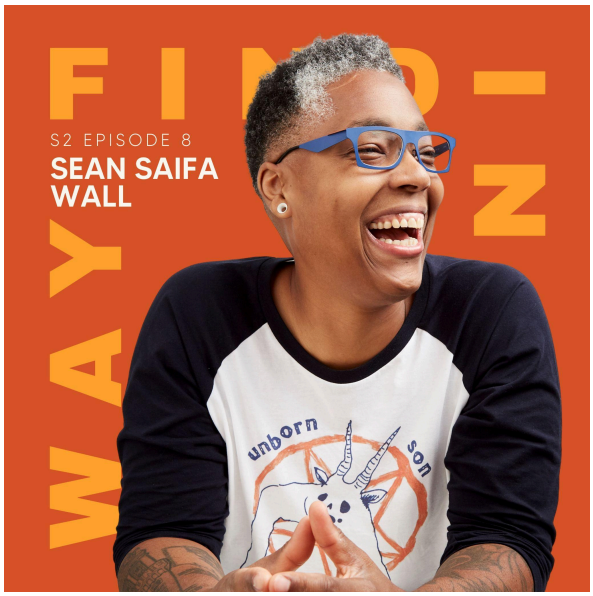
Finding Our WayPodcast

hosted by

Prentis Hemphill with guest

Sean Saifa Wall



Published June 7th 2021
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agreement - when two people are speaking at once

Prentis: [music] What becomes possible when we reject binaries? Can we make room for what's real and who we actually are? Have you considered what harm goes into enforcing unnecessary standards and who disappears in our insistence on rigidity? As Sean Saifa Wall shares in this episode; justice for intersex children and adults is the work of healing generations and setting us and our futures free from the violence of binaries. Sean Saifa Wall is a Black intersex activist scholar, and somatics practitioner is the co-founder of the intersex justice project, which is a grassroots initiative by intersex people of color. And he's my longtime friend. I always enjoy how deep and joyful our conversations are. And I hope that you enjoy this episode.

Prentis: What's up Saifa?

Saifa: Yo, what's up P? Talk to me baby. [both laughing]

Prentis: I'm really glad to be in conversation with you and be in conversation with you and kind of a different way today. I get to talk to you about your work

and your offering into the world in a, maybe a kind of slightly deeper way than we usually get into it.

Saifa: Yeah. Yeah. That sounds dope.

Speaker 2: Excited to be with you. Um, I wanted to start, usually we start with a question of, uh, kind of where are we and we'll get there, but I wanted, I wanted you to just, if you could remind me how we met. Do you remember?

Saifa: I do. It was in 2011 and it was the, um, generation five. They were doing a training on child sexual abuse. And I totally gravitated towards you. I'm just like you are so cool. You were so well-dressed. [Prentis laughing] I was like, "oh, that's my negro over there." [both laughing] It was instant love baby.

Prentis: That's right. That's right. There's a few moments I can remember from early on when we met and I do remember that day because you, you are a person, I know you hear this all the time, but you are so consistently you in such a refreshing way. There's no, two-face, Saifa is this way one day, Saifa acts this way the next day, you are Saifa every day and it's amazing.

Saifa: Yo, real talk. Yeah, I keep it 1000 all the time. All the time. [both laughing]

Prentis: All the time. Uh, well, um, I'm glad that you're here. I'm grateful that you're here and that we get to talk about you and what you've been up to. So we start the podcast typically with this question, and you can orient to the question, however you want to, whatever comes up for you. But the question is really asking guests to talk about this moment where we are, and however you define 'we', but how are you thinking about the moment that we're in right now? What are the things you're paying attention to?

Saifa: Man, I think this is a huge question, right? Cause it's like whose moment, um, who are 'we'? You know, and I think when I think of we, I think of black folks, um, I think of intersex folks, I think of queer folks think of trans folks. I had a good, it was a really deep, amazing conversation I had with my friend Mel yesterday. Um, she teaches at MICA in Maryland. She's a professor and we were just talking about our different sort of like experiences a be intersects, right? Like she identifies as femme and, you know, lesbian and interex and identify as male and intersex and we just have different trajectories. Right. Um, and you know, without going into her business, I think we were just talking, we were just sharing our stories. Like we never met each other in real life. Right. Um, and this was

like the first time we've, we've had many conversations, but I just feel like last night we had a deeper level of conversation and we were just talking about how our bodies had changed with hormones. Right. And how she chose different a different path. Like she was able to consent to things and how I wasn't able *mm*to consent to things. Right. Um, and so I think for me, like recently, my heart was really heavy just thinking about the anti-trans bills, like the anti-trans healthcare, um, the sort of discriminating against trans girls on sports teams. And I think the bill in Florida just really shook me, right. That they wanted to do genital inspections, [on] children. Right. And how so much of this legislation is premised on discriminating and really terrorizing trans people, trans children, trans youth, but the legislation, the wording is actually what happens to intersex children, and intersex young people. And I think because people don't know what happens to intersex young people, you know, they're able to pass horrendous laws that end up hurting both trans and intersex, young people.

Saifa: Um, and so for me, like, I feel like I'm no stranger to the overreach of the state, um, to how the state has harmed me, has harmed people in my family. Um, I'm no stranger to that. But I think I am also like, you know, I think as trans and intersex communities, I think we really need to be in dialogue now more than ever. Um, because I think there is, um, an eraser, um, an erasure that wants to take place in using trans and intersex people as experiments. Um, so, you know, I think about that, right? Like I think about just these intersections of bringing this gospel, this intersex gospel to Black people. And you know, you know, P you know, you know, me, man, like I don't do this for the cloud. I don't do this for the fame, like I do it because I was harmed and I don't want to see other people harmed in a way that I was harmed.

Prentis: I think as your friend, I feel really aware of how much the work you do means that you have to tell your story of harm over and over again. And I see it, you know, the, the times where I've heard you share your story, there's such a power. And a power in both refusing the erasure that you're talking about and a power in sharing the kind of complexity of your story as a Black person, as an intersex person. And so part of me is like wanting grounding in your story. And part of me as your friend wants you to not have to tell it to. So I think I'm like, what, what feels powerful or what feels important for you to name, I think in this conversation to really set the context for the work that you're doing?

Saifa: Um, I think that's such a, a beautiful question. And, you know, I, I do this work because there are people who came before me who couldn't share

their story. Um, I do this work because, you know, I, whenever, you know, before COVID, before the days of COVID, um, just sort of, um, giving presentations, I always would ground the story in my Nana. Right. And before I talk about my Nana, like, I want to share, you know, with you, with your audience. Um, last year before I moved to England, um, I went to see a geneticist, right? Because I think for so many years, I've heard that I had these quote "abnormal receptors" that I was incapable of synthesizing testosterone. Right. Um, and I saw this geneticist, uh, he was from Venezuela and he was, it was a very affirming visit. This was at Emory University and he, you know, he, they collected some blood work. And because of COVID, you know, we had a virtual constant consultation to discuss the results. And he said, he was just like, "you don't have abnormal receptors. You just don't have a lot. And so if an X, Y person has a million receptors," he's like "you have 10,000." And what struck me and what moved me so much is that he said that there were people in your lineage who had this, because it was passed through the women in your family. So immediately, I thought about, you know, hundreds of years back thinking of, you know, people on the continent who had variations in sex anatomy, thinking of people who were enslaved and who were probably thrown overboard, um, or harmed, or assaulted because of how their bodies looked or sold to a circus. Um, I'm thinking of, and trying to feel into the people, my people who were like enslaved, um, who couldn't bear children who had, you know, problems with procreation and even having sex right.

Saifa: When they were forced to breed, like I'm thinking of those people in my lineage who survived like Jim Crow who survived the transatlantic slave trade, um, that's the lineage that I carry, right. A lineage of Black intersex people who may have shared their story or may not have. Right. And so I think of my Nana, I think of my Nana, who was 13 years old when she had her first child, my grandfather was 32. Um, you know, I think about her having nine children, she actually had 10, one died in birth, at birth. And she had three intersex children during Jim Crow, *hmm* in North Carolina. You know, they were, um, they were treated, you know, at Duke [University] because they were initially raised as girls, and then they were reassigned to boys. And I can only imagine my Nana, you know, this woman who stood about four foot 11 with only a seventh grade education, having these white doctors tell her about her children. Um, and I think about just in my family, like the level of secrecy, like I remember talking to some of my cousins and, you know, they shared about this being a curse, you know? Um, and I remember I wrote an essay about curing the curse, right. Just like using story, using my

narrative in order, you know, to heal me to heal parts of myself, but also to offer healing for them. Right. And, you know, I believe that healing extends back 10 generations, right? So like, if we think about it on a spiritual plane, like my healing is, you know, bringing is shouting like 10 generations in front of me and shouting 10 generations in back of me, you know? Um, and so, you know, for me, I know that when I close my eyes for the final time, I want to know that I did the damn thing, that I shared with anyone who would listen, um, to let them know what has happened to me, what has happened to others and why this must not continue

Prentis: That point at the end. It feels especially poignant too, because why it must not continue because it is continuing, because it is currently happening. Um, I wonder if you can just say something about that, and then I have a kind of follow-up question to that, but I think it's important to name in a way that makes sense how this continues cause that, that, um, erasure, secrecy part it's so important. I think for, you know, this, what happens to intersex children, has to happen alongside the eraser and secrecy of folks not knowing or paying attention or all of that. So, um, I wonder if you can just say something about kind of your work, what you're *hmm* working to end in this moment,

Saifa: You know, I think, you know, I think Freire, Paulo Freire, and the, um, 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' and, you know, one of the things that sticks with me is this, this idea of dehumanization, which I think we know so well, And so intimately as Black people, like I think is a particular kind of dehumanization that no one should experience. And I think for intersex people, it's a similar to humanization, which is why I always talk at the intersections of being Black and intersex. Right. Um, because they can't be teased, they can't be extricated. They can't be like taken apart. Like it's all the same thing for me. Right. Um, and I think, you know, doctors have done a really great job of making it seem that intersex is so small, so rare. Right? And also keeping intersex people from each other, *mmhmm* and defining what is intersex, who is intersex. Right. And I think for me, sort of like getting intersex away from medics. Because I think if we can free ourselves from medicalization, what becomes possible? *mmhmm* What becomes possible for people, right? And, you know, even the people who know me, who've heard my story, who know them in a sex talk my shit, blah, blah, blah. They still don't think that they could be intersex because they're like, well, you know, even for people who know what intersex is, or may know the definition, they don't implicate themselves, which lets me know that there's still a long way to go. Like

there's still like so much stigma, so much silence, and so much shame around being intersex, that people may not want to confront. And I don't, yo I don't blame them. You know, if you already stigmatized, see like, "oh nah, I don't need to add another thing to the list." Right? But for me, it's like, how do we have expansive conversations around what is intersex? Like, I think so much about how people with PCOS, which is poli-cystic ovarian syndrome, doctors don't know why that happens. Anyone who has PCOS, who's been to the doctors is throw up their hands because they don't know. They just try to do surgeries, put them on hormones. And there are so many people with PCOS who've been misdiagnosed. And for me, it's this kind of like, how do we have, like I said earlier, like how do we have expansive conversations of what it means to be intersex? Because I think historically it has been defined by white intersex people. Who had very particular accounts around medicalization around very harmful surgeries. And when I talk about these surgeries, I'm talking about multiple surgeries on a person's genitals. I'm talking about scarring, I'm talking about, um, lack of sensitivity. I'm talking about incontinence, I'm talking about body dysphoria that happens. And PTSD that happens, when someone has been so violated.

Saifa: You know, like I remember in 2013 I went to a activist meeting in Malta and we worked on the doctrine that would later sort of lay the foundation for Malta becoming the first country in the world to ban intersex surgeries. And so I'm at this meeting and we're like meeting all day, like at least 12 hours is this felt like forever. Right? And so many of us are like traumatized. So many of us have these stories and throughout the meeting, I literally wept. And you know, I, I called together like a workshop cause I was like, I need to do something. I need some healing. I need some healing. I need some somatics. I need some something right. Call it together like this workshop because we had these breakout sessions and it was me and a, um, person who's a licensed therapist. And you know, the activists who came into the room, you could see the weariness on their face, you know? And these were activists from around the world. It was probably like third 30 of us around 30 of us. And folks were tired, tired. And just hearing each person's story one by one, I broke down and wept. I wept. And I wept because I felt so angry and so sad. And I felt my own grief at what happened to my body and just hearing these stories and to think that like there has been no justice done. I was like, you know, I think it, you know, when I came back to the states, I wrote an essay and you know, in the essay I said, you know, the title I wanted, the, the essay to be was "Debating Ethics with Butchers." Cause

I feel like these urologists are butchers, especially if they hear the protests of patients for almost three decades. And if they double down on their commitment, I'm like "you're butchers" right. And you know, I wrote, I was like, my activism is motivated by both love and anger, you know, anger at what was done to my body, without my thorough informed consent and love for a future generation to prevent them from harm.

Prentis: You mentioned it a couple of times, but you know, when I was, um, thinking through this conversation with you, I was just thinking about how rooted in lineage your work feels, almost, I'm not going to say more than, but it feels so significantly rooted in lineage. And you keep speaking to it; your ancestors, intersex ancestors, the children that are coming after you. It feels like such a generational intergenerational, a time-traveling work that you are committed to in this life. And it's, it's um, just transformative to see somebody working so clearly inside of a lineage and possibility for the folks that come after and also in reverence for those who came before. It's beautiful in order for us and maybe by us, I mean, Black folks, maybe, I mean something broader, in order for us to stop all these patterns that lead to these violences that occur to intersex children and intersex people broadly, what do we have to tell the truth about?

Saifa: I think we have to confront our own monstrosity. And I, and I say that because the reason why doctors, endocrinologists, urologists, pediatricians are able to get away with this, the ones who are biased, right? The ones who are prejudiced, the reason why they're able to keep doing this is because of bias. And what people have internalized around what is normal and what is not normal. And the discomfort that we have around bodies that are different. The fact that I remember, I read part of an article. It was a long article. It was in the Atlantic and it was about, um, I think it was Sweden, either Sweden or Switzerland, but I believe it was Sweden that they they're flagrantly flaunting, um, a eugenics move to erase pregnant people who have children who have chromosome variation because there's more than just XX, XY, right. There's XXY I believe this XYY there's just X. Different chromosome variations that they can opt to selectively abort their children based on chromosome variation. So there's an eraser that happens to intersex children even before they're born. I think so much, you know, to use my term again so much is premised around heterosexuality and these surgeries that happen to intersex children are steeped in the 1950s, right? Like it's literally like assign girls, women are supposed to have vaginas with small

clitorises to receive a penis. And boys are supposed to be, have a penis to penetrate a vagina and be able to pee standing up. And I've literally heard urologists say out their fucking mouths that "if a boy can't pee, standing up, he won't understand himself as a boy." But you know, for people who want a normal quote, "normal", whatever the that is, who want a normal child, they'll do it. Right. And I think I've talked to parents and I think there's a lot of fear. There's a lot of fear. And I think as a parent, you have to confront like a lot of things about yourself, around how you were raised. And, you know, physicians are giving parents this, this way out, this will make your kid normal. And you won't have to tell anyone that your child was born with this disorder, that your child was born with this abnormality. And so, you know, gender gets inscribed on the bodies of children, right? Like I was castrated because girls are not supposed to have testes because girls are supposed to feminize, not mascinize, you know, you know, it's fucked up.

Prentis: Yeah. There's something, when you were saying that I was like the doctor, to say that the boy won't understand themselves as a man. It's like the other side of that is saying, we won't shift our definitions to include the reality of this human being, *right.* There's an insistence there that they know is going to impact the child, but there's a unwillingness for us to be changed by *right* each other, by reality, by what's real. One of the things is really coming through to me as you speak, is just how much binaries and our adherence to binaries really requires secrecy in this erasure that you're talking about. That in order for us to try to make these binaries actually exist, there's a whole lot of things that have to be lied about, people that have to be disappeared. And that's just, um, I think I, I, you know, wanted to talk to you, especially, cause I think there's such a gift in your work and how you do your work around expanding our ability. I hesitate to say, "to live with complexity" because it's almost just like 'live with what is', I wonder if you have anything to say or any thoughts about just the binary piece and also, um, expanding our ability to hold,

Saifa: You know, I feel like, you know, the same conversation, it wasn't the same conversation, but I had a conversation with my friend Mel and she said, or they said, cause I know they also use they. Um, they said that, "you know, trans identities remind us that gender is fluid. It changes it's not fixed. And intersex bodies remind us that sex is fluid." You know, I think as someone who has been sexually active, I've seen a lot of bodies, [both laughing] you know? *mmmk* Um, and I think anyone who's been sexually active, we've seen so many bodies and I think it just requires us.

You know, I think, you know, my question is why are people afraid of questioning whether they're intersex or not? Because I'm just like, I think it's very easy for people, you know, who have heard me speak to kind of, it's like a circus attraction in a way, right? It's just like, "Ooh, let's look at hermaphidite. Yes." You know, but I think in my work with people, I'm like, I'm interested in people's stories around gender. I'm interested in their body stories. I'm interested in how they understand themselves, because I think when people understand themselves and they question themselves, then they start to interrogate, "Maybe I could be intersex. Maybe those exams are starting to make sense. Maybe all the hormone panels I was subjected to maybe the hormones I was on. Maybe" any number of things I'm interested in putting that one seed of doubt in people's minds. Because as medical professionals contract, I'm interested in expanding. Right. And I think that's what we have to do. Right. Because I think medicine, you know, to talk about it, somatically medicine is contracting around the gender, binary. M"edicine is this like, this is man, this is woman. And that's just what it is." Right. "And you have these, these little freaks over here that are so rare. They're the intersex people. But generally people are men and women", and they contract and they double down, they pathologize that creates stigma. And I think it's our duty as activists to actually expand, right? To be expansive in our thinking, to be expansive in our practice, right. To actually engage with people. And you know, I feel like it's really cool, you know, cause I'm old, right. *Ok* I'm in my forties. *ok* I don't live the long life. You know, maybe I got some more life to live, but I think it's heartening to see young people on TikTok. I'm not on TikTok, but you know, I be creeping on TikTok, seeing what the kids doing. And I think it's so cool to see young people, bold aas hell being like, "I'm a hermaphidite." "I'm intersex." I" have this, I have that." And I'm like, "yes!" I'm just on the sideline, cheering them on. Right?

Saifa: Because like, I mean, you know, one thing when I do sematic sessions with people, the one thing I always tell people I work with and always a reminder to myself is that you will die. You will die. I will die. We all will die. Right. *mmhmm* And so for me, it's like, 'what's my legacy? How can I support, you know, how can I foment rebellion? Right? Like how can I get people thinking, how can I get people moving?' Because it's not about me. Like I'm interested, what's been on my mind lately, is this groundswell? Like I want a groundswell of people who are just like, I am who the I am. And I don't have to apologize to anyone. Like my body. Well, you know, you know, like Sonya, Renee Taylor would say, "my body's not an apology", you know? Um, and so I want there to be a groundswell

of people because of what I believe- and doctors have gone a record specifically urologists, specifically doctors from the society of pediatric urology, have said that they "will not stop doing these surgeries until they are legally obligated to do so." And one thing I believe unfortunately, is that the suffering has to be so great as to overwhelm the system. Right. Um, and I don't want there to be suffering. Like I actually want there to be, um, people who are bold and who are angry and who are breaking free from the stigma and the silence and the shame that tries to bind intersex folks.

Prentis: That's so powerful. I feel like what you're sharing just speaks so much to even just this moment that we're in, where I often feel like maybe this is true for many moments or always, but I feel like we're at this choice point where there are people that want to contract around the lies contract around the secrecy or contract around the pretending. And the harder thing to do is to expand around the, just what is to be with what is, and to, to trouble our own concepts of ourselves, to be more expressive, more of who we are. And these are the paths that I think are offered to us in this moment. How can we keep, like you said, doubling down or contracting around the lie or how can we surrender to the expansion? I think that this moment could offer us, I want to talk to you about healing. And I want to talk to you about it as someone who has experienced violence at the hands of the medical system that often purports to have healing at its center. You know, that's the, that's the thing that we're told to go to get healing through this medical apparatus, um, I want to talk about what healing actually means for you, your person, for your body, given the relationship that we often have, the correlation we make between healing and medicine. How have you actually experienced or found, or how do you engage in healing?

Saifa: You know, I feel like for me, like healing is so, you know, I feel like people, you know, toss the word around these days, right? They're like, "oh, healing, healing." That's, that's the sexy shit "oh healing. Ooo you wanna heal with me baby?" You know what I'm saying? And for me, you know, I can't tell my intersex story without telling a Black story. I can't tell a Black story without telling the a queer story. I can't tell a queer story, without telling a story of being raised as a girl. I can't talk about being raised as a girl on the, some talking about being raised as a girl in the Bronx, during the crack epidemic. And I feel like for me, both of my parents are deceased. My dad died when I was 14. My mom died four years ago. I feel like when I heal, I heal a part of them that in some ways suffered during this life, you know? Um, and when I think about it, like, you know, I lost

my parents so young, you know, like I feel like there are people who've lost their parents younger, but you know, I think about people my age, who have parents who are like seventies, eighties, who they're looking after. And I was just like, you know, such a young person, you know, by the time I was 38 I already had lost both of my folks. And, you know, I think there's something in there around wanting to really get my mind right. Because I was not given the tools. I was given some of the tools, but not a lot. And I think because of the conditions in which I lived growing up, you know, I was not meant to survive. You know what I'm saying? Like I had a memory earlier when I was walking my dog - cause that's when I do my deep thinking, when I'm walking my dog in the shower on the toilet - and I was thinking about how, you know, my sister has, um, you know, different diagnoses in when she was younger. She's 10 years older than me. She was really volatile. So cops would be at our house all the time. Like my house, my apartment would be flooded with police officers trying to get her out of, um, the bathroom because she's having a psychiatric meltdown. Um, the cops were called to my house so much that they stopped coming. *mhmm* Um, and we hear so much about, you know, Black people being executed by the police and particularly Black, disabled people being executed by the police. Um, you know, I think about my father who was addicted to crack, like I think about my mother who was also addicted to crack. Um, I feel like I probably have lost my mind several times. Um, and for me, like healing, just healing is having some semblance of, not my sanity, but some semblance of humanity, because I feel like when I was younger, there were these constant attacks on my humanity. Constant attacks on my dignity, as a young Black girl, a young black intersex girl growing up during the crack epidemic in the Bronx.

Saifa: And so for me, like having, you know, made it out, right? And, and I don't fall into that trap. Right. That a lot of more established Negroes would do. Right. But like, "oh, I'm so special. I made it out the hood." Right. It's not that I was lucky. I was lucky. *mmmhm* Right. Um, and I think for me, it's just like I knew at some point, because, you know, before I started a recovery in 2007, before I started 12 Step recovery, I had hit such a low a bottom. And I knew that if I didn't heal, if I didn't change what I was doing, either someone was going to kill me or I was going to kill someone. Um, and you know, I feel like for me, that was my mandate to heal so that I can show up in the world differently. And so I can show up in my movement differently. Right. So I can show up with authenticity, with integrity, with love. Right. Um, cause I feel like when we don't heal that shit, that we've inherited, that we, that structured our lives as young

people, we do a disservice to ourselves, but we also do as a service to the organizing. We do a disservice, disservice to the movement building. And then sometimes we get all this fame, but then we're still traumatized, you know? Um, and so I feel for me, like healing has to be a part of, um, especially when thinking about intersex. Like I think about, you know, part of, you know, the project I founded was an Intersex Justice Project. And part of that is reparations to a tone for what has happened to people like hospitals need to break off some reparations. Give people the surgeries that they want, give people the hormones that they want - for free. Give people the psychological support that they want - for free. Right. And I think intersex activism demands, accountability, and we treat doctors like gods. So I think intersex activism *mmhmm* is almost an anomaly because we are not used to holding the medical establishment accountable for their wrongdoing. And I think intersex activism is a radical, particularly intersex justice, right. Is a radical demand for accountability, for accountability and course correction.

Prentis: I just want to underscore one of those points that you made reparations is also a part of healing period. Saifa. I just want to thank you for sharing so much. So thoughtfully. I love you, as a person, as my friend. You are a generous and loving and wildass friend to have. A visionary for this moment that really moves from your heart, and from your love, and through lineage. And I'm grateful for the work that you do to free all of us.

Saifa: Oh, thank you P. I love you too, baby. I'm so glad that you've, you know, that you created this podcast [Prentis laughing] and that you are, that your work and your words are in the world. Because like I told you, it's just like, you know, there's, there's very few niggaaas who can check meeeee. Who got the raaaange. [Prentis laughing] Because so many folks out here don't got the range. You know what I'm saying? And you know, I, I think you are, you are special, you know, like you're, you have a light and you have a brilliance to you, that the world needs to see and experience,

Prentis: You know, it's always an honor to hear that from you. You've encouraged me so much. And I really take it as a deep honor that I'm one that can check you from time to time.

Saifa: Oooo [laughing]

Prentis: You also can check me, and have, so thank you for that. I love you.

Saifa: I love you.

Prentis: [music] Finding our way is co-produced and edited by Eddie Hemphill. Coproduction and visual design by devon de Lena. Assistant editing by Amy Piñon. Please make sure to rate, subscribe, and review wherever it is that you listen to this podcast. You can also find us on Instagram at finding our way podcast or email us with questions, suggestions, or feedback, and findingourwaypod@gmail.com. You can also help sustain the podcast by becoming one of our Patreon subscribers. You can find us on Patreon @findingourwaypodcast. Thank you for listening to finding our way [music].