

Layla: Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Good Ancestor Podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad, and today I'm here with Aja Barber. Aja is a writer, stylist, consultant, and speaker whose work focuses on the intersections of feminism, colonialism, and race in regards to our clothing and how we choose to consume. I met Aja through Instagram, of course, my favorite virtual place to hang out, and I remember the way in which we met was through an article that she had written at the time which I just was like I need to share this because it was calling to attention something that was happening online regarding, you know, race and feminism and particularly white feminism, and I really respected Aja's way of expressing herself and bringing to light the things that we needed to understand in a way that was very clear and concise and so it's been an incredible pleasure to see and witness Aja as she's cultivated this incredible conversation online and the community around the conversation of sustainable fashion and so I'm really, really happy to have you here today, Aja. Welcome to Good Ancestor Podcast.

Aja: Thank you so much for having me. It's really nice to virtually meet. I have a lot of respect for what you do and just who you are and your way of being. I tend to adopt things with you, like you've messaged me before about things and ask like, "Do you have the bandwidth for this right now?" and I've adopted that 'cause it's such a kind and considerate way to enter someone's space so I just — much respect to you, Layla.

Layla: Thank you. The respect is absolutely mutual. I'm really excited to have you here and to have people listening to your brilliance, so let's dive into our conversation. Aja, very first question that we ask every guest, who are some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, familial or societal, who have influenced you on your journey?

Aja: Well, my grandmother is with me at all times. She passed in 2013 and that was really much harder than I ever expected it to be and, lately, with all of the success that I have, I know that she would just be so tickled pink by it and that somewhere in the universe she's just watching and so delighted with glee and her husband, who I never met, my grandfather, he was just a really interesting person who really found a path for himself and his family in so many different ways. They were definitely blockbusters when they moved into certain neighborhoods. They were the first black family and often unwanted. He worked with civil rights. He brought buses of people from York, Pennsylvania, down to Washington for the march on Washington. He was just an all-around interesting, progressive dude. He used to work for the Environmental Protection Agency and one of his friends owned a strip club and he used to get some of the women who were dancers jobs as secretaries during the day and so he was just a really progressive person and people would be like, "Oh yeah, very good secretaries in that office," you know, but like, yeah, and so I've always looked at the way my grandfather did things. He was a scrappy hustler and I've always just taught like this is in my roots, the hustle and the activism, you know? People say, "How does this start? How do you start to get into this stuff?" And I don't think it's a start, I think it's one of those things sometimes where it's in you.

Layla: It's so interesting listening to you speak about your ancestors and particularly how your grandfather is not someone that you've ever met and yet so much of what you're describing of what his life was, I'm like, oh, that's you. That's how you show up in the world.

Aja: He had progressive values which were really like not, you know, definitely did things in his own way which wasn't always the most popular way but he was just a really interesting person so I've always just thought like one day we are going to meet and we are going to have great conversations.

Layla: It's amazing to hear, and as I witness kind of his spirit alive in you already. That's really beautiful. You know, I, in my family, am kind of odd and you probably know what I'm talking about. Sort of you are the only one in your family who shows up in the way that you do that you know of.

Aja: Absolutely. Honestly, I can't explain to my other grandmother what I do for a living. She would just be like — I don't — she doesn't have a computer, you know?

Layla: She has no context to understand.

Aja: No context whatsoever. One time, I was on Good Morning America's website and like she thought that I did, you know? But like — and I think that's the same for a lot of people that operate in internet spaces, that our parents basically have no idea really and then one day we're published in an article. We've written a book and then everybody is just like, "Oh," but like when you're on the come up, everyone's like, "That's nice, dear," you know? My mom asked me if Patreon was legal. She was like, "So, this whole thing, this platform, it's good, right? It's legal, right?" I was like, yes, it's legal, mom.

Layla: I'm not running an illegal —

Aja: Exactly.

Layla: Sidekick, right?

Aja: She was like, "I'm just trying to wrap my head around it all."

Layla: Yeah. it's so funny that you say that. I mean, this year is the year that my family finally — I finally explained to them exactly what I did and they were like, "What do you mean you're writing a book? What do you mean it's being published? What do you mean it's been read by almost a hundred thousand people?" I'm like, well, there's this thing called Instagram, there's this whole other way of being in the world now and so something that I wanna talk about is social media platforms are these like double-edged sword, right? Where —

Aja: Yes.

Layla: — this amazing place for learning, making new connections. You and I wouldn't be having this conversation if not —

Aja: No, not at all.

Layla: — for these platforms.

Aja: But people sure do show up to be the worst sometimes.

Layla: Right, right? It's this other side of it where it's like you and I have both experienced and you're recently, today, coming out of a social media break which you decided to give to yourself because of having to deal with a lot of what I write about in *Me and White Supremacy*, right? So the white fragility, the tone policing, the white feminism —

Aja: Trolling. White feminism.

Layla: And I've —

Aja: Silencing.

Layla: The silencing, right, and I've certainly had my experiences of those and I know it really leaves you feeling heartbroken.

Aja: And drained. Emotionally drained, that's the thing and my partner, he has a day job and he comes home and he just doesn't understand like why I feel so completely drained, you know? But it can be extremely draining. I explain it to people like this. I work from home and during the wintertime, especially in the UK, sometimes I don't leave the house much 'cause it starts to get dark right around 3.

Layla: Right.

Aja: Yeah, and so —

Layla: This is why I don't live there anymore.

Aja: I know, right? It's great in the summer, though. You have this space where people, 75 percent of people think that you're amazing. It gives you a very skewed perception of self, that's why I would say to mom lately because 75 percent of people think that you are so amazing and they tell you that and that's very nice. It can be a bit much sometimes and then there's the 25 percent that doesn't like you, you know? Or even 20 percent that doesn't like you and a 5 percent that hates you. And it's the 5 percent that can drag you down the farthest and the 20 percent can be exhausting because I always say this. I, just on the internet, there are so many people that I don't like but like I don't find the time to tell them because I'm too busy living my life, you know? And I find that people really will make the time to sort of kick dirt in your face even if they don't have to because they're threatened by you, because they're uncomfortable with your message,

because they're fragile, you know, there's a list of things that people come out of the woodworks swinging and it's just so bizarre but like when you get too much of that, it can be just so emotionally draining. I had somebody who sent me all sorts of — they read a post of mine, it was just about like fashion and she wrote, "Well, FU, I'm doing the best that I can, blah, blah, blah, blah," and I came at it from a very calm approach and was just like, "Hey, we should discuss why you're feeling so upset about this thing I wrote," and so I went through it with them and I was like, you know, my work talks about privilege so like I'm not speaking to the person that cannot afford certain things, I'm speaking to the person like me in my twenties who had disposable income and would spend it on clothing from unethical companies. That's who I'm speaking to. We're all doing our best. We're all at different levels. I talked this person down from like basically cussing me out and then when I was done, I was just like, "So why did you come into my inbox yelling at me like that?" and then they blocked me and I was like cool. So it's a lot of that.

Layla: Right. I have certainly for myself created certain boundaries for myself where I won't do things like that and I know that you have your boundaries around when and how you will engage but what I know about just the scenario you've just described is that at the end of it, you have poured so much of yourself out and then you are completely empty.

Aja: And sometimes I have people in my space who have sort of come about being a bit trolly and then they actually end up turning it around, like contributing in a way that's really — and that's very rewarding but that is still exhausting, you know what I mean? Like to get to a point where someone's always sort of making comments that aren't really helping the conversation but then one day they get it and the shoe drops —

Layla: Then they suddenly become your biggest advocate.

Aja: Yes. But still the time period where you're really trying with someone that nobody understands could be so exhausting.

Layla: Right, right, and so we're talking about the side of social media that is absolutely just draining, exhausting, and not just social media but actually what it means to be a black woman who is talking about the kind of topics that you are talking about specifically, so race, colonialism, and fashion, that sort of trifecta is the hotbed of white feminism and so —

Aja: That's right.

Layla: — you get a very vicious side of when it is that 25 percent or whatever that percentage is, it's a very vicious percent because you're threatening the institution of white womanhood.

Aja: Yeah, and you do get it in real life too. I mean, a friend of mine who I really actually very much like, friend of my partner's, who's sort of like, you know, she's

never talked about these topics at all, she's a white person, and she came to me one night when we were out having some Friday night drinks and she was like, "Don't you think sometimes you're a little bit harsh on people when you say like, 'I'm not going to explain that to you,' or this and that, like aren't they just here to learn?" and so we had a really long conversation. This is a friend, so obviously I have the energy to take that with someone I care about. It's like a tennis match, not like Serena style but still quite lively, batting the ball back and forth, and, you know, there was a couple of times where it was like, "I got you," and they understood and it was like, "Oh, yeah, I guess I get that," you know? I was explaining all sorts of things about privilege and white privilege and what it means and by the end of the conversation, I think that they were very tired from the conversation, as was I, and then I looked at them and said, "Now imagine that I had the conversation I just had with you with 30,000 people," and all of a sudden the shoe dropped and they were like, "Okay, I get why you're like —" You know?

Layla: Yes, right, right.

Aja: But they had to sort of be taken through the loop of all of this to sort of begin to grasp it and to begin to understand why it's exhausting for people like me.

Layla: Right. And still, though, Aja, what I love though is that you are cultivating this community and body of work, both on Instagram and Patreon, which are the two platforms that you primarily share the sort of long form parts of your work. I know that I'm guaranteed to come on to you either one of those platforms anytime and find something where you've really thought about what you wanted to say, you're really laying out an argument enlightening us to a new thing that we may not be aware of and particularly in the area of work that you do where I don't know if it's new but it's new to many of us and certainly with what we're seeing right now in the world in terms of the movements on climate change and sustainability, these kind of conversations are really coming to the surface in a new way with also the use of the technology of social media. And so I just really respect the body of work that you are cultivating and the way that you're able to hold conversations. When it comes to specifically that sort of trifecta that we talked about race, colonialism, and fashion, can you help us make the links between the three of those things?

Aja: Yeah. Basically — and Celine Semaan of the Slow Factory has —

Layla: Who's been on this podcast and we had a conversation about you, yeah.

Aja: She made this amazing map that basically maps the trade of fashion today and those very similar colonialist lines to win England, the country I live in, was going all sorts of places and raiding countries for spices and all sorts of other things, it's the same colonialist paths today that's being taken in order to create our fashion and so, basically, how colonialism in fashion works is your fast fashion makers, your big brands, your big chains, nothing is made in countries like America or countries in Europe by these countries. It's all made overseas in countries where people of color live. So, these companies are going into countries, robbing them of their resources, their labor forces, and making very, very cheap garments which

we in the West are consuming rapidly. So, you go and you buy a shirt for \$20, you like it, but it's not made very well because it's made so quickly and after a year it doesn't look the same, you don't want it anymore but then you think, "Okay, well, I'm gonna donate it to a charity," and most charities, Oxfam is doing better, but a lot of charities are only selling 10 percent of the donations that they're receiving in regards to fashion because we are consuming five times the amount of clothing that we consumed 20 years ago and so charities cannot get rid of it. A lot of it ends up becoming landfill waste or we put it into another bag and we ship it to a country in Africa, Rwanda, Kenya, and then once it gets there, it becomes their problem. It becomes either trash or it does get sold and when it gets sold, it ruins the local economy in those countries, so people that are makers and artisans can't sell their clothing for a fair price and get a fair wage because there's tons of carts of clothing, crates everyday coming in from the US, basically, of our fast fashion castoffs. And countries like Rwanda try to actually block donations of clothing from America because the issue had become so big and that wonderful Jim who sits at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue basically threatened to pull other support that we were giving these countries if they block our donations of clothing, so basically it's like you will take our crap and you'll like it and it's so unfair. It's such an unfair system, but in reality we are taking from one group of people of color, consuming, and then basically disposing on another group of people of color and that is a colonialist line.

Layla: Thank you for laying that out because, you know, obviously, people who are new to sort of this anti-racism work really have an understanding that colonialism was something in the past, it's not something that happens now, but there are different ways in which it shows up that are just as damaging.

Aja: And it ties into all sorts of other things in America, you know? Of course, the conservatives want to deregulate everything. What does regulation look like? Regulation looks like factories that have to have safety codes in place so that workers aren't killed. So, when you're in the eighth grade, which is like 14, you learn in civics or history about the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York. Today that building is I think a part of the NYU campus. Anyways, it was this factory at the turn of the century that made shirts and the factory was mostly employing immigrant women and the factory caught on fire and hundreds of people died 'cause they couldn't get out of the building. The building had bad safety code. It was in violation of so much and it was essentially a sweatshop. It was a terrible job. So, when that happened, it basically got the wheels in place for regulation in America today because it was like this can't happen again, so we learned about that as Americans and your teachers are like, "Thank God we have regulation. It will never happen again." Actually, we have just outsourced the problem because as we know in India, there was a fire in Dhaka —

Layla: Horrific.

Aja: At a factory, horrific, people died, and then there was a factory that collapsed, the Rana Plaza collapse, once again, and I think it was something like 1,300 people couldn't get out of the building. Building collapsed on top of them. Building was in

poor shape, and all of these major brands that we all know had been involved in both of these incidences. Few of them got away without even paying the victims' families, you know? There was a fund which a couple of brands did donate to but several brands did not, which these are billion-dollar companies. This shouldn't have happened but the very least, you could pay the victims' families and they're getting away with literal murder.

Layla: Right. As you're speaking, I'm really thinking about how white supremacy really —

Aja: Permeates?

Layla: Not just permeates but how black and brown people are just seen as disposable people. That if 1,300 people die who are brown or black, like, "Oh, it's sad it happened but —"

Aja: It's really disturbing and, you know, a lot of the brands are still allowed to get away with stuff. They might sign like a petition or a pact or something, but a lot of those things that they boast on their websites have absolutely no legality. It's just all talk, basically. They're not taking responsibility. They're not changing a lot but they pretend like they do so that people will go back to consuming.

Layla: Right. So what really struck me as I was sort of preparing for our conversation, so in my work and people who do anti-racism work, we talk about performative allyship, sort of the look of being an ally, you know, have the symbol, do the action, do the thing so that others can say, yes, she's an ally or he's an ally, they're an ally, and I see that in the sustainable fashion trends that are coming up right now where it's about slapping a label on or renaming something —

Aja: We call it greenwashing.

Layla: Right, right. So can you talk us a little bit through what greenwashing is? Because, you know, a lot of us are wanting to do the right thing so we'll see the thing that's the greenwashing thing and we're like, "Oh, okay, this is the right place to buy from then."

Aja: Okay. So this is the part that's gonna be like, oh, God. All of the big brands, mostly all of them greenwash. Basically, the speed at which the clothing is being produced is a part of the biggest problem, you know? Because if these brands weren't producing so much, they could pay people better wages. If they paid better wages, you'd have better factories. You'd have people that got to take breaks. You'd have people that leave at 5 o'clock on the dot. You know, I had a big brand say to a room of people that, you know, the reason why child labor happens is because we give the orders to the factories and then the factories outsource the orders. Well, I'm sorry, but as a brand, you know how fast humans can work and if you're giving a factory an order of 5 million t-shirts and you want it done in three days, that factory is gonna tell you yes because they don't wanna lose your business but you know and I know how fast humans can work and I

think we both know that you're being very dishonest in your ask here, so the speed in which we are moving with our fashion is the problem —

Layla: And is that — just to pause you there, that speed, is it driven by the consumers or is it driven by the industry? Because we were not consuming this fast before.

Aja: It's a two-part thing. It's the speed of trends, and we both played, I played my part in it for sure, for a long time, and it's the industry. It's the idea that every time you walk into a store, you see new garments. That's not right, you know? Like what's happening to the old garments? Fifty percent of fast fashion clothing that's made never even gets bought. It's incinerated. So, it's the speed. It's that whole desire that you always need a new thing. You know, we've gotten that in our head. Like, oh, I'm going to a wedding, I need something new to wear. No, actually, you've got five good dresses and you know what the people of this wedding won't even know that you wore it to the last wedding. You know? It's a social media thing too like, oh, I've been photographed in this so therefore I need something new. You don't need something new. You really don't. So, it's a two-parter. It's us believing that we need new things constantly and it is the consumer market pushing us to buy new things constantly. I mean, from the minute you walk into an H&M, that store is lined up to get you to part with your money. There's a really interesting book called *Why We Buy* that lays out how you're marketed to in stores. You know, there are people that will actually watch hours of videotape where it's like this consumer came in and they skipped over this table so we're gonna move this table into this path and then they'll be forced to stop and look and then they'll buy something, you know? So, it's an art to getting people to buy like that but part of it is as consumers, we have to step away and when you do that, you're gonna be like, good Lord, why was I buying like that? Because I had that realization, I definitely did, and I get messages every single day from people that tell me the same, like, you know, ever since I started following your work, I used to buy something like monthly and I just stopped and I realized I thought I was buying monthly but I was buying monthly but actually I was buying like weekly and now that I've stopped, I have way more disposable income than I've ever had before and I don't feel as exhausted because that's another thing. The rate that we're moving at, we don't really get to truly enjoy our clothing. You know, that's one thing for me, ever since I stopped buying at this really super quick rate, I actually love my clothing more because I'm not constantly looking for the next thing. I'm not constantly looking for the next cheap thrill so I'm really getting to sort of embrace my style.

Layla: It's so interesting you say that because I think sometimes people have the perception that is if I disengage from the trends and what is being offered, then I won't get to find a way to still enjoy fashion, you know?

Aja: Yes.

Layla: Like still enjoy fashion, but how to do it in a way where I'm doing less harm to people.

Aja: I always tell people the first step if you're trying to sort of figure this out, develop your personal style because when you realize what you like and you realize which brands you like and this brand is an okay brand to buy from, they're a small group and, you know, I know that their products are made by five different people and they're paid a fair wage, once you sort of get an idea for your own personal style, then finding the pieces can actually be really enjoyable. Like fast fashion has made us quite, I wanna say "spoiled" in a way because it's like you walk into a store and there it is all laid out for you, "Oh, you want this look," just grab it, cool, done, but I actually think finding the right pieces and the perfect pieces is massively rewarding and lets you really enjoy what's in your closet but I was exhausted by it all when I was shopping at that rate and I didn't realize how tiring it was until I stopped.

Layla: Right. I wanna hear about your journey into this. When was your sort of awakening around this and what has your journey been?

Aja: So, I always wanted to work in fashion but, you know, I talked about privilege and the fashion industry is rife with privilege, you know? I first actually came to London and I worked for a small clothing label and that was a really fun experience because it was run by good people and they were really, really generous with me and hands on and it was the perfect experience and then I moved back to the States and I finished my degree and I graduated and I ended up working in television because fashion just doesn't pay but I took a year and went to New York and I worked for a magazine and that was the experience that everyone sort of says, oh, this is when you realize all the bad things about the fashion industry, the privilege, you know, the fact that if you want a job in fashion, you need to do five unpaid internships. Well, who can afford to do five unpaid internships and live in New York —

Layla: And live in New York, right.

Aja: Yeah. Rich kids.

Layla: Right.

Aja: Therefore, the rich kid gets rewarded with the editor job and the poor job has to actually get a job that's gonna pay the money so like I had that experience and just realized, oh, I don't like the fashion industry. It seems like the only people that are promoted are already independently wealthy which is so unfair and so I came away from it feeling really, really jaded, but I always really liked fashion so I started a blog and I was blogging about like, you know, my outfits and things that I liked and, once again, here comes the rich kids. The rich kids started blogging and then all of a sudden, that was when all the sponsorship came and it was just like, oh, cool, so the person that's already wealthy is being rewarded for being wealthy and having Gucci shoes. Great. You know?

Layla: Right. And to add on to that as well, I'm sure the people who are being approached for the sponsorships are thin, white, cisgender women.

Aja: Yes. I mean, one of the things I even talk about like I live in London, it is a privilege to live in London and to do this work because you have access, like the people that are always promoted the most on Instagram are not living in the middle of middle America and if they are, they're very, very wealthy, you know? They still have the access, but like living in London, I was talking about sustainable fashion when I lived in D.C. but nobody cared until I moved to London and the reason people care is because you're in the right place. You're able to go to the parties. You're able to go to the government meetings that are chaired by cool designers like [inaudible 00:31:26]. You have access and so just living in the city gives you a certain amount of privilege and that's something else I talk about on my platform, that the people that you see with like the big social media accounts, they live in London and Stockholm and Paris and L.A. and New York. D.C., not so much, you know? So, just being back here really gave me something, but that's privilege, it is, and so that's why I always talk about privilege in my platform, but when I was living in the D.C. area, I was blogging and I was enjoying it but one thing I noticed was I began to sort of chart the speed in which people were buying clothing and I think that social media has played its part in it for sure but I began to feel icky about the amount of clothing that I was buying and burning through and I was not one of those people where I would do a whole video where I would go and buy a bunch of stuff and then, you know, show it off and not wear it much. No, I was buying for my actual wardrobe but I still felt like the turnover was much quicker than anything I'd ever experienced in childhood and I just thought that's really weird and then it began to dawn on me that this isn't just me. This is actually the way our world is operating and that's a very, very strange thing. We shouldn't be buying whole new wardrobes every single year, like what is the effects of this, and also I began to notice like the change in what you could get in a charity shop, so when you go into a thrift store or charity shop, where before you could find some really nice things, it's now just flooded with fast fashion. You know, when I lived in London in 2003, you could walk into a charity shop and get some cool stuff and now it's just all leftover Zara, Marks & Spencer, and just like — and it doesn't look good. It doesn't look as nice, you know? And that was when I began to realize that we really had a problem because you're seeing the effects of this and you're knowing that the charities aren't selling all of it. I used to volunteer at a charity shop where I lived and I was seeing those donations come in, you know? I was marking clothing and I was seeing exactly how much we were receiving and it was too much. It was more than we could possibly put in stores so we give some of it to West Virginia, we give it to other charities, but they probably had too much as well, so I began to chart that things were looking pretty weird.

Layla: Yeah.

Aja: Yeah. Through all of my fashion blogging, working at the charity shop or volunteering at the charity shop, I just began to really sort of think, "What on earth are we doing?"

Layla: I'm really curious to know what took it for you from a sort of piqued interest to something that you really are dedicating your time and your energy to? Why are you personally, Aja, so passionate about this?

Aja: I used to write about fashion and I used to write about race and one was in this corner and the other was in this corner and never shall the two meet and then one day I realized actually the two should totally meet. Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Intersectionality*, wrote all of these intersections can be applied in these topics and I think my starting to talk about race on the internet was quite a shock I mean for my family. You've probably experienced this too.

Layla: Right.

Aja: I mean, I first started on Facebook and I think my family, "You're really kinda starting to freak out the white people," and I was kind of like good, maybe it's time to feel uncomfortable, you know? But I just sort of kept at it and I lost people but I realized that they were kind of dead weight that was dragging me down because if I can't share my whole truth with you, then is this really a friendship? I would say no, you know? So it was years of me talking about it on Facebook and pissing people off and not really caring much, you know? But then I began to realize that all these things that are happening with race can be applied to fashion. The race stuff I think came about because under Barack Obama in America, shit started to get real weird, you know? It was just like, you know, I'm used to discomfort around race but it just seemed like white people were saying things that they had never said before then blaming Barack Obama for it, like, "Oh, well, things were much better before that guy came around," and, honestly, as far as race goes, the dude doesn't talk about race that much, you know? So, it was one of those things where white people were so visibly annoyed by the idea that they had this black man as president who honestly is pretty moderate when it comes to race stuff but I could feel Trump coming and I think a lot of people could because things just got weird, like that was why I started talking about race and another thing, as an American, you know, I live in the UK now but Black Lives Matter started to reach prominence right when I became the age where I started thinking about whether or not I was gonna have a family and when you're thinking about it, you're a mother, from the perspective of even a future mom, you start to see things a lot differently. When it's just you and you're just thinking about the future from your perspective, it's a lot different than thinking about, you know, my niece and my nephew, I'll have a baby one day, you know, so I felt like I need to talk about this stuff because I don't want this world to be a mess for the next generation and right now, I'm not feeling so comfortable driving at night in Virginia because police brutality seems to be on the rise, or maybe it was just always there, we just have things to record it, you know, like maybe it was just one of those things where all of a sudden we were all having this, oh my goodness, this is really not okay, you know? So I began to talk about race, it pissed people off but I was still talking about fashion and I just thought, oh, well, why not piss people off with both topics at the same time.

Layla: Right.

Aja: Double your fun or your money back.

Layla: I love what you said though about, you know, as you were considering do I wanna have a family? Do I wanna have children? And you're right, as a mother, as I do my work, so much of it is about creating a world that is better for them and better for, if I have future descendants, that it is my responsibility to do what I can do to create a better world for them.

Aja: I said this to someone the other day. I don't wanna be on my deathbed and have my niece or nephew say to me like, "Why didn't you guys change this?" you know? And I think about even for our generation —

Layla: That's right.

Aja: — as the age that I'm at, I do think sometimes how did the adults sleep at night knowing that like school shootings became normalized on their watch?

Layla: Right.

Aja: I had that thought recently that like, 'cause Columbine happened when I was in the 11th grade and it was this bizarre thing that happened, it was just like this is bizarre, and then it just kept happening and now that I'm 37, I think I can't believe the adults didn't riot in the streets.

Layla: Right. I was thinking about this sort of same thing that you've just said but in the context of climate change. So, I remember being, you know, in school studying geography and thinking, "What do you mean deforestation? What do you mean the ozone layer, like there's a hole in it?" Like, surely by the time we are adults, they will have figured this out and reversed things and as we have seen, that's not the case and it's a lot worse, and so, as I think about what it means to me to be a good ancestor, it's really, you know, I can't — and it's the same when I talk to people with white privilege about dismantling white supremacy, I know that as an individual, you're not an institution. You cannot do what an institution can do, but you changing and making changes within yourself has a ripple effect.

Aja: And on a hopeful note, I mean, I've said all these things about fast fashion, like for instance, fast fashion makers make 500 garments a minute, like that is horrific. That is more clothing than we are possibly wearing. There is enough clothing on Earth where every single person could have at least seven items in their wardrobe but not every single person actually needs that amount of clothing and we know that not every single person is consuming that amount. It's those of us in the West and the global north that need to be sort of doing that. Meanwhile, climate change is going to affect people in the global south first.

Layla: Right.

Aja: So they're having the least amount of the cause and they are going to be affected —

Layla: The most impacted, right.

Aja: Most impacted, and so, the reason why I keep going with fashion is because I feel like there's a lot of things surrounding climate change that's gonna be really challenging, you know? When it comes to the fossil fuel industry, we're gonna need our politicians to do their jobs, you know? That's gonna be hard, but when I think about this process of buying and consuming, I truly believe that we are way more powerful than we give ourselves credit for. I really do, and I think that's why I picked this path because we have seen this change happen in our lifetime and we can reverse it within our lifetime. We can reverse it in five years. We can stop buying so much. We can start buying more secondhand. We can start doing more swaps with our friends. You know, and to be honest, the fast fashion industry is already seeing an effect because —

Layla: Well, this is what I was gonna ask you, right? Because I'm curious about the difference between — it's sort of like when — sorry to bring veganism —

Aja: No, it's fine. Oh, Lord.

Layla: It's sort of like the difference between does an individual act of one person to choose a vegan lifestyle, will that have an impact when a lot of the damage that's being done is by these big companies? There's sometimes an argument that, as I said, like what can one individual do or a group of small individuals do versus the real like huge harm that's being done by these industries? And so you were just saying about the change —

Aja: So the thing about food, and this is why I don't talk about food often, I think that food and clothing are two very, very different things because food is nourishing. We need food to survive. Now, you need a certain amount of clothing to survive too but it's not the same level and it's not as constant. You know, with food, it can be cultural. It can be related to someone's health. You know, you don't know what that person has, you know, the ability to eat and not eat so like I really stay away from that and also as far as disordered eating, it could be a triggering topic for people who have dealt with this disordered eating so that's why I really, really stay away from food because, honestly, I think it's way more complicated than people make it out to be and I also think, with all things, even with like shopping, there's amount of privilege there. I mean, my husband and I, we eat a very like pretty green diet but like we're also two single adults on two incomes and we live in one of the most affluent cities in the world. We can go to a number of grocery stores around the corner from our house and there's loads of vegetarian options and there's loads of fresh green vegetables. You know, the conversation around veganism is missing the fact that black and brown neighborhoods are often the victims of redlining and redlining affects who has grocery stores and who doesn't. There's places in America where it's cheaper to buy your family McDonald's than it is to get a week's worth of fruit and veg, you know? And so there's so much in

that conversation that's so complex and I find that a lot of these online movements just skip right over the complexity of that conversation. Now, with clothing, you do need a certain amount of clothing to survive, but the rate in which we've been buying is not even about survival, it's about greed. It's about how can we push people to buy things that they don't actually need. It's about changing the season. It used to be we had two fashion seasons a year. Now, some stores have as many as 20.

Layla: Wow.

Aja: Yeah, and so it's been a very deliberate greed-related thing and that's why I focus on fashion. I do think that we have individual impact because, at the end of the day, without the demand, there is no supply. People aren't gonna be making 20 seasons of clothing if consumers say, "I'm only buying clothing four times a year," and stick to it. And we're already seeing a response from the fashion industry. The CEO of H&M just did a very misguided interview where he blamed consumers for continuing poverty, saying that the age of eco-activism means that people aren't buying as much and they're gonna negatively contribute to poverty all over the world by not buying things, and what he's saying is I'm a billionaire and I'm threatened by this movement.

Layla: Right.

Aja: The thing is, my dude, you are a billionaire. I think you have \$4.2 billion. Just one of your billions could actually really help a small country to like get back on its feet. You could actually invest maybe two of your billions into your company and you could build amazing factories and pay people fair wages that you refuse to, but sure, go ahead and blame the general public for this. So, when I read that quote, I thought this is a man who's running scared and it made me feel very powerful and it made me want to keep going and to keep suggesting that people stop buying from big brands, start buying from smaller brands, start shopping secondhand more. The more I read things like this where billionaires and I'll also say the H&M family has four billionaires in it so the CEO is a billionaire, his aunt is a billionaire, his brother is a billionaire, and his sister is a billionaire. Four billionaires in one family and you're blaming the general public for poverty? Like how do you sleep at night, my man? So, when I hear things like that, I know that they're threatened by this and they should be. The days of fast fashion companies turning billion profits every single year, that's done. It needs to go away in order for us to combat climate change and I want it to go away and so when I see quotes like that, I know that this man is very threatened by this movement that I'm pushing and it just makes me wanna push all the more harder.

Layla: Thank you for sharing that. You spoke earlier about — I know this is something that you constantly make sure to bring this lens in but you talked about privilege and not just white privilege, right? We're talking about economic privilege and other privileges.

Aja: Education privileges.

Layla: Right, exactly, and so —

Aja: [inaudible 00:47:19] privilege.

Layla: That's right. So when we're talking about fashion and a move away from fast fashion which is cheaper and I don't know if sustainable or smaller brand fashion is of a similar price or if it's more expensive, when we bring in this lens of privilege and who can afford.

Aja: Yeah. There's a lot of misconception surrounding the sustainable fashion movement and I really like to address them. First of all —

Layla: I would love for you to do so, yeah.

Aja: First of all, people always say, "Oh, well, you know, the reason why the clothing is cheap is because it makes it accessible to everyone." If you go into the store Zara, most of Zara's dresses cost £69 and above. That's actually not accessible to everyone. We have to get it through our heads that the fast fashion movement has not been brought to what it is by people that are in poverty. It's been upper middle class people shopping like no tomorrow, so that's the first misconception is that everyone acts like fast fashion only exists because people without disposable income have to shop there and that's just not true. The most sustainable ethical people I know are people like my mom. My mom never buys new. She goes to the thrift store. Like my mom actually, she grew up in poverty and so like that stays with you even though we're very middle class when I was a kid, my mom has never been able to sort of shake that and so, for her, even before thrifting and shopping secondhand was trendy, and believe me, it was not cool when I was a teenager, my mom would buy most of her clothing from the thrift store and a lot of mine too, which I tried very hard to keep a secret, you know? So, the people that I know that are the most ethical aren't even actually buying into this system. It's upper middle class people with disposable income who are buying into it, you know? And another thing, you see like fast fashion never goes, "Oh, it's so cheap." Not everything in those stores is that cheap, you know? Like if a dress from Zara costs £69 and a dress from H&M costs £59, you can go on Etsy right now and buy a handmade dress from a designer in Bulgaria for €60 and that's an actual seamstress and so this is a person that has their business and they're employing, you know, four or five seamstresses in their neighborhood and it's a wonderful thing to actually give your money directly to a maker instead of to a brand who has 50 different supply chains and you would have to go through 50 different people to get to the person who made your clothing, you know? So, there's this misconception that fast fashion is cheap and I think that is a misconception, you know? And there's this misconception that ethical shopping is always expensive and that is also a misconception. It ranges. And then there's also this misconception that, "Oh, well, people without the means to shop will have no place to shop if fast fashion goes away." That's so untrue. Before there was fast fashion, people that did not have would still shop

secondhand, you know? So, it's one of these things where people will throw any excuse at me to sort of continue to buy into this cycle and I just have to feel like —

Layla: I think you are right though. I think it's the misconception. If we're so used to buying from the big brand stores and that's just what we know, sort of venturing into a smaller store where we're not seeing what we're used to usually eating, right? It's something different, it's sort of — I think for some people, maybe a little bit intimidating.

Aja: This is true.

Layla: Yeah. I know that you do some style consulting, right?

Aja: I do, and that's extremely rewarding, like I work with people in all sizes because another thing we know is that fashion has not been inclusive of bigger bodies and so my goal, through my work, is to, one, get people off of fast fashion but also push ethical brands to be inclusive, because you can't have a movement that's gonna be new and better while excluding people same as always, like that's just — that isn't a movement I'm signing up for, so a lot of the work that I do that people don't even see is me just messaging companies and being like, "So, when are you extending your sizes?" That's something I do every single day and it's exhausting but it's worth it.

Layla: This is so important what you're saying because just because the brand is ethical does not mean that they have necessarily addressed or made sure to include the same people who are always centered.

Aja: And one of the things that I also tell people is in this conversation, like all conversations, punch up. Like it is not your job to tell someone with less economic disposable income than you that they should be buying from all these ethical brands. Like that's very unfair. However, you know, especially if you're a Londoner, most of your friends are probably from the same socioeconomic background as you are, you know? So, like, it's one of those things where I'm never ever gonna look at the single mother of two and ask her why she's buying her kids shoes from Primark, you know? Like that's me being a crappy person, but in actuality, most of my friends are at the same place, income wise, as I am so I can talk to them about buying better and the goal overall for me is to basically regulate the fashion industry so that everyone is operating from the same place and when you get to that point, there'll be something for people at every income level, you know what I mean? But, overall, we have to overhaul what we currently have because right now, it's like the Wild, Wild West out there.

Layla: Okay, so tell me a little bit about, and we sort of started the conversation there, but I think this is really important to kind of bounce off something that you just said. As a black woman specifically, addressing these conversations in an area just like every other area that is dominated by capitalists, racists, patriarchy, and this is not to minimize anything of what we've just said so far, but it's not just about sort of the way that colonialism continues to play out and the fact that those in the

global south will continue to be harmed because of the actions in the global north but also, even as that change is made towards an ethical fashion industry, that it still continues to play out, you know, what Bell Hooks calls capitalist white supremacist patriarchy. So you're not just talking about the fashion sort of machine but you're also talking specifically around race and you're a black woman talking about race and so, in the area that you're in, I'm really curious to hear about how do you see voices such as yours being treated?

Aja: Well, at the minute, people are sitting up and listening but like I always tell people I've been beating this drum for like five years and like nobody cared until last year, but at the minute, I find my voice is really well received. I mean, obviously, as we talked about earlier, not everyone is here for your message and, you know, part of me is kind of like that's fine, carry on with your day and find a place where you do feel like you're down with it, but I've seen my audience has grown — when we first met, my audience jumped from 1,100 people to 4,000 people —

Layla: Yeah, I remember.

Aja: — it was bananas. And then, from that time period on, that was last year in August I think, I'm now at 37,000 followers which has been an intense jump in a short amount of time and I think it's because all of these elements are just sort of happening right now with climate change and race, like I always say it's kind of the right place, right time, because, you know, I've been talking about sustainable fashion and race separate, and I think it's a combination of climate change, of Donald Trump, of hostile, right wing governments. I think people are feeling like we need new leaders, we need new voices, and I just think that's why it's happening now but I think that if we didn't have a problem with climate change, no one would see the problem with fast fashion, you know? If we didn't have this right wing spread, people probably wouldn't think that race was still such a huge problem, you know? We see Rachel Cargle's audience really grow and it's because people are really starting to want to like do the work and to be better and so I always say, for me, I feel like it's a right place, right time sort of thing, but not just me. I mean, I've seen so many women of color that I'm friends with that have just had so much success in the last ten years where when I went to college, I was interested in fashion, I was interested in writing, and these were two things that I was actively discouraged from doing by like not just my family but advisers, you know? Like, "Oh, well, you wanna be a writer? Okay, well, that's gonna be a tough one," you know? Where no one ever says that to a white male, but in the last ten years, I've seen people that I know like Ijeoma Oluo who, you know, she is writing amazing books, you know? She's flying all over the world where 20 years ago, I don't think that there would have been a lot of space but I feel like there's this mass awakening going on where people are just realizing we either really, really get to the nitty-gritty of a lot of these issues or we perish and I think that's really what it's come down to, you know? That people are just starting to realize that like these things do matter.

Layla: You know, and because sometimes I've seen it in my field and in other fields as well, sometimes, the voices such as ours are really held up but they're tokenized

and fetishized and then some of the other voices that gets centered are those who don't sit at identities of marginalization, so often who have white privilege are able to build bigger platforms, are seen as more credible, yeah.

Aja: I've seen it just in like fashion sustainability. There's a lot of people, especially in the UK, who have made their money from selling fast fashion so on Instagram, one of the ways that people make money is through sponsored content —

Layla: Right.

Aja: — and through affiliated links and Stories so swipe up to buy this every single day, swipe up to buy this, and I'm not hating on those people because I think getting paid is just something that women, all women, have traditionally struggled with, but I think if you were selling people fast fashion for the last five years, you have to own the part that you've played in this because a white woman influencer who has 250,000 followers, if she is doing swipe ups every single day, say 1 percent of her audience buys a skirt from a fast fashion brand, that's 2,500 pieces sold. That's a part of the problem. So, because fast fashion is starting to get a pretty bad name, I'm seeing a lot of white women who have been selling a lot of fast fashion pivoting towards sustainability and that is pissing me off because I just think this is not your space, you know? Like I have never taken a dime from fast fashion brands and there have been times where I wanted to kick my own ass for not taking that money, you know? When my platform grew, my partner was like, "Well, what are you gonna do, babe? You know, you gotta get a job. You gotta do something," and I was like, "I know, I'm trying to figure it out but I can't take these, it's just —" I can't. Like this company is a part of the problem —

Layla: Right.

Aja: — and the companies with the biggest marketing budgets for influencer marketing are generally a part of the problem and so there was a time period where I was saying no to a lot of stuff where I really could have used that money but because I know I can't work with this company, one, once companies pay you a paycheck, they think they own you and so it would be one of those things where it's like, "Well, we're paying you so could you please not talk about white supremacy on your grid anymore," so I didn't want anyone doing that to me because I knew that I would essentially be muted for a paycheck and that I wasn't prepared to do. So Patreon has been a godsend and it's worked out in my favor because as it turns out, influencer trust is down right now because people are actually sick of being sold to and so, influencer trust is lower than politicians at the minute which is not saying a lot —

Layla: I think we got inundated. We got —

Aja: We got inundated and people got sick of being sold to every single day. It just got to be too much and also people have a hard time with telling what is an ad, what isn't an ad, so they don't know if an influencer is sharing a product, whether or not this person is getting a sneaky paycheck on the side for sharing that product.

Where with me, I basically said, listen, y'all, I don't wanna take money from any of these brands that are offering money because they're actually the brands that I think are kind of bad and needs to go out of business, so what I will do is I will keep this space relatively ad free but I need for you all to support my work in a tangible way so I have a no-brand rule on my Instagram. I will lift up brands in Stories that I think are doing cool things but I don't talk about brands on my grid because I'm not gonna tell you where we shop on my grid. One, Instagram makes so much money off of black women while treating us so badly. I talk about any brand, someone starts getting served ads so Instagram is actually getting a cut from me while I'm not making any money, you know? So I have a no-brand rule on my page where I say if you want to learn where to shop, go follow me on Patreon, there's a full list there, I share brands regularly, I talk about what I like and what I buy but I generally don't talk about brands because as long as there's no money in that space, then everybody's getting something out of it except for me and I don't really enjoy selling people things. I always tell people if I ever sell you a clothing product, my name will be on it. If my name is on it, I will know where the fabric came from, I will know what factory it was made in, I will know how much those factory workers were paid to make those garments and, until that happens, I'm not going to sell you clothing because I can't honestly stand by a lot of these brands because I could tell you as far as greenwashing goes, any big brand that you can name off the top of your head is pretty much guilty of it. The brand that I will think is not greenwashing will be the brand that will say, "You know what, y'all, we're making way too much stuff so we're gonna step back," and that's a very hard thing for a brand to do especially when you have a board of investors that is just looking for a profit every single season. I think that retail is in this place where no one can really win at the minute and that kind of sucks but I'm also not gonna prop up a system that ultimately hurts black and brown people because capitalism tells me to. I refuse to. And so the whole not branding and putting a lot of paid content on my grid has actually been a godsend because people do go to Patreon and say, "Okay, I'm gonna sign up here," and then every day they get an article with information, they have access to the brands that I think are really cool and doing cool things and it's a much less hostile space than Instagram because Instagram can be quite volatile.

Layla: Yes, it can. I just wanna sort of acknowledge and appreciate you for and I see this in so many of the people that I get to talk to is so many of us are finding these pioneering ways of having to talk about and bring to light and hold space for conversations that are really necessary at this time but also trying to do so in a way that really honors you, honors your creativity, honors your energy, honors your labor, while trying to figure out how do I also make sure that everything I'm pouring out into the world, I am being taken care of as well.

Aja: It's a hard balance —

Layla: There's so much, yeah.

Aja: There has been times where brands have offered me a lot of money and I've said no because morally it didn't sit right with me and that is a very, very hard thing to

say no to sometimes, especially when you've gotten married within a single year and had to do the expensive British visa process, you know, and not being able to work. I wasn't able to work at all last year because I was on a fiancé and marriage visa and so it's very hard sometimes to walk that line which is why I get very annoyed when people that have profited from the problem are now going, "Oh, well, I enjoy sustainability too," because what they're essentially doing is trying to line up so they can make money off of whatever the next thing is.

Layla: Right.

Aja: Everybody kind of knows that like the fast fashion train has not just left the station but it's kind of speeding towards a cliff. It's run amok in a way where people are starting to move their seats away from it. So, I just don't think it's cool that people that have made six figures a year from selling the problem and have played their part — there was an article that came out that said influencers are definitely part of fast fashion — are all of a sudden starting to sort of dip their toe into my arena. I don't think that's very cool, but I think, once again, it's white supremacy and greed, you know? Like profiting from movements that you've not built, you know? You see it in the body positivity movement. I am plus size, I'm a baby fat, but I always tell people I'm very careful about not taking up too much space there because I've not spent the majority of my life in a bigger body. I was straight size for much of my life. Of course, straight size but on the bigger end so some people probably do consider me plus size. Either way, I'm very careful about not taking up space where I don't need to take up space because that's a very unfair thing to do, and that's a tenet of sort of white supremacy is trying to like put your finger in all the pies and to have your voice in spaces where it's completely unnecessary.

Layla: Right, yes, exactly. Oh my gosh, you've just like left me with so much to think about and I've really enjoyed this conversation, Aja. Thank you for bringing all of these different nuanced, you know, ways and themes of things that we need to consider and I just wanna, again, appreciate you because I know that so many of us are trying in our own ways using our passions, our skills, the privileges that we have as well as the thing inside that calls to us.

Aja: I wonder if I was coherent enough, so I wanna give people just a few tips —

Layla: That would be amazing.

Aja: — conversation like we would go in one direction which is cool, I think you liked that, but I wanna make sure I'm giving people tips. So, basically, if you're concerned about a brand and whether they're doing right, write them, be vocal, let them know that you know about these bad things happening and that as a consumer, you're not comfortable with it. That's one thing that you can do. But in general, I would say much of the bigger brands aren't doing things right and until they do things better, it's better to shop from a smaller brand. I can say this — I always tell people this. Even if it's a small brand and they have nothing about ethics and sustainability, their carbon footprint is still smaller than a brand on Oxford Circus, so like even if this brand makes no promises to you whatsoever,

you are still contributing to a smaller carbon footprint when buying from them than you are if you go to Zara or H&M or Topshop so that's a great way to start. Buy more secondhand. I've always done a lot of my shopping on eBay because I can't afford all the things I like and so buying it secondhand has always allowed me to have a little bit of access to certain designer goods. So lots of secondhand, there's lots of great places to shop in the US if you're in thredUP, you know, that's a great place, the RealReal is pretty rad, eBay, you know, there's all these resources for shopping secondhand but if you want to shop more secondhand, figure out what your personal style is and what you like because it's gonna make it so much easier and when you actually feel like you have your style, shopping and finding the right item, be it secondhand or from a small, ethical maker, is rewarding and super fun. You'll see. And then, you know, at the end of the day, evaluate, do you really need it? Say you're in a fast fashion store and you're tempted by something. Ask yourself, "Am I gonna wear this garment 40 times?" Because if all of us wore all of our pieces 40 times, we wouldn't actually have a fast fashion problem. The problem is we aren't. And so next time you pick up something, if you really, really need it, you know, like I said, I'm not shaming you, I don't know your financial situation, but ask yourself, "Am I truly buying this because I need it or am I buying this because I feel pressured to buy it?" and if you're not sure, walk away and in an hour, if you're still thinking about it, then go back and get it. But I guarantee you, in most cases, 9 out of 10, you won't be thinking about it within an hour.

Layla: Wow. That is really helpful. Thank you for leaving us with some tips 'cause you're absolutely right, it can get overwhelming and there are so many different pieces to think about and as I said earlier, I think sometimes a lot of us feel intimidated because it's really about a different way of thinking and a different way of showing up in the world and we need guidance and so I really appreciate those practical tips that you have. I'd also really encourage people to follow you on Instagram and to pledge to you on Patreon, we'll make sure to have all those links in the show notes so people can do that. Aja, our final question. What does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Aja: It means leaving this earth better than how you found it and, unfortunately, we have our work cut out for us because the previous generations haven't been doing that. They haven't. But I like to say that I believe in us and I believe in my niece and nephew and I wanna be a good ancestor because I want this earth to be around for the next generation and the earth will always be around but will we as humans be around —

Layla: That's right.

Aja: We're the parasite so at the end of the day, the earth is gonna be fine, it's gonna cast us aside and I just don't want that for my niece and nephew so being a good ancestor and just being a good person in general is leaving every space better than how you found it and so I feel like if you're listening to this podcast and you follow Layla's work, then you're into that, so keep doing you.

Layla:

Yeah. Thank you so much, Aja.