

## 25 Young Women's Voices for Climate

*Beth Osnes, Sarah Fahmy, Chelsea Hackett,  
and Lianna Nixon*

“If a dove is the symbol of peace, then a butterfly is the symbol of change,” declared sixteen-year-old Finella Guy through a megaphone at the Climate Strike on the University of Colorado (CU) Boulder campus on September 20, 2019. Ting Lester, costumed as a huge Blue Morpho butterfly, stood by, embodying the commitment to transformational change needed for international policies and choices to reverse global warming. Finny and Ting are a part of Young Women’s Voices for Climate, a group of nine middle- and high-school-aged women in Boulder, Colorado (also including Eliza Anderson, Lola D’Onofrio, Olympia Kristl, Uli Miller, Lerato Osnes, Leela Stoeede, and Sofie Wendell), along with several CU students, including Sarah Fahmy (PhD theatre), Lianna Nixon (MA education), and Jeneé LeBlanc (BS environmental studies). Young Women’s Voices for Climate uses performance-based methods to speak out and act up for a stable climate. United by a partnership between SPEAK, an initiative for young women’s vocal empowerment for civic engagement, and CU’s Inside the Greenhouse, which focuses on creative climate communication, our mission is to advance climate awareness and action through artistic expression. This group has significantly contributed to bringing performative delight, youth perspectives, and actionable solutions to community climate events. This work is nourished by the positivity of play experienced and expressed through performance. Our approach has brought us increased connection to the natural world, to each other, and to our community.

The primary facilitators for this group are CU Associate Professor of Theatre & Environmental Studies, Beth Osnes, co-founder of both Inside the Greenhouse and SPEAK, and Chelsea Hackett, recent PhD graduate of New York University and co-founder and director of SPEAK. For over six years, Chelsea and Beth have been developing the use of performance-based methods to support young Guatemalan women in empowering their voices for civic participation in partnership with a female Maya-run Guatemalan organization and school, MAIA Impact. This collaborative work culminated in the creation of a twelve-session curriculum for young women. SPEAK’s approach combines vocal training and theatrical methods to support young women in empowering their voices for self and civic advocacy (see Osnes et al., 2019b). Chelsea

and Beth continue to work closely with MAIA to create vocal empowerment curricula for each of the subsequent five grades of their school. This introductory curriculum has been implemented in Guatemala and Tanzania by local community leaders trained by Beth and Chelsea; in Egypt directly by Sarah; and in Boulder directly by all three of us (with Lianna and Jeneé) as a weekly afterschool offering for middle and high schoolers near CU. After completing the initial curriculum in the Fall of 2017, the Boulder group expressed the desire to keep meeting together with a specific focus on climate change, referring to ourselves as Young Women's Voices for Climate (YWVC). We began to form an identity as a local source of positive creative force in Boulder City's ambitious work on its climate action plan.

Our work has been infused with new energy amid the surge of youth activism on climate by individuals such as Greta Thunberg and groups such as the Boulder-based Earth Guardians. Boulder is an international leader in developing climate policies and programs through involvement in initiatives such as the Rockefeller Foundation 100 Resilient Cities and the Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance. CU is a leading university in publications, citations, and grants in environmental science. Nestled at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, we are among numerous national labs, such as the National Center for Atmospheric Research and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, that make this area an international hub for climate science, all of which serves as the context for our work.

Our target community for SPEAK is anyone who identifies as a young woman, whether assigned female at birth or not. This group focuses on women because of the injustice and inequity still experienced by those identifying as women and the need to counter the absence of women's voices contributing to so many sectors of our lives, policies, and culture. There is a strong tie between challenges faced by women and challenges associated with climate change, stemming from the same patriarchal domination and exploitation that has presided over women and the natural environment (Shiva, 1989; Osnes, 2014, p. 13; 32). In the book *Powered by Girl: A Field Guide for Supporting Youth Activists*, Lyn Mikel Brown suggests that adults work with youth to "understand and invest in the conditions that support and enable them to connect with one another, voice strong feelings and opinions, think critically, oppose injustice, and grapple with the culture of power" (2016, p. 10). In particular, "Encouraging girls' strong feelings and taking seriously their social critique invite them to participate in the social and political world around them, a radical act with potentially transformative consequences" (Brown, 1999, p. xii).

While the target community for YWVC is most directly our own city, Boulder, the young women regularly add their voices to women's rights and climate-related actions at the national and international level. For example, they contributed to the Girls Bill of Rights campaign by She's the First, wrote personalized messages to encourage citizens to vote through Vote Forward, and contributed public comments opposing a national proposal for roads to be built through Alaska's national forests, which would disrupt the lives of nearby

Indigenous communities. Supporting others' campaigns helps us understand the scope of this issue and the multiple creative ways in which voices can be joined to impact change.

One of our community's needs is to discover effective methods for encouraging and implementing youth engagement with our city's climate action plan. Beth worked with the City of Boulder and other cities around the world participating in the 100 Resilient Cities Initiative to use performance-based methods for young people to be supported in co-authoring local solutions to climate and resilience challenges. She did this through a musical she created and toured called *Shine* (Osnes, 2017). As a part of that work over the past five years, she made many local connections and partnerships that have led to performance opportunities for YWVC.

Research reveals the importance of actively involving adolescents while they are still relatively young regarding climate-related issues, since pessimism about addressing climate change increases with age, particularly from early to late adolescence (Ojala, 2012; Stevenson and Peterson, 2016). We are interested in exploring how creative expression can support youth in maintaining their feelings of hope for sustained action. Performance-based methods are uniquely well-suited to this need since they give a context for exploring emotions and are rooted in action. It is only with hope, the belief that what you do can make a difference, that sustained action makes sense. Our use of good-natured comedy, inherent in many of our songs and skits, has been shown to help young people process negative emotions associated with climate change, feed hope, and sustain engagement with climate (Osnes et al., 2019a). In the book *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, author adrienne maree brown introduces something she calls "pleasure activism," a politics of healing and happiness that explodes the dour myth that changing the world is just another form of work (brown, 2019). Our approach is certainly in line with this sentiment. By taking on this issue with humor and creativity, these young women do not make light of the importance of the issue; they bring light to it for themselves and their audiences.

Our first public-facing event in 2018 was at a talk at CU's Sustainability, Energy, and Environment Complex by the Swedish psychologist Dr. Maria Ojala, who specializes in youth, hope, and climate change. Invited to perform, the young women chose to do their own take on the song "What's Climate Got to Do with It?" based on Tina Turner's "What's Love Got to do with It?" The chorus was rewritten as "What's climate got to do, got to do with it? What's climate but a long-term view of weather? What's climate got to do with it, got to do with it? Conditions prevailing for over a long time." The laughter induced by the song created an audible and amicable connection with the audience. Starting with singing and dancing together aided in claiming the space and fortifying their voices for what followed: individual minute-long declarations by each young woman about her perspective on the climate crisis. Their presence at this event ensured that young people were not just being talked about, but, rather, were also being represented and heard. Here we

developed a formula of using humor to create a shared and lively connection between the youth performers and their mostly adult audience, followed by personal sharings of youth perspectives on climate through which they were able to address a serious issue and be taken seriously by adults—notably ones who have power to effect change.

Over the summer of 2019, Young Women’s Voices for Climate was invited to perform for a Boulder City Council meeting by Boulder’s senior environmental planners to convey their perspective on why the council should approve the request to revise our city’s climate action plan. The young women met with the staff at the city environmental planning office to discuss why a revision to our current plan was needed. Seated around the conference table with the staff, they shared their views, asked questions, and discussed their five-minute portion of the presentation for the city council. Afterwards, the young women acknowledged that it felt legitimizing to literally have a seat at the table where city decisions are being made and to have their contributions sought out and valued. In the council chambers, their performance provided a rare fun occurrence that was greeted by smiles and encouraging applause by the city leaders: They performed their own version of “Wind Turbines are Beautiful” (set to *The Lion King*’s song, “Can You Feel the Love Tonight?”) with two of them costumed as wind turbines.

Our creative work is guided by the work of Project Drawdown that researched and ordered the impact of the top one hundred climate solutions (Hawken, 2017). Although their use of comic skits and songs can seem frivolous, they physicalize the science behind top environmental solutions as identified by Project Drawdown (Wind Turbines are the #2 solution) and cleverly demonstrate how to activate solutions locally. Promoting wind turbines as a thing of beauty is an appropriate local action since one of the major obstacles to wind turbine development is people’s impressions of them as an eyesore. After the song, each young woman relayed a particular issue related to climate change to which they felt personally connected, such as recycling, girl’s education, access to family planning, and environmental education.

A similar result occurred when YWVC was invited by Boulder environmental planners to perform at the Boulder City sponsored Climate Mobilization Action Plan Launch event in September 2019. With over two hundred people in attendance, they depicted the top five Drawdown solutions. To dramatize number five, Tropical Forests, they enacted a skit and a song created by group members Ting and Uli, featuring one young woman costumed as an old-growth tree who recoils in terror when she notices an explorer in her forest. The explorer tries to defend herself as a non-destructive human. The tree accuses her of clearing the forest to raise cattle, to which she retorts that she is a vegetarian. The tree accuses her of clearing the forest to make furniture, to which she retorts that she only buys repurposed furniture. The tree accuses her of wiping her butt, to which she admits that she does actually wipe her butt many times a day after using the toilet. The tree then suggests she recycle her toilet paper, to which the explorer responds, “That’s disgusting.” The

tree responds, “No, *buy* recycled toilet paper.” At this, two costumed rolls of recycled toilet paper enter along with the rest of the ensemble to join the tree and the explorer in performing a spirited song and dance featuring the chorus “Recycled toilet paper, make sure you buy, Recycled toilet paper, make sure you buy, take from the roll to the tush and then you flush, bye bye.”

Perhaps the fun, creative energy behind YWVC accounts for its appeal; besides the panel of city departmental heads, YWVC was the only group asked to present at this event. All others were invited to have a table in the lobby to share their work. Given this honor, it seems that the previous YWVC performance for City Council had been commended as a way to include youth voices and infuse positive, research-based solutions-oriented expression into our city’s climate action planning.

The sense of optimism and agency has fortified the young women’s ability to tackle more substantial form and content. In November of 2019 at the Old Main theatre at CU, our group produced our first free-standing event: Climate Change Theatre Action (CCTA), a worldwide series of readings and performances of short climate change plays presented biennially to coincide with the United Nations Conference of the Parties, or COP, which took place in 2019 in Madrid. YWVC performed two short plays focused on gender and climate change, led attendees in a creative process of their own expression on various climate-related issues, and received advice on how to use their empowered voices from female Boulder leaders, including the mayor. Sarah took the lead on our collaboration with CCTA, and in the months preceding, read all fifty plays in the collection and chose the two that focused on women and climate. The first play was entitled *The Butterfly That Persisted* by Jordanian playwright, Lana Nasser. This was a challenging piece due to both the subject matter and the poetic language. The group had never performed anything that carried as much emotional weight as this play, which dramatizes an intense conversation between humanity and the Earth. The tone and content unleashed a new maturity amongst the group. Sarah consulted with the members in the choice to perform it as an ensemble piece. Guided by the playwright’s notes on contrasting lyrical and reactive voices, they decided to divide the performers into two groups: seven representing voices of the Earth’s elements and three performers representing the human.

This more challenging material compelled members to wrestle with collective decisions about casting and staging. We had a couple of read-throughs to define certain terms, as well as group and individual script analysis sessions. After much deliberation, the young women decided not to censor any of the words, including the line: “I am here under your feet. I am the body you raped and raped and raped; strong words you don’t like to hear” (Nasser, 2019). The adult leaders had wondered if it was appropriate to expect a minor to say this line and if it would be too shocking for the audience to hear it delivered by a young woman. After much discussion, the young women decided that the line was accurate to what actually happens to women their age and to the Earth, such that one of them should say it, and the audience should be

forced to confront the truth of the line. As they struggled with some of the abstract, poetic language, we did a variety of movement exercises based on poetic imagery, such as flocking, in which the group stands in a clump all facing the same direction. Everyone mimics the movements of the most front person, like birds in flight all following the lead bird. When that person turns the direction of the group, they shift leadership of the movement to the new person in front. Exercises such as this engaged different senses and extra-human physicalities to help them get into character. Each of the three “human” characters developed unique identities and backstories. This helped the performers delve into creating multi-dimensional characters. We also created the illusion that the “elemental voices” could be heard by the humans but not seen, increasing the rhythmic ebb and flow of their language and the human’s abrupt reactions. While a staged reading with limited production elements, the play’s themes were clearly delineated. Simple costumes distinguished the human and elemental voices. The humans stood center stage, surrounded by the elemental voices to indicate the plea by nature to humanity to wake up and care for the Earth.

The young women’s ability to handle such material was also due to the relationship YWVC consciously cultivates with the natural world. A few weeks before the performance, we all went on a weekend retreat near Estes Park. We rehearsed for hours in a clearing outside our cabin on a rare, warm fall day with a backdrop of the Rocky Mountains behind us. The smell of the pine-scented air, hair tossed by the breeze, and the earth beneath our feet, all became intertwined with our understanding of the play; being immersed in nature aided the process and deepened their connection to the content. Lianna created a three-minute video that we screened directly before their performance that shared photos and footage of the young women rehearsing in this natural setting, which helped the audience understand how immersion in nature featured into the artistic process.

The group’s development has not only impacted the young participants but also the adult leaders. For Sarah, who served as the primary director for *The Butterfly That Persisted* and is an Arab woman, this play was particularly special. It was the first play she’d worked on where the playwright’s identity reflected her own. She found it heartwarming to feel represented, let alone in a positive light, which she found to be a rarity in the theatrical canon.

The guidance from the book *Powered by Girl: A Field Guide for Supporting Youth Activists* helped us to more accurately label what we are doing as, not youth-led, but rather intergenerational support and celebration of young women’s voices. Claiming this description helps our work benefit from the needs, contributions, perspectives, and genius of the young women but also to benefit from the experience, connections, and vision of the women. We continue to balance room for voice and choice by the young women as we co-plan and co-guide our public offerings and involve the young women in many aspects of the work, such as how to promote an event or edit the videos created to support our performances.

While such expansion is exciting, one of our biggest challenges is insufficient time, given the young women's busy schedules, to meet and rehearse all that we want to achieve. Given that we formed this group to support the young women in empowering their voices, allowing time for all to express their ideas and opinions is of primary importance. Consequently, some of our performances are a bit rougher around the edges than we might like, but the fun experience and positive impact is solid. In one of our feedback sessions with our group, some of the young women said they felt stress "back stage" and frustration, especially at the performance at the Climate Mobilization Action Plan Launch, where we were given multiple conflicting notifications as to when we would be performing and for how long. However, another noted that those tense situations taught them that they can be flexible and responsive to the changing needs of their partners. As someone stated, "but we pulled it off, and the audience loved it." In the conversation that followed, they decided that they did want to try and rehearse more, as we had for *The Butterfly That Persisted*, but acknowledged that these rocky experiences did help them become more resilient, able to improvise, and confident. We also noted that a fair amount of disorganization is often associated with community organized events at which we are invited to perform, and it is helpful to be prepared to adjust accordingly.

After a year and a half of doing YWVC, we now have an impressive collection of songs, skits, declarations, costumes, and interactive performance-based activities that the young women can perform and facilitate. As opportunities arise, together we can design public offerings using, in part, these various elements to invigorate and inspire our community to activate climate solutions. This experience has also helped the young women cultivate organizational skills for event planning. One of the members of the group, Lerato, is also a member of the Youth Advisory Counsel for Congressman Joe Neguse and arranged for YWVC to perform for our congressional district Youth Summit in the Spring of 2020. Due to Lerato's skills learned from our many events, she was a primary contributor to the planning for this performance event. YWVC members are also utilizing skills in curating public-facing expressions on climate. They were chosen to be the 2020 climate artist-activist in residence at the Boulder Public Library and are themselves taking the lead in curating a gallery exhibit. The exhibit will feature enlarged photos of their many actions, videos of their songs and skits, costumes they have created, other interactive elements, and their actual plant-rich recipes for the dishes they have cooked at our many retreats. In addition, two young women from our group, along with Chelsea and Beth, will be partnering with MAIA Impact on a 2020 retreat at a nature reserve near Sololá, Guatemala to share some of the performance-based approaches our group has developed for a gender-aware approach to climate action. This will contribute towards the co-creation of the tenth-grade curriculum for MAIA Impact based on voice and climate action in a manner that is culturally responsive to their unique context and aims.

In addition to the connections made with our community and the natural world through our artistic process, one of the most powerful results of this work has been the strong connection with one another. Over our internet group text, we cheer each other's birthdays, comfort each other's hardships, organize for events, and check in on each other. We all look forward to our weekend mountain retreats each semester with great anticipation and excitement. The young women do all the planning and cooking for our mostly plant-based meals (Drawdown solution #4 is plant-rich diet). At our weekly sessions, we maintain and vitalize this community dedicated to vocal empowerment by doing vocal and physical exercises to strengthen our voices, rehearse, goof around, and author a sparkling new story for a bright future for all.

We end this essay with words from the young women as to what this group means to them. Finella shares that “vocal empowerment is a group of cool, like-minded young women doing cool and empowering activities to further their voices and share their ideas in the community.” Eliza feels that “this group is an incredible community; it’s a family and a safe space—there is so much love as we work together.” Lerato expresses, “Being a part of this group has been one of the greatest, most empowering and wonderful experiences that I have been a part of in high school. Being a part of this group also means supporting one another as women and building each other up.” In closing, Ting adds, “I have grown so much not only in my voice, but as a person—not letting the limits of society get in the way. I know that sounds cheesy, but sometimes a bit of cheese is good for you. It has protein.”

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