

(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 British-Nigerian author, satirist, and media executive, Nels Abbey. Nels is the author of one of the funniest books I came across in 2020 called *Think Like a White Man*. Told in satire through the words of the fictional black character, Dr. Boulé Whytelaw, *Think Like a White Man* is a satirical self-help guide for black people which explains the rules by which mediocre white men continue to get ahead. This book, which had me laughing out loud with its tongue-in-cheek truth, is the first satirical book on race of its kind, which makes Nels's writing so unique yet so relatable for so many black people and people of color.

In this episode, we talk about a wide range of topics, including Nels's upbringing, our shared admiration of Malcolm X, Nels's experience in the corporate world, and the power of satire to address racism. Nels's writing has been published in every major quality British newspaper. He's a social and political commentator and regularly appears on Channel 4 News, Newsnight, Radio 4, Times Radio, LBC, and Sky News. He's also a former BBC executive, a Clore Fellow, a Penguin Fellow, a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts, and he sits on the boards of various companies. Nels is also the founder of the Black British Writers' Guild.

Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Good Ancestor Podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad, and I'm here today with our good ancestor, Nels Abbey, who also goes under the pen name or has been dictated to by Dr. Boulé Whytelaw III who helped him to write his first book, *Think Like a White Man*, which I want to recommend to everyone. But firstly, thank you for being here, Nels.

Nels: Layla, it's an absolute delight to be here with you. Thank you so much for having me.

Layla: I'm excited to speak with you. I came across your work on Instagram and I don't even know how I found your account. I started following you and you would just post these Instagram posts that were very truthful but that would always make me laugh and always make me chuckle just a little bit and then I would swipe through and then see the cover of your book and I was like, "I need to get this book, I need to order this book, I need to read this book," and then we finally connected and I have your book and I have read it and I can't wait to have a conversation with you about it today.

Nels: Thank you so much. Thank you. The strategy of how that worked a little bit because I'm very new to Instagram, I don't really do — I'm not that — I'm not really good on social media. I'm not one of these young people who are just one of these experts. I just got on it and then photos, okay, offer some people why I was doing the books, offer some substance and then make people laugh at the same time, just make them laugh and think and hopefully I'll win them over, so there we go.

Layla: It definitely worked.

Nels: I must say, I'm equally as big a fan. And it's not even a comparison. I am a huge fan of yours. What you're working on with *Me and White Supremacy* and everything else and all the other work you're doing and the talks you're giving, how you're helping enlighten our society is absolutely — you're doing God's work. It's absolutely important. I'm immensely grateful to you and blown away to be here with you today.

Layla: Thank you. Thank you. All right, but this conversation is about you and I can't wait to ask — I have so many questions but we will start with our very first question that we ask every single guest. Who are some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, familial or societal, who have influenced you on your journey?

Nels: Thank you. It's a brilliant question and I think I'm gonna start with possibly the most obvious ancestor for most black people I could think of and that will of course be Malcolm X. Malcolm X, of course, influenced me. Malcolm X is a story of immense redemption and second chances in

life and really finding yourself and discovering yourself and living with a purpose and unapologetic living and being a stand-up person no matter the threats, and enlightening people who came after you. I mean, Malcolm X was just somebody who's just — whose entire story is almost like a fairy tale to a certain degree.

Layla: It doesn't seem real, you're right. It —

Nels: It really doesn't.

Layla: Yes.

Nels: It really doesn't, like a guy who was so literally the streets, hood, hood, hood brother to the bank thief, whatever you can think of, then goes to prison and transforms his life. The way it was shown in the movie was beautiful but even when you — I think listening to his autobiography then reading it too, one way or the other, has the same impact too. It's just a fascinating, fascinating story of extremes to a certain degree, with an extreme professional criminal to an extremely enlightened, unbelievably enlightened man who was sitting around the table with the best of academics around the world and mopped the floor with them day in, day out. He was a beautiful man who I feel that me knowing who I am and the knowledge of self that I think I've been gifted, that even the concept of knowledge of self —

Layla: Yes.

Nels: — is something that we have to, in fact, because think of our experience, our existence without certain people and what comes to mind as other people too but if you take up the black experience, the black existence without the enlightenment and the forthrightness of a Malcolm X that we could pass on from one generation to another, whose predictions are still coming true 'til this very day.

Layla: Yes.

Nels: Literally everything he said about — the stuff he said about white supremacy and whether it's liberals here or conservatives, the fox and the wolf amongst everything, each, everything he says, it was true then and it's true today. So if you want to know what's happening a lot of

time I would say make sure you understand, read Malcolm X, and you'll probably — you'll really understand, you'll get a good grasp of what you're talking about when you're looking at white supremacy. So I'll say he's certainly somebody who was vastly important to my life, to all of us, I feel. I must emphasize it. Take Malcolm X away and think of who we are as people, how do we perceive ourselves as people. I think it was something almost, I don't know, people believe in prophets and angels or whatever else it might be. I truly believe that the divine wisdom this man had, it was Godsend. He was sent to us to help us and really just usher us and literally his autobiography is a rite of passage for every single black person. You know, life is not complete as a black person unless you've read his autobiography, or at least watched the film. Yeah.

Layla: Yes, I love that. So I watched the film when I was younger but I'm actually listening to his autobiography at the minute as read by Laurence Fishburne, which is amazing and I highly recommend it. Amazing —

Nels: Brilliant.

Layla: — but you're right, like as I'm listening to it, there are parts where I'm like, "Oh, I remember it differently in the movie. That's not exactly how it happened actually in real life," right? Which is often the case but one of the things that I'm really struck by in his journey is that journey from where he started to who he became —

Nels: Yeah, yeah.

Layla: — and the lessons — and really difficult lessons he had to learn after submitting himself fully to an ideology that he, you know, he really believed in and the ways in which it, even as he rose to prominence within the Nation and then had to once again find another new iteration of himself, right? I think, yes, it's highly influential for us as black people but I think he transcends.

Nels: Yeah.

Layla: It is a story of humanity as well.

Nels: Truly. I remember — so I'll give you an example. So I was young when I watched the film the first time, I think it was about — it came out in '96 but I think I was —

Layla: Yes.

Nels: Was it '96 or earlier? But whenever it came — I think it was '96 it came out. So it came out around then, I watched it probably about '98 and I remember just being captivated by it, just captivated by the film and I watched it and then somehow another — at the time I was living, we'll come to this in a bit more detail I'm sure, but I was living in Nigeria at the time. So I was born in Britain, but I was one of these naughty African kids who, when you misbehave, you get sent to the old country so I got sent to the old country. I got sent to Nigeria and I was watching Malcolm X with my younger brother. My younger brother was always — he's four years younger than me but he's always been wiser than his years. He's a lawyer now, brilliant guy, and he quickly recognized there was something profound, but we didn't know anything about Malcolm X. We were British-Nigerian children. We didn't know — the name Malcolm X was not something that was close to us when we were little. The name Martin Luther King we'd heard of but Malcolm X we hadn't.

Layla: Right.

Nels: And then I just remember watching it, at the time, I was about 16, 17 years old, and I was fascinated with it. I was fascinated with this man who went from — there's one scene in particular that really captured me, but at the time, Christianity is — still to this day I'm a Christian, but it was something that he said. So I was sent to a church school in Nigeria, it was a Baptist school, and the concept of blasphemy, so if you said, "Oh, my God," that would earn you six strokes of the cane. So, for example, you cannot call the name of the Lord in vain, blasphemy and beaten for it —

Layla: Right.

Nels: So that was beaten to me quite a bit but what was funny is that there's a moment in the film where Malcolm X, where the pastor, there's a white pastor who used to come over and speak to the prisoners, and him and Malcolm just didn't get along from the

beginning, because Malcolm was always challenging him intellectually, which I must say inspired me significantly. But when he first got to prison, and they put Malcolm X in the hole when he's still little and the pastor then said to him, Jesus — said something about Jesus loves you and then this time Malcolm shouts like, "Yeah, what did Jesus do for me?" So I don't think it was in the autobiography, but, of course, Denzel did a great job being Malcolm because it really —

Layla: Yeah, he did.

Nels: And him just saying, "Yeah, what did he do for me? What's he done for me?" and just like — and to me, it almost knocked me out of my seat in terms of like I can't believe this is being said and it was just such a concept and it dawned on me that actually when you think of it, this man was so low down and so caught up in a system that was designed for him to fail and he literally had fallen into a trap, a trap that still exists till this very day.

Layla: To this day.

Nels: And it was fascinating to see how he responded to it but it actually took the Brotherhood also, which had also been for him when he's actually there conking his hair and everything else that just says to me, yeah, and that brother in the shower and that just shows him the way and the truth and the light and it was fascinating to me. But I remember, I listened to it, so at the time I was — this was about 10 years ago, I was working as a banker, I was working for a large asset management business in the City of London and then I was listening so how it tends to work when I was working in asset management, I'd have loads of screens in front of me, but I could always have my earphone in just in case. When I wasn't on the phone, I have one earphone in and always I'd be — people would think you're listening to the news or something, I was listening to a podcast or something else and I was listening to Malcolm X's autobiography and for some bizarre reason at the end of it, and I was there about 31, 32, doing very, very well for myself and when Ossie Davis — when they read Ossie Davis's eulogy at the end and everything else, I just started crying on my desk. I just couldn't — something just came over me literally, something's coming over me right now. I just reached to the side of my desk, I just — and it wasn't like I'm blurting out but I just felt tears running down my face and I'm just there

trying to fight it back and you know what? I just felt like, oh, my goodness, there's something about it. Malcolm X definitely touches my soul. I mean, a lot of people, whether it's in Britain, in America, or anywhere else, he's just such a fascinating person and everything he represented to us there again. I'll say he's one person. Another person — I know I've spoken so much about Malcolm so I'll probably cut down the rest of people. I want to ask one question. Am I allowed to say anybody who is alive? Must they have gone —

Layla: No, they can be living or transitioned, familial or societal.

Nels: Ah, brilliant. So I was thinking, obviously, so the second person I'll say, and I won't go into it too much, but I'll say Prince because he's passed away but I also will say the same about my mother, but my father. So I met my — again, so I was born into foster care. I met my foster parents, they were my first mom and dad. And I remember they were lovely people. Truly amazing people who taught me a lot. My foster mum was a German-Jewish lady. She actually taught me what racism was when I was a very, very little boy. She was the first person to really just explain it to me and for a while I was a bit confused about how this white lady could know so much about racism. Now, as a grown-up person, you've read a thing or two about Jews in Germany and so you realize that, yeah, this was clearly a person who would know a thing or two about racism.

Layla: She knew, right.

Nels: Yeah, she knew. She was well placed here but I just remember — so when you're growing up, and I think that fatherhood and parenthood, of course, I always have my mum in my life, so even though I was in foster care, my mum, my biological mother would come over every two to three weeks and she'd bring us everything we wanted, sweets, everything, she'd spend time, so I'll also go and spend time with my mum every summer or every other holiday. So, my mum was always in my life and I was grateful to my foster parents, but my dad is somebody — I'm saying this in public now on your show because of the fact that I don't think I gave him his roses when he was alive. My dad died when I was 25 years old. That was about 15 years ago now. So, when my dad, just out of the blue, just clearly out of the blue, just all of a sudden, and you never really prepare for moments like that, but what was interesting

with my dad is that I didn't meet my dad 'til I was 12 years old, so I was 11, maybe 12 years old, and when I got sent to Nigeria, and it was such a fascinating moment because I had never met him and he had never met me before and my dad was this well-to-do, I will say, not wealthy, well-to-do guy who was living a bachelor's life and then my mum sent me to go live with him and he went from living just a bachelor's life with spending so much time with different people and living a fairly fast life to then just being a dad. And I just remember when he picked me up at the airport, growing up as a boy, you're always told things like if you're a boy, for you to be told that you look like your dad and you don't know what your dad looks like, it is a very confusing thing and I don't think — so that gap in my heart and in my mind and that psychological burden was there. So I had — the only picture I've seen of my dad was pictures of him in flares in the Staying Alive era in the 70s. This was the early 90s and then, of course, in Nigeria, then it was such a traumatic experience because you're being ripped away from everything that you are, which is Britain, and then sent to Nigeria —

Layla: Right.

Nels: — and then in your head, you've got a head full of British programming about what Africa is. I still have the literal "Do lions roam in the streets" stuff in my head, imagery in my head. And so I was just a classic British child and then I met my dad, it was kind of strange. I remember seeing him at the airport, and the first thing I thought to myself is, "Is that him? He doesn't look like me. I don't look like him." And he just came over and he hugged me so tightly and he said to me, "You're home now. You're home," and he was — and he was fighting back tears and I thought — to me, at first, I was a little bit like, I always thought I would be a bit bitter seeing him because I hadn't seen him throughout my entire life, but because both of us knew that this is it, it's just us now, we didn't have time to do the whole, right, don't write your dad for another. We just had to get on with it —

Layla: Right.

Nels: — and I remember I had the scary image of Africa in my head too about — even — it was the first time I was on an airplane and I just got on and — when you go on an airplane and you're a child, the funny thing is that you always think it's going to crash so I had that paranoia. So I

was scared at the airplane. I was scared that — it was a Nigeria Airways flight. I was scared of pretty much everything.

Layla: And when we were growing up, there were a lot of hijack movies as well.

Nels: Loads, loads.

Layla: Right?

Nels: You know what was funny to me is that I flew — that flight I took to Nigeria, that was the 31st of December 1991 —

Layla: Wow.

Nels: — and I remember that day because I got — my flight took off at 10:30 p.m. and I was wearing a suit. Nigerians loved overdressing to go on airplanes so I was wearing a suit —

Layla: Yeah.

Nels: — but I fell asleep. I fell asleep and my shirt was wet because I was crying so much and my shirt, all the tears just got onto my shirt. And then what was funny is I then woke up. I woke up because I was woken up by a commotion and I was a bit worried about what was happening so when I woke up, after I just cried myself to sleep, it was people just — some people speaking in tongues, people were praying, people doing all sorts of things and then all of a sudden, the captain started to count down from ten to zero because they were about to say Happy New Year and everything was so crazy to me at that moment, I didn't know that that was what was happening. And I've never been around like that when they're doing full-blown Nigerian evangelical prayers and everything else and then everybody's doing it. You see people there, "In the name of Jesus, in the name of Jesus," they were starting — and then the captain shouts ten to one then the "Happy New Year," and everybody was "Happy New Year," everybody went crazy just hugging each other and then there's a bit of turbulence and people sat down again too and then — It was quite crazy and I just went back to sleep after that. I just remember that moment. And then when I woke up next, I was pretty much in Lagos and I met my dad, and then — meeting my

dad who was a fascinating man because I remember you had a bad image of Africa in your mind because of what you grew up watching, Live Aid for girls.

Layla: Yeah. I was gonna say all the Live Aid and all those, right.

Nels: Yeah, which —

Layla: Flies around kids' mouths and potbelly kids and, yes.

Nels: I don't think — I've got the potbelly myself even because I went to the top boarding school, but I never had the flies on my face. That was quite — even when I was in Nigeria at my lowest, it takes something incorrect to get the flies in your face.

Layla: Yes.

Nels: But, yeah, but that was it. That was what you had in your mind. I remember my dad pulled up and then my dad, somebody went to get him — a valet pulled my dad's car around, it was a Mercedes, I go, "Okay, this guy, he's not doing bad for himself. He's okay," so **[inaudible]** but when my dad and I got inside his car, he turned back around to me and he just jokingly said, "Yeah, there are no lions in the streets here, first of all, or anything else," and that — he knew, he knew what was going through my mind and he just said to me, "There's no lions in the streets, monkeys aren't gonna fall into your bed, no nothing, there's no giraffe or anything else so you're gonna live a good life here. This is a good place," and he said, "This is your home and you need to be proud of it and you need to know where you're from." And it's fascinating. My dad taught me a lot. I mean, so many things about being a man, about being responsible, being respectful, and I'd like to say to any men, any men who's listening to this who have problem with their sons, no matter how grown or young your sons are, that's just the game. That's the way it goes. Like every two men are always going to collide eventually and then — but you have to find that way to make it, to humble yourself and make it work because one day or another, you or the dad, hopefully as should be the case, you won't be around and either your son's going to miss you forever and I think it's good if there's any problems, heed my message, go and make it up with your son. Be a father to your son and also to go and make up with them. Get along

because he has to learn a lot from you. No else is gonna teach him to be a man other than yourself is what I would say. And your wife or your partner too. That's where it is. There we go. But, yeah.

Layla: Thank you.

Nels: I think I've spoken so much but I can speak on this some more —

Layla: Thank you. It's probably a bit different to some of your other interviews —

Nels: No. I'll mention three more then we'll have to move on. The other three people I've mentioned, the lady who inspired me to write was an activist and a hip hop artist called Sister Soldier. She's an American lady, truly brilliant lady. She's become a — they've reduced her name to a political idiom. She was one of the most brilliant people I know, Sister Soldier. Of course Fela Kuti was a huge inspiration. I was lucky to go to — I went to school in the same city where he's from, a place on the Delta, and then finally but definitely not least, an ancestor we like to pay homage to so every freedom loving person has to always respect and pay homage to the good Harriet Tubman, who's always been dear to our heart and who hasn't been given the right — we haven't got the right film on her just yet. We're still working on it but it hasn't just landed just yet. There we go. Oh, actually, that wasn't it, some of the major ones, but, yeah, anyway, that's it. Sorry. I had three, so I talk a lot.

Layla: No, I love it. Thank you. I appreciate it. And as you were talking about your experiences, going back to Nigeria, I just remember, so, you know, I'm East African. I was born and grew up in Wales, had a Welsh accent for the first —

Nels: Wow.

Layla: Yeah, I had a Welsh accent for the first I think 11, 12 years of my life, but when I was 9, my parents decided, "Let's move back home," right?

Nels: Yes.

Layla: And I didn't like it. I just found it really difficult and I think it was because I was so used to a Western worldview, a Western way of being. It was very different from what I was used to but I remember that being there and the experiences that we had were very different to what I was seeing on the TV as well.

Nels: Yeah.

Layla: And I was like where is that Africa because that's not where we live, you know, that's not what I saw when we were there.

Nels: Yeah.

Layla: Right?

Nels: Yeah. I — did you go to boarding school?

Layla: Yeah. So I didn't go to boarding school —

Nels: You dodged a bullet there, trust me.

Layla: Yeah. Because I was — my parents were there, I went with my parents, but we did go to private school and it's actually the only time that I've ever been taught by black teachers was in Africa. I've never, in my education, had a black teacher other than when we lived in Tanzania.

Nels: It's funny you say so because that was one thing — I mean, my story, I'm gonna have to write it, I will write it I think in about two books' time but how I got sent to Nigeria was crazy because my teacher, my teacher was a guy called Mr. Green. I've never had a black teacher too. I've never had a black teacher, not one, in all my time growing up in the UK, particularly in Wales and the countryside as a little boy in foster care and I had this one teacher who was dating a black woman and his name was Mr. Gleason. I don't know where in the world he is now but I hope he's doing well. He was dating this Nigerian lady and it was him who suggested to my mum that I be sent to Nigeria.

Layla: Wow.

Nels: Yeah, so, because — so, early 90s, nobody wanted to be Nigerian. Nobody wanted to be Nigerian in the early 90s. So everyone said you'd be from the Caribbean. So my name being Nels Abbey is very easy to just claim as Jamaican so I just said I was Jamaican. So, for a long time, me and my friends, we worked ourselves up into this frenzy of Jamaican this or what we thought was Jamaican this, often misbehaving, whereas in reality, later on we found out that the only Jamaican guy in our midst was actually a well-behaved guy who've gotten himself a scholarship and then the rest of us worked ourselves up to this frenzy of what — and we were all just faking it. None of us were from the West Indies whatsoever. We're from Nigeria and Ghana and Sierra Leone, amongst other places. Majority of us who got sent back home, we found ourselves with difficult situations. What was funny about it is that this teacher, he knew I was lying. He knew that I was not being honest. And he just said — so during my PTA meeting, my Parents-Teachers Association meeting, he just said to my mom, and I wasn't there, I didn't show up for it, and this was — I think it was a godsend. I actually think I'm quite happy that he did so in retrospect because it kind of saved my life, or it made me who I am today. But he spoke to my mum and he was kind of funny. He said, "Yeah, so Nelson's Nigerian, isn't he?" And then my mum said, "Yeah, he is." He says, "Yeah, well, he tells me he's Jamaican," and then the next thing you know, "Well, I was in Nigeria, I was in Nigeria, and I think Nigeria would be a good place for Nels to go and live. He goes to a good boarding school in Nigeria so the discipline is very good." Anyway, within 4 months of him having that conversation with my mum, actually less than 4 months, within probably like 2, 3 months of him having that conversation with my mum, I was in Nigeria and I was in a boarding school and the first black teacher I had, yeah, he was a cane-wielding psychopath who would actually beat you for any wrong thing, you know? And it was kind of funny because he did say something to me that, yeah, I don't know who I prefer, Mr. Cane or racism or so but it was — we are where we are, but it did cross my mind for a long time. I think, I didn't have a black teacher for a long time but when I had one, I would have preferred the white man significantly from this guy beating you like a slave. This guy was horrendous. So there we go.

Layla: Oh, gosh.

Nels: Embarrassing to say now but it is what it is.

Layla: Yeah, well, let's talk about your book, *Think Like a White Man*, which — I was reading it and I was just like this book operates at so many different levels. So before we dive into it, can you give people an overview about what the book is about and who it's written by and who it's written for?

Nels: Yes, thank you so much. Thank you. So *Think Like a White Man* is a satirical self-help book on being a black person in the professional world. That's the metaphor it is written in. In reality, it's just about being a black person in Western societies and having to navigate white supremacy. The book is written by a gentleman called Dr. Boulé Whytelaw III who holds himself out as the world's leading expert on white people or a white geologist, as he calls himself, and he's got a PhD in white people studies. He's basically this compendium of knowledge and racial rhetoric on white people, which often sounds insane until you realize that, actually, he is very, very sane and the reality is that he might sound funny but what he's saying is actually how things really happen. So he says the unsayable things. So, yeah, so running along with the meta, with the joke, this gentleman contacted me out of the blue and wanted me to write this book with him and I was stupid enough to get suckered into it and here we are today. Yeah, look at all the trouble it's caused me, but there we go.

Layla: So, as a fictional character —

Nels: Yeah.

Layla: — what did Dr. Boulé give you the creative expression to say or write about that you might not necessarily have done as Nels Abbey?

Nels: Everything. I wouldn't have done this as Nels Abbey. I wouldn't have done any of this. I couldn't — there's no way — I mean — so I operate, so in terms of my nine-to-five, working, I was a banker for a very, very long time and I worked my way up to a very senior level in banking fairly quickly by banking standards, particularly with someone with my sort of background, black working class, then I moved into media and I worked at a senior-ish level, yeah, good level over there too. So — and it's kind of funny. So I worked in predominantly white careers, very, very white and even though media likes to pose as liberal, there's

nothing liberal about it. Media is much more conservative than banking is by a country mile. Media is —

Layla: Really?

Nels: Yes, it is. Yeah. Banking, they at least hire people. Banking at least hires black people. So, media — I was kind of shocked when I when I left banking and joined — So banking, we always thought, “Oh, my goodness, there’s not enough black people here. Not enough brown people, anybody else,” but when I joined media, I realized actually these guys are stuck somewhere in the 50s. This is crazy. So when I went on to — I’d pop into senior editorial meetings, for example, and, yeah, they’ll be all white men.

Layla: Right, right.

Nels: And so it was very — and so when you think about that, this was the people conveying information to a society. These are the people who are telling you this is what you need to know today in order to understand how our society is working, and it was just one demographic.

Layla: Yeah.

Nels: And it was very — it was quite scary. So, yeah, so walking in there was quite scary, yeah, seeing that situation. And when you walk around it — and it wasn’t just one editorial meeting or two or three, if you go around all of them, the majority of them, particularly at the senior level, there was no diversity whatsoever, there’s barely any diversity at all, whatsoever, and to make matters even worse, where there was diversity, and it’s something I alluded to in the book, it was often people who were very likely to agree with that worldview already. So, when people speak of diversity of thought, that’s actually the polar opposite. What people want is people who are going to think like them to come around the table and be with them. And so hence why I think like white men, that the yes men rule the world. People want to hear people who think like them and agree with them in a relative matter and I really believe that I don’t think that as much as people think that, “Yeah, your job is to come and disagree with me and tell me how it is wrong,” no, everybody just wants to be told that, “Look, your breath smells like perfume and the sun shines out of your forehead,” and everything else.

Layla: Right.

Nels: It doesn't work like that. Yeah, people like confirmation bias, I think is the term. People like to be reaffirmed that their views are always right than other prevailing views and that's how it becomes.

Layla: Right.

Nels: Yeah, but pre-social media, think of it. Yeah, pre-social media, there was no pushback whatsoever. It was just the news was the news was the news. It was just white men dictating what was going on.

Layla: Right. *Think Like a White Man* is written like a Machiavellian self-help, right? Like how to beat the white man at his own game and one of the questions that I was thinking about as I was reading it, and, obviously, you know, we've said this already, but this is — it is a satirical book, it's a satirical guide but satire is based in truth. It comes from truth and that's what makes it so funny or ironic. One of the things that I was thinking about as Dr. Boulé outlines how to, you know, get power in the way that white people get power, white men get power, I was really thinking about how do you maintain your sense of selfness as a black person, like in trying to use these techniques, lose yourself as a black person, because he's not a person that's like become a white man. That's not what he's saying.

Nels: Yeah. I think it's a good point actually, it's a good point, because the reality of the matter is — is that, look, it's the same question as do we go into the system to change the system? Do you change the system or does the system change you to become more like it? In my experience, it's normally the system changes you. So when you go into any form of profession, you'll probably find that you are eventually adapting the character, unless you're a very, very strong-willed person with a clear purpose set for yourself and the compass on how you're going to get — achieve what you want to achieve, and you're very good at wearing a mask and being — do different things —

Layla: Yeah.

Nels: It's very, very difficult to think that, hey, that what you do for the majority of the day, eight hours of the day, and an hour either side commuting, and take away another eight hours sleeping that you want — do you want to rest or you want to write books, or something else, you spend the majority of your healthy hours of the day inside this environment with people who — they need to see you in them in order for you to excel, in order for them to think that you're the right person in that environment. It's just very, very difficult to actually maintain some sense of self. It is very, very — as the old, I think it's Hawthorne who wrote that no person — no, he actually said no man, but no person could wear one face themselves and another to the multitude without finally becoming bewildered as to which face may be true. And so, such as that thing that often I see young people, young black people often go into their careers, sometimes you see some of them really just assimilate and go far pretty quickly because of the fact that they've either assimilated or they've been able to fake assimilation. And some of them you see the lights dimming, you can see when they're not coping with it and it's a sad thing when you see that situation. But the key thing here is — so back to just to answer the question very, very directly, in terms of maintaining a sense of self, I think — it's so complex a question. It's so complex a question. For me, how I maintain a sense of self is that at the core of everything I do, I always want to make sure people like myself are able to excel after me and also too I wanted to make situations better for people similar to me. That was the driving ethos which was behind writing the actual book and also too it's just who I am. I'm not an angel by any means. Actually, I should probably say I am an angel because if I woke up in my house tomorrow and killed by the police, that would probably be the headline, you know? He's not an angel by his own words. So, I am an angel, just to be clear.

Layla: By his own admission.

Nels: By his own admission. I mean, they said the same thing about Nelson Mandela, not so much — throwaway line, that's a gimme. By his own admission, he's not an angel but that was an angel. Back to it. So, I think that maintaining a sense of really understanding your purpose, and that's what, often, that's — **[inaudible]** why you're doing this, and what purpose are you doing it for. What did you get into this for and are you getting out of it what you want to get in — what you came into it for and that's that. So if I think of black professionals who've really done well, I

think of, say, there's a guy in America called Barack Obama. Interesting guy. He's done okay for himself.

Layla: He comes up a few times in your book actually.

Nels: He does. He does come up a few times. But when you actually look at it, did you see him on The Breakfast Club last week? Or whenever, a couple of weeks ago.

Layla: No, I have not yet so I'm listening to his memoir first. Yeah.

Nels: Okay. You can listen to it. But there's one moment that you can watch him on The Breakfast Club, there was one moment where I think they did quite a good job — David Olusoga who's a BBC British journalist, British historian, I should point out, an academic, did a very, very good job of questioning him. I think for a broad mainstream audience, but when it boiled down to actually really getting Barack Obama, asking tough questions on race from a black perspective and looking at what is it that you did for black people specifically to better their lives and this — I think Charlamagne's exact words were that "Things happened to us, systems were put in place, structures were put in place that put us in this situation. What did you do specifically to get us out of the situation?" And Barack Obama's answer, and they also asked him, "We're not interested in the rising tide lifts all boats or anything else. We want to know specifically what happened for us because our boat has a hole in the bottom." Barack Obama gave a generous answer. He gave pretty much the rising tide lifts all boats answer which was "Black people disproportionately benefited from my efforts." And I see that. But with myself, I don't know, that's why I doubt I'll probably become prime minister of the United Kingdom or President of the United States tomorrow, I would want to be able to answer that with absolute certainty. I'd want to be able to say that this is the difference I made and it cannot just be about, hey, particularly for people like me, because people who are playing from our sorts of background go through vicious experiences sometimes if we're not careful, both here and in Africa, you've lived on the continent yourself, you've seen how bad — I mean, Barack Obama's policies, for example, in Libya, the invasion of Libya, I was no fan of Muammar Gaddafi, I don't think he was good news, but the cascading of weapons from Libya down south into places like northern Nigeria led to my own brother getting kidnapped, and, literally,

I wouldn't wish it on anybody, but I had to negotiate my own brother's ransom to the point where we had to decide what is the cutoff point for us to say he can die and that we can't, we don't have this money, that he could die. And my brother and myself and, God bless him, a gentleman in the BBC who used to be a part of the security services helped us, showed us how to negotiate literally with terrorists, and to go through that experience, and these are the things that people often don't know about because, again, when you see people are saying, "Hey, we need to go into this country," they just don't know often the after effect it has on normal people and for the first time in my life I can think of, it came to my house. It came to my house. It was something that was very, very — it was such a unique, harsh experience. I wouldn't wish it on anybody just, again, it's one of those moments in life where you're there, you can't believe what you're going through, that you're here talking to a person who's saying to you, "If I call back and you do not have the right fee for me, I am never calling again," which means they're going to kill your loved one. And can you imagine the impact it has? And that was six days of terror and we could not tell British police and we could not tell Nigerian police because we knew that once the state gets involved, it becomes a bigger problem. And this has happened to lots of different people. So this has now become commerce, commercial activity on the ground. We just got lucky that he wasn't kidnapped for political reasons or for religious reasons, it was just monetary and so we could pay off money, but political or religious, the weapons in their hands and his body in their hands, it would have been a different thing altogether. So, anyway, so, yeah, so I think of those things in terms of like, yeah, so for myself, I think it's always just having a clear purpose and trying to make sure that in any position that you're in, trying to have a clear, vivid understanding of the impact you could potentially have. So, if I think of the predatory loans that in certain banks, for example, that were targeting ethnic minorities, particularly black people, which decimated black wealth for generations to come possibly, because most people's wealth is held in their household. If I think of those situations, I feel that there's much more that could have been done and I feel that somebody, and I'm not critical of Barack Obama, I think he's done, he's pretty much walked on water but to a certain degree, some of the people, I hope the next Obama who's coming along has a bit more purpose and service towards black people, in particular, and can recognize these things. So take a look at what happened with the predatory loans. It meant that black people getting their homes repossessed in large numbers, which

also meant that a bizarre thing happened during the Obama presidency in which the earnings of black people, the paycheck actually went up, the wealth of black people went down. So earning more money does not necessarily mean that you're actually becoming wealthier, that you're earning more net money, it's just that's liquidity, that means the money you use to live on a day-to-day basis. Wealth is often tied into your assets and if your assets have been stripped away from you so you're having to restart again, it becomes much more difficult, particularly as the housing market grows too, because getting back on that ladder becomes increasingly more difficult. So, yeah, so there's — or the same as stocks and shares or anything else. So it's a difficult one to answer your question in terms of how do you show you don't lose who you are. The answer is a lot of people do lose who they are and a lot of people just have to wear two separate faces, one for work and one for outside of work.

Layla: Yeah. There was something that really struck me as I was reading your book that this was like a satirical survival guide for, in this context, black people in the professional world, but as you said, in the world —

Nels: Yeah.

Layla: — and I was thinking about, you know, in *Me and White Supremacy*, I talk a lot about these different ways that white supremacy shows up in personal interactions and it's like you're showing that in these really tangible ways and saying, "This is how the world is, this is how it operates." Like you can want it to be different. You talk about, you know, there's no space for compassion and empathy because —

Nels: Yeah.

Layla: — the white man doesn't respond to that, right? You can't be an activist in the workplace because these will be the consequences of that happening. I wonder and I was thinking of when I was reading the book, I was thinking of my brother. So one of my brothers, the one who came after me, I'm the eldest, he came after me. He is obviously a black man who — he lives in the UK in London, works in the financial services industry, is an investment strategist.

Nels: Good.

Layla: A lot of his colleagues are white and up until I would say this year, he had some conversations before and was doing some work around race and diversity, but this year really ramped it up. I think both the impact of what the various things that have happened this year, the lynching of George Floyd, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and so on and so forth, also my book becoming what it is and him being my sibling, then people going, “Tim, have you heard of this person?” and he’s like, “That’s my sister. I’ve heard of her.” But he, for the first time, has been really vocal about race and racism in his industry. And my mom is like, “Is this going to be okay? Are you going to get fired?” you know? “It’s okay for Layla to do this. She’s self-employed. You need this job, right? You can’t be an activist. Let her be the activist, let her do those things.” So when I was reading your book about that you can’t be an activist, it just made me chuckle because so many people this year are for the first time saying, “I’m not going to bite my tongue anymore. I’m not gonna hold it back anymore. I’m gonna say what’s going on.” Do you think, because this book was written pre-2020, right? Pre-COVID —

Nels: Oh, yeah, definitely —

Layla: Pre-the Black Lives Matter movement. Do you think if you had written this book now, it would be written differently because of the freedom that we feel to say what we really feel?

Nels: Nope, it would not be written differently. Nope, not a word would be different. Look, as I often say to people, look, a poll just came out yesterday in Britain and they found that a majority of people in Britain, which is inadvertently a majority of white people, significant majority of white people, thought that the Black Lives Matter movement has set back race relations in Britain, or, to use their exact words, had increased racial tension in Britain.

Layla: Oh, wow.

Nels: So I was — at the height of within about a month of George Floyd being lynched, which is what it was, and I’m glad you used the right word, I was invited onto a podcast on Channel 4 with Krishnan Guru-Murthy. He asked me that question. Do you think this is it? Do you think this is that period? Is this the — is this the fall of the wall? Is this the

#metoo moment on race? It should be the #metoo moment on sexism or sexual abuse was — turned out as we thought it would, and it wasn't the fall of the wall, but, in retrospect right now, even at that moment, partly just for myself, I know this game too much. I just think to myself how it tends to work, that, yeah, we do have some degree of freedom to talk a little bit more and we're getting a lot of the lovely signaling. I don't know if you saw the adverts for Sainsbury's, for example, in the UK —

Layla: I did. I wanted to ask you about a post that you put out that is, again, one of your Instagram posts that I see and just chuckle to myself. You had an Instagram post. I wonder if I have it here actually.

Nels: Is it the one about the board?

Layla: It was. So, you said — I do have it here. You said, "Great that Sainsbury's," so, for context, because I know we have listeners and viewers who are not British and may not know what Sainsbury's is. So, can you tell 'em what Sainsbury's is and what you were referring to in this post and then I'll read it out.

Nels: So Sainsbury's is a large supermarket in the UK. I think it might be the biggest or the second biggest. It's an establishment supermarket in Britain. It's really — they sell good food. They really — they sell good food at nice prices and in large quantities, I'll say, and I think that I was just looking at it — so they had created an advert in Britain which had nothing but black people in the advert, which was fairly — which, trust me, in Britain, that's a revolutionary act.

Layla: And it wasn't about race, it was just an advert —

Nels: Gravy sharing black people. Yeah.

Layla: Right.

Nels: Yeah, British people, not just the ordinary people but enough racists went crazy on social media and I mean they went absolutely crazy. They thought that this advert was the front and they should change name from Sainsbury's to blackberries and all sorts of other bits and bobs. This is Britain. We're not good at anti-racism. We are very good at racism.

Layla: Right.

Nels: So there we go.

Layla: So you said in this post, “Great that Sainsbury’s has 100% black people in their Christmas advert. Shame that Sainsbury’s has 0% black people on their board and executive leadership teams. The game... is the game.

Nels: The game is the game. That’s how it goes.

Layla: I was like that is so Dr. Boulé. That is so what Dr. Boulé would say.

Nels: The game is the game.

Layla: Don’t get it twisted. This is the game.

Nels: This is the game. So, no, even — all the supermarkets, Sainsbury’s, Asda, all the coop, Tesco, they’ve all come together to do like an Avengers, anti-racist Avengers advert that went out last week Friday, but I didn’t even get to see it and they’ve all come to take a stand against racism. And I put up a post saying that, well, this is all nice and lovely that you’re taking a stand against racism, against anonymous online trolls that probably got three —probably some Jerry Springer contestant with three teeth sat in his soiled Union Jack flag in some damp house somewhere. That is great. But it’s easy anti-racism. There’s no threat to it whatsoever. So I just pointed out the next thing was that there’s some deportations taking place to Jamaica on Wednesday, next week, 80 something of us have — the prominent black people have come together and called for the government to scrap the deportations. That is racism. Some of these people have been in this country since they were children. The government themselves are just coming off the back end. The Jim Crow South did not deport black people in America.

Layla: No.

Nels: The Jim Crow — they enslaved black people before it became Jim Crow, but they did not deport black. Britain deported its own citizens back to the Caribbean and Africa.

Layla: Right.

Nels: And they're about to do something similar again. Maybe it's a bit more complex this time around but it's the same thing, "We don't want these people here," and that's pretty much it. And my thinking was, well, guys, you've got your feet wet now with anti-racism adverts, why not speak up on this one? Because it's very easy to offer people the pawn of white supremacy and just say, "Oh, yeah, well, this guy over here with three teeth and a swastika tattooed on his forehead, that's the white supremacist." But the reality of the matter is there's a lot more ingrained in that and when you look at the immigration policy, that is often ingrained white supremacy. Donald Trump made it explicit in America that, yeah, this is what's actually happening. And my thing was, well, you've got the power, you've got the popularity, and you also now have the experience, use it. Use some of that to actually save people's lives where it matters on the hard spaces. That is lovely to have an advert. An advert is good PR. This, potentially, and also to fighting powerless racism is easy. It's pawn. You're taking out the pawn. Take out a racist king or queen on the chess set for us and then I will applaud you. I think you'll agree, I love your advert of all black people sharing gravy and chicken legs and stuff and that's amazing. That's —

Layla: It's really a lovely ad, I will say. It's a lovely ad.

Nels: It's a lovely ad —

Layla: But it's also the kind of thing that people say, "Oh, well done, Sainsbury's. Look how diverse they are. Look how anti-racist they are," whereas behind the scenes, as you said, things are the same. The people pulling the strings, people actually in power, the people who have a say, it's the same.

Nels: Yeah. There was an old video one time, I remember the first — I was quite young and this was when Jay-Z had first blown up, within the first couple of years, after 1998 when Jay-Z became a really big concept but then there was one moment where you know those shows where they show you on MTV like a day in the life of somebody, so they did a day in the life of Jay-Z or something to that effect, and then now there's one moment, they had the camera on Jay-Z walking along but then I

think they just panned back a little bit and then they showed all the people around Jay-Z and it was just nothing but white people. I thought to myself, “What the hell is going on here? You’re a black rapper for crying out loud.” Right then — then it dawned on me that, oh, but it just showed to me this guy is becoming somebody very important very quickly, because you’ve got so many white people around you. They’re not there for —

Layla: That’s right.

Nels: They’re all getting paid. They’re there for a good reason. That is the level of executives that’s dealing with you is just at least notionally has just become to a different level and I just want to say this is just a bizarre thing. And the same thing happens because I’m a big Jay-Z fan. I lived when they showed his Tidal, his streaming service.

Layla: Yes.

Nels: When they actually showed the staff of the streaming service and they showed the whole staff and it’s he and Beyoncé were the only two black people in the entire room, it’s just a room full of — and I feel this is just fascinating that what — what is going on over here? And then when I got into banking, I saw the same thing too. There would always be the whole, “Yeah, we’re passionate about equality and diversity.” You think to yourself, really? So, how come I’m the only black person in here? I mean, and that was it.

Layla: Right.

Nels: So, yeah. My first — there was a very, really — when you’re in a job and they do your surveys, for example, they do surveys of how you think the department’s going and what’s happening and your thoughts of how the year has gone and everything else. So, they assured us all that those surveys were anonymous.

Layla: Okay.

Nels: So you could speak your heart, you could speak your mind. And I spoke my mind in the survey. And that was it. And the survey was

anonymous except for the fact they just asked about the demographics and I happened to be —

Layla: Right.

Nels: — the only non-white person there, you know? So —

Layla: So everyone else, this was anonymous except yours.

Nels: Yes, exactly. So at one point, they just said, so when they're reading the feedback to us about 2 months later, they said, "Yeah, so some of our more diverse staff, more ethnically diverse staff are not pleased with how things are going," and I thought to myself hold on a second, and then people start —

Layla: You're looking around, who?

Nels: I noticed the eyes on me. You know you can hear the movement, I just thought, I was like hold on, what ethnically diverse staff? That's me. I'm the only non-white person here. So then it just dawned on me and I'm never filling in one of those surveys again. That was a huge disaster, but there we go. That was that.

Layla: But it's funny but it's also so representative of so many people's experiences of being the only or being one of a small group, right? And then how free do you feel to truly express yourself, to truly share your experiences. There's an exchange in your book where a black man, I think, has gone to HR to ask — he's made a complaint that "I've been doing so well and hitting and exceeding all my targets. I've been identified as being groundbreaking and bringing these groundbreaking ideas and yet, I'm not getting the pay raise that I think I deserve and people who are doing far less work than me are getting paid more than me," and he gets asked the question by the white HR woman who tries to sympathize with him and say, "Do you think it's because of your race? Because, you know, as a woman, I know what it's like to be discriminated against." And, you know, he has that moment of, "Do I say it's about my race? What do I do?" right? And he decides to say, "Yeah, I think that's why," and Dr. Boulé, you know, says that's the end of your career. Like, that's it, that's the end of that job. It's done. You cannot say that it's because of your race. Like you write it in a funny way but it's like

it's one of those things, as I'm reading your book, it's funny but it's also like, ugh, you know? So mad, because these are people's real experiences.

Nels: Yeah. So what I tend to do, actually, that very moment there, I often rewrite it as a script. So whenever I'm doing events in corporations, for example, I just pick two people, I always show up with a wig and a waistcoat so I get a man to play the HR lady and the woman's playing the man and then just reverse roles. I get them to just read out the script to each other and the very moment when the lady says, "Does race have anything to do with it?" I tell him to stop right there and then and we then go around the room and say, "How should you answer that question?" And I just go around and say then, I'm essentially forcing people to think like a white man, to think like a black person who's having to think like a white man. And then it's literally just that exercise, then right there and then, I say to them, "Look, remember, this is just role play. You have no emotional baggage here whatsoever. You have no elements of worry about losing your job —

Layla: You're not gonna lose your job, right.

Nels: You just need to — tell me how should he answer this question?" His name is, I think it was Jerome, yeah. "How should Jerome answer this question?" And it's so interesting.

Layla: It's Tyrone.

Nels: Yeah, Tyrone, yes, Tyrone, yeah, the story of Tyrone, Tyrone Baidu. So in the book I actually call Tyrone Baidu from Erica Baidu's son called Tyrone, but I then go around the room, it's so interesting when I see the faces because the white men who are there, you can see that it's not an easy thing for them to answer. And you'll get some bright spark who would just say, actually, you should dodge the question, hand it back to him **[inaudible]** so that means he doesn't get any pay raise, he doesn't get anything else, but at least he lives another day. That means the pay gap, that's how the pay gap then actually occurs. And then everything else. And then it's just run through me, you just realize, quickly realize, it's a catch 22. That literally either you lose or you lose. And it's just fascinating. I like seeing — I love doing such an exercise because, number one, I love seeing the man sat there with a blonde wig on, I love

seeing because what I tend to bring — let's say I bring a waistcoat, a tie, and a do rag. So the woman who's playing the guy has to wear a do rag —

Layla: Oh, my goodness.

Nels: They play the black professional and everybody just says, "Do I have to really wear a do rag?" I'll say just listen, just play along with it, and they think it's fun up until that moment where everybody has to answer the question, how should you answer the question, and people quickly then realize how difficult this is because it rolls off the tongue but it's very, very difficult.

Layla: Yeah. And which makes me think about, you know, your book is it's laying the white man's game clearly out for us to understand and see how it works so that we can figure out how to navigate it but how do we take what we're learning and, I'm thinking particularly for black professionals but also black people just navigating white spaces in general, especially where how you show up will directly impact your job, your security, your money, things like that, right? Your reputation, things of that nature. How can black people — it's kind of similar to what I asked you before is how do you maintain that sense of self but it's more than that. It's how do we navigate these spaces in ways that are empowering to us, right? So I remember doing the Me and White Supremacy Instagram challenge and I remember so many black women DM'ing me and telling me how hard it was to see the challenge and seeing people writing, you know, white people writing their responses but it was also very cathartic and it was also very freeing because they were able to see, "Okay, I'm not just imagining that these things happen to me, these people are saying they do them. So now I know it's real, right? I can stop gas lighting myself, I can stop denying that these things are happening and then I can just live the way that I want to live because they're gonna think whatever they're gonna think of me anyway."

Nels: Yeah.

Layla: Right? So it's like the game is the game, right? So if this is the game, and we know how it operates, how do we then navigate those spaces and win, right? Like — and by win, I mean — I don't mean win like a white man and become a colonist and a capitalist, right? Take over

the world, but actually have a strong sense of dignity, a sense of success and achievement on our own terms, protect and take care of ourselves, things of that nature.

Nels: Yeah, it's a very good question again. So, in doing that analysis and driving it all down, I think that the sad reality is that often — or the advice that was given to me and often that the advice that I've had to take on board is that you as a black person in the professional world, you are almost at times preparing for your next day, your next step, and by that, I mean literally preparing yourself for catastrophe. So having a backup income, creating an entity outside of the business that you could switch to and get things done. Often, well, when I was in the — when I was working, when I was in the hiring, never the firing business I think but we would hire people, often people would look at CVs. I remember, we just probably send them and recruitment agency will send us about 12 CVs and recruitment agents were a big problem, part of the problem too, I must add, but they will look at those CVs and then sometimes you would see a black name, that I knew was black anyway, or this Nigerian name or Eastern African name or anything else, or a Tyrone who you just know no white parents would name their child Tyrone, and you'd often see that that person has moved around a lot more. And what would happen is the norm would be, okay, over the course of 10 years, you might see this person's worked in two organizations, an average person would work in two organizations, you might find that this person has moved around to five or six organizations in that time. And then the other people will say, "Hey, well, maybe he's just not that good," or, "Maybe she's just not stable," so just like that, maybe she's looking at another CV that's got great experience but — and I would often think to myself, I knew what it was, I'd just say, but I couldn't say it out but I just know that this is somebody dodging racism.

Layla: Yes.

Nels: This is somebody who is going through, I just knew that this is somebody who's going through a tough time, who doesn't want to just sit there and collaborate with their own subjugation. It is difficult to sit in a place knowing that you are being underpaid compared to your peers and you're working harder than them. It is difficult to sit anywhere and actually collaborate with your own subjugation knowing, going day in day out, that injustice burns, a lack of dignity or having to reaffirm your

dignity is a necessity in life. And so knowing all those things, the norm is for anybody with any self-respect, not any — for anybody with the ability, not self-respect, that's a harsh thing to say. If people saw something, they move, only to find that it's systematic. I don't think you saw Dave Chappelle's — Dave Chappelle gave this really great speech the other day where he's speaking about why he left his show, *The Chappelle Show* from the early 2000s and then why people should boycott —

Layla: I think he turned down a very big check, right?

Nels: Yeah, 50 million. He turned down 50 million, he walked away from 50 million, but now those shows are being put in all the streaming services and he's not getting paid for them and he just told people to boycott him, to not watch the show. And he's asked Netflix **[inaudible]** and not broadcast anything else. And he pointed out about how traumatic a period it was for him and when Dave Chappelle does stuff like that, he turned down 50 million for whatever reason, he walked away, it doesn't surprise me as much. When people are really shocked by it, it wasn't until when I went into professional life myself I realized that, yeah, okay, I could see why people walk away, or people pick themselves up and walk away sometimes. And I've seen it many, many, many times. I remember — I'll give you another point. There was a friend of mine who was working in a large asset management business with myself and her and I were meant to go for — meant to go out, meant to go out, supposed to meet up on Friday evening, because we both worked in the same department but I went home on a Friday evening, she said — I gave her a couple hours, three hours or so, then we'll both catch up. I didn't know she was being bullied at work. And this was an amazing, a beautiful spirit and soul and person. And she said, yeah, she will give me a call so I can meet her up and then we'd just meet up wherever we're going to meet up. And the call never came. And, of course, okay, a bit rude and that was that. Then a call never came on Saturday with an apology never came. And by this point, I was really, really fed up. I thought to myself, "Okay, this is quite rude of her," and that was that. And then on Sunday morning, I got a text message just saying, "Please come pick me up," and then I texted her back and I said, "Where are you?" and she said, "I'm in the office. I've been here ever since." She had been in the office from Friday morning right through to Sunday morning working nonstop. I went to come pick her up

in the office and — she was a black lady, of course. I went to go pick her up in the office, once I got to the office so she sat down in my car, she came outside, passed out in my car and said, “Can you please take me to my house?” I took her to her house and then she picked up — she went inside, she gave me a cup of tea, then she came out after and said, “Can you take me to the airport?” I took her to the airport, she went to Brazil and she never returned.

Layla: Wow.

Nels: That was it. These were the harshnesses that people work there sometimes that it can go in dark places but she was lucky she never returned. I got lucky that I never worked with anybody who felt the need to harm themselves in that degree, in a horrible way. But she was totally fine, although it went to the extreme so that element in which somebody might feel that their job is at threat and how do you respond to it and everything else that if you’ve not got your next day prepared, so with myself, for example, taking a step away over the last couple of years to do my own thing, yeah, I feel that I kind of lied to you and I’m pretty sure that if I start — a lot of black people I’ve been speaking to in recent times since the lockdown started, a lot of people are finding that their health has actually improved during the lockdown more so than the other way around, particularly their mental health has improved —

Layla: I’ve heard that a lot actually —

Nels: Yeah, you heard it?

Layla: Yeah, I’ve definitely heard it a lot from people who went from working in an office to working from home that there has been — and also black people who are parents who have black children who feel that their children are now safer because they’re at home rather than being either at school and having to deal with racism at school or having to deal with racism on the streets.

Nels: Yeah. It speaks volumes that, look, it speaks volumes that, look, hey —

Layla: It does.

Nels: So the recalibration of our society, when you're able to dodge — because racism is such a tax. It's such a burden on you. It's a financial tax, it's an emotional tax, it's a spiritual tax, it's a political tax. Even when you just touch on the political side of things, racism means that we can never really be full participants in Western democracies, because one party is always going to be on the extreme racist side of things and the other party is going to be on the mild side of things. So we're always gonna have to pick the milder party unless you're crazy and go to the extreme party. So, for example, in America, African-Americans don't really have much of a democratic space. They decided to vote for the Democrats or say that they'll sit down at home, waste your votes.

Layla: Right.

Nels: That's the two-party system because the Republicans have made themselves so anti-black, so synonymous with white supremacy, explicit white supremacy, which is clearly an issue also for Democrats, but to the point where participation democracy is, as in literally you go into the booth and have a real choice is non-existent. You don't really have a choice. You are just there. You're just part of the turnout to get the numbers that the Democrats who don't really like to do anything for you in return. And similarly, in Britain, where voting for the — I mean, the Conservative Party in Britain, I don't know if you've been watching what's going on here, but it's insane. It's crazy what's going on. There's a lady, the equalities minister, basically **[inaudible]** British equalities minister —

Layla: You post about her often.

Nels: The funny thing about it is that we are from the same place, we're both Nigerians, and she says so much stuff about Nigeria that is just not true. And sometimes, she's just not well thought through and I feel a bit bad for her because she doesn't want anything to do with race. But Boris Johnson has pushed her into this position which she is not equipped for, she has run away from it her entire life, and now she's been pushed here and she's having to figure this stuff out. She's getting into — you criticize somebody like Reni Eddo-Lodge.

Layla: Yeah.

Nels: Reni Eddo-Lodge is one of the best thought-through people on this subject in the world.

Layla: Amen. Yes.

Nels: In the world, and you are one of the worst thought-through people on this subject in the world. And for some bizarre reason, it's kind of like I described it to my friends, it's like, do you ever watch wrestling, Layla? So if you think of wrestling —

Layla: I used to when I was a kid actually, yes. I did.

Nels: I'll give you a classic example.

Layla: Okay.

Nels: Reni Eddo-Lodge is Hulk Hogan or the Ultimate Warrior.

Layla: Okay.

Nels: All right? In terms of actually understanding race and in order to explain what's happening in our society, then Kemi Badenoch who is the equalities minister in Britain is a guy called Jeff in his gray Y-fronts in the ring who literally is just there to take a battering, to keep the show on the road and that's pretty much it. Everybody knows which way this fight is going to end. The commentator doesn't bother introducing you, you're just a prop, you're just a prop there and, for some bizarre reason, you think to yourself normally, Jeff in the ring in his Y-fronts, his gray Y-fronts, doesn't say anything but for some bizarre reason, this Jeff feels that he stands a chance and I just think to myself, this is the insanity of Britain that it just — I don't know. It's a crazy and sad situation that by racism, I was going to write a satire about that racism has been good to Britain. That Britain owes a lot to racism and now asking Britain to divorce itself from racism —

Layla: Yes.

Nels: — is a hard sell because a lot of people know —

Layla: Yes. There's actually a quote of yours as we're winding up. There's a quote of yours that I want to read from the book. You said no matter what shenanigans and criminality it may have embarked on, Britain has always cloaked itself and marketed itself in the translucent cloth of philanthropy and humanitarianism, prospectively and retrospectively, even if that means destroying all evidence to the contrary. And I was just like, "Underline that," right? Because there's the propaganda that it tells itself about itself and then there's the realities of the way that it shaped the world, right? And shaped our lives and why we are even here having this conversation today.

Nels: Absolutely. Absolutely. We look at it, so, I mean, it is so vast that it's hard to actually really pinpoint and explain the role Britain played in actually cascading white supremacy and racism around the world. It's hard to really document it because you're going from place to place to place. Think of Nigeria, for example. Nigeria is the most populated African nation. It's got about 200 million people today, right? Nigeria is literally about 400 different nations all amalgamated into one for Britain's interest. So, you go to Nigeria today, right now, there's loads of people speaking loads of different languages. I'm from a place called Itsekiriland which most people, even in Nigeria, most people have never heard of Itsekiri people so when you speak to somebody, Yoruba house or Igbo, who themselves were told that you are the three main tribes, even the concept of a tribe as in a tribe suggests that it's about maybe a couple of hundred people just like this, that there's more Yoruba people than there are British people. There's about 70 million Yoruba people and there's about 65 million British people, and Yorubaland is bigger than Britain. But for some bizarre reason, Yoruba people are a tribe, yet Scottish people, who are about 4 million people, less than the population of London, are a nation.

Layla: Right.

Nels: So it's subjugated colonial language, the notion of a tribe, even with the Native American tribes. You would think that — when I was little, I used to think that, hey, the Indian tribes or Native American tribes, there was a couple of hundred people. I didn't know millions of people were massacred.

Layla: Right. Well, I think — I mean, the way that American history is taught too within a British curriculum, I don't know how it is now but when we were growing up, was very other and very much this myth of this mystical Native American, right? And the reality is obviously so different but I remember doing some research earlier this year about colonialism and how many Native American people were wiped out by the first Europeans that got to the Americas because of disease, right? And it was like, it wasn't a few people but that's the way that the story is told, right? It's told as it — that word "tribe," like you said, makes it seem like it's a really small group of people. It was a lot more than in the entirety of Europe. So it's a lot of people.

Nels: Yeah. Even when we look at things like the word "colonialism," for example, it is such a sanitizing word because when you're actually digging down deep into what that word actually means and the actions that that word is actually sanitizing and the actions or the policies and actions and beliefs that actually underpin that term, it was horrendous. The term "colonialism" sounds lovely but when you turn around and you start to dig deep into, hey, what happened in Kenya during the Mau Mau Uprising? How did Nigeria become — how did 400 distinct groups become one country? We look at it like the place to build an empire. It was literally an empire. Now, it's just a small region in Nigeria.

Layla: Right.

Nels: And that's pretty much it. So an empire, great empire with their bronzes and their arts went around the world, is still in the British museums 'til this very day, yet for some bizarre reason just became, yep, you're all one big conglomerate, just boom, Nigeria. And I believe in Pan-Africanism. I think that Africans should get rid of the silly European borders and create one profound nation which is the only route to power for us, I believe, make a strong Africa, because I don't really believe that, hey, the Togo or Benin Republic being beside Nigeria, one speaking French, one speaking English, having trade borders, it's crazy. It's never going to work. But the more I just think of everything that has happened to us collectively and the role that colonialism and the enslavement and everything else has played and the cascading of white supremacy, which is what colonialism and slavery were for capitalists for commercial benefit, it's a fascinating thing and the language that's come with it, even sometimes I often say to people that often I argue with

people to try not to use the word colonialism, try to use the word white supremacist rule, or genocidal white supremacy, and it becomes a little bit easier to understand what you're looking at over here when we say this. But it's the language, it's the way it is. Language is power. Language is also history too at the same time. It tells a lot of stories.

Layla: Yeah. I appreciate that. So we're gonna wrap up our conversation. It's been really fascinating and I really want to encourage people to get your book. One question, but I have another one. I know that we've gone a little over our time, but I'm really curious to know, you know, the book was published in the UK. It's now being published in the US as well, it's available in the US. British humor is very unique. Like I remember growing up, you know, we would watch shows like *The Real McCoy* and things like that, right? Like black, real black British humor. And I remember growing up and we didn't have a lot of American TV shows in the UK at the beginning. We do obviously now. But I remember first watching American humor being like it's too in your face, like it's too obvious, right? British humor sort of operates at this satirical level. In publishing the book to the US, were there things that you had to change or Americanize, I guess, in a way or did you feel like the humor still comes through in the same way?

Nels: I felt that, if there's any problem, it was more the other way around. The feeling was that the publisher wanted to make things a lot more British friendly at times. So it's written in a British voice.

Layla: Yes.

Nels: So blackness has dominated —

Layla: Yeah, you don't just cover the **[inaudible]** in your book.

Nels: Yeah. So what I wanted to write was I wanted to write a black book. I wanted to write the blackest book possible, something that was just so unbelievably black to black, black, black, black, and I wanted to be black across the board so it's something that you could pick up wherever you were —

Layla: Yeah.

Nels: — wherever there's a black population, in particular with the European presence there that you can understand the elements, because, look, if you're in Nigeria where there's not too many white people, a lot of this will probably go over your head because you don't have to deal with racism. You have to deal with horrible stuff. You have to deal with Buhari but you don't have to deal with Boris Johnson.

Layla: Right.

Nels: Which is a very different kettle of chips. But my objective was to write a black book that would just be something that black people pick up wherever they may be and feel the humor. So I want it to be something where if you listen to Eddie Murphy, Richard Pryor, Gina Yashere, for example, and her dead jokes that you could recognize that these were the people who inspired the humor here, but he's just writing on something serious. Yeah, hopefully he did that.

Layla: Yeah. Oh, fantastic. Okay. So, I want to leave this conversation, before my final final question, I want to leave this conversation with an inspiring, uplifting, empowering message for black people, black professionals, who don't want to think like a white man, who wanna succeed but on their own terms and who want to thrive. What words of inspiration do you have for them? Or advice?

Nels: My advice would be — okay, I'll give you — some words of inspiration would be no matter how bad today is, tomorrow could always be worse. That is not inspiring. That is not inspiring at all. That's just horrible. No. Inspiring words. **[inaudible]** Boulé Whytelaw's inspiring words that, look, for you to be where you are right now means that you've worked very, very hard and you are truly, truly, truly a special person. You are an Olympian of skill, when it comes to — of professional skill, because you are where you are truly on merits. No one has helped you get here. No one paid for you to get into university, no celebrity mum paid for you to get into university, unless you're adopted by some sort of white celebrity. If you were, congratulations, you've got it made, you should not be working right now, you should be somewhere counting your money. But there's no shortcuts for us or anything else. There's always only ever the long route and we have to go around longer and run faster and harder but you've made it and you're going to continue making it and I think that you should be proud of yourself and

recognize that, look, that you are where you are and you're going to where you're going so you're going to get there with your head up high.

Layla: I love that. Thank you. And just that reminder I think as well that we're not alone, right? Because so often we feel like we're navigating these spaces alone but the more I talk to different people, the more I'm like, "We're navigating them together."

Nels: Together, absolutely.

Layla: Yeah.

Nels: Absolutely. We are navigating these spaces together. We swim together, we are birds of a feather. We flock together.

Layla: All right, our final question that we ask every guest, what does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Nels: It means to live with purpose and to set the groundwork for the people coming after you, to make the lives of the people coming after you easier and make the memories and the thoughts and those who came before you, to make them proud of you, that you've done something, that you've made a contribution, that you've made a difference and I think that's the key thing, you've made a positive difference, yeah, and I just stated before you've made those that came before you proud, that you made those who came after you not just proud but you made their lives easier. I think we all do that by our hard work and creating methods and technologies and satirical books to help us all get by.

Layla: Yeah, I love that. Well, thank you, Nels. You're definitely making so many of us proud, what you've contributed into the world with this book, which is such a one of a kind book. There have been many anti-racism books published this year but also in the years prior. This is the first time that I have seen a satirical self-help book that lays it all there and does it in such a wonderful way. So, thank you for what you've contributed to the world, for your good ancestorship, your good ancestor work. I cannot wait to see more of what you write. I can't wait to read it and I know that, one reader at a time, you're opening people's

eyes and you are also empowering us as black people to own our voice and to own our power. So, thank you.

Nels: Thank you so much, Layla. Bless you. Thank you so much. I'm really grateful for you having me. And thank you to you for being an inspiration and a great ancestor yourself too. So thank you very much.

Layla: Thank you.

(Outro)

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