

Layla: Hi everybody and welcome to another episode of Good Ancestor podcast. Today, I am speaking with my friend Celine Semaan who I am really excited to be speaking with. She is doing some big, big work in the world of fashion activism and I know she's gonna bring a lot to this conversation. If you don't know about Celine, you definitely should. She is a modern ambassador of cultures, fostering communication across industry, policy, academia and the broader citizen population. Her research focuses on circular design & communication, translating complex concepts and systems into approachable stories that resonate with a wide audience. Celine's work in sustainability has made her recognized expert. Her non-profit education initiative Study Hall is now an official partner of the United Nations and it holds an annual summit at the UN Headquarters in New York. We're gonna be speaking about that today too. As a writer, her work has been published in New York magazine, the CUTOUT USA and Vogue as well as studied in universities. As a designer, she has been recognized and exhibited in museums around the world. She lives and works in New York leading research on regenerative aesthetics within her company Slow Factory. And today I'm actually wearing a scarf that is from Slow Factory. This is a scarf that was gifted to me by Celine so I'm very excited to be wearing it. Welcome to the show, Celine.

Celine: Thank you. Thank you so much Layla. It looked so beautiful on you and how you styled it.

Layla: Thank you. It matches with so many different things. It's so easy to mix and match it with so many different pieces and I know we're gonna be speaking today about how we can use fashion in ways that are sustainable and this scarf screams that to me. Thank you for being here. We're gonna start with our very first question Celine about ancestors. Who are some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, societal or familial who have influenced you on your journey?

Celine: This question gives me goosebumps. First of all, because of course when I think of my ancestors, I think of my direct ancestors, my lineage, my family, my grandfather who passed last year who is so present around me, my grandfather who passed when I was younger, who has lived in Palestine and who also trailblazed in his own way and both of them men are around me, I know when we think of ancestors, we think of women and--

Layla: Right.

Celine: -you know, but they are men. My men, but also of course all of the ancestors before me, my great grandmother who is also very close to me and very spiritual, so when we think of ancestors, I literally feel them surrounding me in this dimension. So, they've inspired me a lot. My grandfather who passed last year was an architect but a self-made. At 7 years old, he was taken out of school and he was brought to the construction field with his father and he was expected to build roads at 7. He was such an intellectual. He loved studying. He loved Khalil Gibran. He loved Sufi poetry. He loved of course Rumi and Shams Tabrizi and all of these guys and he was an intellectual. So even as such a young age of 7, for me, that's like the age of my daughter. So, I cannot even imagine what he was going

through but the metaphor for him to his first work basically was to build roads and open roads and I feel that I'm so lucky and so, so grateful of him and of my ancestors who are literally having paved the roads for me, you know, and him physically like literally making roads and that metaphor for me brings me to life when I'm sad, you know, and I'm like what am I doing? Will this work?

Layla: Yeah.

Celine: Definitely him but then of course there are lots of other people ancestors, some are living, some have recently passed that have inspired me deeply greatly. My education is Lebanese French. French because we were colonized by the French. It was a mandate. It was a peaceful mandate but it came with its tool of cultural erasure and for that I can thank them for Agnès Varda who is like a film maker who passed last year, a feminist woman herself but as well as a storyteller, an elder, a beautiful elder the way that she carried herself and everything and from also the French heritage, there's Eugène Ionesco, [Inaudible] [06:08] like these people are all gay white men but they've also to me inspired me in magical realism, in understanding magical realism and understanding that arts is life and we are arts and we are poetry and we are beauty and we are absurd and we are light beings. Zaha Hadid of course just like my grandfather, she is basically manifested her dreams in physical structures and intricate designs and bringing some of her background as an Arab woman but beyond orientalism. It's just like the way that she expressed herself it was so beautiful. Jocelyne Saab is a Lebanese film maker. She was a core part of the war in Lebanon in terms of documenting it and documenting it with poetry and beauty. Edward Said, the father of postcolonialism theory brought me so much piece and reading him and understanding that we can speak of these things in ways that are grounded and in ways that are as intellectual if not more intellectual. And Octavia Butler for all of her body of works specifically around talking about climates even though I don't know if that was her goal but climates, race, spirituality all these things that I embody in this life and one last one Karimeh Abbud who was a Palestinian photographer who lived in Beirut who just changed the game in terms of playful photography. She was very playful. It was in the documentary like she was documenting the people who disappeared in terms of culture, in terms of richness in this region but the way that she documented them was not like in serious faces like they were all like playful and hand stands and just how she was doing it was filled with joy and for me that's something I am inspired by.

Layla: Thank you for sharing all of that. I love all those answers. You know, when you spoke about your grandfather and you said he built roads and he paved roads for me and I thought and that's what you do for the rest of us is something. You are doing that in so many ways. One of the things that I want to get into is you are noted as having coined the term fashion activism and so you are paving this road for us, bridging this two different things which just a few years ago were probably quite far apart, now are yes it's natural and we talk about it and it's normal, but even just a few years ago, we are quite far apart and so I see you doing that work I just wanna acknowledge you for that. And then I love what you said about Edward Said and the way that he was able to talk about these things even some of the

other ancestors that you spoke of, there's this kind of like playful, artistic, free imaginative energy that is paired with this really grounded architected, you know, like framework conceptualism they go together and I see that so much in your work as well. Some of the things that we are gonna talk about today your work with Slow Factory, the Study Hall, you are constructing and facilitating and holding space for really important conversations bringing together issues of fashion and sustainability, climate, racial justice and yet there is that imagination that still there, that playfulness that is still there, that sense of creativity that is still there and so it's really inspiring to see and also I love you for saying Octavia Butler because I love anyone who will mention Audre Lorde and Octavia Butler.

Celine: Oh yeah, Audre Lorde. I wanted to mention her as well for sure. Audre Lorde just a note is that the vocabulary to discuss racial justice in America is so inspiring for women coming from the Middle East because we don't have that vocabulary at all. Of course we learned so much from black authors, black women authors, to me it's in the words, the words that were put together to describe the black experience in America, how we can read that and understand. Wow, hold on a second, you know, there's so much to learn here for any minority under colonial power.

Layla: Absolutely. Yeah. She was just incredible. From the first moment I started reading her words, I was just drawn in and have been ever since and as you said with Octavia Butler, when you're speaking about the 3-gay white men and I was like, oh, and Octavia Butler also and then you said Octavia Butler and I was like, yes. Because she had this very fantastical stories which are really about, you know, they were about humanity but they were also about, and I found so much inspiration about, what to do when you are in situations and in environments were basically it's a dystopia or you're really like the faith of the people is at stake and you're having to re-imagine new worlds and what would they look like, what was the breakdown of the current world wherein they look like, what would be imagining of the new world look like. And in so many of her books, you can see that there are the people who are like have accepted that this is where we need to go, these are the steps that we need to take and they are at the forefront but they are often alone. They are often misunderstood. They are often having to take a lot of hits but they do it because they know it's the only way and they do it for the love of those who they want to be able to lead through that way and I see people like yourself again who are at the forefront of this work, in the fashion industry, it's hard to have this conversations around sustainability. Talk to me a little bit about what your journey has been like in that because fashion is such an institution, you know, a long held institution and it was not built on the foundation of sustainability. It wasn't built on the foundation of you talk about what is good for the people and good for the earth, right?

Celine: I mean I simplify a lot of things to that, of course, I write like deep things and theories and whatnot but I also want to, my main goal is for it to be accessible.

Layla: That's right.

Celine: For it to be understood by the general public like you don't need a Master's to read my stuff and you don't need to dig deep into my weird comparisons and whatnot, you know. So, for me I'm a product of the world of outside the institution similarly to my grandfather, I'm a self-made person, I'm an autodidact, but someone who studies on their own, who don't need an institution to learn and for that I decided to build a sort of an open institution where people can take from what I gathered and learn from these things and come together to discuss a few things for the conversation of fashion and sustainability. It does not come with the understanding that all of these linear system that we live in, this linear system of there is a product, I use it, I discard it, and it's gone into the oblivion, I don't even know where it goes but this linear understanding of the world is also a mirror of the western philosophies and the western understanding of our world. It really begins with the idea of I think therefore I am. This declaration between mind and environment, mind and sobriety, mind and body. It is this division. And when you go back into the western understanding, the western philosophies and the beginning of this linear understanding of our world, it's also the beginning of colonialism. It's also the beginning of justification of the colonial empire that was being built. At the top of that pyramid, there was the white man, the white understanding of the world as the superior understanding as they had figured out a way to justify said perception with science even though it was erroneous later on they figured out with philosophy even though later on and we are still trying to dismantle that, they realized that it's also erroneous, it's false. And so many other theories that they've built around the white western philosophies was built around this erroneous understanding and linear understanding of I am born, I live, I die. And when you look at this linearity, there's basically, this is what we live in, this is the mirror of this understanding. This is how we create products. This is how we source products. This is how we exploit resources from this planet. This is how we've built our societies.

Layla: Right.

Celine: And not our societies as the global south but the western society that is the dominant society that also has impacted global selves, eastern philosophies, indigenous philosophies, black philosophies, all of these other philosophies that when you look at them they are much closer to how nature functions. They are much more scientific as well in terms of regeneration, circularity. These ideas of regeneration and circularity are understood in eastern philosophy. These are understood in the best eastern philosophies first and then in indigenous philosophies as well. Of course the way that everything is regenerated, nothing is born, nothing is dying. Everything is in that circle. There is nothing that is born and nothing that dies. We are and it is in this circle we still breathe the same air as the last breath of the dinosaurs. So, everyone who has exhale their last breath, it's still in this atmosphere. It's still on earth. Everything is still here. It doesn't go away. It doesn't disappear. But for the western philosophy and the western eye, if I don't see it, it's not there unless I see it, it will be there. So, we are living in this mirror of colonialism or at least the philosophies that empowered colonialism and the philosophies that as well defined and justified thousands of years of cultural erasure, of slavery, of racism, of all of these things that we fight, you fight in your

fighters and we fight as well in our fights and different fields could be also pushing against that but at the end of the day, it is a philosophical understanding of what the world is. What is this world?

Layla: Right.

Celine: You know, like what is this world? How do you understand this world? Why are you here? Who are you as a human as one?

Layla: Yeah. So what I am hearing you say is it is about this but it's not just about having a sense of responsibility or having this, you know, recycle, reuse, like having these kind of things that we teach to children, it really goes to the core of how we understand that the world operates, the universe operates, right? And so as you were talking about circular and regenerative and I was thinking about how, you know, there's a law that energy cannot be created or destroyed, it's just get transformed, right? When you were speaking about how we still breathe the same air, everything is still the same and yet you're absolutely right, we act like we are the creator of the thing and then once it's gone, it's gone just because we cannot see it. And to me what that says then is that we don't place any value on anything that it's in that line because we will just send at a new thing and take it through the line and it gets used and then we discarded again. And then that to me reflects we don't understand our value here, you know, and we don't understand the value of the planet and you can see that in the way that we treat the planet, you can see as heading towards our own self-distraction.

Celine: I mean two things I want to demystify, one of it is save the planet, save the earth. Let me just tell you that you're not gonna save the earth, you're gonna save humanity because it will disappear. It's like a nihilist philosophy which I don't abide by and I don't believe in and I value every single human life on this planet but if we don't exist, the planet is fine. The planet actually will regenerate itself once we are going to be extinct. Because what we don't realize is humanity is on the verge of extinction. When the United Nation sends a report, that says we have 10 years before we have unrepairable damage on this planet, unrepairable changes that are going to be swallowing civilizations under the rise of the water, the hurricanes, the earthquakes, you know, all of these things. And again I value every life on this planet specifically indigenous black, brown lives on this planet and I just wanna say that like when we think of I'll save the earth, save the planet, we are wrong in saying that. Because that's not how we are saving, we need to save our humanity first. And the other thing that I want to say as well is like when we talk about environmental racism, the environment is not racist. Who is racist is our humanity. Because when of course the hurricanes are hitting the global south, it's not that the environment is f\*cking racist, sorry for my language, and they are hitting black and brown people first because they don't matter. It's our response to it. It's our response to it. And it's the fact that we are still debating whether or not climate change or climate chaos or climate crisis is coming for us, it's like it's scientifically proven of course science is again up for debate and specifically in like societal studies, but like I mean we are still debating though. We are still debating

whether or not this is real. And when we name the hurricanes with human names and also white names.

Layla: Right.

Celine: Let's just put it that way.

Layla: Yes.

Celine: I mean this is problematic like do you understand what we are doing here? And how we are completely deresponsabilizing ourselves from this phenomena and how we are responding to it is racist. It's not the environmental racism that's racist. Sometimes that term or ecocide just like what are you talking about?

Layla: Because you are right, it gives the impression that the earth, the world, the environment is doing something which erases what is actually going on, the fact that there are systems of oppression, the fact that most of this is quite intentional and that the people who are going to be hit the hardest are black-brown indigenous people and the people who will be the last to survive are those who are white and who hold other privileges and that's not the earth attacking us. You know, it's not the earth taking vengeance on us because we see that a lot as well, those kind of like will the earth is like were just responding to what humanities doing, but it's responding to what those who are in positions of privilege of doing and those who are being affected are those who don't have privilege.

Celine: Mm-hmm. Absolutely.

Layla: So, that's some really great point. So, I wanna talk a little bit about first of all your story, Celine, you're Lebanese, you're in America, in North America, I know that a lot of your history informs your why, your purpose in this work. Can you tell us a little bit about your story?

Celine: Yes. I was born in a war that divided my country, divided it by religion, segregated a lot of the people and the country and so on and so forth and I was born in that time, 1982 and it was just after the French mandate, it was just after this very heavy I would say invisible cultural erasure where our education system have become French. Our philosophies, the way that we understood the world have become more French like I said the philosophical detachment between humans and nature, it was starting to happen at that time. A lot of our ancestors fought back against that but a lot of the new generation that was born in it which are my parents were very much assimilated in that new way of thinking and doing and so on and so forth. So, I was born in that time and during a war that was extremely devastating and that's why my name is Celine, it's a French name. I justify it because I asked my mom like why the hell did you name me Celine? Why am I not Jala or Alia or Ruba or like something and she's like, no, because we had to leave and so you know, you had to have a passport name. You know, you had to have like a name that--they knew exactly where they are going. They were going to the West. They were going to ask for refugee asylum in Canada. First, they tried the

US and then it didn't work. So, they went to Canada and Canada at that time was taking a lot of Christian Arabs, Christian Lebanese that came from the region and so we went there. That's how I ended up there and to me I remember a lot of this time even though I was only 4 or 5 years old and it has really like shaped me in a lot of ways unfortunately. First, being born under the real war where the president at that time, the prime minister was murdered and then he was like the voice of hope, Bashir Ismail, at that time especially for the Christian Lebanese. Now, I know it's super loaded, I'm not gonna go in there.

Layla: Yeah, okay.

Celine: However, okay, so, we escaped that war and we arrived in Canada and I spoke Lebanese Arabic for mainly, of course a little bit of French words but mostly Arabics. So, I had to learn French and quick because my mom also wanted me to go to school so there was all this stuff happening with our papers, the date of birth were not written on it and so on and so forth like a lot of mess-

Layla: Yeah. Right.

Celine: -of the refugee life and then eventually I ended up in school. Of course I'm teased, of course I experienced racism in my own experience, I experienced being in other person and I experienced as well being excluded and also it's very violent as well, you know, this environment like physically violent and so on and so forth and I don't have the understanding nor the words to talk about it and then I live in Montreal for 9 years and then the war ended in Lebanon and then my parents realized like first of all they raised me, but they are like we don't belong here. We are here just for a little bit. We need to go back to where we belong and then they left. And I come back to Lebanon at age 13 and I'm super assimilated in the Canadian western mentality. I think of my country as a shit hole. First of all, it was like it was post war, super apocalyptic like it was really intense and then I get there and I'm like, what the f\*ck is this, how dare they?

Layla: I'm Canadian. Right. Right.

Celine: Yeah. I'm gonna write a book that they stole me into the Middle East and I will threaten them that I'm gonna do that and I'm gonna call Canadian authorities on them. It's so traumatic and my parents were like shut the f\*ck up like you don't understand. So, anyway, at first I was extremely sad to be back in Lebanon. I was also othered there. I was called all sorts of names like a traitor from those who left during the war. Also I'm not Lebanese anymore because my Arabic is broken as f\*ck and I don't understand what happened and I'm like everybody is equal and like we should love everyone and like all this assimilated stories that was taught to me in Canada and at the end of the day it was the most amazing experience because I am so grateful to my parents for having brought me back to the Middle East because I mean that's all I have is that perspective and that experience and that's what enlightened me in my work and being closer to my grandpa and you know, my grandpa at that time he was an architect, he had built the building we

were all living in because he had like a floor for each of his kids and grandkis. And on the roof, he had his arts studio.

Layla: Wow.

Celine: He's an artist. And he was reviving phoenician alphabets. He was reviving Phoenician understanding. He was mapping the Quran, the Korah and the Bible together in this stories and he was like it's all the same sh\*t. It's all this thing. This guy he is right here and like mapping it out and my grandma was like "he's gone crazy". He's crazy. He's senile. He's literally senile. And then I was like, no, this is gold. This is amazing. A lot of arts and a lot of sculpture he was doing was in celebration of his indigenous roots, you know, his indigenusness. We don't talk about that because it's like 2000 years of colonial history whether French was the last one but then before that there were thousands of empires who came to Lebanon and who took over Lebanon and the culture and so my grandfather was a lot of that voice, that indigenous voice that I never heard before and I was like really? And of course his kids were like we're clearly Arab and then he's like, no, we're not. And then all of these things which are a big debate in my country actually in terms of identity it's a big question marks of what are we? What are we because right now, you know, some people say we're Arabs. Some people we're not Arab and so on and so forth and my grandpa has deepened that research and also Aramaic and understanding those languages. He was just so brilliant like very much looking into the roots of things.

Layla: It sounds like he had a huge impact on how you see the world and how you see yourself and how you see yourself in the world.

Celine: And my grandma also on my dad's side who was not an intellectual but was more of an oral tradition and the way that she would take care of things going back for sustainability, the way she would wash things, what she would use to wash things, what she would do with things, how she would mend them. Of course anyone could argue that their grandmothers were their first teachers to sustainability because it wasn't other culture at that time-

Layla: Yes.

Celine: -like whole other perception. So, people can relate to that whatever their religion or country-

Layla: Yeah.

Celine: -but she was also very much interested in our ancestry.

Layla: So, it sounds like that background and having like you said I'm so glad my parents ended up taking us back because it laid this framework because at that age you were already getting a foundation laid in your understanding that was very western centric from Canada and even from like you said the French sort of erasure of the indigenous culture in your country, right?



Celine: Mm-hmm.

Layla: So that was already starting to build and then you have this gift of these living ancestors at that time who were like this is what we should be looking at. This is what is important. That makes so much sense to me now on why you have this energy of being a young elder because you are young and yet the way that I see you is you are like a word of the earth like you are like we need to take care of the earth and of each other and you're bringing us back to that wisdom but in this very modern way.

Celine: But I do live in the city and I live in an apartment, I am in contradiction.

Layla: Right. And let's talk about that though because I think sometimes, a lot of times, in any work, in any sort of movement work, social justice work, there is thinking that we have to be perfect, you know, as I was saying there is this thinking that everything in your life now has to be a reflection of this and if something is awful or that if you are living in contradiction that you should neither use your voice or speak up or that you should sort of hold a sense of shame, you're right hold a sense of shame instead of seeing us as progressively moving towards the practice of it, right? I see that even within anti-racism work that I am doing that I often have to explain like you're not racist or not racist, you're not anti-racist or not an anti-racist. You're someone who is trying to practice anti-racism as a practice and you will make mistakes and you will mess up and then you have to get up and then figure out what to do from there. But you never reach a point of perfection, you never reach a point of ticking all the box and living in this utopia of I am an anti-racist. To me that play out in so many different areas and I know it holds people back a lot from even taking any action, you know-

Celine: Yes, absolutely.

Layla: -at all and so yeah.

Celine: Purism. Let's talk about purism for a second.

Layla: Let's talk about it.

Celine: I may quote Audre Lorde, it's maybe like bring some of that wisdom here and that situation let me just find you the exact quote that I want from Audre Lorde.

Layla: Yes, do it.

Celine: I'm writing a piece actually about the culture of asperity and it's about shame and she says, "Shaming is one of the deepest tools of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy because shame produces trauma and trauma often produces paralysis." And when we talk about shaming, oftentimes, it's the byproduct of purism. I am so pure. This is what I do. I'm a zero waste. I purchased sustainable fashion only. All my beauty care line is sustainable. I never shop at Target. I never

shop at H&M or Zara. I actually shame everyone who comes out of these stores. I wasn't white spacist where this was the conversation. I'm not gonna lie to you. and this is white spaces where there were like we are sustainable and we're gonna do something for sustainable fashion and I would be like guys like, no, I'm out like this is not okay. What you're thinking, what you're doing, you're shaming tactics or wanting to shame people coming out of H&M like you have no idea what the f\*ck you're talking about. If you are able to purchase foods from the RealReal and only the RealReal and only Stella McCartney and only the big privilege things then you are part of the problem.

Layla: Right. And that speaks so much to privilege and access as well, right? Because what I hear you saying is being able to access these spaces where you only use things which are completely sustainable, completely zero waste, that there is a cost that comes with that. But the shaming happens to those who don't have the privilege or the accessibility.

Celine: Exactly. And again another stat, the world's richest 10% produce half of carbon emissions while the poorest 3.5 billion account for just a tenth.

Layla: Right.

Celine: So when we look at this stats for instance, affluent people especially in the global north are responsible of the majority of the carbon emission.

Layla: Right.

Celine: Like let's look at this for a moment. If you are able to afford all these luxury products that are sustainable, you are unfortunately part of the problem. You cannot buy yourself into the sustainable movement. I say that often. You cannot purchase your way into sustainability. Sustainability is a core philosophical understanding and it's a very post-colonial understanding that if we continue as we've designed this, we are never gonna be sustainable. This is not sustainable itself, the system itself is it?

Layla: So where do people go from there? one of the things that I've seen you write about is that and I know you get push back on this, is that although all of us as individuals could be taking actions, if change doesn't happen at scale, there will not be the change that's needed for things actually changed? Maybe you can word that better than I just said it.

Celine: No, no, no that's totally right. I will explain myself here and also I'm writing a couple of pieces this fall coming out that just talk more about this because you know, the problem with Instagram is that you put something that's very simplistic at the end of the day that everyone can kind of understand but there is depth behind it that people don't wanna read and they're just like, waah, white beacons come at you and then you're like OMG what's gonna happen. So just a little bit of a background though is that again going back to our system and I'm very much interested in redesigning this system and I'm a system designer before I got into

this problem or this issue. But when we trace all the main resources that we use today in our supply chain whether it's food or fashion, from cotton to chocolate to coffee to silks to wool to labor, they all trace identically back to colonial routes. Colonialism is not a thing of the past, it's an economic reality. It's part of our present day. And I say this and I've been quoted about saying this and I also wrote deeply about sustainability and colonialism. The system is the reason why we are not sustainable. Now individual action in the face of a system that's already unsustainable, already a linear big ass system that's exploiting the earth and spinning out toxic garbage daily. If you are, the individual action needs to be looked at with your feet on the ground in terms of understanding, yes, it feels good. Yes it brings hope. Yes you feel like you're doing something. But it should not make you feel like you are superior than your peers, superior than anyone else who is eating meat or who has a plastic bag outside the grocery store who has water bottles or has throwing it into the garbage a pot of yogurt. You can't because even if you are the purest form of individual action, your impact is nothing unfortunately and I'm not saying this so that you go into apathy. I'm saying this so you understand that you need to remain humble in your actions. And the impact that you want to do is pushing the companies, pushing the industries together in coming at the center of this conversation. It's not an individualistic conversation and again that's again part of the philosophies, the western philosophies, the individualism, the idea that alone we are fine and we are gonna live, you know, it takes a fucking bitch. You cannot think that because you are zero waste and if everybody we should sanction and police and impose that everyone goes vegan and everyone becomes zero waste and then we are gonna be able to achieve the global goals or whatever. That mentality is an imperialistic mentality of policing and shaming and it's the same root cause as what we are trying to fight. It's a community that we need to build.

Layla: It was like my brain is like rarr because I'm like really hearing what you're saying and there's something that just pushing on my brain there that's sort of a door opening of understanding of what I'm hearing you saying is yes individual actions matter and individual action should not be used to shame other people who are not taking those actions as you and it's really important for us all to remember the bigger picture here which is that we could get a mass group of individual actions but if the system itself doesn't change, nothing changes. And so what is needed is a complete system overhaul, a return to the wisdom of indigenous wisdom that is not linear, that is pre-colonialism-

Celine: Circular.

Layla: -circular that the individual actions matter and they are still within the linear system of colonialism. So unless it changes at that level nothing changes so then you know, it's similar to what I hear in people doing at personal anti-racism practice if I'm just one person making these changes what's the point if it's not gonna dismantle change, you know, legal systems, it's not gonna make institutional change and I would love to hear your thoughts on that. My personal thoughts are systems are made by people and so that we have to start where we have power and control and influence and be able to influence each other but

ultimately unless the system itself which is holding it all together is eventually breached, things will continue to stay the same. What are your thoughts on that and where do you get a sense of I'm asking you a question which I often get asked and I often roll my eyes when I get it but I'm asking it to you now, where do you get a sense of hope like where is the direction for you?

Celine: Hope comes with action so definitely keep being the most amazing like do your individual actions. I'm not saying don't do your individual actions. Do your individual action but it is the same as any religion will tell you, do them but be humble like any sort of spiritual awareness out there is the same. What I'm trying to say I'm not a spiritual leader by any means but like I'm just trying to say that keep doing things. Of course we all change the world together. There's a famous quote that's like "if you think you can't change the world, try sleeping with a mosquito in the room and you see like you can actually move the things." Absolutely, we can move the things. What I'm trying to say here in my response to purism is around shame and I'm addressing shame and I'm hoping that by addressing shame, it's not making you wanna flip the table and do nothing because like you can't shame your neighbor. If you're doing this so you can feel better than anyone else, you're doing it for the wrong reasons by the way. If you want to do some things so you align with your values and you align with your mission or your personal existence on this planet then you do what you have to do daily. Every day you do what you have to do. You do what you have to do and when you can you're gonna speak up. But it's not given that everyone should speak up. In fact just before this call, I was on the phone with my dear friend, Aja Barber I don't know if you know her.

Layla: Yes. Yup.

Celine: yes. I love Aja.

Layla: Yeah.

Celine: Anyway, we were discussing justice because I'm commissioning her to write a piece on individual action and just debating the ideas because it's healthy to be like wait, wait, are we like what are we think to say here. And we were both saying basically that what we are addressing with this is the purism mentality and the shaming that results from this purism mentality. Individual action of course mobilizes. Of course move. But when we say we've designed the system, no, we've not designed the system. The system is the result of imperialist structures. We did not design this like no that's an illusion. Our people and the global south in particular never have anything to say or do in the system

Layla: That is so important. Yes. Yes.

Celine: So, when people say we are destroying the planet, we have to dissect who is the WE who we are referring to.

Layla: We. Right. Right.

Celine: Because it's not all of us who fit in the WE, right?

Layla: Yes.

Celine: And we don't fit in the WE, it's important to understand that all right I didn't create this but I'm gonna do all that I can to dismantle it however I can.

Layla: Yeah.

Celine: In that same way, the purism and the shaming comes from the people who are part of that WE destroyed the planet.

Layla: Right. Right.

Celine: That's what we are addressing and this is nuance. And it's not there to also counter shame because again I'm aware okay what are you doing? You're counter shaming and what that does do?

Layla: Then we get distracted from actually just trying to work, right?

Celine: Right. Right. And we are like no you're shaming me, no, you're shaming me. Meanwhile a wave of trash is coming to swallow us both.

Layla: Exactly right.

Celine: Just to put in context, again, for me I tried a lot to have balance between my spiritual journey in this planet and then bringing me back to earth so many times, you know, being humble, being harassed online, criticized online or all of these things I look at them not as good or bad for me personally. I look at them as all right, how can I say this differently or how can I not to justify the haters online but of course there are open forum out there, open forum, everyone is angry, everyone got something to say and they got the guts to say behind their screens. I totally understand. This is also not like don't read all the comments but can't help myself from reading all the comments.

Layla: Yeah. But it comes with the territory of being somebody who is doing new things that pushed against the status quo, right? And that's something that I've certainly had to accept for myself when you're doing things that are causing people to have to say actually the very foundation upon which we based our reality is wrong and we need to start over. People don't like that. And so what I see you doing is you putting out, you write this incredible pieces but you're also doing work through the Study Hall, is it called the Study Hall and The Library or are they one?

Celine: I know it's still confusing. I know everyone is like what do you do? You do so much. Again, like the regular white western person would say to me and to any person of color that is able to multitask the way we do is like, oh my gosh, you do so much I'm so confused like what do you actually do? I get that a lot.

Layla: I know exactly what you do. There's a lot but it's-

Celine: For sure. For sure.

Layla: -yeah.

Celine: But for The Library, at first I wanted to build The Library and then the first conference was called Study Hall and then everyone was starting to refer to the thing as Study Hall so then I dropped The Library because the legal name was The Library Study Hall, that's our profit name.

Layla: That's what I thought.

Celine: That's how we registered it because my idea is like I wanna build a library and so on and so forth. Now, the conference here is called Study Hall and this is the one that people refer to the most and then there's Slow Factory which is like my company.

Layla: So tell us about both. Tell us about the Study Hall and Slow Factory.

Celine: Yes. So if I were to draw 2 Venn diagrams I'm just looking through my notebook, I may have a Venn diagram somewhere. If I were to draw 2 Venn diagram, I would definitely be drawing Slow Factory, I knew I had it. Slow Factory and Study Hall as two distinct Venn diagram. One is a non-profit, the Study Hall and one is a for-profit which is an agency and a lab which is Slow Factory. And they intersect in the middle of where we run these events called Study Hall and they feed off of each other a lot. So Slow Factory produces these events. Study Hall is a not-for-profit. We exist like Study Hall exist from donations from friends. The events are free, open to the public and for me this is where my values are. I'm not going to take money from citizens ever. I'm never going to do that. That's how I am. I get criticize for taking money from corporations, of course nothing is perfect, you can equally criticize people taking money from citizens.

Layla: Money from citizens, right.

Celine: Because money from citizens like no they shouldn't be paying for this at all.

Layla: What you're trying to do, what I see you doing and appreciate is you are providing free education for anybody who can show up basically, right?

Celine: But it's also broadcasted online on UNTV and on YouTube.

Layla: Amazing.

Celine: And it's also captioned.

Layla: Right.

Celine: So, it's also for desk viewers, they can read it. But as well as this year we're gonna have an interpreter in the room so that people watching live even though we have caption but caption live is always weird because it's like not exact, you know, we have to go back to it. So for the viewers that are at home that want like attend, they can catch up to what we are doing.

Layla: So, you're providing this free education that is very accessible at multiple different levels and you're also what I love about it is the voices who are represented there are black-brown indigenous voices, majority who are often the voices who don't get to be heard and are as we said often the most impacted. It is so inspiring to me. It means a lot to me that you're providing that kind of space and this is I feel like one of the threads that we are following throughout this conversation. Within white supremacy and within white superiority, there is this like feeling of wisdom from black-brown indigenous people is somehow less than or of lower quality or doesn't work-

Celine: Of lower importance.

Layla: -of lower importance doesn't work in the modern world that we live in may have worked back when but it doesn't work now and really you're blowing all those stereotypes out the water.

Celine: Am I? I don't know.

Layla: I mean you are by bringing...

Celine: [Inaudible] [49:31]

Layla: Yeah. With the people who are showing up and being able to share their wisdom and their experiences and you know, their intellectual labor.

Celine: Contribution, yeah.

Layla: Exactly. And so what have been some of the I guess some of the big ways that you've seen these events have an impact in the world at whatever level you want to talk about and also has it face any push back criticisms, people who are attached to white supremacy and white superiority, what kind of things do you come up against?

Celine: Oh, I come up against a lot. Thanks to your book by the way, I have the vocabulary to discuss these things because before I was just angry. I was just angry. Literally I had no idea why and I felt oppressed and I felt silenced. Those were the only words I knew how to express my anger but after I read your book, first, I examined myself and my culture and a lot of the things I come from and it's not perfect and it's far from being perfect even if we can justify that oh but we've been colonized and what not it's not an excuse for what we are today and so on

and so forth. But also the vocabulary that came from reading your book about what I was getting in terms of pushbacks.

Layla: Yeah.

Celine: When I was introducing these concepts in the beginning or bringing the people that I brought in and I brought people and people of color, indigenous black-brown people, it wasn't a space for healing. It was a space for intellectual discourse.

Layla: That's right.

Celine: That's also something different from Study Hall. There are places of healing and I love them and they need to exist. Study Hall is can, yes of course it's healing, but it's a place of intellectual discourse and it's a place where we argue that these philosophies, these intellectual contributions are equal if not superior.

Layla: Superior. Right.

Celine: I'm gonna go there. Just saying like equal and actually are where the real solutions are from.

Layla: Right.

Celine: They are the real solutions. They are where inspiration comes from. They are the solutions honestly, it is a philosophical conversation. And the pushbacks I was getting a lot of white fragility. I didn't know that this was a term actually until I read your book and I was like holy f\*ck. This is fragility and a lot of pushback came from like the European vision of but we are evolved unfortunately it was like a lot of peers in the space that were like but wait this is evolution. This is progress.

Layla: Right.

Celine: Under the guide of progress was so much to unpack.

Layla: Right. Right.

Celine: Because even there are white people that have contributed to the space, an anthropologist comes to mind, Wade Davis, I've had the opportunity to hear in a lecture in person, Wade Davis, white anthropologist. I know the two words together it's like don't quote the white anthropologist. Okay? Celine, you just lost all credibility. But I quote him in white spaces because people can relate and what he talks about is that he dismantles essentially colonialism and white culture backed by scientific for white people and also internalize the imperialism and also internalize colonialism like sorry people of color that are around me they also need to work like I'm sorry like it's not true that we're like, oh yeah, we're the purist form of everything. No, I'm sorry.



Layla: We've all been impacted. We've all been affected. I know for myself I am doing this big work in putting out this Me and White Supremacy work but the huge part of it is I look at me and white supremacy every day, me and white supremacy.

Celine: Me too for sure.

Layla: Right? How has it impacted me the way that I think about the world, the way that I think about myself, my own internalize anti-blackness and this is my own personal philosophy but I strongly believe that to hold space to be out of work for people with white privilege without doing just as much if not more work on my own stuff is irresponsible and so you know, I hold both and what I've learned from so many teachers in this work is that we all have to heal, we all have to heal.

Celine: Amen.

Layla: Right?

Celine: Again, amongst women of color, we are very hard on each other. We police one another. That's something we never talk about and I was just discussing...

Layla: That's a whole other conversation.

Celine: That's a whole other convo but I was just like just on these things, yes, we have to learn, we have to heal. Wade Davis, the book is called *The Wayfinder*, I recommend it because from a scientific perspective, he argues that indigenous knowledge and indigenous wisdom is superior to the western philosophies coming from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century and he argues that if we lose indigenous culture, we lose our humanity. I really recommend this book, it's a very good book.

Layla: I really wanna read it. I'm gonna say if we have it.

Celine: You should read it. He is of a spiritual man of course he comes in a white body in this life but like he knows a lot. I would recommend. I know I'm putting my name on the line here but he had a lot of vocabulary for us also in facing this white spaces and saying look like scientifically like it's wrong what you're saying you know.

Layla: Okay. I really enjoyed this conversation. Thank you so much Celine.

Celine: Thank you for having me.

Layla: Absolutely. Our very last question, what does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Celine: So for me, I do observe my stuff as a young elder and I prepare myself for if I do live longer in my older age, you know, like letting myself age and letting my body age and observing that so that's that as a young elder. What does it mean for me to be an ancestor is we won't get to see the fruit of this labor unfortunately

perhaps I mean Inshallah but like I don't know for real but the idea is that we are planting seeds and it goes back to being humble in what you think you are doing in terms of impact because you won't see it, you know, you're just planting seeds, that's how I believe it.

Layla: I love that so much and I'm just every time I have a conversation with any person on this podcast, I'm always left with something, I always feel stretched, I always feel nourished, I always feel grown. I'm always like, yes, this is why I'm doing this work because of people like you. So thank you so much Celine for being here and for sharing your wisdom.

Celine: And I do this work because of people like you Layla, your contribution to this work is so important. Thank you, thank you.

Layla: Thank you my love. I'll speak to you soon.