Episode 11: “Amplifying Narratives of Connection”
Shelley Buffalo
The Art of Climate Dialogue

Vivian:

Welcome to the Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa, produced by myself, Vivian M Cook, and The EcoTheatre Lab. Welcome to today's conversation with artist, farmer, and food sovereignty and rematriation specialist, Shelley Buffalo.

Shelley:

This poem I wrote actually the same evening after getting back from Standing Rock. This was December of 2016.

Four Days in Oceti Sakowin

The moon and stars above Standing Rock

undiminished by the aggressors strobes

remind us of the infinity

that cannot be bought my love

We laughed when our little recon warriors

the bee buzzing drones (smaller than your backpack my love)

made mockery of the circling helicopter

attempting to intimidate

That damn helicopter , ha, ha

day and night its futile track above our heads

failed to drown out

the calls of migrating geese

and the voices singing around the drum

In that river basin of poor cell signal

and low or dead batteries

I forgot the lighted screen

and remembered the beauty

of authenticity in your face my love

in the center of the universe

we felt all the suffering of humanity

and took courage in loving-kindness

My love, on the hill

where I screamed out

all of my despair

you hugged me tight
even though we did not know each other before
men and women wept openly
then laughed loudly
giving a child a piggy back ride
up a sledding hill

As the Buddha faced Mara
We face brutality
with a pledge of
no-harm
the medicine of Standing Rock

Vivian:

Addressing climate change is urgent, but in order to move toward action, we first have to find ways to talk about climate change with one another. The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa, is a podcast series featuring 13 conversations with artists, farmers, community engaged researchers and community organizers and activists who have all 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.

I'm Vivian and I invite you to explore The Art of Climate Dialogue with me. As we enter into these 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 route of the Ioway, Meskwaki, and Sauk, Otoe, Omaha, Ihanktonwan, and Santee. 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. 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.

Shelley Buffalo lives on the Meskwaki Settlement with her two sons. The Meskwaki Settlement is Shelley's home and community. She says, "Wherever I may wander, my path winds back home to my community along the Iowa River. I'm drawn back again and again because this is where I belong and who I belong to. The Meskwaki culture formed me into who I am today. Some of that formation was harsh and some was loving. I may be middle-aged now, yet I am still a child when it comes to my cultural

education. Yet if there is one thing that I can do in my lifetime that is meaningful, it is to interrupt colonization by staying committed to my own Meskwaki cultural development. Everything I do and say is measured by what my elders have taught and continue to teach me."

The Meskwaki are unique in that their land-based community is a settlement, not a reservation. Established in 1857 with the purchase of 80 acres near Tama, Iowa, the Meskwaki Settlement has grown to over 8,600 acres. Visit meskwaki.org to learn more about the Meskwaki, and I'm excited to share Shelley's and my conversation with y'all today.

Welcome to the podcast, Shelley. Thanks so much for inviting me to your home today for our conversation. We're sitting here, and for listeners, we're looking out on incredibly beautiful trees with the snow and the sun glinting off them. It's really lovely.

Shelley:

Yes. You need to remember the Iowa River down there.

Vivian:

Yes, and the Iowa River. I'm going to have to actually go look at it before I leave.

You just read a poem that you wrote after attending protests at Standing Rock several years ago. Can you tell us more about that experience?

Shelley:

First and foremost, this was in 2016. This was after Trump was elected, but before he took office. In the meantime, there was this basically disaster... Not disaster, but so much as its incredible environmental and humanitarian crisis unfolding with the Dakota Access Pipeline crossing through treaty land and definitely under the waterway, the Missouri River, and how that was putting all the communities, tribal communities, and all the other communities that depend upon the Missouri, including the ecological communities at risk. Because these pipelines, they break. It's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when.

With all of these pipelines, they are not the answer to sustainable energy. Quite the opposite, but yet they persist because of the oil industry is just so powerful. Ultimately, the type of crimes against humanity that were being committed at Standing Rock were atrocious. Before I went there, I remember watching video footage of water protectors having flash grenades fired at them, having rubber bullets fired at them, as well as a water cannon sprayed upon them in subzero, or I think it was sub freezing. I think it was 20 degree weather.

These were non-violent water protectors. I say water protectors rather than protestors, not that protestor is a bad word, even though I think in American popular culture, there's been a lot of propaganda to make protestor a bad word. Even though this is part of the democratic process, is that there needs to be dissent. Especially in a capitalistic system, the political and social dissent is the only thing that keeps the system remotely honest.

I couldn't help but want to be there. I felt like I was seeing all of the video footage and the photographs and all of the reports come in and my heart was just getting ripped open because I wanted to do something. I wanted to do my part. But also, I had two school-aged children at home. I'm a single mother, largely unsupported. I really wasn't in a situation where I could just drop everything and take off to Standing Rock. I had a mortgage to pay, student loans to pay, of course my children to care for. I couldn't be out there for an extended period of time. I was only out there for four days.

But it was enough. It was enough, especially to see the situation. This is the militarization of the police. It's just like, who is paying for all these planes and helicopter and the Humvees and just all of the weapons? The resistance was faced with just a lot of heavily militarized brute force, as well as intimidation and counterintelligence tactics. A lot of folks that were occupying that space out there for an extended period of time, they had to travel up to Bismarck for supplies. Even at Bismarck, just to make a supply run for groceries, gas, whatever, a lot of people had to navigate a gauntlet of hostility from the locals, extremely, extremely racist and extremely indoctrinated locals who really saw Indigenous people as less than human, and the Indigenous fight for the basic right to clean water as anti-American.

Vivian:

That's awful.

Shelley:

Yeah. It was definitely a life-changing experience for me. Standing Rock, period, really galvanized folks. Yes, it's like the fight against pipelines, but ultimately, it is the fight against basically corporate dominance of everything, of our world to the point of our imminent destruction.

Vivian:

The forces behind what are investing in the technology and means to continue to exacerbate the climate crisis and all of the injustice, social and environmental that comes with it.

Shelley:

It's bigger than that. The European, patriarchal, Christian-based, just way of thinking about this earth, that is basically as man's dominion, which is diametrically opposed to the Indigenous understanding of human life on this earth as a part of the whole.

Vivian:

I know today we want to talk about that in particular, this difference between narratives of our relationship with the environment and how we treat the environment and how that's directly connected to whether we're going to find a way to heal those relationships. We'll talk about that more.

In terms of your experience at Standing Rock, I am curious how you and the fellow water protectors who were there, how did you use artistic strategies to bring attention to water protection and climate justice?

Shelley:

My art, when getting back home, then this poem and reflecting upon that experience and then starting to engage, first with Indigenous Iowa, which then Indigenous Iowa was dissolved, and later folks that were involved with Indigenous Iowa, some of those folks went to form Great Plains Action Society. That relationship with organizations that were very involved in this resistance, one of the first things that I did was take part in an art popup. I did some screen printing, which was... I just loved it. I made a design for a t-shirt that I felt like spoke to the political climate at the time.

Vivian:

How did art making, such as the development of this poem, help you process that experience individually and with friends and community members?

Shelley:

The graphic for the printmaking and things like that. Well, it helped me as an individual to process everything that was going on, ultimately to overcome my own personal feelings of just helplessness, of being just adrift in this incredible, powerful tide of environmental destruction and of environmental exploitation and extraction, which also was the exploitation and extraction of humankind, specifically BIPOC folks.

This is why writing and making music and the visual arts, the graphic arts, playwriting, and even dance, the performing arts and all of that, this is why it's so important that people engage in their art to raise awareness, because if you're just depending on the current system, it's just not going to get out there. But also, what art does is it inspires. Instead of just a news report, which is kind of factual, cut and dry. Before we started this interview, both you and I were talking about how difficult it is to read. Our attention spans are now shorter than they've ever been. Sitting down and reading a book or reading an in-depth investigative report or anything like that...

Vivian:

It's challenging.

Shelley:

It's challenging. A lot of the media that we're just getting in little short snack size bites through social media now. That's where we're getting the bulk of our information. With art, that is a way to convey, especially through non-written material, through images, through performance, through these other channels, to convey that message, to grab that narrative.

Vivian:

You have quite a bit of work that you've done in food sovereignty and rematriation. You're a food sovereignty and rematriation specialist. How would you say that the work that you've done as a visual artist is connected to your work in food sovereignty?

Shelley:

Well, in working food sovereignty, local food system, local economies, community building, all of that is interconnected. What's really important in doing that work is that it requires a lot of outreach. It requires a lot of, once again, getting that message out there. Even when you have a beautiful graphic or an eye-catching graphic, it catches people's interest. It draws their attention to it. It also, especially with the visual arts, there's a iconography that lights up parts of the human brain and makes that connection. We are very much a species that symbolism. Symbolism and iconography is very embedded in the way that we interact with our world. The visual arts definitely is not only a powerful way, but a really fun way. When you put together a graphic, even if it's something like we're having a community meal, or we're having, we're teaching, we're having a canning workshop or whatever. It still, it draws in that interest. It's just part of that outreach package when you're doing this work within your community.

Vivian:

In another interview, you also talked about farming and seed keeping as artistry in and of itself. Can you talk more about that?

Shelley:

You're living your art because you're living in a way that's artful and intentional. Once again, from an Indigenous perspective, you are living your life in a good way, according to our traditional knowledge and values and practices. When I was coordinating media to put in the Chicago Field Museum, Meskwaki Pod, the new updated display there, that opened last May, in an interview with Johnathon Buffalo, he said, "What we are taught," and this is teachings from our creator, "is that if you have a good garden, if you are taking care of your garden, then you're taking care of your life, but if you're neglecting your garden, not getting in there and just taking care of it, tending to your garden, then it shows that you're not taking care of your life." I think that's what it boils down to.

Really, when you are growing and gathering your own food, in doing so, that is connecting you to the earth, that's connecting you to life. Our relationship with these seeds, Indigenous folks see these seeds as our relatives. We have our own narratives about each of these plants, about the seeds, where they came from, how they came to us. It's always from a type of understanding of interdependence of all life. Within that is literally we are taught that these are relatives.

When I really grasped that and held these ancestral seeds in my hand, it was just so powerful because I'm like, "These seeds connect me to my ancestors. These seeds connect me to my grandmothers." Our Meskwaki corn, we've had those seeds for over 3000 years. Colonization, especially of North America, dates back to the 17th century. That's about, what, 300 years.

In being a seed keeper, in being a food rematriator, in engaging in this ancestral food work, it's transcendent. We are still here, these foods are still here, earth is still here, these relationships are still here, and the apocalypse that is colonization is but a blip.

Vivian:

You and I have talked about how shifting the narrative about this relationship that humans have with agriculture, and agriculture as part of the larger ecological system that we're all a part of, how shifting that narrative is one of the most important things we need to do when talking about climate action and climate justice. Can you talk a little bit about what you see as the dominating colonizing narrative right now? Who controls that narrative and what we need to start to do to change it?

Shelley:

Ultimately, big ag and big oil are kind of just different sides of the same face, very much so. There's not one without the other. Especially when you look at post World War II, that's when agriculture really shifted in the United States to largely chemical dependent systems. That's just because all of these wartime chemicals. Chemicals that were literally used for warfare and the factories that produced them, the United States needed to figure out like, "All right, we've invested so much in this, we need to find another use for it." So they applied it to agriculture. It's big, it's powerful. That system controls... Here in Iowa, it controls policy, it controls the government. Just every aspect of how Iowans farm and our economies is completely controlled and manipulated by these corporations.

Vivian:

It's a story they're telling that is perpetuated - we talked about perpetuated too by white supremacy and misogyny and how all of these social injustices are completely wrapped up in the perpetuation of those narratives.

Shelley:

Yeah, it's hard to even talk about just because it's so far reaching and so pervasive. Ultimately what it boils down to is environmental injustice, because the folks that always take the brunt, always pay the price, are the underserved communities. Even globally, it's the communities in the global south that have contributed the least, even nominally, to carbon pollution are the ones that are bearing the brunt. And of course, in the cities, like in the Pacific Northwest, they've had these terrible heat waves. The neighborhoods, the poorer neighborhoods don't have shade, they don't have green spaces. They're lacking in central air systems and such, including even places to go to cool off. They just don't even have those. They don't even have third spaces in their neighborhoods. Think of like, heck, Starbucks that has air conditioning where you can go and cool off. They don't even have things like that in their neighborhoods.

They're just left to suffer. Some of them die. Their neighborhoods are several degrees hotter than the wealthy neighborhoods. You can just go on and on and on and on with examples of that, basically environmental racism, but ultimately, just once again, just the very extractive and destructive practices of corporate farming, of the oil industry, of so much industry, even the renewable industries, like the lithium mines. Who's mining that stuff? Where are those mines for all of these batteries that are going to go into electric cars?

It is so violent and so destructive, but yet your average American citizen is really kept in the dark. A week ago I was in Des Moines for Martin Luther King prayer breakfast. We had some round table discussions about environmental justice after the prayer breakfast. I was asked to facilitate one of the table discussions. It was frustrating because we couldn't even really discuss solutions because I was just sitting there at the table trying to get people to understand what the people that are the most exploited in this model. I was just like... Who is it that I said, "We just had sausage this morning." Some folks would say, "Oh yeah, CAFOs." I said, "Yes, factory farms are very destructive. All of those hogs coming out of those farms, who is processing that? Do you think about those folks?"

Do you remember when Covid first hit and the folks that worked in this industry were having the highest numbers of fatalities from Covid infections? Our hospitals, University of Iowa Hospital, their medical ICU ward were flooded with patients from the Waterloo facility. By the time they got to the medical ICU, there wasn't much that can be done for them. They were so sick and so far gone.

It's interesting because these folks are in these processing facilities, which they used to be called slaughterhouses, but they were in, with Covid, they were in a slaughterhouse of humanity. Some of the managers were actually taking bets on how many of their workers were going to die. Where does that come from? Where does that energy come from that you don't even see these people as human beings? Where does that come from?

Vivian:

That's where it starts, is what we talked about earlier, that we have to figure out where that comes from. It comes from the stories we're telling about who matters and what matters, what kind of life has value and that.

Shelley:

Yeah, because there's nobody telling their narrative.

Vivian:

Right. You said in that meeting in Des Moines that it was hard to even just get people on the same page and even just have a baseline understanding of how social and environmental justice and moving toward an agricultural system that pushes against climate change, that those are all connected and people aren't on the same page about that. How do you see artistic and storytelling strategies potentially being used as a way to help people get on the same page, as a way to connect and communicate a different narrative? And what you talked about, amplifying Indigenous narratives that center relationships based in reciprocity and community and rematriation, versus the current narratives that are centered in colonization, extraction and exploitation. How can arts and storytelling techniques help us shift those narratives?

Shelley:

Well, ultimately it's engaging hearts and minds. It's very powerful because you're not telling, you're showing. In the creative writing classes, over and over again, always your professor is telling you, "Don't tell people the story, you need to show." When you show somebody the story, you are drawing them in. You are getting them to experience it on some level.

Vivian:

Have you seen that work starting to happen in Iowa?

Shelley:

It is. You and I both just recently attended the Practical Farmers of Iowa Conference, and Great Plains Action Society, that was the first year that Great Plains attended as an organization. In addition to that, tabled there. On that table was posters and stickers, postcards and zines that had really powerful graphics and art, really beautiful artwork. The response from attendees to the conference was overwhelmingly positive. We were hearing so many people saying, "We really appreciate that you're here and that you're here conveying this message, because this is needed. This is really needed." This is a farming conference. PFI, as an organization, because this is Iowa, and because they are serving a large demographic that is, I don't know, a lot of that demographic is not only white, is not only male, but there's a good portion of that demographic that's also conservative.

Their organization, it doesn't behoove them to engage in really direct action and direct conversations about big ag and big oil. GPAS is... This is what they do. Taking up space and being part of the narrative, putting that narrative out there, representing that, is greatly needed. Folks really appreciated it. Overwhelmingly. There was just a few MAGA types that were being confrontational and weird, very weird, kind of like in a high school bully way, there was some guys that were doing some stuff, but it's just like, "Yeah, we've dealt with this our whole life," so this is nothing new. Being a person of color, it's nothing new. We're used to it. It's not like it's okay though, but to behave in intimidating way, that's not okay. But like I said, we're pretty used to dealing with that.

But when I got home and I brought some of the posters home from the GPAS table, I just was filled with joy, even though I was exhausted too, because I was like... Well, all of that stuff was free. Just thinking

about all of the people that took those posters and those stickers and the zine and how a percentage of those folks are going to actually hang them up at home or in their office.

Vivian:

And potentially continue those conversations then with other people who see the artwork and then engage.

Shelley:

Yeah. There's Moselle, she does a lot of the graphics for Great Plains. Her artwork is just incredibly beautiful and powerful. There's some other artists too. Christine Nobiss too does a lot of the graphics too.

Vivian:

Like you said, it kind of sticks with you in a different way when there is symbolism.

Shelley:

It's symbolism.

Vivian:

And representation and visual cues and reminders for us to continue engaging.

Shelley:

Yeah. It inspires those conversations. It inspires looking at things from a different viewpoint. That's the power that it holds.

Vivian:

With that, I want to talk about your work as an artist and your artwork, how your artwork has contributed to shifting these narratives around agriculture and social and environmental justice. Can you tell us about the trajectory of your visual artwork and how it has been informed by Meskwaki traditions and values, you told me since the beginning?

Shelley:

Yeah, really from the beginning of the time that I... Well, I started doing art really young. I always loved drawing and writing in a lot of crafts, always since I can remember. Every once in a while I'll come across something that has been saved since I was a little kid. Quite often it's just there's reflections on how much I love my family and the pets, but also just the flowers and the trees and just my little neck of the woods and how much I just really loved my world.

The same thing with the artwork, starting from an early age. I also was really fortunate to have spent a lot of time with my grandmother who I learned how to bead from. Studying her bead work and her handiwork and her designs and being immersed in that type of... It's a stylized representation of the natural world.

Meskwaki are a woodlands culture. We're a northeastern woodlands culture. A lot of our applied arts is really based in botanical. It's inspired by botanical imagery. That's just kind of something that I was

immersed in as a kid, grew up in, always seeing this. There wasn't any intentional indoctrination. This is just our culture, this is our way of life. This is our decorative arts, which are not only decorative, but that have a cultural social spiritual. It's all in there. It's all a part of it.

When I decided to become a visual artist, when I was a student at Iowa State, first off, I was really fascinated with architecture. By the way, I'm still a builder. I have that engineering type brain who's problem solving and building and figuring out how to do things. But first, coming from a small public school and then going to a university like that, I really struggled with the math and the sciences to get good enough grades in order to make it into the program.

Even though I was a stellar student in math and sciences in high school, but you think of it this way. In the smaller schools compared to West High over in Iowa City, or Dowling, over in Des Moines, or even Ames High, once I got to college, I felt like I had missed at least a couple of grade levels in math and sciences going into those courses.

The other thing was just financially. I came to understand that there was no way financially I could afford to pursue the architecture programmer, even the graphic design program. I didn't have the money for the projects and none of that, or even a lot of the supplies. I always loved painting and drawing. My mother is the one that encouraged me to just... "Study that. You've always been an artist, just do that." So that's what I did instead of dropping out of school. Because I figured if I can just get my Bachelor's degree, then the rest of my life is just going to follow suit.

I did learn once I did finally get my Bachelor's degree that wasn't the case. There is no job waiting for you. That's a whole social strata and money and connections and stuff that you have. Not only do you not know how to navigate it, you don't have an entry point into that, the professional class, because you didn't come from it. You have no introductory. There's no doors open for you. It's always an uphill battle.

But with the arts, especially now that I look back on these older pieces that I was doing even before I was 20 years old, they were very much influenced by the decorative arts of the Meskwaki. Very much influenced by my relationship with the Iowa River, my relationship with the woods, and even thinking about trees and roots. I don't have the painting that has these people that their torsos are basically coming out of tree trunks and they're pierced by these huge thorns.

Well, out here we have the honey locust and the black locust. Even being around those trees with these gigantic thorns and just the idea of this human being integrated into this tree and also pierced by it and all these other things that were coming out is just... That was just my upbringing caused me to reflect on how that interconnectedness, and even the animistic qualities of all life. If you look at the painting behind you, these frog men are hanging out in the woods. Trying to explain that is really hard. Some people look at it and they just get it, because I can't even explain it, in a way.

Vivian:

That's why it's... Yeah, that's why it's visual art. Right? It's because you get a... It inspires a feeling like you were talking about earlier, of interconnectedness and makes us think about these social connections we have and how it's connected to the environment and how that's part of this larger narrative that it sounds like for you -when you're talking about narratives around exploitative colonialist cultures and how that ends up seeping into all of our lives, in our newspaper stories and our interactions with people, in our economic systems and our social systems. But it sounds like what you're describing too is this sense of interconnectedness and relationship with the environment seeps into your artwork and the stories that you have been telling for a long time.

Shelley:

Yeah. Into everything. It's a sensibility. Like that painting, I can't explain it actually. It's these two frog men. They are in the woods. It's twilight, and one of them is standing and pointing to the sky. The other one is sitting. The sitting frog man has a beer in one hand and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, but he's chill. He's sitting there and he's listening. The other one pointing to the sky, in a way, the one pointing to this sky... Well, what he's doing is he's telling a story. He's storytelling.

These two dudes, why are they frog men? For me, I wasn't thinking this out conceptually. This just came out. But now when I reflect on it, I understand who I was portraying is Indigenous people and the fact that they're kind of anthropomorphized. I have trouble saying that word. I can see it in my head written, and I know what it means, but this is basically what I'm doing, but not in a cartoon way. It's just these dudes are of the woods.

But yet with the cigarette and the beer, those are symbols of colonization. But still, the one storytelling is the one that is maintaining that oral tradition that keeps them Indigenous, instead of completely and totally assimilated, not in just how they dress and what they drink and smoke, but also in the way their sensibilities and the way they think about life on earth and community, and even on that spiritual plane, how they relate. Those oral traditions and that storytelling is what... It's funny. They're frogmen, but at the same time, from an Indigenous perspective, it's what keeps us human.

Vivian:

You have not only incorporated these narratives and sensibilities in your visual artwork that you share with people and continue to show, not just tell, but show what a different relationship with the environment could look like than the one that has overtaken so many of our economic and social systems, but you've also incorporated a lot of this oral storytelling in your advocacy work. I know you told me that you intentionally integrate personal narratives and traditional storytelling with historical and cultural information when you're giving talks about rematriation and food sovereignty. Can you talk a little bit more about that and how storytelling is an important technique that you use?

Shelley:

Yeah, storytelling is really important. In the past, I have had PowerPoint presentations. I have found those incredibly ineffectual because you are talking at the audience, you're not engaging with them. When I'm asked to speak to an issue, I approach it as an assignment. I do prepare. I do take some notes. Sometimes I'll just have some notes in a notebook. Sometimes I'll put them in a couple of... Just brief notes. Sometimes it's like I can't remember certain words or terms right off the top of my head, or as well as numbers, such as statistics, stuff like that. I'll have these prompts and these little notes, but I don't go off a set presentation. That's because a lot of it is spontaneous where I look out at my audience and I think about who are these folks that I'm engaging?

I'm not talking at them, I'm engaging. Where are they coming from? What are their life experiences? Two, it's just like, what do they want to hear from me? Some of it's spontaneous, but very much there has to be that historical reference, because history has not only been whitewashed, it has been so bastardized. We just went through Thanksgiving, and even the story of Thanksgiving was just cooked up in post-Civil War to create unity in the United States. It was only very marginally based on the true history of that relationship with the eastern Indigenous folks and the Puritans and the colonists, the early colonists.

Storytelling does need a historical context. It has to have that element and then tie it into. You tie that into how that relates to our contemporary issues. It's like, this is the issue from the very beginning, and it's still going on, and then trying my best, and I am definitely not Johnathon Buffalo, who's our tribal historian. Nobody is. He's devoted his life to this. At the same time I've learned from him, I've done my own reading, my own studying of Meskwaki history. It's an ongoing. I am a learner. I don't consider myself learned. I consider myself a learner, including of the language, but I do draw from what I know and what I understand to be and just try my darnedest to then share that perspective with the audience, to inspire them to see these issues through the Indigenous lens, because it's just not going to naturally happen. The dominant narrative is pushing quite the opposite direction.

Vivian:

You're talking about how to incorporate history and the importance of history and these contemporary narratives and to bring an Indigenous lens and to really amplify Indigenous narratives around agriculture and social systems and economic systems, and our relationship with the environment in how it's really important to get these narratives into our conversations as much as we can. One way that I know that you're doing this now is through a collaboration on an AgArts play with Mary Swander called Squatters on Red Earth. Can you talk a little bit about this play and how y'all have tried to tell a historical story while taking into consideration contemporary conversations around agriculture and social and environmental justice?

Shelley:

Well, knowing that the history of the relationship between the Meskwaki and the Amana Inspirationalists, what little I do know, but a lot of this is just family narratives that have been passed out. My peers are all pretty much, they're all Generation X. Many of my peers would talk about their grandparents, going to the Amanas with their grandparents to visit friends there. The generation before would hitch up the horses to the wagon and it would be a two-day trip. There were farmers on the way where the Meskwaki had relationships where they would camp on their land overnight. It's roughly... to main Amana, it's roughly about a one-hour car drive from here, but with a team of horses and wagon, that's about a two-day trip. And then just learning about... That there were longstanding friendships in my grandparents and great-grandparents era, and then great-great-grandparents, basically from when the Amanas settled there.

I just was always amazed that there's just a complete amnesia in the contemporary Amanas. I'd visit the Amanas from time to time either to go... Well, they used to have a lot more little festivals and stuff going on. Two, I was just interested. Who are these Amana people? At least they used to have a friendships with the Meskwaki. They used to have a mutually... Because of their communal way of life, they saw in each other's cultures so many similarities. Once again, the same sensibilities that set them apart from the dominant culture, and also that they wanted to maintain that way of life and those social structures rather than be assimilated into ultimately American individualism. But in current times, it's just like when I did talk to people from the Amanas, nobody even was aware that there used to be this close-knit relationship with the Meskwaki and that actually the Amanas was Meskwaki land. Well, still is. Like I said, with the land back movement, this is native land.

Many other Indigenous folks, the land acknowledgements. That's the thing with land acknowledgements is that it's complicated. There's many people over the course of thousands of years that have stewarded this land prior to colonization. Many different groups of people.

It's just that fascination that there was these recognition of similar cultures and sensibilities and which inspired these two groups to have friendships. Especially in the old pictures of Meskwakis from the turn of the century, there's so many of those photos. The Meskwakis have the Amana blankets wrapped around them from the woolen mill. They loved those blankets from the woolen mill. It was a trade relationship too.

When Mary, I don't even know how this started because Mary Swander, I can't even remember, because Mary Swander and I, we've known each other for around 35 years. She was one of my professor's creative writing instructor at Iowa State University. I think Mary saw this grant opportunity, and it's just like... It kind of... Things have just fallen into place. I think it was... I suggested doing writing, while basing the play on that history, that relationship, the relationship of these settlers that wanted to live apart from the larger American culture and this native community that had tenaciously resisted assimilation. That's just interesting. It's exceptional.

Vivian:

We've talked about how narratives around climate change have to address the ramifications, historical and present, of colonization and white supremacy and extractive relationships with the land and each other, and how in a lot of ways, in this play, both the Meskwaki and the Inspirationalists were trying to fight against some of these forces. This play's going to go on tour. It's a puppetry play, and you're designing the scenic design for it and the crankie and everything, which I'm very excited to see. What conversations around these topics do you hope emerge from the play when it goes on tour?

Shelley:

One of the things is that it's showing a different narrative. It shows these conditions that, at least for a time, brought people together, two very different groups of people together in a friendly relationship. Even how that was a mutually beneficial relationship. It shows a model of the potential for understanding and respect between two different groups of people founded in their commonalities, founded in their belief systems, but especially these social structures that are very important to them and that they really wanted to maintain.

Mary enlisted me as consultant. One of her main priorities was to approach this project and collaboration with the Meskwaki and learning this narrative, telling this story in a good way, in way that isn't extractive, in a way that isn't cultural appropriation, which is the standard. Mary did not write the play from an Indigenous perspective because she's not Indigenous. She wrote the play from the perspective of the Inspirationalist informed by the Meskwaki historian with that historic perspective put in there.

I'm excited about it. I'm excited to see it come together, and especially how it comes together. There's going to be a matinee and then a evening performance here actually in Toledo, which is a town very close to the Meskwaki Settlement at the Wieting Theater. That production is going to include students from Meskwaki Settlement School that are in the drama club.

Vivian:

Very cool. The play is going to be ready to be toured and people can book the play to come to their communities starting this summer. People should be on the lookout for that. I know that this play and the topics you're talking about are connected to what you've told me you want to do with your work moving forward in the coming years. You said you want to focus your artistic and advocacy work on rematriation, including restoration of the bison of the prairie and of Indigenous agricultural leadership.

How do you hope to use artistic and storytelling techniques to work towards such a future and to help us envision such a future?

Shelley:

It's one thing to identify what's wrong, and it's one thing to identify what's broken and what needs fixing, but it really takes folks with a creative vision that think outside the box, that also make connections, or even folks that love history, that love storytelling, that loves... Just wants to learn. Well, what the heck was going on in the Amanas when they settled there? What is this relationship? I want to know. I want to know what makes this tick. How does this reflect on our current relationships in our communities and how they're structured?

That's where the art is. That's where the art lives, is because to show the vision of a future that can be beautiful, that can be based in community, that can fulfill that need for connection with each other. When you're connected, you can trust each other. We have a society now that's getting so increasingly fearful and violent. These mass shootings are just, "Oh yeah, another mass shooting." It's just now it's normalized, isn't it? Even when it happens in your community, what happens? It just picks up. The next day everything just continues the same. All of this, it's not going to be saved by one play. It's not going to be turned around by one poster, but there does need to be be an alternate narrative to the dominant narrative because the dominant narrative is to maintain the status quo. The status quo is killing us.

Vivian:

As we're talking about shifting these narratives, policy plays a big role in this. Do you see arts and storytelling playing a role in pushing for climate policy for land back, food sovereignty policy?

Shelley:

We don't have billions of dollars to line the pockets of legislatures and governors and utility boards or whatever. We don't. That's the corporate model of creating and maintaining policy that maintains the status quo. But what we do have is we do have our creativity. We have our imaginations. We can envision alternatives to this. The more that we step away from the distractions of modernity and especially just that hamster wheel of consumerism and even basing the value of our lives on how productive we are and how much we achieve, or in those hierarchical systems, and even driving a better car, being able to afford designer goods, buying your way into the next class system, all of that is a distraction. The more that we turn away from that and then turn into this of rebuilding culture, because big ag in Iowa is not agriculture, it's agribusiness. It's corporate agri business. It is not agriculture. Local foods, food sovereignty, rematriation is bringing the culture back into our food systems. Iowa imports, once again, close to 90% of the food that we consume. We are not America's bread basket. We are producing...

Vivian:

That's the narrative we tell.

Shelley:

Yeah, that's the narrative, but it's a false narrative.

Vivian:

It's false.

Shelley:

We aren't. A few years ago, I took the soil short course before the PFI conference. In talking about the history of the soils of Iowa and how there's very few other places in the entire world that had, and had soils like Iowa had before it was settled by Europeans. Now it's just like... Commodity farmers are dependent on heavy chemical use in order to get anything to grow. That's just insane. It's such huge, huge cost.

I was born in Iowa, I grew up here. I grew up in rural Iowa. I have seen over the decades the effects on our rural economy and our communities of the farm crisis. It is just suggesting any alternative seems to be sacrilege.

Vivian:

But that's what we have to do. We have to figure out strategies for suggesting alternatives, and then pursuing them, which it sounds like is what you're talking about, and a lot of people on this podcast series are talking about, is how can we propose alternatives in a way that really engages people and engages communities and helps move toward actually pursuing those alternatives?

Shelley:

Another one of my professors, this is a photography professor, said that, "Why do we have the humanities? We have the humanities because it teaches us how to be human." Now, current times, the humanities, the arts are more important possibly than ever in human history.

Vivian:

I would agree with that. With that, I actually want to, as we're nearing the end of the interview, with that in mind, what are the three key ideas that you want people to understand about your work in the arts and humanities?

Shelley:

For one thing, when I was a student in Iowa State, I really struggled with spending all of that time, energy, and money studying art. At that time, my primary medium was painting. I was just like, "What's the purpose of all this?" I had this creativity in me and I wanted to express it, and I wanted to develop it further. At the same time, I'm just like, "What is the use of all of this? How is this going to plug into basically the corporate machine?" The idea of, yeah, you graduate from high school, you get your college degree, and then you get a good job, and then you live the American dream.

I really thought that. I didn't know any better. I very quickly learned that there really wasn't a place for me. I had to, in order to just continue to invest in this and to keep at it, I really had to think about what is the value of art? It's just because the world needs artists. We are the storytellers. We process that mythology.

I'll read this quote for any creative person out there that I would like them to internalize, in a way, a way of thinking of their role in society is this. "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." That's a quote that I read today, that's Margaret Mead. I may be a small person in a very big world, and I may be a dissenting voice in this

extremely powerful and quite often violent dominant narrative, but a life well lived is a life that's true to oneself, and that in whatever gifts that you were born with, that you are able to express your gifts in an authentic way. That's a life well-lived.

Vivian:

My last question is, what is the biggest recommendation you have for others who may be looking for ways to use arts and storytelling to talk about climate change in Iowa agricultural communities?

Shelley:

The biggest recommendation is to invest in relationships. It may seem like a bit of a cliche, but find your people. Sometimes that means you got to step out of your comfort zone. You may have to leave some people behind. With art, the model of the starving artist and the artist alone in the room pumping out masterpieces or whatever. No, it's so much... Whether it was the expressionists or the Impressionists and of the Western art, all these different art movements are based in community. One of the things that I have been trying to get going for years, especially for our little rural communities, is third spaces. We don't have them.

Underserved communities, which also include rural communities, we do not have third spaces. Out here in the sticks, as well as in the city, any of the underserved communities just... We're impoverished in that way. Artist collectives, and even just like... I don't know. Heck, support those little cafes or coffee shops or form them where you have third space to go, where even if you just bring your laptop and sit in a corner, you're still in community. You know that barista and you're not paying into corporate profits. You're paying into this small business whose owners live in that community, but ultimately local, local, local, small. But there's a huge need for it. We need to rebuild that. It's just like none of us can create or operate in a vacuum.

Vivian:

Well, speaking of which, how can people connect with you and your work?

Shelley:

I am a board member of Great Plains Action Society. Contacting and supporting Great Plains Action Society is a good start because we're a little community that we're supporting each other in this work that we do. A lot of times it's nice to have folks contact you through an organization rather than just always having... The biggest thing is folks having access to me as an individual. It's hard, because as a Meskwaki woman, I always have to think about the potential for extraction. Let's say, Great Plains Action Society, as well as AgArts.

Vivian:

Well, thank you so, so much for sharing your time and stories and all of the incredibly insightful experiences and strategies that you've used to talk about climate action and justice and our food systems.

Thank you for listening to The Art of Climate Dialogue. We hope you'll listen to the rest of the series. More information about podcast interviewees is available at ecotheatrelab.com. We invite you to engage in conversation with us by leaving a comment, responding to the short feedback forum in our show notes, and checking out The EcoTheatre Lab's website. We want to thank all of the organizations

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