

Art, Advocacy and Ancestral Knowledge: Olafur Eliasson ^(OE) in conversation with Firdaus Sani ^(FS)

In this conversation, artist Olafur Eliasson and Firdaus Sani, a descendant of the Orang Laut, the “people of the sea” in Singapore, peninsular Malaysia and the Riau Islands, discuss the importance of Indigenous knowledge, the situational specificity of working creatively and as activists, and the civic role of museums and artmaking practices.

OE Hello Firdaus. Nice to meet you.

FS Hi, Olafur.

OE I'm curious to learn more about you, your work and background. Do you also work as an artist?

FS I do consider myself an artist and use my art as a form of activism. The work that I do is heavily influenced by my culture. I often work with artists, especially artists or performers who are Orang Laut or Orang Pulau¹ descendants.

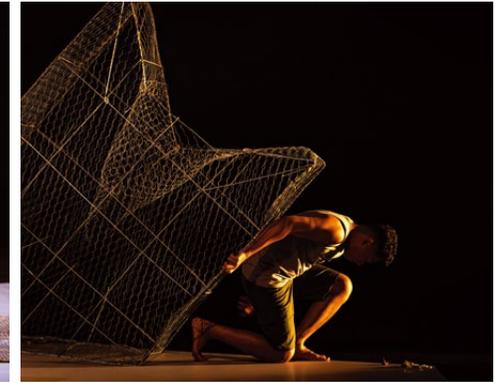
I'm a 4th-generation Orang Laut and advocate for Indigenous cultures in Singapore. I've also recently started a non-profit organisation, Orang Laut SG, which promotes cultural preservation in Singapore.

In May 2023, poetic vocalist Asnida Daud and I researched and performed *Air Da Tohor (The tide is low)* at the Esplanade in Singapore. “Air da tohor” is a vernacular expression used by the Orang Laut and Orang Pulau to call attention to low tides when fishing. The performance had four segments incorporating sounds and movements that were inspired by coastal community members, including their oral traditions, maritime craftsmanship, cuisine, environmentalism and relationship with the spiritual realm. I wrote the poetry for this performance using the mantras that I've learnt from my grandparents.

¹ Orang Pulau (“people of the land”) refers to occupants of Pulau Semakau and the Southern Islands, including Kusu Island, Saint John's Island, Lazarus Island, Pulau Seringat, Pulau Tekukor, Sentosa and two Sisters' Islands.



ABOVE:
Asnida Daud and Firdaus Sani's *Air Da Tohor (The tide is low)*, performed at the Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, 2023. Images courtesy of P7:ISMA. Photography by Beznie Ng.



OE How are your grandparents? Are they still around?

FS My grandmother is. My grandfather passed on a couple of years ago. My family came from an island called Pulau Semakau. It's a landfill now.

OE I see. Where is the island? When did your family move from there?

FS Pulau Semakau is among a cluster of islands along the south coast of Singapore. A lot of these spaces have been turned into petrochemical plants and recreational areas, so no one lives in the Southern Islands anymore. Many of the communities who used to live there were moved to mainland Singapore in the 1970s, including my grandparents and my mum.

In the 1990s—I was born in 1988—I visited the Southern Islands with my grandparents. That's how I got exposed to island culture. We have ancestral roots in the Riau islands as well, because we are a seafaring community and tend to move around a lot. We still visit different tribes in Riau. Their culture is part of my research. At Orang Laut SG, we research the intersections between different communities in Riau and in Singapore.

OE When your grandparents moved from Pulau Semakau to the mainland in 1977, were they forced to move or did they want to move to the mainland?

FS In Singapore, we don't usually use the term “forced,” but you could say that they were indeed forced to move. We could also say that they were relocated but, in actuality, these individuals were displaced. The Semakau Islanders were given notice to move in 1974. By 1977, they had to leave. There were people who resented this and did not want to move. They tried speaking to individuals such as the late Othman Wok, who was the elected representative of the Pasir Panjang constituency, to revoke this notice.

OE Do the Orang Laut, as an Indigenous community, have a sacred connection to the land? Most people think of Singapore as a largely Westernised, modern city, and these spiritual perspectives regarding the sanctity of the land may not be an intuitive connection to make. I was also wondering, does your family have a site-specific relationship to the island?

FS That's a really good question. Yes, we do. My family, and others who lived on the island, are directly influenced by the various coastal communities around us. A lot of our practices might have derived from Hinduism. We recite mantras, understand that each space has its own guardian and prepare daily offerings.

Animism, for example, also plays a big role in the practices of coastal communities. This is not just the case for the Southern Islanders—the Orang Pulau—but also the Orang Seletar² and Orang Laut. I think many in the Orang Seletar community still pray to the mermaid spirit today. When we dismiss animistic beliefs and practices, we dismiss a huge part of our culture.

These are practices that may seem “un-Islamic,” so the Southern Islanders were socially stigmatised when they moved to mainland Singapore. On mainland Singapore, many individuals within the Malay community were Muslims, so the Orang Pulau reshaped who they were to adapt to their new environment. Along the way, some of their traditions were lost. Some of my family members still have these beliefs and practise these traditions but may not talk about them because these traditions are frowned upon. I am not even allowed to learn them because my relatives want these practices to die with them. They believe that the younger generations are not capable of using such knowledge responsibly or wielding such power properly.

OE We're now speaking in 2024 and quite some time has passed since the 1970s. Today, the country is known globally for its efficiency and its tolerance, yet it functions with an autocratic system that is somehow still very democratic. Everybody wonders how on earth Singapore does it. The small scale of the country is just one factor, I'm sure. Is there still a hierarchy between different social groups in Singapore? How are Indigenous people seen in Singapore?

FS I would say that there's little to no recognition of Indigenous people in Singapore. Social hierarchy is purely driven by economics here. What we at Orang Laut SG push for is the acknowledgement of Indigenous cultures. When the Orang Pulau first moved to mainland Singapore, they were seen as lesser than or less equipped. They also lived a life of poverty. This affected the next generation. Some descendants of the Orang Pulau do not understand why their family members are poorer than others within Malay communities. This is the generational impact of displacement.

² The Orang Seletar are nomadic sea people who roam among the mangroves and rivers of the Johor Strait, which is between Singapore and the Malay Peninsula.

The coastal communities are facing increasing pressure to relocate. I recently spoke to one of the community members of the Orang Seletar in Malaysia and learnt that they only have about four to five years to live in their current location because the land is going to be repossessed by the Malaysian government. There are talks of Chinese developers taking over that land. My point here is that while factors like climate change are often touted as reasons for displacement and relocation, there are in fact other forces that affect these communities. Regionally, there has been an uptick in international organisations, missionaries and corporations approaching these coastal communities with the promise of economic support and betterment. But there is often a catch to their promises. Their developments end up eroding Indigenous cultures.

OE It's clear that these ancestral lands are incredibly valuable to your community. I've been thinking about what Indigenous or ancestral knowledge means and about how some knowledge resides in the land and some resides in our bodies. These are ways of thinking that exist outside of Western epistemologies.

What you've just mentioned is highly site-specific, and what Donna Haraway might refer to as “situated knowledges.”³ Haraway speaks about the problem of the unlocatable to critique capitalism and the irresponsibility it fosters. Within globalist schools of thought, if you are unlocatable, you cannot be held to account. It's so hard to identify with something that is global. In this moment, when our world is facing environmental, climate-related and ecological catastrophes, thinking in situated terms is incredibly important. The idea of site-specificity is something that I've considered a lot. It's about allowing knowledge to be an actor or an agent. Essentially, once knowledge is situated, it becomes a kind of trajectory. It becomes a verb instead of a noun. The challenge for the United Nations and large, transnational corporations is to move away from generalising terms that deprive Indigenous resources—knowledges, skills and capacities—of their potential for agency or activation. It is also to recognise the presence of both Indigenous and Western knowledges, and to shape means for them to co-exist instead of pitting them against each other.

I'm curious about how we can achieve that. From what I can see, Firdaus, you are, by will or by circumstance, trying to bridge them and offer possibilities for mutual recognition and co-existence. What I understood from your practice is that it is an attempt to foreground the ancestral and Indigenous knowledges and cultures that the world has lost sight of. As these cracks present themselves within modernity, you're offering something fundamentally valuable. I'm very grateful for what you're doing, even though I could not be further away from your activities this very minute—I'm literally across the planet.

³ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn, 1988), 575–99.

This is the question my mind is turning around: How do I, as a Westerner, having grown up in a system that is safe, paid for and that has provided me with so much privilege, understand that the Western system itself stands on the shoulders of a past slave trade? I am a part of the very problem that I'm discussing. I have enjoyed the privilege derived from the issues that you have discussed, and I accept and acknowledge that I'm on the other side of history—the wrong side, if you will—which is why I feel that it is my responsibility to research and reconsider the tools I have been given. It's urgent for me to become increasingly aware of where I stand and where others are situated.

FS It's the first time I'm hearing the term "situated knowledges." I'm going to look it up after this conversation. What I've taken from it, based on your sharing, is the burden that I carry in terms of learning, transferring and maintaining this knowledge.

It's a very soft advocacy that we're trying to do at Orang Laut SG. We can't say outright that we want land rights or Indigenous rights. Instead, we offer education. We share knowledges from my ancestral land and ancestors. I think that what we learn from our ancestors and what we try to educate others with are very nuanced.

We recently interviewed ten Orang Laut and Orang Pulau descendants as part of a collaborative work with NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore to investigate the connections between displacement and identity.⁴ I visited the Southern Islands in the 1990s before it was turned into a landfill, but having spent most of my life on the mainland, do I have the right to use the terms "Orang Pulau" or "Orang Laut"? I'm conflicted when I use these terms, even though my family lived on and had access to the islands. I've learnt all these skills and acquired the knowledge, and I can share them, but I still struggle to use these terms openly, and sometimes I cringe at them as well. This is a personal battle that I face. The ten descendants whom we interviewed were also hesitant to use the term "Orang Pulau." They feel that this term is very closely related to the term "Southern Islander," which does not apply to us. Like me, they have all the knowledge, which has been passed down from older generations and through familial ties. We worry that we won't be able to transfer this knowledge to the next generation with the further development of the Southern Islands.

Even policies for boat docking restrict our access. The Southern Islanders were granted rights to dock their boats at West Coast

⁴ Orang Laut SG and NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore conducted a series of video interviews with Orang Pulau descendants for a project titled *Air Sunyi* ("silent water" in Malay). The project is part of a larger effort by Orang Laut SG to create awareness and recognition of the distinct cultural identity of Singapore's Indigenous islanders, many of whom have kinship ties with sea-based communities across the larger Riau Archipelago. *Air Sunyi* explores the enduring significance of the term "Orang Pulau," and the ancestral connections that remain for islanders and their descendants.

⁵ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

⁶ "In moving from a childhood in the woods to the university I had unknowingly shifted between worldviews, from a natural history experience, in which I knew plants as teachers and companions to whom I was linked with mutual responsibility, into the realm of science. The questions scientists raised were not 'Who are you?' but 'What is it?' No one asked plants, 'What can you tell us?' The primary question was 'How does it work?' The botany I was taught was reductionistic, mechanistic, and strictly objective. Plants were reduced to objects; they were not subjects." *Ibid.*, 41–42.

⁷ Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018).

Park. But these licenses were only issued to individuals who came from the islands. Based on our experience, when these individuals pass on, their licenses cannot be transferred to their children. This issue is ongoing. The younger generations are not allowed to acquire new licenses to dock these boats at West Coast Park, which makes it difficult for them to go out to sea and to get in touch with and practice our cultural traditions. Orang Laut SG's advocacy is thus not just about sharing knowledge but pushing for the recognition of these places as heritage spaces. These are places that are important to the community.

The nuance of the matter, especially in Singapore's context, lies in how we push for Indigenous rights without actually saying that we want Indigenous rights. If we said that, we'd be opening a can of worms. In Singapore, everyone is supposed to be treated equally. It is a very sensitive topic, and we are trying to navigate that while trying to advocate for what our community wants and needs.

OE There's complexity to being a contemporary young person who has to reconcile with an extended lineage or history. I imagine it's natural to feel some struggle or imbalance when using vocabulary related to Indigenous traditions due to the stigma surrounding the language. The words themselves don't seem to fully capture what it means to be a Southern Islander either.

This impulse to integrate seemingly contemporaneous knowledge with timeless generational wisdom reminds me of Robin Wall Kimmerer's wonderful book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*.⁵ Kimmerer talks about Indigenous knowledge and Western science as different approaches to understanding and being entangled with our surroundings, with nature. She offers perspectives on how Westernised humans may be brought to reconsider their own worldviews. In the book, she suggests that, instead of looking at a tree and thinking of it in terms of its utility, we should ask the tree, "What can I learn from you? Who are you?"⁶ This pushes back against the extractive nature of modern civilisation and Western knowledge systems, which have fallen short in protecting the planet. Indigenous epistemologies have much to offer, to make up for Western science's drive to separate subjects in complex relationships into smaller, discrete objects of observation.

I am drawn towards the idea of co-existence between Western and Indigenous knowledges. I'm thinking here of the work of the Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar.⁷ He takes inspiration from the Zapatista

movement in Mexico and writes that they "voiced with amazing lucidity and force [... that they] want a world where many worlds fit."⁸ While we are caught up in the current global capitalist dominant world order, how do we create a pluriverse, that is, a universe consisting of many worlds that co-exist? The superficial assumption that Indigenous or ancestral knowledge is outdated must be challenged. This comes back to what you were sharing, Firdaus, about the boat licenses and how they cannot be passed on to future generations. The licenses have been granted to the older Southern Islanders and their boats, but their boats are contemporary—they sail today. It is all a question of perspective.

Creating opportunities to nurture multifaceted perspectives in civic society and allowing a dynamic range of views and contexts to thrive is incredibly important. Art museums, for instance, can do this by creating spaces where rules are pliable and where we may share an experience without having to agree. I am referring to a space where we can acknowledge that being different is valuable. In the museum, two people may look at the same painting and identify with or appreciate very different elements. This discussion of difference can take place within what I sometimes call "safe spaces"—not in the sense of safe spaces for people or groups to share without risking criticism but safe spaces for diverse ideas and cultures. The art museum as a safe space can in turn serve as a model for how to be together with people who may approach or see things differently.

I also think part of what we're talking about here is the status of emotions. What is important for me as an artist is that my artworks and thinking honour complex thoughts and feelings, like the ones that you, Firdaus, have in relation to the term "Orang Laut." To me, the difference between a good museum and a great museum—or good art and bad art—is whether it goes beyond visitors' immediate feelings to address more fundamental needs. This happens when someone encounters a work by an artist that makes them feel like it acknowledges and articulates a need or a longing that they had but could not quite describe. They may feel as if the artwork, and even the museum, really see them, and so they leave the museum feeling listened

to. They may experience a sense of belonging at the museum in realising that they are not alone. A sense of community may emerge from this sense of acknowledgement and recognition—of being seen, met and heard. A great artwork or museum can reflect some of our longings, our deeply felt needs.

FS

I had a very candid conversation with some Southern Islanders about how they would feel if our histories were to appear in museums. A lot of us have this sentiment that we would have failed as advocates for the preservation of our culture if we only appear in museums.

It cannot end in museums for us. I agree with your thoughts as to the function of museums, but we still want to preserve our culture and be represented in cultural spaces beyond museums. That's what we're trying to work towards, and why visual art is so important. Visual art allows us to draw upon the intangible parts of our culture and to showcase them.

Much of our culture goes unseen. It is kept within our community, and we are careful about how we share our narratives while being sensitive to the needs of our community. This act of sharing is also about finding our audience and making sure that they are able to understand what we're trying to share.

I mentioned earlier that Asnida Daud and I performed at the Esplanade in 2023 and that the performance had a strong focus on animism. For the performance, I wrote a poem based on the mantras that my grandfather taught me. I tweaked it here and there, but there are still many ecological references within the poem. I'll recite some verses:



Asnida Daud and Firdaus Sani's *Air Da Tohor (The tide is low)*, performed at the Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, 2023. Image courtesy of P7:ISMA. Photography by Bernie Ng.

*Oh Anak pari, kami beri salam
Oh Tok hitam, kami beri salam*

*Oh Penunggu darat, kami beri salam
Oh Ular laut, kami beri salam*

*(Oh descendants of stingrays,
we give salutations
Oh dark guardian, we give salutations*

*Oh guardian of the land,
we give salutations
Oh sea serpent, we give salutations)*

Olafur, you spoke earlier about the function of trees. Trees are not just trees. They are sources of

medicine, for example, but some of these trees are also portals to the other worlds. Many trees on Pulau Bukom or Pulau Semakau had their mangroves cleared to make way for petrochemical industry or landfill. Such losses could have been stopped if the government had been educated on the significance of these native trees to Indigenous communities.

The Environmental Impact Assessment process in Singapore does not necessarily always include consultation with Indigenous communities. The people who used to live on the Islands still regard that space as sacred. Our role is to address gaps in knowledge by bridging these communities and bringing the sentiments of the Indigenous to the government.

OE I enjoy hearing you say that trees are also portals to other worlds. That really speaks to the depth and multitude of our relationships with trees. A few decades ago, the scientist Suzanne Simard unearthed evidence of the genius of trees. They communicate with each other through large underground mycorrhizal networks and share nutrients through these networks. So-called mother trees sustain entire communities of trees in this way. When you compare a human to a tree and consider the mess that humans leave behind—trash, devastation and war—the tree is healthier, better, smarter and wiser by far.

Human exceptionalism is such an illusion. The Qu'ran, for instance, foregrounds ecological consciousness and has much to say about how we should treat plants and the Earth. I worked on an exhibition in Qatar recently. In my conversations with Reem Al Sahlawi, a young activist, she spoke about how the Islamic faith offers an interpretation of ecology that is implicitly active.

Coming back to our previous discussion on museums, I mentioned that they are, to some extent, safe spaces in civil society. But, they are also spaces of privilege. Museums are elitist in many ways, though there has been a stronger consciousness about the need for diversity within them in recent years. They have the potential to host critical discourse and disagreement about our

values and the state of our society. I believe everyone should have access to culture as it is tantamount to having access to your own history, your own identity and, more importantly, your own future. Museums are catching up to this now. Previously, they tended to focus on preserving the past, but more museums are now becoming interested in the future. Now, the question is, how do we become good ancestors of the future, to our children? We must focus as much on the ancestral knowledge that we receive from the past as the ancestral knowledge that we pass on to the future. This point has come up in some of my recent conversations with artist and theorist Neema Githere about “ancestral accountability.” It’s not just about what we’re receiving—it’s also about what we are giving.

Firdaus, you mentioned earlier that there is a poem that you wrote based on the ancestral mantras that were passed on to you by your grandfather. I would very much love to hear the poem you wrote. Do you know it by heart?

FS I know the mantra that was passed down to me by heart, but not the poem I wrote based on this mantra. I’m always told that I’m not allowed to share the full mantra with anyone, except for people within the family.

What I find interesting about the mantras is that they start with an Islamic verse, *Bismillah*. You also end it with Islamic verses. These lines clearly show the influence of Islam on our culture. There’s a lot of pain and heart that goes into mantra writing. My grandmother taught me a love mantra and a mantra to give respect to a certain sacred space, which I have turned into a poem:

*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim
Datuk nenek, cucu mintak ampun
Kami datang, tumpang bertempat
Mata kami jangan dirabun,
Mulut kami jangan disemat*

*(In the name of Allah, the most gracious and
the most merciful
Dear ancestors, your child seeks for forgiveness
We come, for shelter
Our eyes, do not mist
Our mouths, do not close)*

It describes the summoning of seven little eagles. It also describes dead branches and the ecology around them. As it continues, the mantra explores the idea of longing and how you want someone in particular to think of you.

There's also a closing act—a performative way to conclude the mantra to make the spell work. It must be recited with a pillow before you sleep. You hit the pillow three times, front and back, and then sleep on it. You must do all of this for seven nights. The process itself carries ideas of longing and manifestation.

I've also been taught other mantras about healing and how to use the flora and fauna around us. There are plants that commonly grow by the roadside in Singapore that you can actually use as medicine.

I think ecology is inherently intertwined with the spiritual—not only in mantras, but also amidst plants and other living things. Having said that, there's way more that I do not know, and a lot that has not been shared with me. There's a lot of convincing that I have to do amongst the elders, because they don't believe that the younger generations need to know these things or are responsible enough to actually use them.

This speaks to your point, Olafur, as to how we as future ancestors could pass down this knowledge to the next generation. Over the past few years, I've been trying to empower those around me and to convince the older generation of how important it is for this knowledge to be passed down. If not, it'll die with us and we don't want that to happen.

OE Thank you so much for sharing, Firdaus. We've spoken about needs and feelings. We've also spoken about art, the resources that we are responsible for organising, and the voices with which we speak.

I came across a phrase recently: to lean into. There are many things that are hard to quantify, like love or trust. It is more productive to think of these terms in an active way. Trust doesn't just fall out of the sky. It is something you build. I like the idea of leaning into trust. As I'm listening to you and open-

heartedly trying to gain access to the knowledge that you have been sharing so generously with me, I'm leaning into you, just as you are leaning into me. This creates a degree of movement because when you lean, things change. You must take a step if you don't want to fall. The question for me is, how can I listen more deeply? I could hold your hand and look you in your eyes. You would be giving me your voice and knowledge, and I would be giving you my listening ears, so to speak—and both of us would be actively engaged in connecting with each other.

What I mean to say is that the museum and artworks have this one great asset: their capacity to listen. Though museums can be didactic, they can also embody a mode of listening—to their visitors and to the artworks and artefacts within their walls. An artwork may also appear to be listening to you. It can reflect needs or longings that you haven't verbalised for yourself yet. You may also experience a play or a poem speaking what is alive inside of you. It is not me reading the poem but the poem reading me.

When I came up with the title for this show, I was thinking about how curiosity is really a journey. Ultimately, being curious entails both the act of active listening and getting rid of your ego. By "ego" I mean the insistence on assumed or predetermined realities, truths and hierarchies. That ego can drive polarisation and, if anything, is a less compassionate attitude to adopt.

FS Everyone's journey is unique. I'm thinking back on how I began reclaiming these Indigenous narratives only in my early 30s. In my 20s, I rejected this identity of being an Orang Pulau. I struggled with it because of all the social stigma associated with it. So, the idea of a personal journey resonates with me quite a bit.

When considering ancestral land, I think of the Malay word "tanah air." "Tanah air" means homeland, but when broken up into individual words, "tanah" refers to land and "air" means water. So, within the Malay context, we have always acknowledged water as integral to our concept of home. "Tanah air" is a term that is really powerful, especially for me, because the sea is home to many communities, including my own. When I acknowledge ancestral land, which I no longer live on, I ask myself: How can I remain connected to a space even as I am removed from it?

This idea of connectivity lingered in my head throughout this conversation. Olafur, you've mentioned that you're currently on the other side of the world from me. As for me, I have very little access to the sea these days. These are seemingly two separate topics, but they revolve around a central theme: How do we stay connected to our culture and how can our culture remain relevant in a developed world or modern city?

I agree that art and museums play an important role in connecting people. For artists, it is important to think about the kind of messages they try to convey. What I'm always thinking about, especially in the context of Singapore, is whether our audiences understand what we're trying to say. How can we provoke deeper thought? Are we doing enough to spotlight Indigenous knowledge or culture? I see myself as a vessel, a go-between for the voices that matter.

This conversation has been great. It's been a real pleasure.

OE I'm grateful to share this time with you. Curiosity, for me, opens us towards listening. I find it so important to remain curious. If we do so, we are also likely to be open to change, to move and to acknowledge our blind spots, wherever they lie, and pay attention to things we may inadvertently take for granted. I would not be able to take responsibility as a future ancestor to my own grandchildren if I do not remain curious.

In a sense, curiosity has to do with facing forward instead of facing backward to what we know. To face forward is to think of new models for living. Curiosity is also about facing inward, being curious about your inner life—about your mental health—and acknowledging that the rationalisation that infects much of our modern lives takes us away from our own sense of presence, of feeling alive and of engaging fully with our senses. There is a need for re-spiritualisation and a need to divest ourselves of our increasing numbness. This numbness is the blindness that I'm talking about.

What I'm also talking about is "doing." I'm talking about living life, and I'm talking about the deep respect I have for the activism that you're doing, Firdaus. I'm proud to be associated with your important work, and I think that curiosity has been here all along on this little journey of a conversation.

We may travel across the planet in straight lines, but our lives are full of curves and crossroads. A curious journey is one in which you do not give up on your curiosity.