(Intro)

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 question 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.

Emma Dabiri is an author, a teaching fellow in the African Department at SOAS, and a visual sociology PhD researcher at Goldsmiths. She's presented several TV and radio programs, including BBC Radio 4's critically acclaimed documentaries, *Journeys in Afrofuturism* and *Britain's Lost Masterpieces*. She's the author of the 2020 book, *Don't Touch My Hair*, also called *Twisted* in the United States, and the 2021 book, *What White People Can Do Next: From Allyship to Coalition*. *Don't Touch My Hair* or *Twisted* is an Irish Times bestseller and it's also our second book selection for the Good Ancestor Book Club. Emma's passion for African studies, history, sociology, literature, and liberation movements shine both in her work and in this conversation.

(interview)

Layla: Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Good Ancestor Podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad, and I am here with the beautiful, amazing Emma Dabiri, the author of *Don't Touch My Hair*, also called *Twisted* in the US, and her brand new book, *What White People Can Do Next*. Welcome to the show, Emma.

Emma: Thank you for having me.

Layla: It's a pleasure to have you and I've been so looking forward to this conversation. You and I had the chance to be in conversation in 2020 about my book and it was such a pleasure to speak to you at that time that I'm just thrilled to be able to be back in conversation with you and to ask you about your work this time.

Emma: Yeah. I'm really looking forward to it as well. And that conversation was fantastic. I had so much really, really positive feedback from it. So many people got such a lot from it. So —

Layla: Oh, I'm so glad —

Emma: You were wonderful.

Layla: Oh, thank you. As were you. As were you. So, I also wanted to say, Emma is our second author who is featured in the Good Ancestor Book Club. This month, we are studying her book, *Don't Touch My Hair*, also called *Twisted*. It's her very first book and, for various reasons, I wanted to choose it. I've been going through a journey of exploring myself through exploring my relationship with my hair and we wanted to also choose a nonfiction book for our second month and it just felt like the most natural choice and we just kicked off discussions yesterday and I know it's going to be an incredible month of conversations throughout the month. And then, at the end of the month, we will be in a private author event with Emma where our book club members can ask her their questions themselves. So, I'm very excited about that and thank you for saying yes to being a part of the book club, Emma. We are really honored to have you.

Emma: No, it's a huge pleasure. Thank you for the invitation.

Layla: Absolutely. So, if you're listening and you'd like to join the book club, you can just visit goodancestorbookclub.com for all the details. All right, so, our very first question: Who are some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, familial or societal, who have influenced you on your journey?

Emma: Yeah, I absolutely love that question because the idea and concept of ancestors is really like central to my work and my latest book, *What White People Can Do Next*, some of the reviews have been saying that I feel like — I'm not boasting saying this, I'm just repeating what other people have said —

Layla: I am giving you full permission to boast —

Emma: What the reviews have said.

Layla: Please boast.

Emma: But, no, it's been incredibly exciting for me because the work has been likened to people that I see as my literary ancestors and even beyond that, actually, whose work has been like very, very instrumental in my own and whose energy animates a lot of my thinking — whose previous work animates a lot of my thinking, yeah. So, one of the reviews was saying that there was echoes of Baldwin and Baldwin is somebody that I draw on a lot. I draw on his work a lot in the book, in the second book, and another of the review said it was as though it was written by the love child of James Connolly, who was an Irish revolutionary socialist who was executed by the British in 1916 in the Easter Rising, which is a really like important date in Irish history and the fight against imperialism and British colonialism. So, they said it was as though it was written by the love child of James Connolly and Audre Lorde and I was just like, "Oh, my God, I can't deal with this —

Layla: Wow.

Emma: So that was very exciting.

Layla: That's amazing.

Emma: So they would be some of the people who I would, yes, see as ancestors. There's other characters as well, other people as well. They tend to be writers. I recently read a book called *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and the woman who wrote that, Harriet Jacobs. It's the only slave narrative that is written by an enslaved person that focuses specifically on the sexual exploitation of women during slavery and it's just an incredible book. Like not only her remarkably like harrowing story and what she went through to get her freedom and to protect her children, but also the quality of the writing itself. And, in fact, when it was first published, they didn't believe it could have been written by someone of African descent —

Layla: Wow.

Emma: — and it was actually credited as being written to a white woman. But her name has been restored as the rightful author. So there's lots of people.

Layla: I love that. And I imagine hearing feedback like that, like I think it's beyond, right? It must be quite overwhelming and how are you receiving it?

Emma: Yeah, it does feel overwhelming and I even feel like uncomfortable saying, you know? But, yeah, it just feels like the greatest honor —

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: — that could be bestowed on me. So, yeah, it feels, yes, slightly overwhelming, but amazing.

Layla: Yeah, and it's interesting that you said, "It kind of makes me feel a little bit uncomfortable." Do you think maybe that's because we so honor these literary ancestors and what they mean to us that, you know, it's kind of like they're otherworldly, you know? That there's no way that we could touch anything close to them but, at the same time, I think about the fact that they probably felt like that in their lifetime when they were writing their books.

Emma: About other people —

Layla: Right?

Emma: Yeah.

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's interesting. Yeah, that's true.

Layla: Yeah, it's incredible. I'm just — I'm so happy for you. I'm not surprised you're hearing things like that. So I have my copy of *Don't Touch My Hair* here. So, let's talk about you and your background. And I have a soft spot for anyone Irish because my husband is Irish and also, so I, you know, had never visited Ireland until we got married and, you know, I went there the first time and I was like, "I'm home," like I love this place and if we ever had to leave the Middle East and move back to the West, I wouldn't move back to the UK, which is where I'm from, I would actually choose to move back to Ireland. That being said, I don't know the Ireland that you grew up in, you know, which is very different to the experience that I'm having now,

in 20— you know, whatever, visiting there and not feeling like an oddity. But in reading your book and your experiences, it's very clear that you were very, very other in that space. So, tell us a little bit about, you know, what it was like growing up in Ireland as a black, mixed race child and how that informed your outlook of yourself in the world.

Emma: Yeah, absolutely. So, in the late 90s, there started to be migration to Ireland that has resulted in today there being like a visible, non-white Irish population —

Layla: Yes.

Emma: — and that started to happen in the mid to late 90s —

Layla: Which is the part that my husband is part of, so he's come in that sort of late 90s migration. Yeah.

Emma: Okay, yeah. So that's when there started to be a visible, non-white Irish population and, you know, a lot of people that were born then are coming of age now so there's really interesting kind of black Irish and brown Irish demographic change happening which is having — which is just like, yeah, having a really fascinating — like really beautiful culture like emerging, you know? And the country has changed in ways that I could never have anticipated in the 1980s —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — when I was a child, and even in the 90s, like I was a teenager in the early to mid-90s and it was, again, before that migration was beginning, had begun, and, yeah, it was just like, you know, it was a country that was kind of 99.9 percent white Catholic, very socially conservative. There were very, very few black people. There were very few people that were different

in any way, you know? But particularly ideas about black people were quite established even though there wasn't actually like a physical presence of black people and a lot of that —

Layla: Oh, interesting.

Emma: — had to do with like the role of the Catholic Church and the Catholic Church was incredibly culturally dominant at that time and there were so many missions to Africa, you know? So, as I talked about in the book, you know, kind of being accosted on the street by like nuns who've done like kind of missions in Africa that like stalked me and I go into the type of exchanges that we had —

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: — in the book, unsolicited exchanges. There was a real narrative of African inferiority and I actually was — I was born in Ireland but we moved to the States soon after I was born, came back to Ireland when I was like four or five and that was around the time that Band Aid was out, you know, with like Bob Geldof and the famine in Ethiopia and that was just really — that image of Africa was really dominant —

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: — so there was the assumption that if you were black and any association with Africa, you should be kind of grateful to be in Ireland, you know? Because there was this dynamic that the Irish were charitable and helpful to the unfortunate, starving Africans. We had like collections for the black babies in school. We — "pennies for the black babies," where, you know, you collect pennies and it'd be sent off to Africa and I remember going to Africa, you know, kind of like not naming

any specific countries. I remember going on holiday to Nigeria, to my grandparents, and coming back to school. There's like skyscrapers in Lagos —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — and like my grandparents like have a chauffeur. I was like, "I don't think they need your pennies, basically," you know? And I was hauled out of the class and told, you know, that I had a chip on my shoulder and I needed to stop kind of inventing stories and there was a lot of resistance to anything that interrupted that narrative of African kind of primitivity and inferiority. So I had a lot of like kind of confrontational exchanges from a young age. Also, I think, to me, what was so difficult was the fact that I didn't have any peers really or even other family members, you know, who I could really — my parents split up when I was about eight, my dad went back to Nigeria, and I have siblings but they're a lot younger than me. So, I was experiencing all of this stuff without having any kind of support from anybody else who might have had, you know, similar types of experiences so it was very much that sense of isolation. I speak to young Irish people now who tell me that they experience racism but then they also tell me that like half of their class is black, you know? That's something that I couldn't even begin to imagine.

Layla: Yes.

Emma: It sounds like there's more — there's now more black children in some classes than there were in the entire country when I was growing up, you know?

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: So it was that kind of — it was that isolation that was really difficult. It was the racism compounded by the isolation.

Layla: What I find really fascinating is that, within that experience, you know, because, as children, we can interpret things in a plethora of ways to try and make sense of what we're seeing and what we're experiencing. What I found really fascinating is that you were this like revolutionary from a very young age, right? So, tell us about the pamphlet that you created to teach people about the truth.

Emma: Okay, so, from a very young age, I felt like very compelled to tell like black stories and I also read a lot from a young age and I read a lot of black history and I read a lot of books that had like black protagonists. Somehow, we got them in Ireland. I've since found out that one of the bookshops that I spent a lot of time in, which is a whole another story, was actually like a very radical bookshop and so, as a result, they had a lot of like very like small presses and they were actually selling quite a lot of children's books that had black characters, but also not just had black characters in a kind of like representational way but because it was a radical bookshop grounded in radical politics, these were often like, you know, from small kind of like Marxist-like publishing houses and stuff so —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — messages. This was in the 1980s as well, you know? Things are politicized in that way often. So, I was consuming all of this quite radical texts but kind of not consciously. And I just really, from a young age, could see the experiences that I was having kind of on my own in Ireland as part of a bigger story of black history and forms of discrimination and oppression that black people, you know, had experienced and were

experiencing globally. I just kind of tapped into that. I also felt — this is really interesting about ancestors, I also felt that there was — the way I used to think about it was there was somebody that I was like descended from that wanted me to talk about this stuff, right? But I couldn't really articulate it properly and I didn't say it to anybody because I didn't have any frame of reference for that and it just seemed a bit odd and I already was seen as extremely odd so I was like, "Let me not add to that." I'll just — I'm not going to speak about this. Then, when I left Ireland as a teenager and moved to the UK to go to university and did a degree in African Studies — so my dad is Yoruba, which is like one of the main ethnic groups in Nigeria, and I started to learn about the Yoruba cosmology and the centrality of ancestral spirits amongst the Yoruba — not just amongst the Yoruba but across, throughout the continent of Africa more generally and their names in Yoruba, like *Babatunde* and like *Yetunde*, which are like "Father comes again," "Grandpa — like if a child is born after, you know, a grandfather has passed away recently, it will be like *Babatunde* and if a girl is born, it will be *Yetunde*, which is like, you know, like "Grandmother comes again." So, I realized that this idea of kind of ancestral presence actually was very commonplace within that part of my culture so now I kind of had a frame of reference through which I could kind of understand those earlier thoughts that I hadn't really known how to articulate or to make sense of so that was interesting.

Layla: Yeah, so you —

Emma: As well.

Layla: What I loved is that you, you know, you created this pamphlet —

Emma: Oh, I didn't answer that, sorry.

Layla: Yeah. You wrote about the —

Emma: Yeah. So, when everybody else was doing catechism, because Ireland's a very Catholic country, I didn't make my communion or my confirmation as a personal kind of decision which was, again, like extremely odd. So, when everybody else was — the rest of my class was learning catechism, the lessons that they needed to go through those very important rites of passage in Ireland, I kind of was off on a desk on my own doing an independent study project and I wrote an anti-slavery —

Layla: Self-assigned.

Emma: Self-assigned. I wrote an anti-slavery kind of treatise called "Break the Chains" and I remember the cover, it was like the length of a coffee book and then I pasted on this like white paper covering and then I drew like these slavery shackles getting like broken apart and it was like the story of Olaudah Equiano who was an abolitionist, a really famous and influential African abolitionist. There's actually a question mark over whether he was born in present day Nigeria or in the American South but he became free and moved to the UK and actually married a white English woman but he was a very influential abolitionist and I wrote kind of like a summary of his life and then I brought it up to the present day and I tried to contextualize the circumstances of black Americans through the history of slavery basically and I think my teachers were just like, "I don't know what to do with this."

Layla: Did you present it to them? Like, "I've finished this self-assigned project."

Emma: Yeah, ’cause I was doing it like for ages. I was working on it for a long time. I think I maybe got a tick at the end or something. I wasn’t particularly praised for it, you know?

Layla: I can imagine —

Emma: I think they just didn’t know what to do. I think they were just like, “Oh, this is weird,” but like, of course, it’s weird, that’s the kind of weird shit like a foreigner would do —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — you know? That kind of attitude. So, yeah —

Layla: Well, I mean, I think it’s incredible that you’ve been using your voice in that way from such a young age and also that you are — and this is what I love about reading *Don’t Touch My Hair*, you are like one of my favorite kinds of writers which is a writer who loves research and loves to take that research and make it less academic but still have it be very thorough and very — like it’s meaty, right? It’s not top surface stuff but it’s relatable in a way that an everyday person can read it and feel like they really learned something. I love writers like that. And it sounds like that’s what you did from this very, very young age and try to contextualize it, trying telling a story about why this matters, why is this important for us to understand. It seems like that’s a thread that stayed with you.

Emma: Yeah, thank you for that observation. You know, I went on to study history and I always felt that any conversation that was like trying to make sense of why things are the way they are now without any kind of wider historical context, I always felt frustrated by that. It was just like, “But it’s like that because of this,” and if you don’t know — if we don’t know that, we’re not going to understand how and why we’re here, you know?

So, actually, yeah, I think that is something that I felt for a long time.

Layla: That's incredible. So you — talking about sort of your upbringing and, you know, what your experiences are, you were the only, basically, right? I mean, around you, you're looking, you're not seeing people who look like you and, on top of that, an added sort of complexity or nuance is that your mother is white so you were not getting that reflection of yourself through her as well.

Emma: Uh-huh.

Layla: Talk to us about the journey of your hair and your relationship with your mother because — and I'll say this, I have a black mother, my mother with my hair, she looks back on photos of me now and it's like, "I just didn't do your hair." You know what I mean? She gets so embarrassed when I post like older photos of me because she's like she raised me effectively as a single parent even though she wasn't a single parent because my dad worked at sea and was away for months at a time so she was a single parent, she had three kids, and, you know, it takes time to do black hair —

Emma: Yes.

Layla: — and I was also, you know, it was hard to get me to sit down to do the hair, right? So, there's a lot of photos where my hair is just like there's a lot going on and —

Emma: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Layla: You know, at age nine, I remember that's when she started relaxing my hair and my mom, again, for context, is also a hairdresser so I've always had my hair done by her even when

I got, you know, started locs, she is the one who started them for me.

Emma: Oh, that's so lovely.

Layla: So, I know that, as a black girl with a black mother, hair was this thing, right? It was always a thing. What was your experience with your mother?

Emma: Yeah. So I spent like the first few years of my life living with my mum but also like my extended Nigerian family so like my grandparents. There were lots of black women around, basically. And then my hair was just worn like very short. I just had like a really short Afro, which is quite like a, you know, an ordinary hairstyle for like little Nigerian girls so I don't really remember it like being an issue. When we moved back to Ireland, it was just allowed to grow and then there weren't black people around anymore and also, for me to have just had like a short Afro as I was getting older in Ireland, I would have hated that, you know? Because that was so far from the boundaries of femininity which was to have ideally blonde, but even if it wasn't blonde, to just have very long, flowing hair. That's like what little girls did. I know hair is a very potent and central thing in a lot of cultures but, in Ireland, there really was a cultural tradition of little girls having very long hair and that being like a real little — that being a real marker of being a girl, you know, and really kind of where beauty and femininity and girlhood were seen to reside. So having like a teeny weeny Afro in that context — so, anyway, my hair started to grow and, obviously, it wasn't growing down, I have very tightly coiled, Afro-textured hair, I've really inherited the Nigerian side of my hair and it was just growing and just not really done like my mum didn't know like about, you know, like detangling or how to like twist it or how to like braid it or anything like that and then also there just weren't the products available in Ireland at

the time so there wasn't like the expertise and there also just wasn't really the products, like we get this — this is before the internet as well so —

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: — I can just go online and like order it, you know?

Layla: And the reality is the products have only really become available en masse in very recent years, right? So, I can imagine in the 80s, it's like, "What do I do? What do I put in it? How do I do it?"

Emma: And also, when I was researching *Don't Touch My Hair*/*Twisted*, I went into the black cultural archives in Brixton and I was going through old hair magazines, black hair magazines, black beauty magazines from the 80s and early 90s and the products like the Sta-Sof-Fro Pink Luster Oil —

Layla: I'm getting flashbacks.

Emma: Yeah, like the DAX —

Layla: That's the blue one as well.

Emma: Yeah, the blue jar.

Layla: Yep.

Emma: Those products, you know, they are not like the products that we have today —

Layla: No.

Emma: — like for natural hair, you know? And the language in the ads for the products was all really like punitive and kind of to do with like your hair being a problem so obviously my hair was like presented as a problem that needed to be managed. I know — in fact, I know now that wasn't just because I had a white mum. That's also the way Afro-textured hair was seen in that time, you know, by many people. And my mum had — there were a few Nigerians in Dublin at the time, not very many, but my mum had one or two like Nigerian friends, female friends, and it was actually one of them that was like, "Let's just straighten her hair." So that was kind of like the norm in black culture —

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: — at the time. So, they didn't actually relax it. I had a texturizer put on when I was about 10 and I talked about it in the book and I remember the woman was like, "Oh, Emma's hair is really 'coarse' so let's leave it in for extra time to really break that hair down."

Layla: Right.

Emma: And break it down it did because, initially, when we were finished, I had these like soft waves of hair like kind of coming down because my hair was quite long and by the next day, it was starting to come out. I just like — my hair had just been burnt, you know? And God knows like — it was coming out in handfuls. I lost like lots of hair, just not using the chemicals properly, you know? And then my hair was just — it objectively didn't look good, you know?

Layla: Right

Emma: And as well I got like cornrows but I didn't want to have cornrows because every — all the other little girls had long, flowing, swishy, "princess" hair and then I'd leave the cornrows in for like a long time so they'd be like really fluffy and just — it was just actually really traumatic. I was deeply, deeply ashamed of my hair.

Layla: You know, when you said, "My hair started coming out in clumps," I have an 11-year-old and we will never relax her hair. That's not even a — that's not even a question and it's interesting because the conversations we have, she has a different hair texture than me because she has inherited more features from her dad, who has more kind of Arab in him, we both have Arab ethnicity in us but he has more in his family, so she's taken a lot of features from him. Her texture is more — so if we're talking about the hair types, which, you know, that's a whole other conversation in and of itself but it's more that kind of —

Emma: Yeah.

Layla: — type 3 kind of curls as opposed to kinky, coily curls like mine. It's very interesting to me because her hair is the kind of hair in Eurocentric standards that if you're going to have curly hair, it should be this kind of curly.

Emma: Exactly, exactly.

Layla: Right? Like this is the desirable kind of curly to have and her constant reflection to me is, "I wish I had hair like yours" —

Emma: Yeah.

Layla: — like, "I wish my hair grew like yours instead of growing like mine," and I find that so interesting because that is the

opposite of the message that I received growing up and through most of my life, right? That this is not the kind of hair to have. But what I was saying was I can't imagine her at — even 11, right? And clumps of her hair coming out because of something that we did to it to try and make it other than what it is. I can imagine that was highly traumatizing. And, yeah, I mean, just really, really tough but one of the things that you talk about is kind of the normalcy or the kind of — yeah, like the normalization that so many of us have, like, oh, you know, every few months, I get my hair relaxed, I get my hair straightened, and that's just the experience of being a black woman in this society.

Emma: Yeah.

Layla: At what point did it become like this isn't a normal that I want to have in my life? Like at what point were you like, "Actually, this isn't normal"?

Emma: So, when I was pregnant with my first son, yeah, I cut it all off. I had actually — I hadn't relaxed it for about a year before that. I had a lot of like new growth. Because my plan was to cut it off so, I guess, for anyone listening who doesn't know, you can't like unrelax your hair.

Layla: Right.

Emma: You have to cut off all the straightened hair and also the word "relaxer," as I say in the book, it's like a really gentle, innocuous term —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — for like quite a brutal chemical process, you know? You're deforming the elliptical shape of the hair and breaking the hair to make a facsimile of European-textured hair —

Layla: Yes.

Emma: — and they're using like harsh chemicals to do that. As you can't undo it, you just have to cut or shave your hair off and start again. So I couldn't bear to have really, really short hair again. To have really short Afro hair, that made me feel like I was like kind of relinquishing victory to a long vanquished enemy. I was like I can't do that. This is how I felt at the time. So, I had to like let my hair grow out so at least I felt if it was going to be natural texture, it wouldn't be really short. So, when I was pregnant with my son, my first son, I cut off all the relaxed ends and I had kind of like an in-between length Afro, which actually was like — did really look bad and it would have looked better just far more —

Layla: If you'd just done it —

Emma: If I just had it short, you know? Just had it nicely barbered and just had like — or a teeny, weeny Afro type thing would have actually looked really good, but I just was still obsessed with having like long hair, you know, in a way that is definitely informed by Eurocentric norms and norms of femininity kind of thing. And so I did it because I just felt, for me, a lot of people say it's not political. For me, it was political. I felt that my worldview and what I was doing to my hair were not in alignment. I also didn't want to use those chemicals when I was pregnant, which was really like, you know, the incentive to cut it off at that point. They also say that when you're pregnant, you know, your hair grows more so I was like this is a good time to cut it off, I can get that length. But I still really felt that it was kind of a sacrifice. I was going to be kind

of like a frumpy, militant person. I couldn't imagine that I could be like, you know, attractive and have natural hair. It was more like my sacrifice for the cause. And it took like still another maybe two years to get out of that mode of thinking.

Layla: It's interesting that you say it started with pregnancy, because that's definitely how it started for me. So when I had my — when I was pregnant with my daughter, my first child, that's also when, you know, that's — you're like, "I don't want to put chemicals in me. I don't know how it's gonna affect the pregnancy." So I stopped relaxing it. Again, the idea of shaving my hair off was just like outside of any realm of like any comfort, right? So —

Emma: Yeah.

Layla: — I just couldn't imagine what that would look like and I think it is so informed by the persistent messages that we receive around beauty and what it means to look like a woman, what it means to be beautiful, and so I remember I'd left it, I just didn't relax it, and then made the decision after the pregnancy that I want to transition to natural but I didn't want to chop it off so I had half-relaxed, half-not-relaxed hair, which looked terrible. Because those two types of hair require entirely two different types of care, right? So, it was hard to know what to do with it and I would go to hairdressers who were not black and they would just be like, "What am I supposed to do with this?" Which is very disheartening and decided to go back to the relaxer because I just — I was like it's too hard, it's too much work, it takes too much time —

Emma: Yeah.

Layla: Right? All of those kind of things that I said to myself, but when I had my son again, I stopped it and then I was due after

he was born to re-relax it and I had quite a bit of growth by this time and I woke up one morning and I said I'm not doing this anymore. I'm just not doing — I'm not doing this anymore. And I said to my mom, "Let's shave it off, let's just chop it all off," and so we shaved it all off. And I remember, for the first time ever, seeing what my actual hair looked like and I was — I was shook, like I was like, "What? This is my hair? I have this hair?" And it has been this amazing journey ever since of seeing myself in an entirely different way, you know? First the journey of growing and caring for Afro hair and sort of having, you know, a loose, natural and learning about the products and the different kind of care and all of that amazing stuff and now being on a journey of, "I wonder what locs would look like," right? We went into lockdown and I was like, "Hmmm, wouldn't it be interesting if we locked it?" and so what happened, because my youngest brother has locs and they look really good on him, so I'm like, "I want to try it," but it is a journey and one of the big things that I've learned in this journey, and I think you encapsulate it so well in *Don't Touch My Hair*, is our concepts and ideas around time, like the idea of the time and the effort it takes to look after our hair as being a hassle or being something that gets in the way of other things that we should be spending our time on. And that was — when I first started reading it, like I was reading and then rereading, Emma. Like I was like, "Wow, I never thought about it this way." So, can we talk a little bit about that? I would love to dive into that, because you start this book talking about precolonial Africa and hairstyles and what hair means and how it's connected to so many other things and the part about time really stood out for me.

Emma: Oh, I'm so glad to hear that. Yeah, so the little bits and pieces that I'd read about black hair, a lot of them, you know, start with slavery and so they start with this stigma of being attached to Afro-textured hair and I was just like that is not the

beginning of the story, you know? That's actually a recent development. So, I want to look at and explore what Afro-textured hair symbolized and expressed and its significance before there was any stigma attached to it, before there was any sense of kind of like shame or deviance or there's any concept of like "good hair" —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — being a hair texture, just like, you know, a softer, more loosely curled texture. And I was really fascinated and kind of just annoyed by this concept of like, you know, black hair being reimagined as a burden. And part of that burden is like there's not enough time to do it and then the blame, the blame for there not being enough time is placed on the hair itself rather than the system that we live in, which is a system that developed, you know, with other imperatives in mind and which has been like imposed on people of African descent so I was like, "No, let me shift the lens. The problem is not my hair texture." My hair texture isn't deviant, you know? It grows the way it grows for a reason. It's not a mistake.

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: So, it does take time to do this texture of hair but in the cultures that I was looking at, people had the time to do it because they weren't enslaved by industrial time, imperial measurements of time that seek to maximize profit under capitalism, you know? People were not the slaves of time. So, even outside of actual bonded chattel slavery and the realities of that for people of African descent, the imposition of kind of like capitalist and industrial time also means that one doesn't really own their time, you know? Whereas in the precolonial cultures that I'm looking at, hair was a really central and important artistic medium through which people expressed

everything from like their spirituality to like their social status, social commentary, all of these things, and it's a really important part of their culture because they own their own time —

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: — they prioritize doing their hair. So if the hairstyle takes three days, the hairstyle takes three days. That's the priority of the culture. To me, reframing it like that, even if that's not necessarily our reality today, you know, reclaiming that time to do one's hair and not seeing it as a burden is — becomes a radical act, you know? Becomes a decolonial act.

Layla: Yeah. Well, it makes me think about our hair rituals here at home, particularly, again, around my daughter's hair, which this — especially sort of in the — maybe pre-pandemic but also into the pandemic where I sort of was like, "We're gonna start braiding your hair," like that's how we're going to take care of your hair. We're not going to brush it every day, right? We're not going to try and always have it in this style that sort of matches up with, again, like Eurocentric standards of what hair is supposed to look like but we're gonna braid it and it takes time. It takes time to wash it, it takes time to condition it, right? If we're doing a deep condition —

Emma: Yeah.

Layla: — it takes time to sit and braid it and, depending on the size of the braids that we're doing, it could take two hours, it could take four hours, right? Like it's going to take time and she also has very long hair as well. But it's become this really beautiful time together where, you know, we want to put in this protective style that is expressive in different ways. Each time, we're like, "Let's try it a different way." I'm exploring this

part of my heritage as well because it's normal for people from my ethnic background to, you know, have hair as a time, like you said, it's a part of creativity, it's a part of community, family time —

Emma: Yeah, intimacy and bonding.

Layla: Absolutely. She really gets to own, I hope, at least, that she gets to really own her narrative as a black girl and grows up into a black woman who doesn't see her hair as a burden. And it's also just our time together. Like we sit, we'll watch a movie or two, right? Depending on how long it takes —

Emma: Yeah.

Layla: — and it's not this burden but I've really had to shift my own programming around that and so when I read in your book around, you know, exactly what you said, like they owned their time and they were not constricted by concepts of productivity that really come from capitalism that is — the foundation of which comes from enslavement. That this simple process of doing our hair is very revolutionary. And I love that. Like I said, I read it several times over and I thought this is about so much more than hair, like this is about hair —

Emma: Absolutely.

Layla: — but it's about so much more than hair, because it got me thinking about my time and how I use it and things that I think that I need to be spending it on and, also, how sometimes when I have a lot of time, there's a sort of voice in the back of my head that's like, "You're supposed to be doing something with this time."

Emma: Right.

Layla: Right? Like idle time is lazy time, right?

Emma: Non-productive time.

Layla: And you talk about, in your book, this recasting of black people as being lazy. Can you talk about that?

Emma: Yeah, so this narrative of an inherent laziness of black people is kind of one of the basic tenets of racism. It's just so deeply paradoxical. I mean, this is like, you know, a group of people who, if we're looking at those who were enslaved, you know, in the Americas and the Caribbean, people whose unremunerated labor built the modern world, the modern economies that frame modernity, you know? That generated vast, vast wealth for Western nations and they received no remuneration for centuries. The audacity of attaching a narrative of laziness, of all the narratives to attach —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — to that particular group of people is astounding, you know? It's astounding. And then even if you look at the African continent, for people who weren't enslaved, under colonialism, there's enforced labor.

Layla: Yes.

Emma: When wage labor is first introduced in a lot of African countries, people don't want to do wage labor where they work for starvation wages to pay taxes to these colonial powers who've come and just like forced themselves, kind of — like imposed themselves. So, one of the things I write about in the book is actually the resistance that many African people had to the wage labor that was being forced on them so that they

could pay taxes to rich European countries. And, again, that's not laziness. I think it's really important that we actually see that, in many cases, circumstances were better for African people before colonialism.

Layla: Absolutely, right.

Emma: The whole development narrative suggests that Africa is being steadily improved by its relationship and interaction with the West and if you look at the circumstances in many of, well, the countries that are invented under colonialism but in many of those areas that become the modern day countries, it's actually a place of abundance, in many ways.

Layla: Absolutely.

Emma: The scarcity is an artificially created scarcity because you have these Western powers there extracting all of the resources, often through forced labor —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — you know? So, again, the narrative that people whose labor and resources is being stolen to enrich a group who oppresses them, the narrative that those people are lazy is, I guess, to use the current parlance, gaslighting, par excellence.

Layla: That's right. Right, exactly. So, in the book, you track across — and I said a little bit earlier, this isn't just about hair, it's about so much more than hair and it is, this book is sprawling in the things that it covers using hair as kind of a gateway or a frame to look at these different things, whether it's spirituality, whether it's capitalism, you know, kind of like activism and civil rights movements and things of that nature.

What was it that made you choose hair as the kind of prism to look at all of these different things?

Emma: Yeah. So, I think one of the strong motivating factors was hair is something that, you know, is emotive and many of us can relate to and are interested in and it's kind of like a popular and — it's become a popular mainstream kind of conversation.

Layla: Yes.

Emma: So, I thought it was a powerful way, because some people have described the book as something of a Trojan horse, which is quite interesting. My new book is also being described as a Trojan horse, something very different to what people maybe initially assume or anticipate. So, I used something that is kind of popular and more well known to introduce ideas about African metaphysics and philosophy and all of this stuff that is maybe slightly more obscure or esoteric but I think is incredibly valuable and, you know, we all can learn a lot from having more of an understanding of it, and I also really wanted to shut down that dismissive thing you hear, 'cause talking about black hair was, you know, really provoking. It was becoming more mainstream but there was a backlash against that and it was provoking actually outrage from people that were just like, "Oh, my God, it's only hair," you know? Just being really dismissive —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — so I really wanted to create a robust challenge to that idea that it's just something frivolous and shallow and superficial and that it's only hair and to demonstrate that it's really, really so much more than that. And hair is really, in the context of black people, hair is a really incredible way of looking

at histories of resistance, at histories of assimilation, at all of these different forces. We can tell so much about the way black people are being treated and how black people are responding to that treatment or, you know, resisting that treatment through hair culture, you know?

Layla: Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. That makes so much sense. Because, you know, again, you know, my own hair journey is very much informed by my personal healing journey, my sort of personal liberation journey.

Emma: Absolutely.

Layla: ’Cause I gained consciousness around things that have been programmed into me around what it means to be black and a woman and how I internalized that and understood that and understood myself and that these conscious choices to big chop, right? To grow an Afro, to lock my hair, yes, it’s a certain aesthetic, it looks a certain way, but it’s loaded with so much history and it’s a very intentional choice that isn’t just about I want to look different, but that I want to embody different than what I have been embodying up until now.

Emma: Yes, so that, that really resonates and, as I say in the book, when I kind of big chopped my hair and went back to my natural texture, the energy around me actually shifted and it opened up a new chapter in my life. The changes that occurred were actually extremely deep and profound and I don’t think — it’s not all because of my hair but it’s also not just a coincidence, you know? There’s a deep interrelationality.

Layla: Absolutely. As I’m continuing to read, so I haven’t gotten to the end of the book yet but I’ll be there soon, but the thing that I’m really paying attention to is what I’m learning about my own internalized oppression and also our collective

internalized oppression. So, you start us in precolonial Africa where hair meant something different, and different to what — that was the norm for them but isn't a norm for us now. It's something that many of us as individuals are kind of trying to reclaim and come back to and live in our lives, but it is not a norm into like what the history of natural black hair has been and what it looks like now and I'm paying really, really close attention within myself to how I have internalized this idea, like you said, the hair being a burden, the hair taking time, trying to make it a facsimile of something else and that it goes really deep. Like even within my own journey of having — being where I am with my hair now, there are so many deeper layers still of internalized oppression around blackness, right? So, what are some of the things that, on your journey, have come to the surface that you're like, "Oh, that's internalized oppression, that's an idea that I have inherited or been programmed into that I've taken as normal but it's actually not normal," and what are perhaps some of the things that your readers have reflected back to you about what that's brought up for them as well?

Emma: I feel one of the things is the stigma that still exists around like hair that is my texture or your texture, the hair that is, even within the natural hair movement, the idealized type of hair is still the softer, looser curl in many ways and that's not to say that everybody that has that hair also doesn't have struggles and also doesn't have desires to have a different type of hair, even as you explain with your own daughter and, again, I was writing about Tatyana Ali, remember Ashley in *The Fresh Prince*?

Layla: Yeah. Who we all want it to be or was that just me?

Emma: No, we all wanted to be. So, a large part of that was her hair, you know?

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: She has Indian ancestry, I think one of her parents is Indian, and that is very evident in her hair texture. But I was reading — I write about it in the book the fact that she had, in that hierarchy, she had high status because of her hair texture but how she really wanted to have the same texture actually as her mother and her other black relatives because she just wanted to fit in —

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: — even though it was perceived as a status thing, you know, there was still a feeling of difference and othering. So, with that being said though, I think, for me, one of the biggest things is, yeah, that kind of stigma around texture, one of the reasons it took me longer to go natural than it would have — not that it might have been, it would have otherwise, was because if I had had the type of hair texture that is more commonly associated with being mixed, I would have gone natural a lot earlier but I knew that the hair texture that I have, it is the one that still remains, you know, often undesirable and stigmatized. So, for me, it was really coming to love and to appreciate the particular texture of natural hair that I have. And I honestly wouldn't change it for the world. I mean, to me, it's the most diverse of all the textures, because you can have — you just have the Afro and then you can do anything from just having kind of the classic quintessential Afro to, if you'd so desire, having it bone straight, you know —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — and everything that exists —

Layla: In between.

Emma: — in between that, yeah.

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: So, to me, it's the most kind of versatile. And, yeah, I just — I think coming like growing to love the texture that I have.

Layla: One of the things that I find challenging or kind of confusing is, you know, hearing from people who are not black who say things like, "But I love black hair, I think it's beautiful and I envy it and I wish I had hair like that and if I had that hair, I would rock it," and all of those kind of things and I struggle with that and I can't quite put my finger on why because I don't necessarily think they're lying but I also know how hair that looks like mine has been treated. So I'm like, so I know I'm not imagining these things, right? But I also am hearing you say that you love it so — I don't know, has that been something that you've encountered?

Emma: Yeah. Yeah, it is. So when I've sometimes spoken about like the deep shame that I had around my hair as a child, and this shame wasn't like because it was something I was born with, it's because of the way people responded to my hair —

Layla: That's right.

Emma: — something like a convention, you know? I didn't have a sense of it until I was repeatedly told it. I've had white women say, "Oh, well, you know, we all just want what we don't have. I really wanted an Afro. I really wanted to have Afro hair," and I'm like, even if that's true —

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: — were you going through extremely like damaging, transformational processes to achieve Afro hair and you felt like you couldn't be seen publicly unless you were seen with your Afro? Because that's not what was going on. That hasn't happened —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — and let's just be really wild and imaginative and pretend in this one particular instance that was happening, then that would be an anomaly —

Layla: Yes.

Emma: — you know? That isn't happening across the board where white women globally are participating in a damaging associated with lots of health risk —

Layla: Right. That part as well, yes.

Emma: Yeah, you know, the chemicals in the relaxer are associated with everything from like different forms of cancer to like fertility issues and endocrine disruptions. White women en masse are not exposing themselves to those chemicals to create a facsimile of black hair. It's just not comparable. And even if a white woman doesn't like her hair, her hair isn't part of a package of things that have been used for almost 500 years to dehumanize the group that she comes from, because, again, with the stigma around black hair, that's, again, not something that just naturally emerges. That comes from the invention of race and the construction of blackness that we begin to see in the colonial Caribbean in the 1660s that is created, that is

engineered to justify the dehumanization of black people, to justify their enslavement —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — from which like Western economies are becoming increasingly reliant on. And one of the parts of that dehumanization is these people don't even have hair, you know? This is wool and this is what animals have —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — so they will be used like livestock on plantations. So, the stigma around our hair comes from that historical reality. So, that stigma is part of a historical dehumanization of black people.

Layla: Thank you. That is really helpful, thank you. And there's instances where I hear that, I'm like I know you mean well and you're also trying to relate your experiences to my experiences so that, you know, we can have a conversation, but I also feel like you're just not getting it and I don't know how to explain how you're not getting it but it's deep and it goes, you know, what you just said about it's not happening en masse —

Emma: Yeah.

Layla: — is so real. So thank you. Thank you for that because that's helpful for me to be able to process why I'm feeling uncomfortable when I hear that.

Emma: It's a false equivalency and one of the things in my new book, *What White People Can Do Next*, I have kind of like eight things that need to be done and one of them is top the false equivalencies and that would be an example. It's not one of the

examples I talked about in the book but that would be one of the examples of a false equivalency, you know? Oh, everybody just wants what they don't have.

Layla: Right, exactly. That is a great segue for us to talk about your next book, which, congratulations, it's out now. How does it feel that it's out in the world? And can you tell us about what it's about and what you hope it can achieve?

Emma: Yeah, absolutely. So it's been out for less than a week so it's all very new and unfolding. The response to it has been — it's been very well received and the response has been incredible. You know, I'm still kind of in the midst of it.

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: It was very nerve-racking because the advanced copies of the book were only sent out to readers maybe like a week before publication date so, basically, I didn't really know what anyone thought of it until it was —

Layla: It's been out in the world —

Emma: — publication time —

Layla: Right.

Emma: So I was like, "Ahh," you know? Usually you have a little longer than that to gauge how people are feeling so it was pretty nail-biting. But, yeah, it's been incredible. And, again, it draws on just that background I have in African studies and in post-colonialism and the black radical tradition and brings some of that to bear on the current anti-racist space.

Layla: Yeah. So, what is it about and what do you want it to achieve?

Emma: So what I want it to achieve is — I'll just read the back.

Layla: Yeah, please.

Emma: I think that would be even better. So it's *What White People Can Do Next: From Allyship to Coalition* and I highlight the unequal power dynamics that I fear allyship can reinforce and urge instead the building of coalitions of mutuality and shared interest and then I have — basically, it's divided into different — how many steps? One, two — a number of different steps which are "Stop the Denial," "Stop the False Equivalencies," "Interrogate Whiteness," "Interrogate Capitalism," "Denounce the White Savior," "Abandon guilt," "Call People Out on Racism," "Stop Reducing Black People to One Dimension," "Read, Read, Read (and Dance)," "Redistribute resources," and recognize that this shit is killing you too.

Layla: Wow.

Emma: And that's it. And then we need to talk about racial injustice in a different way, one that builds on the revolutionary ideas of the past and forges new connections. So, again, to reference ancestors, I draw a lot on the organizing of the 60s in the 70s. There's a lot of references to the Black Panthers and organizing in that period so, again, kind of people that have, you know, been in the struggle from before my birth, I used them as a guide making my way through all of this.

Layla: And this is why thinking about being a good ancestor is just something that gives me so much life and just so much nourishment and inspiration is that there are so many lessons

from history, so many things that people have already grappled with the kind of questions that we are grappling with in this time and have tested and experimented with and tried and found ways of doing liberation work that are — there's ways of doing it that reinforce the very thing that you're trying to fight and there's ways of doing it that are about tapping into something deeper so that we can build something more sustainable.

Emma: I want to hug you, yes. Exactly.

Layla: And this is why I think your book is important. I think it's important to not think that we are facing this for the first time and that we have to invent solutions for the first time because this isn't a 2020 problem, this is a 1600s problem that people have been —

Emma: Absolutely.

Layla: Right? Experiencing and grappling with and, you know, really deeply sharing and practicing ideologies that are for the long term. And that it's important for us to link to that and to embody it now and, at the same time, in tandem with that, together with that, we are facing unique challenges in this time as well, right? And things are showing up different, old things but they're showing up differently, or new things, pandemic being one of them, that are showing us things in different ways and so there's a need for new innovation, new creativity, new thought leadership. And so it's like we're in this long line of ancestors, they are the ancestors, we are the ancestors, we are also preparing the new ancestors who are coming.

Emma: Yeah.

Layla: Right? And that we're constantly in this process of learning, right? Because it's so easy to say, you know, do a book like *Me and White Supremacy* or whatever book it is and that's it. That's the work, right? But we are all learning from one another and building on top —

Emma: Absolutely.

Layla: — of what we are sharing and so I love seeing a book — like when you're going through the steps, the different parts of it, I was like, yes, like this is important. There's so many more layers. There's so many. It doesn't just stop with one thing. There were many things that you talked about, the points that you numbered, that stood out for me, "Distribution of Resources" being one of the most important ones, I think.

Emma: Yes, 100 percent.

Layla: Okay, because we can talk a lot, we can even change our mindsets, we can change our behaviors but if resources are not redistributed, we're still dealing with power imbalances.

Emma: Absolutely, yeah.

Layla: Yeah. But the other one that just, for me, personally, really stood out was — and I don't know if they were connected, it was — you said, "Read, read, read, and dance?"

Emma: Yeah.

Layla: Was that one?

Emma: That's one. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So it's Read, Read, Read and then in brackets, and dance.

Layla: Okay. Can we talk about that one? Because that was the one that gave me the most joy.

Emma: Yeah, absolutely. So, the idea behind it is that — so, first of all, I discuss the importance of reading, you know, so that we can tap into all of that work —

Layla: Yes.

Emma: — that has been done before us, you know? That we can build on that —

Layla: Yes.

Emma: — you know, this idea that we have to reinvent the wheel. But then I say, “There are sources beyond books too. European enlightenment thinking privileges, distance, and judgment over other ways of knowing so we need to think about using senses beyond the problem solving level.” And then I talk about the black radical tradition and how it’s found in black expressive cultures where the most profound expressions of freedom are located in roots, reggae, and dub and jazz and techno and house and hip hop. Not necessarily always in the lyrics but in the sonics. That’s one of the sites where the movement is liberatory, where it is black as in fugitive. This idea of fugitivity is one that I talk about quite a bit and then I just say, “Use your imagination, use your creativity, tap into other forms of consciousness, dance, as Emma Goldman, the 19th century anarchist, urged for a revolution without dancing is not a revolution worth having.” So, yeah, joy is actually also really central to the proposition that I’m coming with in this book.

Layla: I love that so much and, you know, joy and my own journey with joy has been very informative in my journey as

someone who writes about anti-racism because there has definitely been — I've evolved in the way that I do my work so that it is instead of me burning myself out, trying, begging, asking, waiting for white people to get it, it's how do I live with my full humanity now and not wait for that time to come and so joy has to be a really important part of that and how I show up, but just as you were reading, one of the things that came to me was, oh, okay, I see why her work is being compared to Audre Lorde. So I love her so much. I am a huge —

Emma: Yay. Shout-out Audre.

Layla: — huge Audre Lorde fan and it made me think of her essay, *Poetry Is Not a Luxury*, and the *Uses of the Erotic*. It made me think of those two things —

Emma: Oh, wow.

Layla: That's exactly what came to mind for me that there are these ways of knowing and these ways of accessing our magic, right? And our wisdom that go beyond what we have been taught by the — she says like the white European fathers.

Emma: Absolutely. And, interestingly, something that I do in this book as well is also, because I'm Irish, right? Which is — obviously Ireland is like a "white" country but I talk about Irish people's inclusion into whiteness and how it's not as straightforward as —

Layla: No.

Emma: — English people invented whiteness in the colonial Caribbean for a plethora of reasons —

Layla: Right, because Ireland is not a colonizing power.

Emma: It's not a colonizing power so it has lots of parallels with other colonized countries but then the difference it has is that Irish people came to be racialized as white. So, there's these parallels and then there's dissimilarities. But one of the things I talk about is like who were white people before they were racialized as white? And, in the context of Ireland, I look at like Irish culture before the construct of whiteness and I pose the — there's a Scottish Gaelic ecological principle that I talk about in the book called *Dùthchas* and it's like the entanglements between the human, the nonhuman, and the environment. This kind of relationship that was bulldozed over by the construct of whiteness and modernity, even for people who are racialized as white. So, those European white forefathers, there are other whitenesses in Europe that were also obscured.

Layla: Right.

Emma: Like whiteness also is diverse.

Layla: Right.

Emma: Whiteness is like a generic category imposed on lots of different people —

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: — to consolidate capitalism, but who those people were before they became racialized as white is very different. And from the Irish perspective, that's really interesting to me.

Layla: Right, and just as you were speaking about that particular concept, you know, I thought, oh, that's a very like — and indigenous to many different places, right?

Emma: Exactly.

Layla: Like an indigenous concept and that there is a history that people who are called white now have of indigenous culture that is very connected to indigenous cultures of people who are now called black —

Emma: Yeah.

Layla: — or, you know, whatever other label, that we're all connected in that way but this very purposeful creation of whiteness, as you said, to uphold capitalism, cut that off.

Emma: Exactly. And recognizing that can be helpful in the building of, you know, mutuality —

Layla: Yeah.

Emma: — and solidarity while still recognizing our differences —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — you know? But reframing from allyship, which is kind of, you know, maybe a favor from a benevolent, charitable white person, reframing it from that —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — to the building of coalitions.

Layla: Yeah, and sometimes it's a favor that, you know, it's coming from like a white savior perspective but I also have seen it be as a guilty party feeling like this is the atonement that I need to do for myself, right, and the history of my ancestors —

Emma: Yes.

Layla: — and that their only understanding of themselves is from the birth of whiteness as we know it today.

Emma: 100 percent and that's why one of the headings is "Abandon Guilt" and one of the reasons guilt has to be dispensed with is because these actions being motivated by guilt center making that person feel better about themselves —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — making them feel better and helping them to get over their guilt. So, it's going to kind of distort like the action and the intention so one of the things that needs to be dealt with, which we have been moving, but anti-racism can't be motivated from a sense of guilt and, again, Audre Lorde talks about that a lot.

Layla: Exactly.

Emma: She's like, "I have no creative use for your guilt."

Layla: That's right.

Emma: No.

Layla: It doesn't do anything and it actually — this is how I feel. I don't hold the expectation of anyone to live in a perpetual state of guilt because that is to live in a perpetual state of dehumanization as well.

Emma: Yes.

Layla: Right? So it's not helpful. It doesn't help what I believe the practice of anti-racism is really about which is a stepping stone towards full human dignity for everybody, right? It's not a place to land at and we just arrive, "We've become anti-racist now and we're here," right? Like this is a stepping stone that we're using to try and get to the better world where we don't even have to have these conversations but being stuck in guilt is saying you're in the sort of purgatory of this is where you live now in this place of guilt.

Emma: Yes. It's an incomplete and non-generative emotion, you know? If the guilt triggers like a behavior that leads to like greater knowledge and to change, then the guilt has some sort of purpose, but people always just become paralyzed and fixed in the guilt. And that's not helpful.

Layla: That's right. I know it's hard — and we're going to be wrapping up now. This has been amazing, I could talk to you forever.

Emma: I really enjoyed it.

Layla: When I've been reading this book, and I can't wait to read the next one, I've just been like, "Oh, I wanna ask her about this and this and this because she's just full of research and full of her own kind of creative thinking around these things," but it's often hard when you've just published a book to know the impact that it's going to have in the world. There's no way for you to know what your newest book is going to do and how it's going to affect people but if you could choose, like if you could have a choice around the impact that you wish it to have, what does that impact look like? And, you know, you can be as vague or as specific as you want, but what do you want to see it do? Like we're two years from now and masses of people

have read this book, what do you want it to have actually done?

Emma: I say in the book that I don't want us to be having this conversation. As we've been discussing, these conversations have been happening for centuries, actually. This type of — not just conversations but, actually, you know, like full-on movement work has been happening for a really, really long time. But I don't want these conversations to still be happening in 20, 10, even 5 years' time. So, with the book, I'm trying to bring in fundamental shifts in people's thinking and how they imagine and how they think about racialized identities. I go — the "Interrogate Whiteness" chapter is really looking at how and why whiteness was constructed and I've had a lot of feedback on that one, from people racialized as white being like, "Wow, I got the whole race was a social construct thing but I never saw whiteness kind of in those terms."

Layla: Right.

Emma: So, one of the things that's kind of key to the book is the fact that like there's a huge movement for racial justice, there's a huge movement for environmental justice, there are all of these different things happening simultaneously because the world is like, let me keep my language before the watershed, the world's not in a great place, you know? But if we have this kind of atomized approach to issues and we're splintered, we are not as powerful as if we create these like mass movements. So, it's about identify — I say — the same forces that have a disregard for the lives of black people, that have a disregard for the lives of women, for indigenous people, for the marginalized, for the poor, for the earth itself, it's the same forces, right? So if we can identify that same origin that is the source of our different forms of oppression and exploitation, then, you know, we can think about creating those

kind of mass movements that somebody like Fred Hampton from the Black Panthers was trying to do with the Rainbow Coalition where he brought working class Southern whites together with Black Panthers, together with Puerto Ricans, and people, you know, historically pitted against each other and —

Layla: Yes.

Emma: — obviously, the relationship between the Southern whites who had the Confederate flag, you know, this group, the Young Patriots, had the Confederate flag as their symbol, Fred Hampton can see that even though they don't experience racism, they do experience police brutality because they're poor and they live in, you know, poor and under-resourced areas. They do experience the inequalities perpetuated by capitalism. So, if they can identify that they actually do have shared interests rather than see themselves as natural enemies, that can be incredibly powerful. But, yeah, it's about kind of identifying our mutual points of interest despite our differences and differences that, you know, were invented to divide us in order to better exploit us.

Layla: Yeah. Wow. It's powerful. I can't wait for everyone to read it. At the end of writing this book, how did you feel? Like did you find it an energizing process? Did you find it a traumatizing — like what was the energy for you?

Emma: I found writing *Don't Touch My Hair*/*Twisted* traumatic —

Layla: Right.

Emma: — actually, especially when I'm dealing with stories like Margaret Garner whose story informed *Beloved* —

Layla: Yes, which I'm just about finished reading and took a side note to go and read about Margaret Garner and was horrified.

Emma: Yeah, it's horrific. So, reading stories like that, the research around that kind of stuff, I was traumatized by, you know? It's not something I'm not familiar with but I just felt very emotionally invested in it and it's flipping heavy. So, in a way, I found writing quite a lot of that book quite traumatic. This one, no, I found it more energizing and, even though *Don't Touch My Hair* is also hopeful in many ways and ends on a hopeful note, invoking a future, the other book, the newest book, *What White People Can Do Next*, really does have like a strong thread of revolutionary joy running through it and a lot of people have described it as hard hitting but hopeful so I think I kind of felt that as I was writing it. That was animating the process. It was also just really stressful writing it —

Layla: Well, yeah. And that's —

Emma: But that aside —

Layla: That aside. But I love that for you. I'm so happy to hear that. It's challenging doing this kind of work and there's often a price to be paid because we're tapping into our actual life experiences and actual, you know, implications for what we look like and our identities and so I'm really happy to hear that this was a book that has given you hope that you're offering, that it's not just a book that you've written for us but it's a book that is giving you joy as well. I love that for you.

Emma: Thank you. Thank you so much.

Layla: And I also just want to say before I ask our final question, I just want to say, you know, getting to hear about your story, from a young age to now and sort of, you know, obviously, an

outsider looking in, but it is so beautiful to see the ways in which the little girl that you are and that you were and the spirit that was within her, that that flame has just grown and become more beautiful and become more fierce and more proud and, when I see you, I see me and I see so many of us and I'm so happy for you and so happy for all your success and your unapologetic way of being in the world because it inspires me to show up in the same way. So I just want to say thank you because, you know, I think about often my own kids and who they're going to grow up to be and how they're going to grow up and show up in the world and I'm like I want everyone who I interview here is so inspiring to me and your story is just like — it's incredible. So, I just want to say I'm proud of you.

Emma: Thank you. Thank you so much.

Layla: Because when I read your story, I was thinking about me as a little girl, right? And the otherness that I felt and the kind of ways that I was explaining it to myself, which is the opposite of the way that you were processing it. It was very different. I think — there's some similarities but there's a lot of difference. But it's just — it's like I see winning and I'm like, "That's a win for my little girl, my inner little girl," and I love that.

Emma: Oh, that's — that's really, really beautiful and sustaining and just deeply encouraging so thank you. I will take that with me as nourishment and sustenance as I go on because it's not always easy so thank you so much.

Layla: It's not. I just want to hold up that mirror and be like, "I see you and I love it and I love it for all of us." Thank you. So, our final question, Emma: What does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Emma: To have contributed in the ways that I can to the world being a better place for more people than — doing what I can do with what I have and who I am to — you know, I don't want to say it's like making the world a better place but just — I feel like I have kind of like work, that is my life's work, you know, that I'm supposed to be doing and I'm doing that work so doing that work is the good ancestor.

Layla: Exactly. You are a good ancestor. You are doing it. You have your mission, you know your calling, and you're walking it out and it's beautiful to see and I love you and I'm so happy to be connected with you and to be able to read your words. So thank you so much for this conversation.

Emma: Thank you so much. Honestly, like so deeply nourishing as ever and, yes, you're just — you're just wonderful, a gift to the world.

Layla: Thank you.

Emma: Thank you.

(Outro)

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. Thank you for listening and thank you for being a Good Ancestor.