

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 63: Climate Change

Guests: Elena Aurora, Layel Carmago and Alex Ghenis

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

Introduction

[hip-hop beat with radio static]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Heyyyyyy there, friends! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today's episode is about climate change, and more broadly, the climate crisis. Living in California, I see firsthand what happens to marginalized communities during natural disasters and emergencies. And these events are only gonna increase as the destruction of our planet goes unchecked. Our world is changing, but it's not too late to do something about it.

First, I'm in conversation with Layel Camargo and Elena Aurora, the creators of Woke N Wasteless, a project highlighting the intersections of environmentalism, climate change, and social justice. Next, I talk with Alex Ghenis, a Policy and Research Specialist at the World Institute on Disability. You're gonna learn about consumption, capitalism, zero waste, climate resilience, and how people most impacted are the ones with the wisdom and creative solutions that we need. You'll also learn about the relationship between, conflict, migration, and climate change. Are ya ready? Away we gooooo!

Introduction to Elena and Layel's interview

ALICE: So, Layel and Elena, thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

ELENA AURORA: Yay!

LAYEL CARMAGO: Thank you for inviting us!

ELENA: [laughs] We're so excited.

ALICE: Why don't we have you both introduce yourselves?

LAYEL: I'm Layel Camargo. I am queer, I'm transgender, I live with two invisible disabilities. I have endometriosis, and I self-identify as being on the Asperger's spectrum. I'm born in San Diego, currently living in the Bay Area. I'm a descendent of the Yaqui and Mayo Indigenous tribe of the Sonoran Desert. I am a college graduate. Yeah, and I'm just happy to be here!

ALICE: Me too! How about you, Elena?

ELENA: My name's Elena, Elena Aurora. I'm also queer. I'm in relationship with Layel. I come from European descendent in that we, on my dad's side, we benefitted from white supremacy

and capitalism over the years, and our lineage are European, German, and English? I almost forgot for a second! And then on my mom's side, we're Peruvian and a mixture of Spanish and Indigenous relatives on that side. I identify as mixed race. I'm currently doing some farm work and kinda learning and spreading my wings in what social justice looks like in the food sector. But I come from a reproductive justice sort of background, and I've been organizing with birth workers for the past five years or so. I'm from the Bay Area. I'm from the South Bay, and I currently live in Berkeley with my partner and my dog!

[gentle acoustic guitar music break]

Woke N Wasteless and working toward zero waste

ALICE: So, you two created [Woke N Wasteless](#). What is Woke N Wasteless, and why did you two create it?

LAYEL: Woke N Wasteless, the name itself, we benefit a lot from Black and African American resistance history from the term "woke." To be woke means to be awake, to be conscious. We created Woke N Wasteless because we both are people that try to live in more harmony and in right relationship with the planet as well as other people. And part of that was really looking at the way that we eat, looking at the way that we live our day-to-day, and making conscious decisions wherever possible to kind of live in more harmony with the earth. We wanted to amplify other people of color who were doing the same thing: people who represented our communities and who cared about the planet but just don't get the spotlight because they don't fit in the cookie cutter box of how beautiful and performative like white people are set to be seen on social media.

ELENA: This is Elena speaking. A few years ago, we decided to go zero waste. I had told Layel, "I want us to go zero waste, but I feel like that's a white people thing." And Layel was like, "It is a white people thing!" [chuckles] But really, the zero-waste conversations we were seeing online, especially on Instagram, were kind of about consuming our way out of climate crisis or out of the environmental issues that we're seeing. And we really saw the root of those environmental issues as consumerism, as resource extraction, and how do we move the conversation into folks of color having solutions or have always had solutions, and moving the conversations along that way. And moving the hashtag #ZeroWaste less about what kind of bumble bee wax you have to cover your Tupperware and more about how can we be better allies to folks with disabilities, to Black and brown people, to Indigenous folks, and trying to shift stuff that way.

ALICE: And for a lot of listeners who may not understand or maybe even heard of what zero waste is in terms of the movement, could one of you kinda explain it in terms of it as a philosophy?

LAYEL: Yeah. This is Layel. Zero waste is a post-industrial term that was created in the early 1970s. There was companies that said, "Oh, we could use byproducts left over from making weapons or from making chemicals or cleaning products, and we can reuse them and call them zero waste and resell another product." And it's a term that came out of the Bay Area. Zero waste, I think, in the last 10, 15 years has really become a way for people to self-identify themselves as not creating trash, as not using plastic, where everything that they use is quote-unquote "low impact." But again, this is from a white lens. Some of the people who are leading in the zero-waste movement—and by leading meaning they coin themselves as being founders of it as a lifestyle—they fly all over the planet. You just look at their social media, and it's like, you're actually not living a low-impact life. Which, again, brings me back to why it's important for people of color and for folks who live on the margins to be able to own that term for themselves

and really recon it to what it actually means, which is living in better harmony with their ecosystem, whatever that looks like for them. Because our people have been doing it first before we started seeing “zero waste” as a term that was used to sell you something.

[upbeat acoustic guitar and drum music break]

ALICE: What are some everyday things that you both do to really create a household, a home to really live in harmony?

ELENA: Well, there’s the simple things that I could say. We make our toothpaste. Layel at least works at some place that has composting toilets. We recently moved into a coop that has solar panels, which we know comes with a certain level of privilege. We try to reduce our plastic use. We can make all of these individual changes, but we’re still dealing with the symptoms of a collective problem. What is my role as one person in doing bulk grocery shopping? How is that gonna benefit versus making sure that there are bulk grocery stores available to folks? But really, at my core, I’m trying to think about what’s really for me about creating points of intervention in systemic changes where we can have more people having more access.

And I think disability community especially has been affected by just access to having things that—I’m air quoting on the phone right now—the “zero-waste movement” in terms of what is actually accessible to folks. It still is focused around the products you can buy to be more environmentally friendly. And I wanna excite people to think about well, how do we just live with producing less waste? And those who need to produce the waste that they need to be able to survive, how can we allow that to happen for those folks who need it? So, it’s really shifting the individual into the systemic.

LAYEL: I think something that has really helped me to kinda be able to stay focused on just my impact all around is to really be kind of conscious of how I go my day-to-day. Like where am I using things? There are definitely times when I have had to pick driving to work over riding my bike, but just the fact that I’m conscious of it is, unfortunately, a very rare thing. And this is just like at my core, what are the small ways that I can be more conscious and make better selections for myself that are available? Things like “carbon footprint” are a guise for this continued idea that really, we think we can buy our way out of our current problem, out of the current infrastructures and the systems that are hurting people.

Simple things you can do is be conscious, and wherever you feel empowered to make the best decisions for yourself, whether it’s recycling, whether it’s composting, whether it’s limiting your plastic use, whether it’s collectivizing with the people that you live with: there’s a lotta little ways we can support each other in this.

[mellow acoustic guitar break]

Wisdom about zero waste that isn’t being amplified yet and biodiversity

ALICE: Speaking of language and terminology like “zero waste,” a lot of it is the superficial presentation and coverage about it. It’s very much about this very white, classist experience. And what is some wisdom that you both know about that you think should be amplified that’s not being amplified?

LAYEL: I think we all have our internal wisdom. We’re born into this world with our ancestors’ wisdom alongside us. I’ve been kind of introduced to this term “biodiversity”: the idea that every species has its own diversity. There are folks with different abilities, there are folks of different colors, there are folks with different neurodiversities. Especially as a gender non-conforming

person, if I was to exist in my tribe 500, 600, 700 years ago, I would have a very particular role. I would be a culture keeper. Maybe I would steward land in a particular way. I would have a particular role in my immediate family. And because of capitalism and because I don't fit in particular gender box, I'm easily disposable. And this can be easily said if you replace my gender identity with my race, with my ability, with everything. Every single person on this planet has a unique experience, and through those experiences, we have so many creative solutions to our global problems.

If we're really concerned about plastic pollution, we should not only be talking to white, upper-class people who have access to policy change about how to fix our plastic pollution problem. We should be talking to everybody, from people who manufacture it and extract the oil to people who use it the most: folks in the medical sector and folks who rely on sterile environments. And I don't think that we value biodiversity because under capitalism, the only thing that matters is the person on the top who's making the most money. When we can't find a solution, we need to break away from our constructed individualism and be comfortable tapping into the minds and the power and offerings that other people have alongside us who navigate the world very differently than we do.

ALICE: I love this answer, Layel. Thank you so much for sharing.

LAYEL: Of course.

ALICE: How about you, Elena?

ELENA: There are a lot of Indigenous folks, a lot of folks of color, a lot of frontline communities that are showing us real solutions, that are organizing. There's tons of organizations all across the United States, that are just doing really great work. I think about I like this analogy, "the Oppression Olympics," like who's more oppressed, you know? But really, Indigenous folks and really, folks with disabilities are the ones that don't get brought or asked to the conversation ever. I would just like to see more respect given to the things that those folks in those communities are saying.

LAYEL: So, I think with solutions, if we could just live more simpler, we could fix a lot of those problems. What that means is that we have to slow down. And the great thing is if we slow down, we make more room for folks with different abilities, we make room for elderly, we have more intentional upbringing of young people. But at the core, we destroy capitalism's main mode of function, which is go as fast as possible and make the most money as fast as you can. 'Cause it's a race against, a race against time [chuckles] at this point.

ELENA: And other people.

LAYEL: Yeah, and exploit other people. The problem is that—and we saw this with the plastic straw ban—is that we saw an issue, we got activated, and we made changes, and we left the people who have been always impacted the most, who maybe have a level of comfort better in this country than they would in other countries, we left them behind. And now, there are impacts that are being had on communities that we didn't think of.

[mellow acoustic guitar plays for the next two sentences, then fades out]

So, I think with solutions, I think it is always better to slow down, to live more simpler, and to support local economies. Buy from people who are within your ecosystem, whether it's your city, whether it's your neighborhood, whether it's in your family network. Who is within your

ecosystem of people that you trust that you really want to have a regenerative relationship with that could help you be able to meet your needs in a less-impactful way? It's very important to stretch the imagination and lean on our more creative communities. The disability community is such a fucking creative community! [chuckles] The experience of somebody who's disabled naturally means that they have to be creative. And the same thing can be said for gender non-conforming people.

ELENA: You know, I think about how Black and brown folks were strategically redlined from accessing land. Or if they had land, very strategically, their land was taken away. That has led to, I think, a disenfranchisement of our food and how we get our food. And I could kinda nerd out with sort of monocultural cropping and how it's hurting our soil and kinda going back to this biodiversity concept that, if we have people in right relationship to the land, then we're able to really think about small-scale agriculture on a bigger scale, right? There's something really beautiful about having access to land. And I don't quite know what that would look like, but that would be a beautiful solution for me: that more people have access to land and be able to be in right relationship with land, regardless of their ability, regardless of their current comfortability with land. 'Cause some people don't wanna go outside, don't wanna touch the soil, and they shouldn't have to. But how could we then open the door for them to maybe appreciate it or, I don't know, enjoy the smell of a peach or whatever the sensation might be?

[upbeat acoustic guitar and drum music break]

The future of Woke N Wasteless and personal activism

ALICE: So, what do you both hope for in terms of the work you wanna do with Woke N Wasteless in the future and just in your own activism in your everyday life?

ELENA: I know that I need to expand my vocabulary and expand my mental vision of what it means to work in conjunction with disabled communities, with Black communities, with communities who are maybe monolingual speakers that aren't English. It's also a slow process to learn how to be in right relationship with those folks too. And I think Woke N Wasteless is exploring what that means. We do a lot of speaking gigs. We're thinking about different content and projects that are sort of bubbling up.

LAYEL: We're doing really good at storytelling.

ELENA: Mm.

LAYEL: Just being us, being queer, trying to live a life that's in better relationship with the planet feels like we're going down the right path. We have been asked by Greenpeace if there's any projects that we have going on to kind of get them in the loop and see how they could support. And so, I think for me, growing our storytelling platform and expanding it so other people can take ownership over it, where other people can also see themselves reflected in it is, I think, something that has always been at the core of what we do.

ALICE: Absolutely. Stories are the gateway to a whole new world, a whole new movement-making.

ELENA: Mm.

LAYEL: Yeah, totally. Which, Alice, we're building a new world.

ELENA: Mmhmm.

LAYEL: That is what we're doing. Because all these other motherfuckers who have access to wealth and control people, they have built this world that we live in, and it wasn't by our choice. So, of course, we're taking it back, and we're building our world: the world that can hold many little worlds, where we can all live in however relationship we want to.

ALICE: Absolutely! I love it.

[upbeat acoustic guitar music break]

Final thoughts

ALICE: Are there any other final thoughts you'd like to share with me?

LAYEL: My collective—Movement Generation—we've been thinking a lot about just how to be better allies with everybody who is in social movements. And I just feel like caring about the environment or caring about climate change, it shouldn't be an issue area. We're talking about caring about something that means the possibility of our race continuing, as a human species, continuing to exist. Are there some of us who deserve to kinda pay the brunt about that more than others? Yes. But we know that there is no fairness in this game. And so, I think the thing that feels really important for me is that everybody feels ownership over this quote-unquote "movement" or over however they decide to be in relationship with the environment.

It should never feel like environmentalism, climate change, even conversations about zero waste should be getting in the way of somebody else's dignity and empowerment. And if it does, that means it's not doing the right thing. I think that's just something that the environmentalist movement has done such a horrible job at, is letting people of color take ownership over this issue. And the issue is about existence. It isn't about whether we believe in cap and trade or green jobs or any of that. It's about whether we're gonna exist, whether we have trees, whether there's elephants in the future, whether we have access to clean food. And all of these things are already compromised, and we should all be willing to do our part, whatever that means, even if it's just having a conscious understanding of what our impact is on something that we've already been doing for thousands and thousands of years, which is taking care of ourselves by taking care of the earth. And I think that we can achieve that irregardless of your race, your class, your ability, anything. We can all do that for each other.

ELENA: Many years ago, I heard about this study. It's called CHAMACOS Study. They were looking at how pesticides and pesticide usage was affecting pregnant women. Most of them were Latina. It wasn't how they were directly affected. It was how like when their husbands—of course, it's a heteronormative study—but how their husbands would come home from working in the fields with pesticides, have pesticides on their clothing, and then interact with their families, even if they took them off before showering, whatever. They were looking at the birth defects around, or how the changes in birth rates and stillbirths and all of these things within families that were so in close proximity to pesticides. What does this mean for the disability community when we start to think about, OK, pesticides, and we're talking about this word "birth defects," right—which again, is inherently ableist—what does it mean for studies like that to exist and sort of the erasure of the fact that naturally folks with disabilities, folks with variant ways of doing things and navigating the world are going to naturally exist? What does it look like for us to have sort of this negative connotation around creating more of that, I guess? And it just raised a lot of questions for us. How do we think about disabilities in this same context as like, we're gonna keep seeing people and their physical bodies, and I'm sure their mental, spiritual, and emotional bodies also being affected by this. And how does the conversations within the disability community that've already been so vibrant and wonderful, how can that actually

support the collective, the group, around navigating these things? And I don't know. That's not really a question or a statement or anything. It's just sort of something that's been on my mind.

ALICE: Yep! Well, Layel, Elena, thank you so much for talking with me today.

LAYEL: Yeah, thank you, Alice. This was amazing.

ELENA: Thank you, Alice!

[gentle guitar music break]

Introduction to Alex's Interview

ALICE: So, Alex, thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

ALEX GHENIS: Yeah, happy to be here.

ALICE: Why don't you introduce yourself, if you don't mind?

ALEX: Yeah. So, my name is Alex Ghenis. I am a policy and research specialist at the World Institute on Disability in Berkeley, California. I broke my neck partway through high school and moved from the South Bay, Palo Alto, up to Eugene, Oregon. And I'll tell ya. Eugene has just a ton of environmentalists and hippies up there, and it's great because it's super green. When I came to UC Berkeley for college, I was really interested in politics. I took a class on climate change and just saw this is a huge issue. I went to grad school. I looked actually at renewable energy, and specifically, energy storage. I realized soon enough, we have to switch over to renewables, and I wanna be able to plug in my wheelchair at night when it's not sunny out. And I know plenty of people where they need stable, uninterrupted power in order to have a reasonable quality of life, and in some cases, in order to survive.

I started my own research and blog all about how people with disabilities will be affected by climate change, how they will actually also manage some of the resource shortages. There's only so much oil in the ground. There's only so much coal. There's only so many metals that go into a lot of say, medical equipment and things like that. And it got talked with some people at the World Institute on Disability, which is a research and policy group over in Berkeley. And they said, "Hey, this is really interesting, and do you wanna come on board and work on this research with us?" And that's kind of our how our projected called New Works Disability got started. And then also started some more kind of concrete, funded projects looking at improving transportation systems and educating people about how to better prepare for disasters.

We're a small non-profit, so even here I'm helping out and working on some of our other projects like financial literacy. And actually, having emergency savings is important for emergencies. It's important for storms. Everything is really interconnected, and working at WID and working on our projects has shown me that.

ALICE: Yeah. And I myself am a wheelchair user, and I use a ventilator. And like you said, having access to electricity, a stable source of electricity, really is life and death for many of us in the disability community.

[mellow acoustic guitar music break]

ALEX: I think there's also some value to having locally-produced renewable energy. Home solar panels, that's actually a lot cleaner than large solar farms out in the middle of the desert where,

as you convert solar power into different currents and ship it across these huge power lines, it's wasteful. So, we need to support people to have locally-generated, renewable, reliable, stable energy and then make it affordable, especially for folks like you, myself, and our other friends and allies with disabilities who, because of really unfair and broken social structures, have higher rates of poverty, have lower average incomes, have lower access to emergency savings. And making a system that supports everybody.

Innovations, climate resilience, and disability experiences in conflict and climate change

ALICE: What do you see are some models and innovations happening either here or globally that you're kind of really excited about?

ALEX: I'm interested in people looking at climate resilience. I'm excited about the movements to build more resilient infrastructure and more resilient societies. You know, a lot of the things that we are seeing right now in terms of migration either is directly caused by climate change, where you might have someone who, they started dealing with drought and they were farmers and they don't have enough ground water. They don't have enough rain. And then all of a sudden, they lose their livelihood, and they say, "Where am I going to go? I'm going to go to somewhere that I know has a stable economy." And then they move. First of all, that's difficult for people with disabilities. But second of all, that causes some social strife. Certainly has led to a rise of radical anti-immigrant politics that is really troubling. On the other hand, if you have people who, moved into cities, caused crowding in cities, and then all of a sudden, some conflict gets sparked out of that, then you've got refugees from war. Climate change contributed partly to that violent conflict, and then you have migrants. People need to learn how to understand that people are moving around, that they're not doing it just because they want to. But they're doing it because circumstances are forcing them to do it.

ALICE: Yeah, and we can't forget that throughout history, so many wars have been about natural resources.

[gentle acoustic guitar music break]

ALEX: I wanna take a step back too and just think about someone with a disability, someone with a mobility impairment, chronic health condition, someone who's blind, deaf, hard-of-hearing, has learning or psychological disabilities, whatever it is. Imagine them having to make that trek, hopefully with the support of family, friends, caregivers, and the rest of it. Or if they are more solo, they probably can't make that trek, and they will be stuck in a perilous situation in a country that's either experiencing violent conflict or experiencing a declining economy, maybe lower access to affordable food. Maybe the government is losing a bit of its tax base and starts cutting back on social services.

ALICE: As we've seen even here in the United States during natural disasters, we're the ones who are left behind, who die because of poor planning or just the fact that we're isolated socially and physically.

ALEX: Here in California, we've had a lot of forest fires, recently some flooding as well. This past winter, we've had some mudslides, a really troubling amount of fatalities and loss of life and livelihood and property, and people are moving. Those climate migrants are happening here within the United States. You mentioned a lot of people with disabilities just get stuck behind. It's an intersectional issue. The Camp fire that hit California in 2018 led to about 80 deaths, and at one point when 60 or so people had been positively identified, they found out that 75% of those, more or less, were people who are over 65 years of age. People were stuck at

home. They didn't have their own vehicles to get out. They couldn't reach a friend. Not all of these factors directly affect every single person with a disability, but there's definitely lines that can be drawn there, and it's tough to think about.

ALICE: Yeah. And there's also the factors of geography and technology in terms of just cellphone coverage in rural areas. For a lot of deaf and hard-of-hearing folks, as we've seen time and time again during major emergencies, they have difficulty getting vital information about hey, your community right now is evacuating. And I think this is, again, a question of infrastructure.

ALEX: Yeah, absolutely. And here in California we call it—and elsewhere as well—the "urban-wildland interface," which is just kind of this more rural areas that are surrounded by trees. As California dries up and we get weather that creates a higher risk of fires, those fires could just sweep into these neighborhoods. And rural areas have always had lower incomes on average than urban areas where you can call them job centers. Out there in Paradise, which was the town in California that got burned by the Camp fire, there were just trailer park homes all over the place. And a lot of people who are on fixed incomes purchase mobile homes because it's what they can afford, and they're told that the financing will be within their means. At the same time, they've got propane tanks, they are out at this urban-wildland interface, and some of them, they're kind of made of just plywood and really flammable materials. So, here you have people who are on fixed income, many of them with disabilities, who are just in riskier environments as well.

[chill acoustic guitar music break]

ALICE: What do you think is missing in terms of just the public discourse and also the political discourse about climate change?

ALEX: Oof! [laughs] It's a painful, painful question to answer. [laughs] It pains me to a huge extent that there are people that deny it. And you have, again, these farmers all around the country that know that stuff is changing, and I just wish we had more of their voices. Actually, something that I wish we had more of is a baseline level of education about what is climate change and the climate science behind it. I think that climate change should be a core part of the education in our public schools. I think that the talking heads and powers that be just need to bring this up as one of the largest, and arguably the largest, problems to ever face humanity and the survival of our civilization.

At the same time, figuring out we need to provide people with the tools, the resources, community engagement, other things to have a certain amount of internal peace, a certain amount of communal peace and communal support. There's a group called the International Transformational Resilience Coalition, and they are headquartered up in Oregon. And there was a bill that's recently been introduced up in Oregon asking to provide public education on resilience, personal, and then eventually kind of communal and societal resilience strategies in the face of stressful—be it political or environmental—events. And it's focused really, to a large extent, on climate change, but we need to show people how to have peace and how to still get things done and make change even when they know that it's a scary world out there that's getting more frightening.

Final thoughts

ALICE: Is there anything else you wanna talk about in terms of climate change and the disability community?

ALEX: There's something to be said for bringing people with disabilities into the green lifestyle, the environmental lifestyle. I myself, I use some plastic medical supplies. I wish I could live a zero-plastic lifestyle. I wish I didn't have to replace the rubber tires and chemical batteries in my wheelchair. But that's just not the way it is. So, people with disabilities, and we need to figure out ways to live more sustainable lifestyles. But on the flip side, the environmental community needs to allow us to live using the supplies that we need, not for example, take away plastic straws from people who have little or no function in their arms and just need straws to be able to drink and stay hydrated! And that there needs to be allyship, mutual understanding, mutual support, and mutual progress between our two communities.

ALICE: You know, it is really interesting how that's such an interesting topic that just riles people. Pushback that I got from online, from people who identify as environmentalists are like, "You hate sea turtles." It's like it's a little more complicated than that, you know! This idea of all or nothing, I feel like it really leaves out not only disabled people but all kinds of people.

ALEX: Yeah, it does. And I think straws are one of the things that are so distinctly necessary to a certain population group, and we need to take a holistic look at this to make environmental progress without damaging what ends up being kind of a human rights issue of a reasonable quality of life. And if you can't drink, you can't survive, so it's even survival for some folks.

ALICE: Well, Alex, it was a delight talking to you today. Thank you so much for being on my podcast.

ALEX: Yeah! Really excited to chat, and thanks for helping to spread the word.

Wrap-up

[hip hop music]

♪ How far will they go?
Oh, yeah yeah.... ♪

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Elena, Layel, and Alex's work on my website.

The audio producers for this episode are Cheryl Green and Sarika D. Mehta. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Bye!!!

♪ Rock it to the blast off
Stop, drop, dance off ♪