

Episode 5: “Celebration as a Mechanism for Resistance”

Moselle Nita Singh

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 artist, farmer, anthropologist, ethnobotanist and activist Moselle Nita Singh.

Moselle:

Reverence is so important for really nourishing deep care for the things around you, for the things that you have, the little you have. I always think about also, my grandpa, when he first came to the United States, he brought one cup and he said, "This one cup is for me to drink water, is for me to eat from, and it's for me to wash myself with."

These simple, simple, simple things that remind us, these are things that matter. This is what matters. It's the connection that matters. That's the real wealth. That's real wealth. And it's been interrupted again and again, and again and again. And it's absolutely painful to live in this society that doesn't have that. We are not given access to that. People don't have access to the relationship with land in that way. They don't have the relationship with the plants in that way, with water that way. It's just so painful. But how do we get to that? It's, yeah, community, absolutely. And it's going to be really, really challenging, but I'm hoping that more and more people are willing to take the risk to jump into this very uncertain unknown, because that's the only way to separate yourself from the overwhelming processes of, again, capitalism and colonization. How do we begin to decolonize? What does that look like in our lives and how can we begin to do that? It's complicated and it's imperfect, and accepting that and finding those areas where we can celebrate in resistance is so, so, so key.

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 dispossess 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

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Moselle Nita Singh is an artist of Punjabi descent with a background in agroecology and biodiversity regeneration. She has a bachelor of arts in cultural anthropology and a master of science and ethnobotany. Moselle has worked at various nonprofit organizations, biodiversity initiatives and small organic farms across the Midwest as well as Nicaragua and India. Growing up, she often turned to the more than human world to foster a sense of belonging, experiencing the effects of industrial farming, catalyzed her activism, as well as her interest in the ways in which we celebrate, honor and defend our relationship with life through grassroots organizing, seed saving and art. In the fall of 2020, she turned towards art as her primary mode of exploration, expression, healing, and activism. We'll jump into our interview today with Moselle describing a recent trip she took to Pakistan, which inspired an art piece she created afterwards. You can view this art piece and more information about Moselle on this episode's podcast webpage on The EcoTheatre Lab's website.

Moselle:

So I was just recently in Pakistan with my dad and my sister. My dad was born there, and obviously I have a lot of characteristics that draw my lineage to Punjab, which is the region where that side of my family comes from. So we went there, and while I was there, I was just really bombarded with so many things, just so many sensory things. If anyone's ever been there, you might have an understanding of what I'm talking about, but just the sounds and the smells and everything were so intense, and I haven't been back there since I was nine years old. So one of the things that really stuck with me was the scenery is one thing. We were up in the north for part of the trip, and seeing the mountains is something that always takes me back to when I was nine years old and we were out up in the mountains and walking on glaciers and just the enormity of these mountains is astounding.

And this most recent time when we were there, we were up in northern regions, we were in the foothills of the Himalayas, and I just was overwhelmed with seeing smog everywhere, smog and every day waking up and never seeing a clear blue sky. It just really hit me kind of where we are in this trajectory as a human species on this planet and experiencing climate change and the different effects and how all of these different components are coming together to create this experience that we're all having on this planet together.

So when I was there, I was really just overwhelmed with all these different sensations and sounds and sights and all of this, and just the magnitude of where we are as people and driving through these more rural areas and seeing fields that were being burned. And also, I mean literally fields of trash also being burned and also understanding that this is a place that's within a historical context, and understanding how recent the British had colonized this area and how it affected all of these people.

And with the British partition and mass migrations, my family was in the middle of it. My family was on the border. We were from Punjab, so that region was split in half by the partition. And understanding, really, this area is far more complex than a lot of people realize, but just seeing how these processes unfold and how climate change is really affecting this region. Pakistan actually has the highest concentration of glaciers of all countries in the world besides those are in the polar regions. So seeing how climate change really is affecting this area and floods, just this year, massive flooding that thousands of people were killed. And this is an effect of climate change and flooding and the ways that the Green Revolution has impacted the ways that people interact with the land, so the way that the soil has been deprived and is not soaking up water.

So when there are floods, it's really rushing through these areas. So for me, when I was there, it was a painful, humbling experience, but also coming back to what is my home now and waking up and seeing blue skies when before, every single day, waking up to just smog and this heaviness and the way it clogs

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your sinuses and fogs your head, and then waking up here and recognizing that I have so much to process as far as how can I allow myself to really feel all aspects of that experience and how it's related to, and I get emotional talking about it, but my identity. And one of the ways that I do that is through art.

So I've made this piece that is really me trying to put all of these feelings into an image that are really hard to put into words, which is why I have such trouble talking about all of it because it's connecting so many pieces of climate change, a sense of self where you situate yourself in the world, who you are as a person, what you care about, what you're passionate about, senses of community, but also long lineages of suffering and pain and how so many people all over the world have been affected by capitalism, colonization, mass migration and climate change is a unifying factor. It affects everybody.

So the piece was really just me trying to... This massive complex feeling that I was having from that experience kind of manifested in this image. At the very top of the image there's a word that I wrote in Urdu, which is my dad's mother tongue, one of his mother tongues. He speaks multiple languages in that area if you understand parts of that area. It's a very diverse, so many, many different languages, but predominantly Urdu is in that region.

So the top, it says, "Fanaa," which is a word that is often used in sophism, which is sometimes described as Islamic mysticism. But there's so many different ways of, again, describing all of this. Fanaa is basically ego death. It's annihilation of the self, it's annihilation of the self in this kind of overwhelming understanding of oneness. And that's really what I was experiencing at that time was this sensation of boundlessness in that we're all connected in this kind of tumbling forward of these cycles of life and death and how climate change absolutely is part of that, how massive climate events are part of that with the rotation of the earth and how seasons change.

We're all participating as life forms on this planet. And I was just really feeling that in a really deep sense. So I mean, the image itself is kind of just the ways that water rushes through a space, and it can be seen as such a life-giving thing, but it's also renewal, it's rebirth, it's destruction at the same time. And it's like the world opening up and this cataclysm of event after event and we're all tumbling forward through it. Even if you go back before human beings being here, it's an evolution of species, this whole story of unfolding of life, and it's carried by water. That's how I see it. And in there, if you look at the whole image, it's really a face. It's a skull, there are the two orange spheres that are the eyes. And then you immediately see the top row of teeth. And then if you look even further, you begin to see the bottom row of teeth and you see where the tongue would be coming out, and that's where the white bull is, or it can also be seen as a dragon.

But again, connecting to the ways that culture is so alive and the folklore and the stories we tell and the connection we have to our lineages and these stories of movement and all of that. So the tongue that's coming forth and the white bull, it is a reference to a myth that comes from my lineage of the white bull. In between the two horns of the white bull is where the earth rests. And as the bull tilts its head, shifting the weight from one side to the other, that's when the access of the tilt of the earth shifts its direction.

And that's also massive climate events, ice ages from the Earth's tilt, all of these things, these massive shifts that we are all participating in as expressions of life on this planet. And again, you can go all the way back to seeing bacteria as an expression of life. So I do see things that it's important to connect things on all of these skills, and this is kind of a visual representation of me allowing those boundaries and rigidity to just let go and just let things flow from one image to another, from one association to another, and really find cohesiveness, find a story of movement, of dynamism, of being alive, because I think that's something that we can all relate to. So that's kind of what I was doing for myself, was finding

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movement in all of this, a shared story and an acceptance of these cycles that we're all part of, of life and death and everything else.

Vivian:

Thank you so much. That was wonderful to hear you describe the story of that piece of artwork and listeners will be able to go to the podcast webpage and actually see it and connect it to these stories you're telling and how you process and I think, as an artist, help all of us process these really complex and devastating and unifying challenges that we're facing. So thank you so much for sharing that and welcome, Moselle, to the podcast. Thank you for joining us.

Moselle:

Thank you for having me here.

Vivian:

So to start, I wanted to talk a little bit more about this description of your trip to Pakistan and the artwork that emerged from that experience. So at the end there, you talked about art as a way to communicate a kind of acceptance about the inevitability of climate change impacts and these cycles that we are experiencing and how humans are having an impact on those cycles, perhaps in a way that we shouldn't be, that's harming a lot of life, including ourselves. At the same time, I know that you've contributed so much artwork to climate action efforts where grassroots groups are refusing to accept the climate trajectory we are on, in fighting against practices that are exacerbating climate change. So how can art both help us come to terms with climate change and also fight against it?

Moselle:

Yeah, absolutely. That's such a good question. Gosh, there's so many different ways to talk about this, but one of the things that I always have to remind myself is that accepting these cycles does not mean complacency. I mean, I've never really felt complacent about it, but it's easy to think, "Oh, if I just accept these things, it's just inevitable and why should I care?" I've never had the option of not caring. I always deeply care about things, but I think a lot of people, when it's intellectualized, it's like, "well, why should I care about this if it's just going to happen anyways. What's the point?" For me, acceptance is not complacency. Acceptance is understanding that I have a place here, and while I exist in this place, in this form, as this person, I'm going to use... I keep getting emotional, so I apologize if emotion makes people uncomfortable, but it's just kind of my person.

Vivian:

Don't apologize.

Moselle:

Understanding that I have a place here and I'm going to use my talent and the things that I care about, the way that I choose to express them, which is often through images, which is often through art, because I always feel like language fails me. I'm going to use that to celebrate the life that I have here, to have curiosity for the things that I've experienced to really honor the phenomenon of life that I am experiencing and I have experienced for 31 years. To honor all of those things, all of these experiences that have come to me. Art is a way to celebrate. Art is a way to really have celebration, be the

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mechanism of resistance. And I think that's such a powerful thing because resistance doesn't have to come from a place of hate or division.

It can come from this place of, "I am going to celebrate my life so hard and so deeply. I am going to honor this connection that I have felt with plants, with water, with seeds in a way that cannot be silenced by mechanisms of colonization or capitalism. I refuse to deaden the life around me." And I do that by enlivening that which I'm experiencing. It's not through mechanisms of violence. It's through bringing things to life and really amplifying those things that are so alive around me. So art has been a mechanism of that and bringing myself and connection with all these people around me who similarly are coming from fragmented identities or identities that have been affected by colonial capitalist processes and really fighting for this truth that we're all connected and that I'm connected to the life around me.

So, for me, that's kind of what it is. Art is a way for me to give the gift back, the gift of being alive, to show that the creative dynamic things that make me alive and those feelings and all of that, I can lend that creativity back to a collective cause of resisting the idea that we're all just dead matter meant to be transacted for corporate gain, which is just absolutely a vile way of understanding this life that we have.

Vivian:

I really love the way that you describe your work as resistance through celebration and as not only the end product of whatever you create as an artist being resistance, but that your entire process as an artist is that by making sure that it is celebratory, that it is unifying, that it is connecting with other people. Things that I think often don't happen in the practices that are so exacerbating the problems that we're facing with climate and social justice. And I love how you talk about celebration and gift giving as part of your artistic process. In the performing arts practices that I grew up with, we often talked about that too, like right before you go on stage, don't be nervous because you're giving a gift or funnel that nervous energy into the fact that you're connecting with other people and that that's what art's about. And I wonder if you could tell us more about how you see this idea of celebration and gift giving directly connected to propelling climate action?

Moselle:

Gosh, again, there are so many ways to talk about this. So for me, gift giving is observable everywhere. I think that there's an inherent intrinsic understanding that our livelihood is bound up with the livelihood of all other life forms, like 100% they are entangled. And this is something that has been forgotten because of the mind mechanisms of supremacy and the ways that we have, kind of, created this framework that humans are supreme and we're the pinnacle of evolution. That's not actually what it is. That is such a warped way of understanding what has come to be. We emerged from a complex interaction of all other life forms. We would not be here without that. We were birthed from that. We didn't come before or after. We were birthed from that. I think that's really, really key because as we look around, we don't have dominion over anything. That is not the right way to look at it.

That is not accurate, that's not real. We are in partnership with, we come from... All the life forms are different forms of elders. And one of the things that I keep telling myself is, a better way of understanding this connection that we have of everything, is through kinship. And I really, really feel that. And it's tied to my experience of being somebody who grew up in rural Iowa and someone who has a... I didn't really have a good sense of belonging, so I really did turn... I literally did turn to plants primarily and amphibians. It's like frogs. Frogs and trees. I was very, very much so... I observed them. And then there was this deep care that came from this being on the land with these other forms of life,

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and they literally saved my life so many times. But I found a sense of kinship with the more than human relatives who live here with us because everyone has that. Every human being has that.

And I think it's really important to connect on those levels because that's a really good way of transcending all of the boundaries we've imposed on ourselves when we understand climate activism as a solely anthropocentric movement because it is not. It is not. Everything else, absolutely 100%, has this intrinsic inclination to survive. If you look at a tree, it's just being a tree. All these horrible things can be happening around. There can be drought, there can be floods. The tree is going to keep pushing to survive. It just is going to keep being a tree, and we're all part of that. So I think, for me, it became really connecting to this kind of a multi-species understanding of self and situating myself as being in kinship with more than humans around me. Gave me a strength to understand that I belong, no matter where I'm at, and I'm going to dedicate myself to all of that unfolding.

I am going to defend the agency of a tree to be a tree, the agency of a frog to be a frog and not be poisoned by the behaviors that I have on the land or that... I mean, industrial agriculture is such a great example of how all these things play out and how industrial agriculture affects the water and how the water then... I mean, it's just this tumbling effect. We're all connected.

So, Robin Wall Kimmerer often talks about the gift economy as well. We were birthed into this life. That is a gift. This experience is a gift. This experience of living is a gift. 100%. This is an absolutely incredible phenomenon. So, for me, the fact that I'm in this form and have my eyes open and able to experience the smells of cardamom, the smells of sage, and touch the soil and be in the presence of these spaces that are absolutely incredible, the presence of an oak tree and the way that it's branches arch over and the ways that bur oak, in particular the gnarled limbs of a bur oak, I grew up with that. It hits me in the heart. It's incredible. I'm so sorry. I'm so emotional.

Vivian:

Don't say sorry.

Moselle:

Why would you not want to celebrate that? And I think that it hits everyone in their core if they really sit and think about existing is a wild phenomenon. Doesn't matter who you are or where you're from or if you can understand aspects of your lineage or not. A lot of us don't know where we came from and it doesn't matter. You're here and you belong. And I think that's important to remember.

Vivian:

Thank you for sharing that. I think it's really beautiful to not only think about our relationship with all of these both problems and just existence in this way, but to talk about that, because I feel like we don't actually very much.

Moselle:

Yeah, very. I think oftentimes these conversations are reduced to, and at the same time, overcomplicated by a very anthropocentric view. As I mentioned before, we can get into the biopolitics of all this. Absolutely. I mean, I can absolutely get into that. But at the same time, I think it's really important to set the precedence that this is something that transcends all of those boundaries that we put on categorizing and identifying and the borders that are artificially created between us as people and as life forms. Do away with all of that. Let's make that the precedence. Do away with all of that and

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then we can get into the specifics of understanding how all of those movements and flows go through different identifiers and categories of people and life forms and geographic locations, because it's the same process as tumbling through all of these places. So that's why I like to set the precedence of, we are all actually very much so experiencing the same thing and then we can talk about specifically what's happening on the ground in certain places, because it's the same thing. It's just different expressions.

Vivian:

And how do you think that art can play a role in helping us build these relationships that are celebratory and are unifying, not only with other people, but with our larger ecosystem and try to bridge those gaps that we're constantly told are part of the narrative?

Moselle:

Yeah, I mean, I'll start to get into more specifics because I've already spent a lot of time talking about these larger ways of understanding all of this. But for example, with my artwork, I've always made artwork, but I didn't really publicly share it for the majority of my life. The majority of my life I've worked in agroecology and biodiversity conservation. But really it was me coming from that place of being a little kid and seeing the frogs die and being curious about why are they dying? And I was asking questions as a child like, "What's happening here?" I was reading Rachel Carson in sixth grade and writing about the effects of industrial agriculture on water and soil and how it affects amphibian and aquatic life.

And it was really that observation that I made when I was a kid, because I was very close to the land and I was very connected to the things around me because that was where I felt most connected, that carried me through all of my life so far. And now I'm at a point where I decided that I was tired of trying to make myself fit into the ways that people communicate that is societally considered valuable or societally considered important, which is often through academia or through politics, right? And I don't function there. I don't communicate that way. And rather than forcing myself to try to communicate through those channels, excuse me, but F that. Truly, no, I resist that. I don't want to do that. That's not how I communicate. If you can tell, I'm a very emotional person, but that's not a bad thing. I'm just very sensitive and connected, and I feel pain very deeply.

So I said, "I'm not going to do that anymore. I'm not going to filter what I'm saying or only say it through certain words in order to be heard. I'm tired of trying to be heard. I am just going to speak the way that I want to speak." When I started doing that and I started making artwork from that place, that's when I connected with Sikowis and she saw my artwork, and she's had such a big impact on my life, even though we really haven't known each other for that long. But her friendship and her camaraderie in this has been so huge in the whole trajectory of my life being told that I wasn't saying things in a certain way that was considered palatable or appropriate or all of these things. And then I finally met somebody who was like, "I like the way you say things and the way that you want to say them."

It was a relief. It was such a huge relief. And I finally found belonging alongside people that really respect me, value me for who I am, and that's enormous. That's like an enormous deal. So if we're talking about climate change and community, finding those who have kind of released themselves from those mechanisms that are very subversive, these are subversive mechanisms of, "You can say things, but only through this channel, through these words, using this language or in this sphere," for you to be valued. And that's just absolutely inaccurate. And I feel like I'm late in life in finding the people who actually are willing to collaborate collectively and who have freed themselves from those structures. So I'm super grateful to Sikowis, super grateful to Great Plains Action Society in the Buffalo Rebellion

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Coalition, and all of these folks who are rallying around resistance through multiple mechanisms, through art and through whatever means that really speaks to them, because it can be through politics. If that's where your heart is, and that does sync up with the way that you speak, 100%, do that.

That isn't what syncs up with you then don't do that. And that's why it takes a whole village of people. It takes people with different skills, different backgrounds, a very diverse set of life experiences to really push these things forward so that we can have an actual narrative of oneness and collectivity in diversity. It's essential. Art is essential, and having people from different backgrounds is essential.

Vivian:

And I know when we talked earlier than you, you were talking about how it can be very isolating caring so deeply about all the life around us and seeing so much harm. And that can be a very isolating experience and can feel like, "What can I do to solve it all?" And that none of us will be able to solve it all. So figuring out how we can move towards collective action and find the people in life that can help us contribute a little peace that is life giving to us, while at the same time resisting the practices that are causing harm.

Moselle:

Absolutely. Yes. Yes.

Vivian:

Can we talk a little bit more about the work, the artwork that you've done with groups like Great Plains Action Society and the Buffalo Rebellion? I know you recently created artwork for the Buffalo Rebellion Coalition's Climate Justice Summit in 2022.

Moselle:

Yes.

Vivian:

So how did your artwork help facilitate conversations about climate action through that event?

Moselle:

So for the Climate Justice Summit, I was kind of given an open prompt, basically. I mean, I was given the event, so the Climate Justice Summit, it was in Des Moines, Iowa. And so I grew up in Iowa. So I really did pull from all of my experience that I've had growing up in rural Iowa, literally surrounded by corn and soy, and the fields would be aerial sprayed. And I remember that as a kid. And like I said, again, I was asking questions at a very young age, and one of the things that was just very blatantly in my face was this very distinct difference in the way that people understood and approached land. And I came to understand that relationship between people and plants is literally written in the landscape. So there's industrial agriculture that promotes monocultures, it promotes homogenization and really in every single way.

So, I don't just mean homogenization of having mono cropped fields of corn and soy. I mean biocultural homogenization. So the main thing that kept popping in my head was this quote from Vandana Shiva, who's an environmental activist that I worked for in northern India. And there was one day we were all sitting there and she was speaking to us about so many different things, but one of the things that she

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said was, "Diversity, not uniformity, is the criteria of evolution." And then she went on to speak about how that isn't just diversity of seed and diversity of plants and animals, it's diversity of people.

Vivian:

Yeah.

Moselle:

It's a biocultural phenomenon. So, like in the Midwest, diversity is not something that really exists. So that's why that became kind of the center point for me. Diversity, not uniformity. So that was the main thing. And in the image itself, you'll see the top part is all these different plants of different kinds, and it's a nod to prairie plants. All of them are actually silhouettes of real prairie plants. But our prairie only exists as a prairie because it's this extremely diverse community of different plants. And these different plants are able to create a home for diverse life forms, insects, amphibians, all these different pollinators, all of that in a way that it interrelates with the soil and the roots run so deep.

So the way that they live in this space is life giving. And it's only because of the ways that all these different expressions are interrelating that, that habitat is so life giving. And then you can compare that to a mono crop field of corn or soy, where literally the whole purpose of a mono crop field is control and to kill everything other than the corn or the soy. And what ends up happening, when that's the relationship that unfolds, you see extremely tired, deadened soil.

You don't see any other lifeforms. You see, just... It's painful. Whenever I drive home and I see these fields of corn and soy, just rolling fields of corn and soy, and I see tired dried up soil, it is painful. It's physically painful, viscerally painful. So that image is so deep in me, and that was where that image came up, was diversity, not uniformity. And it's tied to my experience of working with Vandana Shiva. All of it came out in that image. The top part is the prairie, the bottom part are these monocrop fields. And you can also see the long barns that are supposed to be indicative of CAFOs, these...

Vivian:

Right.

Moselle:

It's just like that relationship with living organisms is so abysmal. It is violent, it is horrifying, it is different expressions of slavery of other life forms, and it's awful. And then the top part is something very different of biocultural diversity. So that's really what that was. That's where it was coming from for me. And if people understood that, that was the conversation that was coming from it, awesome. If they just enjoyed the image itself, awesome.

Vivian:

And I know you said that the process of creating that piece was also in conversation with other members of the Buffalo Rebellion Coalition. And so regardless of whether we can really follow up with people at an event who we don't know very well, to see how they responded or what they took away from artwork, you actually did interact with people during the art making process. So can you talk about those interactions and how that might have facilitated conversations about climate change?

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Moselle:

Yeah. The other pieces of artwork that I created for the Buffalo Rebellion Coalition were coming from conversations with me, Sikowis and Mahmud who's also part of the Great Plains Action Society. And we were talking about how can we create art around this? What's a good way to stimulate conversation around this? And Mahmud is the one who said, "These roots run deep." As soon as he said it, lights went off in all of us. We're like, "That's it."

So again, it was from this conversation of, we all know what's going on here, we all know that there's this importance of returning to the knowledge coming from the plant relatives of this place, which are largely expressed through tall grass prairie. And those roots run so deep, they really literally do. So all these conversations that are coming up with the CO2 pipelines and the ethanol production, and then how all of these giant things, either the monocrop fields of corn, how that's often funneled towards CAFOs or ethanol production, and then the ethanol production produces a ton of CO2.

And then part of their whole line of thinking is, "Okay. Well, we produce all this CO2 for these green initiatives. Let's initiate another green initiative of these CO2 pipelines of carbon sequestration, and let's pump it all into the earth." And that's like... The scope is so narrow. It's only through, again, the mechanisms of capitalism itself, of ethanol production as ethanol production is the most important thing and everything else around it needs to go back into the ethanol production, which is not going to serve anyone other than the corporations. So that's why people are starting to speak out against the CO2 pipeline. So that's why we were having this conversation. How can we create art to open up this conversation that people understand it's not a green initiative. That is not a green initiative. It's being marketed as such. They're saying that this is part of a sustainable approach to the land and all of this stuff, but that's not accurate. Who are the ones who are actually having the most sustainable interaction with this particular habitat, tall grass prairie?

If you really want to talk about long-term how to address these issues, you have to understand that your greatest allies are going to be the living architects of a space. That's plants. 100%, that's plants. And from the plants, they're the ones who are creating the habitat. They're creating the home that supports all other life. And it creates not only the home, but it creates the architecture through which air, soil, water, sunlight, therefore energy, is moving through a space. They are vital. Why can't we get back to that? And also, I just want to throw this in there because it's something that I keep thinking of is, it is 1000% true that within our lifetime we can have massive life giving effect on the spaces around us. I think oftentimes people think humans only have the capacity for a destructive impact, and that's not true. Humans can have a relationship with plants that absolutely is life-giving, that is going to have a bio diverse effect on the space around them, a life-giving effect that's been shown again and again and again and also within my own direct life.

And when we moved to this place in rural Iowa, it wasn't all wooded. There was no prairie, but we were planting things, we were planting oaks, we were planting tall grass prairie, and it became this little pocket of life that was nowhere else around me. And I literally watched these trees grow from planting them to being absolutely massive and understanding that within 30 years, massive changes can take place if you have a relationship with plants, because they, again, are living architects. You can't put... What's going to do it better, a solar panel or a tree? It's going to be the tree. The tree is going to have more beneficial effect than a solar panel. A hundred percent. I can't believe that, that's even a question in some people's minds.

Vivian:

We haven't talked about this much, but you have a background in anthropology and ethnobotany, right?

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Moselle:

Yes.

Vivian:

So can you talk a little bit about how, one, what you studied in those realms and then how that has informed your artwork for events like the Climate Justice Summit?

Moselle:

Oh, yeah. Okay. So again, like I said, all of this is coming from my gut. All of this is coming from my heart. It is very complicated for me to try and talk about it in a way that's legible for other people because it's not linear. It's this giant web of all of these things that I've noticed and have paid attention to over time. So, yeah, my interest in anthropology came from a reflection of self. Why am I so different? Why am I experiencing life so different? Why for me is normal having curry all the time or why is normal for me eating a whole garlic with my grandpa and talking about his time growing up in a village in India? That was my normal, and it was very different and I kept getting fed these things of, "You don't belong. Go back to where you came from." All of this stuff like, "Your family didn't deserve to immigrate here." Things like that. And I was trying to... How do I make sense of this person that I am in this space? So that's why I turned to anthropology.

I was like, "Culture is a weird phenomenon. It is so strange how people can have very different perspectives and have so... It's literally every single person has a different world that they're living in because they have different realities, they have different truths, and they have different life experiences." And I was trying to grapple with that. And then anthropology, because of also my experience with the land, I was always curious in this relationship between people and plants, people and landscape, people and water. And that led me to anthropology, but through medical anthropology and through food. So I was looking a lot at food waste, and I was looking at food sovereignty, seed sovereignty, things like that and how it kind of manifests in different parts of the world.

And then when I got into ethnobotany, it became very clear to me that what I was looking at was the biopolitics of that actual relationship between people and plants. And that's how I was really starting to understand the mechanisms of colonization, capitalism and globalization absolutely have impacted every single human and their relationship with plants. Everywhere in the world has affected everyone differently, but it has affected everyone. And I just started to really take the lid off of every single situation I was looking at. I was like, "Okay, even something that seems so positive, something that's like the production of native seeds, production of seeds for Tall grass Prairie, how's that being done? There are many different ways that's being done, but it became very clear to me that there are mechanisms that we really need to keep our eye on, which has a lot to do with scale.

So even something that is seemingly so good like saving seed can be done on a massive scale. So plant domestication processes became something that I really tuned into because that particular relationship that we have with these plants that are seen as valuable for agricultural purposes, for cultivation purposes, what has happened in those relationships? We have created this relationship that has expressed itself or has manifested, I suppose, in a way that has resulted in plants that are no longer resilient to drought, no longer resilient to salinity in the soil, no longer resilient to massive climate change.

We have over domesticated these plants. We have instilled domestication syndromes where the plant can no longer protect itself, it's no longer synthesizing the compounds that it needs to, to protect itself.

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These defense compounds, we've actually bred those out of a lot of plants because they often have a bitter taste. So because we're only gearing things to our own pallet, we forget that these plants have an agency. These plants are trying to create a full life for themselves. They have an agency. They have a very, very deep intelligence in what they're doing and the ways that they're relating to other plants around them, the ways that they're communicating with the soil microbes, with the fungal component, all the micro rise, right? With pollinators, all of that. There's so much there, and a lot of the times we've just overlooked it.

Vivian:

And it sounds like a lot of the artwork that you do is trying to make that visible and you've talked-

Moselle:

Exactly.

Vivian:

... Again and again about how your artwork is supposed to draw people in, whatever they might take from it, but also draw people in, so they ask questions about the complexity of what you're portraying with biocultural diversity and comparing that to our current systems and how to make sense of that so that we can move forward.

Moselle:

Yeah. And to just have your eyes open about all of these processes, because also something that can be presented to you as sustainable, be aware that's not always the case. You have to question scale. Always question scale. Because if there's somebody who's trying to sell to you an idea of a new super food, like, "Oh, the Baobab nut, it's so good for your skin." Understand that there's a whole process behind that, and it's affecting people all along the supply chain and is affecting real people on the ground and everything is way more complicated than we think. And really the importance of localizing yourself. Where are your feet? Where are you connecting to the earth? Who's directly around you and how can you engage with that with the skills that you have, with the experience that you have, to live in a way that's coming from, "I am going to celebrate everything that I'm experiencing as much as I can, even though I'm feeling such deep pain because I have an understanding of the enormity of all of it?" It's hard, but it's what you have to do.

Vivian:

Right. And bringing all of that, all of that knowledge that you have about these processes and how that is a cause for pain, but also maybe a cause for celebration in recognizing what the potential is, like you said, to see changes in our lifetime and how to communicate that and hopefully have more people try to understand that and then act on it. In these events that you've been a part of that are working toward climate action and climate change dialogue and climate awareness, what do you think the benefits are of using art in particular as a communication strategy?

Moselle:

Oh, well, art is such a... Because it transcends language, I think that oftentimes we get so stuck in the intellectual, it turns into this whole game of theory, and it's like, "Well, is it possible or is it not?" And art is just kind of like, "That question doesn't actually relate. Get that out of here. Let's actually take the

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barriers off." And it shows so much movement and so much that we cannot put into words. It's this gut feeling. It's coming from the heart. Why does something pull you in or attract you or stimulate some kind of a thought? These are processes that are very, very, very, very complex and they're not linear. They're so interwoven with... Okay, so somebody who looks at a piece of art, they're coming in with a giant entangled meshwork of references and ideas and feelings and experiences. So when they see something, when they see an image, it's pulling from all of that. All of that comes forward.

So what I hope when I'm creating artwork and when people interact with it, I want them to interact as a whole person and understand that the things that they noticed in my artwork are coming from them. Even though I've provided a very dynamic structure, I purposefully try to hit something that's in between so that they can engage with it in a way that actually pulls from in between all of their reference points as well, because I think this is something that we all have in common. It's harder for me to do that in protest art because it has to be printed in a certain way. But that's why I think it's really important that I shared both expressions because they are coming from the same place, but it's just the effect is a little bit different.

Vivian:

And how you're figuring out how to communicate in different contexts, whether it is a space where people can engage for long periods of time and figure out and answer and ask those questions about how, where are their reference points and-

Moselle:

Exactly. And where are they coming from?

Vivian:

Right.

Moselle:

Yeah.

Vivian:

And you've talked a lot about emotion, and I think we've learned, over time, that most people make decisions based on emotion, and that action really does come from emotion and our own personal backgrounds and identities.

Moselle:

Exactly. That was something that I wanted to mention too, is because there's a lot of stuff that we carry with us that is largely imperceptible and unknown to us in a cognitive, intellectual way, but it's in us just like our DNA, but also there's a lot of knowledge from ancestors in us, and it is a literal... Literally, we are carrying that with us. So we are carrying far more than we realize with us. And one of the things that has been really important for me is connecting with my own lineage. Because one of the craziest things for me, that I recognize about my own life, is before I knew really who I was or what I was connected to, I was already engaging with all of the things that absolutely went a thousand percent made sense for me to be doing. There's this quote that I always go back to that is, "How does a seed know into what it must grow?"

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So it just does. It just grows into it. Does it know that? No, it's just like... It just does that. And I think that people are the same way. So before I really had an understanding of my background, what it meant to be somebody who has lineage to Punjab, where is Punjab, how has that history unfolded, I didn't know much about it. I didn't grow up with that as part of my history lessons. My history was very European centric. It was very American centric, and I didn't know much about the history of India as a country. I had stories I had from my grandpa and my father, and that is what I was going off of. It wasn't from a textbook. And it was hard for me because I'm this person who's in between. My mom is of European descent. We don't know much about her descent besides potentially Danish.

And then my dad's side, I know much more about. I am very much so in between. I wasn't brown enough or Indian enough to really connect with the people who had two parents who were from that region. And I didn't grow up speaking the language because my dad wasn't speaking it in the home. Identity has a huge, huge, huge role to play in understanding who we are, having confidence in who we are, letting go of the feelings of shame and moving on and actually coming from a place that feels authentic and real and expressing from that point. So for me, it was understanding, "Oh, my gosh, this whole time I've been living my life, I didn't even know that I was actually ancestrally connected to Northern India until I came back from India." My dad was like, "Oh, yeah, your grandmother was from Shimla, which is right next to where you were saving seeds."

I'm like, "What? You never told me this before?" And then I just literally, just about a month ago, found out that... So my grandpa's parents, so my dad's dad, my grandpa, both of his parents were orphans who were both in a Christian missionary compound in Lahore, and this is pre partition India. So this is before Pakistan was even a country. A lot of people don't understand, Pakistan is a newer country. It was formed in 1947 after the British partition. So they were in pre partition India. This is recent history and recognizing that I've been affected by it in a way that's localized to that region, to Punjab, and seeing also how colonization, because after 1947 then was the introduction of the Green Revolution. The Green Revolution was all of this bullshit about high yielding seeds. If you buy these certain seeds and you apply these chemical fertilizers and pesticides, you'll have all these high yields.

It was all about production. It was all about that very capitalistic understanding of the relationship with the land. It completely interrupted the village unit in Punjab. People weren't functioning in the way that they were before from series of colonization, famines, and then introduced the Green Revolution. Punjab means the land of five rivers. So these rivers are coming down from the Himalayas. It's considered the bread basket of India. And then I can't help but recognize, "Oh, my gosh, there is a parallel here with Iowa and the connection with the Mississippi River and the way that industrial agriculture has affected this region of Iowa." Why? How incredible is it that growing up in Iowa, I didn't even understand that, that was directly my lineage, and I'm over there saving seeds without understanding. Another thing to that I feel it's really important to mention, is the ways that the Green Revolution has now resulted in farmer suicides that are happening throughout Punjab, farmers who are caught cycles of debt because they have to buy these seeds.

They're not allowed to save their own seeds, and they end up drinking the pesticide that they are told to apply to the soil. They end up drinking it. The water table has... The groundwater has nearly completely depleted. The five rivers, it's supposed to be the land of five rivers, and they're drying up. The soil is deadened. It's not as lush as it used to be at all. And now looking at the pollution and all of this, that's affecting that part of the world. And let me tell you, Iowa, though it's different, these are the same processes. So it's just seeing on one side where it's largely... It's affected them differently and has resulted in, since 1995, over 200,000 farmer suicides. This is a problem. This is unbelievable. And no

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one's talking about it. People don't know that in 2021, the massive farmer protests that were happening in India, this is why. This is why. People don't even know it was happening.

It was the largest protest that was happening at that time. People didn't know about it. All of this is connected. And then understanding, why was that the thing that caught me when I was a kid, the pesticides being sprayed? And I started asking those questions as a little kid. I think there's far more at play and connecting it to, "Well, where did I come from? Who are the Indigenous in the land where I came from?" I'm not saying that I'm Indigenous because I'm so many weird iterations of something else, that I feel like I don't really have a place, but my art is the way that I create a place for myself. But all of us have these very complex lineages. Ask the question.

Vivian:

Thank you so much for sharing those experiences and how you've used artwork to try to make sense of for yourself and for the wider community that you're a part of like what these questions are that we should be asking, and how our history has led to our current moment and how our current moment could lead to a future that has more potential and has more connection. So as you've worked as an artist in climate movements over the past several years, can you talk a little bit about what you've learned about using art to encourage conversations about climate change?

Moselle:

Yeah. Like I mentioned before, I didn't really start leaning into art as my main way of communicating this until 2020. And it completely changed my life, completely changed my life. I suddenly felt so much freer than I had ever felt before. And it just goes to show that, I guess, the main message for me from that process was finding your passion and communicating in a way that doesn't bind you up, is so important. It is so important that while we're here, we honor ourselves and at least give ourselves the opportunity to express ourselves without the thought of, "This isn't enough. This isn't right. Not being valued," all of that stuff. Do away with all of it. Just let it come up and honor that process. Every single thing we do is a creative process, whether it's through in science, academia, whether it's in politics, whether it's in all of it. All of it is a creative process.

Everything we do, the way that we are in the world is an expression. It's a creative expression. We are the ones who are piecing together what we choose to be important and how we choose to conduct ourselves in our lives. The ways that we live is a creative, artistic expression. The ways that we communicate with people, how we relate with our community, how we carry, what's your connection with your own body. That too is such a beautiful place to begin being curious about how do I want to engage with this relationship, with this kinship, with this experience itself. So I think that, that was a big shift for me, and it opened up so much in my life. Yeah.

Vivian:

What have you experienced as barriers to talking about climate change in agricultural communities and then how has art helped or maybe also faced challenges in that realm?

Moselle:

In academia there were definitely barriers. Throughout my entire academic experience, barriers along the entire way. A lot of the things that I was talking about when I was younger, people weren't asking those questions, so I was really isolated and people didn't really care about the things I was talking about either. And then as I got into working for nonprofits, I found it incredibly difficult. Nonprofits,

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specifically in the United States, when I was working for nonprofits that were... Like, for example, when I was working for Vandana Shiva, she's from Northern India. It's a very different way that nonprofits come to fruition when it's created by somebody who's from the region and really understands the complexity of the place and has connections to the Indigenous communities and is literally doing everything that they're doing for the Indigenous people to benefit them. It was conserving Indigenous seed for Indigenous people. So very different from the way that nonprofits tend to unfold in the United States.

Oftentimes, they are not formed in such a way. And I kept finding myself in situations where I'd be speaking out about something or I observed something that didn't make sense and seemed to be quite exploitative in nature, so I would ask a question, and obviously those questions are really uncomfortable for people to look at if they really want to believe that they are functioning from a place of justice and righteousness and all of this, all of that narrative. There's a lot of savior complex that unfolds in the world of nonprofits.

But also at the same time, what's very real in the United States is the nonprofit industrial complex. And that was what I kept poking at, at every single nonprofit I was at. And people don't want to look at that. So that's why I ended up leaving that way of being or that way of engaging in these conversations because it didn't fit well for me. And for some people it fits well for them and they're able to recognize that it's imperfect and they're able to communicate with people who need to be spoken to in a certain way in order to come to a certain understanding. And that's wonderful, and they need to be in those positions. However, for myself, I kept finding myself in places where my authentic voice and the way that I authentically speak to things wasn't seen as acceptable.

Vivian:

You've talked about the importance of being in community and how you have found and you've told me before, that you've found community with the land and with people who are in community with the land. And that, that is an incredibly important step toward climate action is repairing those relationships that, I think, not for everyone, but for a lot of us have been broken, this idea of that we are separate from the life around us. And it sounds like there are barriers perhaps in some of these other spaces to talking about climate action because the rules around these dialogues don't really allow us to talk about relationships and emotion and deep connection and how pain and celebration go hand in hand sometimes. And that art, perhaps, and I've seen it in your art, does allow those conversations to be intertwined with one another.

Moselle:

Absolutely.

Vivian:

How have you seen, or how do you think art can be used to advance climate policy and climate actions on a large national, international, scale?

Moselle:

I suppose it hits on what I was mentioning before about art as being something that transcends language, transcends boundaries, kind of transcends a lot of the categorical impositions that we put on things to rationalize. It hits on something that's beyond rationalizing. And anybody who's gone into philosophy or has poked around in philosophy and has gone into how logic can I... You can use logic to

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make sense of horrible things. We need to go beyond that. And I think art hits on something that is far more visceral.

And I think that it has the potential to mobilize people to act from that place of the gut and from the heart, which I think is what's missing. We don't really value those things because they're considered intangible and for some reason people don't value the things that they can't really-

Vivian:

Count?

Moselle:

That they can't count. Exactly. That they can't put into numbers and then reduce down to something that essentially, a lot of the times it comes down to economics for a lot of people, which I absolutely hate that, that's the case. So again, the fact that so many things are wrapped up in capitalism, wrapped up in this idea that nothing is valuable unless it's reduced to a number that can be transacted.

So as far as policy though, again, because I also think that art is something that bridges also an age barrier, a generational barrier. The ways that people communicate from different generations is very different. We're all functioning in very different pockets of history and time where we came into being and as that formed through time. But I think art is something that can bridge all of that. And when we're having these conversations about climate change and policy, I think that's something that's absolutely missing is something that's a cross-generational conversation. Not only cross cultural, but cross generational. And oftentimes the jargon that's wrapped up in the ways that we talk about political action, it functions through the same structures of casteism, because casteism is alive in the United States as much as it is in India.

Casteism is another expression of racism. We need to get beyond that. And I think the art is something that can push the conversation to something that is hitting people in a more visceral way and in a more human way. So I think art has a huge potential, and I don't think that has really been something that's been fully realized yet, at all, really.

Vivian:

That sounds like you've started to see some of that. I mean, you talked about the importance of moving towards policy as being able to mobilize people to push for policy actions that will address climate change. And it sounds like, in the Climate Justice Summit and other events that you and the Buffalo Rebellion have done, that art has helped build community that builds up this mobilization to push for certain ideas and actions actions to happen.

Moselle:

Yeah, it's a great point. I mean, because as I had mentioned with the formation of the different designs for the Buffalo Buffalo Rebellion Coalition and the protests for the CO2 pipelines, I mean, we also were collaborating with David Solnit, a very well-known art activist based out of San Francisco, the Bay Area. And we were collaborating with him. He did the actual printing of the signs so the conversation wasn't isolated to Iowa. It suddenly reached all the way to the West Coast, and then they had a teach-in over there while they were building some of the materials there as well.

And just having these opportunities to come together to understand that there are pockets of people who have shared values, I think is such a healthy reminder of you're not alone. We might be all working

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in isolation. We might be creating in isolation, which is often how creativity happens for a lot of people, but even if that's the case, there are people who have shared values and we need that reminder. And one of the huge things that has been interrupted from these processes of colonization and capitalism is an interruption of the ability to form community around shared values. It's purposefully interrupted because when you have the ability to actually gather around shared values and community, you can mobilize and you can break down these really strong structural systems that don't want you to do that.

Vivian:

Thank you. And thank you for sharing your own experiences, finding community with land and with people and how that's through your artwork and the other experiences you've had in agro ecology and everything else. Thank you for talking about it because I think that's what we're trying to do with this podcast series too, is just to say we need to talk about it and figure out ways to ask the questions and not just all be thinking... Some of us at least thinking these things on our own. And yeah, that is isolating.

Moselle:

Yes.

Vivian:

So thank you for sharing. And I have two questions that are really for our listeners to take away from this conversation. So one, what are the three key ideas that you want people to understand about the work you do as an artist and climate activist?

Moselle:

One, you belong. You belong in this conversation. You belong exactly where you are and you belong by your own creative mechanisms. You create the space in which you belong. Two, I would say main takeaway, I would hope, is that we are intrinsically, necessarily multi-species assemblages. And I would even do away with the word species, honestly. If you allow your mind to continue to actually understand what I'm trying to say, we are absolutely connected with all other life forms around us and remembering that will also help foster that sense of belonging. And then third, I would say, find a way, find your way to express that celebration in resistance because it can look like anything that you want it to look like and risk.

Take the risk because the world is a wild, wild place and somehow things fall into place and when you're doing things from your gut and from your heart, incredible, absolutely incredible things happen. And trust in your experiences. Find inspiration from your lived experiences. These are so valuable. You don't need to be digging into textbooks all the time. You don't need to prove yourself right or wrong from external sources. Understand that there's so much knowledge at your feet and in your direct experience. Trust your gut.

Vivian:

Those are incredibly helpful, I think too, for us to take away from everything you've shared about the work that you do and to see that in the work that you do, and also for us to think about in the work that we do. So with that, the last, biggest takeaway, what is the biggest recommendation that you have for others who might want to use artistic strategies to facilitate conversations about climate change in agricultural communities?

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Moselle:

Yeah, I would say, remember to balance because these engaging with this topic and connecting yourself to this topic, because art, you have to be able to engage with that very deep place to create. Balancing the pain and the joy is very, very difficult. However, I always have to remind myself, don't forget the role of play. Don't forget the role of curiosity. These topics are so painful and so heavy, and again, like I said, we live in a society that is purposefully isolating. Do not forget to play. Do not forget to be inspired. Do not forget that this whole experience, you can play with any sense that you have.

That's why I really love that you're also... You're talking with artists who have so many different mediums. That is so important because play with sound, play with different images, play with clay, play with soil, play with books, play. Go talk to people, be inspired. Lift yourself up and be totally taken up by the phenomenon of being alive, that we have this opportunity to go and touch a tree, to smell soil, to touch water. Remember that these core things are sources of such inspiration that are infinite. Don't forget that you have access to that source and don't give up.

Vivian:

Thank you so much for that recommendation and for this entire conversation. It was so wonderful speaking with you, Moselle, and to hear more about your work and the wisdom that you bring and how you integrate all of your areas of expertise and play and relationships into the work that you do. How can people stay connected with you and your work?

Moselle:

I'm in the process of creating a website, so in time there will be a mosellesingh.com that you could go to, to see my stuff. But if I said anything that really perked you up and you want to have a conversation about anything, or if you're an artist and you're wondering how to get started in this or anything like that, really, any questions at all, if anybody was so inclined to reach out, feel free to email me. I'm not doing commissions unless they are for climate justice type work, but kind of side stuff, I am very busy, but I'm open to conversation and all of that. I do want to be connected, so if I did end up inspiring anybody, I would love to be connected.

Vivian:

Well, you inspired me and thank you. I think I'm really taking away this idea of balance and accepting and recognizing and embracing, feeling the pain of what's happening and what we're seeing in our worlds right now, and in recognizing that that's really hard and also that we have to talk about it with each other so that we can also recognize the joy and celebration of living together and working toward something that is more healthy and resilient for all of us.

Moselle:

Yes.

Vivian:

Thank you, Moselle.

Moselle:

Thank you so much.

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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. 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.