

Greening the Theater: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage

Theresa J. May
Humboldt State University

Ecological victory will require a transvaluation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present. And in this the arts and humanities—including the theater—must play a role. (25)
—Una Chaudhuri, “There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake”

In the past three decades ecology has lit a greening fire across disciplines, from environmental history to environmental management, from ecofeminism to green economics. Greening artistic values have spawned land-art, site-specific dance, nature writing, and music with whales. This sea change has renewed both the praxis and theory of literature, visual arts, music and dance. Yet, while literary scholarship has developed diverse discourses in ecocriticism, theater artists and scholars appear to be oblivious. In a 1994 issue of *Theater*, Erika Munk reported that “our playwrights’ silence on the environment as a political issue and our critics’ neglect of the ecological implications of theatrical form are rather astonishing” (5). In the decade since Munk and guest editor Una Chaudhuri laid the gauntlet down, response has been thin. What accounts for theater’s absence from ecocritical discourse, indeed from the environmental movement? In part, tradition. Today’s burgeoning ecological art and writing grows out of two centuries of nature writing and landscape painting. Likewise, ecocriticism in literary studies had its genesis in the plethora of analyses of *Walden Pond*. Perhaps American drama has no Gary Snyder, no Terry Tempest Williams, because it had no Henry David Thoreau.

In her article “There Must Be a Lot of Fish in that Lake: Toward an Ecological Theater,” Chaudhuri posits that theater’s humanist origins make it “anti-ecological.” Contemporary theater artists working with ecological themes have been hamstrung by a theater tradition that defines drama as conflict between and about human beings. Chaudhuri observes that even plays that “manage to bring an ecological issue to center stage” must “exist within a theater aesthetic and ideology (namely nineteenth-century humanism)...that is programmatically anti-ecological” (“There Must Be” 24). Downing Cless points out, however, that Western theater history is rife with works in which nature plays a significant role—from the earthly goings-on in Shakespeare’s *Mid-summer Night’s Dream*, to Anton Chekov’s endangered *Cherry Orchard*, to Samuel Beckett’s barren post-apocalyptic landscape in *Waiting for Godot*. Cless argues for “innovative

interpretations,” suggesting that theater will green if stage directors work toward ecological interpretations (“Ecocriticism” 10). Yet as Chaudhuri warns, the use of “ecology as metaphor is so integral a feature of the aesthetic of modern realist-humanist drama that, paradoxically, its implications for a possible ecological theater are easy to miss. Its very ubiquity renders it invisible” (“There Must Be” 24). Consequently, even when a director makes choices to drive home an ecological meaning, that meaning may be obscured when it meets deeply ingrained humanist listening in the audience. It is incumbent then on critics and historians to help change the listening into which new works of drama speak and shift assumptions that inform the perception of canonical works. When ecocriticism moves from page to stage, scholars may discover what Erika Munk called a “vast open field” of “histories to be re-written, styles to re-discuss, contexts to re-perceive.” Everything, she harkens, “cries out for reinterpretation” (Munk 5). Believing that ecocriticism can illuminate theater’s participation in our ecological culture, I explore strategies for greening the theater along two streams—applying ecocriticism to the dramatic canon, and recognizing new works of “ecodrama.”

As theater scholars awake to the possibilities of ecocriticism, ecocritical discourse itself must grow. Theater is not literature after all, and ecocritical analyses of dramatic texts alone do not tap the rich ecological implications of embodied artistic representation. Plays begin where their texts leave off. Echoing Mikhail Bakhtin, theater is the place where drama “takes on flesh” (250). Theater scholars bring key perceptions about the way the body functions as medium between material and metaphoric worlds and the ways theater audiences influence performance in an organic exchange of meaning-making.

Theater is both immediate and communal and this may in part account for its absence from the genre of “nature writing.” While a playwright may find the peace of mind to write while in repose at his or her own Tinker Creek, the work is not complete until it makes the transition from written word to human utterance. Playwrights must ultimately work in community, coming together with other theater artists and an audience. They write to this end, knowing their text must leap from the page as an immediate communication between actor and audience. Theater functions as a field of exchange where myths take flight, moving between the permeable spheres of self and community and then out into the terrain of our lives. It is a messy, scrappy process, occurring mostly in cities where urban types labor long hours in shabby basement theaters, sharing their work with others who have braved both weather and parking conditions to sit in the dark for a few hours bearing witness to action on stage. To discover the ecology of theater and its potential to awaken ecological sensibilities in us, ecocritics must come into the theater and partake.

Always an immediate, communal and material encounter among embodied performer, audience and place, theatre is ecological even as it is representational. Ecocriticism, like feminism, post-colonial or multi-cultural theory, addresses injustices felt in the body—the body of experience, of community, of land. Why then has an ecological perspective been absent from the theater? Una Chaudhuri posits that theatre functions within an “aesthetic and ideology (namely nineteenth-century humanism)...that is programmatically anti-ecological” (24). Indeed, theatre’s artifice has seemed a virtual monument to humanity’s triumph over natural forces. But the binary of nature vs. culture, as much recent theorizing has demonstrated, comes apart in multiple places. Not only is “nature” a cultural construction, ecology is everywhere bound up with culture, confounding the philosophical arrogance that posits a humanity separate from what David Abram has called the “more-than-human world.” Ecology is about people too. Once this leap is made, once thinking both about theatre and about ecology shifts such that artifice is not proof of independence from, but evidence of interconnection with, the natural world, then Munk’s “vast open field” appears, and with it the realization that theatre has always served as a forum where people negotiate and generate relationships to their environments (wild, cultivated, industrial, virtual). Ecology considered materially (rather than metaphorically) gives rise to new ways of looking and reading (ecocriticism) as well as creating (ecodrama/performance).

Furthermore, imagination is an ecological force, and representation, in its many manifestations as stories, celebrations, and patterns of signification, is one of the ways people participate in their material/ecological condition. Theatre functions as a field of exchange where stories take flight, moving between the permeable spheres of self and community, then out into the terrain of lived experience. Stories are written in the land and in human and other bodies. Like air, water, food and shelter, some stories sustain life; like toxic waste, some stories kill. At a time when master narratives engage the armies of destruction and empire in a so-called “clash of civilizations,” the critical role of the arts and theatre in particular as a site of counter-discourse, resistance, and re-imagining can hardly be more apparent. The task of dismantling the stories that take us to war must be commensurate with the task of generating the possibilities of justice and sustainability.

The environmental justice movement has begun to challenge the mainstream environmentalism upon which much ecocriticism rests. According to Giovanna Di Chiro, environmentalism’s primary concern for “wild and natural” places perpetuates “separation between humans and the ‘natural’ world.” Environmental justice advocates often perceive environmentalists as “utterly indifferent to urban communities.” Like the environmental justice movement, theatre forces the question of human ecology, inviting examination, for example, of the

disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on the poor, the working class, and communities of color. When theatre becomes a site of ecocriticism, the term “environment” must be reconstituted to include the places “where we live, where we work, and where we play” (300-01). Similarly, in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism* Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy cast the net of ecocriticism wide, encouraging inclusion of perspectives “based not only on the recognition of connection between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women across patriarchal societies...[But] also based on the recognition that these two forms of domination are bound up with class exploitation, racism, colonialism and Neocolonialism” (3). Theatrical analysis presses ecocriticism beyond a traditional white/male-dominated wilderness aesthetic with its implied binaries of nature/culture, wild/tame, rural/urban, toward an understanding of ecological community that includes human and non-human creatures, urban and wilderness places. Contemporary ecocriticism is called to the centrally important concerns of environmental justice theorists who work to expose the relationship between racism and environmental exploitation by reclaiming urban environments as ecological communities and terrain for ecological thought. When the ecocritical view can expand its scope to include the issues of race, class, gender, geographic situated-ness, and white power and privilege, then theatre—which has always been a force for activism as well as the dissemination of hegemonic myths—appears ripe for analysis. Indeed, theatre’s inherent communality makes it an ideal site for examining the habits of mind that perpetuate unjust and unsustainable paradigms, and/or precipitate cultural transformation.

That said, artists and scholars who work to find intersections between ecocriticism and cultural studies do well to note bell hooks, who urges awareness of the politics of domination. “When we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our action, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination” (43). The land is already inscribed with master narratives that silence some while privileging others.

Greening the Canon

Theater has been a powerful force for disseminating the deeply-ingrained belief systems, or mythologies, of American ecological culture, and has participated in the making of myth and policy that brought us to the present crisis. At turning points in this nation’s history—the closure of the frontier, the beginning of the conservation movement, the New Deal era, the rise of post-World War Two consumer culture—theater was there, representing deeply rooted “American” stories about the land. Grounding dramatic texts in specific times and

places helps unmask what Chaudhuri has called theater's "complicity with industrializations animus against nature" and fleshing out how theater has propagated key American agendas (i.e., Manifest Destiny, frontierism, consumerism, globalization) ("There Must Be" 24). In the face of the growing ecological understanding that has marked the twentieth century, most early American drama was complicit with expansion and exploitation, spinning stories that shored up Americanism, and influencing the public debate over wilderness preservation, mining, hydropower and urban pollution.

Frontier plays of the late nineteenth century sanctioned genocide of Indian peoples as well as animals on the plains, preparing the way for radical ecological change. Yet, the representation of western landscapes on stage at the turn of the century also inspired eastern audiences to appreciate wilderness. Fraught with ubiquitous classism and racism, the early conservation movement, as William Cronon has pointed out, perpetuated the subjugation of Indians while it commodified wilderness beauty. In 1906 David Belasco's *Girl of the Golden West* typified the hundreds of melodramas about the land west of the 100th meridian. In Belasco's rendering, a dozen gruff but likeable miners vie for the affections of the woman who runs the local saloon. The geography of difference expressed in the sublime, picturesque landscapes of the melodrama stage helped ingrain the conceptual binary of the land as either "scenic wonder" or "natural resource," marking one landscape as aesthetically ideal and another as a stockpile of "raw materials" for human use. Like preserved wilderness parks, the scenic designs of Belasco's stage obfuscated the general mining of western resources that fed the American prosperity machine. Belasco's description of the recreational options at the Girl's doorstep reads like copy from a California tourist brochure: "God's in the air here, sure. You can see Him layin' peaceful hands on the mountain tops" (357). Meanwhile, miners were laying a violent hand on the land. Smoke from the smelters—a sign of a "boom town"—clouded the view-cape, while chlorine and cyanide, used in processing the ore, leached into groundwater. Mining operations washed mountainsides into rivers of rubble, ate up timber, poisoned groundwater, and obliterated the sublime silence with the sound of the twenty-four hour stamp press.¹

Rogers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* opened in 1943 and serves as a hologram of post-World War II American ecological culture. Its landscape of empire breathed new life into the frontier myth. Conceived in the shadow of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, *Oklahoma!* represented a kind of musically-induced national amnesia that replaced the images of the Dust Bowl and Depression with a more distant and mythic past. Boomer families like Laurey's, who forced open the Indian Territory with their "land hunger," exercising what they believed was a God-given right to break sod, plant wheat, and grow profits, became icons of the American free-enterprise system during the 1950s.

Reminiscent of the paintings of Grant Wood, *Oklahoma!*'s scenic design by Lemuel Ayers put the modern factory farm on stage: hillsides planted in monocrops, cubist haystacks reaching to the horizon. Borrowing Rachel Carson words of some years later, this was "agriculture as an engineer would conceive it to be" (10).² *Oklahoma!* reinstated the illusion of the "family farm" with lyrics such as "Gonna give you barley, / Carrots and pertaters / Pasture for your cattle / Spinach and termayters!" while the "factory farm" joined the ranks of industry, and new chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides made it possible to push the land "about as fer as she c'n go" (Hammerstein 131).

Oklahoma! expunged all traces of Indian presence (focusing instead on the image of America as a "melting pot"), subverted the state's radical past (through the signification of Jud), and reinscribed heterosexual marriage as the metaphor for an American relationship with the land. It perpetuated a feminized landscape (as the farm) against which American notions of "manliness" (as the ranch and cowboy) would continue to be defined. In Curly's West a man must conform to American ideals of private property and bully entrepreneurship or perish. Stalking Laurey like "sumpin back in the bresh som'eres," Jud is a shifting signifier for any number of "varmint" and "predators" that threatened the American way. In the Red-baiting years, coyotes, wolves and mountain lions were also "enemies" of the state and targets of a government extermination policy (Worster, *Nature's Economy* 258-90). Jud is also the stuff of the rank and file Wobblies whose discontent followed hard on the heels of Oklahoma statehood. Jud's story about fire on the Bartlett farm works as an allusion to Wobblie violence, justifying Jud's death and Curly's popular acquittal.

Echoing an Oklahoma Boomer past, a migration of a different kind was taking place as GIs returned home from the war, married and moved to pest-free suburbia. Developers who promoted postwar "tract" housing made use of deeply ingrained frontier values. *Sunset Magazine* promoted do-it-yourself landscaping through which an array of para-military chemical agents entered the ecological soup as homeowners civilized the land by killing insects, weeds, and rodents. Meanwhile, the parable of *Oklahoma!* helped protect the industrial development of the West from scrutiny. Those who complained about industrial effluents, worker safety, or environmental degradation were vilified as anti-American.

In order to shift a war-based economy to a consumer-driven one, President Eisenhower's Council of Economic Advisors urged industry to "to produce more consumer goods. This is the goal. This is the object of everything we are working at; to produce things for consumers" (Schlesinger 83). Curly the cowboy is enthusiastic about the way American life is "chargin' right and left!" and he encourages his countrymen to "keep up the way things is going in this here crazy country!" Aiming to institutionalize mass consumption, advertisers sought

to conflate consumer products with sexual desire. Women particularly would be told that they “can’t say no” to the pleasures of “labor saving devices” as the attraction between Ado Annie and the Merchant, Ali Hakim illustrates. Meanwhile, advertisers constructed a male sexual desire for new gadgets—like the “little wonder” and the automobile. The “Surrey with the Fringe on Top” is a song about a status symbol and the lyrics read like ad copy for General Motors:

The wheels are yellor, the upholstery’s brown,
The dashboard’s genuine leather,
With glass curtains y’c’n roll right down
In case there’s a change in the weather—
Two bright side-lights, winkin’ and blinkin’
Ain’t no finer rig...
Than that shiny little surrey with the fringe on the top! (9)

The automobile gave people more access to the land, but it left a path of destruction that included the bifurcation of wild lands by new highways, air and water pollution, oil spills and shortages, and urban sprawl. Applying an ecocritical lens to cultural products like *Oklahoma!* allows us to unmask the ways in which the arts have often been complicit with the causes of environmental degradation.

A few months after *Oklahoma!* ended its New York run, Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1948) examined the deeply personal consequences of American ecological culture, exposing the rupture between the mythic origins of the “American dream” and its long-term effects. Miller hoped to show what he called the “unbroken tissue” between the individual and his world (*Timebends* 182). Although the word “ecology” was not yet part of the popular lexicon, Miller’s was an ecological vision. The character of Willy Loman has lost his sense of place—a loss that is both psychological and ecological. Willy Loman believed in the dream that *Oklahoma!*’s Curly signified. But in *Salesman*, the promise of *Oklahoma!* is broken; the dream proves unsustainable, leaving a legacy of placelessness and homelessness. Willy Loman shares a fate with the Cherokee who were removed from their homelands by the force of empire and with the Okies whose roots in the soil were shaken loose by farm consolidation. But unlike these displaced and dislocated ones, Willy did not leave home. It left him. Willy’s rootlessness is typical of an American ecological culture that has defined Progress as technological change.

In much of the criticism that has been written about *Salesman*, Willy has been characterized as a man with “pastoral longings” who cannot “adapt” (Bates 60). In a greener light, Willy’s lapses warn of ecological collapse. Willy Loman is a creature whose habitat has been destroyed. He cries out to his sons, “[t]he woods are burning, boys, you understand? There’s a big blaze going on all around” (100). The material-ecological fabric of Willy’s life has unraveled.

“Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there?...This time of year it was lilac and wisteria...then the peonies would come out...What fragrance in this room!” (11). Scenic designer Joe Mielziner amplified the oscillation between the landscape of sustenance and home and that of loss and exile through a scenic scrim that could transport the audience’s imagination with Willy’s back and forth from past to present to past.³ Exiled in a landscape that provides little sustenance, Willy has lost his *sense* of place. Ultimately, his exile and his home are the same site. “They boxed us in here...there’s not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood. The grass don’t grow anymore, you can’t raise a carrot in the backyard” (11). That the air is unfit to breathe is not Willy’s exaggeration. Leaded emissions from high-octane gasoline—the staple of vehicles with “pickup”—produced contaminants that contributed to several thousand deaths. In December 1952 over 4,000 people died from London’s killer smog. Parliament passed the Clean Air Act of 1956 and similar controls were enacted in Los Angeles in the 1950s (Gottlieb 77). That there is neither light nor nutrients to grow vegetables in the Loman’s yard is not merely a sign of Willy’s personal impotence, but a marker of an increasing dependence on synthetic and often toxic chemicals, which would become the subject of Rachel Carson’s groundbreaking *Silent Spring*.

Willy has internalized the code of the frontier. He is both the victim and the carrier of an infectious myth that is the making and measure of a man according to his “rugged” and “wild hearted” father. His brother Ben “cracked the jungle” at seventeen and walked out rich at twenty-one; as a salesman in New England, Willy “broke open unheard of territories,” “knocked ‘em cold in Providence,” and “slaughtered ‘em in Boston” (46, 25). Yet, like a plant unable to root in wind-blown soil, Willy’s son Biff tells his mother, “I just can’t take hold of some kind of life” (48). Wendell Berry observes that the tendency toward habitation rises out of our material/ecological interdependence with the natural world, and yet is at odds with the ideology of the frontier that forms the *modus operandi* of American ecological culture (4). As Willy attempts to live by the dictates of the frontier, he violates the obligations of habitation. Proving his family’s frontiersque self reliance Willy tells his boys, “Go right over to where they’re building the apartment house and get some sand...You shoulda seen the lumber they brought home last week!” (42)—as if these are “raw materials” free for the harvesting, a remnant of the “free land” codified by Frederick Jackson Turner.⁴

In *Death of a Salesman* the cost of the dream has come full circle. In a final hopeless attempt to wrest the dream of *Oklahoma!* from the soil of Brooklyn, Willy is possessed by the necessity to buy and plant seeds: “I’d better hurry... I’ve got to get some seeds... Nothing’s planted. I don’t have a thing in the

ground.” In a kind of grotesque prayer of supplication to the household gods, he paces off rows. “Carrots... quarter inch apart... Beets... Lettuce” (119). As if to say, “Why can’t I, like *Oklahoma!*’s Curly, settle down on my land, or at least grow a carrot?” Willy is exhausted and depleted, but there is no place for replenishment. The soil and his life are barren for the same reasons. American ecological culture attempts to hold onto its pastoral dream while simultaneously poisoning, paving over, or otherwise compromising the lands on which that dream rests. The culmination of a national ethos that denies the permeability between culture and nature, Willy’s death is a personal silent spring.

The use of pesticides (DDT among them) and herbicides, which Rachel Carson would indict in *Silent Spring* (1962), was so pervasive and unquestioned that it shows up as a sign of the times in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). The story of a black family from the Southside of Chicago plans to buy a new home in an all-white suburb, scene two opens with Lena and family members cleaning the small apartment they share and looking forward to the new house. Stage directions explain that Beneatha, “with a handkerchief tied around her face, is spraying insecticide into the cracks in the walls.” Playfully, Beneatha goes after her younger brother with a spray-bottle of roach killer, while Lena calls, “Look out there, girl, before you be spilling some of that stuff on that child!” Beneatha: “I can’t imagine it would hurt him—it has never hurt the roaches [...] There’s really only one way to get rid of them, Mama [...] Set fire to this building!” Perhaps Hansberry intended the reference as chilling metaphor for the way that the white “neighborhood committee” hoped to keep “pests” out of its privileged community. Meanwhile, all over the nation the new “miracle” chemicals promised pest-free farms, gardens, parks, countryside and neighborhoods. In 1958 the U.S. government sprayed Duxbury, Massachusetts, to control mosquitoes. Similar mass sprayings took place on Long Island and along roadways, forests, and urban neighborhoods around the country—anywhere that insects bothered people. As Carson would later explain, after repeated sprayings insect populations return in exponentially greater numbers with new resistance to the very chemicals meant to kill them. Foreshadowing eco-racism and the fight for environmental justice that would embattle black communities in coming decades, Lena warns, “Well, little boys’ hides ain’t as tough as Southside roaches.” In a later scene, Lena’s children give her garden tools, gloves and sunbonnet in anticipation of the pleasure gardening she will do at the new house. The suburban migration of the 1950s was accompanied by a do-it-yourself garden culture promoted by new publications like *Sunset* magazine, which promised new homeowners green lawns and bug-free tomatoes through an array of paramilitary fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides. Ironically, if Lena’s family survives the racism awaiting them in the new neighborhood, Walter and Ruth’s new baby may be exposed to toxins in her grandmother’s garden.

Ecodrama Today

In a 1999 conversation about “green theater,” Molly Smith, Artistic Director of the Arena Stage, Washington D.C., exclaimed, “I’d love to produce pieces about ecology, but where are they?” (Smith 1999). In “Eco-Theatre, USA: The Grassroots Is Greener,” Downing Cless notes that the greening of American theater, when it has occurred, has taken place at the grassroots where local artists respond to regional environmental issues for an audience that shares an ecological relatedness (“Eco-Theatre” 79-102). Community-based environmental issues—including environmental justice concerns—have found theater a viable tool through which to promote social change, open dialogue, or protest the status quo. If ecodrama is to participate in the mainstream, it will require both new critical framing by scholars and increased imaginative courage by playwrights and directors. In a 1991 conference in Seattle, entitled “Theater in an Ecological Age,” playwright Robert Schenkkan (whose play *The Kentucky Cycle* won the 1992 Pulitzer Prize) charged playwrights to become “makers of new myths” (5). As Una Chaudhuri has done, theorists can empower playwrights by illuminating those dramaturgical strategies that move toward an ecological theater—the theatrical styles, devices, characterizations, settings and stories that tell the human story within the ecological story.

In *The Kentucky Cycle* Schenkkan attempts to put the land on stage by dramatizing 200 years of environmental history of the Cumberland Plateau in a nine-act epic. Schenkkan was criticized for dialogue that seemed “recycled from movies,” and branded a cultural colonialist, a story-pirate (Schenkkan was not from Kentucky) (Mason 50-62). While the play does seem to package the complex ecological, cultural, and economic history of the Cumberland into an inverted shoot-em-up Western saga, it is a landmark ecodrama. Tracing the history of seven generations of three families, the play maps the impact of frontier ideology on the land. Economic forces carve their image in the landscape as settlers clear the old forests and drive out or kill off the indigenous Cherokee. An illustration of Wendell Berry’s thesis, in two or three generations, coal companies buy out these new “natives” and strip-mining erases the ecological identity of the land and its former human inhabitants. *Kentucky Cycle* suggests that even when humans forget, the land remembers. “All these mountains is full of bones—everywhere you walk,” the character of Josh Rowen observes (319). The play tries to tell a story in which people and land share a common fate. Even miners draw their identity from the mountains they cut. “It was all one thing—all of us and them mountains” (322). For his great-great grandmother, Mary Ann Rowen, the oak tree is kin. “I used to think that tree was all that kept

the sky off my head. And if that tree ever fell down, the whole thing, moon and stars and all, would just come crashin' down" (175). More than landscape has been lost when she describes her homeland after the mining companies have ravaged it. Mary Ann's identity (like Willy Loman's) was washed away, plowed up, paved over. Schenkkan was outraged by the ecological devastation he saw in Kentucky coal country, but in his effort to write a "universal" drama, he generalized and passed judgment on a place and its people. He was criticized for not being a member of the community, economic or ecological, which he characterized in his play. He could not see the situation from the inside out, critics claimed. He was not one of the land's intimates (Mason 50-62).

Before a rich green dramaturgy can emerge, playwrights must educate themselves about ecological issues, and particularly about the ecology of their own places so that their work can grow from a personal relatedness to the land. After all, ecology is not merely a sentiment, it is a science. Green playwrights do well to seek out environmental scientists and educators, link up with experts in county and state departments of ecology and hazardous waste, with wildlife biologists, fish and game personnel, citizen groups, and environmental justice activists. Rich resources for stories exist in what we can learn from those who work in the trenches of the "environmental crisis" where our communities must solve very complex ecological problems. Seattle playwright Todd Moore immersed himself in the heated logging debate in the Pacific Northwest, and his *In the Heart of the Woods* (1994) was shaped from interviews with loggers, environmentalists, and community members. The result steers clear of environmentalist agit prop while it explores the multi-faceted relationship between people and the trees that have shaped their lives. In performance, Moore himself plays multiple roles, illuminating how the form of a drama carries meanings above and beyond its written text. Embodying each of the voices he created, his body becomes the site of common ground. The reflexivity of the performance in turn implicates spectators who are invited to examine their own relatedness to workers and forests in a post-performance discussion.

A story is a product of connection that maintains a field of contact not only among people but also between people and place. To be part of a community is to be part of its story, and if the land is filled with ancestral stories then "community" includes the rocks, trees, streams, pathways, and animal Others of that place. Stories create a matrix of belonging, a living tissue between past and present and between human and non-human communities. In *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, Una Chaudhri writes about "the mutually constructive relations between people and place. Who one is and who one can be are...a function of *where* one is and how one experiences that place" (xii). Place and person are permeable. Playwrights often underestimate and under-explore the power of theater's place-fullness. In ecodrama, the representation of place

on-stage can be more than the backdrop against which human action is played out. Place can drive the action; sometimes it becomes a kind of character with its own agency. In Lanford Wilson's *Angels Fall* (1983) the land holds outsiders captive when an accident at a uranium mine causes highway closures in a remote New Mexico town. The probability of radiation exposure gives the land its own kind of agency while the boundaries of identity inscribed by human skin are suddenly vulnerable, permeable. *Angels Fall* calls attention to the impact of uranium mining on Navaho lands, such as the 1979 radioactive tailings spill at Ric Puerco (Gottlieb 251-53). Community in this play is a product of shared exposure.

Ecodrama encompasses not only works that take environmental issues as their topic, hoping to raise consciousness or press for change, but also work that explores the beingness of the natural world in such a way that when we leave the theater, things around us are more alive, we listen better, and we have a deeper sense of our own ecological identity. In Anne Galjour's *Alligator Tales* (1997), a "sense of place" is a sense of self. The natural world does not stop at the edge of human skin. People are shot through with the terrain around them; identity and community are collaborations. Being part of this play's ecosystem (the Louisiana bayou) is a kind of marking and being marked. In *Alligator Tales* place has agency; it drives the action. *Alligator Tales* is the story of two sisters, Inez and Sherelle, who live in a small house in the Louisiana wetlands. Theirs is an interspecies neighborhood—alligators, fish, turtles, birds, dogs, cows, virgins, lightning, wind, rain, children and grownups. A man is caught on a woman's fishing line and freed by a dog; alligators sleep on porches and must be shooed off with broomsticks in the morning; a cow saves a man's life; seeing through the eyes of a fish, a woman catches red snapper for dinner; a child is born of a hurricane; a woman is caught in a gill net and led back to breathable air by a fish. The play is a series of border crossings. The swamp itself, as an estuary, is a threshold between freshwater and saltwater, between earth and sea, marking a border between worlds, between possibilities of being. In *Alligator Tales*, a so-called environmental preservation project has the Department of Fish and Game playing middleman as an oil company scoops up drilling rights from unsuspecting locals. Inez' neighbors sell out to the oil company and use their profit to start an alligator farm, selling hides for shoes, belts, and purses. The characters that choose to sell, however, are as indigenous to the place as the alligators themselves. In this way the play provides a window into the ecological/economic questions ecofeminists raise, and for which there are no easy answers. Giljour's play was born of her own childhood on the bayou, and it is not an environmental polemic. Yet it succeeds in transmitting an ecological vision: our bodies and our identities are permeable, awash with the tides; neighborhoods and families in-

clude people, plants and animals, water and land; we have all been conceived in chaos; we are what we eat. *Alligator Tales* brings to the stage a vision of the natural world that David Abram has called “a field of intelligences” in which all creatures are permeable presences and “identity” is a kind of dance of touch-and-be-touched (260).

Architectural forms as well as scenic designs inform the meaning that comes to life when a play is staged. Space speaks. Theatrical architecture has reinforced social codes (as in the multi-leveled aristocratic theaters of the eighteenth century), concretized power structures (witness the single-point perspective scenic design of the court theater with its “king’s seat”), fixed aesthetic ideologies (the proscenium or “picture-frame” theaters of the nineteenth century), and perpetuated economic hierarchies (apparent in our own Broadway theaters). Consequently, theater artists have, from time to time, simply left the building. They have taken to the streets, headed for the city square, the countryside, the factory, even the landfill. An American pageant theater movement of the early century produced dramas on riverbanks and hillsides. Socialist dramatists of the 1930s staged plays in factories, union halls, and city streets. In the 1960s theater groups claimed all manner of indoor and outdoor places for “environmental theater.” This non-traditional staging deconstructs the separation between audience and actor, and produces new levels of audience participation and reciprocity. Because form informs meaning, environmental theater (also called site-specific theater) readily lends itself to an ecological sensibility, with the potential to reawaken in audiences a sense of connection to the natural world.

Theatre in the Wild, a Seattle-based company, has developed watershed education programs using drama in the schools, organized a professional conference entitled Theatre in an Ecological Age (1991), and produced site-specific performances for family audiences that aim to “rehabilitate our ecological intimacy with the natural world.” *Dragon Island* (1993-95) took the audience on a two-mile wilderness trek through forests and meadows near the South Fork of the Snoqualmie River in Washington State. Scenes were staged in a dozen locations along a woodland path, requiring the audience to walk into and through the story. TITW’s work casts the land as player, disassembling notions of static/passive landscape. In *Dragon Island* the environment is conceived as a dynamic creative collaborator. The privileged space of the “stage” is replaced by the sensorial landscape. As audience and actors negotiate the terrain together, boundaries between their respective theatrical roles became increasingly permeable. Meanwhile, the fictional story is woven into the landscape as either planned inclusion, in which collaboration with the environment was designed into the work, or as spontaneous intrusion, in which the unpredictable, dynamic landscape emerges as player. The many spontaneous intrusions—a deer in a clearing, a snake crossing the path, a woodpecker drumming, the gurgle of a

stream or smells of the marsh—become signs of an animated nature, what David Abram calls the “forest of eyes” (69). The meaning-making process of the production is dependent on the polyphony of the speaking landscape as audience, performer, and non-human others are caught up in perceptual reciprocity. In one such scene, the character of Mudgewort flies into a rage when he discovers King Arthur has engaged the audience to help hunt the dragon. The actor playing the role reported that during several performances “a flock of crows would light in the branches of the maples overhead, creating a cacophony of screeching, clicks and caws—incredibly haunting—as if they were talking to us, to the audience, as if they were angry as hell too” (Hitchcock 1995). Theatre in the Wild’s work argues that this complementarity of the natural world is fundamental to the performance’s ecological meaning-making, while it simultaneously, and perhaps consequently, fosters a sense of community born of the alchemy of shared space and shared story.

As a forum in which our myths are forged, theater has been an ecological force, shoring up the many ways we have changed the land and warning us when our dreams violate what Aldo Leopold called “our contract with the land.” A living art immediately subject to social change, theater possesses a unique capacity to generate new stories that can root us in a sustainable future. Earth Matters on Stage (EMOS), an ecodrama playwrights festival held in northern California (2004), encouraged playwrights to engage issues that are civic, ecological and personal. By calling for a diverse range of new works the festival hoped to “usher in a new era of ecodrama” that “inspires us to explore the complex connection between people and place.” Hoping to counter the stereotype of ecodrama as merely agit prop theater, the festival called for new dramatic works that “put an event of environmental crisis or conflict at the center of the play...explore issues of environmental justice; interpreted “community” to include our ecological community; attempt to give voice or “character” to the land...[or] develop a sense of connection between human and non-human communities.” The Festival is especially interested in plays that “grow out of the playwright’s personal relationship to the land and the ecology of a specific place” and/or “attempt to find common ground among diverse stakeholders invested in a certain place or resource” (Fried and May 2). The 2004 EMOS festival attracted 147 entries from the U.S. and Canada and the winning scripts explore a variety of ecological issues including Northwest timber harvesting, chemical pollution of waterways, and Native American whaling rights.⁵

A credit perhaps to the compelling performance of Julia Butterfly Hill and other “forest defenders,” ecodrama seems to be entering the mainstream on the backs of trees. Three plays that should be mentioned are David Edgar’s *Continental Divide*, Graham Smith’s *Shadow of Giants*, and Robert Koon’s *Odin’s*

Horse—a finalist in the 2004 Ecodrama Playwright’s Festival. Each of these plays references the loss of old growth redwood trees in the Pacific Northwest and takes tree-sitters, timber barons, loggers, politicians, and media folk as characters. Each alludes to the leveraged buy-out of sustainable and family-owned Pacific Lumber Company in 1986 by Maxam Corporation of Houston, Texas. Yet their marked differences can help distinguish between plays that use ecological issues as back-story on the one hand, and plays that are environmentalist advocacy pieces on the other. Somewhere at a radical center is a vibrant ecodrama that neither ignores nor demonizes human agency. In *Continental Divide* (composed of two plays, *Mother’s Against* and *Daughters of the Revolution*, performed in repertory) British playwright David Edgar explores the politics of a fictional California. *Divide* was commissioned by Berkeley Repertory Theater and Ashland Shakespeare Festival for their 2003-04 seasons, and subsequently played at the Barbican theatre in London. Scenes in *Mothers Against* take place inside an old family lodge built of old-growth redwood timber, and around a large redwood table where stakeholders encounter economic bottom lines and personal truths as the company’s favorite son, Sheldon Vine, develops his gubernatorial campaign. Central characters are third generation members of a timber company family and frequently discuss their loyalty to the land and love for the trees. The palpable presence of the redwoods represented in the scenic design underscores the trees as both commercial product and habitat. Vine’s daughter crashes his political think tank and complicates his life—she has become a tree-sitter. The struggle between father and daughter to regain one another’s love and respect may represent an America at an ecological cross-roads, but does Edgar’s play qualify as “ecodrama”? Some scenes in the partner play, *Daughters of the Revolution*, are staged in an old-growth redwood forest populated by bungee-jumping activists and massive trees. Yet this forest functions as a liminal space between lawful society and a reality beyond the law in which the main character, a former SDS member, must come to terms with his past. Neither of Edgar’s duo is an ecodrama in the sense of taking the relationship between human and natural world as its central topic. Yet, like Wilson’s *Angels Fall*, the spatiality of the dramas bespeak an underlying ecological relatedness.

Founded in 1977, Del Arte Theatre grew into its commitment to “theater of place” over time. The company’s most recent new work, *Shadow of Giants*, produced as part of the EMOS Festival, follows on early works as it raises questions about the use and/or preservation of old growth redwoods. The action centers on Chance, a reluctant tree-sitter from New Jersey, who arrives at the foot of the giant trees ready to help. Following her baptism by wind and rain, the play pits her will and love for her tree against the seeming amoral economic need of a regular-guy logger. In the play’s mythic world, the character Vana Durga is both a kind of culturally non-specific Mother Nature, and the spirit of the tree in

which Chance has taken up residence. In performance, however, when played by the only actor of color on stage, the character reinscribes stereotypes of Native, perpetuating the “whiteness” of mainstream environmentalism while reinscribing both nature and indigenous cultures as Other. While Del’Arte has good relations with its Yurok and Karuk community members, there is some irony that in the company’s numerous plays about local issues over thirty years, Native characters and performers seldom appear. Similarly, while *Shadow* has sympathy for the plight of the logger, Bald Eg—who (like the bald eagle) is “an endangered species”—the play is essentially the story of a tree-sitter and the performance a celebration of the political protest/performance of tree sitting. While the production reveals the typical tree-sitter as an easy target for otherizing, it makes two somewhat contradictory claims: trees are beings who have “rights,” and the trees belong to the collective. In this way the play hinges on a debate within the environmental movement. Liberal environmentalists who, like Giffort Pinchot, argue that the land and its resources are part of the commons and should be managed for the health, enjoyment and yes, use, of the *polis*, are often at odds with more radical “deep” ecologists who argue that plants, animals, rivers, and oceans are living beings with innate wisdom and right to existence. *Shadow*’s personification of the tree echoes Joanna Macy and John Seed’s *Council of All Beings* in which humans stand in as representatives of the animal kingdom, speaking their concerns for the plight of the earth. *Shadow* validates a segment of the local population often vilified in the press and the citizens who, at least theoretically, support their cause. As bands of tree-sitters filled up unsold seats in the back of the theatre, did Del’Arte nurture an already politically cohesive community while alienating local timber workers and their families? In what ways did the play shift public perception on the issues; was that even its aim?

Robert Koon’s *Odin’s Horse*, which received a workshop production at the 2004 Ecodrama Playwrights Festival, resists vilifying timber company personnel. By putting a writer, Arman, at the center of his play, Koon has created a doorway into the personal world of a timber baron and a tree-sitter. Through another simple theatrical device—the presence of a laser printer on stage—Koon implicates the audience in the web of relatedness that his play explores. The audience, like Arman, uses the trees that are being harvested, even as their hearts go out to the valiant tree-sitter. Like Anne Giljour’s *Alligator Tales*, *Odin’s Horse* sites its action at the intersection of culture and nature. Like Smith, Koon invokes a mythic world, but instead of a generalized representation of “forces of nature,” Koon’s Arman revisits his Icelandic roots in a specific and personal exploration of a cultural connection to the natural world.

Ecocriticism must reach beyond dramatic texts to cope with performativity, with theatre's inherent polyphony, its *mise en scène*, and the dynamic meaning-making processes of performance. Theatre's multivocal, embodied, shape-shifting qualities make it an apt site for exploring questions of identity and community. The ecological implications of embodied representation raise, for example, new insights about the ways the body functions as a medium between material and metaphoric worlds, the ways audiences influence performance, the permeability of self, other, and the environment. With the body as the central meaning-making conduit of performance, ecocriticism applied to theatre must examine how bodies bear the markings of environmental policy. Moreover, the complications of theatre's performativity, its urban- and body-centeredness, its inherent multiplicity unveil new understandings of, and stories about, community, illuminating theatre's capacity to intervene publicly on behalf of social justice and ecological sustainability.

In the theater, metaphoric and material worlds are inextricably bound up, embodying before us what Gaard and Murphy have called "a conception of human and nature intersubjectivity, a relation involving a human identity shaped by an acknowledgement of both connection and difference" (9). Where does a person draw her boundaries and how permeable or fixed is his notion of self, culture, and humanness? Where do I stop and where does the "other" begin? When playwrights and ecocritical scholars engage in a deep ecological inquiry of the theater they can together forge a green dramaturgy, an ecological theater, which will not only tap the power of performance to shape culture but also revive and transform the art of theater. Green dramaturgy asks us to reconstitute the world, to re-conceive our notions of community in such a way that the very boundaries between nature and culture, self and other, begin to dissolve. As theater participates in our human ecological situatedness, it reclaims its ancient roots as a site of ritual celebration of the reciprocity between people and the natural world. Thus, theater emerges not only as a means by which to investigate the long-standing humanist question "who are we?" but also the urgent ecological question "where are we?"

Notes

¹See, for example, Dwane A. Smith, *Mining the West: The Industry and the Environment, 1800-1980*, Chapters 1 and 2.

²In this passage Carson is referring to single crop farming practices.

³For this and other reproductions of Mielziner's design for *Death of a Salesman*, see Mary C. Henderson, *Mielziner: Master of Modern Stage Design*.

⁴See Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier Thesis in American History* in which he posits that "free land" was fundamental to formation of American

character. For a critique of Turner, see Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill" in *The Frontier in American Culture*.

⁵The Festival is a joint project of The Ink People and Humboldt State University in partnership with Redwood Curtain Theater and the Dell'Arte Players. See the Festival website for guidelines, activities and synopses of the six finalist scripts: www.humboldt.edu/emos.

Works Cited

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. New York: Pantheon, 1998.
- Arent, Arthur. *Power and Triple-A Plowed Under. Federal Theater Plays*. Ed. Pierre DeRohan. New York: Random House, 1938.
- Bahktin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
- Bates, Barclay W. "The Lost Past in *Death of a Salesman*." *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Death of a Salesman*. Ed. Helene Wickham Koon. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1983. 60-84.
- Belasco, David. "*The Girl of the Golden West*." *Six Plays*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1929.
- Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977, 1966.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962, 1994.
- Chaudhuri, Una. *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- . "'There Must Be A Lot of Fish in that Lake': Toward an Ecological Theater." *Theater* 25.1 (1994): 23-31.
- Cless, Downing. "Eco-Theatre, USA: The Grassroots Is Greener." *TDR* 40.2 (. 1996): 79-102.
- . "Ecocriticism of Western Theatre History: Not So Green." ASLE Conference. Boston, MA, June 2002.
- Di Chiro, Giovana. "Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environmental and Social Justice." *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. Ed. William Cronon. New York: . Norton, 1996: 298-320.
- Dietrich, William. *Northwest Passage: The Great Columbia River*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1995.

- Edgar, David. *Continental Divide: Mother's Against and Daughters of the Revolution*. London: Nick Hern, 2004.
- Fried, Larry, and Theresa May. "Playwrights Guidelines." Earth Matters On Stage: An Ecodrama Playwrights Festival. Online. (www.humboldt.edu/~emos/) 30 June 2004.
- Gaard, Greta, and Patrick Murphy, eds. *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1998.
- Galjour, Anne. *Alligator Tales*. Courtesy of the Joyce Ketay Agency, New York, 1997.
- Gottlieb, Robert. *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*. Washington, DC: Island, 1993.
- Hammerstein, Oscar. *Oklahoma!* New York: Random House, 1942.
- Henderson, Mary C. *Mielziner: Master of Modern Stage Design*. New York: Watson-Guptill, 2001.
- Hitchcock, Keith. Personal interview. July 1995.
- hooks, bell. "Feminist Scholarship: Ethical Issues." *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End, 1989.
- Kaufman, David. "The Kentucky Cycle." *The Nation* 257.20 (13 December 1993): 740.
- Koon, Robert. *Odin's Horse*. Working draft courtesy of the author, Chicago, Illinois, 2004.
- Leopold, Aldo. *Sand Country Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1949.
- Lilienthal, David. *Democracy on the March*. New York: Harper, 1953.
- Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea*. New York: Oxford UP, 1964.
- Mason, Bobbie Ann. "Recycling Kentucky." *New Yorker* 69.36 (1 November 1993): 50-62.
- May, Theresa. *Dragon Island*. Seattle: Rain City, 1993.
- Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. *The Portable Arthur Miller*. Ed. Harold Clurman. New York: Viking, 1971. 3-133.
- . *Timebends*. New York: Penguin, 1987.
- Moore, Todd. *In the Heart of the Woods*. Seattle: Rain City, 1994.
- Munk, Erika. "A Beginning and End." *Theater* 25.1 (1994): 5-6.
- Schenkkan, Robert. "Theater, Myth and Social Change." Theater in an Ecological Age Conference. Seattle, WA, 22 November 1991.
- . *The Kentucky Cycle*. New York: Penguin, 1993.
- Schlesinger, Arthur. *The Politics of Hope*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963.
- Smith, Dwane A. *Mining the West: The Industry and the Environment 1800-1980*. Niwot: UP of Colorado, 1993.

- Smith, Graham. *In the Shadow of Giants*. Working draft courtesy of Dell'Arte Players, Blue Lake, CA, 2004.
- Smith, Molly. Personal interview. November 1999.
- Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Frontier in American History*. New York: Henry Holt, 1920, 1947.
- White, Richard. "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. Ed. William Cronon. New York: Norton 1995. 171-85.
- . "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill." *The Frontier in American Culture*. Ed. James R. Grossman. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994. 6-65.
- Wilson, Lanford. *Angels Fall*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983.
- Witham, Barry B. *Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003
- Worster, Donald. *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979.
- . *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* 2nd Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.