

PREFACE

From ecotheater to ecodramaturgy

I wrote this book because I wish I'd had one like it to read when I was a young artist-activist. Growing up during the civil rights movements of the 1960s, and coming of age during the second-wave environmental movement of the 1970s, I thought theater could change the world – and there was ample evidence for my optimism. Throughout the U.S. theater was part of protest movements, consciousness raising, and political action: El Teatro Campesino was an empowering arm of the United Farmworkers Movement; Amiri Baraka's Black Revolutionary Theater was rehearsing revolution; Bread and Puppet Theater was inspiring communities to activism (see, for example, Elam (1997). When I learned about the work of Polish theater director Jerzy Grotowski ([1968] 1975), who sought to “abolish the distance between actor and audience,” I understood that this art form carried a power of immediacy and connection that was unique. Grotowski urged artists to recognize the primacy in theater of the “the closeness of the living organism,” even in the face of new technologies that (perennially) threatened the very survival of the art. “The theatre must recognize its own limitations. If it cannot be richer than the cinema, then let it be poor. If it cannot be as lavish as television, let it be ascetic. If it cannot be a technical attraction, let it renounce all outward technique.” Staging plays in which actors and audience were “within arm's reach” of one another and the audience member could “feel [the actor's] breathing,” Grotowski approached each play as an encounter – not only between artist and text and text and audience, but also between individual and community (41). I was inspired by his assertion that the uniquely embodied, immediate, and communal aspects of theater were at the heart of its power and potential to affect social change.

In 1977, I participated in the Teatr Laboratorium's *Mountain Project*¹ in the Polish towns of Wrocław and Legnica (May 2005).² The Project took place in the countryside in and around the nearly thousand-year-old Grodziec castle (Zmysłowski

and Burzynski 2015). What was compelling to me at the time was the subtle way in which the embodied experience of land helped to foster a sense of community among participants. In part, that experience forged in me a theatrical aesthetic by which form – including the embodied immediacy of audience/actor as community – seemed a potent force for social change and environmental awareness. I had to find a way to reconcile my creative ambitions with my social and ecological values, and to balance my passion for the great outdoors with a craft that kept me indoors, often in dark and musty spaces. Inspired by the work of Bread and Puppet, San Francisco Mime Troupe, El Teatro Campesino, and other groups that were using theater to leverage both economic and environmental justice, I started a fringe company with actors who were willing to muck about in the woods – for central to our emerging tenets was to leave the black box behind. If nature were not part of the theater, we reasoned, theater should go to nature. We made giant puppets, collected found objects, talked about audience participation, wrote “new myths,” and occasionally took industry jobs to pay the rent when the grants did not come through.

After moving to Seattle in the mid-1980s, I founded Theatre in the Wild (TITW), whose mission was to use theater to inspire in our audiences a sense of connection with, and compassion for, the natural world. Through Washington State’s Department of Ecology’s Public Involvement and Education, TITW expanded the environmental education curriculum through school residencies in which students devised and performed original plays about their watersheds. We also devised site-specific public performances – immersion theater designed to connect audiences to the natural world and integrate stories into the landscape (May 1999).³

In 1991, my co-director Larry Fried initiated Act Green under the umbrella of TITW, a project to support theater artists in walking their environmental talk. In partnership with Seattle’s Intiman Theatre, Act Green brought theater-makers from across the country together with policy-makers for a three-day conference, called *Theatre in an Ecological Age*. The conference posed this central question: how might theater better respond to the environmental crisis? Robert Schenkkan (1994) – whose play, *The Kentucky Cycle*, had just premiered at the Intiman Theatre – gave the keynote. Schenkkan indicted the U.S. frontier narrative as the root story that sanctioned, indeed mandated, environmental destruction. The idea that stories encapsulate ideologies from which policies and behaviors toward the environment emerge affected me greatly: it was, at least in part, what compelled me to return to the academy a few years later.

At the same conference, Molly Smith, then the Artistic Director of Perseverance Theatre in Juneau, Alaska, gave a second keynote about her company’s commitment to place. Perseverance had staged Homer’s *Odyssey* as a response to the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill off the Kenai Peninsula; the theater had also adapted Sophocles’ *Antigone* through a Native Alaskan cultural lens. Cast members of *Yup’ik Antigone* spoke of what it meant to bend western theater traditions to speak through and about indigenous cultural and environmental concerns

(Denning 1984). This example of forwarding and foregrounding indigenous voices also shaped the direction of my own creative and scholarly work. The conference, however, was centrally focused not on stories, but on stuff – the material practice – of theater. Following the conference, Fried and I published *Greening Up Our Houses* (1994) with suggestions for how to reduce the environmental and human health impacts of theater making. Our desire to nurture new works – new stories – would continue to haunt and motivate us going forward.

The early 1990s was a watershed moment for ecotheater in the U.S. In a 1992 cover story in *American Theatre*, Lynn Jacobson gave a shout-out to regional and community-based companies that were putting environmental issues and ecological values at the center of their productions. In a special “ecological” issue of *Theater* released in 1994, guest editor Una Chaudhuri charged playwrights to take up the ecological themes on stage, and called on scholars to use ecology as a critical vantage point. In 1996, Downing Cless pointed out that grassroot theaters were already “greener” in ways that empowered their communities (79–82). Together, this scholarship began to break open a discursive space, a critical standpoint from which to view theater history, theory, and practice through the lens of ecological thought.

At the University of Washington, I was blessed with faculty who supported my desire to look at theater through the lens of ecology. I believed that Chaudhuri’s (1994) analysis provided a framework for understanding the ecological themes and implications in *any and all* plays and performances, not merely plays expressly about environmental themes. Yet although I’d spent years doing arts-based watershed education and pollution prevention, I did not know the story of the land on which I lived, worked, and played. Despite my passionate sentiments about preserving wilderness spaces, my moral indignation at polluters, and my conviction that the environmental crisis rose out of long ingrained Western European intellectual frameworks that had shaped a capitalist-consumerist culture – I did not know how things came to be the way they are, nor how I might be implicated in the destruction around me.

Alongside theater history and critical theories, I devoured the works of environmental historians William Cronon, Vine Deloria, Jr., Carolyn Merchant, Richard White, and Donald Worster. I began to see how the stories in early American melodramas, or 1930s labor plays, were inscribed in the land around me. I began to see stories everywhere, stories that carry and concretize ideologies that give rise, in turn, to the policies that shape the land. Narratives rose up before my eyes in the form of giant gravity dams spread out in the pastoral vistas of the Seattle arboretum and on the streets of Seattle’s Pioneer district. As I learned of the legacies and of settler colonialism, I also saw how theater in the U.S. had participated in the propagation of stories that shored up and defended its worst (and ongoing) impact on land and lives. I became more fully convinced that theater could be a force for healing, justice, and resilience.

In 2002, as assistant professor at Humboldt State University, I saw firsthand the ecological and cultural impacts of settler colonialism in the form of a

devastating fish kill on the Klamath River. The death of over 70 thousand salmon on Yurok homelands on the lower Klamath River brought home to me not only the artificial separation of *nature* from *culture*, but also the subtle ways this binary thinking perpetuates environmental injustices. Working with Karuk, Yurok, and Hupa tribal members, students, and community members, I wrote *Salmon Is Everything* (2019), a community-based play that documents the cultural significance of that historic fish kill. The process of developing *Salmon Is Everything* was an exploration of the complex ways ecology and environment are materially intertwined with culture, identity, and sovereignty. That process of community collaboration changed me.⁴ As I listened to and learned from my Native collaborators, I became keenly aware of the systems of power and privilege evidenced not only in the control of water on the Klamath River and in the economic priorities that privileged some communities while ignoring others, but also in who was included in policy solutions and whose narrative drove public debate. The process also changed my thinking about what theater can do as a site of civic engagement.

The convergence of ecologically conscious theater practice and ecocritical theater scholarship gained momentum in 2004 when Downing Cless and I started the Performance and Ecology Working Group for the American Society for Theatre Research, a project which has continued to grow and incubate new scholarship. Also in 2004, director Larry Fried and I started the EMOS (an acronym for “earth matters on stage”) Ecodrama Playwrights Festival.⁵ Hosted at Humboldt State University in partnership with the Dell’Arte Company, EMOS called on dramatists to “respond to the ecological crisis and explore new possibilities of being in relationship with the more-than-human world” (quoted from EMOS guidelines; see also Arons and May [2013]). We called for plays centrally focused on ecologies, environmental injustice, and sense of place. EMOS, now hosted by various institutions, is one of several national artistic initiatives focused on the environment crisis and climate change. In 2007, Wendy Arons invited me to write an article in a special “green” edition of *Theatre Topics*. In “Beyond Bambi,” I offered a series of “Green Questions to Ask a Play” as a starting point for ecodramaturgy – the critical and historiographic examinations of plays and performances (2007). In order to put new artistic work in conversation with new scholarly work, EMOS 2009, hosted by the University of Oregon, added a symposium on performance and ecology. *Readings in Performance and Ecology* (Arons, May, 2012) emerged from that symposium.

What emerged as an outcropping of environmentally concerned theater artists (myself and so many others) in the 1990s is now a groundswell of creative innovation fueled by networks of media-savvy artists who are committed to theater becoming a significant force for global ecological transformation. This book represents a personal as well as a scholarly journey – from the sobering confrontation with the ways history lives in the land and reverberates as patterns of privilege, to the work of contemporary playwrights whose dramas (re)envision ecological relations. It stands alongside many other projects, both scholarly and

artistic, that are part of what I've called ecodramaturgy – an unfolding environmental consciousness in North American theater. As we stand together at the threshold of the Anthropocene, I hope that it will provoke your thinking about what theater has, can, and must do.

Notes

- 1 The *Mountain Project* (1975–1978) grew out of the “paratheatre” work of the Teatr Laboratorium (also known as the Polish Laboratory Theatre); it took place over several years and included multiple and cumulative phases, including *Night Vigil*, *The Way*, and *Mountain of Flame* (Kumiega 1985, 183–214.)
- 2 A copy of my journal from my *Mountain Project* can be found at the University of Washington Drama Library in Seattle, Washington.
- 3 Today, I would take issue with some of my own assertions and assumptions in that (1999) article, but I list it here because it describes TITW's site-specific work in some detail.
- 4 In “The Education of an Artist,” I write in detail about my personal process of learning indigenous methodologies from Karuk, Yurok, and Hupa collaborators in the development of *Salmon Is Everything* (111–152). The volume that contains my essay and the play also contains first-person accounts by Native collaborators (see May 2017).
- 5 EMOS consists of a new play contest and symposium hosted by university/community partnerships across the country. EMOS events have included workshop productions of winning scripts, play readings, panels, critical papers, and performance workshops. Following EMOS 2004 at Humboldt State, the festival was hosted by the University of Oregon in 2009; Carnegie Mellon University in 2012; the University of Nevada-Reno in 2015; and the University of Alaska, Anchorage, in 2018.

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INTRODUCTION

Where has theater been while the world's been falling apart?

Present disasters, like present debates, have deep roots in our collective past. Consequently, sound activism requires knowledge of history, just as history told in ways that bend toward justice is itself a kind of activism. Many theater artists, and I count myself among them, hope to contribute to positive social and environmental transformation through their work. But we cannot proceed without understanding the ways in which theater has already participated in shaping social behavior and national policies. American theater has represented some of the central environmental debates of the last century. At times, it has intervened to strengthen democratic and ecological values, but many plays and productions championed U.S. environmental imperialism and were complicit in the project of plunder.

The need for a history of American theater written through an environmental lens was clear when, in the context of a lively discussion about plays thematically related to the climate crisis, one of my students threw up their hands and exclaimed, “OMG! Where has theater *been* while the world's been falling apart?!” While the student's incredulity arose from an activist impulse, it was in fact a request – a demand, really – for an accounting. Traditional theater history and literature courses had not revealed the many ways that theater *has* engaged the environmental crises of the twentieth century. In the uncertain future that is now unfolding, this book aims to lay a foundation for artists and scholars who seek to put their shoulders to the wheel of what Una Chaudhuri (1994) has called an ecological “transvaluation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present” (24).

In the chapters that follow, I take a wide-angle historical perspective, together with detailed analyses of plays and productions, in order to map how theater has responded at key moments in U.S. environmental history. How has theater disseminated ecological ideas or stimulated new perceptions of the natural world?

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How has it helped to perpetuate ecological violence? How might theater be a tool for *decolonizing* movements? Finally, how might theater participate in the transformation of conscience and consciousness so desperately needed now?

In each chapter I consider emblematic plays from turning points in U.S. popular understandings of our relatedness to the environment, namely, the closure of the frontier, the wilderness preservation movement, the New Deal conservation era, the rise of the postwar consumer culture, the environmental and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the environmental justice movement of the 1990s, and, finally, the increasing social and political awareness of climate change. Some of these plays have enjoyed critical success that has made them part of the canon; others rose out of grassroots activism. Some represent the deeply rooted “American” stories about the land; others critique those master narratives, telling new stories infused with the ecological values of interdependence and justice. Whether mainstream or grassroots, these plays, performances, and the stories they transmit have become part of not only *what* we think but also *how* we think, and how we understand our place in and kinship with the land.

At the heart of this braided history and play analysis is an assertion that the human imagination is an ecological force and that our stories have social and ecological consequences. The stories we tell touch the land. Storytelling becomes policy-making as stories told and enacted inform values and ideologies, which, in turn, shape individual and collective behaviors. In this way, theatrical representation participates in shaping perceptions, desires, behaviors, and policies toward the land and its biotic communities. As a theater-maker, activist, educator, and scholar, I also am centrally concerned with how the dynamics of racism, sexism, and economic inequity intersect with environmental concerns. To underscore how theater might activate an eco-civic imagination, throughout this book I elucidate the ways by which theater has represented the complex interweaving of ecological degradation and human oppression. Ultimately, this is a book that argues for theater’s potential to assist in mending broken relations (with the land and others) and to inspire ecologically responsible action.

Theater as civic practice

This book conceives of theater as a site of civic discourse that has influenced and reflected society’s relatedness to the land, and that might help us compassionately navigate the social changes that have occurred and will occur as a result of climate change. Plays are blueprints for live performance that require collective co-imagining by people who have come together in time and place. It is necessarily immediate, embodied, and communal – attributes that have everything to do with how theater makes meaning and how it might make a difference. As characters, places, and temporalities are brought to life on stage, a give-and-take occurs between the imaginations, sensibilities, and visceral experiences of the performers and the audience. This alchemy of embodied communal feeling,

visceral response, and shared risk reminds us that no matter how abstract or virtual our interactions may be outside the theater space, we nonetheless inhabit the world as embodied organisms. At the same time, theater's inherent reciprocity encourages dialogue not only between performers and audience but also between the event of the performance and the larger sociopolitical milieu in which it takes place. In an age when digital, virtual, and remote realities dominate our everyday experience, it is useful to take a moment to consider these defining qualities of theater.

Theater has long served as a site of civic practice and a forum for civic action; through plays, diverse societies have explored questions of free will, social conscience, community obligation, moral leadership, and the social and ecological consequences of hubris. This is civic power, as inherent in theatrical *form* as it is in any particular narrative content. Theater's form begins with an invitation. You may have heard the axiom that theater starts with the question *What if?* Theater depends on the willing suspension of disbelief by which audiences and actors set aside rigidly guarded worldviews about self, world, and other. The prologue of Shakespeare's *Henry V* makes this invitation clear when the Chorus asks the audience to "entertain conjecture of a time" (1.1, 1). For a few hours, audience and performers are expected to summon the generosity to collectively conjure the world of the play – a world that may appear fantastical or even revolutionary. In this task, both audience and performers are responsible for bringing the play to life in the present time and in a shared place of the stage. This fundamental contract – the willingness to collectively engage in fiction for the purpose of bearing witness and finding meaning – makes theater a vital civic tool. Theater cultivates democratic values and strengthens the civic muscles of tolerance, empathy, and self-reflection.

Applied and community-based theater practitioners tend to argue for theater's efficacy as a tool for social change and civic engagement (see, e.g., Cohen-Cruz [2005, 2010]). I argue, however, that the idea of civic engagement provides a framework for understanding how theater functions more generally. As a communal act, theater hones our capacity to be in a relationship – a sense of connection that is foundational to ecological health and democracy. Theater's immediacy requires us to be attentive and responsive to others. As stories play out in real time and physical space, theater invites us to *live into* the world of the play in order to examine together the consequences of human actions. In doing so we experience the ways we are unexpectedly connected and implicated. The ruse of the play – the *What if?* – allows for open-minded, playful consideration of possibilities actualized as sensorial experience so that we might taste and feel those possibilities and glimpse the wisdom that otherwise comes from lived experience. Theater 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 to *give audience* to values that may conflict with our own. In this way, theater exercises the imaginative elasticity necessary to safeguard democracy, justice, and compassion as climate change unfolds.

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In the chapters that follow I examine the democratic value of theater's unique capacity to gather people together in community. Throughout, I argue that because theater is a practice of collaborative imagination and collective conjuring, it has ample capacity to intervene in the large master narratives that have helped perpetuate environmental injustice. By telling untold stories theater can reclaim histories that have been erased or distorted, unmask and expose the impact of ideologies, assert new voices, and carve out space for those that have been silenced or marginalized. These stories can build relationships, crack outdated ideologies, open new possibilities, envision futures, and help to (re)shape the social, political, and ecological landscapes of our lives. In the present historical moment, theater artists have an opportunity to tell stories and explore forms that actively practice compassion and demand justice – stories that are visionary, generative, and healing. For theater artists in particular, I pose this question: In the face of the shattering facts of climate change and other human-caused planetary biocides, *what if* the skills that you possess, the stories that you tell, and the forms through which you tell them could help to save lives, prevent suffering, heal destruction, reclaim worlds, and transform what it means to be a human animal in a diverse ecological community? *What if?*

Ecodramaturgy as methodology

Ecodramaturgy is theater praxis that centers ecological relations by foregrounding as permeable and fluid the socially-constructed boundaries between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, individual and community. It encompasses both artistic work (making theater) and critical work (history, dramaturgy, and criticism) in three interwoven endeavors: (1) examining the often invisible environmental message of a play or production, making its ecological ideologies and implications visible; (2) using theater as a methodology to approach contemporary environmental problems (writing, devising, and producing new plays that engage environmental issues and themes); and (3) examining how theater as a material craft creates its own ecological footprint and works both to reduce waste and invent new approaches to material practice.¹ As a critical lens, ecodramaturgy examines the role of theater in the face of rising ecological crises, foregrounding the material ecologies represented on stage.²

Although environmental issues have concerned dramatists throughout the twentieth century, ecodramaturgy as a critical discourse can perhaps be traced to the summer of 1994, in which a landmark issue of *Theater* was dedicated to ecology as a vantage point for theater studies. Editor Erica Munk (1994) wrote 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). Guest editor Una Chaudhuri (1994) likewise envisioned an ecological theater that would be possible only if and when we recognize ecological themes as more than metaphorical comments on the human condition. Theater’s human-centric bias, she argued in that piece, stems from an ideology that shares common caus-

with Euro-American industrial civilization's celebration of artifice as an expression of human superiority over and separation from nature. Ultimately, Chaudhuri's analysis not only identified a probable cause for mainstream theater's perceived silence on ecological issues; it also suggested a framework for viewing and conceptualizing the ecological themes and implications in *any and all* plays and performances. Munk likewise urged investigations of "the way ecologies – physical, perceptual, imagined – shape dramatic forms" and suggested that "we stand at the edge of a vast, open field of histories to be rewritten, styles to rediscuss, contexts to re-perceive" (5). Since that time, artists and scholars have responded in myriad ways, and their work is part of the many-handed project that I call ecodramaturgy.

As a component of theatrical production, ecodramaturgy helps to decipher the meaning a play might have had in the past and what it might mean to a contemporary audience, thus informing a decision about how or whether to produce it today. However, merely overlaying green themes on narratives and forms that still sow the seeds and structures of oppression is not enough. Theater artists must continue to ask: What is the history of the land we are representing on stage? How was the idea of nature or environment understood in the historical moment represented in the play? How does the play represent the consequences of those ideas as they impact people and land? How do those ideas and representations resonate differently today? Questions about the social, political, economic, and ecological context of a play or production shed light on a play's potential for meaning-making and expose the ways a play might inadvertently reinscribe environmental imperialism through the repetition of familiar tropes and narratives. Such questions form the axis of the chapters that follow.

My argument in this book is that theater matters precisely because the stories that we have told as a nation have *already* had material-ecological impact. Theater has long served as a means through which human beings have questioned and examined their relationships with the natural world.³ Indeed, the environment, the land, and ecological paradigms of thought have always been present in the drama and on the stages of this nation; in this way, theater has helped to produce today's environmental realities. U.S. theater has participated in spinning the stories that forwarded the ideologies and practices of Manifest Destiny, white supremacy, and extractive capitalism. But it has also provided potent means to intervene in longstanding destructive narratives. As an activist framework, ecodramaturgy acknowledges this history *in order to* take responsibility for the destruction of land and culture that some plays have supported, as well as to forward theater's participation in the *decolonization* of people and land. These chapters examine the ways in which theater in the United States has participated in bringing us to this perilous moment and invite readers to consider the stories they have encountered in the theater or in life. As part of U.S. cultural history, those stories have had material consequences for the environments in which we all live, work, play, and worship.

Nature, in a word

In the preface to this book, I mention my early passion for *the great outdoors*. How did I learn to use this phrase to describe the same *wilderness* that terrified my settler ancestors? The phrase carries layers of personal as well as sociopolitical and environmental history. For starters, it signals my privilege as a person who has access to and is assured a measure of safety in *outdoor* places. Furthermore, what might be the association between those *outdoors* and the nationalism that is implied in the descriptor *great*? None of these questions coursed through my mind when, at age 22, I hiked the length of the John Muir Trail alone. Yet, my very ability to venture forth, even the awe that I felt in the high country, were products of my sociopolitical position. What I called *nature* was in every way a product of culture.

All the terms that we use to name or describe the natural world carry layers of historical and cultural meanings. The words themselves encapsulate stories and histories buried in the land. Terms such as *wilderness*, *natural resource*, *landscape*, and *ecosystem*, carry socioeconomic implications and embedded understandings of power that give agency to certain persons or institutions and divest it from others. The point here is that none of these are stable or self-evident terms. Science, likewise, is of its historical moment. The science of ecology developed (and continues to develop) over decades, and its conceptual framework is not independent of the political and economic pressures in which it was forged. In the chapters that follow, I use *ecosystem* when referring to the interconnectedness of living and geologic components in a specific locale (e.g., the ecosystem of the prairies or the ecosystem of the inner city). I use the term *land* to mean the entire field of presence that includes plants, animals, and inorganic geologic features such as waterways, as well as human beings. I have tended to use the term *natural world* when referring to those plants and animals with which humans share the planet and the term *landscape* when it is important to emphasize the visual and consumptive behaviors that have often governed U.S. society's relationship to the land. In discussing the way the natural world was conceptualized during a certain period I use the terms common at that time, such as *nature* or *wilderness*.⁴ Throughout this book, all these terms (and more) are to be understood as constructed notions open to critique and unpacking and are not called out in quotations.

The title of this book poses a similar challenge in its use of the word *American*, and I have similarly dispensed with quotation marks in this case – but not with the awareness of the contested and changing meanings of the term. While *American* has many, and sometimes dubious, connotations, it is a term that must be engaged with in discussing the history of what has been and still is known as American drama. As the descriptor of national identity for those who live within the political boundaries of the United States, *American* has been used as a tool of exclusion as well as belonging. Ideas about what is and is not American, as well as who does and does not belong, are much contested by residents of the United States and by residents of the Americas. In the United States, who

or what is American has often been defined in contrast to who or what is *not* American, resulting in the exclusion of sovereign indigenous nations as well as millions of other residents of two continents. In the chapters that follow, I use the term *American* to critique such problematic connotations but also to invoke the term's complex history, which no synonym can replicate. I use the term *United States* (or *U.S.*) when discussing national policies, programs, or events that have specifically to do with the operations of the nation-state. I use the term *American* when the artists or historical figures under consideration have used that term to describe themselves and when their work has been invested in defining, protecting, or challenging that identity. I have also used it to describe mainstream U.S. cultural contexts and affinities that are or have been understood, particularly by residents of the United States, as American – and there, its meaning has changed over time. The chapters that follow deal with how theater has participated in that discourse.

American is an identity associated with power – imperial, white supremacist, and economic – for many of the artists and historic figures in the early chapters; it is an identity that is called into question and preempted by works and artists discussed in the later chapters. The plays discussed in the first six chapters were authored by U.S. citizens – many were celebrated as canonical examples of American drama – and these participated in the accumulation of meaning and identity around the term. Others, which I discuss in the final chapter of this book, challenge that hegemony through works that blur the borders of belonging. These plays reclaim, redefine, and redraw what American means – and what it means to be American – in hemispheric terms. They stand on different American ground, one with both indigenous and colonial histories and an indigenous present; and one that asserts shared ecologies, languages, and cultures to be as significant, and perhaps more significant, than national citizenship. Indeed, the plays at the center of Chapter 7 were written by women who are Canadian citizens, but their identities (as First Nations/Métis and Québécois) are more complex and fluid.

Finally, as a U.S. citizen of settler descent, the stories and ideologies contained in many of the plays I discuss have also been deeply ingrained within me as a part of my own cultural inheritance. In each chapter, I wrestle with ideologies, assumptions, representations, and master narratives in which I myself am implicated. With this in mind, the chapters that follow are my own meditations – personal as well as scholarly – on how theater has not only been part of the problem but also how it might contribute to civic and ecological justice and healing.

Chapter summary: from cowboys to climate change

No story has proven as useful to the U.S. nor as destructive to the environment as that of the frontier. As mythos, the frontier continues to inform who Americans think they should be.⁵ As an ethos – the guiding values that inform

actions – frontier ideology is operative everywhere around us, playing out in individual lives, businesses, families, and communities. Frontier ideology is still reinforced on stage in U.S. theater today, while its violence continues to be felt by people and land in the twenty-first century. The recent Broadway musical *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* is a case in point, with its cavalier use of Jackson as a hero and stereotypical representation of Native peoples and history (Friedman and Timbers 2010). As individuals, we may reject frontier values and directives, yet as a society we are no more postfrontier than we are postracial, in part because of the interconnection of both discourses and corresponding, institutionalized practices. In Chapter 1, I consider how Augustin Daly's *Horizon* (produced in 1871) and William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody's *Wild West: The Drama of Civilization* (1886) propagated what J. M. Bacon calls the "ecological violence" of settler colonialism (2019, 59–69). Both Daly's play and Cody's extravaganza reveal how dominant Anglo narratives justified U.S. military occupation of indigenous lands, promoted resource extraction from western lands by eastern capital, and normalized white supremacy and the extermination of people and animals (see, e.g., Opie [1998], 2). I argue that a critical, self-reflexive awareness about how we represent, discuss, and frame history is crucial for ecodramaturgy to guard against propagating the very values we hope to dismantle.

In the early twentieth century, as the nation sought to cope with the diverse ecologies of a single continent, a vast majority of Euro-Americans saw the land through a viewfinder of stories – such as the Judeo-Christian Garden of Eden – that justified ongoing Anglo-U.S. expansion. Meanwhile, Gifford Pinchot's (1947) idea of conservation for use sanctioned ongoing extractive capitalism, albeit through a gloved managerial hand. The mutually interlocking stories of the frontier and the biblical garden worked on and in the imaginations of early conservationists, as well as the politicians, capitalists, and citizens they hoped to sway. In Chapter 2, I examine how David Belasco's *Girl of the Golden West* (1929 [produced in 1905]) and William Vaughn Moody's *The Great Divide* (1906) reflected the discourse of the early twentieth-century conservation and preservation movements, which characterized progress as a reclamation of the biblical garden (see, e.g., Merchant [1994]). At the time of its 1906 production, Moody's story of a woman who agrees to marry an outlaw to save her life posed questions of national significance. How will this marriage, which begins with an act of violent and violatory conquest, survive to nourish family and home? As a metaphor for Euro-Americans' relationship with the land, *Divide* provides a complicated engagement with – if not answer to – this quandary, along with a good measure of denial. Both works reflect a dichotomous framework that categorizes land as utilitarian or scenic – binary thinking at the heart of the early wilderness movement that shapes national environmental policy today.

As the United States caught up with Europe's industrialization, rivers, forests, and mineral deposits became the raw materials of industrial capitalism and the basis for the nation's growing international power. Progressives of the 1920s envisioned nature itself as an "organic machine,"⁶ while many dramatists

(including Elmer Rice, Sophie Treadwell, and Eugene O'Neill) were concerned with how technology was idolized.⁷ I begin Chapter 3 by exploring these tensions through an analysis of O'Neill's *Dynamo* (1929), a curious and troubling play about a young man infatuated with the power and potential of hydroelectric power. By the early 1930s, the ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl had illustrated the cost of poorly managed resources. During Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, conservation-for-use gained credibility as the nation's governing framework for land and resource management. Beginning in 1935, with unemployment at 25 percent, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) began to put people back to work building national infrastructure, revitalizing eroded land, controlling rivers and waterways, and building national parks. Under the WPA, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) not only employed out-of-work artists but also sought to use the theater to educate citizens. In Chapter 3, I consider how FTP's *Triple-A Plowed Under* (produced in 1936) popularized New Deal conservation policies and economic programs by arguing that the welfare of society and land are bound together.⁸ *Triple-A* foreshadowed the New Deal Soil Conservation Act of 1937, while it also advocated the more socialist position of political solidarity between workers and farmers in the form of a Farmer-Labor party.

In 1942, at a turning point in World War II, New York's Theatre Guild's hit musical *Oklahoma!* (1942) revealed cultural perceptions of land and environment saturated with racial and jingoist overtones. Chapter 4 examines how *Oklahoma!* repurposed the frontier narrative to champion the industrial development of the west and the mounting antiradical/anticommunist sentiment of the period during and after the war. As a musical adaptation of *Green Grow the Lilacs* by Cherokee playwright Lynn Riggs (1931), Oscar Hammerstein's version tells the story of Oklahoma settler-pioneers and statehood in 1906 without mention of the region's indigenous presence or history. In his introduction to Riggs's play, Jace Weaver (2003) describes *Lilacs* as "the story lived by Lynn Riggs's relatives, and by all people who migrate in desperation, in search of a better life, building their new home with nothing but the land and their own hands" (3). What was a multiracial, multiethnic community in Riggs's play becomes, in *Oklahoma!*, principally white. I argue that Rogers and Hammerstein's adaptation of *Lilacs* helped to justify the federal termination of tribes and absorption of their lands during the 1950s (see, e.g., Dunbar-Ortiz [2014], 173–175). Meanwhile, the economic fantasies celebrated in *Oklahoma!* give way to tragedy in Arthur Miller's 1948 *Death of a Salesman* (1971), which opened on Broadway only six months after *Oklahoma!* closed. Miller's play sent a prescient warning about the mental and spiritual, as well as environmental, impacts of consumer capitalism. Considered together, these plays reveal the continuing cognitive dissonance in the nation's relationship with the land.

The second-wave environmental movement grew out of both the antinuclear movement of the 1950s and the publication of Rachel Carson's (1962) *Silent Spring*, which details the effects of chemical toxins on both humans and nonhumans. As

consumerism was reframed as an expression of patriotism, scientists warned of the dangers posed by the many new chemicals that saturated every aspect of modern life. Despite the impact of those chemicals on human health and habitat, the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s was steeped in the mythologies and values of wilderness preservation and thus missed the connection it might have made to social justice. Meanwhile, theater artists in the 1960s and 1970s were making clear connections between environmental and social problems. In Chapter 5, I argue that during the civil rights movements of the 1950s through the 1970s, theater concerned with social justice prefigured the central issues of the environmental justice movement that would come two decades later. In *A Raisin in the Sun* (1994 [produced in 1959]), for example, Lorraine Hansberry is concerned with the human price paid for the so-called American dream. In her story of the Younger family, Hansberry illuminates the human health impacts of racism and poverty on women, children, and families – issues that would be at the center of environmental activism into the twenty-first century. Theater was also a central activating force for the *Movimiento*, helping to engender a sense of pride in shared culture, language, history, and stewardship of the land among Chicano/as.⁹ The work of El Teatro Campesino, for example, contributed to ecological understandings rooted in histories of mestizo/a presence on the land and in the ancestral homelands of Aztlán. Yet the second-wave environmental movement and the civil rights movements of this period seemed to run on separate rails due, in part, to a milieu that defined nature as something apart from everyday human affairs. The environmental movement of the 1970s was primarily a conversation among whites about recreational places long ingrained with white and masculine privileges that were so much a part of the wilderness tradition. Nevertheless, on stage the embodied art of theater reclaimed both urban and rural environments as sites of habitation where human rights and nature's rights had been violated by a system that regarded land and labor as mere commodities.

Throughout the 1980s, female activists in communities of color gained visibility as they resisted the siting of landfills, incinerators, and toxic waste sites near homes and schools. Then, in 1991, the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit redefined “environment as the places where people live, work, play and worship,” initiating a culture shift in environmental discourse in the United States (see, e.g., Adamson, Evans and Stein [2002]; and Sandler and Pessullo [2007]). Environmentalism, activists argued, must attend to, and redress, the way that women, children, communities of color, and those living in poverty have been more severely impacted by the shadow side of consumer capitalism (see, e.g., Di Chiro [1996], 298–320).¹⁰ In Chapter 6, I turn to consider plays that deal directly with environmental justice concerns, from the impact of resource extraction on the Cumberland Plateau in Robert Schenkkan's (1992) *The Kentucky Cycle* (1994) to the long-term effect of agricultural pesticides in Cherríe Moraga's 1993 *Heroes and Saints* (pub. 1994). Taken together, these two works and their productions reveal trends and cautions. Critics at the time called out the way in which Schenkkan's play recycled frontier stereotypes, and seemed

to trade on the stories of Kentuckians, simplifying lived experiences of communities for dramatic effect. *The Kentucky Cycle's* ultimate failure on Broadway demonstrated a tension between mainstream theater's appetite for universal stories and stories particular to specific communities and places. Building on Cless's (1996) analysis, I discuss *Heroes and Saints* with particular attention to the embodied representation of environmental injustice as the lived experience of women and children. Driving questions for this chapter include: How can theater increasingly empower narratives that demonstrate the interdependence of people and nature that lies at the heart of environmental justice? Moreover, how can settler-descendant dramatists take care to not replicate the very patterns of colonization that they hope to critique?

In 2001, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) scientist James Hansen met with then Vice President Richard Cheney to brief the administration on a matter Hansen believed was central to national security – namely, the earth was warming at rates that far exceeded normal geologic fluctuations, and it appeared that humans were the cause.¹¹ Throughout the late twentieth century, the scientific community warned officials and the public about the effects of increasing carbon emissions on the earth's atmosphere. Indeed, scientific evidence had been mounting since the 1950s. Meanwhile, growing public awareness and firsthand experience of climate change in the first decade of the twenty-first century has contributed to an increased sense of urgency. Yet mainstream U.S. media and popular discourse often characterize the climate crisis in terms of disparate and unexpected cataclysmic events (e.g., hurricanes, wildfires, Antarctic ice cracking). Contemporary dramatists, meanwhile, connect human and nonhuman stories to the long-term causes of climate change through multivocal, multitemporal, transnational, and transspecies stories.

In Chapter 6, I consider theater at the millennium that has focused on the ecological implications of globalized economies and climate change. The runaway power of transnational corporations has caused ecological havoc for people, places, and biotic communities, and has fueled transnational environmental justice activism. Indigenous peoples and developing nations throughout the world have argued that the culpability and risks of climate change are not equally shared by all peoples or nations of the world. Moreover, research shows that the burden of impact from climate change will fall more heavily on the most vulnerable in society, and on indigenous communities in regions at higher risk, such as the Arctic (see, e.g., Watt-Cloutier [2015]; and Nagel [2016]). These new issues and understandings have inspired theater-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. In the final chapter, I examine climate change theater more broadly, with a close reading of two plays that employ innovative artistic forms.

Demonstrating the complex, far-reaching continuance of settler colonialism's ecological violence, First Nations playwright Marie Clements's *Burning Vision*

(2003) traces the mining of uranium on Dene land in the northern Canadian territories and its transnational impacts on lives and land. First produced in 2001 *Burning Vision* connects the dots between the exposure of Dene workers to radiation poisoning and the Japanese deaths in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where the bombs developed from the Dene uranium were ultimately used. Clements's play also marks precisely the connection between the nuclear age, the birth of the Anthropocene, and environmental injustice.¹² Using a ceremonial structure, *Burning Vision* ruptures separations across time and space, collapses past and present, and fuses human and nonhuman life into a single fabric of ecological and embodied relationship.

As the millennium brought increasing warning by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, dozens of plays about climate change began to hit the U.S., Canadian, and British stages, among them *Sila* by Québécois dramatist Chantal Bilodeau (2014). The first of Bilodeau's Arctic Cycle, *Sila* calls attention to the climate justice implications of resource extraction and geopolitical economic pressures by centering Inuit traditional ecological knowledge in which humans and animals share both kinship and culture. Both *Sila* and *Burning Vision* echo Inuit activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier's (2015) argument that the degradation of the environment is a violation of human rights.¹³ Social health issues such as teen suicide, depression, alcoholism, and loss of cultural traditions, Cloutier argues, must be understood as symptoms of climate change. Both plays suggest that part of theater's function in the age of climate change is grief work. In "Climate Change as the Work of Mourning," Ashlee Cunsolo Willox (2012) posits that "grief and mourning have the unique potential to expand and transform the discursive spaces around climate change to include not only the lives of people who are grieving because of the changes, but also to value what is being altered, degraded, and harmed as something mournable" (141). The questions that should compel our artistic will moving forward include: How might theater and performance help us to remain present to the loss that will occur as climate change continues? And perhaps more importantly, how might theater work to resist ongoing ecological violence through enacted histories of decolonization?

Taking a stand where we stand

The environmental and climate crises of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are crises of identity and relationship, concerned at once with our most basic material needs as well as our most abstract notions of who we conceive ourselves to be in the web of life. At the very nexus of problems that concern governments or neighborhoods, the central questions become: How do we live and behave in relation to one another and to the land in a way that sustains life, land, community, and justice? How can we take responsibility for the stories that have helped to perpetuate over a century of destruction on a global scale? How can theater respond to the consequences of those narratives without

perpetuating them? What, if anything, is recoverable in stories that we have inherited? How can theater transform narratives of exploitation into stories of habitation? How can theater empower stories of interdependence and amplify the voices of those who have been most impacted by environmental crisis? And in all of these, how can we make the best use of the ways of knowing that are at the heart of theatrical practice – embodied exploration, story sharing, communal creation, imaginative experimentation, and the palpable immediacy of being together?

Theater can help us to remember and re-member our relationship with the land and to consider the permeable boundaries between human life and the environment. In doing this, theater can help us to examine our own ecological identities: Where do we draw our boundaries of skin and kin? How permeable or fixed are our own notions of self, culture, and humanness? This most ephemeral of art forms can help us imagine into and embody ways of being human consistent with ecological knowledge and ecological sensibilities. Theater's fluid, mutable, and palpable way of knowing is useful not only to acknowledge what is happening but also to envision multiple and generous possible futures. If the art of theater is our homeplace, then we are presented now, as at past historical crossroads, with the opportunity to *take a stand from where we stand*. From here, we have a unique opportunity to tell new stories and to apply the searing, sensuous edge of our critical and creative practices with humility and courage as we live into the questions of the future. Surely the world needs theater's *What if?* now more than ever.

Now is a powerful time for stories. What artists do matters; how we represent gender, ethnic, and racial identities matters; how we represent animals, food, and lands also matters. The systems of oppression, domination, and exploitation that commodify the labor of women or people of color, for example, stand on the presumptive ground that land and natural resources exist for the purpose of wealth accumulation. As I underscore in the pages that follow, what we consider to be our most cherished notions of identity, and the material culture that issues from that self-sense, are constructed from the fabric of our stories. Stories are, in this sense, ecological forces that inscribe both the land and our bodies. We belong – to the earth and to one another – but with this kinship comes a reciprocal and sacred trust. The environmental crisis is an invitation not only to develop new behaviors but also to tell new stories that reflect our ecological reciprocity with the planet, with the land we share and have single-handedly decimated. Emerging from within these dire and often hopeless awakenings and moments of consciousness-raising, theater can offer a source of *new* stories that reconfigure who we understand ourselves to be within the circle of life of the earth. Theater, too, can be a kind of nourishment for our species and for the nonhuman communities that share this home planet with us. This book is for young artists – like the student I mentioned earlier and the many like them – who possess a passionate awareness of both the power of theater and the perilous conditions on earth. To those students – incredulous, just fired-up artists that remind me of myself back then: your work

matters. Your work will carry us forward. And finally, this book is for anyone who has faith in the power of stories and the role of the arts to illuminate, inspire, and actualize an ecologically just and interdependent future.

Notes

- 1 This third strand (the ecological footprint of the material craft of theater) is not part of my study here, as its technical demands deserve separate treatment. For the interested reader, however, many resources on environmentally friendly theater-craft do exist. See, for example, Garret (2012), Fried and May (1994), and Rossol (1991). See also the *Center for Sustainable Practice in the Arts* (CSPA), which publishes a quarterly journal on the topic and maintains a blog with up-to-date resources. See also the Broadway Green Alliance.
- 2 The ecodramaturgy lens has gone by various monikers in recent decades, including green dramaturgy, environmental dramaturgy, and ecological theater. As a starting point for ecodramaturgical, critical and historiographic examinations of plays and performance, see my “Green Questions to Ask a Play” (May 2007, 110). See also Arons (2012), Chaudhuri (1994), Cless (1996, 2010), and Lavery (2018).
- 3 Downing Cless (2010) argues as much in *Ecology and Environment in European Drama*, in which he recasts the history of European theater as a conversation about Europeans’ shifting values and understandings of the natural world. See also Arons and May (2013) for more regarding ecodramaturgy’s intersection with other critical frameworks.
- 4 For a more in-depth discussion of the shifting meanings of wilderness, see Roderick Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind* ([1973] 2001). See also Cronon (1994) for more on this topic.
- 5 In “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century,” environmental historian Patricia Nelson Limerick (1994) argues that the frontier has become a ubiquitous cultural tool for making meaning and interpreting events. Deeply ingrained in the U.S. collective imaginary, Limerick describes the frontier as “the fly paper of our mental world [because] it attaches itself to everything” (94).
- 6 Use of the phrase “organic machine” was ubiquitous among early twentieth-century engineers, managers, and conservationists. See, for example, Richard White’s *The Organic Machine* (1995), which offers a history of hydropower development on the Columbia River, and Donald Worster’s *Rivers of Empire* (1992), which details the extent to which rivers, and nature itself, have been conceived in mechanical terms.
- 7 The critique of technology and mechanization in the drama of this period has been a popular topic among scholars. See, for example, Charles Thorpe (2009) and Dennis G. Jerz (2002). Scholars have also drawn connections between *Machinal*’s implicit critique of technology and violence against women. See, for example, Jennifer J. Parent (1982), Miriam López Rodríguez (2011) and Merrill Schleier (2005).
- 8 A decade later, Aldo Leopold (1949) would articulate this concept as society’s “contract with the land,” and he then expanded upon the ethical implications of such a contract. His ideas were later applied to describe the atmosphere itself as a commons to which society has an ethical obligation.
- 9 *El Movimiento* refers to the larger Chicano/a movement in the U.S. Southwest that gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s and continues today in the twenty-first century across the United States. This sociopolitical movement has included political, social, and cultural activism; cultural and literary production; and community and global consciousness-raising. See, for example, Laura Pulido (1996), as well as Yolanda Broyles-González’s (2004) pioneering work on the history and widely held misconceptions concerning El Teatro Campesino’s creation and evolution within the broader Chicano movement and U.S. civil rights movements.
- 10 As the environmental justice movement exposed the disproportional impact of environmental degradation on workers, mothers and children, and communities of color, it also asserted a human place *in*, rather than apart from, the natural world. This new

- footing for environmental thought is more fully explored in Giovanna Di Chiro's (1996) "Nature as Community:"
- 11 Hansen (2011) details his attempts to discuss climate change with the Bush administration in *Storms of My Grandchildren*. See also Andrew C. Revkin's (2006) *New York Times* article on Hansen's report of attempted silencing by NASA.
 - 12 Stratigraphers differ about the start of dramatic change in the earth's climate, but many place its beginnings at the time of colonialization. At the very least, the advent of the nuclear age, Jeremy Davies (2016) argues, marks the start of the Anthropocene's Great Acceleration.
 - 13 Watt-Cloutier was nominated for the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for her work (although she did not win the award).

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EARTH MATTERS ON STAGE

Ecology and Environment
in American Theater

Theresa J. May

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