

Beyond Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism in Theatre Studies

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Critics and scholars who want to investigate the way ecologies—physical, perceptual, imagined—shape dramatic forms stand at the edge of a vast, open field of histories to be rewritten, styles to rediscuss, contexts to re-perceive.

Erika Munk (5)

Introduction

It took a hurricane to demolish the popular conceptual binary that distinguishes between “nature” and “culture.” Whether we understand nature as a cultural construction or as an authentic “other” that is “out there,” Hurricane Katrina dramatized its fierce, inexorable interconnectivity with human culture. This interface between nature and culture is the site of ecocriticism: the critical application of an ecological perspective to cultural representation. An increasingly lively and nuanced ecocritical discourse in literary studies has entered its third decade, but a comparable discourse in theatre studies has been slow to take root. Given that ecology is the study of the interrelatedness among living organisms and their environment—and theatre is always an encounter between people and place—I find this gap surprising. Certainly a sense of urgency could not be more apparent. Recent (re)confirmations of global warming predict a twenty-first century in which we humans will come to terms with our relationship to the natural world, come hell or high water.

Twelve years ago Erika Munk observed 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), yet a relative few have taken up the gauntlet.¹ In the same landmark 1994 issue of *Theater*, Una Chaudhuri argued that the reason may lie in Euro / American theatre’s “programmatically anti-ecological” humanist paradigm (“There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake” 23). In “complicity with industrialization’s animus against nature,” modern theatre has “proffer[ed] a wholly social account of human life” (24). Unable or unwilling to speak beyond that frame, theatre may be at best a reflection of human culture’s disassociation from the other-than-human world. And yet, if theatre is trapped in a humanist catch-22, then imagination, dreams, and mimesis have no connection to our ecological, our animal selves. This, in turn, is to subscribe to a duality of body versus mind that we know is not true—contemporary science, philosophy, economics, arts, and medicine have demonstrated otherwise. In the theatre, we also know this binary to be unsupported by praxis. My aim here is to call on theatre scholars to flesh out the way in which the human imagination participates in, and is integral to, our ecological “situatedness.” We know that stories can open new possibilities of being, can crack the eggshells of long-standing ideological paradigms, and can also devastate and kill both land and people. Stories layer upon one another like geological strata; they are both invasive and indigenous; they are ecological forces as potentially powerful as hurricanes.

Does ecocriticism seem placid, too contemplative, or even indulgent in the face of present-day horrors? When the world around us is up in arms and going up in flames, who can afford to go green? In this vein, a colleague once chided me for my so-called tree-hugging “Bambi-esque” interests. Bambi always comes up when a discussion of ecological concerns falls prey to poststructural cynicism, and he—Bambi—is as good a place as any to begin. Both a myth and a trope, Bambi is an aggregate of cultural memory, a signifier ripe with ideology.² When deployed, Bambi shores up a particular construction of the human / nature relationship. In “Animal Geographies: Zooësis and the Space of Modern Drama,” Una Chaudhuri observes that “[a]s pets, as performers, and as literary symbols, animals are forced to perform for us. . . . Refusing the animal its radical otherness by ceaselessly troping it and rendering it a metaphor for humanity, modernity erases the anima even as it makes it discursively ubiquitous” (105). Bambi mediates and mystifies the ecological in everyday life. She / he is a site of the wild tamed, named, and commodified.³ Bambi is an example of “ecominstrelsy”—a reflection of human power and privilege, the Other transformed in a performance of human desire. When deployed, Bambi is an assurance that we also are tame, civilized, and worthy of the biblical role of master.

As I attempt to sort out theatre studies’ tepid embrace of ecocriticism, patterns emerge and gaps become apparent in the current handful of theoretical works that employ an ecological lens. From these beginnings, I suggest strategies for the trajectory of an emergent ecocriticism in theatre studies. In addition, this essay probes a growing rift between a vital literary ecocriticism on the one hand, and a discursive thread of “ecological” performance studies on the other. These divergent discourses run the risk of developing segregated and exclusive trajectories, shaped by (among other things) their allegiances to particular forms. Ecocriticism in literary studies grounds its discourse in text, avoiding the messy, multilayered, and ambivalent issues that arise from performance production, as well as the urban-centeriness that typically accompanies it. Theatre studies is positioned opportunistically between the literary and the performative, and as such can function as a bridge between discourses. However, as I will argue below, we must turn our attention to the material-ecological implications embedded in cultural performances, and not merely recite their existence.

We live in a watershed moment—in all senses of that phrase. My purpose here is not merely to rehearse Munk’s “vast, open field” and not only to underscore Chaudhuri, who notes that on stage “ecological meaning—as opposed to the mere theatrical presence—of this [nature] imagery has remained occluded, unremarked” by critics and scholars (“There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake” 24), but also to call for a vigorous, unabashedly material-ecological discourse in theatre studies, one that recognizes the ecological roots and implications of language, representation, systems of signification, and master narratives. Global warming, for example, is not only a sum of particular human actions, but the material-ecological results of certain master narratives that Euro / American culture has told over time.

The reader will no doubt note that my inquiry is nonlinear, favoring an unfolding thought and association. Passing through a *space* of discourse rather than marching through a line of argument, I hope this essay will serve to further the random and willy-nilly cross-pollination of ideas and their fruitful germination. For my own part, I came to this critical vantage point from my own praxis. After participating in the Mountain Project at the Teatr Laboratorium in 1979, I was engaged in the ecological implications of performance as a practitioner of site-specific theatre, environmental educator, and co-author of a book about sustainable theatre practice.⁴ That interest drew me back to the academy and toward the theoretical application of ecological perspectives to theatre studies, where I have worked to stimulate an ecocritical discourse particularly focused on the intersection of ecological issues with those of race, class, and gender.⁵

In 2004, I co-produced “Earth Matters on Stage: An Ecodrama Playwrights Festival” (EMOS) in an effort to call forth new dramatic work that engages the myriad ecological questions societies face.⁶ I teach a graduate theory seminar titled “Art / Culture / Nature,” developed originally to pro-

vide environmental-studies students an appreciation of the role of arts and humanities in values and community formation. Currently, the course invites theatre and performance students to investigate the ways in which the arts can be an ecological force. I owe much to my graduate students, who predictably cock their heads and ask, “So what *is* ecocriticism?”

Beyond Bambi

Attempting to define any theory is asking for trouble, but I accept the challenge because definitions set forth by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, editors of *The Ecocriticism Reader*, and echoed by Peter Barry in his 2002 edition of *Beginning Theory* (which dedicates a chapter to this new discourse) are sometimes vague, often limiting, and tend to ignore the politics of power implicit in constructions of nature, as well as the ways in which performance complicates the process of meaning-making. Ecocriticism is a critical (discursive) perspective on cultural performance (from theatre, film, and literature to zoos, amusement parks, and social protests) afforded and informed by the science of ecology and the greening fire it has precipitated across disciplines. Barry notes ecocriticism’s roots in nature writing and especially in the literature of the western United States. These beginnings help us understand why theatre scholars have been slow to join in the conversation. Literary studies has a long tradition of criticism that examines the signification of landscape and nature imagery as well as having a body of canonical texts.⁷ Contemporary ecocriticism grew out of these studies in landscape aesthetics, Romanticism, and nature writing.

Current conversations in theatre studies such as Chaudhuri’s *Staging Place* and *Land / Scap / Theater*, edited by Elinor Fuchs and Chaudhuri, have attempted to bridge this gap. These publications have opened a doorway, but it is Chaudhuri’s 1994 essay, “‘There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake’: Toward an Ecological Theater,” that walks boldly through the door, calling for “the arts and humanities, including the theater” to participate in “a transvaluation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present” (24). Ecocriticism in theatre studies (and performance studies, as I will argue below) will find interdisciplinarity inescapable.⁸ Our inquiries have the opportunity to engage not only literary ecocriticism, but perhaps more importantly, cultural studies and environmental history as well.

In *Performing Nature*, editors Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart map out a conversation that is necessarily “hybrid and interdisciplinary,” while it is “fraught with epistemological uncertainty and controversy” (19).⁹ The editors recognize that ecology and the arts “are a process of endless exchange and interconnectivity between the human and the other-than-human that leads to ‘co-produced nature-cultures’” (19). We already conceptualize *in terms of* the ecological world, and its injury, destruction, and loss shatters identities and bodies of knowledge. This very co-production of meaning, the always / already interrelation of the so-called human and natural worlds, provides the impetus for ecocriticism in theatre and performance because theatre’s materiality encompasses and depends on the living, breathing body / organism as its means and central signifier; equally, it depends on taking, encountering, and negotiating place.

Glotfelty and Fromm claim that “ecocriticism is the study of literature and its relationship to the environment” (xviii)—a definition that eschews the politics of power that are embedded in both terms. All constructions of “nature” are ideological: “wilderness,” “the great outdoors,” “ecosystem,” and / or “Gaia,” for example, are concepts that are historically situated and have been politically deployed. Ecocriticism should not be limited to literature, and indeed, the inclusion of theatre and performance within its discourse will bring new and important issues to light. Precisely because theatre is both a living art form and a site wherein bodies, communities, politics, commerce, and imaginative possibilities intersect in a material way, ecocriticism in theatre will engage the debates occurring around us, including not only global warming, but also green business practices, sustainable urban planning, environmental justice, food security, consumption, watershed democracy,

globalization, and many other human concerns. To engage the messy, multifarious, and necessarily anthropocentric art of the theatre, ecocriticism in literary studies must reach beyond its Thoreauvian Old Guard. Steven Rosendale observes that

[a] growing number of scholars are clearly interested in expanding the purview of ecocritical practice by widening the canon of texts for ecocritical investigation and placing environmental criticism in a more productive relation with other, perhaps suspiciously humanistic, theoretical perspective and critical practices. (xvii)

However (to be fair), theatre studies must cease its patronizing dismissal of green concerns in the recognition that our discipline is positioned to powerfully engage and shift societal perceptions around ecological issues. Furthermore, a growing rich body of discourse in our field *does* exist and unashamedly can and should be recognized as ecocriticism.

Before suggesting some pathways for ecocritical discourse in theatre, a brief exploration of a recent play may demonstrate the kinds of questions and concerns provoked by this focus. Chaudhuri has recognized “a new materialist-ecological theater practice that refuses the universalization and metaphorization of nature,” and it is in this spirit that this eco-reading of Edward Albee’s *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* proceeds (“There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake” 24). The play follows an urban-dwelling architect at the height of his career as he falls in love with a goat and destroys his marriage. (This is no Bambi play!) *The Goat* explodes species taboos by offending our sense of absolute difference, illuminates the role of human desire in the commodification of nature, and probes the depths of what Theodore Rozak and colleagues have called “ecopsychosis.”¹⁰

In a rarified encounter with a goat, Albee’s Martin experiences the autonomy of the nonhuman Other:

It was as if an alien came out of whatever it was, and it . . . took me with it, and it was . . . an ecstasy and a purity, and . . . a love of a . . . un-i-mag-in-able kind, and it relates to nothing whatever, to nothing that can be related to! [. . .] I knelt there, eye level, and there was a . . . a what? . . . an understanding so intense, so natural. (39–40, ellipses in original)

What Martin does with this moment of recognition and, Rozak and colleagues would argue, *reconnection*, is characteristic of a cultural ecological malady.¹¹ In a gesture both of alienation and domination, believing himself in love, but performing master–slave, he fucks her / it. Martin languages his experience of Sylvia as “[n]ot a cunt, a soul!” but he is helpless to relate to his new love in a way other than conquest (“I had to have her”). Sylvia is a stand-in for an accessible “nature”—for pastorality, for a wilderness tamed. She is also a stand-in (albeit on four legs) for men, women, and children who have become—through skin color, gender, national origin, or simple dependence—at once the objects of desire and the consumables of a heterosexual patriarchy. Differences among humans then—race, gender, sexual orientation, class, or nationality—become petty by comparison. But Sylvia is *not only* a metaphor for difference—Albee sees to that when her bloodied body is brought onstage. She is *she*. She was a being, one who bleeds and suffers and one from whom life can be taken. To presume that suffering is only a human capacity is hubris.

As Chaudhuri has observed, the presence of a particularized, individual, bleeding animal body onstage forces nothing short of an epistemological crisis that “brings the human story to a screeching halt. . . . The animal is understood literally as a defeat of meaning; a black hole in the family’s comfortable universe” (“Animal Geographies” 112). Seen through this ecocritical lens, Albee’s play wrestles with species identity and species privilege and confronts the ethics implicit in our reciprocal relationship with “the others.”¹² Part of this “comfortable universe” is the assumption that we are a species apart. But the sight of Sylvia’s butchered body reveals what Paul Shepard, in *The Others*, calls the “gut-wrenching awareness of the subterranean similarity of ourselves and our [hunted] victim”

(32). Shepard argues that as “hunters meditate[ed] on signs—not only as object in their own right but as indications of an unseen animal—[they] unlocked speech and symbol from the call and sign system” (22). Our intimate relationship with animals, he argues, marks the *beginning* of meaning. Consequently, then, as one by one the animals leave us (as I write, another—the freshwater dolphin of the Yangtze River—has succumbed to extinction), the world loses *bodies* of knowledge.¹³

Martin’s eco-psychosis is such that he cannot name an experience of nonduality except within the conceptual system of (hetero)phallogocentric dominion. A successful architect and urban-planning prodigy who is “the youngest person ever to win the Pritzker Prize,” Martin is poised to build “[t]he World City, the two hundred billion dollar dream city of the future, financed by U.S. Electronics Technology and set to rise in the wheatfields of our Middle West” (13). As utopias go, Martin’s dream city is no *Communitas*, and it appears he is not heir to the philosophies of Lewis Mumford and Barry Commoner.¹⁴ Instead, we are lead to believe by Ross’s line of questioning in scene 1 that Martin belongs to the professional lineage of the technocrats of the 1920s, whose faith in technology’s power to transform the deserts of the American West into productive gardens gave rise to such unsustainable projects as Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles—all once touted as a “city of the future.”¹⁵

How is it that Martin falls from grace? Like an ancient Greek tragedy, *The Goat* chronicles a man of high standing brought down by his own hubris.¹⁶ Consequently, in a characteristically Dionysian rendering of justice, the gods seem to tell him, “If you toy with us, we’ll toy with you.” Martin’s so-called bestiality is symptomatic of a more fundamental aberration: that who he is issues from an unsustainable exploitative relationship with the other-than-human world. Here is a Gehry-esque architect whose ambition is familiar in US history.¹⁷ His relations with nature are both professional and personal. Not only does he take Sylvia for his own needs, he is poised to transform a region of the Great Plains (“Kansas—wherever,” the heartland, dead center) through what we can only understand as overwhelming technological force (13). On *this land*—conquered over and again by waves of what Wendell Berry characterizes as rapacious exploiters in pursuit of profits; over the top of the bones of twenty million buffalo; through the ghosts of the cattle barons that followed; hot on the trail of the “sod-busters” whose wheat-standard ingrained mono-cropping in US agriculture; past the family farms that went bust in the Dust Bowl; trampling the hollow dreams of sharecroppers; even over the top of an industrial agriculture that would continue to press the land with chemical technologies into the twenty-first century—Martin, a consummate frontiersman, will erect his American dream.¹⁸ Presumably the 200 billion will pay for the technology necessary to provide power, alter the course of the weather, and what—create water? The Ogallala Aquifer, the largest underground source of water in the Western Hemisphere, historically stretched from Texas to the Dakotas. However, with increased use by industrial agriculture after the Dust Bowl, in the past seventy years the Ogallala has been depleted faster than it has been replenished (Worster 234–325). Martin’s dream city would be one more unsustainable, ecologically naïve attempt to compel the land’s obedience.¹⁹

Martin’s hubris emerges in light of the environmental history of the Great Plains. Apparently he and his corporate partner have not learned the lessons of dust bowls, droughts, extinctions, and water scarcity, ignoring what Aldo Leopold called in 1949 “our contract with the land” (*Sand County Almanac*). According to Leopold, our relationships with the land, its inhabitants, and elements are reciprocal. Our ethical obligations to the land and its ecological communities are not luxuries entertained by those who do not work for a living, but rather they *are* our living. We are not separate from our ecological community; its fate is our own. While American society shares the world with nonhuman Others, we seem generally unequipped or unwilling to face the moral questions that the history of our husbandry as well as our conquest have raised. The cost of such hubris for Martin is the ultimate shattering of his own home place, materialized on stage as his wife Stevie throws art objects (human creations, like cities) across the room. Ultimately, all that will remain are artifacts, shards of their strongly held beliefs.

Martin stands naked in the face of his rewards: he tells Ross that he received the news that he had won the Pritzker Prize when “at the gym; I’d taken my clothes off, and Stevie called. [. . .] Well, it was . . . gratifying—not being naked, but . . . hearing about it—the Prize” (14). The flesh is the primary site of our interface with the ecological world, and the image Albee conjures is hilarious though apt. Society reaps the rewards of its rapaciousness in the flesh, vulnerable to the toxic excesses of its “progress,” forgetting that at best, the skin is a permeable boundary. Consequently, Walter Benjamin’s litany of loss and wreckage in society’s wake is a catastrophe both global and personal. The breakage enfolds our permeable bodies, our families, and our children.

Green Methodologies

Ecocriticism that engages the ways in which representation participates with the ecological well-being of earth’s species and spaces can draw effectively from a variety of methodologies, among them environmental history, gender and postcolonial studies, phenomenology, cultural geography, materialist historiography, and performance studies.²⁰ Each generates intriguing driving questions. Chaudhuri has begun to map several compelling ecocritical directions for theatre studies. Moving one signifier at a time through modernity’s dislocation of nature imagery from its material-ecological counterpart, she has suggested an application of cultural geography to show “the mutually constructive relations between people and place” (*Staging Place* xii). Then, together with Elinor Fuchs, she explores the role of landscape in meaning-making, with an emphasis on how “entire dramatic worlds and aesthetic forms can emerge from the landmarks, afflictions, and patterns of particular landscape” (4). Currently, she has brought attention to the signification and necessary re-literalization (read: eco-materialization) of animal bodies on stage (“Animal Geographies”). In all of these areas, and for precisely the reasons Chaudhuri herself has noted (namely, theatre’s habituated metaphorization of nature), it will be crucial to take care to retain the ontological integrity of ecology; that is, the study of living organisms (including humans) within the earth-based environment on which life depends.²¹

Some performance-studies scholars deploy ecology as a kind of aesthetic systems theory in order to describe the multifarious, dynamic, and interdependent relationships between, for example, production and reception, actors and space, or theatre and its social context. No doubt, theoretical invention, playfulness, and polyphony are fundamental to discourse about performance. Ecology, however, is more than a “du jour” theoretical term. The use of “ecological” for rhetorical purposes (typified by Bonnie Maranca’s *Ecologies of Theater*) tends merely to sanitize the term while eschewing its political as well as its material-ecological implications. Divorced from the material-ecological issues confounding contemporary society, “ecology” is reduced in this discourse to yet another natural metaphor. Chaudhuri notes that to “use ecology as metaphor is to block the theater’s approach to the deeply vexed problem of classification that lies at the heart of ecological philosophy: are we human beings—and our activities, such as theater—an integral part of nature, or are we somehow radically separate from it?” (“There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake” 27).

In ironic and often playful examinations of the semiotics of sites such as the Alamo, the Columbian Exposition, the Wild West, and Las Vegas, many performance studies and theatre-history projects lap at the shores of ecocriticism, but as Chaudhuri notes, they fail to “rise to the ecological occasion,” which asks that we “conceptualize our moral responsibility” for our ecological communities, including human and nonhuman (“There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake” 27). Ecological performance studies must move through the complex layers of performativity to connect more of the dots, looking to the material-ecological impact of such “performances.” Hegemonic values are often held in place by iconography and long-ingrained master narratives, while the associated devastation, genocide, ecocide, or injustice is occluded. William Cody’s (Buffalo Bill’s) Wild West extravaganza, for example, was complicit with racist anti-Indian policies, as his enterprise provided the govern-

ment with a repository for rebel Lakota Sioux during the Ghost Dance uprising, while it was also complicit in the oppression and annihilation of people and the exploitation of land—specifically, mining gold in the Lakota sacred lands of the Black Hills.²² It is not enough to expose the Alamo or Buffalo Bill's Wild West, for example, as Baudrillardian simulacra. We must critique the underlying master narratives in terms of their ecological implications, even as we have critiqued these sites for racist, sexist, jingoist, or other hegemonic values.

Ecological issues, like the concerns central to feminism and postcolonial and multicultural theory, address injustices felt in the body—the body of experience, of community, of land.²³ The lens of ecocriticism foregrounds the material-ecological human / nature interface. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Ansdúa have articulated this kind of “theory in the flesh” as one that arises from “the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings [which] all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (23). Ecocriticism applied to theatre must examine how bodies bear the markings of environmental policy, raising questions that go to the heart of cultural convictions about self and other, subjectivity, community, identity, and about the impact of cultural values and ideologies on the material / ecological world—in which humans as organisms are, even in our most abstract and rationalist moments, utterly embedded. Foregrounding the body also brings into focus the web of social, political, economic, and ecological systems that touch our bodies. In *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism*, Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy call for the 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)

A dangerous ecocriticism will participate in the discourse of environmental justice by foregrounding the body as medium between material and metaphoric worlds, and mapping the connections between social injustice, human and other bodies, and environmental exploitation.

In the semiotics of Cherríe Moraga's *Heroes and Saints*, for example, the “presence-of-absence” of Cerezita's body is multivalent: she is material evidence and reminder of the impact of toxins on the health and well-being of workers and their families as well as the land, but she is also a metaphor for a society that denies the body. She is a warning: we cannot continue to grow food by inhumane and unsustainable means. Moraga's image-rich play draws identification between grapevines and the bodies of children. In a horrifying gesture of protest, the workers hang the bodies of their children, who are believed to have died as a result of pesticides, on crosses and place them in the fields. In an indictment of an agricultural ethos in which both workers and land are abused, coerced, and poisoned, Moraga exposes the triple power-base of industrial agriculture's hegemony through the alternating sounds of crop dusters (corporate growers) that spray the grapes, the nighttime helicopters (law enforcement) that patrol the fields for errant protesters, and the Catholic Church, whose belief system masks oppression as “God's will.” Yet, Moraga reconstitutes the material-ecological meaning of the sacrament of Communion. Catholics believe that bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ. Here, the grapes become blood, and if they are covered in poison, that blood is poisoned. We all participate in an ecological communion. The body of the earth and the bodies of the workers (and by implication all those who consume grapes or any other mega-crop of California's industrial agriculture for that matter) are “one in the flesh,” as the Catholic Mass says.

Environmental history can help expose ecological hegemonies by foregrounding the body in works that have not expressly taken environmental issues as their subject matter. In Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*, for example, clues to an ecological hegemony of the 1950s and '60s when urban neighborhoods as well as rural roadsides were indiscriminately sprayed with DDT and other toxic pesticides. Scene 2 opens as the Younger family is seen cleaning their small apartment.

The stage directions tell us that Beneatha chases her younger brother Travis around the room with a spray-bottle of roach-killer. They run around the sofa until Lena calls, "Look out there, girl, before you be spilling some of that stuff on that child!" Beneatha replies, "I can't imagine it would hurt him—it has never hurt the roaches!" Foreshadowing the fight for environmental justice by black communities in coming decades, Lena warns, "Well, little boys' hides ain't as tough as Southside roaches" (55).²⁴ Why is it important to foreground such details and to contextualize them within the environmental history of the period? Is it not enough that Hansberry is remembered for her courageous play and its indictment of segregated access to the American dream?

Foregrounding the intersection of ecological and social injustice is a form of resistance in the face of rhetoric that continues to polarize the environment versus jobs, urban needs versus rural rights, and wilderness protection versus resource development. In addition, the complex questions at this intersection interrupt the notion that environmentalism is the cause célèbre of white privilege and helps expose the systems that benefit from driving a wedge between, for example, communities of color and wilderness preservation. The kind of rhetoric that claims that environmentalism is a luxury has not talked with indigenous people working hard to preserve species and biodiversity, and has not breathed the air in treeless, parkless inner cities where the incidence of asthma among children is exponentially higher than in middle-class neighborhoods.²⁵

As I hope my exploration of Albee's *The Goat* illustrated above, environmental history can set a play or a performance more solidly in its earthen sphere—that is, in the eco-materiality of the world of the play and / or the world of production. This contextuality can illuminate the ways in which narrative, scenic trends, and material production have, as Bruce McConachie notes, "helped to reinforce or undermine existing hegemonies" that govern conceptual and economic relations to the natural world (40). Environmental history can help, for example, expose David Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West* (or other picturesque depictions of western lands on eastern stages) against the backdrop of hydraulic mining's soot-filled boomtowns, which signified rapacious resource extraction from western lands. The geography of difference expressed in the sublime and 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 ripe for ocular consumption) while another is delimited as a stockpile of "raw materials" for human use and abuse. Like preserved wilderness parks, the scenic designs of Belasco's stage obfuscated the general mining of western resources that fed the American prosperity machine of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Belasco's description of the Muir-esque recreational options in the High Sierra reads like a California tourist brochure: "God's in the air here, sure. You can see Him layin' peaceful hands on the mountain tops" (357). Meanwhile, miners were laying a violent hand on the land. Smoke from the smelters—a sign of a "boomtown"—clouded the viewscape, while the chlorine and cyanide that were used in processing the ore leached into groundwater. Mining washed the mountainsides into rivers of rubble, ate up timber, poisoned groundwater, and obliterated the sublime silence with the sound of the twenty-four-hour stamp press.²⁶

Environmental history is not geologic history; instead, it maps human history from the point of view of its impact on, and interface with, ecological (and sometimes geologic) changes in the land. Thus it allows us to see how geological and ecological conditions have informed human affairs, and also how human activities have far-reaching though often occluded effects on environments. The Living Newspapers *Power* and *Triple-A Plowed Under* taken together illuminate the workings of American binary thinking about the land (scenic wonder versus natural resource) through their epic chronicles of the decades during which that binary thinking became national environmental policy.²⁷ This conceptual, and primarily aesthetic, distinction paved the way for massive public-works projects in western lands and the subsequent environmental problems they have caused. During the 1930s, the land was conceived as "worker," as the lyrics of Woody Guthrie's "Roll on Columbia Roll on" suggest. In the fight for public power in the western United States, the Federal Theatre's *Power* argued that cheap electric power was not only a necessity, but a human right. Selling the idea

of public power depended on invoking the old image of the early pioneers and the family farm, but paying for construction of large-scale “high” dams required the partnership of the military-industrial complex—and a number of current EPA Superfund sites have been their legacy.

Foregrounding environmental history often lends chilling dimensions to our understanding of representation on stage. Foreshadowing of the catastrophes of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Tony Kushner and Jeanie Tesori’s *Caroline, or Change* spotlights the geo-ecological reality of the Gulf Coast wetlands corridor for folks of Caroline’s race and class:²⁸

Nothing ever happen underground / in Louisiana

cause they ain’t no underground / in Louisiana.

There is only / underwater.

Consequences unforeseen. / Consequences unforeseen . . .

Sixteen soggy feet below / the Gulf of Mexico (7).²⁹

Yet John Lahr wrote in the *New Yorker* that “the terrain is a metaphor for Caroline’s *internal landscape*: she is literally and figuratively swamped” (123, emphasis added).

As Chaudhuri has pointed out, the use of nature as “metaphor is so integral a feature of the aesthetic of modern realist-humanist drama [and criticism], that, paradoxically, its implications for a possible ecological theater are easy to miss. Its very ubiquity renders it invisible” (“There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake” 24). An ecocritical reading will resist turning Caroline’s material-ecological circumstances into a metaphor that obscures the causes of her vulnerable position. As Caroline toils, “[t]orn between the devil / and the muddy brown sea,” danger is both environmentally and socio-economically situated and reflects the racist implications of environmental management: “Tough and dreary and all disheveled / sixteen feet below sea level / Baby / Gonna *drown* . . . Doing laundry full of woe, / ’neath the Gulf of Mexico” (7). Environmental history can provide the means to ground the metaphor in its material origin—in this case, the wetlands corridor of southern Louisiana. This natural barrier and fish estuary has eroded at a rate of “an acre every fifteen minutes” since the 1930s.³⁰ For Caroline, geography is jeopardy.³¹

In *Staging Place*, Chaudhuri observes that “[w]ho one is and who one can be are . . . a function of *where* one is and how one experiences that place” (xii). Certainly in the Louisiana bayou and Mississippi Delta, “place” not only shapes identity (and sometimes destiny), but has a kind of agency. In Anne Galjour’s *Alligator Tales*, a “sense of place” *is* a sense of self.³² 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. Galjour’s script was born of her own childhood on the bayou and transmits 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 “identity” is a kind of dance of touch-and-be-touched (260).

Alligator Tales is the story of two sisters, Inez and Sherelle, who live in a small house in the Louisiana bayou. Theirs is an interspecies neighborhood of alligators, fish, turtles, birds, dogs, cows, virgins, lightning, wind, rain, children, and grownups. A man is caught on a woman’s fishing line and freed by a dog; alligators sleep on porches and must be shooed off with broomsticks in the morning; a cow saves a man’s life; seeing through the eyes of a fish, a woman catches red snapper for dinner; a child is born of a hurricane; a woman is caught in a gill net and led back to breathable

air by a fish. The play is a series of border crossings. The swamp itself, as an estuary, is a threshold between freshwater and saltwater, between earth and sea, marking a border between worlds, between possibilities of being. In “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performative,’” Jill Dolan reminds us that theatre’s primary function is not to formulate the new organizational structures (laws, policies, and so on), but to provide a forum in which people might engage the magical “what if” in order to taste experience not their own. Theatre allows us to *feel* a new possible future—and feel it together (455–60).

All at once, with the UN report on global climate change, the interlocked fate of human and other-than-human worlds has flooded the mainstream. The questions “Is global warming real?” and “Are human activities to blame?” have, nearly overnight, coalesced into “What can we do?” If the art of theatre is our home-place, we are presented now, as at past historical crossroads, with the opportunity to *take a stand where we stand*. From here, we have a unique opportunity to tell new stories in new ways by applying the sometimes searing, and sometimes silly, edge of our critical and creative practice to the undeniably human predicament of ecological situatedness. From this standpoint—the fluid, mutable, palpable location of theatrical experience—we might view the vast panorama of culture through eyes informed by the practice of invention, imagination, and possibility. Surely the world needs now theatre’s “what if” more than ever.

Critical animal studies constitutes an important ecocritical debate in theatre and performance studies.³³ Una Chaudhuri and Alan Read have opened up a conversation that provokes new readings of human / animal relationships in performance. Chaudhuri explores the ideologies that lay at the feet of human representations of animals in modern drama, while Read notes that performativity is not solely a human domain.³⁴ Just as discourses that deconstruct notions of race in, for example, American minstrelsy are understood to combat racism through critical means, critical animal studies leads toward questioning the ethical questions provoked by Sylvia’s bloodied body. Does this analysis help us think newly about human / nonhuman relationships? Does it eat away at society’s complacency toward the food industries’ objectification and mining of animal bodies? A dangerous ecocriticism will foreground these and other ethical concerns.

Conclusion

We need an ecocriticism that is dangerous to business as usual, one that intersects with cultural and performance studies in such a way as to expose the individual values and organizational ethos that sanction such signs of eco-psychosis as the performance of power in the forced-species cross-dressing at Abu Ghraib prison; an ecocriticism to unmask the ideologies that characterized Hurricane Katrina as a “natural” disaster; an ecocriticism that exposes the mythic underpinnings of unsustainable resource extraction and human exploitation, that complicates pat environmental rhetoric, and illuminates a nuanced and complex interrelatedness with the more-than-human world. At a time when so many longstanding human endeavors seem to have endangered the integrity of all earth’s species, ecocriticism can expose and dismantle the ideologies and master narratives that shore up business as usual and inspire performances that help society recalibrate toward sustainable human means. The opportunity as well as the urgency is clear.

My students often find that they have few models for ecocritical analyses in theatre studies. Table 1 provides a list of driving questions that have been points of departure for me. I share them, hoping they will be applicable to many forms of cultural performance.

Table 1

Some Green Questions to Ask a Play

- How does a performance engage or reflect (even as “wallpaper”) the environmental issues of its time and place?
 - What are the clues to the ecological conditions of the “world of the play”? How do those conditions intersect with representations of race, class, and gender?
 - How does the play reflect specific and historically situated philosophical paradigms of thinking about the human place in nature?
 - How does the play represent / complicate the effects of technology on people, animal, plants, and the land?
 - How does the play propagate or subvert the master narratives that sanction human exploitation of the land?
 - How are place and person permeable? How does the performance blur the boundaries of individual and ecological community?
 - How does the spatiality of performance inform the reciprocity among spectator, performer, and environment? How does use of space inform notions of ecological “community”?
 - How are animal or other nonhuman bodies deployed and used as rhetorical or metaphorical devices, and what is exposed when these are re-literalized?
 - How does the body as signifier and medium function as the borderland where ecological identity is negotiated?
 - Does the performance inspire us to think newly about our relationship to the natural world and about our definitions of self or community?
 - What are the material means of production (resource / labor use) and its ecological implications (human and environmental impact)?
 - What are the material-ecological conditions of the historical moment of production, and how do these intersect with race, class, geography, and gender?
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Notes

1. In addition to the work of Fuchs and Chaudhuri that is discussed throughout, see also Downing Cless’s “Eco-Theatre, USA.”

2. Here, I am drawing on Roland Barthes’s essay “Myth Today,” in *Mythologies*, in which he probes the ways in which ideologies take on form through myth, becoming “naturalized” and invisible (143).

3. It appears that the popular perception of Bambi’s gender is contested terrain. I polled a number of colleagues, moms, dads, and children, but perceptions were curiously fixed and mixed! So I have chosen to use the “she / he.”

4. See Larry Fried and Theresa May, *Greening Up Our Houses*.

5. See Theresa May's "Greening Theatre Studies," "The Ecology of Willy Loman," and "Consequences Unforeseen . . ."

6. The Ecodrama Playwrights Festival was hosted by Humboldt State University in 2004. Future EMOS festivals will be hosted by the University of Oregon, Eugene. Meanwhile, see www.humboldt.edu/emos or e-mail Larry Fried at enviromonkey@gmail.net.

7. The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ALSE), founded in 1995, boasts hundreds of members in six countries. Its journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment (ISLE)*, is in its fourteenth year. Doctoral programs in ecocriticism are offered at several universities in the United States and United Kingdom, and a number of university presses list ecocriticism as one of their primary publishing areas (e.g., University of Georgia, University of Nevada-Reno, and University of Arizona). ASLE's web site, <http://www.asle.umn.edu/>, contains much useful information, including an ecocriticism bibliography, links to PhD programs in ecocriticism, and a link to *ISLE*.

8. Rewarding intersections with ecocriticism will be found in the disciplines of ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, studies of the Americas, indigenous studies, cultural geography, environmental studies, applied arts, dance, landscape design, urban planning, natural resource management, environmental philosophy, and ecofeminism.

9. Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart's *Performing Nature* is a collection of ecocritical approaches to theatre and dance, but also to social protest, para-theatre, sculpture, earth art, landscape design, architecture, and film. It effectively demonstrates both the potential scope of the discourse as well as useful intersections with more familiar theoretical frames.

10. The notion of "ecopsychosis" was coined by Theodore Rozak, Mary Gomes, and Allen Kanner in their revisionist critique of humanist, Freudian-derived psychology that calls for a new practice of "ecopsychology" in contemporary mental health.

11. See Theodore Rozak, Mary Gomes, and Allen Kanner's *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*.

12. See, for example, Una Chaudhuri's "Animal Geographies."

13. See Robert Pitman, "A Fellow Mammal Leaves the Planet."

14. See Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, chap. 3. Here, I am referring to *Communitas* by Paul and Percival Goodman, whose theories of urban utopia (today we would say "sustainable") communities were informed by the writings of Lewis Mumford, Murry Bookchin, and Herbert Marcuse.

15. See Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire*.

16. See Chaudhuri's "Animal Geographies" in which she notes that by the long history of ancient Greek tragedy, the goat Sylvia is quickly transformed from a nonhuman being into a sign in the theatre (105).

17. The Pritzker Prize is architecture's highest award, like the Nobel Prize. Renowned architect Frank Gehry won the prize in 1989. A simple Google search will reveal the magnitude of the honor Albee's Martin has received.

18. See Berry, *The Unsettling of America*; also see Worster, *Dust Bowl* and *Rivers of Empire*.
19. See Worster, *Dust Bowl*.
20. See Wallace Heim's "Performance and Ecology: A Reader's Guide" in which she details many of the key books across disciplines that might be gathered under the umbrella of "ecology and performance." The list composes an excellent reading list for graduate study in ecocriticism as it relates to theatre and performance.
21. I have explored similar issues in "Greening Theatre Studies: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage." Some portions are reprinted in revised form herein with permission from *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*.
22. See Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Frontier in American Culture*; see also White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, pt. 2.
23. See May, "Greening Theatre Studies."
24. See "Consequences Unforeseen . . ." in which I explore the parallel environmental-justice themes in Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* and Kushner and Tesori's *Caroline, or Change*.
25. See Ian Greaves et al.'s "Asthma, Atrophy, and Lung Function . . ."
26. See Duane Smith's *Mining the West*.
27. See Worster, *Rivers of Empire*; Smith, *Mining the West*.
28. See May, "Consequences Unforeseen . . .," for further discussion of the ecological resonance of *Caroline, or Change*.
29. Lyrics for *Caroline, or Change* are included with the CD recording produced by Jeanie Tesori in 2003.
30. See Joel Bourne's "Gone with the Water."
31. See May, "Consequences Unforeseen . . ."
32. See May, "Greening Theatre Studies," for further discussion of *Alligator Tales*.
33. See Cary Wolfe's *Animal Rites, American Culture: The Discourse of Species and Posthumanist Theory*.
34. See Alan Read's "Play—Ground—Nature—Table" and "On Animals."

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