

Confronting Climate Denial with an Intergenerational Conversation/Song

James Damico, Indiana University Bloomington, Bloomington, IN, USA

Abstract

On September 19, 2019, millions of people worldwide participated in youth-led climate strikes. This article considers an artistic response to one of these strikes in a small Midwestern community in the United States. The response is a song and video framed as a conversation between youth and adults about climate change denial. Climate justice requires ongoing conversations with adults bearing responsibility for listening intently to the voices of youth advocating for climate justice. Educators can help foster a deeper understanding of our current reality and inspire more timely and comprehensive climate action with arts-based approaches. There is potential for songwriting, as a form of literacy practice, to be more widely applied in K-12 schools and teacher education to further enrich a collective understanding and commitment to addressing climate challenges.

Keywords

Arts, music, climate change, denial, climate strike

On September 19, 2019, millions of people worldwide participated in youth-led climate strikes to demand action on climate change. Strikes took place in more than 180 cities with youth urging world leaders to take clear, definitive steps to combat climate change. It was also the largest climate mobilization in United States' history, involving more than 1,000 towns and cities, including major metropolitan cities of New York, Boston, Chicago, Washington DC, and San Francisco, as well as smaller communities like Bloomington, Indiana where I reside.

The [Sunrise Movement](#) played a critical role across the United States, leading and organizing these rallies, and this was certainly the case in Bloomington, Indiana where middle school and high school students joined forces with university students as well as adult community activists for a sequence of events: a coordinated student walk-out of class, a rally held at the university, a march through campus, an assembly at a community park for speeches and music, and a march to city hall to make a formal presentation to the mayor.

As an observer and documentarian, I captured in photos and video much of the day's content—signs, posters, and speeches—and how the youth moved through public spaces on their way to city hall.

Inspired by this experience, I wrote and recorded a song called "Meet Us in the Street". I also created an accompanying YouTube [video](#) for the song. This article explores this artistic response to the world-wide climate strikes, framed as an intergenerational conversation about climate change denial.

The need for climate conversations

For noted climate scientist and communicator, Katherine Hayhoe, having conversations about climate change is the most important thing that we can do to address the crisis. While conversations will not necessarily lead to focused, collective climate action and policy change (e.g., Latkin et. al., 2024), it remains essential that we [talk about it](#) and find ways to seek and forge common ground across different backgrounds and perspectives (Hayhoe, 2021).

One consistent finding in larger survey data is that people across age groups in the United States have different climate beliefs and views about what actions need to be taken. Compared to youth and young adults, older adults are more likely to

equivocate about the existence of climate change or disagree with calls for large-scale climate actions. Older adults are less open to a complete phasing out of fossil fuels (Tyson, Funk & Kennedy, 2023) and are less engaged in climate change activism (Tyson, Kennedy & Funk, 2021). The song “Meet Us in the Street” addresses this intergenerational difference.

Addressing climate change through music

The arts bridge a gap between scientific data and public understanding about climate change, often by activating emotional or visceral responses that can cultivate awareness and mobilize action. Music, in particular, has a rich history in raising consciousness about environmental problems. Iconic songs like “[Big Yellow Taxi](#)” (1970) by Joni Mitchell, with the line “They paved paradise and put up a parking lot”, and “[Mercy Mercy Me \(The Ecology\)](#)” by Marvin Gaye serve as poignant environmental anthems.

Attention to environmental concerns also streams into the present with songs like “[All the Good Girls Go to Hell](#)” by Billie Eilish; “[Trouble in the Water](#)” by Common; a club dance track called “[Melt](#)”, by house DJ Kelly Lee Owens, that samples melting glaciers; “[Hands Off the Atlantic](#)” by Thom Yorke; the song “[New Gods](#)” by Grimes on the album [Miss Anthropocene](#); the song “[The Atlantic](#)” by the group [The Weather Station](#); and “[The 1975](#)” by The 1975 that features climate activist Greta Thunberg issuing a withering critique of climate inaction.

My background

I have been an educator for 30+ years, beginning as an elementary and middle school teacher before becoming a university professor. I have addressed environmental concerns across this time (Damico, 2021) yet took up climate change more directly in 2008 during the US presidential race between Barack Obama and John McCain. At that time, both candidates acknowledged the scientific consensus on climate change and recognized the [urgency for action](#). However, subsequent shifts in the political discourse prompted me to prioritize climate change in my teaching and scholarship to better understand the ways future teachers might engage with this critical topic (Damico, Baildon & Panos, 2018; Damico, Panos & Baildon, 2018).

I approach climate change as a socioscientific topic because it traverses political, civic, geographic, economic, social, cultural, psychological, and historical dimensions (Klein, 2014). I also employ a justice lens to climate change for two reasons. The most vulnerable populations, particularly those in the Global South, bear the brunt of climate change effects despite having contributed the least to its causes. Second, climate effects are compounded by existing inequalities—gender, racial, socioeconomic, and geographic—both within the United States and across the world.

My climate-centered teaching and research also directly address climate denial—the refusal to accept the well-established scientific consensus on global warming and the reluctance to take necessary actions necessary to ensure a more stable planet (Damico & Baildon, 2022).

Finally, I am an avid songwriter and this includes a sizable batch of songs about resilience, hope, and possibility in our changing world. This article delves into one such song, “Meet Us in the Street”. Inspired by the September 2019 climate strike where I live, I recorded the song with local youth and adults in a music studio and created a [video](#) with the footage I captured to bring the song to life visually. The performance includes a lead vocal from my longtime musical partner, Allen Davis, who is also a Teaching Professor and Director of the Basic Language Program in Spanish at Indiana University. Allen brings his many talents as a vocalist to a range of musical projects. This includes performing with the Indianapolis Symphonic Choir. Also featured in the song is a harmony vocal from Stephanie Power Carter, Professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning and the Director of the Center for Video Ethnography and Discourse analysis (CVEDA at The Ohio State University. Stephanie is also a songwriter and vocalist immersed in her own creative projects.

The song is an intergenerational conversation that delves into the heart of our current climate dilemma. While youth persistently call for clear, decisive, and far-reaching climate action, adults have tended to dwell in climate denial, minimizing, ignoring, or dismissing the need for timely and comprehensive climate change action.

An intergenerational conversation

Accessible on all major music streaming platforms and as a YouTube [video](#), the song deals directly with climate denial among older Americans. The opening lines of the song make this clear. Denial takes center stage as an adult male narrator intones,

*My head's been in the sand too long,
My head's been in the sand too long.
My head's been down so long, you forget how to be strong.
My head's been in the sand too long.*

The common idiom—“bury your head in the sand”—links to the title and cover illustration of the book *Climate Change Denial: Heads in the Sand* by Haydn Washington and John Cook (2013). While this idiom can be traced to the false view that ostriches hide their heads in the sand when threatened by predators, the image indicates someone is choosing to deny a problem exists. With the opening verse of the song, this avoidance or denial is paired with weakness, as captured in the line “you forget how to be strong.”

The child’s response in the second verse, the first conversational turn, invites the adult to move from rumination to action, to unite in a place—the street—perhaps the most significant form of public assembly that has spearheaded social change throughout history and has been central to the global, youth-led climate movement. Notably, to get to the open air of the street, the child needs to “head out of school”, the setting where teaching and learning about climate change has been lacking or nonexistent. Striking in the street is also about justice.

*We’re heading out of school, striking in the street.
We’re heading out of school, striking in the street.
If there’s no justice, can’t be no peace.
Come out and meet us in the street.*

With the third verse comes more reflection from the adult and a growing acknowledgment that behavior change for him might be possible. The proposed path toward self-awareness will be through his emotions (“a change in heart”).

Could be a change of heart just in time.

Could be a change of heart just in time.

Maybe a change of heart will open up my mind.

A change of heart just in time.

For the following verse, two children harmonize this conversational turn and again emphasize action, a declaration of the work ahead about two key sources for human species survival: clean water and air. The children remain unequivocal and resolutely determined to advance justice (what’s “right, good, and fair”).

We’re going to clean the water, clear the air.

We’re going to clean the water, clear the air.

We’re gonna make it right—right, good, and fair

We’re going to clean the water, clear the air.

Up to this point, the video has juxtaposed images of the singers with footage from the September 19 events in the town where I reside, including posters and placards created by youth. Running text at the bottom of the video provides links to the following sources for further context and study:

- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change ([IPCC](#)), a climate science authority,
- [DeSmog](#) and [Inside Climate News](#), leading climate journalists,
- [350.org](#) and the [Sunrise Movement](#), prominent advocacy organizations,
- [From Climate Denial to Ecoustice](#), website with education resources

After an instrumental break, a chorus of adults is ready to reckon with the reality of climate change with the Sunrise Movement a catalyst for action.

*Our heads have been in the sand too long,
Our heads have been in the sand too long,
Time for Sunrise, for a new dawn.
It's time to be strong.*

With the final conversational turn, adults and youth together issue the call for others to join them on a journey to advance climate justice.

*Come out and meet us in the street
Come out and meet us in the street
If there's no justice, can't be no peace.
Come out and meet us in the street.*

Next steps

Climate justice requires adults and youth working together to advance and enact climate-related solutions. This collaborative problem-solving must be firmly rooted in ongoing conversations with adults listening intently to the voices of youth advocating for climate justice. By doing so, we can deepen our understanding of the current reality and inspire more timely and comprehensive action.

Moving forward, I am dedicated to integrating the arts in my own climate-based teaching and scholarship. This includes highlighting the efforts of educators at all levels who use the arts to cultivate awareness and catalyze action. I also aim to explore how songwriting, as a form of literacy practice, might find broader application in K-12 schools and teacher education to enrich our collective understanding and commitment to addressing climate challenges and help create sustainable futures across generations.

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