

Audio Transcript: Climate Frequencies Episode 5

Natalie Sharp: Inhale and exhale.

I begin every day like this, with a little meditation, bringing myself back into the present moment.

The air is all around us. It moves through us. It's an essential bringer of life, which we don't even notice. In this episode, we'll be thinking and responding to air.

We'll be talking to Chisara Agor, who's a multidisciplinary musician and sound artist from London. Their multimedia project, *The Air We Live In*, raises awareness of UK air pollution and the effect it has on people and on the planet.

Nyiesha Mallett: We're not sure what this world looks like. We only know what we want out of it. Artists could give us that sense, artists could give that look.

Elizabeth Yeampierre: People like to say that the air affects everybody in the same way, and it does not affect everyone at the same time.

Natalie Sharp: We'll be bringing them together with climate justice activists Nyiesha Mallett and Elizabeth Yeampierre, who are both part of an organization called UPROSE in New York. UPROSE centres black and indigenous voices at the heart of the climate emergency.

Daisy Lafarge: In birth you grew maladaptive breathing patterns to survive the air. Patterns in which you are now architecturally invested.

Natalie Sharp: We'll also hear poems from Glaswegian poet, Daisy Lafarge, whose collection, *Life Without Air*, ponders the fragility of air and its effects on both our psyche and the climate.

There's a lot of crossover between the work of UPROSE and Chisara, and I was really excited to get two different perspectives on the same issue from both sides of the pond.

I just initially wanted to ask you, do you remember a particular moment from any point in your life where you've felt a real need to breathe?

Elizabeth Yeampierre: A few years ago I had a bilateral pulmonary embolism and I almost died from not being able to breathe, and my father died of an asthma attack in Hunts Point in the south Bronx. So breathing is something that I think about all the time, and I stop every day, at least once, for about 15 minutes and I breathe and I meditate and remind myself that breathing is life. I don't know that I would be so conscious about it if it wasn't that literally our right to breathe is being taken away from us in every community that we live in, in the United States.

Nyiesha Mallett: Yeah. I definitely practise breathing in my lifestyle, in my practice. It's important for me before I create any work as an artist to just have a moment to breathe and sit down with myself, but I also think about like how I might be walking down the street and not want to breathe the air at a moment, like walking past a gas station or in Manhattan and they have these fumes, that's coming

up through the street vents, or like fumes that's coming from fast food restaurants. Like those are moments where you don't want to breathe, where you want to hold your breath.

Natalie Sharp: Thanks for sharing that. Chisara?

Chisara Agor: My father is a Tai Chi practitioner. You know, as a young child, you're kind of, " I don't want to join in the classes, it's kind of uncool to stand there and because kind of your energy is all over the place. But you know, learning about that and realizing its importance now as an adult is brilliant. And I've seen how people having access to that grounding can change you and can heal you.

Natalie Sharp: I feel really aware about the necessity of the work that you're doing at the moment. Can you just tell us a little bit about the idea of where *The Air We Live In* came from?

Chisara Agor: I was thinking a lot about pollution in general and climate change, and especially, you know, I live in South London, so about air pollution and traffic and cars and the increase of cars in the area. And in 2013, a young girl called Ella Kissi-Debrah passed away. And the cause of her death for the first time in the UK, and the first time in history, was put down as air pollution.

She died of a severe asthma attack and lived about 20 meters from the South Circular, which is one of the busiest roads in the UK. And I think that really hit home for a lot of people, because it was so prevalent in the news, and because people were then finally talking about this, but also because we were putting a young black girl's face to this crisis and it kind of became very clear, for those of us who live in areas where there are high poverty and where there is this marginalization that not only do we have the risk of political and social oppression, but we also have this environment that we live in that can also kill us and that is with us now. And that these problems that exist with us and have done for many, many, many years. And, you know, seeing, Ella's mother talk about how she wasn't aware of how air pollution was affecting her child's health, really hit home in regards to raising awareness within the community about this killer that we are not told about because it involves confronting the whole structure of how our societies is built up and dismantling that.

Elizabeth Yeampierre: I did want to say Chisara that what happened in England with the girl, went all over the United States and it was an affirmation for our communities that everything that we've been saying for generations was true. It was the first time that we saw something like that, and it was really, really powerful and we felt really aligned and in solidarity with the people of colour in England. It really made a big impact on us.

Chisara Agor: That's so good to hear, yeah. Before I did this piece, I was working with Talawa Theatre Company, it's a black led theatre company in London, and they asked me to do a film and music piece about breathing because of all the things about breathing and George Floyd. It was actually, the intention was for it to be a source of healing and kind of a journey for people watching and listening to remember to breathe.

Natalie Sharp: I can see a school child wearing what looks like a World War II gas mask, and they're stood in front of a kind of council estate. And as I'm looking at them, they appear to be falling. And as they hit the floor, they begin to crawl. They don't get back up again. They've still got this gas mask on, which has loads of moss and lichen and ferns around it. It's like a kind of a green gas mask. This school child is crawling along the pavement and there's people walking past, there's cars going past and no one's really paying them any attention.

Chisara Agor: The specific area that I filmed in is another one of these roads with really high, illegal levels of air pollution, and along that road, there are five or six primary schools and children of colour walking up and down these schools and they don't drive, and that was one thing I noticed. I went during the end of school day, it was just, I was just standing there and watching all these families walking down the whole length of this road to get to, I guess, their buses to go home. And they would do this route every day, every morning and every day at three o'clock and at those times, those peak times, the road is packed and the traffic is not moving and you can smell and you can taste and you can feel that air. And so what was really shocking was that area being so congested and the children whose lungs and whose bodies are still developing, receiving that and those particles every day.

Natalie Sharp: Pope L is an artist who talks about giving up verticality. In one of his most famous pieces, he crawls through New York sidewalks, drawing attention to those who have lost verticality, a term he uses to describe people who are wealthy and healthy enough to remain upright.

Chisara Agor: He crawled in one of the richest districts I think in New York. And his idea of this crawl was to explain this verticality that non-Western and non-white people have, and that they are unseen because they have this vertical perception of the world. I think I kind of recognize that as when we think about climate justice and environmental justice on a global scale and who suffers from this, it's like who is allowed to be upright and kind of demand things and kind of say, you know, we need to start recycling, we should start doing this, even though they are the highest polluters, even though they are, they are able to make decisions because they have the money through colonialism and all this kind of historic and political baggage that you have, I was trying to indicate that yeah, people of colour and people in poverty are the people doing the least amount of polluting and damage, but suffering the greatest effects of climate change.

Natalie Sharp: At this point, I wanted to bring Nyeisha and Elizabeth into the conversation. They're both from an organization called UPROSE. UPROSE, which centres women of colour is a climate justice organization based in Sunset Park, New York. It's an ongoing project, which since the mid-90s has been campaigning for clean air. Sunset Park is an area where many residents suffer from illnesses such as asthma, respiratory diseases, cancer and diabetes, which are all contributed to by the air pollution of traffic on the nearby local highway, which sees more than 200,000 cars and trucks pass by every day.

Nyeisha, I wanted to bring you into the conversation. How did you become involved in UPROSE? And can you tell us a little bit about what it is?

Nyiesha Mallett: I got involved at the age of 14. I was looking for my first summer job, and here I am today, still doing the work, and I'm still trying to get used to be a part of that journey. I started high school after that summer, so things that, classes I'm taking, things that I'm hearing, you know, I'm saying different things in class, I'm talking about what I know a little more and understanding how my life is being affected by climate change every day and what my contribution will be in the future and what I want it to look like.

Natalie Sharp: Amazing. Thank you. And Elizabeth, can you tell us about the campaign to clean up the air in Sunset Park? Like what kind of methods do you use?

Elizabeth Yeampierre: Well, um, thank you for that question. We definitely make the connection between our fight against environmental racism and extraction and the health of the people in the

community. So we have stopped the siting of power plants. We stopped the siting of a 520MW power plant that would have been the size of three US football fields. I don't, because I know football means something else in England. We have doubled the amount of open space. We have a plan to turn the industrial waterfront into a place that's a vehicle for climate adaptation, mitigation, and resilience, so to shut down the polluting infrastructure. We have brought back buses that were taken away by the city so that people would have access, and people may not see the connection between this and climate change or the connection between this and environmental racism, but there is. All of that polluting infrastructure drops tons of particulate matter 2.5 knocks socks, all of the emissions that get trapped in narrow air passages for our children and our elders, and not only causes asthma and upper respiratory diseases, but cancer and other kinds of health disparities.

Natalie Sharp: And Chisara, can you reflect on that when you're Thinking about how you came to make *The Air That We Live In*?

Chisara Agor: Elizabeth said earlier about hearing the news about Ella Kissi-Debrah and how it resonated because it does. I kind of want someone to say, actually, no, it's not like that here. It's different. Why would it be any different when the historical context is the same? The most polluted boroughs, in London we have boroughs, there's Newham, and again, a 70% of Newham is people of colour, and it's also the poorest borough in London. So these things all line up. Manchester in the UK is one of the highest polluted cities and not only do we have divides in London in boroughs, but also we have the North-South divide in the UK. So the wealthier side in the South, you know, money and infrastructure is pumped into that area because that's where the city is, that's where the money is made.

I think with *The Air We Live In*, with the project, I obviously was focusing on what was close to me and what was near to me, but with the intention for it to resonate globally and to demonstrate that this is not just a one city problem.

Natalie Sharp: And what other problems in regards to clean air are there in New York?

Elizabeth Yeampierre: My goodness. Um, there isn't a single community of colour in New York City that isn't surrounded by environmental burdens. A lack of environmental amenities, but a disparate number of environmental burdens and it's black and brown children in New York City that, not only have breathing problems because of poor pollution, but are also having other kinds of problems, like learning disabilities. Little girls start developing, at the age of eight or nine, they start with their menstruation because they're in such proximity to these environmental burdens. So I think that people often think that it's just the breathing, but it really is how all those chemicals and all those emissions lands in our bodies.

And it isn't just a generation, it's multi-generational it's intergenerational. Think about the fact that it is our communities that have been, we're the descendants of extraction, of slavery, of colonization. So we have over generations had the worst food, the worst air quality, the worst everything, and sustained stress because of racism from generation to generation. That not only makes us unhealthy, but it makes us more susceptible to disease. So you take that historical context and then you add to that climate change and all the stresses that people are dealing with racial violence, with ICE raids, with all of the things that our people have to endure on a regular basis, things that other people read about, but we live, right? And you've got a community that's tremendously vulnerable to air pollution. And people like to say that the air affects everybody in the same way, and it does

not affect everyone at the same way, because some people have access to other homes at other places, good food, better healthcare. Our communities do not.

Natalie Sharp: Hearing from Elizabeth, Chisara and Nyeisha, one thing that becomes apparent is that we may not necessarily feel the effects of air pollution until much further down the line.

You can't see the air, but is it possible to imagine a life without it?

Daisy Lafarge: My name is Daisy Lafarge. I'm a poet and writer based in Glasgow and I'm going to be reading from *Life Without Air*, which is a book of poems that came out in November 2020.

Desecration Air

The dunes migrate inwards, sag
Like cellulite from the headland.
In birth, you grew maladaptive
Breathing patterns to survive
the air, patterns in which you are now
Architecturally invested;
Your dealings with air are more frequent
than ever. Brittle waves of grit
Clump the wind-lashed marram
Who only avoid the sand's smothering
By growing, syringe-like
Into the air, and in so doing suckle
And cleave the dunes around them.
Such a boom and bust modality
Raises the question of who
Is mother to whom, if your method
Of resisting an environment
Becomes in turn the order
That generates its form.

Natalie Sharp: The romantic poet John Keats coined the term 'negative capability', a term which refers to how great writers pursue a vision of artistic beauty, even as it leads them into intellectual confusion. In other words, trying to understand something that you can't see or touch. You can only visualize it by looking at its effects.

And this seems like a good metaphor for the air we breathe. I think Daisy's poetry speaks to the negative capability of air. It's especially provocative and poignant in a time when it's becoming difficult to breathe.

Daisy Lafarge: Falsification air

What can I pass on, you ask,
About methods of detecting the air?
It has become so baitual
I am not sure where to begin.
Each morning I walk into the world

Looking for signs. Early, before light
Is normalised by the shadow of buildings
And the gentle fraying of traffic. It seems the signs
Are most attracted to states of dereliction
To receive them, it helps to be empty
But imbued with residual function
Like a disused water tower
Or any number of wither technologies.
Lie back. Let the world grow over you
Like weeds. Consider the sheets of air
Gridlocked in double glazing. Now
Are you beginning to understand?

Natalie Sharp: Her book *Life without Air* has a title which is taken from the words of 19th century chemist and microbiologist Louis Pasteur. Though he gave his name to the term pasteurisation, he was massively right wing and a huge germaphobe.

Daisy's poems weave together scientific words that Pasteur might have used, with an almost mythical language, which strips away the notion that air is pure - and exposes its toxicity.

Daisy Lafarge: In our memoir on spontaneous generation, everything combined to prevent the interference of air. On March 23rd, we filled the shape represented. A most simple method of observing the deadly effect of air. To assure ourselves we filled two tubes. We cited a mineral medium. On April 9th, we composed a liquid. This liquid had previously been left to herself. This liquid, the author says, had a feeble reaction. For the first few days she remained perfectly clear, then began to grow turbid. On that same day, we first observed a deposit between the mercury and the sides of the tube. Kept at summer heat, she speedily swarmed with organisms. By evening, a tolerable activity had begun to manifest. On the fifth day a few bubbles betokened. On May 13th, we refrained from impregnating. We examined a drop. She was less vigorous without having actually ceased. Under observation she seemed to languish. She showed every sign of intense unease and asphyxia, although mobile at the articulations. After having lived without air, we concluded that she could not be suddenly exposed. We were forced to regard her as a distinct species and have employed the vaguest nomenclature, leaving her absolutely intact. She possesses unusual powers of resistance. She may be brought to a state of dry dust and be wafted about by winds.

Natalie Sharp: Through the series, one thing that keeps coming back is this idea that everything is connected. One thing affects another. The emission of smoke and gases has been known to affect rainfall. Airborne pollution particles can also change how rain clouds develop, potentially delaying rainfall to create more violent summer storms.

In 2012 Superstorm Sandy was so deadly and destructive that it killed 233 people across eight countries from the Caribbean to Canada.

Nyiesha Mallett: Sandy happened when I was 11. It was interesting because I didn't really understand what was going on other than the fact, my friends, I knew friends that had their house flooded or like, could they move back into the homes that they were in specifically in like areas like Sunset Park that are near the water. A lot of people lost their housing. So I was hearing those stories, just like everything else, Sandy kind of hit parts of Brooklyn differently. So I didn't see these things until I came into UPROSE, but the crazy thing is that the effects were even worse three years later than it was the actual day Sandy happened. And the effects are still even worse today because

there's still families who don't have access to their homes or who couldn't move back to those areas or had to move out of New York in general. Then you start mapping, well these are communities of colour these are people that look like me, so what are the solutions?

Natalie Sharp: And Elizabeth, can you share your findings with us about those affected by Hurricane Katrina? Who they were? Who those voices were?

Elizabeth Yeampierre: You know, Hurricane Katrina really broke my heart. And then I saw it again with Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, which, you know, you're talking about people of African ancestry, with long deep roots in New Orleans and the Gulf South. And you couldn't look away, even though it was painful to see those black bodies floating and you knew that they weren't going to get the help and the support that they needed because they were black. And that's the story of Katrina. And that is the story in Puerto Rico. And those are our collective stories,, they're the same, they're the same people.

So for us, it's not even just, how do you slow down climate change? It's what does resilience look like for us? Because that word is loaded for us. Resilience means bouncing back to what was normal, but when the past wasn't normal for us, when the past was racial violence, police brutality, unemployment, disinvestment, we can't bounce back. We need to think about how we move forward. And so even coming up with language is important for us, which is why Chisara's art piece is so important because it really triggers the imagination. It tells people, it literally provokes deep, deep feelings of anxiety and fear, but also really provokes what is possible in terms of what we might be able to do collectively.

Nyiesha Mallett: Black and brown artists who have this spiritual connection to the land are reclaiming that right now, and that's why our art is important within the sense of the climate justice movement, because we're not sure what this world looks like. We only know what we want out of it, and artists could give us that sense, artists could give that look and help people understand and vocalize and talk about it and visualize it in a different way.

Natalie Sharp: And Elizabeth, I read, you were talking about how you're having to create and replace your own language. Is that why you've used the word resistance as opposed to resilience?

Elizabeth Yeampierre: People think about resistance in the sense of it being revolution. This is about revolution. This is about recreating, repurposing, re-imagining what our future is going to be like and what's acceptable and what isn't, and that's not just physical space. That is literally relationships. It's easier to focus on infrastructure and policy and not address the issue of the fact that there are no just relationships, that we need to engage in deep, deep self-transformation.

And so the word resilience assumes that before the event, everything was normal, but nothing has ever been normal for us. And so we need to think forward. And what's the language? What's the word that we use to capture how we envision ourselves five years from now, 10 years from now, a hundred years from now?

Chisara Agor: There is this new language of artistry and making and creating that is embedded in a shared experience and a shared artistic language that doesn't necessarily mean that we're all doing the same dance moves or the same, using the same instruments, but there is an energy and then there is a spirit of demonstrating our legacy, our history.

Natalie Sharp: The language of the UN... of the COP and G20 summits is broken, it does not work and no meaningful change can be hoped for through the traditional avenues of lobbying and policy making.

In the recent Cop26 summit, many activists whose voices have been historically overlooked, representatives from indigenous movements, trade unions and youth strikers, were yet again, not given a seat at the table making this most recent summit the whitest yet.

Something needs to change, some kind of radical transformation. Can we create a space for reconnection?

Elizabeth Yeampierre: We think that infrastructure can be dull and boring. It doesn't capture the imagination of people, but we need to reach people's hearts and we need to reach people's minds, and the way that we engage in that deep cellular spiritual transformation is by making sure that art is integrated into all of the work that we do. And so, you know, Nyeisha's an accomplished artist and if you came to our office, you're going to see art everywhere.

Chisara Agor: I want to go over there and just hang out and have a tea and chat!

Elizabeth Yeampierre: I hope I get to see you because I feel that what you do is transformative and necessary in this time when we're in deep pain and feel sometimes that there's no opening, like we're not going to be able to get past this.

Chisara Agor: I just want to jump through the computer screen and just give everyone a hug really.

Elizabeth Yeampierre: Sorry, I just want to say about that, because we didn't mention that, we are fun, we do party. We do embrace joy because that is our resistance right there.

Chisara Agor: Yes, please!

Elizabeth Yeampierre: So comment hang.

Nyiesha Mallett: Yeah, I'm definitely a tea person, so I think I can hang with y'all.

Natalie Sharp: The times we live in are... to put it bluntly, bleak. But in making this series, I've talked to some incredible artists, thinkers and activists, who despite the relentlessness of the 24 hr doomsday cycle are pushing up for change, and through their words, actions and artwork are holding the mirror up to us, showing us that this is not a responsibility that falls on any one person, young or old, privileged or not. It is fundamentally a collective effort, not just to clean up our planet, but also to listen...

To the layers of crusted rock
To the seedlings pushing through the frost
To the songs hidden in the canopy
To the cries of migrating whales as they surface for air
And to the very particles of air themselves.

If we are to be able to survive in a world in which it's becoming increasingly hard to breathe, where the land, the sea, the forests and the very ground on which we stand are deteriorating, we need to find some kind of way of reframing what the climate emergency actually is, instead of recycling the same old story.

Thank you for listening to Climate Frequencies, you can now hear all five episodes wherever you get your podcasts.

Find out more about these artists, activists, thinkers, problem solving, inspiring and amazing provocateurs by visiting the [BALTIC website](#).

This episode was produced, sound designed and scored by Femi Oriogun-Williams. Tess Davidson and Silvia Malnati were our researchers. Alannah Chance was the executive producer.

That's it for this series from the BALTIC... I'm still Natalie Sharp... and if I don't see you next time, I'll see you on the stomping grounds!