

## **An Introduction to The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa**

Welcome to The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa, produced by myself, Vivian M. Cook, and The EcoTheatre Lab. Today, I'll be introducing the series so y'all get a sense of what to expect in the next thirteen episodes!

As we enter into conversations around climate action, sustainable agriculture, and community-engaged arts in Iowa, The EcoTheatre Lab and I want to first recognize that Indigenous nations have been leaders in such conversations for centuries and continue to be today. Iowa now occupies the homelands of Native American Nations to whom we owe our commitment and dedication. Iowa is now situated on the homelands and trading routes of the Ioway, Meskwaki, and Sauk, Otoe, Omaha, Ihanktonwan, and Santee and because history is complex and time goes far back beyond memory, we also acknowledge the ancient connections of many other Indigenous Peoples here. The history of broken treaties and forced removal that dispossessed Indigenous Peoples of their homelands was and is an act of colonization and genocide that we cannot erase. And as a result, Indigenous ecosystems within Iowa have suffered from extraction, degradation, and unsustainable agricultural practices, contributing to the ongoing climate crisis. Understanding and addressing these injustices is critical as we work toward climate dialogue, action, and justice in our communities. My thanks to podcast interviewees, Shelley Buffalo, enrolled member of the Meskwaki tribe; Lance Foster, enrolled member and tribal historian of the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska; and Sikowis Nobiss, Plains Cree/Saulteaux of the George Gordon First Nation, for their collaboration in developing this acknowledgement.

So to get us started, let's first talk about why The EcoTheatre Lab created this podcast series.

The climate crisis is affecting communities on a global scale, including agricultural communities in the U.S. Midwest. Climate change must be addressed urgently in these communities, and farmers, landowners, community-engaged researchers, community organizers and activists, and as this podcast demonstrates, artists must be key players in climate solutions. Research shows that a critical and often overlooked step in addressing climate change is climate dialogue. After all, how can we act to address climate change if we don't first talk about it with one another? And research has also shown that effective facilitation of climate dialogue in agricultural communities should highlight values, diverse perspectives, and personal experiences, three elements that artistic engagement methods are especially apt at incorporating into public dialogue.

Within this context, the goal of this podcast series is to explore the use of artistic strategies to facilitate climate dialogue – and consequently, encourage agency in climate action – in Iowa and other Midwestern farming communities. The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa features thirteen conversations with artists, farmers, community-engaged researchers, and

community organizers and activists who have used arts and storytelling strategies to talk about climate change and agriculture. Through this podcast, they generously share these strategies so that listeners can implement them in their own communities. And what a wide array of strategies we have to share!

Over the past several months, I've talked with fifteen inspiring interviewees, and to encourage you to listen to the rest of the series, I'll share some snapshots here of these conversations.

Omar de Kok-Mercado showed me his striking, drone-captured photography and videography of prairie strips, emphasizing how art can help us *envision* a climate future that is healthy and desirable. He talks about the power of imagination and the importance of communicating the beauty and mystery in our world – and how artists can help document different agricultural systems that are already being practiced, engaging farmers, policymakers, and community members in seeing the possibilities for a climate-resilient future. He paints his artistic practice, especially his photography, as conversation starters that make the entry into such conversations inviting, appealing, and digestible, with a focus on core values that many of us share. Omar describes his “deep romance for the potential of the Iowan landscape” and how his art is a love language for that landscape, creating ways for him to process fear, anger, and grief, and also wonder, curiosity, and hope; for him to listen to and develop a relationship with the landscape; bring that into his own work as a farmer and researcher; and encourage other people to do the same.

I sat in Ruth Rabinowitz' living room, looking out on her farm, which – as a photographer and ceramicist by training – she describes as an artistic installation and the biggest thing she's done in her life. Like Omar, Ruth uses photography, as well as what she refers to as a “public journal” on social media to document her process of transitioning her farm to more climate-resilient practices. She notes that people are drawn to beauty, and so she strives to highlight the beauty in climate action. As a ceramicist, she looks at the soil like the clay in her art, both lifegiving materials to listen to, to show up for, and to be in conversation with to create something beautiful. She argues that many of us can and need to connect with the land and each other in ways that are replenishing, and that the arts can help facilitate that process.

I listened to Hiphop artist and youth educator, DK (DeAn Kelly), describe how our personal health, the health of our relationships, and the health of our environment are all inextricably connected. He points out that what is happening to the environment around us is a reflection of what is going on within us and within our relationships to each other. DK has seen how art, and especially music, stays with us and influences us. Hiphop's form, in particular, allows writers to communicate a lot in a short amount of time, providing an engaging platform to invite conversations, validate shared experiences, and encourage imagination, play, and creativity. Like Omar, DK, too, emphasizes the necessity of talking about our fear, anger, and grief so that we

can get to hope. He says that community is our biggest asset, and we need to find ways to share our words, our resources, and our hope with one another.

Sikowis Nobiss, the founder and executive director for Great Plains Action Society, and I talked about the development of Great Plains Action Society and how they integrate artwork into most everything they do – how art as resistance helps fuel their advocacy. Sikowis shares how art plays a critical role in creating community power; communicating consistent, striking, and attention-grabbing messaging; and building, celebrating, and uplifting Indigenous culture. She describes how, with their artistic practices, they “can tell a story with one quick glimpse.” Great Plains Action Society works to ensure people can see and hear alternative narratives and that people throughout the Midwest know that, in Sikowis’ words, “just because you don’t own land doesn’t mean you don’t get a voice” in agricultural and environmental practices. Sikowis describes art as a way to create space for honest conversations and invite people into those spaces.

Moselle Nita Singh and I talked about truth-telling and people’s relationships with each other and the land. We talked about how critical this is to climate action, and how art may be a pathway to help repair these relationships. Moselle has developed resistance art for organizations such as Great Plains Action Society and Buffalo Rebellion, and she also developed the cover art for this podcast! She strives to practice celebration as a mechanism of resistance, processing and celebrating life, relationship, culture, and potential through art. She, like Sikowis, discusses how culture connects us to our histories and our ecosystems and how climate action is not anthropocentric – our action needs to be in conversation, in kinship, with all the life around us that is also striving to survive. She talks about the need for biocultural diversity as a response to climate change and injustice. That art can stimulate curiosity, emotion, and attraction to this conversation. That people can bring themselves and their experiences to the art. And that art can help us balance pain and joy in this life. She recommends that those of us listening intentionally localize ourselves, engaging with our communities through our own skills, histories, and stories.

Lance Foster, artist and Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, describes how art can amplify agricultural history as a way to help us move toward more reciprocal relationships with our ecosystems. He explains the power of public art to encourage people to think, without telling them what to think, leveraging the potential of art to integrate both beauty and aesthetics and meaning. Like Moselle, he talks about the unique ability of art to bring people into the conversation through the connection points that resonate with them. Both DK and Lance talk about how children embrace curiosity, wonder, and imagination – and how art allows adults to tap into curiosity, wonder, and imagination, which – as Omar also points out – is critical to envisioning a future that is climate resilient. Lance describes artists as honest witnesses, helping communities see and connect with what is happening around us. And he describes how art can help people document their own observations of change through their

lifetimes, opening people to conversations about climate change through an entry point of their personal experiences. Lance tells us that “right now, you can influence the future history.”

Sociologist and creative writer, Angie Carter, and I talked about the use of artistic strategies in organizing, the use of photovoice to invite community members to share what they value about the places they live and their relationships with the land, and how we need to reshape narratives about who is and should be engaged in protecting our soil, water, and land. Angie describes how art allows space for multiple stories and experiences and helps us see how to build relationships with each other and connect with land as a community, not a commodity. She talks about the importance of laughing, finding joy, and caring for ourselves and one another in organizing work, and she illustrates how events that strategically incorporate arts and storytelling opportunities provide space for this. Angie says that “we all live our lives in story,” and “the stories we tell or the stories we don’t tell shape our cultural stories.” We need to develop stories collectively that depict not only what we’re against, but what we’re for, what we want to protect, what we value, and how local values and actions connect us to global initiatives. She encourages people to build community locally to push for change, amplify stories that need to be told, and create new stories together.

In their episode, Linda Shenk, Jean Eells, and Stephanie Enloe describe how, in an initiative through the Women, Food and Agriculture Network, they use micro-storytelling to offer women landowners agency in conversations about soil, climate, and land stewardship. Their work demonstrates how personal stories facilitate an entry point into conversations about climate change by meeting people where they are, valuing each individual’s expertise, and creating space to share grief, questions, resources, action, and hope. They, like Angie, explore how information about climate change is often communicated from a deficit-based model, assuming that people don’t have the information they need, and if they have more information, they will act differently. This model has not often been successful in changing behavior, and the foundation for Linda, Jean, and Stephanie’s project is an asset-based, storytelling-based model, where, through story, participants identify, share, and apply the strengths they already have individually and within their communities. We can see through this project how everyday narratives can reveal resources and lead to action in agricultural communities, moving people past the paralysis that often stops us from approaching climate action.

Tamara Marcus, Linn County Sustainability Director and climate change researcher, also highlights the necessity of recognizing the expertise and assets that every community member holds and can contribute to conversations around climate action, climate-resilient agriculture, and climate justice. Tamara discusses storytelling techniques as a way to make research more accessible, meet people where they are, expand our understanding of different knowledges, and help translate research into practice. Tamara emphasizes the importance of “building capacity for individuals within their respective communities to be the changemakers of their own narrative.”

They note that “we all need the expertise and knowledge of each other to exist in this world,” we can all learn from one another, and that building and healing relationships *has* to be a first step in climate action research. Relationship-building is critical, but it takes time, and storytelling is a strategy that can facilitate that process. Like Angie, Tamara emphasizes the importance of *local* agency, action, and narratives. They note that we need to collectively create stories that allow for the complexity that exists within all the systems that need to come together to address climate change – agricultural, social, economic, and environmental. We can create these stories by examining the narratives we already tell about the systems we live in and whether these are the narratives we want. If not, we need to identify what we care about and how to change our narratives to reflect those values.

I talked with Mary Swander about her nonprofit, AgArts, and listened to her read an excerpt of *The Girls on the Roof*, a narrative poem that takes place during the 1993 Midwestern floods. Mary describes her book as a climate parable, a story that teaches us a lesson about climate change, but through an intimate, romantic tale of a small community and family secrets. She identifies some of the most promising reasons why arts and storytelling techniques need to be used more often as we figure out how to talk about climate change in agricultural communities. Mary discusses how stories beget stories, which means storytelling initiatives create space for multiple perspectives to be in dialogue; when I share a story with you, it invites you to share a story with me, and on and on and on. And, as Mary says, climate change is part of all of our stories now, so we have to figure out how to share those stories with one another on a local level, in spaces where we can develop trust. And we have to trust the *process* of sharing stories and the ripple effects that inevitably come from that. Artists, by nature, work to understand effective ways to communicate with large groups of people, and in this way, they are absolutely necessary to climate action. Mary also shares the opportunities AgArts offers for farmers and artists to join together through residencies that foster interdisciplinary collaborations and understanding through dialogue.

Shelley Buffalo, an artist, seed keeper, and food sovereignty and rematriation specialist, is collaborating with Mary on a new play called *Squatters on Red Earth*, which is just one example of the kinds of projects she does. During our conversation, Shelley and I talked about the importance of examining who currently controls dominant cultural narratives and why. To address huge environmental and social issues like climate change, we need to dismantle white supremacy and intentionally make space for personal, cultural, and historical narratives that center reciprocity, community, and justice. Shelley shares how her own artwork – as a storyteller and visual artist – is a way to process and connect her to her family and Meskwaki history and culture. She integrates these connections into her advocacy work, engaging audiences and drawing them in through storytelling and the power of visual representation and symbolism, helping people to make their own connections, ask critical questions, look at things from a

different perspective, and see potential in the future. Shelley says that now, “the humanities, the arts are more important possibly than ever in human history.”

Alice McGary, artist and founder of Mustard Seed Community Farm in Ames, identifies how agriculture and art can come together to not only help us *imagine*, but also to actually put into *practice* new ways of living, farming, and artmaking in community. She talks about how community-building is critical to climate action and how artistic spaces can facilitate that process. Like Moselle and Shelley, Alice explores what it means to be in kinship with the people and all the life around us, recognizing that the root of many of our problems is exploitation and so we must actively work to re-imagine food, economic, and social systems that are instead reciprocal. We can learn from ecology and live out ideas of mutual aid and justice that we see demonstrated within ecological systems. She says that, not only do we need cultural shifts to address climate change, but we do indeed have the power to make those cultural shifts, and creative spaces like Mustard Seed Farm work to empower community members to tell their stories, identify their assets, and take action. She says many of our narratives around climate action focus on what we will have to “sacrifice,” so in the work at Mustard Seed, her team strives to showcase that these so-called “sacrifices” may not only mitigate climate change, but also bring joy, beauty, relationships, and fun. In her everyday practices at the farm, she creates space for people to share stories, find personal ways to connect to the work, and figure out where their power is. Alice explains how art can bring us together, uplift us, and transcend us as we work to find that power.

And finally, I talked with Cornelia Mutel, a long-time science writer who has adopted storytelling strategies in much of her recent work. In Connie’s episode, we discuss how researchers and science writers can integrate storytelling techniques -- such as memoir, first-person narratives, and metaphor -- into their work as a way to communicate more effectively. Like Lance, Ruth, Omar, Angie, and the Women, Food, and Ag Network team, Connie demonstrates the power in observing and documenting change and then sharing those personal, local experiences to start conversations. She notes that storytelling is a way for science communicators to reach wider audiences, that it is much harder to disconnect from concrete human experiences than from data. She tells us about how her readers have fallen in love with the places she’s described in her books, and that this is what she wants, to invite readers to “love our beleaguered world,” to create safe spaces where people can talk honestly about the fear and joy that comes with conversations about climate change, and to envision a hopeful future together and the actions that must lead us there. Connie shares several excerpts from her writing, demonstrating how she has applied storytelling techniques in her work and emphasizing again and again how a vision for the future is critical in climate change dialogues because hope generates action.

Out of these thirteen interviews, several themes have emerged regarding the potential for arts-based climate dialogue in Iowa agricultural communities – and beyond.

Almost every interviewee highlights art and storytelling as critical tools to help us clearly see climate change in the present and, perhaps more importantly, envision a climate-resilient future that is beautiful, appealing, and hopeful. This vision may very well be necessary in guiding our current plans for climate action.

Artistic and storytelling practices also have the potential to reveal, celebrate, and examine the local histories, cultures, and values in the places we live, creating relevant entry points into climate change conversations that recognize community members, what they care about, and their skills, experiences, and perspectives. Arts and storytelling, as multi-faceted, often subjective and complex forms of communication, can help us understand – through a variety of perspectives – our histories, present, and future, and how they are intertwined. As Lance says, we can be honest witnesses together through art, and as Moselle says, there is great power in celebrating in resistance. Everyone has a story to tell, and platforms that invite the sharing of those stories meet people where they are, creating space for them to make connections, build relationships, celebrate, and perhaps heal.

Healing was a theme that cropped up over and over again. Many of the interviewees – and I'm sure many listening to this series – believe we have to find ways to heal and replenish ourselves and our relationships with each other as we are working to heal and replenish our relationships with the land. And many of the interviewees discuss how artistic practices can offer such healing.

People are emotional beings and often make decisions based on those emotions. Unlike many forms of science communication rooted solely in data, artistic and storytelling techniques acknowledge that emotion needs to be validated and needs to be shared in order to move toward any sort of action. And, as several interviewees have seen in their work, art incites curiosity, curiosity provokes questions, and stories beget stories, all ways to catalyze dialogue, which may lead to action.

The interviewees for this podcast have also emphasized again and again the power of community. Climate change is an overwhelming, far-reaching problem that is affecting us and all the life around us in sometimes incomprehensible ways. None of us will ever be able to solve the problem alone, and interviewees have highlighted the importance of arts and storytelling as a way to invite people into the conversation, encouraging everyone to contribute their story, their skills, their assets. In this way, as we work to preserve and increase and celebrate diversity within our ecosystems, we also work to preserve and increase and celebrate diversity within our cultural systems, which is critical to climate action and justice. As Omar says, it is much easier to engage in conversations about diverse systems because there are so many more entry points where

people can find connections and relevance to their own lives. And once more people find their way into the conversation, we can work toward developing shared knowledge and resources and shifting societal narratives about agriculture and climate change into ones that better reflect shared values, diverse perspectives, and just biocultural systems. Such societal narratives, as this series explores, will then inform the actions we take and the systems we choose to keep, dismantle, change, and build.

Because climate action depends, in large part, on effective policy, I also asked each of the interviewees to provide their thoughts on how storytelling and artistic approaches to climate dialogue might support climate policy. Mary gives an example of working with farmers to envision their farms in the future, amidst climate change, and how that process brings to light actions that need to happen *now* to materialize that future, including what policy supports need to be pushed for. Connie, along with several of the other interviewees, notes that politics already make use of storytelling. Politicians take personal stories on the campaign trail to translate their platforms to human problems. The stories told by protestors or discussed by voters often gain media attention and are still brought up in policy arenas years later, regardless of whether the protests or votes were deemed “successful.” Angie says, “the more we can try to share some collective story and amplify it and build our power together around that, I think that’s where we can start to see some of these wins and gains when it comes to shifting the policy landscape.” Moselle and Tamara also highlight the ways that art and storytelling can connect people across cultures and generations, mobilizing communities to tell collective stories, share those stories with policymakers, and catalyze action.

Sikowis’ response to this question is simple and powerful— Great Plains Action Society shows up at the Iowa capitol with art, and it grabs the attention of the media and policymakers alike, inserting those stories into the policy narrative. DK notes that we replay music and stories over and over and we share them with friends, so they can help us rehearse the language we need for advocacy. Linda, Stephanie, and Jean illustrate how storytelling can shed light on both barriers and opportunities for climate action facing farmers, landowners, and all of us. Omar and Ruth argue that we *need* to be documenting climate-resilient systems that are already being practiced. If we use artistic strategies to do so, we may be more likely to draw attention, which will likely lead to questions and conversations. And in those conversations, there may be opportunities to both share policy resources that already exist to help implement such practices and also encourage policymakers to increase support so that these systems can be adopted more widely. Lance and Shelley note the ways that different policy arenas are connected – that we need policy support for the arts and humanities to ensure that people continue to learn about the history of the places they live and practice critical interpersonal skills of listening, questioning, and conversation. Alice describes how Mustard Seed Community Farm supports direct political action when they can, and also offers a creative place where people can not only find their power, but also how they want to leverage that power to push for policy and change.



These fifteen podcast interviewees come from different disciplines (artistic and otherwise) and offer unique perspectives. But like The EcoTheatre Lab, they have all discovered the power and *necessity* of art and storytelling in healing our relationships with each other and all the life around us. I have learned a great deal from all of the interviewees in this series and am thankful to have shared space with them. During our interviews, I not only learned strategies for facilitating climate dialogue in agricultural communities, but we also actively engaged in climate dialogue during the interviews themselves, sharing stories, art, resources, and community. I invite you all to join in community with us as well. Listen to the episodes, and share them with your neighbors and friends and anyone you know who is looking for ways to talk about climate change, so we can work toward climate action and justice together.

Thanks for listening to this introduction to *The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa*. More information about podcast interviewees and episodes is available at [ecotheatrelab.com](http://ecotheatrelab.com). We want to thank all of the organizations and individuals who made this series possible. This project is funded by both a North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program Graduate Student Grant, which is supported by the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and a Johnson Center for Land Stewardship Policy Emerging Leader Award. Our podcast consultant is Mary Swander, our podcast musician is Omar de Kok-Mercado, and our podcast artist is Moselle Nita Singh. Our podcast land acknowledgement is adapted from text developed by Lance Foster and Sikowis Nobiss and from conversations with Shelley Buffalo. This episode was edited by myself and Taylor Sklenar, and Rosie Marcu-Rowe is our podcast series editor. I'm Vivian M. Cook, Community Engagement Director for The EcoTheatre Lab and The Art of Climate Dialogue podcast producer and host. Take care.