

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Eileen Ivette. She is an Afro Colombian award-winning video producer, digital storyteller and travel influencer on a mission to inspire and empower others to explore the world while celebrating cultural diversity. As an Afro Latina traveler, she combines her passion for history, culture and travel with resources illuminating black history events and businesses across Latin America and the Caribbean. She is the founder of [Black Latin History](#), which recently won the award for best travel series at the Black Travel Film Festival. And she has now partnered with global brands and destinations ranging from TripAdvisor to Visit Brazil. And she will be a featured speaker at the upcoming [WITS Travel Creator Summit in New York City](#) where we'll be hanging out together.

Eileen, welcome to the show.

Eileen Ivette: Thank you. I see why bios are so important. I'm like, wow, I sound fancy.

Matt Bowles: You have an amazing bio because you have been up to some really incredible stuff. As you know, I am such a big fan of your work, and I am so excited to have you here today for this conversation. But let's just start off by setting the scene and talking about where we are recording from today. I am actually in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Asheville, NC today on the east coast of the United States. Where are you today?

Eileen Ivette: I am currently in Jersey City, New Jersey. This will be my homebase until about June when I leave for my Afro-Medellin group trip.

Matt Bowles: Well, I think I want to start this off by asking if you can talk about one of your viral TikTok's. I have now watched this a few times, so I see why it went viral. But you had celebrities like Viola Davis sharing this TikTok. I mean, this went all over the place. The title of it is [How Braids Became a Secret Map for Escaping Slavery](#). Can you share a little bit, maybe even the background to that TikTok in terms of making it and then share that story with people?

Eileen Ivette: Yeah. So, to me, I was just doing this really interesting hidden history video about Afro Colombian women being geniuses and using hair as a way to draw escape maps out of the ports of Cartagena in Colombia into San Basilio de Palenque and what these different hairstyles that still exist today for black women, like Bantu knots and cornrows and things. I thought it was fascinating, I thought it was interesting. And so, I put it out. I dropped it on TikTok and within 24 hours it had a million views. I put it on Instagram. It took 30 days for it to reach a million views. But after those three days, within a week, it went from 1 million to 2 million to 3 to 4.

Then Viola Davis reposted it. But to see the audience be like, this is why cultural appropriation is a thing, and this is why we say it's not just our hair and why non-black women shouldn't be wearing braids. And just the conversation about beauty and black womanhood and everything that happened from that, I was like, oh wow, this is so beautiful that this little video that I almost didn't put out because I was like, I could edit this better. Sparked this whole conversation across multiple platforms. Until this day, I still get tagged in videos of people reposting it. And it was a really beautiful experience.

Matt Bowles: Well, I know a lot of the topics that you have chosen to focus on and highlight and bring to the surface in the case of these hidden histories relate directly to your own Afro Colombian heritage. And I would love to get into a little bit of your personal background now and maybe even

before we do your story and your experience growing up. Can you share a little bit about your parents' story? Talk about where your family is from, where your parents lived, what their life was like in Colombia and then their experience immigrating to the United States.

Eileen Ivette: So, both my parents are from Buenaventura, Colombia, which is on the Pacific coast of Colombia. Colombia is actually the only South American country that has Caribbean and Pacific Coast. And there's a huge difference between the coasts. El Pacifico, as we call it, is essentially one of the most heavily black populated areas of Colombia. So, you have Buenaventura, you have El Choco, you have Tumaco, you have very black, very lit places in El Pacifico, essentially. But my mom's side of the family, they moved to Cali, Colombia, which some people call the doorway to El Pacifico, right.

They moved to Cali, Colombia, when she was, I think, a teenager, if I'm not mistaken. But I think by age 25, my mom had got the opportunity to come to the US and she didn't want to. She actually did not want to, not want to come at all in any way, shape or form. She loved being in Colombia, she loved being Colombian. But everyone was like, are you crazy? I think this is the late 80s, early 90s. You have this opportunity to go to the US which at that time is the US the land of dreamers. You're not going to take it. And she was like, I guess her aunt at that time was here in the US and so that is who she came to see. And she landed in Houston. My mom's a teacher. She's been very big about education. Very big about education is the way you can make it out of your situations. That's my mom.

My dad's side of the family is a little more crazy, if I'm being honest. My dad also came to the US in the 80s with his brothers. I'm not going to get too much into their story. Just think 80s Columbia stereotype. So that's my dad. Sign up with the family. But it's amazing. I like to call them the Four Brothers. If you've ever seen Four Brothers, the movie. Yeah, that's the vibe. So, my dad's side of the family is great, but they're a little more kooky. And so that is how they came to the U.S.

Unfortunately, my dad was in prison for about 11 years. And so, I did grow up in a single parent household. My mother did a phenomenal job, and she would send my older sister and I back to Columbia to spend time with our grandma and the rest of our family, who were still in Colombia. And so, we would spend a lot of childhood summers in Cali and Buenaventura. And that's where I discovered my love for arepas and cold showers. And I was like, why are people taking baths with cold water? And just a lot of what shaped my identity, like salsa music and what it meant to be a Black woman in Latin spaces. And how those intersected and how they can exist at the same time.

Because in Houston, probably in all of Texas, to be Latina, to be Hispanic equals Mexican. And especially at that time. So, if people heard you speaking Spanish or heard you had some type of Hispanic heritage, they're like, oh, you're not black, you're Mexican. So that's on the US Front. In the Columbia front, my family has always been very proud to be black and very understanding that we are black people who just happen to be dropped off at a different stop on the ship. And so, I had this understanding of my blackness. I had this understanding of what Columbia looks like, because every time I went to Columbia, it was very black.

And so being in Houston and constantly being told, oh, you're not black, it didn't make me shy away from my blackness. It kind of radicalized me and made me more proud to be black and very adamant about claiming my space and my identity. And it shaped a lot of what I was passionate

about. It made me want to go to school for journalism to create my own platforms that highlighted Afro Latina, that highlighted blackness in the Latin space has been my moral compass for everything that I do.

Every creative project that I've had since basically college into now has been some type of platform to tell these stories and to tell stories of my community. And so, I went to Howard HBCU, and it was really fun being at Howard because. But you learn the many, many ways people are black. There's a regional difference. People from California, from Houston, from New York. We all have our own different slangs, personalities, things. We're into styles. And so, you learn the regional difference within black American culture. But also, there were other Afro Latino students on campus. And it was really cool because I had this idea called *Tes Caseros*, which was basically, if you remember the show *guy code* or *girl code* on MTV, where it was basically comedians in front of a green screen talking about certain topics. I basically did that with topics within Afro Latina.

So, like crazy mom sayings or superstitions that your family believes in or what it is like being at Dominican party. So, I had 12 other students on campus ranging from Afro Mexican, Panamanian, Cuban, Haitian Venezuelan. It was such a great mixture of showcasing the differences within Latina as well. And we just talked about our experiences. And it was cool because we ended up becoming a really close group because, oh, there's more of us on campus on this historically black college. We were able to also be there. There were a lot of us on campus and just show people there's another way to be black as well.

Matt Bowles: How big was the Afro Latinx community in Houston that you were immersed in? There was your family living in an area where there were a lot of other folks with a similar cultural background. What was your high school dynamic like? And then what made you decide that you definitely wanted to go to an HBCU?

Eileen Ivette: So, in Houston, there's actually a really large Afro Colombian population. And oddly enough, most of them knew each other prior to even making it to America. They knew each other from Buenaventura, they knew each other from Cali. And even today, when I look at old family photos, I'm like, wow, y'all have known each other before I even existed. This is crazy. But it goes to speak community, right? And how tight knit the community is. So, growing up in Houston, up until the fifth grade, we lived on the southwest side of Houston. And for any listeners who are from Houston, you all know the southwest side. You know, it has a very large black and Hispanic population, but that was Colombian land. Okay. There were so many parties growing up where they were just, their cousins, but they're not really cousins. Aunties and uncles that aren't really aunties and uncles. It's just the fact that we were all Afro Colombian in a country that our family isn't from.

And so, every Easter, they would rent a beach house in Galveston, and all the families would be at that beach house and just having a good time. And so, my childhood was honestly truly amazing because there were so many Afro Colombians in Houston and Colombian restaurants and things like that. So, it never felt like I wasn't connected to my culture at that time. My goal, my dream was, was to move to New York and work at a fashion magazine. That's what I wanted to do. I was that person in high school. I was like, I am going to be at *Essence* as a fashion intern. I feel like wherever you go to college is usually where you'll end up.

In that area it is where you'll most likely get your first job offers, where you'll make connections and things like that. And so, I was like, I don't want to live in Texas my entire life. I don't know why I felt that way, even though I had this wonderful, amazing time growing up there. But I was like, I want to leave Houston. I want to leave Texas. I just want to experience something different. And I was trying to get as close as possible to New York. So, I applied to a few colleges. I applied to work at Howard. A different world is one of my favorite shows of all time.

And in my senior year in high school, reruns would come on every day after school, and I would watch them. And so, I watched all five seasons through reruns on TV one after school. And, of course, you know, A Different World by season two, Debbie Allen was in charge. It's at Hillman College is an HBCU. So, I think that subconsciously made me want to have that type of experience. And I knew Howard had a really good journalism program, so I was just applying to places I knew had really good journalism programs. But Howard didn't give me a lot of money. And Mizzou, I think, was going to cover 75% of my tuition. So, I was like, oh, I'm going to Mizzou. Easy. That's fine. But everyone, when I say every teacher, every assistant principal, every person who knew my mom when they heard I got accepted to Howard and I wasn't going to go, they were like, Eileen, are you crazy? They're like, what do you mean you're not going to go? And I was like, well, Mizzou gave me more money. They have an equally really good journalism program.

And the people who sold it the most were actually my history teacher, Mrs. Hartman. She's this little old white lady. And she was like, Eileen, I heard you got into Howard. She was like, what do you mean you're not going to Howard? She was like, their acceptance rate is so low. You got accepted. I know what you want to do with your life. You're so talented, you're so smart. You need to go to Howard. She was like, I understand the other elements, but she was like, you really need to go to Howard. And I was like, Ms. Hartman, what is going on? And then my Titi Miriam, which is one of those aunties who is not really related to us, but I grew up around. She had come to stop by to see my mom, and she was like, with the Alumni network alone, you will have a job once you graduate. And she also had a niece who was at Howard at the time as well. And she was like, Alumni Network. Yes, schools are important. Yes, the journalism program is important. But she was like that network will last you years, your entire life. So, she was like, really? Think about it. I think that conversation is what helped my mom also be like, yeah, we're going to Howard.

And I was like, oh, yay. Yay. And so that's how I actually ended up at Howard. It was a little bit of convincing. It was something I applied to, but I was convinced. I was Going to Mizzou. And everyone else was like no, Eileen, you're going to Howard. And best decision ever. I'm so happy everyone made me do that. Literally the best four years of my life. I think it's very important I say this for a lot of black students and black people, that going to an HBCU is literally four years of your life that you will never get to experience anywhere else. Because for once, you are the majority, you're not the minority, and you get to move through society as the majority and know that there's just a certain level of understanding between all of us.

Anytime I think about my freshman year at Howard, I think about this was 2014. It was also the same year that Mizzou had a lot of protests by their black students because the white students were calling them monkeys, throwing bananas at them. I think the school president, he was about to get fired or something, so he resigned. They were having a lot of problems, a lot of racism on campus. That was my first semester, freshman year at Howard, and so it was just, yeah, I made the

right choice. I get to be myself surrounded by all these talented black excellence people. For the first time, I'm not the smartest one in the room. We're all smart, we're all ambitious. We all have these really big life goals. And it was like, oh, okay, this is a whole new field in space that I haven't been able to experience yet.

Matt Bowles: Well, first of all, big up to Howard. As you know, I lived in D.C. six blocks north of Howard on Georgia and Gresham place, for anybody that knows D.C., so lots of love for Howard. I know that your very first year at Howard, one of the things that you did is you got to go on a trip to China.

Eileen Ivette: Yes.

Matt Bowles: And I want to ask you about that. But before we talk about that trip, I want to ask if you can think back prior to choosing to go on that trip. How did your interest in the rest of the world and going to see it and traveling outside of the US And Colombia, how did that start to develop?

Eileen Ivette: That's so crazy. I've actually never thought about this because I kind of have a personality where it's like, you know, I want to experience everything at least once, so if an opportunity arises, I'm going to take it. Right? And for me, it was like, oh, when else am I going to have the opportunity to go to China at that time? This is pre me thinking, like, travel, influence, anything like that. I'm like, when else am I this black girl from Houston, Texas, single Parent, household going to have the opportunity to go to China. I have an opportunity to go. Let me go to it. Because prior to that, the only other place I had ever traveled to was Columbia. And so, I joined that org specifically because I knew they were the org that took students to China. And I was like, I want to go to China. I think this would be really cool. I need to experience something new. So, let's go to China. And yeah, China was everything. It was such an amazing trip.

Matt Bowles: What were your experiences like from landing there? First impressions for people that have never been to China. Can you describe what it was like and then what your experience was like over the course of the trip?

Eileen Ivette: So let me paint the picture. It is 15 freshman Howard students. This is July 2015. We just completed our first year at Howard, right. It's a few weeks before sophomore semester is about to begin. But again, it is 15 black kids with, I think we had three chaperones. So, all black people going to China. I need y'all to understand that. We flew from D.C. to Toronto and then Toronto. We landed in Beijing. Beijing was our first place. So that was my first ever time having a flight that long as well. It was incredibly long. That is when I learned I needed to start packing my own snacks for long haul flights. Just in case I don't like the food that they're feeding on the plane or if I get hungry quicker because I have no snacks. I don't even think I packed a book. And I love to read. So, I was on this 14, 15-hour flight just watching movies and going to sleep. That's all I could do.

And we landed and my feet were swollen because I didn't have compression socks, my feet were swollen, which is crazy that that's the first thing I remember about. And it was really hot. We were like, wow, it's whew! It's very hot. And then we did our check in process. And then we were off to dinner and that was all family style. So, we realized, okay, quickly, everything is going to be family style here. The cup water was this small. We were like, oh my gosh, we're so thirsty. So cute and so young. And then we were there for I think two weeks and we were there in Beijing and Shanghai. And

that whole experience was just really eye opening because it's like, yo, we're in China. It never occurred to me that I would ever be in China. I would ever be in China at 19 with such a big group of people.

But we also quickly learned, as amazed as we are by these landmarks, this history, the landscape. People were more amazed at us, oh, we want a picture with you. We quickly became entertainment. We quickly became what people were there to see. And at first it was kind of like, okay, I get it. Maybe y'all don't see that many black people here. Or the only black people you do get to see are celebrities. So, it's a lot of us. That's what you're assuming. One of my friends does actually look like Gabrielle Union. I'll give it to you. But I think we all snapped when we made it to the Great Wall of China, because we're at the Great Wall of China, okay? And we're all like, oh, my gosh, this is the Great Wall of China. But people just kept bombarding us to try to take pictures with us, handing us their babies. There was just no personal space. There was no, hi, do you mind? And of course, language barrier and everything like that. But I think that was the breaking point for us because after a while, we were like, no pops, no paparazzi. We were trying to be funny about it and joke about it. And again, we were young at that time, so it was like, okay, this is cool.

But now that I'm older and I'm reflecting back, I'm like, wow, that was just so rude to a certain extent. But I can also be appreciative of it and the cross-cultural learning and connection because I have these Marley Twist in, and one of them was loose, and we were on a ferry at night. I was like, oh, we're sitting here. Let me just. Just refix this Marley Twist really quick. I'm looking at the reflection in the window because I can see my reflection and I'm twisting it. And next thing you know, I see there's four or five little Chinese women looking at how I'm doing it, taking notes and everything. Just like, turn around. They're like, hi. And so that was like a cute, sweet moment, right? But other times it was, okay, I am tired of being at the show. I'm really just trying to enjoy this experience, these landscapes, this history. But I wouldn't change anything about that trip. I was 19 in China. I didn't think I would ever be there at that point in my life.

And so, for me, that opened up my mind to traveling more in the world and seeing more of the world and learning more about different cultures and just being okay with being uncomfortable. Lost in Translation. Not necessarily knowing what I'm eating, but being like, sure, let's go. It's either going to be good or it's going to be nasty. I just don't have to eat if I don't like just being more accepted, really just going with the flow and just being like, you know what life is, what you make it. And you can either be really negative about it or really positive about it. And I'm just going to be positive about this experience and enjoy it. That was my first international trip outside of Colombia and got to just really be in a completely foreign land to me.

Matt Bowles: Well, another thing that Howard did is that it eventually was responsible for the introduction between you and your now long-term boyfriend. And I want to ask a little bit about that. You two travel together. You have such an adorable relationship. It's so amazing to see you together online, traveling the world together and all of that. But I'm wondering if you can take us back to the beginning of that relationship, talk a little bit about where he and his family are from and then how that cultural dynamic and you getting to become familiar with his culture, how all of that evolved and ultimately led up to the trip in 2022, which is the next one I want to ask you about.

Eileen Ivette: Yes. So, my boyfriend and I met July 4, 2019. I was living in Harlem at the time, and we met at a Howard alum party called Lit-nic at Prospect Park, Brooklyn. So that sets the scene.

Neither one of us was actually supposed to be at that party, which is crazy. We always say divine alignment. God wanted us to meet each other that day, but we just started hanging out more, getting to know each other more. And as we're getting to know each other more, he's like, oh, yeah, I'm Sierra Leonean. And I was like, oh, that's interesting. I didn't know anything about Sierra Leone, to be honest. I'm like, oh, I'm Colombian. And he's like, oh, that's cool.

As foreign kids, we're trying to see what similarities we had growing up and where the similarities across our food and music and things of that nature. And by a year and a half later, we are officially dating. We've gotten to know each other. I know his culture; he knows my culture. And Fast forward to 2021. My great aunt had unexpectedly passed. And I was realizing as we were doing all the funeral arrangements and things about that, how much I didn't actually know about her life before I existed and before she had kids and things of that nature. And I was like, wow, as we get older, we really have to make the effort to learn about our elders and their stories and these things. Because if they are unexpectedly taken from their stories, die, if they don't share them with us, that part of the family tree just completely disappears.

And so, my boyfriend, he hadn't been back to Sierra Leone since he was 2 because there was a war in Sierra Leone and the country was trying to rebuild. And so, he hadn't been back since he was 2. Both his parents are from Sierra Leone, so 100% Sierra Leonean. And his grandma, she was in the States for a while, but then she went back to Sierra Leone, I think, in 2014, because her mom was getting older, and she wanted to be with her mom in her last couple of months and years. And so, I'm on this super wave of we need to be with our elders, we need to talk to them and make sure we're having these moments and memories with them just in case anything happens.

And through our relationship, he had always been saying, like, yeah, I would really love to go back to Sierra Leone. I really want to see my grandma. I haven't seen her in so long. There are two peas in a pod. And he was like, I would really love to go back to my country. And so, I was on it. I was like, we are going once every other month. Remind him like, hey, are we going to do that trip? Do you really want to do it? Just reminding him, putting it in his head, we should really go to Sierra Leone. And I had never been to the continent of Africa yet, so I was really like, I would love to go to Sierra Leone. I would love to go to the continent of Africa. And then finally, in 2022, he was like, okay, we're doing it. And I was like, yeah, let's go.

Matt Bowles: So, in the lead up to this trip, when you had confirmed we're definitely going, what were the feelings and emotions, I mean, for him going back and for you going to the continent for the first time?

Eileen Ivette: So, leading up to the trip, I'm someone who shows my excitement every day, and I had a countdown, and I would be like, are you excited? Are you excited? Like, are you excited? But he was excited. But obviously it's his family, right? Knowing his family history and things that happen behind the scenes, he's like, I'm excited, but I also don't know what to expect. He was like, I'm trying to go in without expectations so that I can just really enjoy the experience. And I was like, that's valid. But I was like, the Energizer Bunny. I was like, oh, my gosh, we're going to Sierra Leone. I was so excited. And once we finally landed, we were there for three weeks, and our one goal was to just spend time with Grandma. It wasn't one of those trips where we were like, okay, we're going to go to Boon Island, learn a lot about Sierra Leone and the country. And on the tour we were there to spend time with grandma.

We were at her house. She had, like, a little shop. She lives at the very top at the very height of a mountain. And she was in her early 70s at that point. She wasn't able to leave the mountain often, but she had a little shop that she was selling eggs and bread and stuff to the neighborhood. And so, we would just sit out there with her, talk to her. And I kind of took the hat of being the family historian, so I would just ask her questions. But you can also tell when elders don't want to talk about certain things because it's painful memories. She left Sierra Leone because of the war, and there's no family photos because they all burned down during the war. And they live on top of that mountain because during the war, they had to move. And so, they were one of the first families that lived there. There was no electricity, any water, anything like that when they first moved there. And they would have to walk for an hour to a water well and back to get water.

Learning these stories and hearing these and then seeing what the neighborhood looks like now, there's a lot of construction and people. People are building homes and houses. But I could tell those certain things, she would just look off and reflect. And I was like, you know what? I got it. There are just certain things that you don't necessarily want to talk about. But I was really grateful that she shared her story of how she made it to the US how it was a total accident, because as most immigrant kids, sometimes our parents will send us back to the country they're from to be raised by our grandparents as they're getting their footing in the States. And that was my boyfriend and his sibling story. They were sent back to Sierra Leone when he was 2, and his older sisters are two or three years older than him. So, they were in Sierra Leone. But then the war started to pick up, and it was getting really bad. And so, the country had a mandate that all American children needed to be sent back to America.

And as the story goes, Grandma and her two sons with the kids were going to the airport, and the taxi driver kept telling them, I'll take the kids in. It's fine. Y'all can stay here, I'll take them in. I'll take them in. And Grandma, being the wise woman she is, she was like no, I'll go with the kids. And so, her two sons stay, and she goes with the kids to check them in, to put them on the plane. And my boyfriend wouldn't let go of her leg and basically saying, no, I'm not leaving without her. And so, the gay agent was like, you can go. Tell her to get on the plane too. It turns out that with every American kid that I think it was up to two adults could accompany them. And the taxi driver knew that, and so he was trying to go with one of the kids as his way out of the country. Grandma didn't know that. And so, in a blink of an eye, she's on a plane heading to a foreign land, a foreign country. She didn't get to say goodbye.

So, you know, her husband, her mom, her kids, like, she's just whoosh away. And that was 1997, and she was in America all the way up until 2014. And so, her telling me that story, her remembering the details and everything about that, I was just like, this is why this trip was important, to hear these things, to make sure that we're able to record them, to be able to take pictures and make new family photos and videos and stuff, because they don't have anything. And so, it was a very emotional journey, but also a very beautiful one. And I think my boyfriend and I were just really happy we did it. And also, we needed to do this especially to just be more grateful about the things that we do have, the privileges and the ease of things that we do have growing up in the US and things of that nature. And it was a really beautiful experience.

Matt Bowles: When you did that comparison between the Afro-Colombian cultural dynamics and the Sierra Leonean cultural dynamics in the diaspora in the US Immigrant experience in particular.

I'm curious what similarities you found, but I'm also curious, as your relationship has evolved over the years, how you have maybe culturally influenced each other and how the relationship has incorporated both cultures.

Eileen Ivette: Yeah, that's such a great question, because I think my boyfriend and I, because we are first generation, I think sometimes we don't realize that we're doing cultural things until he'll come to Houston for Christmas and then he'll see all of our crazy Christmas traditions and things like that. So, I think in terms of similarities, there's more similarities in the sense that we are immigrant kids, first generation kids, versus direct similarities. Between Sierra Leone and Colombian culture in the sense of the food in Sierra Leone is very spicy. Very spicy, but so delicious. Okay. But I didn't grow up with spicy food. El Pacifico Afro Colombian food that I know and grew up with is cheesy, its savory, it's sweet. Lots of coconut, lots of seafood. Versus, once I started eating Sierra Leonean food, it was very spicy. Lots of cassava, lots of smoked turkey, also seafood, but palm oil, lots of stews.

And so, in terms of food, it was totally the opposite. I love Sierra Leone in food. It is delicious. And I have built up my spice tolerance over the years, but the first time I said, whew! Oh, this is hot. This is so hot. Oh, my gosh, this is so hot. And my boyfriend was like, anytime he eats Colombian food, I think people think that all Latin cultural foods are spicy. And it's like, no. Colombian food is the furthest thing from spicy. We don't do spice at all. So, yes, in food differences right now, I can't think of a single similarity in terms of food, but in terms of the immigrant experience, being the ones who were translating documents for our parents or having to be the kid who knew all. And it was just like those little things that. Oh, you had to do that, too. Me too. I definitely am the password kid. I had to write down my mom's passwords.

But I think we also had a few differences because he is the eldest son and I'm the youngest, and so he had different responsibilities than I did as the youngest. No one was asking me for a lot of stuff. I'm a baby. Eileen doesn't know. I'm left out of a lot of information. They're like, I. She's somewhere over there. So, I got to move through my life and my childhood in society in a very selfish manner and really got to just focus on my goals, my things, and that nature versus him being the eldest son, being the first boy, he had a lot more responsibilities in life. And so, we've realized that the differences we do have is because of where we also fall into the children's hierarchy.

Matt Bowles: Well, one of the things that you two do that I think is so cute and amazing is that you gift each other shared travel experiences instead of material presence. And I think that is so amazing and so special. And I want to ask you about that. Starting with your second trip to the continent, when he took you to South Africa. Can you share a little bit about that trip and what your experience was like?

Eileen Ivette: Yes. So that is my Favorite birthday tradition that we've started in our relationship is like, let's go somewhere. And we have a very similar travel style, so it's worked out really well. And he's honestly my favorite person to travel with. But South Africa, I have a personality where I can hyper fixate on things. And I was hyper fixated in South Africa. I was like, I really want to go to South Africa. Like, my screensaver on my laptop was a coast in Cape Town. I was just like; I really want to go to South Africa. I need that to happen this year. And he was like, okay. But over time, throughout the years of our dating, he knows that I like to be surprised to a certain extent, but I need to know certain things. So, I knew we were going to South Africa. Everything about the trip was a surprise.

But for this one, I knew we were going to South Africa, and I was so excited. I was like, yes, we are going to South Africa. We're crossing this off. And he planned such an amazing trip.

It was a completely opposite experience than Sierra Leone, right? Because Sierra Leone was family. It's history. It was a heavy trip. And South Africa. My birthday's in October, October 24th, so it's like the end of the year. And I was like, I just want to relax. I don't want to do too much movement. I just kind of want to do some fun, crazy stuff, cross something off my bucket list. And then honestly, be in the mountains, swimming, enjoying some good food, enjoying the beautiful views, and just relaxing and chilling. And he was like, I got you. And that is exactly what he planned. We walked with the lions, we went to a safari, and then we paraglided. And then the rest of the trip was very much just relaxation and just I got to read a book and just swim. It was the most beautiful, beautiful trip that he could have planned. And I'm so happy that that is the little tradition we've created.

Matt Bowles: Well, I want to ask you next about the reciprocal follow-up trip that you planned for him for his 30th birthday. Going back again to the continent to this time Morocco. Can you talk about that trip?

Eileen Ivette: Yes. So, my boyfriend's the opposite of me where he likes to be surprised. He likes not to know a single thing that is going on. So, it is very easy to surprise him. But sometime last year we had written down where our top five places are that we would love to go in the next couple of years. But Morocco was on his list and his birthdays in February, so it makes it really hard. Planning his Birthday sometimes because it's cold, majority of the places. And so usually we've gone somewhere in the Caribbean or Mexico or something because we know it's guaranteed warmth and heat. But I was like, no, it's 30, I have to go big. He took me to one of my top bucket list destinations for 29. So, for 30, that's a big deal. He deserves to just be spoiled and get to cross this off of his destination list as well.

And so out of the five places that he had on his top five, Morocco was the only place where it was going to be possibly warm at the time. And so, I was like, say less. We're going to Morocco. And I love the fact that my boyfriend also loves to travel throughout the continent. And that is something that we really want to do more this year is to travel throughout the continent and experience different things. And him being West African, he loves seeing how it is in other parts of like, you know, North Africa, South Africa, like just seeing what the similarities are because we're all African, but also what are the differences. He just really wants to experience something new. And so, when I travel with him, I get to do a lot more adventurous stuff and be in places that are a little more secluded because we're together and I'm not by myself, so I know I'm going to be safe, you know. So, we spent three days in the Sahara Desert and just had a really unique experience of, oh, we made our own custom perfume scents. We did this. We did. But we also learned a little bit about culture and history. And yeah, it was a really good trip.

Matt Bowles: So, reflecting on those three different regions of the continent that you've been to, I think that's a really important point about how incredibly different it is from South Africa to West Africa to North Africa and the Maghreb. It's just entirely culturally different experiences. So, reflecting back now on those three that you've had had, what maybe tips you would give people who are thinking about, I'd like to go to the continent maybe for the first time where might be a good place to start.

Eileen Ivette: I think Morocco and South Africa are really beginner friendly countries to visit on the continent. Sierra Leone, I say, is you need to be an advanced traveler to go to Sierra Leone because they are still developing and building up their tourism industry. And so, you got an, I feel like you need to know somebody in Sierra Leone to travel to Sierra Leone. But I think Morocco is super touristy friendly. They have a really well-developed tourism sector. And yeah, I think navigating Morocco to me was really simple. And the same with South Africa. I would recommend South Africa over Morocco just because I love the beach. I love being on the coast. I am very much El Pacifico, baby. I love being on the coastline. I love seeing mountains. Mountains and just that juxtaposition of these beautiful, vast mountains cape against this beautiful flowy sand and water. So, I'm a little biased because that is my preference. Especially Cape Town will feel a little European. So, if you are looking for the most cultural experience in South Africa, maybe Johannesburg over Cape Town. Because Cape Town will very much feel like you're just in another European country. Country, yeah.

Matt Bowles: Big shout out to Johannesburg. I'm glad that you said that. I have been putting people on to Johannesburg. It is entirely different from Cape Town. I mean, it is really fundamentally a totally different experience. And in many of the absolutely most amazing ways. I mean, it is the nightlife and the street art, and the fashion and I mean, it is just really a city that has a swag that is at a whole different level. I mean, I was just so enamored with Johannesburg. And so, I've been talking about it a lot. But how did you find Joburg?

Eileen Ivette: I love Joburg. I wish we would have had a little bit more time in Joburg, because Jo'burg was the adventure part of our trip. So, we were doing the safaris, we were doing the line walking. We were pretty much gone all day. And then by the time we came back, we were exhausted. So, we didn't get to experience it fully and thoroughly and explore the city because we kept having to be in these cars and these buses for one to two to three hours to get to these experiences. So, I definitely want to go back for the more cultural aspect of it, to see the fashions, to taste the food, to hear the music scene, to just really be amongst the people and the community and meet people.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, for sure. And the political history in Joburg is super powerful and super important. The apartheid museum that's in Joburg is super powerful. And I think also in terms of Cape Town, I mean, I totally agree with what you mentioned about it is having a colonial European type of vibe in parts of the city and highly racially segregated and all that. But there are opportunities to go to other places in Cape Town that have a really different vibe. And so, if you go to Khayelitsha Township, for example, and you go to the Rands party on Sunday in Khayelitsha, that is an entirely different vibe than what you're going to get in the waterfront areas of Cape Town and things like that.

And so, you know, to your point, when you have more time and you can be more intentional about saying, what types of experiences would we like to have? And then how can we be intentional about creating those? And I have had amazing experiences in Cape Town, and I have had amazing experiences in Joburg. And a lot of it's just about thinking about, okay, how would I structure that experience and stuff like that. And even with wine tasting and stuff, I mean there's now black-owned wineries and there's different things that people are really making an effort to incorporate into their itinerary or if they're into that sort of thing and so forth. So, a lot of it is just about doing the

research as with any other type of travel, right. And just saying how can we design the type of experience that we're looking for?

Well, Eileen, I want to transition us now a little bit and talk about your professional trajectory. You had mentioned you were super passionate and excited about studying journalism and you went to Howard. And then I'm wondering if you can take us a little bit on your professional career, some of the journalism projects you've been involved with. I have watched now all of your [videos](#) that you were involved with producing for AJ+. Which I have been following AJ+ for quite some time now. And I have found that they do some of the most important journalism on a wide range of topics, including the genocide in Palestine over the last year and a half and a number of other really important topics that they have just been putting excellent coverage out on in these concise short-term videos and other things that have just been so important. You have been involved in producing a number of these that I have now watched on a variety of topics. And I'm wondering if you can just take us a little bit on your journalism career and some of those projects that you've been involved in that you've been most proud of and passionate about.

Eileen Ivette: Yeah, so post-graduation, the first job I had was working at Complex Networks. I was a product assistant on a show called Full Size Run, which was like a weekly sneaker news roundup type of show. And I got that because one of the production coordinators went to Howard and senior year, we had a New York media trip where they took us to different media companies that Howard alum worked at to learn about the inner workings and things like that. So, BET Networks, Complex, Smart, wherever there was a Howard alum, we were there meeting with people trying to get Internships, job offers X, Y and Z. And so, I worked at Complex, and I was there for almost two years. They were based in Times Square at the time. And so, I was living in New York. My childhood dream of moving to New York, working for a fashion magazine, had become a reality. And it was crazy to me that I was able to accomplish that at what, like, 22, 23, straight out of college. This was my big childhood dream, and I was able to do it. But the crazy thing about dreams is sometimes they are not what you think they are.

And so, while it was a wonderful experience, it really helped me in what I do now and my skill set and strengthen my skillset. I knew while I was there that, like, this is not necessarily what I want to do with my career, my life. I didn't feel like I was using my degree. And so, I took everything that I could learn from them in video production, setting up cameras, creating series, writing scripts, budgets, stuff like that. And I knew I, one, wanted to move out of New York, but two, I wanted to be a producer. Being there made it very clear that that is the job title role. That made sense for me and what I was passionate about. And so, one of my old professors at Howard, he was just checking in. And at that time, AJ+ had kept popping up on my timeline as well, and what they were doing and the way they told their news stories on Instagram and Twitter and how they were able to tell news and make these really interesting documentaries that were short, concise, but very informative. And I was like, I think I want to work at AJ+. And he was like, oh, that's so crazy. I just met somebody who worked there at this conference or something. He was like, let me find his email and I'll make the introduction. And I was like, oh, my gosh, thank you. And they were like, we think you'll be a good fit for this show. We would love to introduce you for this.

And so that show was talking about the intersection of, like, social justice through food, why so many people of color are lactose intolerant, and what does that have to do with white supremacy or

the stigma that MSG has with anti-Asian sentiment and how MSG is actually not like, this bad thing that Western media has made it seem. So, I was like, okay, I could do this. This is funky, this is quirky, this is creative. But it's still very heavy journalism. It's investigative. I was like, I'm getting this job. That's how I ended up at AJ+. That was the Job that got me out of New York, the job that got me back to dc. And so, I started working on that team. I loved it. It was so quirky; it was so creative. I got to research all day, and I love researching. And I was hired as an associate producer.

But then Pandemic happened three months into that position, so I had to switch teams into the Daily News team. And so Daily News, I had to pitch, score, script, edit, come up with a copy for a 1-to-3-minute piece in 10 hours every single day, Monday through Thursday. And so that got me really fast at being able to script, being able to be succinct, concise, how-to storyteller in a very easy way. Looking for the B role, like just being very quick, right? And then I was able to shift over to the Explainers team, which is probably most of the work that you saw that I've done for AJ+ the way I like to explain it, unveiling the powers at BE and how that affects society today. So, it's talking a lot about colonialism, geopolitics, but through the lens of pop culture.

So, one of my favorite stories I got to do that I'm really proud of was how Latin America tried to eliminate black people and failed. And that is a story that goes back to my moral compass of things that amplify my community of Afro Latina and our stories. Just looking at how when people talk about, about Latin America, they love to pretend that racism doesn't exist and that is just class issues. But it's like, no. Black people have very lived realities in Latin America that are very similar to black American experiences that are pretty sure are very similar to black people in the U.K. The diaspora has experienced a lot of the same traumas wherever we are in the world. And so that was looking at how these whitening projects, these attempts to basically get rid of black population, visibly Black people in Latin America, in the entire region, and how that kind of differed from the US and why the racism is still the same thing, even though the US has the one drop rule. And it was very clear, it was very black and white. You're black, you're white. Latin America approached it differently through mestizaje, through mixing mixed populations. And they were just trying to make sure that people's skin no longer looks black.

And so, it's a very deep story, a very interesting story that I am super proud of and very proud of that story. But working on that is kind of also what made me be like, you know, what maybe I need to do Black Latin history and go in my own route of things. Just because I was like, I'm fighting for a lot of points to be made in this piece that I know are super important. And so, yeah, it was a little back and forth with that one, but the end result was exactly what it needed to be. And you can see a lot of the work I've done for them, how that's kind of influences what I do on my platforms, on my own socials, and how I approach storytelling and editing, giving information to people. It's unveiling. Okay, you know, the surface level, but let's unveil all the layers of history and things like that. So, I try to keep it between hidden history, but also moments of joy and how people can travel too. Because it's hidden history, but it's also still living history. So how people can travel to these spaces and experience Bomba or Rio Carnival and things of that nature while also knowing, like, hey, historically, a black woman did start this.

Matt Bowles: All right, we're going to pause here and call that the end of part one. If you would like to watch Eileen's AJ video that we just did, discussed, or if you would like to check out her award winning travel series Black Latin History, or if you would like to watch her viral TikTok on how braids

became a secret map for escaping slavery, all of that, as well as everything else we've discussed in this episode is going to be linked up in one place in [the show notes](#). So just go to themaverickshow.com go to the show notes for this episode and there you will find all of that as well as all the ways to contact and follow Eileen on social media. And if you would like to meet me and Eileen in person, we are both going to be at the [Wits Travel Creator Summit](#) in New York City in May 2025 and you can get a special discount if you would like to join us. Beth Santos, the founder of Wonderful that puts on the *WITS Travel Creator Summit*, has been on the show twice and she is offering Maverick show listeners a \$75 discount if you would like to attend the event. So, you can get that by going to themaverickshow.com/wits and then you can get your discounted ticket there and come and hang out with me and Beth and Eileen and a whole bunch of other Maverick Show guests that are going to be there. And then if you do grab a ticket or even if you're just going to be in the New York City area, then shoot me a DM and let me know so that we can plan to link up. Just follow at *maverickshowpod* on [Instagram](#) and then shoot me a DM there so we can plan to connect in New York. And of course, be sure to tune in to the next episode to hear the conclusion of my interview with Eileen Ivette. Good night, everybody.