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**Matt Bowles:** My guest today is Shayla Lawson, a professor of English and creative writing at Amherst College and the author of five books, including their latest: [How to Live Free in a Dangerous World: A Decolonial Memoir](#). Shayla has been published in Salon, ESPN, and New York Magazine, and was a nonfiction finalist for the National Book Critics Circle and Lambda Literary Award. Originally from Lexington, Kentucky, Shayla is also a world traveler and has spent time in over 50 countries. Shayla, welcome to the show.

**Shayla Lawson:** Well, hello, Matt. How are you doing today?

**Matt Bowles:** I am doing amazing because you and I have agreed to have a virtual wine night this evening and talk about your amazing book that I have just finished reading. So, I could not be better, but let's just start off by setting the scene, and talking about where we are recording from today. Unfortunately, we are not in person, but let's also talk about what we are drinking. I am actually in the Blue Ridge mountains of Asheville, North Carolina. And I wanted to get a bottle of wine that was from one of the places in your memoir that you wrote about, so I selected Italy. I know that has played a very important role in your journey. And so, I have actually just opened a bottle of Barolo from the Piemonte region.

**Shayla Lawson:** That's a good choice.

**Matt Bowles:** A special bottle of wine for this interview tonight, Shayla. So, I will be drinking through that. But where are you this evening and what are you drinking?

**Shayla Lawson:** I am currently in the library of my soon-to-be home. I am in the process of moving and I am drinking a screw-top Montepulciano. Mostly, because I'm not sure in the midst of moving where my actual wine opener is. So, we are screw-topping it for the evening.

**Matt Bowles:** No shame in that. A Montepulciano is an excellent go-to wine.

**Shayla Lawson:** Excellent dry wine. Yeah.

**Matt Bowles:** Absolutely. No question about it. Well, I want to start, I think going back and talking about your upbringing in Kentucky. I want to ask about the impact of poetry and creative writing on you as you were coming up because I know your initial career trajectory, you were an architect for many years before you went back to get your MFA and all that. And so, I'm curious in those early years and even the earlier part of your career, can you talk about the impact of words and poetry on your life?

**Shayla Lawson:** Being a writer was the only thing I ever dreamed of becoming. My parents had a big library going up. I loved going through it. I've loved being in the library. I wanted to make it in the library myself, that was one of my dreams.

But when I was in college, architecture struck me because it was about the study of language, but in a different way than English. It was about how the way that you think about something and the way that you talk about something defines how you experience it. And that was a new concept to me. For instance, one of the earliest stories that I remember hearing in architecture school was about one of those very Savior's groups who decided they were going to take a bunch of toilets to a particular

indigenous area. And they thought that by providing clean, sanitary, running toilets, they were doing this big thing.

They came back years later, and the community had been using them to wash all their vegetables. because they just couldn't see why you would have a clean running stream of water and use that to defecate in. What I liked about architecture is that it was thinking not just about words but the impact that they have and the ways that language is not necessarily universal. And so, must adapt to start thinking about universal concepts and thinking about how we experience the world and how we experience the world in different places. So, architecture turned me into a traveler in a lot of ways.

**Matt Bowles:** And can you talk about as you were traveling before your MFA and that part of your journey, were you writing about your travels as you were going along? Cause I was struck when I was reading your memoir about the different periods of your life that you talked about, and some of them you were quite young in the periods that you were talking about and yet you were bringing the reader in with extraordinarily vivid detail. Can you talk a little bit about your role as a writer just on your own as you were going through all these travels?

**Shayla Lawson:** Yeah. That's the poet part. I am a terrible voyeur. I am always watching and listening. It scared the crap out of adults when I was growing up that I was constantly just over there with my big ears and big eyes recording everything. And I believe that as a child, I did have this ambitious idea that I had stories that would need to be told someday. I was not too terribly far off, but I've always kept just very vivid recollections of the things that I've gotten to participate in, and they show up so much as well in my dreams. So, I think because they're places, I continue to go back to, it's easy to set the scene on the page because there's a part of my mind that is always on that wet street, getting ready to go into the French bar in Kyoto. And it's always, on my midnight first walk in Venice where I'm on a bridge and I can hear the scuff of my shoes and I stop because I see an actual lady doll from Lady and the Tramp and I take this as this amazing omen because that was my only relationship to Italy when I arrived in Italy was Lady and the Tramp.

So those kinds of things just felt like the universe saying, um, I was special, that I was gifted with something, and it's hard to forget those kinds of things when they show up in the world when you get some kind of serendipitous cue that you are the star in your journey.

**Matt Bowles:** And given that you have been traveling for so long and documenting all these stories and experiences for so long, how did you decide that now was the time to write this memoir? And can you talk a little bit about the selection of the title, [How to Live Free in a Dangerous World: A Decolonial Memoir](#).

**Shayla Lawson:** Now seemed like the right time because we're much more travel-hungry. You know, we all spent those years inside and whether we're hitting the streets in some grand way, it's just the idea that we're back in motion.

But also, we have such a different sense of what it means to be outside at this point, and particularly our relationship with our bodies in peril. So, when we were putting together a title for the book, [How to Live Free in a Dangerous World](#), felt like a good accumulation of the experience of what we all know right now to be the truth of being in a body and being outside is that it's dangerous. It's more dangerous than we used to think of it being in a lot of different ways. But we also have this desire to be free, this desire to live comfortably and well and in community. And those things are often the hero against danger. And so, I liked putting both of those concepts together in the title.

And then the decolonial part just comes from trying to present a different experience of travel. I read a lot of travel books growing up that I just kind of, 'eh' about because there was no room in there for me. It was such a limited idea and it always felt very much like this hierarchical, like, hey, look how cool I am. I'm hanging with one finger off the side of a mountain and that's the only way that you can travel. And I just wanted to see a book that was doing something different. And a lot of what I got out of traveling was just understanding my stupidity, the stupid American, and how that shows up in so many ways.

And I wanted to share the beauty of being humbled by that when I went out into the world. And I thought I knew so much. I thought I was hot shit. And in every situation, I learned that there's so much more about the world that I must understand.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I think the memoir is an extraordinary I'm going to just call it a masterpiece.

**Shayla Lawson:** Yey!

**Matt Bowles:** I feel like you have set the bar in terms of travel memoirs. I mean, as I was going through this, I was consistently like, 'wow'. I was wowed both by your observations and reflections about the world as you were experiencing it through your travel. And, about the reflections on the self-discovery and the personal growth and the self-actualization journey that was happening at the same time. And the way that you put all this together was just remarkable.

**Shayla Lawson:** Thank you.

**Matt Bowles:** I was so enamored the entire way through. The writing is incredible. Folks, when you just read like the first two pages and you'll be like; "oh, I see what this is going to be like", and you'll see what I'm talking about. And so, I think the question that I want to pose to you is, if reflecting on all of this, any tips that you have for approaching travel in a way that allows it to play a meaningful role in self-discovery, self-actualization, and helping us learn and process and often reframe our ideas, either about ourselves or the world or both.

**Shayla Lawson:** Be prepared to get lost. I think it's easy to travel with an agenda and an itinerary and then you decide that your experience just reaffirms the world as you know it. But if you're willing to get lost, if you're willing to end up in situations where you must depend on other skills that you don't usually have to use. Having to depend on other people who speak a language that you don't know. Having to get past your prejudices of what it means to not know things. Those are the times that I think we learn the most in traveling.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I want to ask you about some parts of the book. And I had several experiences as I was going through the book, where I would listen to a part of it because I was listening to the [audio book](#). And there were a couple of parts that just stopped me. And I was like, wait a minute, because it was so profound, the reflection, the insight that you were sharing. So, there are several times where I'm like walking and listening to it. And then I would like to stop, find a bench replay the part, and listen to it again because I think that there are so many incredibly thoughtful insights in here.

But you also articulated them in a way that I have never heard them articulated in that way before, based on your observations and you're being a poet and everything else. I think the chapter that I want

to start with is called on trafficking. When you're talking about your experience in Lisbon, Portugal, which I want to start here, I think, too, because Lisbon is a city that I've spent a lot of time in.

I probably go through it once a year or so. I was just there last year, and it was interesting because the last time I was in Lisbon, I was hanging out with one of my homegirls, [Chrisan Wright](#), who Maverick Show listeners know because she's been on the podcast, and she hosts a podcast called [Blaxit Global](#). And so, she chose Portugal for her Blaxit destination. She's originally from the Bronx. She now lives in Lisbon. And so, she and I were in Lisbon having coffee, talking about the Black community in Lisbon and all the things there.

**Shayla Lawson:** Yeah, that underground Black community in Lisbon is something else.

**Matt Bowles:** It is! And you talked about that in [your book](#), but I thought that you talked about it in a way that was so interesting, and you juxtaposed a whole number of different things. I want to just read a quote, and then allow you to sort of expand on it. You said:

“The same country that began the great forced migration of Africans all over the world is now becoming the place where its young intellectuals gather freely. The city that created the African Diaspora is now the hub for calling us all back together”.

And I want to ask if you can talk a little bit about, just for folks that are not aware, about the Portuguese role in the slave trade and the contemporary erasure of black history in Portugal that you observed there. And then, the seeming juxtaposition of that with the Africa ex-Patriot Renaissance that you also observed going on in Lisbon.

**Shayla Lawson:** Yeah, I mean, this is one of those places where I had a lot to learn because when I set foot in Lisbon, I had no idea it had the kind of relationship to the slave trade that the Dutch and the English, and of course, those of us who are in the Americas, have always associated with our culture. And, within the first 24 hours of my landing in Lisbon, I took this incredible tour, which I talked about [in the book](#), that was suggested to me by a black expatriate. And, I learned all of a sudden the relationship that innately should have made so much sense to me as a traveler when I think about Brazil, when I think about Angola, when I think about these places where I have people that I love. But I had never made the connection that if we think about where languages are if we think about the migration of languages, it tells us so much about the history of slavery and the slave trade. So, Portugal had slaves and had the earliest slave ships, so they had people of African descent living in Portugal as early as the 1400s. And yet if you go to Portugal today, there is no word that you can use to call a person Black as their identity, which is a terrifying prospect that the only words that they have available are words that have such negative connotations nobody would ever use them. And that says a lot about the ways that they've managed the erasure of their history because Portugal, to me, always was kind of like the European underdog. It was the one that was a little bit scrappier and a little bit more bluesy than the rest of them. Like they felt like, one of the things I mentioned [in the book](#) is I used to think of the Portuguese as like the black people of Europe. But that was because I was missing the fact that the black people were always the black people of Europe.

**Matt Bowles:** Hahaha

**Shayla Lawson:** Hahaha. And so, I had to be reeducated. And the beautiful part of that reeducation is that it wasn't just happening in a way where I was coming in contact with Portuguese black people. I was coming in contact with this entire range of Black people from Madagascar, and Eritrea, and from

the Bronx, and D. C., and the U. K. Like, Black people were coming from all over the world to move to Lisbon.

And I think a lot of that, it's this unconscious renaissance, you know, this relationship to the fact that there is an origin point that brought us to the place that we are now, that spread us all over the world, that got our ancestors moving. What happens if we realign in that space? What happens if now we aggregate all these ideas in Lisbon as a hub to kind of call us back? What becomes the next thing that we can do? What are the ways that we can share information as black people who've been trafficked all across the world? And I think that's just one of those great things that we can start thinking about when it comes to decolonialism and freedom, is how are we using our time traveling to connect, not just to take pictures that we can post on Instagram of being in front of the same monument that everybody has seen, but what is the opportunity that you take in your travels to make a magnetic connection to your heritage or to a group of people that in some way calls out to you? And that's one of the things that I just really loved about being gob smacked in the face with all of this new history and future going to Lisbon.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, one of the people that you mention [in the book](#) is part of this discussion is, of course, James Baldwin. And I want to ask if you can talk a little bit about Baldwin, maybe even the influence of his writing on you, but also in particular his choice after growing up in Harlem to leave the United States. He's obviously talked very extensively about how important that was and how powerful that was for him to be in France, looking back at the United States and so forth in terms of the development of his politic views, self-actualization, writing and everything else. And I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about that and some of the parallels that you were mentioning in terms of what's going on today.

**Shayla Lawson:** Yeah. With Baldwin, I'm indebted to his travels when it comes to my own because he was one of the Harlem Renaissance. Everybody within the Harlem Renaissance, those were the places that I first went to when I was a child, and I started getting the sense of the fact that I belonged in the world, and the world was going to love me.

When I went to Italy, when I moved to Italy for the first time, it was because of that direct inheritance that I had from the Harlem Renaissance and growing up reading Baldwin as a kid. But one of the things that I wanted to do as a response to his work is think about what it's like to travel now in France. Specifically, when we talk about that connection of the Black diaspora, looking at the fact that the juxtaposition of what it would have been like for Baldwin to travel. In which, most of the people that he was getting to know in France would have been white people, they would have been primarily of French descent, you know, with maybe a scattering of Rogerian people and just a few people who are of African descent.

Today, the places that Baldwin would have frequented; the bohemian spaces, are these real hubs for people of color from francophone countries around the world. And so, it really shifts us culturally. I remember there being at a conference where that idea started to hit me, because I still thought of France in that Baldwin-esque way, where I thought of it as this place where you could come as a person of color and be treated like a human. You know, just be treated by the content of your character, as you will. And then, when I was surrounded by a bunch of francophone people of color at a conference in France, it helped me to understand that I needed to shift my mindset, that they were dealing with the same kinds of erasure, now that they were a very populist majority within the country. And so, I had this beautiful opportunity to write online, where I looked at my relationship with young francophones coming from across the diaspora and me and the way that we can speak to each other and connect on these levels that Baldwin never had available because of the internet. So many of us

have gotten together through the internet and our ability to reference the same memes and the same hashtags use the same gifs and use the same idiomatic expressions. Memes that even if we don't share a colonized language, even if I don't speak French in this case, because my French is invisible, the one thing that all of my francophone fellow people of color and I had in common was the language that we developed speaking online so that we could all start thinking culturally about ways to increase civil rights in our environments.

And that was just such a cool thing to see because in that situation now when we're with a group of French people, we can see the difference between old and new culture. The ways that French are still holding on to very old ideas of what information bohemian and liberation mean, whereas there is an entirely new well of all those ideas that are happening on the internet. So, it's also cool because in a travel book, what I'm also saying is like, you don't have to travel. You don't have to get on the road. You don't have to get in an airplane to experience what it's like to be a part of travel culture today. You can get on your computer, you can be online, and use these communities as the first touch of what it's like to be a part of the culture, because there's such a blossoming, blooming, beautiful conversation happening out there. And particularly, the one that is connecting people of color across these threads of us being trafficked across the earth.

**Matt Bowles:** I thought that was one of the best chapters, and I thought it was really interesting too that you tied that concept into travel safety for Black folks. I actually pulled a quote from that chapter, which I would like to read the way that you stated [in the book](#), you say:

“The quiet beauty of Black travel is that throughout the globe. Black speaks to each other through what we've shared on social platforms. We've inadvertently built communities on common wavelengths, bonds that are stronger than geography or language. This is the kind of shared community white people assume they're creating for themselves when they left behind their rich cultural ethnicities for social power. But, because the power of whiteness is based on exclusion who I think you aren't and not inclusion. All the things I believe you can be and will be and have to teach me, it's not real solidarity, it doesn't travel well. If you understand blackness. You can travel anywhere in the world and be safe, make friends, and find enlightenment. Who you are can be all you need, because we are a network of resources linked together in ways that the dominant culture ignores”.

I thought that was super profound and important.

**Shayla Lawson:** I'm glad you did because it is an idea that I want people to think about. Like, what's lost when we decide that whiteness is a majority capital power solution? I can give you a perfect example of how that works in action. So, when I was in Italy. I was working at the Guggenheim Museum, and I gave an okay sign with my fingers to tell somebody else that I was on it. So, in Italy, that means something very different.

Hahahahaha.

I was possibly suggesting some very adult later activities, like after work, you know, I was getting myself into trouble. But at the same time, when I think about the way that blackness travels today, I can put my finger up against my eye in a very particular way. And almost anybody across the diaspora who is involved in that online world will understand what I'm saying: “Stay woke!”. And the quickness that can happen versus when you have to make so many different translations because we've been sold an idea of togetherness, as opposed to an actual togetherness that's blooming organically and naturally through what's happening in culture. We find ways to save ourselves. We can talk to each

other faster. We can signal danger much faster. We can signal to each other that food is safe, or water is here. Imagine, how much better that's going to travel in the zombie apocalypse when you have ways to talk to each other that are not culturally based. And so, whiteness misses all of this possibility. The rigidity of saying that this is what fits in a box means that everything that gets littered on the floor that doesn't fit in that box is still language. And there are people who have picked up all those pieces and tools and put them into the world. And being able to speak the world's dialogue is one of the most important things that you can do as a traveler. And it's one of the things that people often miss out on when they have decided that they are white, as James Baldwin would say.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, you have a chapter [in the book](#) called; On Blackness. And in that chapter, you make some really interesting reflections, I think. And I want to read a really short quote and then I want to ask you if you can expand a little bit on this. You say:

“If we let blackness create divisions between us and them, Colonialism wins”.

I want to ask if you can expand on that reflection, but also in the context of your thoughts on blackness with a small B versus blackness with a capital B, and how those insights came about through your travels.

**Shayla Lawson:** Yes, this is something that I learned while I was in Zimbabwe, right after Trump got elected as president. And, it was a time where being Black, with a capital B, was a really big thing on my mind, because it had become such a dangerous part of living in America. And what I learned in Zimbabwe is the difference in language between Black, with a capital B, versus black with just a regular case, lowercase b. So, blackness is a distinctly African American concept, which means that in order for things to fit into the range of a capital B, they have to fit a certain capitalist agenda of what blackness represents.

In black culture, we talk about the idea that you can get your black card taken away if you don't fit the rules of what has already been delineated as fitting into capital B black culture. Martin Luther King Jr., hip hop, this aggregate of who we say Black people are. The problem is that Black people are everywhere. Everywhere. This means that, in the way that America often does when we decide that the silo of what is important only fits within the structure of an American framework, an American consciousness, we leave out so much of culture. There's so much of culture that we don't know. I think a great example of this that we've seen recently is Afrobeats. So, it is mind-blowingly stupid to think that Africa has not, for generations, had incredibly popular, incredibly catchy, incredibly amazing music, been an entertainment hub. But it wasn't until America put Afro beats into the capital 'B' Blackness of what is black in the world that we started thinking of it as a strong enough music style so that we're not just categories and all African music is world music.

Now we've got Afro beats as a distinct identity, you know, even to the point of like a Grammy. And that's what happens; we distill what blackness is into this very, very small, entertainment-focused box. You know, what people can look at and say: “That is black” you know, then they can point to and say that. But what I learned in Zimbabwe is when you are everything, when you are the world, you don't have to be screaming, “Hey, I'm here!” all the time. You don't have to be that one capital B standing up and trying to solve every single issue. And that was a really nice thing for me to learn; that I didn't always have to be the person jumping up to solve the social justice issue as the Black person in the room. That gave me the opportunity to think of what it meant to make conscientious decisions, you know, make nuanced and quiet decisions about when to execute that kind of thing. And then later on, I got to kind of apply it to just this very punk rock lens that I liked, which hanging out with this band called

the Monkey Neds, that do a lot of cultural projects there. Their lowercase b was very much like a punk rock b to me, in the sense of still being on this very analog way of communication and very anti-establishment, and we don't care if anybody is picking up our frequency. We are never meant to be pop music, and so that is a blackness that I really want to encourage; the idea that Black people don't have to be pop music. We don't all have to fit into one specific box. We can be punk rock. We have been punk rock for a very long time. And I like thinking about both of them existing. Who doesn't like both pop and punk rock music? The world works better when we've got both.

**Matt Bowles:** And you also talk in that chapter, in that context, about solidarity with other colonized people across that BIPOC acronym, if you will. And I'm curious about your reflections on that in terms of the colonial divisions and how you came to that consciousness while traveling too.

**Shayla Lawson:** Yeah, going around the world and having Syrian people come up to me and say that they're Black people, and Egyptian people come up to me and say they're Black people, and Palestinian people, and people from New Zealand, and people from Australia, and being an academic, and then having contact with professors who were working about the phenotypical notions of blackness and including Southeast Asians within that range of blackness, and Pacific Islanders and I just I loved thinking too about how big the world can be because when you get relegated to the qualities of a minority, you can feel so alone. The more of a minority status you have, the more you just keep counting, the size of the equation down where you're insignificant and zero. And one of the things that I write a lot about in the book is taking that zero and turning it into infinity. If you've been discounted that much, just think of how much more of everybody else's knowledge you've had to know and how wonderful that makes you. It's those infinitesimal equations, those binaries of zeros and ones that create the universe. And I love going big and thinking about it in those terms. If we can just make each of us feel a little bit more like their equation matters, we can change the world. And just thinking about how well you fit in the world is one of the ways that that happens the best, you know? If you feel like you have to live up to one certain standard, to be the right kind of version of you, then we have a problem. But if you feel that every single version of you matters because it's unique and significant and fills the universe, then we win.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I want to move us next to one of the most important and profound chapters [in the book](#), which is called 'On Them.' And I think I want to start just by reading a quote from the book and then asking you to expand on it. You say, "I see the acceptance of pronoun usage similar to how we've accepted stars. They fire billions of light years ahead of us in a shape we cannot ascertain. And yet we have come to learn there are more than just those specs of light we see in the dark. We do not have to be in the dark. In time, we will no longer let our eyes be the limit of how we perceive people". Can you, Shayla, talk about, first of all, your gender identity as being a rock star?

**Shayla Lawson:** Yes.

**Matt Bowles:** And your journey that led you to choose to change your pronouns.

**Shayla Lawson:** So, I love it too because making fun of pronoun changes and non-binary identity is hot right now, and I make fun of it too, as someone who has accepted myself as a non-binary person, because I love the malleability, the recognition of our ideas of this very fixed notion of gender changing in the same way that the planet itself is always changing. And I've been really humbled by the time that I've gotten to spend with Gen Z as a college professor because the language that they speak when we talk about the ways that language really informs the world is so much more sensitive and thoughtful and grounded than the language that I grew up speaking.

And I love seeing that in this evolution of mankind, it is so much easier for them to accept the idea that we are not just a small dot on a page, that we're not just somebody that, as I was taught generationally, to just kind of point and click and categorize quickly. So, when I say my gender as rock star, what I think about is where my lineage comes from, which is Prince, Frank Ocean, Donna Summer, Grace Jones, and Little Richard. And on top of that, billions and billions of light years of stars in a galaxy, you know, each one of us is composed of some crazy percentage of stardust, you know, and so I want to talk about gender as reflections of that, reflections of our spiritual purpose, and how we can start to think differently about how we use that language, not just as a reflection of where to put somebody within the spectrum of a binary, but thinking of non-binary as truly something that is outside of a thin line. That it's not supposed to be the zero point between male and female. It is supposed to be representative of what we lose when we say these are the only two ways we want to identify people.

And so, I like to think of this as part of my spiritual journey. It's evolving. I still get my own pronouns wrong all the time. I'm terrible at correcting other people because I'm just like, I know they know in their heart, they're getting it right, you know.

Hahaha

Because I'm old, you know, like, I am trying. My heart is to be new school as an old ass person, but why it matters to me so much and why I'm so in awe of Gen Z and Gen A and our general future in terms of the ways that they are traveling light years ahead of anything that I thought was imaginable when I was young is because it tells us where we can go in the future. How much different the world can be if we don't just limit ourselves to the periphery and we start actually getting to know each other on these larger astral levels. And I feel like people are starting to slip into that a little bit more. We're taking more ayahuasca, you know, we're doing more drugs. And I'm just looking forward to a time when we all get to approach each other with the pronouns that feel most native to us without any kind of shame or judgment, but still maybe a little bit of funniness inside us.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, one of the other quotes from that same chapter that I want to read, you say, "Black people have always existed outside the binary since its inception. The gender boundaries of a patriarchal capitalist colonial system have always denied us our full personhood". I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the role of colonialism in enforcing the gender binary in Africa and the diaspora, and what your thoughts are in terms of how folks might want to think about the passing, for example, of legislation in countries like Uganda or Ghana in terms of the anti-LGBTQ legislation that's been discussed a lot lately. How should folks think about that in the historical context that you frame in the book?

**Shayla Lawson:** One of the most insidious forms of terrorism when it came to the enslavement of people was telling us that we were less valuable than somebody else because of something about the composition of our bodies. And so, for all of us, that has been one of the most treacherous forms of enslavement. Because even if you're at the so-called top, if you are a cis white man, there is a standard of cis white man that you're not meeting that is painful. And for every single one of us who goes beyond that definition, we are all dealing with the consequences of where we fit on these rungs of a ladder. And it makes us competitive about where we fit on the ladder.

And I have just seen so much damage done to all of us, but for the sake of this podcast, I'll just stick, you know, specifically to the ways that gender binary has worked against black people, people of color writ large. But if I just look at black people for the sake of time, it's queered our bodies. You and I were riffing earlier. Fred Moten is one of both of our favorite philosophers. And Fred Moten talks a lot about

the fact that the Black body is inherently queer because of the things that have happened to it. And he doesn't mean that in the kind of prejudiced way against LGBTQ bodies that we often hear about the idea of subjugation and violence and abuse. What he means is that we can never fit within the binary. Because the binary was exclusively created for the sake of making sure we could never meet its standards. So, knowing the kind of generational violence that is imputed to my family members, my ancestors, my brothers, and sisters across the globe, it just doesn't make sense to me to keep fighting for it. And that's why it's important to me to abscond from it in the language that I use to describe myself.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, Fred Moten is an incredible person. I first encountered him almost 20 years ago. I was going to an event at one of the universities in the Washington DC area when I was living in DC, and it was put on by some of the black student organizations. It was a black Palestine solidarity panel, and Angela Davis had just gotten back from leading one of her Women of Color delegations to Palestine. She was a featured headline speaker on this panel. So I was, I'm going to that panel.

**Shayla Lawson:** You're going! Yeah! Hahaha

**Matt Bowles:** Yes. And so there I am in the audience, and of course, it's Angela Davis. And then, there are other Black scholar activists up on the panel with her, one of whom I'd never heard of his name was Fred Moten. And I just remember, literally 20 years later, I remember some of his contributions on that panel. One of which sticks in my mind is, I feel like it was in the question period, you know, they opened up for questions. And it's mostly black folks in solidarity with Palestine who were in the audience. But of course, at any of these events, you always get some Zionists that come to the event to try to disrupt these things.

So, some Zionist grabs the mic, you know, and says to Fred, "You have to at least acknowledge the right of the state of Israel to exist as a Jewish state". And, you know, he is all angry and Fred, in the calmest demeanor I've ever seen someone respond to something like that, just takes the mic and he says, "Well, first of all, I'm an anarchist, so I don't have to acknowledge the right of any state to exist".

**Shayla Lawson:** Hahahahaha. Number one.

**Matt Bowles:** And, it was like mic drop. I was like "I have to pay attention to whatever he is writing. How do I find his books?" So yeah, he made quite an impact on me and have really appreciated him. So, it was nice to hear him mentioned in your book.

So, as we start to see these anti-LGBTQIA+ bills being passed in places like Uganda and places like Ghana, what thoughts do you have on how we should think about those?

**Shayla Lawson:** Yeah, it's challenging because, you know, it's one of the places where it often paints this distorted picture that homophobia is inherent to African culture. Yeah, it's challenging because, you know, it's one of the places where it often paints this distorted picture that homophobia is inherent to African culture. But when I think about that definition of queerness that we talked about in relation to Fred Moten, it's what queerness does to threaten colonization, to threaten the binary that makes it so dangerous.

And so, in these spaces, we have to check where the money is going. The idea that the same very right-wing colonists are fighting for a white savior version of Christianity, in which blackness has always

been this place where they go to bring the good news to, as opposed to ever considering that Africa is the exact link that brought them Christianity, to begin with. We end up in these situations where because of the abhorrence that has been put on what it means to be a body within that structure of this hierarchical binary, now all of a sudden, we see people across the African diaspora as the hardest hitting in removing anybody who represents queerness from their demographic. And it's because of the fight that we're trying to go through to fit back into that hierarchy. Somebody who's told people that if they can remove queerness from their bodies, then they will be good, then they will be loved, then they will be able to be sanctified. But we have thousands of years proving that's a lot.

A lot of people are very bad at looking at the past and understanding that nothing will change it unless you do. And it's rather unfortunate that that's the situation that we find ourselves in now, but it's one of the reasons that I'm fighting so hard that us that are in that capital 'B' black world start thinking about ways that changing things like our gender pronouns will affect the larger diaspora in relation to saving the lives of young people who are fighting that battle largely through LGBTQIA representation.

You know, we're not going to see civil rights battles against colonialism. It's too late. But that battle is happening in queer communities across Africa right now. And if it was brought to our attention that that is one of the places that we can start to bolster people up, because it is the Black Lives Matter of our times, then maybe, we would start getting better representation on both sides of the issue for these camps that are largely being supported by right-wing constituencies that have a huge underlying agenda.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, one of the other quotes that I want to pull out from the 'On Them' chapter that I thought was really important, you say,

"I am finding the words to get to the bottom of how I decolonize myself. And when the language fails my quest for freedom, I make it my choice to question it. I see that they, in me, as not unlike the 'X' in Malcolm".

I thought that was such a profound analogy.

**Shayla Lawson:** Thank you.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you expand a little bit on that analogy and talk about the process of how we should think about decolonizing ourselves?

**Shayla Lawson:** Malcolm X's journey is one of those that I've always found deeply inspiring because on so many parts of his journey, there was so much he didn't know, but he kept fervently fighting for the part of his journey that he did know, which was that we deserve to be free. When I adopted 'they, them' as my pronouns, I thought of it very much in the same way as when Malcolm went from little to X on the way to El Shabazz, as a way of delineating his continued journey. And that's exactly where I feel I am. There's so much about this that I don't know that many other people could educate you far better on. But what I know intrinsically is that this is the road, and so I am doing my best to walk on it.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, the other thing that I want to ask you about that has obviously been a major element of your life and you talk about it in the book is your journey with EDS. And I want to ask if you can just share a little bit about that for folks that have never heard of EDS in terms of what it is, but how it's impacted your life and specifically how it impacted the writing of this actual book.

**Shayla Lawson:** Yes, so Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome is a genetic disorder that tends to first show up as being super athletic, super-fast, super good at sports, really energetic and with it, and over time progresses in inexplicable degeneration. I've torn both of my ACLs twice. I dislocate my knee nearly every week. Right now, I'm recovering from a sprain in my right foot, a 50 percent tear in my rotator cuff, and I have distended the anterior tilt of my pelvis to the point where it's really hard for me to stand, and that's a normal week. If you're a person out there who is suffering after being a fairly 'healthy and energetic person that people probably thought maybe were a little too dramatic about the injuries that you got but now you're getting lots of series of injuries and you don't have any answers, I think it's worth it to mention Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome as an option because it's a difficult disease to get diagnosed since it goes in all sorts of directions. You might simultaneously have bad diarrhea and your eye is falling out. Like those are two different doctors but it's the same disease and it makes it really difficult to figure out exactly what's happening. So of course, that informed me writing the book because I sold [this book](#) about three months after I realized that I had been diagnosed.

It was interesting in terms of timing because when I first planned on taking this book on the market, it was more of a 'throw your backpack on and go' kind of guide to the world. And I sold this book taking Zoom calls in a full neck brace, which really changed my perspective as well, about what it meant to release another travel book in the world that had the prejudice of ableness. And it hit me as I was writing this book, the profoundness of saying that somebody disabled got through this much of the world. Because it also didn't look like, to me, that I was going to get through very much more of it. And I had never had those thoughts in relation to travel before, that I might have ended the time in which travel was possible for me. It did not, largely because I've adapted to what it means to travel as a disabled person and to take far better care of myself than I used to. But I love that that became part of the journey of the book, that traveling enabled me a chance to come across different holistic practitioners that helped me learn how to cope with my symptoms that far before I ever got an answer or diagnosis to why my body was starting to become less and less mobile. And then on the other side was the affirmations that I got in the world that you could be disabled and make a difference.

When I thought about Sammy Davis Jr., who I named my dog after, until I was a disabled person myself, I never thought about what it meant that he was blind in one eye. You know, until I was blind in one eye for a period of time, I never thought about what it meant to be blind in one eye and dance, you know, like do a pirouette and land that. Like, try doing that with one eye closed, you know? And here was this person. That was what he was doing all the time to inspire us. And I think about the way that going to Frida Kahlo's house just let me let out this huge sigh because I used to always feel bad about the fact that I wasn't a writer in the way that I heard people talk about, that they sit at their desk 30 minutes every day and they write. Most of the time, if I'm writing, I'm in bed. And a lot of times, I'm not writing, I'm recording because my body can't take anymore.

But it wasn't until I went to Frida Kahlo's house, I saw these two rooms. In her studio, there was a bed in one room, and just across the wall, there was another bed. And I was like, now that is a life that I understand because you might not be able to walk from bed one to bed two, but if you have both, you have more options. So, yeah, that's the thing that I'm most proud of when it comes to this book, is what I'm saying is that you can be anything and see this world. And it doesn't matter how far you can go or how long. It really is just a matter of how much you want to because there are just so many ways that the world is open to us. Books, conversation, sunlight, astral projecting in your dream. And I think the thing that keeps us from being free is the people who know that it's dangerous for us to know that. Because why would we come to work if we could be traveling all the time? We could be traveling just by sitting down with someone that we invite onto our porch that we've never met and just, you know.

**Matt Bowles:** One of the things that I want to ask you about [the book](#) is how you chose to structure it. So, it is not a chronological story. The chapters are organized by theme. And so, in theory, you could just kind of jump around and read different chapters, and they would all make sense. They don't necessarily rely on you reading it in order. However, reading it in order, I was "okay, this is ordered in a very particular way for a very particular reason." I'm wondering if you can talk about, once you chose that you weren't going to do it chronologically, how did you choose the order of these chapters and how to take the reader on the journey that you wanted to take them on?

**Shayla Lawson:** Yeah, I love to think of [this book](#) as my Purple Rain album, where you can listen to each of the individual tracks whenever you want to, at any time, and it's great.

But if you do the entire sequence, you've got a movie, you know, and that's the plan. So that was what I had in my mind is just, if this was a movie, when this is a movie, let's just put that out into the universe. I've written this as a movie script.

I've done the work for you, please. If you're in Hollywood and looking for a delectable screenplay with all the affinity groups that are suing you right now, this would be the perfect opportunity.

**Matt Bowles:** Absolutely. I love that. Yeah. Because I was going through it. I was like, "okay, I see what's going on here."

But it is an incredibly powerful and emotionally riveting journey. In addition to all of these insights that you're dropping along the way, I want to ask you a little bit, Shayla, about writing. Can you talk a little bit about your writing process for the way that you tell travel stories and maybe talk about it in the context that the book came together or the way that you wrote the different chapters of [this book](#), what is your approach to writing a travel story?

**Shayla Lawson:** I have to see it and then I have to feel it. And if I can't see and feel both within the first three seconds of the scene, then it's not a story. Because that's what makes travel stories shine, is if you can get the details right.

**Matt Bowles:** As a poet, can you, first of all, explain what is the difference between poetry and prose? And, as someone who has written both, how do you as a writer choose between whether to express something through poetry or prose?

**Shayla Lawson:** Yeah, so poetry is density. That, to me, is what separates it from prose. And I also see poetry as a visual art. I believe strongly, as someone who studied architecture, that it's architecture. It's the scaffolding to your building. And what's really sexy about it is that the building is up to your creative imagination. In prose, it really is about figuring out how to construct that house. You give us the entirety of the house, what we fill it with is left to our imagination, but the house itself is there. For me, the limitation of poetry is if I want you to learn something very specific, if I want to know what you're going to leave this with, that can't be a poem. Because the whole idea of a poem is that emotive quality that you get from looking at really great visual art. It's not meant to leave you with a complete statement. It's meant to leave you with pieces. And prose, I find it much easier to write the things that mean something to me because they're political, because they're controversial. With poetry, I feel like it's a much better vehicle for changing someone's mind. Because reading a poem itself is kind of a conspiratorial act. So, I think that's kind of the way that I weigh the difference between the two.

**Matt Bowles:** All right, Shayla, I want you to put your creative writing professor hat on for a moment, because my podcast audience includes a lot of travelers, with a lot of interesting life experiences. So, for people who would like to turn those life experiences into great travel stories, what writing tips do you have for them?

**Shayla Lawson:** My first writing tip would be: find your heartbeat because that's the first hurdle to telling a story. I love doing scansion with my students, starting with the idea that Shakespeare writes in iambic pentameter, which is typically thought of as the rhythm of a heartbeat, which is part of the reason it sticks with us and why it's been so popular. But each of us has our arrhythmia. And I think it's important if you want to learn how to tell your stories. We've moved into the world of free-verse poetry. That is how we live our lives now. So, it's not about having a standard heartbeat; it's about finding your own. Once you have a good sense of your heartbeat, whether you're walking, sitting, standing, or whatever way you're comfortable, the next part is finding a way to tell your story to your heartbeat. You can write it, you can record it, but the main thing is building that connection between your heart, your mind, and your body. Because if all of those fill a line to tell your story, then your story will flow.

**Matt Bowles:** The last Chapter in [your book](#) is called 'On Liberation', and I'm wondering if you could leave us with some final reflections on liberation and the role that travel can play in that journey.

**Shayla Lawson:** Yeah, freedom is what we want, but liberation is what we need. Liberation is once we realize we are free, we free others, because we know that, that's the only way that any of this will last. And for me, that came with foraging with a group of travelers while I was living in Bermuda with Kristen White and her copious activist friends. It was really an incredible experience because the day was so simple, yet it was so filled with optimism and wonder.

We foraged in the rain with someone who could trace their family lineage back to some of the first ships that landed on Bermuda. Their family, being scientists and medicine people from where they came from, immediately went and started checking out the plants to see what they could use to heal them so they could survive. And here they are, centuries later, sharing that art with everyone else. We picked wild spinach that had been seasoned only with salt from the sea, and it tasted sweet savory and perfect. We went home and watched that drizzle turn into a thunderstorm, roasted a large fish, and sat by the fire, sharing stories. What is life, if not this? What are we trying to get to, if not that as liberation? It's just the opportunity to spend time with the people that we love and have so many people love us back. That's what I'm really hoping for people to get out of the journey of [this book](#) and out of their experience with traveling.

And I'm hoping that by showing people that a decolonial mindset can lead to larger, long-term, beautiful consequences for the world, you know, those of us who are blessed to travel have a responsibility to making sure that we're envoys to the information that needs to be shared so that this world continues. If each of us thought of that as an honor and not a burden, where would we be? Where could we get in five years? If each person who took a trip this year took it upon themselves to learn something new or spend at least 15 minutes listening to somebody that they don't know tell them something about themselves without interrupting, how much different would the world be right now?

**Matt Bowles:** I think that is a beautiful place to end the main portion of this interview. And at this point, Shayla, are you ready to move into the lightning round?

**Shayla Lawson:** Yes.

**Matt Bowles:** Let's do it. All right. Normally I ask people to recommend One book, but since you are both a writer and an English professor, I'm going to ask you to recommend three books other than your own, maybe that have significantly impacted you, but three books that you would recommend other people should read.

**Shayla Lawson:** Awesome. [Zami by Audre Lorde](#). [Everything We Love Can Be Saved by Alice Walker](#) and the [Parable of the Sower by Octavia Butler](#).

**Matt Bowles:** All right. If you could have dinner with any one person who is currently alive today that you've never met, just you and that person for an evening of dinner and conversation, who would you choose?

**Shayla Lawson:** Easy. [Andre 3000](#), because it would be dinner and a show. Like the conversation would be amazing. And then it would just be like three hours of woodwinds. I'm down.

**Matt Bowles:** Hahahaha. That's amazing. And I love that the answer was easy. That is amazing.

**Shayla Lawson:** Hahahaha

**Matt Bowles:** All right. Shayla, knowing everything that you know now. If you could go back in time and give one piece of advice to your 18-year-old self, what would you say to 18-year-old Shayla?

**Shayla Lawson:** You know yourself. Yeah, because I wouldn't want to necessarily change the scope of anything that's happened, but I think it would be great for me to let my 18-year-old self know that you know yourself and trust that. And the people who tell you otherwise have no idea what they're talking about.

**Matt Bowles:** All right. Of all the places that you have now traveled to, what are three of your favorite destinations you would most recommend other people should check out?

**Shayla Lawson:** Okay. I'd say Venice, Italy because it changed my world and it's sinking, so it won't be there forever. So yeah.

Definitely, St. George's Bermuda so that you can check out Kristen White's tours and her bookshop, long story short, because they also changed my life forever. And let's do it. Lexington, Kentucky, because that is the best place to come and find me, author extraordinaire, and I would be happy to show you around all my favorite haunts.

**Matt Bowles:** Amazing. All right, Shayla, what are your top three bucket list destinations? These are places you have not yet been. Highest on your list you would most love to see.

**Shayla Lawson:** Okay, Iceland, because I really want to be in a hot spring and watch the northern lights at some point in my life. Ghana has been on my list for a very long time, especially with the year of return. I'm still waiting to make mine. And Thailand, I have never been and would really love to.

**Matt Bowles:** Those are great pics. I have been to Ghana twice. I was there a year ago for a Deti December in 2023, turning into 2024. I have been telling stories about it ever since. It was amazing!

The first time I went actually, I did go in 2019 and I went for a month, and it was like in the summer in June, and it was amazing. And in the summer, in June, when there are not a lot of tourists there, it's not the tourist season. There were still like the Sunday party on Labadi beach gets like 5,000 people. They have DJs lining up at the beach. It's just wild. And then people like, you got to come back in December.

I was like, how can it be better than this? They're like, just come back in December. I was like, okay. So 2023, I came back in December and sure enough, it was completely off the chain. So, I think that is an excellent choice, uh, Shayla and, uh, Thailand as well. I've spent several months there. So, feel free to hit me up for recommendations when you are ready to plan those trips.

All right, Shayla, we have now come to the most important question of this interview. I'm about to ask you to name your top five hip hop emcees of all time. But before I do that, let me just ask you this. Have you ever publicly declared this before? Does the world know Shayla Lawson's top five, or is this going to be like a breaking Maverick show exclusive?

**Shayla Lawson:** This is a breaking exclusive. Yes.

**Matt Bowles:** Folks, we are bringing it to you as an exclusive from the Maverick show. Shayla Lawson's top five. Now, before you name your five though, can you share a little bit about what hip-hop music has meant to you and why you love hip-hop?

**Shayla Lawson:** Hip hop is where I learned about revolution. So, I feel really indebted to hip-hop for everything that I've become.

**Matt Bowles:** I feel similarly, to be honest, because. For me, as a white kid growing up in almost entirely white suburbs, when I got a hold of Public Enemy's Fear of a Black Planet album and started listening through all the lyrics, I started asking questions. And then I started doing research. And so, for me, like when people ask me like, how did your political consciousness get to where it is now? I'm like, well, first of all, Chuck D like that, like I've never met him in person, but like, I credit him all the time because that started me on a path to asking questions and all that kind of stuff.

So, and then of course I became a hip hop DJ and I was hip hop DJ for much of the nineties, actually. Started doing all kinds of different mobile DJ events and everything else and had a hip hop show on the radio station in college and all that kind of stuff. So for me, it was a big part of my heart and soul and drove a lot of things from politics, to a lot of the rest of my life as well. So super, super excited about this though. All right, Shayla. Who are your top five?

**Shayla Lawson:** It's tough. Okay, let's start with five, Lady of Rage. And now all of a sudden it starts getting difficult, but I'm going to go with number four, MC Lyte. Three, Queen Latifah. Two, Rah Digga, which I'm sure is going to be controversial, but I've got the evidence. And number one, Lauryn Hill.

**Matt Bowles:** Amazing. We're going to drop the mic at that with the top five. But Shayla, I want you to let folks know, first of all, how they can buy the book. We are going to link everything you say up in the show notes, by the way. So, folks are going to be able to find direct links to everything.

But how can folks buy the book? And then how can they follow you on social media? And how do you want people to come into your world?

**Shayla Lawson:** Buy [the book](#) wherever you tend to buy your books the easiest. I mean, we definitely are going to have a link to [Tertulia](#). And Tertulia is a great program. They're offering 20 percent off of my book and also 50 percent off if you're a brand-new subscriber.

So, it's a great opportunity to support an independent bookstore app. But I also, as the devil's advocate, it's like buying your book on [Amazon](#), you know, the world is ending whether or not. Millionaires and billionaires have rocketed. So, you know, do what feels good in your spirit. But please do take a look at the book and maybe buy it or support your local libraries and check it out.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, I just want to encourage folks. This is a Truly extraordinary travel memoir, both in terms of the thoughtfulness of the insights and reflections, as you've probably heard throughout this conversation, there's a lot more where that came from. It is also an incredible journey that Shayla takes you on through the book as the reader and the prose is just exquisite. You will be just, trust me if you're listening to [the book](#), listen to the first five minutes, or just read the first two or three pages, you will understand what I'm saying. You're like, "Okay, that's what he was talking about".

And then it's like that throughout [the entire book](#). It is a truly incredible experience to go through this book. So definitely, if you want to listen to it, if you want to read it, however you do your books, we're going to link it up in the show notes so that you can do that. Just go to <https://www.themaverickshow.com/>. Go to [the show notes](#) for this episode. They're going to find direct links to get [the book](#) as well as to come into Shayla's ecosystem.

Shayla, this was amazing. Thank you so much for coming to the show.

**Shayla Lawson:** It was a pleasure, Matt. I thoroughly enjoyed it. Thanks for having me.

**Matt Bowles:** All right. Good night, everybody.