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Kinship and Community in Climate-Change Theatre: Ecodramaturgy in Practice

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Abstract: Ecodramaturgy, a critical framework that interrogates the implicit ecological values in any play or production, is explained here and then used to demonstrate the central tenets of climate theatre, including theatre's potential for decolonisation, interspecies understanding, and community engagement. *Burning Vision* (2002) by Marie Clements employs a ceremonial performance form to unearth the hidden history of uranium mining on Dene lands as it argues for environmental justice and the authority of Indigenous oral traditions. *Sila* (2014) by Chantal Bilodeau foregrounds the interdependence of culture and community across species. Finally, *Salmon Is Everything* (2006) by Theresa J. May amplifies the voices of Indigenous communities most affected by ecological loss. Taken together, these plays and their productions underscore the potential for theatre-making to function as a democratising force in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Marie Clements, Burning Vision, Chantal Bilodeau, Sila, Theresa J. May, Salmon Is Everything, kinship, ecodramaturgy, climate theatre, animal representation, environmental justice theatre

Ecodramaturgy is a critical and artistic framework that foregrounds ecological relations and responsibilities in dramatic work and material theatre practice. As a praxis that centres ecological relations, ecodramaturgy endeavours to: (1) examine the implicit environmental message of a play or production by illuminating its underlying ecological ideologies and their implications; (2) use theatre as a methodology to approach contemporary environmental problems (writing, devising, and producing new plays that engage environmental issues and themes); and (3) examine how theatre as a material craft creates its own ecological footprint

Note: Portions of this paper draw on the Introduction and chapter 7 "Kinship, Community, and Climate Change" of my monograph Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology and Environment in American Theater and are used here with permission.

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and works to both reduce waste and invent new approaches to material practice.[1] What follows deals with the last of these aims through an analysis of three plays, each of which represents the lived experience of environmental injustice and demonstrates how theatre might intervene in the ongoing patterns of settler colonialism's ecological violence.[2] The plays discussed below – *Burning Vision* (2002) by Marie Clements, *Sila* (2014) by Chantal Bilodeau, and *Salmon Is Everything* (2006) by Theresa J. May – foreground Indigenous ways of knowing, which understand ecological kinship as a set of ethical relationships across space, time, and species; and, as such, each of them might be considered an example of climate theatre more broadly. At the heart of this discussion is an assertion that the human imagination is an ecological force and that our stories have social and ecological consequences.

As an art form that is at once immediate, communal, and embodied, theatre is uniquely positioned to engender compassionate responses to climate-related social and ecological crises. Theatre's immediacy requires us to be attentive and responsive to others. As stories play out in real time and physical space, theatre invites us to *live into* the world of the play in order to examine together the consequences of human actions. Doing so we experience the ways we are unexpectedly connected and implicated. The basic ruse of almost any play calls for an open-minded, playful consideration of imagined worlds actualised as sensorial experience so that we might taste and feel those possibilities and glimpse the wisdom that otherwise only comes from lived experience. Often called the "magic if," theatre's requisite willing suspension of disbelief exercises human capacity for imaginative risk-taking. This is precisely what leverages theatre's potential as an activist form of storytelling. For the short period of the performance audience members set aside their firmly held belief systems to entertain, as imaginative possibilities, the perspectives, needs, struggles, and realities of others. Theatre thus exercises our capacity to listen, to acknowledge worlds of experience different from our own, to simultaneously hold multiple and conflicting viewpoints as plausible and real, and experience values that may conflict with our own.

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1 In recent decades, the ecodramaturgy lens has gone by various names, including green dramaturgy, environmental dramaturgy, and ecological theatre. The term *ecodramaturgy* was first used in Arons and May (181), but establishing the field has been a many-handed project. See, for example, the contributions in Arons and May, *Readings in Performance and Ecology*; Arons, "Queer Ecology"; Chaudhuri, "Ecological Theater"; Cless, "Eco-Theatre", *Ecology and Environment*; Lavery; and May, "Beyond Bambi", *Earth Matters*.

2 Sociologist J.M. Bacon theorises the direct connections between settler colonialism and environmental degradation as socio-ecological violence in "Settler Colonialism as Eco-Social Structure and the Production of Colonial Ecological Violence."

The work of climate activism is arduous and multifold, asking at once for social and political engagement and personal growth: nothing short of a reorganisation of the imaginative understanding of what it means to be human. The diverse upsurge of artistic will on the part of climate-change cultural workers shares an unwavering faith in the civic function of arts practice. The work of humanity in the Anthropocene is not only to cope through innovative geo-engineering but to imagine the possibilities of being human in a way that exercises and expands our capacity for radical empathy across differences of person, body, community, nation, geography, and species. Climate sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard calls for a "revolution of our shared imagination." We must, Norgaard argues, "imagine the reality of what is happening to the natural world [. . .], imagine how those ecological changes are translating into social, political, and economic outcomes, and [. . .] imagine how to change course." Theatre can help us accomplish all three. Theatre provides this imaginative space where people – as audiences and artists – can encounter one another in the joint work of understanding, processing, and responding to climate change. Composed of embodied and communal storytelling that provokes felt connections of responsibility and reciprocity, theatre as a way-of-knowing is a critically useful decolonising methodology, one that can help not only envision but enact compassion, justice, and democracy going forward. *Burning Vision*, *Sila*, and *Salmon Is Everything* are three plays that utilise theatre's potential as a place to envision and call forth a future informed by empathy across difference, community responsibility, and just relations. By enacting the forward momentum in what Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor calls "survivance," which encompasses not only survival but thriving culturally, spiritually, and ecologically, they work to affirm the presence of Indigenous lifeways (*Manifest Manners* vii).[3] These and many other examples of climate theatre demonstrate a key function of theatre as a site of civic generosity – a place that exercises the civic muscles of empathy and collective imagining, and does so within the context of community. Thus, what follows also argues for the unique ways in which theatre functions as a crucial tool of democracy for the Anthropocene.

Indigenous peoples and so-called developing nations throughout the world have argued that the culpability and risks of climate change are not equally shared. Moreover, research shows that the burden of impact from climate change will fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable in society and on Indigenous communities in regions at higher risk, such as the Arctic.[4] These new issues and

3 Survivance involves an active presence and continuance. Beyond mere survival, survivance connotes thriving in the face of ongoing settler colonialism, including Indigenous refusal of narratives of victimhood and/or tragic disappearance. See, for example, Vizenor's *Manifest Manners* and *Literary Chance*.

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understandings have inspired theatre-makers to expose environmental and cultural imperialism in the age of climate change by amplifying the voices of those places and peoples who have been silenced, ignored, or who are at greater risk. First Nations dramatist Clements's *Burning Vision*[5] employs a ceremonial structure to rupture separations across time and space, collapses past and present, and fuses human and nonhuman life into a single fabric of ecological and embodied relationship. A decade later, Québécois dramatist Bilodeau's *Sila* calls attention to climate justice implications of resource extraction and geopolitical economic pressures by centring Inuit traditional ecological knowledge as a space in which humans and animals share both kinship and culture arising from shared land. During this same period, *Salmon Is Everything*, a community-based play, which I devised in collaboration with the tribal communities of the Klamath River in the Pacific Northwest, put cultural sovereignty and kinship centre stage.[6] All three works illuminate the ways in which environmental degradation can also be understood as a violation of human rights.[7] Below, I examine the ways these three plays employ multivocal, multitemporal, transnational, and transspecies stories.

Tough Like Hope

Burning Vision traces the mining of uranium on Dene land at Great Bear Lake in the Northern Canadian territories and its transnational impacts on lives and land from the initial discovery of uranium ore to the detonations of the bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Great Bear Lake is one of the largest and deepest freshwater lakes in the world and the centre of life for traditional Dene subsistence-hunting communities. "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," Clements recalls (Personal interview). Clements notes that, in the case of white prospectors who claimed to discover the ore, "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" (Personal interview). *Burning Vision* maps the

4 For a discussion of the disproportionate climate-related risk to Indigenous communities of the Arctic, see, for example, Watt-Cloutier.

5 Produced in 2002 at the Firehall Arts Centre in Vancouver, B.C., and then in subsequent productions at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa and others (*Burning Vision* 9–11).

6 *Salmon Is Everything* was produced in 2006 at Humboldt State University and 2011 at the University of Oregon; it was published in 2014 and again in 2019.

7 Sheila Watt-Cloutier addresses this violation of human rights directly in her testimony before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

hand-to-hand route of the black rock from the miners who unearthed it, to the Dene ore carriers who loaded it, the boatmen, stevedores, and "sandwich girls" who worked along its watery transport across Great Bear Lake, down the Mackenzie River, across Slave Lake to Fort McMurray, where it was loaded on trains bound for Ontario refineries and, ultimately, the labs and test sites of the Manhattan Project.[8] The play's interweaving of seemingly distant lives shows the way – subtle, like radioactive dust itself – in which humans across the planet are connected through the vulnerabilities of their skins. The result is a counter-geography that challenges how we remember and whom we remember; that gives flesh to the far reaching and intimate impacts of human action and makes transtemporal, transnational, previously invisible relationships explicit.

The play's title refers to a prophecy by a Dene medicine man in the 1880s, who had a dream in which he foresaw the impact of the atomic bomb on his people and on another people in a faraway place. According to Dene oral history, this powerful dream caused him to sing through the night and call to his community to listen to what he had seen (Kenny-Gilday 109–110; van Wyck 174–185). Cindy Kenny-Gilday notes that for the Dene and other people of the Northwest Territories, "dreams have as much impact on daily life as the cycle of caribou migration" (109).[9] The narrative of the medicine man's dream told of a deadly material that came from Dene land and would be "dropped on people far away and it burned them all. These people looked just like us" (109). The dream was verified when a delegation of Dene travelled to Hiroshima in 1998 on the anniversary of the detonation of the first atomic bomb (109–110). *Burning Vision* weaves stories of Dene ore carriers, their widows, and others whose labour was extracted along with uranium ore to make weapons of annihilation, to affirm the authority of Indigenous oral tradition. Doing so, the play calls direct attention to the bomb that is settler colonialism – a force that continues to send out shock waves of destruction and suffering.

Clements's play is structured in four movements and begins with the sounds of detonation of the first atomic bomb, dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. This is quickly followed by two white prospectors, the Labine Brothers, who in 1921 laid claim to the black rock, which is itself personified in the play as Little

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8 Gordon Edwards provides a chronology of the mining of uranium at Great Bear Lake for use in the US atomic programme in "How Uranium from Great Bear Lake Ended Up in A-Bombs: A Chronology."

9 In 1997, the Canadian Supreme Court recognised Aboriginal oral history as legitimate evidence of historical fact, similar to written accounts. The decision promised recognition of claims by Dene of the Great Bear Lake region who had lived with the legacies of radiation exposure for decades (Kenny-Gilday 107).

Boy – a character whom Clements describes as "*a beautiful Native boy. Eight to ten years old* [. . .] *the darkest uranium found at the center of the earth*" (10). The juxtaposition of these dual inciting moments asks the audience to attend to the way settler colonialism finds a material and metaphoric equivalent in the atomic bomb. Expanding circles of action move out from this moment as Little Boy runs away from them into the darkness of the stage. Like valences around the central moments of discovery and detonation, more stories emerge, coming (literally, on stage) into light: a Dene Widow mourns her deceased ore-carrier husband by keeping a vigil fire; a young Métis/Dene woman earns her living making bread to sell in the boomtown that grows around the mine. An Icelandic Captain shepherds the ore down the waterways of Northern Canada to points where it is loaded for transport to processing sites in the US, and then to Los Alamos, New Mexico, the site of the Manhattan Project.

Burning Vision must be understood as a sequence of moments across times and places that generate a circular hyper-present in the space of the stage and the moment of performance. Clements's dramatic arc is not a chronological narrative, but rather composes a circle of events that bring relationship and responsibility into focus. In this way, *Burning Vision* functions as an example of what Laguna Pueblo poet and theorist Paula Gunn Allen calls "ceremonial time" (69). This achronology, Gunn Allen explains, represents the "tribal concept of time [that is] timelessness" in which both time and space are multidimensional. From this Indigenous perspective, which is consistent with theories of relativity in contemporary physics, the self is conceived "as a moving event within a moving universe" (69–70). Effectively interrupting the temporal and geographic distances that become a rationale for disconnection, *Burning Vision*'s wheel of consequences leads us back, again and again, to an examination of the extractive act that took the black rock from Dene homelands and sent shock waves out across the world. Eighteen characters from various spaces/times emerge, collide one into another like electron valences in an atom. As the characters come into relation with one another, the historical events that connect them become apparent.

Early in the play, the character of Rose, a young Métis woman, enters the circle, carrying a sack of flour over her shoulder. As she walks, a thin stream of flour leaks out, inscribing a circle on the stage in which audience members, as well as the other characters, are implicitly included. Throughout this and the next three movements, Rose recounts her mother's recipe, knowledge that has been, stirs, kneads, and folds the dough, and lays it out to rise on stage. As the central material metaphor of the play, the bread-making provides an image for the way the play kneads times and spaces together, and a reminder that making anything carries moral obligation. As matter and space, like the soft dough, fold back upon one another, characters fall into sudden relationship. Rose mixes the ingredients

for her bread throughout the four movements, repeating the phrase "substances meeting like magic" and alluding to the way both bread and ore are transmutable and permeable: earth-becoming-human-body (39).

By the third movement, the sacks of flour become indistinguishable from the sacks of ore. The wind mixes the white flour leaking from Rose's sack with the radioactive 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). In performance, this infiltration of the dust is reinforced by the physical closeness of the audience to the playing space. The audience can see, feel, and perhaps taste the flour dust spreading from the stage. They might viscerally imagine how the dust and debris from the uranium mine became so much a part of the environment that people were breathing it and consuming it in water; that caribou were eating it as they grazed on vegetation.

At the time of the Dene delegation's trip to Hiroshima in 1998, the Canadian government had not admitted knowledge of the health impacts of uranium mining in Dene communities. The character of the Widow of a Dene ore carrier calls attention to the governmental denial. At the centre of the play, and the stage space, the Widow sits by her fire, talking to her husband's boot – his figurative and material point of connection to the land. She cannot seem to let the boot go, even though traditional Dene practice is to burn the earthly possessions of those who die so that they may cross over. Neither can she let go of his clothes, especially a beaded jacket that she had made for him:

> 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)

The Widow's refusal to release the material remains of his life and hers constitutes a refusal to let his death remain invisible. As she calls attention to what was ignored by the Canadian government, the Widow affirms the vibrancy of matter and material culture by speaking to his boots as living objects that still contain elements of her husband. This active unwillingness to let go of her ore-carrier husband is not denial in the face of grief, but rather an insistence that attention be paid to the still-ongoing effect of radiation in the lives and land of Dene villagers. In performance, her vigil *becomes an invitation* (to the audience as well as the players) to bear witness to a past that has been forgotten by some but demands to be remembered. Her presence at the centre of the play and centre stage not only asks witnesses to remember but also to consider what reparations are due to fam-

ilies and communities who were put at disproportional risk and whose suffering went unacknowledged and un-studied for decades.

Burning Vision builds wider circles of relation through the character of Koji, a Japanese fisherman living in Hiroshima who falls through the hole in the earth made by the atomic bomb and then emerges as a fish in Great Bear Lake. There he is reeled ashore by two Dene fishermen and, in a later scene, meets and falls in love with Rose. A fantastical episode that is realised in the imaginary world of the stage, Koji's story alludes to a Dene legend in which a fisherman follows a trout into the depths of the lake and finds the beating heart of the world itself.[10] By the fourth movement, Rose is pregnant with Koji's child and friendship has grown between Rose and the Widow. The final scene wraps back to the moment of impact superimposing the two catastrophes to reiterate that the bomb fell not only on Koji and his grandmother in Hiroshima, but it fell over time on the lands of the Dene. Like the Widow's ore-carrier husband, Rose loses her life to the radioactive dust that contaminates her environment and the very bread she made. But the Widow embraces Koji and Rose's child as her own kin, saying: "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" (212). Through the Widow's refusal in the face of apocalyptic reasons for despair, Clements resists the narratives of annihilation so common not only to stories of nuclear holocaust, but also to futurist fictions about climate change. She answers the question "what carries on?" with a clear message of determination not only to survive but to thrive.

As ceremonial theatre, *Burning Vision* unearths and transmutes material linkages, forged by the making and use of the atomic bomb, into a vision of an intimate world in which people across time and across geography come into relation. We are not one flesh, but we are *of* one flesh: the fibres and sinews of the ecological world connect us in material and spiritual ways. What we do or fail to do has consequences for people, other creatures, and the land on which we all live. This is how we fall into one another's worlds.

Representing Kinship

In 2005, Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Commission, sued the United States for its precipitous role in global climate change. She argued that

10 Clements re-renders the Sahtu' Dene legend of the Waterheart, or Tudzé, who gives life to the everyday physical world of trees, fish, water, and human beings. Dene elders speak about the significance of this legend in interviews archived by CBC Radio ("Tudzé").

the US role as the largest producer of carbon emissions – the cause of climate change – constitutes a violation of the human rights of Indigenous peoples of the Arctic under the "1948 American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man."[11] Watt-Cloutier's 2007 testimony before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights lays out the many ways climate change disproportionately impacts traditional peoples of the Arctic as well as Indigenous people and vulnerable populations throughout the hemisphere and the world (Watt-Cloutier).[12] Damage to land, loss of permafrost, sea-level rise, loss of sea ice, and other changes to the environment, she explained, have in turn caused a loss of traditional lifeways, values, and culture, all of which negatively impact the physical and mental health of Inuit communities.

In *Sila*, Bilodeau takes up questions of climate justice in relation to geopolitics, local politics, and ecological reciprocity on Baffin Island, in the Inuit territory of Nunavut, Canada.[13] Set in and around the village of Iqualit, a community on the frontlines of climate change, *Sila*'s three interwoven storylines represent diverse ways of knowing (including nonhuman knowledge) to flesh out tensions between Indigenous and nationalist sovereignty. At the centre of the intersecting stories, Leanna, an Inuit climate-justice activist inspired by Watt-Cloutier, struggles to balance the two worlds that need her – her daughter and grandson, and her geopolitical work. Leanna's daughter, Veronica, a school teacher and poet, is modelled on contemporary Inuit vocal artist Tanya Tagaq.[14] Leanna and Veronica embody a commitment to family, community, land, and culture through contrasting choices – one working tirelessly in the international arenas; the other taking a stand locally through education, cultural sovereignty, and art-as-resistance. Bilodeau draws on Watt-Cloutier's testimony regarding the cultural and emotional impacts of climate change on the social and ecological fabric of lifeways in Inuit communities. Loss of the ecologies on which culture depends has caused increases in rates of youth addiction, depression, and suicide (Vinyeta, Powys Whyte, and Lynn). While Leanna struggles with international politics, Veronica's son Samuel is in crisis.

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11 The full text of the "1948 American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man" can be found at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights from the Organization of American States (OAS).

12 The full text of Watt-Cloutier's testimony can be found on the Earthjustice website.

13 Nunavut was formed as a new territory of Canada in 1999, when it gained autonomy from the Northwest Territories. The change has brought increased regional independence and Indigenous cultural and linguistic autonomy (Kikkert).

14 In 2014, Tanya Tagaq, Inuk vocal artist and throat singer, won Canada's Polaris Prize, one of the nation's highest artistic honours (Kozinn).

The third storyline follows a polar bear and her cub as they hunt, swim, and try to survive in a world where the winter ice that they depend on is melting too soon and too fast. The polar bears address one another in the familiar, as *anaanaa* and *paniapik* (Mama and Daughter), signalling that these are not the megafauna so ubiquitous in climate-change discourse, but rather ecologically and culturally situated autonomous beings, ones with whom Inuit communities have long shared a mutually life-sustaining relationship. The question of *ecological* sovereignty compounds that of national and Indigenous sovereignties through Mama and Daughter, who are fully developed characters with lives and lineage.

Dramatists writing on ecological themes have struggled with the task of representing nonhuman Others. Una Chaudhuri has described this effort as “theatre of species,” which in the face of environmental risk and disaster “reminds us that we humans are one species among many, among multitudes, all equally contingent and threatened” (“The Silence of the Polar Bears” 50). The theatre of species, she argues, “brings the resources of performance to bear on what is arguably the most urgent task facing our species: to understand, so as to transform, our modes of habitation in a world we share intimately with millions of other species” (50). Bilodeau’s Mama and Daughter polar bear fall within this project of representation for the purpose of critiquing, rather than asserting, human-centric values. Yet it does so within a wider cultural milieu in which the very image of the polar bear is an oft-used rhetorical device, calling up almost instantly the very meanings that theatre of species and ecodramaturgy work to resist. For example, polar bears featured in climate-change discourse pull at sentimentality; the Coca-Cola bear is a commercial strategy; and in popular culture, the stereotype of “Nanuq of the North” has functioned as a stand-in for racist depictions of Arctic peoples.

Representing polar bears on stage carries ethical responsibilities. Stacy Alaimo observes that in light of the very real suffering – both human and nonhuman – exacted by environmental degradation we must proceed with caution in representation. Meaning-making has become a “swirling landscape of uncertainty where practices and actions that were once not even remotely ethical or political matters suddenly become so” (16–17). In 2014, I directed a production of *Sila* at the University of Oregon, where we struggled to resist the oversaturated symbolic meaning of polar bears as helpless victims of climate change, as well as the tendency of audience members to fetishise polar bears as cute megafauna. As part of its project to collectively imagine humans, animals, and land as a singular fabric of ecologically interconnected lives, *Sila* situates its polar bear characters in Inuit culture and traditional knowledge. Our production then sought to invite the audience to understand this specific cultural and ecological context of the polar bear characters.

Alaimo proposes that as embodied animals, humans are necessarily part of an ecological entanglement that includes not only our biological interdependence with all that surrounds us, but that our ecology includes all spheres of culture. Humans, she argues, "cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously environmental, economic, political, cultural, scientific, technological, and substantial" (16–17). Bilodeau invokes Indigenous storytelling as a framework for understanding the workings of the socioecological relations in the Arctic. Consequently, our production sought to foreground this interweaving of human and animal lives. We approached the representation of Mama and Daughter *as a process of embodied inquiry* rather than as the task of making and (re)presenting the *object* of the bear. In *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*, Matthew Calarco suggests that such an "encounter with what we *call* animals" produces a kind of "clearing of the space for the *event* of what we call animals" (4). Taken together, Alaimo and Calarco's ideas ultimately prompted us to consider the characters of Mama and Daughter as open questions, as invitations to explore what we might share and confront what we cannot know.

Bilodeau situates Mama and Daughter in an Inuit cultural ecology and cosmology; their homeland, traditional knowledge, and culture are shared. "It is my duty to make you a good hunter. [. . .] So you may live a long life and be a great *nanuq*," Mama tells her cub (18). "Like the *nanuq* who climbed into the sky? [. . .] Tell me the story again!" the cub cries (18–19). The story Mama tells establishes a cosmology of interdependence and reciprocity in an era "when strange powers were shared among animals, people, and the land, when all creatures spoke the same tongue and traded skins with ease" (19). *Sila*'s bears thus resist objectification because Bilodeau situates them within an Indigenous framework of Inuit cultural knowledge, and philosophical tradition provides a kinship place for the ice bear as cohabitant of this Arctic environment.

In an early scene, Mama is teaching her offspring to read the surface of the water, a survival skill that underscores the bear's knowledge gained through lived experience and demonstrated through her intentional transference of that knowledge to her cub. The bears wait at the edge of a seal breathing hole in the ice:

> MAMA: Stay low, *paniapik*. [. . .] The seal sees you. He sees the shadow of your paws moving across the ice. The seal hears you. He hears the symphony of ice crystals shifting under your weight. You must learn to be attentive and silent.
> *They wait.*
> DAUGHTER: (*whispering*) Anaanaa, how will I know when the seal comes?
> MAMA: The bubbles in the water will tell you that he is here. (17)

The scene establishes that polar bears have knowledge specific to their lived experience that is interconnected with that of the Indigenous people with whom

they share place and sustenance. Mama explains to *paniapik* that the seal too has knowledge, perception, wit. The seal too can "read" the signs of predator presence, can listen to the language articulated by ice crystals as they bend and speak. The world in which both bear and seal live is alive with a kind of language or speaking – a symphony of meaning – issuing from the Inuit concept of *sila*, understood as the breath that informs all things.

But *Sila*'s bears are played by human actors, a theatrical materiality that would seem to belie any attempt to represent polar bears as autonomous beings, fixing them forever as mere puppets of human fancy. Can embodied performance potentially work to disassemble species privilege and instead perform an inquiry into the possibility of kinship? We hoped that representing nonhuman animals through human bodies could be a collective contemplation on *both* the socially constructed animal and the ecological animal with whom we share, as living cohabitants, breath and air, muscle energy, requirements of food and shelter, rest, attraction and affection, familial connections and social associations, aging, pain, injury, and mortality. We worked to perform a representation of the bears that invited an active contemplation of kinship. Shared flesh, breath, blood is a way of knowing our animal character/s outside of, or in ways inaccessible by, discursive language. It requires confronting our common flesh and the concurrence of our suffering.

Philosophical arguments alone, Calarco maintains, will not "suffice to transform our thinking about what we call animals," and he suggests that "any genuine encounter with what we call animals will occur only from within the space of surrender" (4). In the case of my UO production of *Sila*, our work began with our own bodies, for even as actors may stand in for imagined Others, the actor's body is an ecological system in present time: bodies burn fuel, exchange oxygen and carbon molecules, and otherwise carry on their aliveness. The community of bodies – actors and audience – also form an ecological system in which they affirm, merely through the act of breathing together, the interweaving of body and environment. Six actors used a contact improvisation process to breathe and move together as one body/community. Actors began with touch, then breath, then began moving, breathing together, always moving, always touching, bearing each other's weight when necessary. The interwoven lives of bears and humans could be signalled by this compact of touch, by leaning into our embodied connection. Collectively and nonverbally, actors *felt* into imagined experiences of the polar bear characters, experiences that they too have had: hunger, fear, love, generosity, celebration, grief, rage, loneliness. Speaking them out aloud in rehearsal, the actors, moving and imagining themselves as one organism, allowed these imaginative suggestions to filter into and inform their interwoven movements. What began as an exploration in rehearsal continued in performance as

the ensemble of moving human bodies that played the Mama bear from scene to scene, with the single addition of a puppet bear head, designed to reflect Inuit stone carvings suggested by Tulugaq's carving.[15] The result was an imagined polar bear that was also a community – because indeed Inuit use every part of the bear when hunted, and one bear sustains many people. In this way we not only felt into what Calarco calls "the space of the animal," but we also metaphorically represented the central value of the bear to a village (4).

Through their kinaesthetic engagement as a community of bodies, performers opened a space of contemplation regarding the kinship between bear and human but committed their mind and muscle, like a practice, to coming into relation to all that they know and do not know about polar bears. Active, embodied inquiry, a series of moment-to-moment embodied questions carry the actors' energies into a conversation with the idea of a bear. As a way-of-knowing that is at once dynamic, emergent, and embodied, theatre allows us to encounter not only our concepts of the polar bear but also the unknown Other, who exists beyond those constructions.

Indigenous peoples across North America have already lived through the socioecological cataclysm of settler colonialism to survive and thrive. Kyle Powys Whyte argues that figuring out "what exactly needs to be done will involve the kind of creativity that Indigenous peoples have [already] used to survive some of the most oppressive forms of capitalist, industrial, and colonial domination" (47–48; see also Vinyeta, Powys Whyte, and Lynn). Meanwhile, Linda Tuhiwai Smith cautions 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" (3). Decolonising, Tuhiwai Smith asserts, consists of (re)claiming (stories, lives, land); celebrating (culture, women, survivance); indigenising, or "centering of the landscapes, images, languages, themes, metaphors and stories in the indigenous world" (146). Tuhiwai Smith suggests that decolonising is a proactive, generative, life-giving process, and one in which stories and storying is central. As powerful forces of transformation, stories help people remember and reclaim the past and call forth new visions of the future. Among North American Indigenous peoples, storytelling is understood as an action that can generate material change.[16] Indeed, *stories* do work that often cannot be done by procedural, legal, or scientific efforts alone.

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15 The origins and meanings of transformation pieces in Inuit art are complex; this art often entails artwork depicting an animal becoming human (or vice versa). For more on the interconnections between Inuit art-making and spiritual practices, see Laugrand and Oosten.

16 LeAnne Howe theorises the profound implications of the power of Indigenous stories to bring realities into being in "Tribalography: The Power of Native Stories."

Performing Possible Worlds

Going forward, theatre could be a place to embody *the stories of relation* that might foster a just and compassionate response to climate change. First Nations dramatist Monique Mojica affirms this envisioning potential of theatre in part because it is storytelling actualised through embodied, present-time performance:

> by performing possible worlds into being [. . .] by embodying that wholeness on the stage, we can transform the stories that we tell ourselves and project into the world that which is not broken, that which can be sustained, not only for Aboriginal people, but for all people of this small, green planet. (Mojica and Knowles 2)

As activism-through-storytelling, *Salmon Is Everything* is an example of theatre that works to not only envision and embody ecological justice and resilience on stage but also to demonstrate how citizens with oppositional self-interests might strive towards more inclusive communities through the practice of relationship-centred civic action.

In the autumn of 2002, over 60,000 salmon died in the Lower Klamath River in Northern California – one of the largest fish kills in the history of the Western United States. An ecological catastrophe that destroyed a primary source of first foods, it also caused lasting emotional, spiritual, and cultural trauma to Indigenous tribes that have depended on the river for economic and cultural sustenance since time immemorial. The health of the Klamath River, which runs from the base of Crater Lake through central Oregon, through the Siskiyou and Marble mountains, to the Pacific Ocean, has been compromised by a series of dams constructed in the early twentieth century to support agribusiness. Consequently, salmon runs have declined dramatically in recent decades. The river's headwaters in central Oregon provide water for the Klamath Tribes, including Klamath, Yahooskin, and Modoc peoples, as well as farms and ranches, established primarily by Euro-American settlers under the Reclamation Act of 1902 and post-Second-World-War homesteads. As the river winds South and West through the Siskiyou mountains, the Klamath runs through the traditional homelands of the Karuk and Hupa peoples. In "Salmon Feeds Our People," Ron Reed and Norgaard note that the Karuk tribe was among the wealthiest and healthiest tribes of California due to the abundance of salmon and other foods in their homelands' fecund ecosystems. Today, they point out, the Karuk are among the poorest as a result of the depletion of salmon in the Klamath River system (4). The mouth of the Klamath River is located in Yurok homelands in what is now Northern California. Together with the Karuk, the Yurok were the hardest hit by the fish kill of 2002. Meanwhile, all along the river's winding path, small towns, unincorporated villages, private mines, farms, ranches, and homes derive their living from the river in some fashion.

In 2001, the ongoing environmental degradation of the river was exacerbated by a drought in Eastern Oregon and precipitated a new battle in the region's water wars as farmers and ranchers demanded that agriculture take priority over fish. By September 2002, river water had warmed as a result of reduced flows from the dams upriver, and as autumn runs of coho and chinook salmon entered the mouth of the Klamath River to spawn, tens of thousands died from gill rot caused by the warm water temperatures. Salmon corpses lay floating and putrefying along miles of riverbank. News of the fish kill spread through North Coast Indigenous communities like wildfire. A climactic chapter in the generations-long conflict over water use along the Oregon-California border, the fish kills of 2002 threw a national spotlight on water policies and politics in the region.[17]

Salmon Is Everything was developed in collaboration with the Karuk, Yurok, Hupa, and Klamath/Modoc tribal communities, whose traditional homelands lie within the Klamath River watershed, in order to call attention to the impact of the fish kill (and the sequestering of water by upper watershed farmers and ranchers) on Indigenous communities of the watershed. The play centres on three families – a Karuk/Yurok family of subsistence fishers, a ranching/farming family, and an environmental biologist and her partner. Based on interviews and first-hand accounts, the play documents the fish kill and its aftermath not merely in an attempt to find common ground in a factious community but to represent voices and lived experiences that were not being heard in local or national media. In this way, the play becomes a space to envision a new watershed citizen.

The character of Tim, an upper Klamath rancher, represents corporate agriculture of the region. "I'm not anti-fish," he remarks early in the play, "I'm just anti-bullshit. I don't think the water is over allocated [to the farmers]. My family has been cattle ranching in the Upper Klamath for over one-hundred and fifty years" (64). At a loss for how to solve the compounding political and economic crises caused by the drought, he risks a trip to the mouth of the Klamath River where he meets Will, a Karuk fisherman. The exchange between the men challenges Tim's foundational belief that the land is a resource to be exploited, and instead he begins to understand the river as a web of relations:

> WILL: I've lived in the Klamath River system my entire life. The River is [. . .] my home, my church, garden, highway, counselor, friend, brother – hell, provider. [. . .] Come and walk with me and cut open the bellies of rotten salmon to detect their sex. Come and walk with me. Count with me. Hack their tails so they won't be recounted. You can't escape the smell. This is a real-life situation. It's not a book; it's not pretend. It's not something you read about

17 For histories of the fraught politics of the Klamath watershed, see, for example, Most, as well as Doremus and Tarlock.

> that happened a hundred years ago. It's happening right now, today. To people in my life. Maybe all your rancher and farmer friends up there don't understand that. You tell them to get the hell down here and help us clean up this mess that they helped make. (76–77)

Tim returns to his ranch, family, and community of agriculturalists with an invitation to imagine into the lived experience of others:

> TIM: We can imagine. We can imagine what it might be like to have those salmon returning, not just to the Klamath River, but to the Sycan River. I can feel the excitement for what it might be like to have them come. To be a hungry seven-year-old boy – and have them come. (85)

In the end, a play that was purposed to tell the story of actual events conjures a new world and a new set of relations. In a scene of an imagined future, Tim calls his Karuk friends and asks:

> when that first salmon comes I want you to call me. Call me and tell me, okay? Would you do that? And on that day, I'm going to go down to the pivot field and turn off my irrigation for the day. And if the main pump is running, I'll turn it off too. Then, we're going to call our friends who irrigate down in the Scott Valley and they're going to turn their pumps off. And I'm going to call Walt in the Klamath Project and he's agreed to turn his water off for a day. And he's going to call the members of the Water Users Association and they're all gonna turn their water off on that day. A dozen admin folks who work for the City of Klamath Falls are going to fill milk jugs with water from the tap in their house and drive it down to the edge of the Klamath River and dump it in. Don't laugh. I know it's more an act of love than of water. It's holding another place tight, holding other families tight. (88)

As the character of the Reporter observes, this "show of solidarity with fish and tribal people will be symbolic at first" (88). Yet, in the power of performance to spin a possible world, *Salmon is Everything* asks its audience to imagine into the lives of others in order to, as Donna J. Haraway writes, "nurture on-going and living worlds" of relationship, connection, and mutual responsibility even in the face of present catastrophes (33).

Our historical moment requires theatre to rise to the ecological occasion, envisioning nothing short of a reimagined human animal in kinship with our world. As the ecological effects of human agency – once so central to the very definition of drama – circle back to dwarf human history, climate-change theatre has opened up new dramaturgical questions that challenge theatre's traditional focus on human-scale narratives. Each of these plays encompasses tragedy, yet the very fact that these stories can be enacted and embodied on stage is a life-affirming expression of hope and resilience. As a way of knowing that is at once imaginative, affective, immediate, embodied, and communal, theatre can become a place to cope with shifting realities and to envision ways of being that preserve humane

democracy. At a time when the master narratives of Empire have induced a global ecological crisis, with implications for human and animal suffering of catastrophic proportion, the critical role of the performing arts as a site of counterdiscourse, resistance, and reimagining can hardly be more apparent. The task of dismantling the stories that have sanctioned destruction must proceed apace with the task of generating new stories that help flesh out the possibilities of a just, humane, and sustainable world. Theatre is a site of confluence in which ecological relationships might be (re)imagined, explored, articulated, and, if not healed, at least brought to consciousness in ways that might sustain us on the path ahead. Surely the world needs theatre's "magic if" now more than ever.

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Bionote

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