

Episode 3: “Rehearsing the Language of Climate Action”

DK (DeAn Kelly)

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. And welcome to today's conversation with Hiphop artist and educator, DeAn Kelly, also known as DK.

DK:

(singing)

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 routes of the Ioway, Meskwaki, and Sauk, Otoe, Omaha, Ianktonwan, 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, Shelly 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.

DeAn Kelly, also known as DK Just Human, is a Hiphop influencer and mentor. He is committed to producing positive Hiphop music and has five years of experience in community engagement, performance and hosting workshops and events. DK is from Des Moines, Iowa and is here to inspire through the arts. Welcome to the podcast, DK. Thank you so much for being here.

DK:

Yes, Vivian, I'm very grateful to be here and have this opportunity.

Vivian:

I'm so excited to talk to you today about your work. So to start off, at the beginning of this episode, we heard a clip from your song, "My Freedom." So this piece and much of your work, as I understand it as an artist, an educator and community builder, you tackle social, mental, and environmental health and

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how they all intertwine. And in this song you talk about the opposite of freedom as extraction and prison and slavery and walls, both physical and of the mind. And you talk about freedom as an escape from hatred and greed and a return to nature and honesty and a collective memory of when we were more connected to the land and all the life around us, including one another. So can you tell us more about these themes that you focus on in your work?

DK:

Yes. So when I first wrote the song, "My Freedom," that was sitting at about six years ago, I was living in Osceola, Iowa on a farm and I was working out there. And I spent a lot of time by myself writing and just trying to find my voice because I've always been a writer. But at this point in my life I was questioning if I wanted to still be a rapper. I didn't really like the negativity and the stereotype of a Hiphop artist. So I wanted to steer away from that and get into other things.

That's when I got into kung fu and just reading different books about science and about nature. And I found myself wanting to speak for the unheard, for the voiceless. And I see all of these trees and animals around me that just seemed to be looked at as a price. So that was really where that song inspired from and that's where I continued to move forward with. Was that I didn't want things to go unheard when it seems like there's something that needs to be listened to. And it's not just about the cha-ching, so.

Vivian:

In a lot of your work, you're trying to bring awareness, it seems like, in some way, to these problems or maybe disconnection that we have with the other life around us. That we're looking at it as just commodity and very extractive and it's really important to talk about that. What do you feel like the barriers are to talking about climate change and the other harm that's coming to the environment?

DK:

Yeah, I think a big barrier is our own fear of being judged and caring what people think. I realized as I started to write these lyrics and I started to perform them for people, I had a lot of listeners that would come to me and say, "You don't know how much I thought about that myself and just never knew how to put the words to it." Or "I just didn't have the courage to speak about that."

So that made it really clear that this is what a lot of people think, but a lot of people are afraid to talk about it. So I think that's one of the biggest barriers because I know for me, I've been in a lot of different places to perform where I was feeling like maybe these people were going to judge me and that they weren't going to hear my music and I was just going to be a rapper up there yelling. And next thing I know, I have people from all different walks of life saying how much they heard me and how much they felt the same thing.

Vivian:

When you say judge you or they felt the same thing and they wish they could have put words to these sorts of feelings, are you talking about feeling disconnected from the land, searching for a freedom from these ideas of greed and money and everything that kind of surrounds us every single day? Is that what you're talking about when people are trying to find the words?

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DK:

Yeah. Just the hard topics of mental health, of racism, of the environment. These things that we all see, but we just keep moving and doing the job that we're supposed to do, play our part and go in society and make sure that we do what we do so we can get what we want. And I started to change my wants to needs, needs of others and that's when I started to take that step myself to find the words to say in front of people. So I got past that barrier of fear because I found the need that was stronger than my own fear. But yeah, all of those topics that are challenging, especially like climate change.

Vivian:

And so you talked about really challenging topics like mental health and racism and how that's connected and all interwound with problems with the environment. And how we're taking care of the environment or not and how we're taking care of each other or not. So can you talk more about paying attention to social connections and our mindsets, why that's important to climate action?

DK:

Yeah. I remember when I was just graduating high school and I was in my room and I saw how messy my room was and I remember I was reading something because I didn't read a whole lot while I was in high school. I actually started reading when I graduated, which was pretty funny. But I found a quote or it was just a statement that said that, "Your room is a reflection of your mind." And that hit me. I'm like, dang, my room's really messy and there's things that I've probably left behind in the last couple of months that I should probably attend to. So I started to see our earth as a big room, a big home for humanity and the reflection of what it looks like is coming from within.

So a lot of these issues I feel are coming from our own personal expression of whatever it is we're dealing with inside. And if we're dealing with sickness and trauma and things that we're bottling up, it would only make sense that we're going to destroy the things that are around us because we don't care about it as much because we're so focused on this pain. That's what happens when you get sick. Your body focuses on the issue and it heals it. So if we're always focused on the issue, we're not able to extend and be connected to everything else.

Vivian:

Wow. I haven't thought about it in exactly that way before and I think that's really helpful imagery to connect how we are taking care of ourselves and our communities. And how that relates to how we're taking care of everything else around us. It also makes it kind of tangible.

DK:

I was just going to say the same thing because I've gotten many times where I'm just overwhelmed with all of the complex things that human life requires, especially in today's society. I mean, that's what my song, My Freedom, actually goes towards is, this is about me, it's not about other people. I need to figure out my own thing so I can have my own personal freedom and I can move out of my destructive behaviors or destructive habits that were developed over my childhood that I wasn't aware of.

Vivian:

Right. And I know when we've talked before then we've talked a little bit about that as even as community engaged artists, we do have to figure out how to find balance and health in our own lives if

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we want to increase that in the lives of those around us. You use a variety of artistic strategies in your work. So not only Hiphop lyrics and music, but you have live performances and music videos and then you work with youth and community members as they create their own artwork. So I'd love to talk a little bit about why these particular strategies might be effective for encouraging conversations about climate change. The first, can we talk a little bit about, in your experience, what role Hiphop in particular can play in climate conversations?

DK:

Seeing how big Hiphop got after the 80s, once it blew up, everybody was trying to find out how to use it as a source to reach out to the young kids. It's the next best thing. It's cool. It's hip, hop, that's kind of the thing. So just the fact that Hiphop is not only one of the biggest genres right now, but also it has the ability with rapping to say a lot of... in Hiphop it's the spot where you can get the most words in a song. So if you only have a three-minute song, you can say more words in Hiphop than you can in any other genre. So that means we can say a lot of information for young people who are listening to it and a lot of young people are listening to it. So I think just that alone and just seeing its influence and seeing how artists who have really big names can make people drink Fiji water just because they say it in a song and make it popular.

And next thing you know everybody's getting Fiji water or Timberlands or the Nikes and Air Force 1s. All of these songs influence us, especially the younger generation. Just to segue, that's why I work with younger kids. I try to work with fifth and fourth graders because I see how much they're influenced by the culture of Hiphop. It's in their video games, it's in their movies, a lot of the songs they listen to. And a lot of it is that it's really catchy. It has a catchy beat. So I figured if I write lyrics that you like the beat to, you're going to repeat the song just because of the beat and then your subconscious and eventually hopefully your conscious picks up on all of the words that are displayed in that song.

Vivian:

So I've been listening to quite a bit of your music as I've been preparing to talk to you today. And it does get stuck in your head in a good way, in a good way.

DK:

Guess I'm doing something right as a writer.

Vivian:

Yeah. The lyrics do come through and allow us to resonate with them for longer even than the three minutes like you said that we're listening. And I hadn't thought about that before about how specifically with the Hiphop forum you can fit so much more language in terms of storytelling. That can be really powerful. So you talked about how one of the ways that you feel like you can make the most influence that you are is doing so much work with kids. So you teach youth in particular skills in writing and poetry and Hiphop. Can you talk a little bit about your approach to teaching?

DK:

I try to approach it just from a very loving space. I don't really have much of a plan. I remember when I first got my first teaching job, I was in a room with a bunch of college graduates, people who have degrees and stuff and I was one of the only ones who didn't have a degree. And I still left with the job to be able to go work with youth. And that meant a lot. But it was a struggle to figure out how to take all

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my feelings and the things that I've learned and give it to kids. So my first approach was just be there around them. Just being somebody who's a smile and who's positive makes a big difference in kids' life. And you don't really have to teach them anything. It doesn't have to be a forceful thing. It's just you hang out with them, you see what they say and if you have anything to say in response to it, if it's positive, if you feel like it's worth their time and it can help them grow, say it.

And I just meet a lot of kids where they're at. There was this one time I had a teacher come and ask me if I cussed in the classroom. I was like, "First of all I said the word that the kids said. And we were working on the power of words and how they can infect people. So it just so happened that the person who was walking by only heard me say it. But when I explained to her what I was going on and how I was meeting them where they're at, it made a lot more sense than just, "Oh, he was in there saying a bunch of curse words." But I just try to meet them where they're at because if you don't, they're not going to grasp what you're trying to give them. And that was hard at first, going in the classroom and saying a bunch of big words that they don't have in their vocabulary. It makes them disconnected. They feel like they're not smart enough to understand what you have to offer.

So it's very important to step back and just be there. And then whatever, as a Hiphop artist, I get the benefit of throwing whatever in there. We can make a song about law today, we can make a song about earth today. And then we can learn things through that process, but it always starts with just being with them.

Vivian:

Learning can be through relationship that if they start to trust you or feel like you're on their side and are going to meet them where they're at, then learning's going to come from that. And they're going to have a starting point. Can you talk more about how the young people that you engage with, how they engage with each other too through art?

DK:

I had a group of a bunch of basketball player boys and you can see how that group was my first time I had an all boys group. Normally it seems like a lot of girls like to hop into the poetry and a lot of guys are like, "I don't want to do that." It is like a trend. So when I had this group, it was very shocking, but they were all basketball players so there was a lot of ego in the room, there was a lot of competitiveness. But I had to remind them that if we're on the basketball court, you're affecting each player by what you do. So if you're behind, the whole team is now slacking because of you. So to be able to make those references to those kids at that time made them understand, made them connect to what we were doing.

So then you get them now actually engaging into it. And it was just really cool to see how well they would come together once they actually had a topic. Before when there was nothing to do, everybody's kind of all over the place. But once they have a goal and they have the reminding that we're in this together and that we're in a safe space, they seemed to do a lot better and they listen to each other. And surprising, I get fifth graders who are sitting there that stop and listen and then have their input or no input at all, whatever it is. But just the fact that they can stop and listen amazes me. I've worked with fourth graders and I remember the teacher came in and she was just surprised how quiet they had gotten. Because these kids, first, they come in, they're yelling, these were also the kids that created a chant, "DK! DK DK!"

So they would yell throughout the whole hallway and it could be very overwhelming for the other teachers that are in there trying to calm these kids down. And there was times where I worked with that

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same group where I couldn't even calm them down. There was nothing working. But at those moments where they were all quiet and writing their poem, I'd remind them that, "You guys are working like college students right now. You guys just graduated from being fourth graders to college students, because what that sounds like is what you're doing." Minds are working, you hear pencils, you hear questions about what they're doing and they're all engaged into it. And then they have a moment where they get to decide if they want to share their work. I always give them that opportunity. You get a piece of candy and you get an opportunity to develop confidence.

So if you want to come up here and develop some strength in your voice, you can come up today because this is a safe space to do it. And some of them are afraid and then they'll see some of their other friends do it and then they want to try it out. Some of the kids that are afraid in the beginning are normally the ones that want more than one opportunity. They want more and more at the end of it. And that's something you see a lot when we play the games that I play with them or we do the writing exercises and they get up there and they see the kid get the candy or they see the kid accomplish it. It just makes them want to do it too. And that's just cool to see how they all engage with each other in a positive way. Because I feel like there can be a lot of negative perspective on what kids do when... "Oh, the kids don't sit and meditate. They don't sit and be quiet." It's like they actually do if they have the right leadership.

Vivian:

Right. I've taught theater to kids before and that's always the best part, is seeing how if we show them respect, then that leads to respect for each other where they stop and listen. And respect for themselves in terms of sharing their work and realizing that everybody has a story that they can tell and a story that they can start from. Even if we're all basketball players on the court together and what we learn in that space can translate elsewhere in terms of how we treat each other. That's really great. How do these young people engage with topics like climate and social justice through their art when they're working with you?

DK:

Yeah, oh, wow. I've just had young kids that will say very deep things about their connection. You have a lot of these kids who actually have a lot of feelings and thoughts and you don't realize it until they get the opportunity to share them. I'll have kids talk about their connection to mother nature and how the sun makes them feel happy and how water is important for them because just to even be able to drink or wash their clothes. They're aware of how nature helps them and some of their language might not all the way be there. So I think it's very important to let them start where they're at, say what they have to say and then you can help them understand what they're even trying to express in the first place. There's been many times where I was just very shocked to see how much a kid really thought about that topic. And you don't know that until you open that door.

Vivian:

Right. And I know you have a program that you created called, You in a Verse.

DK:

Yes. Yep.

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Vivian:

Can you talk about this program a little bit? I know you've told me that you feel like this program gives youth confidence in particular to say the things that they're thinking about their relationship with each other and with the environment and how to put that into words. So what is this program? How does it work? And how can it give youth the confidence to talk more about climate change and other challenging topics?

DK:

You in a Verse is literally what it kind of sounds like. It's the universe within you. You have a lot to share and writing it in a verse or in a poem gives you a clarity that you can't find from a book, from out outside of yourself. So a lot of the times you get these kids that talk about where they're at. Not always do we get to the bigger topics. Sometimes we just talk. I have these twins that I work with, they live with their uncle and their dad is in prison and their mom is supposed to come visit them and she doesn't. And I wouldn't have known that until I had the... they're happy, they're always talking, they're always wanting to engage with me and be a part of whatever we're doing. But then you hear something like, "I miss my dad and not seeing my mom during the visits makes me sad."

Just to hear them say that, it's just like, dang, these kids are actually going through a lot and they're still coming up and smiling. But to be able to start there gives them that expression of who they are. They get that self-awareness and they get to speak it in front of other people and that gives them a sense of self that they can bring with them for the rest of their life. We're going to go through confrontation, whether it's with our partner, our parents, a police officer, whatever that may be, there's going to be a time in your life where you have to speak up. And what I do with the fifth graders is, I start with them and I have them speak up in front of the kids they're around. These are kids that they see at school and they feel comfortable around. So this is your opportunity.

You can see where they're nervous and they're scared and then they do it that first time and then you do it again and you keep doing that and that develops that strength for your voice. And that's very important. And then we get to play fun games and stuff that they don't realize what they're getting in the games. They may be getting rhythm or a mental exercise that helps the flow of their brain and whatever it is, they find it really fun and they engage with it. And just them paying attention to rhythm, being able to pay attention to when things change. And that can be useful in the environment. Know when things are changing in your environment. And we can do that with the rhythm and the games that we play. So there's the exercises that we get to do, the games we get to play and then it all comes down to helping them write the verses that express who they are to the core.

Vivian:

You're talking about games and exercises and how that's a way to have these kids have fun with each other and with you and kind of trust each other and build relationships with each other. But ultimately it leads to them being able to think about who they are, what the relationships are with each other, what the relationships are with the environment. So how can playing and creativity facilitate climate dialogue for people of all ages?

DK:

First of all, when we're dealing with topics like climate change, it's a very big topic and it's also confrontational. It's a reflection of who you are. It's all of these things and it can be very overwhelming and it is a very serious topic. So when we're dealing with serious topics like this, if you're just focused on

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all of the bad things and all the negative things, it's very hard to move forward. And one thing that you can see is that you can see there's a difference in moving forward with fear and moving forward with love. When you have acceptance in your heart and you surrender to your environment, you can see more of a flow there is. And then when you have this fear, you can see where things start to have a bunch of hiccups and a bunch of where you start to stumble a lot more.

So if we can stay in a playful mindset. I remember when I was working at Fairway, I was 21, 27 now, this was years ago. I was looking at everything as a sense of I'm a wise child instead of an adult. Everyone was like, "Oh, you got to be an adult, you got to grow up." And it was like, well, it seems like a lot of adults don't have it figured out. And the thing that it seemed like they were missing was the child within. So that's why I played with the words of being a wise child because I'm still the same being that I was when I was born. I'm just older now and I have experience, and experience offers wisdom.

So I have a wisdom with my environment now because I'm older, but I want to keep that sense of a child within. So I don't stress out and I don't lose that sense of that sense of hope and that sense of love that we get as children. We don't hold on onto things as children, we let it go very easily, and we're also very curious. So those things are important to remind ourselves to not take it so serious.

Vivian:

And I know some of the other artists that I'm talking to in this podcast series, we talk about this power of imagination too and how it's critical for addressing these massive problems with social and environmental injustices like climate change. And how we have to imagine a different world and some pretty vast changes that are going to have to take place. And maybe, yeah, we have to look toward younger people and children and that sense of imagination that sometimes we lose a little bit, to be able to start thinking outside of the systems that we're currently operating in.

DK:

And imagination allows us to make connections as well. When you're learning information, it can be very easy just to see it for what it is on the surface. But with imagination you start to connect things that have no relation. And that's what the artist does, if you think of a painting, you can take a bunch of different things and put it in one painting and it becomes a symbol to represent something. So I see it in that light as well.

Vivian:

Yeah, that's great. So we talked a little bit about Hiphop and about the arts education work that you do. I also want to talk about how you as an artist both perform live and in music videos, which are two pretty different forms for your work, and maybe reach different people and also allow you different ways of conveying your music. So how do these two performance modes differ in how they encourage conversations about challenging topics like climate change and justice?

DK:

The live performance always gives you... that's my bread and butter. I've been live performing since I was in fifth grade and I've just recently started doing more music video work and stuff online. But with live performance, you get to connect with people in real time and you get to have them engage with you. One thing I love to do is make sure that majority of the people are actively participating in some sort of way. Whether I'm doing a call out and having them respond to me, or one time I passed out a bunch of shakers, I had a bunch of little egg shakers and I passed those out. I think I had 25 of them, I

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passed out all of them and just had the people part of the band. That gives people a sense of togetherness that I was talking about earlier. That is really important because we have to have that sense of a tribe, that sense of community.

So when I'm performing live, I get to remind people who are probably coming from their house or coming from their job where they don't feel as connected with other people. So when you're in that concert and you're looking at other people doing the exact same thing you are, enjoying the same thing you are it impacts them in real life, in real time. Which is a lot different than when you're watching a video that you can't respond to it in real time. You can leave a message or do something that the creator can now go look at later. But in real time you don't have that sense. But what that could do is now it could reach people that aren't in your environment. I've been working out of Iowa for the last few years and this is something that needs to go outside of Iowa.

This kind of message about climate change and about taking care of ourselves. So being able to get that to the rest of the world, the digital platform is very useful to be able to talk to people in China, to be able to get the message out to people in Australia, wherever it is in the world. And then also you can have a little more preparation with how you display it. You can have more control over how they view the video and what's in the video. Those two methods are different in that way and I've been able to utilize them successfully as far as just performing and inspiring people, helping people see things differently. And then the videos have helped bring in audiences from other places.

Vivian:

But you talked about the importance of making these conversations more integrated into our everyday lives. And how the music videos, because they are so accessible and because they have this power of imagery, can do that. And we've also had conversations about how we can make healthy and just social and environmental systems seem sexy and appealing in the way that consumption and convenience are often portrayed everywhere we look as sexy and appealing. So can you talk more about how this idea informs your process as you create lyrics and visuals?

DK:

When I was in high school, I realized that I set a lot of trends. I would do something, I'd see a lot of my friends start to do it. And I started to realize that as a writer and if I was going to lead, I wanted to be able to lead them into something that was actually good. I don't want to just be talking about whatever and not being conscious of it. So I started to actively be conscious of things that my words can create in the mind. The first example that pops in my head is shifting through books as my mind shapes with these words. Just as an African American who's talking about reading books, especially when growing up nobody made reading in my family look sexy. That's what we want to call it.

So I started to realize that the people I looked up to, I thought they were very cool. Like my cousin, he had all the girls, he was very funny, he seemed to always have money in his pocket, all these things that I thought were important and he made it look really cool. But he also influenced me to participate in things as a young kid that I shouldn't have been participating in as a teenager. And that was just because of how cool he made it look. So I started to ask myself, how can I make these other things look cool? So you want to find those connections. It's like I try to find the fine line between something that we don't necessarily do, but then also almost like putting a little bit of salt in it or putting some ranch, just a little bit of ranch on something that isn't as tasteful. That's been my approach is, where they're at and then give them just a little bit in that moment and just take them a step further.

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Vivian:

And making it so that we want to pay attention to these conversations and we want to be a part of it. Like you said, that there's so many things in our society that we are encouraged and pressured to be a part of and to participate in and to exacerbate. Including all of the systems that contribute to climate change. It's really hard to get away from them. So how can we create conversations that people really want to be a part of? And that is not all doom and gloom, but also, hey, look at this world that it could be and it looks pretty darn cool. It looks pretty sexy and appealing, right?

DK:

Yeah, there's a lot of beauty to find once you let go of judgment.

Vivian:

Right. So we also talked about your live performances and the impact that those can have in terms of not only getting the message across, but really connecting with people and helping people feel connected to each other. So I know one of your recent performances was at the Fresh Air concert in Zearing, Iowa. Can you tell us more about that performance and what artwork you shared?

DK:

So Zearing, Iowa is very rural Iowa. It was the country. Going out there, I did feel a little nervous coming from the city, being African American, you see Donald Trump signs. You see all these different things that normally symbolize disconnection between the African American community. So I just didn't want to come out there and be the rapper just yelling about a bunch of stuff that nobody's listening to because they're already shutting me down before I even start rapping. So that made me very nervous approaching to that. And once I got on stage and the music took over, normally once the music takes over, I get out of my head and in the now. And I did my performance and I recited poems from the kids. I recited some of my poems like, "7 Generations," I performed some of my songs like, "The Other Side," that talks about the grass is greener on the other side.

After I got done performing, I had the grandfather of the land, he was 71 at the time, and he came up to me and said that he heard every single word that I said. And I was just very shocked because out of all people, I figured that older, especially older white men aren't really going to be able to grasp everything that I say. I even have struggles with my grandfather understanding me just in a normal conversation. But for him to say he heard every single word meant the most to me because that's why I write lyrics is so people can hear the words, not the beat. The beat is just to make it attractive. But for somebody who I viewed who I was almost casting my own stereotypes, on thinking that they weren't going to receive my message, he really did. And then not only did he say he heard every word but said my music could have existed in any era of his life.

And I got goosebumps thinking about it just because this is Hiphop. Hiphop's only been around since the 80s, now 50 years. And he's going back from, I can't do the math right now, but maybe the 50s, 60s. And he was saying that my music could have existed in any of those eras and that meant a lot because it meant that my music wasn't just here for the moment. It's something that is speaking for the entire species, the entire globe. And that that's my goal. So to have someone like that to come up to me. And then I had a young kid just on the opposite side of the spectrum, I had a young kid come up to me that was very inspired to do some of that kind of work. He was I think nine years old and his mom brought him up and just said how much he loved what I did. And wanted to know if there was ways that he can

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get involved in my workshops and things that I offer because He wants to be able to talk about those same things with music.

And this is a nine year old that is seeing somebody who's older than them that doesn't look like them, that is saying, "I want to be able to do that because that's positive and that's what I want to do with my life." And-

Vivian:

That you shared the other kids' work too.

DK:

Yes.

Vivian:

I think you told me the poetry that they wrote was about relationships, their relationship with the environment. So I think you told me the prompts were, the power of the sun, and relationship with water, and their favorite activity outdoors, and their favorite animal, and building relationships with the environment. That maybe is connected to agriculture since Iowa is such an agricultural state, but also goes beyond agriculture and especially beyond agriculture as a commodity industry. And looking at, okay, what is our relationship with the land and the other life around us that can make our relationship with agriculture more healthy?

DK:

And I just remembered one of the poems that I read of one of the kids, it's very short, very simple. It's like, "I like to drink water. It is nice. I especially like to drink it with some ice. If I don't drink it now, I'll drink it later because I am not a waster." First of all for him to rhyme, "Later," and, "Waster," I wasn't expecting it. But I don't tell them how to talk about water. I don't. I give them the prompts like, your relationship to water. And that's what this kid in the summertime thought about having water with some ice and also thought about, if I don't drink it now I can save this for a different time. I don't have to dump it out. I don't have to get rid of it. This is something I can come back to. And that just something so simple but it's also really profound when you think about the depth of a little fourth grader coming up with that.

Vivian:

That's really wonderful. That's beautiful. You also said that at this concert then you shared your poem, "7 Generations."

DK:

Yes. Yeah.

Vivian:

So you recently participated in the Water Rocks! Earth Day poetry slam. The prompt that inspired, "7 Generations," was, "The future of our world amidst climate change." In contrast to much of your other work that I've seen, which focuses, for the most part, on hope and change and how we can get there.

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This piece really does envision an future where climate change has overcome us. So I want to talk a little bit about that. But first can you share that piece with us?

DK:

Yes, yes. No, I'd love to. 7 Generations. The heat grow stick, it's getting harder to breathe and all the oxygen has disappeared with the trees. Soon one day there will be no more water to drink. A million years of life can be gone in a blink of an eye. How many more people would die? Please. Which one of those people am I? We haven't met, but your actions affected my life. Using money has certainly come with the price. Oh, grandfather tell me, how did you use your own life to help me? No clean water, no food. I don't know how much more of this we can go through. I haven't eaten in weeks, people feed on the weak, other children eating bodies they see on the streets. Nowadays, no more seeking for peace. Your friendly neighbors look at you when they think of a feast.

Humans, I hate you. I don't know why nature would create you. We're made to take care of this planet cause nothing but damage, and I just don't understand it. Why? How many more people would die? I wonder which one of those people am I? How has my actions affected this life? Using anger as certainly come with the price. Maybe you have fought and truly gave it all. You had to fight to try to make us a new path. But the conditions you were in were just too bad. Now it's too late. It's too late. We have finally reached our true fate. This is destiny's last flower and humanity's last hour.

Vivian:

Wow. One, thank you for sharing that with us all-

DK:

Of course.

Vivian:

Again, and for writing that piece. And I want to talk a little bit about it because for a lot of our conversation, a lot of the work that you've talked about and shared is about how can we envision this more hopeful world? And this particular prompt was kind of the opposite of that. Is how do we envision a world where climate change is growing a lot worse. And in your piece than you touch on all these ideas that we talked about, abouts systems. That this person talking to their grandfather, understanding that the grandfather was caught in systems that were really hard to get out of. That we all participate in because it's really hard to figure out how to separate ourselves from them and to reconnect with each other in the land. And you talk about relationships and trying to understand relationships not only between the people around us currently, but with the people that came before us. There's a lot there. So first of all, can we talk about the title and this principle of, 7 Generations, that inspired the poem?

DK:

Yes. Seven generations, is a Native American philosophy that every action we make, we should consider the next seven generations. And if you consider the next seven generations, you actively guarantee their survival, you guarantee the resources that they can utilize in the next seven generations.

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Vivian:

So in this piece then you're talking about generations down the line and what we're doing now is not making it sustainable. So how do you find balance when you're writing about social and environmental injustice between exploring fear like you've done here, fear and anger versus hope and action?

DK:

Yeah, first I do want to clear it up. I wrote the song, it was originally a song before it was a poem and I wrote it four years ago. I wrote two new poems for the ISU thing. But I just felt like the topics that they were asking for, this was opportunity now for this poem to really be heard. Like I said it, for five years I've been talking about nature and now people are starting to really reach out to me for that same topic. But when I wrote it four years ago, I was coming from a place of I was very angry. I did hate humanity. I hated that. I didn't understand why nature would create something that would become such a virus for it. If we're so destructive, why create us in the first place? So coming from that space was very real for me.

When I was writing that song, I fasted, I didn't eat anything and I actually sat in a field where horses are normally at. So there was no grass. It was just all dirt. And I just looked at everything as if there was no resources. And as I was writing it, I went through the emotion of my future seven generations, of talking to me and looking back at me and what I've done. And I was approaching it very hateful and angry. But then as I continue to write it just clicked like, well, maybe you shouldn't be so angry. What if your anger is affecting this too? What if the way I'm writing this can affect the way other people view it and they think that this is the only option? I wanted to show that peace can be found.

So then I started having the inspiration to show through... I almost had my own peace as I wrote it. And that's kind of what I do as a writer, is a lot of this is my own affirmation. It's my own resource to be able to look back on what I thought and what I've wrote. But it really came as I went. And then as it all finished, then I find balance. It's like now you have the realization through all that pain I had, I put it somewhere finally, so it wasn't just in me. And I was able to release that and releasing that was, "Maybe you have fought to truly give it all you had."

So it was like, wow, maybe my grandfather who I was just... because when I'm writing it, I'm not only looking at myself, but I'm also looking at my grandfather. It's almost like an infinite sign. But I started thinking, my grandpa did love me and he did try his best. And the fact that I'm here and I'm alive means something was done right. So it was just the hand, the cards that they were dealt. So just realizing that really helped me release a lot of my own pain and frustrations with who came before us. And that's always a good foot to step forward.

Vivian:

That's really helpful to think about I think when we are discussing climate dialogue and what needs to be a part of that to move toward climate action is recognizing that maybe there is room for both fear and anger and hope and action that they can go hand in hand. Because I guess your whole philosophy of what we are dealing with personally in terms of our own health, physical and mental. If we don't acknowledge that and work through it and talk about it, it's going to be really hard to talk about how it's related to all of these other larger societal and environmental challenges that we're dealing with. And how we have to, if we're angry, maybe it's important to talk about how we're angry if we're going to get... and there are a lot of reasons to be angry and how we have to talk about that to get to hope. We can't just jump over it.

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DK:

When we feel something, it's important to let it out. So if you happen to feel fear, don't try to deny it and say you still feel hope. Figure out what you're afraid of and through that you'll find the hope.

Vivian:

And there's a lot of fear, I think, too in climate action. I think when we're talking about what we're we're going to do about climate change? Then there's a lot of reactions of, well, if we change the way that we're doing agriculture or we change the way that we are finding energy, then there's a lot of fear that comes with change and reasonably so. Like what does that mean for jobs? What does that mean for individuals and communities, economic welfare and social welfare? And how can we make sure we're approaching these conversations with equity? I think there's a lot of fear that needs to be talked about and not ignored.

DK:

And I think the art and the music is just a very good way to display the options, the resources, the things that are the solutions that can happen from this. It gives the opportunity to display what is real and the what's going on, but then it also gives it opportunity to show what we can do about it. So yeah, I find it very, very important too that you're doing a podcast like this to talk about how the arts can help that conversation.

Vivian:

Yeah. And we talked about earlier how hopefully it also connects people who are wanting to do this kind of work to each other, somehow even me talking to you. And hopefully we can all kind of connect to each other because you, I know, do a lot of community building in your work. And that community building through art may be a way to help us navigate these intense ideas and emotions. Like you said about those live performances, that it's a way for people to come together and connect and feel like there's a place to process and then work towards action.

And that those intense ideas and emotions may be the reason we sometimes avoid talking about climate change or other problems in the first place. So I wanted to talk about that a little bit actually. You've discussed in our previous conversations how it's important for communities to rely on one another for climate resilience and climate action. So how can artistic strategies help us build community and identify the assets that each of us can bring to climate conversations?

DK:

I first want to say that I think community is the best asset that you could have. Having connections with people who feel the way you do and that just want to help you and you help them, that goes a lot further than monetary value and material things that we could have. So one of my things is I always relate to how I was as a kid. I always try to figure out what did I do then to understand how to navigate now? So when I was in high school, I was always called the social butterfly butterflies, I was a person jumping from table to table in the cafeteria, talking to everybody.

So I started to realize that I'm kind of that way now. I connect a lot of different groups that normally don't connect, that's something that I'm able to do. And one of my biggest things that I want to do is be able to connect the African American community with a lot of these healthier options as far as yoga, more healthier foods, being able to have more healthier habits to do daily.

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And then also for them to help with the conversation of what's going on in our environment, in our earth. I try to find relationships like with Rainbow Lake Farm where they're already doing the work, they're already trying to create an organic farm, a space where artists can come and be connected with nature as they create their work. Being able to that relationship now when I meet young kids who are looking for a safe haven, somewhere to go where they can just create, I now have that relationship. And I can honestly, with trust within me that I know that they can go out there and they would be in safe hands and they would be able to get that work that I can't provide myself.

So I think that's the biggest thing is, in my mind when I first started this, I thought I was going to be like a vigilante fighting all of this by myself and I thought I could do it all myself. But all that did was kept me from being able to do anything at all. So now that I'm starting to actually extend and find people who are already doing that, it really helps to be able to do what I'm good at, they do what they're good at, and we come together and get it done.

Vivian:

And for listeners, you can look on the podcast webpage to find out some more information about Rainbow Lake Farm too. Who is creating a space for artists and conversations about sustainable and regenerative agriculture to be in the same space. And I think you even have some videos up of you and your brother doing music out there, so listeners can check that out as well. As we begin to wrap up our conversation, I did want to talk a little bit about... we've been talking a lot about climate dialogue. And I think a lot about how climate dialogue can lead to climate action and how we need to talk about it before we're actually able to do anything about it. And you've talked to me about how there is so much that language can do to bring us together to shift our mindsets and to catalyze action. So how can music like yours help us find the language that we need to push for climate policy?

DK:

A lot of times when I write and I have an inspiration of something I've never wrote about before, I have to find the words myself. And the benefit of putting it in a song that I'm now going to recite remember and then perform a lot, gives me the opportunity to rehearse these words that I had no concept of before. So as a writer, I get to learn all these new words by repeating my song and rapping it over and over and over. So now these concepts get embedded into my brain. I have new vocabulary. So as a viewer who would like a song and you want to listen to it more than just once, you would eventually be able to put those words on repeat.

And then if you're having conversations with your friends and talking about your favorite song and why it's your favorite song and what it's saying in there, now you got to have those conversations. And because that's what we do, we learn something and the goal is to go out and see if we really know it. And so you go have that conversation with somebody, be challenged. So that's what I feel like my music is able to do, is it allows the listener to then go to somebody else and see if they actually heard, if they were listening to it. But then it breaks them down to, well, what is that? When he mentioned that word, what did that mean? And they get to go and look that up. The viewers get to learn with me, which is really cool.

Vivian:

We get to rehearse with you too, rehearse the language that we might need to have these conversations even outside of your music videos. That you've kind of catalyzed that process for us in your own work. And especially because you're a teacher too, in hearing about your approach to

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teaching, I think has been really valuable for me. And thinking about how teaching or facilitating opportunities for art making is also a way for that rehearsal to happen. That especially when you talk about kids or anyone really figuring out how they can discover their own language and story too, and that we all have somewhere to start. And that we can find the language that is relevant to our own experiences to then bring into basis of action. Whether that's pushing for policy directly through letters or talking to the people who make policy. Or if it's through protests and advocacy, getting together with other people, going to places like Rainbow Lake Farm and contributing to conversations. Or actually learning more about different ways of approaching agriculture. Any of that. So thank you.

DK:

Yes. Yeah, no, no. And just add on to that. It's about affirmation. What are we affirming to ourselves? What are we saying? Because normally what we say to ourselves becomes our action. If I have songs that are repeating a bunch of positive affirmations, eventually, hopefully that becomes the action.

Vivian:

Reality. Yeah, that's a really good point too. That the language we use in our dialogue does become action eventually. It's the story and narratives we tell about our life. So with that, you've given us a lot, I think, of takeaways. But I wanted to give you the opportunity to share with us the three key ideas that you want people to understand about your work and take away today.

DK:

Three things that I want people to take from my music and my work. First thing is that, music can be more than just entertainment. Music, and art, not just music, but all arts can be a form of education. It can be a way of relaying information, relaying truths about reality, things that are normally harder to digest. It can be a more comfortable way to enjoy harder topics. Second thing is that, especially like with Hiphop, Hiphop is not all negative. That there is people out there, not just myself, who make positive impacts with their Hiphop and their word choices and the way they display themselves and what they're trying to display to the world. There's other artists who do that same thing that are in the Hiphop genre. And the last thing is that, we're all just human experiencing this human experience together and that when we're together doing it's a lot easier.

Vivian:

So with that, we're taking away that about your work, but also other people might want to do similar work, as you've mentioned. So what is the biggest recommendation you have for others who might want to use artistic strategies to talk about climate change, especially in agricultural communities?

DK:

When you have the idea, do it. Don't sit on it. It's like waking up from a dream. If you don't write it down right away, you're going to start to forget it. There's a lot of work that I didn't record just because I was really turned off by online. I didn't like the digital world. I didn't like what it was doing to humanity, so I stayed away from it. But what that did was I created a lot of songs that are just in my soul that if I die today, nobody would ever hear it. So I think it's really important to just do it and don't care about, oh, it's not going to be good, or whatever. It's something to look back on as you get older. And if you just do it now, you're going to get better and then you will be able to look at the growth of what you did before. But don't let that fear of judgment or that it's not good enough, stop you from doing the work. Just do it.

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Vivian:

And if you share it, like you've said before in this conversation, if you share your work, that might open the doors for someone else to share theirs.

DK:

Exactly.

Vivian:

And that's how conversation starts. How can people connect with you in your work?

DK:

Every Thursday we release a video on YouTube, DK, Just Human. We're also going to be releasing a single weekly as well. So on Spotify, Apple Music, on Amazon Music, all those platforms, you can type up, Dk Just Human, and there will start to be songs weekly that you can check out. I don't do too much social media stuff, but DK Just Human, you can type that up and you can pretty much find anywhere.

Vivian:

Wonderful. Thank you so much for talking with me today, DK, and I look forward to all the work that you have coming up in the future.

DK:

Thank you. And I was very grateful to be here.

Vivian:

Thank you for listening to The Art of Climate Dialogue, and 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 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.

"My Freedom," played at the beginning of this episode features songwriting and vocal performance by DK and musical instrumental credits by 4Klassix Music. This episode sound technician was Louie Jordan. 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. Rosie Marcu-Rowe is our podcast editor. And I'm Vivian M. Cook, community engagement director for The EcoTheatre Lab and The Art of Climate Dialogue podcast producer and host. Take care.