

Jasmine: I just hope to build pieces and projects that can have an impact on the world and on the mediums, like I wanna be innovative and smart and so even to hear you say like this piece was a new way of looking at poetry, I was hoping for something like that. And so, thank you, and it's affirming we're on a good path.

(Intro)

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.

Layla: Jasmine Mans is a Black poet from Newark, New Jersey. Her recently published book, *Black Girl, Call Home*, has been named one of Oprah's most anticipated LGBTQ books and a *Time Magazine* must read, to name a few and Jasmine herself named as *Essence's* number one contemporary Black poet to know.

You probably know *Black Girl, Call Home* from its iconic cover that Jasmine has described as Black girl nostalgia. Jasmine's poetry has gone viral many times over on YouTube. In this conversation, we talk about two of those videos, *Footnotes for Kanye* and *Cycles*. She's opened packed shows for Mos Def and Janelle Monáe and performed at such esteemed venues as the Kennedy Center, Broadway's New Amsterdam Theatre, the Wisconsin Governor's Mansion, and the Sundance Film Festival.

Jasmine also participated in *Brave New Voices*, an eight-episode poetry documentary on HBO. She's a contributor to The 1619 Project, and recently co-hosted the Kennedy Center's Arts Across America series alongside renowned poet, Jason Reynolds.

Jasmine is also the voice behind Ulta Beauty's MUSE Campaign. She's the creator of the company Buy Weed from Women, where she sells her own designs in support of women working in the cannabis industry.

(interview)

Layla: Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Good Ancestor Podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad, and after a wonderful summer break, I'm so excited to be back for the podcast with incredible new conversations with incredible good ancestors. And, today, we're starting with an amazing poet, a poet called Jasmine Mans, and she is the author of this book, you may have seen it probably all over Instagram, it's called *Black Girl, Call Home*, and as you can see, I've got my sticky notes all over it because I love this poetry collection so much and I'm so happy and so excited to be in conversation with Jasmine. Jasmine, welcome to the podcast.

Jasmine: Thank you for having me. Thank you so much for having me.

Layla: It's so incredible to get to be in conversation with you. I've been, in addition to reading the book, I've also been exploring a lot of your spoken word poetry and a lot of your just visual art that I really can't wait to get into conversation about. But let's start with our very first question that we ask every single guest: Who are some of the ancestors, living or

transitioned, familial or societal, who have influenced you on your journey?

Jasmine: Oh, my grandmother just transitioned. My Aunt Mabel was a storyteller and taught me and my brother how to read. My uncle, William Mans, was a member of the Black Arts Movement and he was my first poetry teacher. Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, the works of Gwendolyn Brooks have always like changed me. Tupac. I feel like all of the art that I've taken in throughout my life has moved me in some way and so there's just so many people I'd go on to name.

[inaudible] who was a member of the Black Arts Movement and a poet here in Newark and after — like when he was like 70 years old became my poetry teacher in high school, this like retired man of the movement. And so, by way of living in Newark, New Jersey, there were a lot of poets in the Black Arts Movement that would happen to teach me poetry in their elder years and pass away way before I actually knew who they like meant to the greater world. Also, like my uncle used to bring me to Amiri Baraka's house and so, so many poets that I would name just from here, but, yeah, everywhere.

Layla: Wow.

Jasmine: Yeah.

Layla: That's incredible. Thank you for sharing all of that because one of the things that I was thinking about in preparation for this conversation, and as I said, just reading the book and watching a lot of your spoken poetry, it was like there's so much power in both your words and how you perform and it's a power that feels really grounded. It feels like it comes from a long lineage. I remember watching one of them and thinking, "Gosh, who does she remind me of?" and that it

was Maya Angelou, that's who she reminds me of, the tenor of the voice, the timbre.

Jasmine: That's big.

Layla: It's big but it felt real. There is an energy that I've seen you exude when you're doing your spoken pieces that is almost — I don't wanna say bigger than you but it's you amplified. It's not you when we're having this conversation. It almost seems otherworldly. Could you tell us a little bit about your journey? Because that's — I know a lot of where your work started is in spoken poetry. Can you tell us about that and how you experienced yourself in those moments when you're on the stage?

Jasmine: It's so interesting because I went to college and I was a part of poetry collectives and like did poetry professionally and poetry has always been deeply a part of my academics and a part of my professional life. It's been my only professional life. It wasn't until just recently, I mean, during my experience of *Black Girl, Call Home*, I felt this, but recently at a funeral, I went to Newark, my hometown, there was sound and there were people using their voices as storytellers and there was this essence of bebop and there was this essence of call and response that my community knows so beautifully, that is a mixture of God and poetry, and I realized, I was like, "Oh, this is where it comes from," and when you go to college, you may think it came from that mentor that you found when you were 25 and then these things help you refine these tools, but I realized that the sound of my voice and the cadence and the tone, it comes from it, it was inherited from this community of storytellers and of folklore that exists in our celebration and in our mourning. And when I sat at that funeral, I was like, "Oh, this is where you come from. This is where all of that comes from."

Layla: That's powerful.

Jasmine: Yeah, and I don't take credit for it. Like I feel strong when I perform, I feel like God is speaking through me and so it is something that I don't wanna take credit for.

Layla: That's beautiful. I love that. And we so take for granted so often what we take to be as mundane, right? And what we take to be as just this, "Well, that's just, you know, where I grew up. That's just my family. That's just the rituals that we have in our culture," or whatever it is but it's so deep and I love that you had that moment of reflection and, really, it sounds like it almost re-grounded you back in, "It's not even me that's doing this, I'm the tool, I'm the channel through which this is happening, but I'm a product of my environment and of the work that is being done through me as well."

Jasmine: Yes, yes, absolutely.

Layla: Do you remember the first poem you ever read?

Jasmine: I was discovering — I wanted to be a rapper so bad. It wasn't even about poetry, it was about my rap.

Layla: I could see that. I could see it.

Jasmine: And then something in me said, "You should be a poet instead," and I remember being militant and writing a poem about like burning the flag of the United States. That's not the first poem, that's the first poem I remember and that I shared with like my sixth grade teacher, but it was about burning the flag and America not being honest and it was — I remember at that moment when I was discovering things about the civil rights movement and poets that existed before me and my love

for poetry came by way of understanding civil rights and the strides of Black people in the United States.

Layla: Well, there's so many incredible poets and poems that came from that period, right? That are — I mean, when you think about the power that is in them speaking directly to the circumstances that they were living in. I can just imagine you at school reading that poem and just, yeah. So you mentioned Tupac and he's a rapper but he is a poet, right? There's so much similarity between the two forms of expression. What's the distinction for you that made you decide, "Actually, it's poetry specifically that feels most right for me"?

Jasmine: I think in school, it was the programs that like I knew I was a storyteller, I knew I wanted to use my voice, I knew I wanted attention. Like I always imagined myself on stage as a child but I never knew how. And then I wanted to be a singer, my mother's like, "You couldn't sing," and I was deeply attracted to write music but there was no spaces. And the closest thing to rap was like there were poetry classes, there were oratory competitions, and so I was like, "This is my opportunity to get attention," like there are children who grow up and they want people to watch them, they want to be seen. And at a young age, I knew that I wanted people to watch me, I just didn't know how. And then I felt comforted by the idea and felt brilliant as a child in the idea that I could write down words and get attention and I can be a storyteller in different ways and I can be creative and once I was rewarded by it, I just became — I just allowed myself the opportunity to explore now. And so I just found my way deeper into this thing, like, yeah, it was poetry, it was speech and debate, it was rap, but at its core, it was storytelling,

Layla: Storytelling, yeah. That's a perfect segue for us to talk about *Black Girl, Call Home* because poets arrange their poetry

collections in all manner of different ways, right? There's so many different creative ways that we can arrange a poetry collection. What I love about this book was that it felt like a story. It felt like I started somewhere and then I was taken on a journey and I ended somewhere. So tell us, in your own words, first of all, for those who've never read *Black Girl, Call Home*, what is it about in its essence and what is it that you wanted to achieve? What is it that you wanted to express? What story did you want to tell?

Jasmine: It's about stumbling away from home and stumbling back home. And the stumbles are the obstacles that we face as women and then uniquely as Black women. And so white women and people of different colors will read this work and they will not directly connect to everything in the book but then there are certain things that are universally ours and that's love and it's heartbreak and it's being an ungrateful daughter. For a lot of women, it's gonna be assault. It's gonna be how they feel about their bodies the first time we experienced a period. But then deeply for the Black women, I wanted to be able to acknowledge like the Black women who were sterilized, the Native women who were sterilized. I wanted to acknowledge Whitney Houston as a Black woman who's from Newark, how we treat addicts, and how — like I wrote like five poems about her, some in which we acknowledged her as an addict, others in which we acknowledged her as almost an auntie and then what we have done with the idea of Black women versus the actual person. And so I wanted to take the opportunity with the book to kind of explore things that I didn't know and I'm grateful to my publisher to be allowed so much space in the book because I was free to like really, really explore and include things and not feel like I had to chop away at ideas and details. It was more of an inclusive book than it was a rigid book in the sense that I had to let go of many concepts. And so it is the stumbling away

from and towards home. And then we say the stumbling is the obstacle, and home we'd speak of both metaphorically and concrete where it's like it's the actual house, like I think of home as in my mama's house, but also think home is in myself and so it's that concept that I hope remains fluid within the book.

Layla: Oh, that is so well said. So thank you. That is so well expressed because there is so much in this collection that you span so many subjects, both your own personal experiences as well as, like you said, experiences that many of us can relate to through different experiences that we've been through as well as things that we've seen in the media that we see Black women who are, whether they're celebrities, whether they're Black women who have been killed through state violence, there's just so much in there. And it was — there are several times throughout that it was just like, "Uh, I felt that," you know? Like, "Uh, I know that. I know that feeling." I'm not Jasmine Mans, I don't have these specific experiences she's had but I know exactly like the flavor of this or the, yeah, the feeling of it, the texture of it in my own life, in my own experiences. So, yeah, it was wonderful.

Jasmine: And all of those experiences I didn't have, I learned about, I researched, and I discovered and I wanted to create a space for those narratives to exist within my work. Some of those things, like I was doing research on sterilization and then on like mentally ill women who were sterilized and those were things like I was an African American literature major and I've never studied mentally ill women who were operated on, like we talk about women who were operated on but I never thought about or considered mentally ill people who were also enslaved in the United States. And there were things that like I was literally writing within my own shock and confusion that I

wanted to display in my own writing. And so I was never writing as someone who knew but as someone who was stumbling.

Layla: Yeah. Wow. That is powerful and I think as writers, so often, when we finish the product, like the book is done, it looks like this cohesive, easily flowing piece of writing that just makes it — like it just flowed out of you, Jasmine Mans, right?

Jasmine: Right.

Layla: But there's so much research that you did and also so much processing that you did of your own journey as well as, like you said, what you were learning about people's experiences that you hadn't even considered what this must have been like for them from their perspective and how that impacts you today. It's very humbling for writers. It's very, very humbling to get to the end of the book and know like I had to sweat, I had to bleed, I had to cry to humbly be able to present this first to myself and to the world.

Jasmine: And we're not talking about two years' worth of writing, we're talking about all collected work. We're talking about poems that I've been writing over 10 years that have been in my portfolio that I've been wanting to share with the world. And so you have a wealth of work that some existed years ago and then some were brand new to me and a brand new writing experience to me. And so we have time and growth and there's just a lot of good breaths in the book.

Layla: Yeah, I appreciated the breaks in the middle.

Jasmine: It wasn't all just new. It was a time of processing.

Layla: So before we even get into like the poems themselves, and I would love if you feel comfortable to recite some because

I don't have Jasmine Mans's voice, like that's not gonna happen so is there any that you feel comfortable with, I'd love to hear you recite them. But first we have to talk about this cover. I mean, there's a reason that it was everywhere on Instagram. And I will say, for me, the moment that I saw it, I was like, I had shivers like at the back of my neck, my cheeks, I could feel it, and it was because I was like, "This is me. I had these clips. I had these specific clips growing up." And, Jasmine, I mean, I grew up — I was born and I grew up in Wales in the United Kingdom and I had these clips, right? I've heard you refer to the cover as sort of Black girl nostalgia and it was amazing to me how there is a very different experiences in what it means to be a Black girl all over the world but there are some things that are just universal and it was incredible for me to see this and just see myself and just think, "Oh, a little black girl in Wales, growing up in Wales, was like Jasmine Mans growing up in Newark." Can you talk to us about this cover and some of the like reactions, like I've shared for myself what it felt like for me, some of the reactions that you've had from other Black women and Black girls.

Jasmine: So it's a picture of Adeline, the photograph is called Adeline in Barrettes and I believe she took that photo at AFROPUNK in 2014 and 2016. It was taken by Micaiah Carter and he is an incredible photographer that will go down in history, who's a Black photographer and I think he's about 26, 27. But it's a piece of art. Like I first noticed the photograph on Instagram on I think MyBrownBox, on like a Black girl Instagram page, and I was like this is a beautiful piece of art. And I've learned to love art. I am a lover of art. If I see a good piece of art, I'm gonna stop and relish in that. And so when it came to creating a book cover and finding, it wasn't creating a cover, it was finding the cover, well, and creating it, we'll get to that, but it was just like it had to be art. It had to reflect what was in the book. It had to grab at people. And so I was like every time we

were writing about the book, our team, I kept saying, “Black girl nostalgia,” I kept saying this thing and it was difficult because it’s just like this is your first collection of poetry, if you’re talking specifically to Black women, do you alienate all of the other women who will read your book? And then will book buyers feel like you’re alienating all of the other poetry readers? And if you look at a lot of poetry books, they’re very racially ambiguous. There are stars on the books, there’re butterflies, there’re things, there’re symbols on poetry books rather than actual faces or things that lend itself directly to blackness. And then the books that do lend themselves directly to blackness are academic poetry books or so by authors that have made it in their career where they don’t have to play the game. And I am a first-time author and the expectation is for me to produce a commercial book, poetry book, and by commercial, meaning that it is inviting to people across racial demographics. And now, the book is titled *Black Girl, Call Home* so we are already specific in the title —

Layla: We’re already in it, right.

Jasmine: We’re already in it and we’re getting deeper into this gumbo and now we have this cover and we were sourcing a lot of covers. I think finding the cover was a bigger conversation than the actual buying the book and building the book. It was the cover that took the longest conversation. And we had 60, 70 covers that were like, “Well, what if it was ambiguous and it was just a telephone? What if it was just the title? What if it was a picture of you? What if it was a picture of a different Black girl? What if it was a picture of a Black girl on a phone?” It was so many titles that made your head spin. And the funniest thing about everything was the fact that this cover was the cover that I showed them from beginning to the — every time I presented idea, I said, “Here’s some ideas but I want this one. Here’s some ideas but this one. Here’s some ideas but this

one,” and I am so happy that I remained aggressive about that cover. I’m so happy that I trusted my audience and my creative ability to know what was good enough for my work. Because if you see covers, there’s not this big tada about poetry covers and you don’t see many poetry covers that are like, “This is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” You don’t even look at books and I don’t remember the last book I’ve read that I said, “This is the most beautiful cover I’ve ever seen.” I’ve read incredible books, like books that I’m gonna keep right next to me at all times but no one’s ever made — I never felt like, “Oh my gosh, this cover made me feel a lot.” And the cover is a poem within itself. It feels beautiful. I didn’t make that. That is a real woman. And I’m grateful that I got that cover, I’m grateful that they trusted me to even allow me to have input. And it won like a book cover award.

Layla: Look at that.

Jasmine: Yeah, and I didn’t even know there were book cover awards.

Layla: I didn’t either.

Jasmine: The book cover is a really big deal for me. It’s a big, beautiful piece of art and I’m grateful that Micaiah Carter made it, I’m grateful that it was lended to me for the cover of my book. And I’m a lover of art and so I think about like the future of like, yo, like one day, they’re gonna be like, “That wasn’t just a cover. That was his cover.” And so it’s like there’s so many beautiful artists or even like Nina Chanel doing Meek Mill’s album, like I’m sure the people in the hood or some of the guys in the hood buying Meek Mill’s album doesn’t know that this is Nina Chanel’s work and that her work is also like on Newark right before you get on the train and the art community is going crazy in this moment because she just did Meek Mill’s

album cover, but they're just these beautiful moments where these brilliant, brilliant artists coexist and collaborate with other artists and I'm grateful for my connection by way of my first book.

Layla: Yeah. It's so powerful, Jasmine. I didn't even — I know that this was a — I've heard you talk about how you had to go through many, many conversations to decide on the cover but I love what you shared about some of the, let's say, challenges that Black authors and authors of color face in a predominantly white publishing industry with predominantly white publishing teams and literary agents and everyone who are there because they want you to win, they want you to do well, so their suggestions are really coming from the perspective of what they know works for the status quo that they are used to working in as well as —

Jasmine: It's about what's gonna sell.

Layla: Yeah, what's gonna sell.

Jasmine: I've always been a businesswoman within my own realm, right? So it's like I was a businesswoman with \$1,000, then I became a businesswoman with \$5,000, but I was always a businesswoman within my own means. But that didn't change the fact that I was a businesswoman and they want a cover that is going to sell. And of course I do too. And there is this universal myth that everyone follows that we have to be palatable to everyone, where it was like, but, no, but if we focused on the demographic we're speaking to beautifully and brilliantly, everyone else doesn't matter. And so we just like, what if all Black girls fall in love with this book and they all buy the book and the book sells out, we don't need it to linger within demographics. Who cares if the book trickles down to demographics of people who it was never for? What if we

directly targeted a specific market and we did well amongst them?

Layla: I think that's what's happened, right? I think that is what's happened and it reminds me of, and I don't remember the exact quote, but the sentiment of Toni Morrison's that, "I stood in the center and I made myself the center instead of accepting that I'm this marginalized person. I am the center. I am my own center. We are the center." That's what you've done and that's what you — that's the decision that you made and I think it's, regardless of how it ends up on the other side, right? How well it sells, yes, like you said, you're a businesswoman and that's also important and you want your book to go far, but I also think that there's something very powerful to be said about knowing that when you put a body of work out into the world, it was 100 percent what you wanted it to be. That you didn't compromise yourself, you didn't dampen yourself down, you didn't make yourself more palatable just so that it could be this huge success and you trusted that you being yourself and you speaking to the audience that this book is intended for was more than enough.

Jasmine: I guess it's kinda like making a soup and you're like, "Let's make this soup bland enough and then if anybody wants to add some salt or pepper or hot sauce, they can add all of their own." It's bland enough that everybody can try and not be hurt by it.

Layla: Right. They'll say, "It's too salty. It's too spicy. It's too lemony," right.

Jasmine: But this was never soup. It was like a spicy gumbo and people who like spicy gumbo are gonna enjoy this but if you don't, you won't. And so I think it's about sitting outside of that myth of that things have to be bland and general enough or

palatable enough. I think it's also acknowledging that this was a unique time. It was like *Black Girl* came out after Breanna Taylor was murdered. It came out after George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and so many other people that I can't name right now, God rest their souls. And so we watched as the price of Black art increased, both visual arts, both literary arts, performing arts. And so we even watched TikTokers on Instagram refuse to dance. And so people are looking at and acknowledging Black art differently than they were before and people have to be more transparent. And so the success of *Black Girl, Call Home* also leans on the fact that people are looking at Black art differently today.

Layla: And I think, you know, obviously, we interview a lot of authors on the podcast and we host a book club and, I mean, this is my personal challenge to white readers, readers of color who are not Black, you know, to really think about does it have to look like me in order for me to find something for myself in this, right? And whether it's the universal piece that you spoke to, there's something so much deeper in poetry that speaks to a universal experience but there's also let me learn about an experience that's not mine as well.

Jasmine: Or even like that's not even a conversation when it comes to Black children learning literature. That is just like when we start off in school, we start off with Shakespeare and *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Great Gatsby*, which we understand are lovely, traditional books, but it's just like you got Black kids in Newark like literally reading *The Great Gatsby* and I'm just like, "How does that —

Layla: Why?

Jasmine: Why? Yeah. Like, for what? For who? Like who is this — but we already decided that there was this some like

traditional western standard that children have to live up to so if your reading experience as a black boy in Newark starts with *The Great Gatsby*, how well is this gonna continue on? Like if we're starting with *The Great Gatsby* and going to Shakespeare in English class and your reading experience is controlled by your literary class, by your literature class, how well is it gonna go for starting off with like very, very removed white people? And so it's like if I started off with Jason Reynolds or Ta-Nehisi Coates and *Between the World and Me* or if I started off with Maya Angelou in my classroom, it would have been a different — I would have had a different relationship with reading. And if I had a different relationship with reading, I would have had a different relationship with my vocabulary, my understanding with words. I would deny reading if I started off with white writers, the white ones that kids are forced to read now. And so it's not until like I got to college and the appropriate writers were given to me that I was like, "Oh, it's different," or even now where it's just like, I'm now reading for fun and I'm not reading necessarily to learn the next big thing, I'm literally reading for fun. And that feels so good. Like I'm in the coffee shop and I'm laughing, like I'm laughing while reading a book and I was just like, "I didn't laugh at reading a book until this year." Like I never was like, "Oh my gosh, this book is fun and this feels like I got a friend." Like that's so valuable. I don't know how I got here but that's so valuable.

Layla: It is. It speaks to a lot of what I've been thinking about recently as we really refocus this podcast and book club to center BIPOC voices, especially Black authors. The first book that I remember reading by an author who was not white and they were Black, I found it by accident. We just moved to Qatar, I was looking for a library, I was looking for a book to read before school started because I didn't have friends yet, we just moved here. And my aim was find the biggest book that you can find because then it can last you until school starts. The

biggest book I found was *Roots* by Alex Haley. So, I'm 15 years old, never read any books by Black authors, never learned about the transatlantic slave trade, had no idea about any of this, and that was the book that I found and it changed my life truly. I mean, it still stays with me to this day. But then after that, it was then a return to all white authors, essentially, because that was what was in the bookshop and that was what was the best sellers and that was what was available to me until I was in my 30s. I'm talking about not that many years ago, that's when I discovered Black poets. That was when I realized poetry could feel — you could feel something when you read poetry —

Jasmine: Right, and so even when we're talking about — we're just talking about literature and how literature is white and then we go into poetry and we start with like the Shakespearean sonnets, Emily Dickinson and all of these people who are great but irrelevant to the palate of the Black child. It'll go, like it'll work eventually, like people will find Holden Caulfield and be fine, but there are things that would make children fall in love. And why not start there? And I did not enjoy reading until like maybe a little bit after college, where I realized, like, oh, "I can control the kind of reading that happen and I can have a different relationship with reading." That reading didn't have to be about like, "Once I finish this book, I'm gonna be the smartest person on earth." It didn't have to be, "I'm gonna read something so contextually hard that it's gonna be unbearable to get through." It could be, "I'm just going to read as if I'm in conversation with a friend," or, "I'm gonna do it for the fun and the joy of it and there are gonna be parts that are hilarious and I can laugh," and once joy is included in the experience, I think it becomes more of an imprint. Just like once trauma is included in the experience, it becomes more of an imprint. If joy is imprinted in literature,

then it'll stay for the person and I think that becomes the most valuable asset.

Layla: Yeah, wow. I love this conversation so much, Jasmine, because —

Jasmine: I do too. Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Layla: Thank you. It speaks to what you were saying just then, you know, reading a book and feeling like you're having a conversation with a friend. That is what I felt with *Black Girl, Call Home*. I felt like I was getting to know a new friend and that they were telling me their story about the people and the things and the experiences that had been so formative for them in them becoming the person that they are today. You start off talking a lot about your mother and your relationship with your mother and your relationship with home and the environment and the environment she created. I mean, even when I see this cover, the word "home" for me is synonymous with mother and this cover, after thinking about myself, my next thought was my mum doing my hair. You have this poem, I can't remember what it is, but all it is is just words that give you a journey of a Black girl's hair being done, right? And all the different things that are being done to it. Can you talk to us about that those early poems in the book, the ones about mother, home, Black girl hair?

Jasmine: Because even if you look in the back of the book, there's a web and so you see like a circle —

Layla: I love that.

Jasmine: Yeah, and then it directly goes to mom because you're like, "Oh, the first home is the womb," and so, in order to

acknowledge home first, you have to start with your mom. And then, by way of my mom, we stumbled into my grandmother. And then it was a big — at the time of the writing, my grandmother was losing her house and so that became sort of like this outline, this imprinting thing that I couldn't stop talking about. And so as I was talking about my mom and my grandmother, I kept saying my grandmother's house, this house on South 14th Street that's all of and she's gonna sell soon that my grandfather died in and so you see those details and I'm trying to give as many details as possible so that Newark people can know that it's about them and so that I can remember myself. And so it starts with my mom because it did, everything started with mom. And then I didn't know how much I wanted to write about her and I thought, because, on Instagram, my most popular pieces, I didn't have a mom narrative on my Instagram page or publicly, like that's not what people were showing up for my poetry to see. On Instagram, I had this presence of love poetry. On YouTube, I had this presence of like aggressive poetry where it's like you can tell that I existed in the slam poetry world so you had *Footnotes for Kanye*, but people —

Layla: Which I love, by the way.

Jasmine: — and people on Instagram didn't necessarily know *Footnotes for Kanye*. And so I thought that people would be so attached to these love poems because those were what people knew more, but then people were like, no, no, no, like you talked about your mom and I feel this way about my mom and I feel this way about being a Black girl, and there are things that I thought were uniquely Newark or uniquely me about like going to a repast or my mom who cooked on Sundays or macaroni and cheese and all Black people bringing macaroni and cheese to the repast and all of these things and it was universal. It was something that so many women experienced. And so I am

grateful, I am excited. My mother actually — a girl was like reading my poem about her on TikTok and she was like, “So I found your poem on TikTok,” and it made her really, really happy. But like, yeah, I didn’t know how important this was for us to talk about as Black women. And now I’m just like, “Oh, let’s talk more about it.”

Layla: Yeah. I think there’s something about poetry as well that allows us to experience the complexities of it as well, because when we think about, specifically as Black women in relationship to our mothers, our Black mothers, and all of the different — everything, right? The histories of racism, of sexism, of homophobia, everything, right? That’s in there, plus just cultural, like tender moments of intimacy and, yeah, the own ways that we built our home and we built our home environments, there’s a lot in there that poetry, I think, allows us the space to hold all of the complexities together and to not have clear answers, right? To be able to actually sit in it as opposed to wanting to solve it or make some parts of it right, make some parts of it wrong. I mean, there’s the part, and I can’t remember which poem it is, where you tell your mom that you’re going out with a girl and she says, “Oh, so you’re a dyke now,” right? And that — I felt that gut punch of there’s something very — there’s a particular kind of vulnerability and pain that comes from those words coming from your mother. And at the same time — that judgment, that being seen in a certain way coming from your mother, but at the same time, there’s still so much tenderness as you speak about your mother throughout it as well and you’re holding it all. You’re holding all of it.

Jasmine: There was something in me that wanted to aggressively honor my mom even in the poems that were not honorable, like that one, like that’s what I summed it up to be that my mother called me a dyke because she was scared for

me. That's not what she actually said to me. And so I think there are pieces — I think I gave my mother grace in the book that she may give me in actual life. But, yeah, I felt myself and found myself wanting to honor her. And sometimes, you end up in this really interesting space with the truth because you don't wanna honor somebody so much that you can't be honest about the particular moments because one thing that poetry does is poetry, my poetry or I don't think poetry in general is meant to tell this holistic narrative. Like I can't tell you my entire experience on the poem. I'm talking about a moment that happened in the kitchen right before I was supposed to leave out the house. It was a moment, and it was imperfect and my job is to tell you about this imperfect, ugly moment, not the life's character, but the moment. And so that's sometimes hard for me but I found myself really, really wanting my mother to read this book, to find this book, and to feel honored. But then also —

Layla: I felt it.

Jasmine: Thank you, thank you, and for also those complexities to be seen and heard and for Black girls to be able to sit in conversations like, yeah, like, "Yeah, I get it."

Layla: Yeah, like it made me think of memories with my mother where I'm like, "That really hurt," right? That really hurt and it imprinted itself on me that moment that you're talking about, that moment in time imprinted itself on me and influenced a lot of how I grew up into a woman and saw myself, but also I'm now at an age where I can look back and see more of the fullness, like you said, the grace that your mom extends to you, I can see more of the fullness of what our story as mother and daughter has been over time as opposed to that particular moment that was relevant to me then but when I think about me and my relationship with my mom now, I'm constantly

overflowing with gratitude. The things about her that used to get into my skin, I now see as cute, right? The things that I'm like why did she judge me in that way, I can separate myself from the emotion that was associated with it. And I know that that's my particular journey with my particular mother and all of us have different stories with our relationships with our mothers and with our parents, but it's like you said, I felt like there was the moment and then there was, when I took your poetry collection in whole, there was also the bigger picture as well and that felt like honoring, very much so.

Jasmine: Thank you. Thank you so much.

Layla: So, would you like to recite a couple of poems for us and I would like for you to choose.

Jasmine: Yeah, okay. Let's see where we go with this.

Layla: Okay.

Jasmine: "My fairy godmother left today, took off her wings and floated away, heard the Holy Ghost hummed a note that rang in her soul, made us believe that there was really something special about a Christmas Eve right in the middle of the ghetto. There may not be anything under this tree, no gifts from three kings, but, boy, can that girl say, holding notes as strong as wooden Baptist church pews with back pockets holding the Bibles and sins of some men who would scurry away but find an early Sunday morning to come back with them. Chasing a sound that could turn a pumpkin into a chariot made us believe that Cinderella could be a brown girl with a chance at forever if she had a little faith and some measuring tape, a little glitter and a whisper that could grant you one last wish, or a last kiss. God placed you in the dreams of every brown girl with a fairytale in her heart and a prayer stumbling

up the stairs of her throat with no proof that anyone could ever hear it. When we applauded your name, could you hear it? When you were drowning, could anybody hear it? Whitney, why do you always have to be the one to remind us that the clock strikes 12, that we just die too soon, that some girls will end up naked in their bathrooms, that the curtains can close on a high note, that you can find heaven and a quick fix on the same street and the bricks leaving you with regrets that could run your throat dry, make you take some secrets to the grave, but can make a flower blossom right up out of concrete, knocked and folded her baby back into its soil. They placed you between a poem and a song, a Black girl with faith as blind as the wind yet as real as its whisper, forcing us all to remember that God, God can look at you with sins and all and still think that you are beautiful enough to die for. Whitney, I believe in miracles because of you. And I promise to tell my daughter about you, about the day that God turned a million mice into men that would carry your body to the gates of heaven. I believe that there is a glass slipper and a pair of wings for you and every girl from Newark with a dream that it is the most beautiful, beautiful ball, beckoning us all to just dance with somebody. This is the light.”

Layla: Sorry, I just — it makes me wanna cry. It’s so beautiful. Thank you.

Jasmine: Oh, thank you.

Layla: Thank you.

Jasmine: I’ll do one more.

Layla: Okay.

Jasmine: “I stared at a picture of Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte, wondered if we still fight the same, bite the same, if they ever made more love than since, if they ever stared at our generation just wondered where all the fireflies went. Did they all die or did they just not find us worth the light? Did they not find us worthy enough of them dressing to the nines in their shine, just waiting to become fallen stars between the hands of a blushing girl in front of another just waiting to give up her audacity and her world, a promise that if I died tonight in these sheets, I would still want you next to me. Like this love survived all of those riots. I know when you are scared, I held your hand when the hurricane came, pass me my lighter. I’m sorry I made you cry, I don’t give a fuck if you cry, I will always wipe your tears when you cry, like I know you did not give me permission to but I already started asking God about you, told Him if he doesn’t mind, I’d like to make it to heaven before you do, to run your bathwater and to make you a plate, to turn your TV to your favorite channel then turn it off and make you believe that you left it that way and I vow, I vow to never to open the door for a scent other than yours and I promise to always remember your scent and that we will laugh at every single thing that hurt when we were humans, like when we were poor. When we slept on our bedroom floor on Leslie Street, when we only had water and grilled cheese, the moment you said, ‘Baby, I may not have any money, but I got a soft spot with a melody and a pair of arms that could rock you to sleep, so what? Are you thinking about taking a chance on me?’” That’s it.

Layla: Thank you so much, Jasmine. It was beautiful.

Jasmine: Oh, thank you.

Layla: I could listen to you all day, oh my goodness.

Jasmine: Thank you.

Layla: And there's something — there's the beautiful thing about — you know, another beautiful thing about poetry is that you can experience it in different ways. You can experience it in one way when the poet themselves is reciting it and you can experience it another way when you are reading the words on the page and actually seeing not just the words but how it's arranged. There's different ways that it can be arranged that builds up certain energy or calms down the energy and so you experience it in different ways. I watched your YouTube video of *Footnotes for Kanye* after I read it. So when I read it, I read it in a certain voice and when I watched it, it was in a different voice than how I was expecting it to be and I was like, "That is so interesting," because it's still powerful both ways but it's really interesting how you can read it in different ways, you can experience it in different ways.

Jasmine: Yeah, yeah.

Layla: Yeah. Is that something, because I know that you — I've seen your really recent video for *Cycles*, which is this mini movie. It's a movie. I mean, it's directed, it's a story, it's poetry, there's music, there's the visual element, the visual beauty to it as well as the heartbreak that's in there. You're so masterful in all of these different ways of expression —

Jasmine: For *Footnotes for Kanye*, oh my gosh, that was 2016. I think I wrote that piece in 2015 and we put it out in 2016 and I wanted to make this video because I knew this poem was important to the culture but I didn't have any money and so I didn't know how to use my resources. I remember putting it out on SoundCloud. It was on SoundCloud for months and it got like 2,000 views. And then I went to visit my girlfriend at the time, who lived in London, and one of my friends in London was like, "I'm gonna record it." What do you mean? This is very

important. And we went to like a four-story parking garage and we recorded the piece in a parking garage.

Layla: It reminds me of that Beyoncé video for — what's that song where she's in like a parking garage on the *Lemonade* album. That's the kind of gritty — you know what I mean? Like the gritty energy of it.

Jasmine: Yeah, it was all like happenstance. And then I remember putting it out and no one saw it and then one day it got out on Facebook and everyone saw it and that piece was important to me because it was very — I mixed in a lot of Kanye's raps.

Layla: Yes, it's very clever, I have to say. It made me laugh even while reading all the different emotions of it. I was like, "This is so masterful."

Jasmine: I remember talking to my mentors, I remember talking to like Rafael Casal and so many mentors and saying like, "Is this piece good? What would you take out? Is it too long?" And then some people were like, "You're being redundant," duh, duh, duh, but I was like — like I was asking for so much support with this piece because I knew that *Footnotes for Kanye* would be really, really important. And then *Cycles* — well, back to *Footnotes for Kanye*, I think like there are sometimes poems that you remember, there are poets that you remember and there are sometimes poems that you remember. And so sometimes, like no one might not remember me but they'll remember *Footnotes for Kanye*. There's so many people that don't listen to poetry that found *Footnotes for Kanye* because it fell outside of the niche market. And that's the exciting thing about going viral and that was exciting about like I first started going viral on WorldstarHipHop, where it was the worst, most ghetto channel for a poem to ever exist on. But

you saw poems getting 300,000, 400,000, close to a million views and so it wasn't existing just in the poetry space, it existed for everybody. Now everybody has an opinion. Now everybody wants to be in conversation about these topics and ideas, whether it's like barbershop conversation, whether it's academic conversation, or creative conversation. Now it exists in a greater conversation. And I wanted *Footnotes for Kanye* to do that and I knew it was supposed to be that important and I hope that it does good things in these different spaces. *Cycles* was a blessing, like literally. A friend of mine, a family friend, came to me one day and said, "I'm starting a production company, I want to shoot you for my first project. If you have a poem, let me know. I'll build everything," and I shared a poem with him that I had for a year now because I got my heart broken and I wrote about it and he built out this incredible storyboard line by line by line and I remember having a moment where I was just like I would rather give no visual than give a visual that doesn't lend itself to the quality of the writing, that I knew that the poem was important, that it was valuable, and I was like, "What if it's not good? This is his first project and I'm giving him a poem that means so much to me." And he was masterful and I'm grateful, like that wasn't me, I didn't come up with the concept, this tone. I literally just wrote the poem. Like the only thing that I gave to the process — not the only thing, but I gave the poem and I built the sound and the music with my friend Billz Egypt who scored everything, but everything in regards to the visual presentation of that piece was the work of my friend **[inaudible]** and his production team that speaks to like trusting people and having great collaborators who really believe in you, because two of my most magical pieces in my experience, *Footnotes for Kanye* and the *Cycles* piece, were two people who are like, "Oh, no, these poems are important so I'm gonna give you something," and they gave me their talent and their time and it became something beautiful and I'm grateful

because I know the end of my skills. I can never edit or record anything and so I'm grateful for that.

Layla: Oh, I love this, because it's — and we'll link to those two videos in the show notes as well so *Footnotes for Kanye* and *Cycles*, we'll link to the videos of that. But what you did, I love that you said — basically you know, "This is my lane," right? "This is what I'm really good at, this is what I bring to the table," but then finding those collaborators that see your vision and have something that you don't have, a vision that you can't see, and being able to pair those two is you're really presenting a new way for us to experience poetry, right? Because there's written poetry, there's — we can watch — we've got slam poetry and spoken word, but this felt like a music video that's not a music video, a poem that's more than a poem, there's music, you're seeing not just the story but you're seeing the emotion as well and I love it. Like I hope you do more. I hope that you...

Jasmine: And when I'm working with people, no matter what project I'm working on, I'm like there's one equation and we have to fill out the equation and we have to test it. And so it was like this is poetry but this is sort of a music video but the hook is just at the beginning and at the end but then it's super long, why would anybody listen to you for six minutes? That's just really long. All right, well, let's just call it a bigger story. Let's — like it'll be our mini movie. And, okay, if you recite in it, it'll feel more performance space. And so we — it was us like saying, okay, you need to recite in the poem, the music, this woman saying, "I wish you well, I wish you well," is very valuable for me like emotionally and as a storyteller, right? Like everyone knows like I'm a queer woman, I'm a storyteller, but no one's ever seen me with a woman before. And so this was my first time with a woman and I remember being in a relationship with one of my ex-girlfriends, Sabrina, I love her to

death, and then that was a public relationship but that was my only public relationship and then I got to showcase myself in space as one with a woman, which was a really, really big deal for me. And then me having conversations with the team of like, “We need you to make two Black women look beautiful,” and I’m talking to my director and he’s like, “Yeah, like I did color research and I made sure that your skin tones were perfect —

Layla: Yes, they were.

Jasmine: He’s like, “You have a more red skin tone and she has a more lighter skin,” and so like it was a lot going into this about like how to make these women feel good and look good on camera. How do we represent that softness and the hardness and the subtle moments of like dancing in the kitchen? And I’m a really big Whitney Houston fan and like something that is big for me is dancing to Whitney Houston and so it was very nostalgic. The team was very thoughtful in like presenting this piece because it was real. But then there were like real women in the piece. I mean, we don’t often do that. We don’t often showcase queer women and so I just want to —

Layla: Especially Black queer women.

Jasmine: Exactly, and I wanted it to feel good and look good.

Layla: So when I was, like I said, preparing for this interview, I knew there were certain things that I wanted to look at. With that video, I was kind of like, “Okay, I have to be ready,” you know what I mean? Like I can’t just watch it casually, like this looks like something she has poured her heart and soul into and I really wanna sit and watch it beginning to end and be really present with it. But I felt like, you know, at the end, that I was like, “I want more. I want more of these little mini stories,”

you know? It reminded me of watching *Black Is King*, right? Where we have these songs but they're a story and there's these moments — and it all weaved together so, yeah, I'm basically here just saying please give us more from you and your team.

Jasmine: Like totally, like we have meetings where we're like, "All right, what's the makeup of the next piece?" And I, for the first time, have a team of creative people who are excited, who believe in the ideas, we just are excited about sharing thoughts with one another. And so I can, for the first time, say like proudly like, "I can create more and I'm gonna give you so much more because I now have a good team who can follow an equation that works." It's showing, it's storytelling at my best ability and it's showing the beauty of queer women.

Layla: That's it, beauty. Yes.

Jasmine: Yeah. And even in this heartbroken ass poem, it still felt beautiful. And so I do want to do that and it's also like now like I'm charged, like I feel like I found myself here, yeah.

Layla: Yeah. Well done, Jasmine. I just — when I see somebody who's just like in — they are on their square, they know exactly what it is that they are here to give and to do and they just wanna do it to the best of their ability and do a really good job and leave behind something that really matters and, like you said, people may not remember my name but they're gonna remember this, you know? Even with that *Footnotes for Kanye*, when I was reading through it, there was a line in it and I was like, "I've seen this before somewhere," you know? I was like, "I've read this somewhere else before," but I had never heard of you at that time but it had been in the stratosphere. That's the thing about pouring ourselves into our creativity is that it

goes so far beyond us. We never know the impact that it's having out in the world. Yeah.

Jasmine: Absolutely. That is how I feel and I just hope to build pieces and projects that can have an impact on the world and on the mediums, like I wanna be innovative and smart and so, even to hear you say like this piece was a new way of looking at poetry, I was hoping for something like that. And so thank you and it's affirming that like we're on a good path and so I'm grateful for that, truly.

Layla: This is beautiful. I could, first of all, I could talk to you about every poem that's in this book. I wanna make sure that I'm honoring your time and I also really wanna encourage everybody to go purchase *Black Girl, Call Home*. There are so many wonderful poems in here. There are poems that will make you cry, that will make you smile, there are things that will speak to your own experiences but also things that are happening around us and help us to see them in a new way. One of the ones that I'm thinking about, actually, is — Oh, I got right onto it, *Missing Girls*, which you can see is it's a word search. I love word searches so I was like, "Ooh, word search," and then saw what it was and that it's these names of Black girls that are missing. It's even hard to try and encapsulate the experience of seeing something like that and the impact of it and what it means and when we think about this idea of missing white woman syndrome and how white women are treated when they go missing versus Black women, women of color. There are just so many pieces throughout here. I loved the poem on Serena, Serena Williams. I loved the many poems that you had about Sandra Bland, but I also then loved your own experiences around romance and love, right? There's just so much in here so I really wanna encourage people to go ahead and buy this book and go follow Jasmine and go see everything that she does because she's amazing. Jasmine, I

wanna wrap up with our final question here: What does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Jasmine: I guess to leave the world better than I inherited it. One of my favorite lines from Tupac is he says on *Unconditional Love*, “My goal is to be more than a rap musician, the elevation of today’s generation, if I can make them listen,” and so it’s to elevate within my medium, to elevate my thinking, and also to elevate my thoughts of joy and love and service. I’m a storyteller who’s serving the medium, and so I just want to leave the world better creatively but then also in function for like young Black girls.

Layla: Thank you. Thank you, Jasmine.

Jasmine: Thank you. It’s been a pleasure. Thank you so much.

(Outro)

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