

Layla: Hello and welcome back to another episode of Good Ancestor podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad and today I'm speaking with Ramon Stephens from The Conscious Kid. Ramon Stephens is a Ph.D. student at the University of California San Diego and executive director at The Conscious Kid. His research focuses on recruitment, retention, resilience and student voice for black students and marginalized student groups. He's currently researching black graduate experiences at UC San Diego. Ramon has created, developed and supported student-driven, culturally relevant curriculum and programs in various universities, high school districts, schools and non-profits across California, Washington and Washington D.C. Currently, his research supports UC San Diego and San Diego Unified in the development and implementation of a district wide ethnic studies curriculum. Ramon has presented his research at conferences including Stanford's Race and Equality Language Conference and the American Educational Research Association Conference. The way that I have got to know about Ramon and the incredible work that he's doing over at The Conscious Kid is through Instagram. Conscious Kid has a thriving Instagram community that is incredibly educational. And I'm really excited to be speaking with him today, so welcome to the show Ramon.

Ramon: Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited.

Layla: I'm really excited to be here with you too. Let's start straight in, our first question, who are some of the ancestors living or transitioned, societal or familial, who have influenced you in your journey?

Ramon: Well that's such a deep question. There's so many that I can think of, but if I were to kind of go down from the beginning, I actually definitely give credit to, you know, my mother and father, my grandparents as well. You know, my mom made sure and my dad made sure that, you know, we're exposed to diverse narratives. Always conversations of equity around the table. Reading books as a child all the way to being an adult and so there's just so much. And so I guess, and if we aren't really talking about actual authors, you know, so out of the gate I'm gonna obviously give it up to my family, my grandparents also. But if we're gonna talk about authors, you know, I can talk about that all day long.

Layla: Who are some of the authors that really get you excited when you think about them whose work you're always, you know, quoting or is top of mind for you?

Ramon: Well, let's see. At the top of my head, I really like Sylvia Wynter. I really like Bell Hooks. I really like Gloria Ladson-Billings, Arnetta Ball, Derrick Bell, Chester Pierce, Kimberle Crenshaw, Audre Lorde. I can probably go on forever. Just, you know, at the top of my head I could think of, you know, Angela Valenzuela, yeah.

Layla: Books and writing obviously is a passion for you as it is for me. I would love to know about how you got started on this journey of creating The Conscious Kid and if you could tell our listeners who've never heard of The Conscious Kid before, what is it that you do over The Conscious Kid?

Ramon: So, The Conscious Kid was started with me and my wife, Katie Ishizuka. She also wrote the paper, we both wrote it together, The Dr. Seuss article, so she's very, very important in this work so I wanna make sure I give her credit. So yeah, we're both authors and researchers but we are also parents. So, we have two young kids of color. And so we're looking for books to find representation of them when they were born because we want them to have, you know, powerful narratives that empower who they were and built their identity up. So, we went to the library and I remember Katie goes and asked you know how many books do you have that has black characters because our sons are half black and are quarter Japanese and quarter white. So they're mixed but their hair is distinctly black. I mean, they look, you can tell that they're black.

Layla: Mm-hmm.

Ramon: So the librarian goes in the back and she comes back with three books out of the whole library. You know, one of which is a black girl praying to God, that her hair isn't nappy, another one is like-

Layla: Oh my gosh.

Ramon: -it was a 10-year-old girl whose character's hair and we are like, wow! This is interesting. So as we, you know, we're talking about these amongst ourselves and we're talking about this with other parents of color, they're finding the same situation where they're trying to find these empowering narratives but there just these things to be lack of books. Before, you know, under represented marginalized groups and but also buy those groups as well. And so as we started to do this work, we started looking at different libraries and noticed the same pattern going our line and looking at all this kind of all these publishing things. So it became this thing where we have to go through all these work to find a good book that's by a person of color from the group that still has empowering narratives. And the books were like there were so, we're collecting them in our library and we began sharing them with other parents. You know, we're just like, you know, maybe we should make a project out of this. And it kinda birth into this concept of, you know, research, training for equity but also making sure parents still have access to tools that help, you know, build positive racial identity for their children and for, you know, other students that they help raise.

Layla: That's incredible. And I'm really moved by that because here on The Good Ancestor podcast and when I think about what it means to me to be a good ancestor, it starts first with my children and the impact that my being first of all has on them. And then the things that I do in the world how that impacts them. And it gives me chills just, you know, hearing about how this really important work was born. And that it started first with your own children. You know, The Conscious Kid is really I see it providing so many resources and so much education to so many different parents and so you're having this impact on other people's kids who you didn't, you know, you were not thinking about when this journey begun, and it's really beautiful to see how that love for your children has rippled out into this amazing project.

Ramon: Well, thank you. It's an honor to hear those positive words. It is super cool too being a parent going through this process because, you know, as we work with our, you know, people who support our work and come to our page and so on and so forth. You know, we're experiencing this journey with you. I mean, part of it is, yeah, really cool on research but it's like, no, we're real parents, real human beings, real people of color here that are going through this process and so we share your pain and your struggles that come with trying to have the highest expression of yourself, within a system that is consistently trying to limit you or marginalized you.

Layla: I think that's such an important point to make that you are human being just like everyone else. Parents just like everyone else going through the journey of parenthood as your kids grow and are at the different stages of their lives and you're at different stages of your parenthood and then at the same time you're exploring these findings, sharing these, you know, treasures but also these research findings which I'd love to talk next about the paper that you and Katie have put together on Dr. Seuss. But I really resonate with that. I remember, part of my early-on frustration when I receive the question from my parents, you know, what am I supposed to teach my kids about racism, or how can I find, you know, more books that are more diverse? You know, questions of that nature which are valid questions. I remember feeling frustrated because I remember feeling like, I'm also just trying to figure it out. Like, I don't know, you know, I'm trying to find the books. I'm trying to understand how to navigate this. And I think that it can be forgotten when you're in the position like you and Katie at The Conscious Kid are in where people come to you and to your page as a resource.

Ramon: Right.

Layla: Right.

Ramon: Totally.

Layla: Yeah.

Ramon: Yeah, absolutely. You know, and I totally get that, you know. And here's the thing, it's pretty funny you'll see, we get those questions you know, all the time you know. How do I raise my child? And it's kinda--

Layla: It's like, I don't know. How do I raise mine?

Ramon: You know it's really funny. And people will expect sometimes. It is a thing for people of color, especially for white folks to be asked and people of color to raise their children which historically has been a thing when you talked about slavery or indigenous folks being colonized and people being utilized to raise their children and the expectation that you're like this representative for all people of color and all forms of equity and you know, you're like this token person that they come to for advice that's supposed to know everything and you know, we're all in this process figuring it out and making sure white parents also taking a part of themselves to find other resources to train

themselves as supposed to expecting people of color to do it for them. But at the same time, we still support folks that are obviously allies and come to our pages of resource but at the same time just being mindful of the labor that you expect from folks, you know. And who you're expecting to work.

Layla: Yes, yeah. I think you do a beautiful job of really making it clear where your center point is. Who is being centered? You know, as we talked about in the introduction, it's really about focusing on black student voices and marginalized voices, rather than the intention being a resource for white parents to come.

Ramon: Exactly.

Layla: Yeah. They get the benefit of the work that you're doing but they're not the intended beneficiaries.

Ramon: Exactly, right? And that's important because it's like, we do this work for our community, right? We do this work to support ourselves. We do it to support our resilience within our community. And for white folks if you can benefit from that, that's great. You know, we appreciate the support come on in. But just remember that we keep our community group centered. Right? And that's important because how else to get to know you better than coming from yourself or somebody who represents that part of life. So, that's great because a lot of times people will do this and will forget like who they're doing it for. And a lot of times it is to appease, it ends up appeasing white folks. When you see people doing research always juxtaposing or comparing themselves to white folks and using whiteness as a standard for what is normal as oppose to looking deeply within their own community and creating a unique framework that starts with that; as supposed to this kind of binary situation.

Layla: Yeah, exactly. I just wanna pick up on something you just said there. You said using whiteness as a standard for normal. And, so I grew up in the UK and I'm not American, I'm British. I grew up in the UK and we did have the Dr. Seuss books in our libraries. But they were not as popular as I believe they are in the US. We had other kinds of books. I remember we had a series of books called Peter and Jane and they were I think brother and sister. I don't know if you have that in the US.

Ramon: I'm not familiar with it.

Layla: Yes. So they are this boy and this girl, Peter and Jane, I believe they're brother and sister. And it was a book that would teach you how to read. So it's very simple sentences that you would read but they were the standard books that, I still remember them. And when I think back, I can't remember ever seeing a book, as a child, a book with a black character or even a character who was a kid of color. And I think so much about as I do my own, you know, personal healing work around my own internalized depression, I think a lot about the messages that I internalized as a child around white as the standard of normal.

Ramon: Right.

Layla: And what that then meant about me, and what that meant about people that look like me. Can we talk a little bit about what is actually the impact that you have seen, that you understand of children of color and black children not seeing themselves represented in literature?

Ramon: Oh that's a great, that's a great, great talking point right there. So, one of the things that we noticed and this is supported by a research, right? But you can see it also in your own personal home and in my own personal experience as growing up. When we talk about, why do you educators sometimes have a tough time engaging students of color, right? The quick argument is to, "Oh, well those kids aren't working hard enough and their families don't value education." And all these myths that are not necessarily true, part of it is not being able to see yourself in the literature, right? If you want to create or manifest a vision, you have to be able to see yourself in that vision first, right? So if you can't see yourself within the literature, and it's not relating to your life, you know, why am I even here? How does this apply to me? I don't even know how to use this stuff because all of the stuff in these books, concepts in these books are usually there because of some sort of white privilege and the person in the book is often a white person who is being privileged, right? So that's not necessarily correlative to your life or your experiences that you have. So, you see, this disengagement from both education at large but also within themselves. And the thing is it's like, when we look at like the publishing industry, there's so many books about people of color still written by white folks. So it still comes from this lens of whiteness.

Layla: Right.

Ramon: So, when you get to see yourself in these books, sometimes the images are distorted, because the sense of whiteness and white middle-class norms often being centered as what is normal often times being colored one, you have a tough time really engaging with the literature. Kind of understanding why you're even reading it in the first place? You see things like you've mentioned earlier, the internalization of white supremacy where you might start to even reject things of your own culture or feel awkward around people from your culture.

Layla: Yeah, guilty, guilty for sure. Yeah.

Ramon: Yeah.

Layla: It's something that I know I definitely grew up feeling.

Ramon: Definitely, right? And the thing is this that, there's such a limited narrative of what actually represents, you know, your story or other people or I shouldn't say other people, but you know, marginalized groups' stories that aren't heard. Then there comes this problematic stereotypes that didn't come out because people are ignorant about those groups and what they're actually looking like. And so the limited representations

in the media, like I said it come from this middle class lens often times it's super deficit, right? Because it's juxtapose against whiteness. Whiteness being superior, right? Everything else being inferior, if you are a person of color, for example. So for example, like black folks in the media, right? You see these common stereotypes of these like, violence, or bad parents, or kind of token coons who are there to appease folks and make them laugh or so on and so forth. When you actually go and spend time and you live in a black community you'll see that there's so much more, right? We're not all just rappers and athletes. Nothing against folks that do that but there's so much more to our community. There's scientists, right? There's authors, right? There's entrepreneurs. There's so much diversity once you actually have those human relationships. And so, it's unfortunate, because people also think that, right? Not having those kids of color, that's for the people of color, that's for them, right?

Layla: Right. Right.

Ramon: We are doing this paper. But the problem is then white folks start to develop these distorted narratives and this works for I think for any dominant group that doesn't allow voices or diverse voices from underrepresented groups. But, they developed these distorted stereotypes and versions or narratives of what you're supposed to be so that when you engage in like there's only one, there's like this black box, right? And you have to fit all these stereotypes. And if you don't, then all of a sudden you're not black or somethin'.

Layla: Right.

Ramon: And that gets tough to navigate all those micro aggressions within, so they don't get the actual accurate representation of what your community looks like because that community is not telling their own story. And most importantly, people of color then begin to internalize those narratives and either distance themselves from black or starts to develop deficit understandings of what it means to be in a black neighborhood or a black community or a black family. And try to conform to whiteness as-

Layla: Right.

Ramon: -standard. Yeah.

Layla: Yeah. That's so well explained. I was just nodding my head throughout the whole time that you're talking. Because I could relate to so much of it myself. And I grew up in a very white community, I went to a very white school. So as I'm listening to you talking, I'm sort of having flashbacks, memories, you know. Definitely can see how all of those things resonated very true for me. As a parent, I have two kids, who are black kids. They're growing up in the Middle East, not in a pre-dominantly white culture, but they go to a school that is multicultural but is a British curriculum school.

Ramon: Mm-hmm.

Layla: And one of the points or issues or concerns that I had and that I raised with the school in the parents' meeting last year, I believe it was. You know, they were talking about how my daughter who's older is going, they're going to be reading these sort of longer novels, these longer fiction novels. And I remember looking at, what was, what they're gonna be reading this year and it was, the authors were all white males.

Ramon: Hmmm.

Layla: The protagonists were white kids, predominantly. And whether there were elements of sort of other cultures, it was from a very like, mystical sort of ancient world perspective given through white lens.

Ramon: Hmmm. Wow.

Layla: You know I have issues with the fact that we, you know, where are the female authors?

Ramon: Right.

Layla: And authors of other genders. And where are the narratives in the stories being told through a non-white story teller. And you know, they said, "Yeah, we know this is an issue. But unfortunately we take our curriculum from the UK." So the issue is from the UK. And my issue there is, but there are black people and people of color in the UK and there surely are black children's authors and authors of color in the UK. Why is it that those authors' stories are not the ones that get the big book deals, get the headlines, you know, are presented as the desirable stories to present to students and to children? And when I look through sort of the library of resources that you have over at The Conscious Kid, there are so many books.

Ramon: Uh-hmm.

Layla: So there's like, this thing, this idea that these authors and these stories don't exist are the same time they exist. But people are thinking but where do I find them? So what's the disconnect?

Ramon: Well, I appreciate you sharing that story with me just in general about your kids and the things you're going through just to affirm that. So I think the disconnect is obviously within this notion of whose story has more power? Whose story has value and whose stories don't? Right? We know that there's a certain amount of space within an educational curriculum and consistent like what you said, when you talk about female authors of color is not getting centered. It's not that there isn't books available. There's plenty of books available. They're not being centered because there's this understanding that people from those groups, their stories don't have value or that's kind of the underlying myth. The larger narrative that often ties into is this kind of notion of like the canon, right? So the school district will say, well this is the canon that we've always studied and these are authors who everybody loves. But when you start to go into those authors' works a lot of times like you said, like you mentioned right, we're

seeing a lot of these problematic norms that are being centered and more importantly be complete erasure of underrepresented groups. And so why is that there, why is this canon? Is a canon really that important, right? Or can we complicate what that looks like? So it's important to underrepresented groups, we have our own canon, right? You know, when we talk about feminist studies, they have their own canon. When you talk about black feminist, they have their own canon. When we talk about black existentialism, we have our own canon, right? But that isn't standard or given value. Mainly because a lot of the concepts talked about in those stories often challenge these dominant norms, right? And starts to undermine whose group has power and who can control the narrative? So it goes back into this larger institutions when we talk about, you know, racism, when we talk about patriarch, when we talk about class, right? It's tied to these larger institutions that are present here in the US but are rooted in colonialism, so they're all over the world, unfortunately, right? With the slavocracy was an international movement and so you know, even though we don't have this much Dr. Seuss as you mentioned over there where you grew up, there's still the same kind of power systems and mechanisms, for example, of white supremacy that are still penetrating the lives and part of that is erasing people of color's voice, you know. People of color having the power to create their own narrative and their own story about their own existence, mainly to maintain the power of those dominant groups. And that's why I think there's a disconnect and that's why I think that the canon is always used and it's like supreme narrative of who has the most knowledge and which voices are considered the most intellectually superior. And it's not a coincidence when you talk about the role of institutions that they tend to center white males as being the "authority" of what knowledge is supreme and what knowledge has the most value.

Layla: Yes, so good.

Ramon: [Inaudible] [23:45]

Layla: Yes. When you said who is considered intellectually superior, that really struck me. You know, I've loved books all my life. I've loved reading all my life. But it was only really within the last two years that I have discovered the writings of black authors and my mind was blown that like you said, we have our own canon.

Ramon: Hummm.

Layla: And at the same time it's considered inferior in some way. And yet when you read it, the depth and the complexity and everything it just there's nothing like it, for me at least. Sometimes I think these institutions and this white centering, gives this idea that these stories are only relevant, black stories and stories from people of color are only relevant to the people from those groups. While stories that center white people are relevant to all groups.

Ramon: Right.



Layla: So this is a story about, you know, I remember when my daughter was a bit younger, someone gifted her a book about loving her hair. And, you know, that's a nice book to gift to a little black girl. But there's this idea that it should only be given to a black girl and should only be read by a black girl.

Ramon: Right.

Layla: That a white child would not get any value from that. What are your thoughts around that?

Ramon: Yeah, that's so true. So you know well part of the work that I also do is like doing ethnic studies wherein we touch on that a little bit. But there's an assumption right, ethnic studies are books for kids of color or they have narratives about communities of color are just a favor we are doing for these black and brown folks.

Layla: Right.

Ramon: And you know they should be thankful for that that we're even doing that and but we don't need to waste our time doing that. Here's an interesting part when we study ethnic studies, right? And we look at the work of, oh my god, Christine Sleeter. Sorry it just slipped my head. So when you look at the work of Christine Sleeter, she studies white folks and white students and what they get from reading, you know, ethnic studies curriculum and multi-culture education. We look at all the groups, white students actually learn the most and benefit the most because they're not used to having conversations of race on a daily basis. They're not getting exposed to narratives about people of color, right? So then there's this also this notion kinda within school that people don't bring any knowledge to the school. They don't have any value because people of color's knowledge and experiential knowledge that we gain on a daily basis isn't considered valid. So we didn't start to look at it like it's kind of empty vessels that they're gonna pour this knowledge into. When in fact we know that students coming with their own histories and their own stories and their own cultures and that has value. And as a result, we look at stuff like ethnic studies curriculum or reading books about people of color. We're like, okay, I've heard this narrative before. But these white folks, they have not heard this narrative, right? So it's like we'll gain value in it but they actually end up often times getting the most out of it because they have not had exposure to these diverse narratives. And just like you said, you know, once you start reading gaining access to these books by people from their own community telling their own story, there's so much nuance in it, right? There's so much wonder, I hate to just say wonder, but there's so much brilliance and diversity within, within the book about wow, this is one, one lens of this group from the community that-

Layla: Right.

Ramon: -isn't often seen.

Layla: Yes, yeah. It's so interesting when you were talking just now thinking about as you were saying about students of color coming in and sharing their narratives on how helpful it is for white children to be able to hear these stories because they don't hear them at home. I was thinking about how a lot of, I remember when I was growing up and I'm sure it still happens, that a lot of children are taught this idea that we don't see color.

Ramon: Right.

Layla: Or we've seen it but it's just this beautiful tapestry but there's no conversation around what difference actually looks like and means or anything like that. And so there's a very superficial, it's a very superficial way of trying to give the appearance of being anti-racist without any of the work.

Ramon: Right.

Layla: Right? And so that's why to me having stories where whether or not they are about racism, right, because like for example, you know, Toni Morrison was criticized many times by white people because she didn't center white people as her narratives or she didn't center, you know, African-American people struggle against white people as her main narrative. The narrative doesn't have to be around the struggle of being black or a person of color.

Ramon: Mm-hmm. Exactly.

Layla: Right.

Ramon: Totally. Yeah. And that's what people, when they come watching like black stories whether it's a book or even a movie, right? And you can tell sometimes, you can usually tell often times when it's a white person doing it because-

Layla: Right.

Ramon: -it's like this narrative like they're going through, I met some drug addict doing it in the hood, like not to say that there aren't black folks that have those experiences but that becomes center, right? This completely negative deficit narrative always gets centered, right? They have to be in a gang, they gotta be going through all these things, right? Not just stating that those stories are important, right? But there's so much more to being black than just going through it all day long, right? Like there's beautiful moments of resilience and beauty within the community that is often not captured and so it falls back into those kind of stereotypes, unfortunately.

Layla: Yeah. Yeah. So, okay, I want to talk about Dr. Seuss now.

Ramon: Great.

Layla: You and Katie have put together a really important paper on the impact of Dr. Seuss' writings, how he has been held up as the sort of standard for children of anti-racism when in fact a lot of his work, both in children's literature and outside of children's literature was highly racist.

Ramon: Mm-hmm.

Layla: Can you tell us a little bit about how you got into sort of exploring this area and what are some of the findings that have come out of it?

Ramon: Oh, yeah. So the journey is pretty interesting, you know? It was during my first year as a Ph.D. student and we're getting this tour around campus, right? And Dr. Seuss, Ted Geisel was a big name on campus, donating a lot of money. And so you know, we are sitting on top of my personal friend of my cohort, he says, "Man," he whispered, he says, "well he's like, you know, all those racist Japanese cartoons when we were two. And I was like, "Really? I had never heard of it."

Layla: Right.

Ramon: He's like, "Yeah. He did all those racist propaganda in the earlier part of the century. You should check it out, you should google it. It's pretty, pretty well-known." So I go back home and you know I'm telling Katie about it. I'm like, "Did you know, look it up and we were like oh my god." You know, so then she got really fired up and starts, she wrote a blog post on it and wrote kind of this like, basically got the ball rolling on the paper and kind of starts to put all these, she starts, you know, she goes to the library and she's like, "Well let's see if we can get all these books." And I'm like, "You know what, ask the library Ted Geisel, they would have all the Dr. Seuss books." So we just go up there and go request it. So she bust up this kind of blog post on it and then from there we're like, you know what after she bust up that blog post and got the initial shell going of the work, I was like, you know what, we can turn this into a research paper and be like put the methods together and then started exploring all the books through our methodology and then from there the paper pretty much, pretty much was born. But I definitely gotta get credit to her for being the first to, you know, get it going, get it started, get the idea and the ball rolling on that paper. And then yeah, once we went into the books and we started looking at all the different things from the architecture to the characters and the few characters of color that are present and how they're being depicted, we're like, man! You know this wasn't just something that was just this political cartoons which are always explained. This is something throughout all these books, right? And the assumption is this, when you approach literature and you said it great, we're talking about, you know, what is whiteness as a norm mean? One of which is like you said, this universal application that it applies to everybody, to which that is color blind, right? And so because it's color blind, it doesn't have any actual interactions with folks who see them as human or understanding so when they depict, when whiteness is used as a lens to depict obviously used as a color, to me it's like stereotype. So I mean, there are like black people and two black kind of characters with that, you know, wearing skirts and look like monkeys and were ape-like and so they don't even

have the human aspect to sort of like, why is this always being, why these books always being centered, right? And so we ran into this narrative words like, "Okay, well Dr. Seuss was racist up until he came out with Horton Hears a Who! which is supposed to be this kind of formal apology and the Sneetches right? And people actually use the Sneetches to teach about race. So you know, I was really excited and kind of dive in to those books. And so when we dive in to those books, we see we're in the Sneetches. And just to give you, 'cause we're like, this is what teachers like in, I'm talking about experts, are using to teach race which was this fascinating. We're like using a race to teach race, I don't know how effective this-

Layla: Hmm.

Ramon: -would be. And so, we go into the Sneetches. And just to give a quick kind of synopsis of the story it's like, you have these folks that have stars on their belly and you have these other folks that don't have stars on their belly. And people without stars on their belly, they really want to be with the people that have the stars on their belly. But the people with stars on their belly, you know, they're essentially like kind of rejecting and I'm not letting them join. And then essentially at the end of the book is where these people without stars on their belly, eventually, they get stars on their belly and they're able to join this larger dominant group.

Layla: Right.

Ramon: And I think this is so problematic because it has these notions of like conform me like, why can't the people without stars on their belly just be happy with themselves? Why do they have to conform and get a star on their belly and be just like the dominant group and only until they can join the dominant group are they happy and really able to actualize themselves, right?

Layla: Right.

Ramon: And just like the classic narrative of white supremacy and I'm thinkin', this is what folks are usually teach about race to, you need to conform to the dominant group and this is considered cutting edge and it just blows my mind. Because, it just shows once again like people say that, "That's okay. That's where he should be. And he's not racist." And we're like okay. Well first of all, we all know that institutional race impacts everybody. And we all participate in this. So there's no choice of not being racist, okay?

Layla: Right.

Ramon: That's something you're gonna deal with your entire life. Racism isn't something that you get to choose to partake in, right? That is such a white assumption because of the fact that, you know, they're not oppressed through the institutional race of privilege, right? So they feel like they can interact when they choose rather if you're a black person and you have this black skin and this black visual appearance, you know, you don't have the choice. You have to interact with race all day long, right? And so it push

back on that part. But the second part is that, no, none of these--the book narratives don't change like this is even a word. This is equally problematic as all the other books. And the fact that people are using it to teach race I think is also, thinking of how misunderstood institution of race actually is. Yeah.

Layla: Thank you so much for sharing all of that so simply and deeply at the same time. What really strikes me about Dr. Seuss. First of all, I remember being a kid and seeing those books and I didn't like them and that's why I don't remember anything about him. And so, there is not many stories that I remember but I remember The Cat Freaked Me Out. For some reason, I didn't like him. And so it's interesting reading about where the sort of inspiration for that character came from. The sort of, you talked about how it came from this very anti-black image of the black minstrel shows.

Ramon: Yes.

Layla: But what really strikes me though is this desire of the institutions to want to cling unto-

Ramon: Mm-hmm.

Layla: -this person because he's our person. But he wrote all these books and they rhyme. And it's like, so we're gonna ignore, you know, and I had never seen any of the things, when I was reading your paper, had never seen any of the things that the cartoons that he depicted and the kind of things that he wrote about. They are extremely vile. It's not racism light, if there's such a thing. It's extremely, extremely racist. And then this idea that was in his past, as you said, that was how he was before and how he's had a change of heart. And so he's created these stories and now we're gonna use these and it's like, but what about teaching from black people and people of color themselves?

Ramon: Exactly.

Layla: Why do we have to hang on to this guy? Why does he have to be our guide?

Ramon: Exactly. Exactly, it's still like, in the US you know, they have this thing called Read Across America and all these schools, all over the country, you know read Dr. Seuss. So what was great though is that it's put on by the NEA, the National Education Association, I believe to be, but NEA puts it on. However, you know, they recently did change their stands due to our work that we did our work and-

Layla: That's amazing.

Ramon: -she was in the diverse office as supposed to centering Dr. Seuss but you still have all these schools that still want to center him. There is this kind of protest attachment to it. And I think it has to do with the white supremacy both within our institutions and within ourselves and the way that people have come to understand themselves. Talking about this notion of like, when people try to use this notion of, well this is Dr. Seuss' point to that kind of Western canon, I feel like within the US.

Layla: Absolutely! Yeah, and it's not an exaggeration to say that, that the work that you and Katie have done around this has really, really activated some people. And has really offended some people to the extent that, you know, you have to be careful about your identity and your safety.

Ramon: Absolutely!

Layla: That's why we're not doing a video interview today because we wanna make sure that you're protected. But what strikes me so much about that is, if it's create that kind of a reaction over books-

Ramon: Right.

Layla: -children's books. That there is that kind of a violent reaction how dare you call out our guy? How dare you say these things and write these things about over children's books? You know, if we're at that level there, when it comes to real institutional change, it is no wonder that people in this area of work face the kind of backlash that they do. And it is no wonder that change doesn't happen because they still so strongly and so vehemently hold onto what they know as what is right and true and the standard.

Ramon: Absolutely! And you know this fear, there's a fear too.

Layla: Right.

Ramon: I mean, at the end of the day we're just exposing, you know, how the book actually is depicting people of color. And so we're saying, maybe we should switch up, right?

Layla: Right.

Ramon: It's not gonna be a big deal but the issue is because it is tied into these larger institutions of power. These larger power structures, for example, white supremacy via that white Western canon, people automatically put it in this binary that you wanna erase kind of our story like this.

Layla: Right. Right.

Ramon: You wanna replace it with your narrative. And it's not necessarily the case. I'm not saying get rid of every single white person's story.

Layla: Right.

Ramon: I'm just saying this is not the best book to be teaching about racism.

Layla: This is not our guide.

Ramon: Yeah. Do you know how many authors there are, you know? And like you mentioned earlier, if we're gonna be teaching about race and we're gonna be teaching about people of color's stories, you know, like you said there's so many books once you actually can go out there. And there's so much amazing concepts that does not get supported. But it's all of it the violence and the reaction is just indicative of how much power, like power relevant white supremacy is. And this kind of history of where, when people of color from underrepresented groups have stood up to dominant groups about control of their narrative in the way that their narrative is being depicted using violence as a tool to put them in their place, is this all this colonialism. And it's about colonizing knowledge, it's about colonizing narratives, it's about whose voice gets centered and it's about power, right? And that's why there's that violent reaction is because there are visible underlying assumptions that tie into white supremacy that whites, that our white patriarchy dude, who we love so much, his voice should have power because of these institutions that have privileged him and are privileged of my narrative and my voice. And so now you're threatening to take that away. When it's like, no, we're just trying to figure out a way to coexist it's like it's a buffet, right? There's so much-

Layla: Right.

Ramon: -on the table. We can add other voices. You don't have to just have your voice be centered, right? And if your voice's gonna be at the table, you know, let's make sure that the narrative does not being problematic.

Layla: Right, distorted and yeah, yeah exactly. Again I'm just so struck by The Conscious Kid. Something that you and Katie started as an endeavor to help make sure that your children were able to read more diverse books than what was, you know, offered at the buffet, is actually, it's a revolutionary thing that you're doing.

Ramon: Thank you, thank you. It means, it means a lot to hear that.

Layla: It really is and I really honor you for it. And I really, it's so important to me for my kids to see the kind of work that you're doing. It's so important for so many kids and so many parents out there. What are some of the conversations that you have had with other black parents and parents of color around this work? Allowing them to see and giving them access to and you're pointing them towards, you know, there are books with narratives of us, you know. What is some of the feedback that you've gotten from parents of color?

Ramon: Oh my god, so, when speaking with you know, like folks with color, especially for black folks, I think too is people really appreciate being able to get access to these books. But it, like I said, it's not just about the content, right? It's about looking at the context in which the books themselves are created or consumed. So once again realizing the importance of supporting, you know, black office or office from those communities. Both to get a more enriching narrative, right? But also to make sure that, that money is going back into the community and not once again being stiffen up to a dominant group who has appropriated your narrative for their own benefit and come up now. Not to say

that these authors don't have, you know, white authors' writing black books don't have a good intentions but at the end of the day we do know that it is a white person, you know, using somebody else's narrative. Often times making money for off a bit and taking up space for what could be a black person's voice to give a more accurate narrative and make sure those resources go back to that community. And so, but the other it is like there's two parts of it, so there's a space of resilience, right? Where we see, you know, parents were like, "Man, this is so great." And you can see the impact on their child and not being afraid to express their blackness, right? Not being worried about wearing braids and getting punished for it. They're looking a certain way and assumptions being made about like your character that aren't necessarily true. But then there's this fight, right? When you go to the institutions and you talk about and you share these stories, right? You can bring researchers about the impact and all these stuff. And when we look at the research of black parents, we know that institutions pushed them out, right? When black parents started talking about including things like more diverse books or equity and what that can look like in the classroom or being more inclusive of a black voice, we know that those parents are often gaslighted, pushed out. And even if they bring in researchers, teachers don't even, I mean not mostly all teachers, but essentially we know the education system, generally speaking, doesn't even care for that research or even evaluate, right? And so it becomes this ongoing struggle where you're always kinda try to fight for your child to have a representation of themselves. So that they can feel like they can actualize and be proud of themselves and have a positive identity. Because we know, right, when new identity work that if you don't have positive identity of yourself and you're always being exposed to these problematic narratives that does impact to you, right? And it creates various forms of trauma that can last decades. I mean, we talked about it earlier, right? The biggest part of this work, you know, is like really unpacking your own white supremacy that has been embedded in yourself. And you know, white supremacy is intersectional, right? It's not just race. It's race, it's gender, it's class, it's ability, it's all those encapsulated in these kind of concepts. So it's all these different forms of oppression that are intersecting your daily experiences that have been embedded within you that you haven't really noticed because of things like color blindness which teach you not to look at race. So then you never get to unpack it or talk about it. It just gets embedded into your consciousness, right? As early as the age of, when you're a baby, I think you can start seeing racism at the age of three. There has been this report with kids, they can see racism at the age of three. And then it becomes fixed by age seven. Meaning that, although they may change the way that they are acting and the words that they're saying, internally they still hold a lot of racism, problematic narratives about people of color. So that's the fight that you're always going and it gets like, you see the positive impact on your child and you see the space but as you go to these institutions that are unfortunately rooted in these, you know, institutions like white supremacy and capitalism and patriarchy, you still, or still finding yourself fighting. And fighting these battles to make sure that your voice is included. And like it's one of the oldest stories in the game, you know? Just-

Layla:

Right.



Ramon: -following to make sure your voice is included. We've been doing it for hundreds of years it's just like, you know, our turn now. I guess.

Layla: Right. And it's so interesting you say that Rachael Cargle, when I, she was our very first guests in this podcast and she said something like, you know, the work is not new it's just our turn.

Ramon: Love that

Layla: Yeah.

Ramon: Love her too.

Layla: So it gives me chills that you just said that. As you were talking about narratives that we learned as children and how that gets internalized and lasts for decades, you know, like I said earlier I'm still unpacking a lot of that stuff. And I know one of the major lies that is, still gets at me is that I'm a burden.

Ramon: Right.

Layla: Right? And so that means from being a black and Muslim student in a predominantly white and Christian environment. And often feeling like I was, in a stock of pure rice, I'm like the little, you know, the little rotten rice that's in there. Or you know, just someone who spoiled the purity and the pureness of what was around me. And so that has this ripple effect even now as an adult where I act smaller or play smaller than I actually am a lot of times. Or I find it difficult to ask for what I need or what I want 'cause I don't wanna be burdensome to another person. It means that I am constantly or often thinking what is that other person thinking of me? Because of my own story about myself which comes from never seeing myself represented. Always feeling, that story that you said about the Sneetches, always feeling like, if I could just assimilate enough, then I would be able to somehow pass. Don't know how with my melanated skin that somehow be able to pass. So just fly into the radar. And so you know, my work in the world and just my person this means I don't apply into the radar. You know, I'm out in the world. I'm seen by a number of people as a public figure. And the work that I'm doing is having a global impact, and yet, I still have to contend to those feelings. And I know so many of us do.

Ramon: Oh my gosh, I love what you're saying. That's so real, that's so real. And you know we talked about all the different ways that, I think about different forms of research to talk about that experience 'cause I feel that way too. It's so common, you know, especially for people of color 'cause you're always saying you're sorry. Don't want to speak too much, you know. You don't wanna "be that burden", right?

Layla: Right.

Ramon: Like this notion of like the stereotype threat, right, taking place. But it's also this notion of, I think, when we talk about, you know, what can institutions do to change things like that as being aware of their own fragility, but also realizing that, when you're being this burden, this is value, right? People see critique as something that is, you know, you wanna tear me down. And you wanna eliminate my voice or somethin' like that. When really critique, this comes from a place of love. Let's look at that as a place of, this is a chance for me to learn something new about myself, right? And you can include that student's knowledge or that person or individual or human being's history or story of what they're trying to tell you, right? Now you actually are being having the opportunity to learn and kind of modify your way of living to be more inclusive and more importantly, you have a chance to become a better, better person, a better student, a better leader now. 'Cause now you're learning how to work with different groups of people. And more importantly you're gaining empathy in being able to see yourself and other peoples' stories, right? That's the-

Layla: Right.

Ramon: -our problem is, not being able to have empathy for individuals, first of. And not being able to see yourself from other perspectives which is, you know, one of the important reasons of things like social studies which now are getting cut out from a lot of school classes. Like where does some of the stuff come from? We look at school as a lot of impact on a lot of stuff because when you're talking about peoples' narratives, when you're talking about whose voice has power? You know in school when you bring up these things often times it's seen as a threat and from that early age you learn that your different story is not accepted in this larger spaces. And that carries on throughout life and you get disciplined for it, you know-

Layla: Right.

Ramon: -who is anti-American or anti-establishment when it's just like, no, I'm just trying to see if we can modify the narrative to just be a little bit more nuance, in the sense. But it's interesting that you say that, you know, even with all that success, right?

Layla: Right.

Ramon: Still feeling, knowing that these institutions are still impacting like when you're so successful but still feeling that you're still not good enough or you're gonna spoil that purity, right?

Layla: Right.

Ramon: That purity.

Layla: It's that impostor syndrome which I think so many black kids, kids of color, kids whose parents who are immigrants, you know, have.

Ramon: Yes.

Layla: Because of the lack of positive stories and then the like abundance of negative stereotypic stories. And I think it's really important for white people to understand that even if, and specially teachers, even if a black student or student of color is not articulating because they're not able to, you know, aren't communicating the fact that that's how they feel about themselves, that they're carrying it, right? So like many black kids, I was raised with the idea that you have to work twice as hard to get half a star, that's global. Anywhere black kid is raised in a white environment, that's the message that you get.

Ramon: That's right.

Layla: And so, I have always worked super hard. And was always, you know, the top student. I was always excelling and getting all of these accolades and yet continue to carry that impostor syndrome. So I've had, you know, you talked about, you know, you have the success now as an adult. I had that success as a child, and I still carried it. And so, I think it's so important that, so often, especially liberal white people who are in let's say a relationship with or in community with other black people and people with color, will say things like, well, you know, we don't really have racism here. Or that's not really a thing in our community. And they're judging that by the fact that the black people or people of color and their community have not said anything.

Ramon: Exactly.

Layla: To indicate that there is racism effect. But really we're carrying it all the time.

Ramon: Absolutely.

Layla: Yeah.

Ramon: You know, I used to participate in the institution of race, right?

Layla: Right. And when your child is a black kid or a kid of color, you're not able to understand what's actually happening. You're just absorbing, right? You're just a sponge absorbing that these are the norms, these are the standards. Okay, they are the norm, I am the other out. I have to work twice as hard. I am not gonna see myself represented. I must assimilate. And so they're going through their academic life like everything's normal.

Ramon: Right.

Layla: But it's not normal.

Ramon: Right. And that's why it's important to have books in schools talking about these things, right? Because you're internalizing all these narratives that are going, all these little microaggressions and macroaggressions you're just internalizing it in and you're

watching it. But you don't really get to kind of unpacking it. So, I mean, you know that there's something wrong going on, right? I could think of-

Layla: Right.

Ramon: -like I remember when-

Layla: Yes.

Ramon: -I was in kindergarten, I was around these like white kids and I knew that I was different. Because they're like, you know, blowing up their cheeks and making their face turn red and they're like, you know, "he can't do it, he can't do it." And at that point I knew that I was, I knew that I was different. But because there's no real stories that are teaching folks how to interact with people of color and what race actually looks like, because of color blindness or think that, you know, like you said, they just haven't said anything but the reality is this that, no it's a lifestyle. From the moment I wake up to the moment I go to sleep, right, I'm always gonna be dealing with these institutions. And although we haven't said anything to you, right? You participating and don't forget you are a guest in this community. And that your whiteness still protects you from certain things, right?

Layla: Right.

Ramon: So, even though no one said it, right? Being aware of this, once again, these white norms, right? Color blindness being one of those white norms that universal application towards everyone's experiences is not really, it's not normal. It's just whiteness manifesting itself from the space.

Layla: Yeah. Thank you for articulating that. Where do you see the work at The Conscious Kid going over the next 6 months, 1 year, few years, you know, what are you planning or what's wanting to unfold?

Ramon: Yeah. So, we got a lot of exciting projects here coming up. So one of the things that we're gonna be diving into is we're gonna be doing a new series about kids and race that talks to educators and parents about how to, you know, interact with children talking about issues of race to hopefully prevent some of the things we were just talking about earlier. So how, what does that look like in the young age. Even for babies and toddlers. So that's gonna be exciting. The Conscious Kid were also doing some new research on kind of ways to provide tools for teachers that they can use in their classrooms and in schools to provide things like critical media literacy which basically analyzes, you know, provides this kind of set of critical thinking tools that you can use to both question what's going on in your environment, you know, how does it relate to my life? How does it relate to kind of my identity development and my outcomes within a particular space? And what are some of the things that I can do to take action? And still providing like kind of some quick tools for teachers that they can use to analyze books or particular forms of literature for problematic or positive messaging, that's also another project that we're working on. And then, you know, down the line, you know,

lots of good things. I mean, I know we talked about one day, you know, workin' on a children's book down the line and getting a physical space for our library so we can have, you know, make community there and run training as well.

Layla: Wow.

Ramon: And then we also, we're gonna be teaching a course here at UCSD on this critical media literacy here in the spring this year. So we got a, we got a few different things kinda going on here.

Layla: That's amazing! That all sounds really amazing. You know, the impact that you've had just through your Instagram page and the work that you do there, everyday has been so impactful. So we're really excited to see that the impact continuing with these specific programs of book, in person, and space as well. I think that-

Ramon: Oh awesome.

Layla: -it's gonna be amazing! I'm really excited to see it uphold and fold and to keep cheerleading you on because this is really important work that you're doing.

Ramon: I really appreciate it Layla. You're amazing as well and all the work you do is incredible. And the fact that you have chosen to, you know, include our voice within the space just means the world to us. And I really enjoyed having this conversation with you and we just wanna say, I'm super grateful and thank you on the highest level.

Layla: Thank you so much. And yeah I'll share your work with white parents all the times. So, it's an honor for me. So as we close up I wanna ask you our final question, what does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Ramon: Oh, it's such a great question. Well, when I think about what it means to be a great ancestor or good ancestor, I gotta think about like the ancestors that I've had in my life. Ancestors have this ability to kind of create. Form at a formlessness, you know, create a life out of lifelessness. Situations that can seem dire can become bright, right? And it has to do with this interconnection with one another. So being an ancestor is about both understanding your own journey by providing this guidance, or not this guidance, this kind of, this space for those who can come after you that helps to provide resilience but also understand their own interconnection to one another and the universe and their highest selves, right? Being able to help to facilitate the highest expression of oneself even within the spaces of oppression, right? And so that is to me one of the most important things and narratives about marginalized groups is that people say that when you go to this oppression and they're starting to learn but then they think that's your whole life. But it's like, no, even within this racism, even within this institution of race, and even within this institution of patriarchy and capitalism and so on and so forth, I can still maintain my resilience. And I can still have a happy life and have these moments where, you know, of resilience that are next to none. So, out of all those things that are intersecting and impacting my life on a daily basis, good ancestor provides that

knowledge and makes that knowledge accessible to those to know that yes you are still a human being that can express on the highest level even within those spaces. But it will be something that you will continually battle with your entire life but know that that will not limit. That's not gonna be your whole story, right? There's gonna be more to you than just that piece. You have so many other parts of self and that self being both yourself, human kind, universe at large, working for you and working through you. So, understanding, help to providing an understanding of self, one's own power that they have and the power of their own voice, I think is what a good ancestor does.

Layla: That's beautiful Ramon. Thank you so much.

Ramon: Thank you so much. And once again I really appreciate it.