

Borderless Re-membrance: Layla K. Feghali Interviewed by For The Wild

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SPEAKERS

Layla K. Feghali, Ayana Young, For The Wild Announcement

For The Wild Announcement 00:00

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Ayana Young 00:33

Welcome to For The Wild podcast. I'm Ayana Young. Today on the show I'll be speaking with Layla K. Feghali, an ancestral remembrance practitioner, herbal medicine maker, storyteller, and archivist. She has a background in traditional and ancestral healing practices, plantcestral aka herbal medicine, community organizing and mental health and incorporates her knowledge in all these fields to support healing and education in her communities.

Layla K. Feghali 01:06

Our plants are our ancestors. Yes. What does that mean? They evolved before humans. They've been on this earth for a really long time. They have consciousness and we literally depend on plants for everything, even if we don't consciously acknowledge that.

Ayana Young 01:26

Layla's work is dedicated to reviving earth based ancestral knowledge, with a special emphasis on the remembrance and restoration of sacred ancestral wisdoms from the SWANA aka MENA region, where her own ancestors originate. Her approach emphasizes relationship building, ancestral healing, and honoring the embodied knowledge that lives deep inside our bones and the body of the earth. She is currently based between her ancestral village in Lebanon and her diasporic home in Tongva aka Los Angeles, California where she was born. You can learn more about her work, her herbal medicine offerings, plantcestral remembrance classes, embodied research project and her other offerings at www.riverroseremembrance.com and visit the online community archival project she hosts at www.swanaancestralhub.org. Well, Layla, thank you so much for joining me in conversation today. I

feel really excited and just relaxed to be speaking with you about this range of topics that we'll cover today.

Layla K. Feghali 02:38

Thank you so much. I'm so honored that you've invited me and I'm really looking forward to our conversation.

Ayana Young 02:45

Me too. So before we delve into the many facets of your work around plantcestry, re-membrance and storytelling, I want to begin by recognizing the term SWANA which stands for South West Asia and North Africa. So I'd love if you could talk a little bit about why the use of SWANA is important, and how it refutes colonial understandings of the 'Middle East' and also, how does it acknowledge the abundance of languages, religions, cultures, and ethnicities that are otherwise erased under the title of Arab?

Layla K. Feghali 03:24

Yeah, thank you for that question. So SWANA is the geographical way to describe the area, as you said, known as the Middle East and North Africa. And the reason that I and others have started to use that term is because the Middle East positions us in relation to Europe, Middle of where? East of where? So South West Asia and North Africa is a less colonial way to geographically place the region and it's a very diverse region which straddles different continents. It straddles different racial groups, different ethnic groups, different linguistic groups, different religious communities. So, you know, Arab, actually doesn't even represent the whole region, even ethnically, not even remotely. I could really dive in deep on this one and it's a little bit of a controversial topic for some people, actually. But even many of us who are identified geopolitically as Arabs, contemporarily aren't necessarily ethnically Arab. We've been Arabised. It's a tricky thing. So for me, SWANA is a language that allows us to include a lot of the communities and the histories and eras of our lineages that can be erased in other language about the region.

Ayana Young 04:55

Yeah, I could see that from just your brief explanation so far. And if there is anything else that you want to dive into under this topic, I'm really excited to hear more about that, if you do want to take a little more time.

Layla K. Feghali 05:09

Well, I will say that, for me so my ancestors, at least in recent generations come from Lebanon or probably more accurately for me to say بلاد الشام [bilad alsham], which is the Arabic way that we refer to the Levant, which includes Palestine, Syria, parts of Jordan, and Lebanon, for the most part. Before European colonial borders were drawn around that region, we were kind of a borderless region with a lot of migration and movement in between and, like a lot of places in the world, were more organized around small localities like villages or tribal identities or even families that live in certain areas, but all kind of had relationships and movement between one another. So what I'll say is that when we talk about the culture ancestrally of that region, that those countries are all considered Arab countries right

now. And we are, you know, we speak Arabic we live the geopolitical realities that it means to be an Arab, you know, in the political sense in this moment. And most of us have Arab blood to some level or another. But also, that part of the region is not the origin place of who are actually Arabs, that come from deeper in the Arab Gulf regions. And because we've had so much migration and movement, I surely have Arab blood, but I also have a lot of other blood that I just feel like has been colonized so many times over over the past five thousand years that it's almost like people from the region don't even acknowledge or remember that anymore. So it's very deep layers of amnesia or erasure or just having forgotten or become kind of disconnected from who we were and who we are.

Ayana Young 07:24

Thank you Layla for going a bit deeper into that with us. Now on the River Rose Remembrance about page you write, "Our work is dedicated to re-membling, reclaiming, and restoring the original baladi, ancestral wisdoms and paradigms of practice across our respective communities. Our approach is rooted in healing relationship, unveiling stories, and awakening embodied memory resilience, knowledge in collaboration with the natural world". So I'd love if you could begin by speaking to the work of re-membrance as it relates to our liberation and earthly restoration. And then how is re-membling also deeply tied to the rewiring of our thoughts, gathering of memory and the work of repair, which is to say engaging with something that is uncertain.

Layla K. Feghali 08:19

I feel like for me re-membrance, it has layers. So on one hand, for me, the work of re-membrance is connected to re-membling ourselves just on a really personal level. Re-membling who we are, what our soul was brought to this earth to do, re-membling our essence, when we drop in deeper beyond the kind of social identities and pressures and experiences and things that inform and are part of who we are, of course. But I also think of re-membrance, I feel like when we really go deeper and deeper into that work of reclaiming and re-membling who we are, it's directly related to earthly justice. Just like every other being that exists on this earth, we are part of the natural world. And the natural world operates in relationship and every ecosystem and every little tiny organism in any ecosystem has a really specific function that we require in order for everything else in the ecosystem to maintain balance. And so for me, the work of re-membrance is reconnecting to that specific role, that specific life function and purpose and spirit that we carry. That basically, when it falls into place, allows our whole communities to be thriving and working. Because we're all part of nature, I believe that it's pretty simple like without even getting too heady about it, it's pretty simple and clear that if we all reconnect to that, it will naturally match with just the ecological integrity of our world. Because that's how we're designed. That's how we're designed. And that's not to say that in the modern world, we don't have other functions that are evolutions of this moment and this era of technology and just all the realities that exist in our contemporary world. But I think that life is true and intelligent, no matter what. We still all drink water to survive. We still all breathe air, we still all eat from the earth. So that's a truth that doesn't really change and it doesn't really shift. So on the other level of just liberation and how that plays into our social fabric, our political realities, all the oppressive ways that humans have chosen to conduct things and many times in ways throughout the more recent eras, and probably throughout history to some level or another, of course. I don't want to romanticize the past. But for me, the work of re-membrance, and when I say, reconnecting to our original ancestral traditions and paradigms and ways of being, I

believe that the earth has its own laws. And there are universal laws that are basically designed to affirm and protect the integrity of life and its cycles. And so I think the work of re-membrance, it embodies the dignity that we really seek when we're speaking about liberation, it just gets to the root of it. Because if we really re-membered in that way, we would start to be keyed back into the laws of the earth instead of the man made laws that are kind of running a muck in this contemporary moment. I think that's why I like to emphasize our Indigenous ancestors and relatives, because those are the laws that our Indigenous ancestors and relatives, both contemporarily and throughout history all around the world have been heeding.

Ayana Young 12:24

I definitely agree with you on that. I want to explore the terminology of plantcestor which you're responsible for popularizing and coining. I guess I'm wondering if you can share a little bit about how this understanding came about and why is it so important to give it recognition through definition? And then maybe perhaps, if you could speak to the relationship between us and plants as it relates to memory? I think about why or what do our plantcestors remember and in what ways do they act as vessels?

Layla K. Feghali 13:02

I don't know how the term itself came about. It was just like my ancestors just put it in my ear, you know. And it felt like the culmination of things that I had been learning and being taught by a lot of my teachers before that moment. So I do want to acknowledge that while I think I popularized the term and I never heard it, and when I did research I didn't read of anyone else using it before me, the concept itself of our plants being our ancestors, it's definitely one that does not belong to me. I think it belongs to Indigenous People all over the world. So one of the first teachers and friends that talked to me about this concept, and I just remember really clearly a conversation we had about it, was my friend Atava Garcia Swiecicki who tends Ancestral Apothecary in Oakland. I was in a dream circle that she was facilitating and we were working with plants intermittently within that dream circle. I remember there was a conversation before class or after class, and some of us were just sitting around. We were talking about plants and she just said, "Well, our plants are our ancestors". And we got into this conversation with whoever was there about that. Of course, she probably learned that through all of her teachers before that, too. So for me, I feel like that understanding and then when my ancestors kind of gave me the word plantcestor all together, it felt like it turned into more of a paradigm than just a language. So in terms of why is it important to recognize. It's not really about ownership. It's about more about the fact that I think that that language speaks to a whole paradigm of understanding, a whole relationship, a whole body of knowledge and relationship really, that probably extends beyond me. And that I've also, I feel like I've grown in my relationship to that word and the spirit and the energy it carries. It's informed a whole practice that I facilitate, for re-membrance in my community personally. When you talk about what do our plantcestors remember? That's the part that this term kind of speaks to me around a lot. Our plants are our ancestors. Yes. What does that mean? They evolved before humans. They've been on this earth for a really long time. They have consciousness and we literally depend on plants for everything, even if we don't consciously acknowledge that. We're breathing oxygen that they are creating for us. Everything we're eating comes from plants, even animal products come from plants, they eat plants. Our medicine is still made of plants, even pharmaceuticals originally come from plant

components. A lot of our houses are made of plants. Our clothing until recently has been all made of plants. We are in very deep, intimate relationship with them. They literally create the foundation of our cellular and physical beings and bodies. So what don't they remember? I like to really emphasize the importance of working with plants from our ancestral and our bio regions. So where we live, the plants native to where we live, and the plants native to where we come from because plants eat sunlight, they photosynthesize. They consume, they live through digesting light, they digest the patterns of the stars and the exact way and formation that they move above the skies of where we are or where we're from. All the interactions that they have with their pollinators that change from ecosystem to ecosystem, of the soil and the water and all the memory and all the wisdom and all the intelligence of life, of just the raw material of creation goes into them. They're basically the bridges between us and those worlds in such an immediate way because we then consume them into our body. So I feel like for me, the plantcestors, they are our memory. They are the reason that we know and remember things. They have literally made up who we are and all the kind of raw creation wisdom that feels disconnected or forgotten. I really feel like they wake that back up in our bodies when we relate to them with intention and respect.

Ayana Young 18:18

I have experienced what you're talking about in my own life with plants and that re-membrance and having that element of respect and integrity and attention to them is mandatory to allow the re-membrance to start flowing. It just makes me curious too about plant memory and climate change or plant memory omits places that have been clear cut or poisoned or extracted from etc. And I know you often talk about the Lebanese cedars who have historically endured mass clearing throughout changing empires and so I'm interested to hear if you have anything to speak to about the Lebanese cedars directly or the plants that have been, gosh, really raped and poisoned and I guess also maybe another part to that question is if you think there's a correlation between, let's say the age of an individual species like thinking about old growth species, and what they may be able to hold compared to the newer ones.

Layla K. Feghali 19:35

That's a deep one to contemplate. I've thought about that a lot myself. I do experience on a personal level, that old gross species have something. I mean, they're carrying memory that is just older. So I guess that it makes sense that there's something really special there and that it opens a portal into other worlds. Most old growth species, I guess, are trees. And I feel like I think of trees, like the cedars and other trees, redwoods [and] other trees, they carry so much life inside them beyond their own life because they become homes to animals, fungi, smaller plants. They are like these mothers that sort of nest all this other life inside of them. So I really think about how whole ecologies get erased when an old growth species is cut down not just that species, every single species that has depended and revolved around it for their life. So your question about cedars makes me want to just say explicitly that beyond the kind of more physical reality that I was speaking of around how plants make who we are, I subscribe to the beliefs of a lot of Indigenous peoples around the world that these plants are also, they're not only part of our consciousness, but they're part of our actual existence on a spiritual level, on a cosmological level. I have an Elder that I have been so honored to build relationship with up in the old growth cedar forests in Lebanon over the past several years. Recently on one of my visits with him,

he quite simply said to me, "Basically when the cedars cease to exist, we will cease to exist". They are us, especially the cedars because they're a creation site for us. They're not just important trees that have spiritual value, even for social or cultural value or whatever it is. They are our literal creation site. Our cosmologies begin there. So in some spiritual way, we're bound to each other. And the fact that they've been clear cut, but never completely exterminated, is really powerful. It's as powerful as the fact that they've been clear cut and the immense grief that that could cause. But the fact that they still exist and that some of them exists and that there's starting to be a consciousness coming back that is really pushing people to reforest them in a mass way. To me, it's a direct reflection and expression of us as a people. I feel like maybe I'm being a little abstract about answering your questions so let me know if this doesn't feel direct enough for you. But quite simply, we can't exist without them and when we exterminate these natural habitats, we're really exterminating ourselves.

For The Wild Announcement 23:22

Hey For The Wild community, Ayana here. As appreciative as we are of the sponsorships we receive throughout the year, we can't continue to produce the podcast on their generosity alone. I know I've mentioned this before, but I just want to take a moment to express how much time, effort and care goes into the preparation and production of our episodes. From research, writing, production, outreach and social media content. With the format that we work in and other forms of emerging digital media in general, it's hard to demonstrate just how much work goes into the product that listeners have come to expect. Over the years for the wild has grown into a small, dedicated and loving team of individuals who are committed to the work that we do. We all consider ourselves lucky to be able to do this work amongst each other and create unique offerings each week. However, For The Wild also wants to make sure that we're able to pay a living wage and support individuals in living a dignified life. As it stands right now, the funds we raise through our Patreon only cover the cost of one of four to five episodes we produce a month. If you want to see us continue, or perhaps are especially moved by the episode you're listening to today, please become a monthly sustaining member through our Patreon or consider making a one time donation directly to us through our website. You can do so at patreon.com/forthewild or by visiting our website at forthewild.world/donate. Alright, thanks so much for listening. Now let's get back to the interview.

Ayana Young 25:02

These topics that we're speaking about together cannot be spoken about with a direct linearity. To them, they're too big, they're too vast. They're, they're too powerful for us to understand in those ways and I don't even think it's a respectful way to speak to these topics. So I'm really enjoying the way that you're inviting us into being with these questions. I'm wondering if now more than ever, we might need to really call upon the power of co-creative cultures and I also imagine that co-creative culture really must play an important role in navigating ancestral inheritance and re-membrance. So I'm wondering if you would share a little bit more about this, especially as it relates to the SWANA regions. Historically, I'm wondering how has colonization conflated notions of homogeneity with safety and why is it vital to uplift the histories of migration, exchange and relationship?

Layla K. Feghali 26:09

Well, gosh, since we're talking about ecosystems and ecologies, I guess I'll just leave it at that because migration is very natural. This actually gets back into the conversation about Arabness and indigeneity within the context of the SWANA region and identities and the terminologies that are used and all of that, because I think some people have this concept that when your bloodlines are mixed, for example, if I carry Arab ethnic blood, but I also carry blood that's native to the part of the eastern Mediterranean, that is called بلاد الشام [bilad alsham], does that mean that I'm not Indigenous? Or that my ancestors or people are not Indigenous or whatever? I feel like no, that's not what it means. There is absolutely nothing that is not natural and Indigenous in every species of life beyond humans that does not migrate. Migration is so much a part of the way that life functions. Plants and animals and sand from the deserts and waters and everything. Everything in our world moves beyond fixed borders and travels back and forth and moves in things that are not lines. We are not stagnant. Nothing about life is stagnant. And so in some ways, it's just colonization. First of all, just even cutting us into lines and borders is the first place where that fallacy kind of begins because some people actually take controversy with the language of SWANA because splitting Africa into north and not north is offensive in a lot of ways, and splitting just these different regions up from each other is problematic to people and I can definitely hear why. But on the other hand, those borders, those continental definitions mean nothing. The land defines how we relate and how we don't relate and who we exchange with and where we exchange with and what gets created through those relationships. So I think that's the same on ethnic fronts and across racial lines. Now, all that being said, I am not a proponent of appropriation being masked as cultural exchange. That is not what I'm saying. I absolutely do not support that or condone that in any way. I think I'm more of the mind that when we acknowledge the ways that who we are and where we come from is informed by the land it's the part of, not in a stagnant way, but in a moving way. A lot of that stuff makes sense. When we root ourselves in the specific place and culture and people and origin that we come from, the way that we exchange and relate and co-create, becomes more respectful by itself, it just becomes that way. Because we are something. We're coming to the table with something. So I think that's part of the work of re-membrance for me in terms of how it also rebalances some of the really problematic, quote unquote, cultural exchanges that we're having in the contemporary world, it's that it repositions us in relationship to home but not in a stagnant way, in a way that creates more possibilities for reciprocity and mutual recognition within exchange that happens along natural lines. So in the SWANA region, for example, I come from Lebanon most contemporarily. We recognize the ancestors of that region about four or five thousand years ago, to be the Phoenicians or the Canaanites. The Canaanites are believed to come from the eastern Nile Valley, which would probably be around like Ethiopia or Eritrea, or Sudan. I think about the fact that the Nile river runs all the way from the depths of East Africa, up through northeast Africa, into North Africa, Egypt, into the Mediterranean. And all those places along the Mediterranean have pieces of the Nile River inside of them. Culturally, people have moved in the same direction. So that feels really old and remote in some ways. But when I went and visited, for example, the Nubian communities in the south of Egypt and I started to ask them for their oral histories about lineage and where they come from and who they are and how they define their own tribal and historical terms, because I really think it's important for us to ask people for their local version of history and not just rely on what we read on Wikipedia or whatever. And when the Elders who I was speaking with started to talk and share with me, eventually I asked them and what was your relationship to the Canaanites civilizations of my ancestral region? And he looked at me and he said, "you guys were one of the tribes of Nubia, and you traveled north, and it was

like a big dramatic thing and there was conflict about the decision to do that. And that's it. You were tribe of Nubia". It reminded me, that I was like, oh so when people say you guys are Canaanites and you come from the eastern Nile Valley, and then you go and visit people who live along the Nile, and still have their Indigenous language and their stories and their histories to a greater extent than a lot of us, and they corroborate that story and say the same thing. Then I go up to the Sinai Valley, which is a Bedouin area in the north of Egypt, basically north east of Egypt. That kind of is like the land mass that bridges Palestine, to Egypt or Africa to South West Asia, if we want to speak in colonial continental terms. I spoke with the Bedouin Elder there and we talked and we connected and I said, "you know, who are your ancestors? Where's your lineage from? What is your origin?". And I had always been taught that Bedouins originally are Arabs, they're ethnic Arabs that mostly come from the Gulf Arab region and that's their ethnic lineage. So he looked at me and he said, "Well, who are your ancestors?". He turned the question back to me as Elders do sometimes. I said, "Well, our ancestors are Canaanites". And he got a big smile on his face and he told me to turn my head and to look at this mud brick on his wall. He lived inside the valley, he was still living in the traditional way, off the grid in the middle of a valley inside the Sinai region, in a house with traditional mud blocks that he constructed the house of and written on the mud block. It said in Arabic, كنعان, which is Canaan aka Canaanites. He said, "I want you to see that that was there before you got here so you know that I am being honest with you. When my children asked me who we are, I tell them that we're Canaanites. That's our lineage". And I said to him, "Oh, I didn't know I thought that most Bedouins come from the Arab Gulf originally. He said, "Yeah, there's four different tribes, main tribes, and our lineage in this region comes from Canaan". So I could see the map in the oral histories of moving up the Nile, to the Sinai which is the bridge between the continents, and up into Palestine, and Lebanon, and Syria, all of which were part of the land of Canaan, and I see how my ancestors migrated. So to think about myself in relationship to only the landmass of Lebanon, it would be false. It would erase so many expressions and origins of my lineage and I'm just stopping at that area. But then, you know, you go to Sicily and Malta and the northern coast of Morocco and Tunisia, and they were all places that had Canaanite influences because we're connected through the waters, whether it's the Nile, all the way up through the Mediterranean, we're connected through the land. So I feel like the land, ultimately, not the borders, but the land and the way that our ecosystems and ecologies move. They are what we as humans follow and they determine the realms of exchange, and interaction and co-creation that we have just like they do with everything else in nature.

Ayana Young 35:48

Thank you Layla for that description. I was following your words through the map of my mind. That was really lovely to be transported to your homeland. So thank you for that. And now I'd be really remiss if I didn't bring up plantcestry in context to earth renewal. And in preparing for this interview, I came across something you wrote quite some time ago on the SWANA ancestral hub about Nefertem, or the Egyptian Blue Lotus. So I was wondering if you could talk about how you've been guided to protect and revitalize plantcestors through your work with River Rose and perhaps share the story of Nefertem as an example of the ways in which others are caring for plantcestors with purpose.

Layla K. Feghali 36:37

Well, it's so interesting because you're bringing up all these creation plants. So Nefertum is a deity of the Egyptian Pantheon who is the spirit of the Blue Lotus and I believe that's the only plant that actually is a deity in that Pantheon. And not that there aren't plants associated with other energies but that Nefertum is a deity and in some of the cosmologies in Egypt is a creation site similarly to the cedars. And I won't go geeking out too far on that but there's a relationship in our cosmology, even between those plants. So in 2016, I made a pilgrimage that was something that had been calling me for a really long time to kind of expand beyond Lebanon and really start to travel other parts of my ancestral region in an attempt to re-member and just to really immerse myself in the memory of the land in a different kind of way. And speaking of relationship across places and cultures, just an acknowledgement and a recognition that there's been so much migration and interaction, that there are pieces that I have lost that I might find in Egypt or in Iran or in Morocco or in wherever it is that are related to what I seek and what feels lost in Lebanon, for example. So when I went there, that was my only goal. It was really to immerse myself in the sacred places and make offerings to these different ancestral lands and be receptive and really listen with my being and yes, talk to Elders and people along the way if they presented themselves but it was really more of a spiritual journey. So I actually wasn't thinking about connecting to Nefertum or the Blue Lotus in a conscious way or it wasn't like part of my plan or my intention or what I was seeking, but it just kind of came to me. So it came to me through a woman who is an Elder who is interested in re-membering and reviving the ancestral Pantheon and paradigms of knowledge in Egypt, and had been relating to one of the last botanists in Cairo, who she said was basically protecting seeds and plants of the old, old grain in Egypt. Egypt is different than Lebanon and other parts of the Levant in that it's a different landscape. It's desert, it's Nile river beds, so it's got different plants, different energies and in a lot of ways it doesn't have as many plants in the city in particular, it's not like a very plant rich place. So actually talking about plants in Egypt, it didn't get very far. There were very few people and very few plants that people were talking about, except in the Sinai region really. And probably in the Nubian territories where they have a little bit more fertile and agricultural and planting cultures because they're still along a part of the Nile that's really lush. So this woman basically, when I met her, I was really excited because there just weren't a lot of people who are talking about that. And she basically said, my mission is to resurrect and revive the presence of this plant because she believed (much as we were talking about with the cedars) that the consciousness carried inside the plant is an important part of reviving and restoring our people and the conditions and the social realities and the spiritual and the physical and all the realities of how people are living in Egypt and in our region right now. So she just felt like, the further this plant goes, the more it's consciousness will be present on this earth and that it is my responsibility to tend and she asked me to take one with me to grow in Lebanon which was a great honor. She gave me instructions about how to plant it in a sacred way that honored and invoked the spirit of Nefertum, the deity that is embodied by that plant. I obviously felt like the mystery within that flower and that particular effort to revive our sacred plants, which is something that I'm just lucky that I found her but it's not luck. It was just that our destinies are synced up in that way. The understanding and the intention around these sacred plants having a place in supporting the consciousness of our people, as well as our lands and restoring on that level, it's growing in our region. Slowly and quietly, but it's growing. So she really honored me with the gift of being a part of that, in bringing that plant to Lebanon. It's interesting, the way that I have wanted to work with this in terms of not just the hands on plant cedars and lotuses in the earth and in the waters, which is really important, but I really wanted to use the tools and skills I have, especially as

a diasporic person. I knew that flower essences are a really powerful way to capture the consciousness inside these really sacred plants and I feel like part of the reason she wanted Nefertum to be planted was because the consciousness of its presence needs to be present in our beings. Actually, that's what my SWANA flower essence medicine line is about. [It] was really about kind of sharing some of these stories and allowing the reach of these sacred plants to go beyond borders, beyond locales. This is something my Indigenous Elders from here have taught me, and one Lakota Elder of mine specifically used to tell me all the time. That re-membrance (she didn't say it in this words, I'm using the language of re-membrance) but she would tell me basically and affirm for me that re-membrance is a global project because most Indigenous people in this world right now have lost pieces of their knowledge or their memory, their wisdom, and she really was telling me that within the Lakota paradigm, that the belief was that we all have pieces that each other need and so tending our local cosmologies and ancestral wisdoms will feed and like kind of fill the pieces of the puzzle so that everyone else can fill theirs. I remember having dreams, actually, after I received Nefertum that I was gifting a lotus to an Indigenous Elder here. Basically to say that I feel like flower essences are really potent because it's important for people here to experience the vibration of the sacred plants and consciousness inside the plants in Lebanon, or in West Africa, or in Australia, or in Mexico, or in wherever it is, like we need the pieces of consciousness that live inside these energies are needed for all of us to re-member where we're from and who we are, and to kind of fill that puzzle. And so yeah, my way of kind of doing that has really been through the flower essences besides just tending because it's really hard to travel with plants these days, like, TSA is really not about that life. So I travel with the flower essences. And, you know, I hope that that's a way that the consciousness inside these plants can just wake up what needs to be woken up in people wherever they are.

Ayana Young 45:29

As I'm reflecting on your last response, I'd really like to bring into conversation, the topic of indigeneity because we can't talk about ancestry without recognizing its existence. I know on your website, you point out that we have to acknowledge that at some point, all of our ancestors were Indigenous to the land. But I want to talk about the delicate work that needs to be done around claiming ancestry and indigeneity in terms of the entangled histories and present day manifestations of privilege and oppression. So I would really love if you could speak to how you have navigated this personally so that others might be able to feel a little more clarity in their own journeys.

Layla K. Feghali 46:19

Yeah, that's part of the reason that I like the language of re-membrance also, because for me re-membrance is a process. So I say that to say that our ancestors were all Indigenous at some point. However, that does not mean that we are all Indigenous right now. And I think that is really important. So for me re-membling is like a process of growing in proximity to and honoring the ancestors of my lineage that were Indigenous and the Indigenous wisdoms that exist within my lineage and within my bones, but I say that and acknowledge that as a person who did not grow up in an Indigenous way. I grew up in a traditional way, and to some level, the things that I was acculturated within my traditional immigrant family are extensions or expressions of aspects of our indigeneity. But you know, there's also layers around what indigeneity means. There's a political reality of being Indigenous right now, as we see and know the ways that people who are actively fighting to protect their languages, their territories,

their lands, their waters, their basic dignity and rights as human beings who are connected to a land base and a whole paradigm of living that is connected to that land base in this capitalist colonialist era of time, that cannot be ignored or conflated with someone like me, for example. I didn't grow up in that active struggle. Maybe my ancestors four generations ago did. But that's not my reality. I grew up in the US responsible for a lot of colonial things on land that the Indigenous people of this area still don't have rights to and never invited us or gave us permission to be here. That is all really important. Then the other layer is that I think of indigeneity as a whole paradigm of practice. I think of, while not all Indigenous people are living like this right now because some of them are experiencing that political struggle, but not necessarily connected to the older parts of their paradigm. So that's why I'm separating these things. I hope this makes sense. But Indigenous also is a whole paradigm of practice. It's people who are heeding the origin stories. The cosmologies. The original ways of living as instructed by the lands that they are from and tending those relationships and basically living in sync to those earthly laws that I spoke of before, that their whole society and reality of life is being defined by those laws, and not the laws of the world. And that's kind of like where my spirit is at but I don't know if I will ever really be able to fully claim and embody that because I'm healing. I'm healing from colonialism. Parts of me will never be touched by colonialism, those Indigenous parts of me, but it doesn't make me Indigenous right now. I think you understand this but hopefully that makes sense. So for me, that being said, I really feel that the work of reconnecting to our ancestors and our origins is how we come into a better relationship in supporting Indigenous people and their struggles right now. And I say that as a person who, I'm not really a fan of solidarity culture. What I mean by that is I believe that relationship culture is a lot more authentic and powerful. I would want someone to relate to my struggles from a place that's rooted in understanding the relationship between their realities and my own, not as a performance of or a gesture of political alliance. I feel like while that's appreciated and necessary, to some extent, it's also not very deep, it can't hold the immensity of what we're up against right now. So I believe that the work of tending our ancestral lineages both allows us to situate ourselves in a way that is more authentic and it also addresses some of the, you know, ancestral work like you can't bypass things. It forces us to also address the ways that our lineages have been part of violating some of those laws and ways that we also take responsibility for evolving our lineages and the ways that we've been responsible for harm, as well as the ways that we've been carriers of wisdom and tenders of the earth. So I think that it's a both and if you know what I mean, I really feel like the deeper layer of work of re-membrance is what will anchor our gestures of political dissent to just the injustices of this time and this moment and allow us to heed the leadership and the voices and the needs defined by the Indigenous people of our world right now, with a lot more authenticity and respect and integrity, rather than the kind of performative way that I see solidarity being expressed a lot in our current moment, if I'm truly honest.

Ayana Young 52:28

I really appreciate your honesty. When you were talking about the performative quality of solidarity, there is something kind of a chill that ran through my body, a little bit of a perk in my spine feeling of like, oh, wow, yeah, I've definitely felt this type of shallowness especially around social media and solidarity and the performative nature of that and I think that media can support frontlines people. I think that protest can support people on the frontlines but I agree that it is not deep enough to really deal with the immensity of what we're up against. I really appreciate hearing about how re-membrance and

plantcestors, like we were talking about earlier, really offers a way to tend these wounds of severance and separation, whether that was forced or chosen and just the historical wounds that still echo into our contemporary worlds and there are personal and collective choices be they ecological or technological, etc. So I really feel grounded in what you were saying and I'm thinking about somebody like you who has a background in somatic work and folklore dance, I'm also wondering if we could discuss some of the nonlinear embodied ways to do this work of re-membrance as well as the cultivating of the SWANA hub through relationship and storytelling. So I'm wondering how does ancestral knowing exist, not just in research and history, but also in creative and intuitive ways? And how is this way of knowing a remedy for those of us who long to do the work of ancestral re-membrance but may not have immediate access to our histories or traditions and relationships?

Layla K. Feghali 54:29

To me, that is the plantcestral work. That's why I engage plantcestral work because I feel like it is an embodied practice of being able to access and wake up those memories inside of our bodies and our beings because I feel like I'm one of those people. Though I definitely grew up in closer proximity to my ancestral culture than I think a lot of people in diaspora have, just by virtue of my parents being immigrants who come from villages, not cities. Who come from land that we're actually allowed to return to which, unfortunately, is not a reality for a lot of people, including a lot of SWANA folks who really exists in exile. I feel like the task right now and where memory really lives is in our bodies and in the body of the land. So, for me, dance has been a part of that movement of any kind. And also just direct relationship with the land, even if it's not land of our ancestors, just land itself carries memory and can wake up those memories inside of us. I think intentionally relating to plants from our ancestral lands, not in a heady way, but feeling how they are in our bodies. I think cooking, doing ancestral recipes and being in the ritual of ancestral crafts or anything that really engages our bodies physically in that way and in a state of intention and listening is the work. I feel like that is what re-membrance is. I feel like re-membrance is for those places where we've lost access, direct access to the bodies of knowledge and wisdom. It took me a while to reconcile with this, but in a lot of ways, I feel like that's where the real answers are. I feel like I have so much respect for my Elders and so much gratitude for the deep, profound gift of having been given the opportunity to actually relate to traditional Elders because I know a lot of people don't really get that, it just doesn't come across their path in that way. But I will say that all the knowledge I've collected or that has been passed down to me, it doesn't sink in the same way as the embodied practices and wisdoms that are engaged through my body and my being directly. Which is where I think ceremony is so powerful and so central to so many ancestral traditions and ways, because that's what that is. That's exactly what that is. So I really think it's limitless. I feel like creating a piece of art with the intention of connecting to your ancestors or a plantcestor can be in an avenue of waking up that memory in your body. I think it really just comes down to learning how to actually listen to our bodies and our spirits and empower the subtle ways of knowledge that exist through us that honestly, patriarchy and colonialism have tried to suppress so much that we don't think they're real. So we don't really take our feelings and our sensations and our internal feelings and knowing seriously because we don't think that they're true, but they are.

Ayana Young 58:03

Yeah, I agree. It feels like it's by design that we don't value those ways of knowing. I wanted to ask a follow up question that feels really related to what we're speaking about in recognizing the nonlinear ways of knowing. And I'm also thinking about just the many mystical traditions that our ancestors have relied on for healing ritual and divination. You were speaking about that with the ceremony. I'm wondering if you could also engage with or seek to revive certain mystical traditions alongside your work with plantcestors.

Layla K. Feghali 58:45

It's actually interesting you asked that because that's what this work is. That's the center of this practice really, for me. The plantcestors came after. The plantcestors actually came to me to help me with that. So the actual heart of this seeking journey and this body of practice that I've been cultivating is about reconnecting to the Indigenous paradigms, which are really embedded in our mystical traditions and practices. My ancestral work on that level, preceded all of the work with plants. The plantcestors literally came knocking at my door, they started to speak to me in my dreams and I realized that's why. They just came to help me, they came to help me with a more direct, kind of like vessel of information in my body that could just support the waking up of those things that felt lost. I will say that there's a lot of mystical traditions that still exist in the SWANA region, but a lot of them are expressions of Abrahamic religion, which looks really different in the region than it does in the West. Like Christianity and Islam have their own layers of depth and flavor and the Christianity, especially in the region is not the same as the kind of colonial version of Christianity that we think of here. It's different, it's older, but I kind of yearn for deeper, older stuff even older than that, just iterations of those mysticisms. That came even before that, even though I do consider those earth based traditions to when they're practiced in their proper way. And because I'm a creature of diaspora, for me, the diaspora has exposed me to a lot of mystical paths and lineages that are more intact, that have really helped me with that work. So I want to acknowledge that I specifically want to acknowledge the African diasporic traditions and the afro diasporic ancestors who have been able to carry and create and maintain really advanced and just profound bodies of spiritual practice and tradition, despite the cruelty and the impossibility of fathoming the transatlantic slave trade. So the Ifda tradition of the Yoruba people of West Africa has definitely been a major support for me in reconnecting and re-memembering my own ancestral path, even though it's not my ancestral region. But that's a whole mystery of diaspora. So my ancestors speak a lot to me through that and have spoken a lot to me through Indigenous ceremonies across Turtle Island or North America and just really any, like solid, grounded, rooted lineage of practice that has welcomed me to sit has been a vessel for direct communication with my own ancestors to some extent.

Ayana Young 62:18

Well, Layla, this conversation has been so fruitful and nurturing. In closing, I think listeners would be so appreciative if we took a moment to honor the role of myth, poem and storytelling. I'd like if there are any particular moments or memories, stories or plantcestors that you carry especially close to you at this time, if you wouldn't mind sharing that with us.

Layla K. Feghali 62:43

Oh, my god, there's so many... I shared this one. This is not my first time sharing this one, but it's the one that feels present right now after what we've talked about and just thinking about how sometimes

you have to leave home in order to come home and collect the pieces to find your way back. For a long time, I just felt kind of covered in the grief and the overwhelm around what feels lost and the war and the pain and the displacement and all the heavy things that make it feel hard to connect and to re-member and to be present with the ancestral knowings in this paradigm and in this reality and why was it like that? And I just felt some shame around it, I guess. Like, what's wrong with me? What's wrong with us? How have we just like lost so much value and thrown away so much of the value of who we are in allowing ourselves to become this lost and forgotten? And then I started to realize that so much of that is written into our cosmologies regionally. I'm thinking of a story in the cosmology of Egypt that involves Isis who basically had to go into exile after her brother, who was really jealous, basically took over and killed her husband Osiris and threw him in a coffin and ruined the peace and the harmony and the order that he was creating in Egypt. And she fell into this deep, deep grief and went into exile to protect herself in the darkness of that time and after grieving for a while she mustered the strength and the power and the will to start looking for the coffin of Osiris, and she started traveling all the way up the Nile and asking people if they had seen the coffin until she arrived to the Delta area that starts to go into the Mediterranean Sea. She stayed there for a while and she prayed and she reflected and she thought and she waited for her ancestors and her guardians and the deities to speak to her and to guide her in a direction. She received the instruction to take a trip through the Mediterranean to find his coffin, which had floated up to the Mediterranean. So she goes to the shore, she gets on the boat, she gets ready to go on that journey. She asked some children if they've seen the coffin and they say, 'Oh yeah, we saw it floating up there. And she's told to go to Byblos, which is a port city that is about 10 minutes away from my father's village where I live in Lebanon. Basically she goes through this whole process and it turns out that Osiris is there and his coffin has become embedded in this tree that's in the house of the palace of the king of Byblos and she finds this way to get into the house and to reclaim the coffin and all these things happen and she finally gets the coffin after all this grieving, all this traveling, all this work. This exile, this state of exile of not even being safe enough to go home. And she gets on a boat getting ready to go back to Egypt with his coffin, and she just can't bear the thought of waiting to open it. So she opens it and at that moment, the jealous brother sees them and scatters the bones all throughout the water and she has to go through this journey of picking up bone by bone by bone. And one of the pieces was lost. And the alligators didn't eat the other ones because they were her allies. But she basically goes on this journey of collecting the bones to put him back together. And then praying over his bones, his skeleton, with her grief and with her love and with her power to resurrect his life. I just feel like it's not a coincidence that she collects the bones between the Mediterranean and the Nile on the coasts of this shore. She reclaims this precious sacred being, her partner, this leader, you know, she reclaims him in this village on the coast of Lebanon, so close to the coast of my Lebanon. In a state of exile, I'm not in exile but I am in diaspora. Just this whole journey of needing to leave and then having all these trials and tribulations along the process and then having to go and pick up pieces of something that has been spread and scattered all over the place and some that you can never find again. And she manages through her prayer and through the support of the spiritual worlds and the earthly worlds that she relies on and forges relationships with to honor that ancestor and bring something of him, of his lineage, of his power back to life. I just feel like that's the work, you know, and that it's just destined. That is one of the cosmologies or mythos that my ancestors and our region have left for me as an affirmation and you know, the tree that he ended up in was a cedar tree. So I feel like we can go deep into the mystery inside of that, but I feel like the work is to go

home, and to go home from wherever you're from to. And sometimes that means you leave home to come back home. But you know that that work of collecting the bones, that's the work. And it's with purpose. And the grief is with purpose. And the losses are with purpose and the things that get created from scratch and brand new in the process of piecing things back together, and leaving and coming back, they're all sacred and with purpose too. That's it.

Ayana Young 69:43

Thank you so much for taking this time with me today and just being able to share the depth of, or at least the beginnings of the depth, of these questions that we're sitting in and I really appreciate your care. I feel like I can feel you even though we've never met and we're not even being able to see each other in this moment. Maybe it's the plancestors that are speaking through you that I am picking up on and really resonating deeply with and trusting. So thank you for all that you're doing in the world and if you wanted to just do a quick shout out with River Rose and how people can find you online and learn from you.

Layla K. Feghali 70:31

Thank you so much, too. It's such an honor and a pleasure to talk to you and to all the folks that are listening to this podcast. I look forward to meeting you one day in the flesh. Folks can find me on Instagram or on Facebook, but I'm more active on Instagram, at River Rose Remembrance. I also just want to shout out that we have an online archival project that's like a digital archive for collecting and cross pollinating, ancestral and plantcestral knowledge from the SWANA region. We have our own website as well as our own Instagram. So you could check out that space on Instagram at [@swana.ancestral](https://www.instagram.com/swana.ancestral) or the website swanaancestralhub.org.

For The Wild Announcement 71:31

Thanks for listening to another episode of For The Wild podcast. I'm production team member Carter Lou McElroy, and the music you heard today was from Zikrayat. I'd like to thank our host and founder Ayana Young, as well as the rest of our podcast production team. Aiden McCray, Andrew Stores, Erica Ekrem, Aaron Wise, Francesca Glassbell, Hannah Wilton and Melanie Younger. If you enjoy today's conversation, please rate us on iTunes or wherever else you get your podcasts. If you'd like to stay up to date with our projects and offerings, subscribe to our newsletter by visiting forthewild.world/subscribe.