

## Frontiers: Environmental History, Ecocriticism and *The Kentucky Cycle*

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We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect... . That land yields a cultural harvest is a fact long known, but latterly often forgotten.

Aldo Leopold,  
*Sand County Almanac*, 1949<sup>1</sup>

In a 1994 issue of *Theater*, editor Erika Munk laments that, “our playwrights’ silence on the environment as a political issue and our critics’ neglect of the ecological implications of theatrical form are rather astonishing.” She urges theater practice and theater studies toward a new “ecological” frontier: “[c]ritics and scholars who want to investigate the way ecologies—physical, perceptual, imagined—shape dramatic forms stand at the edge of a vast, open field.” Ecocriticism presents itself, she says, “like the days of contemporary feminism: everything cries out for reinterpretation.”<sup>2</sup> Robert Schenkkan’s *The Kentucky Cycle* takes up Erika Munk’s challenge to put the implications of the environmental crisis and the philosophical reaches of ecological theory on the regional and Broadway stage. While critical response to *The Kentucky Cycle* yields a cultural harvest almost as rich as the one Schenkkan reaped from the history of the Cumberland plateau, none of that criticism, ironically, has addressed the play’s “ecological” project.

Robert Schenkkan hoped *The Kentucky Cycle* would expose an “American mythos” that ravages both landscape and human life.<sup>3</sup> In California, *The Kentucky Cycle* appeared to have struck gold. The Mark Taper Forum production in spring 1992 won five Drama Circle Awards; and then Robert Schenkkan won the Pulitzer Prize. The *Los Angeles Times* ran a mildly gloating editorial at the time, noting that *The Kentucky Cycle* was “the first play in the 76-year history of the Pulitzers to win without a New York opening.” It concluded, “no offense intended, but if you’ve made it here, you’ve made it.”<sup>4</sup> In New York, the *Los Angeles Times*’ editorial would be proven wrong. On Broadway *The Kentucky Cycle* was strung up by the very myths it tried to undo.

When the play first opened at the Royale Theatre on November 14, 1993 Frank Rich claimed it was “masterful storytelling,” and *Time* magazine’s Williar

A. Henry III heralded the Broadway production as “a work of undeniable power.”<sup>5</sup> But the favorable winds did not last. Shortly before *The Kentucky Cycle* opened in New York, Bobbie Ann Mason interviewed Kentucky scholar and activist, Gurney Norman, in the *New Yorker*. Norman had been highly critical of the play, and Mason’s article, “Recycling Kentucky,” gave his comments a national audience. The Mason-Norman post-colonial critique of Schenkkan’s play ultimately seemed to find consensus among key critics. By the end of November, Jack Kroll had concluded in *Newsweek* that Schenkkan’s characters rang false, that he “writes with a bludgeon,” and that the production was “a simulacrum of true theatrical power.”<sup>6</sup> And David Kaufman, writing not long before the production closed in mid-December, 1993, called *The Kentucky Cycle* “vacant” and “ambition masquerading as art.”<sup>7</sup> Other key New York critics, including Paul Simon and John Lahr, followed suit.

*The Kentucky Cycle* was dismissed by New York in the fashion of the East’s century-old characterization of Western cultural products as uncultured and unsophisticated. “What wowed them in Seattle and Los Angeles,” David Kaufman claimed, “is being less warmly welcomed in New York.” The play was “more apt to have an appeal and be mistaken for ‘art’ in Los Angeles than it was in New York.”<sup>8</sup> Frontierism played out not only in the images and rhetoric on-stage, but in the play’s reception, and the power dynamic between regional theater and Broadway.

In this paper I argue that, while *The Kentucky Cycle* reinscribes the very frontier mythology it hoped to critique, the play’s critical reception also reads like a maelstrom of rhetoric from William Cody’s own *Wild West Show*. In order to make sense of the play’s dramatic fall from grace in New York, I illuminate Robert Schenkkan’s project in *The Kentucky Cycle* in light of “ecological” theory and contemporaneous trends in environmental historiography. In the later sections of this paper, I examine thematic aspects of *The Kentucky Cycle* from two ecocritical perspectives—eco-Marxism and deep ecology.<sup>9</sup> The paper concludes with an inquiry: is Broadway “good soil” for ecotheatre? An ecocritical examination of *The Kentucky Cycle*’s theme and its critical reception begins to reveal why a work which might have stood as the flagship of “ecotheatre” was turned away from the door to the American canon of dramatic literature. Under this “green” lens, an “American” ideology of the land looms so ubiquitous that even the best-intentioned playwrights and keenest critics are quickly used by its mythologies.

#### ***The Kentucky Cycle* as Environmental Historiography**

Tracing the history of seven generations of three Kentucky families from 1775 to 1975, *The Kentucky Cycle* examines the relationship between people and the land from which they have drawn life and profit, on which they have spilled one another’s blood, and in which they have buried both enemy and kin—a rela-

tionship which bears itself out only over the course of generations. Miriam Horn observes in *US News & World Report* that *The Kentucky Cycle* is “a theatrical epic which explores the psychological and social perils of forgetting.”<sup>10</sup> Horn could have added “ecological” among those perils.

*The Kentucky Cycle* is not only “revisionist history,” as reviewers noted, but environmental history, informed by an eco-Marxist, post-colonial critique of the American frontier. It is appropriate, therefore, to examine the play in light of trends in contemporary environmental history, and useful first, to look at the development and key projects of this land-based historiographic perspective. Tracy C. Davis tells us that feminist historiography must generate “a new range of questions for historical consideration” and draw on “a new range of sources.”<sup>11</sup> Likewise, environmental historiography mandates a revision not only in the subject of historiography, but its methods and means as well. Environmental historians challenge the notion of history as a story of political, economic and military events; and instead posit a history told as the chronicle of the relatedness between humans and their ecological context.

As early as the late nineteenth century, historians recognized that human history and natural history are bound together.<sup>12</sup> In 1929 historians writing for the *Annales* sought to “make the environment a prominent part of ... historical studies.” These historians advocated a narrative that was “more than the succession of events in individual lives.” Instead, historical events should be “seen from the vantage of nature.” “Nature” in this case was envisaged as a “timeless element shaping human life over the long duration.”<sup>13</sup> Later in the century, Aldo Leopold’s “Land Ethic,” published in 1949, reframed social and political ethics: people are responsible, he claimed, for the ways in which their actions affect the land on which their livelihoods depend. History, therefore, must reflect that reciprocity, and measure how we have, or have not, lived up to our contract with the land.<sup>14</sup> In 1967, historian James Malin advocated “an ecological reexamination of the history of the United States,” and set the stage for contemporary environmental historiography.<sup>15</sup>

Since 1970 environmental history has developed into a rigorous scholarly enterprise. According to Donald Worster it “rejects the conventional assumption that human experience has been exempt from natural constraints, that people are separate and ‘supernatural’ species, that the ecological consequences of their past deeds can be ignored.”<sup>16</sup> In “Doing Environmental History,” Worster suggests that environmental historians seek to deepen our “understanding of how humans have been affected by their natural environment through time and, conversely, how they have affected that environment and with what results.”<sup>17</sup> The discipline of environmental history crosses borders. Like *The Kentucky Cycle*, it is concerned with the intersection of ecology, natural history, and socio-political history. Informed by the “worldwide cultural reassessment and reform” that char-

acterized scholarship in the early 1970s, environmental historians are engaged in a reexamination of various meta-narratives—the frontier, for example—in light of issues of race, gender, ideology, and notions of historical “truth.” In addition, environmental history often examines how philosophical and political ideologies shape humanity’s relationship with, and impact on, the non-human world; and this, at least expressly, was Schenkkan’s project in *The Kentucky Cycle*.

Robert Schenkkan is not the first to paint a sordid picture of capitalist greed, nor the first to represent the uneasy longing with which people watch the landscape around them change. Neither is he the first playwright to put an environmental problem at the center of his story, (though he is the first to win a Pulitzer for doing so). Significantly, however, *The Kentucky Cycle* is the first mainstream American play to stage the complex interdependency between capitalism and the environmental crisis by attempting to expose the ideology that drives our relationship with the land: the myth of the frontier.

Robert Schenkkan is not native to Kentucky (but rather to southern California), and consequently, several critics claimed that he generalized about the people of Kentucky as only an outsider could. Bobbie Ann Mason’s interview with Gurney Norman blasted the play’s dialogue as “recycled from movies” and “invented country talk.”<sup>18</sup> Instead of dealing the frontier myth a blow, Mason and Norman imply, Robert Schenkkan acted like a pillaging conqueror himself, a cultural colonialist, a story-pirate. He packaged the complex ecological, cultural and economic history of the Cumberland Plateau into an inverted shoot-em-up Western saga.

In “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century,” Patricia Nelson Limerick observes that, as an idea—propagated through imagery and imbued with certain values—the frontier is so deeply embedded in the way Americans think that it “uses historians before they can use it.”<sup>19</sup> Many reviewers commented that Schenkkan’s play mirrors the “wild west” of the Western movies many of us grew up watching—only with the rolls of the heroes and villains reversed. It seems that while Schenkkan hoped to expose the myth of the frontier, he failed to successfully deconstruct it. No small task. According to Limerick, environmental historians have been trying to define, debunk, and deconstruct the frontier in American culture for several decades without success. Examining the fate of similar attempts to expose and deconstruct the frontier will shed light on why, in his attempt to wrestle the beast to the ground, the frontier got the best of Robert Schenkkan.

### Deconstructing the Frontier

Response to *The Kentucky Cycle* in New York is reminiscent of criticism leveled at a contemporaneous effort to deconstruct the American Frontier. In 1991—the same year *The Kentucky Cycle* premiered in Seattle—an exhibition

entitled, "The West as America," opened at the National Museum of American Art. The exhibit suggested that the landscapes of the America West—painted by, for example, Thomas Moran, Frederic Remington, George Catlin, and Asher Durand—were "ideological narratives" that reflected the attitudes of the painters and their times, especially with regard to race, class, gender, and war. In other words, the exhibition tried to show that painters paint (and writers write) from within their own set of cultural values and prejudices, that no artist's work is free of ideology, but rather imbued with it. The exhibition suggested that ideological biases are embedded in the work of these noted American artists who depicted "picturesque" and "sublime" landscapes as places of spiritual renewal, and frontiers full of heroic settlers, and sometimes "noble savages." The controversial exhibition enraged many visitors, along with members of the press, and at least two members of the United States Senate. In his introduction to *The Frontier in American Culture*, James Grossman explains the negative critical response to the exhibition:

Historians found themselves summoned by reporters to reargue a series of controversies they had assumed were . . . dead . . . . The frontier thesis in the minds of reporters and apparently their readers, remains vital. . . . It remains so deeply embedded in a wider constellation of images about the West and the United States that the reporters regarded any questioning of it as radical and daring.<sup>20</sup>

Patricia Nelson Limerick observes that "[t]he popular understanding of the word 'frontier' and the scholarly effort to reckon with the complex history of cultural encounters in colonialization share almost no common ground."<sup>21</sup> As scholars (and playwrights) thrash about in its sticky meanings and discomfoting implications, "the public is paying absolutely no attention . . . it's perfectly evident that the public has a very clear understanding of the word 'frontier,' and that understanding has no relation at all to the definitional struggling of contemporary historians."<sup>22</sup> (Nor, it would seem, to the dramaturgical struggles of playwrights.) Likewise, James Grossman posits that the media attention given the controversy over the National Museum exhibition "highlight[s] the gap between scholarly trends and popular understandings of history."<sup>23</sup> *The Kentucky Cycle* functioned in, and perhaps fell into, that gap.

In recent years a group of environmental historians (the New Western Historians), including Richard White, James Grossman, and Patricia Nelson Limerick have set out to examine the images central to popular understanding of the history of the West. In "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," Richard White posits that two nineteenth century meta-narratives still inform our thinking

about the land. The first, propagated by Frederick Jackson Turner, characterized the frontier as a wilderness to be “settled” in which the pioneer/farmer was hero. The second narrative, championed by showman-soldier-scout William Cody, constructed a frontier to be “won” by wresting it from “hostile savages.” Turner’s was a frontier characterized by man’s conquest over nature, a victory of the plow, a narrative in which the pioneer “tamed” and “civilized” the wilderness. Cody’s was a frontier of conflict, a territory won by the bullet, a story of the hero-scout, and later, the heroic gun-slinging cowboy.

Richard White observes that these two meta-narratives, although seemingly contradictory in their mythic motifs “taught the same lessons.” Furthermore, White claims, Turner and Cody have dominated Americans’ understanding of the frontier for over a century.<sup>24</sup> Both sets of images define Americanism in tropes of courage, manliness, individualism, ingenuity, and inventiveness; and both narratives reinforce the belief that hard work pays off in prosperity. Furthermore, both the Cody and Turner narratives assert that those who exhibit these “American” characteristics have a right to the means by which that deserved prosperity is gained—the land and its riches. These are the values exhibited by the early pioneer characters in Part One of *The Kentucky Cycle*—values that Schenkkan hoped the play would be able to vilify. According to White, both Turner and Cody “erased part of a larger, and more confusing and tangled, cultural story to deliver up a clean, dramatic, and compelling narrative.”<sup>25</sup> Many critics have accused Robert Schenkkan of doing the same. Rather than undoing the frontier, *The Kentucky Cycle* activates the already-ingrained frontier imagery and values in the minds of audience and critics.

Caught up in their own frontierisms, reviews of the New York production, whether condemning or laudatory, read like a hailstorm of Codiesque rhetoric. For William Henry III, *The Kentucky Cycle* was “full of treachery, betrayal, and greed”; for John Lahr it was “a continuous bloody battle” full of “bullnecked bravado” in which “gun-toting Cherokee warriors appear out of the menacing darkness”; and for Miriam Horn it was “blaze of cold knives and hot lead.”<sup>26</sup> The play’s narrative was characterized as “galloping” for David Richards; “a thrill” for Frank Scheck; “a captivating tale” for David Littlejohn; “robust, jam-packed” for Frank Rich, in which “settlers battle injuns” and “no one hesitates to use a gun.”<sup>27</sup> Clearly, the *story* about the story of *The Kentucky Cycle* is straight out of Cody’s *Wild West*, and reflects the already-ingrained Turner/Cody images in the minds of reviewers themselves.

Among environmental historians, Patricia Nelson Limerick notes, the frontier has been “nicknamed the ‘f-word’ and pummeled for its ethnocentrism and vagueness.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, the frontier appears to be hard-wired into the fabric of American identity, populating contemporary national iconography almost everywhere one turns. It is no surprise that one ambitious playwright’s pot-shot at frontier

ideology backfired: the frontier is an American “habit of mind.”<sup>29</sup> Limerick observes that, “[a]s a mental artifact, the frontier has demonstrated an astonishing stickiness and persistence. It is virtually the flypaper of our mental world: it attaches itself to everything.”<sup>30</sup> Likewise, James Grossman observes a “national preoccupation with frontier images, metaphors, stories and reenactments.” He notes that the “images associated with stories about the frontier maintain a constant presence in our lives . . . symbols of the frontier are deeply embedded in Americans’ notions of who we are and what we want to be.”<sup>31</sup> The icons and images of the frontier are so ever-ready in American collective memory that historians, politicians, advertisers, dramatists, and their critics need only harvest and deploy them to their purposes.

The frontier myth is elastic, mutable, both invisible and opaque—a quagmire. In *Mythologies* Roland Barthes describes a process of “mythification” as one that functions to shore up the ideologies which shape culture. Dominant ideologies are “not exposed to view” but masked or “naturalized” in motifs, images, language, and narratives shared by people who claim a common identity.<sup>32</sup> For U.S. citizens, the frontier is not only a neighborhood at Disneyland, but an ideology that drives how we frame our own history; one that undergirds our connection with—and consequently our disassociation from—the land, its creatures, and one another. Barthes might argue that until the concept of the frontier—as a sign system—is interrogated, we remain captive of our own mythologized ideology. *The Kentucky Cycle* is a product of that sign system even as it attempts to expose it.

Contrary to the numerous reviews that lay all of the play’s successes and failures at Robert Schenkkan’s feet, *The Kentucky Cycle* is a work conceived and produced within an economic and ideological superstructure that mediated both its creation and reception. Marxist theoretician Terry Eagleton reminds us that an author’s vision is a product of the ideology or ideologies that the same author may seek to critique. “We think instinctively of the work as the product of the isolated, individual author, and indeed this is how most works have been produced.” But every artist is “rooted in a particular history with particular materials at his disposal.”<sup>33</sup> The language, images, situations, and the form that Robert Schenkkan employed in *The Kentucky Cycle* are “already saturated with certain ideological modes of perception, certain codified ways of interpreting reality; and the extent to which he can modify or remake those languages depends on more than his personal genius.”<sup>34</sup> The frontier, as an ideology, is indivisible from the images and language used to critique it. Frontier ideology informs the perception and saturates the language, of Schenkkan’s drama certainly, but also of the reviewers who have passed judgment on the play. Americans are attached to a vision of the past, one that sanctions our present identities and future aspirations. James Grossman has observed that “Americans continue to tell variants of these [fron-

tier] stories because they are as much about the American future as the American past."<sup>35</sup> The frontier is still the central performative motif of Americanism, and several reviewers resisted Schenkkan's attempt to unmask it. For John Lahr, the assertion that genocide and displacement compose the soil in which the American dream has grown up is to "dramatize the woe, not the wonder in the American experiment."<sup>36</sup> David Kaufman called *The Kentucky Cycle* an attempt to "debunk the myth of the American frontier" that was "relentlessly politically correct."<sup>37</sup> Grossman and Limerick conclude, "as an aspect of our collective consciousness, the frontier has become virtually irremovable."<sup>38</sup> If this is so, Robert Schenkkan's project in *The Kentucky Cycle*—to begin to dislodge what historian Warren Susman has called "the official American ideology"—was both an ambitious and near-to-impossible task.<sup>39</sup>

The controversy over the National Museum exhibition, along with the ubiquitous presence of frontier iconography in American popular culture, demonstrate that the frontier is still a working and vital myth. It sanctions the colonialization of landscapes and peoples of the past and the present while simultaneously masking or naturalizing that colonialization. As such, it is the context in which the writing, production, reception and critique of *The Kentucky Cycle* took place. It is the frame of reference through which Schenkkan saw the past (even if he was also able to see the dark consequences of that past); and the frontier is the veil through which reviewers saw and wrote about the play's production.

#### Toward Eco-Marxism

Robert Schenkkan sets out to map how an ideology has affected the ecosystem (including its human members) of the Cumberland Plateau. Early in the play he brings to bear an eco-Marxism seemingly informed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno who characterize the "program of the Enlightenment [as] the disenchantment of the world. . . . What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim." Frontier ideology gave "Americans" permission to take from the land when ever, where ever and what ever their economic ambition required; to make "nature" the "servant" of mankind. In the first episode, "Masters of the Trade," Michael Rowen steals a gold pocket-watch from a man he has just murdered in the "grand land of opportunity" where "an eye for an eye" is the only law. The watch appears in subsequent scenes as a gift or heirloom, working its way through seven generations of Michael Rowen's descendants, like the values of the enlightened world it represents.

Horkheimer and Adorno claim that, "ruthlessly, in despite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness."<sup>40</sup> However, as an environmental historian, Schenkkan recognizes that this "trace" does exist; it is inscribed in the land and in the bodies of the people who lived and



worked on the land. The possibility of a “self-consciousness” exists in the willingness to examine those myths that keep an environmental disaster from being linked to its philosophical past.

In *The Kentucky Cycle*, driving economic forces of history carve their image in the landscape over time until it is unrecognizable, almost foreign. First, settlers clear the old forests, and drive out or kill off the indigenous Cherokee. In two or three generations, coal companies buy out these new “natives” and strip-mining erases the ecological identity of land and its former human inhabitants. In an early scene, the price of the settler’s Enlightenment-inspired colonization of the land is symbolized in the murder and burial of Rowen’s half-Cherokee daughter. Wrapped in deerskin, the body of the child is buried in the earth along with the bones of other past deeds, where it is forgotten within one generation. Seven generations later the mummified body is unearthed by Michael Rowen’s descendant, Joshua, who begins to decipher the history written in the landscape: “All these mountains is full of bones—everywhere you walk.”<sup>41</sup> As if to link the ideology that sanctioned the ravaging of the land with the price paid, Joshua Rowen wraps the child in his own coat and re-buries her, along with the gold watch he inherited from his ancestors.<sup>42</sup> *The Kentucky Cycle* suggests that even when the humans forget, the land remembers.

For Robert Schenkkan, the ideology of the frontier has three component parts: the myth of the pioneer, the myth of abundance and the myth of escape.<sup>43</sup> The first myth, propagated as we have seen by the Turner thesis of the pioneer as a “civilizing” influence on the wilderness, is reversed in *The Kentucky Cycle*. The pioneers are “savages.” Yet, this inversion is not as inconsistent with Turner as it may seem. Richard White notes that Turner’s thesis included a “regression” to primitivism as a prerequisite to progress. Conquering the wilderness involved meeting a hostile nature with an equal measure of fierce manliness. Richard White explains that “[t]he ‘free land’ to which the pioneers moved was available for the taking . . . American progress began with a regenerative retreat to the primitive, followed by a recapitulation of the stages of civilization.”<sup>44</sup> Some members of the three families in the play are, perhaps, baser creatures than the pioneers in school books of memory, but even as illustrations of “our darkest and most denied national memories,” as one reviewer put it, they hardly dissemble the Turner/Cody narratives of collective memory.<sup>45</sup>

The second component of frontier ideology for Schenkkan is that of the “inexhaustible bounty of the land.” Speaking in Seattle in 1991, at a conference entitled, “Theatre in an Ecological Age” (shortly after *The Kentucky Cycle*’s run at the Intiman Theatre), Schenkkan remarked that the “myth of abundance” perpetuates the deception that “these resources are so vast they will never end. You can’t possibly use them up.”<sup>46</sup> The play attempts to dispel that myth. By the final scene, the land’s resources have apparently run out—at the cost of the destruction of an

ecosystem. People, land, and hope are used up. We are left with the image of what Donald Worster has called “the vulnerable earth.”<sup>47</sup> Yet, even with our current understanding of the impact of human affairs on the environment, the Turner/Cody images of an inhospitable wilderness are so deeply ingrained that a “wounded” earth smacks of tree-hugging sentimentality. Schenkkan’s attempt to go against the grain runs up against the difficult task of representing the cost of environmental loss without appearing “romantic.”

Finally, it is the “myth of escape,” according to Schenkkan, that naturalizes our disassociation with the consequences of our past actions and the actions of our ancestors. At the core of frontierism, Schenkkan claims, is “the idea that what one did in the past doesn’t matter, that a man can endlessly reinvent himself and begin anew.”<sup>48</sup> The myth of escape is predicated on the myth of abundance. Citing the way in which present-day American politicians re-invent themselves to suit the pollsters, Schenkkan told the 1991 Seattle conference of theater professionals:

The myth of the frontier says, if you don’t like where you are literally or metaphorically, well pick up stakes and move. There’s plenty of land out there. Change your name, change your address, change your history. Because what you did yesterday doesn’t matter.<sup>49</sup>

The character of JT, who has come to buy up the Rowen’s land for an East Coast coal company in “Tall Tales,” best embodies this myth of escape. A morphing creature, JT tells the stories that serve his purpose; he constructs his identity as a means to an end: “[t]hat’s how somebody like me can do what he does! I just tell people the stories they want to hear. I say what people want me to say and I am whatever they want me to be.”<sup>50</sup>

*The Kentucky Cycle* strives with a vengeance to dismantle this myth of escape by linking present conditions to past actions. By telling a story in which people are bound within the interdependent world of plants, animals, land, air, and water, Schenkkan hoped to illustrate that escape is an illusion. Yet, humanly experienced ecological consequences are missing in the play. In the final scene, Joushua Rowen confronts a wolf—an icon of the lost wilderness and presumably the descendant of the wolf that the audience heard howl at the opening of the play. Rowen fires his rifle into the air, the wolf flees. What is the message here? That the wilderness will win out, will “run free” in the end? If so, the frontier myth would appear to be rolling merrily on.

No reviewer seems satisfied with *The Kentucky Cycle*’s ending. It is interesting, however, to notice how some phrase their contempt. John Lahr, for example, finds the wolf scene a hollow attempt at “pantheistic uplift . . . [W]hy



(L-R foreground) Charles Hallahan, Jeanne Paulsen, Randy Oglesby, Ronald Hippe and (background) Lillian Garrett-Groag in a scene from Intiman Theatre Company's world premier production of Robert Schenkkan's *The Kentucky Cycle*. Directed by Warner Shook Seattle WA, June 1 - July 13, 1991. (Photo by Chris Bennion.)

the exhalation and signs of victory? The wolf may be wild and free but the people on the land are trapped and tainted and diminished as ever."<sup>51</sup> Lahr is thinking here within the frontier model; he's under the misconception that "nature" is endlessly "out there," that there is a "wild" where this wolf *can* run free. Ecologically speaking, the reverse is more accurate. The landscape represented in the play is, if not destroyed, at least uninhabitable to most of the plants, animals and people that once lived there. Unlike the human, the wolf cannot pick up and move. If we understand what an ecosystem means, then the wolf is doomed while the ever-privileged human beings can walk away, an unscathed audience to catastrophe. The wolf may be a survivor, but it will not survive long. Without the ecosystem in which it functioned as an integral and interdependent element, the wolf's is a refugee life, preying on other survivors, exiled, never home. It is only a matter of time before the wolf, like Mary Rowen's azaleas in springtime, will be "just a story."<sup>52</sup> We can only guess that Schenkkan meant to show an inexorable relatedness of human to wolf to land, but failed. As with the wolf, so with the man—there will come a day when there is no place left to run. Yet on that, the play is silent.

Amid the gunshots and blasts of dynamite, *The Kentucky Cycle* is mute on a number of other counts as well. Terry Eagleton reminds us that "it is in the significant silences of a text, in its gaps and absences, that the presence of ideology can be most positively felt."<sup>53</sup> *The Kentucky Cycle* depicts one capitalist commodification of land after another, blasting opportunism, big money, business speculators, and coalmine company owners. The play characterizes environmental destruction and its accompanying human poverty as products of American industrialism. Human history sweeps across a landscape as the spirit of Manifest Destiny sanctions the lapping up of the soil for the sake of "Progress." The capitalist commodification of land as a "natural resource" includes the people who work the land, and/or the inhabitants of the conquered landscape: in *The Kentucky Cycle* Cherokees, African Americans, mine workers, women, and children are "mined" along with the land. In all this the play's critique appears clearly eco-Marxist. Yet, it does not cut into the systems that perpetuate and shore up the American commodification of land and people; instead, it remains within what enviro-political theorists call "reformist environmentalism."<sup>54</sup> In addition, in Bobbie Ann Mason's *New Yorker* interview, Gurney Norman points out that in trying to write generally about "the failure of the American dream" Schenkkan "ran roughshod over a whole culture" in particular. He was, Norman claims, "tromping on real people and the real facts of their history." Norman believes that "the play's vision blames the victim" while "the absentee owners [of the coalmines] are ignored."<sup>55</sup> An eco-Marxist position would have clearly identified a system of commodification and its matrix of signification, not mere individuals, as the perpetrators of environmental destruction. Furthermore, as a cultural product dependent on capitalist mechanisms of commodification of natural resources and hu-

man creativity, *The Kentucky Cycle* commodified the life-experience of one class (Kentucky's mountain people) for cultural consumption by another class (urban theater goers).<sup>56</sup>

Richard White observes that when historians (or dramatists) depend on mobilizing familiar images, as Turner and Cody did (and Schenkkan does), he or she runs the risk of erasing a "larger and more confusing and tangled cultural story." Experience, White notes, is "more varied and complicated than Buffalo Bill . . . . To tell so many stories of this kind is to cut off the telling of other stories, other narratives, other imaginings."<sup>57</sup> Gurney Norman's critique of *The Kentucky Cycle*, which can be considered an eco-postcolonial one, points to the stories that Schenkkan did not tell.<sup>58</sup> "What's left out," Norman claims, "is people's resistance [to strip-mining]—and their real lives."<sup>59</sup> We are left to wonder what is the play that Gurney Norman might have written? Where *The Kentucky Cycle* fails as eco-Marxism, particularly under a post-colonial cross-examination, the play does suggest a deep ecologist's notion of a bond between human beings and "nature."

#### ***The Kentucky Cycle* as Deep Ecology**

Deep ecology, a perspective articulated by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in the early 1970s, argues that nothing short of reshaping the fundamental paradigms of thought of Western culture will alter the present course of environmental devastation.<sup>60</sup> The "root cause" of the environmental crisis, deep ecologists posit, is a crisis of cosmology, a spiritual disorientation. Homo sapiens must reconceive a place in nature, and re-weave themselves into the "web of life" through a new understanding of what it means to be human. In many ways, Schenkkan's own rhetoric regarding the purpose of *The Kentucky Cycle* resonates with deep ecology's call for a "new story."<sup>61</sup> It is difficult, however, to dig a world view up by the roots, especially when the tools one must use—words, images, industries—are products of that same world view.

In the collective "text" of reviews about *The Kentucky Cycle*, few writers discuss the play's clear, if subordinate, theme: people tend to fall in love with land. The play is filled with non-human objects of human affection—the creek, dogwood, oak, deer, mountain, wolf. Trapped within to their own swashbuckling sagas of pistols and pillage, reviewers mention the non-human elements of the narrative only in passing. Yet, the identifications between human and non-human characters in *The Kentucky Cycle* are marks of the play's deep ecology. In *The Kentucky Cycle*, a "sense of place" is a sense of self. Landscape does not stop at the edge of our skins, but penetrates, reciprocates, resonates. The play posits that we are shot through with the terrain around us. What we call our "identity" is a collaboration with the palpable world. Being part of an ecosystem is a kind of marking and being marked. In "The Homecoming," the character of Patrick Rowen describes his experience of hunting:

When I hunt, I don't 'pretend' I'm a deer or nothin' I just am. I'm out here in the woods and things just get real . . . still . . . or somethin' . . . When I reach that place, when I just am, there, with the forest, then it's like I can call the deer or somethin'. I call 'em and they come. Like I was still waters and green pastures, 'stead of hunger and lead.<sup>62</sup>

In the play's final scene, another man, generations later, expresses similar experience. Joshua recalls that, "it was *all one thing*—all of us and them mountains."<sup>63</sup> Even the miners drew their identity from the mountains they cut.<sup>64</sup>

In the prologue and epilogue that frame the "Tall Tales" episode, an elderly Mary Ann Rowen recalls the landscape etched in her heart "like a lover's promise." Before the strip-mining erased her world, she measured time by a seasonal world and marked her place in it by the sensible, sensuous counterpart to her living—the landscape around her. The oak tree is Mary Ann's existential anchor.

I used to think that tree was all that kept the sky off my head. And if that tree ever fell down, the whole thing, moon and stars and all, would just come crashin' down. I think sometimes how that tree was here way before I was born and how it'll be here way after I'm gone and that always makes me feel safe.<sup>65</sup>

In traditional literary criticism we might read this oak as a "metaphor" for life, for Mary Ann's world, and for the culture of the mountain people who with it will be cut down. A deep ecology perspective would re-literalize the oak: it is a tree, another living being, with whom Mary Ann Rowen has a deeply personal relationship; the oak is family.

More than landscape has been lost when Mary Ann describes her homeland after the mining companies have ravaged it. There is nothing to hold "up the sky" and nothing to "hold the land down"—the sensible world has collapsed. "What you get is a just a whole lotta rain, movin' a whole lotta mud."<sup>66</sup> When what was sensed loses its sensibility, when the markers are gone, then the container of human identity goes too. The landscape of the past is washed away and with it, Mary's identity and her children's history.

### Conclusion: Broadway and Ecotheatre

Clearly the frontier is not a quagmire we can climb out of nimbly; its substance is a mix of soil and ancestral blood. The more we slog about, the more tightly it grips our modes of thinking. While *The Kentucky Cycle* sets out to unravel frontier ideology, it re-inscribes the frontier images that keep that ideology

in place. In turn, reviewers set out to critique that re-inscription, they re-inscribe it more firmly still. While unmasking the frontier is not a project that one production or one playwright can complete, *The Kentucky Cycle* has begun a process of recognition: the frontier is a deeply ingrained construct through which our relationship with the environment is mediated. That project was and is a worthy one. It serves both artists and critics to examine the ways in which *The Kentucky Cycle* was able to critique frontierism, and where it remained silent as a result of our collective daily immersion in frontier thinking.

What accounted for *The Kentucky Cycle*'s dramatic fall from grace extends beyond the play's weak dramaturgy and liberal politics to the machinery of Broadway itself. Concealed behind the two-million dollars the Royale production reportedly cost, are the politics and the economics of theater in the United States. In a recent article on Preston Jones, Sheila McNerney has observed that the industry of theater in America organizes itself around a binary of regionalism vs. Broadway.<sup>67</sup> Therein lies a masked ideology, as Terry Eagleton has pointed out: "[d]rama is a capitalist business which employs certain men [sic] . . . to produce a commodity to be consumed by an audience for profit."<sup>68</sup> He invokes Walter Benjamin, urging us to ask, what is a production's "position within the relations of production of its time?"<sup>69</sup> In the minds of theater practitioners, audiences and critics, New York has been "constructed as the place where quality is tested and reputations are made," claims McNerney.<sup>70</sup> *The Kentucky Cycle*'s position, in relation to this Broadway/regional binary, places it as a product of the West, written and originally produced in the West, and concerned with Western issues (environmentalism). Additionally, the West celebrated Schenkkan's success as a victory over Broadway's cultural oligarchy.<sup>71</sup>

As *The Kentucky Cycle* moved from West Coast regional theater to Broadway, the critics themselves helped to repackage it, prepping East Coast audiences for a "work of undeniable power."<sup>72</sup> Sheila McNerney posits that regional theater maintains Broadway as the "gatekeeper of the American canon of dramatic literature." And in *American Drama: The Bastard Art*, Susan Harris Smith observes that the process of canonization signified by a play's move to Broadway usually involves comparing its author to other "great men" of American theater.<sup>73</sup> David Littlejohn compared Schenkkan to John Steinbeck and Upton Sinclair.<sup>74</sup> Robert Brustein went for broke and invoked both Aeschylus and Eugene O'Neill.

Determining that the play has sufficient "universal" themes is also a key to its Broadway-worthiness, McNerney observes about Preston Jones *Texas Trilogy*.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, as *The Kentucky Cycle* moved from regional theater to Broadway, favorable critics and Schenkkan himself constructed the plays "universality," making it Broadway ready. Robert Brustein, for example, endorsed the play's significance as a work "endowed with the dimensions of a national saga."<sup>76</sup> "Sense of place," is always specific, not universal; and Robert Schenkkan has

been moved by the devastation of a particular ecosystem, a particular place. Ironically however, and perhaps in order to pass through the gates to New York, Schenkkan reframed the story of his visit to the Cumberland as a “metaphor” for “American mythology.” Between the post-colonial criticism that claimed Schenkkan had little right to tell the story of the Cumberland, and Broadway’s demand for universal themes, the sense of place that had originally inspired Schenkkan’s project was negated. Schenkkan was not *really* writing about the Cumberland, he said, but about the great American mythos. Place became merely a metaphor.<sup>77</sup> By its “universality” dictum, Broadway seems to marginalize all places, save its own.

The question of a “theatre of place” is significant for artists as well as critics who find affinity with an ecological perspective. In their surveys of the “green theatre movement,” both Lynn Jacobson and Downing Cless have observed that localism—or a sense of place—is one of the key characteristics of “ecothatre.”<sup>78</sup> In order “make it” (i.e., on Broadway) does a writer or a production need to subscribe to the dynamics of commercialism to the degree that only the most insipid, reformist environmentalism is “universal” enough? As Terry Eagleton reminds us, theater is part of an economic base which “closely determines the nature of the art itself.”<sup>79</sup> He cautions that “[i]t is not just a question of pushing a revolutionary ‘message’ through existing media; it is a question of revolutionizing the media themselves.”<sup>80</sup> Then are Broadway and ecotheatre mutually exclusive?

Robert Schenkkan hoped to critique the unacknowledged myths that have sanctioned our ravaging the land, but depended on the mythos of Broadway for success. While he attempted to undo the ideology that endorses an American commodification of land, natural resources and people, *The Kentucky Cycle*’s success depended on that self-same commodifying mechanism. Its failure on Broadway, however, may be its mark of success as a milestone of ecotheatre. *The Kentucky Cycle* should be understood as an invitation. What is still missing, however, as Erika Munk has pointed out, is evidence of any fecundity in theater creation, production, or scholarship that engages American drama with the fate of American land. It is there that our stories are etched, like paths of erosion after a storm.

## Notes

1. Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1949) viii.
2. Erika Munk, “A Beginning and End,” *Theater* 25.1 (Spring/Summer 1994): 5.
3. Robert Schenkkan, “Theatre, Myth and Social Change,” conference keynote address, “Theatre in an Ecological Age,” Seattle, Washington, 22-24 November 1991: transcript 5. Personal collection.
4. *Los Angeles Times*, editorial, 111 (2 April 1992): B6.
5. Frank Rich, “200 Years of National Sorrows in 9 Chapters,” *New York Times*, 143 (15



November 1993): B1; William A. Henry III, "America's Dark History," *Time* 124.22 (22 November 1993):72, respectively.

6. Jack Kroll, *Newsweek*, 122.22 (29 November 1993):77.

7. David Kaufman, "The Kentucky Cycle," *The Nation*, 257.20 (13 December 1993): 740.

8. Kaufman 742.

9. Jill Dolan has posited that feminism must be understood as feminisms in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1991). Likewise, given the breadth of current discourse in environmental thought, it becomes possible, for the purposes of theater studies, to speak in terms of reformist ecology, eco-Marxism (including a deconstructionist perspective), deep ecology, eco-post-colonialism, and ecofeminism.

10. Miriam Horn, "The Malignancies of History," *U.S. News and World Report*, 115.11 (9 September 1993): 72.

11. Tracy C. Davis, "Questions for a Feminist Methodology in Theatre History," *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, ed., Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie, (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1989) 59-76.

12. Donald Worster, ed., "Doing Environmental History," *The Ends of the Earth*, (Cambridge UP, 1998) 295-96. Worster has noted that new, essentially environmental, historiographical approaches were taken by historians as early as the late nineteenth century, citing Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" given at the Colombian Exhibition in 1893 a few years after the U.S. Census Bureau had declared the American frontier "closed."

13. Worster 291.

14. Leopold 201-226.

15. James Malin, quoted in Worster 295.

16. Worster 290.

17. 289-307. In addition, Worster notes, historian Richard White has traced the early development of environmental history. See, for example, *Land Use, Environment and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington*, by Richard White.

18. Bobbie Ann Mason, "Recycling Kentucky," *New Yorker*, 69.36 (1 November 1993): 50-62.

19. Patricia Nelson Limerick, "The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century," *The Frontier in American Culture*, ed., James Grossman (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 75.

20. James Grossman, ed., Introduction to *The Frontier in American Culture*, (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 3.

21. Limerick 72.

22. 79.

23. Grossman 4.

24. Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," *The Frontier in American Culture* 11.

25. 11.

26. Henry 72; Lahr 138; Horn 74, respectively.

27. David Richards, "Smashing America's Favorite Myths," *New York Times* 143.2 (Sunday, 21 November 1993): H5; Frank Schek, "The Kentucky Cycle Traces Two Centuries of a Turbulent Family," *Christian Science Monitor* 86.3 (30 November 1993):12; David Littlejohn, "Appalachian Marathon: The Poor and the Powerless," *Wall Street Journal*, 2 April 1992: A12.; Rich, B1, respectively.
28. Limerick 72.
29. 80.
30. 94.
31. Grossman 1-2.
32. See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans., Annette Lavers, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 109-58.
33. Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, (Berkeley: U of California P, 1976) 68.
34. Eagleton 27.
35. Grossman 4.
36. John Lahr, "Suffering Succotash," *New Yorker*, 69.41 (6 December 1993): 138.
37. David Kaufman, "The Kentucky Cycle," *The Nation*, 257.20 (13 December 1993): 740.
38. Grossman 1-2.
39. 2, quoting Warren Susman.
40. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Concept of Enlightenment," in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, ed., Richard Kearney, (New York: Routledge, 1966) 199.
41. Robert Schenkkan, *The Kentucky Cycle*, (New York: Plume, 1993) 319.
42. Schenkkan 331.
43. Schenkkan, "Author's Note" 333-338.
44. White 15.
45. Henry 72.
46. Schenkkan, "Theatre, Myth and Social Change," conference keynote address, "Theatre in an Ecological Age," Seattle, Washington, 22-24 November 1991: transcript 6. Personal collection.
47. Donald Worster, "The Vulnerable Earth: Toward a Planetary History," *The Ends of the Earth* 3-22. Worster posits that the idea of a vulnerable, or wounded Nature was a new idea when George Perkins Marsh wrote "Man and Nature" in 1864. Worster traces the subsequent development of this notion to the present day environmental movement.
48. Horn 74, quoting Schenkkan..
49. Schenkkan "Theatre Myth and Social Change" 6.
50. Schenkkan *The Kentucky Cycle* 204.
51. Lahr 140.
52. Schenkkan 206.
53. Eagleton 35.

54. For a discussion of reformist environmentalism and other “green” perspectives in political theory, see, for example, Tim Hayward, *Ecological Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994); or Andrew Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Routledge: New York, 1990). “Reformist,” or mainstream, environmentalism maintains that protection of the environment can occur within the structures and institutions of the dominant culture; environmental problems can be addressed primarily through educational, technical, and economic means. For example, toxic dumping can be controlled through economic incentives, and new technology will solve the plastics problem by inventing a bio-degradable plastic. Reformist environmentalism does not advocate structural changes in the economic, political and social fabric of the dominant culture.

55. Mason 58-59, quoting Gurney Norman.

56. See, for example, Mason 50-62,

57. White 54.

58. An “eco-postcolonial” perspective emerges as environmental issues are linked to the colonialization of people and landscape. For example, an eco-post-colonialist might point out that rain-forest depletion is fueled by the Western consumer’s appetite for “natural” and “exotic” wood products, cheap beef, coffee, sugar and other products. Meanwhile, as people living in those “mined” areas of the planet work to Westernize their land’s production, the system is further perpetuated by local people’s exploitation of their own land. A post-colonial ecologist might point out that people of color or indigenous populations are often as “endangered” as endangered species. Eco-postcolonialism often examines the way political and socio-economic borders are permeated by the border-less-ness of environmental issues. Under this lens, environmental justice becomes a central concern among activists in so called “developing” nations and among the urban poor.

59. Mason 60-61

60. See, for example, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed., George Sessions, (Boston: Shambhala Press 1995).

61. See, Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988).

62. Schenkkan, *The Kentucky Cycle* 51. Ellipses his.

63. 322, italics his.

64. An interesting ecofeminist examination of the play might be made by examining the ways in which female characters are often, but not always, placed as the gateway to the natural world. Ecofeminism argues that no critique of Western subjugation of the earth is complete without addressing the feminine gendering of “Nature,” and the affect of such gendering on the otherized, feminized environment. The oppression of both women and landscape is embedded in gendered language, such as “virgin wilderness” that construct landscape as a passive “container” in which men’s history takes place. Ecofeminism critiques the commodification of earth’s body and woman’s body as material “resources” and as images.

65. Schenkkan 175-75.

66. 206.

67. Sheila McNernery, “Preston Jones and A Texas Trilogy: Regional Drama or the Drama of Regionalism,” *Theatre Studies* (in publication).

68. Eagleton 59.

69. 60. These are Eagleton's words, paraphrasing Benjamin.
70. McNerney, (in publication.)
71. See, for example, Richard Hornby, "Regional Theatre Comes of Age," *Hudson Review* 46.3 (Autumn 1993): 529.
72. Henry 72.
73. Susan Harris Smith, *American Theatre: The Bastard Art*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 106.
74. Littlejohn A12.
75. McNerney, (in publication.)
76. Robert Brustein, "Hillbilly Blues," *New Republic*, 209.18 (1 November 1993): 30.
77. See Miriam Horn's review in *US News and World Report*, and Bobbie Ann Mason's *New Yorker* interview with Gurney Norman and Robert Schenkkan to detect this process of re-framing.
78. See, Lynn Jacobson, "Green Theatre: Confessions of an Eco-reporter," *American Theatre* 8.11 (February 1992): 17; and Downing Cless, "Eco-Theatre: The Grassroots are Greener," *TDR* 40:2 (Summer 1996): 79.
79. Eagleton 60.
80. 62.