

Layla: Hi everybody and welcome back to another episode of Good Ancestor podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad. Today, I'm here with someone I've been wanting to talk to for a really long time, Leah Vernon. She is queen of looks, just slays her job, slays fashion, makeup but also has the most profound and inspiring writing and so I'm really excited to have her here today. Let me tell you a little bit about Leah. Leah is an international Hijabi social media influencer, an award winning author of the new memoir *Unashamed: Musings of a Fat, Black Muslim*. She is a motivational speaker, an educator and a content creator. Her content has garnered over a million views combined and she has been featured in hundreds of media platforms from the New York Times to BuzzFeed. This Detroit native was inspired to start blogging in 2013 because there wasn't enough inclusion in media. Her goals are to continue to spread style and self-love in direct presented groups and to spark a fashion revelation. She is already doing just that. Welcome to Good Ancestor podcast Leah.

Leah: The intro was like amazing.

Layla: You are amazing and I just can't wait for this conversation. So, first question who are some of the ancestors alive or transitioned, societal or familial who have influenced you on your journey?

Leah: Wow. Getting right into it.

Layla: We are getting right into it.

Leah: Honestly, I would say like right now is and probably forever always be like Maya Angelou like when she passed away I was very hurt like personally. I'm just like I never got to meet her. I was like in the park crying. I was like we just lost a whole universe to me that we will probably never get back. So, I feel like I had a connection with her because her journey was like a lot of our journeys and a lot of our mothers' and grandmothers' journeys. She just transcended that into the way she dance, the way she moves, and the way she spoke. She can like cry a tear and it would be inspiring to me. It will move me. A lot of people don't have that where they can just be and makes a huge impact like her living her truth. It's something that I inspired to be all the time and then someone who is alive, you just said like ancestor...

Layla: Yeah.

Leah: I would say of course my girl Oprah. When I was growing up and this is really sad to say, I didn't see my family as role models like my grandmother, my own mother, my aunts, they were never role models to me. I'll probably get into that later. But I was always searching for someone that I connect with. Someone that I thought was like me and that I transpired to be like and Oprah was that for me. During the time, there were no fat black people in the media, I think she was like the only one and the way she handled even though she has had her up and downs and I know everyone doesn't agree with her like overall she is a pioneer and she is everything to me. It has been that since I was like 9 or 10 years old. So, yeah, like I think those 2 people, those are my girls.

Layla: I love it because they are each other's girls, right? So, Oprah and Maya Angelou was such a mentor and a mother, sister, everything to Oprah. So, that's beautiful. Maya Angelou is someone who is very special to me too. My daughter is named after her. She is like you said just to her beingness I mean you can still watch some of her poetry recitals and you just get chills in the way that she held herself and the way that she was unapologetic in this really unassuming way. There was nothing forceful about her but it was powerful.

Leah: Knows humble. It wasn't like, you know, now in social media it's very like oh, yeah, I have 10,000 followers. You don't have to say that. You don't have to name drop. Just walk to a room and be proud in that. And I feel like that's something we are lacking. It's something that I strive to my own life.

Layla: Yeah. I was gonna say I feel like it's something that you do very well and I know that you are someone who talks with great transparency and you don't sugarcoat things, right? About your experiences, about being a fat, black, Muslim woman in the world and also in an industry in which many of those identities are not just not the norm but seen as something to avoid, right? Just before we came to this interview, I was thinking about you as I was getting ready and I was thinking about myself growing up and I grow up in the UK and I was thinking about a lot of the magazines that I used to love to buy, you know, teenage girl magazines and there was never anybody who look like you on those magazines but there wasn't even anyone who is black and thin and not Muslim, right? It was just white, white, white. We didn't have things like Essence magazine or any other kind of black representation and so I often think about the difference between myself growing up and the experience my daughter has growing up. She is growing in the age of the internet so even though you're on the other side of the world, she will have access to people who look like you and how that just is so important. How you

show up is seen as revolutionary by so many people but it's also just you showing up as yourself.

Leah: Yeah.

Layla: Right? I know you've had a lot of comments of people say where did you get the confidence?

Leah: Here like where I could scratch. Would you ask a thin person that? Like I don't hear and everyone is asking like thin or straight-sized people like as a thin person, where did you get your confidence? Like I've never heard them say that. They say it to fat women, dark-skinned women, people who are not necessarily considered societally beautiful or wanted or like put on the beauty standard pedestal and it's just like these microaggressions it seems like very small and insignificant, but when you have a lot of interviews and people come to you asking that, you have to get them because it's like this is not an appropriate question in a context. If it was like another like plus-sized woman asking me or another like marginalized body asking in a way that's conversational and not like loaded, that's fine. Well you have like a straight-sized white woman asking you that you're like, honey, would you ask that to a straight-sized person or white woman? Like would you ask them that? And like I had to always put that because people like think that I am basically rattling a cage that everything is personal or everything is inclusive so why do I have to give to you, you know, being the dead horse, what it is like, no, like you guys have no clue the behind scenes of being in the industry like you said that is so against these looks. I always tell people I'm shocked when a company hires me to model like I'm legit shocked. Not because like I'm not a confident person who I don't think that I'm able to produce the same quality campaign that someone who is taller or thinner or non-Muslim could do, it's just the fact that it's so rare. And so when I get called as a person who doesn't have a modeling agent, I'm standing with people who have a million followers, a quarter million followers who are tall and in the right places who are usually biracial and you have me who is 5'4", you know, not the right fat, right? Way bigger than all the models. Can't walk in heels, from Detroit, loud as fat, and I'm standing amongst them that's so shocking to me like I would never get over that because it's so rare. It's amazing like I've never ever thought like I've never set out to do this.

Layla: Tell us a little bit about how you did begin doing this. You said you saw that there was not enough representation.

Leah: Right.

Layla: Yup.

Leah: So, just to take it back a little bit. So, when I was growing up I have body dysmorphia. I probably still have it but of course like growing up in a black Muslim community words like these are not widely used, right? Things like mental illness and depression and anxiety like you don't use those words like oh, you know, you're a little sad go pray about it. You got that. And so as a black girl growing up in a very like there's two sides like you have your disadvantage black community and then you also have like the Muslims who are like middle eastern daisy. So, I was split between those two and then the third would be white society. So, you're a fat black girl in the middle of all these identities that she doesn't fit in, right? So, with the body dysmorphia I absolutely hated the way I look, absolutely hated anything like ethnic whether it was my hair texture, skin color, the way I spoke, where I live. My plan was to live life as a white woman and I'm not even getting. Like it's kinda it's funny now but this is a lot of the problem that we go through.

Layla: Right. I think that so many of us whether we were able to articulate it or not when we look back now we're like that's actually what I was trying to be.

Leah: Yeah. And I was like I'm denouncing everything that I thought was ghetto or ethnic or culturally Muslim, I don't want that. As soon as I get out of this house, I'm gonna live my best life as a white woman and that was my fucking goal which is disgusting at this point because I definitely I'm a proud black woman.

Layla: You're one of the proudest black woman I know. So, that's something like comical.

Leah: And I'm just like very, very black like black pot. And so like having all those issues, people always tell me like, oh my god, like Leah you're so photogenic. And I would literally be so mad when they would say that because I was like I don't look like anybody on magazines. I don't look like anyone on the catwalk. How dare you lie to my face and tell me that I'm photogenic and it was that bad. I will be angry that they will even say that to me because I wasn't. It wasn't true. That's what body dysmorphia does and makes you think that you are not worthy but you set the standards of what you think beauty is, everyone thinks beauty is and so for many years I didn't want mirrors. I was angry. I didn't want blackness. I didn't want

anything and then I went to a fashion show and people kept coming up to me and asked me like are you a model? Are you a designer? Like who are you? I'm like I'm basically a normal person who just dresses well. And that kind of like gave me an idea like forever and ever like even to my insecurities I have people come to me and tell me that I'm photogenic or that I'm charismatic and asked me in front of the camera and I was like what if maybe I just try writing and blogging. And so I started as a writer first and writing that no one wants to read it. And I'm just like okay so what if I post pictures with my accompanied writing and then for a long time people were like only looking at me as the beauty and not a writer. I'm like, woah, wait a minute I'm a fucking writer too like I write things like don't just say, oh so cute, pretty, oh my god, it's only a face. No, no, no, I'm an actual writer so please respect that as well. So, now I'm at a point where people respect both, the beauty side and also that I'm actually like 2 Master's Degrees having individual who writes very well. But the journey from me starting to why I am now has been a lot like dealing with body dysmorphia, I went through a divorce during that time which was very, very messy and shady; weight gain, weight loss, and unhealthy ways so for me blogging in 2013 to now a lot of shit has definitely changed.

Layla:

Thank you for sharing that. Two things came up for me as you were talking. First of all was I thought of Maya Angelou again and about how she was equally many different things at the same time and wasn't like, no, I'm only this. I'm only a poet, I'm only this. It's like I see so much of that in what you're saying because we were just saying before we hit record on this conversation that when I see your pictures like I love fashion and colors, right? So, when I see your pictures I'm like, ah, so many good ideas and so good and so pretty and I just wanna click, yes, and everything and then I begin reading the post and I'm like, oh, hold up a minute. She is making me think again and I feel like I read the post and I'm like I like the image but the writing even more just like got me so in my heart and makes me think and I love that you represent both at the same time that you can be both at the same time because so often we got pitch and holes as well, right? If you're the beauty, the talent, the model then just be that. You don't have to go on and rant about the fact that you're struggling with mental health or issues of racism or issues of fatphobia but you're like no I insist on both. I have everything all at the same time.

Leah:

It was actually really funny like you just said, so there's this model that I work with and she is like very--she is surface, not even a lie, she's surface and she's very beautiful, very successful and I work with her in a project, seen her recently and she was this like you are saying things that I would never say on set. I thought that is so refreshing and I'm just like I'm crazy all the times, I don't remember. So like what happened? She was like used to say it like you just straight up and I was like I'm tired. I'm sitting down. She's like as a model like we're just like buddies. We're

just like there to be beautiful, we get up and we get the shot. I'm like I'm tired. I'm sitting down. She's like I would never said that. That's so refreshing like I didn't think to even say something like that. I'm just like girl, I'm 76 years old. I will get the shot but I'm tired, I'm sitting down for 5 minutes. Give me 5 minutes. Because that will make you feel on set like oh, hurry, hurry, hurry, rush, rush, rush like, no, I'm the talent and so I'm gonna get what I need to do what I need to do. A lot of times we get into this like hustle and bustle like we need to constantly be on. I need 5 minutes to recuperate and so a lot of people like you just said like they are still surfaced that they just kinda get into this comfort zone of like okay pretty picture, booty shot. It's just like can we mix that up a little bit? Could we put our own like personalities into what we do? It's totally fine. I mean I'm not gonna say like it's easy to like live in your truth and also trying to be commercial because of course being commercial is where the money is at. So, I'm not gonna say like companies that wanna work with her and work with me because I'm too loud. I'm too considered woke right? So, it's just like it does hurt you in a long run, adding your personality and your values and your character to your brand, but I do think in a long run it will pay off like I'm hoping that my community will see that that I'm not just surface and I'm telling you the real deal of this industries and that it touches you enough to be like if she has a shirt I'll support it. If she has a book, I'll buy it. If she has an event, I'll attend it like that's the kind of people that I want. That's what kind of community that I want around with.

Layla: And that is so what you're cultivating and attracting. It's so clear. I mean the comments on your social medial post are so thoughtful and people are connecting to you as a person but you're so right that I think when we get invited into these spaces especially the people who hold marginalized identity, sometimes it's just like you should just be grateful that you got in the door.

Leah: Yup, exactly.

Layla: And take up as little space as possible, be as quite as possible, be as safe and unthreatening as possible and then maybe you'll get a second chance again. And you're just defining all of that. But it cost you.

Leah: Of course. Yup. And I go through a lot of like financial struggles because I don't think people understand that like you said there's cost in everything. When you decide to start telling the truth like honestly like I don't even go hard as I could go like what I go hard on that's like me 25% of what I really wanna say. There's a cost which means that I don't get paid as much. I don't get as many gigs as other girls do. I've had to turn down gigs that I thought didn't lined up with my values. So,

there's times when I'm just like I'm living off of credit card. I might be popping on New York Times, BuzzFeed, Huffington Post, but your girl is living off of maxed credit card. For most part if I'm down down I'll share it but I'm just like okay I might get the next cheque, you're good, but one time I was like I can't continue to create content remains saying was out since I was 4 so you often donate to the webinars because I can't sustained myself. I'm not getting the gigs.

Layla: That's the thing. It's easy to look at you and say oh she's a pioneer, she's doing this work. She inspires me. She helps me to apply my own courage but not realizing you're taking a lot of hits in order to be that and you know, you're not doing it for anyone else except yourself first, right? It's about you standing in your integrity first but I think it's so important for people to realize the people that we hold up as our inspirations that there is a cost to that especially when they hold marginalized identities and that we should be supporting them as much as possible because likes and comments don't pay the bills.

Leah: Exactly.

Layla: A lot of people don't understand that. She is actually a close friend of mine, she's like I told her that I had won the Gilda award 2 years ago from my nonfiction writing which is like amazing and I think that was catalyst for like me writing the book and as getting published now. But I've used the money to take a flight to LA to a free modeling and kinda connect with the LA crowd and see what was out there. She's like it must be really fun to just like travel and like take pictures. I'm like are you kidding me? Wow. I'm living off a Subway sandwich for the day. That's my budget for the day, is a Subway sandwich. Please don't play with me. I have stories about like me traveling with \$20 on my pocket. Eating crackers and water for breakfast just to get to a fashion show in New York like come on. Don't do that to me like that's something I don't necessarily share now that I'm kinda like a little bit more in the game but like I was struggling out for the first like 3 or 4 years.

Layla: And during that time when you didn't have the platform that you have now and you didn't maybe have the opportunities that you're getting now, what was the thing that kept you going?

Leah: It was a couple different things. The first thing was I think I have a lot of hope like sometimes I'm pessimist, sometimes I'm optimist. I'm like a little bit in the middle but I think the optimist in me was like if you quit today what if tomorrow is gonna be your day? And that kinda like push me through. Also when people say that I

can't do something it honestly pushes me. I'll just think all the negativity and I just harness it into like fire. I'm just like, oh, so you said that, okay, great, great, great. Then I will try 3 times hard just to get that because I'm petty. I just like I love seeing people disappointment when I win. I love it. Like, oh, you thought I was gonna win, oh, okay. And that makes me so happy. Also like when I was down, down where I just really couldn't make it, literally like the universe was setting me some random person to tell me to keep going. I'm not even kidding. It would be like a random like I remember this one time I was like I'm done with blogging I don't wanna see pictures. I don't see nothing. The next day this blogger that I still in touch with, she featured me in one of her articles and I'm just like I'm literally crying right now because I just thought I was gonna stop doing this and you just gave me a hope to keep going and she just had this whole like spill about like what I'm doing is revolutionary and I should just keep going and like we didn't know each other like that. I will get little stuff like that people just come to me like what do you do? You need to keep doing that like I'll be like oh god. I'll keep doing this. There's so many times that I was gonna stop like so many. It was like weekly at that point. It was frustrating.

Layla: It is and I know you've written about this about how people show their highlights basically on social media and not really showing what's going on behind the scenes but it is a struggle and when it's something that you believe in and you're the only one who sees the vision and you're the only one who understands why you're going through everything that you're going through it's hard but I love that you have those moments. I know I have had them as well where literal strangers or people that you were not expecting to just come in and say keep going. It's so affirming. So, you are to me at least I do find you hopeful and an optimist even while at the same time calling BS but you've had it tough, right? You had a challenging upbringing and then you're in an abusive marriage and went through a divorce and yet you are able to talk about those experiences and really you owned all of them and yet you have risen from them.

Leah: Right.

Layla: To me anyway that's how it seems to me that you have that you took all of those things that happened and didn't let them define you but have taken the path of defining yourself for yourself. Can you tell us a little bit about what that journey has been like for you?

Leah: So, when I started like be in the news it's funny because like I have a split personality. I have this very, very grandiose beautiful part where I was like slay

faces, Lady Gaga's outfits and I have this part where I'm very thoughtful and I don't wanna be bothered by humans and I just wanna write and create content somewhere and just send it out when necessary and I have this competitive spirit which I have had ever since I was very, very little which I think has absolutely helped me. A lot of people when I first started joining this were so against it and I remember my cousin one time I used to write like openly, I write little articles and enter contest like I was very proactive like at a young age doing the writing thing and I remember my cousin I was like yeah I'm writing a book and she withdrawn at that time and she is like, oh, are you writing books? And that made me so mad. I'm just like you fucking bitch like why are you, I didn't call her that. It wasn't just her it was other people I was telling, oh, I'm writing a book and I have my fellow members unfortunately black fellow members they'll be like "I mean don't you have a degree? What is that gotta do with your degree? Can you make money from that? Why don't you make any money?" Like I would get that all the time so I started doing this thing where I didn't tell anybody that I was doing anything. I didn't tell I was writing book stories, submitting them, anything in social media I never told people because I would always get unfortunately from my Muslim community and my black community and including my ex why are you doing this? Like Muslim woman don't do this. Like you should be focusing on starting a family. You should be focused on using your degree to actually make world money. When these people are having even captained to their own greatness, but they are trying to tell me what I should do and I wish I would had a community back in the day because I feel like [Inaudible] [25:51] but I wish a lot of love especially like people of color and marginalized individuals would have that support like as the other cultures have like this support of okay, were gonna buy this. It might be crap but we are still gonna buy it just for this person. I feel like we are very hard on each other to the point where a lot of us quit before we even get started and so that was like my main thing is like people wanted I don't know if it was like jealousy or was this like actual concern for me not having anybody and still being educated, but I started to internalize it but I always knew that I was different from the other people. I would tell people that I don't think it was arrogance. I'm like I'm not saying that because I'm trying to be arrogant. I honestly feel like I'm different from you like you guys don't happen to what the creator has given you and I'm trying to do that. And so I had a very, very tough, especially on my marriage like I feel like the more I tap into my power then less love I got, the less attention, the less emotional support, financial support. He just did not want me to be who I am right now which is why that had to end. But the way it happened was really fucked up. Now that I'm looking back on it, he wasn't comfortable with me living in my truth. He wasn't comfortable with me igniting that spark that I was born with already. He wasn't comfortable with that. A lot of my friends weren't comfortable with that, my family members and just very interesting to see like how they try to demit and how like they sent me to give in because I could have gave in and even to this damn day like why didn't you give in? Like what made you different from them that you just was like I don't care, I'm not stopping.

Layla: Well done, first of all is what I wanna say because to have so many people to be in an environment where people not only don't get what you are doing or why you're doing it but are actively trying to discourage you from it is really hard and I think some of it is family dynamics but I think also a lot of it is the way that we internalize our own oppression and the way that we fear. So, it's like we can't do that, black women don't do that, black people don't do that, Muslim people don't do that and it's like who said?

Leah: Exactly.

Layla: Right?

Leah: Those were kind words said to me.

Layla: But for our own sort of safety and protection it's like stick with what's safe. Stick with what we know because if you do that you threatened everything and it takes a lot of courage and resilience and strength and vision and just so much to keep going when the force is just pulling you back into that entropy and it's like just stay here. Everyone you love is right here and so to be able to keep digging that thing form within you to keep you going is really inspiring. I'm really glad that you did because I look up to you, you really inspire me. I remember I was shopping with a friend a couple of months ago and I hadn't been clothes shopping in forever and you know, when you have children it changes your body and then you don't know what your body is or what fits you or who you even are and so it was the first time that I was like I'm gonna go and get a whole new set of clothes and I remember trying this jumpsuit on and it was beautiful but I remember looking at myself in the mirror and thinking I look fat and that was my fatphobia, not just fat but that fatness and ugliness and so I remember looking in the mirror and then I thought of you and I was like hold on a second like I just saw a picture of Leah yesterday wearing a jumpsuit and she looked fabulous AF, right? And I didn't look at that picture and think oh no, she shouldn't be wearing that. It didn't enter my mind. I was just like I wish I could rock a jumpsuit like that. So, I bought it because that was like no, forget this. People are gonna get what they get. This is my body.

Leah: Exactly. Stop playing games. I think we all have internalized fatphobia. Even fat folks have internalized fatphobia. I hate fat woman tells another fat woman, oh, I don't think that's flattering on you and I'm like I will throw a glass of wine on your

face. Do not do that. Do not do that. Because you know it's hard out here. You don't need hatred from every angle like we are all we got even I have times where I have internalized fatphobia as a body positive activeness and a fat activeness. I'm just like, woah, see, because it's so ingrained in us be like fat is ugly, fat is not worthy, it's lazy, it could have possibly be beautiful and this is ingrained in every single human being and so it's hard to fight against it but at least you know that you are self-aware enough to be like, wait, hold up, I don't allow that.

Layla: Yeah. Well, for me it was actually a turning point. So, from that point on those thoughts in terms of how I look, they don't enter into my mind. I remember when shopping for it always be like maybe I'll buy that when I'm thinner.

Leah: Yeah.

Layla: Right? Maybe I'll wait until I'm thinner and now I'm like I really like my body and it's not the body that 10 years ago I thought I would be able to love and so thank you because you don't know. You're like a little angel in people's shoulder and changing them and you didn't even know it.

Leah: I thought I was a witch, but okay, thank you.

Layla: I know you have that picture with like...

Leah: Sassy, the sassy agent.

Layla: Well, you have that picture with like your tutu like you're fairy tutu. You're like little fairy godmother in my shoulder.

Leah: I think my goal of this year is to do more cosplay because like that is so amazing to show the image of fat person doing the same exact thing as the cosplay character or the celebrity like at my birthday I did Beyonce's Formation.

Layla: I remember.

Leah: And it was so funny. I literally have like 2 dollars so I was like where can I get like some shirt, so where can I get the hat and the neck piece. I got them from Amazon which you know, Amazon is trash but still. It was really cheap and I went out until I get out of the street and I was like studying Beyonce's movement and the pictures and I just snap it with my own like little fan I picture of like Beyonce Formation, recreation and it was like people really loved it.

Layla: It was amazing.

Leah: It's like I love like, yeah, why do we have to always be like second best or where you have to be the sidekick or the funny friend? We need to start working on changing the narrative so that your kids and other people's kids and even the grandmas can see that we've been living second best for a long time and it's time to change that like I have the same right as you as a human being. I have the same right. Why do I have to be put in these boxes and why not live as less than you because you have thin privilege or white privilege? No, I'm not doing that anymore. That's over. That ship has sailed like I'm over it.

Layla: Yes. Tell us a little bit about your book and also perhaps you can frame it in the context of so it's called Unashamed, right? And I'm really looking forward to reading it. We as black women already deal with a lot under white supremacy but you also face a lot from the Muslim community as well, right?

Leah: Unfortunately.

Layla: Unfortunately, right? There's sometimes the kind of messages that you get and you post them and I'm like no, this is...

Leah: I get so many--I have so many. The once I post are not even what I get. So many.

Layla: I can imagine. And so I talked a lot about Audrey Lloyd because she is a huge inspiration and a good ancestor for me and she often defined herself as black woman, lesbian, poet. You have defined yourself, fat, black, Muslim woman unashamed. What has that journey been like of taking the actual journey that you've been through and putting it into a book?

Leah: So prior to me writing this book, I never wanted to write about my life ever. And as you know, I'm sure you have written nonfiction or your writer used to do nonfiction, you just say write fiction. So, growing up books were something that I used to get away from my life. I started this at a very young age and so when I was little of course it was all white books because, you know, white authors are always like the thing. And so I would dive into this white narratives as a little black girl and just getting away from my father not being there, get away from my mom's mental illness and the displacement that I felt growing up. So I was this like I want to create stories to the same thing for another little girl or boy who needs to get away and so I wrote fiction only. I never wrote nonfiction. Fiction to me you can hide, you can create these worlds that are very much so like a world that you want to be in. You can put pieces of yourself at different characters and so I felt like I never had control and so fiction was like something that's what I wrote. I was accepted for a fiction program and they told me that I had to take another class that was not fiction and I'm like I'm not here for that. I'm here for fiction. And they are like well, you have to take either poetry, screenplay, screen writing or nonfiction. So I'm like I don't wanna take any of those but I have to pick one so which one is the most easiest? I'm picking nonfiction, of course the class is all white, teachers are white but the teachers although white they are hippies and they were a little awake. So they introduced me to all these black literature and I'm like, what? In my 20s I have not known about black nonfiction memoir writers and this is some good shit. And I was just like this is amazing. And I'm like, wow! And so they made me write about different things and at this time I was still married, I was still connected to my mom and I did not want to incriminate because people are always saying that I was incriminating people that I always has some to say. To me I think the less incriminating stories to share was about them. At the end of the semester, we have to go meet with our teachers and I sat across front this is actually a story of my book, I sat across from my professor and he was like very dry like I would make jokes he would never laugh. And so I sat across him, he's like Leah I know you're in fiction but I would bet my entire career that you're gonna be a nonfiction. I was like, sir, I'm not doing that. He was like, what?

Layla: You're like uh-huh, it's not me.

Leah: I said, I'm not going to out myself. I'm not gonna out my family and my people because I'm not doing that. Thank you but no thank you sir. And he's like in the 20 years I have been a nonfiction, I've never seen anything like this before. And I'm like well it is what it is. I'm not doing it. And so life has a way of coming in full circle. So, what happened was I got 2 Master's Degrees. My mom ended up spacing out mentally and started being really, really mean to my siblings and then one by one they started getting cut off like either they cut her off or she would cut them off. She was going through some mental stuff and physical stuff as well. And

so one point she bullied my little sister and I was like I'm done with it. Because you're getting really mean. You're being someone that I don't know who you are and you're causing me distress. So, simultaneously I'm going through a divorce. I'm going through a lot of emotional abuse then that just ends. So, now I'm living in a house. No savings. No job. No nothing. No insurance. And I am angry. I'm mad as fuck. I'm like fuck everybody. I'm mad. My dad was not there. My mom was not there. My husband who I thought was gonna be there. I'm mad at white people and Muslim people like I'm mad at everybody and I was sitting at this kitchen table I just moved in, my whole body is like sore from moving and I'm just like I'm gonna put all this anger and frustration and this hurt and trauma into essays. And I'm gonna write and I'm gonna write and I'm gonna write, I'm gonna cry, I'm gonna write so every single essay or portion of this book I would literally have to get up and go take a nap because I was like my face was hurting and I was crying. And so this book honestly came out of frustration and anger and then more into something a little bit more inspirational but the first half of it is very heavy, it's very heavy and of course it's not even everything that happened but it's a heavy read. But you go through this journey of what it's like to be a fat woman? What is it like to be a black woman? A divorcee? You go through these events with me and this journey and you learned a lot about yourself, learned a lot about me.

Layla: Wow, I really can't wait to read it Leah. You know, sweat, blood and tears went into it. I mean you're a phenomenal writer just on Instagram. I really can't begin to imagine what this book holds and store and isn't it so interesting and I found this myself as well how I know with my work a lot of it began in anger and then became something more than anger but it had to start there for me at least and I think as creatives and as artist, we mind our lives and our experiences for ourselves first to go through the healing and then it becomes something that can really serve so many people. So, I can't wait for this contribution that you created. You are going to be one of those black literary writers that people are studying in college and university.

Leah: And that is funny because like I have these 2 personalities, right? And so the beauty me wants to be like, oh I wanna be like the black literary human being and the other side this is like, oh my god, your whole life is gonna be open for dissection because right now I've been getting a lot because the publish industry is very elitist as you know.

Layla: Very white.

Leah: Right. White woman. The reviews that I've gotten, the industry reviews that I've gotten have been so Caucasian like one girl is like she just so rah and so dirty, so mature. This content is mature. I'm like first of all this is the life of a black woman usually. This is what we live all the time. Sometimes I get even if the good review from a white woman I'm just like I don't want you dissecting me like I'm some damn like animal or something. So sometimes I'm just like I don't even know what you read because I don't want you're Caucasian eyes to be like, oh, this is what they do like don't worry about me. Worry about you.

Layla: Right.

Leah: And so I'm trying to not get into that mindset of like, okay, I understand.

Layla: Toni Morrison talked about this, right? The White Gaze and writing under the white gaze and I know I contend with it just within this podcast. So, I interview mainly people of color, mainly black people, mainly black women and friends but I have a very white increasing audience and I know that it's something that I'm constantly navigating from myself is I wanna have honest conversations with people like Leah and I don't wanna think about who is listening to it and who is watching because I don't wanna have to cater for that and I think it's something that we are so often aware of, right? That you as a writer, you're creating this body of work and at the same time you have this kind of like, ooh feeling, as people are reading it because the way it is being received isn't the way that you intended it to be received.

Leah: Yeah.

Layla: But at the same time it's gonna reach the masses.

Leah: I'm trying to figure out like it's like identity thing. It's very like comes from your identity. I don't think I can prepare myself for like what's gonna happen with this book like I honestly don't think I can prepare for it because there are mature things and I do think I'm not gonna get like attract Muslim communities, I know that for a fact and so I need to prepare myself for it to be hypercriticized and people taking this like contacts and then non-Muslims--one dissection and kind of spin it into something else that was never meant to be. So I don't think that I can prepare myself for this book. I actually called my sister a couple of weeks ago, I'm

like throw the whole fucking book away. She was like girl, what? I said throw the whole book away. I don't wanna know more. I don't want it.

Layla: So, you have to deal with that being in the public eye anyway, right? I was scrolling through your feed and you had a post where you said that you've done a video where you done a Brazilian wax.

Leah: Yeah.

Layla: And then you've been told that you couldn't come and speak at the mosque because you posted this video.

Leah: Right. It was not even nowhere near my vagina.

Layla: Right. It was all your face. Just so people are aware.

Leah: Yeah.

Layla: It was all your face.

Leah: They are mad about it. I was like I don't even do nothing. What did I do?

Layla: But you're used to unfortunately having people from different communities project different things onto you and you know, send you different critics and criticisms. How are you taking care of yourself knowing that? Because anyone who puts themselves out into the world that comes, regardless, right? Regardless of your identities. You create something. You share your vulnerability. You have an opinion. A voice and then you stop adding identities like woman like black like Muslim like fat and it gets rammed up and rammed up.

Leah: Honestly for me like so when I was in Detroit I had like my self-care things that I would do because Detroit is very affordable. And so I would do like okay I'm gonna get my toenails done or I'm going to go get ice cream and take a walk or

I'm gonna go to the library or the DIA which is like an artist too. And so in New York it's so expensive here. It cost to breath. And so like when I first moved here it was very difficult because I didn't get the jobs I thought I was gonna get so I was just basically tugging it out and living off the savings which was very difficult still keeping from that and so I was in a depression all the time here. I was constantly anxious and I have my car everything is expensive so getting your nails done in Detroit versus New York that's been like double the price. So, I started getting back into my old disorder habits when I first moved here it was really bad and I was crying like every day living here. And so I'm trying to figure out ways while I'm living here and still on a budget to how can I do more self-care things. So, I'm still trying to at the same time deal with this book stuff and my social media stuff and the interviews and living in a place that's not my own home, you know, like I never moved anywhere in my entire life. It's my first time moving somewhere alone. And though it is a lot to do like I'm always pretty tired. I'm trying to make it work and try to add more self-care. I probably could add more unfortunately I don't think that's like realistic. So I do little things. I'll go out with friends. We get sushi or I get like ice cream or when you have so many different things you have to do and people will pressure you about deadlines that you should have dealt like 2 days ago, 2 weeks ago. Like self-care or deadlines because like that should put money. So, honestly I was doing good with self-care in Detroit but now I went backwards.

Layla: Yeah and so often I think as black women we have the stereotype that's put on us is the strong black woman, right? So you don't feel the pain of when someone's being a troll to you basically or being fatphobic, islamophobic, misogynistic, what do you sort of emotionally and mentally to be able to protect yourself?

Leah: Well, I mean a lot of people will be like oh they are trolls, they don't nod, they just let her roll off but once you keep getting hit over and over and over again it starts to take a toll because you're just like why are you bothering me? I don't bother other people like I don't have time to troll somebody or create a fake account to tell you that you're fat pig like I just don't have time for that. And these people have time for that. Their goal is to hurt you. Their goal is to knock you off your squares that you can stop doing what you need to do to get to where you need to be. Stop you from living in your truth. Living your truth makes other people hell uncomfortable I have noticed. And so a lot of people wanted them liked because they don't have the courage or tenacity to do what you're doing. So, their goal now is to dim your shit and so learning all of that and kinda putting into context help a little bit. I don't think it was 100% protected or can prepare themselves for hate. I don't think that's ever gonna be a thing. I was like I was 100% protected from hatred like that's not how human beings work. Unless you're a robot you're gonna feel something from someone spreading or spitting hate to you or just

being plain dynasty or trolling you. I think that now I understand that there's a bigger picture and that as you're getting closer and closer to like who you are meant to be or wherever you meant to see or where you're gonna travel or who you are meant to meet as you are closer to that it's gonna get hella hard like the universe or the bad part of the universe is gonna try to put all these obstacles and rocks and boulders and family and your baby like jobs and money. They're gonna put everything in your path to keep you from getting to that whatever that is.

Layla: Right.

Leah: And so I have to tell myself like when things get difficult and shit starts coming down all at once that you're so close to a breakthrough. And so that honestly helps me get through the next step because I've seen what it's like to kinda get over a hump and I can look back and be like, okay. So, now that I know that then it's gonna help for the next double hump that I have to get over and just understand that honestly at this point I think it will be an injustice if I quit. I will be doing an injustice not only to myself but I mean I don't wanna be this person but I feel like millions of people.

Layla: I agree.

Leah: Because there's no other fat black Muslim going to do what I have done.

Layla: No, there isn't.

Leah: There is not which is very scary and a lot of pressure but honestly like I don't think I could quit because just on the mere fact that I feel like if I quit I will be letting myself down and a lot of other people. Life is gonna be a struggle whether I'm doing something I love or doing something I hate.

Layla: That's it, right? So, true because you can stay small and protect yourself from the hate but you're not living your fullest self.

Leah: Exactly. Because I know artist who talked to me and they look at my career just like not even on that big scale I mean it's like it's medium and they'll be like I am

low key envious because I feel like you've done so much in such a little time. I don't know what is stopping me but something is stopping me from doing it. And I feel their pain when they say that shit because that was me at one point. Where I was like I'm not writing anything like there's 5 years like that I didn't write, didn't create. I was a housewife, a worker and that was the worst time of my life when I cannot create. And so when I see other people and see the pain of them not being able to live in their truth or not being able to create because of something that's stopping them or themselves or society or financial I feel their pain. I'll tell them you're gonna struggle whether you do it or not. So pick a struggle.

Layla: Yes. Brilliant. Amazing. That's such a perfect place for us to close up. Thank you so much Leah. This conversation has been so good. I cannot wait to read your book. I know it's gonna do amazingly. I'm gonna be sharing it everywhere. What does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Leah: Hmm, I never really thought about it actually. I'm kinda like I tried to live in the moment because I don't try to think too far in advance because it scares me but either really scares me or really excites me, it's like either or. I think what it means to be a good ancestor is leaving impacts when you're no longer here. So like for my work like I'm not gonna be here forever unless they create like stuff like Android like they can put my soul or brain into if they don't do that then I would like my work to live on and still create the same impact kinda like you know Maya Angelou and other ancestors we talked about like I want my work to still live on and create that same impact because the issues that me and you and a lot of other people talk about, these are issues that will be forever. We will always have to deal with these issues and so if I can leave something of impact and importance for the next generation when I'm no longer here that would be a good ancestors to me.

Layla: Beautiful. Thank you so much Leah.

Leah: Thank you.