

Introduction: Ecocriticism

Over the last decade, ecocriticism has gained ground in the areas of theatre and performance studies, opening up inquiries into human connections to, interactions with, and ideologies about the other-than-human world that are found in drama and performance. In addition, the creation of new works of ecodrama (including ecologically informed interpretations of existing works) and eco-activist performances increasingly stimulate our imagination and interrogate cultural assumptions about, for example, the interdependence between the human and other-than-human worlds, social/environmental (in)justice, or environmental imprints left on the human body.

Perhaps one of the more significant notions for theatre and performance studies to arise from the use of this critical frame is that it posits a radical rethinking about the representation of humans and their environment. Instead of the human-centered perspective that has traditionally dominated Western theatre and drama scholarship and performance, ecocriticism shifts the point of view to one that locates humans within a mutually-reliant system, whereby human and animal bodies, land, plants, and trees influence one another. Whether working with the traditional dramatic canon or with contemporary works, this shift allows scholars and practitioners to investigate not only written texts but also performance texts, in order to unearth fresh insights into cultural and political ideologies that lie at the core of some of the most pressing social and/or environmental issues of the past and present and to challenge the ideological structures that create and sustain social and environmental injustices.¹

The four articles (in revised form) in this supplement were originally presented at the “Mapping Ecocriticism across Performance” seminar at the 2005 American Society for Theatre Research conference in Toronto, Canada. Though the seminar included papers on a range of performance studies topics, such as tree-sitting, organic farming vacations, and smiling dogs, the collection of essays found here emphasizes ecocriticism as applied to theatre and drama. It represents two ecocritical approaches—the first three essays are examples of ecocritical readings of specific plays, and the fourth explores the praxis of ecodrama—and offers a fairly diverse look at the continuing efforts of ecocritical scholars in theatre studies.

The devastation of Hurricane Katrina serves as the starting point for Theresa J. May’s essay “‘Consequences unforeseen . . .’ in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Caroline, or Change*.” Using the 2004 productions of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and Tony Kushner and Jeanie Tabori’s musical *Caroline, or Change*, May illustrates how ecocriticism can be used in theatre to interrogate systemic environmental injustice through focusing on the impact such injustices have on “the body—the

body of experience, of community, of land.” In doing so, she examines the ecological situatedness of the characters in both plays to expose the dominant ideologies that resulted in the “consequences” of Hurricane Katrina.

Downing Cless’s article “Ecologically Conjuring Doctor Faustus” presents an eco-critical reading of Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*. Reading the play through the lens of writings on natural philosophy to which Marlowe would have been exposed at Cambridge, Cless argues that the play is more than a straightforward Christian morality tale and about more than the hunger for political and/or supernatural power; it is a commentary on the dangers of “over-extending, over-consuming, and over-reaching.” Marlowe’s Faust (unlike the character found in the original tale) is an overly independent character who selfishly over-consumes and who is, therefore, out of balance with the natural order of things. This self-centeredness makes him a “tragicomic anti-hero” rather than the tragic hero he is generally assumed to be.²

In “‘Ireland mustn’t be such a bad place so’: Mapping the ‘Real’ Terrain of the Aran Islands,” Karen O’Brien examines the intersection of Irish representation and ecology found in Martin McDonough’s play *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1997). She argues that the play interrogates this intersection along three lines: representation, structure, and aesthetics. First, contradictory representations of Aran Islanders found in American filmmaker Robert J. Flaherty’s 1934 documentary *Man of Aran* and in McDonough’s *Inishmaan* (set during the making of Flaherty’s film) expose the problems inherent in defining Irishness in terms of romanticized notions of the rural West of Ireland. Next, the tensions created between these two representations work structurally not only to expose the fissures that separate humans from the non-human world, but also to reveal spaces for renegotiating interconnections between the two. Finally, the play’s intersecting representations create a psychic desire for the “real” in the audience, whereby “unrepresentable” traumas of the past become detectable through repetitive actions or utterances. In this manner, McDonough’s play creates an aesthetic that allows for new ways of remembering and telling about the past and that promotes transformation and regeneration through a model of interdependence between the human and non-human worlds.

Whereas the first three essays concentrate on the strategy of applying an ecocritical lens to specific plays, Nelson Gray’s essay “Birds, Trees, Stones, and Politics: Agency & Ecology in Some Recent B. C. Performance” is more praxis-oriented. In particular, Gray explores the significance agency plays in “ecologically informed performance” through the examples of two recent productions in British Columbia: *The Songbird Oratorio*, a site-specific performance Gray developed with composer DB Boyko and visual artist Beth Carruthers, and a work by First Nations playwright Marie Clements, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, a fact-based play that creates a fictive world where trees and stones interact with humans in order to challenge the cultural assumptions that marked the suspicious deaths of

more than ten women in British Columbia as “unnatural and accidental.”

These essays concentrate on works written specifically for the theatre. The ecocritical stance taken in May, Cless, and O’Brien’s essays open up the specific works they address to revelations about the cultural and political ideologies that underlie environmental and social injustice, human excess and self-absorption, and representations of “unrepresentable” trauma written on bodies and landscapes. Gray’s examination of ecodrama in praxis offers a look at theatre and performance that resituates the basis of dramatic conflict and agency from a human-centered point of view to one in which the human and the other-than-human worlds function interdependently. Though these essays provide only a few examples of ecocriticism at work, they illustrate the diverse issues and insights that this critical lens can mine from the dramatic canon and apply to the performance text.

—Joy Richmond

Notes

1. For a fuller discussion of ecocriticism in theatre and performance studies (an essay to which I am indebted for the opening comments in this introduction), see Theresa J. May’s forthcoming essay, “Greening the Theater: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*.

2. Marlowe adapted his play from the English translation of an anonymous German work: *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*.

