

Birds, Trees, Stones, and Politics: Agency & Ecology in Some Recent B.C. Performance

Nelson Gray

Ecology involves interrelationships, and interrelationships, by definition, require multiple agencies. This is a paper about the significance of agency in ecologically informed performance, with reference to some recent productions from British Columbia and with particular attention to *the SongBird Oratorio*, a work focusing on the interrelationships between birds and humans, and *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, a play in which trees and stones take part in the transformation of a criminal injustice. While ecologically informed productions might be considered solely as those that foreground conservation issues, my argument is that the performances under discussion here, and others like them, can also be deemed ecological by virtue of the way they situate human action vis-à-vis physical agencies that are other than human. Such performances, it seems to me, present action (that often-cited Aristotelian term) as interaction, and extend the field of this interaction by tossing out the entrenched anthropocentric assumption that human conflict and its resolution is the be-all-and-end-all of meaning and existence.

The term “agency” has a branching number of meanings, all of which stem from the notion of action; it can denote a faculty of action, an action itself, or the personification of an action. Agency as a human attribute is an important concept in post-colonial discourse,¹ but the term may also be applied to non-human forces. The O.E.D., for instance, lists a wide range of examples including fire, the Supreme Being, citizens, insects, government organizations, an invisible force, and ‘a strong east wind’. Something else to notice about agencies is that while they may have intentions and goals, these are by no means prerequisites. Asserting that the sun’s agency causes the crops to grow does not, for instance, necessitate that the sun has chosen to act this way. And, although we may be accustomed to attributing intentions and goals to human agencies, doing so can still engender debates involving questions of free will and determinism. In its most basic sense, then, agency is simply action or the capacity for action. Having agency means having the ability and the power

Co-founder of JumpStart, founding artistic director of Savage Media and founding co-director of the SongBird Project, Nelson Gray is a writer/director of interdisciplinary and ecological performance. His collaborations with Lee Eisler resulted in national and international touring productions and his work on the SongBird Oratorio has been presented in Canada, England, and the United States. Nelson holds an M.F.A. in directing from the University of British Columbia and is enrolled in doctoral studies at the University of Victoria, with a focus on ecological theatre.

to act. Ascribing agency to something configures it as an active force in the world. When someone or something has agency, he, she, or it warrants respect, or—at the very least—acknowledgment.

Generally speaking, Western theatre, from its beginnings until the Enlightenment, acknowledged non-human agencies in the earthly realm as manifestations of the divine, either with respect to a singular, omnipotent Creator, or to a more pluralistic interplay of gods and goddesses. After the ascendancy of humanism and scientific rationalism, agencies in the natural world had a more ambiguous authority, and, eventually, theatre and its attendant criticism began to focus more specifically on human action, and to background or simply ignore physical forces that were other than human. With the exception of the Symbolists and a few others, Modernist movements in theatre tended to give precedence to human-centred action. Naturalists emphasized hereditary, social and economic forces. Vorticists championed the speed and aesthetics of machines and war. Surrealists were interested in the *human* “unconscious.” Existentialism and the Da Da movement underscored the absurdity and meaninglessness of the *human* condition. It was as if denying divine influences in the natural world had led, over time, to an underlying assumption that the only agencies worthy of consideration inhered in our selves, or in those aspects of the world that *we* had manufactured. The rest was just scenery.

The performances from British Columbia that I will be considering here offer an alternative to this human-centred focus, providing a more pluralistic view, but without returning to pre-Enlightenment notions of the divine. They do so by acknowledging other than human energies in the natural environment as forces that actively govern and shape the world. The appearance of more and more of these performances over the last few decades is no doubt due to the increasingly global awareness of life as an interdependent field of relationships and to the ecological devastation that can result when humans act without this recognition. The emergence of such productions in British Columbia, however, may also have to do with the specifics of place: the scale and diversity of the region’s topography; its diverse First Nations cultures whose stories, performances, and practices have, for thousands of years, paid respect to other than human energies; and its strong tradition of ecological activism. The environmental movement in this western Canadian province, which has links with First Nations people, has been particularly prominent over the last few decades. From the formation of Greenpeace in the early 1970s, to the 1993 protests over the logging of old growth forests in Clayoquot Sound, to the continued lobbying of the David Suzuki Foundation, ecological activists in B.C. have continued to draw attention to the value of whales, bears, streams, and wetlands as subjects in their own right and significant contributors to the biosphere upon which our own existence depends.

Given this historical context, it should come as no surprise that a number of contemporary B.C. playwrights, choreographers, and performing artists have begun to incorporate elements of the natural environment in their productions, not as backdrops for human conflict, but as components that are central to their works. The range and variety of such productions are considerable, yet an overview of the work can reveal three principle ways that these artists acknowledge the agency of other than human subjects: by incorporating them in the creation of their work; by portraying such agencies figuratively in the mimetic action; and by fashioning outdoor, site-specific productions where audiences can perceive these physical elements—sunlight, terrain, bird flights, animal calls, and the like—directly, through their senses.

Choreographer Karen Jamieson's 1998 work *The River* provides an excellent illustration of a performance in which the artist incorporates the agency of the environment as part of the creative process.² Taking her inspiration from Brewery Creek, a covered stream that runs beneath the city of Vancouver, Jamieson worked with the Brewery Creek Historical Society, researching the path of the stream in order to create a performance that would lead audiences on a journey from its headwaters to its estuary. By paying attention to the agency of Brewery Creek, Jamieson was afforded a perspective of the city's history informed by the events associated with the river, and was led to choreograph movement that enacted what she refers to as the "congruence between the human body, comprised as it is almost entirely of water, and the flow of the river as it moved through a series of transformations, beginning with its headwaters, spreading out into a swamp, becoming channeled into a rushing stream and, finally, opening out into the Pacific."³ In a similar vein, the 1999 production of The Electric Company's *The Wake* began, as their website describes it, "with the experiment of drawing narrative directly out of landscape."⁴ The "landscape" or, more accurately, the *site* was Granville Island, a land mass located in a densely populated area of the city, and a popular tourist destination. The Electric Company, working collaboratively, researched the ways in which people and the land had informed one another over a succession of decades; and, in the completed production, the audience was guided through a series of (mostly outdoor) locations where scenes enacted the stories of three generations of a fictional family, some of whom engaged with the land in a reciprocal way, while others, assuming a position of mastery, exploited it.

Despite the fact that history books frequently trace the origins of theatre to rituals in which performers, garbed in animal skins or plumage, enact the energies of other than human creatures, contemporary examples of bio-mimesis in Western performance are rare. Headline Theatre's *Mamu, the Currency of Life*,⁵ conceived and directed by David Diamond and Kevin Finnan, and *The Girl Who Swam Forever*⁶ by Marie Clements are two notable exceptions from British Columbia, both of which present non-human species, figuratively, as agencies. *Mamu*, based

on conflicts that emerged during protests over old-growth logging, includes masked performers who portray, through voice and movement, the members of a threatened bird species—the Marbled Murrelet—conveying their struggles to survive the ravages of clear-cut logging. Marie Clements’s *The Girl Who Swam Forever*, which features a Fraser River sturgeon as a fundamental force in the action, was first conceived when the playwright began researching the origin stories of the Katzie people, stories in which the links between humans and other species are expressed in accounts of shape-shifting and metamorphosis.⁷ At around the same time, I alerted the playwright to Terry Glavin’s *Ghost in the Water*, a book about the plight of the sturgeon in the Fraser River and its significance in the lives of the Katzie people.⁸ Drawing on both these sources, Clements’s play tells a contemporary story about a young First Nations girl, recently escaped from a residential school, who alters her form from human to sturgeon and back, gaining both knowledge and courage and, in the process, strengthening and renewing her capacity for action.

Two examples of companies that recognize environmental agencies via site-specific productions include Theatre Skam,⁹ a Victoria-based theatre troupe that has a tradition of setting its work in outdoor environments, and Vancouver’s Kokoro Dance who, in addition to performing its Butoh-inspired movement on traditional stages, has presented performances in which dancers emerge naked and dripping wet from the Pacific Ocean, make their way slowly, powerfully onto the shore, and then return to the water.¹⁰ A third example of companies exploring the possibilities of outdoor venues is the 1998 production *All Flesh is Grass* by Radix Theatre.¹¹ Inspired in part by perceived continuities between human and vegetable life, *All Flesh is Grass* was performed in an open field, in the middle of one of Vancouver’s industrial zones, and included human-vegetable “hybrid” characters, portrayed by performers that had been planted in the soil up to their waists. Site-specific outdoor performances of this kind provide distinctly different experiences than those to be found in more conventional venues. At such productions audiences are offered the opportunity to view mimetic elements alongside a first-hand experience of environmental forces—sunlight, ocean, air, soil—agencies that inform the mimetic elements of the performances and are, in turn, informed by them.

The SongBird Oratorio, a performance that I developed with composer and musical director DB Boyko, in consultation with visual artist Beth Carruthers, employed all three of the above approaches, engaging with other than human agencies as contributors to the creation of the work, conveying them as part of the figurative action, and incorporating them in site-specific, outdoor venues.¹² The performance was first conceived in 1997 when Beth Carruthers and I, walking in an industrialized area of the city, paused for a moment and heard, mixed in with the din of truck sounds and industry, the evening song of a robin. Having discerned in that song an expression of a primary life-force, Beth and I set to work conceiving the SongBird Project, a three-year long eco-arts campaign, involving links with

walks . . . on this throbbing ball of mud we call the earth.”¹⁵ When his experiment falters, however, he decides to entirely change his approach. “You see my mistake?” he exclaims, “For years I’ve been attempting to translate the songs of birds into human language when what I should have been doing is converting our human speech into the expansive and lyrical language of birds”:

In the language of birds there are no subjects or objects, no distance between the singer and the song. You can’t fix the meanings of their calls, as if they were little machines: putting a stranglehold on the sounds and squeezing out every drop of logic; trying to control the outcome of the experiment just to prove the hypothesis; reading things into the songs; hearing what you want to hear; creating connections that were never there . . . No—forget useful—forget want¹⁶

As the protagonist’s research continues, however, his new approach leads him further and further from the perceived safety of his human identity into a liminal state where the distinctions between bird and human are both blurred and thrown into relief by the way in which they become juxtaposed in his perceptions:

Arms – Wings
Eyes—Words
Fingertip—wingtips
Initial the air
Fingers are beaks—feathers clothes
Claws toenails—pinions bones
Perch, balance—Balance, stand
Mate—migrate
Locate—return . . .
Earth—sky
Sky—ground
Earth—place
Birth—voice.
Bird—voice—woman
man¹⁷

Having arrived in this liminal state, where assumed distinctions dissolve and inter-relationships are imagined anew, the protagonist becomes more and more overwhelmed by his discoveries. The songs, which had once delighted him, now begin to haunt him until, eventually, he comes to see his own birth and death as part of a corporeal existence in which all creatures, each in their own distinctive

form, participate. "I'm ready now," declares the protagonist, at the end of his explorations,

I'm awake. I'm clean.
I've turned off all the machines.
Everything is still here.
The clock has stopped and there's not a sound.
(*the sound of fluttering wings*)
So. You've come.
Yes. Good.
I knew you would.
I heard you singing before I was born.
Yesterday you were sounds in water
Tomorrow sounds in the trees
I know you now—
I hear who you are
Grandmother Crow—
Great-grandfather Swallow.¹⁸

As this character's language suggests, there is a material world that comes before and after our temporal human existence, and these wild winged creatures, because of their distinctness and difference, frequently call this to mind and, strangely, connect us. Gary Nabhan quotes Mary Midgley's appreciation of this in her book *Beast and Man*: "The world in which the kestrel moves, the world that it sees, is, and will always be entirely beyond us. That there are such worlds around us is an essential feature of our world."¹⁹ Midgley's assertion is instructive. We humans, after all, inevitably construct language to make links to, and to help us negotiate our relationship with, the phenomenal world; but since these constructions also determine the kind of world we inhabit, it behooves us to choose our language with care, and to remember that these culturally determined ways of seeing (which are also part of the natural world) are never the whole story. As David Abram argues in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, while language may be semiotic, it is also, in its origins, the register of a corporeal encounter with a physical world.²⁰ In producing *the SongBird Oratorio*, therefore, we made a decision to stage the work in site-specific ways so that audiences might experience the metaphorical frame that our performance provided vis-à-vis the materiality of actual birds in all their distinctness and autonomy.

The first of these productions, a work-in-progress, took place at the Vancouver Dawn Chorus, one of several community-arts events that Beth Carruthers and I conceived and directed as part of the SongBird project. The Vancouver Dawn Chorus was planned in conjunction with The International Dawn Chorus, an annual event,

begun in England and held in the beginning of May, a time when in many countries bird populations have returned from their yearly migrations and are filling the skies with their songs.²¹ For the International Dawn Chorus, people in several parts of the world rise before daybreak to celebrate and show their appreciation for the return of the birds, first by simply listening to their songs, and then by gathering for various social events. What Beth Carruthers and I did in Vancouver was to designate “listening posts” in several key areas of the city where people could assemble at dawn and, with the help of field naturalists, learn to identify different species of birds by the distinctness of their calls. A few hours later, the groups at these various locations, after compiling lists of bird species, were invited to gather for a community breakfast at the Roundhouse Community Centre. Here they shared their experiences and combined their lists into a more comprehensive one that included all the species of birds that were heard or sighted that morning. It was only after the compilation of this list, and after naturalists on hand had given renditions of birdcalls, that the SongBird composers and performers presented their songs from the Oratorio. Producing the songs in this way created links between science and art, between the local community and its professional artists, and between the mimesis of performance and a sensory experience common to all. More specifically, it provided the audience with a first-hand experience of the creatures that had inspired the vocal compositions, and allowed them to perceive, in their own way, the connections and distinctions between these two kinds of “song.”

The second way that we provided for the participation of actual birds in the Oratorio had to do with choices we made with respect to staging the completed work. Our venue for this production was the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden, a culturally constructed homage to nature and a site shared by both birds and humans. To enhance the participation of birds at this location we then chose a time of the year, spring, and a time of the day, “magic hour”—the twilight transition from dusk to evening—when birds were most likely to be active in song. In doing so we were recognizing not only the agency of birds—their winged migration, their distinctive movements and their songs—but other non-human forces as well. Like the Athenians, who, over 2500 years ago, had chosen to stage their theatre festival in the spring as a way to celebrate the return of Dionysian energies, we were taking into account the earth’s daily rotation and its yearly circumference around the sun, our primary source of light and warmth; and, by setting the work on a spring evening, in the transition between daylight and darkness, we enabled the audience to experience these elements, as well as the comings and goings of songbirds, both directly, via their own individual perceptions, and in terms of how they contributed to the action of this particular performance.

One moment of human/bird juxtaposition in this production occurred when DB Boyko and Christine Duncan were performing their vocally transcribed rendition of Takeo Yamashiro’s composition for the Oratorio. The song, as performed by Boyko

and Duncan, incorporates extended vocal techniques, moving from registers that resonate in the lower cavities of the body to high-pitched warbling and rhythmic modulations articulated in the most delicate vocables. I had staged the work so that the singers would perform this song, one of the dramatic highpoints of the production, atop a stony outcrop at twilight, so they would be visible, in silhouette, to the entire audience. What made this staging more resonant, however, was that at the very moment that Boyko and Duncan began to sing, a robin happened to perch on a nearby branch, and held forth with its own high-pitched evening song.²² We could not, of course, have predicted that this would happen, anymore than one can predict that, at a given moment, an audience will laugh or an actor will suddenly rise to the occasion and deliver a line or a movement in some unforeseen and inspired manner. And yet, by engaging with forces in the natural world—the setting of the sun, the return of the spring, the attractiveness of the garden to birdlife—we had allowed for such a possibility, and others like it, to occur.

The SongBird Oratorio, a predominantly lyrical work, pays little attention to internecine human struggles. Ecologically informed performances need not ignore conflicts between humans, however, nor background social, political and ethical concerns. *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, for instance, is a play that confronts issues of misogyny and racism, yet its political message unfolds in a world where trees and stones are integral to the action. Clements's play is, first and foremost, a response to violence: 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, convicted of manslaughter in one of these cases and seen drinking with each of the women before their deaths; and the violence of a culture that passed judgment on these deaths but refused to acknowledge its own complicity.²³ As Clements's title suggests, one of the crucial aspects of the play's politics has to do with disturbing the cultural assumptions surrounding definitions of "natural" and "unnatural." The play begins with documentary evidence: a series of slides with excerpts from actual coroners' reports attributing the deaths of these women to "unnatural and accidental causes." The next visual is a slide projection of the play's title, which, in juxtaposition with the coroners' reports, pointedly draws attention to the racist overtones of these official documents. For if the deaths of these women are judged to be "unnatural" or, in other words, cultural, it seems curious, does it not, to perceive them as accidents? The only way, then, to make sense of these medical reports is to adopt the cultural assumption that these women, in their excessive consumption of alcohol, were unnatural, in the sense of being unhealthy or perverse. According to the coroners' reports, then, the women are to blame for their own deaths, and society is off the hook.

Clements, in re-writing this social injustice, re-situates the perversion on the cultural side of the ledger, ascribing it to the unnatural, i.e., unhealthy, Jordan (and to the society that gave rise to his actions), while returning dignity and agency to

the murdered women. The action begins when Rebecca, a Métis woman, attempts to locate her First Nations mother, who had disappeared years ago after walking out on her husband and her daughter (the young Rebecca). Rebecca's search for her mother leads her to the hotels and bars of Vancouver's downtown eastside where, unknown to her, Rebecca's mother and nine other women had met their deaths by alcohol (aided and abetted by Jordan), and where their spirits and stories still linger. Rebecca, made vulnerable by the desolation of this oppressive urban wasteland, is in danger of being dragged down herself, and, at a critical point, Jordan sets out to take advantage of this, preying on her with offers of alcohol. In the play's climax, however, Rebecca discovers the horrific truth about Jordan and, aided by her Mother's spirit, turns the tables and enacts her revenge by cutting his throat.

Critical commentary on *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* focuses, understandably enough, on Clements's strong political message.²⁴ What most of this critical attention either 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 informs the play's action and politics. Gina 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."²⁵ 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 and other than human forces, there are no hierarchies and no assumptions of human privilege.

Perhaps our theatre criticism has yet to engage with and/or thoroughly assimilate what Val Plumwood, in her 1973 study, so clearly demonstrates: namely, that binary thinking about nature and culture is intricately bound up with an oppressive rationalist tradition that conflates women and minorities with the natural world and then configures the whole lot as inferior to (a particular definition of) culture. As Plumwood states in her introductory remarks,

To be defined as 'nature' in this context is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject, as the "environment" or invisible background conditions against which the "foreground" achievements of reason or culture (provided typically by the white, western, male expert or entrepreneur) take place. It is to be defined as a *terra nullius*, a resource empty of its own purposes or meanings, and hence available to be annexed for the purposes of those supposedly identified with reason or intellect, and to be conceived and moulded in relation to these purposes. It means being seen as part of a sharply separate, even alien lower realm, whose domination is simply "natural," flowing from nature itself and the nature(s) of things. Such treatment, standard in the west

for nature since at least the Enlightenment, has since that time been opposed and officially condemned for humans (while all the while normalised for marginalised groups such as women and the colonised).²⁶

To resist such oppression, Plumwood points out that women and colonized peoples would be wise to avoid identifying with nature as so defined and choose instead a view of culture and nature that dispenses with the binaries and all the assumptions of hegemony that go along with them.²⁷

One of the achievements of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* is the way that it is able to dramatically enact the kind of political and ecological vision that Plumwood endorses, returning agency to women, to First Nations people, and to the other than human world in an unequivocal rejection of dualistic thinking. In its acknowledgment of other than human agencies, for instance, Clements's play is replete with what Western critical thought has conventionally characterized as anthropomorphic tropes. Not only do the trees in this play "whisper," they also breathe, embrace loggers like lovers, and make decisions about whether or not to spare the lives of those on which they fall.²⁸ Moreover, according to Rebecca—the play's central protagonist—the very name for her surroundings has come into being as an interaction between trees, sky, and humans, all of which are configured by her as subjects:

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.²⁹

Attributing human characteristics to trees, as I learned in high school, is an example of the pathetic fallacy; and yet, as the anthropologist Tim Ingold, points out, the very idea that one can project human characteristics onto a non-human world necessitates and privileges an anthropocentric cultural view that assumes a separation of humans from nature.³⁰ Perhaps, too, at this particular juncture in history, it might be instructive to pause for a moment and consider which is more true—a so-called scientific view that assumes a fundamental opposition between the human and natural world, or one that, via a different set of metaphors, sees connections between them? Or, since prevailing post-modernist views are suspicious of any single or universal truth, perhaps it's more helpful to simply ask which of these views is the more salutary one, or—for that matter—which is the more just.

In enacting her own view of justice, Clements clearly acknowledges other than human elements, but she offers no easy moral formulas. Her portrayal of the relationship between trees and loggers, for instance, does not valorize the former at the latter's expense. Instead, it offers a vision of a reciprocal, albeit violent, relationship. Loggers fall trees and trees fall on loggers; saws slice through human limbs as easily as through branches; and all of this equivalence, according to Rebecca, is part of "an honest trade . . . an honest respect for the give and take of nature."³¹ 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 costs of such a system.

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.³²

Rebecca refuses, in other words, to divide the world into clearly demarcated heroes and villains, or, for that matter, into inferiors and superiors; and Clements, who—like Rebecca—is connected via her distaff side to First Nations traditions, evidently shares her protagonist's view. In Clements's play, for instance, First Nations women have direct links with the physical environment, but the latter is in no sense deemed inferior to culture. In one section of the play, for instance, Aunt Shadie, the spirit of Rebecca's long-lost mother, remembers how, when she was alive, she had become more and more invisible to 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."³³ 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 rock and 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 the process: "A mother opens the heart of her child and places a rock inside the flesh."³⁴ Almost immediately after, Rebecca's dreaming 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."³⁵ Later, when Ron, a police officer assigned to the downtown eastside, tells Rebecca that she doesn't "seem Indian", her stinging critique of his racism 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.³⁶

As all this imagery of rock, stone and sand suggests, Clements's perception of the interrelationship between the human and the physical environment is part and parcel of her political stance. Rebecca's connection with her mother and the other First Nations women, the connection that provides her with the strength to resist and to take revenge on Jordan, is inseparable from her acknowledgment of, and relationship with, trees and stones. As a consequence, her revenge on Jordan, though clearly a human response to an intolerable injustice, can also be seen as the result of a more complex field of relationships involving interactions between the human and other than human physical world: an agency of place comprised of environment and history, nature and culture, perceived as an integrated and interactive whole. What makes a play like *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* both politically liberating and ecologically sustaining 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.

In a telephone interview with the playwright, I asked Clements about the ending of her play, an ending in which Rebecca slits the throat of a character who bears the same name as the actual individual, Gilbert Paul Jordan, convicted of manslaughter, and who—at the time of the play's premiere—was out of jail on parole.³⁷ “Do you believe,” I asked, “that your play advocates the daughter of a woman who has been murdered in this way taking revenge on her mother's murderer? Or do you see it as a protest—like the burning of an effigy—as an expression of rage, and a call for change?” Marie's answer was indicative, once again, of a view that refuses to assume binary oppositions between human and other than human agencies:

I think in some ways it's playing with the concept of natural and unnatural—how in societies before us it was necessary to mercy kill a sick animal. And I felt that this man is a sick animal. He doesn't even have the prestige of being an animal really, but he is sick and we've allowed him to do what he wanted to. Obviously he's not the first man who has done these things, and our history repeats again with this new case. But we've allowed a hunting

ground for these people, and I felt, like a lot of women, I hope,
that it's enough—it's enough.³⁸

Productions that foreground human conflict and its resolution without taking into account other agencies are not, of course, inauthentic, but their predominance implicitly privileges human action. *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, *the SongBird Oratorio*, and the other performances cited here are examples of productions that refuse to silence the other than human physical world or to background it as if it were nothing more than a frame for human concerns. Such ecologically informed productions can, it seems to me, encompass a wide range of forms, including performances that focus on conservation issues and those that are direct acts of intervention by ecological activists such as Greenpeace and other organizations. A characteristic common to all this work, however, is the way that it recognizes diverse agencies in the physical world.³⁹ Viewed in this way, ecologically informed productions have been around since the first recorded instances of performance in the amphitheatres of ancient Greece, though their role and significance today is underscored by the environmental destruction that a combination of human industry, anthropocentrism and sheer solipsistic greed has bequeathed to the present generation.

Contemporary ecological performance accords with post-modern and post-colonial sensibilities that reject fixed and universalized points of view in favor of a diversity of perspectives in which there is no privileged centre of authority, yet extends this idea of cultural plurality to the other than human world. Such work reflects a polyvalent, multi-directional world, a shifting constellation of autonomous agencies that form and reform, something akin to an animistic view. In such a world, no one, whether human or other than human, is placed into the background; and, since everything is either a subject or potentially so, action is always interaction—a dynamic interplay and exchange of forces in a field of relationships that are always “subject to.” “[We] are human,” writes David Abram, “only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human,”⁴⁰ and while ascribing conviviality to all the elements of nature tends to cobble over some of their less human-friendly aspects, there are strong philosophical grounds to support the claim that humans can only know themselves as part of an interdependent field of relations. Martin Heidegger in “The Thinker as Poet” speaks of “poetry that thinks” as “the topology of Being.”⁴¹ And, in this era of shifting ecological consciousness, it may be instructive to remind ourselves that Heidegger is not restricting his remarks to a topology of *human* “Being,” but is, rather, arguing for an ontology that is much more expansive, and that leaves open the possibility for diverse agencies and a realm in which there are no binary oppositions between the human and the other than human physical world.

Notes

1. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies*, (London: Routledge, 1998) 9.
2. Karen Jamieson, chor., *The River*, Karen Jamieson Dance Company, The Roundhouse Community Centre, Vancouver, 30 April-3 May 1998.
3. Karen Jamieson, telephone interview with the author, 28 August 2005.
4. The Electric Company, *The Electric Company – Very Live Theatre*, accessed 20 August 2005, <<http://www.electriccompanytheatre.com/works-thewake.htm>>.
5. David Diamond and Kevin Finnan, *Mamu, the Currency of Life*, dir. David Diamond and Kevin Finnan, Vancouver East Cultural Centre, Vancouver, 13 May 1994.
6. Marie Clements, *The Girl Who Swam Forever*, dir. Nelson Gray, The Dorothy Somerset Theatre, Vancouver, 21 September 1995.
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11. Kendra Fanconi, Andrew Laurenson, and Paul Ternes, *All Flesh is Grass*, Radix Theatre, Vancouver, 3 July 1998.
12. Nelson Gray and DB Boyko, *The Songbird Oratorio*, dir. Nelson Gray, The Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden, Vancouver, 7 May 2001.
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15. Nelson Gray, *7 Monologues for the SONGBIRD ORATORIO*, accessed 23 August 2005, <<http://Songbirdproject.ca/monologues2.html>>.
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17. Gray, <<http://Songbirdproject.ca/monologues6.html>>.
18. Gray, <<http://Songbirdproject.ca/monologues7.html>>.
19. As quoted in Gary Paul Nabhan, *Cultures of Habitat* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998) 7.
20. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996) 74-75.
21. The International Dawn Chorus, Home page, accessed 4 January 2006, <<http://www.wildlifetrust.org.uk/urbanwt/idcdsite/index.htm>>.
22. I am not, here, ascribing intention to the robin, merely agency. The robin may have been defending his territory, and may or may not have been oblivious to the human performance.
23. See Ginny Ratsoy's introduction to *The Unnatural and Accidental Women in Playing the Pacific Province: An Anthology of British Columbia Plays, 1967-2000*, ed. Ginny Ratsoy and James F. Hoffman (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2001) 473-476.
24. Ratsoy, *Playing the Pacific Province*, 473-476. See also Ric Knowles, "The Hearts of Its

Women: Rape, Residential Schools, and Re-membering,” *Performing National Identities: International Perspectives on Contemporary Canadian Theatre*, ed. Sherrill E. Grace and Albert-Reiner Glaap (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2003) 245-263, and, in the same publication, Richard J. Lane’s “Performing History: The Reconstruction of Gender and Race in British Columbia Drama” 265-277.

25. Ratsoy, *Playing the Pacific Province* 475.

26. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Opening Out (London: Routledge, 1993) 4.

27. 64.

28. Clements, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women, Playing the Pacific Province*, ed. Ratsoy and Hoffman 478-79.

29. 478-79.

30. Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling & Skill* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 44.

31. Clements, *Unnatural and Accidental Women* 479.

32. 479-80.

33. 504-505.

34. 505.

35. 505.

36. 510.

37. Ratsoy, *Playing the Pacific Province* 473.

38. Marie Clements, telephone interview with the author, 20 May 2004.

39. I am aware, of course, that there are no easy formulas: determining whether a given production recognizes other than human agencies in an *ecological* manner would necessitate, to be sure, a detailed analysis.

40. Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* ix.

41. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 12.