

Greening the Theater: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage

Ecological victory will require a transvaluation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present. And in this the arts and humanities – including the theater – must play a role.

Una Chaudhuri (1994:25)

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

In her article “There Must Be a Lot of Fish in that Lake: Toward an Ecological Theater” Chaudhuri posits that theater’s humanist origins make it “anti-ecological.” Contemporary theater artists working with ecological themes have been hamstrung by a theater tradition that defines

drama as conflict between and about human beings. Chaudhuri observes that even plays that “manage to bring an ecological issue to center stage” must “exist within a theater aesthetic and ideology (namely 19th century humanism)...that is programmatically anti-ecological” (1994:24). Downing Cless points out, however, that Western theater history is rife with works in which nature plays a significant role – from the earthly goings-on in Shakespeare’s *Mid-summer Night’s Dream*, to Anton Chekov’s endangered *Cherry Orchard*, to Samuel Beckett’s barren post-apocalyptic landscape in *Waiting for Godot*. Cless argues for “innovative interpretations,” suggesting that theater’s ecology may be a matter for directors (2003:10). Yet as Chaudhuri warns, the use of “ecology as metaphor is so integral a feature of the aesthetic of modern realist-humanist drama that, paradoxically, its implications for a possible ecological theater are easy to miss. Its very ubiquity renders it invisible” (1994:24). Consequently, even when a director makes choices to drive home an ecological meaning, that meaning may be obscured when it meets deeply ingrained humanist listening in the audience. It is incumbent then on critics and historians to help change the listening into which new works of drama speak and shift assumptions that inform the perception of canonical works. When ecocriticism moves from page to stage, scholars may discover what Erika Munk called a “vast open field” of “histories to be re-written, styles to re-discuss, contexts to re-perceive.” Everything, she harkens, “cries out for reinterpretation” (Munk 5). Believing that ecocriticism can illuminate theater’s participation in our ecological culture, I explore strategies for greening the theater along two streams – applying ecocriticism to the dramatic cannon, and recognizing new works of “ecodrama.”

As theater scholars awake to the possibilities of ecocriticism, ecocritical discourse itself must grow. Theater is not literature after all, and ecocritical analyses of dramatic texts alone do not tap the rich ecological implications of embodied artistic representation. Plays begin where

their texts leave off. Echoing Mikhail Bakhtin, theater is the place where drama “takes on flesh” (250). Theater scholars bring key perceptions about the way the body functions as medium between material and metaphoric worlds and the ways theater audiences influence performance in an organic exchange of meaning-making.

Theater is both immediate and communal and this may in part account for its absence from the genre of “nature writing.” While a playwright may find the peace of mind to write while in repose at his or her own Tinker Creek, the work is not complete until it makes the transition from written word to human utterance and is heard. Playwrights must ultimately work in community, coming together with other theater artists and an audience. They write to this end, knowing their text must leap from the page as an utterly immediate communication between actor and audience. This is a messy, scrappy process, occurring mostly in cities where urban types labor long hours in shabby basement theaters, sharing their work with others who brave weather and parking conditions to sit in the dark for a few hours to bear witness to the action on stage. Theater is ritual. It functions as a field of exchange where myths take flight, moving between the permeable spheres of self and community and then out into the terrain of our lives. Theater is an embodied experience, biological even as it is representational. Theater occurs among living actors and a living audience who gather in actual space, and its ecology derives from this immediacy. Because theater is always an encounter between people and place it is (with dance) the most “natural” of arts, reaching back into a mytho-poetical past in which Western culture’s dualistic thinking dissolves into a ritually enacted ecological reciprocity with the natural world. To discover the ecology of theater, and its potential to awaken ecological sensibilities in us, ecocritics must come into the theater and partake of what British director Peter Brook describes work that “evoke[s] in audiences an undeniable hunger and thirst” (121). Then

ecocriticism can help shape a theater culture that is responsive to ecological values and through which our relationship to the natural world may be renewed and deepened.

Theater's exclusions from ecocriticism may not be entirely self-imposed. An art of illusion and mimesis, theater is the epitome of cultural artifice, not nature. According to Giovanna Di Chiro, mainstream environmentalism (and ecocriticism) has helped perpetuate a "separation between human and the 'natural' world" by focusing concern on "'wild and natural' areas defined as places where humans are not and should not be in large numbers." She further notes that environmental justice advocates have been "reluctant to call themselves environmentalists" because they perceive environmentalists to be anti-urban or "utterly indifferent to urban communities" (Di Chiro 300). Like the environmental justice movement, theater is urban-centered, people-centered, highly political and necessarily commercial. Like environmental justice, theater forces the question of human ecology. Ecocriticism often privileges a wilderness aesthetic and has only recently begun to recognize urban ecologies. If theater is to be a site of ecocriticism, the term "environment" must be reconstituted to include the places "where we live, where we work, and where we play," and eco-scholarship must address the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on the poor, working class and people of color (Di Chiro 301). Similarly, in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism* Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy cast the net of ecocriticism wide, encouraging inclusion of perspectives "based not only on the recognition of connection between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women across patriarchal societies...[But] also based on the recognition that these two forms of domination are bound up with class exploitation, racism, colonialism and Neocolonialism" (3). When the ecocritical view can expand its scope to include the issues of race, class, gender, geographic situated-ness, and white power and privilege, then theater – which has always been a

force for activism as well as the dissemination of hegemonic myths – appears ripe for analysis. Indeed, theater’s inherent communality makes it an ideal site for examining the habits of mind that perpetuate an unsustainable paradigm, and an apt art with which to stimulate the cultural transformation we desperately need.

Myths that Shape the Land

Roland Barthes has deconstructed the way in which “mythologies” are “naturalized” such that they become the hidden but defining master narratives of a community or nation-state (109-58). Theater has been a powerful force for disseminating the deeply-ingrained belief systems, or mythologies, of American ecological culture, and has participated in the making of myth and policy that brought us to the present crisis. Ecocriticism allows us to recontextualize the American canon, unmasking what Chaudhuri has called theater’s “complicity with industrializations animus against nature” (1994:24). A greener lens can also help us recognize when theater has broken with that animus and played against the grain of mainstream views. Because “the metaphorical use of ecology can sometimes misrepresent the actual ecological issues at hand” ecocriticism must employ environmental history and performance studies to interrogate the material-ecological contexts of dramatic texts and theatrical performances (Chaudhuri 1994:27).

At turning points in this nation’s history – the closure of the frontier, the beginning of the conservation movement, the New Deal era, the rise of post-World War Two consumer culture – theater was there, representing deeply rooted “American” stories about the land. By grounding dramatic texts in specific times and places, this section fleshes out some of the ways theater has propagated key American agendas (i.e., Manifest Destiny, frontierism, consumerism, globalization) in the face of the growing ecological understanding that has marked the 20th

century. Most early American drama was complicit with expansion and exploitation, spinning stories that shored up Americanism, and influencing the public debate over wilderness preservation, mining, hydropower and urban pollution.

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

By mid-century, New Deal ecologists who constructed a Nature that ran according to market principles in turn found their concepts valorized on the American stage. Plays like the Federal Theater's Living Newspapers, *Triple-A Plowed Under* and *Power* functioned as dog-and-pony shows for New Deal land-use policy.² Both plays opened in New York and toured the nation from 1936 to 1939. For New Dealers, the "Earth Factory" was chain of economic relations between "producers" and "consumers." Appropriating the discourse of economics, these "New Ecologists" believed nature could be summed up as a kind of thermodynamic river of energy, an "organic machine."³ Pinchot's "efficiency conservation" emphasized technological mastery of the natural world.⁴ Land provided "biotic capital," rivers of "white coal" promised kilowatt-hours, lakes had "energy budgets," crops and herds could be managed for their "net yield" as the Dust Bowl was dismissed as a loss of the soil's "nutrient capital" (Worster 1994:291-315). The Federal Theater Project helped put these new land management strategies in familiar images and plain terms for the American public.

Opening while the Supreme Court deliberated on the constitutionality of the Agriculture Adjustment Act, *Triple-A Plowed Under* explained the farm crisis in simplistic economic terms and argued for farm subsidy. Reflecting the cross-pollination between economics and ecology of the era, the characters of the Farmer and the Worker demonstrate an ecological connection as "producers" and "consumers." But the play avoids both the economic causes and ecological costs of the Dust Bowl by portraying the Farmer as an innocent victim of the "system." As Donald Worster has noted, a culture of agrarian conquest on the plains had exemplified exploitative capitalism and Farmers were hardly guiltless during the "dirty thirties" (Worster 1979:44-63). This disconnect is typical of dramas whose radical politics (in this case promoting the Farm-Labor Party) overshadowed ecological realities.⁵

The Boulder Canyon Project Act of 1928 inaugurated the era of big dams, which would give us, in addition to Hoover Dam, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Grand Coulee Dam and a host of other big-dam projects throughout the American South and West. In 1936 another Federal Theater play entitled *Power* opened in New York while the country awaited the Supreme Court's decision on the legality of TVA. Celebrating the heroic engineer, *Power* sanctioned massive hydroelectric projects that would conquer and put to work the nation's "wandering and inconstant" rivers (Lilienthal 2). *Power* touted electricity as a "right" and human dominion over nature went unquestioned. The play opened in Seattle during "public power week" sponsored by Seattle Light and Power Company. Audiences could also see film footage of the Grand Coulee Dam under construction, and view exhibits about the benefits of electricity (Witham 78-90). Many of the technological wonders and consumer goods made possible by the mass consumption of hydroelectric power would be put on hold until after World War II, and in the meantime, big dams would service the munitions industry, helping to manufacture weapons of mass destruction accompanied by unprecedented environmental contamination.⁶ After the war, these "monuments to modern man" became tourist sites where the "rivers that won the war" (Dietrich 271-295).

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

Reminiscent of the paintings of Grant Wood, *Oklahoma!*'s scenic design by Lemuel Ayers put the modern factory farm on stage: hillsides planted in mono-crops, cubist haystacks reaching to the horizon. Borrowing Rachel Carson words of some years later, this was "agriculture as an engineer would conceive it to be" (10).⁷ *Oklahoma!* reinstated the illusion of the "family farm" with lyrics such as "Gonna give you barley, /Carrots and pertaters / Pasture for your cattle / Spinach and termayters!" while the "factory farm" joined the ranks of industry and new chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides made it possible to push the land "about as fer as she c'n go" (Hammerstein 131).

Oklahoma! expunged all traces of Indian presence (focusing instead on the image of American as a "melting pot"), subverted the state's radical past (through the signification of Jud), and reinscribed heterosexual marriage as the metaphor for an American relationship with the land. It perpetuated a feminized landscape (as the farm) against which American notions of "manliness" (as the ranch and cowboy) would continue to be defined. In Curly's West a man must conform to American ideals of private property and bully entrepreneurship or perish. Stalking Laurey like "sumpin back in the bresh som'eres," Jud is a shifting signifier for any number of "varmint" and "predators" that threatened the American way. In the Red-baiting years, coyotes, wolves and mountain lions were also "enemies" of the state and targets of a government extermination policy (Worster 1994:258-90).⁸ Jud is also the stuff of the rank and file Wobblies whose discontent followed hard on the heels of Oklahoma statehood. Jud's story about fire on the Bartlett farm works as an allusion to Wobbly violence, justifying Jud's death and Curly's popular acquittal.

Echoing an Oklahoma Boomer past, a migration of a different kind was taking place as GIs returned home from the war, married and moved to pest-free suburbia. Developers who

promoted postwar “tract” housing made use of deeply ingrained frontier values. *Sunset Magazine* promoted do-it-yourself landscaping through which an array of para-military chemical agents entered the ecological soup as homeowners civilized the land by killing insects, weeds and rodents. Meanwhile, the parable of *Oklahoma!* helped protect the industrial development of the West from scrutiny. Those who complained about industrial effluents, worker safety or environmental degradation were vilified as anti-American. Environmentalism was construed as a Communist-inspired attempt to undermine the American way of life (Ellis).

In order to shift a war-based economy to a consumer-drive one President Eisenhower’s Council of Economic Advisors urged industry to “to produce more consumer goods. This is the goal. This is the object of everything we are working at; to produce things for consumers” (Schlesinger 83). Curly the cowboy is enthusiastic about the way American life is “changin’ right and left!” and he encourages his countrymen to “keep up the way things is going in this here crazy country!” Aiming to institutionalize mass consumption, advertisers sought to conflate consumer products with sexual desire. Women particularly would be told that they “can’t say no” to the pleasures of “labor saving devices” as the attraction between Ado Annie and the Merchant, Ali Hakim illustrates. Meanwhile, advertisers constructed a male sexual desire for new gadgets – like the “little wonder” and the automobile. The “Surrey with the Fringe on Top” is a song about a status symbol and the lyrics read like ad copy for General Motors:

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

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

A few months after *Oklahoma!* ended its New York run, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1948) examined the deeply personal consequences of American ecological culture, exposing the rupture between the mythic origins of the "American dream" and its long-term effects.⁹ Miller hoped to show what he called the "unbroken tissue" between the individual and his world (*Timebends* 182). Although the word "ecology" was not yet part of the popular lexicon, Miller's was an ecological vision.¹⁰ The character of Willy Loman has lost his sense of place – a loss that is both psychological and ecological. Willy Loman believed in the dream that *Oklahoma!*'s Curly signified. But in *Salesman*, the promise of *Oklahoma!* is broken; the dream proves unsustainable, leaving a legacy of placelessness and homelessness. Willy Loman shares a fate with the Cherokee who were removed from their homelands by the force of empire and with the Oakies whose roots in the soil were shaken loose by farm consolidation. But unlike these displaced and dislocated ones, Willy did not leave home. It left him. Willy's rootlessness is typical of an American ecological culture that has defined Progress as technological change.

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

unraveled. “Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there?...This time of year it was lilac and wisteria...then the peonies would come out...What fragrance in this room!” (11). Scenic designer Joe Mielziner amplified the oscillation between the landscape of sustenance and home and that of loss and exile through a scenic scrim that could transport the audience’s imagination with Willy’s back and forth from past to present to past.¹¹ Exiled in a landscape that provides little sustenance, Willy has lost his *sense* of place. Ultimately, his exile and his home are the same site. “They boxed us in here...there’s not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood. The grass don’t grow anymore, you can’t raise a carrot in the backyard” (11). That the air is unfit to breathe is not Willy’s exaggeration. Leaded emissions from high-octane gasoline – the staple of vehicles with “pickup,” – produced contaminants that contributed to several thousand deaths (Gottlieb 77).¹² That there is neither light nor nutrients to grow vegetables in the Loman’s yard is not merely a sign of Willy’s personal impotence, but a marker of an increasing dependence on synthetic and often toxic chemicals, which would become the subject of Rachel Carson’s groundbreaking *Silent Spring*.

Willy has internalized the code of the frontier. He is both the victim and the carrier of an infectious myth that is the making and measure of a man according to his “rugged” and “wild hearted” father. His brother Ben “cracked the jungle” at seventeen and walked out rich at twenty-one; as a salesman in New England, Willy “broke open unheard of territories,” “knocked ‘em cold in Providence,” and “slaughtered ‘em in Boston” (46, 25). Yet, like a plant unable to root in wind-blown soil, Willy’s son Biff tells his mother “I just can’t take hold of some kind of life” (48). Wendell Berry observes that the tendency toward habitation rises out of our material/ecological interdependence with the natural world, and yet is at odds with the ideology of the frontier that forms the *modus operandi* of American ecological culture (4). As Willy

attempts to live by the dictates of the frontier, he violates the obligations of habitation. Proving his family's frontiersque self reliance Willy tells his boys, "Go right over to where they're building the apartment house and get some sand... You shoulda seen the lumber they brought home last week!" (42) as if these are "raw materials" free for the harvesting, a remnant of the "free land" codified by Frederick Jackson Turner.¹³

In *Death of a Salesman* the cost of the dream has come full circle. In a final hopeless attempt to wrest the dream of *Oklahoma!* from the soil of Brooklyn, Willy is possessed by the necessity to buy and plant seeds, "I'd better hurry.... I've got to get some seeds... Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground." In a kind of grotesque prayer of supplication to the household gods, he paces off rows. "Carrots... quarter inch apart... Beets... Lettuce" (119). As if to say "Why can't I, like *Oklahoma!*'s Curly, settle down on my land, or at least grow a carrot?" Willy is exhausted and depleted, but there is no place for replenishment. The soil and his life are barren for the same reasons. American ecological culture attempts to hold onto its pastoral dream while simultaneously poisoning, paving over, or otherwise compromising the lands on which that dream rests. The culmination of a national ethos that denies the permeability between culture and nature, Willy's death is a personal silent spring.

Giving Voice to the Land: The Eco-dramatist's Conundrum

Arthur Miller was neither the first nor the only playwright to offer a resounding rebuttal to the ubiquitous frontier ideology that under-girds American ecological culture. Yet ecodrama continues to press against the constraints of humanist traditions. In a 1999 conversation about "green theater," Molly Smith, Artistic Director of the Arena Stage, Washington D.C., exclaimed, "I'd love to produce pieces about ecology, but where are they?" (Smith 1999). In "Eco-Theatre, USA: The Grassroots Is Greener," Downing Cless notes that the greening of American theater,

when it has occurred, has taken place at the grassroots where local artists respond to regional environmental issues for an audience that shares an ecological relatedness (1994:79-102).

Community-based environmental issues – including environmental justice concerns – have found theater a viable tool through which to promote social change, open dialogue, or protest the status quo. If ecodrama is to participate in the mainstream, it will require both new critical framing by scholars and increased imaginative courage by playwrights and directors. In a 1991 conference in Seattle, entitled “Theater in an Ecological Age” playwright Robert Schenkkan (whose play *The Kentucky Cycle* won the 1992 Pulitzer Prize) charged playwrights to become “makers of new myths” (5). As Una Chaudhuri has done, theorists can empower playwrights by illuminating those dramaturgical strategies that move toward an ecological theater – the theatrical styles, devices, characterizations, settings and stories that give voice to the land.

In *The Kentucky Cycle* Schenkkan attempts to put the land on stage by dramatizing 200 years of environmental history of the Cumberland Plateau in a nine-act epic. Schenkkan was criticized for dialogue that seemed “recycled from movies,” and branded a cultural colonialist, a story-pirate (Schenkkan was not from Kentucky) (Mason 50-62). While the play does seem to package the complex ecological, cultural and economic history of the Cumberland into an inverted shoot-em-up Western saga, it is a landmark ecodrama. Tracing the history of seven generations of three families, the play maps the impact of frontier ideology on the land.

Economic forces carve their image in the landscape as settlers clear the old forests and drive out or kill off the indigenous Cherokee. An illustration of Wendell Berry’s thesis, in two or three generations, coal companies buy out these new “natives” and strip-mining erases the ecological identity of the land and its former human inhabitants. *Kentucky Cycle* suggests that even when humans forget, the land remembers. “All these mountains is full of bones – everywhere you

walk,” the character of Josh Rowen observes (319). The play tries to tell a story in which people and land share a common fate. Even miners draw their identity from the mountains they cut. “It was *all one thing* – all of us and them mountains” (322). For his great-great grandmother, Mary Ann Rowen, the oak tree is kin. “I used to think that tree was all that kept the sky off my head. And if that tree ever fell down, the whole thing, moon and stars and all, would just come crashin’ down” (175).¹⁴ More than landscape has been lost when she describes her homeland after the mining companies have ravaged it. Mary Ann’s identity, (like Willy Loman’s) was washed away, plowed up, paved over. Schenkkan was outraged by the ecological devastation he saw in Kentucky coal country, but in his effort to write a “universal” drama, he generalized and passed judgment on a place and its people. He was criticized for not being a member of the community, economic or ecological, which he characterized in his play. He could not see the situation from the inside out, critics claimed. He was not one of the land’s intimates (Mason 50-62).

Before a rich green dramaturgy can emerge, playwrights must educate themselves about ecological issues, and particularly about the ecology of their own places so that their work can grow from a personal relatedness to the land. After all, ecology is not merely a sentiment, it is a science. Green playwrights do well to seek out environmental scientists and educators, link up with experts in county and state departments of ecology and hazardous waste, with wildlife biologists, fish and game personnel, citizen groups, and environmental justice activists. Rich resources for stories exist in what we can learn from those who work in the trenches of the “environmental crisis” where our communities must solve very complex ecological problems. Seattle playwright Todd Moore, immersed himself in the heated logging debate in the Pacific Northwest, and his *In the Heart of the Woods* (1994) was shaped from interviews with loggers, environmentalists and community members. The result steers clear of environmentalist agit prop

while it explores the multi-faceted relationship between people and the trees that have shaped their lives. In performance, Moore himself plays multiple roles, and illuminating how the form of a drama carries meanings above and beyond its written text. Embodying each of the voices he created, his body becomes the site of common ground. The reflexivity of the performance in turn implicates spectators who were invited to examine their own relatedness to workers and forests in a post-performance discussion.

A story is a product of connection that maintains a field of contact not only among people but also between people and place. To be part of a community is to be part of its story, and if the land is filled with ancestral stories then “community” includes the rocks, trees, streams, pathways and animal Others of that place. Stories create a matrix of belonging, a living tissue between past and present and between human and non-human communities. In *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, Una Chaudhri writes about “the mutually constructive relations between people and place. Who one is and who one can be are... a function of *where* one is and how one experiences that place” (1997:xii). Place and person are permeable. Playwrights often underestimate and under-explore the power of theater’s place-fullness. In ecodrama, the representation of place on-stage can be more than the backdrop against which human action is played out. Place can drive the action; sometimes it becomes a kind of character with its own agency. In Lanford Wilson’s *Angels Fall* (1983) the land holds outsiders captive when an accident at a uranium mine causes highway closures in a remote New Mexico town. The probability of radiation exposure gives the land its own kind of agency while the boundaries of identity inscribed by human skin are suddenly vulnerable, permeable. *Angels Fall* calls attention to the impact of uranium mining on Navaho lands, such as the 1979 radioactive tailings spill at Ric Puerco (Gottlieb, 251-3). Community in this play is a product of shared exposure.

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

childhood on the bayou, and it is not an environmental polemic. Yet it succeeds in transmitting an ecological vision: our bodies and our identities are permeable, awash with the tides; neighborhoods and families include people, plants animals, water and land; we have all been conceived in chaos; we are what we eat. *Alligator Tales* brings to the stage a vision of the natural world that David Abram has called “a field of intelligences” in which all creatures are permeable presences and “identity” is a kind of dance of touch-and-be-touched (260).

Architectural forms as well as scenic designs inform the meaning that comes to life when a play is staged. Space speaks. Theatrical architecture has reinforced social codes (as in the multi-leveled aristocratic theaters of the 18th century), concretized power structures (witness the single-point perspective scenic design of the court theater with its “king’s seat”), fixed aesthetic ideologies (the proscenium or “picture-frame” theaters of the 19th century), and perpetuated economic hierarchies (apparent in our own Broadway theaters). Consequently, theater artists have, from time to time, simply left the building. They have taken to the streets, headed for the city square, the countryside, the factory, even the landfill, in order to break out of the ideology gripping their theatrical world. An American pageant theater movement of the early century produced dramas on riverbanks and hillsides. Socialist dramatists of the 1930s staged plays in factories, union halls and city streets. In the 1960s theater groups claimed all manner of indoor and outdoor places for “environmental theater.” This non-traditional staging deconstructs the separation between audience and actor, and produces new levels of audience participation and reciprocation. Because form informs meaning, environmental theater – sometimes called site-specific theater – readily lends itself to an ecological sensibility, with the potential to reawaken in audiences a sense of connection the natural world.

Dragon Island (1993-95), a site-specific drama, which I wrote and directed for Theatre in the Wild of Seattle, took the audience on a two-mile wilderness trek through forests and meadows near the South Fork of the Snoqualmie River in Washington State. Scenes were staged in a dozen locations along a woodland path, requiring the audience to walk into and through the story. With each step participants make a physical investment into the material and metaphoric world of the play. In *Dragon Island* the act of negotiating the terrain together causes the boundaries between audience and actor to become increasingly permeable. Everyone crossed the unsteady footbridge; everyone waded through the tall grass; and everyone felt the quick cool breeze upon entering the woods. Each moss-covered log, wild rose, tree, gust of wind, or screeching crow became part of the world of the play and influenced its meanings. The environment is conceived as a dynamic creative collaborator in this kind of immersion drama. The privileged space of the “stage” is replaced by the sensorial landscape, which was woven into the fictional story of *Dragon Island* in two ways: as planned inclusion in which collaboration with the environment was designed into the work, or as spontaneous intrusion in which the unpredictable, dynamic landscape emerged as “player.”

Dragon Island participants received parchment maps bearing stylized representations of the topography of the land in which the performance took place and indicating the route to follow through the woods. Weaving the sensory landscape with the imaginary landscape, the map promoted more attentive visceral connection to the land. Place names from the imaginary world were given to features of the landscape. Bog of Bog, Mother’s Spring, and Merlin’s Grotto co-mingled the metaphoric and material worlds, calling attention to the perceptual world – that rock outcropping, this stump, a marsh, a dry creek-bed just ahead, a change in the ground surface from soft forest duff to sand and stone. Merlin’s Grotto, for example, took place under

overhanging vine maples where the mottled light produced a sense of interiority, as if the sunlight were coming through the thatching of an old roof. As in *Alligator Tales*, some characters exist at a conceptual threshold between human and non-human, subverting dualistic thinking that separates human from animal. At the Bog of Bog participants encountered Lillymoss and Mudgewort, characters who personify what Abram has called the “consanguinity of the human animal and the world it inhabits” as they appear and disappear along the path or ooze over the ground near a decomposing stump (66). They are a sign of perceptual reciprocity, links to the “forest of eyes” (Abram 69). Mudgewort flies into a rage when he discovers the participants are hunting the dragon with King Arthur. The actor who played Mudgewort reported that during several performances “a flock of crows would light in the branches of the maples overhead, creating a cacophony of screeching, clicks and caws – incredibly haunting – as if they were talking to us, to the audience, as if they were angry as hell too” (Hitchcock 1995). The actor’s experience of the complementarity of the natural world is an example of spontaneous intrusion in which the polyphony of the natural world is fundamental to the performance’s ecological meaning. The many unforeseen intrusions that emerged as part of *Dragon Island* – a deer walks into a clearing, a snake crosses the path, a woodpecker’s drumming, wind in the trees, the yacking of crows, gurgle of a stream, sun-light falls in a certain way, smells of the marsh – became signs of an animated nature, the voice of place, the speaking landscape. Immersion drama promotes connection between people and the surrounding environment while simultaneously, and perhaps consequently, fostering a sense of community born of the alchemy of shared space and shared story.

Earth Matters on Stage

As a forum in which our myths are forged theater has been an ecological force, shoring up the many ways we have changed the land and warning us when our dreams violate what Aldo Leopold called “our contract with the land.” A living art immediately subject to social change, theater possesses a unique capacity to generate new stories that can root us in a sustainable future. Earth Matters on Stage: an Ecodrama Playwrights Festival in northern California encourages playwrights to engage issues that are civic, ecological and personal. By calling for a diverse range of new works the Festival hopes to “usher in a new era of ecodrama” that “inspires us to explore the complex connection between people and place.” Hoping to stimulate debate about the definitions of such a genre and counter the stereotype of ecodrama as agit prop theater, the Festival includes plays that:

put an event of environmental crisis or conflict at the center of the play;...explore issues of environmental justice; interpret “community” to include our ecological community; attempt to give voice or “character” to the land...[or] develop a sense of connection between human and non-human communities.

The Festival is especially interested in plays that “grow out of the playwright’s personal relationship to the land and the ecology of a specific place” and/or “attempt to find common ground among diverse stakeholders invested in a certain place or resource” (Fried and May 2). The 2004 Festival attracted 147 entries from the U.S. and Canada and the winning scripts explore a variety of ecological issues including Northwest timber harvesting, chemical pollution of waterways, and Native American whaling rights.¹⁵

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

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

society and a reality beyond the law in which the main character, a former SDS member, must come to terms with his past. Neither of Edgar's duo is an ecodrama in the sense of taking the relationship between human and natural world as its central topic. Yet, like Wilson's *Angel's Fall*, the spatiality of the dramas bespeak an underlying ecological relatedness.

Dell'Arte Players has developed "theater of place" for thirty years in Blue Lake, California, and *Shadow of Giants* was produced as part of its annual Mad River Festival in June 2004. The action centers on Chance, a reluctant tree sitter from New Jersey, who arrives at the foot of the redwoods ready to help. Following her baptism by wind and rain, the play pits her will and love for her tree against the seeming amoral economic need of a regular-guy logger. Smith has attempted to give voice to the land through the character of the tree (Vana Durga) who regularly speaks and dances with Chance. In *Giants*, Smith has created a mythic world in which Nature is personified. Vana Durga is both a kind of culturally non-specific Mother Nature, and the spirit of the tree in which Chance has taken up residence. In performance, however, when she is played by the only actor of color on stage, we must wonder if her character echoes stereotypes from an assortment of indigenous cultures, thus perpetuating the "whiteness" of mainstream environmentalism while re-inscribing both nature and indigenous cultures as Other. *Giants* has sympathy for the plight of the logger, Bald Eg, who like the California Bald Eagle is now on the verge of extinction. "I'm just doing my job" Bald Eg explains to Chance before he goes up to cut her out of Vana Durga's canopy. But Smith's play provides few new insights into what Richard White has called the fundamental relationship between nature and work. In "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" White reminds us that labor has been one of the primary ways that human beings have maintained living connections to the natural world. Both our knowledge and appreciation of nature is rooted in farming, fishing, hunting, mining,

logging, (White 171-185). Through the character of the Texas timber baron (a not-so-subtle reference to Maxam CEO James Hurwitz), *Giants* suggests that White's perspective is a viable one, but shies away from the difficult terrain where "nature" and "culture" intersect.

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

Theater can help us examine our own ecological identities: where do we draw our boundaries and how permeable or fixed are our own notions of self, culture, and humanness? Where do we stop and where does the "other" begin? In the theater, metaphoric and material worlds are inextricably bound up, embodying before us what Gaard and Murphy have called "a conception of human and nature intersubjectivity, a relation involving a human identity shaped by an acknowledgement of both connection and difference" (9). When playwrights and ecocritical scholars engage in a deep ecological inquiry of the theater they can together forge a green dramaturgy, an ecological theater, which will not only tap the power of performance to shape culture but also revive and transform the art of theater. Green dramaturgy asks us to

reconstitute the world, to re-conceive our notions of community in such a way that the very boundaries between nature and culture, self and other, begin to dissolve. As theater participates in our human ecological situatedness, it reclaims its ancient roots as a site of ritual celebration of the reciprocity between people and the natural world. Thus theater emerges not only as a means by which to investigate the long-standing humanist question “who are we?”, but also the urgent ecological question “where are we?” For the former cannot be answered fully without including the latter.

Works Cited

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. New York: Pantheon, 1998.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
- Bates, Barclay W. "The Lost Past in *Death of a Salesman*." *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Death of a Salesman*. Edited by Helene Wickham Koon. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1983: 60-84.
- Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977, 1966.
- Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. New York: Avon Books, 1968.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962, 1994.
- Chaudhuri, Una. *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 1997.
- _____. "‘There Must Be A Lot of Fish in that Lake’: Toward an Ecological Theater," *Theater* 25:1 (Spring/Summer, 1994): 23-31.
- Cless, Downing. "Eco-Theatre, USA: The Grassroots Is Greener." *TDR* 40:2 (Summer 1996): 79-102.
- _____. "Ecocriticism of Western Theatre History: Not So Green." ASLE Conference Paper. Boston, MA, June 2002.
- Di Chico, Giovana. "'Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environmental and Social Justice.'" *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. Edited by William Cronon. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996: 298-320.
- Dietrich, William. *Northwest Passage: The Great Columbia River*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995.
- Ellis, Jeffrey Charles. "When Green Was Pink: Environmental Dissent in Cold War America." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California Davis, 1995.
- Frederick Jackson Turner. *The Frontier in American History*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920, 1947.

- Fried, Larry and Theresa May. "Playwrights Guidelines," *Earth Matters On Stage: An Ecodrama Playwrights Festival*. Online. Internet. (<http://www.humboldt.edu/~emos/>) 30 June 2004.
- Gaard, Greta and Patrick Murphy, eds. *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998.
- Gottlieb, Robert. *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*. Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1993.
- Hitchcock, Keith. Personal interview. July 1995.
- Kaufman, David. "The Kentucky Cycle." *The Nation* 257:20. (13 December 1993): 740.
- Leopold, Aldo. *Sand Country Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949.
- Lilienthal, David. *Democracy on the March*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953.
- Mason, Bobbie Ann. "Recycling Kentucky," *New Yorker*, 69:36 (1 November 1993): 50-62.
- Miller, Arthur. *Timebends*. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Munk, Erika. "A Beginning and End," *Theater* 25:1 (Spring/Summer 1994): 5-6.
- Schenkkan, Robert. "Theater, Myth and Social Change." Presented at Theater in an Ecological Age Conference. Seattle, Washington, 22 November 1991.
- Schlesinger, Arthur. *The Politics of Hope*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963.
- Smith, Molly. Personal interview. November 1999.
- White, Richard. "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, William Cronon, ed. New York: Norton 1995: 171-185.
- Witham, Barry B., *Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003
- Worster, Donald. *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- _____. *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* Second Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

- Arent, Arthur. *Power and Triple-A Plowed Under. Federal Theater Plays*. Edited by Pierre DeRohan. New York: Random House, 1938.
- Belasco, David. *The Girl of the Golden West, in Six Plays*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1929.
- Edgar, David. *Continental Divide: Mother's Against and Daughters of the Revolution*. London: Nick Hern Publisher, 2004.
- Galjour, Anne. *Alligator Tales*. Courtesy of the Joyce Ketay Agency, New York, 1997.
- Hammerstein, Oscar. *Oklahoma!* New York: Random House, 1942.
- Koon, Robert. *Odin's Horse*. Working draft courtesy of the author, Chicago, Illinois, 2004.
- May, Theresa. *Dragon Island*. Seattle: Rain City Press, 1993.
- Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman. The Portable Arthur Miller*. Edited by Harold Clurman. New York: The Viking Press, 1971, 3-133.
- Moore, Todd. *In the Heart of the Woods*. Seattle: Rain City Press, 1994.
- Schenkkan, Robert. *The Kentucky Cycle*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.
- Smith, Graham. *In the Shadow of Giants*. Working draft courtesy of Dell'Arte Players, Blue Lake, California, 2004.
- Wilson, Lanford. *Angels Fall*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983.

Notes

¹ Smoke from the smelters was a sign of a “boom town.” Chlorine and cyanide were used in processing the ore, leaching into groundwater. See, Dwane A. Smith, *Mining the West: The Industry and the Environment, 1800-1980* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1993), Chapters 1 and 2.

² In 1927 Cambridge zoologist Charles Eton published *Animal Ecology*, a practical tool for the management of living “communities” in which “food chains” formed a system of economic exchange among plants and the animals that consumed them. Competition in Eaton’s model functioned only to improve the health of the whole community. Eaton’s theory defined “community” (later to become “ecosystem”) as a set of essentially economic relations. Oxford botanist A.G. Tansley extrapolated Eaton’s model in 1935. All food exchange among the links in the chain, he posited, was in essence an exchange of energy. His theory marked the application of the laws of thermodynamics to ecological systems. See, Worster, *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, Chapters 14 and 15.

³ Ecology came to be understood largely as a subordinate division of economics. This linguistic and philosophical marriage of the theoretical model of one field to another has entrenched ecological science in an economic value system from which it has yet to be extracted. See, John M. Jordan, *Machine-Age Ideology: Social Engineering and American Liberalism 1911-1939* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁴ See Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) regarding the myth of the garden as the ideological ground for industrialism.

⁵ The play’s fatal flaw rests in the way it conflates big, corporate-style farming with the “little farmer.” The unity the play attempted to forge between protesting workers in urban areas and the nation’s farming community was lost on those who served to gain most from farm subsidies.

⁶ Oak Ridge, on the Tennessee river, and Hanford on the Columbia river in Washington, became plutonium producing sites. See, Dietrich, *Northwest Passage: The Great Columbia River*, Chapter 11.

⁷ In this passage Carson is referring to single crop farming practices.

⁸ In *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the 1931 script by Lynn Riggs on which the musical *Oklahoma!* was based, the following stage direction is given when Jud is killed in the chivoree, “the howl of a coyote was heard ... desperate and forlorn.”

⁹ For a detailed ecocritical analysis of *Death of a Salesman*, see my “The Ecology of Willy Loman” in the *New England Theater Journal* (Fall 2004).

¹⁰ Miller was not referring specifically to ecology, yet his statement reflects an ecological sensibility. Indeed, taking “society” in its biological sense, Miller’s is a concise statement of the ecologist’s understanding of the natural and human cultural world.

¹¹ For this and other reproductions of Mielziner’s design for *Death of a Salesman*, see Mary C. Henderson, *Mielziner: Master of Modern Stage Design*, New York: Watson-Guption Publishers, 2001.

¹² In 1948 the deadly smog of Donora, Pennsylvania, for example, symbolized the potential reach of the hazardous byproducts of the post-war urban and industrial order. Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the Environmental Movement*. In December 1952

over 4,000 people died from London's killer smog. Parliament passed the Clean Air Act of 1956 and similar controls were enacted in Los Angeles in the 1950's. See also, Clive Pointing, *A Green History of the World* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 358.

¹³ Here I am referencing Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier Thesis in American History* in which he posits that "free land" was fundamental to formation of American character. For a critique of Turner, see Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill" in *The Frontier in American Culture*, James R. Grossman (ed.), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994): 6-65.

¹⁴ An interesting ecofeminist examination of the play might be made by examining the ways in which female characters are often, but not always, placed as the gateway to the natural world.

¹⁵ The Festival is a joint project of The Ink People and Humboldt State University in partnership with Redwood Curtain Theater and the Dell'Arte Players. See the Festival website for guidelines, activities and synopses of the six finalist scripts: www.humboldt.edu/emos.