

ERIKA ALEXANDER: CA TASK FORCE REPARATIONS HEARING
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Hello. My thanks to The California Task Force for the invitation. Ms. Alecia Turner for getting me here, and my friend screenwriter, CS Drotman for her help. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today. I've been trying to get "government" attention for a while, so if I'm here now that means all my "good troublemaking" has not been in vain.

My name is Erika Alexander and I'm an actress. I've been an actress for nearly 36 years. You may have seen my work, if not there's still time. Thank goodness for syndication. Through the years I've expanded my skill set and added to my resume, now I am also a writer, producer, director and cofounder of Color Farm Media. We call ourselves the Motown of film, television and tech.

And I had to learn those skills in order to survive and thrive in a business that has for years traded on toxic narratives that were designed to create me, and minority communities as "the other." We have made progress and for that I'm grateful to those who paved the way, and for abolitionist creators determined to

destroy those stereotypes. But along the way I learned a thing or two, about being human and influencing narratives. So I can bear witness to the power of story as a mighty tool towards making reparations for African Americans today and in the future. Here's what I want to talk about. 1:26

- Storytelling. If you ain't in the storytelling business you ain't in the game. Everything is about narratives. Everything. And those who control the narratives, control the world.
- Activists. I'll tell you what I learned from great activists who are for reparations and others who are against. Why they tell the best stories and why that matters.
- Theory. Why Storytelling is the vehicle to move hearts and minds of Americans toward reparations.
- Techniques. I'll discuss how key narratives devices help the medicine go down.

Today I am here as a journeyman *storyteller* and explorer returned from the front lines and badlands called Storyville. **I'm here to tell you how to sell the story of reparations.** To start, I'll tell you my story.

My Story

It's an *origin* story. I've worked in tv & film. You probably know me from *The Cosby Show*, *Living Single* and *Get Out*. You may even know me as the Producer of the recent John Lewis documentary, *Good Trouble*. And I'm proud to be a working actor. I'm one of the lucky ones, because before all of that I was just a Black girl from the mountains of Flagstaff, Arizona. 2:57 My mother was a teacher. My father was an itinerant preacher. They were both orphans. They had six kids. We lived in the Starlite motel's two-bedroom shack, off of Route 66.

It was tough and we did a lot of dumpster diving. I started work around five years old, knocking on doors and asking for jobs, sweeping the porch or taking out the trash. My brothers, they were stronger, they would shovel snow. And when they got it, a twenty dollar bill was *mythological*. That was the way it was, until one day fate stepped in and my father, a COGIC Pentacostal and Baptist preacher was discovered by the German Lutherans. They thought he was special and sent him to the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. And life changed for me. Suddenly there were more opportunities. My mother sent me to a summer arts program. And when an Merchant Ivory independent

film came to town in the fifth week of that six week program, they held an open call, looking for girls of color to audition. I, along with hundreds of girls, showed up, hoping for a miracle. When the smoke cleared a miracle happened, they chose me for the lead. I was discovered there in a basement theater called New Freedom. That first job got me a union SAG card, health care and a career. I was fourteen and I've been trying to make good on being the one that "got over" ever since.

Story. Now that you know mine, I'm no longer a stranger or a face on a screen. I'm more human. And I believe in reparations for descendants of African Americans. As a way to heal a nation who has yet to reform, repair, or to apologize for its heinous history.

Reparations will need creators and great storytellers to use all their powers to lift it above the clouds. Storytelling is the most powerful tool for change in the world. You see, most people cannot remember details beyond the way something makes them feel. Story is the conduit to our mind, but once a seed is planted it's the quickest to our hearts.

REV. DR. WILLIAM BARBER II - The Third Reconstruction

My friend and mentor Rev. William Barber II is a master storyteller. The gold standard for the power of story in its might to create right. To have this discussion, I'll borrow his signature framework called *The Third reconstruction*. In it is a moral, constitutional and economic call for reparations.

Reverend Barber, a MacArthur Genius Fellow, is senior pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina. He is also co-chair of The Poor People's Campaign, started by MLK Jr.

Rev. Barber says, "I don't separate morality from economics. I don't think America can be if she doesn't ultimately deal with this issue, the legacy of systemic racism and how it continues to hold the country back."

Rev. Barber is the Creator in this story. A world builder. He says we are "the architects of the Third Reconstruction." See now, just right there - you sat up straighter in your seat. Because w/ one phrase he

recreated you as a character with a purpose, in a more dynamic world. Our everyday ordinary just became *mythological*. He believes "you have to have a place to shift imagination...prophetic, moral imagination, before you could even have a hope of political and public policy implementation."

In storytelling terms he helped me see *the arc of history*:

The first reconstruction, after slavery; the second after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.; Rev. Barber gave me a perspective from slavery's end, through civil rights, to the turbulent journey we're on today.

Now slavery, its effects and deformities, don't feel so far away. With that knowledge Americans are assured a place inside history. That's what woke is: You, consciously, making history in your own time. Now reparations are within our grasp. The challenge is to awaken others into joining this journey.

The Third Reconstruction is in progress. Barber has the blueprint, he's given us the compass, now we can start drafting. No experience required, but imagination is essential. We'll need that to move the

reparations conversation forward. If this is the Third Reconstruction then we are all the architects of it. All of us. Surely that is a higher calling. But be forewarned, if it only took reason to make a season all our days would be 72 and sunny. But this ain't Hollywood. They'll be real Katrina's and other storms to endure. We can succeed, but we'll need to declare that we are responsible for a better tomorrow. Rev. Barber's superpower, and he has many, is shifting that "everyday to a brighter way." Rev. Barber declared this is The Third Reconstruction. Believe him, and let's get on our way.

Our next master storyteller is Saru Jayaraman. As an archetype Saru is a modern day warrior and battle cat. In real life she is the President of *One Fair Wage and the Director of the Social Movement Center* at the University of California, Berkeley. And she leads an army, alongside Rev. Barber and other grassroots justice organizations, working daily to advance the moral agenda and uplift service workers' voices on the historic and continued abuses of tipped wage workers. Saru's mission is to destroy the tipped waged economy, a holdover from slavery, and redress the tremendous gap in wealth between Black and white households--the effects of accumulated inequality and discrimination, as well as differences in power and opportunity that

can be traced back to slavery and this nation's inception. She approaches this complex issue by telling us a story about a practice we all do that holds the nation's poorest people and women together in poverty. Tips. It's a powerful message for people to understand what is on the end of our fork and why it's there. Making the invisible visible is its own clarifier and can move many from daytripper and down from the cheap seats to the dugout.

Our next master storyteller is a Killer and a wordsmith. He uses his tremendous vocabulary and first rate mind to chisel a new image for a tribe of lost people.

Michael "Killer Mike" Render.

I met him earlier this year when making our documentary and podcast about reparations, called The Big Payback with my white, male co-director Whitney Dow. It's because of the podcast, and not my killer smile, that I imagine I was invited here. Well doing those projects we had great conversations with Michael "Killer Mike" Render. One of the best storytellers on this hot, blue rock, a disrupter for social justice and a leader in Barber's Third Reconstruction. As a rapper and activist he has street cred, charisma and

bold appeal, that's rooted in his *authenticity*. In storytelling terms he's a shapeshifter and a trickster. Able to move between class, commerce and politics, as an artist and intellectual. Michael uses his influence to reach a segment of America's most marginalized citizens, Black men. Inviting them into complex discussions that are engineered to benefit them, their families and their communities, but they are rarely invited to contribute in a meaningful way. Michael is their emissary. He is able to convey the bigger picture of how reparations can empower them now, but also future generations, to greater heights. He speaks to their aspirations to engage their appetite for *imagineering*, to borrow a Disney term, to create their future now.

Sure, he believes in reparations, but his approach is holistic. "...as long-term, systemic, purposeful organizations and systems set up that puts, for the first time, Black people who were brought in here as beasts and chattel on a pathway to having their full rights and privileges, recognized and enjoyed."

Through Michael's lens, we can also envision the greatness Reparations can build in African American communities. Not just as cash payments, but through land grants or lotteries, plus exemption from

taxation, forgiveness of federal loans, etc. If you begin with equal footing, as he puts it, then it's possible to scale new heights ... only dare to imagine bigger. And we can, because he's a product and the endorsement. The message he's sending works precisely because it is aspirational and motivational; it cuts through the noise and confusion as he keeps it relatable.

There are, and were others like him through the years. Most notably James Forman who crashed a Sunday service at Riverside Church service in Morningside Heights, on May 4th, 1968, to deliver his *Black Manifesto*; demanding 500 million dollars in reparations from white religious establishments. Or "\$15 dollars a Nigger." That woke them up that morning on his Straight Talk express. Though folks like this make people nervous, we'll need more shapeshifters to shake it up and not hide behind politeness and respectability politics.

Katrina Brown

But every great story needs its villain, and though reparations has many, our next storyteller volunteered for the position. Her name is Katrina Brown. Katrina is a descendant of the DeWolf family in Rhode Island

and they were the largest slave traders in North America. Katrina learned of her family's history from her grandmother and has since taken personal accountability for their actions. In doing so she willingly placed herself in this story as her family's proxy for the brutality, greed and evil of white supremacy. Katrina gives life to the ever-present white shadow hanging from sea to shining sea. To admit that her family was the largest slave trading family in US history, is a mea culpa of epic proportions. It's a powerful position and strikes citizens as participants in an ongoing modern, conversation of slavery, racism, and its systemic nature. Instead of a past disassociation in a bygone era. Katrina, and some of her family members, even took the step to travel to Africa and as an act of reparations apologized for their involvement. That brings it home. No hide n' seek there.

Yvette Carnell

Her approach, to some, may be considered controversial, but her style and delivery are effective. Yvette Carnell is the co-founder of ADOS or African Descendants Of Slavery and her buzzword is ***specificity***. She is speaking to and for the descendants of American slavery only. The core of the issue is, who is eligible? Her answer would say, to

the folks who were harmed the most. The descendants, who paid w/ flesh, blood and pain, the hundreds of years moneyball, that created the US's endless revenue stream. Her words create excitement and exclusivity to that audience. She speaks in the first person to *the first person(s)*. She's on a linear quest and she's a threshold guardian for an specific group, the children of American Slaves. She says...

"... The descendants of chattel slavery have made a different and a heavier contribution to America than anybody else. And, "did it unwillingly and we got abused because of it. And we have a specific cost. Now, when you have a specific cost, that means a specific payment." Thus, they suffered what she calls an *accrued disadvantage*. She does not disavow the harm of slavery to others, but says, those "who came here voluntarily—would not be eligible for Reparations, but would have access to our *Black agenda* in terms of our collective *lived experience*."

As we go along we'll find reparations works like a Rubik's cube. We keep turning the tiles until they align in a way that makes sense, but the hope is to one day reach a good consensus and make Reparations a reality.

Other effective advocates are the people fighting against it. **Larry Elder** is one such person.

He's a conservative and failed candidate for CA Gov. He's also a successful radio personality.

Every great story has powerful forces that work against its goals. In fact, Rev. Barber, the creator of our story world and an architect of the Third Reconstruction, asked me to quote educator and theologian, Howard Thurman: *"The measure of a mans estimate of your strength are the kinds of weapons he feels he must use in order to hold you fast in a prescribed place."*

We call them good and bad guys, fate, karma, luck. But let's not assign a motive, let's talk about the methods used to speak to a counter audience, or the arch-conservative, Larry Elder fans. When he took the stage and made a case for Reparations, to the slave owners! Again, not to the actual descendants of slaves, but to their torturers. His argument, though specious, is effective with a huge segment of our country.

As a storytelling tactic that reversal, or twist, it's awesome, because it upsets expectations. By fighting

against reparations and arguing for the slave owners, for damages, or reparations, he makes the entire subject radioactive. You've seen it happen before with critical race theory, the 1619 project and BLM. Larry Elder says:

"Like it or not, slavery was legal. Their legal property was taken away from them after the Civil War. So an argument can be made that the people owed Reparations are not just Black people but the people whose property was taken."

You may not dig that message, but the news outlets do and so does *The Gram* (Insta). That sound bite resonates with his arch conservative audience and liberals. Especially, because he is an African American. But the real benefit is it sows chaos, doubt and exhaustion in the entire population. Now the conversation is no longer about who's responsible or remedy. And being an unreliable narrator in a tragic-comedy, he uses his exposition as ammunition. It's as good as shooting a firearm in a crowded theater because the effect is similar. Chaos. How can you create possibilities, and make progress in that atmosphere? And that rhetorical device is reliable. Just when it works he is victorious. Effectively reorienting and shifting blame on the victim and

heaping empathy and new perspective on the wrongdoer.

Finally, this all brings me to a surprising turn of events in this 400 year slavery drama. And, perhaps, the most notable story I could tell you today about the determined, young ingenue in this passion play, Evanston, Il; 5th ward Alderwoman, **Robin Rue Simmons**. She's an all star in anyone's playbook and a "first", like the moon walker, John Glenn. Dubbed the "Rosa Parks of Reparations," Robin did something no one has ever done before, she passed the first reparations bill in American history. And in true hero's fashion she did it in the year of the return, 2019. The 400th year since we arrived as enslaved in 1619. It was an auspicious year indeed.

Uniquely made for the moment, Robin traveled to Africa and came home inspired by the idea of reparations "as a tool" in Evanston, Illinois. Though she was a novice herself to the idea of reparations, she knew how to maneuver in her town's local political space. Tying it's funding to recent legislation in Illinois, legalizing marijuana, she knew she had to move fast to assign a percentage of that new revenue stream toward a reparations agenda for African-Americans who lived in her city. It was a genius move, because it did not require residents to pay or redirect city funds. And

it tapped a new income source; drawing on that recreational marijuana tax revenue.

Though she is our ingenue and hero in this story, she has the political instincts of a national player. Using the "element of surprise" and capitalizing on her city's relative ignorance of the decades-long reparations debate and struggle. She got the bill passed in an 8 to 1, majority white council. She "just put her head down and got it done."

Like any hero she also had personal stakes and understood the dramatic disparity between the properties available to whites vs lack of access for black homebuyers, and she became determined to help correct that inequity in Evanston. Their Big Payback is redressing discriminatory housing policies. Like all heroes she's paying the price for her success. Stress, death threats, anxiety, exhaustion. But she sees its worth, because, *"This is our nation's history, not just black history."* Which Evanston, the little town that could, proved when right thinking white people were moved to action with historic results.

Robin is preceded and matched in Washington, DC by the awesome Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee with her push for HR40. A bill to study reparations started by the

late Detroit Cgrs. John Conyers. And her successful passing of a new holiday Juneteenth. A storytelling engine of tremendous proportion. Again, the element of surprise in her favor, her opposing party passed the holiday. I see it as effectively getting weeks of marketing, branding, celebration and education around the subject of American slavery, freedom and the legacy that created the conditions for that to flourish. In other words, Critical Race Theory. They didn't see it coming. It is a trojan horse. Story is a smuggler too and is the best smart power we have to change the world. If we tell a better, truer stories we can disrupt the evil story a white racist has that tells him he can murder us in broad daylight, with in impunity. We can change the narrative and rebrand Blackness, to recreate as human, so he will finally get his knee off our neck.

One last nod to other interesting archetypes in the reparations fight. Including the billionaire, Tom Steyer, as well as pioneers like Callie House and Queen Mother Moore. Their stories and their ability to recruit partners and collaborators because of their storytelling ability made a way out of no way. We must see story as the first line of defense and the most effective offense we have to make progress.

If we are to make the world ready for reparations, we must tell a better story. And as a part of my personal journey, and professional mission, I'll continue to do my part to create the conditions for change in the national reparations conversation for African Americans. Our success here and nationally will have global implications. Good. We end our story with a powerful, unvarnished truth, To quote the economist and professor Julianne Malveaux, who is wary of using the term Reparations *too broadly or too narrowly*. In her view, it must encompass awareness as well as compensation for what's been lost--or rather taken. She says, Reparations is about justice denied and justice attained. Let us all seek justice. Thank you.

Erika Alexander, Co-founder, Color Farm Media. X. e.

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