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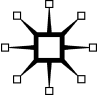
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# INTRODUCTION

WENDY ARONS AND THERESA J. MAY

THE POPULAR CONCEPTUAL BINARY THAT DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN “NATURE” and “culture” has taken a beating in recent years. Recent large-scale ecological disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina (2005) and Irene (2011), the Gulf oil spill (2010), catastrophic flooding in Pakistan (2010), severe drought in the US Southwest (2011), and famine in Somalia (2011), among others, have vividly dramatized the fierce, inexorable interconnectivity between nature and human culture, and made visible the extent to which that very binary thinking, which has been so instrumental to technological and cultural development, is also carrying us to the brink of ecological collapse. A fundamental transformation of values with regard to the more-than-human world, one that includes a full acceptance of our enmeshment in the larger ecological community, is long overdue.<sup>1</sup> But here we come to a fundamental paradox: one of the key means of shaping and transforming human attitudes and values is the arts, but the arts (in the West, at least, where this book has its origins) have traditionally been conceived as the activity that most divides humans from “nature.” Moreover, theater in its present form—with its emphasis on human conflict in the context of human institutions—occupies a space at the far end of that spectrum. Consequently, the terms we join together in the title of this volume—“performance” and “ecology”—do not easily or readily share space together, either materially or ontologically.

This paradox explains in part why, at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, ecology and environment are not only underrepresented and underthematized on the Western stage, but also undertheorized in theater and performance scholarship. Representing and thematizing the more-than-human world in performance with the tools we generally bring to bear on the task seems to require, by default, reinscribing that binary divide between culture and nature, given that performance itself is always already a cultural interpretation of and overlay onto the “natural”

world. As such, theorizing ecological theater and performance will demand a reconceptualization of the nature and purpose of mimesis, and require finding ways to represent the more-than-human world on stage that do not ineradicably “other” nature. Such theorization is urgently needed if the performing arts are to play a role in transforming social values in the face of the ecological challenges of the twenty-first century.

How can we provoke an increasingly diverse and complex discourse, one that has the purpose of inspiring *artists* as well as scholars? Critics and scholars play an important role in relationship to the arts—not only do they comment on existing work, but they also propose new ways of thinking that can, in turn, call forth new work. In the last half-century, productive reciprocal conversations between scholars, critics, and artists have produced rich and varied performances that have transformed previously ingrained cultural attitudes about gender, race, and sexuality. Despite the fact that ecological degradation will likely precipitate enormous social and political upheaval in the next century, and, with it, unpredictable and unimaginable effects on human communities and cultures—the kinds of concerns that have traditionally been prime subjects for the performing arts—theater scholars and practitioners have been slow to engage environmental issues. Biologist Neal Evernden reminds us that “an involvement by the arts is vitally needed to emphasize...the intimate and vital involvement of self with place...environmentalism involves the perception of values, and values are the coin of the arts” (102–103). As a scholarly and artistic community we have largely failed to rise to Una Chaudhuri’s challenge, published in *Theater* in 1994, to play our role in addressing the crisis of values that the current ecological crisis represents. Theorists and scholars now have an opportunity—we would argue a responsibility—to critically apply an ecological perspective to theatrical representation, and, in this way, take the lead in forging a space, and sensibility, into which artists may increasingly move to create.

While the approaches taken by the chapters collected here vary, they share attentiveness to the material-ecological implications embedded in cultural performances. As difficult as it may be to talk about what nature *is*—particularly in light of the poststructuralist understanding of nature as discursively constructed—we must acknowledge and keep present the material reality of the more-than-human world if we are to find compelling ways to reframe our relationship to it. As Glen Love argues in his book *Practical Ecocriticism* (2003), “ecological thinking...requires us to take the nonhuman world as seriously as previous modes of criticism have taken the human realm of society and culture” (47). The authors collected here are practicing just such a mode of ecological thinking, defining ecology in its scientific, material sense, keeping focus on the insights theater and performance can

provide into our material embeddedness and enmeshment in and with the more-than-human environment that contains and sustains us.

As a result, this volume is the first to address intersections of performance and ecology in which *both* terms are understood in their material (rather than metaphorical) sense. Some previous contributions to this discourse have tended to 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 theater and its social context. No doubt, theoretical invention, playfulness, and polyphony are fundamental to discourse about performance. But the use of “ecological” for rhetorical purposes tends merely to sanitize the term while eschewing its political as well as its material-ecological implications.<sup>2</sup> Divorced from the material-ecological issues confounding contemporary society, “ecology” is reduced in this discourse to yet another metaphor. Una 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?” (*Theater* 27). By embracing the challenge of understanding ecology from a material standpoint, the chapters in this volume open up new fields of inquiry, making distinctions, connections, and deviations that plunge us into the ethical, intellectual, and theatrical storm of our present, potentially heartbreaking, moment in history.

#### FROM ECOCRITICISM TO ECODRAMATURGY

This collection builds on critical and theoretical intersections between literary ecocriticism and theater/performance studies that have been slowly but increasingly articulated over the past two decades. Ecocriticism, which concerns itself with the study of the relationship of literature to the natural world, has been a steadily growing field of inquiry within literary studies, spawning a foundational text (*The Ecocriticism Reader*, 1996), a professional organization (The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, or ASLE), and a number of articles and books.<sup>3</sup> While no single perspective or philosophy unites literary scholars who engage in ecocriticism, in general the ecocritical enterprise seems to take one of two forms: either analysis of the depiction or figuration of nature and the land in “canonical” works of fiction, or studies of nature writing. In its attentiveness to the ways in which literature of the past has figured or stereotyped nature (as resource, as romanticized backdrop to human activity, as wilderness, etc.) and to the ways recent nature writers have attempted to revise received notions of nature and the environment, ecocriticism can be seen to play a

role analogous to that of feminist criticism, which similarly seeks to reveal the ways in which literature of the past reinforced culturally constructed ideas of gender and to celebrate the strategies used by feminist writers to rewrite and revise those ideas.

The growth of interest in ecocriticism among literary scholars has only just begun to spark a similar interest in the subject among their colleagues in theater departments. This may be due to the fact that the ecocritical wave coincided chronologically with the explosive growth of performance studies as a central area of interest among theater scholars. Whatever the explanation, the fact remains that only a handful of theater scholars and historians to date have attempted similar studies of the relationship of theater to the environment. In the 1994 special issue of *Theater* Erika Munk was among the first to make an urgent plea to the profession to undertake such studies, noting that the intersection between performance and ecology was “a vast open field with histories to be rewritten, styles to rediscuss, contexts to re-perceive” (5). This is a plea that went largely unheeded until recently, when a smattering of articles and books appeared on the subject, many by the editors and contributors to this volume, which have helped lay the groundwork for a recognizable, growing discourse, grounded in a variety of methodologies, from theater historiography to performance studies.<sup>4</sup>

We see this discourse coalescing into an emerging practice of “ecodramaturgy,” a term coined by Theresa J. May, one of the editors of this volume.<sup>5</sup> Ecodramaturgy is theater and performance making that puts ecological reciprocity and community at the center of its theatrical and thematic intent. Ecodramaturgy carries with it new frames for thinking about theater and new approaches and challenges to making theater. For example, one of the challenges for playwrights has been the difficulty of telling effective stories about the earth’s environment. Ecological stories take place on a scale beyond the human, and so even when a playwright strives to foreground ecological issues on stage, the stories are hard to contain. The story of a tree may be some 800 years old; the story of an ecological catastrophe (such as Hurricane Katrina, or the toxic flood in Hungary) can be generations in the making; and the stories of glaciers, rivers, and species unfold over millennia. Ecodramaturgy, in conceiving of drama in relation to earth processes, stretches any notion of epic theater to the far reaches of human attention.

Another challenge is to flesh out the connections between resource use, economic policy, and impact on humans and land in an increasingly globalized context. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes that globalization “produces problems that manifest themselves in intensely local forms but have contexts that are anything but local” (6). In an increasingly globalized popular culture, the ways in which we are connected become at once more illusive and more apparent, depending on one’s focus. In the face of



what Appadurai calls “this chaotic, high-velocity, promiscuous movement of financial (especially speculative) capital” (4), theater might function as a site wherein the collective imagination is engaged (and strengthened) through collaborative and transnational lucid dreaming. Ecodramaturgy makes connections between theories of globalization and those that recognize the importance of local and regional identities as represented in and through theatrical production.<sup>6</sup> Both globalization and the resistance to it require a cognitive-imaginative leap beyond what has been required even in the era of empire. The days of bourgeois innocence are over, not only because we have at our fingertips sources of information about the far-reaching effects of our privilege, but also because those effects include the systematic degradation of planetary systems on which our very embodied existence depends: clean air and water, food security, climate stability, and species diversity.<sup>7</sup>

A third challenge involves the presentation and representation of nonhuman animals in performance. Cognitive psychologists note that a key characteristic that sets humans apart from most other animals is our ability to “read each other’s minds,” attributing thoughts and motives to other people based on the behavioral, verbal, and visual cues they send. Cognitive psychologists call this “theory of mind.” Some philosophers and literary theorists, such as Denis Dutton and Lisa Zunshine, speculate that the evolution of a human art instinct is closely linked to our evolved capacity to read minds: early hominids who could get into the minds of others and re-present their feelings, desires, urges, and internal conflicts (in the form of stories, pictures, songs, and performances) might have had an adaptive advantage in forming the social bonds and networks that allowed the human species to thrive in a variety of ecological niches.<sup>8</sup> Theater may thus satisfy a deep, inherited desire to investigate and inhabit other people’s minds. But nonhuman animal minds are closed to us, and while some animals (like dogs) have an uncanny ability to read and respond to subtle changes in our body language and mood, the majority of the evidence suggests that most animals do not possess the capacity to develop a theory of mind. An ecodramaturgical approach asks us to reconsider, in light of such theories, what the animal stands for or stands *in* for on stage: Why do we perform with animals, or put animals on stage, in the first place? How do we present an animal’s ineradicable “otherness” in ways that prompt viewers to reconsider their relationship or their responsibilities to it? How might the presentation and representation of animals challenge us to think about who we are, as animals who dominate the ecological niches we share with other species?

At the same time, modern biology demands that we recognize our fundamental *nonseparateness* from the more-than-human world: not only do we share the same DNA gene pool with every other life form on the planet, but we are also, despite our fantasies of human exceptionalism, always

already part of a collective of organisms. As Timothy Morton reminds us, “We have others—rather, others have us—literally under our skin” (277). An ecodramaturgical approach will ask how theater and performance might shock us into recognition of the inescapable interdependencies and shared contingencies between our species and the millions of micro- and macro-organisms with which we share both a gene pool and a planetary ecosystem.

Ecodramaturgical work pays close attention to two other challenges as well. One has already been alluded to: the ecocritical project of reconsidering historical theater texts and performances with attention to the anthropocentric/ecologically hostile attitudes and behaviors they normalize. Thus the work not only involves a consideration of, for example, how animals figure in contemporary performance, but also the history of animals as objects of mimesis and as “performers” themselves. Historical ecodramaturgy also aims at excavating the often-occluded environmental history against which many dramas unfold, and at revealing the dramaturgical structures that continue to foreground human conflict against a background of (rather than in reciprocity with) a natural environment. The second challenge centers on the current and historical material production of theater and performance, that is, on theater’s use of both inanimate and animate resources in the process of telling stories. Theatrical production is hard on the environment: as theater is currently practiced in the West today, most of the resources that go into making theater are wasted. Producing theater requires, among other things (1) the labor of human and nonhuman animals; (2) materials from a variety of sources, including once-living organisms (wood, cloth, etc.) and resource-intensive mining and manufacturing processes (metals, paints), many of which produce high levels of toxic waste at some point in the cycle; (3) energy-intensive transportation to bring labor and materials to the performance site; and (4) a range of energy inputs on site to power tools, lights, and HVAC systems.<sup>9</sup> Ecodramaturgy pays attention to the environmental impact of theatrical production, creating reciprocity between the story told and the means of production. For theater to matter at all, we must think of it as an ecological actor, and cease producing work that privileges the metaphoric over the material to such an extent that the plight of the material gets lost in the spectacle itself.

#### OVERVIEW

The chapters that follow advance key theoretical and practical concerns about how performance has or might function as part of the transvaluation of values necessary to forestall ecological collapse, such as: intersections and complications of landscape and body; performances that participate

in and/or reflect ecological debates; ecology, technology, and representation; the cultural (de)construction of “nature”; animal representation on /off stage; and ecoactivism/community-based performance. The chapters in this volume are grouped into sections, each of which represents a focused ecocritical conversation in theater studies. The final section presents an array of applications of ecodramaturgy to the specific areas of directing, theater pedagogy, and scenography. The chapters in each section speak to, and sometimes challenge, one another. We hope that these groupings will serve to invite the reader into an open-ended and lively debate.

Part one, “Ecocriticism and Dramatic Literature,” demonstrates what might be revealed when play texts are read through the lens of ecology, and when the environment and ecological forces are considered as part of theater’s history. Barry Witham brings the material impact of the droughts of the thirties into contact with social constructions of class, showing how poverty and disease were conceptualized as part of the “natural” order of capitalism, and how urban industrial pollution was thereby rendered acceptable or invisible. Drawing correlations between material-ecological degradation and many of the equally degraded social conditions of the thirties, Witham illuminates how the theater attempted to implicate both as part of industrial capitalism’s waste stream. In an analogous vein, Nelson Gray attends to the reciprocity between social and ecological events in the work of Canadian playwrights, arguing that Canadian theater artists have forged an ecocentric ethos by bringing issues of place and identity to the forefront in response to ecological challenges brought by colonial forces. In the final chapter of this section, Robert Baker-White reminds us that the animal too often becomes a stand-in for human suffering. He interrogates how modern American drama has employed the representation of animal life to help us see with new eyes particularities of isolation, marginalization, and coercive human social pressures. The ecocritical approach to dramatic literature taken by these contributors suggests that additional strands, of the nonhuman variety, may need to be added to a North American web of intertwined identity.

Animal bodies, even as spectacle, help us to remember that we too are embodied animals of the upright variety. Part two, “Animals and/in Performance,” begins with two chapters that are bound to raise debate between and among their readers. Una Chaudhuri’s exploration of cultural performances of the plight of the polar bear argues for the urgency of a “theater of species” that might prompt us to transform our habitation of the planetary ecosystem that we share with millions of other species. Baz Kershaw asks if humans and primates share a kind of performative commons that can be detected by one another regardless of the conditions of contact (in the “wild” or in the laboratory). Together the two chapters cut to

the questions of ethics that lie at the heart of critical animal studies. Derek Barton reminds us that the otherness of animal bodies has, from time to time, served to consolidate social and political boundaries. When the first live giraffe was gifted from Egypt to imperial Vienna in 1828, the giraffe not only became a zoological spectacle, but also gave rise to a performative culture of “giraffe-ness,” from hair styles to clothing to theater, that signified Austrian national ascendancy through the large-scale consumption of goods (emblazoned with a symbol of ascendancy in the form of the giraffe’s body), which imperial power and affluence enabled.

Part three, “Theorizing Ecoperformance,” contains three chapters that yoke the issue of ecology and performance to aesthetic, social, and political theories. In the first chapter of this section, Bruce McConachie ponders what it might mean to create ethically “ecological” performance, given that the most effective way to “save the planet,” from the perspective of the rest of its species, would be to eliminate humans altogether. Drawing upon evolutionary theory, cognitive science, and the aesthetic theory of John Dewey, McConachie argues that performance, because it has the potential to “rearrange the materiality of our minds,” can also exert pressure on, and possibly transform, our conception of and attitude toward ecological reality. Katie Gough investigates how performance maintains a sense of place even when ecological disaster—in this case a devastating volcanic eruption on the island of Montserrat in the lower Antilles of the Caribbean archipelago—erases all recognizable markers of place. Gough uses the case study of Montserrat to theorize how performance can make explicit the ways in which nature constitutes an active agent of cultural memory. In the section’s final chapter, Arden Thomas explores Eeo Stubblefield’s “still dances” with Anna Halprin and reads them through a lens informed by Lacanian and ecofeminist theory, arguing that these performances embody the claim that a felt, mutually improvisational, *still* connection to others and to nature can further social and environmental change.

Activism’s place in performance studies is well established, yet few have analyzed such practice as embodied performance. In part four, “Ecoactivism and Performance,” Sara Freeman’s chapter aims to reanimate a moment in recent British theater history by repositioning British alternative companies (such as Gay Sweatshop, Women’s Theatre Group, and Joint Stock) in relation to the antinuclear movement’s aims of ecological and social justice in Thatcher’s Britain. In the following two chapters, Sarah Standing and Meg O’Shea look at the centrality of the body in environmental activism. Standing investigates the way in which actions by ecoactivist groups such as Earth First! embody both theater and performance in their efforts to shape and change political and social perceptions about environmental issues, while O’Shea

sees the work of the Otesha Project, which uses sustainable modes of transportation to bring a play about sustainability to diverse audiences, as a model providing insights into how behavior change for long-term sustainability can be encouraged and facilitated in dynamic communities. Each of these contributors argues for the central importance of a congruity between embodied practices and activist goals in the effectiveness of activist performance.

A similar congruity in the material practice of theater is necessary if we are to begin to create a truly “green” theater for the future, and the final section of this volume provides space for case studies from artists and practitioners who have developed ecologically mindful theater practices. Part five, “Case Studies in Green Theater,” presents several case studies that demonstrate how ecological sensibilities are currently being applied in theater practice. Downing Cless describes methods for directing plays in ways that foreground and make visible the occluded ecological stories in canonical works. Working from the premise that there are new stories to tell about the environment in new ways, Anne Justine D’Zmura presents a methodology for creating devised work on local ecological issues that has the potential to carve out life-changing and environmentally minded experiences for artistic collaborators and for members of the larger community they serve. Cornelia Hoogland theorizes how sound might reorient our experience and understanding of nature, and provide young audience members with an antidote to their fear of the natural world by reorienting their attention through recorded aural narrative. Justin Miller offers a case study on “best practices” in green theater that aims to guide others in a method of creating theater that both leaves a lasting impression and yet has a minimal impact on the environment. And in the last chapter of this section, Ian Garrett of the Center for Sustainable Practice in the Arts lays out the current state of green scenographic practice and resources.

What was a fringe conversation in theater studies only 15 years ago has burgeoned into a complex, nuanced, diverse, and multivoiced praxis. Like other movements that have spawned both artistic practice and theoretical dialogues, the work of both theorist and practitioner is interconnected, reciprocal, and mutually provocative. In a reflective epilogue, “Thinking Forward...” Wallace Heim responds to the chapters in this volume and suggests what may be next for ecocriticism in theater and performance studies. The field of ecocritical scholarship and ecodramaturgical practice, represented by the chapters collected here, is opening up questions that provoke not only a new understanding about what theater and performance might do, but also new questions about how the human imagination is a crucial aspect of our ecological well-being and that of the planet and its many communities.

## NOTES

1. “More-than-human” is a phrase coined by David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* and is widely used in literary ecocriticism.
2. Bonnie Marranca’s *Ecologies of Theater*, for example, typifies this approach.
3. A Worldcat subject search on the keywords “Ecology and Literature” returns over 500 entries; a search on the keyword “Ecocriticism” returns over 150. Recent contributions to the field include those works by Armbruster and Wallace, Branch, Buell, Coupe, Garrard, Glotfelty and Fromm, Ingram, Love, McKibben, Meeker, Moore and Phillips that are listed in the bibliography.
4. A representative (but not comprehensive) list would include the following from the bibliography: Gray and Rabillard; Giannachi and Stewart; Szerszynski, Heim, and Waterton; Arons; Cless; May; Rosenthal; Scott; Spiegel and Yassi; and several of the articles included in Fuchs and Chaudhuri.
5. The term “ecodramaturgy” originally appeared in May, “Kneading Marie Clements’ *Burning Vision*.”
6. Cf. Heise, pp. 12–13.
7. Cf. May, “Kneading Marie Clements’ *Burning Vision*,” “Beyond Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism in Theatre Studies,” and “Consequences unforeseen . . . in *Raisin in the Sun* and *Caroline, or Change*.”
8. Dutton hypothesizes, for example: “Stories are intrinsically about how the minds of real or fictional characters attempt to surmount problems, which means stories not only take their audiences into fictional settings but also take them into the inner lives of imaginary people. Just as there would have been a major adaptive advantage in learning stories to deal with the threats and opportunities of the external physical world, so for an intensely social species such as *Homo sapiens* there was an advantage in the ancestral environment in honing an ability to navigate in the endlessly complex mental worlds people shared with their hunter-gatherer compatriots” (p. 118). Zunshine puts forward a related hypothesis in *Why We Read Fiction*, pp. 3–26. For competing theories on the evolution of art and fiction among humans, see Boyd, Carroll, and Coe. See also Arons, “Beyond the Nature/Culture Divide.”
9. See Fried and May, *Greening Up Our Houses*. In 1991 Theatre in the Wild of Seattle convened a conference entitled “Theatre in an Ecological Age,” which took up the complex challenges of what is currently called sustainable theatre practice, or “green theatre.” Until recently, *Greening Up Our Houses* has been the only comprehensive guide to green theatre practice. The movement has grown rapidly in recent years. See The Center for Sustainable Practice in the Arts, [www.sustainablepractice.org](http://www.sustainablepractice.org).

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