

Full transcript of the *Growing up with gal-dem* episode Zeba Blay

The hosts of this episode are Niellah Arboine and Natty Kasambala. The guest on the show is Zeba Blay. This transcript is a verbatim transcript, and we are using verbatim transcription to capture the conversation:

- Non-verbal communication will be indicated within square brackets, e.g. **[laughter]**
- Overlapping conversation will be indicated with a forward-slash, e.g. **/me too!**
- Pauses will be indicated with ellipses, e.g. **It took me (...) a while**
- Interruptions will be indicated with a hyphen, e.g. **I was reliev-**
- Titles of books, publications, films, or brands will be indicated in *italics*, e.g. ***gal-dem***

Voices will be named with their full name for the first sentences, and then by their initials going forwards.

Natty Kasambala to NK

Niellah Arboine to NA

Zeba Blay to ZB

Transcription:

Zeba Blay The other day I went to the park, and there were these two little black girls like playing tag, like they were just like running around the park. And they had the big braids that your mom would do when you were younger and, and there was just like such an innocence and a beauty to it. I just wanted to like grab him and be like, you have to remember like, you can't lose sight of what it feels like to just be a little girl and be amazed by the world you know, and be interested in the world and not be afraid.

Intro music:

gal-dem clapping with intro chant: g - a - l - d - e - m!

[laughter]

Natty Kasambala Welcome to a brand new season of *Growing up with gal-dem*. A *gal-dem* original podcast inspired by our book *I Will Not Be Erased: Our Stories About Growing Up As People Of Colour*.

Niella Arboine My name is Niellah Arboine, and I'm the life editor at *gal-dem*.

NK And my name is Natty Kasambala, I'm a former editor, and long time contributor at *gal-dem*.

NA *gal-dem* is an award winning media company committed to sharing the perspectives of people of colour from marginalised genders. Each week, we invite a guest to respond to old diary entries, letters or text messages from their younger selves. The point is to nurture important discussions about growing up.

NK You can find *Growing up with gal-dem* on *Apple podcasts*, *Spotify*, the *Acast* app, or wherever you get your podcasts.

NA Zeba Blay is a film and culture critic, who has contributed to a number of publications including *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *ESSENCE*, *Shadow and Act*, *Film Quarterly*, and *Indiewire*. Formerly Senior Culture Writer at *HuffPost*, Blay has spent her nearly decade long career writing about pop culture at the intersection of race, gender and identity. Born in Ghana and based in New York City, her book *Carefree Black Girls*, published by *Square Peg*, is out now.

NK Ok so, I'm so excited to have you on the show. Thank you so much for joining us Zeba, and congratulations on *Carefree Black Girls*. How are you doing?

ZB I really don't know. I don't know. It's my first book. And it's like really exposing to release work, you know, especially when like you're writing about going through it. You know? Yeah, I don't know. I'm excited to to just know what people think, to be honest.

NK Yeah, I was gonna just ask, in terms of, I guess, putting together the sorts of things that you put into this book. I think we'll talk more about the title and where it started, but in terms of laying out your contents page, and like the chapters you're going through, was that a process for you?

ZB Yeah, I think the book that now exists. And the book that I imagined, in my proposal, and the proposal that I wrote for it are two very different books. I think initially, I had wanted to write a much more sort of straightforward, you know, analysis of different pop cultural figures. And in writing the book, I realised that like, writing is about being honest, you have to be honest with yourself, you know, you have to meet yourself on the page. And so it was in the process of writing the book that I realised, like, oh, like the book that I thought I was writing, I can't write that book, because I actually have to face what these things mean to me, like how they have affected me personally, I feel like that was more valuable than just doing another sort of like, straightforward, like, I had to confront the ways that images have helped and hurt the way that I conceive of who I am as a person. So it was really confronting, but it was necessary, you know?

NA Yeah, I feel like it must have been very hard to try and like, talk about what it is to be a black woman without putting yourself into perspective.

ZB Exactly, yeah.

NA So yeah, it makes total sense.

ZB And I write about it in the book, where I feel like a lot of times when it comes to cultural critique, something that I struggled with, was this thing where it was, like, I was made to feel like my experience and my identity was superfluous, and that it wasn't objective to insert my experience, my background, my neuroses, everything into how I consume art, which is

ridiculous, because like, everyone consumes art from a subjective point of view. But I think that whiteness will really make you feel like your point of view is irrelevant. And so I really had to fight the need to feel like I had to explain myself, you know, because I feel like when you're more focused on appealing to people who, like, don't understand you, but also don't care to understand you. It takes something away from what you're trying to say, you know, and so, yeah, it was like, okay, like I have to... What I'm trying to do with this book is affirm the fact that black woman's stories are valuable and are important and should be just as talked about, analyzed, geeked out about the same way that everything else is, you know, and you can't do that without centering yourself, you know, but it's scary to center yourself sometimes.

NK Yeah, I think you're so right. It's like the opposite of what we're told good culture journalism should be, it should be like, can I tell you if this thing is objectively good and objectively high standard? And like, you know, can I talk about from my perspective with music, and we're talking about production and features and the industry, but you're told, you know, not to necessarily insert yourself not even to talk in first person or kind of project, when actually you're so right. Everything we consume comes from a place of your own perspective. So I'm sure that that was super scary to I guess, like, completely flip the narrative in the way that you do in terms of leading with your experience and leading with your theories and your perspective, and then kind of weaving cultural history into that, which I really liked.

NA So you were one of the first people to coin the hashtag 'carefree black girls', you know, as a way of celebrating Black women online. Was that the impetus for your book?

ZB Yes, I think that the impetus was celebration, but it was also, I think, I really wanted to, like just explore what that even means, like, what does it actually mean? To be carefree? Right? And, you know, that's what the book is really about mental health, you know, and it's like, at the end of the day, am I always carefree? No. [laughter] I'm usually very anxious and very depressed. But joy is as much a part of my experience as despair is. I was really interested in taking this idea of the carefree black girl, which I think when it became sort of a thing in like, 2013/2014, I think it became a very specific sort of aesthetic. It was like, you know, like, light skinned, 3C curly haired girl in like a flower crown like frolicking in that field, like that was what it was giving. And then there was also conversations about how like, oh, well, there are some people who felt like the idea of like, the carefree black girl was exclusionary of so many other different types of black women, you know? And I wanted to explore like, well, is that true? And like, what if we could reframe it and like, let's really talk about what it means to be free in a world that is so steeped in white supremacy that no one actually really is free, including white people. And so yeah, so it was like it was it was as much a celebration as it was a way for me to sort of deconstruct how I feel about the concept of freedom. As someone who lives in America, as someone who's an immigrant, as someone who has often had to really fight to claim joy in my life, I feel like that is in itself a celebration, like it really makes me happy that I was able to write honestly and openly about the fucked up parts of being black in this world. It's like, that makes me happy in a way, because I feel like I grew up in a culture that did not care about my pain, and didn't want to hear about it. And didn't want me to talk about it and didn't want me to analyse it. And I feel like in doing so, I mean, I'm hoping that I'm opening up the conversation

and the floor to, just to imagine different ideas of what freedom even is because I feel like if you can't articulate to yourself, what being free means to you, then like, what does it even mean to say that you're free? You know what I mean?

NK Absolutely. And I did initially have a question in here about, I guess, like, what baby Zeba was like, and whether she was, you know, carefree. But I think I'm more interested to find out, I guess, like, are there any moments today or in this latest stage of your life post book? Like, what is the time that you feel the most free?

ZB Well, it's interesting. I've been told a lot, like by a lot of like family members that when I was a little girl- because I don't have a lot of memories of my childhood because of trauma. But I've always been told, like, Oh, you were like, such a spicy, like, spunky little girl. Like, you didn't take shit from anybody. And you were just like, so like, you know, loud and like the life of the party. And they're describing a person who I don't know who that person is. You know, I mean, like, I think, as I've gotten older, I'm a much more introverted, reserved, scared person. I move with a lot of fear. I push through a lot of fear in my life. And so I think for me, the moments that I feel most free are there moments when I can feel that little girl that people tell me about like, I'm like, Oh, wait, like, that was like actually the core of who I am and experiences, traumas, you know, just like the realities of living in this world chipped away at that person. And every time I write, it's a way for me to try to get back to her. I feel like I feel free when I'm writing. Honestly, I feel like I feel free when I'm standing up for myself and not letting people take advantage of me, you know, I write a lot in the book about the way that I can often self isolate, I'll stay inside, like for weeks on end, because I'm just afraid of being outside. And when I can, like muster up the courage to just be in the world, like, as something as simple as just walking down the street to go like to the deli, to pick up a sandwich, and I can just walk out the door and feel grounded and bodied, I feel really connected to a part of me that I feel like has, has really been beaten out, quite honestly, you know.

ZB I was gonna say like, I think Black girlhood is one of the most beautiful things in the world. Like just seeing, like, the other day, I went to the park. And there were these two little black girls like playing tag, like, they were just like running around the park. And they had little big braids that your mom would do when you were younger. And, there was just like, such an innocence and a beauty to it that like, I just want to like grab them and be like, you have to remember like, you can't lose sight of what it feels like to just be a little girl and be amazed by the world, you know, and be interested in the world and not be afraid, you know, like, I think that like there hasn't been enough depictions of that experience of childhood of a black girlhood of like, there's been so much of the trauma and of the pain, but not enough of just like the mundane, running around in the playground with your friends. And like, that is always what I'm thinking of and trying to capture when I write about black women.

NK Yeah, I think you're so so right. And I have the same kind of like, it's just like a visceral reaction sometimes when I just see young, black girls, and I'm just like, you're just the most amazing, perfect little beings ever. And I just want to like capture it and preserve it, you know. And you share some stories from your own childhood in the book, I wanted to ask a little bit about obviously the chapter on colourism, which I think is such a key aspect of how we experience the world. And I really loved how you challenged this idea of colourism as like this separate thing to racism, and actually, it's racism. It's just like, of a specific kind. And it seems like it's something that, you know, is one of those things that starts to chip away in your childhood, as you kind of encounter different experiences that raise your awareness of it. So I guess I just wanted to ask a little bit about what the process was like, even starting to tackle that chapter? And just, yeah, how it's been to kind of express that side of yourself, and it's something that we see so rarely.

ZB I think colourism is something that is not discussed nearly as enough as it should be within our own communities, but also like on a larger scale, because as you're saying, colourism is the scaffolding on which racism is built, right? Like what is racism? It's a system which privileges certain people over others. What does it privilege them based on? Based on their appearance, on the colour of their skin, on their features, on the texture of their hair. That's literally the basis and the criteria with which people decide whether you deserve housing or education. Like for that to not be at the forefront of every conversation. I mean, it particularly like you know, in my case, because I write about entertainment, it's like, it really confuses me how, you know, like, we'll talk about we need representation and diversity, and then they will present Zendaya to us. I love Zendaya. She's an amazing actor, right? But you cannot tell me that her winning an Emmy is a win for me. Right? Like at the end of the day, but I feel like because the representation conversation completely flattens the nuances of identity and the nuances of race, that the question of like, whether it makes sense for you know- When I was going up who was the most famous black actress? Halle Berry. That was the black actress. That was the girl, Halle Berry. And anything Halle Berry did I was rooting for her. I was here for it. But I also understood intrinsically, that part of the reason why she was even in position to be nominated for an Oscar and become the second black woman ever to win an Oscar, the first Best Actress winner, was because of the fact that she was a light skinned black woman with Eurocentric features. I understood that, I'm not sure that a lot of the powers that be in Hollywood understand that. And I just find that like, really basic, like, I feel like there's a certain barrier, right? It's like, we need to push the conversation forward, you know. And so for me and writing that chapter, and just in thinking about colourism, in general, it's just like, we as brown skin, as darker skinned black femmes, like we understand it, because we live it every day. So we can have the conversation all day, like we know what the tea is, like, we know what it is. I'm more interested in the Halle Berrys and the Zendayas and the Thandiwes and all these people, I want to hear what you have to say, I want to hear how you feel about the roles you have taken on in the past that you knew should have gone to darker skinned actresses, but you took it right? Like I want to have that conversation. What was very important for me to convey was that I've never grown up feeling any type of way about my like, I think my skin is beautiful. I've never been like, oh, I want to be light. Never. That's never been the issue. However, I have known that. It doesn't matter how I feel about my skin. Because I know that when I go out into the world, there are other people

who are going to treat me a certain way about it. You know, and I feel like the conversation about colourism so often hinges on how like, and it's not to diminish the experiences of people who have had to contend with like self esteem and like not feeling seen. Like that's not to diminish that. But it's like when the conversation begins and ends at Oh, like dark girls feel bad. It's not-

NK That it's a personal problem.

ZB Exactly. It's like, oh, but why do they feel bad? There's something happening externally that's creating that problem. And let's talk about that, you know, yeah, I just find colourism to be complicated, but then it's not, you know?

NK Yeah. Yeah. I mean, in the same way that conversations play out, you know, about privilege, again, like throughout races, I think there's so much denial, despite overwhelming evidence. Like, if we had to actually say, you know, just to just point out I think you mentioned in the book about, okay, can you name someone- Can you name actresses under 30 who are getting big roles who are dark skin? And then think about how many you can name who are under 30 who are light skin, and you're looking at the evidence, and you can name like three who are you know, and it was funny, because as I was reading, I thought, oh, Kiki Layne. I bet everyone's gonna say Kiki Layne. And then that's like your third example, because there's so few of them. And it's like, unless you want to say that everyone who has light skin is just genuinely more talented?! How can you explain and how can you at the same time as ignoring colourism and pretending that it doesn't exist, continue to literally prove the point, if that makes sense. Like if colourism didn't exist, there wouldn't be colourism, if that makes sense?

ZB Exactly. And it- again, there's no logic to it. And it's even like, I don't know how anyone can say that they are committed to dismantling white supremacy. But then they don't want to interrogate their proximity to whiteness. If you as a light person cannot even acknowledge that you experience privilege because of your proximity to whiteness, then how are you going to dismantle this thing called racism because they're basically the same thing. And the kind of brilliant in a way thing about white supremacy is that it creates this cognitive dissonance, it creates this ability to believe in one thing but not see the other thing that's right in front of you. Because yeah, like light skinned black people are oppressed, right? Like they do experience racism, like they are not exempt from what it means to be black in this world. And yet the reluctance to acknowledge the reality of where they sit in this arbitrary hierarchy. White supremacy is all about denial. It's like deny reality. [laughter] Let's deny reality, right? We're all gonna live in this like hellscape, but we're gonna pretend like it's completely this is like the natural order of things like this is it's normal to exploit an extract and disenfranchise people based on the way that they look. It's normal. So like, just because I got this role, it's because I'm the best person for the role. I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know what you're talking about. But you do, but to acknowledge what it actually is, would mean to have to relinquish certain benefits that you get from the system. And I think a lot of people don't want to do that, you know?

NK Yeah.

NA It is time for your extract. Are you okay to read that for us?

ZB Okay. So this is an entry that I made on my *LiveJournal*, on the 15th of June 2009. So I think I would have been like 19. So it says, [reading] I'm one of those people who always says they're going to do something, I make a big show of it, too. I get everything all planned out and lined up. And then when it comes to the point where I actually have to deliver, nada. I mean, there's certain circumstances in my life as of right now that makes it harder to do things, like get a job, for instance. But I think I've been hiding behind these circumstances for way too long. Always citing them as a reason why this or this, or this is not possible. It's such bullshit. Anything is possible. It's a cliché, but it's really fucking true. I guess I just had to stop being afraid and believe in myself. Now. Now. Now, before I'm a 50 year old spinster, still living with my mom without even cats to keep me company. I'm allergic to them. I don't know. I guess I need inspiration. Actually, no, I don't need inspiration. But I guess it would be nice. I don't know. I want to do a lot of things. And I can't let the shitty obstacles in my way hinder me. I want to get my masters, publish a book, write a screenplay, win an Oscar. I know, these are pretty lofty ass goals. And perhaps I may never reach them. But the sad part is I haven't even tried, let alone failed. I guess I'm afraid of the failing part. But I really have to get the fuck over it and just see what happens. Right? Right.

NK Thank you so much for reading that. How does it feel looking back at this in general and revisiting that time, but also reflecting on like, where you are today, and having achieved some of those goals?

ZB It's interesting, because I realise that, wow, like we change, but we really are at our core, the same people. You know, that's why I was talking about getting back to that child self, because that really is who you are. And the older I get, the more that I see these threads, and these patterns and these themes of my life. And I read that entry that I wrote, so so long ago, and I'm just struck by how it essentially could be something that I wrote now, you know, because I'm still grappling with these same feelings of self doubt, and a fear, you know, so much so that, like, it puts things into perspective, right? Because there I'm writing about, like, Oh, I wish I could publish a book. And I have published a book, and I still don't feel accomplished, right? And so it's like, okay, like, it's time to interrogate that it's time to interrogate, what does success actually mean for me, right? Because I think back then, my idea of success was very much built around an idea that had been given to me, you know, that had been given to me by capitalism and white supremacy, and like you have to be, if you do these things, you will be valuable. Whereas like, I now realise that the value is not in... It's not in the achievement, it's in how I feel about the achievement, you know. And so reading that back, it's just like, such a reminder of how far I've come, not in terms of what I've accomplished, but in terms of how I feel about- how I feel about myself. I like the reminder of just knowing that, like, that's where I need to focus my sights on, you know?

NA Yeah, I was gonna ask that because yeah, the extract it seems like success is very much linked to education and your career, and then awards, but it sounds like now that's shifted for you, or now that you've got some of those goals you completely have changed that. What now, today, what does success mean to you? Is that something you even used to define yourself, your life, your goals?

ZB For me, success means being really committed to being a good person, being committed to constantly evolving, being committed to liberation, being committed to happiness, you know, because I think for a long time, because I deal with depression and anxiety. For a long time, I just decided that like, oh, happiness is not something that's in the cards for me, that's not my journey. Right? Like, so I'm not even going to think about that. That's not even going to be a priority, because I'm not capable of being happy. By that same point. It's like, oh, well, like maybe if I do this, and this and this, it will approximate somehow this idea of happiness. And chile, when I tell you, as soon as I turned like 27,28, I'm 32 now. 27-28, 29. I was like, Oh, my God, none of this matters. We're all going to die. Like I say this so much. And it sounds so morbid. But it's actually for me, it's such a happy- not a happy thought. But it's just like a grounding thought, I am going to die. Like, okay, do I want my book to do well? Of course, but if it doesn't, does that have any bearing on who I am, on my soul, where I'm going after this whole situation is over, it really doesn't. Once you like, recontextualise your life based on those parameters of like, oh, like, one day it does, I don't care how it happens, I may be an old lady in my bed, I might be in a car, I don't know how it's gonna fucking happen. But I'm going to be gone one day. And so if that is what's going to happen, I have to be really serious about what it is that I am here on this earth to do. And I am not here on this earth to make money or gain accolades, or be famous, or whatever the fuck, I'm not here for that I'm here to heal myself, to help other black women heal. And to find my freedom in a world that constantly tells me that I'm not free. Because the thing is that, so for me, it's like, okay, like, I have to constantly fight against the absurdity of life in this world. And part of that fight is to not put value into things that white supremacy values. Right? An Oscar, it's cute or whatever. But like, what does it actually mean? Look at the institution from which it comes. Right. And for me, it's like, if White people really fuck with what you're doing, you have to question what you're doing. [laughter]

NK That's, that's a great metric.

ZB You know what I mean? For me, success is about who am I? Like, who am I? You know, and like, that is what my work has to be about. My work cannot be about, you know, we saw Michaela Coel a couple months ago at the *Emmys* with her speech. And I feel like people will hear something like that. And they're like, yes, queen, but they aren't really internalising what that actually means. Visibility is a trap. It is a trap. And if you're not careful, you will get wrapped up in the aftermath of the work rather than in the work itself. And I'm always trying to be concerned with the work itself.

NK Yeah, I totally agree. I think especially in careers where those metrics are visible, and they are kind of, they exist beyond just like, I got a promotion at work. And I this, it's like, no people outside of my industry will hold certain standards and see those things as success. But it is like,

you know, sometimes you get one of those things, you reach one of those benchmarks and you're like, I don't feel any different. The money enters your account. I don't feel any different. This can't be it, especially throughout the last couple of years, a lot of people have been having similar experiences in terms of like, waking up to realise that, you know, when I strip it back to its core, without the free dinners, or without the gigs or without these extra benefits that distract, am I actually happy with what's happening and am I actually happy in myself in my life when I'm left alone, no distractions, you know, in my home? And I think it's a really scary kind of idea to reach some of these benchmarks and feel like it's still not enough but it can also be quite freeing. Yeah, God, I'm right there with you.

NA And that they don't matter. This whole idea that we're all gonna die is the one thing in life, then why aren't we just living like I wasn't put on it to answer emails.

[laughter]

ZB Exactly! Oh my goodness bruh like the false urgency.

NK This is obviously a luxury but being able to pay your rent, being able to be comfortable enough to not worry about where your next meal is coming from is a good baseline. And we're privileged to have these things. But there's like this weird kind of gaslighting that happens beyond that, where as long as you are doing what looks externally, well, you shouldn't really be concerned with whether it feels good or not. You should just be thankful, you should just be grateful. And I guess I wanted to know about like that pressure to succeed and that pressure to kind of keep going, versus the carefreeness. Do you ever find like, it's a struggle to balance between, like, the happiness and also like, I also do have to work and I do have to pay a job? And like, how do I do it so that I can do the things that I want to do, and continue to do the things that can benefit me and other people, but kind of you have to do them sometimes through the lens of these other institutions and structures that hold the book deals or hold the publications, etc.

ZB Honestly, I'm still figuring it out, you know, because I just came out of like five years of being a staff writer at *The Huffington Post*, which, you know, I learned a lot from my experience, one of the things I learned was, I don't like being a staff writer, you know, I'm a Taurus. I don't like deadlines, I don't care about being productive. And I think a lot of my anxiety comes from being the kind of person who doesn't care about productivity, but living in a world and working in an industry that is so hyper focused on like, you got to do this, you got it, you know, like, it's just like, this constant state of just feeling like I'm not doing enough, you know, for me, I think, I don't know what happens next. I don't know where my career and my life is gonna go next. But I just know that boundaries are really, really important. Not only boundaries with other people, but boundaries with myself, right? Because we can become our own worst sort of, like, boss, it's like, you gotta wake- It's just like, chile, I'm tired. I'm on deadline, right now for something, I told my editor, I will get back to you, I'm doing an interview, I will get back to you later today. You won't die if you don't get this article at-

NA Nobody ever dies. Ever.

[laughter]

ZB Because it goes back to the work, right? It needs to be about the work and not, because what happens is I if I rush, and just kind of spit something out, it's gonna produce work that is not going to fully incompetent fully reflect who I am and what I'm trying to say, right? It'll be passable, it'll be you know. So it's like, I have really been like retraining myself after coming of experience, to write not from a place of, you know, online writing is so much about like clicks and like traffic, and like, what's your take- the hot take, and I'm retraining myself to be like, no, like, I'm only going to write about something because I want to. And I'm going to take my time, and I'm going to, like, really consider what it is I'm saying, and whether it's just reactionary and like what is actually contributing to the conversation, because I think that like I'm very much guilty of writing like very, like reactionary work that is built for a model that isn't concerned with truth, you know, all the time. Obviously, like, we want coins, we want to prepare our rent. It's a tightrope that you have to walk. But I think that at the very least being aware, and reminding yourself that you are not a machine that you were not put on this earth to work. That is not what we're here to do. And the gifts that you have, were not given to you to amass capital, especially for someone else. Like, the fuck? No. That's not what these gifts were given. And so it's like, at least being cognisant of that helps me to, you know, bob and weave and sort of figure out each sort of situation and obstacle that comes my way. And there may be times when I fall into the trap of feeling like I need to do everything. But I'm just gonna keep trying, you know, keep that awareness.

NK Yeah, it's just a good light criteria to hold yourself to, you know, when a project comes around to say, like, does this actually meet these criteria of feeding my soul or, you know, contributing to a conversation instead of just like, oh, that's sick cheque, or, Oh, that's a really good opportunity. Oh, it's a really good publication, you know? Yeah.

NA Learning to say no is wonderful. Just being like, No, I don't want to write that. No, no, I love it. It's my new favorite word, is 'no'.

ZB It's fun to say no, especially even like, you know, my *Instagram*, I've gotten like so many emails from people. I'm just like, what? And it's no shade. It's like other people who want to do that, that's fine. But it's like, it's again, it's just about like, looking at yourself and being honest about whether this thing, this opportunity aligns with who you are. That's it, you know.

NA Thank you for that. I've got a lot to think about now. [laughter] Okay, I think we're on to the final segment. So yeah, I wanted to ask you, what advice would you give to your younger self, especially about these kinds of goals of success?

ZB I would tell my younger self, and I would tell my current self, and I would tell my future self, that you are worthy, you know. You are worthy, and you have a right to be in this world. Because I feel like that feeling of not feeling like I belong here has been a part of a lot of my struggles,

and every facet of my life. And in terms of my career, and my work, I struggle so much with feeling like that nothing I have to say is like, valid. And I know that that voice is not of me, right? It's not that core little girl person who was like, you know, cussing adults out when she was three years like that, you know, like, that is not who that person is. That is all the things that have been dumped on me. And being a writer and releasing work, especially personal work can be so scary, because it's really, really exposing. The thing that's come up a lot with the release of my book is just like, oh my god, like, I don't have a right to write this book. Like, who do I think I am? You know, like, Who do I think- you wrote a book bitch, like, Who do you think you are? You know? And it's like, no, like, if like, some mediocre white girl can get a half a million dollar book deal and not even write the book. We all know who I'm talking about. If you don't, it's Caroline Calloway. Hi, girl. If they can do that, then I'm allowed to write- you know what I mean?! Like, it's just like reminding myself, No, you are worthy. You are here, just by the fact that I exist at all, is enough of a justification for me to express myself. And I think that is the reminder and the advice that I kind of always want to keep with me for the rest of my life. Because I know it's gonna be a struggle, you know, for the rest of my life. And I just have to, yeah, I have to remember that.

NK Yeah. Thank you so much. What do you think that younger self, either the really younger, self, younger Zeba who was that like spicy youngster, spicy toddler, telling adults what to do. Or the self who wrote this extract in 2009, if they were to see you today, where you are in your journey of kind of realising your purpose and what drives you in life... What do you think they would think of that?

ZB I think they would be really impressed. It's funny, because currently, I'm not impressed. But if I can put myself in that place, and where I was, at that time in my life, I'm like, Oh, wow, like, not only have you like, managed to carve out a place for yourself, as a writer, you're also like doing real work, to feel validated outside of that. I'm so excited for who I'm going to be when I'm 40 or 50. Because I just feel like I've come a long way, you know, and sometimes I forget that, but it's like, even me sitting here and talking with you all right now, like I would never have been able to do this 10 years ago, I would have been too nervous. I would have said no, you know, but look at me getting to connect with two people on the other side of the world, like look at all of the things that come out of choosing myself and I think that younger me would be really impressed and excited and like, a little bit gagged, you know? [laughter] Like, okay, like you're out here. Yeah.

NK Yeah. Thank you so much for joining us Zeba that was incredible.

NA Thank you.

ZB Thank you.

NA Very refreshing chat about why we're on this planet, to be honest, yeah.

NK I'm a bit thrown. It was like she was speaking directly to my soul, honestly. Yeah, I think like I said in the interview, like it's something that a lot of us have been grappling with, especially throughout lockdown and the pandemic and also just when you get to a certain stage in your career, or you're kind of like Zeba, you know, you reach a certain goal for you, you know, you're a Lifestyle Editor at a very successful publication, or, you know, you get a certain title or acknowledgments and it's like, what now? I think it can be such a scary moment to realise you know, that achieving certain things or reaching certain goals, that's not all life is about, that's not going to solve the other problems or the other issues, it's not going to like flip a switch, and suddenly, you're going to be happy, like, there are always going to be these other elements that are equally as important as the work you do. Even if that work is visible, even if that work is like, externally celebrated. It's tricky, isn't it?

NA It's hard to kind of recalibrate what you see as success. And, you know, is it just about how much labour you can give capitalism? Or is it all the other things that make you happy in life? Yeah, I just really just felt when she was like, you know what, we're gonna die one day.

NK I'm on my existential shit, like, every single day since I was 17. But there is something really freeing in that, like, not necessarily, even though you know, we're all gonna die some day. But just like, if you were to pass away, or if something was to happen, like, are you happy with how you're living your life right now? Not, oh, I'm gonna work this hard and I'll get to something in the future. In two years, I'll have this much and then I'll be happy. But like, if you looked at this last week, and everything you did, did you do something for yourself? Did you do something for the people you love? Like? Were you laughing? Did you get some joy in your life? Or were you just you know, grinding for something that's coming later. And I think that's something that I've realized is so key in terms of like, work or friends or pressures will have you thinking that like, life right now is not for enjoyment. Like that comes later. This is the grind, this is the hustle. This is when you need to be busy, like good, busy, good, busy. That's fake, bro! Like, there's no such thing. So live now and like, say no to that last opportunity that means working all weekend, or that doesn't pay you enough, but you just think, oh, but it's better if I just do it, you know, I think we need to give ourselves more allowance and how we balance our work and our life and our priorities and not feel like not balancing work at the top is slacking or being a failure.

NA Completely. And we're just not our jobs. My career is not me. And sometimes it's hard to separate the two obviously, if something's your passion as well. But that is not actually why I was put on this planet was to just work, work and then die. Like that's very boring. [laughter]

NK Yeah. And I think it's really hard, like we talked about to acknowledge those bits, while also remaining grateful for the opportunities that we do have. And actually like, capitalising on the opportunities and platforms we have, you know, but you can have both you can be happy in your career and still want your evenings and still clock out at 7 or 6pm. You know?

NA Fully we can critique the system and still, you know, be a part of it, [laughter] because-

NK Still in it, still completely enable it and chase people all the time. [laughter] Anyway, you know, we're just figuring it out. And I think that's another part that I really loved about Zeba. She was like, very much like in the midst of it, and looking forward to the future as well as you know, reflecting on the past at the same time.

NK This has been an *Ai Ai Studios* production.

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Exit music:

gal-dem clapping with intro chant: g - a - l - d - e - m!

[laughter]