Enacting Nature

Ecocritical Perspectives on Indigenous Performance

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A Chorus of Ecological Voices

Enacting Nature in Contemporary Indigenous Performance

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Ecological strategies, sustainable solutions for environmental change, and their effective communication across various cultural boundaries are among the primary challenges of the twenty-first century, joining human beings of diverse origins in a planetary community. For the development of policies to counter climate change, and to protect and share resources globally, it is crucial to establish and exchange, across regional differences and national boundaries, interculturally sensitive understandings of specific places—including the spatial, temporal, physical, social, and cultural coordinates that shape them. In the humanities, a reading practice has emerged over the past few decades that highlights the close connections between nature and culture, and which addresses some of these questions. Ecocriticism, famously defined by Cheryll Glotfelty as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii), has developed into a popular and widespread methodology (cf. Heise, Garrard, Goodbody and Rigby). Its manifestations include a wide spectrum of critical stances and practices, from activism to systems theory, and from thematic analyses of nature writing (Payne) and "the environmental imagination" (Buell *The Environmental Imagination* and *The Future of Environmental Criticism*) to the dehumanized, ecocentric revisions of "deep ecology" (Naess, Sessions) and material feminism (Alaimo).

At the intersections between Indigenous Studies and ecocriticism, however, critics have only recently begun to explore the ethnically and/or culturally specific implications of nature, environment, and the land. In the field of postcolonial studies, Cara Cilano and Elizabeth DeLoughrey have inquired into "global knowledges" from an ecocritical point of view, and Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin combine, in their volume *Postcolonial Ecocriticism,* both these methodologies in order "to contest [and] to provide viable alternatives to western ideologies of development" (27). The project

to develop new parameters of thinking about ecological imperialism, environmental racism, and the ecological implications of cultural diversity and mobility was also continued by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley in *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment.* While a small number of Indigenous texts play a role in these studies, the coordinates for a fruitful critical investment in representations of nature are still being mapped. Common stereotypes, such as the wilderness topos, the "ecological Indian," or the keeper of a planetary spirituality, have proven tenacious and difficult to overcome. In North America, for instance, the predominant image of Indigenous people has been linked to Romantic discourses of nature: Indigenous people are presented as noble custodians of their environment; instinctively harmonious with their environment, yet unable to meet the challenges of technology and civilization. "Time and again," Shepard Krech writes in a seminal study in 1999, "the dominant image is of the Indian in nature who understands the systemic consequences of his actions, feels deep sympathy with all living forms, and takes steps to conserve […] the earth's harmonies" (21). Along with these simplifying stereotypes, the American continent was inaccurately described as an Edenic "wilderness" by European settlers. This situation was quite similar in Australia and New Zealand: the depiction of the "new" territory's population as nature's "children" implied static and primitive cultures, fitting perfectly into the patronizing paradigms that justified colonization.[1] The images of the eco-Indian or eco-Aboriginal—effectively revived toward the end of the twentieth century—have been powerful instruments of dispossession and displacement.

Ecocriticism thus requires not only historically specific and culturally sensitive investigations of the "connections between social injustices and environmental degradation" (Adamson 20), but also a critical awareness of the underlying discourses, power structures, and ideologies in representing these injustices. Ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, critical race theory, and Indigenous studies provide helpful frameworks for what Joni Adamson projects as "a more inclusive environmentalism and a more multicultural ecocriticism" (xix). Furthermore, Franca Bellarsi, in "Ecocriticism, or Beyond Eurocentric and Anthropocentric Anti-Humanism," calls not only for redefinitions of what classifies as "nature writing" but also for the development of "an ecocritical aesthetics that would acknowledge biodiversity and the dynamically interrelated processes of nature, as well as recognize the limitations of human

[1] For more detail about the conflicts between settlers and Aborigines in Australia, the reader could turn to Russel Ward's *Concise History of Australia* (in particular to the chapter entitled "New Settlements and New Pastures," 86-138). For an account of how settlers viewed Māori, the reader can consult Keith Sinclair's *A History of New Zealand* ("Australian Colony" 29-50, and "Brave New World," 51-70).

language when it comes to expressing the non-human realm" (164). In spite of the fast expanding field of ecocritical practice, therefore, much remains to be done at the theoretical sites of discussion.

In terms of genre, ecocritical practice has been predominantly concerned with fictional and non-fictional prose texts. Relatively few approaches have been taken toward the analysis of drama and theatre from an ecocritical perspective. Among those, one can list Gabriel Egan's monograph on *Green Shakespeare*, Baz Kershaw's *Theatre Ecology. Envronments and Performance Events*, Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May's edited *Readings in Performance and Ecology*, a supplement of the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (Richmond), a special section of *Theatre Topics* on "Performance and Ecology" (Arons), a special issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* entitled *Theatre in an Age of Eco-Crisis* (Nelson Gray and Sheila Rabillard), as well as a few scattered articles. However, no systematic approach has yet been undertaken to explore the interconnections between ecocritical methodologies and Indigenous theatre, drama and performance.[2] This volume hopes to serve as a first comparative exploration of these combined fields; bringing together analyses of Indigenous plays from North America, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. Together, the contributions that have been collected here seek to explore the relationship between Indigenous drama and the "environment" in the widest sense—as place, land, nature, wilderness, social space, "thirdspace" (in both Soja's or Bhabha's senses[3]), and "alterNative" space. Our notion of ecocriticism is not limited to environmentalism as a form of creative advocacy, but it acknowledges, in its basic assumption, Robert M. Nelson's insight that "cultural identities, like individual identities, emerge not from class struggle but rather from the land" (7). This anthology does not purport to offer a definitive theoretical model through which ecological Indigenous performance must be examined. Rather, our approach implies an exploration of the multi-faceted languages of ecology on the contemporary Indigenous stage.

The contributors to this anthology make abundantly clear that the link between Native people and their environment, while certainly evading Euro-centric values of materialistic exploitation, does not imply a kind

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2 The October 2013 issue of *Theatre Journal*, edited by Ric Knowles, is devoted to "Interspecies Performance." While this thematic perspective is not directly related to ecocritcism in performance, it certainly prolongs debates initiated by earlier work on ecology in theatre and drama (Knowles).

3 Next to Bhabha's famous post-colonial denotation of the "third space" that results from hybridity, in which negotiations of new stances become possible, Soja defines "Thirdspace as an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectices of spatiality-historicality-sociality" (57).

of easily homogenized and unproblematic harmony. Viewed together, the essays published here debunk the myth of the "Ecological Indian," which Greg Garrard describes as follows: "Since the sixteenth century at least, 'primitive' people have been represented as dwelling in harmony with nature, sustaining one of the most widespread and seductive myths of the non-European 'Other'" (Garrard 129). By contrast, the essays assembled in this collection examine in detail how the Indigenous "Other" relates to specific environments in various parts of the globe, focusing on different Aboriginal nations and tribes. At the outset, one limitation must be acknowledged: this comparative perspective focuses on Indigenous works written mostly in English or (in one case) in French, i.e. languages of the colonizer. Nonetheless, in many of the works analyzed, linguistic and cultural palimpsests of oppressed Indigenous cultures can be detected, either in unglossed scenes in the Native tongue or in the use of Aboriginal aesthetic devices. Thus, the corpus of works dealt with here is often hybrid, an in-between-ness that enables the authors to forge unique ecological discourses. The approach adopted in this volume seeks to open up perspectives which will have to be extended to the works of artists working in non-Western languages.

The various contributions to this book, whether focusing on North America or Oceania, offer insights into diverse performance practices, including drama, dance, and film. Most of the essays alternate between issues of ecojustice and of what could be termed ecospirituality. For our purposes, ecojustice is understood as the intersection between ecocritical discourse and "political, ethical and religious overtones" (Clark 120). By analogy, we construe ecospirituality as that aspect of ecocriticism dealing with the spiritual bond between Indigenous people and the Earth.[4] In their exploration of these notions, the essays collected here survey a large corpus of work by such established Indigenous artists as Tomson Highway, Drew Hayden Taylor, Marie Clements, Yvette Nolan, Kevin Loring, Wesley Enoch, Hone Kouka, Briar Grace-Smith and Witi Ihimaera, while shedding light on emerging figures as well.

The collection's opening essay, Birgit Däwes's "Stages of Resilience: Heteroholistic Environments in Plays by Marie Clements and Yvette Nolan," mirrors the agenda of most of the essays gathered in the volume. Unwilling to "hug trees," Däwes develops a model she calls heteroholistic cultural ecology. Her concept is derived from Hubert Zapf's notion of "cultural ecology," which allows the critic to see literature "as a specifically powerful form of symbolically staging and

[4] The double focus of this anthology on the notions of ecojustice and ecospirituality owes much to productive discussions about ecocitrical theories with Franca Bellarsi, to whom the editors extend their thanks.

exploring the interrelationship between cultural and natural processes and energies" (Zapf 49). It also echoes Cherokee scholar Billy J. Stratton's "heteroholism," which Däwes praises for its acknowledgment of "the importance of land and local landscape to Indigenous cultures without denying the dynamic, in-progress, and unstable characteristics of these cultures" (28). Such a perspective enables Däwes to examine how the stereotypical notion of the "Eco-Indian" is debunked in experimental plays by Marie Clements (*The Edward Curtis Project*) and Yvette Nolan (*The Unplugging*). Däwes's contribution is followed by a series of articles focusing on North American material. Ric Knowles's "Mounds, Earthworks, Side Show Freaks and Circus Injuns" goes back to the roots of Indigenous performance in North America. Knowles argues that ancient Indigenous mounds and earthworks can be regarded as literal performances expressing a special relationship with Native ecospheres. Knowles further describes his involvement as a dramaturge in an ongoing theatre project devised with LeAnne Howe and Monique Mojica, entitled *Side Show Freaks and Circus Injuns*. The latter attempts to provide a contemporary equivalent to ancient mounds performances. In the next essay, Jaye T. Darby focuses on *Out of Dust*, a little-known play by an artist of Cherokee heritage, Lynn Riggs, first produced in 1949. While this work focuses on European settlers, it nonetheless evokes issues connected with Native ecology: because they view the land as a purely materialistic entity devoid of any spiritual dimension, these European characters ultimately wreak only havoc. Moving to the contemporary period, Maryann Henck examines how Drew Hayden Taylor's *The Berlin Blues* enlists the use of Native humor in order to oppose the tendency, only too evident in today's globalized world, to ghettoize Native culture through ecotourism. The play satirizes a European attempt to commodify Ojibway culture through a theme park display. In contrast to this form of cultural imperialism, Taylor's play proposes an alternative experiment. The latter, while taking into account the relationship with the Native environment, enables people from different cultures to engage in a fruitful dialogue. In her essay, Yvette Nolan concentrates on *Chasing Honey*, a 2007 play by Laura Shamas, a member of the Chickasaw nation. This powerful work focuses on the ancient practice of beekeeping as a marker of Native identity. The advent of Colony Collapse Disorder, as bees unexpectedly leave their hive, is likened to the decay of Native identity. It suggests a loss of interconnectedness with the natural world. In her contribution, Nicholle Dragone concentrates on *Re-Creation Story*, a 2008 play by Onondaga playwright Eric Gansworth. This work dramatizes the mythology of Haudenosaunee creation through a blend of Native storytelling and Western metatheatre. Indeed, the narrator of the play is invited to deliver a lecture about Haudenosaunee creation in a college-like setting. Only

when he allows the audience to correct his narrative does Gansworth become a true Haudenosaunee storyteller. Thus, the play develops a Native ecology balancing the human and the non-human through a perpetual process of re-creation. In the concluding essay of the section on North American Indigenous drama, Ginny Ratsoy shows how Kevin Loring's first play, *Where the Blood Mixes* (2009), combines issues of ecospirituality and ecojustice. In this work, Loring foregrounds traditional N'lakap'mux (Salish Natives from interior British Columbia) concepts of interconnectedness of being and place. This spiritual environment can heal the wounds inflicted by the residential school system, which took generations of Native children away from their cultural roots. Not only is land of central importance in this work, but so are the Thompson and Fraser rivers, the habitat of sturgeons, the guardians of Native spirituality. The human and the non-human thus merge into a single web of being.

The second part of this volume, which is devoted to performance in Oceania, equally tackles issues of ecospirituality and ecojustice. Maryrose Casey's essay, "Serving the Living Land: Place and Belonging in Australian Aboriginal Dramas," analyzes the spiritual role of the land in works by contemporary artists Wesley Enoch and David Milroy. Casey successively examines the role of birthing trees in Enoch's *The Story of the Miracles at Cookie's Table*, the Aboriginal recontextualization of Euripidean models in Enoch's *Black Medea*, as well as the allegorical role of the vegetable garden in Milroy's *Windmill Baby*. While Casey focuses on text-based drama, Rachael Swain illustrates performance practice from remote Australia, in particular from the North-West. In "Dance, History and Country—An Uneasy Ecology in Australia," Swain develops an ecocritical performance mode which invites spectators to accept an Indigenous perception of "country," the Aboriginal English word meant to refer to the Australian outback. Drawing on her experience as a theatre practitioner, she carefully details how stories of the Dreaming are enacted in the performance, *Fire, Fire, Burning Bright*, devised by the Neminuwarlin Performance group (2002). She also focuses on *Crying Baby* (2000), by Marrugeku, an "intercultural company creating contemporary dance theatre in remote Indigenous communities" (172). She traces how Indigenous dance is used in this performance to tell the "Orphan dreaming" of an Aboriginal family forcibly removed from its "country" (172). In her essay, Diana Looser offers the first English-language examination of francophone Kanak playwright Pierre Gope's *La Parenthèse*. Gope, Looser argues, belongs to the growing number of Indigenous Pacific artists who have recently articulated ecological debates in the wake of colonization and globalization. In *La Parenthèse*, Gope uses the garden archetype to articulate a post-pastoral vision that reflects political issues relevant to contemporary New Caledonia. In this

garden, the Gaiac tree symbolizes ancestral wisdom while Hortensia represents settler-colonial groups. The play asserts the profound link with the natural world characterizing Kanak culture. A cross-cultural vision of harmony is eventually established between different plants symbolizing ethnic groups. By way of conclusion, Looser underlines the originality of Gope's ecodramaturgy, which "mobilizes the natural environment to provide a more lucid view of the operation of human institutions" (197). She points out the critical role of the "mediation of the artist as a gardener" (197). In their essay, "Unfolding the Cloth: Patterns of Landscape and Identity in The Conch's *Masi*," Lisa Warrington and David O'Donnell analyze work devised by a Pacific theatre company operating from New Zealand. The Conch was founded by Nina Nawalowalo, a New Zealander of Fijian and English extraction. As the authors indicate, "*Masi* takes an ecological stance, embracing the inter-connectedness of art, land, identity, culture, politics, environment and spirituality" (199). As a performance piece, *Masi* blends Fijian and Western theatrical devices, including photographic illusion. Cast as an observer in the piece, Nina Nawalowalo introduces Fijian elements through her folding and unfolding of *masi* cloth. As the authors of the essay indicate, "*masi* cloth symbolizes the land and the natural world […] the makers of *masi* cloth are predominantly female" (204). For Nawalowalo, *masi* cloth brings to mind the homeland as well as the soul of Fijian culture. It evokes the Polynesian notion of *va*, the space of "betweenness" that does not separate but rather connects (202). Furthermore, *Masi* develops a trickster-like relationship with its audiences, one that recalls Pacific satiric clowning traditions. In her contribution, Hilary Halba examines how the Māori concepts of "mauri (life-force) and tapu (restriction or protective prohibition, influence of ancestral entities)" (220) are articulated in the ecosystems of various Māori works: *Woman Far Walking* (a play by Witi Ihimaera), *When Sun and Moon Collide* (a play by Briar Grace-Smith) as well as in *The Strength of Water*, a film written by Briar Grace-Smith. In the latter work, the negative effects of the tapu of a particular place are alleviated by water. As Halba puts it, "a tapu is cleansed through dialogue between humans and the natural world" (231).

As a conclusion to the intercontinental journeys charted in the previous essays, Maufort's "Performing the Spirit of the Earth: Multi-faceted Aesthetics of Ecology in Contemporary Indigenous Drama" provides a comparative analysis of aesthetic devices in plays from North America and Oceania, focusing on works by Tomson Highway, Andrea James, and Hone Kouka. In doing so, it brings together the different regional ecosystems examined in this anthology. Echoing Maryann Henck's discussion of Drew Hayden Taylor's *The Berlin Blues* and Diana Looser's examination of *La Parenthèse* in the context of a globalized

age, Maufort investigates how Aboriginal playwrights develop unique aesthetics enabling them to express their ecological vision in ways that evade the homogenizing gaze of Western globalization.

All in all, the essays assembled in this volume explore the multiple ways in which Indigenous playwrights from continents separated by the Pacific Ocean have negotiated their ecological interconnectedness with the natural world, whether in the shape of the land, rivers, animals, or plants. As a genre, Indigenous theatre seems particularly apt to spatially configure the relationships between humans and their environments: from the highly experimental approach to uranium mining in Marie Clements's *Burning Vision* to the ritual preparation of a dancing circle in James Luna's *Emendatio,* from the planetary, cosmopolitan vision of Tomson Highway's *Rose* to the metaphorical landscapes of Diane Glancy's plays, and from Wesley Enoch's dramatizations of Australian Aboriginal Dreamings to Hone Kouka's and Briar Grace-Smith's celebrations of the spiritual bond between Maori people and the land, the spectrum of "staging nature" is as wide as it is powerful. In dealing with ecospirituality or ecojustice concerns, the various performance practices discussed in this volume constitute, in their very diversity, a chorus of ecological voices. The songs of this chorus do not celebrate a facile harmony with nature but allow environmental challenges to be heard.

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