

Acknowledging nature's agency:  
the ecocentric tradition in English-Canadian drama

by

Nelson Gray

B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1977

M.F.A., University of British Columbia, 1997

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in the Department of Theatre

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## **Supervisory Committee**

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## Abstract

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While there have been numerous critical studies of English-Canadian drama, none to date has investigated portrayals of the natural world from an ecocritical perspective, paying particular attention to plays that make the relationship between human characters and the more-than-human physical world a significant part of the action. Through a series of close readings, this study considers the texts of such plays—those written in this part of the world from 1606 to 2011—with respect to what they reveal about attitudes to the natural world. After showing how depictions of nature in plays from 1606 to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were inflected by Eurocentric attitudes and colonizing agendas, I go on to draw attention to a series of dramatic works that acknowledge the agency of the more-than-human physical world as an *oikos* or dwelling place that is fundamental to human identity. By showing the rise and development of this body of work from the 1920s to 2011, I trace the genealogy of what I characterize as an ecocentric tradition in English-Canadian drama—plays in which elements of the natural world function, not as scenic backdrops or as a pool of metaphors for exclusively human concerns, but as forces in their own right that shape and determine human actions and are, in many cases, affected by them.

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## **Dedication**

If I dedicate this dissertation to this mysterious blue-green planet that we inhabit, it is because the earthly forces that are continually forming in co-existence with us are ultimately the precondition for all the ideas in these pages and for all of the ideas in all the dissertations that have been written, that are being written and that will ever be written until the end of all our days.

## Introduction

A properly ecological approach . . . is one that would take, as its point of departure, the whole organism-in-its-environment.

Tim Ingold<sup>1</sup>

Portraying our human relationship to the more-than-human physical world is hardly a new phenomenon in the history of English-Canadian drama, yet there has, until now, been no scholarly study that considers such portrayals from an ecocritical perspective. Among the many ways that one might undertake such a study, I have chosen with this dissertation to focus on scripts that acknowledge, to varying degrees and via various means, the agency of the nonhuman physical world. Such dramatic texts, I contend, comprise an ecocentric tradition in English-Canadian drama, one that has gone unnoticed in scholarly studies and which—given the relevance of ecological concerns in our age—warrants some critical attention. My purpose in this study, then, is to demonstrate the existence and import of this ecocentric tradition, charting its development in dramatic texts from 1606 to 2010.

The primary focus of this study will be on these plays as scripts rather than on the material aspects of theatrical production. This is by no means because the latter has no bearing on how our relationship to nature has been portrayed in this country. To be sure, a whole other study lies waiting to be undertaken on this topic, particularly with respect to site-specific performances produced in outdoor locations. My intention here, however, is to show that there is enough in the texts themselves to begin tracing the

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<sup>1</sup> *Perception of the Environment* 13.

genealogy of this ecocentric tradition. Thus, while most of the scripts under consideration in this study have been staged—in some cases, numerous times and in a range of venues—I will, except for a very few instances, limit my analysis to the ways in which an ecocentric worldview comes to the fore in the published versions of these dramatic works.

My interest in these ecocentric plays initially arose from my own writing and directing for the stage. In the early 1990s, after writing and directing plays and interdisciplinary performances on a wide range of subjects, I began to wonder about the relationship between contemporary theatre and the increasingly alarming ecological challenges of our era. While I could see plenty of evidence for the depiction of human characters and actions in exclusively social and urban settings, I was hard pressed at the time to find productions that included nonhuman nature or, more particularly, that recognized the ways in which our human lives interacted with the circumambient physical world. Would it be possible, I wondered, to create theatre that would make our human relationship with the nonhuman environment a significant part of the action and that would enact social, psychological and political concerns vis-à-vis this relationship? If so, what would such plays look like and how would they be structured?

My artistic response to such questions was to create and produce—in collaboration with artist and philosopher Beth Carruthers, composer/musical director DB Boyko and urban environmentalist Val Schafer—a community-based initiative called the Songbird Project. This cross-disciplinary project, located in Vancouver, BC, brought together artists, scientists and activists in forums and collaborative exchanges to raise awareness about our human connection with and dependence on the natural environment by

drawing attention to the existence and plight of songbirds in the city. As part of my contributions to this broadly based project, I wrote the script for and directed *The Songbird Oratorio* (produced May 2001 at the Dr. Sun Yat Sen Classical Chinese Gardens)—a performance in which songs by five composers provided counterpoint to a story about a scientist who believes he has found a way to understand the language of the birds.<sup>2</sup>

After my work on the Songbird Project, however, I began to entertain another series of questions, and it was these that led me to undertake the research for this dissertation. As a theatre historian, I wanted to know about Canadian plays in other eras that had acknowledged our relationship with the more-than-human physical world. My goal was to discover what attitudes these plays conveyed toward nonhuman nature and to see if such attitudes might have changed over time. In particular, given what had originally piqued my interest in the relationship between theatre and ecology, I wanted to explore whether these works might have something to teach us about our relatedness to, and responsibility for, the biosphere in which we dwell.

Fortunately, ecocriticism, a critical methodology designed to engage with such questions, was already being formulated by a number of literary scholars, many of whom had concerns similar to my own. As Cheryll Glotfelty explains in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996)<sup>3</sup>, ecologically informed criticism or ecocriticism,<sup>4</sup> a

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of *The Songbird Oratorio*, see Gray (2006). More information on the Songbird Project can be found at [songbirdproject.org](http://songbirdproject.org).

<sup>3</sup> *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996) has been widely recognized as a groundbreaking compilation of ecocritical writings, and one of the first of its kind. See, for instance, Buell (11) and Garrard (3).

field of enquiry with roots in the 1970s, had begun to emerge in a concerted manner in the early 1990s. The appearance of specialized university courses and programs, the formation, in 1992, of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE), and the establishment, a year later, of the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*—all of this, according to Glotfelty, provided ample evidence that, by 1993, “ecological literary study had emerged as a recognizable critical school” (xviii).

In addition to detailing the origins of this new critical approach, Glotfelty’s introduction also offered a definition. “Simply put,” she writes, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” a relationship, she contends, that is characterized by reciprocity (xviii):

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. (xix)

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<sup>4</sup> The term “ecocriticism” is the one most often employed by literary scholars today, although there are others—Laurence Buell, for instance—who prefer to refer to the field as “environmental criticism” (Buell viii).

Glotfelty's rather sweeping definition of the field wisely left room for ecocritical scholars to consider a wide range of literature in a variety of ways. Her remarks allowed for the examination of environmental themes and representations of nature in all kinds of texts and for diverse interpretations of such writings based on ecologically informed thinking.

Since Glotfelty's formulations in 1996, ecocriticism, fueled in part by the mounting ecological pressures of our age, has become a well-established field of scholarly enquiry. To date there have been several book-length studies of ecocriticism as a critical methodology<sup>5</sup> and several that consider ecocritical ideas in light of environmental justice and postcolonial literature.<sup>6</sup> In addition to *ISLE*, literary journals focusing on ecocriticism now include *The Goose*, an online journal from ALEC, the Association of Literature and the Environment in Canada, and *Green Letters*, an ASLE UK publication. As Laurence Buell observed in 2005, one sign that ecocriticism is being widely embraced by academics is "the growth within the last decade of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) from a localized North American ferment into a thousand-member organization with chapters worldwide from the UK to Japan and Korea to Australia [and] New Zealand" (1). Moreover, as both Buell and Greg Garrard have noted, the field of ecocriticism, in addition to being increasingly well established, has become a diverse mode of inquiry, with distinct and often conflicting points of view (Garrard 16-32, Buell 97-127). Buell notes, for instance, the specific approaches taken by "deep ecologists," eco-feminists, and those concerned with

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Garrard (2004), Buell (2005), Hunt (2010), Clark (2011), Goodbody (2011).

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Bewell (1999), Anker (2001), Hutchings (2009), Huggan and Tiffin (2010), Wright (2010), Carrigan (2011), DeLoughrey (2011), LeMenager (2011).

environmental justice, and he makes reference as well to “the discourses of animal and other nonhuman rights and a range of discourses of local-global interaction from liberal green reform to anticapitalist critiques of consumerism” (126).

Yet while ecocriticism has become an increasingly popular and multi-faceted approach to studies of fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction, ecocritical approaches to drama and theatre have been relatively slow to materialize. Initially one might not have expected this to be the case. Wallace Heim, for instance, in “Performance and Ecology: A Reader’s Guide” cites an early instance of ecocriticism—J. W. Meeker’s *The Comedy of Survival: In Search of an Environmental Ethics* (1980)—which considers dramatic form from an ecological perspective (405). In the same article, Heim also pays particular attention to another example of ecocriticism and drama: the 1994 issue of *Theater* (25:1), edited by Una Chaudhuri, which features several articles exploring links between ecology and theatre, including the Canadian scholar Sheila Rabillard’s ecofeminist reading of Carol Churchill’s *Fen* (62-71). In her introduction to this issue of *Theater*, Erika Munk makes a far-reaching assertion. “Critics and scholars,” she writes, “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” (“A Beginning and an End” 5). In the same issue, Una Chaudhuri echoes Munk’s enthusiasms. “Ecological victory,” she declares, “will require a transvaluation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present. And in this the arts and humanities—including the theater—must play a role” (24). Over a decade later, however, the ecocritic and director Theresa J. May, alluding to both Munk’s and Chaudhuri’s calls to action, laments the relative scarcity of both ecologically informed

drama and ecocritical discourse on theatre. “In the decade since Munk and guest editor Una Chaudhuri laid the gauntlet down,” she writes, “response has been thin” (“Greening” 1).

In 2005, May’s assessment with respect to ecocritical studies of theatre was accurate. At the time, there had been only a handful of book-length scholarly publications incorporating what might be considered ecocritical approaches to plays and theatre productions. Elinor Fuchs’s *The Death of Character* (1996) was one of these. According to Fuchs, much of postmodernist theatre could be characterized as a movement away from the portrayal of character to the presentation of what she called “landscapes,” natural/cultural fields of relationships in which human characters are merely one among many elements.<sup>7</sup> Una Chaudhuri followed with *Staging Place* (1997), a study that draws attention to place and geography in the development of modern and postmodern theatre. Then, in 2002, Chaudhuri and Fuchs teamed up to co-edit *Land/scape Theatre*, a compilation of early ecocritical readings of European and American plays and productions. In England, two companion publications, *Nature Performed* (2003) and *Performing Nature* (2005), emerged from the lively interactions between scholars, artists and activists that had taken place in July, 2000, at *Between Nature*, an international conference on ecology and performance at the University of Lancaster.<sup>8</sup> The first of these books, *Nature Performed*, is a collection of articles that views performance vis-à-vis the natural world from a largely sociological perspective,

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<sup>7</sup> “There are, of course,” Fuchs writes, “human figures on these natural/conceptual landscapes, but the landscape itself is the central object of contemplation. The result could be seen as a new kind of pastoral, one appropriate to an ecological age when the human figure is no longer the measure of all things” (12).

<sup>8</sup> The conference proceedings also gave rise to a website on ecology and performance: The Ashden Directory ([www.ashdendirectory.org.uk/default.asp](http://www.ashdendirectory.org.uk/default.asp)).

while the second is a series of essays exploring recent ecologically related initiatives in theatre, performance and film. Such book-length publications, however, were as yet anomalies in the world of theatre criticism, and with only these studies and articles by May (“Greening” 2005) and Downing Cless (“Eco-Theatre” 1996), scholars were only beginning to explore “the vast, open field” that Munk had described in 1994.

Since May’s 2005 assessment of the field, additional ecocritical readings of English drama and theatre have emerged in both the England and the United States. In England, Baz Kershaw’s *Theatre Ecology* (2007) critiques traditional dramatic forms as a dangerous “addiction” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As an antidote, Kershaw considers examples of site-specific work and alternative performance practices that, for him, are a more suitable response to what he views as an era of impending ecological collapse. The United States, meanwhile, has witnessed ecocritical studies by a number of theatre scholars. Una Chaudhuri has continued to be a leader in the field, providing ecologically informed readings of American theatre, based, more recently, on her interest in the burgeoning field of animal studies.<sup>9</sup> Theresa May, through her articles<sup>10</sup> and her symposium/festival *Earth Matters on Stage*,<sup>11</sup> has been a major catalyst for ecocritical approaches to theatre and for the development of eco-drama. Since the section devoted to ecology and theatre in the 1994 edition of *Theater*, two related sections have appeared in American scholarly publications: the first, in 2006, in volume 20, issue 2 of *The*

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<sup>9</sup> See Chaudhuri (2006, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> See May, Theresa J. (2005, 2006, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Co-founded by Theresa J. May and Larry K. Fried, *Earth Matters on Stage* 2004 took place, in 2004, at Humboldt State University and, in 2009, at the University of Oregon in Eugene. See [www.uoregon.edu/~ecodrama](http://www.uoregon.edu/~ecodrama).

*Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, edited by Joy Richmond; the second in the September 2007 issue of *Theater*, edited by Wendy Arons. In 2010 Downing Cless published *Ecology and Environment in European Drama*, a book that offers ecocritical readings of canonical works from the Western theatre tradition, and—even more recently—two ecocritical studies of Shakespeare have been published in the United States: Lynn Bruckner and Daniel Brayton’s *Ecocritical Shakespeare* (2011) and Simon Estok’s *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia* (2011).

Despite this activity in England and the United States, however, ecocritical responses by Canadian theatre scholars have not, as a rule, been forthcoming. If, in the United States in 2005, ecocritical responses to theatre had been “thin,” in Canadian theatre scholarship they had been non-existent. By and large, this has continued to be the case.<sup>12</sup> While scholars over the last two decades have considered a wide range of themes and issues in Canadian drama—nationalist trends (Perkyns 1984, Plant 1984, Benson and Conolly 1987), feminism (Zimmerman 1994, Grace and Rebeiro, 2003, Scott 2010), theatre of the north (Grace 2001), African-Canadian Theatre (Sears 2000), Aboriginal theatre (Appleford 2005), Queer theatre (Kerr 2007), theatre of war (Grace 2008) and intercultural theatre (Knowles 2009)—there has been hardly a mention of Canadian plays with respect to environmental consciousness or ecocritical concerns.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For exceptions, see Gray (2003, 2006, 2010); Gray and Rabillard (2010); Derksen (2010).

<sup>13</sup> One exception is Shelley Scott’s mention, in her preface to *Nightwood Theatre*, of “theatre ecology” as a phrase that appears in this venue’s “most recent mandate statements and website copy.” Scott describes this as “an evocative phrase that clearly reflects contemporary preoccupations about the environment” and speculates that in employing it, the company may even be suggesting “an alliance with ecofeminism” (12). There is a distinction, however, between the idea of a “theatre ecology,” a term referring to how different theatre companies respond to specific audiences and community needs, and ‘ecofeminist’ plays or those that take on ecological import by making the relationship of humans to the more-than-human physical world a central part of the action.

In the introduction to his anthology *Modern Canadian Plays*, Jerry Wasserman observes that Modern Canadian drama “was born out of an amalgam of the new consciousness of the age—social, political and aesthetic—with the new Canadian self-consciousness” (15). Yet in Wasserman’s account of how this new consciousness informed Canadian drama, there is nary a mention of how the rise of environmentalism in the 1970s inflected portrayals of nature in these plays or whether a particularly Canadian response to the more-than-human physical world may have emerged at this time. Remarkably, ecological concerns vis-à-vis drama do not appear in any concerted way in Andrew Houston’s introduction to *Environmental and Site-Specific Theatre* (2007), a collection of articles on English-Canadian theatre that one might have expected to reflect ecocritical theory, but which—with the exception of an article on Murray Schafer’s *Princess of the Stars* and another on the soundscapes of Hildegard Westerkamp—focuses primarily on constructed environments and urban sites with little or no mention of the more-than-human physical world.

Until very recently,<sup>14</sup> one finds the same dearth of ecocritical ideas in Canadian theatre journals, where attention is given over to regional concerns, identity politics, community theatre and intercultural theatre, all with respect to social concerns rather than in terms of the human relationship with nonhuman nature.<sup>15</sup> One relatively recent

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<sup>14</sup> See Gray and Rabillard, “Theatre in an Age of Eco-Crisis” *Canadian Theatre Review* 31:2 (2010). See also Gray “Birds” (2006), “The Murmuring-in-Between” (2010), “Yes to Everything” (2010).

<sup>15</sup> Part of this may be due to a generation of theatre artists wanting to distance themselves from the rural concerns of earlier Canadian playwrights in order to focus on what they deem to be more immediate concerns of urban life. In an interview in the Fall 2010 issue of the *Canadian Theatre Review*, playwright and theatre director Karen Hines observes that, until recently, there has been “a prejudice against theatre that dealt overtly and directly with environmental issues in terms of it being the granola, Birkenstock, macramé ghetto of the theatre world” (“Yes” 23). In the same interview, Daniel Brooks, artistic director of Necessary Angel Theatre, points out that while ecological issues are omnipresent in the media and

issue of the *Canadian Theatre Review* focusing on site-specific theatre (Vol. 1, Spring 2006) seemed particularly well suited to buck this anthropo/socio-centric trend, yet here again ecological concerns remain virtually nonexistent.

The absence of ecocritical discourse is equally conspicuous in some of the most in-depth critical studies of Canadian drama. Robert Wallace's *Producing Marginality* (1990), for instance, emphasizes the diversity of gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation in the country's theatre productions; Craig Walker's *The Buried Astrolabe* (2001) looks at the contributions of four contemporary Canadian playwrights, providing an overview of their work as a whole and its impact on Canadian drama as a national literature; and Ric Knowles's *The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning* (1999) considers the social and political implications of dramatic form and structure. None of these studies, however, reflects or makes mention of ecocritical ideas.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, in the few cases where nonhuman nature is mentioned in studies of English-Canadian drama, it tends to be viewed as a (passive) object, something to be transformed into a distinctively national work of art or used as a symbol in a drama depicting exclusively human concerns. Critical commentaries by Anton Wagner, Alexander Leggatt and Sherrill Grace exemplify this critical perspective. In *Space and the Geographies of Theatre*, a collection of essays edited by Michael McKinnie, Anton Wagner considers Herman Voaden and Lowrie Warrener's *Symphony* with respect to how these artists's focus on the natural world provided an inspiration for their work and

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prominent in film and popular culture, Toronto's theatre scene has, for the most part, been "preoccupied with questions of race and of multiculturalism or diversity" ("Yes" 23).

<sup>16</sup> Knowles's study includes a discussion of the environmental theatre of R. Murray Schafer, but without drawing on ecocritical ideas or paying heed to the ecological import of Schafer's site-specific work.

assisted in the development of an authentically national dramatic form (“A Country”). In the same publication, Alexander Leggatt argues that James Reaney, more than Voaden, deserves recognition for “dramatizing man’s involvement with nature,” because “he never loses sight of the *human* drama” (26). Sherrill Grace, in her introduction to *Staging the North*, draws attention to the fact that the subjects of all the plays in this anthology are embedded in a northern landscape, but then excludes a consideration of nature *qua* nature by writing about the place-based significance of these works in terms of whether they are staged “within the social interaction of individuals, within a historical context, or within a single human mind” (xiii). For all of these theatre historians, then, the implication is that human drama is paramount, with nature relegated to a supporting role. Such a view leaves little room for the consideration of the more-than-human physical world as a literal force in the action or for plays that convey the relationship between human beings and the natural world as a *reciprocal* one.

Craig Walker, in his introduction to *The Buried Astrolabe* (2001), takes this anthropocentric view even further. “Through art,” he writes, “we encounter, amidst the indifferent natural universe, a world corresponding to the human imagination. There desire and concern, anxiety and fantasy, enjoy absolute dictatorship” (4). According to Walker, in other words, “the natural universe,” rather than having a literal presence in works of art, functions only as a kind of *tabula rasa*, a screen onto which individual artists project their own exclusively human concerns. Walker’s assertion, with its elision of the agency of the nonhuman physical world vis-à-vis the “absolute dictatorship” of the human imagination, takes anthropocentrism and the valuation of the individual artist to an extreme, and yet his remarks underscore in a way what is missing in nearly all

historical and critical studies of English-Canadian drama to date: namely, the understanding that more-than-human life forms and physical forces might have some value and agency beyond being merely a backdrop for human actions, a pool of metaphors for human states of mind, or the raw materials for the construction of plays. One might more easily understand such an omission if there were an absence of plays that portrayed nonhuman nature in anything other than an anthropocentric mode. As I shall be demonstrating, however, there are many instances in English-Canadian drama where playwrights have portrayed other species, natural physical forces, and sometimes the biosphere itself as agencies in their own right: autonomous forces, distinct from the human characters, yet integral to the dramatic action. And it is in these plays, I argue, where human action is portrayed in terms of its interactions with such more-than-human natural agencies, that what I am characterizing as an ecocentric sensibility frequently comes to the fore.

Making claims about the *agency* of nonhuman nature and the existence of a specifically *ecocentric* tradition will, however, require some clarification with respect to how I will be employing these two rather slippery terms. Let me begin with a discussion of what I mean by agency in nonhuman nature, and then proceed to a discussion of how, for the purposes of my research, I will be applying the concept of ecocentrism to this study of English-Canadian drama.

At the outset, I should clarify that my notion of agency with respect to the natural world differs from how agency is typically understood in feminist and postcolonial criticism. In these two latter forms of critical discourse, agency is employed specifically in reference to human rights and freedoms. Feminist criticism, for instance, proceeds

from the premise that women should have the same rights and freedoms as men, while postcolonial criticism is concerned with the continued resistance of peoples oppressed by imperial powers. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin cite agency in this context as one of the “key concepts” of postcolonial studies:

Agency refers to the ability to act or perform an action. In contemporary theory, it hinges on the question of whether individuals can freely and autonomously initiate action, or whether the things they do are in some sense determined by the ways in which their identity has been constructed. Agency is particularly important in post-colonial theory because it refers to the ability of post-colonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power. (8)

In post-colonial criticism, as in feminist criticism, in other words, the concern is with whether human individuals or groups of individuals are free or not, within the realm and limits of human affairs and political structures.

Given its political meaning in these contexts, agency as understood in feminism and post-colonialism obviously cannot be simplistically predicated of aspects of nonhuman nature—of birds and insects or, say, wetlands and forests. Greg Garrard makes this clear enough in his discussion of Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic”—the moral principle that Leopold formulated as a way to safeguard the rights of nonhuman others. Leopold, an American conservationist writing in the early 1940s, believed that to protect the rights and freedoms of nonhuman creatures, our notion of the rights-bearing community should be expanded to include nonhuman subjects such as “soils, waters,

plants and animals”—what Leopold called the “biotic” community’ (216, 204). He then formulated the central tenet of his land ethic with respect to this expanded community: “A thing is right,” Leopold proposed, “when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (224-5). Greg Garrard, however, while acknowledging much that is admirable about Leopold’s conclusions, points out that his premise of a rights-bearing biotic community comprised of both human and nonhuman citizens is problematic. “[W]hile the metaphor of [such] ‘citizenship’ is appealing,” writes Garrard, “human societies attach reciprocal rights and duties to citizenship and our duties are exclusively *to the wilderness*; we do not derive any in return” (72). Garrard’s understanding that democratic rights and freedoms are not something that can, in this sense, be negotiated with nonhuman nature is a reminder to be wary about cobbling over distinctions between human rights and the rights—as understood by humans—of other life forms and ecosystems. Yet while nonhuman entities such as birds and wetlands can hardly be expected to vote, obey the laws, and have agency, in this sense, within the sphere of human politics, one can still conceive of them as possessing agency in other ways.

According to the Oxford English dictionary, the word “agency” has a number of meanings, all of which derive from the Latin word *agere*, meaning “to do” or “act”. It can denote a faculty of action, an action itself, or the personification of an action. The Oxford dictionary’s extended definition, in fact, cites many different types of agency as examples, including fire, the Supreme Being, citizens, insects, government organizations, an invisible force, and ‘a strong east wind’. Agencies, then—as these examples illustrate—need not be exclusively human, nor do they require intentionality.

Asserting, for instance, that the sun's agency causes the crops to grow is not to say that the sun has chosen to do this, but it does acknowledge this more-than-human element as a distinct force—something that, by its actions, can affect the world or bring about change in some way. When something is an agency or has agency, it warrants attention, and attention, to varying degrees and in different respects, implies value.

References to action in critical studies of drama may well call to mind Aristotle's *Poetics*, where he places emphasis on tragedy as the imitation "of an action" (11). In the *Poetics*, however, Aristotle writes about humans as if they were the sole provenance of such action. "Tragedy," he observes, "is not an imitation of men, *per se*, but of human action and life and happiness and misery" (12).<sup>17</sup> It is, however, a much broader notion of agency-as-action that I am employing as a benchmark for the selection of plays in this study—plays in which forces and life forms such as rivers, trees, birds and animals are 'actors' that affect the lives of men and women in various ways. In some of these plays, such agencies are portrayed as physical forces with which the human characters must contend; in others they are depicted as sentient and communicative subjects; and in still others they are enacted, in accordance with a pantheist or animist worldview, as the embodiment of a spiritual force that animates the natural world. What is common to all of these forces and living beings, however, is their portrayal as agencies that impact human characters in some ways. As 'actors' in this sense, they all contribute directly, and often in significant ways, to the affective and interpretive force of these works.

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<sup>17</sup> If one were to take a broader view of the action in Greek tragedy, however, one could acknowledge that gods—along with the plagues (*Oedipus Tyrannos*), birds (*Agamemnon*), vines and earthquakes (*The Bacchae*) that are their manifestations—are also prominent agencies in these works and affect the human characters in fundamental ways.

As already mentioned, however, my purpose in this study is not only to show that there are plays that acknowledge the agency of nonhuman nature, but also to argue that such plays are ‘ecocentric’. “Ecocentrism,” as Lawrence Buell has observed, has a complex genealogy, with sources in Darwin and in Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, in western philosophy (via Spinoza, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Naess) and in Eastern religion (esp. Buddhism and Taoism) (100-101). As a result, writes Buell, “eco-centric thinking is more like a scattergram than a united front” (101). In the glossary that Buell provides in an appendix to *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, “ecocentrism” is described as “[t]he view in environmental ethics that the interest of the eco-sphere must override that of the interest of individual species” (137). Given this definition, it is hardly surprising that this author is skeptical about ecocentrism as “a practical program” (102). Exactly what, one might ask, is this “interest of the eco-sphere,” and, as Buell himself asks, *who* is to determine this? (104). Moreover, as Greg Garrard has observed, another problem with this notion of ecocentrism is its implied assumption that an “eco-sphere” or “ecosystem” is a fixed and static “locus of value” —something that, according to Garrard, runs counter to “modern theoretical ecology” (73). As he explains, “[m]any species transgress ecosystem boundaries” and, while “some species benefit from change,” this is not universally the case. “[A]n entire ecosystem,” he points out, “does not stand or fall together” (73).

A less restrictive definition of ecocentrism can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary, where it is described as “[t]he view or belief that environmental concerns should take precedence over the needs and rights of human beings *considered in isolation*” (my emphasis). Defined this way, ecocentrism is a more reasonable

proposition. Rather than implying that human needs and rights should be trumped by some reified notion of “the ecosphere,” this notion of ecocentrism is simply an acknowledgment that such needs and rights must take into account their affect on the more-than-human physical world. The ecocentric sensibility to which I am referring, however—and that, as I contend, arises in this particular body of work—has less to do with formulating a practical approach to environmental ethics than with imagining a more earth-centred alternative to the anthropocentric world view that privileges humans as the only authentic agents on the planet (and therefore the only legitimate ‘actors’ in a play) with the rest of nature ignored or reduced to the status of objects and resources.

Eco-feminists Carolyn Merchant and Val Plumwood have each argued that anthropocentrism of this kind can be traced, in some degree, to the legacy of a mechanistic view of nature that emerged in Western culture in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant explains that, as this view took hold, “[f]orce was [understood to be] external to matter rather than immanent within it. Matter was corpuscular, passive, and inert; change was simply the rearrangement of particles as motion was transmitted from one part to another in a causal nexus” (102-3). For Merchant, the adoption of this mechanistic view amounted to a shift from a conception of nature as organic and animate to one in which the physical world was, to all intents and purposes, dead. “The removal of animistic, organic assumptions,” she writes, “constituted the death of nature—the most far-reaching effect of the Scientific

Revolution” (193).<sup>18</sup> Plumwood, in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), adopts a similar position:

In the paradigm of scientific mechanism nature is nullified and defined as lack. It is seen as non-agentic, as passive, non-creative and inert, with action being imposed from without by an external force. . . It lacks all goals and purposes of its own (is non-teleological and non-conative). Any goals or direction present are imposed from *outside* by human consciousness. (110)

For both Merchant and Plumwood, this mechanistic view, in turning a blind eye to the agency of the natural world, lost sight of it as a vital, generative force. The result was that action tended to be seen exclusively as human action, with its origins in human consciousness and human will. Moreover, they argue, such human-centred thinking, by promoting an instrumentalist view of nature as nothing more than a passive “resource,” paved the way for its unfettered exploitation, and resulted in some unprecedented environmental damage (*Death* 103, *Feminism* 110).<sup>19</sup>

The Canadian plays in this study, however, convey a view of the nonhuman physical world that differs markedly from this mechanistic, anthropocentric, and instrumentalist one. In these plays, human action takes place within a physical universe that is neither passive nor inert, but active, alive and comprising value beyond its status

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<sup>18</sup> Although making this claim, Merchant is also careful to point out the benefits accruing from this mechanistic view of the world, among which—as she observes—was the science of ecology. (103)

<sup>19</sup> In *Man and the Natural World*, the historian Keith Thomas, while acknowledging the rise of such mechanistic philosophies, also takes note of countervailing attitudes during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries that tended to mitigate an instrumentalist view of the more-than-human physical world.

as resource. In these plays, other species and physical forces function as actors/agencies with respect to the human characters on stage, eliciting a range of responses from pity, fear and loss to inspiration, wonder, gratitude, solidarity and a sense of belonging. Such plays, as I see it, are ecocentric, not because they directly engage with ecological themes and issues (although some of them do), nor because they explicitly support an ecocentric ethics (although some of them do this as well); rather, I call these plays ecocentric because their worldview is one that positions human actions alongside other active, acting, and reacting agencies. Such a definition leaves open the manner and the degree to which an ecocentric worldview makes an appearance in these plays. In some of these, human characters simply make reference to such agencies and their effects; in others, they more directly encounter them; in still others the question of how to co-exist in reciprocity with such other life forms and physical forces is a core dramatic concern. Considered as a whole, however, this body of ecocentric drama deserves to be seen as a contribution to how we humans conceive of ourselves in terms of our place in the universe. Indeed, in the words of Lawrence Buell, ecocentrism in this sense “amounts to nothing less than a new Copernican revolution at the planetary level—this insistence that the world must no longer be thought of as revolving around us” ((105-6).

Since the 1920s, English-Canadian playwrights have, in general, adopted three dramaturgical approaches to convey such an ecocentric worldview. The first is a particular form of mimesis: namely, the imitation of other life forms and physical forces as characters in their own right or, in some cases, as hybrid characters, comprised of both human and nonhuman elements. Works that employ this form of mimesis include

Herman Voaden's *Murder Pattern*, James Reaney's *Colours in the Dark*, and several plays by Tomson Highway, Monique Mojica and Marie Clements. Many of these same works also incorporate another of these dramaturgical techniques: namely, the positioning or 'bracketing' of human actions within the agency of particular natural environments. Herman Voaden, for instance, includes Earth Voices that observe and comment on the lives of the "isolate hill folk" in *Murder Pattern* (325), creating what is, in effect, a framing device for the human action. Clements and Highway achieve something similar by beginning and ending their plays with the actions and utterances of the nonhuman physical world. The action in Clements's *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, for instance, begins and ends with the sound of whispering and falling trees, while Highway's *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* both opens and closes with the "gurgle of a river," the "voice of the land" (Clements 367, Highway 13). In such plays, then, while human events are still the focus of the action, they are depicted as taking place *within* a world as opposed to constituting a world unto themselves.

In addition to these two ecocentric strategies, a third dramaturgical device in the plays that I've selected for this study is the depiction of human characters (and, by implication, human identity) in terms of a reciprocal relationship with the more-than-human physical world. In Archibald Key's *The Mother Lode* and Gwen Pharis Ringwood's *The Lodge*, the reciprocal aspect of this relationship is shown when the attitudes and actions that characters adopt toward the more-than-human physical world have direct consequences in their lives and in the lives of other species. In plays by Voaden, Reaney, Highway, Mojica and Clements such reciprocity is conveyed through the depiction of characters whose identities form alongside and in response to elements

in the more-than-human physical world, while in others, such as Michael Cook's *The Head, Guts and Sound Bone Dance*, Blake Brooker's *The Land, The Animals*, Karen Hines's *The Pochsy Plays*, and Daniel Brooks's *The Eco-Show*, it is evident when characters, encountering the effects of environmental loss, experience fears, anxieties and an attendant loss of identity.

Throughout this dissertation, I will be paying close attention to all three of these dramaturgical devices with respect to how they function within specific plays. In terms of the chapter by chapter structure of this dissertation, I have, for the most part, adopted a chronological approach, looking at scripts published from the early 1600s until 2011, making references to the cultural and historical contexts from which these works emerged, and pointing out how these have inflected the depiction of human/world relations. In so doing, I have set forth, in four chapters, what amounts to a brief genealogy of ecocentrism in English-Canadian drama, shedding light on the conditions that led to its appearance in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and charting its development until the present day. Within select chapters, however, I have occasionally departed from this overall chronological model, choosing a topical structure to discuss groups of plays that enact similar worldviews or that give rise to similar portrayals of the more-than-human physical world.

In Chapter one, "Colonization and its Discontents," I present a pre-history of this ecocentric tradition. Looking at plays, written from 1606 until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the lands that would one day become Canada, I show how colonizing attitudes among invader/settler populations in this part of the world left little room for dramatic portrayals of the natural world here as an *oikos* or dwelling place. To

demonstrate this, I begin with an ecocritical reading of Marc Lescarbot's *Theatre of Neptune*, a work that, like the European masques and fêtes that were its models, refashions what Merchant calls the organic cosmology of a pre-Enlightenment age into a more anthropocentric and instrumentalist view of the natural world. Although Lescarbot's marine masque, unlike most of the other plays alluded to in this study, is written in French, its instrumentalist and ultimately colonial view of the 'New World' provides an ideal context for this opening chapter. In my reading of the *Theatre of Neptune*, I show how Lescarbot, while employing two of the ecocentric dramaturgies mentioned above, eventually undermines the effects of these by appropriating oceanic power in accordance with Henry IV's imperialist agenda in 'New France'. Having shown the ways in which the *Theatre of Neptune* functions to colonize both indigenous lands and people, I proceed to identify a number of other pre-20<sup>th</sup>-century plays, which, like Lescarbot's script, configure nature in the 'New World', primarily in terms of territory, as an object to be acquired. Chapter one then concludes with a reading of Robert Rogers's *Ponteach* and Charles Mair's *Tecumseh*, two plays that, although written over a century apart, provide critiques of European settlement in the 'New World', while managing, at the same time, to lend support to European expansion by elegizing indigenous people and their relationship to the land as a part of a newly discovered but inevitably vanishing paradise.

In Chapter two—"Identity, Place and the Dwelling Perspective 1920-1967"—I consider the rise and development of an ecocentric worldview in English-Canadian drama with specific reference to concerns about dwelling and place-identity among the country's settler populations. Employing the anthropologist Tim Ingold's concept of a

dwelling perspective, I look at characters in selected Canadian plays from the 1920s to 1967 whose identity is closely tied to their relationship with the more-than-human natural world. In the first half of this chapter, I consider how Herman Voaden's contributions as an editor helped to promote the rise of an ecocentric worldview in Canadian drama, and then show how the portrayal of such a worldview in his own plays stemmed from a combination of romantic nationalism and pantheism. In the second half, I examine how an ecocentric perspective emerges and develops in the plays of James Reaney, via this playwright's emphasis on place-identity and through his particular approach to enacting animals and elemental forces in the natural world as 'characters'.

By the 1970s, a decade that began with the inauguration of Earth Day in the United States, two developments in Canadian history would have a profound effect on the ecocentric tradition in English-Canadian drama. One of these was the looming environmental crisis that, by the end of the 1960s, was beginning to percolate more and more into the popular consciousness; the other had to do with the plight of First Nations people who, after years of cultural genocide, were struggling to re-claim their cultural heritage. In Chapters three and four, therefore, I look at plays in the second half of the twentieth century in which concerns about dwelling and the natural world have appeared in two forms, which, while mutually instructive, reflect different histories and different ontologies.

In Chapter three, I show how Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Margaret Hollingsworth, Michael Cook, Karen Hines, Daniel Brooks, and Blake Brooker, writing in the context of a deepening ecological crisis, convey environmental losses as a loss of self and a profound displacement from the more-than-human physical world. For such writers,

concerns about species eradication and the pollution of land, air, and water resulted in works in which the more-than-human physical world becomes the source of existential fears and anxieties. In their plays, then, if elements in the natural world have agency, it is due to their absence or impending absence and what that will entail for human protagonists on a planet that is becoming increasingly uninhabitable.

Finally, in Chapter four, I look at how a different form of ecocentrism finds expression in the plays of Tomson Highway, Monique Mojica and Marie Clements. Here, I show that in the works of these First Nations and Metis playwrights, relationships with the more-than-human natural world, rather than being a source of anxiety and dislocation are, more often than not, identity-forming—part of the assertion of a cultural heritage. I argue, moreover, that such assertions of indigenous identity, informed as they are by an animist ontology, pose an alternative to colonial actions and attitudes and, in so doing, constitute what is, in effect, a highly developed eco-political stance.

## Chapter One

### Colonialism and its Discontents: A Pre-history

The first palpable signs of an ecocentric sensibility in English-Canadian drama did not really emerge until some sixty years after Confederation, when citizen playwrights of the newly formed nation were beginning to turn their attentions to this country's expansive natural environment as an *oikos* or dwelling place. Before this, in an era when European and indigenous people were struggling for dominance in this part of the world, concerns about dwelling were overshadowed by concerns about who would be occupying these lands. As a result, portrayals of nature in the dramatic writing from this particular time and place give rise to a two-fold story of colonization. In the first part of this story, the natural world is configured primarily as territory, in works where British or French playwrights are affirming their country's claims in the 'New World'; in the second part, another version of colonialism shows up in plays where indigenous peoples and their relationship to the land are depicted as an Edenic paradise that is vanishing and destined, eventually, to fade away.

Before attending to the ways in which this two-fold story comes to the fore, however, it's worth noting that in a good portion of pre-20<sup>th</sup> century plays from this part of the world, nature—or at least nature in the 'New World'—is absent altogether. This is the case for instance, in the satirical comedies that—according to theatre historians Eugene Benson and Conolly—were popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (4-5, 16-21). Plays such as *The Female Consistory of Brockville* (1856), *Dolorsolatio* (1865), *H.M.S. Parliament*

(1875) and *The Fair Grit* (1876), for example, are social and political satires where dramatizations of nature are noticeably absent.

For a relatively small invader/settler population situated within a vast physical environment, drama that focuses on social concerns to the exclusion of the natural environment might seem somewhat of a paradox. As Anthony Pagden reminds us, however, this was a population whose values and ways of thinking, imported from Europe, were largely urban-centred. “[S]ince antiquity,” Pagden writes, “European culture [had] been founded on the concept of the *oikos* in the city” (2):

The civilization which has shaped the normative behaviour of all Europeans has always been, by definition, a life lived in cities. For generations the settler looked to Europe as the source of legitimacy, and as a model on which to construct his Nueva España, New England, Nouvelle France” (2-3).

Moreover, according to the literary critic and historian Northrop Frye, it was the very ubiquity of the natural world in what was, for these settlers, a new and foreign land, that would have led them to turn their attentions so exclusively to social concerns. In his “Conclusion to the First Edition of *Literary History of Canada*,” Frye speculates that the “vast unconsciousness of nature” would have been a challenge for the country’s early settler populations and contends that such settlers living in “[s]mall and isolated communities” would have developed what he calls “a garrison mentality,” turning inward for solidarity as a buttress against such a “menacing, and formidable physical setting” (350-351).

Yet while the commentary of these cultural historians reveals links between Euro-centrism and the absence of nature in the early drama from this part of the world, another form of Euro-centrism can be found in those plays from this period where nature does make an appearance, but where its agency is undermined in terms of what the eco-feminist Val Plumwood has described as an inter-related series of colonizing strategies (“Decolonizing” 51-59). Colonization, Plumwood argues, occurs not only in direct acts of territorial expansion, but also in the “conceptual strategies” that colonizers adopt to justify their own supremacy and to configure colonized others, whether human or nonhuman, in terms how these others might serve them (“Decolonizing” 51-59). “Since the [colonized] Other is perceived in terms of inferiority,” she explains, “and their own agency and creation of value are denied, it is [deemed] appropriate that the colonizer imposes his own value, agency and meaning, and that the colonized be made to serve the colonizer as a means to his ends” (“Decolonizing” 59). For Plumwood, therefore, anthropocentric attitudes in Western Europe that perceived humans as separate and removed from a natural world over which they ruled and that, according to a good deal of Enlightenment thinking, had value primarily as resource, were, in effect, a colonization of nature.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, as she goes on to argue, during the period of European imperialist expansion, this colonizing view of the natural world was then further employed in a colonization of territories that viewed both these lands and its inhabitants as little more than an extension of an already objectified and devalued

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<sup>20</sup> Plumwood argues that such anthropocentrism, having its sources in a combination of rationalist philosophy and Christian teachings, has been “standard in the west since at least the Enlightenment” (*Feminism* 4).

nature. In other words, from a Eurocentric perspective, such lands and its indigenous people were viewed, like nature itself, as lacking in any intrinsic value or agency and therefore available, without any moral constraint, as resources to be claimed and annexed. The anthropocentric colonization of nature, Plumwood argues, laid the basis for the Eurocentric colonization of indigenous lands and people, both in the Americas and elsewhere (52-53).

Peter Mancall and Northrop Frye each depict versions of a Eurocentric colonization of nature in the ‘New World’ that corroborate, in more general terms, the analysis that Plumwood provides. “Early modern Europeans,” Mancall observes, “did not, in general, greatly respect nature in its most pristine forms” (732). When they first arrived in on the continent, he explains, “they believed that they had found an abundant supply of all of the natural resources they could want” (731). Northrop Frye makes a related claim. “After the Northwest passage failed to materialize,” he writes, “Canada became a colony in the mercantilist sense, treated by others less like a society than as a place to look for things” (“Conclusion” 346).

Colonizing attitudes both in terms of the natural world and with respect to indigenous peoples can be found in some of the earliest drama to be written in this part of the world. Consider, for instance, Marc Lescarbot’s *Theatre of Neptune in New France*,<sup>21</sup> a place-specific work, with a clear colonial agenda and a dramatic text that, as Jerry Wasserman observes, was “the first theatrical script to be written and produced in what would become Canada” (17). As a script written at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The *Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France* was first published in 1609 as an appendix in Lescarbot’s *Histoire de la Nouvelle-France*. The passages I will be quoting are from the 1982 English translation by Eugene Benson and Renate Benson, published in Jerry Wasserman’s *Spectacle of Empire* 73-81.

century, the *Theatre of Neptune* hearkens back, in some respects, to an organic view of the cosmos that was a prevailing paradigm in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe (Merchant, *Death* 99-126); as a work that metaphorically appropriates oceanic power, it reflects a shift towards an emerging humanist and scientific ethos that was already being played out in the court spectacles of Europe (Orgel 55, Strong 40-43); and, as work with a colonial underpinning it enacts an instrumentalist view of the ‘New World’ that, as we will see, characterizes a good deal of the drama leading up to and immediately following Confederation.

As several scholars have noted, the *Theatre of Neptune*, written by a man who was, at the time, in charge of the only colonial outpost north of what is now the state of Florida,<sup>22</sup> functions on a number of levels as a justification for the imperialist claims of France.<sup>23</sup> Jerry Wasserman, in his book *Spectacle of Empire*, sums up much of this critical assessment when he characterizes it as “a small-scale spectacle of wishful triumphal imperialism” and “a snapshot of strategies for imperial conquest” (13, 14). In fact, as we shall see, Lescarbot’s script, in its portrayal of the ‘New World’, fairly epitomizes the colonization of lands and people that Plumwood writes about in her analysis of how European powers justified their expansionist policies. From an ecocritical perspective, however, what is additionally striking about this early 17<sup>th</sup> century script is the fact that it accomplishes its colonizing agenda through the appropriation, by metaphorical means, of a powerful force in the natural world: the ocean. Given its ultimately instrumentalist treatment of oceanic power, however, the

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<sup>22</sup> Wasserman, *Spectacle of Empire* 17.

<sup>23</sup> See Wagner’s “Colonial Quebec,” his introduction to *Canada’s Lost Plays* 4: 9. See also Fournier 4, Benson and Conolly, *English-Canadian Theatre* 42, and Bowers 41.

*Theatre of Neptune* begins, ironically enough, with two dramaturgical devices that pay homage to this force of nature and, in so doing, it conveys, in its opening at least, a measure of respect for it.

The first of these devices is its depiction of the ocean as a character in its own right and, perhaps even more to the point, as an immortal character. At the start of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, enacting forces in nature in the form of gods and goddesses from Classical antiquity was a popular practice in masques and court entertainments, and Neptune was a familiar character in such spectacles. As Jerry Wasserman points out, Neptune made regular appearances in the *entrée royales*, *réceptions*, and aquatic pageants that scholars have cited as probable sources for the *Theatre of Neptune*.<sup>24</sup> He cites, for instance, Henri II's triumphal *entrée* into France in 1550 in which Neptune appeared "[s]urrounded by dolphins, whales, and triton-musicians," "a fête celebrating Charles IX at Fontainebleau in 1564 [that] featured Neptune in a chariot drawn by sea-horses on a canal," and a wedding celebration in 1581 that "produced a river fête" in which Neptune arrived on "a triumphal chariot" (25-28).

In representing the power of the ocean via the figure of this Roman sea god, Lescarbot was most certainly employing a well-worn Renaissance trope. And yet Lescarbot, who had arrived at this tiny French outpost after a three-month sea voyage, would also have had a more visceral experience of the ocean, a fact that may explain the particularly prominent role that Neptune plays in his script. In the *Theatre of Neptune*, after all, this sea god is not only the principal and eponymous character, he is also the first to arrive and, in a soliloquy declaring his own agency, the first to speak.

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<sup>24</sup> See Fournier 3-4, Lelièvre and Baillet 134-141, Girard 700-701, and Doucette 7.

The author's stage directions stipulate that Neptune arrives "*dressed in a blue cloak, wearing buskins, with long hoary hair and a beard*" and entering on a sea-going chariot drawn by "*six Tritons*" (71). Having arrived in this elaborate and stately manner, he proceeds to intercept a small sailing vessel—not a fictional one, but an actual ship entering the harbor on its return to Port Royal, the outpost where Lescarbot had been stationed along with a handful of other French colonists under his command. On board, according to Wasserman,<sup>25</sup> were more colonists, under the leadership of Lescarbot's friend and superior officer, Jean Biencourt de Poutrincourt, and it is to this leader that Neptune speaks. "HALT, Sagamos,<sup>26</sup> stop here," Neptune commands him, "And behold a God who has care for you" (73). Then, having hailed and effectively silenced the man who, as Hannah Fournier tells us, was the King's representative in New France,<sup>27</sup> Neptune proceeds to identify himself. "I am the brother of Jupiter and Pluto," Neptune declares. "Once upon the time the Universe was divided among us three: / Jupiter received the sky, Pluto the Underworld, / And I, being more foolhardy, received the sea" (73). Lescarbot's Neptune is playfully self-deprecating here, but he is also quick to assert the extent of his power: "NEPTUNE is my name. Neptune one of the Gods, / The most powerful beneath the heaven's vault" (73).

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<sup>25</sup> See Wasserman, *Spectacle* 17-23. According to Lescarbot's account, the *Theatre of Neptune* was devised as a way to welcome Jean de Biencourt, Sieur de Poutrincourt, and his crew upon their return to the colonial outpost the French had called Port Royal.

<sup>26</sup> In a footnote to his script, Lescarbot notes that "Sagamos" is an "Indian word meaning "Captain" (73).

<sup>27</sup> Fournier 9.

In Lescarbot's portrayal of the ocean, the natural world is both a communicative subject and a remarkably powerful one. "I arrange it," Neptune declares, "that the Fleming travels as swiftly as the wind as far as China" (74).

I make it happen that a man, carried on my waves,  
 Can see from another pole unknown stars,  
 And cross the borders of the torrid zone  
 Where the waves of the liquid element foam.  
 Without me the French King would not have received  
 The triumphant gift of a superb elephant from Persia:  
 And furthermore, without me the French soldiers  
 Would not have planted their arms in the countries of the Orient.  
 Without me the Portuguese, venturing on my waves,  
 Would have wallowed without glory on their enclosed banks,  
 And would not have carried away the treasures of the East  
 Which the mad world foolishly adores. (74)

As Neptune's declarations make clear, the ocean's power, while admittedly benign in its dealings with the "mad world" of humanity, is extensive indeed: enabling travel to remote shores, providing opportunities for trade, determining the fates of captains and kings, and doing all of this, it would seem, as an active and autonomous force.

In addition to configuring the ocean as a character who declares his own agency in this way, Lescarbot's opening to the *Theatre of Neptune* also incorporates a second device: namely, the depiction of human actions from the perspective of the nonhuman physical world. As Neptune perceives it, the actions of mariners, whether Flemish, Portuguese or French, are carried out within *his* world, and as a result of his good graces. "I arrange it," Neptune declaims, "I make it happen," and Lescarbot, by adopting this non-human perspective at the very onset of the action, conveys a world in

which human actions, while significant,<sup>28</sup> are viewed as part of an ongoing relationship with a natural world that necessitates both negotiation and respect.

As we will see in the following chapter, both of these dramaturgical devices—the depiction of natural forces as characters and the portrayal of human action from a nonhuman perspective—show up again, under different historical circumstances, in ecocentric plays from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It would be a mistake, however, to view the opening of the *Theatre of Neptune* as an early prototype of such dramatic writing. Instead, Lescarbot’s adoption of these devices, rather than preparing the ground for an emerging view of the natural world, was actually reflecting the fading remnants of an earlier one.

Carolyn Merchant provides a detailed account of this earlier “organic” worldview, which, she contends, was characteristic of European attitudes toward nature in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (*Death* 99-126). As Merchant explains, such a vision “had its roots in Greek concepts of the cosmos as an intelligent organism” and had developed during the Renaissance into “a spectrum of organismic philosophies” with a single premise: “that all parts of the cosmos were connected and interrelated in a living unity” (103). Furthermore, according to Merchant, this understanding of the cosmos as organic and alive had some direct implications for attitudes and actions toward the natural world. “As long as the earth was considered to be alive and sensitive,” she writes, “it could be considered a breach of human ethical behavior to carry out destructive acts against it” (3). Thus, until the emergence of the more mechanistic worldview in the 17<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The mariners, after all, had to venture forth on the high seas in order for the wondrous events that Neptune describes could transpire.

century, “[t]he relationship between most peoples and the earth was an I-thou ethic of propitiation to be made before damming a brook, cutting a tree, or sinking a mine shaft” (*Radical* 41).

In the *Theatre of Neptune*, the most direct form of propitiation to the ocean is expressed in a votive song, sung by Neptune’s Tritons on behalf of the French colonists: “Loyal Neptune, grant us / Security against your waves, / And grant that we will all be able / To meet again in France one day” (80). As a simple and straightforward prayer, this Triton’s song clearly expresses an I-thou relationship with the ocean, conveying what Anton Wagner calls these colonists’ “fear of the unlimited power of nature” as they anticipate the Atlantic crossing that they will need to navigate in order to return to their homes in France (“Introduction” 9). There is, too, something akin to an I-thou relationship in Lescarbot’s portrayal of the relationship between Poutrincourt and Neptune as a reciprocal one. Neptune, for instance, observes that his decision to favour de Poutrincourt’s marine exploits has been granted because the latter “cared” to visit him, and, in another passage, the god lets it be known that his continued loyalty to Poutrincourt and his colony is based on the understanding that his “status and laws” will continue to be respected there (74).

In the *Theatre of Neptune*, however, all of these indications of an organic cosmos are ultimately undermined when Neptune, in a sacred oath, pledges his undying allegiance to the Sieur de Poutrincourt and the imperial ambitions of Henry IV. “I swear by my sacred Trident, “ Neptune declaims near the end of his address, [t]hat I will always support your enterprises. / And I will never rest / Until I see my waves in this area / Pant under the weight of ten thousand ships / Which in the twinkling of an eye do

whatever you want” (74). Even more assurances follow on the heels of this pledge, including praise for the Sieur de Monts—the man originally commissioned to stake out and establish a foothold for “New France”—and for the king who commissioned him:<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, go forth joyously and follow the path  
Where destiny guides you, because I see Fate  
Preparing a flouring Empire for France  
In this new world which in the future will proclaim  
The immortal renown of De Monts, and of you too,  
Under the mighty reign of HENRY, your king. (74)

Such assurances leave little doubt that Lescarbot is subsuming nature’s power under the aegis of the monarchy. To be sure, with Neptune’s sanctioning of Poutrincourt’s colonial aims, Lescarbot’s respectful acknowledgement of the ocean’s power has undergone a significant sea change. His “Neptune,” who had once spoken as a powerful and autonomous force in nature, now seems little more than a mouthpiece for France’s imperial aims.

In its overall portrayal of nature, then, the *Theatre of Neptune* contributes to what is, in effect, a significant paradigm shift. By paying homage to the ocean as a divine agency, Lescarbot’s script invokes the organic worldview of a previous era, but, in appropriating this force as an affirmation of monarchic power, it looks ahead to the Enlightenment of 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, a more humanist age that witnessed an increasing emphasis on the mastery and control of the natural world as resource.

In the world of European theatre, the *Theatre of Neptune* was by no means the only work of its time to convey this shift in attitudes toward nature. In fact, it was a rather late addition to a tradition that had already been functioning in this way. Stephen

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<sup>29</sup> Lescarbot, *Histoire de la Nouvelle France*, IV: 211-215.

Orgel, for instance, points out that the creators of masques in 16<sup>th</sup> century England had already been depicting deities, not as a way to propitiate nature, but as a way of celebrating the power of the monarchy. “The Renaissance Empiricist,” he observes, “was able to list among the promised benefits of the new learning the most fabulous wonders of masques: dominion over the seasons, the raising of storms at will, the acceleration of germination and harvest”—all of which were intended to provide evidence of King’s power and beneficence (55). Theatre historian Roy Strong makes a similar point. “In the court festival, he writes, “the Renaissance belief in man’s ability to control his own destiny and harness the natural resources of the universe find their most extreme assertion” (40). Moreover, as Jerry Wasserman explains, in the court fêtes that were the most probable precursors to the *Theatre of Neptune*, one of the most established ways to celebrate a king or prince’s authority was to have the immortal sea god pledge his service and undying devotion to the monarch. “[T]hespian Neptunes,” he writes, “acknowledging their fealty and subordination to world princes and those prince’s representatives were commonplace in France and widespread across the rest of Europe” (*Spectacle* 30).

But while the *Theatre of Neptune* may not, in this sense, have been particularly innovative, its distinctness from its European counterparts can nevertheless be measured by the fact that it was the first of these *fêtes* to take place in the Americas and the first to adapt this theatrical motif in a dramatization and affirmation of France’s territorial claims. If Lescarbot’s script is unique, in other words, it is because it was the first to transpose a Renaissance trope to the “New” world. In so doing, however, it was also the first dramatic work to perform a Eurocentric appropriation of this part of the world: the

first, that is, to promote a view of these lands and their indigenous inhabitants as “unused, underused, and therefore deserving of annexation (Plumwood, *Decolonizing* 53).

Lescarbot’s portrayal of the four (un-named) “Indian” characters that arrive to offer gifts and pay homage to Poutrincourt in exchange for his beneficence makes this colonizing perspective exceedingly apparent. After having Neptune declare his allegiance to France’s expansionist goals, Lescarbot goes on to depict these Indians as kowtowing subordinates who affirm the greatness of French civilization and are more than willing to submit to its rule. The “First Indian,” for instance, bringing an offering of “elk or moose” and speaking “[o]n behalf of the Indian peoples,” announces that he has come to pay homage “To the sacred Fleur-de-lis / in your hands, you who represent / The Majesty of your Prince” (78). Then, after expressing his hope that the colony, with its “civil customs” and “Royal governance,” will “flourish,” he humbly offers the services of his people and pledges their undying loyalty (78):

We offer whole-heartedly our skills  
Which lie only in hunting,  
And all we desire  
Is to live forever in your favour. (78)

Lescarbot’s portrayal of this First Indian, then, clearly diminishes the latter’s agency, rendering him and his people as an inferior race, whose skills “lie only in hunting,” and who are over awed by French culture.

In the ensuing action, Lescarbot continues to reinforce this image of a people as willing participants in their own subjugation. This is particularly the case, with his depiction of a Third and Fourth Indian. The “Third Indian”, for instance, unlike those that precede him, has no gift of elk meat or beaver skins, the evidence, at least, of this

people's hunting skills. Instead, Lescarbot's third (anonymous) Indian comes bearing a gift from his "mistress" as a token of her affection for Poutrincourt. "Therefore, accept gladly" he says, "—For the love my mistress—This present made with such affection / Which I offer you" (79). Even more demeaning, however, is the portrayal that Lescarbot provides of a "Fourth Indian," who, humiliated from an unsuccessful hunt, brings only promises of what his future fishing endeavours might provide and who, for the time being, is reduced to begging:

Now I will search  
 Along this sea coast  
 To see whether I cannot find something  
 To provide for your kitchen:  
 And, if meanwhile, you have  
 Somewhere in your shallop  
 A little *caraconas*  
 Give some to me and to my company. (80)

According to Plumwood, such condescending portrayals are, once again, typical of the strategies European colonizers employed to rationalize their conquests. By feminizing native peoples (as is the case with Lescarbot's Third Indian), Europeans could portray them as deserving of mastery; by infantilizing them as inept and in need of assistance (as is the case with Lescarbot's Fourth Indian), they could position themselves as paternal benefactors; and by representing indigenous people as primitive people lacking in culture (as is the case with all four of Lescarbot's Indians)—Europeans could conceive of their imperialistic enterprises as civilizing ones ("Decolonizing" 52-55).

In the *Theatre of Neptune*, the colonization of both the natural world and of indigenous people in the 'New World' would more than likely have been conveyed as well in a tangible way by the place-based elements of the production: the fact that it began in skiffs or canoes on the Atlantic seaboard and proceeded, after a burst of cannon

fire, to the more controlled interior of a French garrison (Wasserman, *Spectacle* 36). In the opening moments of the production, for instance, as Neptune declared his authority over men and ships, he would, after all, have been speaking with his watery kingdom all around him as the visible evidence of his agency—a fact that would make his eventual affirmation of French supremacy in the region all that more palpable. And while Lescarbot’s pageant—unlike the lavish town-based spectacles in France<sup>30</sup>—would have been initially dwarfed by what Rick Bowers calls “the enormous unknown backdrop of the new world” (39), its progression from sea to shore and to a garrisoned banquet hall, would have functioned as a kind of ritualized landing via which the claims of ‘New’ France could be both dramatically and physically enacted.

Canadian theatre scholars have, by and large, discredited the *Theatre of Neptune* as a direct influence on the development of drama in this part of the world. For Fred Jacob, Lescarbot’s marine masque was “an isolated incident” (461), for Leonard Doucette it was “an isolated exception (9),” and for Jerry Wasserman, it was “a one-time event that had no apparent influence on the subsequent development of theatre in North America” (*Spectacle* 9). Through its instrumentalist treatment of nature, however, and its portrayal of the ‘New World’ and its inhabitants as territorial acquisitions, Marc Lescarbot was conveying an anthropocentric and colonial perspective that would come to characterize much of the drama that would emerge in this part of the world for the next three hundred years.

After the *Theatre of Neptune*, a work that predates most of the dramatic writing in North America by over a century, one of the next scripts to enact this colonial

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<sup>30</sup> See Wasserman, *Spectacle of Empire* 25-28 and McGowan 37-58.

perspective is George Cocking's aptly titled *The Conquest of Canada* (1766). As a work written by a British North American soldier, Cocking's play is an unabashedly patriotic celebration of the British victory over Montcalm in 1759.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, its action focuses primarily on the heroics of English soldiers rather than on the land that they are fighting to acquire. Indeed, when nature appears at all in Cocking's script, it is only in terms of the rhetorical devices that English troops employ to rally themselves in their preparations for battle. In the lyrics of one of their songs, for instance, the English soldiers compare their military might to that of a powerful storm. "When our Thunder shall break, o'er the Walls of Quebec, / Monsieurs! and Your Walls shall all stoop!" they sing, "As Hurricanes sweep, thro' the Land, and the Deep, We'll sweep to Destruction the Gauls!" (17). The night before the climactic action, Wolfe, the British commander, extends the conceit, promising that the French forces "shall e'er long, hear Britain's Thunder roll! And feel the Bolt" (20); and, according to one soldier, all three of the British Commanders will surely spur men to battle "as the Sun Heat and Day Light" (10). Aside from its presence as imagery, however, the nonhuman natural world has no other dramatic presence in Cocking's play. Even the geography that was so crucial in the battle for the Plains of Abraham has no significant role in the action, and there are no signs that Wolfe and the soldiers he commands have any relationship whatsoever with the lands they are claiming and struggling to acquire.

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<sup>31</sup> In the preface to the published work, Cocking writes: "I was incited to the Task by ruminating on a rapid, and almost uninterrupted Series of Successes, in 1758, and the great and ever memorable Year of 1759, &c. the glorious Effects of the amicable and happy Union, which subsisted between our gallant Troops, and intrepid Tars; who, with a true Spirit of martial Bravery and Emulation (never to be outdone, or equalled again, but by themselves) baffled, bore down, and triumphed over all hostile Opposition" (1).

In Antoine Gérin-LaJoie's *The Young Latour* (1844), the depiction of nature as territory in a colonial struggle appears again, but this time from the perspective of a heroic young French officer—the Young Latour of the title—who chooses to fight for a remote outpost in Acadia after his father has negotiated a deal to sell what he considers its “barbaric soil” to the English (122). In the action of this play, the son and officer declaims his love for the soil of this land and heroically battles to defend it. In this case, then, the physical world of nature has at least some agency with respect to its significance as a home, and yet, as in Cocking's play, the natural world here is primarily configured as a contested military prize in a struggle between a father and a son.

Nonhuman nature is conveyed as territory as well in Louis Fréchette's *Papineau* (produced, 1880, in Montreal and Quebec City). Fréchette works up a love story between a French patriot named Rose and an Englishman, and weaves this into a dramatic work that pays homage to Papineau's vision of Canada as an independent republic, comprised of both French and English Canadians. As in the two plays previously mentioned, the notion of place in *Papineau* is, once again, specifically about national boundaries: when characters look to the soil, it is mainly to see where the lines have been drawn; when they look to the sky, it is to find out whose flag is flying there. In one scene, Rose conveys the land as a blank page upon which her country has inscribed its history, describing how her countrymen, “[a]xe in one hand, sword in the other . . . have written the glorious name of France in immortal letters from the wastes of Hudson Bay to the plains of Louisiana” (152). In another scene, the whole range of the future country's political options are displayed when Papineau orders the organizers of a political rally to hoist the French flag, the American Flag, and the English Flag—though

the men, in one comic moment, have to resist the temptation to fly the English one upside down (155).

Such anti-English sentiments have no place in Catherine Merritt's *When George III was King*, a play originally published in 1897, but with no evidence of any productions, and a work that carries out its colonizing agenda by paying tribute to Canadian soil as the rightful property of British subjects. In this play, a family has its lands confiscated for remaining loyal to the British during the American Revolution. In the final act, however, the loyal family receives, as its just reward, a parcel of land in Upper Canada.<sup>32</sup> "Our government has granted to us each two hundred acres," the father William Fordyce tells his children, "and, methinks, we have chosen a most pleasant situation!" (178). Buoyed up by this opportunity for a new life, William's wife Elizabeth has a vision of the Union Jack planted "safe upon Canadian soil," and, as the entire family declares their allegiance to King George, the play concludes with an anachronistic chorus, off in the distance, of "God Save the Queen" (181-182).

A similarly patriotic fervor, but combined with an early feminist perspective, infuses the depiction of the more-than-human physical world in Sarah Curzon's *Laura Secord The Heroine of 1812*, "a poetic drama," written in 1876 and published in 1887, that, according to Anton Wagner, was "intended for reading rather than stage production" (*Canada's Lost Plays* 2: 93). As the playwright states in her preface, "[t]he drama of 'Laura Secord' was written to rescue from oblivion the name of a brave woman, and set it in its proper place among the heroes of Canadian history" (94).

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<sup>32</sup> Anton Wagner, in his introduction to Volume 2 of *Canada's Lost Plays*, notes Merritt's participation in the United Empire Loyalist Association and calls the play "a perpetuation of the spirit of loyalty to the British Empire" (12).

Curzon's play dramatizes the actions of Laura Secord, who, during the war of 1812, undertook a day's journey by foot to alert the British officer Lieutenant Fitzgibbon of an imminent attack by the American forces. In Curzon's rendition of these events, Secord's warning is what allows Fitzgibbon to mount a successful defense of Upper Canada, so that Canadian soil is secured as British territory, "thanks to a brave woman's glorious deed" (139).

In Curzon's *Laura Secord*, the physical landscape plays a prominent role in the action. As the wilderness through which Laura Secord must travel, it becomes, to some degree, an adversary, providing a series of challenges that she must confront. In an encounter with a rattlesnake, for instance, Secord at first "*recoils in fear, but remembering the cowardly nature of the creatures, throws sticks at it, and it glides swiftly away*" (120). Soon after she gathers her "waning strength" to confront a cliff where "a brier all beautiful with bloom / Hides many a thorn that will dispute [her] path" (122). Later still, her bravery is tested by "*a rapid-running stream,*" "a wilderness of tangled boughs," and a gloomy forest at nightfall where a pack of "dreadful wolves" begin to howl (123, 125).

Anton Wagner has paid respect to the "first use of gender role reversal in English-Canadian drama," explaining how this occurs when Secord leaves her wounded husband at home with the children and ventures out to brave the elements (*Canada's Lost Plays 2*: 93). In this early form of feminism, however, there is no critique of the masculine role itself—no indication, that is, that the prototypical masculine identity as a

social construction might be problematic.<sup>33</sup> Instead, according to the dramatic terms that Curzon has established, Secord must prove herself capable of overcoming the more-than-human natural world that confronts her so that she can stand forth as a worthy—*i.e.*, conventionally ‘masculinized’—representative of the British Empire.

In addition to asserting her superiority over nature in this way, however, Secord also declares, in what Anton Wagner has called “a rhapsody of the woods,” both her appreciation for the land and her belief in Britain’s right to claim it (*Canada’s Lost Plays* 2: 94). This transpires in Act 2, Scene 2, when Curzon’s protagonist, tired from her journey, pauses for a while in a forest glade. Here she daydreams of “Fair Flora [. . .] filling the air with bloom,” of “The gladsome Spring” as a young bridegroom, and “The lovely Summer, in her robes of blue” as his bride (119). When she recalls the imminence of an American invasion, however, her daydreams transform into a disturbing vision:

And shall this land  
That breathes of poesy from every sod,  
Indignant throb beneath the heavy foot  
Of jeering renegade? at best a son  
His mother blushes for — shall he, bold rebel!  
Entwine its glories in defiant wreath  
Above his boastful brow, and flaunt it in  
Her face, rejoicing in her woe? (120)

For Curzon’s fiercely nationalist heroine, then, the earth itself would be saddened by an American occupation. Moreover, for this Christian protagonist, the image of Americans as the rebel sons of a mother earth takes on additional resonance when, in the conclusion of this scene, she defends herself against a rattlesnake — “a straight descendent, thou of

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<sup>33</sup> For a detailed critique of the traditional masculine identity with respect to its inherent antipathy to both women and the natural world, see Val Plumwood’s *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

him, methinks, / Man's ancient foe"—and in her pronouncements, sees herself as a woman in a new Eden, taking revenge on Satan for his temptation of Eve (120).

Is there no Eden that thou enviest not?  
 No purity thou would'st not smirch with gall?  
 No rest thou would'st not break with agony?  
 Aye, Eve, our mother-tongue avenges thee,  
 For there is nothing mean, or base, or vile,  
 That is not comprehended in the name  
 Of SNAKE! (120)

Via such Biblical imagery, Curzon makes it apparent that while evil presents itself in the natural world, there exists in Upper Canada the possibility for redemption, so long as the devil—along with the Americans—is sent packing, and Britain maintains its divinely-sanctioned right to occupy these lands.

While Curzon's *Laura Secord*—like all of the works considered above—is concerned with establishing and affirming territorial claims in this part of the world, two unproduced dramatic works from this period of colonial history—Robert Rogers's *Ponteach* (published in 1766) and Charles Mair's *Tecumseh* (published, over a hundred years later, in 1886)—paint a different picture of the natural world. Both Rogers and Mair's, that is, depict a pre-contact North America as an unspoiled state of nature, free from the corruptions of the 'Old World' civilization that was taking its place, and they do so, revealingly enough, by assuming the personae of indigenous people. In fact, in contrast to Lescarbot's depiction of native North Americans as a submissive and subjugated people, both of these playwrights provide highly sympathetic portrayals of native protagonists fighting heroically to defend their lands.

Robert Rogers—a British North American whom Benson and Conolly cite as one of the earliest playwrights to deal with a Canadian subject and setting—was one of

the first English playwrights to present a version of nature in North America as an unspoiled wilderness, and the first, as Tim Fulford notes, to create a “fully-fleshed Native American hero” (Benson 4, Fulford 21). Rogers based his protagonist on the historical figure of Pontiac, chief of the Ottawa nation, who, in 1763, led a number of tribes in the Great Lakes Region to wage an impressive but ultimately unsuccessful rebellion against British forces.<sup>34</sup> A hundred and twenty years after the publication of *Ponteach*, the English- Canadian nationalist Charles Mair<sup>35</sup> based his eponymous protagonist on the Shawnee leader, who, to resist expansion by the United States, forged an alliance of Western tribes and fought alongside the British in the War of 1812 (Dippie 7).

In their depiction as the courageous, wise and dignified champions of their lands and people, both Ponteach and Tecumseh are prime examples of the ‘noble savage’ trope—an idealized conception of Native North Americans, emerging in part from the writings of Rousseau, that shows up repeatedly in British and French writings in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. (Fulford 2, 46-7; Krech 16). According to this idea, indigenous people had once lived in a free and spontaneous manner, safe from the corruptions and artifice of European culture, amidst a plentiful natural world that was imagined as a kind of rough-hewn un-fallen paradise. Conceived as living ‘close to nature’ in this way, native people were believed to have developed into admirable, honourable and ‘natural’ souls, characterized by loyalty, integrity and an

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<sup>34</sup> For a detailed historical account of this rebellion, see Richard Middleton’s *Pontiac’s War: Its Causes, Course, and Consequences*. For a more concise summary, see William Nester’s *The First Global War*, pp. 224-7).

<sup>35</sup> Mair was a founding member of the ‘Canada First’ movement (Shrive 27, Benson and Conolly 12).

unflinching bravery. “The noble savage,” Shepard Krech explains, was based on “benign and increasingly romantic associations” that placed emphasis on “the rationality, vigor, and morality of the nature-dwelling native” (16). In its earliest form, Krech tells us, the idea of the noble savage evoked an image of a “Peaceful, carefree, unshackled, eloquent, wise people living innocent, naked lives in a golden world of nature” (16). Moreover, for Krech, it is this romantic view of the noble savage that has given rise to the image of the “Ecological Indian”—another cultural stereotype that configures First Nations people and Native Americans as died-in-the-wool environmentalists.

As Tim Fulford explains, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries European writers frequently invoked the noble savage trope as a way to criticize their own governments’ imperialism and “commercial colonialism,” and he cites Rogers’s *Ponteach* as a particularly striking example of this (21). Fulford notes how this native protagonist, in contrast to the British characters in Rogers’s play, possesses a “self-conscious interiority” and consistently comports himself with dignity and integrity (21-22). He points out that although Rogers’s *Ponteach* is—as he puts it—“prepared to wade in blood,” his violent rebellion is presented as entirely justified by Rogers’s portrayal of European “colonial rapacity” that “is not just casual (the work of ‘a few bad apples’) but systematic” (22).

In Act one, Scene one of *Ponteach*, Rogers illustrates this “colonial rapacity” through a series of despicable acts by British settlers. Scene one introduces the unscrupulous trading practices of M’Dole, a man who believes that “it’s no Crime to cheat and gull an *Indian* and who is more than happy to show an apprentice the

deceptions he employs (180-81). In Scene two, two unsuccessful English hunters ruthlessly murder a pair of Indians, steal their furs and weapons and then cut off their scalps, hoping that, in the event of a War, they will be worth “Two Hundred Crowns at least” (185). In Scene three, when Ponteach appears before a British colonel to protest such actions, the latter treats him with contempt: “Tush! Silence! Hold your noisy cursed Nonsense; / I’ve heard enough of it; what is it to me?” (187); and, in Scene four, some British Governors with orders from their King to distribute gifts to Native leaders, hold back three quarters of the assigned goods for themselves. “Lay these aside,” says Governor Catchum, “They’ll fetch a noble Price” (191).

Having exposed such injustices, Rogers then moves the action forward in two ways: first, by taking up Ponteach’s perspective as he initiates his plans for a united front against the British; second, by revealing tensions between Ponteach’s two sons that will have tragic consequences, eventually bringing about both of their deaths and, in the process, the demise of their father’s rebellion. Before Ponteach’s tragic fall, however, Rogers provides an idealized image of the lands and way of life that this leader was struggling to defend.

We get an early indication of this in Act two, when Ponteach’s two sons, Philip and Chekitan arrive, “*loaded with venison,*” and relishing the abundance that their lands provide during times of peace. “Now may we hunt the Wilds secure from Foes,” Philip tells his brother, “And seek out Food and Cloathing by the Chace / While Ease and Plenty thro’ our Country reign” (197). In Act three, this image of the natural world as a land of “Ease and Plenty” is more fully elaborated when Ponteach and the leaders of other First Nations and Native American forces assemble in a counsel of war. Ponteach,

attempting to rouse his allies, warns of how their “pleasant Lakes and Fertile Lands” are being “usurp’d by Strangers, Ravagers, rapacious Christians” (220). Then, “The Bear,” another native leader, adds fuel to the fire, with a description of the ruins that have resulted from the British occupation.

Look back, my Friends, to our Forefather’s Time,  
Where is their Country? Where their pleasant Haunts?  
The running Streams and shady Forests where?  
They chas’d the flying Game, and liv’d in Plenty.  
Lo, these proud Strangers now possess the Whole;  
Their Cities, Towns, and Villages arise,  
Forests are spoil’d, the Haunts of Game destroy’d,  
And all the Sea Coasts made one general Waste. (223)

Rogers’s depiction of these native leader’s concerns over the destruction of their lands was, in many respects, historically accurate. European settlers, whose sense of property was based on farmed land, had been provoking native tribes by clearing forests (Mancall 364-65). As Rogers’s biographer Allan Nevins puts it, “the irresistible trenching of the sturdy frontier farmer upon their hunting grounds beyond the Alleghanies filled [Pontiac and his allies] with resentful dismay” (82). At the same time, though, the imagery of “pleasant Lakes,” “Fertile Lands,” “running streams and shady Forests,” clearly draws upon the myth of the noble savage living in an unspoiled nature as a way of driving home Rogers’s critique of abusive colonial practices.

Although less pointedly critical of such practices, Charles Mair, in his play *Tecumseh*, adopts and contributes to the noble savage trope as well, depicting his heroic protagonist as a warrior of undaunted courage, a martyr for his people, and—because he fought with the British against the Americans—as a Canadian hero. Moreover, Mair’s late 19<sup>th</sup> century verse drama, suffused as it is with notions inherited from the British Romantic tradition, elaborates even more on the image of the ‘New World’ as an

unspoiled state of nature.

As Kevin Hutchings has observed, one of the idealized images of the British Romantic tradition was that of a “genuine, uncorrupted ‘Man’, a being whose status stems from an unalienated connection to the world of nature that is the source of his strength and dignity,” an image, he argues, that both drew upon and became conflated with notions of Native Americans as noble savages (157). Hutchings describes how the Solitary speaker in Wordsworth’s *The Excursion*, dissatisfied with European art and artifice, “strives to imagine an alternative mode of being located in, and drawing mental and spiritual sustenance from, an untouched American wilderness whose ‘shades have never felt the encroaching axe, / or soil endured a transfer in the part / Of dire rapacity’” (157-8).

In Mair’s *Tecumseh*, a poet-artist character named LeFroy, in his reverence for North America’s wilderness and for the noble freedom of its indigenous people, bears a noticeable resemblance to Hutchings’s description of the Solitary in Wordsworth’s poem. When LeFroy first appears in Act one, he declares himself “a part of Nature’s self / And not divorced from her like men who plod / the weary streets of care in search of gain” (20). He then unfolds his vision of an Edenic wilderness—a natural world “unnamed,” “unsubdued,” and “unshadowed by a sail,” wherein “There lived a soul more wild than barbarous / A tameless soul—the sunburnt savage free— / Free and untainted by the greed of gain / Great Nature’s man content with Nature’s food” (21-2).

While it would be wrong, as Norman Shrive points out, to view LeFroy solely as a

mouthpiece for the playwright's ideas,<sup>36</sup> Mair's idealized depictions of Tecumseh as an honourable, loyal and courageous warrior consistently reinforces LeFroy's rendition of the noble savage trope and all that it entails. In Act five, when the British forces buckle to the Americans and their leader General Proctor falls back to save himself, Tecumseh, speaking with heroic conviction, rallies his own troops and leads the charge: "Courage! Warriors, courage! Let our deeds / Take colour from the scene. Now must we fight / Like men; not run like slaves" (122). And, in a later scene, after Tecumseh has been killed in battle, the British commander Colonel Baby pays tribute to the fallen native leader:

I mourn the death of one—  
A soldier—and a savage if you will—  
Able and honourable, valiant, pure  
As ever graced the annals of the earth. (126)

Mair is also careful to show that Tecumseh's impeccable moral character has emerged, not from the traditional sources of European civilization—"No need had he of schools or learned books"—but from a close relationship with the natural world (127). He was, the American General Harrison says, a "master and a spirit of the woods" and an "[u]nsheltered traveller in sad solitudes"—the very embodiment, that is, of LeFroy's Wordsworthian vision (127).

With their idealized portrayals of indigenous people and their lands, *Ponteach* and *Tecumseh* provide an obvious contrast to the *Theatre of Neptune*. Rather than objectifying the 'New World' and its inhabitants as colonial acquisitions, these works

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<sup>36</sup> In his biography of Mair, Shrive observes that Mair did not agree with all of LeFroy's "revolutionary utterance" concerning property, and notes how, in Act four, Scene seven, the favourably portrayed General Brock offers opposition to the poet-artist's utopian ideas. "Lefroy," Brock cautions, "such thoughts, let loose, would wreck the world" (182).

confer agency on a natural world as that which nourishes and dignifies indigenous people, depicting the latter as warriors who are more than ready to fight for their lands and way of life. And yet, while Rogers and Mair were providing resistance to *some* colonizing attitudes, they were also, by adopting and promoting the conception of the noble savage, imbuing their dramatic writings with colonial assumptions of their own.

Foremost among these assumptions was one that, as we've seen, was already present in Marc Lescarbot's *Theatre of Neptune*, but which is evident in an entirely different context here: namely, that native North Americans, as a people living close to nature, lacked any culture of their own. If, according to the noble savage trope, a pre-contact North America had really been an un-fallen natural paradise—an idea reflecting the Greco-Judaic and Christian belief in a Golden age<sup>37</sup>—it followed that its inhabitants must have remained innocents untainted by civilization. If indigenous people, that is, were to be prime examples of the Romantic idea of the 'natural man', it seemed to follow that they could not also be cultured men. According to this way of thinking, however, such 'noble savages' would have no real political agency in the world that had come into being with the arrival of Europeans. If the pristine wilderness was gone or was about to vanish, the indigenous people whose way of life depended upon it, would soon follow. They would, in effect, be doomed to extinction—a convenient fantasy for European settlers wanting to expand their territories.

Brian Dippie's *The Vanishing American* provides a detailed study of how this fantasy, already prevalent in America by 1776, became increasingly entrenched after the

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<sup>37</sup> See Krech 17, Fairchild 2, Dippie 18.

War of 1812 and during the years of western expansion in the United States. During this era, he explains, representations of Native Americans as a people regrettably but inevitably fated for extinction became increasingly common in the country's literature and art. "Romantic poets, novelists, orators, and artists," he writes, "found the theme of a dying native race congenial, and added those sentimental touches to the concept that gave it wide appeal" (11). Dippie argues that while sentimental touches depicting the American Indian "at the sunset of his existence" were elegaic, the myth they proposed also appealed to a commonly held racist belief: the idea that native Americans were "doomed to 'utter extinction' because they belonged to 'an inferior race of men . . . neither qualified to rise higher in the scale of being, nor to enjoy the benefits and blessings of the civilized and Christian state'" (10-11). As Dippie puts it in the preface of his book, "The myth of the vanishing American [Indian] accounted for the Indians' future by denying them one" (xii).

With this in mind, if we return to the plays by Rogers and Mair, it is easy enough to see the ambivalence of these verse dramas with respect to their portrayal of indigenous lands and people, for while these plays convey both of these in the context of an un-fallen paradise, they also depict them in ways that support the conception of the Vanishing Indian. In the conclusion to Rogers's play, for instance, Ponteach, the defeated Ottawa Chief, his rebellion thwarted, bids adieu to his beloved homelands:

Ye fertile Fields and glad'ning Streams adieu;  
 Ye Fountains that have quench'd my scorching Thirst,  
 Ye Shades that hid the Sun-beams from my Head,  
 Ye Groves and Hills that yielded me the Chace,  
 Ye flow'ry Meads, and Banks, and bending Trees,  
 And thou proud Earth, made drunk with Royal Blood,  
 I am no more your Owner and your King. (257)

On one hand, the pathos conveyed here stems from the specific historical conditions that Rogers was writing about and with which he as a British soldier was well acquainted.<sup>38</sup> In historical terms, Pontiac's defeat was indeed a crushing blow for the tribes in and around the Great Lakes region,<sup>39</sup> and Mair's Ponteach embodies this defeat as a fallen 'king' struggling to maintain his dignity and that of his people. There is, too, something approaching an ecocentric sensibility conveyed in Pontiac's final apostrophe to his homelands, the source of his nourishment and wellbeing. In Ponteach's address to "a Proud Earth, made drunk with Royal blood," that is, there is both an acknowledgment of his specific ties to this "Earth" and a more universal reminder that no matter how powerful we imagine ourselves to be, we are all, ultimately, dependent upon it. Yet while there is arguably both historical accuracy and an early environmental lesson in the conclusion to this play, Rogers's depiction of Ponteach's defeat also conveys the idea that the era of the noble savage has ended. As Ponteach bids farewell to his homelands, the implication is that we, *i.e.*, British North Americans, are saying farewell to him and his people and to the Edenic world that had once provided for them.

In Mair's *Tecumseh*, too, one finds an elegiac vision of the noble savage as an idealized race that is doomed to extinction. This is evident early on the action when, in Act one, Scene two, the playwright has the poet-artist LeFroy recite a poem about the "injury of earth's majesty" to a stand of trees that he believes is destined for destruction (21). "There was a time on this fair continent," he declares, "when all things throve in

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<sup>38</sup> Rogers, in fact, as the leader of a special woodland battalion had been involved in bloody battles with Pontiac's forces (Nevins 81-90).

<sup>39</sup> Brian Dippie writes that historians have commonly referred to Pontiac's rebellion as "the last significant Indian resistance to American advance" (7).

spacious peacefulness,” when “the prosperous forests unmolested stood” and “all that flowed was sweet and uncorrupt” (21). For Lefroy, however, the wilderness that he so reveres and that was once the home of the “sunburnt savage free” are fated for destruction, for, while the giant oaks “dwarf” him with “their greatness”, yet there “shall come / A meaner and a mightier than they, / And cut them down” (20). Moreover, in the conclusion to *Tecumseh*, the image of the Vanishing Indian once again takes prominence. As in the closing lines of Rogers’s *Ponteach*, Mair too pays homage to his vanquished native protagonist, but in this case the Shawnee warrior has died, the whereabouts of his buried remains are unknown, and it is only British and American soldiers who are left to lament the passing of the “mighty savage, resolute and brave” (127).

Despite the persistence of the Vanishing Indian as a recurring image in North American culture, however, Native North Americans did not die off and disappear into the mists of time. In fact, as Brian Dippie has shown, in the years since the publication of these two plays, they have been on the increase.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, as the fourth chapter of this dissertation will show, in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the next millennium, First Nations and Metis playwrights in Canada have been able to establish a very different portrayal of indigenous characters—one that divests itself of colonial stereotypes while re-claiming, in an eco-political context, traditional worldviews and relationships with the land.

In the context of this pre-history of ecocentricism in English-Canadian drama, however, what deserves emphasis here is that in a time of colonial conquest, some of the

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<sup>40</sup> Dippie xv-xvi.

first glimpses of nature in the ‘New World’ as an *oikos* or homeland, were conveyed by Europeans attempting to view it through the eyes of its indigenous inhabitants. Territories, it seems, must first be acquired—and, more importantly, lived in—before they can become appreciated as home, and, it wasn’t until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that playwrights descended from invader/settler populations would begin to portray the agency of the more-than-human physical world through the eyes of non-native characters, and to make concerns about identity, dwelling and their relationship with nonhuman nature a central concern in their dramatic works.

## Chapter Two

### Identity, Place and the Dwelling Perspective 1922-1967

In the decades leading up to and immediately following World War II, concerns with dwelling and identity vis-à-vis the more-than-human physical world became prominent in a number of English-Canadian plays. During the 1920s and 30s, in dramatic works by writers such as Archibald Keys, T. M. Morrow and Herman Voaden, the depiction of characters who engage and interact with the Canadian wilderness reflects a strong identification with the natural world among settler populations in what was, for them, a new land and a new nation. In the 1950s and 60s, a similar emphasis on identity, place and the natural world emerged once again, this time in the plays of James Reaney, an author whose writing for the stage includes a diversity of nonhuman characters, ranging from bears, trees and sundogs to wind, birds, coyotes and rain. In works of all these playwrights, human characters and events form and take shape in reciprocity with autonomous agencies in the more-than-human physical world, and it is in such plays that, for the first time in English-Canadian drama, an ecocentric worldview comes to the fore.

One way to understand the ecocentric worldview in these plays is with reference to what anthropologist Tim Ingold has characterized as a “dwelling perspective” (153). Drawing on the philosophy of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty and on the ecopsychology of James Gibson, Ingold defines a “dwelling perspective” as one “that treats the immersion of the organism-person in an environment or life world as an inescapable condition of existence” (153). “From this perspective,” he writes, “the world continually

comes into being around the inhabitant, and its manifold constituents take on significance through their incorporation into a regular pattern of life activity” (153). In other words, according to Ingold, a dwelling perspective is one that perceives human existence as an organic and relational process, one constituent of a physical world that is in a continuous state of becoming.

For the purposes of this study, what is important here is that this model of how we inhabit and perceive the world is one that accords with what I have characterized as an ecocentric sensibility. In his book *The Perception of the Environment*, Ingold narrates how his reading of James Gibson’s *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* led him to adopt this (inherently ecological) “dwelling perspective.” The key to Gibson’s “ecological approach,” Ingold explains, is in its departure from an assumption commonly held by psychologists in the late 1970s: namely, the idea that people perceived the environment around them by “constructing representations of the world inside their heads” (2). Ingold explains:

It was supposed that the mind got to work on the raw material of experience, consisting of sensations of light, sound, pressure on the skin, and so on, organizing it into an internal model which, in turn, could serve as a guide to subsequent action. The mind, then, was conceived as a kind of data-processing device, akin to a digital computer, and the problem for the psychologist was to figure out how it worked. (2-3)

For Ingold, what made Gibson’s approach so revelatory was his view that human perception occurred, not as “the achievement of a mind in a body, but of the organism as

a whole in its environment” (3). Ingold’s own notion of a dwelling perspective, then, derived from this view of how one might experience the world. Rather than understanding human perception as a process of decoding something that is ‘out there,’ removed and separate from ourselves, a dwelling perspective, Ingold explains, situates us as “organism-persons within a world that is inhabited by beings of manifold kinds, both human and non-human” (5). “Therefore,” Ingold writes, “relations among humans, which we are accustomed to calling ‘social,’ are but a sub-set of ecological relations” (5).

This view of how humans are situated and constituted within the physical world is, I contend, similar in many respects to the ecocentric perspective that emerges in many of the plays that I will be examining in this chapter—plays that offer dramatic portrayals of human social relations in terms of how they take place within a larger field of actions involving the more-than-human physical world. In particular, I will be considering how this perspective emerges in the dramatic works of Herman Voaden and James Reaney and how—in plays such as Voaden’s *Murder Pattern* and James Reaney’s *Colours in the Dark*—it is fundamental to the vision of the world that these writers convey. Before looking at how all this transpires, however, a good place to begin an examination of the dwelling perspective in the English-Canadian drama of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is with Carroll Aikins’s *The God of Gods*, a play in which, as with Rogers’s *Ponteach* and Charles Mair’s *Tecumseh*, environmental wisdom is conveyed by a First Nations character, arguably another version of the noble savage/ecological Indian construct.

Aikins's *The God of Gods* (premiered 1919, at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in England) is a tragedy in which two young First Nations lovers, Suiva and Yellow Snake, eventually meet their demise. First, Yellow Snake is killed because he refuses to bow down to his people's 'heathen' superstitions, and then Suiva, after recognizing the superstitions and hypocrisy of her people, commits suicide. With this dramatic action, Aikins appears to be offering a warning about the dangers of mass allegiance to a fanatical religious ideology, yet his portrayal of Yellow Snake as a Christ figure vis-à-vis the 'superstitious' beliefs of his tribes-people is inflected with a religious chauvinism of its own. Cradling her lover's corpse, Suiva decries the actions of her people: "This is not God. The God is dead. You killed him. He walked among you but you did not know him. He was God. [. . .] His name was love" (66). Aikins's choice to have Suiva protest her lover's death in this manner suggests that what distinguishes Yellow Snake from the religion of his people has to do with a form of enlightenment that is decidedly Christian. Moreover, if the sacrifice of Yellow Snake is, as Suiva's claims suggest, a recapitulation of Christ's death, then her First Nations tribes-people become configured, in a kind of double-handed religious bigotry, as both blood-thirsty savages and Christ-killing Jews—quite a nasty bit of business.

Regardless of this kind of Christian chauvinism, however, an early passage in Aikins's play manages to deliver up one of the first bits of ecological wisdom in English-Canadian drama. The passage occurs in a scene where Yellow Snake is telling his beloved Suiva about Hidden Water, a magical land far away from the injustices of his people. In this passage, Yellow Snake employs an elaborate conceit wherein the

birds of Hidden Water are dreams and their young are the works of art that are born from such dreams:

YELLOW SNAKE. The birds look like these birds but they are really dreams that choose the trees they love and nest in them. They mate like thrushes but their young are not like birds at all. Some are of stone with sand, and some are pictures made with blood on birch-bark, and some are only voices. But when they sing it is like quick water under the white moon. (13)

In what follows, though, Yellow Snake's vision is framed in what today would be described as ecological terms: "And you must never hurt these birds or rob their nests," he tells Suiva:

Because if you hurt them, you hurt the trees. If you kill them, you kill the trees; and if you kill the trees, you have no shelter from the sun and storm; and though you live, life will be dull as sleep is without dreams; and you'll be glad to die. (13)

Within the terms of the conceit that Yellow Snake is employing, what he is really talking about is the conservation of art, not birds, but the vehicle of his metaphor nevertheless manages to call forth the image of a world where humans, as part of nature themselves, are required to take responsibility for the web of diverse relations in which they reside, and where the idea of a life without this diversity is expressed as a state of abject misery.

In the English-Canadian drama of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, it is not only 'Ecological Indians' that provide the vehicle for ecological insights. Consider, for instance, Archibald Key's *The Mother Lode* and T. M. Morrow's *Manitou Portage*—two of the first plays in English-Canadian drama that depict a profound awareness of dwelling and place-identity among the settler populations of these times. Before launching into an ecocritical reading of these plays, though, it is worth noting that they

might never have been published if it were not for the efforts of Herman Voaden. It was Voaden, after all, who was a catalyst for these works and who brought them to print along with four other one-acts in *Six Canadian Plays*, an anthology of plays that, according to Voaden's preface, are all "infused with the vigorous, outdoor spirit of Canada" (viii).

As the preface and introduction to *Six Canadian Plays* make clear, Voaden's goals for *Six Canadian Plays* were nationalistic and aesthetic, yet both these goals were in turn connected to his deep convictions about the significance of the natural world. In his introduction, he calls for a dedication to the local and for an appreciation of the wilderness as a distinctive feature of Canadian experience. "[T]here must," he writes, "be keen observation, sympathetic study, and patient 'awareness' of a new environment" (xv). He cites the painter Lawren Harris's reliance on "the stimulus of earth resonance and of a particular place, people and time," and he lauds Yeats and Lady Gregory in Ireland and Walt Whitman in America for their willingness to draw inspiration from the specifics of their lands and to respond to these new stimuli with distinct voices and innovative literary forms (xv-xvi).

Voaden's assertions of "a new people in a new land" make it apparent that he is speaking to and about Canadians with ancestral connections to Europe, and his repeated emphasis on the local is part of a concerted attempt to provide some distance from the traditions and ways of seeing imported from what was in his view the 'old country' ("Introduction" xxiv). In his preface to *Six Canadian Plays*, Voaden quotes Bertram Brooker's view of the Canadian artistic spirit as "a response to the new, the natural, the open, the massive—as contrasted with the old, artificial, enclosed littlenesses of Europe"

(vii), and, in his introduction, he places great emphasis on the inspiration of a northern geography, described by F.B. Housser as “a rough country of rivers, waterfalls, lakes, canyons, and great hills” (xviii).

As Sherrill Grace has pointed out, what Voaden meant by the “north” is “but one part of a complex and long-standing ‘discursive formation’” in Canada: “a plurality of ideas of North that are in constant flux yet are persistent over time across a very wide field of endeavour” (*Canada* xiii). In *Six Canadian Plays*, Voaden’s editorial contribution to this “discursive formation,” with its continual praise for the ideas of Fred Housser, appears at times to be veering towards a dangerously exclusionary form of nationalism. Scott Watson, in a particularly scathing attack on the Group of Seven and their promoters, goes so far as to describe Housser’s published accounts of the Group of Seven—a book that Voaden cites as one of his primary influences—as “a white supremacist tract” (277). “Identifying the Canadian race with the wilderness and the north,” Watson writes, “Housser evoked a mystique of snow and ‘whiteness’. Whiteness represented the northern expanses, but it also had racial connotations” (277).

Voaden’s editorializing, however—despite its reliance on Housser’s study of these Canadian painters—seems less concerned with searching for a source of racial purity than with finding a way to characterize the particularity of the Canadian identity vis-à-vis what he perceives as a British and American ethos. In his introduction, for instance, he writes about a Canadian idealism that brings together the enthusiastic “ardour” of Whitman’s America and the “poise and restraint of the British” (xix), and, while he describes his country’s capacities for spiritual growth as being (as in Whitman’s America) “unlimited,” he also mitigates this by saying that its “fresh and untrammelled”

idealism is also indebted “to the experience of an older, war-weary world” and to a “peculiar fusion of races,” as opposed to one pure and exclusionary one (xix). Regardless, too, of Voaden’s explicitly nationalist sentiments, the depictions of settler relationships with the land in *Six Canadian Plays* are hardly assertions of an overly zealous exclusionary patriotism. Instead, as the following examples will illustrate, what these plays convey is a considerably ambivalent vision of the country, one whose people are, in various ways, humbled by the agency of the natural world.

In Betti Sandiford’s *Bone Spoon*—one of the plays published in Voaden’s anthology, but which was never staged—an island in Georgian Bay becomes the catalyst for a young woman’s story about the history of its early settlement. “I don’t feel it [the story] came out of me,” she tells her friend. “I felt it—all around me—it came out of the rock—it was ready for me” (20). The story that emerges, though, is a tragic one: the tale of an explorer who falls ill and is left to die in an isolated and unforgiving land (20).

The land is equally harsh in J. E. Middleton’s *Lake Doré*, the action of which concludes when a widow named Stella, shamed by the actions of her husband, commits suicide by walking out into a frozen mountainous landscape. Most of *Lake Doré* takes place indoors, within a small northern cabin, but Voaden’s production (April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1930 at the Central High School of Commerce) placed emphasis on the environment outside its walls as an overwhelming and oppressive force in the action. The production both began and concluded with blue and white lights revealing a scenic backdrop—based on a Franz Johnston painting—depicting a small cabin, dwarfed by its physical surroundings, and Lowrie Warrener’s Apia-like rendition of the northern landscape with its “three-

dimensional, stylized pieces painted a silver grey” and its cold, blue and green lights,” was similarly designed to create “a bleak and austere feeling” (*Six Canadian Plays* 88).

The land has an austere feeling as well in Dora Smith Conover’s *Winds of Life*, produced, along with *Lake Doré*, at the Central High School of Commerce. In Conover’s play, a formidable Ontario setting becomes a test of character for a young man and his mother, whose determination to set down roots in her northern homeland forces a restless patriarch named George Fryer into doing the same. When the latter, after faking his death and making plans to start a life in the United States, comes to the realization that his wife and son will not be coming with him, he abandons his plans and decides to accept the challenges of his northern surroundings. “I suppose life *is* worth fighting for,” George tells his son, “—even with the winds and the currents all wrong” (132). Here, then, as in the other plays in this anthology, nationalist sentiments, rather than a being a vehicle for jingoistic pride, are expressed as a kind of grim determination to survive in a harsh and unforgiving climate.

Like the other works in *Six Canadian Plays*, Archibald Key’s *The Mother Lode* and T. M. Morrow’s *Manitou Portage* convey a similarly sombre mood in their depiction of how the lives of Canadian characters are shaped and informed by physically and psychologically demanding environments. Both Key and Morrow, however, in addition to making the natural world a significant force in the action, place particular emphasis on the reciprocity between the human characters and their physical surroundings, paying attention to the ways in which how we perceive and treat the natural world can affect how we are treated in return.

In Archibald Key's *The Mother Lode*, for instance, the relationship that a prospector, George Fairburn, has with the natural environment has more to do with notions of home, conservation and a cross-species community than with striking it rich. "It's something you boys don't understand," he tells his fellow prospectors, "I love this country—it's mine. This little hill we're on is named after me and so is the township over there [*pointing to the left*] and that means a lot to me" (39). The place where Fairburn feels most at home, though, is in the woods outside the township, and his idea of community includes other than human life forms—the trees and animals with whom he shares his existence. When another prospector, Oscar Hansen, disparages Fairburn's reverence for place as "sentiment," Fairburn's makes clear his personal connections to the land.

Maybe I am queer, Oscar, but when I'm out here—all alone most of the time—I do a lot of thinking. I talk to the trees—grizzled, charred stumps most of them—that went through the fire with me. I listen to the animals and feel I've something in common with them. [. . .] It's their bush as well as ours and I'll keep it for them until civilization sends us all further north. (39)

Fairburn's stance here is ecocentric by virtue of the way he acknowledges the agency of other life forms (he 'talks' to trees and 'listens' to animals), but his assertion that animals have as much right to inhabit the bush as we do—that it's 'theirs' as much as 'ours'—also makes him an early proponent of the North American conservation movement.

It could be said, for instance, that Fairburn's ecocentric view of the world anticipates by at least a decade the kind of thinking that Aldo Leopold was formulating in the 1940s and which came into print in 1949, shortly after his death, in *A Sand County Almanac*. Fairburn's notion of commonality with trees and animals, for instance,

has parallels with Leopold's proposals to widen "the boundaries of the community to include soils, water, plants and animals, or collectively, the land," and Fairburn's notions about the rights of animals to inhabit the land are in keeping with Leopold's "land ethic," a moral philosophy designed to change "the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (219-20).

In the midst of speculators looking for quick returns, however, Fairburn's conservation ethic makes him an anomaly, and, as a result, he comes very near to being a kind of a scapegoat. Fairburn seems to recognize this in his depictions of his dealings in town. "I'm afraid of the city," he tells his prospector companions, "I'm afraid of men when I'm back there—they all want to cheat me, to use me for their own ends" (41). In the company of his fellow prospectors, too, Fairburn becomes the object of ridicule. When speculators fuel rumours that some of Fairburn's mineral claims in the area might be a bonanza, other men rush to stake claims in and around his, and when these claims don't pan out, Sandy MacPherson—a prospector who Fairburn thinks of as a friend—accuses him of being mad. "Just think of it," Sandy tells the others, "that crazy fool's been prospecting in these parts for fifteen years and what has he found? [. . .] He's bushed" (33).

In the play's conclusion, however, Key sees to it that Fairburn's respect for the environment is amply rewarded. In a moment of poetic justice, Fairburn picks up a rock that a trapper named Joe has offhandedly tossed to one side, and finds mineral traces that lead to a major discovery: "Look! Joe. Look at this," he exclaims:

It's free gold—a bonanza—and copper, too. [*Faces south-west toward the dyke and pulls out his compass*] North-east south-west. [*Shouts.*] It must be—[*puts hands to mouth and call off-stage.*] Pete! Sandy! Oscar! Come back! Come back! I've found the vein—the mother lode. (47)

As a dramatization of virtue rewarded, Key's conclusion configures the play as a straightforward parable, with Fairburn emerging as the ideal Canadian settler and his discovery but the outward manifestation of what he already possesses: a home—a personal relationship with the land that constitutes a wealth of its own. In this context, then, it is MacPherson and the other prospectors who, having run off at the first rumours of a new find, seem shiftless and anti-social, while the idealistic Fairburn comes across as more grounded. Indeed, in a world of greedy speculators, Fairburn's preference and respect for the bush and its inhabitants, far from seeming crazy, stands forth as a corrective to a mentality that would reduce the earth to nothing more than a collection of resources waiting to be used—what the philosopher Martin Heidegger called “a standing reserve” (*The Question* 322-323).

For Canadian settlers and their descendants, however, affirmations of their physical geography as a home were complicated by the fact that they were colonizers, inhabiting the homelands of indigenous people. While Key's *The Mother Lode* pays no heed to this ethical contradiction, T. M. Morrow's *Manitou Portage*—the play that, in Voaden's anthology, immediately follows it and that, according to Sherrill Grace, was Voaden's favourite<sup>41</sup>—confronts this contradiction head on, conveying the shadowy awareness among these invader/immigrant populations that they were not only strangers in this so-called new world, but interlopers as well.

Morrow's play brings this awareness to the fore via the depiction of Big Jack O'Connors, a swaggering river worker whose attitudes toward nonhuman nature are the

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<sup>41</sup> Grace, “A Northern Quality” 6.

very antithesis of Fairburn's. The physically powerful O'Connors easily intimidates his fellow workers, but the real test of his strength comes from a particular place: the eponymous "Manitou Portage," a mountain pass that, in the course of the play, comes to symbolize a passage between two cultures, between the human and the more-than-human physical world, and, eventually, between life and death. According to Scotty, one of Jack's companions, the pass is haunted.

SCOTTY. I remember hearin' once, away back, before I come on the river, there was a couple of stout lads took it into their heads one night to stop here. On'y they didn't stop long. They was back in camp inside half-an-hour with the life scared out of them pretty near.

O'CONNORS. An' what'd they see?

SCOTTY. I don't mind hearin'. I guess they never knew. It was jus' somethin'. They say there's some thin' here. I heard once there was dead Indians buried somewhere round. (55)

Scotty has other stories about the pass, too: about a man found devoured by black flies; about another man who shot and killed his own brother after mistaking him for a deer; and about men who have fallen into the pool below, never to return. "What kind of fish've they got down there anyhow?" asks O'Connor. "It aint a fish," Scotty tells him, "It's something the Indians used to talk about. Manitou they called it; a sort of a god of some kind. Some folks say it's the Manitou scares you off, if you try to stop here" (55). O'Connors scoffs at the idea that any "heathen god" could scare him, and issues a challenge: "Hello, Manitou! Say, Manitou, listen! This is me, Big Jack O'Connors. An' yuh can't bluff me. I'm stoppin' here tonight, jus' to show yuh up. Come on now, Manitou, do yur dammedest" (57). In the action that follows, O'Connors's arrogance spells his demise.

O'Connors's eagerness to pit his strength against the physical elements, combined with his ridicule of the Manitou, provides a prime example of what the historian George Grant, writing about the ethos of the Canadian settler, called a "conquering relation to place" (17). Speaking as a descendant of settler populations transplanted from Europe, Grant argues that the source of this stance toward the natural world has its source in an experience of dislocation.

[T]he break [with the European world] was not only the giving up of the old and the settled, but the entering into the majestic continent which could not be ours in the way that the old had been. It could not be ours in the old way because the making of it ours did not go back before the beginning of a conscious memory. (17)

For Grant, it was this experience of dislocation, along with "the very intractability, immensity and extremes of the new land" that led "mastering Europeans" to engage in "a battle of subjugation" with the North American environment (17). Moreover, in Grant's view, this "conquering relation to place" had links to a view of the country's indigenous populations as a people that must also be conquered, and, as he sees it, these two attitudes have become the source of a profound estrangement. "That conquering relation to place," he writes, "has left its mark within us" (17).

When we go into the Rockies, we may have the sense that gods are there. But if so they cannot manifest themselves to us as ours. They are the gods of another race, and we cannot know them because of what we are, and what

we did. There can be nothing immemorial for us except the landscape as object. (17)

Northrop Frye, in his essay “Haunted By a Lack of Ghosts,” both echoes and elaborates on Grant’s notion of this estrangement from the land and indigenous culture. “There are gods here,” he writes, “and we have offended them. They are not ghosts: we are the ghosts, Cartesian ghosts caught in the machine that we have assumed nature to be” (478). For Frye, Canadian settler populations and their descendants, separated from ancestral traditions that once engendered respect for the land, had lost their connection with the natural world. As the title of Frye’s article suggests, it is this absence of ancestral traditions—what he calls “a lack of ghosts”—combined with the adoption of Cartesian attitudes toward the nonhuman natural world, that, according to Frye, haunts them with an awareness of their own ghostly detachment from the land.

Frye’s re-phrasing of Grant’s ideas, with its references to ghosts and the offended gods of indigenous people, bears such striking parallels to what transpires in *Manitou Portage* that it reads like a direct commentary on the action. In Morrow’s play, O’Connors, during his overnight sojourn in the mountain pass, discovers that what he had earlier ridiculed as a “spook” is far more powerful than he had anticipated. When night sets in, he begins to shiver from the cold. An animal’s eyes look out from the darkness; a cloud of insects startle him; and then, one by one, the spirits of those who have died in this mountain pass appear to him, shaking his confidence and eroding his vitality. Finally, in the obligatory scene, the spirit of the Manitou appears, “imperturbable as a statue carved from the primordial granite,” and, after viewing this tiny braggart man “as if it might regard an annoying insect,” recedes back into the

waters below (65). The by-now exhausted river worker, in a desperate move to reassert his mastery, tries to pawn this off as a victory, but his words are cut short, he drops his peavey, “*falls heavily*” and “*lies still*” (66).

In enacting O’Connors’s hubris and consequent demise, Morrow’s play serves as a reminder about the very attitudes that Grant and Frye characterize as disturbing traits in the Canadian psyche. While hardly a personification of a Cartesian worldview, Jack O’Connors, in his assumptions of superiority over the physical world and his lack of respect for indigenous traditions, might well be seen as the epitome of a rootless, human-centred existence that is out of touch with its surroundings, and Morrow—by dramatizing O’Connors’s encounter with the Manitou—has, in effect, served up a vivid metaphor for the projected fears of a transplanted settler population still coming to terms with its arrival on an indigenous people’s soil. Morrow’s “Manitou,” like the portrayals of indigenous protagonists in plays by Rogers, Mair, and Aikins, continues to conflate native people with the natural world, yet this playwright, by handing it a victory over O’Connor’s arrogance, has managed to enact what is, in effect, the converse of the Vanishing Indian trope. At the end of *Manitou Portage*, after all, it is O’Connors who—in keeping with Frye’s insights about settler culture—is reduced to a ghostly status, while the Manitou, as a reminder of the persistent native presence in this country, endures (65).

Read in tandem—as Voaden’s placement of them invites us to do—Key’s *The Mother Lode* and Morrow’s *Manitou Portage* raise ideas about dwelling in the natural world that, in their time, were both prescient and radical in their implications. Key’s play, which, in combination with Aikins’s *The God of Gods*, provides evidence of an

emerging environmental awareness in Canadian drama, proposes the notion of dwelling as a co-existence with other life forms and as a lived experience of reciprocity. Morrow's *Manitou Portage* reinforces this idea with a warning that the attempt to dismiss the force of the natural world (along with indigenous traditions linked with the land) is both unwise and dangerous.

Given the overall tone of the preface and introduction to *Six Canadian Plays*, one might expect the dramatic works contained within its covers to be a good deal more ecstatic in their portrayals of the Canadian environment, an environment that Voaden envisioned as the source of a joyful creative discovery "bringing distinction and national character" to the country's idealism (xix-xx). Reading more closely, though, one finds that he reserved his most heartfelt praise for the accomplishments of Canadian painters (notably the Group of Seven). "The artists [*i.e.*, painters]," he writes, "have gone furthest; theirs was the joy of first discovery" (xix). By contrast, he is less than enthusiastic about what his anthology of one-acts has to offer. "The plays," he observes, "are for the most part 'first flights' and somewhat lacking in 'technical facility,' and 'the authors would be the last to claim that their efforts are free from faults' or 'had met with a large degree of success'" (vii, xix). Yet in bringing *Six Canadian Plays* to print, Voaden had, at the very least, accomplished one of his goals: namely, the creation of something unique in Canadian drama. Works such as *The Mother Lode* and *Manitou Portage* may not have been ground-breaking in terms of their stylistic innovations or "technical facility," but they were distinct in terms of how they brought to the fore issues of place-identity and dwelling in the settler consciousness of this era, issues that

were, and would continue to be, significant concerns in the development of an ecocentric drama in Canada.

Voaden's most significant contributions to the development of an ecocentric worldview, however, came about as a result of his own writings for the stage. Like the works he helped publish and produce, Voaden's plays were also concerned with issues of identity and place vis-à-vis the Canadian environment, and, like his fellow playwrights, he made sure that the natural world was a fundamental part of the action in his work. Reflecting back on his writing life, Voaden lists three primary themes in his plays: "an intense and idealized love of nature, a strong belief in the North and our challenging 'wider margins' and a passionate devotion to country" (*A Vision* 74). For Voaden, however, the natural environment, in addition to being the font of his creative inspiration and the touchstone for what he perceived of as a distinct national identity, was also the foundation for his spiritual beliefs.

In a December 16, 1932 article for the *Sarnia Observer*, after describing how a production of Wagner's *Ring Cycle* at Bayreuth had "impressed itself on [his] mind indelibly," Voaden explains how, three years later, he discovered both the inspiration and the form for his play *Earth Song* via his relationship with the natural world ("Author," Critical Writings, Voaden homepage).

I spent many long days rambling over New England hills, walking from morning till dark. These were very happy days. I began to feel that the secret of content and greatness lay in being very much in harmony with nature – in harmony with the movement of the seasons and the cycles of the days. So I wrote the play in five cycles of light and growth – each cycle consisting of

four scenes – spring dawn, summer noon, autumn sunset, winter night.

(“Author”)

Furthermore, as Voaden goes on to explain, the “harmony” that he perceived in nature, in addition to providing him with a template for its dramatic structure, was also the means by which his two archetypal protagonists, Adam and Eve, arrived at a state of “perfection” and “completion”:

Through these cycles my two characters, whom I have called Adam and Eve because they represent the promise of life in a new world, move through experiences which finally lead to the perfection of their own characters and their completion in each other. This final consummation I have called, symbolically, their godhood. (“Author”)

Having been “indelibly” influenced by the dramatic personae of Brünhilde and Siegfried in Wagner’s opera, Voaden, it seems, wanted to create his own heroic protagonists, characters whose “godhood” would stem from their identification with the natural world. What he meant by “godhood” at this time, however, was still somewhat difficult to pin down.

In Anton Wagner’s 1993 collection of Voaden’s dramatic writings, a much older Voaden is more explicit about what his spiritual beliefs were at the time.

I believed that we “touch eternity” by living a life in which our spirit and “god-soul” become part of the rhythm and loveliness of earth. Our lives go on then, despite death. [. . .] Readers may be uneasy with an expression like the “god-soul.” I believed that man was a fragment of God. I was deeply influenced by Whitman’s pantheism (*A Vision* 314).

Voaden's "intense and idealized love of nature" and his "belief in the North," in other words, were rooted in a Whitmanesque belief in the physical world of nature as the source of immortality. "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love," writes Whitman in "A Song of Myself," expressing his faith in a self, united, after death, with the natural world (l. 339). "The smallest sprout shows there is really no death" he asserts, "and if ever there was, it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it" ("A Song of Myself" l. 126-127).

In contrast to Whitman's ebullient affirmations of the natural world as a vision of immortality, however, the natural environment that characters in Voaden's plays encounter is more likely, at least initially, to evoke the fear of death than assurances to the contrary and, according to Northrop Frye, such fears were not uncommon among Canada's settler populations. Frye, in his "Conclusion to the First Edition of Literary History of Canada," points out that a hostile physical environment—one he describes as "terrifying, cold, empty and vast"—makes frequent appearances in the Canadian poetry of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (365). He notes, for instance, in the narrative poems from this era, "the recurrence of such episodes as shipwreck [*sic*], Indian massacres, human sacrifices, lumbermen mangled in log-jams, mountain climbers crippled on glaciers, animals screaming in traps, the agonies of starvation and solitude" (365-6). Such episodes would not, one assumes, evoke an image of the natural world with which one might readily identify, and this is precisely Frye's point. Romantic identifications with nature, he explains, were characteristically troubling for Canadian poets at this time, not only because the country's climate was inclement and the terrain often hazardous, but because of an increasingly Darwinian view of the nonhuman physical

world as a “nature red in tooth and claw” (365). As a result, in Frye’s view, poetic encounters with this version of the natural world, rather than providing a vehicle for transcendent, metaphysical experiences, often led writers into fearful confrontations with their own mortality. “I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry,” Frye writes, “by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature [. . .]. It is not a terror of the dangers of discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest” (350).

Frye’s observations about a terror of the soul in regard to nature are in conflict, of course, with Voaden’s professions of a Whitmanesque pantheism, but it was this very conflict that provided the dramatic tension in many of Voaden’s plays. In nearly all of Voaden’s dramatic work, that is, his characters’s nationalist and spiritual beliefs are called into question and tested by the difficulties of dwelling in a formidable physical environment. Unlike Morrow’s Big Jack O’Connors, however, Voaden’s protagonists do not to use force to resist and overcome their physical surroundings. Instead, in almost every case, they heroically assert their identification with the very elements that threaten them, and it is through such difficult identifications that they come to inhabit their natural environments in a way that grants them a hard-won sense of belonging.

One early example of this identification with a harsh and unforgiving natural world occurs in *Northern Song*—an unproduced work, written in 1930, that explores the fear of becoming lost in the Canadian wilderness. Much of the action in *Northern Song* involves an interchange that occurs between Don, a young man with artistic sensibilities, and Joe, a wilderness guide, when a third man—a painter named Keith—goes missing in the bush. For the inexperienced Don, the woods are unfamiliar, and he is beset by fears

about his friend's plight. The next morning, however, Keith walks out of the bush unperturbed and tells the others how, inspired by the elemental scene he was painting and determined to capture its vitality on canvass, he had chosen to make a home of where he was for the night (110-11).

The opposition between Don's fearfulness in the bush and Keith's appreciation of it as a home has parallels with a story Northrop Frye tells about an ethnologist friend and an "Eskimo" caught out in a blizzard in Northern Canada. According to Frye, when the ethnologist, terrified by the harsh conditions, cried out "We're lost!" his native companion offered a calming corrective. "We're not lost," he explained, "We're right here" ("Haunted" 476). For Frye, this story epitomized the sense of estrangement that settlers and many of their descendants experienced in the Canadian wilderness in contrast to the experience of the country's indigenous people for whom the natural world was more clearly a home. In *Northern Song*, however, the painter Keith, in his remarks to his wilderness guide, conveys his admiration for the rough, wild beauty of Canada: "You see, Joe, this is different country from Europe. It's wilder and rougher. You can't paint it in the old soft beautiful way. The sunlight and shadows are clear. There is no mist. Everything is rough and strong" (101). "People don't belong here as yet," Keith explains in a decidedly ethno-centric assertion, yet his understanding of the Canadian wilderness makes it apparent that, for him at least, this part of the 'New World' is about to become a home. "I've grown used to it now," he tells the others, "You can't roam in the North as much as I have in the last three years without learning how to take care of yourself" (111).

In *Wilderness*—a work that had its 1931 première at Yale University—Voaden continues to explore how characters might learn to identify with a formidable and potentially threatening natural environment. For the protagonist of *Wilderness*, however—a young woman named Mary—the challenges are much more daunting than those that the youthful Don encounters in *Northern Song*. Whereas in the latter, Don is relieved to find that his companion has survived his night in the bush, in *Wilderness*, Mary receives news, near the end of the play, that her fiancée, Blake, has been caught in a blizzard and frozen to death.

For Blake's mother Ellen—a woman who has lost her husband in a drowning accident—the death of her son is a psychological wound from which she cannot recover. In contrast, however, Mary rises to the occasion in a surprising manner. After choking down the news of Blake's demise, she almost instantly transforms her grief into a heroic affirmation of her fiancé's love of the wilderness, vowing, no less, to pledge herself in the same manner to the physical world into which, as she sees it, her beloved's body has now been transfigured:

I too shall hear the wilderness calling, calling my life into a great adventure. It will be my land. I'll belong to it. I'll be part of its winds and woods and rocks—part of its Northern Lights (*Pause*) though he's gone now he'll still be part of it. He'll still belong. And he'll be content. (179)

Mary's affirmation here is Whitmanesque in terms of her confrontation with death via an enthusiastic identification with the natural world, and, for Voaden, the fearlessness of such a stance was a distinctly Canadian attribute, instilled in settlers by their relationship with a demanding environment. Also inherent in Mary's heroic (albeit melodramatic) soliloquy, however, is the seed of an ecocentric idea—the notion that to identify with nature requires accepting one's embodied existence as part of a physical world of other

agencies, a world of “winds, woods, and rocks” from which all organisms emerge and to which they must ultimately return.

Voaden’s commitment to this idea of our immanence in nature (and to a belief in nature’s divinity) shows up in nearly all of his dramatic writings and almost always via protagonists who, like Mary, confront Frye’s “deep terror in regard to nature” and assume a similar bravado. Similar scenarios also occur in a number of Voaden’s later, less naturalistic plays where—in an interdisciplinary style that he called symphonic expressionism—choreography, music, scenic elements and light all serve to convey the struggles of emblematic characters faced with physical surroundings that dwarf and threaten to overwhelm them.

In *Earth Song*, for instance, an early version of Voaden’s symphonic expressionist style, the struggles of two archetypal protagonists, Adam and Eve, eventually give way to proclamations of rapture where they declare their love for one another and for the earth:

*EVE.* We shall be one with earth and each other.

*ADAM.* This is the hour of consecration. In communion we shall fulfil the earth-life within us.

*EVE.* In the ecstasy of awakening earth we shall be complete together. (257)

Something similar (although expressed in a less bombastic manner) occurs in *Hill-Land*, Voaden’s next foray into symphonic expressionism—a work produced and directed by Voaden in 1934 at the Central High School of Commerce in Toronto. In the conclusion to *Hill-Land*, a young man named Paul, having lost his father and young brother to the vicissitudes of a hazardous environment, faces up to the death of his grandmother in a manner that calls to mind Mary’s response to loss in *Wilderness*.

I shall walk over the earth which gave her strength, and I shall meet her there. I shall climb the hill, where Rachel and I loved each other, and I shall meet her there. [. . .] All these years she has been part of the hills and the sky. Now she is everywhere, and indestructible. (312)

Like Mary's response to the loss of her fiancé, Paul's courage stems, once again, from identification with an environment that has tested his resolve, but which has, in the process, made it all the stronger.

Identification with nature is also a central theme in *Murder Pattern* (1936), but in this play—arguably Voaden's most ecocentric work—the ebullience spouted by characters such as Mary in *Wilderness*, Adam and Eve in *Earth-Song*, and Paul in *Hill-Land* has been replaced with a less optimistic, more solemn vision of human existence. Whereas Voaden's earlier work tends to celebrate the endurance of the human spirit in a heroic, Whitmanesque (at times almost Wagnerian) manner, *Murder Pattern* places emphasis instead on the limits of the human, depicting what it might mean to situate our lives within a nonhuman physical world that extends beyond our ability to understand it.

Voaden accomplishes this shift in perspective via a device that had not been seen in the drama from this part of the world since Lescarbot's depiction of Neptune in 1606: namely, the personification of the natural world as a character and as a speaking subject. Yet whereas Lescarbot fashions a Renaissance-styled Neptune as a way of naturalizing France's imperial claims, Voaden's employment of a chorus of Earth Voices in *Murder Pattern* conveys a tragic, post-humanist sensibility, portraying Canadian settlers as subjects whose lives are circumscribed, mitigated and ultimately subsumed by the natural world.

*Murder Pattern* was not the first time that Voaden had explored the possibilities of personifying nonhuman physical forces in a performance script. He had already done

so to some extent in *Symphony* (1930), an unproduced collaboration with the painter Lowrie Warrener. In this work, the protagonist is an Everyman character whose struggles unfold amidst nonhuman natural forces such as trees, wind, grains of wheat, clouds, heat from the sun and so on. The script for *Symphony*, however, is not a play *per se*, but a scenario for an expressionist dance piece.

Warrener and Voaden's decision to make *Symphony* a movement-and-image-based work contributed to its ecocentric perspective by ensuring that all its 'characters', as portrayed by dancers, would have a similar status. All, that is to say, would be expressed, in purely physical terms. Consider, for instance, how the authors envisage a moment in the Second Movement of *Symphony*, when an animated northern wilderness presses in upon their Everyman character, threatening to overwhelm him:

The wind comes up, the tree forms sway into more grotesque and menacing attitudes, and the whole north takes on motion. Then Man's inner imagination transforms the shapes and figures that terrorize him into huge overpowering shapes that close in upon him, soft and yielding. As he resists and rejects them they change into other shapes and move and writhe about him. They rush against him and appear to smother him, then scatter for a new attack upon the senses. (42)

In this passage, the human protagonist clearly has a central role in the action, yet in the midst of all these movements and shapes, the lines of distinction between what is human and what is not begin to blur. Moreover, in the script for *Symphony*, it's not only in moments of terror that such blurring takes place. In the conclusion to this second Movement, for instance, at the moment when the 'Man' has overcome his fears and is

ostensibly more at home in the wilderness, the authors, in an homage to the Group of Seven,<sup>42</sup> depict him as if had become ‘one’ with his environment: “For a moment he stands at the summit, regarding the scene before him. In its sturdiness his figure resembles one of the dark wind-blown jack pines that crown the ridge” (143). A similar image of metamorphosis occurs in the conclusion to the Fifth and final Movement of *Symphony*. Here, the Everyman figure, after a series of profound losses, ascends, at the end of his life, to another vantage point, and the audience is invited to contemplate a sublime vision of the north that calls to mind one of Lawren Harris’s paintings of snow-peaked mountaintops:

the mountain summit, visible at last, radiant with the morning light. The music is tumultuous and triumphant. On either side of the great lifting shoulders of the summit can be seen other peaks in the distance, likewise caught in the matchless radiance of morn. (150)

In a prefatory comment to *Symphony*, Voaden refers to this image as a “transfiguration” and describes it as an expression of his pantheistic beliefs. “[This] final transfiguration,” he writes, “was important to me. Here was *my* religion. I was, and am, a deeply spiritual person—but in the way of St. Francis and Whitman—worshipping nature and light and the sun and trying to live Christ’s humanity in my life with my fellow man” (156). For Voaden, then, it was a pantheist vision that laid the foundation for the transformative conclusion to *Symphony*, in the image of a man, who, at the end of his life, has become a mountain.

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<sup>42</sup> “It was a sign of how much our friends in the Group of Seven meant to us,” Voaden writes, “that Man’s sturdy, triumphant figure resembled ‘one of the sturdy jack pines that crown the ridge’” (*A Vision* 153).

Although image and choreography, were their scenario produced, might have allowed Warrener and Voaden to portray their Everyman as a being embedded within, contained by, and ultimately at one with the earth, Voaden's *Murder Pattern*, a play in which the earth itself has a speaking role, arguably conveys a more radically earth-centred stance. As Christopher Manes has observed, the domain of speech in Western culture has been conventionally conceived of as specific to human beings, while all other forms of life have been generally treated as mute. In his article "Nature and Silence," he makes the point that this way of thinking, which Manes views as a significant contributor to our current ecological crisis, effectively privileges human beings as the only authentic 'subjects' on the planet, so that all other beings become silent, passive objects. As Manes points out, "It as if we had compressed the entire, buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of epistemology, to the point that someone like Georg Lukacs could say, 'nature is a societal category'—and actually be understood" (15).

Manes locates one of the primary sources of this human-centred thinking in the Christian tradition, and, in particular, in the forms of Biblical exegesis that arose in the Middle Ages:

According to medieval commentators, eagles soared higher than any other bird and could gaze upon the sun, undazzled, because they were put on Earth to be symbols of St. John and his apocalyptic vision, not the other way round. From this hermeneutical perspective, it was inconceivable that eagles should be autonomous, self-willed subjects, flying high for their own

purposes without reference to some celestial intention, which generally had to do with man's redemption. (19)

This kind of exegesis, he explains, "swept all things into the net of divine meaning" (with the human always at the centre) and "established God as a transcendental subject speaking through natural entities, which, like words on a page, had a symbolic meaning, but no autonomous voice" (19-20).

In *Electric Animal*, the critical theorist and media scholar Akira Lippit provides additional insights on the 'silencing' of the natural world. Like Manes, Lippit also points out how the traditional Christian worldview tended to objectify nonhuman animals in order to privilege the sovereign human subject (75). Moreover, as Lippit explains, a tradition of Western philosophy has been equally concerned with making distinctions between humans and animals by emphasizing language and speech as the provenance of a uniquely human subjectivity.

Arguably the most sensitive arena in which human subjectivity struggles for dominance is that of language in general, and speech in particular. Most surveys of Western philosophical thought affirm (with a few very important exceptions) the consensus that although animals undoubtedly communicate with one another, only human beings convey their subjectivity in speech. That is, human speech exceeds its function as communication and actually performs, with each utterance, the subject. (14)

Lippit's study details how Western philosophers—from Aristotle to Descartes and from Hegel to Lyotard—have advanced the view of nonhuman animals as creatures that lack speech and, therefore, subjectivity, and that it is only recently, in the writings of

philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Jacques Derrida, that this idea has been called into question (15-17, 127-134).

Given the observations of Christopher Manes and Akira Lippit, Voaden's decision in *Murder Pattern* to represent the nonhuman world, not only via image and movement, but also via a speaking chorus of "Earth Voices" was a strikingly original move in English-Canadian drama.<sup>43</sup> Before *Murder Pattern*, Voaden had already been exploring the dramatic possibilities of other kinds of choruses in his plays and performance scripts. In *Earth Song* and *Hill-Land*, for instance, his speaking choruses served a number of functions: sympathizing with his human protagonists, giving voice to their hopes and fears, threatening them, encouraging them, and offering spiritual guidance. In these earlier works, however, the characters are personifications of *human* emotions and ideas: "The Ecstatic Voice," "The Lyric Voice," "The Philosophic Voice," "The Voice of Pity," and so on. What was new and radical about *Murder Pattern* was his conception of the chorus as an expression of earthly forces and of the earth itself. While the choruses in *Earth Song* and *Hill-Land* are conveyed as personifications of human psychology, Voaden's chorus of Earth Voices is more specifically grounded in the physical world of nature, and it is from this position of an imagined alterity that it speaks.

What is even more remarkable in *Murder Pattern*, however, is the fact that Voaden invites his audience to imagine not only that the Earth could speak and to do so as a self-reflective consciousness, but also that it could do so more eloquently and with a

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<sup>43</sup> For European productions that incorporate natural forces as communicative characters, see Richard Wagner's *The Ring Cycle* and Leoš Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen*. Determining if these are ecocentric productions, however, would require some detailed analysis.

greater awareness than the human characters in the action. “Pity,” says the second Earth Voice, “the isolate hill folk, fearful, estranged. They have no words to speak the terror of the gloom, and the silence, and the unending distances that wall in life from life” (325). Here, then, the more conventional Western views described by Manes and Lippit have been turned on their ear. Now it is the physical world of nature that has language, while his characters—having no words to express the scale and gloom of the environing world in which they dwell—are unable to grasp the full significance of what it is saying. Indeed, a good deal of the dramatic irony in *Murder Pattern* stems directly from this juxtaposition, for while the audience, via the Earth Voices, can hear and appreciate what the physical world is saying, the characters on stage remain, for the most part, unaware of its voice and, as a result, of the full measure of its import and agency.

The central dramatic action in *Murder Pattern*—the story for which these Earth Voices provide commentary—is both simple and, in some respects, grim. In an isolated rural Ontario community, a man (Jack Davis) murders his brother-in-law (Steve Doan), confesses his crime, and is sentenced to death. When his sentence is then commuted to life imprisonment, he is arraigned, becomes mortally ill in jail, and, finally, returns home to face death alone. Yet it is not the dramatic narrative of *Murder Pattern*—its linear sequence of events—that carries the import and interpretive force of this play, but the variety of ways in which its action is framed and bracketed.

Voaden employs several sets of characters to establish this bracketing of the action in *Murder Pattern*. Two newspaper reporters<sup>44</sup> offer one perspective of the unfolding events, presenting the observable, objective details of the case via news bulletins of the murder, the trial and, later, of the murderer's imprisonment. The following passage, for instance, provides a sample of their journalistic approach:

Friday, April 25th. The body of Steven Doan was found today, one hundred and twenty yards west of the Gore Road, near the top of the big hill. The dead man was lying on his back, in a sheltered hollow of the ground. Three bullet wounds were in his body -- one through the shoulders, one in the chest, one in the stomach. (325-26)

In addition to these journalistic accounts, a First and Second Narrator provide a more omniscient view of the play's unfolding events, describing the setting, establishing mood, and exploring the murderer's state of mind. At one point, after describing the details of Jack Davis's lonely, unhappy marriage to Steve Doan's sister, they depict the harsh environment and weather as factors leading to what became a source of enmity between the two men.

SECOND NARRATOR. Nine years ago he married Annie Doan, sister to Steve Doan. It was not a happy marriage. They had no friends, except the Doans.

FIRST NARRATOR. Six silent years followed after the marriage—six lonely and unhappy years. Three winters ago the fourth child was about to be born. Roads were blocked with snow, and Davis walked eight miles to the village. When finally the doctor broke through with his team it was too late. Mother and child were dead. Then the feud began. (329)

Yet another view of the action in *Murder Pattern* comes via the farmers in the settlement. In brief terse exchanges, these rural characters speculate about who the

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<sup>44</sup> In the workshop production, according to the reviewer Augustus Bridle, they were stationed "in little red-light booths on the floor of the theatre" (qtd. in *A Vision* 319).

murderer might be and offer a range of opinions about the crime and the actions taken by the authorities. Such exchanges, for instance, provide the following portrait of the murder victim, Steve Doan, a man rumoured, for the most part, to be a lazy misfit and a bully:

FIRST FARMER. Everybody says it was him burned Jim's sugar camp early this spring, and shot Butcher's colt last fall.

SECOND FARMER. He was that aggravatin' and sarcastic, everyone was against him. He was lazy. He wouldn't work. Then he'd have nothin' and he'd go out and take it from someone. You couldn't leave anything around in the woods but what it'd be gone. (326)

For Voaden, though, it was not enough to have all of these human characters commenting on the action, presenting facts and documentary details, providing psychological motivation, and offering ethical judgements; for him, the place itself had to speak.

Why? What does this earth chorus provide that his human narrators and characters could not? Many of the functions that Voaden's Earth Voices serve are similar, after all, to those supplied by his First and Second Narrators. Like them, they comment on the isolation of the community; like them, they delve into the psychological state of the murderer, Jack Davis, and explore the motivations for his crime. Despite these similarities however, the perspective provided by the Earth Voices distinguishes itself from that of the human Narrators in two significant ways. The first of these results from their portrayal of the nonhuman natural world as an on-going agency, independent of

human mortal concerns;<sup>45</sup> the second stems from their depiction of human existence as part of this agency and as that which continues to partake in it, even after death.

In keeping with their human-centred concerns, the First and Second (human) Narrators portray the nonhuman natural world, for the most part, in terms of how it affects the lives of the settlers that inhabit it. The start of the play provides a typical example of this:

SECOND NARRATOR: (*After three drum beats, the first on a bass drum.*)  
The neighbourhood is of mountainous roughness. The bush lies close up to the little farms. The first settlers made clearings along the road, and in the woods. But the soil, which gave promise of richness and fertility, proved to be shallow and stony. The winters were long, spring came late, and the frost early. Years passed. One by one, they gave up the struggle and moved elsewhere. Here and there the clearings were deserted, the houses ghost-like and silent. (323)

From the perspective of these human Narrators, then, the natural environment is the “setting” or backdrop for the action of the play, or—in another sense—it is the ground on which the settlers have carried out their actions.

Quite another view of the natural world, however, is provided by the Earth Voices. Here, environmental forces are portrayed without reference to human actions and human goals. Instead, these forces are themselves the ‘actors’, and they move, relentlessly, in their own time, and for their own sake:

SECOND EARTH VOICE. All the while, the deep lakes moved their waters slowly towards the river and the sea, catching the myriad moods of wind and sun and cloud, through spring and summer and autumn and winter: through countless days and nights, through breathless dawns and tender twilights. (323-25)

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<sup>45</sup> In this respect, what the Earth Voices offer in *Murder Pattern* is something very much like what the choral addresses to the gods provide in the theatre of ancient Greece, namely a way of reflecting on human actions from the vantage point of those who do not die.

What is significant here is that Voaden's Earth Voices acknowledge the nonhuman physical world in a way that the human narrators and characters—all of whom are preoccupied with ethical and social issues surrounding the murder and the trial—never fully comprehend. Conveyed as processes that take place throughout the seasons and over “countless days,” such geophysical actions transform the natural world from a static backdrop into a range of on going forces that envelop human affairs. Sometimes it is the agency of the sun that the Earth Voices describe: “All day long the sun has poured its warmth into the earth. All day long the soiled snow has melted in the hollows, and the water has washed over the roads, in noisy streams” (325). At other times, it is the agency of the moon: the way it “whitens the farms, and silvers the quiet mirrors of the lake” (325). In November, it is the “despotic fury of the wind and the rain” (337), while in the spring “the dun earth warms to the curious sun” (338). Revealingly, when Davis is wasting away in prison, the Earth Voices remind us of biological processes, outside his jail cell, that are independent of his suffering, rather than emblems of it: “Spring passes, and warm rich summer drowns in the Lakeland. The trilliums are withered in the sheltered glades, and in the pasture fields the wild strawberries have borne their fruit” (339). The contrast, in other words, between what is going on with Davis and what is occurring outside his cell could not be more striking. Davis is dying; the natural world, meanwhile, continues to bear flowers and fruit.

Having looked at the contrast between how the human narrators view the more-than-human physical world and how the Earth Voices do, let us now turn our attention to how these two sets of narrators view the human action in the play. Like the two parallel, yet contrasting views of the physical environment in *Murder Pattern*, there are

also two distinct views of human existence. The human narrators view the settlers in this rural community from a perspective informed, it would seem, by Darwinian and Freudian notions. For them, the settlers are characters that, as a result of their isolation from civilization, have begun to devolve and regress:

FIRST NARRATOR. Shut off from the world to the south, life stood still. There was no fresh blood. Here and there, in the great solitude, life moved backwards, towards the animal, the grotesque, the warped and evil. (323)

This, then, is a view of human identity as something determined by forces from both within and without: by genetics, by environment, by repressed drives and murderous instincts. From such a perspective, evil is not some absolute force in the universe, but is, instead, contingent on circumstances. As a result, when the First and Second Narrators turn their attentions to the murderer, Jack Davis, they do not ask the audience to judge the evil in him, but, rather, to see how this individual fits into a naturalistic “pattern” of psychology and environment.

FIRST NARRATOR. Consider this man. (*DAVIS is staring out to the audience*) An ordinary farmer of the north? No! A true subject to fit into our pattern. For loneliness has had its way with him—loneliness and terror in the midst of magnificence. (329)

Having objectified Davis in this way, the First and Second Narrators, along with the two newspaper reporters and the Farmers in the area, provide a picture of the circumstances that have led to his crime: a poor upbringing, an unhappy marriage, loneliness, the death of his wife and child, and the brooding accusations of in-laws who blame him for these deaths. Had Voaden restricted the audience’s view of Davis to this perspective, *Murder Pattern* might well have been a naturalistic play in the classic Zola mode, revealing how Davis, like the harried Woyceck in Georg Büchner’s play, was

driven by circumstances to commit his crime. The dramatic effect of *Murder Pattern*, though, does not stem entirely from the kind of social, class and psychological analysis that informs Büchner's *Woyzeck* and the plays of late 19<sup>th</sup> century naturalists such as Strindberg, Chekov, and Ibsen. Instead, what distinguishes *Murder Pattern* is the way in which the human social realm, with its ethical, psychological and juridical elements, fits into a larger "pattern," a cosmology made evident and given expression by his nonhuman narrators.

From the perspective of the First and Second Narrators in *Murder Pattern*, the import of Jack Davis's sorrowful existence—his loneliness, his crime and his sentencing—is viewed primarily in terms of how it is shaped by the social community and in terms of how it affects this community. Accordingly, the audience is given to understand how it is that Davis came to commit murder and how, for the sake of the polis, he must, Oedipus-like, become an outcast. In contrast, the commentary by the Earth Voices remains entirely removed from such political and juridical concerns. As an expression of what Voaden called the "wider margins,"<sup>46</sup> their views of the murdered man and of the murderer have little to do with issues of ethics and justice. Instead, they offer the audience a view of these men in terms of their relationship to the physical cosmos, and, in the process, Davis and Doan begin to look less like individuals with specific psychological and ethical profiles and more like archetypal everyman characters, similar in kind to the mute protagonist in Voaden and Warren's *Symphony*.

The way in which the Earth Voices portray Steve Doan, for instance, provides no moral account of his character—no indications, that is, of how he treated his neighbours

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<sup>46</sup> *A Vision* 74.

or of whether he merited his demise. Instead, they observe him solely as a physical force, something akin to the rushing waters of a stream or the outspread branches of an oak tree:

Steven Doan tramped the woods and strode the north roads. He was a giant. He feared no man. His strength was the strength of three. Tonight you shall not call him to his tramping and striding. Tonight his giant strength is spent. (327-28)

This description of Doan as a kind of Promethean force of nature does not, to be sure, override the community's view of him as a lazy, dangerous troublemaker, but it does provide another perspective—one that bestows a measure of respect upon the murdered man as a living organism, part and parcel of the physical world.

A similar effect is achieved by how the Earth Voices depict the murderer, Jack Davis. Their portrayal of Davis does not emerge in the first two-thirds of the play, where the action is primarily concerned with the social and ethical consequences of the murder. With Davis's imprisonment, however, the First and Second narrators are silenced, and the Earth Voices take over much of the commentary, providing a view of the prisoner, not in terms of his crime, but in terms of his mortality, and it is this much different view of Davis that brings the action of the play to a close.

The last five pages of the script accomplish this in the form of an elaborate dramatic conceit that is, in effect, a kind of inverted apostrophe. In poems such as John Donne's "To the Sun Rising," Keats's "Bright Star," and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," poets address forces in nature as if they were animate, intelligent beings. In *Murder Pattern*, this convention is reversed. Here, it is the nonhuman world of nature delivering a poetic address to Davis as if he were part of an animate Earth.

The Voices begin this inverted apostrophe by sympathizing with the imprisoned man's abject loneliness and with his growing apprehension that his sad and desperate life will soon be coming to an end. In Davis's first moments behind bars, the Earth Voices speak to him through the wind, the rain and the darkness of night—elements that inform and intermingle with his own thoughts, confirming his fate and inviting him to accept the stark inevitability of his life sentence:

SECOND EARTH VOICE. Listen, O prisoner, to the despotic fury of the wind and the rain. Listen to the wind, tortured, ceaselessly strident. Through your thoughts the rain beats steadily, incessantly, speaking its message of bitter finality.

FIRST EARTH VOICE. The night comes, dark and disastrous. For you too, O soul, it is the end. The doors are closed to hope. It is the end. (337)

Although these Voices announce that Davis will never return to his former freedom, they also encourage him to overcome his fears by identifying with the circumambient physical world. "Do not despair," the Second Earth Voice, counsels the prisoner: "You have yet the gift of life. The earth is not dismayed. It listens and is quiet, keeping its own secret. You, too, must not fear. You must believe and wait" (337). By directly addressing Davis in this way, the Earth Voices take on a more interventionist role in the play, becoming, in a sense, his mentors and spiritual guides. And while Davis doesn't directly respond to these Voices, there are indications that, by attending to processes in the natural world, he is 'listening' to the message of consolation and community that they are bringing to him.

SECOND EARTH VOICE. He sees the measureless skies arch to the circling hills.

FIRST EARTH VOICE. He watches the clouds drift over the hills, shadowing the sapphire lakes, and the waving forest of colour, and the great rocks rounded and moss-grown, that stare at the sky. (341)

Davis's loneliness, in other words, is thrown into relief by the sublime grandeur of the world outside his cell and by his likeness to nonhuman agencies in this world—the rocks that, like him, “stare at the sky.”

Toward the close of *Murder Pattern*, with the dramatic focus shifted from Davis's life in prison to his impending death, his identity as a criminal outcast is less of a concern, and the life of this sorrowful man—imprisoned by fear and loneliness in a world he doesn't understand—begins to take on significance as a paradigm for human suffering. “Inexorable is man's fate,” The Earth Voices proclaim, “Bitter his course, through life's dark maze” (338). From the perspective of these physical agencies that do not die, all humans are, in their mortality, abject beings. To mitigate this suffering, however, the Earth Voices offer a post-human world, inviting him, and—by implication the audience—to reflect upon his (and their) significance as an integral part of this imagined alterity.

Davis has a chance to experience this post-human world when, having become mortally ill, he is released from prison to spend his last days in his lake-land home. The Warden assures him that there will be “folks” there who will be happy to see him, but the conditions of his release do not allow them to contact him. Instead, what welcomes Davis is the land, offering him its “warmth and strength” and—significantly, given Voaden's pantheism—its “rapture”:

SECOND EARTH VOICE. Come back to the clear sunlight of the lake-land, to the rapture of the giant-lifted skies.

FIRST EARTH VOICE. You shall hear the white clouds sing, as they drift the soundless arch of heaven. You shall hear the wind, blowing in sunlight. (339)

The natural world, in other words, while making life difficult for Davis (and the other settlers of this desolate land), also has a more favourable aspect. Indeed, by the end of *Murder Pattern*, the elemental forces that, via the snow-blocked roads had deprived Davis of his wife and child and driven him into isolation, have become the vehicle for his redemption, a way for him to move beyond his suffering and, in accordance with Voaden's pantheism, to become one with the elements.

In bringing about this resolution, Voaden's Earth Voices employ language that is reminiscent of Biblical imagery. As part of their ongoing address to Davis, one of the Earth Voices describes the lake as "a miracle of blue and white" (339). "Rejoice, o exile," it tells him, "you have come home at last" (339). "Surely the quietness of earth possesses him now," declaims the First Earth Voice, "Surely the peace of earth is in his heart" (341)—lines whose rhythms and diction are redolent of the Psalm of David's "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (Psalm 23.1.6). As in all of Voaden's other works, however, there is no Christian transcendence in *Murder Pattern*. Voaden's "miracle of blue and white," for instance, is a "miracle of wave and sun," and, when Davis returns home, the Earth Voices relate how "[h]e sees the measureless skies arch to the circling hills" (339, 341). If the Earth Voices draw on Biblical language, in other words, it is only to advance a consistently earth-centred view of transcendence, one entirely in keeping with Voaden's pantheist beliefs.

*Murder Pattern* concludes with a clear affirmation of this kind of pantheist-informed transcendence. After portraying Davis, on his deathbed, apprehending "the great rocks, rounded and moss grown, that [like him] stare at the sky," the Earth Voices go on to describe how nonhuman nature pays its respects to his death: "The autumn

woods are reverent this day” (341, 342). Then, in a final passage, they welcome Davis’s spirit into the enduring, brooding and mysterious agency of the physical world:

You have entered the temple now at last, O lonely one. You are part of the mystery at last. Your body is one with the earth. Your dreams shall blow steadily in the eternal winds. In them your spirit shall brood and pass endlessly among the hills . . . lonely and enduring as the hills. (342)

The transcendence conveyed here is decidedly less ecstatic than the kind affirmed by characters such as Mary in *Wilderness* or Paul in *Hill Land*. Instead of a triumphant affirmation of the human spirit, what the Earth Voices offer is a sorrowful but compassionate view of mortality: a vision of death as a metamorphosis into an agency that endures, but according to terms and processes that are beyond human concerns.

It might be argued that Voaden’s resolution, with its vision of a nonhuman physical world that is, in some respects, sympathetic to human suffering, is as much a “wish-fulfilment”<sup>47</sup> as Lescarbot’s idea of Neptune conferring his blessings upon the tiny colony of settlers on the Atlantic seaboard. Yet, from an eco-critical view, the perspective that *Murder Pattern* offers is significantly different from the one portrayed by the *Theatre of Neptune*. In Lescarbot’s *Theatre of Neptune*, that is, nature is a source of secular power and its assurance means an endorsement of his countrymen’s claims of dominance; in *Murder Pattern*, nature’s assurance is nothing more than an acceptance of our human mortality and our embeddedness in an on-going surge of natural energies: an other-than-human world comprised of earth, wind and hills. Rather than depicting a nature that obliges and honours human power, *Murder Pattern* conveys how and why we might acknowledge and appreciate nature as an animated materiality in its own right.

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<sup>47</sup> See Wagner (“Colonial” 9). Jerry Wasserman, too, describes the *Theatre of Neptune* as a “small-scale spectacle of wishful imperial triumphalism” (*Spectacle* 13).

In Voaden's view, the natural world, with its enduring agency, is a source of immortality and, as such, has the power to mitigate the fear of death. Yet the possibility for such immortality depends, it would seem, on our capacity to appreciate the physical world in which we dwell, for it is only by coming to see the sublime beauty of the rocks, the hills and the measureless skies that Davis is able to appreciate his own life and death as part of this magnificence.

In concert with the other works discussed in this chapter, Voaden's plays—and, in particular *Murder Pattern*—provide considerable evidence of an ecocentric sensibility in the drama of English Canada, a sensibility that differs strikingly from what George Grant called “a conquering relation to place.” Such works, in keeping with Ingold's dwelling perspective, situate human characters and the social realms they inhabit within the circumambient physical world and portray this more-than-human world, not as a collection of resources or inert materials to be manipulated, but as an *oikos* to be acknowledged, both for its own sake and in terms of how it might provide a means of measuring both the worth and limitations of human actions.

In the post-war period of the 1950s and 60s, a dwelling perspective similar to the kind found in Voaden's work, can be discerned in the plays of James Reaney, a playwright whose writings, like Voaden's, convey a respectful appreciation for place and for nonhuman nature and that frequently situate human lives and actions as events that take place both alongside and within the realm of the more-than-human physical world. In Reaney's plays, as in Voaden's writings, this ecocentric perspective developed gradually and, as in Voaden's *Murder Pattern*, it depended, to a great degree, on his ability to stage forces of nature as characters in their own right. Such nonhuman

characters initially arose in Reaney's plays for children, but he was also able, in his later plays for adults, to have actors portray a considerable diversity of such dramatic personae—from wind and forests to tortoises, bears and sundogs.

For Reaney, the depiction of nonhuman life forms and forces as characters was part of his earliest development as an artist. *The Red Heart* (1949), his first volume of published poetry, includes personae that speak, like Voaden's Earth Voices, from the perspective of the physical environment, viewing human actions from a more-than-human perspective and, in so doing, reminding his readers of their embeddedness in the physical world. In "The Great Lakes Suite", for instance—a series of poems included in this volume and later set to music by John Beckwith—it is the lakes that speak. In one of these poems, "Lake St. Clair," Reaney adopts the persona of the lake to tell the story of a bear's protests about the pollution coming from the cities of Windsor and Detroit (46). In another, the poet begins in a whimsical manner, conveying "Lake Superior" as a character who is both authoritative and proud: "I am Lake Superior / Cold and grey. / I have no superior; / All other lakes haven't got what it takes; All are inferior" (43). At the mid-point of the poem, however, this playfulness takes on a more ominous tone in accordance with what Margaret Atwood has designated as a distinctively "Canadian"<sup>48</sup> version of nature: "I am so deep / That when people drown in me / Their relatives weep / For they'll never find them" (43). And, in the poem's final lines, Reaney, via this Lake Superior persona, manages to serve up an image of the physical world as an inter-related family of forces, a world that has its own intrinsic presence outside of any human

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<sup>48</sup> Atwood, in *Survival*, observes that, for the Canadian writer, "[t]he two favourite 'natural' methods for dispatching his victims are drowning and freezing, drowning being preferred by poets" (55).

actions or concerns: “In the light of the Moon, my mother / In the light of the Sun, my grandmother” (43).

Despite these representations of the circumambient world in Reaney’s poetry, though, the ecocentric worldview in his dramatic writings did not emerge until his poetic imagination, combined with his experience of writing plays for children, had awakened him to the full range of creative expression afforded by the stage. It is hardly the case that nonhuman nature goes unrepresented in Reaney’s earliest dramatic writings. In Reaney’s *The Killdeer*, for instance, a play that premiered in 1960 at the University of Toronto’s Alumnae Theatre, the dialogue is frequently interlaced with references to animals and—as the play’s title would lead one to suspect—to birds. In this early production, though, the nonhuman world is subsumed almost entirely by human-centred concerns.

*The Killdeer*, a play that incorporates both psychological realism and melodrama, tells the story of Harry Gardner’s struggle to overcome a femme fatale/dread mother figure named Madame Faye. In the dramatic action, Faye has framed Rebecca, Harry’s beloved, with a murder charge, and Harry, an inexperienced young lawyer, must expose Madame Faye’s deceptions. The significance of the play’s title becomes evident when Madame Faye relates a story of how, as an envious adopted child, she had beaten to death a wounded bird that her sister, the “true-born” daughter, had been nursing back to health. Toward the end of this story, she conveys her feelings after having killed the bird.

I felt the ground had turned to whetted knives.  
I waited for her [her sister] to say something. She didn’t.  
My own badness was like a rotting thing.  
I could smell it. I knew now the one thing I

Wanted in the world was for her to break the spell.  
 To come at me—hit me over and over again.  
 For what I'd done. Then I'd stop hating her. (59)

With this story, Reaney establishes Madame Faye's childhood self-loathing as the source of the hatred she feels for her sister. Within the action of *The Killdeer*, however, even though her sister is no longer alive, Madame Faye's relentless envy leads her to view her sister's daughter Rebecca, as a substitute for the wounded killdeer. Thus, after successfully implicating Rebecca in a murder charge, she delivers the following address to her long-departed sister: "Well "I have your killdeer [*i.e.*, Rebecca] now and I'll torture it / Till your ghost comes from the grave and / Annihilates me with hatred" (59). Later, as Madame Faye revels in her evil plans, she speaks once more as if her sister's ghost can hear her, making clear, as in the story of her childhood, that she identifies with the wounded bird. "I don't want my wing to be fixed," she cries, "I want / you to take a stick of wood and beat me to death" (61).

In an ecocentric play, Madame Faye's story might have been couched as an explicit warning of the ways in which human pathology can have dire consequences for nonhuman others.<sup>49</sup> Instead, by making the wounded killdeer a metaphor for Madame Faye's psychological state, Reaney ensures that this play is concerned, not with wounded birds or with the depiction of troubled human relationships with the more-than-human natural world, but with questions of justice and forgiveness in the social sphere. In this sense, then, the worldview in Reaney's *The Killdeer* contrasts with the one in Reaney's "Lake Suite." In the latter, humans are viewed from the perspective of

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<sup>49</sup> Two examples of this are Edward Albee's *The Goat or Who Killed Sylvia?*, where an animal pays the price of a dysfunctional human relationship, and Michel Marc Bouchard's *The Tale of Teeka*, a children's play about a boy, physically abused by his parents, who passes on this abuse by killing his pet goose.

nonhuman nature (*e.g.*, as those who poison its waters and who drown in its depths); in this play, however, the killdeer is portrayed through a human-centred lens—both in the way the characters refer to it and in terms of the overarching action of the play.

In Reaney's *Night Blooming Cereus*, a chamber opera premiered April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1960 in Toronto's Hart House,<sup>50</sup> the playwright is conveying something quite different from the psychological and juridical concerns in *The Killdeer*. Like the wounded bird in *The Killdeer*, the eponymous cactus plant in *Night Blooming Cereus* is a central metaphor in this script, but what it conveys is not human psychology or sociology, but an overarching cosmological design. The central human character in *Night Blooming Cereus* is Mrs. Brown, a lonely old woman of humble means, whose daughter has left home at an early age, never to return. In the opera's inciting incident, a mysterious young woman arrives at Mrs. Brown's doorstep, bearing a bittersweet message. With her identity undisclosed for much of the performance, the young woman eventually reveals that Mrs. Brown's long-lost daughter has died, but that she, the granddaughter, has come on her mother's behalf to ask the old woman's forgiveness. The significance of the granddaughter's visit, however, is underscored by the fact that she has unwittingly arrived during a very special occasion: the night when several of Mrs. Brown's neighbours have come to watch the flowering of a very special night-blooming cactus.

Within the context of the opera's dramatic action, Mrs. Brown's cactus, unlike the wounded bird in *The Killdeer*, has both agency and import. Much more than a passive

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<sup>50</sup> According to Ross Woodman, Reaney completed "the first version while teaching summer school at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia in 1952" (16).

prop, this staged ‘bio-mimesis’<sup>51</sup> is such a significant element that even the granddaughter’s visit, the most significant human action in the play, is relegated to a subplot. As Reaney makes abundantly clear, however, Mrs. Brown’s cactus is no ordinary one. While Strindberg’s *A Dream Play* concludes with the flowering of a gigantic chrysanthemum, Reaney’s chamber opera opens with an even larger blossom. According to Reaney’s stage directions, it is “*as if time had quietly and suddenly stopped while in the gray sky above the village appears a vision*”:

*the Night-blooming Cereus opening in slow beach crashing swarming splendour and glory, a blossom larger than airplanes or zeppelins, four times really the size of the village, three times the size of Toronto, twice the size of Bethlehem and once the size of Eden. Then it fades as time comes back. (30)*

With such an opening image, it is not surprising to discover that the cactus that is about to flower in Mrs. Brown’s home is extraordinary in many respects. Not only does it, like many varieties of cactus, bloom only on winter nights, but—according to the song that Mrs. Brown has composed in its honour—it is about to flower after having been dormant for the last 100 years, something that no actual species would do. “Night-blooming Cereus,” she sings, “Now for us / You will come out / after a century / to see my friends and me” (35).

Moreover, for Mrs. Brown and her neighbours, the flowering of this particular cactus is such a wondrous event that it has come to epitomize the possibility of fulfilment in their lives. In its blossoms, Mrs. Brown, hopes to see “the face of [her] lost girl” (35); Barbara, an orphan, yearns to see her mother and father; the aptly named Mr.

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<sup>51</sup> Una Chaudhuri has coined the term “zoosis” to designate the representations of nonhuman animals in all kinds of discourse (“(De)Facing” 9) “Bio-mimesis,” my own neologism, extends this notion to representations of all life forms.

Orchard seeks confirmation of his chosen occupation, to “see why [he] work[s] in the earth” (49); and, in the choral song that concludes the opera, it becomes apparent that all of these characters’ expectations are tied to their belief in the flowering cactus as the visible sign of a divine dispensation (49).

ALL: When I behold  
 All this glory  
 Then I am bold  
 To cross Jordan.  
 Open, flower.

Then I am bold  
 To call on God  
 When I behold  
 All this glory,  
 Open, flower. (49-50)

From the perspective of Mrs. Brown and her neighbours, in other words, if this Night Blooming Cereus has agency it is, in large part, a divine agency. As an embodiment of God’s blessings, it affirms their patience and inspires both courage and hope.

Reaney’s decision to configure the cactus as a Judeo-Christian symbol and to make its flowering the climactic moment of this chamber opera signals a shift from the psychological and sociological focus of *The Killdeer*, yet in the process, the vision he presents runs counter, in a couple of ways, to an ecocentric worldview. To begin with, the fact that this cactus is so different from any known earthly species, serves to undermine its actuality as a literal force of nature. Even more problematic, from an ecocritical perspective, however, is the critique that many writers have levelled at the Judeo-Christian cosmology as an inherently anti-ecological one.

Both Lynn White Jr. and Christopher Manes, for instance, make arguments that humanist Judeo-Christian teachings in the West have advanced a troubling relationship

with the more-than-human physical world, first, by providing humans with a starring role in God's celestial plan, and, second, because this plan celebrates the ultimate destruction of earthly existence in favour of an entirely transcendent one (White 9-10, Manes 20-21). Val Plumwood, in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, also takes aim at what she views as the ecologically suspect legacy of this theological tradition. As part of her eco-feminist stance, Plumwood contends that Christianity, in keeping with Platonic philosophy, encouraged binary oppositions of soul and body, spirit and matter, male and female. Such teachings, she argues, by affirming soul, spirit and masculinity as the superior sides of these oppositional pairs, have devalued the body and the natural world along with women and marginalized others who have traditionally been conflated with them (*Feminism* 69-106).

From an ecocritical view, then, it could be argued that while Mrs. Brown and her neighbours, by paying homage to this cactus plant, appear to be acknowledging the agency of the natural world, what they are actually doing, on a symbolic level, is affirming a religion with an inherently human-centred bias. In other words, even though the epiphany in this play appears, not as the star of David or as an image of Christ on the Cross, but in the flowering of a cactus plant, the symbolic manner in which Reaney has depicted this botanical agency serves, finally, to configure it as the vehicle and sign of a Christian dispensation.

It would be inaccurate, though, to assess the worldview that develops in Reaney's later writings as an expression of the Judeo-Christian ethos that one finds in this early chamber opera. As Germaine Warkentin observes in the introduction to her edited collection of Reaney's poems, "Reaney uses the Bible rather the way a poet of the

Renaissance might use classical mythology, not with literal conviction [. . .] but as a source book of metaphor” (xii). Ross Woodman, too, in his study of Reaney’s life and work, points out that the poet and playwright, although raised as an evangelical Christian, “never accepted as a matter of religious belief the Gothic horrors issuing from the pulpit” (9). Although Woodman begins his study by acknowledging the impact of Reaney’s evangelical upbringing on his creative output, he goes on to show how these early Christian teachings were transformed via the teachings of Northrop Frye and a poetic tradition inherited largely from 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romanticism. Woodman explains, for example, how the influence of *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye’s study of William Blake, “provided [Reaney] with an archetypal vision of the Bible in which the Logos is equated with the imagination, thus transforming in a comprehensive and systematic way Reaney’s earlier evangelical world into a literary one” (14).

Reaney’s interest, via Frye, in Blake’s affirmations of the childhood state as a source of imaginative vision might also help to explain this playwright’s predilection for the creation of children’s theatre. As Woodman writes, “[T]he success with which Reaney incorporated the world of myth, fairy tale, and nursery rime [sic] into his dramatic vision is the result of his conscious effort to shape his mature vision upon the recovery and recreation of childhood” (17). Yet while Reaney was incorporating these elements into his dramatic vision, he was also exploring, in his plays for children, some of his most ecocentric enactments of nonhuman nature.

Reaney’s first explorations of this kind occur in *Names and Nicknames*, a play for children premièred in 1963 at the Manitoba Theatre Centre. The action of this play takes place in the nursery-rhyme pastoral world of Farmer and Farmwife Dell. Its plot

revolves around a troublemaker, the malicious Old Grandpa Thorntree, who tries to spread cruelty among children by saddling them with offensive nicknames, but whose malicious plans are foiled when Farmer and Farmwife Dell provide a veritable cornucopia of names for their third-born child—far too many for Thorntree to corrupt. One of the most striking aspects of this play, however, is Reaney's employment of a six-member children's chorus to enact what is, in effect, the ecological community of the farm.

Woodman views *Names and Nicknames* as the “turning point in Reaney's search for an adequate form for his experimental drama” because in it he was able to move beyond the constrictions of the well-made play (52). It was also, however, a turning point in the development of Reaney's bio-mimesis because his employment of this chorus enabled him to transform nonhuman nature from a passive backdrop into a proliferation of particularly active forces. In *Names and Nicknames*, one encounters an array of bio-mimesis, from cawing crows, humming bees and singing frogs to a host of barnyard animals. There are instances, too, of actors enacting and animating forces not conventionally considered to be alive. For example, at one point, the chorus animates the autumn wind, and, in another case, they depict stars. As a result of such portrayals, what emerges in *Names and Nicknames* is an image of the world comprised of and formed by a web of inter-related forces, both human and nonhuman.

In the series of children's plays that follow on the heels of *Names and Nicknames*, Reaney continues to stage such nonhuman others in a variety of ways. For instance, in *Apple Butter* (1965), a play involving marionettes, Reaney depicts a world inhabited by fairies or spirits that are immanent in elements that range from “animal”

and “vegetable” to “mineral,” “bone,” and “paper” (20). The basic plot involves an orphaned boy named Apple Butter who, after preventing a tree from being chopped down and after saving a cow from being butchered, is able to evade punishment thanks to “Tree Wuzzle,” a spirit that animates wood, and “Rawbone,” a spirit that animates bones. In this play, then, it is not a Christian worldview that emerges but one more in keeping with the theological design that the religious studies scholar Graham Harvey describes in his book-length study of animism.

In the opening pages of this study, Harvey takes pains to distinguish between two contrasting ways that the word “animism” has been employed since the physicist and chemist George Stahl first formulated a theory of “vitalism” in 1708 (3-4). He observes, for instance, how ethnologist Edward Tylor’s adoption of this term initially led to the pejorative view that those who practiced animism were essentially mistaken about the world (6). This “old usage,” Harvey explains, “constructed animists as people who did not or could not distinguish correctly between objects and subjects, or between things and persons” (xiv). As Harvey goes on to explain, however, this older concept of animism was radically altered in the early to mid-twentieth century as a result of anthropologist Irving Hallowell’s dialogues with the Ojibwe people of southern central Canada.

According to Harvey, Hallowell’s work revealed that, while the Ojibwe people traditionally view other species and, in some cases, inanimate objects as ‘persons,’ “it is a mistake to see this as a projection or attribution of human-likeness or life-likeness onto ‘inanimate’ objects” (18). “While they do distinguish between persons and objects,” Harvey writes, “the Ojibwe also challenge European notions of what a person is” (18).

[For the Ojibwe, t]o be a person does not require human-likeness, but rather humans are like other persons. Persons is the wider category, beneath which there may be listed sub-groups such as ‘human persons, ‘rock persons, bear persons’ and others. Persons are related beings constituted by their many and various interactions with others. Persons are wilful beings who gain meaning and power from their interactions. (18)

As Harvey explains, it was Hallowell’s understanding of this aspect of the Ojibwe worldview—that, for them, ‘persons’ can be either human or nonhuman, so long as they have agency—that resulted in a more appreciative notion of animism among researchers and writers in Western culture (18). Whereas the old animism arose as “an expression of a nest of insulting approaches to indigenous peoples and to the earliest putatively religious humans,” the revised notion of this term, Harvey claims, not only suggests an alternative to the anthropocentrism of Western culture, but led to a greater respect both for indigenous ways of knowing and for the more-than-human natural world (xii-xiii).

In *Apple Butter*, Reaney’s animist perspective is apparent at the outset when the “spirits” playfully announce themselves to the young orphan boy. “I am the spirit of all things bony,” Rawbone tells Apple Butter (26). “I am the wuzzle of all wooden things,” declares the Tree Wuzzle (20):

When you hear the trees sigh in the wind, their millions of leaves rustling and whispering, [. . .] it is my voice you hear. When the branch taps at the windowpane late at night and seems to say – I want to come in – it is my hand that is knocking.” (20)

Reaney's portrayal of this animate world—what the poet Ezra Pound called “the germinal universe, of wood alive, of stone alive”<sup>52</sup>—is made all the more evident by the very materials from which these two spirit-puppets are made. In his notes to the published play, Reaney explains that the marionette for Tree Wuzzle is to be made of “old pieces of wood picked up in the bush” with “fresh leaves for each performance,” while Rawbone is to be “made out of cattle bones; thigh bone for face and torso, smaller bones for arms and legs” (10).<sup>53</sup> Constructed in this way, Reaney's hand-made marionettes would not only represent these spirits, they would also, in a performance, be the material signs of this animism—of wood and bone ‘animated’ by theatrical means.

A similar kind of animist worldview, this time more ostensibly drawn from First Nations sources, emerges in the action of *Geography Match* (1967), Reaney's next play for children. In *Geography Match*, a grizzly bear and a coyote are conveyed as mythical spirits of darkness and light that disguise themselves as human characters. These, however, are only some of the nonhuman ‘characters’ in this play, among whom can be found icebergs, muskeg, grizzly bear, hairy mammoths and many others, all of which have speaking parts. In one scene, each child pretends to be a particular animal—a porcupine, a groundhog, a moose, and so on—and, in so doing, they discover, in a manner similar to many First Nations initiation traditions,<sup>54</sup> a self-awareness and a

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<sup>52</sup> “Our kinship to the ox,” writes Pound, “is constantly thrust upon us; but beneath this is our kinship to the vital universe, to the tree and the living rock [. . .]. We have about us the universe of fluid force, and below us the germinal universe, of wood alive, of stone alive” (*Spirit of Romance* 92).

<sup>53</sup> Referring to the marionettes in this play, the playwright's son, James Stewart Reaney, observes, “[t]hey are all primitively formed creatures of wood, bone and string and *not* particularly human” (8).

<sup>54</sup> For discussions of such traditions, see Jenness (qtd. in Suttles 41-64), Ingold 92-95, 114-115, Sharpe 66-73, and Ridington 101-106.

personal vitality formed from the characteristics of the specific animal being enacted. As the playwright's son James Stewart Reaney observes,

Each child reveals its essential nature in a personal animal riddle which is both a disguise and an emblem. Even the weaker children (sulks or bullies) who find themselves to be a skunk or a mouse secure new strength in the protective and adaptive powers of their animal incarnations. (10)

Reaney's employment of this kind of bio-mimesis and his enactment of an animist worldview in these plays for children appears to have led to portrayals of nonhuman characters in his plays for adults. *Listen to the Wind* (first performed in 1966—only a year after *Names and Nicknames*<sup>55</sup>—at the Althouse College Auditorium in London Ontario) is the first play for adults in which such staging appears. In *Listen to the Wind*, Owen, a boy with a life-threatening illness, collaborates with “his cousins, his grownup relatives and the neighbourhood children” to act out “their adaptation of a Victorian novel, *The Saga of Caresfoot Court*” (Reaney, qtd. in MacPherson 136). To help bring about all of this meta-theatre, however, Reaney—as in his earlier plays for children—employs a chorus that animates a variety of non-human forces and life forms. Jay Macpherson, in the September 1966 issue of *Canadian Forum*, describes the function of this chorus and its contribution to the play:

The chorus mime, recite, sing, thump, clap, and play instruments from recorder to pop-bottle; waving antlers they are a forest, surging and whooshing they are the sea, holding flowers and twittering sweetly they are

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<sup>55</sup> For Reaney's description of how *Names and Nicknames* inspired his work on *Listen to the Wind*, see his “Production Notes” to the 1966 première (117).

a dewy English garden. When needed, they mingle on stage as party guests or a pack of starving dogs. [ . . . ] Above all, by establishing season, prevailing wind and specific atmosphere for most of the scenes, they add immensely to the play's imaginative dimension. (137)

In addition to what this chorus animates, however, Owen and the other children in the play also take on the role of the wind. Sometimes it's the north wind that they impersonate, bringing in malevolence; at other times it's the more benevolent south wind.

In an interview with Derrick Jensen, the eco-philosopher Thomas Berry attributes great significance to the wind in terms of its affects on humans.

A biting wind on a winter's day tells the person of harshness and the challenge of existence. It wants to make a person strong. And the softness of a summer breeze tells us of the compassionate dimension of the universe.

People say, 'Oh, that's poetic. That's romantic.' But it's the most scientific thing there is. If someone says to me, 'I don't hear the voice of the wind,' I say, 'You better learn.' [ . . . ] One of the most important things about the wind is that it is uncontrollable, and therefore beyond human calculation. [ . . . ] It says, 'I know something you don't know, and I have a lot more control over your life and death than you.' (40-41)

Like Thomas Berry, Reaney, in *Listen to the Wind*, acknowledges what is outside the social realm as an inextricable part of what makes us human, and the staging of nonhuman nature in this play is what enables him to do this.

For Reaney, his meta-theatrical approach in *Listen to the Wind* had direct links to what he perceived as a playful, generative force in the natural world. In the Production Notes to the 1966 première of *Listen to the Wind*, he writes of how the dramatic approach in this production was informed by the idea of imitating games, and then goes on to relate this to the spontaneous play that creates patterns in the nature.

We've had theatre of cruelty (the rebirth of tragedy – the imitation of our deathwish); we've had theatre of the absurd (the rebirth of comedy – the imitation of our bitter laughter); we've had the theatre of detachment (the rebirth of the miracle play – Mother Courage drags her cross). The one thing we never imitate enough is games, play . . . imitation itself. The instinct just to “have fun” – to make a pattern simply because like a whooping crane we can't help doing a spring dance with our bodies. (117)

In likening the patterns that the whooping crane makes with those that emerge in theatre, Reaney is implicitly acknowledging continuity between ourselves and other species and positing existence as a combinatorial of playful, relational energies in the world—what the eco-critical scholar Theresa May, referencing the work of David Abram, has called “a dance of touch and be touched” (“*Greening*” 96).

In a program note to the 1967 production of his play *Colours in the Dark*, Reaney makes similar connections between theatre and the kind of play observed in nonhuman nature. “Surely,” he writes, “one of the things theatre could be about is the relaxed awareness that comes when you simply play—like the weasel dancing up and down to himself near the end of Act One” (Author's Note 4). The weasel to which Reaney is referring here, however, is only one of several instances of bio-mimesis in this play, a

work in which, once again, actors take on the roles of both human and nonhuman ‘characters’, and in which the generative force that inspires actors, whooping cranes and weasels to form patterns through embodied play is, in effect, the core dramatic action.

*Colours in the Dark* begins with human characters, a three-generational family comprised of Gramp, Gram, Ma, Pa, a Son, and a Niece. Along with Reaney’s by-now-familiar chorus, they enact a scenario where Pa, on his birthday, tells his children the story of his life’s journey from boyhood to maturity.<sup>56</sup> This story begins with an enactment of Pa as a young boy, recovering from measles in a dark room where, unable to see, he spends his time colouring the pictures that he *imagines* in his crayon book. This scenario then becomes the framing device for the action that follows: a series of scenes associated, in the young boy’s mind, with seven different colours—scenes that, at the same time, foretell seven stages in the life that he will one day come to lead.

In this re-enactment of what is, in effect, Pa’s life story, there is plenty of emphasis on human community, one of the most effective depictions of which occurs in the image of a single child as the apex of a family pyramid. “[It] takes a lot of people,” the chorus of children declares, “to make one child” (22).

It takes  
Two parents  
Four Grandparents  
Eight Grandparents  
Sixteen Great great grandparents  
Thirty-two Great great great grandparents  
Sixty-four Great great great great grandparents  
One hundred and twenty-eight Great great great great great grandparents  
Two hundred and fifty-six Great great great great great great grandparents

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<sup>56</sup> In his Author’s Note from the Original Production, Reaney describes this story as the “backbone of a person growing up, leaving home, going to big cities, getting rather mixed up” and, eventually, “making identity come to him wherever he is” (3).

Five hundred and twelve Great great great great great great great grandparents  
 One thousand and twenty-four Great great great great great great great great  
 grandparents (22).

Yet while Reaney celebrates this ancestral human community, he also takes care to demonstrate how this community is enfolded within a larger field of action, comprised of bears and forests, wind and thunder, and of the physical cosmos as a whole. “*Dimly we realize,*” he writes in his stage directions, “*that not only are we going through the hero’s life and stories he heard as a child, but we are going through Canada’s story—glacier and forest, also the world’s story*” (19).

Some of this “world’s story” is narrated by Granny Crack, an old woman who has been around since the ice age, and who—as she herself makes clear—is part of the world whose story she relates. “I was the mother of your sun,” she tells the children around her, “I was the sister of your moon / My veins are your paths and roads” (40). In addition to identifying herself as part of a celestial family and her body with the earth, Granny Crack also introduces a scene from the world’s story in which a stand of conifers and hardwoods, played by children, engage in a battle to inhabit the northern lands left behind by a receding glacier.

FIR BOY. Get out of here—you hardwood trees. Stop  
 Crowding us cone-bearers out.

MAPLE BOY. Aw—you gummy soft wood. Now the glacier’s gone,  
 This is my territory.

FIR BOY. Aw—your leaves drop off in the fall.

MAPLE BOY. Take that back.

*A fight between a whole company of fir branch bearers and maple branch bearers—using their branches as swords. (17)*

A scene such as this, with its depiction of interspecies rivalry, makes it abundantly clear that the world's story in *Colours in the Dark* is one comprised of both human and nonhuman subjects.

Another scene of interspecies' conflict in this world's story takes place when a young girl named Sadie, while out blackberry picking, encounters a Grizzly Bear (played by Gramp) who views her as his nourishment.

GRAMP. *as a bear Enters and lifts up a child.*  
 Child, my cubs need nurse. I need your blood.  
 SADIE. Wouldn't blood red berries do instead?  
 GRAMP. No. Flesh must be my bread. (21)

In the conclusion to this scene, Gramp (as the bear) carries off Sadie as his meal. The balance is redressed later, however, when "*MOTHER and FATHER in huge Mother-and-Father-carnival heads come on like marionettes*" to retrieve their daughter from the animal's belly. "*Father slices the bear open. Out springs the devoured child.* (26)

Reaney is drawing here on the death and resurrection motif of Mummer plays (Wickham 145, Vince 27). Accordingly, after the Father has sliced open the bear and released the devoured child, the Mother, assuming the traditional role of the Doctor in these medieval folk plays, stitches the bear back together again. Then, with both the bear and Sadie resurrected, the interspecies' negotiations continue. "What about me?" asks the revived Bear, "What am I to eat?" "Here," Sadie replies, "have my pail of berries" (26). Such negotiations between humans and the more-than-human world are, once again, an example of the ecocentric world of *Colours in the Dark*, a world in which humans and other species play equivalent and reciprocal roles in a biological round of birth and death, devouring and proliferation.

This same notion of reciprocity in the relationship between humans and other earthly beings assumes an animist character in *Colours in the Dark* during scenes where, as in Reaney's *Geography Match*, human characters undergo transformations into other species. The first character to undergo such a transformation is Tecumseh, the indigenous North American mythologized, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, by Charles Mair. As portrayed by Reaney, Tecumseh, after teaching some mistreated children about his own struggles against oppression, crawls into a hollow log and emerges as a tortoise "who will never die"—the tortoise being a playful allusion to Turtle Island, the pre-contact name for North America (31).

In a later scene, the "cardboard box" that, according to Reaney's stage directions, is to serve as Tecumseh's hollow log, is put to use in another act of metamorphosis. This time, it is not a First Nations character that undergoes the transformation, but an aging artist named Mr Winemeyer. Two boys on a bicycle trip first encounter Mr Winemeyer when taking shelter from a storm that Reaney, in yet another bit of ecocentric staging, portrays via a dancer, "dressed like the Wind" and her "rain doll" (48). For these two impressionable boys, Mr Winemeyer—a musician, sculptor and storyteller—appears to have all kinds of magic at his disposal. They are both surprised and alarmed, therefore, to discover him, after a terrible fall, lying helplessly on the ground. When one of the boys offers to go for a doctor, however, Mr Winemeyer will have none of it:

MR. WINEMEYER. Nothing doing. Help me over to that hollow log there. Help me to crawl inside it. It's a magic log the Indians made. I found it in the lake. There.

*He disappears into the log. [ . . . ]. From the other end of the log emerges a huge pale green luna moth. It flies away.*

BOY 2. Come back, Mr Winemeyer.  
 BOY 1. He's not in the hollow log.  
 BOY 2. I know. Come back. Come back. (58)

Human-animal transformations such as these, with their implicit references to First Nations traditions, might well lead to a reading of the worldview in this play as a strictly animist one, in keeping with the image of the world conveyed in Reaney's *Geography Match*. In *Colours in the Dark*, however, Reaney complicates things by giving prominent billing to another miraculous event, and one that, as in *Night Blooming Cereus*, bespeaks a Christian cosmology.

The scene I'm referring to here is one in which "Bible Sal," a character who has been parodied earlier in the play because of her fundamentalist Christian notions, reappears to debunk the positivist views of a professor named Doctor Button (68). For Doctor Button, the universe is a fixed mechanism, governed by unalterable rational laws. Bible Sal, however, manages to confound Dr. Button's reason by speaking a series of languages that, according to such laws, she would never have had the time to learn. Read in isolation, Bible Sal's 'defeat' of Dr. Button via a kind of speaking in tongues looks for all intents and purposes like a confirmation of Christian fundamentalism. Yet such an interpretation would be no more helpful than viewing the transformations of Tecumseh and Mr. Winemeyer as evidence for the 'truth' of animist religion. Indeed, by juxtaposing animist transformations with Bible Sal's Christian victory over Dr. Button, Reaney seems to be saying that there is value in both these worldviews, while absolute truth in neither. In *Colours in the Dark*, in other words, both the Christian and animist imagery are tropes that affirm what Dr. Button, with his positivist views, decries:

namely, that the world, rather than a fixed, mechanical object is alive and has agency and, moreover, that there is “a holy creative force which binds the Universe together” (65).

By enacting the three-generational family in *Colours in the Dark* as part of a creative force that informs the entire physical universe, Reaney presents, in a dramatic mode, the kind of ecocentric worldview to which the cultural historian Thomas Berry alludes. According to Berry, the shift from an anthropocentric age to what he calls an “Ecozoic era” will require an acknowledgement “that the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects” (“Thomas Berry” 39). And, in a world where Tecumseh can change into a tortoise, which is, in turn, an embodiment of the land, and where a Grandfather can transform into a sundog, and then into a Grizzly Bear chased by children in the form of barking dogs, humans are hardly isolated ego-centric subjects, with the rest of the natural world relegated to objects. Instead, Reaney’s world in *Colours in the Dark* is one in which humans and nonhumans alike are integral part of an ecological community, a communion, that is, of inter-related subjects.

Before concluding this chapter, however, it is worth noting that the world of nonhuman nature that eventually emerges in *Colours in the Dark* is considerably more vulnerable than the one Voaden depicts in *Murder Pattern*. In the mid-1930s, writing from the perspective of a European settler culture faced with what George Grant called the “intractability” of nature in the ‘New World’, Voaden enacts his Earth Voices as omniscient, invincible forces. Thirty years later, however, when Reaney was in the process of creating *Colours in the Dark*, nature’s intractability had been overshadowed by powerful technologies. As the historian Donald Worster notes, the detonation of

atomic bombs in 1945 and in tests during the Cold War confronted humankind with its capacity for destroying both human lives and natural systems on a scale never before deemed possible, and the rapid industrialization that followed in the wake of World War II resulted in a disturbing legacy of unprecedented environmental damage (342-60).

In *Colours in the Dark*, indications of this environmental damage appear when Reaney's protagonist travels from his rural home to Toronto, sees the pavement as a "cement tapeworm" and curses the "street where it's increasingly difficult to find a green leaf" (80). At one point, a priest on a Winnipeg street is stopped in his tracks by a dead bird on the sidewalk: "An indigo bunting. Total blue" (73). "Do you know who it is?" he asks a group of children, "It's the body of someone slowly freezing to death—frozen to death with the hard heart and deaf ear that will not listen." "Is the dead bird you?" the children ask, "Do we have to listen?" "It's you," he answers, "It's me" (73). This heightened sensitivity to the death of a single songbird, with its recognition that nature's frailty signifies our own, is in direct contrast to Voaden's depiction of a vast, sublime natural world, seemingly impervious to human activity. From the late 1960s on, however, similar signs of environmental losses occur with greater frequency in English-Canadian plays, and—as the following chapter will show—in a good many of these (ecocentric) plays such recognitions become central to the action.

## Chapter Three

### Vanishing Nature: Shattered Identities and Problematic Mourning

“We already conceptualize in terms of the ecological world, and its injury, destruction, and loss shatters identities and bodies of knowledge.”

--Theresa J. May. “Beyond Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism”

“To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself.”

--Judith Butler. *Precarious Life*.

While a dwelling perspective in the works of playwrights such as Herman Voaden and James Reaney resulted in some of the first examples of an ecocentric worldview in English-Canadian drama, the decades after the 1960s witnessed a number of plays in which ecocentricism takes an entirely different form. Playwrights such as Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Margaret Hollingsworth, Michael Cook, Daniel Brooks, Karen Hines and Blake Brooker, writing in the context of a deepening ecological crisis, developed works in which environmental losses are crucial to the dramatic action and created characters who experience such losses as a concomitant loss of self. In a sense, what these plays evoke is the mirror image of a dwelling perspective: the depiction of a natural world that is withdrawing and disappearing instead of coming into being and of a world of human characters whose identity is shaken and undermined by this awareness. To be sure, if the world of nonhuman nature in these works has agency, it is most often via its *absence* and all that this entails for characters who perceive their existence as part of a world that is polluted and vanishing. It is, then, this nightmarish mirror image of Ingold’s dwelling perspective—of characters increasingly displaced from a more-than-human physical world upon which they depend—that constitutes the ecocentric perspective in these works.

The environmental losses depicted in these plays, and that are the source of persistent existential fears, differ in both kind and degree. While some involve a specific animal—a cougar in Ringwood’s *The Lodge* and an Arctic bowhead whale in Hollingsworth’s *Numbrains*—there are indications in other works of extensive forms of ecocide. In Cook’s *The Head, The Guts and Sound Bone Dance*, for instance, the abjection experienced by two Newfoundland fishermen stems from the loss of the Atlantic cod stocks, while in *The Land the Animals, The Eco Show*, and *The Pochsy Plays* a whole gamut of environmental loss is acknowledged. “Call attention to the enemies of water,” admonishes Doris, one of the scientists in *The Land, The Animals* (114). “We know that our polluted air stunts, sickens and kills children,” observes the apocalyptically minded father in *The Eco Show* (65). “We live in a scary time,” Pochsy tells her audience at the beginning of *The Pochsy Plays*, “All indicators point to the distinct possibility that we are a species bent on self-extinction” (25).

Whether it is a specific environmental loss or a larger ecological crisis that is conveyed, however, a common feature in all of these plays is the way in which the vulnerability of human characters is evoked by the fragility of the nonhuman physical world. Ringwood’s *The Deep Has Many Voices* (1969), for instance, includes a scene in which Steve, a truck driver, relates the story of his encounter with a young moose:

STEVE. (*Shaking his head.*) Young moose. Not five feet from my headlights when I skid to a stop. That’s right. Not five feet. He had slipped on the ice, and gone down to his knees. You ever seen a young moose close?

MITTER. Yeah. I’ve seen them. Long, slender legs like they can’t bear his weight. Loose hide.

STEVE. Hide red-brown and loose. Strange looking . . . spraddled like that he looked grotesque and strange. Helpless. There in my headlights. Finally he managed to get on his feet. He looked proud then. His head bearing those antlers lifted to the light. Then he edged off the road and

with one leap was up the snowbank. I could see him start up the mountain, a mountain king . . . that's what he was . . . king of the mountain. Funny thing. . . I felt lonesome after he'd gone. Real lonesome.

MELISSA. I know. Like you were empty, like you were missing something. (362)

One of the reasons that Steve's story is striking is because of its portrayal of the radical difference between these two species and the world that each inhabits: the truck driver, powerful in his manufactured terrain; the young moose, vulnerable on the man-made thoroughfare, but strong and vital in his own realm. What makes this scene additionally compelling, though, is the evocation of an interspecies connection and of the idea that the absence of the moose is linked to the sense of loss that Steve speaks about and that Melissa is quick to acknowledge as an empty feeling—an experience of “something missing.”

The awareness of our human difference and estrangement from the world of other animals has a long history in Western culture. One of the earliest instances of this occurs in Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve, having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, become aware of their nakedness and seek to cover themselves. Greg Garrard, writing about the pastoral as one of the major tropes in ecocriticism, describes Genesis 3, the story of Man's fall, as an elegy of lost pastoral bounty and innocence (37). Such elegiac sentiment has found expression in drama as well. In *The Expulsion*, one of the plays from the Medieval York Cycle, Adam is remorseful when he discovers that all the other creatures of the world have become estranged from him:

Sa welaway, for harde peyne,  
 Alle bestis were to my bidding bayne,  
 Fisshe and fowle, they were fulle fayne  
 With me to founde.  
 And nowe is alle thyng me agayne

That gois on grounde. (Beadle 71: line 98)

Moreover, in this play, it is not only the creatures of the world that have turned away from Adam, but the earth itself and all its elements (Beadle 72: 17-18.). “Alle this worlde is wrothe with me,” cries Adam, feeling the very ground tremble and groan beneath his feet (Beadle 115: 113-115). Yet while human self-consciousness has, in the Judeo-Christian tradition at least, engendered an elegiac nostalgia for the natural world as a lost Eden, the emptiness that Steve and Melissa acknowledge in Ringwood’s play needs also to be considered as an estrangement peculiar to our present era.

Environmental philosophers refer to this as the loss of a relational identity, one that existed when other species were more plentiful and when humans, who were not so cut off from the more-than-human physical world, experienced their environing world as a shared space. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Val Plumwood writes extensively about this relational self and notes “the loss in modern urban life of much of the basis of that identity” (156-180, 186). Akira Lippit, moreover, alludes to Carl Jung’s observations that in the modern era, the human world “suffers from the exclusion of animals” (17). “According to Jung,” he writes, “the dislocation of animal being lessens the fullness of *our* world” (17).

Ringwood’s prescience in conveying the modern era’s susceptibility for species loneliness as a loss of self was indebted, in part, to the insights of Rachel Carson, the biologist whose writings, as Donald Worster observes, “inspired a global environmental consciousness” (347). In particular, the 1962 publication of Carson’s *Silent Spring* is widely regarded as a major catalyst for the modern environmental movement. As Linda Lear, in her introduction to the fortieth anniversary edition of Carson’s study, points out,

“Carson’s writing initiated a transformation in the relationship between humans and the natural world and stirred an awakening of public environmental consciousness” (x). Greg Garrard, in the opening to his book on ecocriticism, makes a similar point. “It is generally agreed,” he writes, “that modern environmentalism begins with ‘A Fable for Tomorrow’, in Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*” (1).

In ‘A Fable for Tomorrow’, Carson tells an apocalyptic tale of a world where bird populations have been wiped out, raising the spectre of a silent spring as a warning about the dangers of pesticides. In an environment comprised of interconnected life forms, she argues, the DDT that is used to eradicate pests will seep into the soil and water systems and will pass through the food chain, poisoning fish, birds and, eventually, humans. Part scientific report and part social critique, *Silent Spring* functioned as both an analysis of ecological harm and an indictment of the industrial agricultural practices and government sanctions that brought this about. As Linda Lear observes,

Carson’s concept of the ecology of the human body was a major departure in our thinking about the relationship between humans and the natural environment. It had enormous consequences for our understanding of human health as well as our attitudes toward environment risk. *Silent Spring* proved that our bodies are not boundaries. [ . . . ] Like the rest of nature, we are vulnerable to pesticides; we too are permeable (xvi).

Direct evidence of Carson’s ideas in Ringwood’s writings can be found in *Compensation Will be Paid*, an unproduced dramatic sketch that depicts the catastrophe that befalls a family living just outside the sixty-mile radius of a chemical plant.

Although the action begins on a radiant spring morning, the Grandmother's fears that it may well be a "silent spring" are confirmed when the discovery of a dead frog is followed in quick succession by the death of a hen (384). The death of the family puppy comes next, and—in the somewhat predictable finale—a young granddaughter, who had been feeling unwell, succumbs to her illness (385). The action abruptly comes to a close here, but the family's loss of the granddaughter cannot help but cast sinister shadows on the chemical company's assurances, conveyed by an employee clad in chemically-protective gear, that "compensation will be paid" (384).

Rachel Carson's warnings about the dangers of chemical contamination arose during the Cold War years when fears about radiation from atomic testing were prevalent,<sup>57</sup> and Ringwood's *Mirage* (1979)—a play that spans three generations in the life of a Prairie farming family—pays heed to both of these concerns. *Mirage* begins with Hilt, a young man in the present day who must decide between taking a job in a uranium mine and choosing to resurrect the family farm. In the first scene, when a First Nations woman, Jeanne White Calf, warns him about the risks of radiation poisoning, Hilt reminds her that while uranium mining may be dangerous, the chemicals that are prevalent in current farming practices are not safe either. "There's risk in everything," he tells her. "Farmers use fertilizers, weed sprays, grasshopper poison. That's risky. What can you do? We have to have food" (492). In her response, Jeanne—yet another First Nations character with ecological advice—makes an observation in keeping with Carson's findings in *Silent Spring* and follows it up with a story.

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<sup>57</sup> See Donald Worster 342-349.

JEANNE. When the gulls eat the poisoned grasshoppers, I suppose the gulls die too. No more miracles then.

HILT. Miracles.

JEANNE: There was one. My grandfather told me. There was this terrible plague of grasshoppers so that the sun was blotted out. At Wascana Lake, near Regina, when the plague came you couldn't see the sun. Those grasshoppers ate every leaf and blade and they traveled like a cloud. In 1937 in the spring the grasshoppers came like a cloud and everybody was full of madness. Their crops disappeared and their gardens and every living leaf. And then suddenly the sky was full of white gulls, flying and squawking into that cloud of grasshoppers, gobbling them up until they were all gone. It's true. You can read it in a book. My grandfather said things began to get better on the land after the white gulls came. The Miracle of the White Gulls, my grandfather called it. (492-493).

Jeanne's grandfather's story, with its attention to fluctuating cycles in predator-prey relationships, makes the idea of agriculture without insecticides appear as a possible and, given the poisonous nature of such chemicals, a reasonable proposition. Having established this notion, Ringwood then shifts the action back to a scene in 1910, where an old-timer named Dowser provides some additional advice on farming to John Ryland, Hilt's grandfather.

DOWSER. (*turning*) There were Dinosaurs on this place once. Long ago, before the Buffalo. Did you know that?

JOHN. No.

DOWSER. I've seen bones. Perhaps this was no plain then. A jungle. But Dinosaurs roamed the land, bigger than elephants. Don't plough all your land, John Ryland. Leave a strip here and there in prairie wool—obeisance to the Dinosaurs. (499)

Several years later, in another conversation with John Ryland, Dowser tries to get his message across again. "I hate to see that grass ploughed up," he tells John. "Roots can go down six feet looking for water. [ . . . ] Leave some of that grass, John. For the prairie (sic) dogs and the gophers and the meadowlarks. And me" (506). Ryland doesn't listen, however, and ten years later, during the dust bowls of the 1930s, he realizes too

late the wisdom of his friend's advice: "You were always at me to leave some of the prairie wool on the place, Dowser. I reckon you've been saying 'I told you so' these last years" (515).

Ecological wisdom comes slowly to the Ryland family, but it does come. By the time John's son Ryan is a grown man, he speaks to the now aged Dowser about what the land has taught him:

I've grown good wheat, but if I had it to do over again I'd try another way. I wouldn't depend on fertilizers and sprays. The Saskatoon bushes in the coulee don't bear fruit like they once did. And there aren't as many wild flowers as there used to be. I had the great idea that I was farming scientifically. Now I wonder if I've just been mining the land. (541)

Ryan's appreciation for learning from and working with the land rather than mastering it has left him with a greater respect for its agency, an attitude toward the nonhuman world that, in his view, is in keeping with attitudes espoused in traditional First Nations cultures. "The Indians are right," he tells Dowser "A man doesn't own the land. The land owns him. A man just holds it, in trust" (543). In many ways, the respect for the land that Ryan conveys here is reminiscent of George Fairburn's stance in *The Mother Lode*. Like Fairburn, when Ryan Ryland is faced with a choice between a personal relationship with the land and the quick economic rewards that sales of his property will garner, he decides on the former—at least, that is, until his son Hilt has completed his university degree. In the closing moments of *Mirage*, however, there is no poetic justice for the Ryland family, and the play concludes with Hilt Ryland still faced with the difficult dilemma of whether to retain the family farm or to cave in to the increasingly competitive pressures of agri-business.

If a resolution is conspicuously absent in the conclusion to Ringwood's *Mirage*, the same can be said about the conclusions to many of the plays from this period that confront the consequences of environmental degradation. Given the enormity of the environmental losses portrayed in these works and their depiction of an economy without environmental safeguards, individuals often can do little more than acknowledge (or not) this sorry state of affairs and grieve (or not) for the consequences.

From the perspective of some ecopsychologists, however, learning to acknowledge and to grieve for environmental damage deserves to be viewed as a significant act in itself. In "The Ecology of Grief," Phyllis Windle suggests that finding ways to mourn for the losses in the more-than-human physical world is a crucial step in the development of an environmental ethic. She writes that the failure to grieve "for the magnificent trees, the lovely animals, and the beautiful places that we are losing" will inevitably sap our "passion, commitment, creative energy and concentration" and leave us ill equipped to confront the environmental challenges before us (144-145). The deep ecologist Joanna Macy makes a similar argument:

Just as grief work is a process by which bereaved persons unblock their numbed energies by acknowledging and grieving the loss of a loved one, so do we all need to unblock our feelings about our threatened planet and the possible demise of our species. Until we do, our creative response will be crippled. (250)

In arguing for mourning as a necessary first step in coming to grips with a growing ecological crisis, Macy also makes links between an elegiac response to environmental losses and the Aristotelian notion of catharsis. The ability to authentically mourn for

our environmental losses, she contends, is a salutary release of fears and anxieties that can help us to affirm our ecological selves and reconnect with “the larger web of life” (252).

Margaret Hollingsworth’s *Numbrains* is a one-act play that serves as a vehicle for just such a catharsis with respect to fears and anxieties over losses in the more-than-human physical world. Its central character is an unnamed sixteen-year old boy from a troubled family. His mother, after a violent break-up with his father, has fled with his younger sister to California and never returned, leaving him to be raised by his father—an uneducated bigot who breaks furniture when he’s enraged, calls his son a “numbrain,” and chooses a nineteen year old girl—not much older than his son—for his second wife. In his response to this kind of upbringing, the boy has become a disaffected loner, who directs much of his anger at those who mistreat animals. Although a self-professed “pacifist,” the troubled adolescent (in addition to inheriting some of his father’s bigotry) is anything but peaceful when it comes to questions of species abuse: “When I’m through school,” he says, “I’m gonna join Greenpeace and go ram the Taiwanese trawlboats. You know how many miles of nets they have? You how many things they kill as well as fish? I’m gonna join the ecology police. Yea” (5-6). With aspirations like these, the boy thinks nothing of walking out in the middle of an English class when he hears reports of a whale that has been stranded on a nearby beach. And while it may be the eve of his seventeenth birthday, he easily forgoes his mother’s annual birthday phone call and the Sarah Lee cake that his father has half-heartedly tossed in the freezer, choosing instead to spend the night conducting a solemn and solitary vigil on this west coast beach.

The wounded and dying whale turns out to be a female Arctic Bowhead, far removed from her usual feeding grounds in the north and doubly exiled as an ocean creature who has become washed up on a west coast beach. As a kind of exile himself, the troubled teen is acutely sensitive to her suffering. He is enraged, for instance, at anyone who causes her further pain or indignity, whether it is the seagulls who tear strips of flesh off her body or the reporters (“technoslaves,” he calls them) who, in their desire for a sensationalist news clip, appear to him to be engaged in a feeding frenzy of their own (7).

As he continues his vigil, however, the boy’s identification with the signs of her suffering—the blood, for instance, that he tries to stop through an act of will—is mitigated by an increasing appreciation of her *difference* from him. When he recalls, for instance, how a neighbour trivializes her pet cat’s every gesture by translating everything into human terms, he has second thoughts about one of his earlier observations:

I made the mistake earlier of saying that she was crying. That was a mistake. What I shoulda said was that there was stuff oozing out of her eye. Just the one eye. The other one’s round the other side. You can’t check at them both a once [sic], so the most you can say is that there’s stuff oozing out of the one eye. That’s what I shoulda said. There’s no proof that animals cry. See, we think that being like us is such a big deal. (11)

What is striking about this boy’s experience of this nonhuman animal is his ability to both identify with its suffering and to respect its alterity. All too often, as Una Chaudhuri has observed, animals are “infantilised as Disney characters,” and forced, in other ways, “to carry our symbolic and psychological baggage” (“Animal” 105-7). Michael Peterson, too, notes that in the case of many live animal performances “[a]nimals are constructed anthropomorphically as bourgeois subjects” or—as he more

intriguingly puts it—“the bourgeois subject is fragmented and distributed among animal surrogates” (41). The depiction of the whale that Hollingsworth’s protagonist conveys, however, manages to extend our sympathies to the suffering of this fellow creature while avoiding the anthropocentric excesses to which Chaudhuri and Peterson allude. In so doing, it accomplishes what, in Val Plumwood’s view, all ecologically-responsible depictions of animal others must do: namely, to evoke an understanding of similarities and differences between human and nonhuman animals so that such similarities and differences exist in a “dynamic tension” (*Environmental* 59).

In *Numbrains*, moreover, the teen’s appreciation of the whale’s difference actually enhances his identification with the nonhuman physical world, as he comes to apprehend the radical otherness of this gigantic cetacean both for itself and as the physical embodiment of a sublime world that he, too, inhabits. In a dream, he finds himself inside the whale, exploring her interior with one of his lighted birthday candles, and it is as if he has found himself within an expansive natural cathedral:

I feel it. All of a sudden I’m being lifted up. I’m on a level with the eye and the mouth’s open, and I walk inside. Man. What a beauty. Long bones from here to over there . . . Long whale bones with this fine hair . . . like hay drying on poles. . . and my feet are like . . . sinking, sinking up to the ankles in krill. Spongey. Red. Brown. Millions of krill. All this dead ocean life. Undigested. And my feet are sinking in dead . . . Or maybe it’s alive. Like me. Or am I? (16)

As in the Biblical story of Noah, the portrayal of this young man’s dream has all the elements of a rite of a passage, a re-immersion into the womb in order to be re-born—yet when he awakens to find that the whale has died, his vigil, as Hollingsworth’s conclusion shows, ends in a grief-stricken lament that exceeds the limitations of human language.



the possibility of mourning the lives of other species. Were this protagonist's grief merely an expression of his own exile and abandonment, the possibility for this would be seriously undermined. Instead, his visceral experience of the whale's difference and of her passing as a loss in its own right allows him to experience her death in a way that connects him to a world larger than his own, larger even than this Arctic Bowhead whale—a sublime and sorrowful mystery to which, as mortal beings, they both fundamentally belong and to which they both must ultimately submit.

While the affective impact of *Numbrains* derives from a protagonist whose sense of self is bound up with a nonhuman animal and who openly mourns for its death, there are other English-Canadian plays where the opportunities for coming to terms with losses in the natural world are often complicated by two factors. The first of these has to do with what has already been mentioned about the sheer scale of the environmental losses depicted in these works—losses far too extensive, it would seem, for the grief of one or two individuals to accommodate. The second reason for what might be characterized as a problematic of mourning in many of these plays originates in their portrayal of characters whose estrangement derives from guilty recognitions that their own actions are, to some degree, responsible for the very losses that they encounter.

Both of these factors inform the dramatic action in Michael Cook's *The Head, The Guts and Sound Bone Dance* and Daniel Brooks's *The Eco Show*, two works that allude to the plays of Samuel Beckett and, in particular, to the apocalyptic vision of *EndGame* as a means of confronting the existential fears, sorrows and bitter ironies arising from environmental devastation. The references to Beckett in both these plays are clear enough. In Cook's play, Skipper Pete and Uncle John, two aged Newfoundland

fishermen, stare out at a lifeless, fished-out ocean and wait, like the two tramps in *Waiting for Godot*, for an answer that never arrives. “If we keep ready, and we keep waiting,” Skipper Pete insists, “they’ll come again. We can’t give up on ‘em (46). Uncle John, however, is not so hopeful, and his estimation of the futility of their current existence as a “death game” configures the pair as a latter-day Hamm and Clov (46). Daniel Brooks, writing some thirty years later, makes the references to Beckett even more explicit by naming his protagonist “Hamm,” placing him in a wheelchair, and framing the action of *The Eco Show* as an increasingly absurd struggle for meaning against the backdrop of a desecrated natural environment.

Such specific allusions to the world of *EndGame* suggest links, similar to those made by Ringwood’s *Mirage*, between Cold War fears of planetary destruction through nuclear fall out—fears that emerged when Beckett was writing in the 1950s<sup>58</sup>--and the spectre, increasingly prominent since the 1970s, of an ecological apocalypse. Yet whereas the script of *Endgame* never reveals what it is that has led to Hamm and Clov’s apparent exile or to the deserted and deathly environment outside their walls, the fears and anxieties of the two old fishermen in Cook’s play and of Daniel Brooks’s “Hamm” and his family in *The Eco Show* are explicitly tied to specific environmental losses for which they, at least in part, bear some degree of responsibility.

In Michael Cook’s *The Head, The Guts & Sound Bone Dance*, the first work in English Canada to specifically address the impact of a major environmental disaster, Skipper Pete and Uncle John, two characters faced with the disastrous results of overfishing on the Atlantic coast are (ironically enough) fishermen themselves, and the

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<sup>58</sup> See Donald Worster’s *Nature’s Economy* 342-347.

loss of the once-thriving cod stocks has left them in a profoundly troubling situation. “I’m dying, Skipper,” says Uncle John to his father-in-law and former captain, “And so is ye. And the trouble is the god damn place has died afore us. We can’t get that out of our guts, can we?” (48). Here, as in much of the dialogue, Uncle John’s language underscores the degree to which he and Skipper Pete identify with the cod that have now been virtually wiped out. For Uncle John and Skipper Pete, the disappearance of what had previously been an abundant fishery has resulted not only in a loss of livelihood, but also a loss of self, or—more precisely—of a dialogical experience of self and world. “We understood each other - the sea, and the cod, and the dog fish, and the sculpin and the shark and the whale,” Pete reminds his son-in-law, “They knew us and we knew they” (46). Confronted with an ocean that has been fished out, however, such an identity is no longer possible for these two Newfoundlanders and the absence of this relational identity has led them to a crisis of meaning that is, in part, a spiritual crisis.

Cook, in an interview with Robert Wallace, after citing Beckett as his greatest influence, speaks about the loss of meaning that haunts the characters in his plays, with a specific reference to Skipper Pete:

Once you’ve been raised a Jesuit Catholic, you never escape it. The pain that my characters share results from their trying to make sense of an absurdist, ridiculous world. They all ask Why? like Job. Although we never actually hear Skipper Pete ask why?, the question mark is always behind him.” (165)

In *The Head, the Guts and Sound Bone Dance*, the names of the characters, with their Biblical allusions, underscore the idea that the psychological malaise that Skipper Pete and Uncle John are experiencing has a spiritual dimension: “Peter”, the “rock” on which

the Newfoundland “character” has been built; and “John”—a man with the same name as the apostle from which Newfoundland’s capital city derives its name—helping Peter to prepare a last supper from the paltry six fish that “Absalom,”<sup>59</sup> Pete’s mentally-challenged son has miraculously managed to bring forth from a dead sea. In a 1980 issue of *Canadian Literature*, a review by Brian Parker notes how a Theatre New Brunswick production, following Cook’s stage directions, took care to reinforce the script’s Biblical imagery.

The left wall of the “splitting room” has “a ragged window—once a church window, saved from an abandoned church somewhere and put to use by a crude insertion in the room. . . ,” and it is through this window that the Skipper gazes as he rhapsodizes about the past and envisions its return. At the end, when he is left alone, the setting sun dies through it to conclude the play. (124-125)

Throughout Cook’s play, however, the spiritual resonance of Skipper Pete’s now meaningless life is inseparable from the material conditions of a man-made environmental disaster the full extent of which would only fully be realized in the years following the play’s première.

*The Head, The Guts, and Sound Bone Dance* was first produced on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1973, at the Arts and Culture Centre in St. John’s, Newfoundland. At the time, the Newfoundland cod fishery was still very much in operation, though it was being significantly threatened by foreign factory fishing trawlers operating offshore.

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<sup>59</sup> In the Old Testament “Absalom” is a son and warrior who, in the Old Testament, takes a stand against his father; in Cook’s play, it is Absalom who symbolically ‘defeats’ his father by holding out the corpse of a boy that Skipper Pete has allowed to drown.

According to a 2005 Parliamentary report of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans, “in the decades prior to the 1960s, annual catches [of Atlantic cod] reached between 200,000 to 300,000 tonnes” (*Northern* 3). By 1968, however, the “harvest, mainly by non-Canadian fishing fleets, increased dramatically to over 800,000 tonnes” (3). In 1977, four years after the première of Cook’s play, the Canadian government passed legislation to protect its fisheries by extending Canada’s off shore fishing rights from 12 to 200 miles off the country’s coastlines, but while this helped to keep the foreign trawlers further offshore, a combination of industry pressure, poor scientific estimates and unsustainable fishing practices by both Canadian and foreign fleets continued to put pressure on these northern cod stocks (*Northern* 8-10). The results, given the lack of action by the Canadian government, were catastrophic. After increased catches of cod in the early 1980s, drastic declines from the 80s onwards forced the federal government to impose a moratorium, in 1992, on the fishing of Atlantic cod (*Northern* 3). The moratorium was originally supposed to be in place for two years; some twenty years later it is still in effect and prospects for recovery, as the 2005 report by Fisheries Canada puts it, “do not provide grounds for optimism” (*Northern* 10). After only a few decades, then, the scenario Cook depicted in 1973—his vision of an ocean stripped clean—had proven to be chillingly prophetic, and, as Val Plumwood observes, the loss of the Atlantic cod stocks is but one indication of a crisis in our oceans that has now reached global proportions.

A recent FAO study shows the massive effects of global markets and fishing technology on the world’s fish stocks: 75 per cent of the world’s fish stock are acknowledged to be either over-exploited or approaching over-

exploitation, leaving only 25 per cent that are not threatened.

(*Environmental* 25)

According to Cook, “the only thing relevant to time” in this play “was that the world [the characters] inhabited was gone” (*Stage Voices* 226). Yet given the environmental context of this play, there is reason enough to read Cook’s portrayal of Uncle John and Skipper Pete’s inaction and denials as a historically-specific social critique. This is particularly the case when it comes to Cook’s portrayal of Skipper Pete’s inability to accept responsibility for his current malaise. While there may be pathos in the aged Skipper’s yearning for a time when the cod were plentiful, the circumstances of the play make it clear that his convictions that “one day, they’ll come back, in their t’ousands” have no basis in reality and, furthermore, that his inability to face the truth is precisely the kind of solipsism that has led to the present ecological catastrophe. Cook has, in fact, structured the dramatic action in *The Head, The Guts and Sound Bone Dance* to critique such inaction and, in part, to provide an alternative.

One of the ways Cook’s critique becomes apparent is via the character of Skipper Pete’s daughter, a woman who is also the wife to Uncle John. After being disparaged by her father, she responds by turning her ire on the two old men, mocking the futility of their nostalgic rituals.

‘tis where ye spend time making fools of yourselves, the two of ye.  
Coiling and uncoiling the same rope day afer day. Knitting nets you’ll  
never use. Making killicks. And they’s only fit now to make ornaments  
in the homes of the stuck-up in St. John’s and upalong. Talking about  
things that once were and will never be again, Thank God. (64)

Speaking with Robert Wallace, Cook refers to how the women characters in another of his plays “understand the value of passion and tear the guts out of immediate experience

in order to go on living,” while the men “only understand the battle for its own sake” (*The Work* 164). In *The Head, the Guts and Sound Bone Dance*, Skipper Pete is only vaguely cognizant that a hyper-domination of the seas has, in effect, sounded the death knell for future generations. He is bewildered, for instance, that having raised his son to survive against the elements, there is now “nothing to survive against” (11). In contrast, Skipper Pete’s daughter appears to see things more clearly; in her refusal to be nostalgic about the past and in her willingness to face the present, it is she who stands forth as the one most likely to survive.

Unwilling to learn from his daughter’s harsh reproaches, however, Skipper Pete continues, along with Uncle John and Absalom, to inhabit a world that has long since passed, and, as the action continues, his unwillingness to see the truth becomes more and more apparent. Given the self-contained world that the aged Skipper inhabits, such faulty vision might seem harmless enough, but Cook shows its destructive nature when, in the conclusion to Act one, one of Pete’s nephews sounds the alarm about a drowning boy and the two old fishermen, instead of going to the rescue or calling for help, fail to act. Indeed, despite the boy’s attempts to enlist the help of the men—tugging on their clothes and begging them to respond—Skipper Pete and Uncle John remain unconscionably oblivious, reminiscing about a death that had happened long ago, and acting, for all the world, as if the present emergency had nothing to do with them (33-34).

For much of Act two, it appears that Skipper Pete and Uncle John’s outrageous neglect will have little consequence. With Absalom’s catch of fish boiling on the stove, the three men drink toasts, sing sea shanties, and dance a drunken jig. In the meantime,

though, the news of Peter and John's failure to act has reached the community, and when Pete's daughter appears for the second time in the action, she is desperate for some kind of explanation. "John!" she cries, "Ye were here. They're saying ye could have saved him" (55). In response, all that her drunken husband can offer is a kind of bleary-eyed denial:

UNCLE JOHN. Drown? Let him drown? We never let nobody drown – dogfish got'n. Skipper . . . (*He looks uncertainly round for Pete. Confused. Looks back at his wife*) I would never let nobody . . . let who drown? (58)

In terms of the Biblical imagery in the play, Peter and John are, as it were, the once-fishermen disciples who have allowed the sacrifice of an innocent to occur, but if Cook's imagery continues to evoke this Biblical resonance, the literal action serves up a typically Modernist irony. This boy is no divine figure after all, and his death will provide no redemption for these men, at least not in terms of any formulaic Christian dispensation. Instead, it would seem, there is only abjection for these two old fishermen who have been so determined to resurrect and inhabit the past that, in a non-action that is both literal and symbolic, they have shown themselves to be hopelessly ineffective.

John's wife's response to the boy's drowning underscores this abjection. Heaping shame on the men, she tears strips off her husband for his drunken denials and then turns to confront her father for what she sees as his more direct role in the boy's death:

Ye knew, didn't ye? All the time. The little feller was in beggin' and pleadin' wit' yer. But ye'd filled that fool of mine with your ravings of a dead past. Dead. . . dead . . . that past. And now you've added another little body to yer tally. If we ever find him, we should hang him round your neck, so we should, until he's rotted away like an old fish. (59-60)

The ecological ramifications of these accusations, conveyed in the imagery of the boy's corpse as a fish,<sup>60</sup> are then driven home when Absalom appears on stage, holding the corpse of the drowned boy in his arms: "Look, father. Look what I caught by the side of the boat. [. . .] I nivr caught a boy before" (62). Unable to come to terms with what he's holding, Absalom continues to seek an explanation. "What shall I do wid him, Father? [. . .] He is mine, isn't he father. I caught him. I nivr caught a boy before. Can I have him?" (62-63) Skipper Pete's only response is to reach out his hand to touch the corpse. He then turns his back, stares out the window and—despite his disturbed son's repeated questions—is unable to offer an explanation (62).

Absalom's inability to distinguish between the body of the young boy and that of a fish results in a complicated pathos, derived in part from Cook's employment of Christian tropes to underscore the play's ecological import. Since the fish is a traditional symbol for Christ, Absalom's mistaken belief that the boy he has "caught" is a kind of 'fish' functions, in the context of the play's Biblical imagery, as a symbolic reminder that Skipper Pete and Uncle John are modern day "sinners" and that the sacrifice of the boy is a kind of sacrilege. At the same time, however, Absalom's fish/boy is also a visceral reminder of the ecological tragedy that this play addresses and of Skipper Pete and Uncle John's complicity as secular "sinners" vis-à-vis the more-than-human physical world.

In the play's denouement, Cook provides some degree of resolution for one of these ecological sinners. While there are no cod leaping in the bay, nor any signs that the

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<sup>60</sup> The inter-textual play is resonant, calling to mind as it does, the dead albatross hung around the neck of the abject sailor in Samuel Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

fish stocks will return, the difference between Uncle John and Skipper Pete's reactions to Absalom's retrieval of the drowned boy, suggests that the first step to a secular redemption inheres in taking responsibility for one's actions. For Uncle John, the pathos of Absalom's mistaken belief about the boy leads to a sorrowful recognition, the first signs of which are conveyed when the former, seeing Skipper Pete's non-response to his son's requests, offers the distraught Absalom some empathetic advice: "Don't matter what he says," he tells him, "Not any more" (64). Then, in the action that follows, Uncle John's ironic remarks to Skipper Pete announce, even more clearly, his rejection of the latter's denials. "I 'low it wasn't too bad a day after all Skipper. One hell of a catch. But I don't think I'll be shareman wid ye any longer. (*He is nearly crying*) I'm going home, ye see. Home . . ." (64). Uncle John's rejection of Skipper Pete and his decision to return home to be judged by the members of his community signals his willingness to take responsibility for his actions. So do the last lines that he utters in the play, offered up as a "*sardonic*" quip to the Skipper, that he will be tying a killick to his leg: "In Memoriam, dat's what they say . . ." (65).

In contrast to Uncle John, Skipper Pete shows little sign of any remorse or substantive change in attitude. With Absalom and Uncle John's departure, he remains on the dock, resolute as ever, as he sits down alone to his dinner of cod and begins to eat. As a once powerful and respected leader, whose choices have brought about his ruin and exile, he is a tragic figure, yet his unwillingness to grieve for those mistakes makes him a highly ironic and ambivalent one. Yet in ecocritical terms *The Head, the Guts and Sound Bone Dance* is less about the tragedy of a once powerful protagonist than it is a collective lament for what's been lost and a critique of attitudes that have brought this

about. And in Cook's conclusion, any pity the audience might feel for its human characters is inseparable from a tragedy involving the nonhuman physical world, a tragedy of the commons, for which the entire community (and, by implication, the audience) must, in the sorrowful manner of Uncle John, overcome their denials and learn to grieve.

Another encounter with the agency of the natural world, expressed by characters who experience a loss of self in its absence, occurs in Daniel Brooks's *The Eco Show*. Unlike *The Head*, *The Guts and Sound Bone Dance*, which, via Uncle John's contrition, evokes a tragic sensibility within a tragedy of the commons, *The Eco Show*'s depiction of a looming ecological crisis is more in keeping with Beckett's vision of characters who, faced with an apocalypse, are unable to mourn for their situation. In Brooks's ecological version of *Endgame*, however, the fact that his family of protagonists are complicit in a global ecocide that is not a *fait accompli* makes for a differently inflected dramatic structure than the one depicted in Beckett's *Endgame*, providing additional urgency to the characters' actions and leaving room for the possibility of change.

In Beckett's *Endgame*, the only access to what is outside the interior world inhabited by Hamm, Clov and Hamm's aged parents comes from two small, curtained windows, positioned high enough on the upstage wall so that, even with their curtains opened, the audience has no view of what lies beyond—no escape, that is, from the empty rituals played out between Hamm and Clov as they engage in what appears to be a fraught and seemingly absurd existence. Moreover, as the audience soon learns, any hope for such an escape is illusory. When Hamm asks Clov about the world outside, the latter, after climbing a ladder and employing a telescope to access the view, offers the

following report: “Zero” (29). Looking out the window with his telescope, he can see no signs of life. “There’s no more nature,” he says (11). To make matters worse, though, no explanation is provided for such a horrific circumstance. The nothing outside their window is simply a given, and, in Hamm’s view, “What for Christ’s sake does it matter? (75).

For Hamm and Clov, though, the “Zero” outside their domestic quarters has consequences. Removed from any historical or geographical specifics and from all but the most minimal signs of life, their own relationship has devolved into a mere game. Moreover, as both the title of the play and the nothing outside their walls suggest, it is an “endgame,” as in chess, where there are only a few pieces remaining. On one level then, what the audience observes in this play is a struggle for domination and control between Hamm—enthroned in his wheelchair and playing the role of a King—and Clov, who, in the context of his begrudging servitude to Hamm, is like the last remaining pawn. Hamm, in particular, is obsessed about his “position” in the game (“Am I right in the center? [ . . . ] Put me right in the center!” (26-27).

Given the lack of any natural world outside their walls, however, the stakes for this game are ultimately trivial. Aside from their strategies of power and control, there appears to be no other purpose for these characters: no future worlds to inhabit and no existing earthly world of the senses in which to dwell. Since the apocalypse, it would seem, has already happened, there is no possibility for Hamm and Clov to have any impact on the decimated world outside their sheltered quarters. There is, in effect, nothing for them to do but live out their lives as a pointless game.

In *The Eco Show*, the two curtained windows of *Endgame* have been transposed, appropriately enough for a postmodern play, into the one small window of Hamm's computer screen, and throughout the action it is this one window that provides Brooks's Hamm, Hamm's wife Gwen, and their two children, Joe and Fifi, with their only access to the world outside their family home. As a link to the world wide web, Hamm's computer affords them an array of fictional escapes: a virtual drive through the countryside, a virtual "vacation" in Europe, family memories in photographs and videos, beautiful images of a pristine natural forest—all of which are projected on the interior walls of their home, a bit like elaborate screensavers.

In these virtual lives, however, there is a pervasive absence of vitality, an absence underscored by revelations, transmitted by way of Hamm's computer, that the physical world outside this family's walls is every bit as bleak Clov's "Zero." In one scene, Hamm has his son Joe read aloud from a text that Hamm has written in response to the information he has been retrieving via the worldwide web. The passage begins with stories about fathers and husbands, who attack their 'disobedient' daughters and wives with axes, douse them with kerosene, and burn them alive. "Stories such as these," proclaims Joe, reading his father's words, "are happening all the time. But what you going to do about it? Nothing" (65). Yet if these stories are, to say the least, disturbing, Hamm's ensuing observations, involving accounts of ecological devastation, are equally so:

We are using up the earth's fresh water.  
 We know that our polluted air stunts, sickens and kills children.  
 We are on the verge of a world shattering arable land crisis.  
 Fish are disappearing in oceans around the world. Species extinction.  
 Deforestation Desertification. Hunger and thirst. We know, I repeat, we know that if we continue to squander the bounty of mother nature, to

pollute her blood, to pour sewage into her womb, continue to pour kerosene on her and light her on fire, she will burn and she will die. Your earth will die. Scientists know this. Your family knows this. And you know it. But what are you gonna do about it?  
Nothing . . . (65)

Such reiterations of “Nothing”<sup>61</sup> call to mind Clov’s pronouncements in *Endgame*, yet Brooks’s portrayal of the world outside Hamm and his family’s domestic lodgings is distinct in a couple of ways from the one that Beckett’s character conveys. For one thing, the conditions that Brooks’s play describes are much more specific. Instead of an abstract negation of a world—the “Zero” that Clov reports after looking through his telescope—the world that Brooks’s Hamm and his family experience, with its detailed references to pollution and ecological harm, is historically specific and one that would be all too familiar for a contemporary audience. Just as importantly, however, the apocalyptic scenario that Brooks’s Hamm is describing here, instead of being something that has already taken place—is one that has not yet come to pass. As a result, whereas Clov’s “Zero” functions as a descriptor for an already desecrated world, the “Nothing” of Brooks’s protagonist is directly linked to action, and—more specifically—to Hamm and his family’s inability to act in ways that will prevent an imminent catastrophe. In the world of *Endgame*, that is—a world where time has, in effect, run out or come to a standstill—actions no longer have consequence; in the world of *The Eco Show*, time is of the essence, and, since the need for action is pressing, the dramatic irony has an additional measure of urgency.

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<sup>61</sup> “Nothing” is one of the most repeated words in Brooks’s play, appearing fifteen times in the first twenty-eight pages.

In the title of Brooks's play, the metaphor of "Game" has been eclipsed by that of a "Show," ironic enough if considered vis-à-vis the notion, promoted in the writings of the philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard, of the postmodern world as an increasingly mediated era in which it has become virtually impossible to discern the difference between material worlds and those that are its copies.<sup>62</sup> Yet while the world that Hamm accesses via his computer is a play of surfaces, the physical world it represents is affecting him and his family in ways that are more than virtual. In his own remarks about this play, Brooks observes that the idea of an ecosystem as a metaphor was a guiding factor for him. "Really, the metaphor that guided me was that of an ecosystem and the interrelationship between organisms in a system and the interrelationships between language—how our language is a kind of ecosystem—and how a family is a kind of ecosystem" (25). In portraying this particular family's ecosystem, however, Brooks takes pains to show that it, like the larger ecosystem outside, is one that is under duress in ways that transcend metaphor. Hamm, for instance is thirsty, but Gwen explains that if she gets him a glass of water there may be "consequences" (66). Their daughter Fifi is occupying herself with the creation of a miniature cityscape, for which—ironically enough—there are not enough "materials" (64). Gwen is sweltering in the heat, but Hamm reminds her that by turning on the air conditioning she will be contributing to the pollution of the atmosphere that their children will have to breathe:

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<sup>62</sup> See Garrard's *Ecocriticism* for a discussion of the problematic of Baudrillard's thinking with respect to the ideas espoused by most ecocritical writers. "Such implacable skepticism towards stable truth claims," he writes, "must be antithetical to an ecocriticism that attends to problems of representation, but is founded ultimately in the assumption of real environmental problems" (172).

Hamm:  
You might as well blow coal dust //

Gwen: (*overlap*)  
// All right –

Hamm:  
// straight into your children's lungs and –

Gwen: // you've made your point. Anything else?

Hamm  
I'd like a glass of water. (62)

As such circumstances make clear, the more-than-human physical world depicted in this play is much more than a metaphor for disturbed psychological relations. Instead, this family's psychological and social problems stem from a troubled planetary ecosystem that is encroaching on their lives in a very immediate and visceral way.

In *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Lawrence Buell cites the sociologist Ulrich Beck's observations that our current ecological conditions have, in effect, served as an instructive corrective by forcing us "to rediscover human beings as natural entities" (90). This, it seems to me, is precisely the view that *The Eco Show* enacts, with its depiction of a family susceptible to some of its most basic animal needs—water to drink, food to eat and air to breathe—and Brooks, by dramatizing the material struggles of this family is conveying a decidedly earth-centred view of human existence, one where our dependence on the more-than-human physical world is repeatedly underscored.

But if portraying this family's dependency on the more-than-human physical world is one way that Brooks's *The Eco Show* departs from the more abstract and more totalizing apocalyptic vision in Beckett's *Endgame*, the other way it does so is by

offering, in subtle ways, a slim margin of hope that a global ecocide might still be averted. As Brooks explains in the fall 2010 issue of the *Canadian Theatre Review*, “The Eco Show is actually, for me, very much in the present tense, with just the slightest exaggeration” (25). Moreover, in addition to situating the action of *The Eco Show* in the “present tense,” Brooks also leaves room for the possibility of a better future, by having Hamm’s fatalistic mindset mitigated by the members of his family. What I am arguing here is that the inter-textual play in *The Eco Show*, while paying homage to Beckett, also suggests that confronting and responding to our ecological perils may ultimately require something more than absurdist humour and ironic detachment. Hamm, after all, is the only character in Brooks’s play whose name directly references *Endgame*, and although there are parallels between Hamm’s family and the characters in Beckett’s play, there are also some distinct differences.

Consider, for instance, the portrayal of Hamm’s father in *The Eco Show*, Brooks’s updated version of the much-abused Nagg, who, in *Endgame*, is condemned to live out his last days in a trash can, defecating and urinating into the pile of sand on which he stands. From the perspective of Beckett’s Hamm, Nagg is an “Accursed progenitor,” someone who has given Hamm a meaningless life as a member of an absurd, miserable species (10). Indeed, as the Beckett scholar Stan Gontarski reminds us, “in Beckett’s world, birth, creation itself is the punishment” (140). By contrast, in *The Eco Show*, Hamm’s resentment of his father is due to the latter’s actions as a former advertising man, actions that have endangered future generations by helping to fuel an unsustainable market economy.

In addition, regardless of how Brooks's Hamm views his father, the playwright's portrait of this Grandpa figure, unlike Beckett's depiction of the disempowered, dominated and biscuit-sucking Nagg, is in many respects remarkably positive. The Grandpa's ebullient energy, for instance, often provides a welcome relief from Hamm's melancholic disposition, and, in the Grandpa's dying address to his son—conveyed to Hamm via a ghostly (video) projection<sup>63</sup>—he comes across as a complex and largely sympathetic character:

I've had a good run...and I don't envy you the world and what's ahead...I see only trouble and chaos...still, I'd like just a little more, just give me a little more time, please, a little more... ah let it go, let it go, game set and match...I'd rather die on the courts...or in the sac... why didn't you say goodbye to me - you should have said goodbye... ah, never mind, stop asking ...let it go... just let it go, it's over...on the other hand, I wouldn't mind...if it's not too much to ask ... please - just a couple of more days ... just a couple more days ... in this ... beautiful world... (84).

What Brooks is conveying here in this portrait of Hamm's father is hardly an "Accursed fornicator," but a man who, at the end of his life, is willing to admit his mistakes, who longs for a reconciliation with his son, and who expresses, with his last breath, a genuine and irrepressible love of life.

If Brooks's portrayal of the Grandpa in *The Eco Show* is noticeably sympathetic at times, so is his depiction of Gwen, Hamm's common law partner. As the woman whom Hamm calls upon to relieve his thirst, to look after the needs of their children, and to care for his dying father, Gwen's character serves, in part, as a reminder of the long-suffering Clov who, in *Endgame*, provides care for the blind, crippled and frequently

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<sup>63</sup> In so doing, Brooks provides yet another bit of inter-textual play, underscoring both his own and Beckett's Hamm as versions/revisions of Shakespeare's Hamlet.

irascible Hamm. In this respect, then, the portrayal of Gwen as a female version of Beckett's Clov might be viewed as little more than a one-dimensional caricature: the stereotypical servile housewife struggling to care for a self-entitled patriarchal husband. In the transposition of Clov's subjugation to that of a beleaguered wife, however, Brooks has also taken pains to ensure that Gwen offers considerable resistance to this servitude. Not only does she bristle in response to her common-law husband's demands (as Clov does in response to Hamm's), but, in a soliloquy, she also takes a more explicit stand, telling Hamm and her two children that she has had enough: "The three of you can go to hell," she says,

I'm done with it, I'm going, or I'll live in the woods or go work in the water mines or I'll just throw myself against the fence, I don't care, I've had it - You don't want me to drink I don't drink, you want me to ration the fucking water, I ration the fucking water. I need air, I need out of this concentration camp. (73)

Furthermore, when Hamm tries to placate her, Gwen goes on to invoke James Lovelock's *The Revenge of Gaia*, comparing her mistreatment to that of a similarly disrespected and angry planet: "What the hell do you want? You want change? You want to treat your fucking Gaia well? Do you?" (73). Gwen, in other words, not only serves Hamm, she also serves as a corrective to his vision, reminding him, in an abbreviated form, of ecofeminist assertions that the mistreatment and oppression of the more-than-human physical world is bound up with patriarchal m and actions that have historically promoted the oppression of women.

In addition to these sympathetic portraits of Hamm's father and his wife, Brooks's depiction of Hamm's two children provides even more of a departure from the uncompromisingly bleak vision in Beckett's *Endgame*. In *Endgame*, the only hint of a

generation that might arise from the “corpsed” world is the one boy who Clov spies on the horizon and whom he views, in disparaging terms, as a “potential procreator” (78). By contrast, Joe and Fifi, the inheritors of a still-possible future in *The Eco Show*, exhibit signs that the world might not quite be such a lost cause. Intelligent and witty in their repartees with Hamm, both exhibit a genuine curiosity and responsiveness to the world, and both manage to disrupt and alter their father’s obsessively fatalistic outlook.

Joe’s wit and intelligence, for instance, shows up repeatedly in his exchanges with his father. When Hamm presses him on the “nothing” that he claims to be doing in his room, Joe explains that when he really wants to do “something” he travels to “one of the 35 rooms in [his] mind” (65). Similarly, when Hamm complains to Joe that he’s thirsty, the latter replies in a pithy conceit, giving his father a dose of his own medicine: “No river likes thirst,” Joe retorts, “because thirst has no end” (71). Even more impressive, however, is the lengthy soliloquy on technology that erupts from Joe in response to his father’s relentless pessimism about the environment.<sup>64</sup> Quoting Einstein and alluding to everything from quantum science and nanotechnology to cyborgs, Joe reveals that he has, indeed, a lot going on in the “35 rooms” of his mind, and that there may be alternatives to his father’s views of the world, which he characterizes as a kind of thinking that is, “well, old” (79).

Like her older brother, but in a more openhearted manner, Fifi also shows herself to be remarkably intelligent. A wellspring of creative output, she busies herself with artistic activities—practising music, making drawings, writing stories and working on a

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<sup>64</sup> In terms of Brooks’s inter-textual play, Joe’s soliloquy recalls the scene in Act one of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, in which Lucky offers up a stream of consciousness outpouring in response to Pozzo’s demands that he “think.”

scale model of a cityscape. In her interactions with her father, she, too, is wonderfully witty. When Hamm, describing a dream in which God appears, refers to the latter as “he,” Fifi provides a clever intervention:

FIFI. Is God a he?

HAMM. I don’t remember. What do you think?

FIFI. He’s a little girl of course.

HAMM. So you could be God?

FIFI. That was me in your dream last night. (63)

Fifi’s creative intelligence, readily apparent here, shows itself in other ways as well. For example, after Hamm has critiqued her scale model of a city for lacking the principles of bio-mimesis and green design, Fifi returns with a much-improved version (79). And, when Hamm tests her writing skills, she proves her talents in a way that both he and Gwen (who is also a writer) can appreciate:

HAMM. “A blade of grass,  
A skyscraper stands tall beside it...”  
What comes next?  
“A blade of grass,  
A skyscraper stands tall beside it...”

FIFI. “Nothing was said.”

HAMM. Fabulous. (*To Gwen*)  
Did you hear that?

GWEN. Yes. Clever. Very clever. (80)

Fifi, it would seem, has the ability to incorporate her father’s anxieties over environmental losses and, in creative projects and playful tropes, to make *something* out of her father’s “Nothing.”

Hamm's father's instinctual energies, Gwen's eco-feminist stance, Joe's thoughtfulness, and Fifi's creativity—all of these modify and, in various ways, provide alternatives to Hamm's seemingly interminable despondency. They also provide opportunities for Hamm to emerge as a more likeable character. In Hamm's interactions with his father, he admits his penchant for melancholy. "You're the warrior," he tells him, "I'm the worrier" (75). When his father accuses him of passivity, however, he rises to the occasion and exhibits some of his father's fighting spirit:

HAMM. That's absolutely untrue. My life is devoted to doing things – I'm raising two children, I tutor inner city kids, I do fundraisers for environmental organizations that attempt //

GRANDPA. All right –

HAMM. - to undo the damage that your generation has done –

GRANDPA. - You've made your point. (76)

Hamm not only shows a more affirmative side of his character by standing up to his father, he also does so by listening and responding to Gwen's concerns about her mistreatment. After hearing her protestations that his obsessions with ecological collapse are crushing her spirit, he does his best to adopt a more hopeful outlook. "There is a future," he tells her, in the conclusion to Act two. "I can do better. We can be better. There is a future, there is, I know, it's hard to imagine it but there is" (81).

Hamm's willingness to suspend his despondency concerning planetary ecosystems for the sake of the more immediate 'ecosystem' of his family is nowhere more apparent, however, than in the care he shows for his two children. Evidence of Hamm's parental concerns can be found throughout the action of *The Eco Show*: in the interest that he takes in their projects, in the guidance that he offers, and in his willingness to attend to

their emotional well-being. While judgmental at times (there are moments, for instance, where he is sarcastic with Joe and demanding with Fifi) he is almost always willing to listen to his son and daughter and to (momentarily at least) set aside his concerns about the planet's demise in order to engage with them in play. After some initial resistance to Fifi's attempts to draw him into a tickling game, he quickly and easily succumbs to her invitations (68). On another occasion, he enlists Joe's help to cheer up Fifi by mounting a bit of eco-friendly theatre (lit by his son's bicycle power), and taking her on a Faustian make-believe tour of Paris, Venice, the moon and, eventually, heaven (74). And, in another light-hearted scene, he lies on the floor with his two children to pass the time in a whimsical game they are playing, balancing their arms in the air in an effort to overcome gravity (77).

Hamm's willingness to respond to his family combined with his moments of genuine connection with them suggest that his concern about the environment is not simply some *idée fixe*, but is related to his affection for those closest to him. It would be imprecise, however, to claim that Brooks, by tying Hamm's ecological fears to his concerns for his domestic *oikos*, has written a human-centred "Home Show," with the environing world relegated to a subsidiary role. To make such a case, one would have to view Hamm and his family as separable from nonhuman nature, something that Brooks's play explicitly refutes.

In a way, Brooks's Hamm, as a man who faces a dreaded future, is a kind of ecological and secular Everyman for our time. How, the play asks, shall he, the members of his family, and the biosphere as a whole be saved? In the conclusion to *Endgame*, the idea of any form of salvation for Hamm and Clov is portrayed as a cruel,

preposterous and impossible idea.<sup>65</sup> In the conclusion to *The Eco Show*, however, the question of a secular salvation remains open. Unlike the teenager in Hollingsworth's *Numbrains* and Uncle John in *The Head, The Guts and Sound Bone Dance*, Brooks's characters are unable to mourn the environmental losses for which they are, in part at least, responsible. And yet, in the last moments of *The Eco Show*, there remains a persistent, if fragile hope for the "beautiful world" to which Hamm's father, in his dying breath, pays homage.

ALL: Row, row, row, your boat, gently down the stream. Merrily merrily merrily merrily, life is but a dream ...

(Fifi elbows Joe. He whispers something to Fifi. Fifi whispers something to him. They laugh. Hamm plays with Joe.)

(The rain gets louder. Fifi rests chin to Gwen's shoulder. Coughs. Gwen kisses her head. Loud rain. They drive. All look out. All are still.) (84)

As the family heads off on this virtual drive through a virtual countryside, their fates, to be sure, seem shadowy indeed, yet in their singing, in their laughter, and in their small gestures of loving care, there are still indications of a dream and of a world that are, at the very least, *worthy* of preserving.

While Hollingsworth and Cook draw on the conventions of tragedy and while Brooks's *The Eco Show* offers a form of tragi-comedy to address environmental loss as a loss of self, other playwrights have turned to satire. Gwen Pharis Ringwood's *The Lodge*, for instance—a play written in 1975 and produced in 1977 by the West Vancouver Little Theatre—is more similar to a Shavian comedy of ideas than to the tragi-comedy of *Endgame*. In plays such as *Major Barbara* and *Heartbreak House*,

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<sup>65</sup> For a discussion of the ramifications of the final "joke" in *Endgame*, see Gontarsky 140.

Shaw sets forth the action by presenting an array of characters, each of whom takes a distinct and contrasting position towards a political or social issue. To further complicate matters, he then adds an unconventional character—the Shavian contrarian—that turns all of these ideas upside down, and, by so doing, provides some instructive social satire. In *The Lodge*, Ringwood takes a similar approach to address an issue with ecological implications—namely, the distinction between nature as ‘home’ and nature as ‘commodity’. Moreover, in what is arguably the first satirical comedy in English-Canadian drama to consider nature in an ecofeminist context, Ringwood addresses about what it means to respect the agency of the more-than-human physical world, while assuming an ethical responsibility for inheriting and inhabiting it.

Ringwood’s setting for *The Lodge* is ideal for this ecofeminist depiction of human/world relations, alternating as it does between the interior of an isolated “wilderness” resort (run by the recently married Shelley and Allen Marsden) and “Soda Creek,” a natural hot springs in a surrounding forest. In Act one, the interior of a “Wilderness Lodge” provides an opportunity for Ringwood to explore, via her characters’ divergent attitudes towards the wilderness, the way human perceptions mediate the natural world. In Act two, she employs the exterior setting at Soda Creek to emphasize the radical otherness of this nonhuman world and to portray *its* agency as a mediator of human actions. Then, in the final act, the characters return to the interior of the *Lodge*, their lives having been altered by what transpires at Soda Creek. There is, in other words, a kind of dialectic of place in the play, and the play’s structure—described by Ringwood as a play in three ‘scenes’—reflects this.

In Scene one, the members of Shelley's family who arrive for a visit at Shelley and Allen's Wilderness Lodge are a mixed bag with respect to the way each of them views the environing world. Shelley's mother, Alice Hobbes, is "a substantial matron in her late forties" with a strong aversion to the wilderness (438). Alice doesn't like birds, finds the "great looming trees" oppressive, and is irritated by the untidiness of the outdoors (438, 445). She and her husband Eardley, in fact, are so preoccupied with their material possessions that their fondest affections for one another are tied to a shared love of their Cadillac (439), while Eardley is such a materialist and an entrepreneur that he can't look at the Soda Creek springs without seeing dollar signs. He envisions, in place of the wilderness, a kind of Canadian Disneyland, complete with "Swiss cottages," a swimming pool, golf course and "plastic animals at the gate—bear, moose, cougar, just like real life only four times the size" (469, 479).

In addition to Alice and Eardley, there's Alice's sister—Shelley's aunt Connie—a woman in an oppressive marriage who identifies with the wild things that her husband Roland, a retired Major, takes great glee in gunning down. Roland, for his part, sees nature as a testing ground for his masculinity—a chance to show that he can subdue it with his superior cunning (466). Unfortunately for him, one of his attempts to do so is foiled by the arrival of another guest, his aptly-named nephew Robin, who—in what he calls "a Greenpeace manoeuvre"—acts as a human shield for a flock of ducks that are the Major's intended prey (441). As for Shelley and Allen, they too have their differences in terms of how they view and treat their forested surroundings. Shelley, for instance, wants their lodge to be a wilderness retreat and is dead set against Allen's plan to pay the mortgage by inviting in a group of trophy hunters (440). With the introduction

of this diverse set of characters, then, Ringwood has made the very idea of “wilderness” and “nature” a somewhat slippery notion, meaning different things to different people.

After the introduction of these characters, the action in *The Lodge* takes on new urgency with the arrival of Shelley’s unconventional grandmother, Jasmine Daravally—Ringwood’s version of the Shavian contrarian. It is Jasmine who, as it turns out, has brought all of these family members together to celebrate her birthday, a celebration that eventually becomes the occasion for a dramatic disclosure. Unbeknownst to any of her family, Jasmine owns the deed to the Soda Creek springs and the forested acreage surrounding the lodge—lands that she had originally intended to pass on as a bequest to her two daughters and their families. In the action that ensues, however, what Jasmine learns is that her relationship with these lands is one that neither her daughters nor their husbands are capable of appreciating.

In Scene two, Jasmine makes a visit to the Soda Creek springs, and it is here that the extent of her relationship with the natural world becomes apparent. Accompanying her on this outing is Jimmy Lashaway,<sup>66</sup> the chief of the local First Nations band and a long-time friend who shares Jasmine’s appreciation for the springs in a way that her daughters do not. As Ringwood’s stage directions stipulate, there is nothing particularly dramatic, sublime or exotic about the springs: “*Just a small hole in the ground with the soda water bubbling up*” (462). Nevertheless, when Jasmine and Jimmy visit the springs, they both express a profound connection with it.

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<sup>66</sup> Ringwood’s portrayal of Jimmy Lashaway as yet another conservation-minded First Nations character indicates that by the time of Ringwood’s play, the figure of the “Ecological Indian,” as characterized by Shepherd Krech, had become a well-entrenched trope in English-Canadian drama.

Jimmy, for his part, speaks of the springs as the site for ceremonial rites once carried out there and of how he, his grandfather and granddaughter have each come there to reconnect with their ancestral identity and to pass through crucial transitional moments in their lives (462). For Jasmine, the springs are associated with the love she shared with her late husband, and her decision to return there now is because she is at a crossroads in her life and in need of inspiration. At one point, in conversation with Jimmy, Jasmine takes a moment to appreciate the age of the forest that surrounds them. “Some of those trees,” she says, “must be seven hundred years old.” “I think so,” says Jimmy, “When they log now, they cut down everything. Then they plant some little spindles so everything will be the same size. They don’t want old trees. Maybe they don’t want old people” (462).

In some respects, the ways in which Jasmine and Jimmy are able to identify with the nonhuman natural world bring to mind the writings of deep ecologists such as Arne Naess, Joanna Macy and John Seed. Deep ecology, a philosophy initiated by Naess, theorizes that such identifications are the means by which we experience our interconnectedness with and compassion for other than human life forms and agencies in the physical world (43). Drawing on the writings of Eric Frohmm, Ghandi, and Immanuel Kant, Naess argues that such compassion is a key component in the development of an “ecological Self”—a crucial prerequisite, he explains, for altering the harmful actions that human-centred thinking has unleashed upon the earth. “If reality is experienced by the ecological Self,” Naess writes, “our behavior naturally and beautifully follows norms of strict environmental ethics” (26). Accordingly, in Ringwood’s play, it is Jasmine and Jimmy’s propensity to experience the land as part of

their own identities that gives rise to their desire to preserve it for its own sake, rather than to exploit it for what it can offer in terms of financial gains.

Upon closer examination, however, the way that Jimmy and Jasmine perceive the Soda Creek springs reveals a view of the more-than-human physical world that has more in common with the notion of ecological identity elaborated by ecofeminists such as Val Plumwood and Karen Warren. Calling into question the assertions of deep ecologists such as Arne Naess and Warwick Fox, Plumwood contends that these writers, by focusing so exclusively on identifying with the nonhuman natural world, run the risk of ignoring the latter's autonomous agency by cobbling over important distinctions between humans and nonhuman others. As an alternative to Naess' notion of an "ecological self," therefore, Plumwood advocates the model of a "relational self," where the individual, rather than assuming an unqualified identification with nature, maintains an ongoing interaction with the physical world: a reciprocal exchange in which both continuities and differences can be discerned (*Feminism* 154-60, 173-182).

Like Plumwood, Karen Warren, in setting forth the principles of her ecofeminist stance, also places emphasis on the value of acknowledging differences in other beings, whether those differences are acknowledged in other humans or in beings and agencies found in more-than-human physical world. "[E]cofeminism," she writes, "is structurally pluralistic in that it presupposes and maintains difference—difference among humans as well as between humans and at least some elements of nonhuman nature" (142).

Thus, while ecofeminism denies the "nature/culture" split, it affirms that humans are both members of an ecological community (in some respects) and different from it (in other respects). Ecofeminism's attention to

relationships and community is not, therefore, an erasure of difference but a respectful acknowledgement of it. (142)

In the scene where Jimmy and Jasmine spend time alone together at Soda Creek, Ringwood, in keeping with such ecofeminist ideas, manages to acknowledge and respect both cultural differences among humans and differences between humans and the more-than-human physical world. As already indicated, although Jasmine and Jimmy share an appreciation of Soda Creek, their individual reasons for doing so are connected to differing cultural backgrounds. Equally relevant from an ecofeminist perspective, however, is Jasmine's appreciation that there is "something" about the Soda Creek springs that cannot be pinned down or resolved. "Do you think the water tastes funny?" Jimmy asks, after Jasmine drinks from the springs. "A taste of soda," Jasmine answers, "and something else—something from deep down inside the earth" (456). Reaching for a way to convey this "something else" Jasmine resorts to a simile: "It's like touching the heart of the earth" (462).

Jasmine's identification with the lands of Soda Creek, along with her experience of the "something else" that resides in its waters—an experience, that is, of both similarity and difference—has strong parallels with what Val Plumwood has identified as a "tension between like and unlike" that, in her view, characterizes the most respectful human relationships with the more-than-human world (*Feminism* 156). It also stands in stark contrast with the more ego-centred concerns that characterize her two daughter's relationship with the more-than-human physical world, a fact that leads Jasmine, at the end of the play, to radically revise her plans. Rather than passing her lands over to her daughters and their families, she opts instead to leave them as a gift in

trust to Jimmy Lashaway's band. "I realized," she tells her daughters, "that it's too late for you to nurture the land, and too late for it to heal you. Sooner or later you'd spoil what's there, defile the mystery. And when the mystery is gone, the land would become your enemy (488).

In a way, Ringwood's *The Lodge* can be read as a kind of comic inversion of King Lear, but with an ecofeminist twist. In these terms, Jasmine is the elderly matriarch who risks losing her authority to two daughters who, as the action of the play makes clear, have been secretly plotting to wrest control of her finances and place her in a seniors' home. Before this can take place, however, Jasmine—discovering, just in time, her daughters' duplicity—maintains her authority and asserts her solidarity with the land and with a community of First Nations people with whom she discovers a common bond. Ringwood's comic reversal, however, also includes the depiction of a cougar's death, a loss of life that, within the dramatic context that Ringwood provides, imbues this play with additional ecological resonance.

In the script of Ringwood's play, the cougar, whose presence in the vicinity of Soda Creek is made evident by its snarls and cries, is a source of tension for the members of Jasmine's family. Not surprisingly, given their differing views of the wilderness, the family is deeply divided in their response to the cougar's cries. Shelley, for instance, wants the cougar to be left alone. "Pretty soon," she says, "there won't be any animals. I bet if this was the last cougar on earth someone would shoot it down" (443). Alice, Shelley's mother, disagrees. "Nonsense," she says, "we can't let carnivorous animals take over," unaware, it would seem, that her description of the cougar might just as easily be applied to herself (442). Major Roland, meanwhile,

despite the protestations of his wife, wants to hunt down the cougar as a sign of his masculinity, and the actions he takes to do so constitute a minor subplot in the action—one that culminates, near the end of the play, when he tells Jasmine the story of how he and Shelley’s husband manage to accomplish the deed:

ROLAND. (*very distressed*) I thought I would track him down and show you all. He was right in my sights. I should have killed him with the first shot. But I didn’t. I shattered the hip. His back leg was dragging. He went for a tree, but he couldn’t climb. I came back for Allan. We went in the bush after him. There was blood all over and we could hear the cougar snarling and sort of crying too. Suddenly he was there . . . crouched right in front of us. Allan fired. I fired too but it was Allan who put the poor beast out of his misery. I had a clean chance and I crippled that cougar, Granny. (483)

Roland’s description of the kill, delivered as a kind of confession to Jasmine, reveals the sham of the Major’s assumptions of masculine mastery, and, in the ensuing dialogue, Ringwood makes concerted links between the cougar, as a frightened, suffering animal, and the men who killed him. “It’s good you shot him,” Jasmine tells Allan, “Roland says the poor thing was suffering.” “Yes,” Allan replies, “he was. So were we. And we were scared too” (484). If Ringwood invites a comparison here between the cougar and their two human predators, however, it is in her portrayal of both the parallels and the distinctions between Jasmine and this predated animal where her eco-feminist sensibilities, *avant la lettre*, can be most clearly discerned.

Ringwood establishes the parallels early on in the play, even before Jasmine’s first entrance. In the opening to Scene one, when the family is concerned that Jasmine, who is late for her birthday, may have encountered some trouble, the men speak about hunting her down like an animal. “I’ve got to track down your grandmother,” Allan tells Shelley, and Roland is enthusiastic about the idea: “Do you happen to have anything

that belongs to Granny Daravalley—a glove, a shawl, socks? If the dogs once got her scent . . .” (441, 454).

In the play’s climax, Ringwood makes the parallels between Jasmine and the cougar explicit. With the latter trapped and wounded in a woodpile outside the lodge, Jasmine, trapped behind a screen, receives an emotional wound when she overhears her daughters’ plans to take control of her finances and commit her to a senior’s home (478-479). Then, when the sound of gunfire draws Alice and Connie outside, Jasmine, crawling like a cougar on her hands and knees, emerges from her hiding place. “I have to get out of here. They mustn’t see me,” she tells Shelley, “I was trapped. Trapped” (480). Despite setting forth these parallels, however, Ringwood also draws attention to and underscores the fact that Jasmine survives, while the cougar does not. In the denouement, after Jasmine has revealed her decision to disinherit her family, Alice responds in a state of shock. “You’re like that cougar, Mother,” she protests, “You leap down on one!” To which Jasmine replies: “The cougar had no escape route, Alice. I have” (488).

Jasmine’s awareness of the cougar’s difference from her is telling in a couple of ways. First, like the “something else” that she tastes in the water from the Soda Springs, the cougar’s difference adds emphasis to the autonomous agency of the nonhuman natural world, preventing the audience from seeing the cougar as nothing more than a symbolic vehicle for a heightened appreciation of Jasmine’s situation.<sup>67</sup> Viewed in terms of the ecofeminist ideas of Val Plumwood, however, Jasmine’s awareness of the

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<sup>67</sup> Ringwood has also structured the action to underscore the literality of the cougar by portraying Jasmine’s experience of being trapped *before* the Major and Allan relate the story of how the cougar was killed.

cougar's difference is also significant as an acknowledgment of her own agency as a woman who shows care and takes responsibility for the more-than-human physical world in which she lives.

In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood takes aim at what she contends is a masculine-privileged construction of nature and culture as two sides of a binary opposition and provides a critique of two feminist positions that, in her view, both stem from and promote androcentric thinking. The first of these positions, she explains, occurs when women, in response to prevailing masculine notions of a feminized and devalued nature, adopt what she calls "a masculine model of humanity and culture" by assuming mastery over this (devalued) natural world as an alternative to being conflated with it (27). Equally troubling for Plumwood, however, is a second position: namely, the kind adopted by feminists who assert their opposition to this "masculine model" by affirming their identification with a natural world that, in their view, is foundational to and therefore inherently *more* valuable than culture. (31). The problem with this critical reversal, Plumwood argues, is that it continues to rely on dualistic thinking that constructs a "masculine culture" and a "feminine nature" as two competing and mutually exclusive sides of a binary opposition. According to Plumwood, therefore, the only sensible alternative for both women and men is to dispense with this binary opposition and with hegemonic assumptions of any kind. Thus, while acknowledging that many women, due to a history of being conflated with a devalued nature, may be more inclined than men to take issue with its mistreatment, Plumwood is adamant that neither men nor women can claim, in any essentialist way, to be any more "natural" or "cultural" than one another (36).

In *The Lodge*, Jasmine's daughters have, it would seem, internalized the idea of a strict division between culture and nature, while taking up opposing positions with respect to this imaginary divide. Alice, in accordance with Plumwood's masculine model of humanity and culture, believes she has every right to subjugate and control the natural world and wants the cougar exterminated. "[W]e can't let carnivorous animals take over," she tells Shelley, "Birds and beasts were put on this earth for our use" (442, 449). Her sister Connie, meanwhile—caught, it would seem, on the underside of the culture/nature divide—takes sides with the cougar that her husband wishes to kill, yet can do little but pound the ground with her fists and shout, "Make him miss! Make him miss! (466). Jasmine's actions, however, show that she is different from either of her two daughters. Unlike Alice, she is able to acknowledge her connection with the natural world and, in so doing, to discern value there; yet, unlike Connie, who can only bemoan the fate of her fellow creatures, she also asserts her agency as a cultural being, taking action to preserve the wilderness habitat of Soda Creek by handing it over, with specific provisions, to Jimmy Lashaway's bands and, in this way, forestalling any future destruction of wildlife and habitat.

In 1979, when this play was first produced, Plumwood's ideas were not yet in circulation, and it would be more than a decade before her first book-length study would be published. Ringwood's satirical portrayal of anti-ecological attitudes, however, and her portrayal of a female protagonist who assumes responsibility for the more-than-human world reveals an affinity with Plumwood's theories. In *The Lodge*, that is, Ringwood not only addresses the sources and consequences of ecological harm, but also

manages, via her depiction of Jasmine Daravally, to convey a substantially developed eco-feminist perspective.

In addition to Ringwood's comedy, two more examples of plays that employ satire to address losses to the more-than-human physical world that are, in effect, also human losses, are Karen Hines's *The Pochsy Plays*, a trilogy of one-woman shows, and Blake Brookers' *The Land, The Animals*, a play written in collaboration with the One Yellow Rabbit theatre collective. Hines, who like Brooker is based, for the most part, in Calgary, has referred to what she calls a "cultural greenhouse effect" in Alberta—the tendency, as she explains it, for there to be an "equal and opposite reaction" to the "avowedly red-necked" element there ("Yes" 23). To support her assertion, she points to ecologically informed productions such as *The Land, The Animals* and Ghost Theatre's 2004 production of *Picnic*, a play "about Weibo Ludwig, the eco-activist bomber" (23). One could easily argue, however, that one of the most trenchant examples of the "cultural greenhouse effect" to which she refers can be found in Hines's own work for the stage: in particular the trilogy of one-woman shows—*Pochsy's Lips, Oh, baby*, and *Citizen Pochsy*—published together in 2004 as *The Pochsy Plays*.

Hines is on record as resisting the labeling of her work as "eco-drama," considering the term to be too reductive. After all, she quips, no one speaks about Tennessee Williams' plays as "mental illness" plays ("Yes" 23). At the same time, however, she willingly cites her sensitivity to environmental degradation as one of the primary motivations for her writing. "I write about environmental issues," she points out, "not because I think I can save the world or change anything, but because that's part of what preoccupies me" ("Yes" 21). As she goes on to explain, such concerns were

engendered in her at an early age: “I was raised by scientists, and the things I heard around the dinner table as a child, from them, from their friends, are probably a huge part of my anxiety as a person now.”

For example, my dad knew the people who first recognized the environmental significance of the equation that basically said CFCs [chlorofluorocarbons] plus ozone equals zero. If that discovery had not happened exactly when it did, we’d all be walking around with parasols right now . . . that was the kind of knowledge that was casually bandied about when I was a kid. (“Yes” 21)

Such childhood experiences, in concert with Hines’s mature artistic sensibilities, can help to explain the appearance, in 1992, of *Pochsy’s Lips*, a one-woman show in which Hines, in her role as the clown/*bouffon* Pochsy, manages to expose our collective folly as the citizens of a contaminated and contaminating culture.

In her introduction to *The Pochsy Plays*, Hines details how the creation of this Pochsy persona derived from two performance techniques: that of the *bouffon* and that of the “personal clown” (12-14). As she describes them, the first of these—the *bouffon* technique—is a “dark form of clowning, which prescribes the use of bodily affliction in combination with parody to achieve its theatri-political effect” (12), while the second—an approach to clowning that she learned from Richard Pochinko—is “an intensely visceral performance entity born from the ‘celebration of the extremities and the normalcy of the self’” (13). Hines goes on to explain that, while familiar with both of these forms of comedy, she was also disappointed with the effectiveness of some of her early forays into clowning, and concerned that the physical affliction integral to the

*bouffon* would be, in many respects, “ill-mannered” and “deeply insensitive,” ostensibly to those who are physically-challenged (12). Her solution, therefore, was to combine these two forms in the creation of a “personal *bouffon*,” one whose affliction would be internal and the result of “a more universal dis-ease . . . (spiritual, psychological, physical) from which no one is immune” (13). In *The Pochsy Plays*, however, Pochsy’s internal affliction is also explicitly a physiological illness caused by a chemical contamination in the workplace.

In *Pochsy’s Lips*, when Hines’s character first introduces herself to audiences, she speaks from a hospital room, “swathed head to toe in gauze, almost like a mummy,” and is disarmingly direct in setting forth the social conditions of a more universal dis-ease.

(24):

We live in a scary time. Advances we have made in science, medicine, and environmental awareness seem not to be keeping pace with the technological advances we have made. We are constantly bombarded by ominous information regarding ever-accelerating environmental poisoning, a continuing apocalyptic threat and mysterious and uncontrollable disease. All indicators point to the distinct possibility that we are a species bent on self-extinction. No one is safe. And there is no escape. (25)

Such dire pronouncements, especially when delivered by a wraith-like character, hooked up to an IV unit and speaking, as it were, from a shroud, are not exactly what one might expect as the start of a comedic performance, and the disturbing content of her assertions is given additional resonance a few moments later when we learn, in more detail, about Pochsy’s physical affliction. As Pochsy explains, albeit in an oddly upbeat manner, she has come to the hospital after having worked at Mercury Packers, a place where “if you spill the mercury and it falls on the floor and bursts into all those shiny, sparkly little bubbles? The best way to pick it up is to go like (*she licks her finger and*

*mimes picking up a mercury ball with it) . . . that” (32). From the very beginning of this performance, then, Pochsy is someone who carries lethal contaminants in her bloodstream. As the victim of a hazardous workplace, she is, as it were, a walking reminder of a toxic world: the very embodiment of the social conditions that she outlines in her opening address.*

Like the fool/*bouffon* that she is, however, Pochsy puts a pretty face<sup>68</sup> on her contamination and sets about blithely ignoring the sources, signs and consequences of her physical disease. And so, while *Pochsy’s Lips* may begin on a somber and threatening note, the gloom is quickly swept away when Pochsy “strips out of the gauze, revealing her pink baby doll pyjamas” and sings a song about falling in love (25). Hines’s fool, in other words, is a romantic one and, what is more, a doyenne of denial. “What’s that gloomy cloud above your head?” she sings. “Fluffy toxic cloud of misery! / Take the psychic scissors, / Cut the rope of worry. / Watch that cloud fly away!” (25-6). Despite the chalk-white complexion, the dark circles under the eyes, and the repeated convulsions that are the symptoms of her contamination, Pochsy endeavours, in a manner that is both hopelessly naïve and pointedly self-absorbed, to remain cheerily optimistic about what life has to offer. Such optimism might, in one sense, be seen as a coping mechanism for the bitter reality she is facing: the fatal poison that she has contracted and that she can do nothing to counter. Pochsy’s dogged determination to put a sunny face on her disease strains credulity to the breaking point, however. And although we may smile at Pochsy’s cheery demeanour, it eventually becomes apparent

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<sup>68</sup> For an analysis of the ecological implications of Pochsy’s “pretty face” and what it covers up see Celeste Derksen’s “Complexion as Metaphor: Eco-satire in The Pochsy Plays” (35-41).

that Hines, by blithely denying her own affliction, is indeed a reflection of a more universal dis-ease: namely, a widespread collective denial in an era of increasing ecological perils.

As Hines herself points out, her “point of attack” in *The Pochsy Plays* is “less about how people recycle their bottles and more about our capacity for ill-considered escapist thinking” (“Yes” 24). Accordingly, in response to the fearful scenario summarized in the opening to *Pochsy’s Lips*, what Hines’s fool serves up for her audiences, both in this play and in the two that follow, is a veritable deluge of “escapist thinking”: a series of elaborate diversions and flights of fancy designed, as Hines has said, “to charm, amuse and engage” (Note 19). And so, throughout *The Pochsy Plays*, while the foolish Pochsy charms and amuses, the world-wise Hines admonishes and criticizes.

As I’ve already indicated, one of the chief means by which Hines is able to achieve her ecologically informed social commentary is via implicit parallels between the transparency of Pochsy’s refusals and our own predilection for escapist thinking. Thus, Pochsy, in addition to glossing over the symptoms of her disease, does everything she can to overlook or make light of the consequences of a toxic world. In *Oh, baby*—the second play in her trilogy—she reclines, Venus-like, on a gigantic clamshell, telling stories about a “Dream Vacation,” while neglecting to mention the slag pile that her shell rests upon (57). Later, in a little hymn to the Lord, she rationalizes species loss as part of divinely ordained plan: “Though the fish may all grow seasick / Birds be blinded by the light / They will fly to Thee more swiftly / Through the hole in the night” (80). And, in the conclusion to *Oh, baby*, Pochsy veils her awareness of global warming and a

contaminated ocean in a wistful daydream of an imagined future where she and her daughter will “watch the icebergs float south and listen to the penguins crying way up high. And every ocean will have a silver lining” (86).

To buttress her escapism and feed her narcissism, Pochsy is quick to seize upon commercial products as remedies for both her own perils and those of the planet. Armed with sunny maxims from posters and self-help manuals and urged on by advertisements for personal care products and for savings plans designed to shore up her meager finances, Pochsy focuses on self-affirmations. “It’s very important,” she counsels, “even when you’re not feeling well, to look your very best!” (30) “Anything your mind can conceive and believe,” she declares, “it will achieve” (31). Her advice to the thousands of refugees appearing on the horizon: “Dream great dreams and make them come true!” (49)

One of the problems is that Pochsy’s search for a pro-active, self-actualizing life style leads her into a series of unsatisfactory results. The vapid get-well greetings that she writes and sends to herself do little to cheer up her stay in the hospital (*Pochsy’s Lips* 33-34). Her transparently narcissistic approach to spirituality leaves her unable to commit to a seemingly inattentive God (*Pochsy’s Lips* 29-30), and her search for intimacy on chat lines results in nothing but lewd demands from the men whom she contacts (*Oh, baby* 65, 70-71) Such repeated disappointments cause Pochsy to redouble her efforts to remain positive, but in doing so, she appears increasingly blind to the realities around her.

Pochsy’s cheery optimism seems out of place, of course, in an environment that persistently mirrors her own contamination. In her daydream of a romantic relationship

with a Nebraska doctor, for instance, the Doctor's wife has, with all the convenience of an Oedipal dream, "[m]ysteriously passed away." This mystery, however, has occurred just after the couple has insulated their house, a detail that leaves lingering doubts as to whether that insulation might have been (and still is) asbestos (38).

Likewise, in one of Pochsy's wilderness fantasies, the opportunity to commune with nature via a Disney-like "solo deer" and a "Native Canadian Indian" is quickly dispelled when she notices that both the deer and the "Native Canadian Indian" have "a little bit of foam" in the corners of their mouths (43). In *Oh, baby*, Pochsy's acceptance of a paid seaside holiday by Mercury Packers (ostensibly a cynical bid to assuage her claims for compensation) brings her into contact with a sun that threatens her with skin cancer, a sight-seeing excursion in which the only sea turtles she encounters are the ones on the company's shiny brochure, and a dead fish (59, 64, 82).

Although we may smile knowingly at Pochsy's naïve and—one could even say—willful myopia,<sup>69</sup> there is something spirited about her willingness to put a brave face on a troubling environment and a physical illness that no product, fantasy vacation, or self-affirmation will ever help to heal. There are plenty of reasons, after all, for us to sympathize with her plight. As the child-like innocent victim of a toxic and inhumane workplace, she appears, for all the world, like one of Charles Dickens's Victorian street urchins. With her pale complexion and the dark circles under the eyes she resembles one of those long-suffering, tubercular ingénues in fin-de-siècle melodramas and turn of the

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<sup>69</sup> Derksen, in "Complexion as Metaphor," describes "the ominous backdrop of environmental decay that Pochsy is ever aware of, part of, and all too easily distracted from" (38-9).

century silent films.<sup>70</sup> And yet there is, at the same time, something unnervingly disingenuous about the way in which Pochsy employs her innocence, often in an overtly alluring manner, as she basks in the attention that the members of her audience provide and invites them to share her fantasies and dreams. As she languishes in the pink baby-doll pyjamas of *Pochsy's Lips* or in the swimming costume of *Oh, baby*, and as she peels off layer after layer of her postmodern corporate-ware in *Citizen Pochsy*, Hines's persona continually presents itself as vulnerable and naïve, while affecting glamorous postures and exuding all the seductive charm of a coquette. Such duplicity is even more troubling, however, given the fact that Pochsy's body, although presented an object of desire, is a site of illness.

Celeste Derksen has noted that a similarly duplicitous relationship with the audience was an essential part of the traditional *bouffon* technique that Hines drew upon in the creation of her Pochsy character. In an article on the gender politics of *Pochsy's Lips*, Derksen points out how the term *bouffon* originated in the “the middle ages and refers to physically deformed persons who were exiled from society” (“Attack” 234). Such abject figures, she observes, “were allowed to return to the villages during special festivals to perform a religious pageant in which they would parody, in a sweet and pandering manner, the religious and secular elite” (234). As Derksen explains, the “pandering manner” that characterized such performances was deceptive in two ways, enabling these *bouffons*, on the one hand, to cover over their abjection and, on the other,

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<sup>70</sup> In the first two *Pochsy Plays*, too, the depiction of Pochsy in this way is underscored by her apparel (the Victorian pink-laced bloomers in *Pochsy's Lips* and, in *Oh, baby*, the cream-coloured pantaloons “reminiscent of a bathing costume from the thirties” (55) and by Pochsy's balletic posturing, with its pointed toes, tilted head and exposed neck. See also Derksen's “The ‘Attack Behind the Invitation’: Gender Parody in *Pochsy's Lips*,” which describes Pochsy's movements as “a compilation of feminine icons, from silent films to beer commercials”(237).

to serve up a form of social satire:

Because of their marginal status, *bouffons* developed a duplicitous form of physical parody. Performers would offset their deformity by creating personae that were as visually pleasing as possible. This would allow them to entertain and please the audience, while at the same time ridiculing their social standards and authority. (234)

Derksen's historical context, with its revelation of this two-fold duplicity, provides us with a way to appreciate the full measure and effect of Hine's technique in *The Pochsy Plays*. Like the traditional *bouffons* that Derksen describes, Pochsy attempts to cover up her affliction by being "as visually pleasing as possible." Even more clever, however, is Hines herself who, wearing Pochsy's coquettish face as a mask, employs her persona's charms to seduce us into recognitions that, under other circumstances, we might not so willingly entertain.

Hine's ability to bring us face to face with ecological realities that we might otherwise choose to ignore has an instructive parallel with the work of the Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky.<sup>71</sup> Like *The Pochsy Plays*, Burtynsky's photographs of toxic tailing ponds, industrial sites, and a carbon-fueled economy challenge us with the way in which our human actions have wreaked havoc on the planet. As the Vancouver-based art critic Robin Laurence comments, Burtynsky's "images confront us with a reality that most of us would prefer to deny" and present us with "the realization of our astonishingly destructive powers" (82). "In Burtynsky's images," observes Lori Pauli "it

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<sup>71</sup> In a telephone interview on March 12, 2010, Hines acknowledged this parallel, and stated that she had been thinking, to some degree, about Burtynsky's photographs when conceiving of *The Pochsy Plays*.

is the insatiable human appetite for the world's raw materials that is of primary interest" (19).

It is not only the disturbing content of Burtynsky's images, though, that is similar to *The Pochsy Plays*, but the fact that he, like Hines, is so skillful in overcoming our aversions to it. The artist and art critic Carol Diehl for instance, in the following commentary on Burtynsky's photographs, might just as well be providing a comment on Hines's technique:

His gritty subject matter is rendered in a romantic way, and it is this incongruity that makes these pictures so compelling. If Burtynsky portrayed the degradation at these sites as unmitigated, we'd feel assaulted and maybe turn away; it would be just too much to absorb at once. Instead, the deft seduction of his art keeps us transfixed. While always aware of the devastated nature of what we're viewing, we keep on looking because there's always some visual pleasure to engage us. (120)

Despite the similarities between what Diehl is describing here and the experience of Hines's performances, however, there is also a distinction between the kinds of seduction that each of these artists employs to keep us "transfixed." While in Burtynsky's photographs, it is the tension between the appeal of the romantic sublime and the horrors of devastated landscapes that holds us in thrall, in the *Pochsy Plays*, it is the gap between the allure of Pochsy's coquettish charms and the body of a woman that has, due to a toxic environment, been transformed from a site of desire into a site of disease and corruption.

As Derksen has pointed out, the association of illness and the female body has, in

many contexts, been inherently troubling in terms of its gender politics. “Pochsy’s body,” she writes, “presents us with a problem—a problem that is strongly feminized” (“Complexion” 37). Drawing on the eco-feminist analysis of Terri Field, Derksen acknowledges that “[v]iewing women’s bodies and illness/destruction as synonymous is indeed a troubling legacy” (“Complexion” 37). In *The Pochsy Plays*, however, what Hines has done is to revise the trope of the dangerous (i.e., corrupted) temptress, aligning the defilement of a woman’s body with the defilement of the earth. In so doing, Hines manages, in a satiric mode, to elicit feelings of pity and fear: pity, because, as a contaminated woman, she is all the more a fool for expecting that anyone will actually desire her; and fear because the more we empathize with or are attracted to Pochsy the more we can see her abjection as a reflection of our own. As her name implies, then, Pochsy is indeed a version of the syphilitic *bouffon*, but in the context of Hines’s social commentary, she is also, as the fool for an ecological era, a symptom and sign of deeply troubling environmental problems and an embodied example of their consequences if we continue to ignore them.

In Blake Brooker’s satirical comedy *The Land, The Animals*, Ted, Doris and Campbell are three scientists from the future, who, via their own foolishness, convey a warning similar to the one in *The Pochsy Plays*. Their assigned task is to enquire into the facts surrounding the suicide drowning of a fellow scientist, a geologist, whose body has been found in their city’s river. In the course of their comic investigations, however, what they also uncover are the signs, once again, of serious environmental problems and of a profound estrangement from the natural world.

In an age of ecological crisis, depicting scientists as fools might seem like a particularly curious comic reversal, since it is biologists, chemists, oceanographers and the like who have, for some time, been sounding the alarm about industrial pollutants and the consequences of environmental degradation. In his portrayal of these three scientists, however, Brooker seems acutely aware of how scientific reporting can be swayed by economic pressures and of how, given such pressures, “science” can undergo a frightening metamorphosis. “Science,” as the scientist Campbell describes it, “is more than observation identification, description and experimental investigation” (78). Instead, in a world where profit-seeking can trump objectivity, it is “Curiosity gone wrong, gossip most poison” (79). Moreover, according to Campbell,

Science is a gold card meat-eater that looks like a man who  
 Has had his eyelids removed for “practical purposes,”  
 Sips disinfectant cocktails.  
 Science is a map to hell,  
 Showing paths, gravel roads, secondary routes and, of course,  
 Super highways.  
 Above all, if you’re a counting man  
 And who’s not  
 Science pays well. (79)

The jaded Campbell is hardly a promoter of his chosen profession, but neither are Ted and Doris, his colleagues and the co-investigators of the geologist’s death. Ted, for instance, who can discern no difference between science and business, cites the case of a technician who “spends eight hours a day staring into specially designed equipment” only to lose “her sense of smell and her ability to smile” (78). Doris, meanwhile, finds it hard to look into a microscope without feeling that she is “interfering with something”(86). “Little did we know,” she explains, “that our ambitious childhood zeal to ape mature activities would lead to such emptiness and regret in later life” (78). As

scientists, Ted, Doris and Campbell, might, at the very least, be expected to employ a scientific method, yet their desire to be “cool, passionless, absolutely objective explorers” (111) is at odds with their self-professed role as both the co-authors of this ecologically informed satire and as embedded beings in the world that is the object of their scientific studies.

*The Land, The Animals* begins with Ted, Doris, and Campbell, in their role as author/narrators, providing what is, in effect, a mini-genealogy of the play. After detailing a few examples of what it is “not,” Campbell explains that in its early stages “it was described as part fable, / part agricultural chemical sales manual. / A scream from the marsh’s clogged throat,” and “an elegant comedy from Canada’s vanishing wetlands,” but then quickly adds that this is not, after all, what it turned out to be (74). The other characters then join in, explaining how the play emerged from a potpourri of environmental themes, images, and subject matter: everything from “A Lesser Spotted Bittern [imitating] a swaying reed” to a narrative about a “hunting/business trip into the wetlands” to an elaborate journey of “thousands of organisms” recently escaped from a sneeze (74). “Finally,” Campbell explains, “it was:”

If nature is so swell, why are animals always trying to relocate  
under the porch or up between the rafters in the garage?  
And what do scientists wear under those lab coats anyways?  
An eco-examination from the point of view of all animals who  
live in the city. Comedy that’s certified dark green. (75)

Campbell’s description here, with its implied deconstruction of a nature /culture binary, functions as a fitting prologue for the ecologically informed action that ensues. Yet even this attempt to pin down the theme of their performance is comically undermined when Doris who, “[*in a confiding tone*],” quickly intervenes to confess that, in the midst of the

creative process, they were all hard pressed to understand what they had actually undertaken. “So many things,” she explains, “were happening so fast” (75).

Doris’s disclosure that she and her fellow author/performers were immersed in a creative process that, in a way, had a life of its own is in keeping with what happens when these same characters, in their role as scientists, encounter a world that appears to play havoc with their ability to objectify and contain it. It’s a world where a geographer’s experience of the land disrupts his ability to map it and where the precise borders of his heart can “never be located” (78), a world where, despite all the achievements of human science, the most successful animals on the planet are beetles (87), and a world where police chalk marks designed to fix the location of a corpse are quickly dissolved and washed away by the moving waters of a stream (102). For artists involved in a collective creation, being immersed in a constantly evolving process might well contribute to the success of the enterprise. For scientists that are supposed to be uncovering measurable and verifiable truths, however, the actualities of a world that will not sit still long enough to be objectively assessed poses somewhat of a dilemma.

What proves to be even more of an obstacle for Brooker’s three scientists, though, stems from an inherent conflict, expressed early on in the play, between their desire for dispassionate observation and their embedded existence in the world that they are studying:

Ted: We were interested in discussing in a general way  
some things that were important to us

Doris: The things that matter most in this bright cool city:  
the land, the animals.

Campbell: We were confused by our needs. One the one hand,  
Our desire to satisfy a remote and mysterious system—

Ted: We're scientists.  
We're from the future.

Campbell . . . and on the other hand our wish to prosper as  
human animals. (77-8)

For Ted, Doris and Campbell, in other words, their search for objective truth and understanding in the physical world has been made complicated by their existence as human animals, and, as the action unfolds, they begin to speculate that it may well have been a similar conflict that led Cy, the geologist whose death they are investigating, to take his own life.

The mention of the Bow River in the heading for scene eleven of *The Land, The Animals* indicates that the “bright cool city” to which Doris refers above is Calgary, Alberta—a city that *is* cool and bright both in terms of its weather and, as this play makes evident, its artistic innovations. In addition to these characteristics, however, Calgary has also become well known as a city that derives most of its financial wealth from the province’s fossil fuels, an industry that, given growing concerns about climate change, has earned the ire of many environmentalists. Environmental critiques have been even more forthcoming, though, since the inception of the Tar Sands Operations in Northern Alberta because of its tailing ponds, its destruction of Boreal forests, and its high carbon emissions. (Kempf, Nikiforuk, Schindler).

In this context, then, it is revealing that the scientist who has been found drowned is a geologist—someone whose skills would be highly sought after in the world of Calgary’s most prominent industry. From what Ted, Doris and Campbell can surmise about this geologist, however, Cy did not originally seek out such employment. Campbell, for instance, speculates that he was lured and trapped, like a wild animal, by

a “promise of retirement plan and other forms of security” (93) to become, as it were, a cog in a machine (93). “He was disappointed,” Campbell says, “when he discovered that the sense of waiting he had known all his life turned out to be illusory and that nothing truly surprising was ever going to happen to him, around him, in him, outside him” (97). As Campbell later observes, Cy “was tricked by a mediocre education that substituted industrial training for knowledge and traded wisdom for techniques to extract poisonous liquids from deep inside the earth’s crust.” (98) Geologists, according to Doris, are “people who spend all day visualizing what is under the ground,” an occupation that can sometimes cause them to “miss what is happening around them” (98). At the same time, however, Cy, Doris believes, was also someone who appreciated nature: he was, after all, a man who jogged to work on nature trails, a scientist who “counted birds on the way to work / and the more he counted the better he felt” (98).

What Ted, Doris, and Campbell’s research reveals, in other words, is that Cy’s suicide had to do with an inherent conflict between his employment in a fossil fuels industry and his embedded existence in a world that is threatened by the very practices that such an industry supports. And if the comedy in *The Land, The Animals* is—as Campbell designates it—“certified dark green,” it is because what underlies the humour in this play is an irreducible anxiety about what this geologist’s suicide epitomizes about the gap between the aspirations of science and the environmental ethics of how it is put to use.

“Modern scientific knowledge,” Val Plumwood writes, “prepares itself to be shaped as a servant of the corporation and the rationalist economy” (41). Such

knowledge, she argues—borrowing a term from Theresa Brennan—is “sado-dispassionate” in terms of the relationship it engenders with the nonhuman physical world, “dictating [for instance] that the battery chicken cannot have an extra inch of cage space, or that fish-catching technology be designed to take the biggest catch, whatever the cost to non-target species” (34). “Such a science,” she writes, “is aptly characterized in Brennan’s terms as ‘sado-dispassionate,’” and “emotional neutrality or the absence of emotion in certain contexts (most obviously that of harmful experimentation) is not an admirable trait but an indication of a deep moral failing” (41).

In *The Land, The Animals*, one obvious indication of such “deep moral failing” shows up in Campbell’s observations of the larger animals that “don’t appear as much as they used to”—a list that includes “coyote,” “beaver,” “porcupine,” and twenty-one other species (94-5). Implicit in such disappearances, however, is also the realization that human animals, as part of the ecosystem, may also be next. “When you pour something down a drain,” Doris admonishes, “it doesn’t disappear, / it lands on our future.” (114).

In the midst of all this ecologically-informed commentary, one of the most prevailing ironies in *The Land, The Animals* results from likenesses that Ted, Doris and Campbell begin to uncover between themselves and the geologist whose drowned body had been pulled out of the Bow river. Like him, they are disillusioned scientists whose attempt to remain “cool” and “passionless” has left them alienated from the world, and, by the end of the play, their identification with the sorry circumstances of Cy’s life, has given rise to what amounts to a tragic awareness. “Sometimes,” Ted remarks, as the action of the play comes to a close, “you discover things you are sorry about” (120).

“I’ve got to get help,” Campbell says, admitting the extent of his own incapacities as he watches his colleague Doris, in a reenactment of Cy’s drowning, lying down in the numbing waters of the Bow river, feeling “like a— / manatee”—a creature whose chances of survival in this “cool, bright city” would be slim indeed (120-21).

Inherent in much of what the science of the last thirty or forty years has been telling us is that we are all, like Sophocles’ most famous character, the provenance of toxic contamination that is threatening our civilization. For Brooker’s three protagonists, the comparison to Oedipus is perhaps even more fitting, however, since as the embodiment of scientific progress, it is their persistence in pursuing knowledge and solving the riddle of Cy’s suicide that leads them to this self-incriminating awareness. “We’re professionals,” Campbell reminds his colleagues, at a point mid-way through their investigations: “We have the best interests of society as our priority” (90).

In the conclusion of *The Land, The Animals*, those interests have been served by delivering a sorrowful message about a polis that seems anything but rational in its relationship to the natural world. A similar message comes to the fore, via various means, in nearly all of the ecocentric plays considered in this chapter, works in which human characters come face to face with the agency of the natural world through an experience of its absence and a concomittant loss of self that this inevitably entails. In context, however, the abject and troubled souls conveyed in these plays deserve to be seen, not as the expression of some inescapable destiny, but as a cry of protest for this state of affairs and an implicit call for actions that dispense with denials and that embrace a more earth-centred perspective. As Laurence Buell has astutely observed, when it comes to eco-apocalyptic scenarios, “the environmentalist dreams such dreams

precisely in order to render the dream-scenario impotent” (59). Karen Hines, in her introduction to *The Pochsy Plays*, indicates this intention as well. “[M]y ultimate goal” she writes, “is to create, in the laughter that springs from a shared sense of futility, a persistent glimmer of hope” (15). “The aim,” she explains, in a comment that might be applied to nearly all of the plays in this chapter, “was to create a self-consuming artifact, something that, by virtue of being so profoundly one thing, invites questions about its opposite” (“Yes” 27).

## Chapter Four

### Identity and Eco-politics in the plays of Tomson Highway, Monique Mojica and Marie Clements

“We live in a time of a political movement, and not only a political movement—you can look at rights, human rights, land rights and things are, I think, all connected in a struggle forward.”  
--Marie Clements<sup>72</sup>

While Hollingsworth, Brooks, Hines and the other playwrights mentioned in the last chapter have created ecocentric plays in which characters' encounters with a degraded natural environment are experienced as a loss of self, First Nations and Métis writers such as Tomson Highway, Monique Mojica and Marie Clements have responded differently to the ecological devastation that has been the troubled legacy of post-war industrialism. In several respects, the worldview depicted by these native artists—informed as it is by animist traditions—has parallels with the dwelling perspective that, as I argued in chapter two, characterizes the ecocentric sensibility in the plays of Herman Voaden in the 30s and in those of James Reaney in the 50s and 60s. As in the dwelling perspective, the animist perspective in these works frequently portrays human action alongside animals and forces of nature as part of a mutually constituted and perpetually unfolding existence. For Highway, Mojica and Clements, however, this animist perspective in their plays is specifically linked to affirmations of indigenous identity that serve, either implicitly or explicitly, to redress colonizing attitudes towards First Nations people. Rather than conveying environmental devastation as a loss of self, these First Nations and Métis playwrights have responded to ecological challenges by standing in solidarity with the

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<sup>72</sup> “‘Yes to Everything’: A Conversation on Theatre and Ecology With Daniel Brooks, Marie Clements, Kendra Fanconi and Karen Hines”

more than human physical world in works that, while addressing displacement, are ultimately about re-claiming their cultural heritage, offering resistance to social and environmental injustice and, in the process, enacting an eco-politics of place.

In a recent study of Native American drama, Christy Stanlake argues that a history of forced dislocations for Native Americans has made “issues of place figure prominently throughout Native American theatrical literature” (38). Adopting Una Chaudhuri’s coinage of the term “platiality,” which Chaudhuri defines as “a recognition of the signifying power and political potential of specific places,”<sup>73</sup> Stanlake devotes an entire chapter of her study to the ways in which place is fundamental to the dramaturgy and staging of three Native American plays. For Stanlake, the “platiality” in these works shows up in three ways: as “rootedness”—an experience and understanding of identity in terms of a reciprocal relationship between humans and landscape; as “worlds of existence”—an acknowledgement of place as the source of community and sacred ontology; and as the experience of “language as landscape” (53-106). According to Stanlake: “place figures so predominantly in Native American plays that one could argue that it carries the same value as characters do and often functions just as actively” (39).

Stanlake’s observations regarding the significance of place in Native American Theatre accords with what is arguably a similar emphasis on place and “platiality” in the works of Highway, Mojica and Clements. For Métis and First Nations people in Canada, as for Native populations in the United States, the forced separation from their traditional lands also entailed a separation from culture and identity. To be sure, one of the cruelest ironies in the history of English-Canadian drama is that while playwrights such as Voaden

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<sup>73</sup> Qtd in Stanlake 5.

and Reaney were attending to what it meant for settler populations to locate themselves—ecologically and ethically—in what was for them a ‘New World’, Canadian citizens via their elected governments were systematically dislocating the country’s indigenous people, removing them from their ancestral traditions and making them exiles in their own lands.

“Exile,” observes Edward Said, “is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (173). The environmental philosopher and psychologist Edward Casey, too, writes about the “unbearable emptiness” that accompanies the experience of “atopia” or “placelessness” that is “poignantly felt in the forced homelessness of the reluctant immigrant, the displaced person, the involuntary exile.” Writing about the forced exile of the Navajo people, he argues compellingly that, for them, the loss of place is quite literally a loss of culture.

. . . [T]he Navajo affirm the continuity of culture and landscape. Since they conceive their land as an ancestral dwelling place and since all significant learning proceeds ultimately from ancestors, culture is almost literally *in the land*. It follows that to learn something is not to learn something entirely new, much less entirely mental; it is to learn how to connect, or more exactly to reconnect, with one’s place. At the same time, to reconnect with that place is to engage in a form of collective memory of one’s ancestors: to commemorate them. To be dis-placed is therefore to incur both culture loss and memory loss

resulting from the loss of the land itself, each being a symptom of the disorientation wrought by relocation (36/37).

The Native American scholar Inés Hernández-Avila writes about the significance of place, not just for the Navajo, but also for indigenous people as a whole. Citing “Native people’s relation to and reverence for their distinct land bases,” she places emphasis on what the land provides “in terms of sustenance, healing, and the distinct cultural pedagogies that reveal and inform Native peoples’ complex belief systems” (16). The land itself, Hernández-Avila explains, “give[s] form and sustenance to native cultures; the ceremonial, spiritual life of any native culture is guided intimately by the land base as teacher as well as provider (18).

In describing the connections between indigenous lands, culture and identity, Casey and Hernández-Avila might just as well have been writing about the Okanagan Nation, a First Nations people in the Interior of British Columbia. Jeanette Armstrong, a novelist, poet and member of the Okanagan Nation, writes incisively about the significance of place in the traditional culture of her people:

The Okanagan language is thought of as the ‘language of the land.’ This means that the land has taught us our language. The way we survived is to speak the language that the land offered us as its teachings. [. . .] We also refer to the land and our bodies with the same root syllable. This means that the flesh which is our body is pieces of the land come to us through the things which the land is. The soil, the water, the air, and all other life-forms contributed parts to be our flesh. *We are our land/place*. Not to know and to

celebrate this is to be without language and without land. It is to be *displaced* (323).

In *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* (premiered January 24, 2004, at the Sagebrush Theatre in Kamloops, BC) the Cree playwright Tomson Highway introduces us to four First Nations women at the moment when their displacement from the land via land restrictions becomes an historical reality. Like many ecocentric plays, it begins with a nonhuman subject “the gurgle of a river—rich, evocative, the voice of a land”—an acknowledgment of its agency and of the landscape itself as language (13). Then, in the three soliloquys that follow, Highway presents the nub of Ernestine Shuswap’s dilemma by revealing that recent legislation from the Canadian government is preventing her people from doing what they have always done: namely, fishing in the river. As Ernestine’s friend Annabelle Okanagan puts it, in a direct address to the audience:

Fishing’s not allowed? Why, that would be like me, Annabelle Okanagan of Kamloops, B.C., that would be like me coming right into your homes, opening my mouth, and telling you, yes, you. And you and you and you, and you and you and you, and you and you and you, and you there in the tight red sweater—that would be like me telling you, “No more breathing. Stop right now.” (17)

As Annabelle understands, removing her people’s connections to the land amounts to nothing less than genocide, and, as the ensuing action makes clear, it is not only their fishing rights that have been outlawed, but also their hunting and gathering rights and even the right to speak their own language—all of which, in Armstrong’s view, are

ineluctably interconnected due to the close relationship, for the Okanagan people, between language, identity and the land.<sup>74</sup>

To dramatize such unconscionably oppressive restrictions Highway complicates the conflicts for his indigenous characters in two ways. The first is by having these restrictions take effect on the day the Thompson River Chiefs are planning to welcome the Canadian Prime Minister, Sir Wilfred Laurier, with a lavish feast (along with a proclamation requesting justice for their people). The second is by making Ernestine's sister, the pregnant Delilah Rose, one of his principal characters—a woman whose husband, Billy Bob, is the son of the White official in charge of carrying out the legislation.

The first of these complications (the aforementioned land restrictions) provides for some politically edgy irony, since Ernestine, Annabelle and their mutual friend Isabelle, while trying their utmost to contribute to the feast, are prevented from doing so at every turn. The fishing restrictions keep Ernestine from her trout, while the hunting and gathering restrictions prevent Annabelle from preparing a delicious meal of stewed beaver and Isabelle from picking berries for the 624 pies she has promised to bake. Meanwhile, the territorial conflicts between the Shuswap people and the invader/settler populations turn Delilah's pregnancy into an intolerable nightmare, and—in a fit of madness—she impales herself with her scissors and dies in the arms of her sister and friends (85-86).

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<sup>74</sup> To further underscore the importance of this relationship, the last names of Highway's characters—Ernestine Shuswap, Isabel Thompson, and Annabelle Okanagan—are the names not only of places (The Shuswap Region, The Thompson River and the Okanagan Valley) but, as Highway points out in an introductory note to the published script, of indigenous languages as well (11). Moreover, all three of these characters repeatedly refer to one another by these place-based names. Thus, Ernestine, Isabel and Annabelle become Ernestine Shuswap, Isabel Thompson and Annabelle Okanagan “of Kamloops, B.C.”

With the cloth, thread and scissors she has been using to sew a gigantic tablecloth for the welcoming feast, Delilah brings to mind the Moirae or fates of ancient Greek mythology. It is not the fates, though, that are the source of sorrow here, but the dislocation imposed upon a people for whom the land is life itself. As the enraged Delilah proclaims, even if she were to cut out “the little white man in her stomach”—a reference, one supposes, to both the fetus in her womb and her internalization of a colonizing consciousness—she would have no world to inhabit (85): “what kind of a world? Huh? Great Big Kahoona of Canada? What kind of land, what kind of country, what kind of world, what kind of life, huh?” (85). Driven to madness and suicide, Delilah turns the white muslin tablecloth into a wedding veil and, with the ill-fated bride now a corpse, what was intended as a celebratory feast becomes a funeral. Then, in yet another metamorphosis, Highway’s script has the giant tablecloth/wedding veil transform into the Thompson river—the river into which Ernestine wades and where she is able, restrictions or no restrictions, to catch a trout “with [her] own sharp teeth” (90). Finally, as the action resolves, it is the sound of this river, “rich, evocative, the voice of the land,” that provides a last reminder that, for the Okanagan people, identity is inextricably linked with place vis-à-vis the more than human physical world (90).

Whereas in *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, Highway emphasizes the place-based identity of the Okanagan people—what Stanlake in her analysis of Native American theatre calls “rootedness”—his earlier play, *Aria*, conveys a place-based sacred ontology. In this script for a one-woman show, premiered March, 1987, at Toronto’s Annex Theatre, Highway depicts an elderly Cree grandmother—a “Kokum”—who comes to enact and affirm her place in a world where, in accordance with an animist ontology,

the more-than-human physical world has agency and where the earth as a whole is perceived as alive.

As mentioned in Chapter three of this study, it was Irving Hallowell who, in his ethnographic studies of the Ojibwe people north of Winnipeg, was the first among Western anthropologists to acknowledge animism as a culturally specific worldview and to perceive that, within this worldview, the idea of “personhood” extended beyond the human social realm to include the more-than-human natural world. As the anthropologist Nurit Bird-David explains,

Hallowell observed that the Ojibwa sense of personhood, which they attribute to some natural entities, animals, winds, stones, etc., is fundamentally different from the modernist one. The latter takes the axiomatic split between “human” and “nonhuman” as essential, with “person” being a subcategory of “human.” The Ojibwa conceives of “person” as an overarching category within which “human person,” “animal person,” “wind person,” etc., are subcategories. (S71)<sup>75</sup>

Bird-David, in her own ethnological research, writes about this animist notion of personhood as a relational one. Describing the animist worldview as a “relational epistemology,” she explains that, according to this understanding, identity is viewed as an ongoing process of interactions with other beings—whether human beings or more-than-human natural forces. Tim Ingold, writing about the animic ontology of the Inuit people,

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<sup>75</sup> Henry S. Sharp places emphasis on the importance of “animals as persons” among the Dene people of Northern Saskatchewan as well. “The Dene conceptualization of animals as persons,” he writes, “for their relationship to those animal/persons is one of the deepest and most profound paradigms of their culture” (59).

elaborates. In animist cultures, he explains, this notion of a relational epistemology is reinforced by a view of the world as the perpetual transformation of a vital force that runs through and enlivens all of earthly existence:

The world of this ‘animic’ understanding is home to innumerable beings whose presence is manifested in this form or that, each engaged in the project of forging a life in the way peculiar to its kind. But in order to live, every such being must constantly draw upon the vitality of others. A complex network of reciprocal interdependence, based on the give and take of substance, care and vital force—the latter often envisaged as one or several kinds of spirit or soul—extends throughout the cosmos, linking human, animal and all other forms of life (113).

Ingold’s description of the “vital force” that, in animist ontology, can assume and animate a diversity of life forms helps to explain traditional First Nations stories of characters—both human and nonhuman animals—who undergo various transformations and engage in cross-species relationships. The traditional narratives of the Ojibwe people, he points out, are “replete with incidents in which humans turn into animals, or marry animals, or give birth to animals and vice versa (93).”<sup>76</sup> Moreover, in concert with Bird-David’s notion of animism as a “relational epistemology,” Ingold’s understanding of the animist ontology is also in alignment with the belief, common in many traditional indigenous narratives, in the shape-shifting abilities of shamans—the idea that such

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<sup>76</sup> Similar tales of transformation can be found in Robert Bringhurst’s *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, translations of stories from the Haida and Tlingit Nations, and in Diamond Jennesses’s transcriptions of the Katzie people’s creation stories as told to him by the elder Old Pierre and quoted extensively in Suttles. See also Ingold (94) and Ridington (102-106).

individuals are capable, like some of the characters in traditional native stories, of taking on animal forms. As Ingold points out, within the secular realm of Western culture, human individuals are normally understood to be defined by their bodily limitations while “ways of thinking, feeling, speaking and behaving—adding up to what is conventionally known as ‘culture’—are variable, even within the life-history of a single individual” (93). In the animist world, however, “it is the variable body that clothes a constant spiritual essence comprising the powers of self-awareness, intentionality, sentience, and speech” (93). According to this animist view, Ingold explains, shamans, as persons of considerable power, are thought to gain access to special vitality by taking on the clothing/bodies of other beings:

A person who can take on many forms can turn up in all kinds of situations, now in one form, now in another, each one affording a different perspective. The greater the person’s powers of metamorphosis, the wider the range of their practical possibilities of being, and hence the more extensive the breadth of their experience and the scope of their phenomenal presence” (94).

In his essay “On Native Mythology,” Tomson Highway explains how Nanabush—a shape-shifting trickster figure who appears in both human and nonhuman form—is a crucial part of the overall action in his play *The Rez Sisters*. Due to the presence of Nanabush, he explains, this play “becomes the tale of small and petty doings of men/women on this earth while only half-aware of some grander, larger ‘design’ that rules their lives” (3). But if Highway, via the presence of Nanabush, is able to enact this larger (and specifically animist) design in *The Rez Sisters*, he manages, via another shape-

shifting character, to do this in an even more pronounced way in *Aria*, a performance structured as one long series of transformations.

The script for *Aria* begins with an elderly grandmother (the Kokum) remembering a time when both her body and spirit were thriving. “Time was,” she recalls, “when my feet were sure and certain in their grip upon this reindeer moss, this grey rock” (81).

And yet I flew, like a spray of twelve fluttering songbirds...my spirit...like mist...floating through tall trees and the bark, the veins of the trunk, nursing like a babe on the very sap. The taste was sweeter than anything this old life or [sic] mine has ever known (81).

The Kokum’s memory of this transport is in direct contrast to her present circumstances—“blind,” “deaf,” and sitting in a “ramshackle house” with the “colour TV . . . four feet in front of [her]” (81). And yet, while rendered physically and spiritually inert by her present conditions, the Kokum’s vitality is rekindled when, after hearing a “songbird in the mist,” she undergoes a series of metamorphoses, becoming, in turn, a mother giving birth, a little girl, a lover of men, a lover of women, a white woman, a career woman, and a prostitute, before eventually becoming herself again, but this time with her spirit renewed and with an affirmation of the Earth as a living being.

As a performance in which a native woman, after a series of metamorphoses, affirms her connection to a living earth, *Aria*, in its very dramatic structure, is a clear reflection of an animist worldview. But if the structure of *Aria* manages to convey this indigenous cosmology, much of its content does so as well. Speaking as the mother of a newly born child, for instance, the Kokum sees, in the veins of the child, a reiteration of the veins she had earlier seen in the trunks of trees: “Hey! The child. My child. / Her veins held up against the light / Are filigree and webs of wonder to behold” (82). In the following action, too, this depiction of the child in relation to the natural world continues.

“My child flies out the window of my dream,” says the young mother, describing how she “climbs aboard the Earth, straddles it and makes its loamy texture part of her” (82). Then, in her next incarnation, the Kokum, speaking as “The Little Girl,” continues to celebrate an earth-centred vitality, envisioning, in the light and warmth of the sun, her mother, and giving thanks for “these bones and skin/Hair teeth, lips and eyes that see” (83).

The Kokum’s transformations, however, do not always result in such joyful assertions of indigenous identity. In one scene, for instance, the Kokum, in the guise of an older First Nations child, encounters the teachings of a Catholic school where the worship of the holy Virgin is designed to make her “forget Cree faster” (83). Later, the differences between an indigenous worldview and a non-native one are pronounced once more when Highway pointedly juxtaposes the Kokum’s appearance as an “Indian Woman,” speaking in Cree and affirming her identification with the natural world, with her next incarnation as a “White Woman,” walking through a cityscape (88). In a footnote to the published script, Highway provides an English translation of the Cree woman’s soliloquy: “these trees / tall, straight / I look at trees like this / Inside of me – here -- / I feel someone new [*sic*], a being / Someone standing there / Someone breathing there / Spirit alive and living” (88). And yet, while this “Indian Woman” draws strength and vitality from the living agency of her nonhuman surroundings, the “White Woman,” seeing her image reflected in store windows, has an entirely different experience. “The spirits,” she says, “I see no spirits whatsoever / On this cement, I don’t know / What this other woman is talking about. / I walk on this cement, and the two / This cement and I- / Are distinctly separate and apart” (89). The contrast between these two worlds, the relational, animist

one of the “Indian Woman” and the more contained and ego-centred one of the “White Woman” could not be much more directly conveyed than this, and, in the conclusion of *Aria*, Highway makes it abundantly clear that the Kokum identifies with and sees herself as part of an indigenous, animist cosmology. “I knew she was alive. / I know Earth is alive,” the Kokum proclaims, reminding the audience that it is this living earthly force—the one that has given rise to all of her incarnations—that will continue to sustain her. “I can feel through the soles of / My moving feet...” she declares, “Earth. / Nuna. / *Us-ki!*” (96).

Like *Aria*, Monique Mojica’s *Pochantas and the Blue Spots* (first produced in 1990 at the Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace) is also structured as a series of transformations and, like Highway’s script, it also draws on animist ontology as a means of asserting indigenous identity. In this performance script, however, such assertions of identity function in a more overtly political context as a clear rejection of indigenous stereotypes and a resistance to cultural genocide. In its rejection of cultural stereotypes, *Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* invites comparison to solo shows such as Marie Clements’s *Urban Tattoo* and Guillermo Verdecchia’s *Fronteras Americanas*, both of which parody the chauvinist assumptions inherent in cultural constructions of ethnic identities and, in a self-reflective neo-Brechtian style, perform alternative versions that are more complex, authoritative and empowering.

As Ric Knowles has shown, there were some very good reasons why Mojica would have been compelled, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, to develop this kind of self-reflective performance. He explains that when *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* “emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s,” a confluence of historical forces underscored the political

aspects of identity for native women in the Americas (“Translators” 250-54). Two of the most visible of these, he points out, were “the mounting of protests and blockades over the ownership or exploitation of sacred native sites and old-growth forests from Temagami, Ontario, to Clayoquot Sound on the coast of British Columbia, and, most obviously, the so-called ‘Oka Crisis’ in 1990” (“Translators” 251). According to Knowles, there were a number of other factors as well. Along with the rise in prominence of First Nations artists in Canada (particularly theatre artists), there was the perception by some women in the First Nations community of gendered stereotypes on Canadian stages (most specifically in a production of Highway’s *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*) and a growing concern among many women of colour that a good deal of feminist writing had been falling back on essentialisms and ignoring or cobbling over racial and cultural distinctions. As Knowles puts it,

At the same time as the resurgence of First Nations political, cultural, and theatrical activity of the late 1980s and early 1990s was taking place, and at the same time as concerns were being voiced about the gendering of that resurgence, feminist criticisms and theory were under attack from a range of locations for purported biological (and other) essentialisms, and for their own elisions of cultural difference” (“Translators” 253).

According to Knowles, then, it was this array of historical circumstances that provided the context for the emergence of *Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, a play about the constructed identity of Native women. And, as Knowles goes on to point out, the theme of constructed identity was especially significant for Mojica, given her self-described cultural heritage as a “Kuna-Rappahonnok half-breed” (qtd. in Knowles 262).

In Robert Appleford's view, parodies of indigenous stereotypes of the kind that Knowles identifies are characteristic, not only of Mojica's play, but of First Nations performance as a whole. "Native Canadian performance," writes Appleford, "—whether it resembles Western-style theatre, an indigenous oral tradition or performance art—serves to keep audiences, regardless of ethnicity, off-balance" ("Making" 232):

It often mingles stereotype and parody with earnestness and recognizably "traditional" content, thus challenging non-Native audience members—many of whom, one suspects, have bought their tickets expecting "real" stories told by "real" Natives on stage--to confront their own expectation of what Native theatre can encompass. (232)

Knowles's detailed historical overview, combined with Appleford's insights about First Nations dramaturgy as a whole, provides a clear framework for a reading of *Princess Pochahontas and the Blue Spots*, a performance that serves up equal portions of parody and traditional content, sending up colonial stereotypes while affirming indigenous identity and ontology.

Mojica's script begins with the introduction of "Princess-Buttered-on-Both-Sides," a comic caricature based on a host of stock images of Native American women drawn from popular culture. As the contestant in a "Miss North American Indian Beauty pageant," the "Princess" arrives, clad in a "white 'buckskin' dress and carrying an oversized ear of corn," and accompanied by the music of "Hollywood tom-toms, 'the Indian Love call,' 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly' and the 'Mazola' commercial" (139). After offering corn nuts to the audience and then tossing them to each of the four directions, she places her ear to the earth, and, upon rising, adopts "a classic 'spiritual'

Hollywood Indian pose” (139). Then, in a direct address to the audience, she declares that she is about to perform “in savage splendor, the ‘Dance of the Sacrificial Corn Maiden,” and that, following this, she will “hurl [herself] over the precipice, all for the loss of [her] one true love, CAPTAIN JOHN WHITEMAN” (139-40).

One of the many clichés of Native American women that Mojica is lampooning here is that of the “Storybook Pocahontas”—the “little Indian Princess from the picture books”—and the “legendary Pocahontas, who, as Mojica points out, has been fictionalized in ballads and romantic poetry as “the archetype of the ‘good Indian’: one who aids and abets white men” (*Princess Pocahontas* 136). In her rendition of Princess Buttered-on-Both-Sides, however, Mojica is also parodying a stereotype of First Nations women that, according to Shepard Krech, has links to the notion of the Native American as a died-in-the-wool “ecologist and conservationist” (16).

In the introduction to *The Ecological Indian*, Krech considers the idea of nature-friendly indigenous North Americans as an inherently condescending trope, providing a genealogy of this colonial construction from its origins in the early writings of European explorer/invasers through its elaboration in the work of Montaigne, Lahontan, and Rousseau. He then charts its further developments in English-speaking America, in the writings of James Fenimore Cooper, Charles Eastman and Ernest Thompson Seton, in the promotion, during the 60s and 70s, of native Americans as icons of the environmental movement, and via the promulgation of this idea in a wide range of cultural formats from dance and theatre to television and, of course, Hollywood films (17-20).<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> As this present study has shown, Krech could also buttress his argument with references to a whole series of ‘Ecological Indians’ in English-Canadian drama, from the eponymous protagonists in Robert Rogers’s

While Mojica's performance antedates the publication of Shepard Krech's *Ecological Indian* by nearly a decade, and, while the script makes no specific references to native North Americans as environmentalists, it most certainly mocks the noble savage stereotype that, according to Krech, formed the basis for the view of indigenous people as ecological. "Corn," Princess Buttered-on-Both Sides proclaims to the audience, pointing to her oversized ear of corn; "Maiden," she adds, pointing to herself, making it clear that what is being mocked here are the 'corny' assumptions that configure First Nations women as Earth Mothers in the wilderness, characters who 'naturally' embody, commune with and worship the natural world.

Later, too, the Host of the Miss Native America Beauty Pageant tells the audience that "Princess Buttered-on-Both-Sides has just arrived "from her home in the deep green forest on the other side of the mountain, by the shores of the silver sea," and—in a later section of the play—the same host declares that the Princess hails from a "woodland paradise" (139, 163). Yet while Mojica employs parody to mock such stereotypes, she also manages, in both the structure and content of her play, to provide versions of First Nations women who undergo transformations and, in so doing, engage with the more-than-human physical world in accordance with a traditionally indigenous worldview.

In *The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning*, Ric Knowles writes that the form of *Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* "is both challengingly disjunctive and ultimately visionary" (149). "Its organizing structure," he points out, "is explicitly based on 'transformation' rather than 'scenes, invoking change rather than linear growth or

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*Ponteach* and Charles Mair's *Tecumseh*, to "Yellow Snake" in Carroll Aikins's *The God of Gods* to the conservation-minded First Nations characters in Ringwood's *Mirage* and *The Lodge*.

development” (149). As evidence, Knowles refers to Mojica’s own description of this structural principle in the introduction and prefatory notes to her play, citing her assertions that “the theme of the set, costumes and props is . . . transformation” and that the play had emerged as a series of “12 transformations” and “four sections where there is a transfiguration of three women or entities who are one” (qtd in Knowles 149).

In “Transformation 1” of Mojica’s published script, *Princess Buttered-on-Both-Sides*, in addition to being one of the contestants, also appears as a coyote Trickster clown. In “Transformation 2,” a contemporary Native American woman relates an autobiographical anecdote that confirms her bloodline, and then, in counterpoint with the modern Chilean-born woman, performs an explicit critique of the “Indian Princess” stereotype. And, in “Transformation 3,” the Native American woman performs the role of Malinche, “the young Aztec girl who was given as a gift to Hernan Cortes by the Maya” (Hernández-Ávila 13), and then transforms again, this time into a fiery volcano.

As already mentioned, such scenarios can certainly be read as self-reflexive theatre—postmodern meta-theatrics in which actors take on a range of fictional roles to underscore the notion of identity as a form of culturally-specific ‘performance’. Yet the playwright’s decision to view the units of her plays as “transformations” and “transfigurations” also brings to mind the way in which transformation vis-à-vis indigenous cosmology informs the structure of Tomson Highway’s *Aria*, and from this perspective, *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* might just as easily be read as an ongoing metamorphosis by which these two indigenous women manage, like the Kokum, to move through a range of personae and, in so doing, to move from a position of passive objectification to one of authenticity and agency.

Reading Mojica's play in this way, it is revealing that some of the most affirmative and politically-trenchant subject positions that these two women adopt arise when they take the form of nonhuman forces in the natural world. This occurs in "Transformation 3," for instance, when Mojica takes on the persona of Malinche, the Aztec woman, sold into slavery to Spanish forces, who, after becoming Cortes's mistress, was viewed as a traitor by many of her own people. To protest such two-fold mistreatment, Mojica's Malinche persona wraps a swirl of cloth around her and ascends a pyramid to transform into an erupting volcano. "I spit, burn and char the earth," she cries (144). Then, in another metamorphosis, she transfigures into a myriad of nonhuman forms, her spirit eventually becoming part of a fecund earth and her voice, the wailing of the desert wind:

I turn to tree whose branches dip bleeding flowers. Bleed into this piece of earth where I grow, mix with volcanic ash and produce fertile soil. Born from the earth, fed with my blood, anything alive here is alive because I stayed alive! I turn to wind. You hear my Llorona's wail screaming across the desert. (144)

This, moreover, is not the only example of Mojica enacting a transformation into the more-than-human natural world as a response to oppressive attitudes. Another instance of this takes place midway through the play—in Transformation 6—where Mojica offers two contrasting depictions of the young Pocahontas. After her satirical send-up of a late-Renaissance troubadour's rendition of Pocahontas as a converted and thoroughly anglicized "Lady Rebecca," Mojica invites the audience to imagine an alternative version of Pocahontas as the native child "Matoaka," anticipating the ritual

initiation that will mark her passage to adulthood. “I belong to the deer clan,” declares the young girl, “We’re the only ones who can wear deer antlers when we dance our deer clan dance” (32); and, as the dance begins, what Matoaka experiences and comes to appreciate is a distinctly animist view of existence:

Becoming woman/child – open up / Look!  
 All around your world, everything’s alive!  
 Everything is growing, (*embraces tree*) everything has spirit,  
 Everything is breathing, (*kneels, washes hands in basin at tree*) (34).  
 Everything needs water, everything needs sunlight,  
 Everything needs rest (34).

As in Highway’s *Aria*, then, what is being celebrated here, in an assertion of indigenous identity, is an animist and ecocentric ontology, one characterized by an ongoing vitality or force that permeates, gives form to and animates a living earth. As a script written in an era of environmental distress, however, it is worth noting that the ‘needs’ of living beings are being conveyed here, and that the young Matoaka’s acknowledgment of this animate universe also includes an awareness of its vulnerabilities.

A third and final example of native identity expressed as a transformation and incorporating an animist (and ecocentric) worldview occurs in the concluding moments of Mojica’s script. This time, however, the transformation occurs, not as a challenge to stereotyping or oppressive attitudes, but as an assertion of indigenous solidarity in response to acts of criminal injustice. In Transformation 12, the Native American woman, after having spoken with her Chilean companion about the murder and dismemberment of the Mi’kmaq activist Anna Mae Aquas, draws on the energies of a “Spirit Animal” who appears in the form of a coyote/trickster:

slant-eyed and head swinging low  
 to the ground  
 my muscles ripple

from shoulder to haunch,  
 now running - now stopping  
 to sniff the air. (165)

Then, the Chilean-born woman, in her role as a “Spirit-Sister,” recapitulates the transformation and speaks with the same voice:

slant-eyed and head  
 swinging  
 low to the ground  
 my spine arches from  
 neck to tail (167)

Joanne Tompkins and Helen Gilbert, writing about this play, observe how its indigenous characters “depict the scenery, including a volcano, thereby critiquing the conventional use of indigenous bodies to suggest the geographical landscape and/or to provide an apparently authentic atmosphere” (208). In the hands of a theatre artist like Mojica, however, enacting the natural world to create “an apparently authentic atmosphere” is also part of what Ric Knowles calls the ‘visionary’ experience of the play, an experience that, by affirming ancestral, animist traditions, provides a vehicle for healing and decolonization.

While both Highway and Monique Mojica, by assuming such an animist perspective, convey what is, in effect, an ecocentric politics in their writing, the work of Métis playwright Marie Clements can be additionally characterized by her ability to extend this eco-political stance, making explicit connections between acts of environmental injustice and acts of ecological destruction. Like Highway and Mojica, Clements conveys an animist sensibility in nearly all of her writings for the stage and employs this as a way of affirming indigenous identity. What additionally characterizes

Clements's plays, however, is an acute awareness of the relationships between poisonous social injustices and the poisoning of the biosphere.

Evidence of an animist sensibility in Clements's plays is easy enough to detect. Almost all of Clements's plays begin and end with the more-than human natural world and incorporate nonhuman 'characters' such as sturgeons, trees, bears and several hybrid, inter-subjective beings, comprised of both human and nonhuman elements. *Age of Iron*, her first play, opens with an image of Mars as a planet of exposed muscles and arteries, configures the earth and the "Seven Sisters" of the Pleiades as speaking subjects, and concludes with a colloquy involving a raven/man, an earth/woman, some sister/stars, and an address to Grandmother/moon. *The Girl who Swam Forever* begins and ends with the voice of a hundred-year-old sturgeon/grandmother communicating from the murky depths of a fouled river bottom and includes a shape-shifting transformation via which a native young woman re-affirms her will to live. In *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, the protagonist Rebecca's discovery of the grim truth behind her native mother's disappearance is bracketed by the sounds of trees whispering and falling, and, in *Burning Vision* and *Copper Thunderbird*—two of her most recent plays—a whole range of nonhuman others can be found: spirit bears juxtaposed with garbage-eating dumpster bears, a turtle, a trout, snakes, a gigantic white buffalo, a ghostly caribou herd, a buried deposit of uranium in the form of a First Nations boy, and a sky of shamanic visions followed by a blue wave that drags them all, along with the artist Norval Morriseau's several selves, into the depths of yet another elemental force—the ocean.

In addition to the animist sensibility in Clements's plays, evidence of the playwright's environmental awareness is equally apparent. In *Age of Iron*—first produced

in October, 1994, at Vancouver's FireHall Arts Centre—this shows up in the actions of a First Nations character named Wise Guy, one of several street characters that Clements likens to the heroes of a vanquished Troy. In an early gesture of defiance, Wise Guy tears up pieces of concrete to free a trapped "Mother Earth" character: "Earth beneath my feet. Poor ol' Mother, suffocating with this heavy load" (200). Later, in an address to the audience, he confronts his "enemies" as those who are responsible for her mistreatment. "You have no such land," he declares, "because you have covered it with an ungiving surface. You call us barbarians. But that is what we call you" (202).

Admittedly, the dramatic effectiveness of Clements's socio-ecological protest is hamstrung here in a couple of ways. To begin with, in order for Wise Guy's protests to be registered, the audience members must assume that they are his oppressors, an assumption that leaves out the possibility of any First Nations people in the audience. Secondly, Clements's personification of the earth as a mother figure does little to breathe new life into what has become a rather tired trope and, according to some eco-feminists, an inherently problematic one.<sup>78</sup> All the same, by giving the earth a voice, Clements is at the very least granting it some agency, and Wise Guy's protests leave little doubt about the solidarity between an oppressed First Nations people and that of a similarly mistreated earth.

Clements's environmental and eco-political stance appears in a more sophisticated form in her second play, *The Girl Who Swam Forever*, an early version of which was produced in 1995 at the University of British Columbia's Dorothy Somerset Theatre.

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<sup>78</sup> Carolyn Merchant, for instance, while demonstrating how the imagery of the earth as mother has proved beneficial in the past, also warns about its continuation in the present (*Earthcare* 141-42). See also Catriona Sandilands's critique of the earth-as-mother metaphor (197).

Considered solely in terms of its human-centred plot, the play might easily be mistaken for an exercise in psychological realism. Its literal action depicts the story of ‘Forever,’ an orphaned First Nations girl in the 1960s, who—after a brief liaison with a non-native fisherman—discovers she is pregnant.<sup>79</sup> Battling a guilty conscience, Forever runs away from residential school and seeks shelter in an abandoned fish boat. Here, plagued by nightmarish visions of Priests and Nuns with gigantic frogs’ heads, she becomes increasingly desperate: first, because of her young fisherman/lover’s fearful suspicions that she might, indeed, be pregnant; and second, because of an overly-protective elder brother who is angry and humiliated that the father of her infant-to-be is non-native.

During the conception of this play, however, Clements drew on three primary sources, all of which place emphasis on the relationship between humans and the nonhuman natural world and which gave rise to a dramatic form that has little to do with the conventions of psychological realism. One of these was Wayne Suttles’ *Katzie Ethnographic Notes*, a book that includes two independently authored memoirs—one by Wayne Suttles, the other by Diamond Jenness—detailing the traditional beliefs and practices of the Katzies, a First Nations people whose pre-contact territories included what is now known as British Columbia’s Pitt Lake region. Jenness’s memoir derives entirely from his interviews with “Old Pierre,” a “medicine man” with a thorough knowledge of Katzie oral history, and it is one of the stories from this history that

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<sup>79</sup> This dilemma is a recurring one in Canadian theatre. Gwen Pharis Ringwood’s *The Stranger* and *The Furies* in her *Collected Plays* and Tomson Highway’s *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* all depict conflicts involved with pregnancies resulting from miscegenation.

Clements cites, in quotation marks, at the beginning of her play:

The Katzie descended from the first people God created on Pitt Lake. The ruler was known as Clothed with Power. This first chief had a son and a daughter. The daughter spent her days swimming and transformed into a sturgeon. The first to inhabit the Pitt Lake. It was from this girl that all sturgeon descended [. . .]. (51)

While Clements was drawing upon the stories of Old Pierre, however, she was also influenced by a second source: namely, a series of disturbing media reports about sturgeons beaching themselves on the banks of the river, literally drowning themselves in the air. In the program notes for a production of an early draft of the play,<sup>80</sup> Clements refers to these reports and to their impact upon her:

I was writing a story about a Katzie girl in the small town of Pt. Hammond. Her perspective. A sturgeon was found belly up on the Fraser River. I was having a hard time with the story of the girl. Her voice. Another sturgeon was found. Dead. Still her voice was caught somewhere. And I tried and I tried to hear her.<sup>81</sup>

Clements, then, was well aware of how her search for the protagonist's 'voice' had been bound up with the seemingly life-denying actions of these sturgeons. To be sure, as she noted on another occasion, "it was as if these sturgeons were trying to tell her something."<sup>82</sup>

As it turned out, Clements wasn't the only writer to be influenced by the sturgeons

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<sup>80</sup> This early draft of the play was produced in 1995 at The University of British Columbia, in the Dorothy Somerset Theatre. A revised script appears in the 2008 anthology *Footpaths and Bridges*, edited by Shirley A. Huston-Findley and Rebecca Howard.

<sup>81</sup> Program note from the 1995 production at the University of British Columbia.

<sup>82</sup> Personal interview with the author. 15 November, 1995.

in the Pitt Lake region of British Columbia, and, while still in the midst of her creative process, she came across Terry Glavin's *A Ghost in the Water*. Glavin's book cites a series of sturgeon deaths similar to those that had drawn Clements's attention, but it does more as well, providing an historical account of the near extinction of the sturgeon in the early twentieth century and detailing the fundamental relationship between these fresh-water inhabitants, who have been around since prehistoric times, and the Katzie people, who have lived by the lake and fished it since time immemorial.

In *The Girl Who Swam Forever*, Clements incorporates all three of these sources to create a scenario in which Forever, after contemplating abortion and suicide, undergoes a dream-like underwater transformation and encounters her grandmother's spirit in the form of an enormous hundred-year-old sturgeon lying buried in the thick mud of a polluted river.<sup>83</sup> This shape-shifting encounter proves a major turning point in the action, renewing Forever's self-confidence, so that when she regains her human form her resolve to live is strengthened and affirmed. Forever's self-realization and survival, in other words, is accomplished via a shape-shifting experience through which she makes connections between the traditional beliefs of her people—beliefs outlawed by the governments of invader/settler populations—and the life-giving nourishment and energies of the sturgeon, a species threatened with extinction due to the greed of these same colonizers.<sup>84</sup> And Clements's ability to depict all of this—making links between Forever's agency and that of the sturgeon—ensures that the action of her play is both political *and* ecocentric: in

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<sup>83</sup> In the original production, this was accomplished via choreographed movement in and around set designer James Bailey's renderings of a gigantic sturgeon's skull and skeletal remains.

<sup>84</sup> See Glavin's *Ghost in the Water* for a description of how, despite warnings and protestations by First Nations people, the demand for caviar drove the sturgeon in the Pitt Lake to the brink of extinction (33-44).

effect, a post-colonial politics enfolded in an ecocentric vision.

As Thomas King has so eloquently observed, “The magic of Native literature – as with other literatures – is not in the themes of the stories – identity, isolation, loss, ceremony, community, maturation, home – it is in the way meaning is refracted by cosmology, the way understanding is shaped by cultural paradigm” (*Truth* 112). To fully appreciate how this occurs in *The Girl Who Swam Forever* means delving further into animist ideas of transformation and inter-subjectivity with respect to how these inform the conflict and resolution in this play. These two structural ideas, however, which ultimately give rise to modes of perception, are so interwoven in Clements’s writing that to speak about one inevitably means touching on the other.

The central conflict for the First Nations protagonist in *The Girl Who Swam Forever*, like that of Delilah Johnson, stems from miscegenation: *i.e.*, from the idea that the fetus that is developing in her womb, if brought to term, will be perceived as a child from two divided cultures. Already implicit in this conflict, then, is the inter-subjectivity of this First Nations woman, the idea that she is by no means an isolated entity, but is rather an embodiment of natural and cultural forces in a state of becoming that, due to racist fears about the children of mixed marriages, has reached an impasse. According to some Western humanist-feminist perspectives, to speak about Forever in this way might appear to reduce her agency as an individual, yet this very idea of individuality, along with the kind of conflict it engenders, is at odds with animist thinking.

In the West the idea of conflicted subjectivity has been influenced by Freud’s theories of an internal division of the self, comprised of a struggle between id, ego, and superego that must, for the health of the individual, be brought into balance. The inter-

subjectivity implicit in animist cultures, however, has more in common with ecocentric ideas of interrelationships, ideas that place emphasis on the individual's responsibility in terms of the human and nonhuman environment in which that individual resides. Jeannette Armstrong, for instance, speaks about the "four selves" that, in the indigenous Okanagan language, are each inherently linked to relationships with family, with a larger human community, with the land, and with ancient, ongoing life of the Earth (319-24). Thomas King refers to a similar notion of identity in his discussion of "All my relations"—the English equivalent of a phrase familiar to most Native peoples in North America" (Relations ix). "All my relations," he writes, "is at first a reminder of who we are and of our relationship with both our family and our relatives. It also reminds us of the extended relationship we share with all human beings" (Relations ix). As King goes on to explain, however, "the relationships that Native people see go further, the web of kinship extending to the animals, to the birds, to the fish, to the plants, to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined" (Relations ix).

From this indigenous perspective, then, subjectivity is neither singular nor divided internally, but exists as a *plurality* in a world of reciprocal inter-relationships, and, because these inter-relationships involve both humans and nonhumans, subjectivity is less ego-centric and more particularly ecocentric—less concerned, that is, with individual striving than with how one acts as part of an interdependent web of relations.

Accordingly, in Clements's play, when Forever is in such despair that she no longer sees the point of living, the stage directions call for an image of a sturgeon to be projected onto her body (68). Similarly, when the grandmother spirit comes to Forever's aid, she places her hand on her granddaughter's stomach and speaks about the continuation, within her,

of an entire cosmos:

Here. Here. These pieces, these stories have found a place in you. Found a place to grow from the beginning and circle to include everything that is you and circle to include everything that is us. Here. Here. It circles and in this motion a million year old dream surfaces. (68)

As Forever's grandmother's words suggest, notions of transformation and inter-subjectivity, which figure so prominently in the depiction of Forever's conflicts, are equally instrumental in their resolution and in how the grandmother/Old One brings this about. At the beginning of the action, immediately after Clements cites the Katzie genesis story, "*a voice speaks—large, dark and old,*" and a light "*splashes down into the darkness*" to reveal, on the bottom of the river, "*the OLD ONE,*" rocking in a rocking chair. "Sometimes," she says, "you don't know your own story from the bottom up, or from the top down, until it meets you" (52):

Meets in you. Words and silence, swimming and falling to the middle, circling each other in a dance of remembering. A remembering transforming. A dream from the here and now to the beginning, and again from the here and now to the beginning again. (52)

As an opening to the play, this is mysterious-sounding language indeed—bound to "communicate," as T.S. Eliot observed about "genuine" poetry, "before it is understood" (238). But what does it communicate, and how is it, eventually, to be understood?

The script's character description tells us that the OLD ONE is *both* the girl's dead grandmother and "an ancient Sturgeon, Old, gentle, and deep" (51). Sturgeons are old in a couple of ways. As a species, they antedate human history, and individual sturgeons live to be over a hundred years old, having the ability to exist for extended periods of time "in a state of suspended animation so pronounced that it is not unlike death" (Glavin 27). All the same, though, there is still a good deal of mystery in what the Old One is saying when

she speaks about “[a] remembering transforming” and a “dream from the here and now to the beginning, and again from the here and now to the beginning again” (52).

This mystery can be partly understood by bringing to mind the belief in re-incarnation that persists—despite the incursion of Christianity—in the ethos of many First Nations people (Mills). In Clements’s play, Forever’s internalization of this belief becomes readily apparent when, after escaping from residential school, she re-encounters her fisherman/lover and senses his fearful suspicions that she might be pregnant:

FOREVER. He just stared at me. Quiet for a long time. So quiet he was almost begging me not to tell him so I just sat there and he just sat down. Me wishing he would say something and him wishing I wouldn’t say anything. So quiet I started listening to my insides. I could hear Grandmother’s voice inside me. Right inside my stomach with it. Listening, guggling, [*sic*] bubbling through my veins. Not so much words but a song she used to sing to me when I was a kid and scared, vibrating through my body like the heartbeat of a drum. He got quieter. I asked him if he could hear anything.

FOREVER. Can you hear anything?

JIM. No.

FOREVER. No? No . . . I wasn’t about to tell him about my Grandmother was there inside me too . . . he looked scared enough (63).

By making it evident that Forever’s child-to-be is, in some sense, a re-incarnation, Clements sheds light on the pronouncements that the Old One makes at the beginning of the play, since, *as* a reincarnation, the child is a kind of “remembering transforming.” In this play, however, transformation always carries the additional import of the nonhuman, and when, in the conclusion of the action, “*the image and cry*” of Forever’s child is brought forward, it is bracketed, immediately before, by “*the carcass of a sturgeon [that] is strung up and cut open*” and, immediately after, by the image of a

leaping sturgeon (70).<sup>85</sup> Such juxtapositions serve as reminders of the parallels established throughout the play between Forever's actions and those of the sturgeon/girl in the Katzie story. But if we read the metaphors of the play through the cultural paradigm that Clements invokes, the implication is that Forever's child is but the latest incarnation of an ongoing transformation that began with the original Katzie genesis story. In this sense, then, the spirit of Forever's grandmother is both an ancient 800-pound sturgeon and a voice that echoes all the way back to the first chief's daughter, the one who discovered her agency in the shape of a fish and forged a connection between it and the Katzie people. Thus, Forever, by "becoming sturgeon," has left behind linear time to engage in a synchronous field of relations, re-incarnating and re-awakening an ancestral past that has long been silenced, and giving voice to it anew. Forever's grandmother, speaking as the Old One again, conveys this complex temporality in a monologue about half way through the play:

THE OLD ONE. A hundred years I have been talking but no one has listened. I weigh 800 pounds with words spoken but not heard, 800 pounds I have grown 100 years to reach you but still nothing. Nothing until I heard my voice swimming inside you. I took those 800 pounds of silence and spun them in years of circles to create you. You are made of words in my silence. You are made of a silence that is me before everything. (61)

What emerges in this monologue is a conception of existence in which time, as it moves forward, continues to fold back, renewing and revising the past while being informed and revitalized by it. Such a worldview is in keeping, once again, with Tim Ingold's observation about the animist view of the cosmos as a vital force engaged in an

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<sup>85</sup> In the 1995 production of the early draft of this script, this was accomplished via slide projections on a circular scrim that, in the course of the action, was configured as a moon, a sun, an eye, a drum, a womb, and a "window" onto the play's mythological backstory.

ongoing and perpetually open-ended transformation, and it is this view that is being conveyed when the Old One speaks of “[a] remembering transforming” and “a dream from the here and now to the beginning, and again from the here and now to the beginning again.”

What all of this discussion about animist transformation and inter-subjectivity has not touched on, though, is how Forever’s encounter with her grandmother/sturgeon resolves the cultural tensions that are the source of Forever’s initial dilemma. While it is possible to understand how Forever’s experience of her sturgeon self might affirm her ancestral identity, it isn’t apparent how this resolves the conflict that Forever must confront due to the fact that her child-to-be will be borne into a world characterized by historical conflicts between two very different cultures.

To answer this final question, it is helpful to consider some of the ideas proposed in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In their writings on “Becoming Animal,” Deleuze and Guattari propose an ontology that bears two significant similarities to Ingold’s descriptions of the animist one. First, like animism, it configures existence as a perpetual and incipient mode of becoming; and, second, it avoids anthropocentric assumptions by asserting that human beings can only experience this “becoming” by abandoning the notion of a fixed identity and entering into a reciprocal or dialogical relationship with what they call the “animal.” “We believe,” they write, “in the existence of very special becomings-animal traversing human beings and sweeping them away, affecting the animal no less than the human” (87). Furthermore, as in the animist transformation that Forever undergoes in Clements’s play, the “becomings-animal” to which Deleuze and Guattari refer provide a version of “human” that, like their view of

existence itself, is always in process. “A becoming,” they write, “is always in the middle; one can only get to it by the middle. A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between, the border or line of flight or descent running perpendicular to both” (94). For Deleuze and Guattari, understanding “human” as a continual state of “becoming” provides a way out of the restrictions assumed by essentialist and teleological thinking. Yet, in this same discourse, they take pains to point out that such “becomings-animal” are neither regressions nor identifications, nor are they a simple “return to nature,” but that they offer “a line of escape” from such reductive ways of thinking, allowing for more heterogeneous relationships to take place. “To become animal,” they write, “is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves” (96). What Deleuze and Guattari are addressing here is the possibility of a radical break from established ideas—a kind of utopian realm where existence has a value beyond entrenched cultural constraints or where it can be accrue value on its own terms as an entirely new kind of experience.

The final transformation that Clements’s protagonist undergoes in *The Girl who Swam Forever* can be viewed as a similarly utopian “line of escape”—neither a regression nor an essentialist identification nor a simplistic return to nature. One way to illustrate this is with reference to another Katzie story, one that Clements specifically drew upon as a way to resolve her play. In this story, told by the elder Old Pierre and recorded by the ethnologist Diamond Jenness, a “half-breed Indian near Abbotsford,” rather than acknowledging an animal, bird or ‘force of nature’ as his “guardian spirit,” claimed that the source of his vitality inhered in a locomotive (qtd. in Suttles 48). Jenness quickly

notes that this particular “guardian spirit” was “abnormal,” and that “the other Indians” initially laughed at the one who proposed it, but such disparagements, as the ethnologist goes on to explain, did not alter the man’s “abnormal” belief:

He insisted, however, that it enabled him to control the weather, because a locomotive goes everywhere through rain and sunshine; and he said that because they had mocked him, he would make the weather very cold for two months. When snow fell the next day and the weather did remain cold for two months, the Indians believed him. (qtd. in Suttles 48)

Early on in the action of *The Girl Who Swam Forever*, Clements employs the idea of this aberrant “guardian spirit” when a train comes storming through the town and Forever, longing to catch it, thinks “about an elder who wanted his spirit guardian to be a locomotive because it was so strong and made of steel” (54). At this point, Forever merely watches the train pass by, but the next time the train whistle sounds, it is after her shape-shifting experience, and this time she boards the train and heads off into the city. What Clements’s stage directions would have us understand, however, is that for Forever (as for the “abnormal” Katzie “half-breed”) this train is an extension of the vitality of the nonhuman natural world embodied by the sturgeon. “*The train,*” Clements writes, “*becomes a white sturgeon and a train, a white sturgeon and train, white sturgeon, train. Like it is dancing between the two*” (69).

Like many of this playwright’s stage directions, the metaphorical complexity that this image proposes would be challenging to achieve in a stage production.<sup>86</sup> To disregard

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<sup>86</sup> In the 1995 production of the early draft of this script, I neglected to clearly bring this part of the action to the fore and only later recognized this as an oversight.

it, however, would be a mistake, since what it underscores is the idea that Forever's "line of escape" will be to avoid the binary thinking that defines one culture against another and that conceives of nature and culture as opposites. Instead of an essentialist portrayal of a First Nations woman as inherently "natural," an identification that might relegate her to the misty forests and dusty plains of some long-lost wilderness era, what Clements is proposing here is an image of cross-cultural transformation. By the end of the play, then, as the sturgeon/train enters the city, it is as if Forever's underwater transformation, by demonstrating the possibility of a dialogic relationship between species, were now enabling her to conceive of transformations in cultural attitudes:

FOREVER: (*Voice-over*) I am swimming Grandma. I am going to have this baby, this dream. Maybe it will have blue eyes and brown skin. Blue eyes so it won't have to stare at us anymore because it would know us, because it would know itself." (70)

Forever's hopes here—the last words to be uttered in the play—point the way to a culture that has moved beyond chauvinist attitudes and ways of thinking. By making nonhuman others central to the action in this play, however, and by doing so in a way that consistently undermines the nature/culture binary, Clements has been able to extend her utopian vision so that it takes place within and therefore clearly acknowledges a worldview that attributes value and agency to the more-than-human physical world.

Engaging with the philosophical and political ramifications of this worldview not only reveals the degree to which this play departs from reductive stereotypes of the "noble savage" and "Ecological Indian," but also illustrates that to read the sturgeons in this play as symbols of Forever's psychological state is to make ontological assumptions that are contrary to this playwright's ecocentric vision. Such assumptions can hardly do justice to the kind of world that Clements is portraying here: one where human identity is

not something fixed, closed, and set off from a world of other species that it seeks to control and master, but rather, something more fluid and permeable, to be discovered in an experience of inter-subjectivity. And in Clements's depiction of this complex inter-subjectivity—of a Katzie girl and a Katzie ancestor who are also sturgeons, and of a child-to-be that is both native and non-native—there is room for multiple agencies, comprised of both human and non-human forms, and a voice that speaks of neither one nor the other, but of the murmuring-in-between.

In *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* and *Burning Vision*—two of several plays that Clements has written since *The Girl Who Swam Forever*—Clements continues to situate her critiques of colonial, misogynist and racist actions in a world where binary oppositions between culture and nature dissolve and where human actions take place in concert with those of other life forms. In these plays, there are no shape-shifting transformations of the kind that Forever undergoes, but there are First Nations characters who, like Forever, draw strength and inspiration from the more-than-human physical world, and others who, like her, are distinctly hybrid identities, comprised of both human and nonhuman characteristics.

Clements's *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* manages to incorporate an animist and ecocentric sensibility in a play that is, first and foremost, a response to violence. As Ginny Ratsoy explains, the violence that Clements's play confronts is of three kinds: the violence involved in the deaths of ten or more B.C. women, most of whom were First Nations, who died suspiciously from excessive alcohol consumption; the violence of an actual individual, Gilbert Paul Jordan, who was convicted of manslaughter in one of these cases and who was seen drinking with each of the women

before their deaths; and the violence of the racist and misogynist culture that was complicit in these women's deaths (473). As Clements's title suggests, however, one of the crucial aspects of the play's politics has to do with the cultural assumptions surrounding definitions of "natural" and "unnatural".

The play begins, after the sound of "trees whispering in the wind," with documentary evidence: a series of slides with an excerpt from coroners' reports attributing the deaths of these women to "unnatural and accidental" causes (367). The next visual is a slide of the play's title, which, in juxtaposition with the coroners's reports, draws attention to an implicit irony, since if the deaths of these women were deemed to be unnatural or, in other words, *cultural*, it seems curious indeed to describe them as accidents. In fact, the only real way to make sense of these official medical reports is to adopt the cultural assumption that these women (as alcoholics) were 'unnatural' in the sense of being unhealthy, abnormal or perverse. According to the underlying assumptions of these coroners's reports, then, these women, it would seem, have only themselves to blame for their deaths—a judgment that lets their murderer, along with a society that appears to turn a blind eye to his actions, off the hook. In the action that follows, however, Clements challenges this social injustice—or, as Richard Lane puts it, re-writes "the official verdicts of the authorities" (273). In so doing, she situates the perversion on the cultural side of the ledger, ascribing it to the 'unnatural,' (*i.e.*, perverse) Jordan and the 'unhealthy' assumptions of a racist culture, while returning dignity and agency to the murdered women.

*The Unnatural and Accidental Women* begins with Rebecca, a Métis woman, and her attempts to locate her First Nations mother who had disappeared years ago after

separating from Rebecca's father. Rebecca's search leads to the hotels and bars of Vancouver's downtown eastside where, unknown to her, her mother and nine other women had met their deaths by alcohol (aided and abetted by Jordan), and where their spirits and stories still linger. Susceptible to the desolation of this oppressive inner city, Rebecca is in danger of being dragged down herself, and, at a critical point in the action, Jordan sets out to take advantage of this, tempting her with offers of alcohol, just as he had with the other women. In the play's climax, however, Rebecca, rather than suffering the same fate as her mother, discovers the horrific truth about Jordan and, aided by her Mother's ghost (Aunt Shadie) and the ghosts of the other murdered women, she turns the tables and enacts revenge by cutting the murderer's throat.

Critical commentary on *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* has focused on the complex blend (and rupturing) of genres in the play (Reid, Bamford) and on Clements's socio-political message (Knowles "Rape," Lane, Ratsoy "Circles," Reid). What this critical attention fails to mention or quickly glosses over, however, is the role of the non-human world in the play—the way in which the agency of trees, rivers and stones frames and informs the play's action and politics. Ratsoy nudges us in this direction with her observation that the playwright's "attention to place—the meticulousness with which she delineates a site—has an actuating effect" ("Circles" 475). Clements's attention to place, however, is not only meticulous, as Ratsoy points out; it also clearly conveys a vision of the world in which, despite distinctions between human characters and more-than-human forces, there are no assumptions of human privilege or superiority with respect to such forces.

In its acknowledgment of other-than-human agencies, Clements's play is replete with anthropomorphic tropes. Not only do the trees in this play "whisper," they also breathe, gasp, embrace loggers like lovers, and make decisions about whether or not to spare the lives of those on whom they fall (478-79). Moreover, according to Clements's protagonist Rebecca, Skid Row—the "setting" for the action—is, in effect, the result of an interaction between trees, sky, and humans, all of whom she configures as subjects:

REBECCA. Everything here has been falling – a hundred years of trees have fallen from the sky's grace. They laid on their back trying to catch their breath as the loggers connected them to anything that could move, and moved them, creating a long muddy path where the ends of trees scraped the ground, whispering their last connection to the earth. This whispering left a skid. A skid mark. A row. Skid Row. (478-79)

Such anthropomorphism might lead some to question the authenticity of this portrayal, arguing that this kind of representation equates with anthropocentrism. Before making pejorative assumptions about the anthropomorphism in Clements's play, however, one would be well advised to consider Val Plumwood's instructive remarks about cross-species representation. In *Environmental Culture*, Plumwood devotes several pages to refuting the charge that *all* 'anthropomorphic' depictions of nonhuman others are disrespectful, claiming that the "pseudo-scientific" rationalism behind this blanket assumption has its roots in a Cartesian "hyper-separation of human and animal natures" (56-7). Anthropomorphism, she points out, will be present at some level in *any* depiction of nonhuman others as "intentional and communicative" beings, yet it is hardly a corrective to represent such nonhuman others in ways that elide their agency and communicative powers. Such seemingly "objective" representations, Plumwood argues,

create inaccuracies of their own and constitute “an incomparable failing” in terms of the destruction of species and habitat that they so often promote (59-61).

Plumwood’s remarks can help us to appreciate that Clements’s anthropomorphic renditions of the trees in *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*—her portrayals of them as living, communicative subjects—are designed not to personify them as anthropocentric subjects, but to acknowledge a reciprocity between human actions and the agency of the more-than-human world. Moreover, in portraying this reciprocity, Clements is no simple-minded moralist. Her depictions of trees, for instance, do not cast them as the victims of ‘evil’ loggers. Instead, she offers the vision of a relationship, albeit a violent one, that takes place between equals. Loggers fall on trees and trees fall on loggers; saws slice through human limbs as easily as through branches; and all of this equivalence, according to Aunt Shadie, is part of “an honest trade . . . an honest respect for the give and take of nature” (470). Indeed, as Clements’s language portrays it, loggers are every bit as expendable as trees in an economic system that rewards the profit-taking of shareholders. Rebecca, watching the burnt-out men in the downtown eastside bars of Vancouver, perceives the human as well as the environmental costs of such a system:

REBECCA. Now the loggers sit like their lovers, the trees – they sit like stumps, and drink, and think. And think the world has gone to shit. They think of a time when cutting down a tree was an honest job, a time when they all had their good-looking limbs, a time when they were respected by the tallest order, a time when drinking was not an addiction. (479-80)

Clements’s social critique, in other words, is directed against those cultural attitudes that ‘cut through’ the agency of others, whether those ‘others’ are fallen trees, fallen loggers, or—as the rest of Act one details—the ‘fallen’ First Nations women whose struggles for self-respect led them to their deaths at the hands of a serial killer. In *The Unnatural and*

*Accidental Women*, the world in which this critique unfolds is one where humans and other species are treated, at the very least, as equals. Both Aunt Shadie and Rebecca, in fact, often look to the more-than-human physical environment—or more specifically, to a traditional animist view of that environment—as a source of strength.

In one section of the play, Aunt Shadie, the ghost of Rebecca’s long-lost mother, remembers that, while still alive, she began to feel more and more invisible in the eyes of her non-native husband. “I could feel myself disappearing,” she recalls, “becoming invisible in his eyes; and when I looked in the mirror, what I held good like a stone deep inside was gone” (504-505). Before walking out on her husband and child, however, Aunt Shadie passes on this earthly, “stony” sense of herself to her daughter, and it is this same stone, as revealed to Rebecca in a visionary dream, that becomes the source of her own strength and selfhood. Within this dream vision, Valerie, one of the spirits of the murdered women, comments, chorus-like, on how this takes place: “A mother opens the heart of her child and places a rock inside the flesh. Inside, so no one – no man, no ugliness, will ever place its grabby hands on it” (505). Almost immediately thereafter, Rebecca’s dream-self acknowledges the consequences of her mother’s action: “It makes me hit the riverbed like a rock. Water shining over me new, over me new, a new reflection of my true self, knowing I am heavy” (505). Later, when Ron, a police officer assigned to the downtown eastside, tells Rebecca that she doesn’t “seem Indian,” her stinging retort includes a re-affirmation of this “stony” self:

That begs the question – what does an Indian seem like? Let me guess – you probably think that, if an Indian goes to university or watches TV, it makes them the same as every other Canadian. Only less. The big melting pot. The only problem is you can’t melt an Indian. You can’t kill a stone. You can grind it down to sand, but it’s still there sifting through everything forever. There, you got it. (510)

Considered as an expression of an essentialist notion of identity, Rebecca's response here might appear to constitute a racist attitude of its own. Is there really something that is quintessentially, substantially and unalterably "Indian"? It is also possible, however, to hear this character's defense of native identity as an affirmation of a cultural and historical difference. In an essay on Aboriginal drama, for instance, Tomson Highway argues for a reading of symbols in First Nations stories vis-à-vis a relationship to the land that has developed over centuries. Such symbols, he writes, "come from deep, deep within the flesh and blood of a people who have known this particular landscape since time immemorial and who are so close to it they have become an integral part of it, like rock ("On Native" 2). Highway's comments, then, might serve as a reminder that in *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, Rebecca's identification with the physical environment is part of an eco-political stance. Her connection with Aunt Shadie, in other words, the connection that, in the end, provides her with the strength to resist and to take revenge on Jordan, is inseparable, in this sense, from a culturally specific relationship with the trees and stones of this particular landscape. As a consequence, her revenge on Jordan, though a human response to an intolerable injustice, can be seen as the result of a more complex field of relationships between the human and more-than-human physical world: an agency of place comprised of environment and history, nature and culture, perceived as an integrated and ongoing process. Indeed, what makes a play like *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* both politically liberating and ecologically affirming stems from Clements's ability to create self-reflexive theatre that portrays existence as an interaction of diverse physical and historical forces in the midst of which human beings make choices that have ramifications for all forms of life.

Conveying that human choices have ramifications, not only in the social sphere, but for the more-than-human environment as well is, in fact, one of Clements's most persistent eco-political strategies. In *Age of Iron*, she depicts a ragged assemblage of street people, under siege by colonial forces, struggling, along with the earth, moon and stars, to assert their agency. In *The Girl Who Swam Forever*, she depicts a sturgeon-woman swimming towards a possible future where respect for Métis people and for the more than-human natural world might one day be achieved; while in *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, the spirits of nine murdered women along with loggers, whispering trees and stones are all part of an ecological community in which a racist, misogynist murderer meets his demise. What Clements does in *Burning Vision*, however, is to give this notion of an ecocentric community a trans-national context and, in the process, to confront and expose an environmental injustice with global ramifications.

According to Theresa J. May, there are clear links between environmental justice, community building, and theatre. "Like environmental justice," she writes, "theater forces the question of human ecology" ("Greening 5"). Drawing on the ideas of Giovanna De Chiro, May asserts that "[i]f theatre is to be a site of ecocriticism, the term 'environment' must be reconstituted to include the places 'where we live, where we work, and where we play,' and eco-scholarship must address the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on the poor, working class and people of color" ("Greening" 5). May's commentary, it seems to me, provides a fitting introduction to *Burning Vision*, since it is in this play that Clements is able to bring to light the way Dene ore-carriers and other workers in the mid-twentieth century were knowingly exposed to radiation in the uranium mining that took place in Canada's Northwest Territories. In *Burning Vision*, however,

Clements is also able to show how the violence done to these Dene people eventually spread out to both to Japanese civilians killed by atomic bombs in WW II and to the more-than-human physical world in both Asia and North America.

The theme and subject matter of *Burning Vision* is dark, dystopian and apocalyptic, but, to counterbalance this, Clements takes creative license with Einstein's theories of relativity, folding the dimensions of space and time into a unified theatrical field where the living and the dead on opposite sides of the Pacific Ocean and in different time periods can come together to find mutual support. Thus, when the atomic bomb drops on Hiroshima, a Japanese fisherman named Koji, a freshly caught trout wriggling in his hands, is transported in a great flash of light to the North West Territories where he is pulled, fish-like, out of the waters of Bear Lake by two Dene stevedores. Furthermore, Koji's transport across space is also a passage back through time, since the "Radium Prince"—the boat on which Koji finds himself—is in the midst of ferrying uranium ore that will be used to construct the A-bomb that, for Koji, had already exploded.

The eminently likeable Koji is hardly the stereotype of the enemy alien. Instead, he gets along well with the Icelandic captain and his two Dene crew members, and a romance quickly blooms between him and Rose, the Métis woman who is down in the hold, baking what is, unfortunately, contaminated bread amidst the stowed away sacks of uranium. Before long, in fact (linear time being a matter of little consequence in this play) Koji and Rose have conceived a child—a living example of cross-cultural ties that run counter to the xenophobia perpetuated by both colonial practices and the warring of nation states. Rose, a Métis woman who has already had a tough time walking the line between her native and non-native heritage, seems especially aware of what her

relationship with Koji might signify. “If I make you mine,” she asks him, her hand on his heart, “then is everyone else the enemy? [or] . . . If you make me yours do we make a world with no enemies?” (95).

With the crackling static of a Geiger counter, repeated references to radiation sickness and the constant threat of the atomic bomb, the world that Clements presents in *Burning Vision* perpetually hovers at the brink of annihilation. In the final moments of *Burning Vision*, however, the community that Clements assembles on stage is a positive and remarkably pluralist one. There is, for instance, a non-native uranium miner who has found the woman of his dreams in a golden-haired beauty who paints the radium dials on watches. There is, too, an elderly widow who calls up the ghost of her beloved husband and along with him the spirits of other Dene workers who have met their fates through exposure to radiation. And there is “Fat Man,” part American patriot (named after the bomb dropped on Hiroshima) and part a nuclear ‘test dummy,’ who, betrayed by his own government, eventually wants nothing more than to reach out to his “adoptive” family: an Asian-American woman, known during the war as “Toyko Rose” and falsely charged as a traitor, and a mysterious little First Nations boy who arrives in Fat Man’s high-tech living room/bomb shelter via a television test pattern.

Assembling all this heterogeneity and enacting it in a single theatrical space is quite a feat, but in so doing Clements has accomplished what May argues ecological theatre must do to become political: namely, to draw attention to and resist the frequent racism and classism of environmental injustice (5-6). Clements, however, makes her play about environmental justice ecocentric as well by making nonhuman and hybrid others part of this community: a Japanese cherry tree, for instance, with significant links to Koji’s past

and whose blossoms cover the stage in the conclusion of the play, and, most notably, a herd of ghostly, irradiated caribou who appear at crucial moments in the action, expanding the cultural space into what Clements, in her stage directions, describes as “*an earth space*” (42).<sup>87</sup>

In addition to the cherry tree blossoms and the ghostly caribou in *Burning Vision*, an equally potent source of the ecocentric vision in this play stems from Clements’s depiction of “Little Boy,” one of the most multivalent and politically trenchant of this playwright’s ‘inter-subjective’ characters. In the character descriptions of her published script, Clements describes Little Boy as “A beautiful Native boy. Eight to ten years old. The personification of the darkest uranium found at the center of the earth” (13). The yoking together of the human and nonhuman elements in this character becomes more complex, though, by virtue of the fact that “Little Boy” was also the code name adopted by the American military to conceal one of the most murderous weapons in history—the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Indeed, by naming their bomb “Little Boy” the military had, in effect, provided a particularly savage oxymoron, conflating a bomber opening its bay doors with the life-affirming image of a woman giving birth to a child. Clements, though, who knows what it means to be a mother and who dedicates her play, in part, to her own “little boy,” subverts and re-writes this military code to remind us of its monstrous implications, and does so in an ecocentric trope, personifying a uranium deposit, buried deep in the earth, as “a naked Indian boy-man, scared and huddled in the

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<sup>87</sup> For an explanation of the historical importance of caribou in the lives of the Dene people, see Sharp (35-36).

darkness.” “Every child is scared of the dark,” whispers Little Boy, “not because it is dark but because they know sooner, or later, they will be discovered.”

It is only a matter of time . . . before someone discovers you and claims you for themselves. Claims you are you because they were the first to find you, and lay claims on you. . . . Not knowing you’ve known yourself for thousands of years. Not knowing *you* are not the monster. (20)

Clements’s Little Boy, then, is afraid, not of the dark, but of those who will come to claim him and what they will make of him. As a “naked Indian boy,” his words may disturbingly call to mind those First Nations children who, having hidden in the dark in residential schools, experienced the terror of repeated abuse (Walker 9). With what Little Boy knows, however, he is also a potential survivor of such abuse, whose very expression of what he fears contains the seeds of resistance and a hard-won self respect; and, as both a buried deposit of uranium and an A-bomb, he is also the voice of the earth itself and what we all might *make* of it, depending, that is, on how we treat it and how we treat one another—two kinds of action, which, as the figure of Little Boy makes clear, are inextricably linked.

In the apocalyptic world of *Burning Vision*, Little Boy, Koji, the glowing, ghostly caribou herd and all the other members of this cross-cultural and cross-species community are ontologically equivalent. All, that is to say, are mortal, ephemeral forms, in much the same way that some of Shakespeare’s characters envision themselves: the stuff of dreams and walking shadows.<sup>88</sup> Yet it is from such shadows that Clements, drawing on a combination of animist ontology and modern physics, assembles what is, in effect, a post humanist and postcolonial community, reincarnating ancestral spirits in the bodies of

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<sup>88</sup> See *The Tempest* 4.1.156-58 and *Macbeth* 5.5.24-26.

present day actors who, in a physical space, before a living audience, enact palpable acts of love, compassion and solidarity as an alternative to the violence that confronts them and that, in a very real sense, confronts us all.

The world that Clements conveys in *Burning Vision* might well prompt us to consider whether a re-affirmed relationship with the nonhuman physical world might offer a way to move beyond the fears and suspicions associated with difference and toward a more heterogeneous community committed to a respect for what we share: our place as members of the biosphere and our ultimate dependence on it. “Remember this tree,” Koji recalls his grandmother saying—before everything erupts in flash of light—“remember my words”(32), and in the closing image of *Burning Vision*, with its glowing ghostly caribou and its falling cherry blossoms, there is a final juxtaposition of fear and hope that has global ramifications (122). The German writer and director Heiner Müller once remarked that theatre is not a medium of enlightenment but “a conjuring of the dead” (224). In a play like *Burning Vision*, however, Clements may have scripted an ecocentric performance that can be both of these, bringing blood to ghosts while reminding us of what Theresa May has called our “inherent communality”<sup>89</sup> as mortal subjects, with decisions to make, in an *eco-politics* of place.

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<sup>89</sup> May argues that “[t]heatre’s inherent communality makes it an ideal site for examining the habits of mind that perpetuate an unsustainable paradigm, and an apt art with which to stimulate the cultural transformation we desperately need” (“Greening” 87).

## Conclusion

One of the main reasons that the study of drama continues to expand and develop is because theatre scholars, informed by changing historical conditions, continue to formulate new critical frameworks for viewing and thinking about plays. By remaining responsive to their times, such scholars not only develop novel approaches to existing and emerging scripts, but also do so in ways that address some of the most pressing concerns of the day. In an era of unprecedented ecological challenges, the question that initially sparked this dissertation was whether English-Canadian drama might have something to say about our human relationship with the more-than-human physical world and, in particular, about engendering respect for the biosphere as the source and condition of our wellbeing. To demonstrate that this is the case, I have been able, through an ecocritical reading of selected plays, to identify a body of work that acknowledges living beings and forces in nonhuman nature, not as scenic backdrops or metaphors for exclusively human concerns, but as agencies that shape and/or interact with human characters in ways that contribute to their lives in fundamental and, more often than not, in beneficial ways.

As I point out in Chapter one, if this body of work did not emerge until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is because in the few plays before this time in which the natural world figures at all, attitudes toward it were bound up with colonizing views of the ‘New World’ and its indigenous inhabitants. As a result, acknowledgements of the agency of the more-than-human physical world were pre-empted by territorial concerns about the natural world as a *terra nullius* to be occupied by invader/settler populations, or as a newly discovered Eden that was destined to fade away along with its noble but

‘vanishing’ First Nations inhabitants. Beginning with an analysis of Marc Lescarbot’s *Theatre of Neptune* and following with ecocritical readings of plays published in the years leading up to and immediately following confederation, I have demonstrated, in this pre-history of ecocentric drama, how colonizing views of nature and First Nations people were in evidence from 1606 until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the dramatic writing from this part of the world. I have shown, too, in the last part of this chapter, that it was only by adopting the personae of ‘noble savage’ protagonists like Ponteach and Tecumseh that playwrights with ancestral connections to Britain could begin to imagine nature in the ‘New World’ as an *oikos* or homeland.

In Chapter two of this dissertation, my research has shown that, from 1920 to 1970, English-Canadian plays appear in which such colonial attitudes have given way to concerns about what it means to dwell vis-à-vis the natural environment of the newly formed nation state, and it is in these plays, I argue, that an ecocentric perspective comes to the fore. As examples of this ecocentric perspective, I have focused primarily on the contributions of Herman Voaden and James Reaney, playwrights whose characters draw their vitality from the particulars of the Canadian environment and, in so doing, enact a regional and nationalist ethos. In drawing attention to the ecocentric sensibility in these authors, however, I have also noted how their emphasis on local and national geographies is enfolded into a more encompassing ontology, one in keeping with what Tim Ingold has called “a dwelling perspective.” Both Voaden and Reaney, that is, portray the human characters and events in their plays as part of an unfolding creation that includes and is informed by earthly elemental forces such as animals, rocks, trees and the biosphere as a whole. And, as I have shown in some detail, both these writers, in

order to convey this ecocentric view of the world, have adopted a similar dramaturgical approach by depicting nonhuman physical forces as characters that speak and act in ways that are central to the action.

In Chapter two, however—despite observing what I describe as similarities in the ontology (cosmologies) and dramaturgical approaches of these two writers—I have also paid heed to a significant difference in their views of the natural world, a difference that, I contend, stems from a natural environment that, in the decades immediately following WW II, was increasingly vulnerable to human activities. I show, for instance, that by the last decade of the 1960s the view of nature as a sublime, immortal design (a perspective conveyed in the plays of Herman Voaden) has given way, in Reaney's *Colours in the Dark*, to one of a natural environment that is beginning to show signs of fragility.

In Chapter three, my reading of non-native English-Canadian plays, published between 1970 and 2010, reveals that the fragility of the natural world has become somewhat of a preoccupation in the drama of this particular time and place. Here, I show how, in a good many of these plays, the spectre of an increasingly uninhabitable environment gives rise to characters whose feelings of anxiety and displacement from the natural world are often difficult to resolve. I argue, moreover, that the sheer scale of the environmental losses depicted in these works, in concert with characters that are in many respects responsible for such losses, has led to a problematic of mourning for the more-than-human physical world. Thus, while playwrights such as Hollingsworth and Cook portray characters who, by grieving over particular losses in the natural world, provide some measure of eco-catharsis for contemporary audiences, others—such as Ringwood, Brooks, Hines and Brooker—have turned to tragi-comic and satirical forms

as a way to distance themselves from anxieties over such losses and as a means of critiquing the denials, escapism and relentless consumerism that have contributed to this sorry state of affairs.

In my fourth and final chapter, ecocritical readings of plays by Tomson Highway, Monique Mojica and Marie Clements reveal a quite different ecocentric perspective than the kind found in plays published by non-native writers during this period. In the works of these artists, all of whom have ancestral links to First Nations traditions, enactments of the more-than-human physical world, rather than occasions for grief or for existential fears, function instead as affirmations of indigenous identity and—in the case of Clements's plays—as part of a trans-national, trans-species ecological community. Here, I show that such affirmations of indigenous identity vis-à-vis the natural world can be interpreted as a form of resistance to a history of aboriginal peoples being forcibly removed from their traditional lands and from cultural traditions inextricably tied to these lands. In this chapter, too, I explain in some detail how Highway, Mojica and Clements, by giving expression to an animist ontology in their writings, have enacted what is, in effect, an ecocentric alternative to anthropocentric ways of seeing, and, in the process, have developed an eco-politics of place that addresses issues of ecological harm and environmental injustice that are particularly relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In its most general sense, what this study has demonstrated is the existence of an ecocentric tradition in English-Canadian drama that has emerged and developed in the context of specific historical and place-based conditions. As we have seen, this tradition is one that, after three centuries of colonialism, in this part of the world, arose in concert with concerns about dwelling and identity in the newly-formed nation and developed in

the context of environmental challenges and postcolonial politics that have, since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, become two of the most distinguishing features of our time.

Demonstrating the existence of an ecocentric tradition in English-Canadian drama, however, might well bring to mind questions that this study has not addressed and that could serve as catalysts for future research. One of these has to do with how this body of ecocentric plays relates to the drama of other periods and in other parts of the world where different historical and place-based circumstances prevail. Another is the degree to which the worldview expressed in these plays has emerged alongside and in relationship to depictions of the natural world in popular culture: in the so-called ‘green-washing’ of industries, in advertisements employing images of nature to sell their products, and in popular films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (with its futurist vision of an eco-apocalypse) and eco-documentaries such as Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* about the dangers of climate change and Josh Fox’s *Gasland*, a film about the destructive practices of extracting natural gas through hydraulic fracturing.

Still another question that this study of English-Canadian drama leaves unanswered, and one that I make mention of in my introduction, is the extent to which an ecocentric worldview might be discerned with respect to how theatre is currently being *produced* in this country. Research that might seek answers to this question could investigate initiatives, such as those recently undertaken in the theatre department at York University, designed to lower the carbon footprint of theatre production through the judicious use of ‘green’ technologies, non-toxic materials and renewable sources of energy (McKernan and Schweitzer). It could also consider the practices of theatre directors, such as Kendra Fanconi of Vancouver’s *The Only Animal*, who make

ecologically informed decisions with regard to the *mise-en-scène* of their performances (Gray, “Yes” 26). And it could investigate as well the existence and potential of bio-remedial and eco-political performances, productions that employ creative means to restore a wetland, clean a polluted river or to ameliorate an environmental injustice by working with members of a particular community.

Another aspect of theatre where an ecocentric worldview might be discovered is in site-specific productions that bring audiences outdoors to experience sunlight, terrain, bird flights, animal cries and the like as part of the performances that they witness. As my reading of the *Theatre of Neptune* illustrates, such productions are not by any means new, nor do they necessarily configure the more-than-human forces that they incorporate in ways that are ecocentric. As I have indicated elsewhere,<sup>90</sup> however, there have, in recent decades, been enough examples of ecologically-informed site-specific work to consider these as the reflection of an ongoing paradigm shift in our time, one, necessitated by current ecological challenges, and in alignment with the worldview conveyed by the series of ecocentric plays identified in this dissertation.

Because theatre traditionally requires a live interaction between performers and an audience gathered together in a common space, it has the ability, perhaps like no other art form, to *place* us in the world in an embodied way. Writing about the distinctiveness of theatre, the artist and eco-critic Theresa May, pays heed to the ecological ramifications of this kind of embodiment.

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<sup>90</sup> See Gray, Nelson. “Birds, Trees, Stones and Politics: Ecology and Agency in Some Recent B.C. Performance.”

Theater is an embodied experience, biological even as it is representational. Theater occurs among living actors and a living audience who gather in actual space, and its ecology derives from this immediacy. Because theater is always an encounter between people and place, it is (with dance) the most “natural” of arts, reaching back into a mytho-poetical past in which Western culture’s dualistic thinking dissolves into a ritually enacted ecological reciprocity with the natural world. (“Greening” 4)

May’s remarks here can, it seems to me, provide a fitting conclusion to a dissertation that has placed emphasis on the agency of the more-than-human physical world in performance. This is because within May’s recognition of an “ecological reciprocity with the natural world” is a fundamentally ecocentric assertion, the idea, that is, that the more-than-human physical world, rather than being the materials from which individual artists create theatre, might instead be conceived as a ‘collaborator’ or ‘co-author,’ not only in site-specific performances, but, by virtue of our human embeddedness in the natural world, in all forms of theatre. Indeed, in an age when considerations about the more-than-physical human world have come to inflect nearly every field of human endeavor, perhaps it is time to consider whether works of art really are an expression of *human* consciousness, considered in isolation, or whether we might more realistically come to see and understand them as the result of nonhuman agencies in the physical world acting on and influencing our consciousness in ways that, until now perhaps, we have only begun to imagine.

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