

(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.

Welcome, Good Ancestors. Today, I'm speaking with creative, entrepreneur, educator, and speaker, Sinikiwe Dhliwayo. Sinikiwe is driven daily by a deep desire to change the narrative of what it looks like and feels like to be well when it's not centered by a white narrative. She's the founder of Naaya, a wellness company and community that seeks to root black, indigenous, people of color in their well-being through decolonizing wellness. Sinikiwe is steadfast in her belief that blackness and humanity are inextricably linked and we talk in depth about what it means to truly value black life and black humanity. Whether making yoga and meditation accessible to those who need the practice the most or telling stories of marginalized folks through elevated photo and video, Sinikiwe is dedicated to creating a more equitable and just society. Sinikiwe's work has been featured in Byrdie, Dame, Goop, Well and Good, Refinery29, and by Queen Bee herself, Beyoncé, in her directory of black-owned businesses.

Hello, everybody, and welcome back to another episode of Good Ancestor Podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad, and today I'm here with Sinikiwe Dhliwayo, the founder of Naaya and a beautiful, beautiful soul that I had the absolute pleasure of connecting with earlier this year. So, welcome, Sinikiwe.

Sinikiwe: Thank you, Layla, for having me. I'm so honored and nervous. Before we had our conversation, I was such a fan of yours. And, you know, the internet is such a weird place. You never know, like —

Layla: Yes.

Sinikiwe: — when you approach people, you're like, okay, is this person going to be nice? Are they going to be terrible? I don't know. And it's always I feel like such a pleasant surprise when people are so lovely and I'm just so grateful that we had our conversation and I'm honored. So, thank you for having me.

Layla: Oh, that is so sweet. Well, I was saying to you, you know, I had two people come to me and say, "You have to connect with Sinikiwe. She's good people," and you hosted a digital salon with myself and our mutual friend, EbonyJanice Moore, who's also a past Good Ancestor Podcast guest, and it was a wonderful conversation on the dynamics between women of color and white women, one that I know is available to purchase, I think, from your website for people to watch which I highly, highly recommend and we'll include the link to that in the show notes, but you held such an amazing space for myself and EbonyJanice, both of us who are black women who are unapologetic in the way that we show up in the world. For us to be that in that space, which is — there was a very large white audience for that event and I — what I witnessed in you and what I observed is somebody who's really devoted and dedicated to centering black people and black voices and so I knew that I had to have you on the podcast.

Sinikiwe: Thank you.

Layla: Yeah. So, before we dive into your work, I want to ask you who are some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, familial or societal, who have influenced you on your journey?

Sinikiwe: I'm gonna try not to cry, this is a hard one for me.

Layla: You can cry.

Sinikiwe: I mean, I — it's bound to happen. I'm a crier, but I would say my great grandmother, so she actually passed about a month and a half ago and her name is Esther and — so I was born in Zimbabwe and I immigrated to the US from the UK when I was seven and so I have a large part of my family that is still in Zimbabwe, especially a lot of my older family members and so anytime someone passes away, it's very challenging. So, I'm 33, the last time I saw her I was 16, and so it's such an odd feeling to like love someone so much and yet not be able to

spend that time with them and that's kind of the sentiment of my grandma, or great grandmother rather, and just listening to my mom like share stories of her. They hosted like a funeral for her and we were sent videos and, you know, all of that kind of stuff and just the way that my mom speaks about her and how she just kind of radiated love towards everyone around her. It's just something that I want to embody in my life as much as possible. It's just, you know, that radical, truthful, honest love and just being that for people in my life is really important. She is someone recently transitioned that I would say is my guidepost for being a good ancestor.

Layla: Oh, thank you for sharing that and, obviously, that's, you know, still really raw, right? It's still really fresh. What do you remember from your experiences with her that really stay strong in your memories?

Sinikiwe: She just loves to sing and dance. So, also, the language spoken in Zimbabwe is Shona and I understand it but I never felt confident enough to speak it and so language was always kind of a barrier but it was just obvious anytime we were around her when we were younger that like she just cared so deeply for us and I think the power of love to transcend even a barrier such as language is something that just really permeates my being. It's like, wow, like love is just that powerful and that potent and that is really, really special to me and even, you know, there were some videos sent to us earlier this summer of her kind of just dancing and singing and those are the memories that I really just want to hold on to of her just being joyful and happy. Yeah, that feels really good to me.

Layla: That's beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. As you were talking about sort of the language barrier between elders, it makes me think of my own experiences. You know, one of the blood ancestors for me who is very close, both when she was alive and actually even more after she passed because I didn't spend that much time with her when she was alive, was my maternal grandmother and she didn't speak English and my Swahili is...I understand it, you know, since I speak with my mum who is the only person I feel confident speaking to in that language, but you're right, like love transcends all of that and I often think about her as I am on my journey and, you know, my life is obviously very different from hers but I often think about the pride that I know that she has in me and I'm sure your great grandmother has that same pride as she sees

you shining in the world and I've heard you say that music or dancing is like one of your love languages. It's one of the ways that you find joy as well. Is that something that you think that you got from her?

Sinikiwe: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I think maybe all of the women in my family. I know that my mom is like a big proponent of just like dancing and so a lot of times when I was growing up, if she were cleaning the house on a Saturday, she would have music on and she would be dancing. We have like a WhatsApp chat with my mother and my sister and we send like songs and things like that —

Layla: Oh, wow.

Sinikiwe: — back and forth. Yeah, definitely, music and dancing is just like a very big part of who I am and I definitely think that she kind of sparked it in a way.

Layla: Yeah. I love that.

Sinikiwe: Yeah.

Layla: You mentioned — so you're from Zimbabwe, the language that is spoken in your family is Shona, and Shona is the language that you used to name your company, which is called Naaya, which means healing in Shona. Tell us about Naaya and what sparked it and what its aims are.

Sinikiwe: All right. So just a bit of my own history. I worked in the magazine publishing industry for 10 years. In addition to that, I'm a certified yoga instructor and also a meditation instructor and so often being in these spaces, just what I felt was that the picture of well-being always happened to be white, always happened to be affluent generally, and always happened to be able-bodied and it was just really frustrating to me. For the past four years primarily I worked for a fitness title and, with that, it was like every month, I was just working on stories for white men and it was just so unsatisfying even when we did share stories of non-white people, it was never just a story of triumph, it was always like, "Oh, this person was in jail and they left jail and now they're doing this thing in the fitness world," right? It was never just like, "This person is great, this person is awesome. They're doing awesome things in the world, you should support them," and so it was just very frustrating to

be like why can't I tell the stories of black folks and non-black people of color that don't necessarily involve our pain? And then also as a visual editor, photo editor, it was also frustrating to, you know, even when we did show photos or videos of people who weren't white, it was always like through this gaze of whiteness and we know how problematic that can be, especially with white supremacy and racism and anti-blackness. And so, with Naaya, my intention, initially, I thought I was gonna start a yoga studio but I live in New York City, I don't come from wealth, and doing anything in terms of having property in New York is so expensive. I also managed a yoga studio as well and just kind of got disillusioned by, one, just like the people frequenting those spaces and how entitled they were in those spaces and also how disconnected they so often were from the practice of yoga and yoga philosophy and that yoga isn't just the physical movement, right, that we practice, it's also self-inquiry and it's also social justice is part of it and, yeah, so having kind of all of those experiences just kind of culminated into me creating a company. As you said, Naaya means healing and just really centering all of the things that are kind of — I don't want to say stacked against us but I can't just talk about, you know, love and light and smoothies and all of that when another black man was killed just this weekend, a 23-year-old black man was killed and he was holding a sandwich from Subway. You know what I mean? Like it felt just very disingenuous not to include all of those other things into this narrative of what it means to be well when you don't occupy a white body. And so I would say that Naaya is, yeah, it's just an amalgamation of all of those experiences. And one thing for me that has been really prevalent, especially this summer, is working with a lot of young people. So, as of last week, I'm really excited, I was able to give 50 computers to young folks in Brooklyn just to enable them to distance learn which just. It was just — it feels just so good because people just don't even understand that like students not being able to physically go to school, that puts an additional stress on students that don't even have access to technology like computers or Wi-Fi. It's like that pushes them further back in their capacity to learn, right?

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: Yeah, and so I think that, for me, it's really important to include all of these things in the conversation of wellness. I don't think it can just be very single minded and I also think that wellness, the way that it's set up in the West, is very individualistic —

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: — and I think community, for me, is a very, very big focus. It's like the things — even just what you were saying about people kind of like vouching for me and saying that I'm good people, it's like, yeah, I want to be in community with good people. That's how we get things done and it's just so important. And I think it's often lacking from a lot of these like heavily centered, like white-centered and white-owned wellness brands.

Layla: So we have this definition of wellness that's the mainstream definition of wellness, right? That is like you say in your website, "Wellness, as it stands now, is synonymous with whiteness, affluence, and being able-bodied," as you mentioned, right? What is actually well-being? What does it mean when it's not centered in a white narrative?

Sinikiwe: I think personally, well-being is this idea of agency, right? And having the means to get therapy if you need therapy. It's having the ability to leave your home and not feel as though you're going to be targeted just because your skin is a certain color. Wellness is being able to have the, again, agency but when it comes to spaces, specifically like work, right? Like so often when a black person is murdered, we have to go to work and we have to pretend that nothing has happened. Especially when I worked in media, it was like that was my job, right? I couldn't escape it. I had to look these things up and I had to be sharing these photos or sharing these videos and things of that nature and that's unsettling for your spirit, right? Especially occupying black skin, it's like I don't want to be sharing this, like that isn't gonna make me feel good, and yet the lack of acknowledgement that, "Oh, wow, this is like a really fucked-up thing that happened so maybe we should just give her space," right? And so often what I would get people would say to me is they'd just be like, "What's your problem? Why aren't you happy today? Why are you upset? Why aren't you smiling?"

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: I'm just like, "Are you that disconnected that you don't even know?" and so, for me, like well-being is really just being like, "Okay, I need to shut off my Instagram or social media today, I'm not going to be

on because I don't need to constantly be seeing these images of black people being murdered," right? It's having that agency to say that and I also just think that — I think right now it's very interesting folks are throwing this word around like decolonizing wellness, decolonizing wellness, and I'm just like do you know what that means actually? Do you know what that means? It's — you actually have to decolonize your mindset from white supremacy and racism. You can't decolonize the concept of wellness. Like it's not even a thing —

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: — and so, I mean, it's just so funny, like all of these words that are misused and it's like —

Layla: Yes.

Sinikiwe: — that's not it, like —

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: — that's not what we're doing here.

Layla: And this year has been, for all the reasons that we know it has, has been particularly challenging to the well-being of black people in particular, especially in the United States, but around the world. What trends have you noticed, and not in white people and how white people are processing what white supremacy is and going through that whole process, but black, indigenous, people of color, what have you been noticing in how people are trying to process all the things that are happening this year from the coronavirus pandemic to the various murders and lynchings of black people, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, the sudden devouring hunger of white people to consume black content and black people in response to that, like how have you seen black, indigenous, people of color trying to cope with that?

Sinikiwe: I mean, I think one really important shift that has happened is people divesting away from even learning things like yoga or meditation from white folks and really shifting back to learning from other black, indigenous, and people of color, which I think is really beautiful because, as we know, like these things come from our cultures, right? It's our

way, our intrinsic way of being, and they have been coopted and so that to me is really, really beautiful. I also think it's beautiful that people are relinquishing this notion that, I think especially for black women, that we have to be strong all the time and all that comes along with that. And I think that that's something that I've always really had a hard time with and people are just like, "Oh, you're so strong, you're so brave," and I'm like, actually, no, like I'm fucking sad. The world is messed up and things are not okay and I don't need to pretend that I am —

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: — and I think the other thing that has been kind of a godsend is that people are being honest about like what they have the capacity for, you know? And saying, like, "Hey, I love you but I can't also take on your worries and your sadness. In this moment, I just need to focus on my worries and my own sadness," you know? And I think that that self-accountability I think is really great for folks. And I also think that I've seen a lot more people seeking out therapy as a resource to kind of get through things and get through trauma, which I think is really important, you know, especially in my own African culture growing up like — so I had suicidal ideation when I was 13 and I went to my parents and I told them about it and they didn't really get it, like they just couldn't really fathom like why I would want to take my own life. And so, you know, it took me a very, very long time to even get to the point where I felt like, oh, like I should seek professional help instead of just reading self-help books to try and kind of get myself through the tougher things. So I think it's always really beautiful when black folks especially go to therapy and I will offer, like it's not necessarily an easy process, right? To find someone who is culturally competent, to find someone who is affordable, but I will say that it's rewarding if you can stick with it and so that's something else that I feel like has happened this year that has been really beautiful.

Layla: I've definitely seen, especially with black people, an even deeper commitment to our joy and our humanity because one of the things that this year has really thrown up for so many of us is just how much black trauma and black pain is a form of circus for everybody else, is something that they're not connected to, do not really understand the depths of what it means to see and hear about black murder for, like you said, for reasons which are, whether it's having a Subway sandwich in



your hand, walking down the street, whatever it is, and I've definitely seen a bigger commitment from many people to center their joy. What does it look like to center our joy in a world that just feels like it's — not only is our joy not allowed, but this world isn't built for our joy?

Sinikiwe: For me, I think especially in a world that's very dominated by social media, for me, that has meant just like sharing stuff about my life that doesn't center around like anti-racism work or trying to like make white people better. Like I like skincare, sometimes I'm going to share about skincare, you know? Like I like music, sometimes I'm going to share about music. And I think that element of breaking down this facade of, you know, just what I was saying before about being like so strong and all of that, it's like, nah, like you're gonna get like all of the sides, right? And, obviously, there are things I keep private that I don't share on the internet but I think also most recently that has looked like making my personal account on Instagram private. As we know, those spaces, especially when you do the work of talking about race and racism —

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: — you're heavily suppressed on those platforms. And so, for me, I'm like I'm not concerned with how many followers I have, right? On those platforms. Like I'm concerned about being a full human being —

Layla: That's right.

Sinikiwe: — like I want to have impact with the work that I'm doing and, also, I want to show up in a way that feels good for me and not show up in a way that just feels like folks are consuming it, right? Like even a couple weeks ago, I posted about my birthday and so many people just like unfollowed me when I made this post about my birthday, and I was like this is insane, like a birthday post?

Layla: Yeah. I'm laughing because this is something that I know happens, right? So I know, for myself, if I start veering off of talking about white supremacy, anti-racism, you know, whatever it is on my platform, whatever post I post that day, several unfollows, right? And I always say to my husband, "Isn't it really interesting that there are so many people

who are here but there are very few who are here for our full humanity? There are many, many people who are here from what they can consume from me,” and I remember watching a video of yours and I resonated with it so deeply because I’ve said it so many times myself, and you shared like “Words are very potent, they’re very important to me, and when you call me a resource, basically you are enacting white supremacy upon me, you’re saying that I’m just here to be consumed.” And this year in particular, we have seen that so many black people’s followings have grown because people are in a rush to learn from us but really only want what serves them and don’t want the rest at all.

Sinikiwe: Yeah, and it’s always just so interesting to me, because I’m like it’s very clear that you don’t have any interpersonal relationship with people that aren’t white. Like when things like that happen, it’s very, very clear to me and I’m not just saying like, you know, go out and find the closest black person and like befriend them, right? But even in the capacity of like work, right? When you think about work and if you are a manager and you have an employee that maybe is black, right? You’re bringing in all of your bias, all of your racism, all of that, so the likelihood of you even treating that person well is probably very low, right? And it’s sad to me. I think that’s just the hardest thing for me to reconcile, right? It’s like how do you reconcile that you don’t even see me as a person worthy of being happy that she celebrated another birthday, you only see me worthy of creating infographics and TikToks or reels or whatever you want to call it that are you learning, right?

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: And you acquiring knowledge or you commodifying me, but then when you get bored, it’s on to the next. Like that’s really sad. And I think what we often talk about is like white supremacy does not just hurt black folks or non-black people of color, right? It’s also like hurting white people, like that is your own humanity that is slowly being chipped away. Like when you really think of the gravity of that.

Layla: Yeah, it’s making me think of something I remember actually from the conversation you hosted with myself and EbonyJanice and she said, “Aren’t you white people tired of having to always be in a position of superiority?” You know? That it is really exhausting to be constantly having to stay in that position and make sure that you’re in that position

and I think, you know, you're right, like what energy is expended or what do you lose from your humanity in not seeing the humanity in everybody else? What price are you having to pay inside of yourself for doing that to another human being?

Sinikiwe: Yeah.

Layla: So, with Naaya, what are some of the main offerings that you have? Where do you like to put your energy?

Sinikiwe: Sure. I mean, I think, obviously, education is one area, so the salon conversations that we host with people like yourself is really awesome, but then, as we kind of are shifting into 2021, I do really want to bring that focus back on to joy of being in our bodies and giving people those resources so bringing back movement and mindfulness classes that people can take. So, I'm really excited about that. I love teaching. Then also just facilitating space for folks to be in their body, because I think that is something else that white supremacy strips us of —

Layla: Yes.

Sinikiwe: — is being in our body, like grounded in our bodies and so that is something else that is very important to me. And then I am in the midst of launching, it's called Black Folks Breathing, and it'll be a storytelling platform, specifically telling stories of black folks and that is something that I am really excited about is telling the stories of black people from black people. So, I'm really excited to launch that platform and grow that as well because I think, yeah, it's not just our trauma that you should care about, you should care about all of it. All the things —

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: — so that's another area. And then, obviously, I mentioned it, or maybe not obviously, but young people is just another area that brings me a lot of joy so just looking forward to continuing working with young folks and, yeah, just kind of creating a safe container as well for them to talk about issues of race and identity just because I think that so often, as young people, they don't have the language, like they go through all of these things and they can't name it necessarily. I mean, I

think very different than when I was growing up, for sure, like I didn't have the vernacular until I was probably in college to be like, "Oh, that person was just fantasizing me," like when I was 13 and they wanted to date me because I was like exotic or whatever, like I didn't have that language for a very long time —

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: — so I think young people now are definitely more equipped in a lot of ways but they don't have that kind of like life experience to really put things into...

Layla: Into a bigger picture —

Sinikiwe: Yeah, exactly.

Layla: Yeah, yeah, and I'm in, you know, that space myself at the minute. So, I'm writing the young reader's edition of *Me and White Supremacy* which is for kids of all races, aged 10 to 14, but, you know, obviously, the way that I speak to a child who has white privilege is different to the way that I speak to a child who does not and so we kind of — there are parts in the book where we split it and there's questions that you have to answer if you are white or have white privilege and questions and reflections if you don't, and I'm constantly thinking about that. I'm thinking about when I was 10, you know, 11, 12, 13, 14, so many of the experiences that I had, which I was not able to name or understand and how lucky my children are to be in a time where there are these resources, there are these teachings, there are people like yourself who are creating spaces for young people to be able to have those conversations. What most inspires you when you work with young people and you're supporting them and being able to name their experiences?

Sinikiwe: I think the fact that they are so willing to unlearn what it is that they have learned that might be problematic, like I think that there are just a lot of folks that are very set in their ways, especially as they get older, and it's just so hard to kind of break through and just be like, you know, just because it's something you've known all of this time doesn't mean that it was ever okay, right? And it's just hard to break down that barrier, especially when I think of concepts like defunding the police or

white folks digging so deeply to be like, “Okay, well, what did they do that the police killed them?”

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: Police aren’t supposed to kill people, period. Regardless of what they did —

Layla: What they did, right, exactly.

Sinikiwe: Like that’s from the jump, you know? And I just feel like with young people especially, like they want so badly to be different than what they have known or what society has taught them thus far, and that makes me feel really good. It’s like, oh, there’s still opportunity here. We still have hope as a species, like we can do things differently. And I think just like the inquiry and then the fact that they don’t really have an ego around things, right? It’s like, okay, so this is why maybe what you said, you know, maybe you should reframe it in this way and their willingness to be like, “Okay, all right, I understand why that wasn’t good and why I should reframe it.” Yeah, it just makes me really happy. I’m just like, “Oh, okay.”

Layla: I love that. And I know that you work — you do some consulting work as well with businesses and brands in how they can create parity in their companies and not just from an optical perspective, but actually like from within and reflected in meaningful ways. So, you were just talking about kids and young people and them being corrected and not having ego around it and being able to say, “Okay, I’ll do that next time.” What do you notice with adults, businesses, and brands when you’re trying to offer that kind of feedback? How does that show up?

Sinikiwe: I mean, I think that this summer, right, there was, like we’ve talked about, this rush of people being like, “Oh, I don’t want to be known as racist or whatever,” but so often, it’s just you care more about the term “racist” than actually doing racist things. Like you’re still doing racist things. And one company that comes like very much to top of mind is Anthropologie and, you know, like most companies, they posted I think a black square or whatever, “We’re gonna be better,” and then under that post, there was a myriad of comments of just like, “Oh, I used

to work for Anthropologie or Urban and we were told to follow around black people in the store,” like so many —

Layla: Wow.

Sinikiwe: — of those comments that the company actually, you know, took the post down completely and then they released a lineup, like a holiday lineup, of virtual events and every single person doing one of those events was white.

Layla: Wow.

Sinikiwe: And for me, it’s just like, I think that that is the dynamic, right? It’s like you talk about it but you’re not really about it. Like you’re not really about it, because the thing about doing the work of being anti-racist means that you’re gonna — will have to relinquish power and you’re gonna have to put black and non-black people of color in seats of power —

Layla: That’s right.

Sinikiwe: — and that is very scary for white people —

Layla: That’s right.

Sinikiwe: — like they don’t want to do that and I even — I had done a video last week about Giving Tuesday and how when folks give to an entity like a nonprofit, especially a white-led nonprofit, that there is so much bureaucracy to who gets that money and how they get that money and how much trauma they need to perform in order to get support from that organization. But, in a way, when a white person gives money to a nonprofit, they can kind of police how that money is distributed, right? Versus if you give directly to an individual, say via GoFundMe or something or even Venmo, you can’t then be like, “Okay, but you have to spend this money in this way.”

Layla: That’s right.

Sinikiwe: Right? You’re literally just giving the money in good faith to say, “I support you, do whatever you need with this money,” right? So

this concept of just also wanting to police how we do things, and so I think for brands especially, it's very evident in how things have transpired, because like, for me, I'm kind seeing a feed of black bodies that is selling a product, that's not good enough, right? Because you're still benefiting from using my body to sell whatever you're trying to sell, right?

Layla: That's right. Yes.

Sinikiwe: I'm curious about how you're treating the people that work for you. What are they getting paid? How are you acting towards them in a meeting? Right? Like that's what I care about more than just like your social media feed, right? So, if you're gleaning very heavily on that, then I don't know if we're going to work together —

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: — like that's not gonna be a thing. And the other thing for me that has made me like very frustrated, especially with like a lot of companies in the wellness space, is this desire to like start new initiatives to reach people of color. It's like, no, there are people doing this work —

Layla: That's right.

Sinikiwe: — give them the support they need —

Layla: That's right.

Sinikiwe: — they've earned it, and let them do the thing. Like you don't need to create another special initiative, like forget it.

Layla: Yeah. So they control it, right? They control how it goes, who has the real power, you know, where the money goes over or where the attention goes. Yeah, absolutely.

Sinikiwe: Yeah. And the other thing I'll just add to that is like I think another thing that happens a lot is just like white folks being like, "Oh, well, we want to mentor you, sign up for this mentor program, learn

these skills,” and like, you know, I’m not in a place in my career where I need to be mentored.

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: I need financial resources to get what I need to get done. And also, keeping in mind that like if you’re mentoring someone and you haven’t addressed your own anti-blackness and racism, then you’re just going to do harm to that person.

Layla: That’s right.

Sinikiwe: Right? And also, the playbook for a white person is not the same playbook that’s going to work for me —

Layla: That’s right.

Sinikiwe: — like, yeah, you can teach me accounting or something of that nature, that’s fine, but like teaching me how you got to be successful ain’t gonna work for me though, right?

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: So, it’s like all of those things like I think is important to keep in mind.

Layla: And there are so many dynamics that you’re bringing to the table here. I mean, a lot around white saviorism, right? And sort of, “We want to rescue you from this terrible thing of racism that you’re facing, but we have nothing to do with that thing. We’re just coming in as these very kind, very generous benefactors who want to be on the right side of history. Nothing changes in the structure of my life or the power that I hold but I will give you a hand up,” right? So you can stand on your own two feet. And it’s like what you were saying earlier about this term, you know, “decolonizing wellness,” like do you really understand what that means? You have to look within yourself. You have to look within the structures that are there and see how is this impeding on the well-being, the success, the joy, the health of black, indigenous, people of color, and do the work there because, you know, one of the things that I aim to do with this podcast is to highlight, to platform as many people of color,



black people, especially because we are so underplatformed. I interviewed Nicole Cardoza who I believe you know and —

Sinikiwe: Yeah.

Layla: — you know, she uses this term “underestimated entrepreneurs” when talking about the work that she does in supporting wellness, entrepreneurs of color, and we are underestimated, we are underplatformed. We don’t get, like you said, their playbook is not our playbook. And yet, here we are creating these amazing things, strategies, books, wellness centers, modalities, so many different things that we’re creating in spite of all of these systems of oppression that work against us. And so, it’s like just give us the space to do our thing, right?

Sinikiwe: Yeah. And don’t feel as though you need to then like take credit for it, right?

Layla: Yes.

Sinikiwe: Or get like a cookie and be like, “I did a good thing,” right? Like even just, you know, I mentioned to you earlier about the computers and for so long, it was kind of something that I just really like kept to myself or folks who like worked with Naaya and people were like, “No, that is something that you need to talk about,” and for me so often, it’s just like, I just want to do the good thing. Like I just want to help folks, like I don’t need a cookie for like being a good person.

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: Right? And that’s what I feel about white folks, it’s just like y’all can just do the thing —

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: — like you don’t need a handout for doing it, right? Or even when we talk about what happened this summer and white folks performing activism, it’s like when I see Black Lives Matter or like anti-racist in someone’s social media profile, that’s a sign that I need to run

really far in the opposite direction because like you're probably not doing what you need to do, you know what I'm saying?

Layla: Right, right.

Sinikiwe: You don't need to perform that. This work is not pretty by any means. And like if you feel as though you need to perform on the internet, then it just means that you don't really get the gravity of what you're doing.

Layla: Right. I want to switch gears and talk a little bit about your passions around creative direction and beauty, you know? When you go on the Naaya website and your website, your personal website, as well, they are beautiful and it's very intentional and you speak about some of the copy that you want black, indigenous, people of color, and you can correct the words that I'm using, but for us to have our intrinsic beauty shown instead of like you said earlier, instead of it being shown through the white gaze, right? Photography of black people through the white gaze. You want our intrinsic beauty to be shown. So, beauty is this theme that I pulled out as I was, you know, researching you. Tell me about that. Tell me about where that comes from for you.

Sinikiwe: Yeah. I mean, I think it's just for so often existing in spaces, especially as a creative, right? And having all of these ideas and just existing where there's a hierarchy, right? So there's a creative director or a photo director and then I fall somewhere to the bottom but then also showing up and existing in a black body as being kind of lower on that totem pole and so conversations that would come up around, you know, like "Is this appropriate? Should we do this instead?" all of that, and just trying to speak up and like not being heard or there's one thing that really resonates in my mind. I had done this story, I led the visuals on it, and it was about these men who were formerly incarcerated, they started a gym, it's called Conbody, and the photos, everything was really beautiful, I was very excited, and then the headline that they used on the story was just — like what? Like did you even think about this like before you decided to use that headline? And, yeah, for me, like I have like at least one idea every day and I just feel as though telling stories especially and not just like the written word but also visually, through the lens of someone who has that lived experience, I think is just really,

really important because there's going to be certain things that I'm just going to know culturally, right? Like —

Layla: Yes.

Sinikiwe: — that's just not acceptable. Like you shouldn't do that. And then when it comes to this idea of beauty, I think that's been a very interesting one for me to just parse out just in general because, you know, on the one hand, like, yes, I don't take it for granted that like, "Layla, you are beautiful, I am beautiful," right? I don't take those things for granted. And also, like I have dark skin. My hair is very curly, right? I am not the standard of black beauty that you see in spaces in general. Like you generally see someone that has lighter skin than me, looser curls maybe, someone who is maybe racially ambiguous, right?

Layla: Yes, yeah.

Sinikiwe: So even for me to find my own intrinsic beauty, like that was a thing, like it took so long for me to get there. I remember when I first moved to New York, the first roommate I had said to me one day, she was like, "Why do you walk just looking at the ground? You never look up from the ground," and I had never even realized that about myself, to be like, "Oh, wow, I do that. Why is it that I do that?"

Layla: And is it — was it a way of sort of making yourself smaller, making yourself — like where do you think that it came from as you've been processing that?

Sinikiwe: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I mean, even just growing up, so like I played sports, I played soccer, I played lacrosse, I was a cheerleader, but when I mentioned cheerleader, people are like, "Oh, so you were super popular." No. Like they would have a party and I would find out Monday about the party, like that was the kind of scenario, right? And so even from kind of that young age, I internalized that like, okay, I'm not going to be beautiful like everyone else around me or in those conventional ways and so I have to compensate for that by having a personality, right? And having like a really good personality and so when we talk about me like looking at the ground, I think 100 percent it was a way to like make myself small, especially like I know I talk about being in corporate spaces a lot, but just, yeah, being in those spaces was so detrimental, the ways

in which like people talked over me and invalidated, you know, my ideas and things like that, but then, in turn, still turn around and use those ideas, you know? And it did, it took me probably, like within the last five years, it really took me to be like, “Hey, this is actually not true,” right? “Just because these folks are telling me that I am not good, I’m not talented, that is actually not the case, because everything that I’m doing outside of these spaces is telling me otherwise.”

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: So something’s got to give, right?

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: It has to be like one or the other and chances are, it’s probably not the people that are telling me that I’m terrible, right? So like really relinquishing that I think has been a journey and one that I’m really proud of, to be honest, because it took a while.

Layla: Yeah. I was going to say that it is such a blessing to get to that place because I know that many people don’t ever get to that place, of that realization of “It’s not what the rest of the world is saying about me,” and I know that this particular conversation that we’re having now, we could be talking about anyone of any race, any gender, any, you know, any identities, but it’s also even more so the more you hold identities which are marginalized in society. You know, one of the things that I’ve recognized in my journey that what I felt was imposter syndrome was actually white supremacy and a very deep inferiority complex from swallowing the lies of white supremacy. You said that one of the ways that you compensated for, you know, you realized, “Okay, they don’t see me as one of them or they don’t see me as beautiful, I’m going to compensate for that by having a really great personality.” For me, that was, “I’m going to compensate by being really smart.” Like I was very, very smart, always the top of my class, and it came back later on me as, okay, but I’ve achieved all these things but why do I still feel this deep sense of not enoughness and going on that journey of recognizing it’s because of these isms and these lies that you’ve swallowed about yourself that tell you, “You’re this, you’re this, you’re that,” and you getting to decide, you know, who you actually are is such a beautiful journey to be on. When I see black women in particular on

that journey and, you know, black femmes on that journey, it's so beautiful to witness because you're working through so many layers of lies that you have taken as truths. So, I think it's powerful and it shines through and it definitely shines through with you.

Sinikiwe: Thank you. Yeah, I mean, it was a long road to get here. But, yeah, like you're saying, I mean, it just now feels so good to be like this is actually not something that I need to take on, this is something that you are projecting onto me, and I feel secure enough in myself that like I can just let you have that. I don't need to take it on. And that feels really good.

Layla: I love that. So, one of the other things that you mentioned in this conversation is that you are a yoga teacher. You also offer yoga training as well. Then you have a yoga and meditation practice that is deeply personal and deeply important to you. Tell me about how you got onto those paths and what they mean for you and how they're helping you to really not only survive but thrive?

Sinikiwe: Well, yoga was actually really hard for me to get into as someone who did sports that were so physical growing up, I just kind of saw yoga and I was just like, "I'm good," and then I ended up getting injured and part of my physical rehabilitation was to practice yoga, and, yeah, I was still in that time of like figuring out jobs and stuff, I was newly out of college, and I felt like my yoga practice was a reprieve from the everyday working conditions that I was in that weren't so great and so I kept trying to find more opportunities to practice, to learn about yoga, and then wanting to also take what I was learning and give it to other people. So, from there, I volunteered with an organization that put yoga teachers in New York City public schools and that experience was very profound because my students — so I think it was — I forgot the stats, but a lot of them fell under the poverty line so they were getting free or reduced breakfast and lunch at school and it was the first time that — so when I started the class, it was a lot of teachers and not so many young people and then by the end of it, it was just filled with all of these young people. One of the common refrains would be that, you know, "I just never knew that I could do yoga, I just never saw anyone like me doing it," and removing kind of all of the extra stuff that often comes with yoga as it has been commoditized, right? So in that classroom, we had mats, we had our bodies, and we had our breath,

right? We didn't have fancy clothes, we didn't have a shiny glamour studio, we were in a basement of a dank building in Brooklyn, right? It was very, very stripped down and I think that's also what made it very potent. It was just like you just need yourself to do this practice and that's something that I try to emphasize in my teachings. It's like, yeah, don't get me wrong, like all the extra stuff is cute. Like who doesn't love a cute outfit, right? And it's not necessary. You don't need that to do this practice.

Layla: Right. Yes, and so, as you were teaching at the school and teaching both teachers and young people, what did you begin to realize about your journey with yoga that took it from beyond like the physical practice to something deeper?

Sinikiwe: Yeah, I mean, I think it was just really also learning like the philosophy of yoga and, you know, learning like the eight limbs of yoga and so I think often, just to like nerd out for a minute, people like separate meditation from yoga but, actually, in yoga philosophy, meditation is one of the eight limbs. *Pratyahara*, I think, maybe I could be wrong, don't come for me, internet, if that's not the correct word, but it is like one of the eight limbs, right? So it's like, oh, like my meditation is also my yoga, and then one of the things that really struck me as well were there are governing principles within the yoga philosophy and one of them is *Svadyaya* which is self-study and self-inquiry and that is kind of like I love that word. It's like, constantly, you're just like inquiring in yourself, like, okay, what is fitting right? What is not fitting right? Like how do I evolve and grow and like be better and show up better is something that I really love, and, yeah, I think that, for me, is what took it to the next level, like even now, like I used to be so hardcore like practicing like five or six times a week and like — you know, I think maybe it was from trickling over from my like sports days and that like rigor of like wanting to be great, wanting to like learn, and then now I'm just like, cool, like the mat's there but like I know that I'm still living out those other tenets of this philosophy which I think is really important. So, yeah, that's how I would say I transcended from the physical aspect only into it kind of permeating into my entire being.

Layla: There's been a number of people that we've interviewed on the podcast who are yoga teachers, who have a yoga background, and have talked about some of these principles, right? Some of these tenets of

yoga, and something that's always struck me is how social justice is just so a part of yogic philosophy and, yet, the image that we see of a yoga instructor who is the mainstream is, again, a white, affluent, able-bodied person, often a woman when it comes to yoga and I wonder, as somebody who has not studied yoga, as somebody who isn't familiar deeply with those tenets, one of the questions that I have as an outsider looking in is how is it that so many white people are going through this yoga training and also living it, according to them in their lives, and yet social justice is so removed from their practice of it? Like what are your thoughts around that? Because I'm — this is a genuine curiosity and confusion that I have.

Sinikiwe: It's so wild and I had an instance of a friend of mine, Yoga with Adriene, Adriene Mishler. She has a very —

Layla: Oh, I love it. I do a lot of Yoga with Adriene. Yes.

Sinikiwe: — but she's also just like a great human and so she had said she would share like the salons and also Naaya on her social media platform and there were so many folks in those comments that were like, "This is divisive. Why is this only focusing on non-white people? Everyone can do yoga. Why are we talking about Black Lives Matter and politics?" It's like, wait, what? Or even to bring it like more relevant, like right now, there are farmers in India, in Punjab in India and they are fighting against the Indian government for freedoms and for rights and there are just so many people that are blissfully unaware of that. And it's like, okay, but on the flipside of that, you're probably drinking your turmeric latte or whatever or your chai even, right? And all of these things, they come from India —

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: Right? Part of this practice comes from India. And so if you are not practicing social justice as part of your yoga practice, then you're missing the point.

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: Right? You're totally missing the point. And, yeah, it's frustrating but it also just says to me that most people see it as a means

of physical exercise, right? Like you're not really interested in all of the rest of it because if you were interested in all of the rest of it, then you would actually have to start to unpack the things about yourself that maybe aren't so great, you know what I'm saying?

Layla: Yeah. Is a large part of it also that who is leading a lot of these trainings as well, right? And who has the access and the means, the resources to be able to afford those trainings and so it stays within a certain group of people of certain identities who, because they are very invested in white supremacy, whether they realize it or not, are not going to delve into that self-study around what it means to be part of dominant culture, that social justice around what it means to have white privilege. Is that a large part of it as well?

Sinikiwe: Yeah, I think, for me, it also brings up this idea of credentialing, right? So, in order to get a yoga teacher training certificate, the standard, at least here in New York, is about \$3,500 or \$4,000, depending on the studio, which in and of itself cuts a lot of people off —

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: — and, also, in terms of scheduling, generally, the training that I did was on the weekends, but a lot of these trainings are held like a month kind of intensive kind of form, which if you work or you have children, like that's not a possibility for you as well, right? And so not only is there gatekeeping because the cost is not accessible, there is also gatekeeping because it'll be — something that I found so baffling was there was, in my training that I did, there was a white woman teaching about native kind of elements within this training and —

Layla: Wow.

Sinikiwe: — it was just kind of flabbergasting. It was like, "Wait, what?"

Layla: There's layers to this.

Sinikiwe: What is happening? But the thing about it is that they're so far removed that I think maybe now it's starting to get a little different that they don't even realize like that they've coopted a culture that is not even their own and now they're teaching it as though it is their own,



right? And it also goes back to that idea of gatekeeping, or not gatekeeping but not wanting to relinquish power, right? Because setting up a training and not having all of your teachers be white means that you have to be honest with yourself and say that I am maybe not the right person to be teaching this material.

Layla: Oh, that. That part. And I think that's really hard and I've noticed that yoga is, and the relationship that people have with it, is very personal. I know that it has helped people heal from so many things, the physical, emotional, spiritual, and so we get very attached, right? Because it has this very specific meaning to us and then when you also have white privilege, you're not used to being told you can't do something, you are not entitled to be in this position, that you're not the best person to do this. There's so many layers to it that then create a very defensive reaction, right? Of "What do you mean I'm not the best person? That's preposterous, that's ridiculous. Who else would it be if not me?" That entitlement runs really, really deep.

Sinikiwe: Beyond.

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: It's a lot of that. It's just being entitled, right? And I think kind of what I touched on earlier about black folks and non-black people of color kind of returning to the source and learning from people that have their same lived experience I think is really powerful and potent, because it's, you know, it's just one way to divest the power that white supremacy has had on infiltrating these particular things. It's just like learn from the people that these things come from.

Layla: Yeah. So, since we're talking about yoga, we've touched on white women, and we talked about the fact that the digital salon that you invited me to be a part of was the dynamics of white women with women of color. I'd love if you could share if you feel comfortable, especially, again, this year because of everything that it's brought up, you know, how are you feeling yourself in relationships with white women? And how to — yeah, I see your eyes has opened real big.

Sinikiwe: I mean —

Layla: Yes.

Sinikiwe: — just keep it 100 and like I've joked with my little sister and other folks about this, but like I feel like at this point, like I'm not accepting any applications for like no new white friends. Like I have white friends that I — are cherished and people that I love a lot —

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: — but they are also people that have been in my life while I've really started doing this anti-racism work, you know, and they are people that I'm like, "Hey, you can't say that," or like, "That is unacceptable," right? They are the type of people and white women especially that I can say that to and they are receptive and willing to learn and also, I think with those particular relationships, our relationships go beyond me like teaching them to not be racist. Like these are people that show up for me, like when my grandma died or when it's my birthday, like they show up for me, full me, outside of me just like being a black woman that they can learn from.

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: Right? And so I think that is why I'm able to be in relationship with those people but, yeah, otherwise, I'm like I don't know about you, white person, like I don't know, like — and that's not to say, right, and my mom says this a lot, she's just like, "I just don't want anyone to think that you don't like —" I'm like it's not that I don't like white people, like white people are fine, it's not about that. For me, it's like about trust, like can I trust you? Can I trust you not to do something that is gonna put me in harm's way, right? And there are very few of those people who have white identity that I feel like that applies to —

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: — and that's just real. I'm not saying that I'm not gonna like be in business with you or be in relationship with you —

Layla: Because there's categories, right? And I feel like, for myself, you know, I definitely have been very discerning and selective about when I

say somebody is my friend, I mean a very specific thing when I say friend —

Sinikiwe: But also like people —

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: — you said friend, like real —

Layla: No, no, no. If I know you from social media, that doesn't mean that we're friends, right?

Sinikiwe: Yes. I think that that is something else that this year has really taught me is to just be discerning with that usage of the word "friend."

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: Like it takes a lot for me to really trust people and to open up and so I don't use that word lightly —

Layla: No.

Sinikiwe: — at all.

Layla: I don't either. No, I don't. I mean a very specific people when I say friend, but you're absolutely right. It is about trust. Friendship is earned. Relationships, especially between black women and white women, have always been fraught, especially when we insist on speaking about our true lived experiences, especially when we ask for accountability, when we ask them to show up, you know, that's when truth is revealed and how committed they are to our whole humanity is really shown. But something that I have observed is that when white women in particular have an awakening around racism, beliefs I think that they hold is, "How can I be anti-racist if I don't have any black friends? So I need to go get some black friends so that I can prove that I'm not a racist," right?

Sinikiwe: And that's the thing and that's where that cognitive dissonance comes in, right? Because it's like I'm sure you're interacting with a black person when maybe you go to the grocery store —

Layla: That's right.

Sinikiwe: — or your salon or even your office, right? How are you treating those black people?

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: Right? How do you treat those black people? Maybe you should assess those interactions first before you try and make a black person your friend.

Layla: Right, because, for me, I mean, when I hear that, I'm like you don't want a friend, you want a pet.

Sinikiwe: Also to affirm that you are —

Layla: That's right.

Sinikiwe: — a good person and that you are not racist, that's what you're looking for. You don't want us.

Layla: And that's not what we're here for and that's not what anti-racism is and it's not about assuaging, you know, white guilt or being, you know, "I stand as the token black person to prove that this person is not racist," that is not our function at all and to do that, and whether you intentionally or unintentionally are doing it, you are perpetuating white supremacy yet again. So, I've just finished listening to Malcolm X's autobiography. And it's amazing. It's so, so amazing, but it's talking about, at one point during the book, I think he was saying that he doesn't believe in segregation but he was saying like we don't need to be with them, they don't need to be with us. Segregation, or desegregation in the sense that it was happening in his time, was about how can we be together, and he was like we don't want to be together, you know? He didn't really want to be friends with white people. And people believe that having an anti-racist world or post-racist world is where we can all be together and hold hands and, you know, love each other and pretend like all of those things don't exist anymore but we're nowhere near there. We are nowhere near there. And we're not going to get there by creating a false sense of friendship which really requires us as black women and black, indigenous, people of color to have a

sudden amnesia about what the world has been and what it continues to be. So, that's the hard conversation that white people don't want to hear because they want to get to the good feelings.

Sinikiwe: I'm not here to make you feel good though. That's the thing. It's like you actually — you should feel bad. The way you treat us and act around us is horrible. Like you should feel bad about that. And you should not need me to make you feel good until you actually do something that is worthwhile for me to maybe change my mind.

Layla: That's right.

Sinikiwe: Right? I'm not just going to automatically hand that to you because you bought a book. I'm sorry. I'm not —

Layla: That's right, thank you.

Sinikiwe: I'm not the one.

Layla: That's right. That's right. And we know that this year, you know, books like *Me and White Supremacy* and so many books have sold so much this year and it's, you know, we create these books because we want people to have the resources to do the work, but buying the book doesn't mean doing the work and doing the work isn't even about reading the book, you know? It goes so far beyond that and it is an ongoing thing. And I want to bring this back to entrepreneurs like yourself who are trying to do this amazing work in the world but coming up against so many systemic barriers, you know, lack of resources, lack of funding, being seen as less credible, and so on and so forth, and also dealing with interpersonal, you know, microaggressions in that space as well. Like what do you want to say to those people who have power in those spaces and who are actively getting in the way of you contributing to the world as this good ancestor that you are in a way that's helping to build an anti-racist, anti-oppressive world? Like what do you want them to know would actually be helpful instead of what they're doing?

Sinikiwe: Yeah. I mean, I think, for one, if you are going to offer financial support or that kind of thing to someone who is black and that has a business, like myself, you can't then really police like what we're gonna do with the money. Like so, my initiative, The Check-In, which was able

to get those computers this summer, I remember very distinctly a white woman e-mailing me to say, "If I make a donation, where is this money going?" When it's all written out on the webpage.

Layla: So my instinct is telling me she thinks you're pocketing the money.

Sinikiwe: 1,000 percent.

Layla: Right, okay.

Sinikiwe: I'm like, actually no. And I think financial resource is something that I speak about really often because even though I had a career for 10 years in publishing, the highest salary that I ever made before taxes was \$58,000. And I live in New York City and that is nothing. And I remember very recently, when I was still at my former job, I had my manager at the time say to me, she was just like, "It just feels like you're not focused on this or you're doing other things to kind of supplement your income or whatever."

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: It's like — but you're not leaving me with a choice, right?

Layla: Right. Pay me more.

Sinikiwe: — my income in order to live. Otherwise, like I can't exist like that, right? And so that to me is like the biggest thing. It's like if you're trying to say that you want to support black people, especially in a financial way, then support them.

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: Don't try and like nickel and dime like what they're doing with their money. Two, like I'm also need y'all to come correct in your e-mail because the amount of people that just sit, and it's as basic for me as like not even acknowledging, like I had a company over the summer that I was in relationship with that I had worked with before and they didn't even ask me how I was or anything. Right? And, you know, at this point in quarantine and COVID, like we know that people are probably not good, right? But, as a human that gives any modicum of a fuck, like you

should still ask, right? And to say like, “Hey, hopefully you are okay, all things considered,” right? But not — just to not even ask that and then automatically just jump to, “Are you able to do an Instagram Live for us on this date?” Literally. They didn’t even ask me how I was, they just were like, “Are you available to do this for us on this date?” That was the conversation and I had to just e-mail them back and just be like, “I’m really disappointed. You are people that I’ve actually worked with before and for you to not even take into consideration what is going on in the world and just ask me to do something for you, that’s kind of unacceptable and, unfortunately, at this time, I’m gonna have to say no,” right? But it is. It’s really just like as basic as that, like are you taking into account that the other person on the opposite end of this e-mail is a human? Right?

Layla: Yeah. And it’s just really striking me that this like white urgency for black expertise or black resources is so detrimental to black well-being. The very thing that they think that they’re helping to fight is the very thing that they’re enacting as they’re asking you to join them in this thing. And it’s just, yeah, the mental gymnastics are just... Anything else, particularly when it comes to — so you talked about the financing which is kind of like the systemic things that get in the way. We’ve talked about how people are dealing through e-mail. I want people to think beyond like — we’ve talked a lot about what’s happened in 2020. But, you know, what happened in 2020 is not — it didn’t just come out of nowhere. It’s an ongoing thing so as people move from the, “Oh, we have to do something now,” to, “Okay, we’re going back to ‘normal,’” what is the normal that people shouldn’t be returning to?

Sinikiwe: Yeah. I mean, you shouldn’t be returning to not taking into consideration if your business or wellness space or whatever, there are only other white people in those spaces.

Layla: Yeah.

Sinikiwe: Right? Like that should not be a thing any longer. Like that should not be a thing. Like it’s not that we’re not qualified, you’re just not looking for us. We are out here and we are qualified, you’re just not looking. And, to that end, you also have to be assessing how you are treating us when we enter these spaces and are these spaces set up for us to do well, right? Because I think so often that people rush to be like,

“Okay, we need to hire a black person,” or an Asian person or whatever, and they also haven’t cultivated a space where a black person is going to come into that space and then not be told, “Why is the tone of your e-mail so angry?” Right? Or, “You need to fit more into the culture here,” or things of that nature, right? You have to create a scenario where we’re going to do well.

Layla: And people assume, I’m hearing what you’re saying, you know, I’m thinking of the people who are not in the work of active anti-racism and active self-reflection who may be hearing this and thinking, “Oh, so you want us to treat black, indigenous, people of color in a special way or you want us to be nicer to them or something like that,” like they have an assumption that the space is already safe, that there isn’t harm that is inherently there of being in an all-white space and having a person of color come in and that we have to bend ourselves to that environment that is safe because it’s safe for them, that means it must be safe for us. And they see it, they may be seeing it as, “We have to make special compensations or dispensations for black people and people of color.” I mean, one of the things that we saw this year was, yes, this very big rise in people gaining some sort of consciousness around racism and then soon after that, sort of — what do they call it? Ally apathy?

Sinikiwe: Yeah.

Layla: Yes, right? Of like, “Okay, we bought the book, like we read the articles, we watched the documentaries —

Sinikiwe: I’m so tired.

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: This is just so much work.

Layla: Right, and so how much more do we have to do? You know, how can people take it beyond thinking that they’re doing us a favor by making spaces safe to understanding the inherent unsafety that are in these spaces?



Sinikiwe: I mean, I think it also just goes to — when we talk about, you know, defunding the police and all of these other things, right? It's like the safety that you feel calling the police, I am never going to feel that safety.

Layla: Right.

Sinikiwe: That's just never going to be there for me, and until you can feel that on a cellular level and just know that it's not gonna be safe for me, nothing is going to change, right? And it's the same with these spaces. It's like you really have to do the work of knowing how you are contributing to white supremacy and how you are upholding white supremacy, and until that point, you can hire as many of us as you want to but it's not going to change anything. Like it's just not, like —

Layla: Unless you change, right, and unless the structures change, yes. Thank you, Sinikiwe. This conversation has been so enlightening and I love you, I love the work that you do in the world. I also want to congratulate you because you got a shout-out from Beyoncé this year and that is amazing.

Sinikiwe: I'm like, Beyoncé knows me, okay, this is awesome.

Layla: I feel like you reached the pinnacle, at least in my eyes, because I love her.

Sinikiwe: I mean, especially in this year, I'm like that's all I needed to do this year basically.

Layla: What was that like for you when you found out?

Sinikiwe: I mean, it was surreal, like someone else had sent it. I think the model that I used in the photograph like shared it, and I was just like, "Oh, wow, this is surreal, but awesome." Very grateful.

Layla: I was very excited for you. I was just so, so happy for you. And you deserve it because the work that you're doing is so incredible. I just want to, before I ask you my final question, just acknowledge you and thank you for the way that you show up for us, rooting us in our wellness, providing this incredible platform for us to remember ourselves, for us

to remember our joy and our full humanity and I'm so inspired by every guest that I get to interview on this podcast because each one of you is doing such incredible work, often underfunded, right? Often underrepresented, underplatformed, and yet shining through anyway. And that, you know, I don't attach the strong black woman to that. That is pure resilience, that is pure hard work, that is love, that is a spirit of healing, and that is — I know that your ancestors are with you as well, right? And backing you up and keeping you going. So, I can't wait to watch you continue shining in the world and I know you're going to continue offering hopeful things for the years to come. So, thank you for everything that you do in the world.

Sinikiwe: Thank you. And I'm excited to give all the young people I know your new version when the book comes out, so very excited for that.

Layla: Thank you. So, our final question, you know, reflecting on everything that we've talked about in this conversation and everything that's important to you, what does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Sinikiwe: I think for me being a good ancestor means to radiate love. Just bringing it back full circle to my great grandmother. I think that this work is taxing. Sometimes, it really just feels like my soul is tired, not just my body but my soul is tired. And then I try to remember love and remember that — pour as much love as I give out into the world, hopefully that much love will come back to me in reciprocity, so, yeah, love, I would say.

Layla: Love, love, love. Thank you. Thank you so much for modeling it and for sharing it here today. So appreciate you.

Sinikiwe: Thank you.

(Outro)

This is Layla Saad and you've been listening to Good Ancestor Podcast. I hope this episode has helped you find deeper answers on what being a good ancestor means to you. We'd love to have you join the Good Ancestor Podcast family over on Patreon where subscribers get early access to new episodes, Patreon-only content and discussions, and

special bonuses. Join us now at [Patreon.com/GoodAncestorPodcast](https://Patreon.com/GoodAncestorPodcast).  
Thank you for listening and thank you for being a Good Ancestor.