence or acknowledge our presence and history, yeah, you know what? We're going to have brown rum and everything now. Cognac, anything that's got some hue, we're going to say, "You know what? You need a little bit of history that was forgotten."

Jason Lee: A paper bag test for our cocktails is what we're saying.

Yvonne Lee: No, no, no. Jason, it's not a paper bag test.

Jason Lee: No Vodka up in here?

Yvonne Lee: It's not a paper bag test because really dark skinned Black people will be like, "You know what? Screw your paper bag test." Anyway, I wouldn't pass the paper bag test.

Jason Lee: I love that and I love you babe. Tonight, our guest is the extraordinary actor and activist Erika Alexander who has got a whole lot to say about artistic responsibility.

Yvonne Lee: She sure does. Yay.

Jason Lee: Hey. Eric Alexander, how are you doing?

Erika Alexander: I'm good. I'm great, Jason. Great to see you. Yvonne, thank you for the invitation.

Jason Lee: Thanks for being here with us. Thank you for your time.

Erika Alexander: Of course. Thank you.

Yvonne Lee: As we all know, we're so excited about this podcast where we're talking about identity. This one we're talking about who are the authors of history and we're so excited to have Miss Erika Alexander here. Matt [inaudible 00:19:17], we got to meet you guys, Color Farm Media at South by Southwest. I remember just

feeling like, "Oh my God! We have found..." We had found kin in this journey to create diversity, equity, inclusion, exploring identity and none other than Color Farm and Eric Alexander are doing the same thing. So I thought, "Okay, we've got to keep..." At that time, it was because of the John Lewis story, good trouble.

Erika Alexander: I remember sitting in that lobby and having never been to South by Southwest. You were one of the first people we met and I thought, "Wow." if South by Southwest is like this, this is going to be great. It was all downhill from there. But no, I'm just kidding. [inaudible 00:20:02]. It was actually cool but you set it off in a very high standard. And then it was wonderful to meet Jason later on. So that's cool.

Jason Lee: Yeah, I came in the conversation a little bit later and I just got to say, as a man of a certain age. I am a huge fan of your acting work. Always have been since the mid 90s there and so when the conversation started between you and Yvonne and Ben and Matt, and I missed that conversation. I was doing some work up in Denver at the time, but by the time I came in, when they told me that you all were chopping it up, I was like, "This is incredible."

Jason Lee: To go from the acting space to the activism space, spaces and the documentary storytelling and everything that you are doing and all about it, it's just very exciting to me because I feel like Yvonne, my wife and I have a similar kind of drive in storytelling, coming at it from actors and also as producers as well. So it's just really, really cool to have you here on our podcast talking about these themes that we're going to launch into. I just needed to say that because I'm kind of geeking out a little bit.

Erika Alexander: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Yvonne Lee: For our listeners that are out there, as Jason has definitely demonstrated here, that Erika is beloved for her iconic acting roles as Maxine Shaw and Living Single, Detective Latoya and Get Out, Purina and Black Lightning, Linda Diggs and Wu Tang and American saga and Bob Ballard and Run the world. And I have witnessed this as well, Erika wears many hats, not only as an actress but as a trailblazing activist, entrepreneur, creator, producer and director. I believe this is true, an all around boss.

Erika Alexander: Thank you.

Yvonne Lee: I want to be that as well.

Erika Alexander: I love it. Me too.

Yvonne Lee: Yes.

Jason Lee: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: As we've said already, she's the co-founder of Color Farm Media and she represents one of the most bold, daring and powerful voices in our country today. We are so happy to have you here.

Erika Alexander: Bless you. Thank you, Yvonne. Can I marry you?

Yvonne Lee: Yes. I need-

Erika Alexander: You say nice things about me like that, I've got to get married to you. Bye Jason. Beat it!

Jason Lee: This is when I just silence myself right now and just listen.

Yvonne Lee: Based on what Jason just said, he'd be like that, "That would be okay. That would be all right."

Erika Alexander: I love it.

Yvonne Lee: Erika, I was wondering if you could also give our listeners a little bit of a background on your entry into TV and film. And then how activism also became this role that you also play, I guess. We've got to think of it as play at some point when it comes to activism, just to keep it real, but keep it fun and find the joy and the love, you know?

Erika Alexander: Sure. Actually, I started my career or was... I was actually discovered doozy. One of these types of stories that people back in the day used to hope to be discovered by Hollywood? It actually happened to me. I was 14 my mother had put me in a summer program at New Freedom Theater in Philadelphia. We had just moved there. There was a six week program and in the fifth week, a movie came to town and they were looking for the two girls to audition for this movie, a Merchant Ivory film called My Little Girl starring Mary Stuart Masterson, Geraldine, Page and James Earl Jones.

Erika Alexander: After a whole mess of auditions and screen tests, the little girl they found was me. From there, I got my little [sag 00:23:31] card and started my journey. At the time they represented not just [inaudible 00:23:38], which of course I had no idea what they were but health care for us was a big deal because actually I'm from Arizona.

Yvonne Lee: Me too.

Erika Alexander: Originally, both my parents were orphans. Yeah, there you go. We were just talking about Arizona. Come on, it's going to be the new place to be at because everything's too hot or too cold or falling into the ocean. But I'm from Arizona. Both my parents were orphaned. I'm one of six and I spent the first 11 years of my life in a hotel called Starlight after Route 66.

Erika Alexander: My father who was an itinerant preacher at Church of God and Christ, Pentecostal, then changed to German Lutheran had a bad heart his whole life. It made things very difficult for us. I started working around five years of age with my sisters and brothers walking around people's houses, knocking on doors, asking to take out garbage, sweep their porch, whatever we could do, recycling cans and bottles to this day, I can't pass a can or bottle on the street without thinking that could be half a penny, a quarter of a penny because that's how we

made up for basically a life where he was a tipped wage worker because that's how you do it. You pass the plate.

Erika Alexander: Fate stepped in and the German Lutherans ended up kind of adopting him as a pastor. They really liked him because he was very charismatic. This was just at the '70s where they were looking for new people to be bring in, there's a fold maybe because the '60s were so harsh and very debilitating. They started to sponsor him. They sent him to first Poughkeepsie in New York to be an apprentice there as a pastor and then to Philadelphia to the Lutheran Theological Seminary. That's why we were there.

Erika Alexander: Long story short, there I was in the summer program, got my little sag card, moved forward. My mother said I could do it as long as I kept my grades up. I was in Philadelphia High School for Girls, an academic high school. So that worked out. I eventually got into NYU but I didn't stay past two weeks because a play came to town. It was Peter Brooks, Mahabharata. And Peter Brooks is a really heavy director from England. It was a nine-hour play and I asked my mother could I do it because he had wanted to cast me and she said, "If you're going around the world, I can't give you an education like that will be." So I left I didn't go back to college.

Erika Alexander: But it started my career, it started me going to work with the Royal Shakespeare Theater, doing plays and a lot of independent films. Eventually, that's where Camille Cosby saw me doing a play at the public theater. Joseph Pap's last play was a play called Forbidden City with the great Gloria Foster, Gloria Foster is that fantastic actress who was in...

Yvonne Lee: I have chills you telling the story. You're right, this is... Keep going. Keep going. Tell me more.

Erika Alexander: Gloria Foster was the wonderful actress in The Matrix. [inaudible 00:26:27] First Matrix, have a cookie, [inaudible 00:26:28]. That is Camille Cosby's best friend. And apparently the story goes that Camille Cosby kept bugging Bill Cosby saying, "You have to see the play, to see Gloria and this girl." And I was the girl she was talking about. He never saw the play. But I get a call one day and come to his house, the casting director meets me and he makes up the role of cousin Pam for me right there and there I was now on TV schedule and that started my whole thing toward Maxine Shaw, Living Single and those types of things and giving me a broader scope in terms of what I could do inside of the world of entertainment. That's kind of my origin story.

Jason Lee: That is an awesome origin story. You're also the co-founder of-

Erika Alexander: Thank you.

Jason Lee: Yes, yes. You're the co founder of Color Farm Media. I'm just wondering if you can even tell us how you started that up, how you met Ben, how's that going. Your net jump, because it is a natural extension of your storytelling past of how you have maneuvered from your acting space to this documentary, film, social activism stance.

Erika Alexander: Sure, going back, because your background is similar to mine in terms of being a part of what creators do. As an actor, you're more of a tool than toolmaker which I always wanted to be more of a tool maker. When I was on those sets and experiencing the inequities that Yvonne sort of hinted at, specifically, if you're a black woman, they are very apparent, especially back in the day. I started acting in the '80s.

Erika Alexander: If you're a dark skinned woman, it gets even more apparent because of the things they asked you to do. Just being black in the industry at all is a miracle if you're able to do it at any level and be successful. It almost never happens. Which is a shame, because we've been so really great as being the culture makers for the world, not just America. But we've been cut off from storytelling and I think it was specifically because it is the most powerful tool for change. That is the truth.

Erika Alexander: I didn't realize that then, when I was too young to realize that I just knew that I wasn't... Didn't want to do parts where I was going to play just foster children, prostitutes and a slave and that's the first three roles I played, including the first role that they found me for. I was a foster child. So I thought wow, I want to do some of the roles of the ingenue, the ingenue where you get to play whether it's Juliet and those types of things. I was told by my agent, when I mentioned that, she said, "Erika, no one could ever mistake you for an ingenue." I was 19. No one would say that to start at [inaudible 00:29:12].

Erika Alexander: I think she thought that as sort of a backwards compliment to say that you're much more grounded and deep. But I took that as where am I supposed to go? What am I supposed to do? Because at the time, if you didn't do those roles, the only things you could do was wait to be old enough to play authority figures. Judges, the help that type of things and that would be for a very long time to come. Because I would be playing teenagers even when I wasn't a teenager for a while and if you're of color, you stay younger looking for a longer time.

Erika Alexander: I didn't know what they would do with me. But when you think about that, that's what got me Jason into trying to figure out how I could be more in charge of my destiny. Like I said, I was out in those mean streets asking people for jobs at five. So I had already been inside of an economy that I thought that I was helping my parents not because I was doing it to be nice, that's a survival. To me, I knew that I needed to be in survival mode there. I started looking at the writers and the executive producers on Cosby Show and other shows that I started to be on and thinking, "Wow, they do have power. I've got to learn how to write."

Erika Alexander: So therefore, it takes me a very long time to figure out how I can gain the discipline to write and that it's a real craft and you just don't show up and say, "I'm a writer, but it didn't occur to me then." And I just kept plugging at it badly for a while and then I ended up marrying a writer, Tony Puryear was the first African American writer to write a movie that made over \$100 million. He wrote Eraser. He was my husband. I married him at 27 and he was the first one to sort of say, "Erika, you've got to sit your butt in that chair, you've got to discipline yourself and you've got to go till you're finished." Writings not writing, it's rewriting.

Erika Alexander: Sort of giving me some sort of template to think about it and also some of the confidence that he had rubbed off on me and he kept saying, "You've got to read to be a good writer. Bullshit in, bullshit out." Things like that and then we started creating together a little bit and trying to make things like concrete park which became a graphic novel and things like that. But over time, I started to see that the more I wrote and the more I created things, the more powerful I felt. The less powerful I felt waiting for a call from an agent or getting a roll and everybody saying, "You're doing so well. My god, you're great, you're great." But then nothing comes of it.

Erika Alexander: You can be encouraged to death. So there you are, the inequities didn't just spread about because of racism. They were there because in the inherent place that you are as an actor is one of non-power, until you get famous and you were not going to get famous in that paradigm. That was not going to be it. People like Halle Berry could get famous and push that forward a bit and even she had big great difficulty, she talks about it. And then there were the few that made it past that and they only allowed for a few and it's still that way to some degree.

Jason Lee: Thank you for sharing that. As an actor, my kind of story, my birth mom is German and my birth dad's brother is African American from Nebraska. My whole thing as an actor, when I was much younger, I was too light to be dark, too dark to be light and the casting room didn't quite know what to do with me. I couldn't be on the streets, too late for the streets, too dark for the board room.

Jason Lee: I am finding this past decade I'll be 50 this year, this past decade especially on the stage I found more work in that role of whatever that is that that represents, whatever that zeitgeist is, that's what's coming at me now. I hear you loud and clear. Let's pick up the reins ourselves. Let's go tell some stories and that's brought the pen to my hand as well. That's cool.

Erika Alexander: Absolutely. Colorism has killed many of a career but it's also really distorted what being Black is. We're all sitting up here with some form of mostly very specifically what European is in us, if it's not in our DNA, it's certainly in our outlook and in the way we think.

Erika Alexander: Here we are talking about who's too dark to do this or that and light skinned brothers like you were kept from the very dramatic roles because Sidney Poitier and Denzel Washington and Wesley Snipes, to get those roles had to be dark skinned. And the era of the light skinned brother getting those roles was before then when they were the ones who were transitioning from a white space inside of the Lena Horne age where they had lighter skinned men play a different form of sort of the acceptable white version of what Black people could be. It's so messed up, it's unreal and I look now and think, we've also digested and ate those stereotypes as well. So you still see them propagated, that the light skinned person cannot seem to break through on those roles and when they do, people are like, "Oh my gosh, but why is that... We should be able to go back and forth." But it's destroyed us.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. As a Black Filipino woman coming to... I love the theater and I loved storytelling and even in that space, I thought wow, I'm Black and Filipino, but in

order to be in this space, I have to choose. I have to choose which route I'm going to go down based on what those people see. I did that for a long time because I love being black but then I realized there was always a situation where I had internalized which is very dim from this black white dynamic. I'm kind of on the outside of that but I'm also...

Yvonne Lee: I've got two browns, brown and Black that I'm trying to navigate, as a child taking into my adulthood and to career, not Black enough to be Black, not Filipino enough to be Filipino. People don't even know what Asian is. They think it's only one thing. Not even realizing that I was coming up in an age where we're Asian American Pacific Islander was actually like an activist term to link together all people of all... Whether you're Asian or Pacific Islander, just to have a platform.

Yvonne Lee: And so then that identity, the specific identity of being Filipino is now not as important if you want to have a platform. That's why we're hiring... If you're Chinese, but you get hired for being Korean or you're Filipino, but you get hired for being Japanese because there's this movement that all of us have to come together. It's interesting, just on both sides of how I have had to figure out how to identify myself for other people because... And stop with the, "I'm not Black enough to be Black, not Filipino enough to be Filipino." People don't know that Asian people can be dark in terms of the industry and their experience.

Erika Alexander: No, and that's the story, I would love to see. I would love to see that story. I would pay money to see a person with your face and your background be in that space, whether it was in the Philippines or here in the United States. What means because... What was it like for you, Yvonne, going into those rooms? They think, "She's exotic." What was the reception that you got?

Yvonne Lee: Well, it actually came to the point where for me, the word exotic became... It wasn't a compliment. Because what it actually did was show that person's ignorance about what the world actually looks like. Like, "Oh, you're exotic. You're Hawaiian. You're..." And then you'd have to... There was only so long, so many times that I could say that this is a teaching moment.

Yvonne Lee: Even as an artist, what I ended up realizing was that the people who are making those choices and this is like, I'm not at your level of where you were in your career, but this is like in the beginning, the people who are making those choices, it's not necessarily the head casting director, it's the young people whose life experience is limited. You are not getting into rooms based on someone who's only seen this much of the world.

Yvonne Lee: I guess when I would walk into the room, I would just hope that it was these things where I was giving over so much power hoping that I was black enough or maybe if not black enough, maybe pretty enough. I didn't even think about going for Asian roles, because there weren't enough and I didn't feel comfortable being lumped into the Asian world. I'm Filipino.

Jason Lee: Yeah, yeah.

Erika Alexander: Right. Isn't that interesting? You can make that distinction, here I am saying that here I am, I was too Black for the room. So then that meant that the thing I'm complaining about is the one thing that would have pushed you forward, meaning that there was a definite sort of expectation of me because they could tell what I was. I wasn't confusing them, like you were Jason. One thing that's holding me back is the one thing that could have pushed you forward. And the thing that held me back ultimately was the thing that you have. It's so messed up what we're talking about.

Jason Lee: That's the tricky all the levers and pulleys of American racism. My mentor acting-wise coming up in Chicago was Brother Harry Lennox. Harry told me, pulled me aside a couple of times and was just like, "Dude, just walk your path. Man, just walk your path. Whatever will come to you will come to you. Don't get hung up in it. It is what it is."

Erika Alexander: Yep.

Yvonne Lee: The big question is and we've touched on it a bit, but to even go deeper as we're talking about who the authors of history, what responsibility do you feel you hold as an artist? You can weave in a little bit if you'd like, the kind of work that you're doing with Color Farm Media, but also talk about the responsibility that it takes. Can we just be artists or are we holding a bigger platform where we have to be a little bit more conscious of the path that we're going down? What responsibility do you feel you hold as an artist?

Erika Alexander: I think to be an artist is the hardest thing. Okay. I think it's the hardest thing in the world. I think that it's noble and I think that it asks from you more than a pound of flesh. I think that anybody takes it on with any sort of seriousness understands that after a while, there's a lot of real joy of meeting people and being able to have the ability to see past the boundaries that we put in front of each other and I'm talking about whether it's the physical boundaries, territory, race, gender, all those things, that's our job.

Erika Alexander: But also, it's a responsibility to demand some kind of truth from the world and keep pushing truths in front of people, so we move forward. I believe that because of all these years of bad storytelling, that's why white superiority was ruling. We saw a great example of it with George Floyd, where that police officer who, in my world, wouldn't have even rated as somebody I probably would have hung out with, he doesn't even look like he's that interesting or anything, held the power of life and death over that Black man with his knee on his neck and he did it in broad daylight and he didn't even blink.

Erika Alexander: While he was being recorded, he knew in his heart that he will not be held accountable or so he thought, but the truth is, that's because storytelling told himself and it continues to perpetuate these types of narratives. What do I think that being an artist is about or creator, any of these things is that we need new worlds, we need new authors, we need new points of view, we need new discoveries, we need new stories and strategies and not just the new versions of familiar brands.

Erika Alexander: I believe in what Reverend Barber said, that this is the beginning of the third reconstruction. We have to push beyond the boundaries that perpetuate white supremacy, tell a better story, but also tell a truth. And so we demand we support me amplify and we repeat, that's what we do.

Jason Lee: 100%.

Erika Alexander: That's what artists do. They think it's about celebrity, they think it's about red carpets, they think it's about all these sorts of things that people may get. But that's the very few at the top 90 something percent of sag are not working and can barely have health care.

Erika Alexander: Hilary Swank got the Oscar that night and went to go eat burgers. She had no health care when she won that Oscar. And so here we are in a position to not only provide some kind of... I think deliver some kind of justice, they are talking about critical race theory. Critical race theory is built... Even though it's not taught by anything except for law schools and colleges if you take it, but it really is actually embedded inside of storytelling.

Yvonne Lee: Yep.

Erika Alexander: And that's why I laugh that people think that Juneteenth was going to be such a small thing. I said, "No, it's another way and reason to start to have conversations about stories that no one will tell." And that is actually the key to planting the seeds that will change everything.

Erika Alexander: It won't be legislation. Legislation is changed by storytelling and narrative. It won't be... It's story. We've told a story about the man called Jesus Christ, and it has lasted for hundreds of years.

Yvonne Lee: Yes.

Erika Alexander: That's how powerful storytelling is. You can tell that about Muhammad and/or Confucius and/or Buddhism or whatever, storytelling is the key and creators are the key to that. So anybody who's in that game is my brother. Anybody that's doing those types of narrative changes and giving their all to it, whether they're inside of it as a performer, actor or producers like you, they have the utmost respect. It is military strategy and we should see this. But it's smuggled in from story telling.

Jason Lee: Erika, that is tremendous. And I was going to ask, I found a quote that you had said about John Lewis, about meeting Mr. Lewis, you said the boy from Troy, Alabama reminded you of the girl from Flagstaff, Arizona. I now know no loud and clear what you meant by that, your politicalism is right on point and we share it 100% and this leads me into our final big question, Sister Erika, how has your identity and responsibility as an artist changed over your career? We've touched on it throughout the episode tonight, but I'm just wondering if you have some thoughts on that. I'll ask it again, how has your identity and responsibility as an artist changed over your career?

Erika Alexander: Well, I thought I was being an artist to ask for better roles and then want to build them or at least create or function as a person who could do it, if I couldn't demand it or see it for myself. That led me to really start to ask questions about why it is I was in the position I was in because I started to see through myself, the collateral damage of what racism is.

Erika Alexander: I saw it then and understood better with story of my parents, young itinerant pastors on the road, having six kids and the things that they had to do or endure just to maintain and survive. I started to see it inside of the narratives that were being told, that I was a part of. I was in so many social stories, whether it was Long Walk Home with Whoopi Goldberg, Common Ground in Boston, The Busing up there. Everything that seemed to come to me, including the Mahabharata, with 28 different cast members but from 17 different countries, started to tell me that narrative and storytelling and mixing and diversity, we should be the norm, not the exception.

Erika Alexander: I started to be an activist but I realized I was born one. It's in me, the DNA of Harriet Tubman is in me. The DNA of people who have come way before us, Black, white and otherwise and found common ground with each other and moved this country forward is the reason that it would be the thing I'd have to take up in order to tell a better story even if I couldn't be in them. Being black in America is having to navigate or confront racism every day. Being a black actress, especially dark skinned as I say, it's not meant to be a political act, but it became one.

Erika Alexander: Activism is finding a way to discuss the disparities and the inequities and [inaudible 00:45:45] that are inherent inside a complicated system. You are not encouraged to do that. There's so many systemic issues at play that after a while, the downward pressure on your opportunities and your wages, the narrative, all that, the real damage that's made in the world has to be confronted, but narratives shape how we see each other, definitely for good, bad or ugly. The story, again, about the police officer, who murdered George Floyd in broad daylight told himself, it was a lie.

Erika Alexander: So if I'm a storyteller and I'm inside of this space, that's so powerful, then all you can do is take up arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing in them as Shakespeare says, to die, to sleep no more. You've got to do what you've got to do. That's my Harriet. The swamps that we're walking now, if Harriet can do it, we can. And so that's how it is.

Jason Lee: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: I just love everything that you're saying right now. I remember and it was in an acting class, there's some people that... They just haven't there... They're the trappings of Hollywood and that's what you go after. And I think when I was younger, I definitely went after, I just want to tell a great story and play a great character, that's me as an artist. And then I realized that that's not the way, even at the theater level or the film level, it doesn't always... You don't always get to choose the kinds of stories that you want to tell.

Yvonne Lee: It's so at some point and that's what I love hearing, what I'm hearing what you're saying is that at some point, you have to figure out what you stand for. Even as an artist, that informs all of your work and that informs who you're going to work with, and the kinds of stories you're going to tell.

Erika Alexander: What do you stand for?

Yvonne Lee: But if you were chasing the carrot of this fairy tale of what it is to be an artist, then you're actually not being true to yourself because you have to do soul searching to figure out not just to dive into a character, to figure about this mom who has a single mom with three kids and is trying to make it, you actually have to have an opinion about the world and what it means for a Black single mom with three kids, three black boys and what she has to do in order to make that story work.

Yvonne Lee: That has to be a part of your life narrative and not just because you want to go play that role because it sounds like you get to cry. Which is what I would think... It's very, very simple but I definitely remember this moment when what do I stand for and letting all of that inform everything. That was the thing that led me down to a more complete life, just being happy as a person so I could give that to the world as we fight to make it a better place.

Jason Lee: Speaking of fighting to make it a better place, while we still have Erika on here, we've got to mention, we've got to bring up, if you can give us just a little bit of a sneak peek at what you have coming up with Dear Evanston.

Erika Alexander: Yes.

Jason Lee: Which we have been talking about. I wonder if you can just share a little bit about what's going on with that doc?

Erika Alexander: Absolutely. So we've been talking about it from a few ways. The point of view of how you get inside of this. Documentary making came out of me really being an activist. I had always admired Hillary Clinton because she was a Scorpio. I like loud women. I like strong women. I like women who people are set against, it's always made me curious to find out what they were about. Because I believe that strong women are not supported enough. They're often made wicked witches.

Erika Alexander: That sort of led me to her cause and it was before Senator Obama had joined in, I'd already been asked by several Black women to support her. And through this journey, I met the kings and the queens of social, not just activism, but civil rights. And one of them was John Lewis. I remained friends with one of his staff members. I got a call one day and they said, "We heard you started a new company," that was Color Farm Media with Ben Arnon, who's my co-founder in that. "We think that there's this documentary and would you get involved? They could use some help." I said, "I'd do anything I could. Whatever, I don't need to have anything to do with it. I would love to help because I want to be of service to John Lewis."

Erika Alexander: Long story short, I ended up doing a documentary about him and producing. [inaudible 00:50:15] Beginning Dawn Porter, who had done Bobby Kennedy for president and a really fantastic filmmaker and she said she was doing something about John Lewis and we said, "Hey, let's partner up." And she was like, "I'm down." And then suddenly, we were on our way. We did not know then that this would be to eat the last year before he would pass away, the pandemic would start and all these things. We'd get it done just in the nick of time, before everything shut down.

Erika Alexander: And then he would have this great final act of not only passing away, but in a year that we needed that energy, good trouble, to push away some of the very dark energy that had settled inside of our democracy. Sometimes you realize you just say yes to life, because you go, "What's the right thing to do?" He's done so many things for us. But it also did so much for us as a young company. It put us in a position to be able to talk to people like you about what we were doing and also tell people what we were trying to do. We wanted to rebrand Blackness.

Erika Alexander: We called ourselves the Motown of film, television and tech. We knew that blackness had been branded evil and more importantly, dark and ignorant and dangerous. We knew that if it could be branded that way, it could be unbranded, it could be rebranded.

Yvonne Lee: Yes.

Erika Alexander: That's what our goal is. Ultimately, if you see things and we appreciate people like Chadwick Boseman, who is the Black Panther of Wakanda and that fictional story, is a Stan Lee and Jack King Kirby thing. But there they were telling a story about this Black king that needed to be realized decades later by this Black actor, that would only have the power to do it then.

Erika Alexander: Therefore, things like that documentary led to Dear Evanston and Dear Evanston is a documentary that we're now, all of us, a part of. Thanks to you, we're pushing forward. It is a story about reparations. We started doing a documentary about reparations with my co-director, Whitney Dao, who did the Whiteness Project and had done Two Towns of Jasper and he's a white man who was working inside of race and narrative change or nice wanting to bring more White ears and I said, "I'm down with that."

Erika Alexander: We started off with Sheila Jackson Lee, Juneteenth 2019 in D.C. and then suddenly, the story popped up and somebody gave us a call and said, "You need to check out what's going on in Evanston, Illinois, with Robin Ruth Simmons, the older woman." And we got down there and we were able to film the sort of emergence of the Rosa Parks of reparations. She was the first person to pass a bill for reparations in American history. This on the evening of 2019 which would of course be the 1619 Project was 400 years of that. I thought that that was no mistake as well.

Erika Alexander: There we were, following her and we asked to engage and be with her. She said, "Yes, please come with me on this journey." That we thought it was important that we document this, that this was American history, that this was the most

historic thing that could happen and that Black people were getting ready to have a reckoning. This is the third reconstruction and we are the architects of it and she's one of them.

Erika Alexander: To be sitting on the bus at Rosa Parks, that's what it's like. And so we've been doing that for the past year and a half. You guys joined our cause and become producers and supporters of this film, but also we're also doing other things inside of it. We're doing a reparations podcast that we did with Charlemagne, the God who called me one day was like, "Yo, Queen! You still doing that reparations thing?" I was like, "Yeah." "Come do it with me at the Black Event Network."

Erika Alexander: And so we were there doing that. Now, we're doing a new one with Audible and also Kevin Hart and him have a deal, and that's called Finding Tamika, about a Black woman who went missing in Spartanburg, South Carolina. And getting into that, and we're looking not just at this murder, which was very heinous and horrible, but we're looking at who was the woman that we lost? We have Black women and girls disappearing all the time. We don't know who they are. And they are here in broad daylight. We should look for them, we should look to see why Diamond Reynolds was in that the car screaming about Philando Castile. Where is she? What happened to her?

Erika Alexander: We need to find these Black women, we need to find these Black people because if we lose them, I think we lose everything.

Jason Lee: Amen. Amen. All of that just seems to strike me. You've mentioned it a couple of times now, the third reconstruction, it is a continuation, it is our watch. There are allies and thinking of those images of King and all marching, Brother Louis and all marching, with dogs [sic'eming 00:55:07] them and just marching and we march on. This has been an extraordinarily inspiring, awesome, awesome conversation.

Erika Alexander: Thank you. And for me, too.

Yvonne Lee: For me over this past year-

Jason Lee: Thank you. Go ahead Yvonne. I'm sorry.

Yvonne Lee: Sorry. I'm moved. I'm moved. So I'm talking over people. I'm talking over and I'm interrupted. Sorry about that. There's some things that I've had to face myself in terms of what I understand about history. That I realized there was so much Black excellence that I thought that when I was growing up, it was only taught... That it started with M.L.K. and that's where it started.

Yvonne Lee: As time has gone on and I've learned more and more and more and go, "Oh, my God, why do I think that it only goes back to 1960 or 1950 or 1925?" It's from the moment that we got here, 1877. It goes back so far, that learning about that, that that excellence across culture, we're talking about Black culture, I can speak to things I don't know about, Filipino culture, that it has not made it to a platform. It's so interesting like when we realize how many truths have been told

without surrounding truths, which makes those truths we've been told lies. That's the part where I find who are the authors of history?

Yvonne Lee: I send my kids to school and I say, "Don't believe anything they say. Question everything."

Jason Lee: [inaudible 00:57:02].

Erika Alexander: Question everything. You know what? The Russians understood that. During the Russian Revolution, they would always fight to take the notes, because whoever took the notes controlled the meeting and whoever controlled the meeting controls history. And so that's why it's important to say we need to be the people who keep the notes, the people who are keeping the books, who go back and say, "No, we'll write the book. We don't care if..."

Erika Alexander: Because the worst thing about what we're doing as the people, don't fear what you don't know, fear the continuance of ignorance. Anything that acts as a barrier to greater understanding, obstruct our talent and our participation in this great third reconstruction. We need you. We need you to prepare a warrior's toolkit to go combat the downward forces of progress. But the truth is, this is a battle and it's going to take creative thinking and strategies to beat it. They understand it better than we do on the side of darkness. They actually use very simple templates to seed ideas. We, who are the greatest idea makers in the world, do not play with our full force. We have got to stop thinking that way. We have the power.

Jason Lee: Amen to that. You've got to be a surgeon with it. I love what you're saying, you've got to go to war because you're right, they're fighting dirty.

Erika Alexander: Absolutely.

Jason Lee: I can't remember who the individual was that said, "I think our problem is we love. Their problem is they hate."

Erika Alexander: Yeah. Yeah. I do believe that it takes, you'd have to have a healthy dose of both. Not hate so much, but really to understand, yes, that if you hate ignorance, if you hate racism, you've got to go down and beat it. I hate ignorance and I hate racism. How do I beat that? Because it's acting on itself through that person. How can you change their narrative?

Erika Alexander: Because truth won't get there, but there are ways. Roddenberry did it through Star Trek. He showed us a way to talk about these things. Science fiction is a way to talk about now, the now.

Jason Lee: First interracial kiss.

Erika Alexander: Absolutely. Again, anybody that's in that space is on the front lines. It is not necessarily in congress. Those people to me, they can take the momentum we give them and push things forward. But the narrative, guess who's coming to dinner? All these things. The reason why [inaudible 00:59:30] was so important,

the reason why we talked about colorism and it acting towards saying, "Why can't Yvonne be the fullness of who she is? Let's tell stories from that point of view. Let's see what it is to be Filipino African American."

- Erika Alexander: What does that mean for us? Well, it means that we can't suddenly see it as an other and that's important. We need Asian and African Americans to come together to combat this craziness. We have to start telling a better story about who we are and about what we are mixed with. It's not just with other people's DNA, it's the ideas that are stopping us. They're better ideas out there and we need to start to inculcate
- Yvonne Lee: Everything that you're saying, it's so interesting, Jason knows I always talk about this book because I think it's amazing, but it's a book called Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent and she talks about-
- Jason Lee: Isabel Wilkerson.
- Yvonne Lee: Jason just looked over at the book because I put it on his desk.
- Erika Alexander: Yes, it's all over. I bought it so I have to read it-
- Yvonne Lee: You bought it? Okay. When you get done reading it girl, you have to call and we have to talk about it.
- Erika Alexander: It's not a guide. It's a big, big book. It's going to be a long night in the theater.
- Yvonne Lee: Basically everything that you're saying, she weaves in personal story with history.
- Erika Alexander: There it is.
- Yvonne Lee: I think that all of those things go together and so the thing that we think we're fighting, we think it's racism, but it's actually caste and so every time we think we're in racism-
- Erika Alexander: That's true.
- Yvonne Lee: Racism is really like a... It's a ruse that we think we can conquer but we're looking in the wrong direction. It's really over there. I found it so fascinating. We've been hoodwinked.
- Jason Lee: We've been hoodwinked. We've been bamboozled.
- Erika Alexander: Bamboozled.
- Jason Lee: Come on now.
- Yvonne Lee: [inaudible 01:01:16] Coalition of people that this is their main focus and we all are able to have as each other, on speed dial. I'm doing this thing. Is there one? Is there a speed dial for people who are doing this work?

Erika Alexander: Yes. Well, you speed dialed me and here I am. I'm [crosstalk 01:01:35]-

Jason Lee: This is it.

Erika Alexander: You said we need to have it. I'm like, "Yvonne, you are it."

Jason Lee: We're here.

Erika Alexander: We need, need, need, need, need more people like you who are really out there, again on the front lines and willing to risk it all.

Yvonne Lee: To that inspiration.

Jason Lee: Game recognize game. Like-mindedness recognize like-mindedness. Cheers.

Erika Alexander: Cheers. Here's to the third reconstruction brothers.

Jason Lee: To the third reconstruction. Yes.

Erika Alexander: It'll come. It'll come soon.

Jason Lee: Change is going to come. Change is going to come.

Erika Alexander: Thank you. Change is going to come.

Jason Lee: History is our responsibility. It is our responsibility to understand it, to question it and to make it a part of ourselves. Art follow suit as does identity. It is up to you what you do with it. Let's be responsible to what we've been given.

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; co-producer, Matthew Soraci; podcast coordinator, Amanda Dinsmore; sound designer, David B. Marling; The Launch Guild and Tobi Gad from his original piano improvisation.

Yvonne Lee: We'd also like to thank Podcast Haven and our guest, Erika Alexander. Remember to grab our Boukman Daiquiri recipe and show notes by going to Lagralanespirits.com. We'll see you next time. If you love the cocktail or the episode, make sure you rate, review and subscribe on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen.