

CREATIVE RESPONDERS

Podcast Transcript In Conversation with Anika Molesworth December 2021

Scotia Hi I'm Scotia Monkivitch,

Welcome back for another episode of Creative Responders: In Conversation; our monthly interview series where we hear from people on the frontlines of the arts and emergency management sector as they prepare, respond and recover from disaster.

Today's guest is agroecologist, scientist and farmer, Doctor Anika Molesworth.

Anika is a founding director of Farmers for Climate Action, a movement that puts farmers at the centre of climate solutions. She is a passionate advocate for sustainable farming, environmental conservation and climate change action.

Anika art and creativity, as you say, play such a critical role in helping us solve this problem and particularly in engaging people at a heartfelt emotional level. Because if we don't engage people at that emotional level, you know, we're very unlikely to see behavioral change, you know, mindset change.

Scotia Hailing from her family's sheep station near Broken Hill in far western NSW, it was the impact of the decade-long Millennium drought on their farm that spurred her interest in climate change.

The crippling drought filled Anika with determination to speak out about the changes she was witnessing on the land and in her community - this has led to her becoming a prominent rural spokesperson both in Australia and around the world.

In her new book, *Our Sunburnt Country*, Anika details her personal story alongside a courageous and optimistic vision for the future of agriculture.

I hope you enjoy my conversation with Creative Responder, Anika Molesworth

Scotia Welcome to Creative Responders in Anika, thanks for joining us. We're pretty pleased that we could speak to you in our final conversation for 2021. I'm here in Meanjin Brisbane on Yaggara Turrbal Country. Where are you joining us today?

Anika So I'm calling in from far western New South Wales from the beautiful Wilyakali country, and it's a pleasure to be here with you.

Scotia So congratulations on the release of your book *Our Sunburnt Country*. I've been reading it over the past month, it's such a wonderful, powerful articulation of the global challenges of climate change and framed in such a personal way through your own stories of your family's farm in Broken Hill. So there's a lot we wanted to talk about with you today, but can we start maybe with the point you raised in the book about the agricultural sector being the first to fully experience the impacts of climate change and how radical evolution in food production is one of the biggest ways that we can get that we can mitigate the effects of climate change. And I wanted to ask you about the importance of telling the story of climate change from the perspective of farmers. Can you talk about why amplifying that voice or your voice is so vital in this issue?

Anika Well, as you mentioned there, you know, people who live and work so closely with the natural world are some of the first to really notice the changes that are occurring, especially in terms of the climate. Because obviously what farmers can grow, where they can grow it, is entirely dependent on seasonal conditions. When is the rain falling? How much rain is received? The temperatures experienced the the abundance and changes in pests and diseases that really does impact the farmer. And so we are noticing a growing voice coming out of the farming sector at the moment, sort of a voice of concern because these people who live and work so closely with nature are saying, Well, we're noticing changes. It's not only affecting our businesses, our productivity and profitability, it's impacting our culture, it's impacting the social fabric of rural communities. And as someone who has the privilege of living out here in rural Australia in the most beautiful countryside, I thought this is an incredibly important story to share. And it is a way of engaging people far and wide with the topic of climate change because we all eat food. And so what happens in the

food sector, how it is impacted by climate change, how we can use the food system to mitigate emissions and adapt to a changing climate is going to be incredibly important going forward. And when I was doing research at myself looking for books on this topic, I found it difficult to actually find a book on this topic. And so I noticed there was a gap there and I felt the urge to try and fill it.

Scotia Great. So from the voice of your experience. You talk and you use the the kind of philosophy of Human Land Association. Can you unpack that a bit for us? What is it? What do you mean by that living with that human land association?

Anika So it's that connection to one's surrounds, to nature, to the soil, to the the birds and animals and plants that surround us. And when you have the privilege of growing food, you see how connected people are with the natural world. You are literally, you know, putting seeds into the ground or raising livestock. You understand the importance of of water of nutrients. You understand how that produce, that plant or animal is then consumed by a person and actually gives them the nutrients needed to function to have good well-being. And so it's a very, you know, a deep understanding of that interconnection that humans have with the natural world. And with that connection, we bear a great responsibility to look after the balance and look after the system to make sure we're not disrupting it and degrading it in a way that would actually negatively influence us people.

Scotia It's about that layering of relationship, what does true relationship mean?

Anika Yeah, absolutely. And there are, you know, many people I can look at in the rural sector who, you know, really exemplify that connection to the land. And of course, we we notice it most significantly when we talk with Traditional Owners here in Australia because they have had, you know, tens of thousands of years of connection to landscape, knowledge of food production, you know, knowledge of community stability and how that is related to the ability to harvest food and collect foods. And I think, you know, nowadays there is a lot of, you know, loss of sense of connection to place. Many people don't feel that sense of belonging to a location, that sense of responsibility to look after that natural environment that surrounds them. And I think that's an incredible shame and something that we need to work harder at overcoming. Because when we do feel connected to a place when we do feel a sense of belonging to look after it, we you know that care in that compassion actually drives our actions. And so that's something that I really hope to engender and talk about in this book.

Scotia Well, the cultural indicators of well-being talk about place and identity being the key core components of how you find your strength, which call that resilience or otherwise, these words are getting tossed around so much now, aren't they Anika in terms of how we understand them or how we unpack them, or what do we mean by them? This notion of resilience, you know, so many definitions or ways that people have used it appropriately or otherwise.

Anika Yeah, absolutely, and as you say, different people will have different interpretations and definitions of the word resilience, but it is not only sort of, you know, bouncing back to one's position after, you know, an event which has shaken our foundations. But how do we bounce forward? How do we do things better? Or how do we regenerate landscapes and food systems? Not talking in the language of, you know, just conserving or sustaining a particular state. But how do we do better than we have before? And as the world and the climate continues to challenge us, we need to be thinking about, you know, how do we do things better than we have been doing the close? The status quo is no longer working.

Scotia One of your friends that you talk about in the book, Yemi Adeyeye talks about that if you have an agricultural conversation, you have a conversation about human existence, and that's kind of what you're saying in terms of how you see the interrelationship occurring between our actions, the actions of our food production and the way that it then impacts on the world around us.

Anika Absolutely. I mean, so often we seem to think of the world in such a fragmented manner that, you know, food productions over here with farmers, you know, the climate and environment somewhere over there and what we buy from the supermarket bears no relation to that farming system or that climate system. And we need to really get better at understanding. No, this is actually one and the same system. And what we do every single day in every interaction we have with each other, with the planet, with our food does have a flow on effect. And Yemi describes that interaction very beautifully. And as you say, you know, talks about food, the in the language of humanity, what we eat, what we put in our body is how our physical well-being, our mental well-being that does influence our planetary well-being and the health of our common home. And so we really need to look after the planet if we're going to have any success in looking after ourselves.

Scotia And I suppose that's that the connection to this world of disaster management that we are sort of working in and with and you know, there's more and more in policy written about the interconnection, the need for everyone to take due responsibility and that it can't be done in isolation. It can't be done like we can't create resilience or we can't create future thinking without an inclusive voice to be part of that and

farming communities so strongly a leader in understanding and building that relationship. And that's in some ways, the formation of organisational groups like Farmers for Climate Action, which I know that you're part of. Ensuring that all of those voices have some place at the table.

Anika Absolutely, we absolutely need diversity in these conversations because we don't learn by talking to ourselves in the mirror. We learn by talking with different people. People who think differently and do differently. And we need to absolutely amplify and encourage voices that have been suppressed or oppressed for way too long and not have not been included in these conversations of where we are going and what solutions do we need to implement. So here in Australia, farmers make up less than one percent of the population. And so often when we're reading articles in the media about what's happening in the farming community of agricultural policies, they're not actually conversations involving the farmers, which I find bizarre. And so we need to encourage people from the rural sector. And it's not just farmers, of course, to, you know, to be involved. And we need to really look at, well, how do we help them be involved? How do we improve telecommunications systems so they can attend conferences and be part of policymaking meetings? How can we nurture and develop the capacity of people in rural communities so they feel wanted and needed and respected to have their voices heard? And we all we should also absolutely celebrate creative and critical thinking, not encouraging people with the same line of sight and the same thinking that has always happened. But people who really, you know, shake the status quo, who really challenge it. And that's often when we look to younger people and we look at those amazing school strikers who are taking to the streets and saying, you know, what's happening is unacceptable and why should I go? Why should I go to school if we're not listening to the science? You know, people who can really like push the conversation much, much further and much, much faster, and that's what we need at this point in time.

Scotia Yeah, and also making sure that that language is framed within real stories, and I think that's the selling point that things like your book and the activity of farmers for Climate Action and other activists is about making those stories real. And I just go back to what you were saying about creativity because, you know, we're here to advocate for that very strong role that creativity in the arts could play, potentially in this space and the responsibility we take and often when talking with farmers and some of the previous conversations we've had on the creative responders of podcast, talk about that the very clear linkage between how artists work and how farmers work as the kind of necessity of problem solving and creativity that forms the processing of both of those kind of areas of practice. You know, to to be a survivor as a farmer you have to be creative in the way that you are engaging with the ongoing daily issues that you that you live with and also the new looking for new ways and new perspectives of how you might engage with the world that you're holding.

Scotia Do you see yourself as an artist, Anika in your work?

Anika Well, I do see farming as a kind of an art form because you are working with this incredible thing. You know, the landscape, the climate, the human system and you understand how these things, you know, have this interrelationship and they bounce off each other. And you know, the way one thing you know is amplified or, you know, is detracted influences all those things around. So, yeah, I do think of it as a kind of an art form. You know, actually producing food and fibers. But I also think art and creativity, as you say, play such a critical role in helping us solve this problem and particularly in engaging people at a heartfelt emotional level. Because if we don't engage people at that emotional level, you know, we're very unlikely to see behavioral change, you know, mindset change. So by using creative mediums and platforms, even, you know, social media channels where we can share photos and videos and stories much more easily and readily and widespread, you know, across the world, people can see these things instantaneously and connect with someone's story. I think it's brilliant. And as more rural people are able to engage even just at a basic electronic communications tech level, that's brilliant because, for instance, I can go out in the paddock and I can see, you know, an incredible central bearded dragon scuttling along the sand. And I can take a video of that and I can share it instantly to, you know, social media and people can engage and go, wow with me, and I can then follow that conversation with, you know, something about the species.

Scotia And something about the way that you there's quite a poetics in how you frame your landscape. Anika, that really pulls, pulls in and you do mention love in your book, and I think love is such a strong element that we choose not to talk about so very much so it was beautiful to see that you bring that to the fore in the way that you write about not not only love of country, but love of process and how we need to engage that in terms of it being the basis for resilient lifestyles.

Anika Yeah, well, I've often reflected on why I am so concerned about climate change, why I advocate so loudly about the need to create the best possible world. And it comes back to very much an elemental level of, you know, I really love this place like I. I am so in love with this landscape. I love that I can live here with my family, and I get such a sense of joy and peace when I walk out, you know, at sunset and I see the galahs in the trees and know the dogs are running ahead of us and I'm having conversation with my husband or my parents. And it's that amazing ecosystem setting that I find myself in that I want to protect. I

want to preserve that. I want to make sure that that is never damaged or degraded, and I know it is in the path of danger because of climate change. So that's what drives me to do as much as I can in this area.

Scotia Yeah, and it's a pretty big it's often talking again in that notion of understanding the impact and the science, how bigger issues that we face. You talked in your book about how moving it was to be in Paris at that historic moment that the Paris Agreement was signed at the UN Climate Change Conference in 2015. And you described it as a triumph of hope and unity and a shining example of how the world can come together to address this deeply shared problem. But how are you feeling now about the level of international cooperation in light of the most recent climate conference in Glasgow and in the way that the agricultural sector is being positioned to discuss actions around this solution that we're all searching for?

Anika Yeah, I still look back at the Paris Agreement and how it was signed and how the world came together, as such, an incredible moment of hope like that is a moment in history that we will talk about for a long, long time and we should be. We should celebrate that. You know how people, countries, nations leaders around the world came together and said that this is an issue that we are going to fight. Fast forward, obviously, we're not moving fast enough. We're not doing enough. Absolutely not. And we can look at, you know, the successes of Glasgow, the most recent cop, and we can also talk about things that weren't achieved, things that didn't happen, that absolutely need to happen. And that's why it's so important for us as individuals to keep the pressure on. I mean, this is not a problem that someone else has the responsibility to fix. It is our problem. It is every single person problem because we're all contributing to it and we're all going to be significantly impacted by it. So I think too often we sort of, you know, point the fingers and say, you know, someone should do something about about this, but we actually need to look at ourselves and our own responsibility and take accountability and do as much as we can own space. And when we look at that sphere of influence that each of us can have, that's where one can actually start to feel quite energized and realize, well, I can do things. And if everyone does something that adds up, that ripple effect becomes a tidal wave of positive action, and that's what we absolutely need right now.

Scotia So, you know that was beautiful, a call to arms that you had in your book about what you can do today, what you can do this week, what you can do this month. It's true we we don't have to be drowned, we can we can take steps forward. And I think that's hopeful, hopeful thinking. And I think that's where the creative spirit can help because creative processes push you into your thinking brain and your capacity to see future beyond the immediacy. And we so much need that right now, don't we?

Anika we've had the science at hand for decades, but often people view the science as you know, academic and abstract, and they're not engaging in it in a way that would then actually spur them to change their actions or to do something different. At this point in time, when something different is required. And so that's why I do believe so strongly in the arts and the creative space, because that's where we actually help engage people, help people to feel empowered, feel motivated, inspired to understand the science, to understand what's happening in the natural world, and then process that at a deeper emotional, personal, urgent level that then creates that behavior change.

Scotia Well, you know, something that you come back to throughout your book is the importance of centering traditional knowledge as a First Nations and indigenous people, I know you've worked a lot in that space and how to harness this knowledge alongside new innovation, like how can we find that blend of past and future? Can you tell us a bit about the process of learning about First Nations relationship to Country and the confluence of these two things playing out as we collectively work towards these climate solutions?

Anika Yeah. I mean, so often we talk about land, natural resources as a commodity, as property, as something that can be bought and sold. And so often when we actually talk with traditional owners, they talk about it in a language of culture, of spiritual value, of, you know, a place, a family place, the story that is tied there to the landscape, the lessons that can be learned from that place that can guide us going forward and they're the conversations we need to be having that, that's the way that we should be looking at the world. You know, these beautiful places, these beautiful natural resources, these creatures that inhabit the world with us. We really shouldn't think as something that can be consumed or used or exploited. But, you know, a life form and life giving substances that we need to live alongside of and live amongst. Someone once said to me that, you know, history doesn't tell us where to go, but it offers a hand on the shoulder. It gives us advice. It gives us knowledge that we then can choose to use to look, you know what? What is the best pathways to move forward? And I think that's a very beautiful description of how we can use what we have learned over history as that guiding hand on our shoulder a chance to use knowledge and skills for better.

Scotia Oh, it's a beautiful analogy, isn't it? I think there's something very interesting this kind of connection in your world between tangible and intangible, and it's often the issue in the when we talk about creative in the arts, a lot of the work that we do and the processes that we use are about engaging in that intangible space of relationship. And yet they're in that farming life that you describe. This is real. Maybe it's a maybe it's about that notion of balance, but this referencing to such tangible outcomes, but embedded so deeply in the intangible relational sense.

Anika Yeah, I completely agree with that. Yeah, being a farmer, you have an amazing opportunity to see those connections and to live alongside those connections to understand how you know, the culture, the social fabric in our community. Wellbeing and mental health actually does flow on to something quite tangible. The productivity of a farm, you know, the nutrient value of food, which is coming off the farm, the the profitability, how much money is ending in the farmer's pocket versus not. And so when we start talking about climate solutions too, depending on what audience we're speaking with, we should tailor our conversations. You know, if someone wants to talk about, you know, the financial costs of not acting on climate change or the financial costs of acting on climate change, we should be talking in the language of economics and profitability and lost profit margins. If that is a if that is a conversation that resonates with that person and would help that person understand why we actually need to be doing more about climate change. But then other people need to engage much more at, you know, a cultural, emotional, spiritual level with this situation first, and we can absolutely talk in that language, too.

Anika I think this goes back to our conversation about diversity and why we need such a diverse group of people involved and a diverse voice involved. So we actually are covering all bases and connecting with a whole range of people on this issue so we can move all sectors of society, all sectors of the economy forward together, so we don't actually end up leaving anyone behind.

Scotia Yeah, so we need to talk about ethics and love within the context of economic development, we can't, we can't, we can't disconnect that relationship otherwise it breeds lack of resilience actually. Like you talk in your book, you need that love to be able to build the tangibility of the farm.

So you, you talk a lot about that imports of collaboration in your book and how we need to bring these diverse ranges of voices to the table to achieve transformative change, not just about slow plot, but how do we look at new paradigms and looking at new ways of how we do that? And I think there's a lot of people who write about collaboration and the challenge that it holds for us as a human species. People like Richard Sennett, etc. say that we need to re learn how to collaborate because without collaboration, we we will continue a cycle that is not it's not going to take us into fresh futures, can you? What role can you see that the arts and creative sector playing in supporting the agenda that you have, that farmers have that farmers for climate action are advocating for? How do you see us in a process of collaboration? You talked a little earlier about showing ways to tell a story, but can you see any other options of how we could collaborate more effectively to to fight this fight in this space and draw this agenda and bring people on board in safe and accessible ways?

Anika Well, I think farmers have an incredible story to tell, something that is rich and unique on every single farm. It is a story of interconnection with the land and love and responsibility of our environment. It is a story of community and producing food that goes to nourish people. And then when we look at the art sector, we see the storytellers, people who can actually paint the pictures, describe the settings and people with words and poetry who can, you know, translate abstract science into something visually beautiful, something that strikes people that, you know, takes them by, you know, a gasping, oh my gosh, like, wow, that's what's happening. And so I think that's a great opportunity for people in the art sector and people in the farming sector to connect. I guess one of the problems is there are quite a few farmers in Australia. How do we do the one percent of the population? I mentioned earlier and they, many of them are geographically isolated. They're living in far flung places across Australia. We are like myself. And so we do actually need extra effort and time to reach out, to connect, to form friendships, to form trusting working relationships. You know, as a storyteller, you can trust me because I will carry your story with dignity and respect that it deserves, and I will present it in a way that you think your story should be presented to the world. So I think it comes down to something very basic of, you know, extending a hand of friendship, offering support, offering services to help amplify someone's voice who hasn't had their voice heard, you know, previously and working with someone closely and respectfully to help cover a very difficult topic. And for farmers talking about climate change, talking about the impacts of floods of bushfires or droughts or what that means, they're really to their business, to the family, to their own mental health. They are difficult stories to open up and share. And so we do need to be careful with these fragile stories. But there are stories that absolutely need to be heard because that is the humanity that's caught in the climate crisis. And that's how we're going to engage people at that emotional, heartfelt level that would then drive the mindset and behavioral change that we need.

Scotia Do you have any examples from your own experience in terms of how creativity arts have been utilized for for your own communication or others support?

Anika Yes. So two years ago, well, actually just when COVID was ramping up here in Australia, I got an email completely out of the blue from a couple from the Netherlands who had just landed in Sydney. They were unaware that they were about to get trapped here for the next 18 months, that they reached out and said, Oh, we were Googling Australian farmers and your name popped up and we would love to come out to Broken Hill. We're very concerned about climate change. We've been reading and watching what's happening with the bushfires here in Australia. I would love to learn from you and to capture some of your

story. They were filmmakers, so they came out here to Broken Hill. They bought a little comedy, then they drove like three thousand kilometers, got to me, spent a few days out here. And, you know, just over the days, you could see how their eyes were widening and in almost disbelief of what's actually happening with the landscape, what actually climate change means to Australian farmers. And over the next 12 months, they put together this amazing documentary film series. They were so inspired by my story that they went on to connect with four or five other farmers around Australia. They did a road trip. They filmed their stories. They've now released them online. They're in discussions with some very amazing, you know, channels to promote the film. They did two cinema launches in Amsterdam and Copenhagen, so I got up at three a.m. in the morning two months ago and I spoke on the cinema screen to the audience in Amsterdam and Copenhagen. And they are just, you know, two incredible people who live in the mouth that live on the other side of the world who want to help share this story. And they're sharing the story, you know, in their home country and with people around the world now. And I feel so incredibly privileged and honored to be part of that, and I want to work with people like that and so many other farmers want to work with people like that.

Scotia What's the name of the documentary.

Anika So the documentary is called The Positive Alternative, and it can be viewed on Waterbear. And there's five five episodes up.

Scotia I'm very curious about how you use the word courage in your book. And could you explain a little what you mean by courage or climate courage it's such a beautiful term to be presented and for us to take on as a kind of stimulus It's such a underutilized but such an important sensibility that we seem to have lost, really.

Anika When we look at the climate crisis so often, we can feel daunted and overwhelmed. And it is much easier to think, you know, someone else will deal with it. I can sit this one out. It's not my fight. But when we realize, you know, the rise in the scale of what's actually happening around us, of the changes that are occurring and not changing for the better - these are things that are actually seriously impacting the health and wellbeing of our planet and therefore our human communities. We need to really reflect on, well, like what do you hold dear in your heart? For me, it's it's my farm. It's it's this beautiful landscape that I'm so privileged to call home. It's time with my family. And these things that I love and these things that you know, other people love, they are in the path of danger because of climate change. And so we need to draw deep that sense of courage and go, well, I won't stand by as a silent witness and watch these things deteriorate or be damaged or be threatened. I can do something and I will do something. And yes, it might seem small and insignificant, and I will ride a wave of frustrations and setbacks. But there will also be beautiful times of hope and encouragement and meeting, you know, terrific people that just energize me and, you know, champion and, you know, encourage me to do more work. And that's that's what matters. So we need to find that courage to, you know, push forward to face our challenge, to face, you know, the really serious challenges we are presented with, but know that we can and we should do something about it. So that's what that's what's courage to me.

Scotia Well, thanks, Anika, for your courage and great platform, you open up for us to talk in real ways about climate change and our future and for the activism and the communication doing around this issue. It's really encourage our listeners to read your book as Sunburnt Country, which is out now and all good bookstores and audio books. But apart from the book, where else can people find you if they'd like to know more about your work or the work that you do in association with other organizations.

Anika Ah, so I'm you know, fairly regular on social media so Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. I do a lot of posts talking about obviously climate change, farming, food security. I have a website which I post up videos to and explain a bit more about my work. But if your listeners are interested in these topics relating to how climate change is impacting the food and farming system and what we can and what we should be doing about it, I would really encourage them to head along to Farmers for Climate Action. They also have a great website, great social media channels. They regularly run webinars where anyone's invited to watch to learn more about these topics and learn how to get involved to help solve this problem.

Scotia Mm how to take action collectively to make change. Thank you so much, Anika, for taking time to chat with us today. It's been lovely spending time with you and hearing your stories and wish you all the very best for this very big journey you and your family are walking on and thanks again for all your energy and courage and inspiration for us to walk along with you.

Anika Thank you so much for having me on the show.

[Theme music comes back in]

Thanks for joining me for Creative Responders: In Conversation and special thanks to Anika for making the time to speak with me.

Anika's book *Our Sunburnt Country* is out now - check our show notes for details as well as a link to 'The Positive Alternative' documentary and other resources related to our conversation.

If you'd like to access episode transcripts and research links related to the podcast, head over to creative-recovery.net.au where you can find all of our past episodes and materials relating to each one.

This is our last conversation for the year - thank you for joining me today - and throughout 2021.

We'll be taking a short break in January and will be back in February with new episodes of our documentary podcast series featuring two in depth case studies about how the arts and creativity can support and transform communities as they prepare and respond to natural disasters.

I hope you can join us then and wish you all a safe and happy festive season.

This podcast is produced by me, Scotia Monkivitch, and my Creative Recovery Network colleague, Jill Robson. Our sound engineer is Glen Morrow and original music is composed by Mikey Squire.

Thanks for listening.