

Tú eres mi otro yo - Staying with the Trouble: Ecodramaturgy & the AnthroScene

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The Journal of American Drama and Theatre

Volume 29, Number 2 (Spring 2017)

ISSN 2376-4236

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In 1994 Una Chaudhuri challenged theatre artists to provide new visions of what it means to be human within an ecological context, writing that the art of theatre must participate in “a transvaluation so profound as to be unimaginable at present.”^[1] As the environmental crisis entered a new era of globalization in the 1990s, the embodied, immediate, and communal art of theatre became an apt site for illuminating the personal and social impact of significant ecological change. In the past two decades theatre artists and scholars have spun counter narratives and invented alternative forms that resisted environmental and cultural imperialism by exposing its mechanisms, amplifying the voices of those places and peoples it has silenced or ignored, and advocating ecological reciprocity between and among land and people.^[2] When I first used the term “ecodramaturgy” in 2010, I sought to acknowledge and coalesce this praxis, and to emphasize the ways it might imaginatively intervene to forward environmental justice, sustainability and democracy.^[3]

Meanwhile, the fate of humans and other life forms on the planet continues on a trajectory of unparalleled risk. Scientists have suggested that we live on the cusp of a new epoch, the Anthropocene—in which human-caused changes to earth systems have outpaced all “naturally occurring” geologic, biologic, and atmospheric factors. Debate continues about whether the Anthropocene began with the age of colonization, the rise of extractive capitalism and the industrial revolution; or more recently, just after WWII when the planet saw an exponential increase in population, coupled with a rise in fossil fuel use, consumer consumption, urbanization, and nuclear radiation. This rise in CO₂ in the planet’s atmosphere during the baby-boomer era is known as “the Great Acceleration.” The arts are vital in such times of crisis not only to imagine all that is at stake, but to enter feelingly into what Jeremy Davies calls “the predicament of living in the fissures between one epoch and another.”^[4]

In what follows I look first at *Harvest Moon* by José Cruz González (1994), which in many ways is emblematic of ecodramas that sought to expose the impacts of industrial and agricultural capitalism on land and communities. The play argues for environmental justice and affirms sustaining values of community, family and culture. I then turn to *Burning Vision* by Marie Clements (2003), an ecodrama reflective of the looming realities of the Anthropocene, which include trans-global interdependencies, irreversible exposures and losses, and generational breakage. The purpose of juxtaposing these two (separated only by a decade and which share much in common) is not to make predictions based on uncertain scenarios of “before” and “after” tipping points, but rather to search for what might become the stories of what Donna Haraway calls “ongoing and living worlds.” Stories and performances are the very

expression of what she calls a necessary “tentacular thinking” that continuously reaches out, nurturing the “generative recursions that make up living and dying.” [5] Cruz González and Clements both employ a-chronological storytelling, moving freely and fluidly between times and places in works that demonstrate the shared vulnerability between people and land. Both expose environmental racism and capitalist imperialism; both reclaim people’s traditional rootedness in and rights to land; and both use theatre to presence the dead among the living, re-member lives lost, hearts broken, and histories forgotten. Both are instructive on ways to live in the fissures, but each envisions and embodies resilience differently. In *Harvest Moon*, hope resides in generational continuity as the play affirms the activist vision of a world in which sustainability and justice are possible. In *Burning Vision*, tentacular tellings embody what Haraway calls “co-presence”—neither hope nor despair, but a state of bearing witness to the breakage and living and loving through it.

A Continuum of Shared Vulnerability: *Harvest Moon*

The environmental justice movement of the 1980s and ‘90s represented the single most important conceptual gain in environmental thought of the late 20th century. [6] In 1991 the Environmental Justice Summit redefined “environment as the places where people live, work, play and worship,” demanding attention and redress for those (women, children, communities of color, and the poor) who have been disproportionately impacted by the shadow sides of industrial/consumer capitalism, such as landfills, incinerators, toxic waste sites, and other “sacrifice zones.” [7] The EJ movement dismantled the longstanding conceptual binary of “nature” vs “culture,” asserting a human place in, not apart from, the natural world. It claimed urban environments as spaces worthy of environmental concern and ecological tending, and demanded that environmental organizations examine the white privilege of their most ardent proponents and heroes. In many ways the conceptual openings of the EJ movement were responsible for the recognition that theatre has been always/already rife with ecological ideologies and implications. Ecodramaturgy emerged to emphasize the intersectionality of community, identity, the body and the land, and to celebrate the power of communities and individuals to enact meaningful change in the creation of a more just and sustainable world.

Many Chicano/a and Latinx playwrights had engaged ecological issues in their works long before ecotheorists ever articulated such a project, illuminating a continuum of shared vulnerability between lands and peoples, and revealing the complex ways that oppression and displacement from homeland, family, history, heritage, and language has had consequences for human and environmental health. Yet, with the exception of Cherríe Moraga’s *Heroes and Saints* and the work of Teatro Campesino, Latinx theatre has been underrepresented in studies of ecotheatre. [8]

Harvest Moon is an act of remembrance, resistance and resilience through which José Cruz González tells the history of four generations of a Mexican-origin American family. [9] Their stories assert the presence and vitality of the family’s real-world counterparts in a century of North American environmental history. Developed and workshopped as part of the Seattle Group Theatre’s 1991 Multicultural Playwrights Festival, *Harvest Moon* premiered at the Group Theatre in 1994, at a time (like ours) of heated national debate about immigration. Particularly in the western states, debates over bi-lingual education and citizenship for the children of undocumented workers were becoming increasingly polarizing and xenophobic. (Proposition 187, denying many basic services to non-citizen residents, had just been approved in California.) [10]

The action begins as Cuauhtemoc, a contemporary young man of the early 1990s, returns to the mural his mother (Mariluz) painted before she died.^[11] On a wall “near a harvest field” in “a valley filled with dozens of farms” so that it will “greet the farmworkers on their way to work and on their way home,” the mural, like the land itself, is an archive of his family’s history and cultural heritage. Cuauhtemoc “carries a backpack and a small tree seedling wrapped in burlap. He looks at the mural...searches for a place to plant the tree...begins digging a small hole but discovers something”—his mother’s paintbrush buried in the soil. In this moment Cuauhtemoc encounters his mother’s spirit, and what was “faded and overgrown with weeds” comes to life around him (11-14). Cuauhtemoc encounters his parents, grandparents, and great grandparents, and is able to forgive his mother (who died when he was a small boy) for spending so much time during her final days painting a mural rather than playing with him. ^[12] His ancestors’ stories of commitment, skill, cunning, and sacrifice become the ground on which he stands. Like the tree Cuauhtemoc plants for his mother, the play lives into and informs his life going forward, arguing not only that social, economic and environmental justice are integrally connected, but also that making sustainable and just choices requires us to remember our histories, listen to the stories of our ancestors and the land itself.

Muralists like Mariluz helped transmit the stories that birthed the mythos of Aztlán, rooting the *movimiento* in a shared ancestral story, and siting that history in the neighborhoods, streets, alleyways, underpasses, and parks of the communities whose story they told.^[13] Murals like Judith Baca’s Great Wall of Los Angeles or Chicano Park in San Diego function as a visual representations of oral histories, proactive and public assertions of presence that (re)claim both past and future. Inspired by a mural that he passed on the way to school as a young man, Cruz González suggests that theatre, like a mural, may be best understood as a visual form that can summon history much in the way that memory functions—associatively, anachronistically, emotionally—treating spaces and places of habitation as archives of memory and records of human action. ^[14] Throughout the performance, actor/characters move into and out of tableaux that bring to life the history that the mural represents, transforming history into flesh and blood presence on stage. As memory associates with memory, the story moves in and out of time periods, and characters appear at various ages in significant moments in their lives. As memories connect and collide in the space of the theatre, the audience also encounters the full arc of 20th century American environmental history—a history in which Mexican-origin Americans are present and integral.

Working the generations backwards from 1990, we might imagine that Cuauhtemoc was born in the late 1970s; his mother, Mariluz, was born in the early 1950s, growing up and coming of age during the *movimiento* and witness to the early years of the farmworkers’ movement in California. Her parents, Ruben and Gloria, were born during the Dust Bowl and Depression; Henry and Lupe, Cuauhtemoc’s great-grandparents, would have come to the United States from Mexico in the years following the Mexican Revolution of 1910, when economic and political turmoil caused many to emigrate in search of work and safety. Woven into this arc, other significant moments in the environmental history of the continent come to life.^[15]

A first generation US citizen, Ruben came of age during WWII, when the US government instituted the bracero program that sought Mexican guest workers for US fields, canneries, and slaughterhouses. Soto, Henry’s friend, and a kind of uncle figure in the play, remembers “an army of laborers. Hundreds of men attacked the harvest each day. There’s not enough work for us all and yet we come by the truck loads” (17). Laborers in the booming post-WWII California agricultural industry lived in barracks without adequate food, clean water or sanitation. “I’m surprised these old barracks are still standing. I can’t

believe we ever lived in them. *The Grapes of Wrath* or what?" muses a 17 year old Mariluz. Her reference is a reminder to the audience that the hardships endured during the Depression and Dust Bowl by white families like John Stienbeck's beloved but fictional Joads were also felt by Mexican-origin Americans.[16] César Chavez's family was one among many landowners in the southwest who lost land in the farm consolidations and liquidations precipitated by the drought of the 1930s, and who came to California looking for work in the growing agricultural industry.[17] In this way, Cruz González couples the experiences of Anglo American workers' struggle to unionize for just wages and healthy living conditions in the 1930s with the farmworkers movement of the 1960s, and the experiences of economic immigrants in the 1990s. Union organizing in the 1930s resulted in labor laws that improved working conditions and wages across many industries, but farmworkers were excluded from guarantees and protections that white workers gained. Meanwhile, the influx of white farmworkers to California as a result of the Dust Bowl migrations displaced Mexican-origin workers. Many were deported to Mexico, including, ironically, families who had lived on and worked the land since California was part of Mexico.[18] It was not until 1978 that farmworkers won a minimum wage on par with other workers; and they are still not adequately protected from industry toxins.

In 1994 *Harvest Moon* resonated with ongoing debates over so-called guest worker programs under H-2A, as well as larger questions about immigration, citizenship, and the economic migration that promises to increase as a climate change proceeds.[19] The generational perspectives of his mother, grandparents, and great-grandparents help Cuauhtemoc understand that the politics of unionizing, immigration, green cards, and the undocumented are personal, and shaped by the history his elders have lived through. In a scene set in the 1960s, some family members are inspired by the young César Chavez and the organizers who have come to town. Ruben's wife, Gloria, becomes a union organizer, but the older Henry warns against making trouble. "We have no papers," he reminds Lupe. Henry's fears are multiple and layered, including not only the immediate threat of deportation, which would separate great grandparents from children and grandchildren, but also a justified fear of violence. Throughout the 1930s and '40s, union organizing frequently was violently suppressed by state and local law enforcement who carried out the bidding of agribusiness.[20] Soto, on the other hand, is both a US citizen and a decorated WWII veteran, and his legal status allows him to stand up and speak out in a way that Henry and Lupe cannot. As he puts on his WWII uniform to proudly participate in a UFW rally (United Farm Workers of America), we learn that he supports an extended family in Mexico. Through these family elders, Cuauhtemoc learns the complicated ways in which each generation carries Mexico within them; the way each lives in the borderlands, regardless of citizenship.

The environmental justice movement of the 1990s fueled public outrage over farmworkers' exposure to pesticides. Companies like Monsanto sold miracle chemicals promising bigger crop yields, but the shadow of such harvests comes to rest in the bodies of farmworkers and their families. In a party scene (also set in the early 1960s), Soto arrives with tomatoes for Lupe. "*Hijole*, those *tomates* are huge," Henry exclaims. The harvest was good, Soto tells her, but while the *patrons* are vacationing in Europe and buying new trucks. The workers have only "a few *centavos* in our pockets, some *tomates* the size of grapefruit" (21-22). Post WWII agro-chemicals that made California the "breadbasket of the world" (and the 5th largest economy in the world by century's end) did not trickle down to farmworkers. Mariluz remembers that she and her brother Manuel worked alongside their parents and grandparent in the pesticide-laden fields. As the scene comes to life, Ruben shouts at the sun, exhausted from the heat. "This shit is robbing me!" Henry tells him to drink some water and get himself under control because the patron is watching. "I don't need water! It's dignity!" he shouts. "We live in an old *bracero* barrack. We bathe

outside from a pipe. *My children are always sick ...*” (31-32, my emphasis). Ruben’s rage at dehumanizing conditions is redoubled as the sound of an approaching crop dusting plane overtakes the scene. “Where are the children?” Gloria runs at the airplane, shouting the name of the grower, pleading for the safety of her children. “Don’t spray Mr. Matterson!” and then “It’s too late.” Exposures to pesticides and herbicides have been at the center of the UFW’s concerns since the beginning of *La Causa*. In 1969, Chavez testified before the House of Representatives about the grave dangers of economic chemicals—part of the increased mechanization of food production. His testimony cites the regular practice of spaying workers, including children, in an unregulated industry, and the illness, injury and death that occurred with regularity in the fields.^[21] We later learn that Mariluz’ father Ruben died of heart failure while working in the fields, a reminder that farmworkers suffered increased health risks and shorter life expectancy as a result of labor and living conditions.

Mariluz, who comes of age during the *movimiento*, is part of a growing *Mestiza* consciousness that prized newly reclaimed heritage.^[22] Even after her diagnosis, Mariluz spends what little time she has left painting the mural, making sure her own son has a record of his history. Some key agricultural pesticides were regulated in the 1970s and ‘80s, including DDT (banned in 1972 in the US). But the then new Republican governor of California, George Deukmejian, refused to enforce regulations and hold growers accountable to the law, prompting Chavez to organize a second grape boycott with its goal to ban the “economic poisons” suspected of causing higher incidences of cancer in farmworkers when compared to the general population. Mariluz’ premature death from pesticide-related cancer in the early 1980s indicts the government’s disregard for the health impacts of pesticides on families like Cuauhtemoc’s.

In another scene set in the 1970s, Mariluz’ brother, Manuel, announces he has joined the Navy. Mariluz worries he will be sent to Vietnam, a war in which Mexican-American soldiers took risks and gave their lives in higher numbers than Anglo soldiers, in part to signal their “American-ness” in the face of racism at home. In Vietnam they were exposed (together with others who served in combat) to chemical herbicides and pesticides. Defoliant weapons like Agent Orange used in Vietnam were not so different from chemicals used regularly in the fields.^[23]

Throughout the play Cuauhtemoc is haunted by the Jaguar Warrior, who appears in the play at moments when courage and ferocious resistance are required. Played by the actor who plays Ruben, the Jaguar Warrior connects Ruben’s anger at systemic injustice with the mythic fierceness of Aztec warriors who fought the conquistadors, and for whom his grandson is named. The Jaguar Warrior binds human and animal together with the story of Aztlán, rooting the struggles of the twentieth century in an older, sovereign, connection to the land on both sides of the border. The Jaguar Warrior entreats Cuauhtemoc to recognize himself, yet Cuauhtemoc demands, “What do you want from me? [...] Who are you?” After his journey through his mother’s mural stories, Cuauhtemoc begins to understand the Jaguar’s answer: “*In Lak’ ech.*” “*Tú eres mi otro yo,*” Mariluz translates. “You are my other self” (73).

Mariluz’ impulse to paint a mural of her family history comes when she is diagnosed with cancer. Like the trees her family the mural will live on in real time and space, nourishing a community’s future long after her individual death. The mural is “alive before you, transcending time and space just like the ancients did long before Einstein!” she explains to Cuauhtemoc (13). At the end of the play, Cuauhtemoc returns to his seedling. “I am planting a fruit tree for you...I now know why I’m planting it.” Mural and tree give flesh to the past in a way that changes the future. The mural is a message of empowerment and pride, and a reminder of a lineage of belonging, and like the tree, requires cultivation: It is meant to call

forth a consciousness in Cuauhtemoc that will empower him in the world, and that he must tend within himself. In this way, painting the mural, planting the trees, and the performance of the play itself are *acts of habitation*: life-giving, sustaining actions that contribute to the vitality and ecological health of the community. But as Cruz González' memory of the mural that had fallen into disrepair on his school route suggests, both the mural (community history) and the trees (ecosystems of that same community) need to be tended.

Anchored in the counter-narrative of a Chicano/a imaginary that provided a foundation to the *movimiento*, *Harvest Moon* connects myth and history to geography and personal lived experience: *Tú eres mi otro yo*. We are bound to one another and to the land in ways that transcend time and national borders. The land is our other self; what we do to the land we do to ourselves. "Can the dead forgive the living?" Cuauhtemoc asks. Can the dead forgive us for making the same mistakes they made? In *Harvest Moon*, human destinies are linked to one another and to the planet in ways that will require not only a recognition that "*Tú eres mi otro yo*," but also a reckoning with the costs of having ignored for too long our human interdependence with one another and with the more-than-human world.

Enter the Anthropocene

The interdependency celebrated in *Harvest Moon* as a kind of generational continuity between past, present and future is increasingly under threat. Our shared vulnerability with the natural world has ruptured into an entirely contingent, and in many ways random, chance of survival. Where is theatre's efficacy in a world that has sown the seeds of its own destruction? In the section that follows I use Marie Clements' *Burning Vision*, to illuminate an ecodramaturgy for the Anthropocene.

In *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, Jeremy Davies follows argument and counter argument as stratigraphers struggle to agree on the epoch's beginning. [24] Davies also weighs the "backlash" against the idea of the Anthropocene in light of its ethical, political and social implications. Cultural theorist Donna Haraway pushes back against dangerous cultural interpretations of the Anthropocene, arguing that naming this new epoch "Anthro" perpetuates a human exceptionalism that, ironically, may include our own extinction. Why quibble over a name? Once our collective bones and material remains of our varied dreams are laced into earth's geologic tapestry of deep time as a thin strand of stone, what does it matter? Names matter because they privilege points of view and can accumulate imprecise meanings in the popular imagination, like debris settling into consciousness, and in this way, Haraway suggests, they may not only name but call forth a particular future.

Naomi Klein, Jason W. Moore and others suggest that humans as a species are not the cause of climate change, certainly not all humans equally. It is not humans, but capitalism—that economic juggernaut that rides roughshod over the planet in ever increasing extractive speed and efficiency, gouging its "marks in earth's rocks, waters, airs and critters" —that is the geologic force of epoch proportions. The Capitalocenes and the Anthropocenes are both counterfeit Haraway argues, because each tends to succumb "to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference," ignoring the grieving voices of mothers (human and non-human), and forgetting the work of spiders, microbes, rocks and moisture, for these too are working to "save" the planet. [25] Both terms, she argues, perpetuate and privilege those very aspects of collective human-ness that fueled the engines of climate change—technological supremacy, managerial science, western chauvinism and determinism, along with historicity that fails to account for, or even be concerned about, the lived experience of people,

creatures, and places. [26] The annihilative forces of industrial capitalism, including fossil fuel use, nuclear testing and radiation, and consumption-based cultures, are products of colonization that has been (and still is) played out on and in human and other animal bodies, ecologies, and geographies. To be clear, Haraway does not take issue with the science (among scientists there is no debate that human-caused climate change will precipitate geologic shifts, marking the planet forever). Rather, she cautions against the Anthropocene's seemingly implicit *vision*: scenarios of mass extinction, economic collapse, human death, and the end of so-called civilization as we know it. As these narratives layer into the popular imaginary, they naturalize catastrophe and invite an attitude of "game over," which in turn nurtures dis-compassion, disconnection, and intellectual distance from lives and living that will be ongoing. It is precisely this aspect of her critique that has been useful in thinking through the potential contribution of theatre in the age of the Anthropocene, asking: what visions of our intermingled future will we call forth?

Davies might dismiss Haraway's quibbling as nonsense, and indeed such discussions may seem academic to those who attend community meetings to strategize in the face of rising seas. As Davies points out, the term has many uses and a wide girth of meanings that invite not only geoengineering trajectories, but philosophical and political ones. The term itself, he suggests, is a wake-up call that provides "an opportunity to comprehend the environmental calamity in its full dimensions." [27] In the Anthropocene, he argues, "environmental movements will need to be concerned above all with environmental injustice and with fostering ecological pluralism and complexity in the face of the simplifying tendencies of the Holocene's final phase." [28] Urging a "living within the crisis" that parallels Haraway's emphasis on earth systems kinship, Davies calls for "vigilant resistance against the searing away of multifaceted socioecological systems and their replacement by vulnerable, saturated monocultures" in order to insure that the "jerky crossing between epochs can be cushioned by upholding states of life—both ecosystems and human societies—that are variegated, intricate, and plural, one in such lively forces of all kinds contend with and interweave with one another." [29] The Anthropocene also requires creative and critical methodologies for decolonizing (not just de-capitalizing); specifically for naming the ways in which climate change has been a product of historical patterns of white supremacy predicated on land taking, rapacious extractive practices, slavery, and rampant disregard for the rights of life and land. It will be some time before cultural theorists and scientists find cohesive ways of talking about the future of earthlings, and so this paper does not seek to reconcile the disparate and protesting voices that endeavor to chart a path of maximum compassion into the unknown.

The tension between Haraway and Davies is useful, however, because it suggests an ecodramaturgy that not only foregrounds the disproportional effects of climate change, tracking the intersectional ways that gender, ethnicity, and economics inform the severity of impact, but also one that puts the shoulder of theatre to the wheel of envisioning a future, helping humans and non-humans inhabit the ambiguities and contingencies of relentless transition. While this direction is not terribly different from what I urged in 2006, when I wrote that ecodramaturgy must map "the connections between social injustice, human and other bodies, and environmental exploitation," the urgency is greater in the face of recent political events. [30] Indeed, the usefulness of theatre has increased not only as a provocateur of activism, but as a means to engage in embodied and affective exploration of ways-of-connecting, coping and grieving. Stories that envision apocalypse, Haraway contends, are luxuries of the (yet) un-endangered. Her advice to dramatists is to heel close to the site of impact: the embodied experiences of creatures including humans living-with and dying-with one another. De-centering not only the human, but the primacy of biological notions of kinship, and taxonomies altogether, she urges envisioning kinship across all matter

(“making oddkin”), and attending to our individual and collective response-ability in these times. In this way theatre can take a stance that Haraway calls “staying with the trouble”—neither driven by activist hope, nor elitist despair (despair is always a mark of elitism: elephants, refugees and coral reefs have no such luxuries), but “tuned to the senses” and mindful of “mortal earthlings thick copresence.”[\[31\]](#) Theatre can help us develop the kind of soulful muscle that staying with the trouble will require.

Just such a poly-attentive a way-of-being-in-the-world is apparent in Marie Clements’ *Burning Vision*, as it illuminates a web of ecological, cultural and personal consequences of the atomic age. For some stratigraphers the birth of the Anthropocene, could be “set with unimprovable specificity on July 16, 1945, ‘at 05:29:21 Mountain War Time’ ... This is the moment of the Manhattan Project’s first nuclear weapon test, Trinity: white light in the pre-dawn New Mexico desert.”[\[32\]](#) Whether this geologic moment will ultimately be the “golden spike” matters less than the specter of annihilation that both the bomb and the Anthropocene have unleashed in the collective imaginary.

Burning Vision is a tentacular story of the making of the first atomic bomb that foregrounds multiple and multiplying relationships across time, space, culture and species (including species of mineral). The action begins on August 6, 1945, with a countdown followed by the “sound of a long, far-reaching explosion that explodes over a long, far-reaching time,” and then a cascading flash of detonation (20). The arc of the play transpires in the split second between that first flash of light and its reign/rain of sudden death, and the stories of the play’s 18 characters are told by the light of the earth-shattering, history-destroying, human-made culmination of what Ta-Nehisi Coates calls the plundering of the planet. Clements’ *Burning Vision* presences and makes visible the lived experiences of humans whose bodies were plundered in the service of the forces that precipitated climate change.[\[33\]](#)

Written in four “movements” like an orchestral score, *Burning Vision* is meant to be embodied, not read. Dramatic structures of beginning/exposition, middle/action, end/resolution are non-existent. This is a play about being in the middle. Like an Escher painting, the middle moment is a site of intersection where form is undone in a process of becoming. Local places, individual people and creatures, diverse and specific cultures across the globe, and different historical moments across time collapse into one another in a kind of double and triple exposure. The play blurs the boundaries of space/place and ruptures any sense of geographic logic, as characters in Japan emerge from the bottom of a lake in Northern Canada, or a factory worker from Pittsburgh descends into the belly of the earth where he meets a woman who works as a radium dial painter from the 1920s. Unfathomable time is both expanded and compressed. Like the “deep time” geologists assign to the Anthropocene, the bomb turns our gaze back on this moment of now, asking how we will be-in-relation as the world changes utterly. The play also insists on another kind of time: an intersecting, simultaneous time that bends upon and within itself, defying rational chronology in favor of the embodied present of the theatre. The voices and images of each movement emerge, overlap, intersect and collide. Between each movement, the sound of caribou hooves on tundra give voice to a time immemorial when traditional Dene communities follow the migration of caribou around Great Bear Lake in the Northern Territories.[\[34\]](#) Through the sounds of hooves and the voice of the Dene elder and prophet, the action of the play proceeds and comes round to where it began: the moment of “now,” the middle moment.

Burning Vision presences a time-space that Laguna Pueblo poet and theorist Paula Gunn Allen explains as an “achronology” particular to indigenous authors: a “tribal concept of time [that is] timelessness.” Similarly, a tribal concept of space is multidimensional. Gunn Allen’s time-space is similar to

contemporary physics in that the self is conceived “as a moving event within a moving universe.”^[35] The play’s achronological structure allows a searing vision to rupture the hegemonic assumption that humans are separate from one another, other critters, the planet, or our collective earth-history. But it does something more, something essential to the project of living in the Anthropocene—affirming survivance even as evidence accumulates to the contrary. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith recognizes that scholarly and creative deconstruction of hegemonic systems (like those that precipitated climate change) provides “insight that explains certain experiences,” but does not “prevent someone from dying.”^[36] Decolonizing, Smith argues, consists of (re)claiming (stories, lives, land); celebrating (culture, women, survivance); indigenizing, or “centring of the landscapes, images, languages, themes, metaphors and stories in the indigenous world”; and from that vantage point envisioning a different future, a way forward. *Burning Vision* carries out what Smith calls “indigenizing projects,” not only by disassembling the ideologies and systems of plunder that make all humans “test dummies,” but asserting improbable intimacies and incongruous solidarities.

Burning Vision grew out of Clements’ desire to trace her First Nations/Dene family history in the Northwest Territory, a history which in telling reclaims stolen lands. “I had taken a trip to the Great Bear Lake region with my mother. I wanted to tell this story of my family’s genetic connection to the history of the land up there, and to the running of uranium.”^[37] The play follows the hand-to-hand route of the “black rock”—from which both radium and uranium are harvested and plutonium is made—from the theft that set claim to it and the miners that unearthed it, to the Dene ore carriers, boatmen, stevedores, and “sandwich girls,” that worked along its watery passage across Great Bear Lake and down the Mackenzie River to Fort McMurray, where it was loaded on trains bound for Ontario refineries and, ultimately, the labs and test sites of the Manhattan Project. Staying with the trouble—that is, insisting on the primacy of relatedness—Clements accounts for the disproportional impact that uranium mining had (and climate change is having) on Dene communities. Weaving together the stories of those who worked on and in the mine with the stories of Japanese characters in Hiroshima, where the material stolen from Dene land was ultimately ignited, Clements challenges how we remember and whom we remember, creating a transnational countergeography that makes previously invisible relationships explicit.

“What was extraordinary to me,” Clements said, is that “one person’s decision not only impacts that person and their community, but has an effect beyond, in this case, an effect that encompasses the whole world.” In a similar way, theatre can ground the abstraction of the Anthropocene in human decision, desire, and agency. The “money rock,” as the Dene called it, was claimed by the Labine Brothers, white prospectors who laid claim to the ore and founded El Dorado Mine on Great Bear Lake. According to the oral account of Dene elders (which carry the same authority as written eye witness accounts under Canadian law), the whites traded sacks of flour for the ore: “They say it was...Beyonnie, who first found the money rock at Port Radium. Beyonnie gave it to the white man, for which he received a bag of flour, baking powder and lard about four times.”^[38] Signaling the land theft operative in their extractive capitalist exploits, the brothers thrash about in the dark of the theatre, collide with walls and objects, and discuss what to trade for their claim. “What’s an Indian gonna do with money? We’ll give him some lard and baking powder and he can bake some bread. Sure! What the hell! What the hell is an Indian going to do with a rock anyways, at least he can eat the bread.”^[39] Meanwhile, in the center of the stage, the rock itself waits, fearing discovery. In Dene worldview the ore is a living being, personified in the play as Little Boy, a “beautiful Native boy...the darkest uranium found at the center of the earth.” Little Boy is “discovered”, chased, captured; then escapes and runs away, desperate to “go home”, back to his place in the earth. But once loose upon the earth he cannot return. Discovered in the beam of a flashlight, the boy

runs for his life; like the many children who ran away from Canadian Indian boarding schools, his place in the world has been destroyed. His new place is not one he chose, rather one precipitated by the commodification of his rock-flesh as part of the first atomic bomb.

Throughout the play's tentacular weaving of a trans-national, trans-temporal, trans-species, inter-cultural community, Rose, a young Métis woman makes bread. A kind of payment for the ore from which the bomb was made, bread calls attention to the flesh of human bodies and that of the plants and animals we take for sustenance. She describes herself as a "perfect loaf of bread" that "is plump with a rounded body and straight sides. I have a tender, golden brown crust which can be crisp, or delicate. This grain is fine and even, with slightly elongated cells; the flesh of this bread is multi-grained" (58). Each of us is just such a grainy substance, and we make and unmake ourselves, Rose suggests, by the way we engage the elements of the earth. In the first Movement, Rose carries a sack of flour over her shoulder. As she walks, a thin stream of flour leaks out, inscribing a circle in the space of the stage—a circle in which the audience is implicitly included. She mixes the ingredients—a recipe learned from her mother. "Substances meeting like magic" she says (39). "Flour, yeast, salt, sugar, lard, liquid. Bread" (59). By the third Movement, the sacks of flour become indistinguishable from the sacks of uranium ore carried by Dene workers. The wind mixes the white flour leaking from Rose's sack with the black dust that infects the environment. "The wind's blowing it everywhere," Rose observes, "The kids are playin' in sandboxes of it, the caribou are eating it off the plants, and we're drinkin' the water where they bury it...I guess there's no harm if a bit gets in my dough" (103). Both bread and ore are material aspects of the earth's body-becoming-human-body, permeable, interwoven.

Fat Man and Little Boy, non-human characters named after the actual bombs dropped by the US on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, become oddkin to humans. Fat Man is a "test dummy" living in an above-ground Nevada test site, where mock homes, complete with foodstuffs, canned goods, appliances, and manikins representing the stereotypical 1950s nuclear family, were constructed to test the deadly effectiveness of "the gadget." Fat Man animates the mindset that made the bomb; ideology incarnate, he is an all-American male, a "living room soldier" (94). Both Little Boy and Fat Man demonstrate Jane Bennet's notion of "vital matter," in which the distinction between life and non-life is dubious at best.^[40] All matter, she argues, has a kind of life that can come to life, with which humans and other critters interweave, and to which humans have obligations as oddkin. By the fourth Movement, Fat Man realizes that, he too is expendable, one whose body and labor have been commodified in the military-industrial project of nuclear arms superiority. Even Fat Man is radicalized when he discovers that, like the ore, the lake, and the air itself, his life force has been mined. Finally aware of his connection to the others, outraged and embattled, he screams at the Brothers Labine: "This is my neighborhood, you hear me ... you...you...liar. [...] you are all a pack of goddam liars!" (115)

Great Bear Lake is one of the largest and deepest freshwater lakes in the world, and its presence percolates through the soundscape of *Burning Vision*. The lake is the center of life for traditional Dene who depend on it for sustenance. Dene villages fished for trout and followed the seasonal migration of caribou herds around the lake. Clements draws on and bends a Dene legend that tells of a medicine man who journeys to the heart of Great Bear Lake. As the story goes, after a "trout steals the medicine man's hook...he dives deep into the lake's abyss" to retrieve his hook. There he "takes on the spirit of the loche" and finds the "living, breathing heart, called the Tudzé" that gives life to the world of plants, animals and human beings. In Clements' play, Eldorado's wet-mine tunnels become liminal passageways that extend to the other side of the earth. At the moment of the atomic blast in Hiroshima, a Japanese fisherman

named Koji, holding a trout he has just caught, looks up and cries out, “Pika!”—the Japanese word for the brilliant flash of atomic detonation and meaning “the light of two suns.” Koji falls into darkness, journeys through the heart of the earth, and surfaces (like a trout) in Great Bear Lake. Two Dene stevedores aboard the Radium Prince haul him out of the water; Rose gives him dry clothing, and the possibility of new life. Koji’s path mirrors a 1998 journey taken by six Deline residents from Port Radium, Canada, to Hiroshima, Japan, on the anniversary of the atomic bomb to convey the Dene people’s regrets and sorrow that ore from their land was used in this destructive way.[\[41\]](#)

Meanwhile, a Dene Widow keeps a vigil fire for the ore-carrier husband she has lost to cancer caused by radiation exposure. Foregrounding the ways humans are commingled with the land, as well as asserting the longstanding kinship of Dene with their traditional lands, Clements' play suggests that ceremonial remembering and grieving in relation to loss of land and loved ones may be a right response to climate change. In “Climate Changes as the Work of Mourning,” Ashlee Cunsolo Willox argues that “grief and mourning have the unique potential to expand and transform the discursive spaces around climate change to include not only the lives of people who are grieving because of the changes, but also to value what is being altered, degraded, and harmed as something mournable.”[\[42\]](#) Traditional Dene practice is to burn the earthly possessions of those who die so that they may cross over, but the Widow cannot let go of her lover’s clothes, especially a jacket that she made and beaded. The Widow knows that the land resides in the fabric of our bodies: “I miss the smell of sweat on his clothes after a long day hunting. I miss how the land stayed in the fabric even when he got inside the cabin” (44-45). She pulls him to her in a dream, calling on their historic kinship with the earth, and resisting the doomsday change that her waking hours struggle to comprehend. “There are plenty of trout and caribou to last us till we die” (70). Yet, each day she wakes to his absence.

Like the theory of the Anthropocene, Clements' characters are concerned with remains—those traces that contain stories. “It is always the little things of his that take my breath away. The real things like a strand of his hair lying on the collar of a caribou hide jacket he loved...the real things like the handle of his hunting knife worn down from his beautiful hands that loved me. The real things...” (87-88). Koji also sites/sights the real, the “little things,” as his spirit roams the post-blast “landscape of notes.” “There are notes left on anything that still exists. On pieces of houses, on stones shivering on the ground, on anything that did not perish...hope remains nailed to what has survived...a tin box of pictures, a rock wall, a rice bowl...a chair, a typewriter, a neighbor, a woman” (51-52). Remains point both toward past and future.

Both nuclear holocaust and the cataclysm of climate change provoke questions of what remains, but also what carries on? For philosophers and cultural workers, the questions of the Anthropocene also include, what is called *forth*? For it *is* a vision, and as a collective imaginary has power to recast what it means to be a human. The danger, Haraway argues, in the apocalyptic vision of the Anthropocene (like the vision of nuclear annihilation) lies in forgetting that individuals, families, and communities of earthlings will live through the troubles ahead, even as many already have. After the bomb is dropped, Fat Man muses, “only Indians and cockroaches will survive”—a reminder to those who imagine the collapse of “civilization as we know it,” that indigenous people of North America have already lived through that particular cataclysm once to survive and thrive (83).

Burning Vision invites a radical shift in world views, staging an anthropoScene that lives through and loves into the future. Rose, we implicitly understand, dies of cancer from the radioactive dust in her

bread; but the child she conceived with Koji, the Japanese fisherman who fell through the world, lives on with the Widow, who tells him: “You look like her. You look like him. You are my special grandson. My small man now. My small man that survived. Tough like hope” (121). In this way, *Burning Vision* resists narratives of annihilation, and instead demands survivance, participating in what Haraway calls “threads of reciprocating energies of biologies, arts, and activisms for multispecies resurgence.”^[43]

In recent years ecodramaturgy has emphasized theatre as *a way of knowing* at once imaginative, affective, immediate, embodied, and communal, suggesting both new methodologies and meanings as scholars and artists work together to exercise a vigorous engagement with ecological ideas, communities and geographies.^[44] This proactive ecodramaturgy moves beyond the call for new works and sustainable production practice to envision, as Chaudhuri writes, “putting the vast resources of lived embodied performance at the service of the program of radical re-imagination called for by the perilous predicament we find our species—and others—in today.”^[45] What that theatre looks like, how it feels, and how it interfaces with the community it serves is an anthropoScenic task: to bear witness to the unfolding present and presence, making visible and palpable the interwoven ways, as Haraway writes, “we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. *We become-with each other or not at all.*”^[46] Perhaps a significant aspect of theatre’s anthropoScenic leverage lies in the ways it can reimagine and revitalize the relationships between and among communities (human and otherwise) and places (material and imagined) even as they continue to be at risk.

Going forward, anthropoScenic ecodramaturgy must not only foreground environmental justice, using theatre to illuminate the lived experience of people and non-human others feeling the disproportional impact of climate change, it must also forge theatre as a place of infinite enmeshment of us-ness, of unexpected intimacies across previously isolated differences with shared ecological vulnerabilities that enliven living through this epochal transition. Staying with the trouble includes understanding compassion as action, and offering a vision of how to *inhabit* a living-if-turbulent present. “[M]any different paths forward are possible,” Davies writes, reminding us that “the chaotic nature of the crisis means that the flap of any given butterfly’s wings might have disproportionate influence on the new world...”^[47] This is time for butterfly wing theatre: conceived as a state of vigilance, a practice of humility, the work of mourning, the necessity of anger, a comic send up of the why-can’t-we-fix-this frustration of test dummies, and an invitation to honor our oddkin of radioactive rocks, caribou, sturgeon, and women pregnant with the future child of a future child who will see our marks and hear our voices across time, and like the Dene See-er, look back at a history that has not yet happened, saying in another tongue, “*Tú eres mi otro yo.*”

Theresa J. May is Associate Professor at the University of Oregon. Her research explores intersections of ecology, cultural studies, and embodied performance. Previous publications include: *Salmon is Everything: community-based theatre from the Klamath Watershed* (OSU Press, 2014); *Greening Up Our Houses* (Drama Book 1994); co-editor of *Readings in Performance and Ecology* (Palgrave, 2011); articles in *Theatre Topics*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *Journal of American Drama*, *Theatre Insight*, *American Theatre*, and *Howlround*; chapters in *Performing Nature* (Peter Lang, 2005), *Community Performance: A Reader* (Routledge, 2007); *Contemporary Women Playwrights* (Palgrave, 2013). She is co-founder of Earth Matters on Stage (EMOS) ecodrama festival, and co-founder of ASTR’s Ecology & Performance working group.

[1] Una Chaudhuri. "‘There Must Be A Lot of Fish in that Lake’: Toward and Ecological Theater," *Theater* 25.1 (Spring/Summer 1994): 24.

[2] . Ecodramaturgy is concerned with three interwoven aspects of theatre: 1) the lived experience of those represented in and present on stage (human and more-than-human), 2) the mode, means and methodology of production, and 3) the larger cultural context or historical moment of production, including theatre’s relatedness to the community it serves, and the politics into which it speaks. The first use of “ecodramaturgy” appeared in my “Kneading Marie Clements’ *Burning Vision*,” *Canadian Theatre Review*, 144 (Fall 2010): 5-12. See also, "Beyond Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism," *Theatre Topics* 17.2 (September 2007): 95-110; Wendy Arons and Theresa May, *Readings in Performance and Ecology*, eds., New York: Palgrave, 2011; “Ecodramaturgy and/of Contemporary Women’s Playwriting.” *Contemporary Women Playwrights*, eds. Lesley Ferris and Penny Farfan (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013: 181-196.

[3] The ecodramaturgy of the 1990s stressed theatre’s potential power to serve as a provocateur of change and a harbinger of transformation, and includes theatre making grounded in an activist ecological sensibility, as well as historiographic and critical projects that work to sharpen our ecological imagination. See May, 2007, “Some Green Questions to Ask a Play,” 96.

[4] Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (Oakland: University California P, 2016), 2.

[5] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University P, 2016), 33.

[6] Giovanna Di Chiro, “Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 298-320; Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (San Francisco: Island Press, 2005), Chapter 7.

[7] See, for example, Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds. *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics and Pedagogy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002); Ronald Sandler, and Phaedra C. Pessullo, *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism: The Social Justice Challenge to the Environmental Movement* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

[8] With the exception of Cherríe Moraga’s *Heroes and Saints*, Latinx plays and productions receive scant ecocritical attention—a gap that runs the risk of reinscribing the persistent “whiteness” of both mainstream environmentalism and theatre. See, for example, Cless, Downing. “Ecotheatre USA: The Grassroots Are Greener,” *TDR* 8.2 1996: 41-5; Linda Margarita Greenberg, "Learning from the Dead: Wounds, Women, and Activism in Cherríe Moraga's *Heroes and Saints*," *MELUS* 34.1 (2009): 163-185W; and Arons and May, 2014.

[9] Here, I follow environmental historian Devon G. Peña, using Mexican-origin Americans to register the intersection of culture and shifting boundaries of nation states. Peña deploys this term as inclusive of those who claim American citizenship, but also those without papers but with a long-standing claim to the

land, as well as those economic migrants who have “returned” to live and work on land that prior to 1849 was part of Mexico. Devon G Peña, *Mexican Americans and the Environment: Tierra y Vida* (Tucson: U Arizona Press, 2005).

[10] See Herbert Dittgen, “The American Debate about Immigration in the 1990s: A New Nationalism after the End of the Cold War?” *Stanford Humanities Review*, 5.2 (1997). <https://web.stanford.edu> Accessed 4 April 2017.

[11] Cuauhtemoc was the Aztec warrior who ruled Tenochtitlan at the time of Spanish invasion and ultimate conquest (1520-21). The character name is itself indicative of the reclaiming of indigenous heritage that was foundational to the *movimiento*.

[12] José Cruz González, *Harvest Moon* (Woodstock IL: Dramatic Publishing, 2002). All subsequent quotations from the play will be indicated in parenthesis.

[13] The *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, designed by Judith Baca, reclaimed the Tujunga Wash of the Los Angeles River; the murals of San Francisco’s Mission District by Juana Alicia and other *muralistas* throughout the 1970s and ‘80s reclaimed and renewed neighborhoods and alleyways; and Chicano Park in San Diego arose out of direct action by a community whose home-places had been destroyed in the construction of the Interstate 5 freeway and the Coronado Bay Bridge. See Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: New Press, 1990), 170-71.

[14] Similar strategies are employed by playwrights addressing climate change and climate justice in their work. See, for example, the *Howlround* series on Theatre and Climate Change curated by playwright Chantal Bilodeau. www.howlround.com.

[15] See Peña, *Mexican American Environmental History*; Laura Pulido, *Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest* (Tucson: U Arizona Press, 1996, 1998).

[16] See, for example: Don Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1996)

[17] Ilan Stavans, ed. “Chronology,” in *Cesár Chavez: An Organizer’s Tale: Speeches* (New York: Penguin Group, Inc.), 2008: xxxvii.

[18] Sarah Wald, *The Nature of California: Race, Citizenship, and Framing since the Dust Bowl* (Seattle: University of Washington Press), 2016.

[19] Useful analysis of the H-2A program and its historical context can be found in “No Way to Treat a Guest: Why the H-2A Agricultural Visa Program Fails U.S. and Foreign Workers” compiled by Farmworker Justice. www.farmworkerjustice.org.

[20] See Pulido, Chapter. 3.

[21] Stavans, *An Organizer’s Tale*, “Before the House of Representatives,” 65-74.

[22] See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books (1987), 2007).

[23] Agent Orange and other herbicides were used against Vietnamese farmworkers—irony across geographies, cultures and nation-states that Luis Valdez ironizes and indicts in his play, *Vietnam Campesino*. See Jorge Huerta, *Chacano Theater: Themes and Forms* (Tempe, AZL Bilingual Press, 1982), 86-91.

[24] For slightly differing narratives of the first use of the term “Anthropocene,” see Davies, 42-45; Haraway, 44-47; and Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Un-natural History* (New York: Pacador / Henry Hold and Co., 2014), 107-110.

[25] Haraway, 4.

[26] See Haraway Chapter 2.

[27] Davies, 194, and generally, “Conclusion: Not Even Past,” 193-209.

[28] Davies, 6.

[29] Davies, 6, 194; Haraway, 34.

[30] May, 2007, 101.

[31] Haraway, 4.

[32] Davies, 102-104.

[33] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 149-152.

[34] See Kerry Abel, *Drum Songs: Glimpses of Dene History* (Montreal: McGill Queen’s U Press, 2005).

[35] Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 69-70.

[36] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (University of Otago Press, 1999), 3, and 142-162.

[37] Personal interview. 12 Nov. 2009.

[38] Cindy Kenny Gilday, “A Village of Widows,” in *Peace, Justice and Freedom: Human Rights Challenges for the new Millennium*, eds. (Gurcharan S. Bhatia, et al, Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2000), 108.

[39] Marie Clements, *Burning Vision* (Vancouver, BSL Talon Books, 2003), 37. All subsequent quotations from the play are from this edition and will be cited in parenthesis.

[40] See Jane Bennett, *Vital Matter: the Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 1-19.

[41] Clements, 17.

[42] Ashlee Cunsolo Willox, "Climate Change as the Work of Mourning," *Ethics and Environment*, 17:2 (Fall 2012): 141.

[43] Haraway, 5. Thank you to my quick-witted colleague, Tricia Rodley, for her trope of "anthropoScenic," during my process of revision.

[44] See Una Chaudhuri and Shonni Enelow, *Research, Theatre, Climate Change and the Ecocide Project* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 1-21.

[45] Chaudhuri and Enelow, 2.

[46] Haraway, 4, my emphasis.

[47] Davies, 200.



MARTIN E. SEGAL THEATRE CENTER
PUBLICATIONS

"*Tú eres mi otro yo - Staying with the Trouble: Ecodramaturgy & the AnthropoScene*" by Theresa J. May

ISSN 2376-4236

The Journal of American Drama and Theatre

Volume 29, Number 2 (Spring 2017)

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