

Layla: I'm Layla Saad and my life is driven by one burning question: How can I become a good ancestor? How can I create a legacy of healing and liberation for those who are here in this lifetime and those who will come after I'm gone? In my pursuit to answer this question, I'm interviewing change-makers and culture-shapers who are also exploring that questions themselves in the way that they live and lead their life. It's my intention that these conversations will help you find your own answers to that question too. Welcome to Good Ancestor Podcast.

Junauda Petrus-Nasah is a writer, pleasure activist, filmmaker, and performance artist of black Caribbean descent, born on Dakota land. Her work centers around wildness, queerness, black diasporic futurism, ancestral healing, sweetness, shimmer, and liberation. She is the co-founder with Erin Sharkey of Free Black Dirt, an experimental arts production company. She is the writer and director of *Sweetness of Wild*, a poetic episodic film series themed around blackness, queerness, biking, resistance, love, and coming of age in Minneapolis. Her first young adult novel, *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them*, is a Coretta Scott King Award Honor book. She lives in Minneapolis with her wife, child, and family.

Welcome, everybody, to Good Ancestor Podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad, and I'm here with the amazing Junauda Petrus-Nasah. Welcome, Junauda.

Junauda: Oh, my goodness. Thank you so much. You know, I'm a huge fan and, as I was sharing, 'cause you're a gangsta and I think there's things that you have been able to articulate so soulfully and clearly that I, as a black woman, needed to have affirmed in existence and the ways that you hold white people accountable to their soulful sort of metronome or a standard or something. Like, I was like, okay, and then of course, you know, we got homies in college.

Layla: Yes.

Junauda: That was exciting to find out.

Layla: I can't wait to share with everybody how you and I got connected because I think it's so — it just to me speaks so much of like the magic that's in your book and we're gonna be talking a lot about your book today and the magic that is you essentially because you burst it, you put it out there, but before we dive into all of that, Junauda, who are some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, familial or societal, who have influenced you on your journey?

Junauda: There are so many ancestors. I've been so abundantly blessed with ancestral energy in my life.

Layla: I feel that about you. Like that is such a part of your book, in your work, in the way that you show up so I'm really curious to know, who are these ancestors?

Junauda: Yeah, 'cause I was thinking about trees, I was thinking about tress, I was thinking about crystals 'cause I had all of these like human formed beings in mind which I'll share but I was like getting ready, getting cute for this moment and stuff like that with you 'cause I saw, thank God you texted or messaged on the gram that you was gonna get beat for this interview so I was like, let me get beat, okay? So I was getting beat and I saw this beautiful amethyst that was on my dresser and I was like, oh, you're an ancestor too, you're an ancestor too, and like from since I've been young, like, rocks, dirt, bugs, those sorts of ancestor teachers. So before I even knew how to read, which, you know, reading was such a big part too of like how I got to meet the other ancestors that have touched my soul and touched my work, but like nature itself was the thing that I felt connected to despite all the other sort of human-created noise of like anti-black girlness, anti-wildness, anti-sensuality, like all of the things that would be my sort of hero's journey to deal with, I feel like nature showed me wildness and affirmation of it. So, yeah, so that's one. So, I brought all these books when I was reflecting on this question 'cause, for me, like when I did become literate and able to read, I was blessed that in the context of being born a black girl in the hood in the '80s, that all of this bad — can I curse on this program?

Layla: Yes, you can curse.

Junauda: Bad bitches, feminists, writers were out here stunting on this literary like front. I would get to like absorb the embarrassment of jewels, you know, 'cause really it's an abundance and, you know, Toni Morrison obviously comes to mind. But like Toni Morrison was somebody I got into like later. I feel though, she, for me, is super like next level in this energy and cerebral-ness that's at one place, like in the future, but also so connected to like African ancestral storytelling. Like, even the way she goes around literary, that was a thing that like truly, you know, made me feel like, wow, like, hey, she's talking about our ancestors in ways that are like sensuous and complicated and poetic but then she's also sort of creating a blueprint of the soul, you know, like a certain kind of clarity of seeing the self. So, anyways, I have all of these books and so one of the books I wanna show is this book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. Have you read this book?

Layla: Oh. No, I haven't. No.

Junauda: OMG. I really would love if you got this book 'cause I think it would just like turn you out like it turned me out. So when I think of like ancestors, like there's also all of these nameless kind of wild women, free child who like somehow moved from off of enslavement or colonization 'cause I'm of Caribbean descent and like were able to really sort of a certain kind of freeness with their bodies, with the ways that they loved, and anyhow, this book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, really talks to the like nameless of our ancestors who were like women like us who, you know, lived lives, who figured out ways to create lives that were tremendously meaningful and rich in spite of all of this stuff.

Layla: Right. I have to get my hands on that. Who is the author of that book?

Junauda: Oh my goodness, yes, Saidiya Hartman. When I say I put respect on this woman's name 'cause the way she writes this book is so lush and genuine and poetic and humorous and brilliant and triumphant, like it's super brilliantly written. The content is very dense as though it were a textbook but she writes it like a Toni Morrison book, like it's wild.

Layla: Oh, okay. Yes, need it.

Junauda: Saidiya Hartman.

Layla: Okay.

Junauda: Other ancestors, Octavia Butler, who is a Cancerian. So I'm also really into astrology so like I'll probably just be astrology dropping people alongside with their names because I do feel — are you into astrology?

Layla: Because I don't know my birth time, have not had my birth chart read so I'm not deep into it 'cause I don't know all my placements and all of that, but I'm very intrigued by it all. I know my sun sign and that's about it, you know?

Junauda: What's your sun sign?

Layla: I'm a Sagittarius which —

Junauda: Oh my — I love Sagittarian women.

Layla: I do too.

Junauda: They are a fierce bunch.

Layla: We are. We're fire.

Junauda: Yeah, but you're also like super calculated fire, you know? Like all the other fire be popping off, you'd be like, chill or like come on now but they're like —

Layla: I think that comes through in my writing a lot. It's very direct but it pierces directly.

Junauda: Oh, yeah. I know. In my book, there's a poem about Capricorn, or is it Sagittarius — maybe it is about Sagittarius, about lava. And, you know, like lava, like when it burns, it like burns down things but you see once it like solidifies, it creates earth. Like the most beautiful places in the world were created by the lava of the —

Layla: Right.

Junauda: So, to me, I feel like Sagittarian heat is very volcanic and very like generative while also like builds foundation, you know what I mean?

Layla: I love that, I love that, yeah. What are some of the other books that you've got with you?

Junauda: Okay cool. So, I have, oh my gosh, okay, so I've been getting like deep diving back into Ntozake Shange.

Layla: That one is on my list. So that's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*.

Junauda: OMG. Okay, I'll literally read the first couple of lines just so you can see how Ntozake went in. "Where there is a woman there is magic. If there is a moon falling from her mouth, she is a woman who knows her magic, who can share or not share her powers. A woman with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs, and tiaras of Spanish moss, this woman is a consort of the spirits."

Layla: I've read that one before and I love it. It reminds me a lot of your writing actually and I'm gonna tell you, I told you before we hit record that I'm basically gonna be gushing on you through this conversation.

Junauda: **[inaudible 00:10:13]**

Layla: I'm gonna let you speak first in that you share, you know, your ancestors.

Junauda: No. I like it both 'cause I feel like always so awkward in these things and I'm like yeah —

Layla: There was one other book that you wanted to share that you showed me —

Junauda: Oh, yeah, yeah. There's a couple other books. Well, there's like *Zami*. There's Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. *The color purple* which is like I have like Celie and Shug tattooed on me. Like that was like my first instance of like black, queer woman love, you know? It was like really seeing the movie and I wasn't old enough to read this until I was 16 or something, but like seeing Whoopi Goldberg and that other sister. I mean, even you like right now with *The Color Purple*, it totally was like —

Layla: This was for your book so I'm wearing — so for people who are listening to the podcast in audio and not on YouTube on video, Junauda is the author of a book called the *Stars and the Blackness Between Them* and I'm showing the cover of her book right now on video and it's this beautiful black, purple, sort of indigo colors and I was like, I need to match this color story for this interview, so I'm wearing purple.

Junauda: I love that so much. Oh, my gosh. You're such a goddess, I'm so grateful.

Layla: I love you and now this is the moment where I'm going to tell you why was it that I was particularly excited to speak with you. So, first of all, we met in a really serendipitous way. You mentioned Toni Morrison and the day that I got introduced to you and your work, I had actually just been, for the very first time ever, to an event that the Free Black Women's Library was doing and it was a Toni Morrison event. It was in honor of Toni Morrison and it was a discussion about her book, *Sula*, which I had finished a few months before. I loved *Sula* and so it was the first time for

me that I had ever been in a space where it was largely women but there were people of different genders there discussing this black writer in an old black's face, right? It was just black blackity black, right? It was just — it just was the most nourishing and filling and beautiful space to be in. I just felt — I felt all the feels and so I come out of that and making my way back to the hotel because later on I'm gonna go meet my friend Latham Thomas who is one of my BFFs but I had never — we had never met in person, that was the day we're supposed to be meeting. Yes. So she sends me a video of you and says, "Hey, this is my friend Junauda. She was sharing with me what your book means to her and I thought you would appreciate hearing this." She sends me a clip of you talking about how the white people that you worked with, I guess in the theater space?

Junauda: Yes, totally.

Layla: Right, had been doing *Me and White Supremacy* and you shared what that meant for you and how they were now showing up differently and how it made things easier for you.

Junauda: Totally. Shout out, Heart of the Beast Theater 'cause when I saw they were doing that — that wasn't even my idea. They like literally were reading *Emergent Strategy* by my friend, Adrienne Maree Brown, and they were reading your book and when I knew they were reading your book, I was like, okay, I'll work with y'all white folks because that lets me know that they're actually serious about doing labor to change power dynamics especially, within these like white-led, liberal, non-profit organizations. It's like a lot of them have created a stratum for themselves to feel good about themselves and still position themselves —

Layla: Oh, that part.

Junauda: — centered. That part. So, when they were doing that, I was like, okay, y'all, I will sign this contract. Let's do this. It lets me know y'all are ready.

Layla: That means so much to me and the reason it made me so happy when I saw the video of you from Latham was, you know, the beneficiaries of my work are black people and people of color and so to get that kind of feedback just filled me up so much. Toni Morrison, then I've seen this amazing video by this woman Junauda and then I go and meet Latham at her home and we're meeting for the first time and that was everything and then I sit down in her living room and on her coffee table are two signed copies of your book and she's like, "Do you want one?" And I'm like, "Yes, I do actually." I always love free books and it's signed and then later that day you messaged me, I believe, and said, "Hey, I'd love to give you a copy of my book,"

and I'm like, "I've actually got it, I've already got it." Yes, and it's signed, it's already signed, so I'm really happy, but that was a very serendipitous beginning to then me opening your book and starting to read it and I started reading it when I came back home to Qatar so I was in New York for about 2 weeks where I was doing some pre-publication stuff and I was speaking at Latham's conference, Continuum Conference, and then I came back home and started reading your book. And I opened it up and I start reading it and I'm like, "Wow," 'cause I didn't know what to expect. I remember you send me a message and you said — I'm gonna read what you told me the book was about.

Junauda: Oh, Lord.

Layla: You said, "It's about queer young black love between black girls across the diaspora, mass incarceration, astrology, ancestral magic, Whitney Houston, and trusting your sacredness despite oppression and heartbreak." That sounds fascinating. I don't know what I'm — like when I opened it, what's gonna spill out, you know? I knew it was gonna be a beautiful story 'cause the cover itself is beautiful.

Junauda: Shout out, Charles Chaisson and Samira Iravani. Like, yeah, 'cause writing a book is so many people. It's people like Latham passing it on to people like you. It's the people — yeah, as you know, 'cause —

Layla: You never know, right. You never know whose hands it's gonna end up and how it's gonna end up in there, which countries it's gonna travel to, right?

Junauda: Yes.

Layla: So, it's complete magic but I opened it and I started reading it and this is like, no BS, I remember the first time I started reading Audre Lorde's work which was not that long ago. I didn't grow up with these writings, with Audre Lorde, with Octavia Butler, with Toni Morrison. It was just a few years ago for me. I remember the first time I started reading Audre Lorde's work and it was like I would read it and then have to just sit, like put the book down and just let it sit for a moment and one of my favorite poems is a poem by Audre Lorde called "A Woman Speaks" and it opens with that line, "moon marked and touched by sun," and there's something about it that just does something to me inside but I actually got — I bought a sign, it was here in the my home office before, it's tucked away somewhere now but it has those lines, "moon marked and touched by sun." How those words made me feel, those words by Audre Lorde, is how your writing made me feel, and each page —

Junauda: I melt, I melt.

Layla: Each page, as I turned it, it was like I feel the presence of Audre Lorde, I feel the presence of Octavia Butler, I feel the presence of Toni Morrison, I feel the presence of Lucille Clifton, I feel all of these, like you said, black, you know, feminist matriarchs. These ancestors who to us now are sort of almost ethereal but also at the same time very real. Like, she's my auntie but also she's an angel, like, you know, like both —

Junauda: She's a deity. Totally —

Layla: Right, exactly.

Junauda: — 'cause we are, we are and they are, you know, and I think it's so tremendous to remember that because I think our whole existence is to try to erase that truth, you know? As obvious as it obviously is, we were taught to think like the worst of who we are and where we're from.

Layla: So it just — it meant so much to me, Junauda, because one of the things that I was so sad about is these women, I mean, I have them above me right now so I'm in my home office and above me are images of Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou, and Octavia Butler. Like, they're here with me always in these interviews and one of the things that I was so sad about is because I discovered their work way later into my life. It's kind of like the way that I'm really grateful that I'm alive in the time that Beyoncé is alive and I feel kind of bad for the people who are gonna know her afterwards but not know her, do you know what I mean? So —

Junauda: Yeah, seeing her in concert, being alive. Well, that's kinda how I feel like when my parents talked about when Bob Marley put out albums.

Layla: Right, right.

Junauda: You know, I know the greatest hits, I know it from like retrospect and nostalgia. I don't know it totally in the present moment —

Layla: In the time. So, the gift that I got with your writing is, no, she's a living, breathing woman now. She exists now and this is how she writes and this is what she — so I have all the feels for you and your book and your work and it feels like you're just

getting started. You're not just getting started because this is your life but also it's like I know there's so much more, there's even more that she's gonna be able to share and give and your work is so fertile and blossoming and I just wanna honor you and say thank you and I'm so grateful for you because in reading your words and the way that you write and the story that you tell but that you infuse it with ancestry and magic and poetry, there's poems in this book, it's this great gift that makes me so grateful to be a black woman, so thank you.

Junauda: Thank you. I'm so grateful and I'm letting this go entirely to my core right now. I think it's not easy figuring any of this existence out and I think it really does mean a lot to feel like you're amongst people who are on the same wavelength and frequency about like how do we really hold space and witness all of our power, all of our magics and activate it so that we could actually heal and there's so many ways that we have healed and continue to heal but I do feel like just grateful, A, to be seeing so lovingly by you and my work to be ensconced amongst people who really did give me permission to literally breathe and continue to breathe and to literally look at myself in a mirror with love and with sweetness and to be curious about my existence on an existential level, not in the ways that I fulfill the sort of fantasies or expectations of whiteness but what is it to actually thrust myself into my existential truth through like shared curiosity and wildness, you know, like I think, for me, so much of the book, and I mean, it was interesting when you were saying about how you found these people later in life. Either they had passed or not when they were like dropping —

Layla: Yeah. Toni Morrison just passed last year, the others —

Junauda: Oh, my gosh.

Layla: Yeah.

Junauda: I have a Toni Morrison story. I never got to meet her, but when I lived in New York, she had written a lib operetta based off of Margaret Garner, *Beloved* is based off of the like African enslaved woman who murdered her children. Anyway, so it was at the Metropolitan Opera in New York and I bought me my little nosebleed tickets, "Oh, my, I'm gonna see me a black opera Toni Morrison wrote," and so I'm there in the lobby and like across the lobby is Toni Morrison. I mean, I was 27 I think at the time and I remember being like, "She's so petite." Like in my mind, like — yeah, she's like maybe 5'2", you know, she's not a very tall woman, you know, and her like dress were just like so pretty and white and like — and she was just surrounded by people and I didn't have no reason to go up to her back then but another person who I had that experience with, Sonia Sanchez, who I actually did go up to and say hi to, so Sonia Sanchez is a Libra and I literally was like, hi, like my heart was beating

and shaking and I was like oh, my gosh, I can't believe I'm about to go say hi to Sonia Sanchez in the middle of the Philadelphia train station. It was just like, "Oh, hi, honey. Hold on a second, let me get my ticket, and then we should talk," and she literally sat with me for an hour and a half at the train station —

Layla: Oh, wow.

Junauda: Yeah, and she was just talking about her garden. She was talking about her —

Layla: Wow.

Junauda: — children and her, you know, she was just being a person who was in a train station, and like those are the moments like when I think about who I wanna be and thinking about — sorry, there's like three things I'm talking about. So one is like here's these beautiful women and they're real women, they're real people —

Layla: Yes, yes.

Junauda: — like Toni Morrison is like this goddess like surrounded by people —

Layla: Right, right.

Junauda: — and the opera she wrote —

Layla: Right.

Junauda: — but she also is like Sonia Sanchez in that like she has a garden and she has a family and she has, you know, grown woman issues she's thinking about. But then I was thinking about like the books, so me writing a YA book, you know what I mean? I'm thinking about like being young women, like what are the things that young people nowadays can have access to to teach them about their witchiness, to teach them about their magic, in ways that I think that I really did absorb from a lot of these folks, you know what I mean? And they've written YA books and it's like, I mean, I think *The Bluest Eye* is a YA book. It's also a limitless book. I think like Toni Morrison taught me that you could write a book that's for and about young people and it talks to the young people and all of our existence, like all of us —

- Layla: Yes. Well, yeah, I mean, I read — and let's talk about your book, so I'm reading *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them* and it was only when I saw it described as a young adult book that I was like, oh, yeah, it's a young adult book but I was — but I was just reading it as a book, you know? I wasn't thinking of it, "Oh, it's for younger people." I'm getting so much from it and I think you're right, it's the young person in me that is getting so much from it. Tell us about this book. What is the premise, for people who haven't read it?
- Junauda: Yeah. So, it's a book that follows two girls primarily, one named Mabel who is sort of a tomboy, queer girl in Minneapolis and she lives with her sort of free-spirited, like conscious black parents, and they're a tight-knit family and a little brother and a cat named Andre 3000. And she befriends this girl Audre who is somewhat like exiled to Minneapolis to live with her black American father and Audre is from Trinidad and she got discovered like making out with a girl from her church and like her mom sent her to go live with her dad and these girls come into each other's life at this critical moment in which Mabel, the girl in Minneapolis, discovers that she has a serious illness. So the book then brings us into the realms of this other character, Afua, who is an astrologer and a man on death row who writes very lushly about black existentiality, in a way, and in Mabel's sort of uncertain future, she really sort of identifies with the stories within his book and meanwhile the girls are also like falling in love and Audre is really doing her best to try to heal her friend, and she also has — Audre, best friend is her grandmother Queenie who is sort of like the —
- Layla: I love Queenie.
- Junauda: — sexy — Yes. I love Queenie. Oh, my gosh. I wanna be Queenie, talking about what kind of ancestor I wanna be, an elder. Yeah, so, I feel like the book really goes into multiple spaces, places, and time. A lot of emotions, a lot of feelings and, yeah, like I really wanted to process black healing and limitlessness within a very violent, earthly existence, which everybody navigates in their own way.
- Layla: There are so many themes that you pull out in the book that are just very meaningful to me. So, first of all, you are Trinidadian and from Minneapolis, right? And have a Caribbean background. Right.
- Junauda: Yeah, my father's Crucian from the Virgin Islands so it's like my mother's Trini, my dad's Crucian, and, yes, I'm born in the States though.
- Layla: Yeah, yeah. So, the place that you're writing from, especially when you're talking about Audre, like it's really interesting 'cause for me, I think — I can remember

years ago when I was in school, my mom had a friend who was from Trinidad and Tobago and we just loved them 'cause we're just like we love the way you talk and the way you are and everything about you, but also, at the time, there were not many black people here in Qatar that we knew 'cause their daughter was at a school that was next to our school, we were friends, but I didn't —

Junauda: Oh, Trinis in Qatar.

Layla: Yes.

Junauda: I can't wait 'til the Trinis find out. I mean, I'll hear —

Layla: You're everywhere. But I didn't get to really learn about the culture in depth until I was reading this book and it's so interesting the ways that black cultures across the diaspora are so diverse but also have so much in common.

Junauda: That part. That is one of my theses of negronickinessness.

Layla: You're right.

Junauda: No matter where we go —

Layla: No matter where we're from.

Junauda: I've been in Brazil, whether I've been in Cuba, whether I've been in Cameroon. We like to be on the block. We like to have fun. We like to laugh. You know what I mean? There's a juiciness to us.

Layla: There's always this energy as well of the matriarch, the woman of the family, the woman ancestors and so reading about Queenie, even though my grandmothers were not like Queenie, but I felt so much connection and remembrance of my grandmothers in reading the book. You know, we're Muslim but my mother is very witchy.

Junauda: Absolutely.

Layla: You know? And I'm just like, it's the African. It's what it is. It's the African, you know, with the herbs and the prayers and this and that and I'm reading your book and the things that Queenie, the grandmother, is teaching Audre, the granddaughter, things which was interesting actually because Audre's mother didn't inherit that and had gone more in the direction of the church and Christianity, whereas there is this bond between the grandmother and the granddaughter that feels very steeped in African and black culture. Why was that important for you to bring out? Like it feels like it's such a core theme of the book.

Junauda: Yeah. I think like so much of my curiosity of life, you know, from a young age, was like I felt in alignment with like witchy energy, even though like my grandmother is super religious, she just passed, she's an ancestor now, she was super witchy though. Our religiosity has never cancelled out our witchy sort of like —

Layla: No, that's —

Junauda: — ancestral —

Layla: Yes.

Junauda: — practices of spirit, spirituality, and I think so part of my study in college was going to Brazil to study abroad and I was very curious to just see like how did African-ness thrive and exist in all of these places, like I went to Brazil and they very much practice a religion there that is inspired and steeped and aligned with African spirituality, Candomblé which is like voodoo or something, yeah, or even like I would say the black church in the United States, you know, like I think there are so many ways that we are inhabitants of spirit and ancestral conversations within our body, like we don't even need to articulate it with —

Layla: Best said, right.

Junauda: — into words, so like for me going to Brazil and being like, oh, this person like that negro I know from off the block, that person over there is like my auntie, and I'm in a whole other country —

Layla: Right.

Junauda: — and I think for me like that was this moment where I was like, dang, one thing these white people really wanted me to understand in all of my upbringing was that something about my African-ness was broken and destroyed because of their enslavement of my ancestors.

Layla: Right.

Junauda: My ancestors didn't know how to literally bring into the seeds of their like marrow and selves, their spirit in connection to spirit, but to actually — like I remember the first night I was in Brazil and I was walking on the street and I heard samba music, like there was like some house party and people were playing guitars and triangles and drums and literally like I couldn't sleep, like my heart like was just hearing the — it's like being on ancestral land. So anyway, like so much of the book is like how do I convey these things? You know, how do I convey the multiple ways we deal with it? Like I think Audre's mom, in a lot of ways, like struggles with how do you live in any particular colonized culture and survive as a woman? Like there are so many ways that we navigate that. I think there is an aspect of queerness though that like Queenie has and Audre has that really allows a certain kind of portal away from some of these things, but to me, I did wanna contend with what I know is the reality of a lot of black people throughout the diaspora is that we really do struggle with how to navigate queerness, and there's ways that the girls in all of the parts of the book are navigating, like how do I live my full wild, sort of divine self in ways that like really is me embodying it from a knowledge that I don't know but I remember?

Layla: Yes, yeah. I think, again, that's one of the reasons why in reading your book and reading how Audre and Mabel navigate how they feel, right, and how their families feel about how they feel or how they have to hide how they feel from their families. It just reminds me of reading *Zami* by Audre Lorde and her having to navigate her relationship with her mother who was from Grenada and having to kind of really hide her queerness, right, and feeling that disconnect, and there was an interview that you did, I watched — I can't remember who it was with but you said something really important in there which is, you said, you know, this book is — part of it is for young people to know, especially young queer people and young queer black people to know there is a space for you to be here but also we've always been here. This isn't new. You know, this isn't something, a novelty that's just happening right now, being queer. Queer people have existed throughout history, throughout time, from the very beginning, and I as one who isn't queer and has, you know, straight privilege and all of that but there is just something so important for me and I think for all of us to have these stories because you do allow us to open that door and to see the world in other ways that straightness or being in the gender binary doesn't allow us to be.

Junauda: Oh, yeah. Like I think that, to me, is something I truly, truly feel grateful to have access to like any story about black folks, and I don't know, like 'cause "queer" is just like the term we have, like I think there is like so many ways that **[inaudible 00:34:24]** ourselves so it's kind of like an umbrella term so I feel like, yeah, like there's all of these ways that, A, this has existed through time and place but also that I think like the relationships with the girls even before there is anything romantic or even with girls that weren't in a romantic bond, there is this like sort of queer love that like young friendship sort of really mirrors, you know? Like I think that as a young person, I was obsessed with my friends, I was obsessed with how they felt, and maybe that's just my kind of emotional personality but like there was like these ways that the ways I related to them had a romanticism that wasn't sexual but was soul-ly deep. So I think like that's the thing of like how do we give humanity permission to be in relationship with each other in ways that isn't mitigated on these very specific spectrums of like, oh, this is romantic, this is queer, this is whatever. I mean, there's not a lot of boys in this book but I think particularly for boys, boys of color, non-binary, trans-bodied people who don't feel permission to live in this world, like a lot of that is a psychosis that was put on to us by white supremacy. Like a lot of that was a violence put on to us. When they came into our ancestral spaces where our cultures were thriving, or not necessarily thriving, just being what they were, like there was a lot of ways that we existed that wasn't around punishing things that weren't cis or hetero or what have you.

Layla: Right.

Junauda: So, certainly in my work, I'm like, yeah, like how do I heal that in a lot of ways for me but, you know, sort of pay it forward in the context of the writing.

Layla: And this is what I love about — I mean, I don't know, would you describe your work and your kind of way of seeing the world as afrofuturism, is that a term that you feel affinity to?

Junauda: I use the term "black diaspora futurism," which is a little more wordy —

Layla: And what's the distinction? What's the distinction for you?

Junauda: Well, I think for me is that like when I think of all of that's created me, like I do acknowledge the diaspora. I do acknowledge being raised in Minnesota on Dakota land, indigenous Dakota land, and the ways that like the drum within these spaces of Anishinaabe and Dakota ancestors, like I learned the drum for the first time and that connected me to my African ancestors, and my existence of being a Caribbean person migrated, so for me like afrofuturism was a term coined by a white guy

which, you know, is neither here nor there but it's there, and I think for me like when I think about the futurism, like it is very inclusive acknowledgment that we are on the continent and we're also dispersed —

Layla: Everywhere.

Junauda: — throughout the planet and have — I mean, even before, like, you know, the slave trade.

Layla: Yeah.

Junauda: So, it's like I'm the only one who I know who uses that term, like I just came up with this, as soon as I heard it was written by a white guy, I was like, you know what, I was never too like, you know, the Afro, whenever Afro is in front of anything, I'm like, who wrote this?

Layla: I need to know.

Junauda: Afro American, you know what I'm saying? Nobody out here Afro American, afrofuturism, but I also would say I'm an afrofuturist in the sense that there's a thought and collection and experience of being in the world that is classified as afrofuturist that I totally feel like strongly in love and in the lineage of.

Layla: Right, right.

Junauda: Who's a complicated writer, lead author —

Layla: And we are writers. That's where we're gonna go, but it's interesting because I went to see — what movie was it? I went to see a movie with my husband and it was with Brad Pitt and it was a movie where he had to go into space to get his father —

Junauda: Oh, my gosh, I wanted to see that movie. Was it good?

Layla: It is a good movie, but the whole time — so because of the work that I do, I'm always watching things through two lenses.

Junauda: I know that feeling. I know that feeling and I'm just like, I wish I could just sit and enjoy —

Layla: Yeah. I wish I could enjoy it, but I'm sitting there and I'm like, so I guess black people just won't go into space then. We won't be there in the future, we don't go into space, we don't exist in space, right? So, when I think about afrofuturism or black diaspora futurism, I think about how it brings — it's based in indigeneity and the past and in ancestry. It says that we can't go to where we wanna go without taking where we've come from.

Junauda: **[inaudible 00:38:52]**

Layla: Right. Right.

Junauda: True.

Layla: Right.

Junauda: I'm totally with you on that.

Layla: Yeah. There's something so grounded in it. There's something so consistent about blackness and being indigenous people of color in the same way that whiteness doesn't afford the same thing. I'm not saying white people don't have roots. I'm saying white supremacy erases that and says you are now white instead of belonging to the culture that you belong to and what you inherit with that is the history of colonization and enslavement and land theft and murders and killings and rapings and all of these things.

Junauda: To the world empty yourselves.

Layla: To the world —

Junauda: Like y'all started — y'all did that to y'all selves —

Layla: Right, right.

Junauda: — and then brought that on.

Layla: Right, and for us, and when you said about I had to learn that whiteness is trying to teach me that there was something broken about me, that being black meant that I was broken, for me, afrofuturism and what I see in this book, so linking it back to your book with Queenie, the grandmother who's teaching Audre, the next generation, as she's growing up is you can't go there without these tools. You need to know these things. You need to know how to tune in to yourself. You need to know how to listen. You need to know how to trust your dreams. You need to know how to work with these elements. That is what will help you as you move into the future. These things won't tie you to the past and keep you stuck here. They will be the foundation from which you grow your own future.

Junauda: Absolutely. I love the way you — that was so eloquent, Layla, 'cause that really is it. Like I think — I mean, I'll speak from being born in the States and my experience, like anything African was considered like the worst.

Layla: Right.

Junauda: It was like the dirtiest, the poorest, the nastiest, like we used to say, "Oh, man, get them African booty scratchers off me," like, you know, we would just say ridiculous. I mean, I don't even think I would say that shit, but the tone —

Layla: That's that internalized — the internalized oppression, right.

Junauda: Totally, and it was like all kids of all races too, in addition to black kids for sure, and like my mom is interesting 'cause like my mom is super like ebony dark skin, always had her hair shaved, in a fade, some Grace Jones shit. She really was like, you know, this Trinidadian woman who was raised to just think she's — she's a Taurian too so my mom is just like the queen of I'm cute, I don't know what anybody — everybody's attractive. It's just true. She's cute. And she's Queenie, like in a lot of ways, Queenie is inspired by my mom, by Alexis De Veaux, like these black women who were just so clear about their regality and about their, you know, deification.

Layla: I've seen pictures of your mom and clear about her regality, it sums her up. Yes.

Junauda: Totally.

Layla: That is an energy that she emanates is regality, and there's no questioning. It's not a — Do I have permission to? Am I allowed? No. No, no. She is who she is. Deal with it.

Junauda: Yeah, or keep it moving, which I think is like literally the start of guidance I needed with my sensitive spirit. I was not raised in the Caribbean like my parents, surrounded in blackness. Like I was raised in Minneapolis which is diverse but also very much like a white supremacist, kinda liberal city and state —

Layla: I was there last year. It's very white.

Junauda: OMG. I would have picked you up and took you around somewhere, brought you some —

Layla: I was there for a conference by one of my friends, Catrice Jackson, and the conference is called Follow Black Women and it was an unapologetically black women-led conference.

Junauda: Gee, where was I? Where was I? And I didn't even know your friend, Catrice. I don't know her. But, yeah, so I just think like for me I'm glad that I had my mom being that because even though like I ended up really having a lot of self-hatred and like dislike for my appearance and things like that, just growing up in the '80s and Minnesota does have like an aspect of not only white supremacy but certainly like light-skinned privilege, you know what I mean? Like there's a lot of mixed people here, there's a lot of interracial relationships and people aren't processing race, they're just making families and making babies and still sort of inheriting and internalizing a lot of these ideas around whiteness being better so I think, for me, like, yeah, just like so much of what I'm still processing in my creativity and within my own womanhood, but I feel like I'm less processing it. Like I'm almost 40, like I really feel like, yo, I'm a bad bitch, I'm fly, you know what I'm saying? It's like I'm cute in the face and in the waist —

Layla: Yes.

Junauda: — you know? It's like I'm totally like have released a lot of those hang-ups but so much of my life was in that heart space.

Layla: How did your healing happen? What were some of the elements that allowed you to get into that space of “I’m that bitch”? What were some of the things that have been important to you? It sounds like your mom was a huge influence.

Junauda: Yeah. I grew up in the grunge alternative, like TLC, baggy pants, and my mom is like this West Indian woman of like Les — you know what I mean? “I Will Survive” [inaudible 00:44:13] and stuff. So I think for me like a lot of that presentation of feminist felt very unsafe growing up, you know, in the hood, we’re in the neighborhood where a lot of like sex trafficking and stuff happened, so a lot of my sense of my beauty was a thing that was hidden and I really feel like lately I’ve I think partly coming out, like I came out in my 30s, you know, like most 30s woman, becoming an artist I think was some of the ways like I kind of retrieved myself, you know? And retrieved —

Layla: Because you talked about wildness and that’s something that I feel, as I was reading your book, was, yeah, she’s a wild woman. She is free. There is a lot of freedom in this book and I feel free as I read your words.

Junauda: I love that, Layla. Yeah, freedom is very important to me. I feel like for whatever reason in this time of being black, that is our hero’s journey in a lot of ways, you know, both on the psychological and physical level, and as a soul level and sensual and sexual level. There’s a lot of ways that this book, what I hope is offering healing for people to totally live in the freedom of themselves in ways that our colonization and our enslavement wanted to take away our sensuality from us, you know, or wanted to negativize or stigmatize it and be like, “Oh, you a hoochie, you a hoe,” and it’s like, “What if I’m a hoochie and I’m a hoe?”

Layla: Right.

Junauda: You know what I mean? Like what are these things that y’all wanna stigmatize — y’all don’t understand us so why are you standardizing us, you know?

Layla: And what’s so interesting to me about that is when white women get access to that freedom for themselves, right, those are not the names that they’re labeled with. Hoochie, hoe, those are not the names that they are called but it is for black women, and then — I’m one of the older people that have just joined TikTok because we’re in quarantine and I’m like I need —

Junauda: A lot of us millennials and older behind this quarantine. You're welcome, TikTok.

Layla: 'Cause I'm not posting anything. I'm just there for the — just for the laughs, just to see it, but the reason I'm bringing TikTok is, you know, I joined it and one of my best friends who's a black woman said to me, "Just be aware," 'cause she joined just before I did, "Just be aware there is a lot of digital black face that happens on this app." There is a lot of white people who take clips from black people and replicate them, taking dances and challenges and things from black people and replicating them so bringing this back to we get called these derogatory names, right, derogatory names, but then they're appropriated afterwards and then they're seen as entertainment, they're seen as cool, urban, edgy, you know, all of those coded words, but when we reclaim our wildness, it's a bad thing, and it seems to me that black people across the diaspora have had the word "wild" weaponized against us and what that has done is meant that we are afraid to access it but, actually, when we access it is where we get our power back.

Junauda: Absolutely, and I think like that's been almost my compass for finding where my power is, is to see what has been stigmatized about me. You know what I mean? What has been stigmatized about my blackness or my queerness or what have you, you know, about my existence? Like the fact that we did not wanna spend our whole day sitting up in some space working for white people, that's also — you know what I mean? Like because we wanna be free, we wanna hang out, you know, amongst our community and laugh and do things communally, like these are all things that have been stigmatized in all kinds of ways but those were our powers. Our powers were our togetherness and our collectivity. I mean, that's what I love about this book with Saidiya Hartman is she talked about like all of these black blues women who, at the time, at the end of slavery, like that our whole bodies, our whole sexuality, was owned by these white people, you know what I mean? They chose who and when we had babies, if we got to even raise our children. So, all of a sudden, at the end of this time and like eras and eras and generations of this, here all of a sudden you have these black women who are like, "Yeah, I wanna have my little apartment and have my little boyfriend come in and fuck me when I wanna be fucked."

Layla: Right. Right.

Junauda: Or, you know, "These are the people I wanna have kids with," you know what I'm saying? And like all of that is like, "Oh, well, you didn't get married and have a kid with this person," and it's like — and that's a thing people can do too but I think like specifically in the blues music, these black women were like, "My man done left me so I got me another man," or whatever the things they would sing about —

Layla: Right, right.

Junauda: — like white femininity didn't create a space for that. Like it was very chaste. It was very like whatever, so black women really were pioneers and innovators in sort of like understanding the immensity of a sexual, romantic relationship life that also too is probably ancestral, you know what I mean? There's ways that we got to live in agency or, you know, be forced in agency around our bodies and things like that as a response and that became criminalized because that was in direct defiance of how white people is like they will — you know what I'm saying? So I feel like for me so much of these feelings, like you said, I'm just beginning in a lot of ways but I still feel so overwhelmed with like the stories and just — I just wanna talk about these things because so much of my life we didn't get to, you know?

Layla: Right, right.

Junauda: It's like, "Don't be a baby mama, don't be a this, don't be a that." That's why I love Erykah Badu. Erykah Badu is like I will be the baby mama, okay? I don't care.

Layla: Right.

Junauda: My kids are beautiful. We eat mangoes and juicy watermelon and burning incense and free.

Layla: Yeah. I knew we've talked about Audre Lorde a lot in this —

Junauda: Oh, I love Audre Lorde —

Layla: Exactly, I can talk about her all day long, but what's just come to mind is one of my favorite things that she's ever written which is "nothing that I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me."

Junauda: Bars.

Layla: Bars, right?

Junauda: Aquarian, man, Aquarian. Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, that — Angela Davis, all of those Aquarian black feminists thought like —

Layla: Right.

Junauda: Lorde.

Layla: Right.

Junauda: Bars.

Layla: And I remember a story that she wrote about, I can't remember which book it was in and she was talking about how she was going to teach at this college and one of the things that she was afraid of people weaponizing against her was her queerness, and so she wrote something on a piece of paper just letting them know, "Yes, I am a lesbian," and put it on her door so that when they came in, they would read it so I told you now, you can't use it against me. I own it. I'm letting you know in advance. And it's like what you said about Erykah Badu saying, "Yeah, I am. I am that thing that you're saying I should not be claiming, and what?"

Junauda: And what?

Layla: And what? For my own self, for my own journey and healing as a black woman. Self-definition, the responsibility, the right, and the privilege to define ourselves for ourselves is so powerful and when we think about the different ways that white supremacy tries to tell us who we are, has told us throughout our entire lives, before we were even here told our ancestors who we were, the act of self-definition and living into freedom in the ways that we choose for ourselves is so amazing and my mentor, Dr. Frantonia Pollins, always says to me my self-love as a black woman isn't an act of revolution because that would be to say that whiteness has the standard of what's allowed and my love for myself, the source of it comes from being in opposition to whiteness. Right? My self-love is my self-love. I love myself because I love myself, not because I'm revolting against white supremacy. And coming back to that space is I think it's so powerful. I mean, I get — I do get the power of claiming self-love is revolution because it is revolutionary to love yourself in a world, in a society that tells you you're inferior, you're nothing, no matter what you do you'll never be good enough, we will incarcerate you, we will punish you, we will all of these things, it is revolutionary to love yourself, and, yet, the source of my self-love will not be in opposition to what you say about me.

Junauda: I mean, that totally makes me think of Alexis De Veaux who is such a brilliant goddess and her talking about like, yeah, like my blackness is just like so in the future. Like I'm just not even studying.

Layla: Right, right. So I —

Junauda: These people —

Layla: — you said her name a couple of times. I'm like, I do know that name. I do know that name and I looked over —

Junauda: Bow.

Layla: There we go. Alexis De Veaux is the author of *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*. This is one of my favorite books.

Junauda: Yeah. Alexis De Veaux is — so she is like my mentor/mama —

Layla: I'm fan-girling really hard right now 'cause this is one of my favorite books in the world.

Junauda: Yo, Alexis, yeah, you should follow her on the gram. She's so adorable and she's totally like this like hot-to-trot queer, 70-something-year-old, you know, bad ass. Like she teaches me about how sexual and sensual and pleased I can be, you know what I mean? Like she really has taught me — and so much of what is in the book is shaped around like her permission to center those aspects of myself and those elements in these characters. Gosh, we're so blessed. We're so blessed by these black women who really did give us — ah, I hate to use this term "permission," you know what I mean? But like in a lot of ways it's like —

Layla: But it fills it —

Junauda: — a foundation. Yeah, it does. Because I have to give my friends, my daughter people that security to be like, yes, be yourself. Like all this other noise, nah, nah.

Layla: What are some of the things that you're excited about now that this first book is out? What are you excited about working on next?

Junauda: Well, I'm in the process and excited and praying and hoping to get this adapted to a film which —

Layla: Oh, yes! I really wanna watch it. Yes!

Junauda: I know. Me too. I think it would be dope and initially when I had the idea for the book, it was a film idea. Like that coming together and it's coming together in a beautiful, divine way and I trust it. I truly trust it.

Layla: I'm so excited for when it's going to be here. I know it's going to be amazing. There's one element actually that is in the book that we didn't talk about and I realize that when you said it just now, you have a Whitney Houston I think pillow?

Junauda: Oh, yes. Houston. OMG. If I would have forgotten Whitney, she would have gotten really mad. She's a Leo.

Layla: We gotta talk about Whitney Houston because she is referenced throughout this book. Why and what does she mean to you?

Junauda: Yeah. So Whitney Houston of course is like black girl icon number 1. You know what I mean? Like thinking about being alive in the time of Beyoncé, like, I think Beyoncé is ancestor and her Meryl is, you know, certainly Whitney Houston is certainly one of them. Like just getting to be sort of this, I don't know, divine, soulful being as an artist but I feel like one thing that sort of came to me — so initially when I was writing this book, I was just like I'm writing this book about these girls, and then Whitney Houston just kept on arriving. Like I was at a friend's house in Atlanta, there is a coffee table book that was a Whitney book 'cause, you know, this was a lesbian woman. She's like, "Ooh, Whitney's my bae." And then me and my wife, we're in Amsterdam, we're on the lurk for a gay club, we find a gay club, there's like this framed picture of Whitney Houston. The next day, we're at a museum in Amsterdam. There's like a painting of Whitney Houston. Then we go to the grocery store, Whitney's playing — like so to me it's like I listen to the ancestors.

Layla: And can I just tell you, I just remembered something that happened today actually. I was in the dining room with my kids, they're doing like study from home, and Maya, who's my 10-year-old daughter, starts humming a song and I listen and she's singing

“I Will Always Love You” and I said to her, “I didn’t know you knew who Whitney Houston was,” and she goes, “Who’s Whitney Houston?”

Junauda: Wow.

Layla: And I’m like, “She’s only one of the greatest singers of all time. You know her song without knowing who she is.” So she —

Junauda: OMG, that’s Whitney. That’s Whitney.

Layla: She knew I was gonna be talking to you today so she just dropped in.

Junauda: Yes. But ancestors talk through children, like children are just like in total movement and conversation with ancestors, for sure. No, totally, like Whitney, so, anyways, like there had been some movies that — not movies, documentaries, that are coming out and articles, like when she passed, about her best friend Robyn who was also her teen sweetheart who then became like her main confidante and had her back through a majority of her career until they fell out in like ’99. So, for me, it was kind of this experience of like, wow, like, you know, just listening to Whitney’s presence in my life. So, anyways, in writing the book, I just was starting to really think about Whitney’s queerness in particular, thinking about, you know, this relationship with Robyn and like this intensity and beauty and sort of like genuine friendship and support, you know, like this connection and also the ways that that sort of was thwarted in the light of becoming like this huge super popstar icon that has never, ever existed before that time.

Layla: Right, right.

Junauda: Like in the ’80s is when like Michael Jackson and Madonna and like just these huge popstars and it’s like Whitney was one of them and like queerness was not a part of the equation, but it also, at that time, reminded me when I moved to New York, I moved to New York in 2006 and there was this older black woman who I used to kick it with ’cause, you know, I’m more with kicking it with people, especially if you’re older than me, we kickin’ it. I mean, she was like in her 40s and I was like in my 20s and we would just chill and somehow we started talking about Whitney Houston. She’s like, “Oh, yeah, Whitney Houston’s bisexual,” and I remember I was thinking like, Whitney Houston’s bisexual? This was when like during, you know, Bobby and Whitney like television —

Layla: Right, and, I mean, just thinking back on her career, all her songs, the way that her whole image was curated, I mean, I remember hearing that she was bisexual, it just wouldn't compute in my brain because of how, you know, she had been marketed and what was the image that was presented. Right.

Junauda: Totally, and I think that's sort of the thing is that that was the machine of pop music, you know? Is that they try to find a distilled narrative that's two-dimensional and like that was sort of the mark she had to bear and also, you know, she's from a very religious family but also a family of entertainers. So, I think there's like a way that, you know, the more and more I've read and studied Whitney Houston, and this is even before like I don't know if you know but recently Robyn Crawford, her, you know, home girl/girlfriend, put out a memoir —

Layla: Yes, yeah.

Junauda: — you know what I'm talking?

Layla: Yes, and I remember it was around the time I heard about that book was around the time I heard about your book so I was like oh, that's so cool. Yeah.

Junauda: Yeah, so I feel like that's kinda how ancestors work sometimes. It's like I feel like there's a time where like everybody really started to think about Octavia Butler, yes, as a really literary force, but as like a person speaking to the time and almost like a philosopher, you know, and I think, and there's ways that we remember people differently as an ancestor and I think right now like Whitney is now not just being like this beautiful sort of spiritual, unbelievable vocal goddess slash, you know, person that experienced troubles with addiction and mental health and what-not but that we're thinking about like her as a more multidimensional being, like what is it to imagine her and that was kind of like my interest in writing the book when she came on into my psyche around it. She has this ability to be full, to be a person with the sexuality, with the silliness, like in reading Robyn's book, there was a lot of stuff around her being a just kind of like this silly, wild, mischievous one, you know? Like she was the one that like Robyn was the one who had to calm her down and chill her out which is what the sister in New York told me. She's like, "Yeah, Whitney Houston is a wild child." She's like, "Robyn would always be the one to calm her down," and I was just — like so all of these like sort of abilities to not see these figures as like these sterile beings, like —

Layla: Right.

Junauda: — even Beyoncé. Like I think lately Beyoncé has had to contend with like, “Yeah, I’m an actual human being —

Layla: Right.

Junauda: — that has feelings and issues and things.”

Layla: Yes. It’s interesting you say about Beyoncé. I was just joking to my husband who doesn’t use social media very much, has never posted anything online in his life ever, and I said it’s so interesting ’cause we’re in the time of this global pandemic right now and Beyoncé hadn’t posted anything online for ages and I’m like, “Babe, people are just waiting on Beyoncé to post something,” like that’s so much pressure to put on somebody. Like they think if she posts something, it’s gonna solve everything, it’s gonna make you feel better in some way, you know, and she gets to have her own experience of this, just like every single one of us is trying to navigate this. There’s something about being in the public eye that is dehumanizing. It makes you this flat, 2D person that people paint their projections onto you and when we’re talking about identities and ways of being that have been historically and in modern-day time marginalized, it’s like you don’t get to be that. You get to be what we say you are. Whitney Houston, you don’t get to be bisexual. You don’t get to be silly, fun. You have to be this icon, this popstar, this thing that we say you are. And, for me, when I heard about Robyn’s book and hearing about Whitney in all of these different ways that we hadn’t known her, I felt sad that she didn’t get to have that when she was here, but I also feel grateful that we get to see that in some way her legacy doesn’t end up being this 2D vision of who she is, that we get to see more of her as this 3D person from different people’s perspectives and going back to that thing around like self-definition, the responsibility, the right, and the privilege to be able to say this is who I am regardless of where I am is just amazing. We don’t all get to do that, you know? We don’t know how to do that. We’re often not taught how to do that.

Junauda: It’s so true. Like I think, you know, there’s this aspect of — I mean, it’s black respectability, this idea that —

Layla: Yeah, there’s different things —

Junauda: — and, you know, the strong, like there’s all of these ideas and I think like what I love about figures like Audre Lorde in juxtaposition like to the queerness of, you know, Whitney Houston, like where Audre Lorde got to be like, “Listen, I’m so myself. I’m so myself. You can’t even destroy my imagination about myself,” and that’s like a black queer experience and then you have Whitney Houston who the

world got to experience her in all these ways and I think before in the lineage of Bessie Smith and like all of these sort of black queer like soul women, you know, like women who sang from the soul that like you hearing that and just your goosebumps, all of that stuff, and even in writing this book. Like I really was like, “Yo, I wanna think about Whitney in this lineage of like black, queer, blues women,” because she sang our blues and she sang it in a way that is like resplendent in like that gospel way that is so black too, like we sufferin’ and the way we would sing, you would think like —

Layla: Yeah.

Junauda: I mean, we hold all of it in the song, you know? So, even though they put her in the pop machine, like she still was bringing that gospel and that soul and that queerness, you know? So, I do imagine what it would have been like to be a black girl growing in the '80s and she was all of those things and she could have been all of the things that she really was.

Layla: Right. Yes. It’s like she was amazing and what more — you know, going back to that idea of permission, how many more people would have had permission to show up in themselves because she had the freedom and the safety to show up as fully herself —

Junauda: Well, and that’s interesting ’cause we’re also like in the times of Janelle Monáe and like I’m trying to think of other sort of like queer, like Frank Ocean and things like that who, yeah, like they get to include that part of themselves safe from the internet, you know, like when the internet came out and here you have like this non-binary, black, queer-bodied spirit like being this sexy rock star and things like that and writing songs to girls and things and thinking of like this ancestral path, like I just also look at these young people who are like these returned ancestors who are like, listen, if I’m gonna be — like I remember when Janelle Monáe first came out and not came out as queer but just came out as an artist and she had her little suits and she’s like doing Prince and James Brown and she’s like all of these beings in this like body and she’s a girl and she’s also not concerned with the male gays and wanting, you know what I mean? I’m not saying that women who are fem do that either, but it was just such a like shift —

Layla: Especially on a main stage at that level, right, right.

Junauda: Yeah, and you’re like her talent is allowed to be a part of her sexuality and beyond her sexuality and beyond her expression, like she like was asserting this thing. You

know, you feel the Whitney and Janelle, you know, you feel the Whitney in all of these beings so thank you, Whitney. Thank you, Whitney, for —

Layla: Thank you, Whitney.

Junauda: You know, and your magic.

Layla: Yeah.

Junauda: Oh, my gosh, Whitney.

Layla: Such a beautiful place to close up. I really loved this conversation. I really wanna encourage everyone, beautiful cover again, to get your copy of *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them*. I really hope it gets turned into a movie 'cause I truly wanna watch it. I think —

Junauda: Oh, and I'm also working on a second book too. I forgot to mention that. Also other projects —

Layla: — second book.

Junauda: Oh, yeah. It's another young adult novel. It's about like a black girl, her parents going through a divorce/existential breakdown and it's in the '90s and she starts training in circus, you know? So, 'cause I used to be a circus — or do perform in circus arts, like aerial art and stuff like that, so that's like my new like premise that I'm working with and it's still fun, it's so beautiful, but, yes, all of the things.

Layla: I can't wait to read it. You know the — before I close, actually, again, I just wanna thank you and acknowledge you. This conversation has been so rich and I've really felt more than in many interviews that I've done, I love every interview I do, there's something special and unique and amazing about every single guest that I have here, but I've really loved being in the space where it felt like these names that we've been saying are here present with us, Whitney and Audre and Zora and Alice and Toni and Octavia that they have been in this conversation with us and I feel them smiling and them being grateful for the ancestors who came before them and being proud of the descendants that they see right now as we flower and blossom into ourselves. What a gift. Just beautiful. I feel very, very blessed, so thank you.

Junauda: Same here. Yeah, like I have been such a huge fan of your work since I met you. I'm like what, oh, my God, cousin Layla, and you're reading my book and you're loving my book and sharing my book with the world so that's beautiful and surreal 'cause I was literally working on this book when I first became aware of your work so —

Layla: Oh, wow.

Junauda: It's just like, you know, these moments, we're like, yeah, like I had to like literally hold my heart in my chest and my body and just have gratitude for this moment so thank you for having me on your show and —

Layla: Of course.

Junauda: — you know, amplifying my work.

Layla: Oh, that makes me so happy and it goes back to again that we never know, like the thing that we're working on in the dark on our own, you know, well, other people are doing other stuff and we're just committing ourselves to this body of work like you never know who's going to be reading it, who's going to be enjoying it, how's it's gonna be changing people's lives. I posted something yesterday that a year ago today I was sitting in the library with stacks of books just eyeballs deep in research to write what my book is so my book is a very like thin book. It's not a very thick, heavy, big book, but it takes a lot to write a book, right? It takes a lot to bring it all in, right? The research, like channeling within yourself, the connection with the divine, everything. That work which is so sacred that a year later you can be sitting in conversation with somebody who, yeah, you came into awareness of them when you were writing your book, so it is all kinds of magic in there for me so thank you.

Junauda: Oh, my gosh. Thank you.

Layla: Alright. Our closing question. What does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Junauda: I think living life with as much creativeness and sweetness and curiosity and sensual pleasure as I can and how do I create a world that supports all of my descendants to be fully in that embodiment without any sense of emotional, mental, societal restrictions. How do I really lean into the liberation of my descendants like on an absolutely viscerally, bodily, spiritually, soulfully level? That for me is what's being a

good ancestor is and, yeah, and also like totally enjoying every morsel of this earthly existence to the best of my ability. This is just one stop on my spiritual spaceship of a body and a soul and I truly want to like be present in such a lush, important way and exude that as an example. So, yes.

Layla: I love that so much. I got chills when you were talking about living into that liberation for my descendants and it's not just — it's not just what will they be able to read that I wrote or what will they be able to watch, you know, a podcast that I was on, but how did I actually live and that my living was a liberated way of living and that was the example that was passed on, not just what I did but how I was, how I be, right, in the world. That gave me chills and I'm really gonna be sitting with that because sometimes we wanna work so hard for those descendants who are coming after we're gone and we forget like you actually have to live your whole life and enjoy your life as well and that what you're passing on is not just what you're giving them physically but how you showed up, what you're giving them energetically in the way that you lived your life.

Junauda: Totally. I feel like Maya Angelo, I'm glad you brought her up.

Layla: Yeah. My daughter's named after her.

Junauda: I love that. Yeah. 'Cause I feel like when I think of her, when I think of June Jordan, that's another ancestor that always come into my heart, there is this way that they just live like these free, like Shug Avery who's like another one of my icons, even though she's a fictional person —

Layla: But she is an icon, yes.

Junauda: She is an icon. To me, it's just, you know, who wears lingerie most the day, who likes to sing, who likes to shake her titties and booty butt and all of the things, you know? Yeah, that's the kind of ancestor I am, Shug Avery, that's for sure.

Layla: Yes, yeah. Again, Queenie. I see Queenie.

Junauda: Totally, oh, my gosh. Queenie is filled with Shug Avery energy all day.

Layla: Thank you so much, Junauda. Thank you.

Junauda: Thank you so much, and let's stay in touch and next time you're in Minneapolis, we'll kick it. Whenever I make it to Qatar, we're gonna kick it.

Layla: Yes. Right. Take care.

This is Layla Saad and you've been listening to Good Ancestor Podcast. I hope this episode has helped you find deeper answers on what being a good ancestor means to you. We'd love to have you join the Good Ancestor Podcast family over on Patreon where subscribers get early access to new episodes, Patreon-only content and discussions, and special bonuses. Join us now at [Patreon.com/GoodAncestorPodcast](https://Patreon.com/GoodAncestorPodcast). Thank you for listening and thank you for being a Good Ancestor.