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Performing with the Environment

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in Theater and Performance Studies

by

Courtney Beth Ryan

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Performing with the Environment

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Theater and Performance Studies

University of California, Los Angeles

Professor Shelley I. Salamensky, Chair

Focusing on twentieth through twenty-first century ecological theater, literature, film, and new media in the United States, I ask how humans may interact with the environment rather than only act upon it. While the nascent field of eco-theater recognizes the importance of space and place, this dissertation goes a step further, combining spatial theory and ecocriticism in order to generate a spatialized eco-performance. The project takes up the prefix *trans-* to consider human and nonhuman environmental encounters and how these spatiotemporal crossings illuminate both spatial injustices and interspecies dependency. I argue that, while each environment has its own particularities, there are parallels to be made between the systems of environmental injustice in one site and those in another. I adapt interdisciplinary methodologies of ecocriticism, urban political ecology, and environmental justice in order to strengthen reciprocity between humans and other bio-organisms, as well as to expose the unequal power dynamics historically embedded in human and nonhuman relations.

The first half of the dissertation centers on land. It explores the ways in which land and metropolites have become separated from each other, and it analyzes performances that expose this constructed divide by transgressing boundaries of “public” and “private” space. The second half of the dissertation centers on water. It considers how water exploitation can lead to disasters that both displace and destroy local ecologies but also make humans aware of their ecological interdependency. Through the prefix *trans*-, this project analyzes how diverse bio-organisms cross and converge, be it in congested cityscapes or moments of crisis. Elucidating performances that foster egalitarian, symbiotic relationships between humans and other bio-organisms, this dissertation both exposes the joint subjugation of people and place and highlights interdependency between humans and their environments.

The dissertation of Courtney Ryan is approved.

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Elizabeth DeLoughrey

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Introduction

For some years now, eco-scholars in various fields have argued that humans and environments are one and the same; we are deeply interconnected with our environment, our world, our planet. From Donna Haraway's cyborgs and companion species (never one but always becoming many) to Timothy Morton's ecological thought to Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality, eco-scholars have strived to reveal the permeability of humans, animals, and environments. And, yet, despite such efforts and evidence that we are biologically-linked to our environment—our cells, skin, and organs bearing environmental markers of bacteria and fungi (Haraway, *When* 3)—we persist in seeing ourselves as separate from it. This artificial divide between humans and environments allows us to continue to disregard our ecological vulnerability and interconnectedness, and, with it, our ecological impact. Through our stubbornly preserved notion of hermetic humans, impenetrable and unaffected by seemingly external environmental changes, we justify our treatment of the environment as alien, distant, *out there* rather than *within* us. The question, then, is this: How can eco-theory serve to convince the general public of its ecological entanglement and facilitate interspecies interactions in daily life?

Haraway argues that "new practices" are needed to create interspecies connectivity ("Otherworldy" 87), while Anna Tsing suggests that "through naming, we *notice* the diversity of life" (6). Richard Doyle, meanwhile, posits that people must experience their interconnectivity with the environment rather than simply understand it on an intellectual level (7). I, too, maintain that practical experiences of ecological interdependence are necessary if we are to take notice of our environment and begin to change our role in it, as well as our treatment of it. Rather than propose one ecological practice in this dissertation, though, I advocate for a diversity of

situational, improvisational, and multivalent practices that are based on local needs but cognizant of regional and global considerations. While I deploy interdisciplinary theories from environmental justice scholarship, ecocriticism, urban geography, and theater studies, my primary tools of analysis are existing ecological practices at work in movements like guerrilla gardening and food justice and in wide-ranging plays, films, and new media. Through the analysis of such case studies, I consider how performance can create material, ongoing interactions between diverse humans and their shared environments.

I suggest that performance—with its emphasis on space, place, shifting temporalities, representation, and framing devices—is highly-suited to stage a dialogue between humans and the environment. Both taking up space and creating liminal spaces of exchange, performance can foreground site-specific, local environments and briefly disrupt time, temporarily replacing the postmodern urge to hurry up with an urge to pause, look, and listen. Despite this ability, theater and performance studies have produced only a trickle of ecocritical scholarship over the last decade, and new plays and productions that directly engage with the environment have also been few and far between. In a monumental 1994 issue of *Theater*, Erika Munk challenges theater scholars and artists alike to begin contributing to global and local environmental discussions (5-6). However, as Wendy Arons noted in 2007, both theater scholars and artists "have largely failed to rise to" Munk's challenge ("Introduction" 93).

Although there have been some important eco-theater contributions since 2007,[1] very little scholarship focuses on ecological practices in performance. While postcolonial

[1] For instance, Wendy Arons and Theresa May's 2012 edited collected, *Readings in Performance and Ecology,* makes a critical intervention in the shortage of scholarship that Arons noted in 2007. The volume was first developed at the "Earth Matters on Stage Festival and Symposium," which is held every few years and has done much to advance eco-theater scholarship and plays.

ecocriticism[2] attends to similar inequalities as environmental justice,[3] but on a transnational rather than a national scale, the smaller field of eco-theater has by and large been concerned with the recuperation of ecology in dramatic literature,[4] animal studies,[5] performance ecology,[6] and sustainable theater design and production.[7]

Perhaps the reason so few scholars focus on eco-performance[8] is because, as May suggests, plays' ecological agendas are often expressed at the expense of artistic merit. Henry Bial wittily critiques this phenomenon with his "formulation, 'The Peace and Love Community Player's Original Production of "Save the Spotted Owl" [Postshow Discussion with Yoga Circle and Group Rendition of Kumbaya to Follow]'" (qtd. in Arons 93). Bial's satirical title not only mocks the often didactic and amateurish quality of eco-performance, but also its tendency to be sentimental, out-of-touch, and privileged. The hypothetical play's single-minded focus on spotted owls exposes a propensity in eco-performance, and most environmentalism, to disregard the environmental needs of disenfranchised humans in favor of single-issue causes. It also plays

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[2] For an excellent introduction to postcolonial ecocriticism, see Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environments* and Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley's edited volume, *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literature of the Environment*.

[3] *The Environmental Justice Reader*, edited by Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, provides a fairly comprehensive introduction to environmental justice across disciplines. Furthermore, *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice: Gender, Sexuality, and Activism*, also edited by Stein, makes valuable connections between environmental justice and (eco)feminism.

[4] In particular, Downing Cless's *Ecology and Environment in European Drama* seeks to recuperate canonical plays.

[5] Chaudhuri has been at the forefront of animal studies in theater, most recently publishing a co-edited volume with Holly Hughes: *Animal Acts: Performing Species Today*.

[6] While Bonnie Marranca's 1996 *Ecologies of Theater* considers theater settings and landscapes, it takes a more metaphorical than environmental approach, as noted by Chaudhuri ("There" 26). In contrast, Baz Kershaw's 2007 *Theatre Ecology* is more directly concerned with the environment and eco-activism.

[7] Larry K. Reid and May initiated the turn to sustainable production design in 1993 with *Greening up our Houses: a Guide to an Ecologically More Sound Theatre*. Since then, producer and designer Ian Garrett has founded The Center for Sustainable Practice in the Arts.

[8] By and large, the terms "eco-theater" and eco-performance" are used interchangeably in theater and performance studies; however, I employ the latter because it is more clearly inclusive of performances outside of theater itself.

on the stereotype of environmentalists as idealists who vaguely hope to achieve world peace through sentimental songs. While many eco-scholars actively work against the stereotypes Bial describes, his formulation nonetheless highlights the need for multivalent eco-narratives and theories that speak to a diversity of experiences of and in specific environments.

With this in mind, I focus on performances firmly rooted in everyday practices that interact with the environment rather than only act upon it. Deconstructing spatialized boundaries of nature/culture and private/public property, which often truncate humans—particularly working class urbanites—from their environments, I argue that multi-perspectival, spatialized performance practices may transform human and environmental relations. While the burgeoning field of eco-theater recognizes the importance of space and place, this dissertation goes a step further, combining existing spatial theory and ecocriticism in order to generate a spatialized eco-performance. The project takes up the prefix *trans-* to consider human and nonhuman environmental encounters and how these spatiotemporal crossings illuminate both environmental injustices and interspecies dependency. I argue that, while each environment has its own particularities, there are parallels to be made between the systems of environmental injustice in one site and those in another. Through the development of spatialized eco-performance practices, I seek to strengthen reciprocity between humans and other bio-organisms, as well as to expose the unequal power dynamics historically embedded in human and nonhuman relations. To that end, I first turn to eco-scholarship that tackles the nature/culture binary before turning to the role of spatial studies in deconstructing divisions between nature and culture and fostering new spatialized eco-performance practices.

Nature, Culture, and Representation

Eco-theater is only the most recent field to consider the possibilities and limitations of representing nature. Prior to the ecocritical turn in theater, ecocriticism in the mid-nineties, originally limited to the "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfeltry and Fromm xviii), began questioning nature writing like that of Thoreau and Emerson. In 1995, Lawrence Buell's landmark text *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* critiqued the anthropocentrism so prevalent in literature, including in nature writing. Buell's work marked a crucial point in ecocriticism's development, because it argued for literary analysis that considers literature's "referential dimension" to the environment outside the text (86). While *The Environmental Imagination* largely focuses on the wild and pastoral, it is nonetheless a progenitor of ecocriticism that takes a more environmentally just approach to literature and the environment.[9]

Sub-fields like ecofeminism,[10] postcolonial ecocriticism, and environmental justice further critiqued nature writing, as well as early ecocritics, for its overemphasis on the natural and its maintenance of problematic binaries between nature and culture, wherein the former is idealistically preserved as pure and wild, separate from human life. While environmental literature prior to the 1990s largely focused on nature writing, ecofeminism, postcolonialism ecocriticism, and environmental justice, conscious of the fact that women and people of color have been similarly subjugated through their essentialized "affinity" with nature, began

[9] For instance, *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* considers gender, race, and anit-pastoralism in environmental literature.

[10] Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* is a primary introduction to ecofeminism, while Noël Sturgeon's *Ecofeminist Natures* provides a history of the movement.

deconstructing it. The three movements helped ecocriticism begin to recognize its own exclusion of environmental justice issues in its privileging of Anglo-American "greening" efforts, and ecocriticism has gradually become more aware of the ways it has reinforced the very Eurocentric ideologies it "purports to dismantle" (Cilano and DeLoughrey 75). Thus, in my development of eco-performance practices, I draw on the existing fields of postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental justice, and ecofeminism, particularly their emphasis on representations that not only attend to the environment but to the humans within it.

One lexiconical solution to the constructed binary between the environment and people is Haraway's term "natureculture" (*When* 15); in pushing the two words together with no gap in between, Haraway insists on their inseparability and their mutual construction. However, language is only one consideration in the representation of an environment which cannot speak for itself. As postcolonial ecocritics Cara Cilano and Elizabeth DeLoughrey argue, "This doubleness—the articulation of complicity and of the need for representation—encourages a self-reflective ambivalence over the ability to know the other, thereby introducing an element of provisionality into any ecocritical reading" (76). Rather than continue to disregard postcolonial people and their environments, Cilano and DeLoughrey urge scholars to "emphasize the limits of representation and translation" (77). A similar strategy has been taken up by eco-theater scholars, particularly Una Chaudhuri, who likewise grapple with the challenges of representing the more-than-human world[11] in innovative ways that do not simply reinforce humanism and, with it, the constructed divide between nature and culture.

Critiquing naturalism, and ostensibly realism, as "programmatically anti-ecological" ("There" 24), Chaudhuri posits that theater must make "space on its stage for ongoing acknowledgements of the rupture it participates in—the rupture between nature and culture"

[11] This term was first popularized by David Abram.

(“There” 28). Like Cilano and DeLoughrey, Chaudhuri argues for a cognizant awareness of the limits of representation, but within western theater rather than postcolonial literature, and, like Buell, she critiques nature’s marginalization, but on the stage rather than the page. She suggests that, by foregrounding human interests, naturalism casts nature as a scenic backdrop to human conflicts; represented as remote, fixed, and passive, nature is the setting that reinforces and highlights the ‘realness’ of human action. Thus, even so-called environmental plays, which intend to bring ecological issues to the fore, can unwittingly obscure, appropriate, or falsely universalize their subject matter, particularly when they use realism to convey their message. Universalism, akin to humanism, can be more harmful than beneficial to eco-performance both when the nonhuman is excluded from the ‘universalist’ narrative *and* when the nonhuman is included and thereby assimilated into a humanist framework.

Other eco-performance scholars have suggested different solutions to consumptive environmental representation. For instance, Bonnie Marranca advocates avant-garde performances (like those of Peter Brook and the Living Theatre) for their emphasis on spatialization (qtd. in Kershaw 308). She argues that, since “space” is more open and nonhierarchical than “setting”—where nature has traditionally been relegated—“any elucidation of a theatre ecology begins in the understanding of performance space” (Marranca xvii). However, as Chaudhuri points out, the connection between theatrical space and ecology is, at best, tenuous and abstract (“There” 27). Kershaw, meanwhile, sees potential in immersive theater that turns spectators into participants, but, as he himself warns, the immersive environments, if not created carefully, may produce their own oppressive, absolutist civilization myths (316-17). Similarly, Chaudhuri suggests that site-specific theater holds great promise for eco-performance, but, unlike Kershaw, she believes that this ecological promise can be manifested materially

rather than metaphorically ("There" 24), thereby creating a much-needed "turn towards the literal" ("There" 28). However, as Kershaw points out, such an act—even if possible—would be highly paradoxical since theaters "are defined by their power to produce metaphors through the creation of spectators" (311). The theater building, as a designated place of entertainment, and the performance itself, which is inherently representational, combine to abstract any literal ecology. This abstraction is only exacerbated by the audience which mediates the performance and, thus, further distances theater from literalness.

Rather than continue to debate the relationship between sometimes literal but always metaphorical theater practices, this dissertation elucidates performance's role in the construction of *both* culture and nature, thereby undermining the dualistic representation of nature as natural, stable, passive and culture as artificial, instable, active. Focusing on performances that denaturalize nature, I explore the concept of nature as both a place—"in the sense of a rhetorician's place or topic for consideration of common themes"—and a trope (Haraway, "Otherworldly" 66). In Haraway's elaboration, "It is figure, construction, artifact, movement, displacement. Nature cannot pre-exist its construction, its articulation in heterogeneous social encounters, where all of the actors are not human and all of the humans are not 'us', however defined" (66-7). It is only by highlighting the semiotic slippage between nature and culture that their dualistic representation may be destabilized, and that, with this destabilization, may come an awareness of how nature and culture are mutually constructed and dependent.

Exposing humanist assumptions of dominion is the first step to undoing them, and to imagining how nature might be represented as agential, social, and changeable. The detachment of nature from fixity allows for new representational possibilities in which the more-than-human world is not segregated from sociality but is as bound up in it as the human world. As Diana Fuss

puts it, humans must begin to question "the *constructionist* assumption that nature and fixity go together (naturally) just as sociality and change go together (naturally)" (6). Insomuch as *both* nature and culture are constructed, unstable, and representational rather than organic, stable, and actual, they cannot escape their interdependency, their inextricable connectivity. Rather than being separated by their 'natural' differences, they are joined by their mutual construction. However, awareness is not enough in and of itself: exploding the nature/culture binary "requires recognition of both continuity and difference; this means acknowledging the other as neither alien to and discontinuous from self nor assimilated to or an extension of self" (Plumwood, *Feminism* 6). Thus, in addition to exposing dualistic representations of nature/culture and highlighting the limits of representation, this dissertation imagines bio-diverse environments through improvisational and flexible ecological performance practices that are not merely consumptive or assimilative.

Toward Spatialized Eco-Performance

In the last thirty years, alongside nature/culture eco-scholarship, there has been an interdisciplinary turn to the spatial, as evidenced by the rise of concepts like Fredric Jameson's "cognitive mapping," Lucy Lippard's "lure of the local," Kenneth Frampton's "critical regionalism," Michel de Certeau's "walking in the city," and Henri Lefebvre's "production of space," which all consider the navigation of social and local space (Kwon 8). It may seem counterintuitive to go searching for the local when postmodernism has declared its extinction; as Marc Auge posits, cultural traits and their evolution are evaporating in the face of globalization, and, in order to participate in the global market, artists and countries alike are forced to integrate and homogenize their work (xviii). Likewise, separating the interior from the exterior and the

here from the elsewhere is becoming increasingly difficult (Auge xix). However, this is exactly what makes spatial specificity so necessary, particularly given the fact that it is through one's experience of place that one develops a sense of ecological interconnectivity and responsibility. While Ursula Heise cautions against attempting to reterritorialize a sense of place, which may not be entirely possible or practical in the digital age (53-54), I would suggest that regional and global perspectives are best expanded and developed out of local contexts and practices. Certainly, local environmentalism that truncates itself from regional and global considerations eventually does more harm than good; however, without a situational, experiential appreciation of place, one is even less likely to care about environments further removed from one's daily life. Ultimately, though, local, regional, and global perspectives are all spatially necessary, entwined, and traversed, and, through spatial practices and negotiations, scales of difference and justice between one site and another are exposed.

In his theory of spatial justice, Edward Soja, building on Lefebvre, takes a "critical spatial perspective" of social justice, arguing for a "consequential geography" that is directly connected to social and political action (*Seeking* 1-2). Soja argues that a spatial analysis of the causes and effects of various justices and injustices may offer new insights that social and historical analyses alone would miss; through a combined "socio-spatial dialectic," the ways in which spatial and social processes interact and shape each other are made visible (4). This recent turn to the spatial stems "from the belief that *we are just as much spatial as temporal beings*, that our existential spatiality and temporality are essentially or ontologically coequal, equivalent in explanatory power and behavioral significance, interwoven in a mutually formative relation" (16). As we shall, it is spatialized behaviors and practices that can connect nonhumans and humans across biological and sociocultural differences. If the goal of eco-performance is to

equalize more-than-human and human relations and find moments of commonality across species, then eco-performance must focus on what is shared—a shared dependency on place, spatial embodiment, and behavioral agency. Lefebvre "could not comprehend the philosophical separation of subject and object, the body and the world. The boundary between them did not seem so clear and clean. The inner world, was it not also cosmic?" (Soja, *Thirdspace* 41). This question suggests that by focusing on species' shared spatial practices and behavioral actions, eco-performance may both expose the construction of binaries like subject/object and nature/culture, as well as forge new spatial relations among diverse bio-organisms and environments.

Despite the recent spatial turn, Soja argues, many scholars continue to emphasize the ways in which social processes *act on* space rather than the other way around (*Seeking* 4). He theorizes that this is because scholars fear a return to "the simplistic environmental determinism" of the past if spatial factors are emphasized too much (4). This is certainly a fear within performance studies as well, where the affects of Naturalism—heavily influenced by Darwinism and determinism—can still be seen upon the stage. However, if space is represented as a passive receiver rather than an agent of change, it reverts to being treated like a receptacle instead of a cause of social (in)justice (Soja 4). Theater itself has a long history of treating location as merely the backdrop against which human action plays out; indeed, the very word *setting* suggests a time and place which may influence the plot but is ultimately inconsequential. The challenge then for geography and performance studies alike is to track the shifting relations between both socialized space and spatialized sociality.

At the same time, although theater studies has only turned to the spatial in the last fifteen or so years,[12] nowhere is place more important than in eco-performance, where oftentimes the setting becomes a character in its own right. In contemplating the importance of the local to theater, Chaudhuri observes, "The difficulty of separating plays from place is even recorded, quite fortuitously, in the near homonymy of the words that designate them" (*Staging* 21). Particularly within site-specific performance, place may take on its own significance, revealing the ways in which "place and person [and, I would add, other species] are permeable" (May, "Greening" 94). Thus, many of the performances analyzed in this dissertation are site-specific; however, they are not colorful, stationary settings but rather shifting and transformational sites that highlight the constantly fluctuating production of space. For instance, in the first chapter, typically rooted plants become mobile, while, in the second, a shotgun house perpetually changes shape, suggesting several other houses and cities. Meanwhile, in chapters three and four, water quite literally changes course, its spatial flow altered by human intervention, as well as by its own properties. Together, these performances bring places and their shifting spatial meanings to the fore, enabling audiences to witness spatial production and the effects of spatial injustices firsthand. In May's words, "Always an immediate, communal and material encounter among embodied performer, audience and place, theatre is ecological even as it is representational. Ecocriticism, like feminism, post-colonial or multi-cultural theory, addresses injustices felt in the body—the body of experience, of community, of land" ("Greening" 86). In order to develop complementary, spatialized eco-performance practices, this dissertation foregrounds multivalent, contextual ecological experiences and narratives, many of which take place in urban sites with sedimented spatial injustices. Through such narratives, I argue for grounded, everyday eco-practices that are improvisational, flexible, and multiple.

[12] See, for instance, Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri's 2002 edited collection *Land/Scape/Theater.*

Chapter Breakdown

The first half of the dissertation centers on land. It explores the ways in which land and metropolites have become separated from each other, and it analyzes performances that expose this constructed divide by transgressing urban spatial boundaries that are unfairly erected and maintained. Chapter one analyzes the subversion of spatial divisions between plants and people in the work of contemporary installation and performance artists Vaughn Bell and Meghan Moe Beitiks. Performing what I call "transplantment," the artists' pieces quite literally traverse spatial demarcations of private/public and nature/culture. Through the transplantment of plants and place, Bell and Beitiks both critique the taxonomic marginalization of plants and perform an alternate ecology, in which plants and people are inter-embodied.

Chapter two employs an environmental justice framework in order to show how racial injustices are compounded and linked to environmental exploitation. It analyzes Marc Bamuthi Joseph's performance *red, black, and GREEN: a blues* (2011), set in Harlem, Chicago, Oakland, and Houston, and the piece's ability to transform marginalized African-American lives and neighborhoods through ecological practices that, out of necessity, celebrate life and improvise with limited land. The latter half of the chapter connects the vegetal improvisation in Joseph's piece to the larger food justice movement and the guerrilla gardening movement, which transgresses spatial boundaries through the illicit gardening of land that is not one's own. Together, the two chapters suggest that spatialized practices like vegetal transplantment, improvisation, and transgression can expose environmental injustice and create more egalitarian urban land practices.

The second half of the dissertation centers on water. It posits that, while water exploitation leads to disasters that both displace and destroy local ecologies, such disasters also

force humans to acknowledge their ecological interdependency with the environment. Chapter three largely focuses on the film *Chinatown* and Cornerstone Theater Company's site-specific *Touch the Water: A River Play*, both of which explore the concrete channelization of the Los Angeles River. I argue that, although the former takes some historical liberties, it encapsulates the corruption embedded in Los Angeles water politics and, through aural and visual effects, places water and its properties center stage. While the film hints at the displacement of indigenous Mexicans and Chinese immigrants who live(d) along the river, it too ultimately marginalizes them. In contrast, *Touch the Water* considers both people and place, creating a connection between the river, largely buried under a bed of concrete, and Latino neighborhoods, inordinately exposed to environmental hazards. Juxtaposing the Los Angeles River's postmodern, pop-cultural representation as a stand-in for sundry other settings in film and television with the site-specificity at work in *Chinatown* and *Touch the Water*, I argue that the river is a palimpsestic blend of conceptual and material spatial iterations.

Whereas chapter three focuses on water that has been displaced and submerged, chapter four focuses on water that has been traumatized and polluted. Analyzing the television news media's and BP's own representations of the 2010 BP oil spill, I posit that the spill was inaccurately narrated as a short-term catastrophe that was resolved when the oil leak was sealed. I contrast this single-minded narrative of ecological resolution with more multivalent, irresolute narratives like those seen in Look Left, Look Right's docudrama *NOLA* and in disruptive, satirical Tweets from @BPGlobalPR. At the same time, I suggest that, since the oil and highly toxic dispersant agent Corexit infected humans, animals, and their shared environment, the spill ironically highlights a trans-toxic, inter-species connection. As implied in Caridad Svich's play *The Way of Water*, humans were made vulnerable by the spill and confronted with their own

permeability, their interdependency with other species. Together, the two chapters consider how water exploitation can both separate humans from their environment and, in moments of crisis, connect them.

Ultimately, this dissertation considers how disparate bio-organisms cross and converge, be it in congested cityscapes or moments of aquatic crisis. Elucidating performances that foster egalitarian, symbiotic relationships between diverse humans and other bio-organisms, this dissertation both exposes the joint subjugation of people and place and highlights interdependency between humans and their environments, of which they are part.

Chapter One

"Transplantment" as Interspecies Performance

Verdant grass fills a shopping cart pushed down a residential street. A leashed box of cacti is taken out for a walk. Moss in a glass dome rests on a human head. A cactus retains water during a water fight. A snake plant is showcased in its own art show. These images, some conceived by contemporary performance and installation artist Vaughn Bell and some by Meghan "Moe" Beitiks, uproot plants from their expected place—the store, the garden, the greenhouse, the windowsill—and reimagine them in motion. Bell's and Beitiks's performance pieces feature plants "out of place"—plants on the move throughout busy urbanscapes, plants simultaneously rooted in soil and uprooted from fixed locations. Performing what I call "transplantment," these pieces quite literally traverse the spatial demarcations of private/public, nature/culture, and plant/animal/human. In motion or prepared for movement, the plants perform material crossings throughout the city that inspire theoretical crossings as well. Through the transplantment of plants and place, Bell and Beitiks both critique the taxonomic marginalization of plants and perform an alternate ecology in which plants and people are inter-embodied. Reimagining their socio-spatial relationship to each other, these vegetative artists signal an innovative engagement between urban plants and people and, with it, a new form of interspecies performance.

Introduction

As much as the works of Bell and Beitiks create a new kind of interspecies performance, they also resonate within existing interspecies theory, itself a burgeoning form that emphasizes

interconnectivity among disparate species. Although the term "interspecies" inevitably maintains species' divisions, it simultaneously erodes categorization through an emphasis on liminality. The *inter*- implies that species are both between each other and in in-between states. As Julie Livingston and Jasbir Puar recently posited, "interspecies," in contrast to posthumanism or animal studies, "offers a broader geopolitical understanding of how the human/animal/plant triad is unstable and varies across time and space" (5). The term emphasizes spatiotemporal relationships between and among species, stressing reciprocality over hierarchy.

Similarly, interspecies performance seeks to change species' relationships to one another through performance. It focuses on the act or process of shifting relationships, and the ways in which performance can strengthen and facilitate such relationships. Insomuch as Bell's and Beitiks's pieces stage highly spatialized encounters between flora and fauna, they speak to the recent theoretical turn to interspecies performance. At the same time, since both artists primarily focus on vegetal life, it is important to acknowledge this distinction, as my use of transplantment attempts to do. Because Bell's pieces and, to a lesser extent, Beitiks's pieces emphasize the portability and mobility of plants in the city, the prefix *trans*-, which implies constant crossing, is more applicable than the prefix *inter*-, which suggests an in-between state. Moreover, insomuch as both artists are concerned with crossing and deconstructing human/animal/plant hierarchies through plant re-spatialization, their transplantment is both metaphorical and material. That said, transplantment still operates as an interspecies performance and thus not only draws on nascent interspecies theory, but also on its theoretical predecessors—animal studies, thing theory, and ecotheater.

For instance, animal studies, which continues to gain interdisciplinary popularity,[13] is particularly useful, given its efforts to erase distinctions between humans and non-humans. Cary Wolfe in particular has stressed the importance of dismantling the institution of speciesism—discrimination among species—because it "can be [and, I would argue, has been] used to mark *any*[14] social other" as inhuman (7). In addition to blurring human and non-human divisions, animal studies considers the challenges and dangers of anthropomorphism,[15] also highly relevant to plant and people relations. As Una Chaudhuri notes, since animals "will not speak, they are ceaselessly spoken, cast into a variety of discursive registers, endlessly troped…forced to perform *us*" ("Animal" 511).[16] While Chaudhuri combats animal ventriloquism, Theresa May cautions theater studies against becoming so preoccupied with the "snarl of anthropomorphism" that it ignores animal representation altogether ("Menageries"). Both perspectives are necessary and applicable to plant and people interactions: on the one hand, plant assimilation is all too likely, given that plants' means of expression are even more unfamiliar to humans than animals' means; and on the other, theater cannot continue to ignore plants for fear of misrepresenting them. One way to approach this dilemma, according to Donna Haraway, is to reject new representations for "new *practices*, other forms of life rejoining humans and not-humans" ("Otherworldly" 85), [17] which, for Haraway, includes plants, minerals, and cyborgs—"hybrid[s]

[13] See Gorman's "Animal Studies Cross Campus to Lecture Hall" where the author notes that animal studies is no longer limited to the sciences, but has been embraced by the humanities, with many departments offering entire courses on animals.

[14] Emphasis in original.

[15] See, for instance: Chaudhuri, "(De)Facing the Animals: Zooësis and Performance;" Shelly R. Scott, "Conserving, Consuming, and Improving on Nature at Disney's Animal Kingdom;" and Haraway, "Otherwordly Conversations; Terran Topics; Local Terms."

[16] Emphasis in original.

[17] Emphasis in original.

of machine and organism" ("Cyborg" 117). Chaudhuri, May, and Haraway are all useful here in that they caution against anthropomorphism, but do not let it obstruct interspecies engagement, and they emphasize the need for new practices to create interspecies dependency.

While animal studies continues to consider what these new practices might be, theater scholarship on human engagement with flora remains underexplored. Plants, in particular, have received far less attention from the humanities, even though humans are arguably more dependent on plants than they are on animals.[18] Perhaps, though, this is because interaction between the two presents even more challenges than it does between humans and animals. While many animals communicate to humans, albeit limitedly, through sound and nonverbal expressions—a wagging tail, a peck, a purr—most plants rely only on spatiality, demonstrating their well-being through the growth of healthy leaves, shoots, or buds and their unmet needs through withering petals and stunted growth. Despite these fundamental differences, animals, humans, and plants are ecologically joined through the most basic of biological needs. They all require one another for life; plants depend on people and animals for carbon dioxide while the latter depend on the former for oxygen. Furthermore, people and animals depend on edible plants for sustenance, while some plants depend on humans for water and care. And yet, the very ubiquity and necessity of plants has caused them to be ignored and devalued. As Michael Marder observes: "The absolute familiarity of plants coincides with their sheer strangeness, the incapacity of humans to recognize elements of ourselves in the form of vegetal being" (4). Ironically, considering that human life would not be possible without vegetal life, plants largely fill background roles to human action. Thus the question remains: how might plants, which have "populated the margin of the margin," be brought to the fore without being completely

[18] As philosopher Michael Marder points out, Western philosophy has almost entirely left plants to scientists since the latter's breakaway from theology and philosophy beginning in the sixteenth century (2).

anthropomorphized (Marder 2)? More to the point, how might performance facilitate interaction between plants and people without a shared language?

In theorizing "plant-thinking," Marder argues that even though plants are voiceless, they, just like humans, express themselves spatially (75). To the extent that they physically take up space, they are "spatialized materiality" (75). However, modern Western thought has abstracted plants, reducing them to resources and colorful backdrops. Since flora's spatialized materiality largely goes unacknowledged, what is needed is a spatial reorientation, and this is where transplantment, the movement of plants across space and "out of place," becomes crucial. Plant mobility has the potential to undermine spatial norms and to highlight the spatial materiality of plants, thus emphasizing plants' and humans' shared materiality. Bill Brown argues that objects become things when they either stop working or get in the way of humans; such occurrences alter the relationship between object and subject (3-4).[19] While plants are living beings, they have been taxonomically reduced to objects, but, through spatial reorientation, their materiality can be reasserted. For instance, in encountering Bell's mobile plants or Beitiks's vegetative jogging companion on city streets, people are not only made aware of the normative marginalization of plants, but are also confronted with vegetal materiality. Hence a spatial reorientation can shift the theoretical relationship between plants and people.

Considering that spatialized materiality is shared by all bio-organisms, it is unsurprising that, in its short existence, ecotheater has almost always recognized a need for material, as well as metaphoric, interactions with the environment.[20] Indeed, theater studies as a whole has long

[19] For more on thing theory, see Bill Brown's book *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, and, for more on the theory of actants, see Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*.

[20] See, for instance: Chaudhuri, "'There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake': Toward an Ecological Theater" and May, "Greening the Theater: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage."

attended to spatialized materiality,[21] and Elinor Fuchs and Chaudhuri's edited collection *Land/Scape/Theater* creates an essential intersection between ecotheater and the broader field of theater studies. As always, however, the challenge is how to theorize materiality without abstracting it altogether.[22] I suggest that a focus on new interspecies performance *practices*, like those of Bell, can shift the discursive practices, reorienting and, in some cases, reestablishing relationships between plants and people.

Since animal studies has already suggested many ideas for human and animal engagement, I propose to develop and adapt these ideas, along with those from the broader field of ecocriticism, to explore plant and people interdependency. My primary tools of analysis, however, are the performances of Bell and Beitiks, which both critique plant marginalization and imagine new material practices for nonhuman agency and interspecies connectivity. I begin by analyzing several of Bell's pieces in order to interrogate the constructions of nature/culture and private/public before considering how the performance of an embodied transplantment can alter plant and people relations. I then compare Bell's and Beitiks's work, expanding on the potential modes and applications of transplantment. Lastly, through an examination of one of Beitiks's staged pieces, I consider the need for and the significance of theatrical transplantment. Ultimately, if anything will remind humans of their interdependency with other species, it is material engagement, and thus I turn to performance tactics that stage interactions between people and plants, hands and soil, carbon dioxide and oxygen.

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[21] This material focus was most recently demonstrated in *Theatre Journal*'s October 2012 special issue, "Theatre and Material Culture."

[22] As Karen Barad observes: "It seems that at every turn lately every 'thing'—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation" (801). With regard to ecotheater specifically, Baz Kershaw suggests that "writing about 'performance and nature'" is paradoxical, since both are so enmeshed in daily life; it is "like trying to trace the outline of the writing hand with the pen used in the writing" (*Theatre* 300).

Urban Transplantment

Despite the biological interdependency between plants and people, the latter have not always recognized the symbiotic relationship. Indeed, the domination of nature has a long and sordid history; according to Horkheimer and Adorno, Greco-Roman individualism depended on human dominion, a principle fully embraced by the Enlightenment (Merchant, "Introduction" 16-17). In the United States, industrialization, and now postindustrialization, have further alienated animals and especially plants from humans. This hierarchical divide is materially manifested in cityscapes where plants are largely treated as backdrops to human action. Although attempts to "bring nature into the city" intensified in the twentieth century, in part because of "the newly emerging fields of public hygiene, landscape architecture, and urban planning," nature is still frequently seen as separate from the city[23] and from human activity (Brantz and Dümpelmann 2). Typically added after city infrastructure is already in place, vegetal life is meant to complement and improve human life, without ever complicating it or challenging its spatialized superiority. Take, for instance, the uniform saplings that dot many a US city sidewalk. Often evenly spaced and identical in species and size, these trees have a tendency to fade into the background as pedestrians or drivers hurry past. Despite the fact that trees and other flora make up an integral part of a city's ecology, they are nonetheless sidelined, cast on the periphery of human activity. In order to rethink such constructed divisions between the social and nature, Bruce Braun and Joel Wainwright suggest that we must "question, rather than simply accept, this relationship between ontology and epistemology (which is always *at work*[24] in

[23] The representation of cities as only social spaces is gradually changing, though. As Bruce Braun notes, more urban geographers have begun to address this oversight, often focusing on bringing nature in the city to fore and extending ethical consideration to the more-than-human (635).

[24] Emphasis in original.

Western metaphysics)" (61). Thus, the work of Bell and Beitiks questions the "naturally" assumed marginalization and inferiority of plants; privileging the space and time of plants over that of people, their work supplants human-centric ontologies and creates new epistemologies—new practices and principles—for human and plant relations.

The two artists are certainly not the first to stage encounters between plants and people. Agrarian societies had a long history of performing vegetal rituals, which, as Victor Turner argues, included rites that altered the "quality of *time*," taking participants outside of secular, normative time (24).[25] Industrialization brought an end to such agrarian rites, and, in the United States today, Big Agriculture dominates farming policy. However, since performance itself has the potential to alter the quality of time, it is essential to (re)establishing a relationship between plants and people, both of whom move at different paces and occupy different places. For example, land art attempts to change spatial and temporal norms by making ephemeral art in and out of land. In particular, the land art of the 1960s and '70s created prodigious works in remote Southwestern deserts; by temporarily fusing land and art, these works challenged the perceptions and norms surrounding both. However, whereas land art generally emphasizes the purity, breadth, and ephemerality of nature and art, Bell's and Beitiks's work critiques urbanites' marginalization of flora and suggests new spatial relationships for flora and fauna engagement. Although the two women are not the only contemporary artists to perform with plants in urban ecologies,[26] their use of absurdity and irony distinguishes them from other vegetal artists.

[25] Emphasis in original.

[26] For a fairly comprehensive list of contemporary environmental artists, visit the online museum of environmental art, available at *http://www.greenmuseum.org/*

Plant-Art as Performance

While both Bell and Beitiks deploy comedy to explore and foster relations between plants and humans, I begin with the former because of her dual emphasis on deconstructing species hierarchies and creating new interspecies practices. Formerly based in Boston and now in Seattle, Bell, raised in a family of landscapers, grows her own work. This means that she not only performs her pieces, but also their care; as she puts it, "The maintenance of the artwork is a performance in itself" ("Re"). Some of her pieces analyzed here, like *Portable Lawn* and *Personal Biosphere*, are site-specific performances where artist and plant navigate both busy city streets and quiet neighborhoods, directly undermining the binary between private and public, "plant" space and "people" space. Others, like *Personal Landscapes* and *A Pack of Forests*, are installations, yet their performance is implied through their spatial arrangement.

However, the most important performance in both the site-specific pieces and the installations is the performance of care. Before Bell's work is shown in a venue, the artist asks staff members to sign adoption papers, formally committing themselves to the care of the plant-art. This performance of care builds interdependence between plant and person, even as the performance of ironic and absurd transplantments exposes humans' marginalization of plants. Thus Bell simultaneously undermines hierarchical taxonomies and builds flora and fauna relationships, making a crucial, twofold intervention into species separatism. However, since change often begins with rethinking old practices before creating new ones, I first consider the deconstruction of private and public space and flora marginalization before turning to embodied interspecies performance practices.

Shopping-Cart Performances

In order to expose the binary between private and public flora, I begin with Bell's 2002–03 series *Portable Environments*, which includes several pieces, all of them featuring plants grown in shopping carts. While most of the pieces were eventually shown in a gallery,[27] they began as filmed performances in which the artist wheeled the shopping-cart plants throughout the city of Boston. In each piece, flora, in several feet of dirt, fills the cart entirely, straining against the metal, thus demonstrating that it was grown in the shopping cart rather than placed inside of it fully grown. The fusion of the stereotypically natural flora and the cultural, urbanized shopping cart blurs boundaries between nature and culture, even as the transplantment of *Portable Environments* contests the strict separation between public and private space. By planting decorative lawns and trees, representative of an urban longing for suburbia, in shopping carts, which are more likely to be seen abandoned on city streets than at stores, Bell pairs a symbol of rootedness with one of transience.

Transversing spatial demarcations of public and private streets with her *Portable Environments*, she speaks to a common problem in American cities: that of limited and unequal access to flora. As she pushes her shopping-cart plants down both relatively green and entirely barren streets, Bell and her portable environments call attention to the larger environment and its management. For instance, the strict organization of public greenery—be it around a park, street, public university, school, or courthouse—and its maintenance may only be conducted by official, approved gardeners.[28] Furthermore, while some city dwellers are fortunate enough to have their

[27] Many of the pieces were shown in a 2003 exhibit, *Portable Garden*, at the Green Street Gallery in Boston.

[28] Certainly, this is not to say that city plants should not be grown or maintained, but rather that they should be made more integral to city life and that their care should be shared.

own private gardens, many others are not. Thus their engagement with plants is limited to observation and aesthetic appreciation, assuming that they have ready access to public parks. Socio-environmental injustices tend to be compounded, however, whereby people with the least amount of personal land often also have the least amount of public land in their neighborhoods, further decreasing the odds of interspecies engagement between people and plants. As urban geographer Edward Soja insists, "[j]ustice and injustice are infused into the multiscalar geographies in which we live," and they create "lasting structures of unevenly distributed advantage and disadvantage" (20). Although there has been a recent surge in innovative gardening practices,[29] spatialized and multilayered environmental injustices mean that working-class neighborhoods, often highly de-industrialized, are cut off from flora and, with it, clean air.[30]

One of the *Portable Environments* that particularly highlights this spatialized injustice is *Portable Lawn*. In the documented performance, Bell vigorously pushes a metal shopping cart uphill; the cart is filled with dirt out of which sprouts unruly grass. Around half of the cart's perimeter, Bell has placed a three-inch white picket fence, through which some of the grass grows. The conventional fence gestures to the privatization of land, but also undermines it by only marking off half of the lawn. Most significant of all, however, is where Bell travels with the *Portable Lawn*: through a Boston neighborhood with identical white houses, each with a uniform front yard featuring only trimmed grass and two shrubs. Each house's patch of grass is guarded by a matching two-foot fence. The black, arched, iron-grate fencing appears to be more of an

[29] For example, in the wake of the 2008 recession, community gardens have sprung up in abandoned lots vacated during the height of the recession. Detroit, one of the cities hardest hit by the economic crisis, has seen a huge growth in community gardens. For more on this, see Mark Bittman's "Imagining Detroit."

[30] Environmental justice scholarship has worked to expose the underlying connections between environmental degradation and race. For a fairly comprehensive overview of the movement, see Adamson.

aesthetic choice than a protective one, yet it nonetheless serves to mark the yards as private property. The houses' front lawns, like so many throughout the country, are nondescript and unremarkable; they are ubiquitous sights that have become part of a pernicious urban monoculture. Bell's mobile lawn, with its tall, uneven blades of grass and visible roots, stands in stark contrast to the stationary lawns, with their stubby, homogenized grass and buried roots. With ironic absurdity, Bell juxtaposes her *Portable Lawn* with the houses' unportable lawns in order to question the seeming normalcy of the latter and to raise public awareness about an otherwise invisible monoculture.

This monoculture has been tracked by Paul Robbins and Julie Sharp, who note that grass coverage of lawns is still increasing in the United States and with it so also is the use of pesticides and fertilizers (111).[31] The pervasiveness of lawns, as well as the massive amounts of chemicals and water needed to keep them in a monocultural condition, goes unquestioned, causing the lawn to be largely "viewed as a cultural artifact, rather than a political or economic one" (Robbins and Sharp 112). Lawns are commonplace, so much so that they only attract attention when they are not well-maintained—when they are overgrown, sparse, or yellowing—or, in the case of *Portable Lawn*, when they are taken out of their usual context and location. Because lawns only receive attention when they are out of order, they are often viewed aesthetically rather than politically. Robbins and Sharp argue, however, that urban monoculture is part of a political economy through which homeowners become "turfgrass subjects," not only subject to the influence of global chemical companies and to the judgment of their neighbors, but also subject to the lawn itself, "whose essential ecology is high maintenance, fussy, and energy

[31] More recently, Michael T. Hernke and Rian J. Podein argue that although the majority of Americans have expressed interest in environmentally friendly lawn care, "aesthetic norms and the lobbying power of the lawn care industry" combine to maintain high pesticide usage in the United States (228).

demanding" (122).[32] Thus while cities' lands may technically be getting greener, they are actually becoming more normative and more harmful to the environment.

Perhaps most problematic to interspecies performance is the fact that the chemicals used to maintain the monochromatic purity of lawns also keep people from interacting with them in any meaningful way. Chemical flags and "Keep off the grass" signage discourage people from approaching lawns, let alone touching or smelling them. University and courthouse lawns are often delicately roped off like museum pieces, while most private lawns are more often than not fenced off, reinforcing the fact that they are on private property and that any public engagement with them will be deemed trespassing. If, however, the size and maintenance of one's lawn is meant to represent one's financial and geographical security, then Bell's work threatens such middle-class measurements of stability, supplanting them with roaming plants; transplanting that which is most meant to represent an established place, *Portable Lawn* exposes lawn monoculture and, with its half-fence, mocks the strict privatization of lawns.

Other pieces from *Portable Environments* also emphasize the urban transplantment of flora, but, in addition, they highlight the seasonality of various plant species. For example, in *Portable Tree,* Bell, flushed and tired by the summer heat, slumps on the base of a streetlight. Next to her, a healthy sapling extends nearly five feet above its shopping cart, its leaves shadowing a nearby parking meter. *Portable Forest*, meanwhile, takes place during winter in Boston; Bell, bundled in a puffy coat and a hat, strenuously pushes a shopping-cart fir tree through slush and puddles, forcefully turning the cart to cross the pedestrian lane. The fir, sparse but green, unevenly extends outward, its branches on one side nearly twice as long as those on the other side. The fir's verdancy and unique dimensions, highlighted against the snow-splattered

[32] Robbins and Sharp are careful to note that the lawn does not operate outside of its own construction, but rather plays a powerful role in producing the monocultural economy.

tarred streets and concrete sidewalks, suggest an alternate ecology, one in which uniform winter trees are not chopped down for short-lived Christmas celebrations, but are maintained as long-term urban companions. Performed in all locales and weather, *Portable Environments* defies spatial and temporal norms that dictate where plants should grow and when people should engage with them.

Performing both care and artistry, Bell grows seasonal plants that will thrive in particular conditions; thus the deciduous *Portable Tree* appears in the summer months, and the coniferous *Portable Forest* in the winter. However, although Bell does not alter the seasonality of plants, she nonetheless stages an alternate ecology by engaging with plants in extreme temperatures. As countless songs and poems attest, spring is typically the season for planting and, by extension, interacting with flora. By playing with plants in harsh weather, Bell contests humans' limited seasonal engagement with them. Despite perspiring in the summer and shivering in the winter, she takes the portable environments with her on city jaunts, thus performing a year-round interaction with them; not only does Bell bring seasonally marginalized plants to the fore, she also makes the most rooted flora—trees—mobile. If lawns are symbolic of middle-class stability, trees are symbolic of longevity. Often pressed against buildings and surrounded by concrete, city trees tend to go unobserved, at least until one of their branches falls or one of their roots cracks the concrete. In *Portable Tree* and *Portable Forest*, however, the trees loom over their shopping carts; comically large in contrast to their containers, the trees take center stage in the cityscape.

With her portable environments, which appear where least expected, Bell exposes naturalized representations of flora that cast plants in background roles. According to Chaudhuri, theater's marginalization of nature can be traced back to nineteenth-century naturalism, which instilled anti-ecological practices still prevalent today. However, she argues that "by making

space on its stage for ongoing acknowledgments of the rupture it participates in—the rupture between nature and culture . . .—the theater can become the site of a much-needed ecological consciousness" ("There" 28). Not only does Bell highlight the constructed ruptures between nature and culture and public and private spaces, but she also creates a rupture of her own: the sight of her and *Portable Environments* traversing the city in all weather directly upsets normative representations of gardens as fixed, stationary, and rooted. Presenting decorative flora in unusual circumstances, the artist ruptures rather than restores binaries of nature/culture and public/private and, in that sense, her work may be reflective of what geographer Maria Kaika calls the "urban uncanny"—moments when the supposedly natural makes an unexpected appearance in domesticated spaces (51).[33] The urban uncanny in Bell's work pops up, for instance, when *Portable Tree* brushes a parking meter or when the artist waits to cross a busy intersection with *Portable Forest*. *Portable Environments* is just that—its pieces travel across demarcated spaces of public and private, natural and cultural. Whereas humans imagine themselves moving from one environment to another, Bell's shopping-cart plants transplant urban environments, and are themselves environments.

Although some homeowners have begun converting their lawns to more water and energy efficient mixed landscapes, public spaces for material interaction between plants and people continue to vanish. As ecocritic Catriona Sandilands observes: "The loss of a public realm for ecological discussion signals the loss of the place where we might come to understand ourselves as ecological citizens rather than as managerial subjects or disciplined objects" (222). The sight of Bell and *Portable Environments* traveling along Boston streets may initially seem absurd, but it also may lead one to consider why such a sight seems bizarre. The shopping-cart pieces not

[33] Although Kaika is particularly concerned with water and the "urban uncanny"—for instance, the way in which a leaky toilet can bring the "outside" "inside"—the term might also apply to other material ruptures that expose the dichotomy between nature and culture.

only signal a loss of an ecological commons—a space in which flora and fauna can interact—but they also create transitory environments for ecological exchange between diverse bio-organisms.

On the most practical level, Bell's performance recycles abandoned shopping carts, turning discarded signs of neglect into mobile homes for plants. Insomuch as plants are typically defined by their lack of locomotion—their inability to move from one place to another—Bell grants her portable pieces a greater degree of physical agency.[34] While the plants still depend on the artist to move them, just as they depend on her for daily care, their mobility destabilizes accepted definitions of plants as fixed, rooted, and instituted. Biologically, plants have always been a crucial part of their ecologies, but, as the portable shopping carts travel through multifarious environments, they perform and signify new practices of interspecies interdependency. Thus even as *Portable Environments* critiques urban monoculture and plant marginalization, it also gestures toward a new interspecies performance practice.

Transplanting Taxonomies

Bell's *Portable Environments* is not the artist's only series to both deconstruct and reimagine human and plant relations. However, whereas *Portable Environments* transplants flora across public and private space, the gallery installations *Personal Landscapes: Desert, Crag, Lawn* (2005–06) and *A Pack of Forests* (2008) transplant flora from the vegetal plane to the animal plane. The two related pieces feature leashed, decorative plants, ranging in size from miniature to small, attached to dolly wheels. The leashed plants look as though they are awaiting walks, thereby linking their domestication to that of pet animals, species traditionally walked by humans. Like *Portable Environments*, *Personal Landscapes* and *A Pack of Forests* parody the

[34] The online versions of both The Free Dictionary and the Merriam-Webster dictionary describe plants as lacking locomotive movement. Although "locomotion" is often defined as the ability to move from place to place, it can also be defined as the "act" of moving.

ways in which culture and nature have been historically represented as separate, oppositional entities. However, the pieces also destabilize the human/animal/plant triad and its ranked taxonomy; thus they build on *Portable Environments*, suggesting not only that plants can transplant fixed spatial boundaries, but that they can also transplant nominalistic boundaries. Even as they undermine the commodification of plants (and, subsequently, animals), Bell's leashed pieces also figure as what Haraway calls "companion species," gesturing toward a performative exchange between people and plants (*When* 7).

Both *Personal Landscapes* and *A Pack of Forests* consist of plants in wheeled trays made of wood or porcelain. Although Bell has, at times, taken the pieces for city walks and invited gallery visitors to do likewise, this particular artistic iteration only *implies* mobility, capturing the plants in a pre-movement moment. Nonetheless, the performance of caring for the plants and the careful framing of the plant art are performances all their own, evidenced by the precise staging of both pieces. For instance, *Personal Landscapes* features five transportable plants: the three largest are leashed closest to the gallery wall while the two smaller plants, which are no more than four inches by two inches, trail behind.[35] The largest tray contains diverse cacti surrounded by desert stones, and, unlike the smaller pieces, it has large wheels that extend beyond the plant's base, not unlike monster wheels. The deep tire tread, combined with the metal frame and chain-link leash, suggests a sturdy, mobile plant that is prepared for all kinds of terrains. In contrast, the four other plants' wheels are neatly tucked underneath their trays and their leashes are made of colorful cloth. For instance, the middle box contains tall grass and has a vibrant purple leash; attached to the grass are hot pink leashes hitched to the two miniature boxes, which also contain grass. The three matching mobile plants—the larger one ahead of the other two, the two smaller

[35] The piece was part of a January 2006 Seattle exhibit at SOIL gallery.

ones following directly behind—evoke any animal or human leading its young. The final plant, a mixture of crag and moss, is shaped like a shaggy Yorkshire terrier alertly awaiting its walk.

On the one hand, the title of the piece, *Personal Landscapes*, suggests a parody of humanist attempts to classify and dominate nature. Although the term "landscape" has been helpful in acknowledging human construction of the land, it has contrarily strengthened the divide between humans and the land, prioritizing intellectual conceptualization over material engagement. As ecofeminist Val Plumwood argues, "[t]o describe the land as a 'landscape' is to privilege the visual over other, more rounded and embodied ways of knowing the land" (123). It is to suggest that the land can be surveyed and encompassed, and adding the word "personal" to the term "landscape" goes even further, insinuating that land can be owned, appropriated, privatized. Inviting "virtual and idealist approaches to the land" (123), landscape terminology[36] often abstracts the very materiality it seeks to contextualize.[37] Thus combined with the leashes, Bell's title gently mocks human ownership and dominion of the land.

On the other hand, the phrase "personal landscapes" can refer not only to private ownership of the land, but also to private, or intimate, experiences of it. As Bell herself says: "I guess what I'm really interested in is landscape but not just landscape as a concept, that's something in the distance, but as a physical reality that humans are intimately connected to. I'm interested in the way the work can sort of reinforce that connection or make us aware of that

[36] It is important to note that Plumwood is most critical of cultural landscape studies, although she also finds the solitary term "landscape" problematic.

[37] For instance, although Fuchs and Chaudhuri regard "landscape" as a useful mediation between theatre and the world and between space and place, they also "acknowledge certain significant discontinuities and occlusions within the assumptions attached to the idea of landscape," and thus break up the term in their book's title, *Land/Scape/Theater* 2–3.

connection in a different way."[38] Both *Personal Landscapes* and *A Pack of Forests* stage an alternate connection between people and plants, one in which the latter, for better or for worse, are compared to animals. If the leashes alone do not make this analogy evident, the crag and moss plant in the shape of a terrier certainly does. By directly placing plants in the role of companion animals, Bell not only stages an interspecies landscape, but also subverts the hierarchical landscape of human/animal/plant. However, just as the term "landscape" is both problematic and productive, so also is the comparison of plants to animals.

Because plants have been so marginalized, their comparison to animals is, in one sense, a promotion. Of course, this is not to say that plants are in any way inferior to animals, or humans for that matter, but rather that they have been taxonomically and practically treated as such. Meanwhile, human regard for companion animals has only intensified in the last century, to the point that pets are integral members of families, sometimes even replacements for spouses and children. Indeed, the immense popularity of companion animals in urban New York has led Roberta Olson and Kathleen Hulser to call the city a "petropolis" (133-43). Urban canine and feline companions, in particular, have increasingly been treated like humans—given organic food, traditionally human names like Paul and Molly, and luxurious stays at pet hotels (Nast 894).[39] Bell's evocative *Personal Landscapes* considers what it might be like if plants were treated as lovingly as companion animals. What if humans rushed home from work to play with their plants, to take them for neighborhood walks, to feed them only organic food? How might this performance of care bring plants from the periphery of human thought to the center? For instance, the three grass plants in *Personal Landscapes* may be interpreted as a broad sketch of

[38] See *http://kqed02.streamguys.us/anon.kqed/topics/arts/gallery-crawl/0908-gallerycrawl.m4v* (accessed 28 December 2012).

[39] In light of the growing pet industry, Nast suggests that a new geographical discipline, "critical pet studies," is needed.

family, a grouping of the same flora in varying sizes. The miniature trays of unruly lawn, in contrast to the larger tray, imply an ecological vulnerability and a greater need for personal attention and care. Likewise, beyond linking the domestication of plants to that of animals, the dog-shaped crag and moss can foster the same awareness and concern for minerals and flora that are typically only bestowed on household animals.

And yet, by linking plant and animal care, Bell also highlights the species' mutual subjugation. Animal studies has considered the anthropomorphism and commodification of animals for quite some time, and much of its findings apply to the "pet" plants in *Personal Landscapes* and *A Pack of Forests*. For example, of all the animals that humans encounter, a staggering 98 percent are not companion animals, but farmed animals intended for human consumption (Wolfson and Sullivan 206). Thus even as canines and felines receive increasingly more protective rights, most animals continue to go entirely unprotected. Linking plants to animals, then, does not necessarily afford them more ethical consideration. Similarly, just because companion animals are pampered does not automatically mean that they have more agency than marginalized plants; in fact, it may mean quite the opposite. As much as the term "companion animal" suggests an egalitarian relationship between humans and animals, the leashes in *Personal Landscapes* and *A Pack of Forests* expose the underbelly of pet domestication. This is colorfully highlighted in *Personal Landscapes* with hot pink, purple, black, and silver leashes, each of which seems to match its plant: the delicately thin pink leashes are attached to the miniature boxes of grass; the thicker purple leash is attached to the larger box of grass; the heavy, chain-link leash is attached to the tray of rugged cacti; and the black leash is attached to the black-and-brown moss-terrier. By complementing the plants with coordinating leashes, which are symbolic of the floras' domestication, Bell comically undermines the

infantilization of both companion plants and animals. As Chaudhuri cautions, "the anthropomorphic and infantilizing mass-cultural discourse on animals" casts animals as "'just like us, only cuter'" ("Animal" 512). Thus while treating animals and, in Bell's pieces, plants like miniature humans may result in better care for both, it also refuses to acknowledge nonhumans on their own terms as simultaneously connected to and distinct from humans.

At the same time, *A Pack of Forests* warns that, unless flora gains the protection and care that has been afforded to companion animals, there will soon be no more forests left at all. As in *Personal Landscapes*, the 2008 piece features several mobile plants, all of them leashed to a gallery wall. Unlike the earlier piece, however, *A Pack of Forests* consists of eight plants, all of them the same variety and all of them in identical fifty by thirty by forty-four inch trays. Six of the plants are in a horizontal line, with two trailing behind them, and, as in *Personal Landscapes*, the plants all seem to alertly and eagerly await something. However, whereas in the first piece Bell's animalization playfully mocks the commodification of plants awaiting their walk, her animalization in the second suggests that the "forests" are awaiting a much more ominous event—extinction.

Ironically, *A Pack of Forests* features no trees and no raised plants that might be mistaken for trees; instead, flat, uniform moss fills each container. The piece thus speaks to tenuous forest regulations, which, if not continually upheld, will leave places like the Amazon rainforest as stripped as Bell's forests.[40] Even as *A Pack of Forests* parodies human attempts to miniaturize and appropriate vast forests, it warns that, if flora continues to be treated solely as a resource for humans, we may just succeed in consuming it altogether.

[40] Susanna B. Hecht et al. argues that a monolithic, apocalyptic narrative of forest deforestation has dominated popular consciousness for decades when, in reality, there has been much forest recovery and resurgence (1-2). However, even though Brazil, for instance, has finally begun protecting its rainforest, with the rate of deforestation dropping by 80 percent during the last six years, there are reasons to suspect that political regulations will once again become lax (Barrionuevo).

However, while *Personal Landscapes* and *A Pack of Forests* critique plant exploitation and domestication, they also transplant stereotypical human/animal/plant taxonomies. Each of the pieces is on a leash and attached to a wheeled mechanism and is thus not only reminiscent of an animal, but also a cyborg. Exceeding taxonomical boundaries, Bell's plant art is made up of multiple organic and inorganic substances that cannot be limited to one fixed category. More recently, Haraway has turned to "companion species," of which cyborgs are "junior siblings" (*Companion* 11). Unlike the term "companion animal," however, the term "companion species" is heterogeneous enough to include flora, fauna, and minerals, and, like the cyborg, it offers the potential for ongoing interspecies hybridity. As Haraway writes, "The [interspecies] partners do not precede the meeting; species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters" (*When* 4). By combining plant, animal, machine, and mineral (the stones around the desert cacti), Bell subverts hierarchical, hermetic categorizations, insisting instead on multiple, ongoing interspecies relationalities. Transplanting normative species' divisions, *Personal Landscapes* and *A Pack of Forests* blur the lines between where one species ends and another begins. Thus the two pieces not only parody human appropriation and domestication of plants, but they also stage a new interspecies hybridity that undermines the fixity of the human/animal/plant triad.

From Deconstructive Transplantment to Embodied Transplantment

The analysis of Bell's work up to this point has focused on the satirical deconstruction of nature/culture, public/private, and human/animal/plant; it has highlighted the mobile transplantment in *Portable Environments* and the taxonomical transplantment in *Personal Landscapes* and *A Pack of Forests*. While all of Bell's work simultaneously subverts plant norms

and performs new interspecies interactions, I have thus far largely focused on the former in order to first undermine existing practices before imagining new ones. Now, however, I turn to embodied interspecies practices, for, as Wendy Arons points out, "[w]hat 'nature' is, and how we relate to it, may be discursively constructed, but no matter how we apprehend that nature, there are in fact real ecological systems that are affected by material action (or non-action)" by humans (150). In the performances previously analyzed, all of the plants have apparatuses that assist their mobility, but also physically separate them from people; the shopping-cart handles and the leashes allow humans to push and pull wheeled plants, but they create distance between the two as well. In the following performances, however, human and plant are materially merged. In the first, which is a series of plant biospheres, people are transplanted instead of plants; human heads are surrounded by glass domes filled with various flora. This inverted transplantment places flora at center stage, quite literally encompassing humans and facilitating an up-close and personal interspecies sensorial exchange. In the next and last piece, *Garment for Flora–Fauna Relationship*, flora is transplanted to the human body, suggesting a strategy for extended material exchange between plants and people. Together, these pieces stage innovative alternate ecologies and embodied practices for interspecies interaction.

Biospheres for Plant and People Permeability

If Bell's mobile plants act as portable companions, her biospheres create alternate ecologies in which plants and humans are on the same material plane. Such ecologies are crucial, given that cultural studies' spatial shift in the last few decades has tended to focus on the comings and goings of humans in space, rather than the environmental changes within space. In terms of theater studies in particular, Chaudhuri notes an overemphasis on humans' "ecological

transit," their moves to and from environments with which they are "utterly and irremediably at odds" (*Staging* 82). How environments themselves shift and move is rarely of any consequence except inasmuch as they inconvenience or uproot humans. So busy are humans passing through, fleeing, or fighting their environments—with which they are irrevocably connected—that, even though space can speak, it is uncommon for humans to stand still long enough to listen (May "Greening" 96).

In response to such postmodern haste, Bell has designed several biospheres over the last decade, some of which include *Portable Personal Biosphere* (2003–04), *Biosphere Built for Two* (2006), *Village Green* (2008), and *Metropolis* (2012). Each biosphere houses a variety of moss and, in the larger pieces, ferns. All of the pieces are made of clear glass, but *Portable Personal Biosphere* is spherically shaped and has one hole in its base for a human head, while the others are rectangularly shaped and have between two and four holes for heads. The larger pieces, which are too cumbersome for mobility, have been hung from gallery ceilings so that visitors can stand with their heads inside a piece and their bodies outside.[41] Bell's biospheres allow just enough space for people to peek their heads in—there is no room for head-turning, let alone for arms. Made stationary by all of the pieces (with the exception of the *Portable Personal Biosphere*), human visitors to the biospheres have nowhere to go; surrounded by flora that they might otherwise never notice, they have little choice but to fully acknowledge the plants that now loom large at their eye level. In the biospheres, the encompassing moss is magnified as the human body is transplanted, stilled, and minimized.

Unlike Biosphere 2, the prodigious glass ark completed in 1991, Bell's biospheres are not made to human scale, but to moss scale. The Biosphere 2 project began because of an interest in

[41] Most recently, *Village Green* was exhibited at Lycoming College Gallery in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, in 2009.

human preservation and, as Baz Kershaw points out, it "has been seen as a metaphor for human survival against all the odds produced by the human animal" (*Theatre* 318). By shaping her biospheres for moss rather than people, Bell privileges the former over the latter. Whereas Biosphere 2 was created as a place for humans to study and classify diverse organisms and environments, Bell's pieces are places for plants; humans are welcome to visit, but the biospheres are not able to wholly or permanently accommodate them. As Bell writes in her "real estate" description of *Biosphere for Two*: "Inhabitants: moss of various species, humans at times." The human heads are temporarily transplanted to the realm of the plants, which physically and ideologically take center stage.

Typical of Bell's work, the biospheres convey a double meaning: on the one hand, they are facetiously commodified, advertised as vacation getaways far "from the crowds and noise;" on the other, they are miniature worlds that imagine a greener and more intimate engagement with flora. For instance, with regard to *Portable Personal Biosphere*, Bell claims that "[a]s you walk, even down a busy sidewalk, you will have the sensation that you are looking out over a green horizon." Even as she employs the playful tone of a saleswoman, mocking human desire to miniaturize and possess nature, Bell also envisions a more egalitarian relationship between vegetal life and people. Spatially inverting the plants' position, she places them on humans' visual level rather than at ground level. Enclosed in the biospheres, human visitors become more physically attuned to the varieties of moss and their specific environment—the moss's dips and swells and the beads of moisture that gradually form on the glass as plants and people exchange gases. These subtle environmental changes, detected by senses that are temporarily fixed in place rather than traveling to and fro, reveal the undeniable ways in which "place and person are

permeable" (May, "Greening" 94). Their exposed orifices surrounded by plants, visitors to the biospheres are sensorially attuned and turned to the plants' materiality.

This figurative and literal turn to plants resonates with Haraway's definition of nature as both a *topos*—a "place," or rather a "commonplace"—and a *tropos*—a "trope" or "turn" ("Otherworldly" 67). It is a *topos* in that it is a discursive place where conversants may find common ground with which "to rebuild public cultures," but it is also a *tropos,* a "figure, construction, artifact, movement, displacement" (67). In that *tropos* means to "turn," Haraway argues that humans and nonhumans alike must turn toward the earth to articulate new, expanded understandings of nature, creating commonplaces that can lead to otherworlds. Bell's biospheres are places unto themselves, tropes of larger ecologies; they create miniature environments in which plants are central and, in the case of *Portable Personal Biosphere*, also traverse other environments. It is in these biospheres where, ironically, humans cannot turn their heads away from plants and must instead turn toward new conceptions of them; in particular, the shared biospheres like *Metropolis*, which can accommodate four human heads at once, offer a commonplace for new performance practices between humans and flora. Physically forced to stop turning away from flora, humans are temporarily transplanted from human time and place to plant time and place; the human and plant hierarchy momentarily displaced, the biodiverse species can begin to physically sense a more egalitarian Otherworld.

Toward an Interspecies Performance

We have explored plants as mobile environments, companion species, and sensorial ecologies, and now I turn to embodied performance in Bell's *Garment for Flora–Fauna Relationship* (2006). Although the piece is not perfect, at times gendering artist and plant alike, it

is an embodied interspecies performance that has the potential to stimulate more egalitarian interspecies practices. Like the artist's biospheres, it stages an inter-embodied relationship whereby plant and person are physically joined; however, unlike the biospheres, which can only temporarily house human heads, *Garment* allows for an extended interspecies exchange. Wearing a dress with a pouch at the chest for a bonsai plant and a side pouch for a water spritzer, Bell becomes hyperaware of the gaseous exchange that occurs between plants, which take up carbon dioxide for photosynthesis,[42] and humans, who require the oxygen released during photosynthesis. While people and plants exchange gases every day, humans have often ignored and abused this relationship, but the garment puts the two species in close enough proximity that they can quite literally exchange gases. The interaction is not only material, though, but also metaphorical, in that the relationship is a microcosmic metonym for the macrocosmic gaseous exchange in which nearly all living organisms participate. Necessitating a material engagement between flora and fauna, *Garment* upsets taxonomical hierarchies by performing a relationship between humans and plants based on reciprocity rather than subjugation.

At the same time, though, while *Garment* offers a prime example of materialized interspecies exchange, its embodiment is also highly gendered.[43] Bell, an integral half of the performance piece, wears a dusty rose smock over jeans, and the plant rests in a pouch just above the artist's uterus. Thus, even as the piece fosters interspecies interdependency, it relies on notions of motherhood and maternal care to bolster the exchange. Based on the performance text that accompanies *Garment*, it is clear that Bell hopes to minimize the piece's association with motherhood by sewing the plant's pocket at chest-level: "It is a nice feeling to have another

[42] Photosynthesis is the process whereby plants convert light energy into chemical energy; this energy is synthesized from carbon dioxide and water to create carbohydrate molecules that can be used or stored by plants.

[43] I am grateful to Petra Kuppers for her insight on the piece's maternal aspects.

being resting on your chest, just above where your diaphragm rises and falls" (*Garment*). However, such associations are inevitable given the plant's general vicinity, the artist's own sex, and the piece's emphasis on nurture. For instance, although Bell highlights the biologically necessary exchange of gases between the two species, she also provides a water spritzer pocket "in order for you to care for your dependent," thereby echoing a long patriarchal history in which women and nature were interchangeably cast as feminine caregivers (*Garment*). As Carolyn Merchant argues, the representation of both women and nature as "naturally" nurturing caregivers on one hand and wild, uncontrollably "natural" forces on the other persisted up until the Scientific Revolution, when man sought to master nature through mechanization (*End* 1-2). "Subdued by the machine," earth could now be reduced from an organism to a resource to be drained, pumped, cracked, quarried, and fracked far more than had been possible before the Scientific Revolution (*End* Merchant 2-3).

In harkening back to a pre-modern era in which women and nature are both represented as maternal caregivers, Bell successfully reasserts earth's materiality, its ontology as organism rather than scientific object, but, at the same time, she also reasserts an essentialized view of women and nature. This conundrum is a frequent one for ecofeminists, many of whom want to reestablish respect for the environment as a living organism without reinscribing the essentialist domination and conflation of women and nature. In considering how women may care about the environment without reinforcing their patriarchal image as naturally maternalistic and caring, Catriona Sandilands argues that "it is vital that the ethics of care be raised as a potential part of a common world to which all actors might find relation" (226). In other words, rather than women de-essentializing their association with nature by disregarding the environment entirely, *all* people must foster a sense of "ecological citizenship," (225) whereby we "consider ourselves

accountable to others whom we may not know," be they human, animal, or environmental others (231). Although *Garment* stresses accountability to flora dependents, as well as recognition of human dependency on plants, it lacks a diverse "ecological citizenship." By failing to depict a variety of bodies in the garment, the piece unintentionally reaffirms women's naturalized role as caregivers, while also casting the plant as an infantilized dependent. A simple solution to this unintended essentialization is to depict more sexually and racially diverse bodies in the garment and to better highlight the plant's own contribution to the relationship; this would not only allow a greater number of participants to directly interact with the plant but would also offer a more varied, interspecies representation of ecological citizenship.

However, since Bell's work is always both a material exchange and a cultural critique, *Garment* may parody both the stereotype of women as natural caregivers and the stereotype of plants as infants wholly dependent on humans. Indeed, the choice of a bonsai, a miniature tree heavily managed and restricted to provide aesthetic pleasure to humans, undercuts the piece's titular suggestion of egalitarian exchange. As the artist explains, "Bonsai are cute. These altered, manipulated trees are miniaturized in such a way as to make them humanly controlled, captives to aesthetics. At the same time, their cultivation is a kind of worship, or at least fetishizing, of natural forms and natural processes" (*Wasabi*). Since humans treasure anything that is child-like, Bell creates "a baby bonsai carrier," the dress's plant pouch, to parody the miniaturization of plants and to take the infantilizing impulse to uterine extremes (*Wasabi*). In this sense, *Garment* is akin to *Personal Landscapes* and other Bell pieces in its satire of vegetative dominion. Highlighting the irony of a worship of "natural forms" that leads horticultural artists to fussily manipulate bonsai, Bell asks viewers to consider the limits of plant micro-management. At what

point does the bonsai become more of an aesthetic object for human enjoyment than a living organism?

By placing plant and person in one garment, Bell resists the bonsai's normative representation as *objet'd'art*. What may begin as a gendered or infantilized relationship can grow into a more egalitarian exchange as the two species learn to share an intimate space—a human body—and to negotiate how they will move and sit together. The human must adapt herself to accommodate the presence, needs, and characteristics of the plant; she must consider how much water to give the bonsai and at what time to give it. Daily variables like access to sunlight and weather conditions all play a role in such a determination, but, unlike most gardeners, the artist may feel the plant's dampness or dryness against her own skin. Thus, she acquires an embodied and experiential knowledge of the plant rather than just an intellectual knowledge. Likewise, the bonsai is also altered by the experience, growing and releasing oxygen at different rates than it would elsewhere. Bell's hopeful claim, then, that "[t]he garment enables flora and fauna to more closely mirror each other's lifestyles" is indeed possible; given enough time, the garment gradually changes both its inhabitants as they learn to coexist (*Garment*). Thus, while the *Garment for Flora-Fauna Relationship* draws on a long history of conflating women and nature as maternal caregivers, it also suggests that, through an extended, close interaction with plants, humans may eventually take on some characteristics of flora rather than only impose their own.

Perhaps most importantly, Bell performs a material transplantment in her garment that comes close to fusing plant and person. The plant is wrapped in the same cloth that she herself is in, and it rests close to her diaphragm, which expands and contracts with every inhale and exhale. Even if she wanted to, Bell cannot forget the plant and its needs, just as, with every breath, she cannot forget that plants enable her own ability to breathe. As Stacy Alaimo writes,

science and environmental ethics are changed by the awareness that "'the environment' is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves" (4). *Garment* creates such awareness, quite literally materializing plant and human interconnectivity. In 1974, Henri Lefebvre warned that nature is "becoming lost to *thought*," to metaphor and fiction (31). However, Bell's transplantment of flora from the margins of the city to the center of the human body also transplants flora from the abstract plane of human thought to the material plane.

Wherever the artist goes, the bonsai goes, too. As she does in *Portable Environments* and *Portable Personal Biosphere*, Bell might take the plant on city jaunts: across streets, by rowhouse lawns, and through parking lots, thereby continuing to upset constructions of plant space versus people space. However, in that the plant is attached to the artist as long as the garment is worn, allowing the two to exchange gases indefinitely, Bell and the bonsai perform an extended, materialized interspecies exchange, both out on city streets and inside the artist's home. Thus, the interaction between the plant and the artist is not limited to public spaces,[44] like a city street or a gallery, where the two performers almost always have an audience, but continues into intimate spaces and moments. The longer the performative exchange continues, the more likely the plant is to not only temporarily transplant personal, spatial boundaries but to also permanently transplant taxonomical, hierarchized divisions. As plant and person negotiate space, air, and movement, both are changed by the experience. Thus, through eco-performances like *Garment*, which create a space of exchange between biodiverse species, notions of human dominion are not only deconstructed, but also *supplanted* by the recognition of mutual dependence.

[44] I use the word "public" here very loosely. It is of course important to note that not all spaces that are called "public" are open to all equally.

Bell and Beitiks at Play

Thus far, I have focused on Bell's work, which simultaneously critiques plant miniaturization and fosters plant and human relationships. In order to expand the applications of transplantment, though, I turn now to Oakland-based plant performance artist Meghan "Moe" Beitiks, whose work seeks to remedy flora marginalization by setting plants front and center. The two artists have much in common: both are white women with Masters of Fine Arts degrees—Bell in Inter-related Media and Beitiks in Live Art—and both utilize humor to strengthen interspecies interdependency between plants and people, particularly in cityscapes. However, Beitiks expands the applications of transplantment in two crucial ways. First, the fact that many of her pieces take place in racially diverse cities like Chicago and Oakland and are often performed outside of rather than within galleries allows for more diverse audiences and participants. While Bell works both within and outside of galleries,[45] she often exhibits pieces in Boston and Seattle, two cities in which more than half of the population is white.[46] Second, although both artists' work is highly performative, Beitiks' pieces, particularly *The Plant is Present*, directly consider the responsibilities and significance of performance to transplantment. Thus, Beitiks's work not only complements Bell's plant-art but also allows for further consideration of the different modes and potentiality for transplantment within theater and performance studies.

The artists' subtly divergent comedic styles also highlight different aspects of transplantment: where Bell deploys irony, Beitiks deploys goofy playfulness. Where the former's

[45] One of Bell's pieces not discussed here does in fact allow for varied interaction between people and plants. In *Pocket Biospheres for Adoption*, Bell travels to cities ranging from Maine to Seattle and invites participants to "officially adopt" miniature plants.

[46] Bell was based in Boston and is now in Seattle, whereas Beitiks was based in Chicago and is now in Oakland. I am not suggesting that the latter should work elsewhere but rather highlighting Beitiks' more diverse locations and audiences.

absurdity is often linked to landscape scale—miniaturized trees, mountains, and "pets"—the latter's absurdity is frequently linked to situational humor and performance interactions. Beitiks' work focuses on what I call "trans-species play," play that not only crosses species boundaries but also pushes the limits of interspecies interaction. Whether she jogs with a plant, challenges it to a water fight, or helps it stage its own solo show, Beitiks seeks to highlight plants' biological characteristics through uncharacteristic play.

Take, for instance, Beitiks's light and silly *Water Fight with a Cactus*. Dressed like Annie Oakley, the artist approaches a prickly pear cactus in her Oakland, California neighborhood. Armed with biodegradable bags of water, Beitiks starts a water fight with the cactus at high noon, staging a battle of "Water Retention vs. Water Retention. Prickly Pear vs. Prickly Personality" (*Water Fight*). In the end, of course, the cactus must win the showdown, given that it is designed to hold water and to withstand the heat, whereas Beitiks, especially with her fair, pink skin, is not. This fanciful performance demonstrates the artist's interest in imagining unusual and unlikely interactions between plants and people. On one hand, the piece is a goofy, aberrant improvisation, something the artist might have drummed up on one particularly slow-moving morning, but, on the other, it is a pear cactus showcase, merely using the water fight to highlight the plant's biological strength and endurance. Not only does Beitiks initially stage the showdown as a meeting of two equals, but she soon admits that, when it comes to desert climates and water retention, the cactus is far her superior. Thus, whereas Bell draws on taxonomical histories of plant miniaturization and compartmentalization in order to playfully subvert them, Beitiks introduces audiences to plants and their unique characteristics through unlikely performance interactions between plants and people.

Despite the subtle differences between Bell and Beitiks, though, both artists are concerned with material and metaphorical transplantment, with changing the way people visually and mentally think of plants and, most of all, the way they experience them. Both artists also negotiate urban spaces, deploying creative strategies to uproot plants from the background of a bustling city and to incorporate them into the center of the action. For example, in *Landscape for Walking*, Bell, as well as visitors to the Edith Russ House for New Media in Oldenburg, Germany, takes long walks through the city with a verdant walking stick. A lush, wavy fern atop a four foot wooden pole, the walking stick allows you to "carry your landscape with you while walking" (*Landscape*). Similarly, in *Yielding Air*, Beitiks jogs with a potted English Ivy in downtown Oakland; dodging traffic at a busy intersection for thirty minutes, artist and plant both bounce to and fro from the high-impact movement. The pace of the two pieces could not be more different: Bell takes a leisurely, calming walk with a plant, whereas Beitiks takes an intense jog; the former gently holds her walking stick, allowing it to assist her movement, whereas the latter clutches the potted ivy, its tendrils trailing behind her as she moves. As with her biospheres, Bell emphasizes the walking stick's soothing and calming affect, its ability to stimulate peaceful exchanges between harried urbanites and plants. Meanwhile, as with her cactus water fight, Beitiks goofily imagines plants engaging in unlikely activities that highlight their biological strengths; jogging with the English Ivy in congested traffic, the artist stresses the plant's detoxifying properties.

Despite the rhythmic differences between the two pieces, both materially transplant flora from the urban periphery to the center. Photos and videos of the performances are not only remarkable for what is highlighted—the artists and their companion plants—but also for what is missing: vegetation. Although Oldenburg and Oakland have little in common, the two cities, like

most others, largely use flora to complement existing infrastructure; particularly in downtown areas, streets and high towers are the priority and, as an afterthought, some greenery may be added to soften the otherwise monochromatic severity. Privileging plant centrality and importance, both artists insist that their plant companions are every bit as mobile and integral to the city as they themselves are. In casting the plants as walking or jogging companions, the artists refuse to keep them sidelined and to perpetuate their representation as "a veritable symbol of stupor and immobility" (Marder 118). Not coincidentally, Bell and Beitiks both feature plants with remarkable air-purifying capabilities, thereby emphasizing the plants' functional and aesthetic contribution to urban environments. In different cities and at different paces, the two artists, as well as museum visitors in Bell's piece, perform extended interactions with plants, incorporating them into their daily activities to the point that they influence the way the artists move, feel, and think. Thus, what may begin as a vegetative alteration—uprooting plants from the urban periphery and integrating them into human activities—gradually alters the human participants and observers most of all, as they begin to reimagine plants' purpose, potential, and place in the city.

The Plant is Present

If Bell reimagines plants through tropes of landscape and scale, Beitiks reimagines them through tropes of theater and performance. This is crucial not only because there is a shortage of contemporary theater artists who work with ecological themes (May "Greening" 84), but also because, in presenting plant and human interactions on a physical stage, Beitiks stages the event itself and the larger consideration of plant performance. In that "performance is always a doing and a thing done," it is both immediate and completed, site-specific and framed by the countless

performances that have preceded it (Diamond 1). However, since performance interpretation does not entirely depend on prior experience, there is still "the possibility of materializing something that exceeds our knowledge, that alters the shape of sites and imagines other as yet unsuspected modes of being" (Diamond 2). With Beitiks's work, these "unsuspected modes of being" may not only include human behaviors and attitudes toward plants but also plants themselves as unsuspected—or rather humanly disregarded—beings in their own right. This is particularly evident in Beitiks's 2011 piece *The Plant is Present*, which deploys the theatrical stage as a device to challenge the innumerable humanist performances that precede it and to supplant the human actor with a vegetative one. In order for the plant to take center stage, though, the human performer must first be unseated. Thus, in *The Plant is Present*, Beitiks's parodically replaces performance artist Marina Abromavić, who became a household name with her piece *The Artist is Present*, with a houseplant.

From March 14 through May 31 2010, Marina Abromavić performed *The Artist* is *Present* in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). The artist sat silently and statically for 736.5 hours in the museum atrium while visitors waited to sit across from her and look her in the eyes. The piece was only one part of MoMA's retrospective on Abromavić's forty year career, yet it was the first to garner the performance artist such popular attention and acclaim. Lady Gaga attended the retrospective, Facebook pages and blogs were dedicated to the new piece, an HBO documentary was made, and since then the performance artist has collaborated with Lady Gaga, Jay-Z, and other popular artists.

In contrast, *The Plant is Present* was performed for two nights in 2011 at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), where visitors were welcome to sit opposite the plant for as long as they liked and to write about the experience afterward. To reach the plant, visitors had to

pass through the exhibition entrance, two double doors that featured the title of the piece and the image and scientific name of the performer—the plant—in a similar font to that used for the Abromavić performance.[47] Adjacent to the doors was a four paragraph blurb about the plant, a *Sansevieria Trifasciata* more commonly known as a snake plant, and its career improving air quality by absorbing toxins. Once visitors stepped through the double doors, they were outside in the chilly November air, and there was a slightly raised platform set on the patchy grass. The small stage had just enough room for two chairs to face one another, and, in one of them, was the snake plant dressed in a black t-shirt, skirt, and shoes, its stiff, vertical leaves extending nearly four feet out of the shirt. Near each corner of the platform, bright stage lights put the plant and its potential visitors under the spotlight.

Both Beitiks' stage set up and exhibition entrance echo *The Artist is Present*, and her close adherence to Abromavić's performance serves to put the two pieces in conversation with each other. For example, the entrance signage to *The Plant is Present*, while smaller in scale than *The Artist is Present* signage, which takes up an entire gallery wall, achieves the same effect, marking the exhibit and its performer as noteworthy. The description of the snake plant as an "epic performer" with a long "career" converting toxins into oxygen stylistically matches MoMA's description of Abromavić's career, while also praising the unique achievements of the *Sansevieria Trifasciata* (Beitiks "Plant Text").

The Plant is Present continues to gesture to *The Artist is Present* in its stage set up. Although the latter uses white tape rather than a raised platform to establish the performance space, both methods serve to mark off the area as important and to set the chair occupants off

[47] In a presentation on *The Plant is Present*, Beitiks describes emailing MoMA for permission to use the Rodchenko font designed specifically for *The Artist is Present*. After failing to receive a response, she chose the most similar font available.

from the observers invited to surround the square performance perimeter. Similarly, although the MoMA piece uses twice as many lights and diffusers as the SAIC piece, both position the lighting in the four corners of the stage, intensely illuminating the chairs and their occupants. Thus, even as the two pieces allow for one-on-one connections between the chairs' occupants, they also use bright lights and audience scrutiny to reflect on the actual performance of interaction. In the case of *The Plant is Present*, this not only means that there may be individual connectivity with the snake plant, but also group consideration of what it means to share a moment with a plant. The industrial lighting plays a dual role in this consideration: first, it highlights that the plant is the star of the show, the one people have come to see: by placing the snake plant under the spotlight, Beitiks not only insures that the plant is present but that it the sole performer rather than a background prop to a human's show. Second, the bright lighting, as well as *The Plant is Present*'s surface similarity to *The Artist is Present*, shines a spotlight on people and plant relations in contrast to interpersonal relations. What does it mean and what can it mean to commune with a plant? The acts of looking, returning a gaze, and being looked at, all present in Abromavić's performance, suddenly take on different meanings when one of the parties is a plant.

By insisting that sitting across from a snake plant is as worthwhile as sitting across from any human, Beitiks foregrounds vegetal life and uses stage devices to encourage contemplation of shared plant-human communication, as well as actual communication. Indeed, many participants note that the intense lighting, the raised stage, and the close seating for two made them feel self-conscious at first; one writes, "I felt uneasy and then at ease. The rain created a strange intimate moment between myself and this living breathing being that I often sometimes forget is living and breathing. I'm walking away with a calm" ("Everyone"). For this person, the

shared experience of getting wet out in the rain with a plant reminds her of the commonality between herself and the *Sansevieria Trifasciata*. Similarly for others, the initial discomfort of sitting alone across from a plant and being seen doing so eventually gives way to small observations about the plant and their own reactions to it; the simple task of spending one-on-one time with vegetal life allows for consideration of what the activity and the plant itself signify. Staging an alternate performance time, Beitiks gives participants the freedom to sit with the snake-plant as long as they wish. Temporarily normalizing human and plant sit-downs, the performance encourages an extended engagement with flora, rather than the passing glance plants typically receive as humans hurry pass them. As Marder suggests, "plant life" has its own unique pace and movement, "which we customarily disregard, since it is too subtle for our cognitive and perceptual apparatuses to register in an everyday setting" and since our own tempo is so rapid (21). Granted an extended audience with the snake plant, stationary visitors may slow their own human tempo and consider plant time and rhythm.

However, although Beitiks's piece encourages human participants to spend time with the snake plant, it cannot determine how they interact with it. The varied responses to the experience reveal that there is still much more work to be done if plants are to be seen as anything other than fixed, unresponsive objects. For instance, several people project their own thoughts and feelings on to the plant, noting its ability to silently listen to them ("Everyone"). Such responses maintain a subject/object relationship, in that the plant is cast as a fixture or prop for humans to reflect further on themselves rather than to engage with the plant. It is hard to imagine that any of the plant's particularities—its species, size, coloring, or characteristics—affect those human observers determined to see the plant as a prop to their own sense of self. At the same time, though, even a failed interaction—one that emphasizes human thought instead of considering

plant thought—can be productive if the human participant takes notice of the plant, observing its specific spatiality rather than ignoring it. For instance, as one participant writes, "The swaying of the leaves felt like the plant was nodding to the conversation we had in my mind" ("Everyone"). Although the participant interprets the plant's movement as tacit agreement, she or he nonetheless pays attention to its shape and movement.

In contrast, other commenters metaphorically attempt to match the piece's humor; one, playing on the fact that the snake plant is native to tropical climates, writes, "Awkward, wonderful, concerned for the tropical—maybe that is why she is so awkward—out of her climate?" ("Everyone"). While such humorous responses are certainly in keeping with a piece seeking to make a direct parallel between a plant and a performance artist, they privilege a metaphorical way of knowing the plant over a material engagement with it, when, in fact, both are necessary for an experiential interaction with other species. While Beitiks' piece may seem absurd at first with its playful substitution of a plant for Abromavić, it, much like Bell's work, ultimately asks *why* such a substitution is seen as absurd and what the extent of plant-human interaction can be. While responses like, "The plant + I are no longer on speaking terms," maintain the piece's humor, they also reveal a resistance to even attempt to interact with the plant on a material plane ("Everyone"). Far more interesting are the responses which reflect an effort, even a failed one, to materially engage with the snake plant. Since plants lack language but have an abundance of spatiality, any communication with them must be through spatial means: How do they move in the wind and rain? Do they grow towards the sun? In what way do their leaves extend? In staging the snake plant, Beitiks provides a space for the consideration of such questions and a reflection on human and plant relations past and present.

Women and Nature

While Beitiks provides a space for alternative plant-human interaction by spotlighting the *Sansevieria Trifasciata* and by allowing participants unlimited time with the plant, she, like Bell, inadvertently bolsters the essentialized conflation of women and nature. However, whereas Bell's *Garment for Flora-Fauna Relationship* casts the human artist as nurturing mother, Beitiks' piece casts the plant artist as female human. So intent is the artist on making a direct parallel between Abromavić and the snake plant that she attires the latter in a black skirt, shirt, and shoes, much like the outfit worn by the performer during *The Artist is Present*. Although this extends the piece's primary comparison, it may take the joke too far, overshadowing the plant's performance with Abromavić's and forcing the plant to play the role of female human instead of plant. As ecofeminists have shown, women and nature already have a long history of shared subjugation. Historically, to be "human"—white, western, and male—meant to be rational, objective, and public, whereas to be other-than-human—female, non-white, non-western—meant to be irrational, subjective, emotional, domestic, and embodied (Sturgeon 8). Thus, those who are sexually or racially different have often been represented as naturally less than human.

The associations of white masculinity to culture and women and people of color to nature still persist and are evident in both *The Artist is Present* and *The Plant is Present*. For instance, in the larger than life headshot used for the Abromavić retrospective, the artist holds a bouquet of flowers that grazes her chin, while tree branches frame her serenely set face. She looks into the distance, her windswept hair and the outdoorsy setting seeming to suggest an affinity with nature, despite the fact that the performance piece itself only features humans. While Beitiks's photo also frames the plant with tree branches, there is no flower bouquet; instead, there is a close up of the snake plant's taut leaves, below which is a shorter blurb about the plant. Whereas

the flowers in Abromavić's photo are props to make the artist herself seem more organic and akin to nature, the snake plant, already culturally recognized as "nature," needs no additional adornment.

In linking herself to nature, Abromavić draws on a long history of conflating women and people of color with nature in order to subjugate both. Subtly represented as one with nature in the exhibit introduction, Abromavić may then be seen as intuitive, mystical, or caring in her performance, not unlike "Mother Earth." Indeed, many participants in *The Artist is Present* were so moved by looking into Abromavić's eyes that they cried, inspiring the creation of the tumblr blog "Marina Abromavić Made Me Cry." Although this response to the artist's piece is in large part due to her identity as a person and a performance artist, it is also undoubtedly influenced by the fact that she is a woman, and women are often essentialized as caring, understanding, and empathetic. The artist's headshot exacerbates rather than deconstructs this naturalization, suggesting that Abromavić is a mystical figure. In contrast, in keeping with Beitiks's goal to "act as a medium between nature and culture in the least mystical sense," the stark photo of the snake plant, accompanied by its scientific description, serves to demystify the plant, emphasizing its active role in cleaning the air rather than its representation as passive houseplant ("Performance").

While Beitiks demystifies the snake plant in some ways, providing visitors with botanical details and individual time with the plant, she mystifies it by attiring it as a human woman, reinforcing the constructed link between women and nature just as Abromavić does in her photo. Despite the fact that plants may be male, female, asexual, or sexually changeable, and that their sexuality is not visible to the naked eye, they, like many animals, continue to be feminized. Indeed, the *Sansevieria Trifasciata* is typically propagated from cuttings rather than seeds, but

this has not stopped it from derogatorily being called “mother-in-law’s tongue,” reinforcing both the perception of women as sharp and bristly and of plants as feminine. By dressing the snake plant as a woman, Beitiks not only anthropomorizes it but strengthens the association of plants with femininity, causing most of the participants to gender their interaction with the plant. For instance, one claims, “She is SEXY and REAL,” thus only legitimating the *Sansevieria Trifasciata*’s realness—substance, materiality, and very ontology—through its sexiness, its degree of femininity (“Everyone”). Another participant teases, “She was coming on to me, but I’m a faithful guy so I had to take leave,” cleverly playing with the verb “leave” and the noun “leaves,” but also casting the plant as a seductress simply because of its feminine attire (“Everyone”).

Although some of the other gendered responses are more subtle, all of them conflate the plant, women, and femininity as one entity. As one participant observes, “It was very tranquil. It seemed like I was sitting with a woman. It was very peaceful and serene” (“Everyone”). The goal of the piece may be to encourage plant-human interaction, but, because the engagement is already gendered by the plant’s attire, the peacefulness and serenity some participants experience is tied to the dual essentialization of women and nature as natural, soothing, and soft. Arguably, Beitiks intends to expose the ways in which Abromavić and the *Sansevieria Trifasciata* are mutually gendered, or perhaps to create a human-like connection between participants and the plant by representing the latter as a female human. However, as the written responses to *The Plant is Present* reveal, imposing cultural gender constructions and sartorial conventions on plants may intensify their gendered objectification rather than foster a truly egalitarian exchange between plants and people.

Staging an Ecological Superstar

Despite the gendered anthropomorphism in the work, though, Beitiks' piece ultimately enables a snake-plant to take center stage, asks thought-provoking questions, and encourages some degree of interspecies interaction. Every aspect of *The Plant is Present*, from the introductory material to the performance itself, forefronts the plant as an artist and professional in its own right. Describing the plant as a "botanical" and "epic" performer, Beitiks highlights its aesthetic and scientific accomplishments ("Plant Text"). As she writes in the piece's introduction, "Over the course of its career, it has gone for months without water, made fiber from its own body, and collaborated with NASA to remove toxins and pollutants from the very air we breathe." Beitiks could just as easily use adjectives to describe the *Sansevieria Trifasciata*'s scientific properties, but instead she employs verbs to emphasize the plant's own actions and activity. In asking visitors to consider the plant as a lively performer with a crucial ecological role to play, Beitiks suggests that they appreciate its contribution and engage with the plant based on its actions rather than its culturally perceived inferiority in the human/animal/plant hierarchy. Thus, although *The Plant is Present* does not involve physical plant mobility as many of Bell's pieces do, it nonetheless transplants the *Sansevieria Trifasciata* from relative obscurity to stardom, from passive and peripheral window dressing to active and central ecological performer. For too long, explains Beitiks, the snake plant "has been stashed in dark corners, plunked into shop windows, and squished into lawn rows. Now we have the unique opportunity to fully appreciate the aesthetic value, artistic aura, and phenomenal performative work of this artist" ("Plant Text"). In assisting the snake plant to take the stage and thereby achieve prominence in a space reserved only for those who act and perform, Beitiks literally and figuratively elevates the houseplant from background extra to ecological superstar.

Perhaps most importantly, the snake plant's heightened visibility and accessibility allow for a greater appreciation of its qualities and a contemplation of its being. The theatrical stage, a unique and alternative space in which, for a brief time, anything and everything is possible, encourages dialogue, exchange, interaction. In theorizing radical performance, Baz Kershaw argues that "performance can be most usefully described as an *ideological transaction* between a company of performers and the community of the audience" an ongoing, negotiated "transaction of meaning" (*Politics* 16-17). *The Plant is Present* not only begins a negotiation between the performers—the snake plant and its companion—but it also casts visitors as both participatory audience members and on stage performers. Playing a dual role, visitors individually perform their own interaction with the snake plant and negotiate the meaning of other audience members' engagement with the plant.

The experience of sharing the stage with a plant, of looking at and considering little else but the plant, allows for new ways of thinking through plant life. As Richard M. Doyle posits, the cognitive awareness that humans are interconnect with their environment does not necessarily persuade people to change their environmental habits; rather, change "seems to hinge on an *experience* of this interconnection as well as an *understanding* of it" (7). The experience of sitting across from the *Sansevieria Trifasciata* in the wind, cold, and—on the second night of the performance—rain, enables some participants to consider how their shared outdoor stage experience might extend beyond the performance space. For instance, one participant finds commonality with the plant based on their "shared vulnerability and strength" ("Everyone"). Others find that, in closely observing the plant, they begin to take on its qualities rather than asserting their own; one imitates the plant's pose and smells its leaves while another experiences sympathy for the houseplant under harsh lights and in cold temperatures ("Everyone").

Finding commonality across difference, another participant observes, “The wind blows my hair and her; or its or she’s leaves” (“Everyone”). Not only does this statement suggest a shared movement but also an effort to know the plant rather than make assumptions about it: Is it a she or an it? Does all of the plant sway in the wind or just the leaves? Indeed, those participants who observe the ways that the snake plant takes up space and moves within it may come far closer to communicating with it than those participants who speak at the plant or pretend it agrees with them. Since plants communicate spatially rather than vocally, small changes in size, shape, and movement act as plants’ self-expression. As Marder explains, “Plant-thinking […] cannot but rely on material signification that bypasses conscious intentionality and coincides with the very phenomenality—the modes of appearance—of vegetal life” (75). Beitiks highlights these modes of appearance by not only providing an enlarged photo of the snake plant but also by creating a staged space for humans to observe plant phenomenality closely and to consider the possibilities, as well as the limits, of interspecies communication.

The very act of thinking about the plant—its needs, desires, movement, labor, and mode of communication—demonstrates “plant-thinking,” what Marder calls “the promise and the name of an encounter…an invitation to abandon the familiar terrain of human and humanist thought and to meet vegetal life, if not in the place where it is, then at least halfway” (10). Of course, humans can never fully know or think like plants, and it is important to acknowledge this and, with it, plant’s alterity. However, the effort to experience and understand plants on a material and metaphysical plane is crucial to fostering respect and protection for flora. Abromavić’s performance was advertised and praised as a once in a lifetime experience, and, in recasting the performance artist with the air-purifying *Sansevieria Trifasciata*, Beitiks suggests that time spent with the snake plant is equally as life-changing. In fact, it may be more so. If the

performing snake plant can even temporarily enable humans to consider flora—its ecological contribution, characteristics, spatiality, and thought—with a vegetal perspective, than it may be the most important performance of all, since only experiential interspecies interactions can slow humanity's full speed destruction of the earth.

W(h)ither Transplantment?

One critique of both Bell's and Beitiks' pieces may be that, too often, they strive to incorporate plants into human activities—walking, jogging, fighting—rather than incorporating humans into plant activities and time. In striving to highlight vegetal life, the artists may be said to emphasize their own agency rather than that of plants. Ric Knowles, for instance, is more interested in "the inexorable growth of grass and other vegetation through the concrete slabs of city sidewalks" as a performance staged by plants themselves than in the vegetal performances of human artists (iv). Although I would suggest that Knowles's example is still an interaction between humans, who laid the concrete, and plants, which broke through the pavement, it is indeed important to meet plants halfway by considering how they themselves perform. However, as Marder cautions, "Vegetal being revolves around non-identity, understood both as the plant's inseparability from the environment wherein it germinates and grows, and as its style of living devoid of a clearly delineated autonomous self" (162). Thus, while Knowles rightly stresses vegetative performance, we must be careful not to ascribe conscious agency or other human values to vegetal life. To do so is to privilege humanism and to fail to meet plants halfway, to fail to consider plant spatiality, time, and biology.

Arguably, some of the pieces discussed here come closer to meeting plants halfway than others. Some, like Bell's biospheres and Beitiks's plant showcase, successfully highlight

vegetative ecologies and encourage extended, intimate observations of and interactions with flora. Others, like Bell's fern walking stick and Beitiks's ivy jogging companion, cast plants as sidekicks to human activity rather than forefront plant activity. Nonetheless, all of the artists' plant-art stages an alternate ecology that transplants flora from the background of urbanscapes and human thought to the very center. For too long, plants, which sustain all life, have been marginalized and taken for granted. Together, Bell and Beitiks denaturalize this normative state, deploying spatial, scalar, and performative modes of transplantment to foster interspecies relationships.

Chapter Two

Rethinking Green: Performing Environmental Justice in Gaps and Cracks

With a few notable exceptions,[48] environmental justice scholarship has primarily come from the social sciences. Certainly quantitative studies play a crucial role in proving disproportionate exposure to environmental degradation and linking "such exposure to public health outcomes" (Alkon and Agyeman 7). However, the goals of environmental justice—to insure that all people, regardless of race and class, have equal access to clean water, clean air, and healthy food—are not limited to any one discipline. With few exceptions,[49] though, environmental justice has been unexplored by theater studies, despite the fact that it, much like practice-oriented eco-performance, is first and foremost a movement that began with scholars, activists, and everyday citizens. This blend of criticism and activism makes an environmental justice framework especially suited to eco-theater, which is also dually concerned with theorizing performance and taking environmental action. Thus, in this chapter, I cultivate a working definition of environmental justice performance and consider its potential contribution to the larger movement.

In order to develop an environmental justice practice for the theater, I analyze three recent performances and movements: Marc Bamuthi Joseph's multimedia production *red, black, and GREEN: a blues (rbGb)*, the food justice movement—and, with it, Mohammed Ali Ojarigi's play *Guardin' Roots*—and the guerrilla gardening movement. The first is a performance based on Joseph's experience planning and holding environmental festivals in various under-privileged

[48] Such exceptions include T.V.Reed's "Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism" and Julie Sze's "From Environmental Justice Literature to the Literature of Environmental Justice," both in *Environmental Justice Reader*.

[49] One such exception that explicitly references environmental justice is May's 2006 article "'Consequences Unforeseen.'"

cities throughout the U.S. The food justice movement, meanwhile, creates community gardens and markets as much-needed, minoritarian alternatives to the largely white food movement and its preoccupation with expensive organic products. Lastly, the guerrilla gardening movement often involves illegally planting on private and public land. All three cases, though seemingly disparate, share fundamental commonalities. To begin with, they are all environmental movements first and performances second: *rbGb* is a staged production that would not exist without the environmental festivals on which it is based. Joseph's performance reflects on his experience mounting environmental gatherings, "Life is Living" festivals, in underprivileged areas in Oakland, New York, Houston, and Chicago. A self-aware contemplation and celebration of the process, pitfalls, and outcome of the festival, *rbGb* serves to mediate Joseph's environmental justice practice and evaluate its effectiveness, as well as that of the larger environmental movement. Although food justice and guerrilla gardening are activist movements rather than traditional theater productions, both employ strategic performance elements. Food justice, for instance, is often taken up as a horticultural and narratival solution to urban blight, as seen in *Guardin' Roots*. Similarly, while the guerrilla gardening movement is concerned first and foremost with growing plants, it often employs guerrilla theater to achieve its goal, as well as to generate awareness for its cause. The movement's creation of terms like "guerrilla gardening" and "seed bombs," its use of code names, and its flair for the dramatic not only utilize military references but performance tactics as well. Playfully and hyperbolically undermining notions of private and public property, the guerrilla gardening movement deploys performance metaphors in its battle against unfair distribution of land and unequal access to it, even as it tries to even the odds through illicit gardening.

Insomuch as *rbGb*, food justice, and guerrilla gardening attempt to improve the neighborhoods of poor people of color and poor whites and to expose environmental inequality, they are part of the environmental justice movement. *rbGb* and, to a lesser extent, food justice and guerrilla gardening are not focused on single environmental issues but on the creation of ongoing ecological practices, the development of personally and communally specific daily habits. Although Joseph and community and guerrilla gardeners may advocate for different ecological principles, they all practice gardening as a material performance and use that performance to force people to rethink "green," rethink private and public space, and rethink disproportionate access to and distribution of environmental resources. Performing ecological practices as a way of life rather than a single act, *rbGb*, food justice, and guerrilla gardening, to varying degrees, advocate for both the environment *and* the people in the environment. I argue that through improvisational but sustained gardening practices, Joseph and some community and guerrilla gardeners create an environmental justice performance based on materiality, adaptability, and location, rather than on fixed, stringent, or prescribed forms of environmentalism. However, in order to better understand the ecological practices at work in *rbGb*, food justice, and guerrilla gardening, I first turn to a brief history of the environmental justice movement.

Environmental Justice

An offshoot of the civil rights movement, the environmental justice movement began in the late 1970s and early 1980s,[50] as African American activists grew increasingly disenchanted with largely white environmental organizations that perpetually prioritized the environment and

[50] Robert D. Bullard suggests that the environmental justice movement began long before the 1970s but was formulated as a social rather than an environmental cause (9). It is fair to say, though, that the movement became far more formalized and organized in the 1980s.

animals over people of color *within* the environment. While some environmental justice principles are not dissimilar from those of existing environmental organizations, particularly in their mutual respect for the earth and its resources, they primarily emphasize environmental justice for people of color who have been unequally exposed to toxic waste facilities and unfairly excluded from governmental decision-making processes that directly affect their communities. Ultimately, the early environmental justice movement galvanized mainstream environmental organizations to reexamine their priorities and perspectives, and it warned corporations that low-income, African American communities would not tolerate toxic dumping and poor air quality.

One of the first watershed moments occurred in 1983 when over 500 people were arrested for protesting a Polychlorinate Biphenyl (PCB) landfill in the predominantly African American Warren County, North Carolina. This led to another defining moment in 1987 with the publication of a report, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, sponsored by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice (UCC-CRJ). Synthesizing several national reports on the location and damage of hazardous waste facilities, the report discovered that people of color are far more likely to suffer from toxic exposure than are affluent white people. To be exact, the report found that 60 percent of Latinos and African Americans and more than 50 percent of Native Americans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders live near uncontrolled toxic waste sites (*Toxic Wastes* xiv). The report's findings led Reverend Benjamin Chavis, then director of the UCC-CRJ, to create the term "environmental racism," defining it as "racial discrimination in environmental policy-making and the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of people of color communities for toxic waster facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and history of excluding people of color from leadership in the environmental movement" (qtd. in Di Chiro 304.)

The report spurred multiracial activists to hold the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 in Washington, D.C. Attended by over three hundred community leaders from the U.S., Canada, South and Central America, and the Marshall Islands, the summit created seventeen "Principles of Environmental Justice," a commitment to pursing environmental justice politically, economically, and socially. Significantly, the preamble to the principles states that their purpose is to "secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples" ("Principles"). Thus, even as the definition of environmental justice has largely expanded to mean fair treatment for all people regardless of race or class,[51] it is crucial to remember the movement's foundation. For the Summit leaders, American environmental injustice began when European colonizers stripped Native Americans of their land, and it continued when they enslaved African Americans to tend that stolen land.

Today, environmental justice is broadly defined as the "attempt to redress the disproportionate incidence of environmental contamination in communities of the poor[52] and/or communities of color, to secure for those affected the right to live unthreatened by the risks posed by environmental degradation and contamination, and to afford equal access to natural resources that sustain life and culture" (Adamson, Evans, and Stein 4). The environmental

[51] The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as:

> fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies. Fair treatment means that no group of people, including racial, ethnic, or socio-economic groups, should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local, and tribal programs and policies. (12)

[52] There has long been debate over whether environmental injustice is exclusively caused by racism or is also caused by classism. See Melosi for more on the history of this debate. Since recent environmental crimes, like the 2010 BP oil spill, have affected both poor blacks and poor whites, I would suggest that, while race is often a factor in environmental injustice, it is not always the only factor.

justice movement takes a holistic approach to the environment, defining it not as pristine and remote "nature," but the physical places where people live, work, learn, eat, and play. Like postcolonial ecocriticism, the environmental justice movement insists that any environmental action consider both ecocentric *and* anthropocentric concerns instead of privileging the former over the latter. For example, a landmark 1990 letter from the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP) to the self-designated "Group of Ten"[53] mainstream environmental organizations called on the groups to work with communities of color and to hire people of color rather than to presume to speak for them (Moore et al). SWOP also noted that representatives from the major organizations claimed that "only in the recent past have people of color begun to realize the impacts of environmental contamination," when, in actuality, they had "been involved in environmental struggles for many years" before the mainstream organizations began telling them about the problems (Moore et al). Since the SWOP letter was released over twenty-five years ago, many mainstream environmental organizations have reconsidered their goals, practices, and lack of diversity.[54] However, large environmental organizations like the National Audubon Society, Sierra Club, and Nature Conservancy need to continue to develop inclusive and holistic practices that not only highlight voices of color but also environmental issues that concern people of color. As urban areas continue to grow rapidly, it is more important than ever that environmentalism turns to a "city-centered" conservation that balances "multiple objectives to increase sustainability from the city core out to the wilderness" (Christensen et al). Instead of solely focusing on "wilderness" narratives and single-issue environmentalism, activists must

[53]The Group of Ten includes Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, Environmental Defense Fund, National Audubon Society, The Wilderness Society, National Parks Conservation Association, Friends of the Earth, National Wildlife Federation, Earthjustice, and the Isaak Walton League.

[54] The SWOP letter provoked most of the mainstream environmental organizations to reconsider, if not entirely overhaul, their principles and goals. For a glimpse of the organizations' response to the letter twenty years later, see Marty Durlin's "The Group of 10 Responds."

consider urban areas as ecologies in their own right with diverse interspecies and infrastructural environmental needs and contributions.

Emphasizing urban ecologies, *rbGb* not only critiques privileged environmentalists who fail to consider how poor people of color are unfairly affected by environmental degradation but also develops city-centered, site-specific environmental justice practices. Conscious that all environmentalism, but particularly that in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, should have practical applications, the piece considers how African Americans can bring environmental justice to their own neighborhoods, despite a long history of environmental disenfranchisement, inequality, and violence. Like the environmental justice movement itself, *rbGb* offers both a critique of environmental injustices and a development of local and regional ecological practices. Celebrating black life while also mourning its loss, as well as the racial injustices that caused it, the piece ultimately advocates a material turn to the soil. However, first it begins by scrutinizing existing "greening" practices and contemplating what can grow out of hardship, sorrow, and packed city spaces.

red, black, and GREEN: a blues

The multidisciplinary, multimedia piece *rbGb* (2011)[55] features Marc Bamuthi Joseph, a spoken word artist who wrote the piece; Traci Tolmaire, a dancer and singer; Yaw, a musician; and Tommy Sheppard (aka Emcee Soulati), a drummer and turntablist. The entirely reclaimed set was designed by installation and set designer Theaster Gates.[56] *rb*Gb is loosely based on Joseph and his collaborators' Life is Living festival, which celebrates "life through urban

[55] I saw *RbGb* in January 2013 at Redcat in Los Angeles. The production underwent small changes while on tour from 2011-2013, but all descriptions here are based on the Redcat production.

[56] Theaster Gates also performed, alternating with Yaw. In the Redcat production, though, Yaw performed.

performance, intergenerational health, and environmental action" ("2013 Oakland"). The festival often includes dance classes, graffiti exhibitions, poetry slams, food justice classes, and gardening demonstrations. Its inspiration came to Joseph after he witnessed his students from the group Youth Speaks repeatedly compete in environmental poetry slams where they were the only African Americans present (Lee). Realizing that someone needed to bring the eco-party to low-income black communities rather than trying to bring entire communities to the event, Joseph took the Life is Living festival to neglected neighborhoods throughout the U.S. While *rbGb* itself has toured throughout the U.S., the piece only features the first four cities in which the festival took place: Harlem, Chicago, Oakland, and Houston. Highlighting the varying degrees of sedimented environmental injustice in the four cities, the piece considers how African American communities can heal and grow in spite of—or even because of—such injustice.

At the same time, as both a second generation Haitian-American and an environmentalist, Marc Bamuthi Joseph himself grapples with how he—a well-educated, middle class man—should assist low-income, African American communities with environmental justice. For instance, in front of a projection of dilapidated "project rowhouses in Houston," the artist confesses, "Truth be told, it's been seven years since I've lived in the ghetto…Sometimes I put my finger over my ghetto pass to hide the date" (*rbGb*). Joseph's acute awareness of his own privileged position is perhaps *rbGb*'s greatest strength; watching him navigate the messy complexities and intricacies of putting environmental justice into action, one realizes just how complicated such a task is. Through Joseph's experience, of both staging the Life is Living festivals and reliving his journey in *rbGb*, he, and the audience along with him, discovers that any effective environmental justice effort must be multifaceted and holistic. Just as Joseph's festival focuses on the celebration of African American life, rather than on single-issue

environmentalism, so too does *rbGb*, as it nonlinearly recounts the artist's experience bringing the festival to the four different cities. In order to do this, *rbGb* draws on African Americans' extensive musical and civil rights heritage; indeed, the title *red, black, and GREEN: a blues* not only references Marcus Garvey's Pan African flag, but also the long history of blues music within African American culture. Through spoken word poetry, blues music, gospel music, hip hop dance, ballet, and film footage of Life is Living festivals, *rbGb* both critiques the environmental injustice that has jeopardized the health and safety of impoverished black communities, and celebrates black life. It asks what going "green" actually means, gradually problematizing the elitist concept and calling for a more holistic approach to and understanding of environmentalism. Celebrating an ecological ethos based on survival and improvisation, *rbGb* suggests, in the vein of de Certeau, that the "art of 'making do'" with everyday tactics is itself a form of environmentalism (30).

Setting the Scene

rbGb not only celebrates an ecological ethos but also invites audiences to join in; every performance begins with ushers welcoming the incoming audience onstage to partake in the action. The house lights remain on for the first twenty minutes of the show, allowing the audience to circle the perimeter of a shotgun house[57] set center stage and to take in the performers' visual, aural, and olfactory actions. Upon entering the theater, the audience hears a rich, male voice softly singing the hymn, "I've Got Peace like a River." Accompanied by a female voice from within the house, the man sits in a rocking chair on what appears to be the "front" of the house. Inside the house's two paneless windows are three of the four performers:

[57] Shotgun houses are long, narrow, rectangular homes common among African Americans in the South during the Reconstruction Era into the early twentieth century. Theaster Gates modeled his set design on a shotgun house that one might find in Houston.

in one upstage left window, Joseph dances back and forth, momentarily filling the window frame before disappearing from view. Rapidly moving from side to side, he appears trapped in the house and asks, "What's the strategy for self-hate?" (*rbGb*). Behind him, the sole female performer, Tolmaire, presses her hands to her ears, bobbing to music that only she can hear. She vigorously jerks her upper body but leaves her lower body firmly planted, as though stuck in place. Meanwhile, in a downstage right window, a performer innocently cuts watermelon and offers it to passing audience members. His kind, calm manner suggests that the fruit is proffered without insult or irony but still some audience members decline.

Suddenly, the audience is forced to step back as the performers pull apart the house, splitting it into four large pieces, each representative of a different city: Chicago, Houston, Harlem, and Oakland. Now the audience too can move inside the house, peering into its crevices and open spaces. The four performers fall into a vocal and physical call and response: Tolmaire calls out while Joseph dances to her lyric; then, Joseph responds with a lyric of his own that Tolmaire's body echoes. As the two sing and dance in tandem within the wide open house, the other two performers take up percussion. One, Shepherd, sits atop a chair on the "roof" of what was formerly the "back" porch; in rhythm with the vocals, he bangs against a reclaimed dustpan and trashcan, shaking the set piece with his verve. The other, Yaw, alternates between drumming on another set piece's steps and frame.

The performers only break from their activity to push the pieces of the house further and further apart, until each section takes up a corner of the stage, and audience members, running out of space, gradually filter to their seats. Throughout the performance, the artists continually shift the house pieces, highlighting one and isolating another, bringing two or three pieces together to make different configurations. The tempo of this task always varies to match the

energy of the performance at any moment. A mournful blues ballad may yield to a joyous hip-hop number, a spirited march may be truncated by a quiet ritual. Through song and dance, the performers evoke the unique energy and rhythm of each city, and, after reliving their "greening" experiences in four disparate cities, the performers slowly reassemble the shotgun house. Significantly, though, the house is not in the exact formation it began in; the "back" is now in "front" and the "front" is now in "back," signaling not only a spatial rearrangement but a metaphorical rearrangement of "home."

"What Would Grow Here?"

"Home" in *rbGb* functions on a number of material and metaphorical levels. When the set piece is a whole unit, it stands in for the countless number of similarly nondescript African-American homes in impoverished neighborhoods. It also speaks to the ways in which ecology, economy, and home are interrelated; as May points out, "ecology and economics both come from the same Greek *oikos*, meaning 'house' and connoting home or dwelling" ("'Consequences'" 132). One's home is an integral part of one's environment and one's experience of place, suggesting that any urban environmentalism must include experiences of home in its activist efforts. When the house is broken into four separate pieces, though, it metonymically represents four distinct cities; thus, not only does *rbGb* consider what environmentalism means for poor people of color in contrast to its cast of middle-class African Americans, it also considers what it means from city to city. The unique differences among Chicago, Houston, Harlem, and Oakland are represented in *rbGb* through music, dance, and spatiality. As set designer Theaster Gates explains, "We've tried to figure out ways to tease out nuances and the differences between them [the cities]. We built the structures in compartments so that together they mimic a shotgun house

that you might find in Houston. And then that shotgun house breaks apart into these sections where rooms become opportunities for sharing story or video or other acts of celebration" ("Marc"). Each section loosely represents a city, a color, a season: Chicago in red summer, Houston in black autumn, Harlem in green winter, and Oakland in blue spring. The colors are only implied with one small, colored light bulb on each house section, and by the seasons referenced by the ensemble in passing.

However, the most notable differences city to city are expressed through rhythm and story. For instance, the use of blues and ballet imbues Chicago with a slow, mournful pace, while the use of hip hop and fast-paced spoken word imbues Harlem with a driven, clipped pace. On one hand, Joseph's nonlinear journey through the four cities causes their differences to overlap and converge, as one city rhythm quickly gives way to another, suggesting commonality across metropolitan difference. On the other hand, in stressing the unique paces and tones of the four cities, *rbGb* also highlights the distinct differences between environmental movements and communities of color in one American city and those in another, emphasizing the need for varied, disparate strategies to meet local socio-environmental needs.

In Oakland and Harlem, for instance, Joseph finds himself overwhelmed by the strict environmental groups he encounters, but, in Houston and Chicago, he is troubled by the ubiquitous poverty and violence he witnesses. Take, for example, the story of a grief-stricken mother in Chicago, in which Joseph verbally articulates the woman's sorrow while Tolmaire physically articulates it. In a moment of quietude onstage, Joseph, speaking as the mother, asks, "Black rain on sunny days. Why you got to take my son away?" (*rbGb*). Near him, Tolmaire embodies the woman's loss, rocking back and forth without anything to steady her. In the face of the mother's tragedy, Joseph grows self-conscious about his group's agenda, sheepishly telling

her, “Me and my do-gooder friends are greening the environment,” but she only responds “in the theme of disaster…She answers with gun recycling the death of black boys” (*rbGb*). As Joseph speaks, Tolmaire leans on him, pushing her body off of his with increasing force, her weight a physical resistance to the son’s untimely death. The encounter leads Joseph to recognize that, “If you’re brown, you can’t go green until you hold a respect for black life” (*rbGb*). Seeing the effects of gang violence up close, Joseph realizes that what is needed is a celebration of black life and culture, an acknowledgement that, for many African-American youths, survival is its own form of sustainability. Part of this celebration is also a respect and care for the environment in which people of color work, play, and live.

Witnessing environmental injustices meant to make people of color “feel broken”—from derelict parks to food insecurity to poor air quality—Joseph discovers that any effective, lasting environmentalism must be rooted in everyday life (*rbGb*). He envisions “Mos Def on a solar stage, green in the ghetto, sustainable hip-hop,” but slowly realizes that, in order to go forward, African-American communities must go back; they must be able to grieve for all the youth that have died and to celebrate those who are still alive (*rbGb*). An environmentalism that fails to consider what has been lost is disingenuous and impractical, but Joseph does not advocate a celebration that ignores the loss of black life but one that fully recognizes it. As Harvey Young argues, what is needed “is a pragmatic understanding not only of the ways in which the past shadows the present but also of how the joys and, perhaps, the *jouissance* of blackness, are tempered with pain” (6). For African Americans, sorrow and joy are inextricably connected, and Joseph extends this complex connection to the soil. Speaking of the young man killed by gang violence, he says, “The first thing you notice is his skin. If it were soil, his is the brown you’d want to sow in. A Chicago native son—hard times he does not blink. So think of this brother

brown. Now see this mother black. See how dark the day becomes when you bury the son?" (*rbGb*). By linking the physical body of the young man to material soil, Joseph suggests an embodied interdependency between the two. The "son" is also the "sun;" the skin is also the soil. Both sustain life and the loss of both is unfathomable.

The interconnection of joy and sorrow is taken up in another moment in which Joseph decides to throw a festival of life, a celebration of African-American life, instead of a preachy or generic eco-festival. His decision prompts a mini-festival onstage as the performers break into a celebratory song accompanied by upbeat skipping and marching echoed by similar onscreen images and sounds. Gradually, the joyful tone gives way to a bluesy mourning of all the life that has been lost. Joseph recalls, "Lots of black boys' souls in the wood, floors, and steel beams," and asks, "What would grow here, fertilized by blood under the concrete?" (*rbGb*). As one performer slowly drums against a steel beam, another sings, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home" (*rbGb*). By interconnecting moments of loss with those of celebration, *rbGb* suggests that a loss of home necessitates a celebration of life, both of black life and the life of the soil, which has the potential to sustain life.

Once fertilized by the sweat, blood, and toil of African slaves, American land today still absorbs fresh African-American bloodshed. In the past five years alone, unarmed black victims like Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, and Jordan Davis have been gunned down and subsequently failed by the justice system. White fear of African- American lives and the lack of value placed on such lives, particularly those of black young men, causes Joseph to turn to the earth, even though he cannot imagine what can possibly grow out of hatred, violence, and bloodshed. In his contemplation of an "aesthetics of the earth," Édouard Glissant acknowledges the seeming incongruity of loving land that reminds one of one's colonization and, in this case, one's

enslavement and disenfranchisement (150). And, yet, Glissant contends that, if healing is to begin, one must develop a "passion for the land where one lives…an action we must endlessly risk" (151). To risk loving a land and home "fertilized by blood under the concrete" is indeed terrifying, painful, and unfathomable, and, as Joseph gradually realizes, even harder to tell others to do. Thus, rather than deliver pat, environmental didacticism to people he encounters in the four cities, or to the *rbGb* audience, Joseph acknowledges and commemorates African Americans' personal and collective losses and celebrates a vibrant, hardy African-American culture, arts, and—most of all—life. Etymologically, "eco" means "house," and, throughout *rbGb*'s spatial and metaphorical reflection and reorientation of home, Joseph proposes an ecological practice that, despite racism, violence, and fragmentation, still somehow celebrates African-American environments, particularly their lives and homes.

"Green is Also the Color of BP"

If Joseph is humbled by the loss and need that he encounters in Chicago and Houston, he is disenchanted by stringent environmentalists in Oakland and Harlem. Witnessing a jarring chasm between the extreme disenfranchisement of low-income African Americans and the extreme privilege of many self-proclaimed environmentalists, Joseph and his "do-gooder friends" realize that the catchphrase "greening the environment" is incongruent with many African Americans' lives and experiences (*rbGb*). This becomes particularly apparent to Joseph when he visits an economically privileged, largely white "eco-group" in Oakland for its help "brown[ing] the green movement" at the upcoming festival (*rbGb*). Instead of offering the artist financial assistance or festival volunteers, group members take him to yoga, a "green sweat lodge," and a vegan Vietnamese restaurant (*rbGb*). Joseph's comical bemusement as he recounts

the experience reveals a startling disconnection between his own understanding of "going green" and the eco-group's understanding. Juxtaposed with many African-American communities' need for food justice, clean air, and access to public transportation, the group's bourgeois environmentalism seems out of touch with the necessities of most people of low-income. Although it is unclear from Joseph's reaction to the group, I would suggest that the issue is not with the group's veganism but rather its financial and racial privilege, which facilitates its veganism. As A. Breeze Harper argues, even though there are vegans of color, "veganism is associated with white people of privilege," and most vegan texts take a "colorblind" approach that assumes whiteness and disregards the ways in which vegan discourses and practices are racialized (222-23). Reflecting on his experience, Joseph realizes the irony of accompanying white vegans to white vegan sites—made so through racial and class privilege—in order to ask them to help him "brown the green movement" (*rbGb*).

In contrast to his experiences in Chicago and Houston, where he felt foolish asking poverty and grief-stricken individuals to go "green," in Oakland, Joseph begins to suspect the commodification and elitism embedded in "going green." As one elderly man in Houston points out when Joseph asks him what "green" means to him, "Green is also the color of BP" (*rbGb*). Likely, the man is not only referring to the color green in BP's logo, but also the company's misleading "green" advertisements, which played ad nauseam after the 2010 oil spill. Thus, although Joseph casually employs the word "green" throughout the first half of *rbGb*, he does so in order to later question and undermine his own flippancy. His juxtaposition of the unfairly disenfranchised and the incredibly privileged suggests that environmental justice is not so much about "brown[ing] the green movement" as much as it is about rethinking the green movement entirely (*rbGb*). Considering the ubiquity of the word "green," and its multiple applications—

from "green" products, today a $40 billion dollar business (Neff 6), to "greenwashing," making false environmental claims in advertisements—it is clear that the term's meaning has become diluted and, worse, misappropriated. Although the Federal Trade Commission issues "Green Guides" to curb greenwashing,[58] the guidelines are, for the most part, nonbinding and unenforceable (Feinstein 229).

"Green" advertising's dubious environmental claims have led to popular distrust of "green" products and a decline in consumer interest in making (supposedly) environmentally-friendly purchases.[59] However, while greenwashing has deterred the average consumer, the affluent continue to purchase expensive "green" products while, ironically, consuming more energy than people of lower income (Dunleavey). Furthermore, more often than not, "green" products are overpriced not because they cost more to manufacture than environmentally unfriendly products but because the high price authenticates the items' "greenness." In many ways, then, the term "green" has bee co-opted by a "green consumerism" and a "green elitism" that is far more about distinctions of class and race than it is about saving the environment.

Although Joseph does not directly critique his own use of the word "green," he nonetheless exposes its elitism, particularly in *rbGb*'s Harlem scenes. As the performers shift the house compartments to suggest a new setting, they quicken their pace and begin marching in a row center stage, their intense, rapid rhythm channeling and matching that of New York City. Together, the performers repeatedly chant: "What are we going to do when there's nothing left to eat but money, and we can't huhhuhhuh [gasping pants] *breathe*" (*rbGb*). Taking on the city's frenetic rhythm, the artists also take on its residents' sense of claustrophobic chaos. They pop in

[58] The Green Guides received a much needed update in October 2012.

[59] A 2012 survey found that while people had reduced their energy consumption between 2008 and 2012, they were less willing to spend additional money on supposedly eco-friendly products than they were in 2008 (Neff 6).

and out of windows, over and onto steps. Joseph and Tolmaire hip-hop dance while one man drums on house steps and ceiling beams and another on wind chimes made of recycled lights. Their hasty physicality and rhythm, combined with their literal lack of breath, suggest that the city is confining, stifling, overwhelming. On one hand, this implies a clichéd representation of cities, historically seen as blights on nature rather than urban ecologies with their own complex ecosystems. On the other hand, though, *rbGb*'s claustrophobic interpretation of New York speaks to the disparate experiences of metropolites, some of whom have less access to parks and fresh food than others and, thus, more of a disconnection between themselves and the land. More literally, if oxygen-producing plants are eradicated, as the performers predict, then people really will struggle to breathe. In imagining a future abundance of money but a shortage of food, Joseph devalues money, which cannot directly sustain life, and prioritizes food that can.

This panicked vignette is immediately contrasted with a scene of smug environmentalism. As in Oakland, Joseph goes to visit an "eco-guru" in Harlem for local help staging his Life is Living festival; however, he finds that "the czar of all things green in Harlem is unimpressed" (*rbGb*). Comically, the other performers act as the czar, interrogating Joseph in unison: "Vegan? Walking up stairs? Are you taking your own cup to Starbucks?" (*rbGb*). Joseph looks completely flummoxed until this last question, when he enthusiastically proclaims that he is indeed bringing his own mug to Starbucks. The czar, however, responds, "Trick question—fuck Starbucks!" (*rbGb*). In rapid-fire unison, the group grills Joseph about the length of his showers, the use of his thermostat and air conditioner, the amount of trash he recycles, and so on. Completely overwhelmed, Joseph asks, "Yo, Harlem czar, I want to go green, but how can I when you won't let me breathe?" (*rbGb*). The question becomes a rhythmic refrain gradually taken up by all of the performers. Returning to a horizontal line, the group's marching, stamping,

and emphasis on the word “breathe” echoes its earlier refrain; tonally and thematically connected, the two moments not only critique unequal access to verdancy in Harlem but also the czar’s stiflingly restrictive environmentalism. In his dogmatic single-mindedness, the Harlem czar is emblematic of many mainstream environmentalists who have fixed, if convoluted, rules and regulations that must be followed if one is to prove his environmental knowledge and commitment. Tellingly, the czar is concerned solely with conservation—of energy, animals, trees, and other resources—and fails to consider how he might create more egalitarian access to and distribution of existing resources. Rather than discuss Joseph’s fears about future food security and air quality, the czar wants to verify the artist’s “green” credentials; this juxtaposition critiques dogmatic environmentalism that privileges rigid regulations and conservation practices over disenfranchised humans in the environment, as well as over personal, material connections with the earth.

Although the Harlem scene is playful, it nonetheless exposes a serious problem embedded in the majority of mainstream environmentalism: guilt. Green marketing is particularly adept at capitalizing on this guilt, insinuating that no matter what one does, it is never enough. The desire to “go green,” and, more importantly, to *appear* to be “going green” often supplant the need to materially connect with land. Thus, Joseph finds that he is neither wealthy enough for Oakland’s “green” group, nor savvy or hip enough for Harlem’s “green” guru. Caught between his guilt for asking impoverished people to “go green” and his guilt for not being “green” enough himself, Joseph demonstrates the need for ecological practices that speak directly to African-American experiences that have not been co-opted by green capitalism. Despite the fact that several studies have demonstrated that people of color tend to vote for clean water and clean air legislation, there remains an unsubstantiated belief that people of color

cannot care for the environment when they are preoccupied with meeting basic needs (Melosi 125).

However, if standards of environmentalism are based on the ability to buy and consume questionably "eco-friendly" products, rather than on environmental justice for humans and nonhumans alike, such beliefs are likely to persist. Although Joseph may have begun his Life is Living project with the intention of teaching low-income people to go "green," he gradually realizes, after listening to individuals' stories and experiencing their neighborhoods, that "going green" can be limited and, at times, counterproductive (Thomas 574). What is needed instead is a flexible, adaptive, and improvisational understanding of sustainability and environmentalism.

Celebrating black lives rather than green mandates, Joseph suggests that whether African Americans are suffering from grief-stricken loss and poverty, or from a self-imposed environmental regulation overload, the remedy is still the same: a renewed, material connection to the earth. While such a connection is by no means a cure-all, especially for those particularly affected by environmental injustice, it nonetheless has restorative properties. A celebration of black life and, with it, the life of the soil, cannot erase what has been lost, as exemplified in Chicago and Houston, or replace all other environmental efforts, as exemplified in Oakland and Harlem. However, it can ground such loss and environmentalism in a materialized ecological practice that celebrates life as well as acknowledges loss and that turns to gardening to create more egalitarian access and personal connection to food.

"I Speak to Him of Seeds"

Joseph's ecological practice in *rbGb* is most clearly defined when the piece specifically turns to gardening, as it does in scenes set in Houston and Oakland. In the former, performers

gesturally suggest gardening poses while humming a bluesy melody. Two of the artists hunch over their gardening work; with laborious movements and bent backs, they harvest. Meanwhile, Tolmaire snaps actual peas in rhythm with the music. As the performers plant and sing, Joseph explains, "We have this rule in the garden. You can't just be pretty. You have to put out. Gardens on landfills…community gardens. Put sweat in; get greens" (*rbGb*). Tolmaire looks up from her peas to chime in, "We're trying to get everyone to grow community gardens in vacant lots, and we don't think we need permission" (*rbGb*). Importantly, the gardening represented in *rbGb* is based on necessity; the performers—and their festival attendees—plant and harvest for sustenance rather than simply for aesthetic appreciation. Just as Joseph suggests a metaphorical turn to the soil to mourn loss of life, he advocates a literal turn to it to sustain life. The ecological practice in *rbGb*, then, is one of survival: survival of African Americans, survival of the land, and the ways in which those two survivals are interconnected.

rbGb's ecological practice is also one of, in the vein of de Certeau, "making do," of finding "*ways of using* the constraining order of the place" one is in (30). As Joseph wryly observes, "Black people pack big culture in little spaces, next to little land, and rowhouses" (*rbGb*). Operating within actual gaps and cracks, Joseph encourages working with whatever one has, planting wherever one can, even in landfills. Whether it is music, dance, or gardening, *rbGb* performs and advocates a material improvisation that seeks environmental justice through everyday tactics, despite sedimented, multilayered injustices. Thus, even as it fosters a particular ecological practice, the piece also maintains a flexibility, openness, and adaptability that allow for divergent African-American narratives and approaches to environmentalism. Through his experience staging the Life is Living festival, Joseph comes to not only advocate for material interactions with dirt but also to champion personal understandings of environmentalism.

Toward the end of the piece, the artist recalls standing with his son in Oakland's Bobby Hutton Park[60] and struggling to explain to him the history of the Black Panther Party—why it was necessary and why many of its members were killed: "My son asks me of justice. I speak to him of seeds" (*rbGb*). With these final, telling words, the performers begin recomposing the shotgun house, as Tolmaire sings, "If you want me to stay, stay, stay…" (*rbGb*). The architectural rearrangement of the four compartments into an order different from their original formation reflects the performers' own spatial and rhetorical journey, as their experiences of various neighborhoods and residents reshaped and expanded their understanding of environmentalism. The shotgun house's rearrangement into a whole but altered unit also speaks to the four cities' shifting relations, the ways in which seemingly local environmental justice practices are regionally, nationally, and even globally interconnected. Indeed, in the final moments of *rbGb*, the performers disappear into the house from which a solitary light illuminates, suggesting both an ongoing environmental justice dialogue (Thomas 576) and a holistic approach to environmentalism. The four compartments, loosely representative of four cities, are moved throughout *rbGb* to suggest spatialized experiences of particular neighborhoods, but, in rejoining the disparate set pieces, the performers highlight the need for simultaneously local and global understandings of home and urban ecology. In *rbGb*, then, environmental justice begins and ends with the home and the earthly foundation on which home is built. It offers one possible ecological practice that, out of necessity, celebrates life, materially improvises, and sustains life through the cultivation of home and land.

[60] Although the park is "officially" named the DeFremey Park, it is locally known for the seventeen-year-old Black Panther killed by police officers in 1968.

Food Justice

rbGb's final suggestion that environmental justice is best sought through seeds is reflective of a growing nationwide food justice movement in which people of color and low-income people, often through community or grassroots organizations, create local access to fresh produce through community gardens, farmer's markets, and so on (Alkon and Agyeman 5-6). Although environmental justice has historically focused more on protecting disenfranchised people from pollutants and toxins, food justice activism has recently become an important component of and companion to the larger environmental justice movement (Alkon and Agyeman 8). Particularly since the 2008 recession, when unemployment increased food insecurity and bankrupt businesses left behind vacant lots ripe for planting, community gardening has grown in popularity and necessity. Indeed, rivaling the tragic narrative of Detroit, a bankrupt city arguably hardest hit by the recession because of its flagging car industry, is a narrative of the city's regrowth: as one journalist puts it, "Read the paper, and you see a wasted landscape; go there, and you see the sprouts emerging from the soil" (Bittman). With more abandoned than occupied properties, the city of Detroit began a free "adopt-a-lot" program, and the remaining residents have taken advantage of it, starting community gardens like D-Town Farm and opening fresh produce markets like Peaches and Greens in neighborhoods with food insecurity (Bittman). Similar efforts have unexpectedly emerged in poor neighborhoods throughout Houston, Oakland, Milwaukee, and the Bronx, to name but a few (Alkon and Agyeman 5).

Before food justice activism took root, the broader food movement—spurred by the immense success of health writers like Michael Pollan and by popular slow food, locavore, and organic trends—became, and has remained, a lucrative market. However, as Alkon and

Agyeman argue, the food movement's homogenous make-up of white, middle-class consumers has made it "something of a monoculture" itself, despite its initial intention to counteract Big Agriculture (2). Thus, food justice activism, led by those who need it most, not only provides disenfranchised people with indispensable, immediate access to fresh produce but also enables diverse, alternative narratives to emerge from the predominantly white food movement. As supermarket chains continue to abandon or avoid low-income areas for higher-income suburbs, community gardens offer sustained access to fresh food; driven by labor more so than money, such gardens allow residents to control their own food security rather than entrusting it to others.

Performances like *rbGb* serve to spread the goals and messages of food justice activists, representing communal garden labor through communal stage labor and creating collaborations between food activism and theater for social justice. For instance, the 2012 Los Angeles premiere of Mohammed Ali Ojarigi's *Guardin' Roots* was both inspired by the South L.A. gardening group Seeds of Carver and mounted in order to fund the group's horticultural transformation of a particular vacant lot at the corner of Leimert Boulevard and Sutro Avenue. Before the performance began, theater ushers handed out tissue-wrapped seeds and displayed a slide show of the gardening group's previous projects, documenting the plants' evolution from fragile shoots to full-grown plants. From the pre-show to the performance itself, then, the production is both a gardening and theater performance that celebrates prior horticultural achievements and hopes to inspire new ones with physical seeds and a gardening narrative.

The play itself is the story of a recently released African-American ex-convict, Dontae Waters, who, upon returning to his South L.A. neighborhood, must choose between falling back into crime and reinventing himself through the new community garden. *Guardin' Roots* not only stages actual community concerns through the character of Dontae but also through the character

of the Homeless Watcher, who acts as both the play's narrator and its Shakespearean fool, seeing what none of the other characters can. The show begins with an elderly homeless man entering the theater and travelling up the center aisle asking audience members for money; the scene drags out uncomfortably until a crew member finally asks the man to leave. Only then does the man take up residence on the stage as the Homeless Watcher, alternating his time sleeping, asking for money, and commenting on the play's action. Thus, *Guardin' Roots* takes a typically invisible neighborhood fixture, the elderly, African-American homeless man, and not only transforms him into a visible presence but also an omniscient narrator. Similarly, upon their prison release, ex-convicts are often socially alienated and branded as unhireable. In contrast, the play makes Dontae the protagonist who not only finds a sense of purpose at the community garden but, in the style of a traditional hero, saves the day for the entire neighborhood by stopping an armed robbery. Elevating characters doubly marginalized by their race and their lack of community stature, *Guardin' Roots* suggests that both the garden and the theater are equalizing spaces in which one's current labor carries more significance than one's prior actions.

At the same time, while not excusing Dontae's previous actions, the play highlights the justice system's deep-seated racism[61] through the character Lorraine, a community garden activist who encourages the protagonist to resist his systematic stigmatization through gardening. It also questions the infallibility of police offices by casting the seemingly upstanding Officer David, himself an African American originally from the neighborhood, as the play's villain. Both actions complicate what would otherwise be a straightforward redemption narrative, thereby suggesting more complex understandings of criminality, justice, and race. Ultimately, though, *Guardin' Roots* is more interested in righting injustices than in belaboring them. Through the

[61] The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) has shown that there are immense racial disparities in incarceration, particularly for drug use, and prison, rather than rehabilitating prisoners, increases the likelihood of recidivism ("Criminal Justice").

community garden, the criminalized Dontae regains a sense of agency and control over his own time and labor, and, by the play's end, more ex-convicts have joined him, thus extending the narrative beyond its protagonist. Meanwhile, through the space of the theater and the characterization of the Homeless Watcher, the homeless are temporarily made visible for the audience and granted a position of authoritative wisdom. Therefore, *Guardin' Roots* represents both a vision for communities and residents affected by environmental injustice, as well as an existing practice. For example, groups like the Oakland-based Planting Justice have already begun to make small but meaningful changes in their neighborhoods by not only starting community gardens but hiring ex-convicts to plant them (Fancher). In joining theater and community gardening, Ojarigi combines the strengths of both: the former's ability to bring marginalized bodies to the fore, the latter's ability to create agency, opportunity, and food access, and the ability of both to unite communities through theatrical and horticultural material practices.

Not only do such practices highlight food injustices and create food access and security, but they also foster interspecies interactions between plants and people. Alaimo defines "trans-corporeality" as an emphasis on the movement of matter across bodies in order to reveal "the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures" (2), and she suggests that food may be the most trans-corporeal matter of all, given how much it travels (12). In growing community gardens, though, people create a sustained, trans-corporeal relationship with food; they not only consume from the garden but also give their bodily labor to it. In Big Agriculture, the convoluted routes and systems through which produce travels often truncate humans from the bodily labor or the genetic modifications that have created it. However, by planting and growing their own food, community gardeners extend their relationship with it, allowing for an increased

understanding and appreciation of plants, as well as the human and plant labor often required to insure their well-being. This is evidenced in *rbGb* when two performers dance as though they are gardening, pushing their weight toward the ground with imagined shovels, while Tolmaire snaps peas in rhythm with their movements. The deliberate specificity and strength of the choreography, alongside the steady sound of freshly snapped peas, imbue the vignette with a sense of ritual, not unlike an earlier scene in which Joseph sprinkles water for the dead. Thus, the acts of planting life and preparing a meal are given as much significance in *rbGb* as a cleansing ritual since both are matters of life and death. Similarly, in *Guardin' Roots*, the presence of one Granny Smith apple on stage allows characters and audience alike to reevaluate its importance. Dontae enthusiastically bites into the apple, marveling, "Can't believe you got apples up in the hood!" (Ojarigi). His delighted, wondrous tone reveals both the degree of food insecurity in his South L.A. neighborhood, where fresh produce is a rarity,[62] and his newfound appreciation for food grown in his own neighborhood.

Through bodily labor, community gardeners develop a sustained relationship with plants from seed to seed, and this interaction heightens the gastronomic enjoyment and appreciation of plants, drawing humans to the soil and seeds instead of merely what they produce. Consumption, no longer entirely severed from production, may be experienced as a political and ecological act, reconnected to the life and growth of the plant that created the fruit or vegetable, as well as the human labor that fostered it. If globalization, as scholars from Marx to Lefebvre to Harvey have argued, truncates "spaces of production and consumption," then food justice initiatives work to "resist economic globalization," making small dents in agribusiness by materially reconnecting people and plants (Carruth 7).

[62] Through what Elizabeth Eisenhauer calls "supermarket redlining," large grocery store chains tend to avoid low-profit urban areas in favor of middle-class suburban areas with plenty of room for parking, expansion, and better profits (125).

At the same time, food justice theater and gardening practices, as well as the food movement as a whole, must be mindful of romanticizing the local to the obscurement of related regional and global histories and their contemporary significance. Since the rise of spatial theory in the 1990's, the debate between scholars who privilege the local, like historian Arif Dirlik and literary critic Timothy Brennan, and those who seek to recuperate cosmopolitanism, like sociologist Ulrich Beck and literary critic Homi Bhabha, has intensified (Heise 4-9). Nowhere is the celebration of the local more prominent, though, than in theater, often highly site-specific and reliant on embodied and situated knowledge. From nineteenth century naturalism and realism to twentieth century experimental theater, the theater space and its actual and representational setting are frequently considered an integral part of performance. However, as Chaudhuri argues elsewhere, naturalistic theater, despite its emphasis on place, tends to abstract and marginalize nature rather than highlight it ("There" 24-26). Casting nature as a backdrop to human action, theater suggests that it is only useful insomuch as it bolsters humanism.

To combat such abstraction, eco-theater scholars like Chaudhuri and May emphasize site-specific theater that invites place to play a central role in the action ("There" 24; "Greening" 96); for instance, Paul Chan's 2007 *Waiting for Godot*, performed in two New Orleans neighborhoods ravaged by Hurricane Katrina, is informed, infused, and mediated by the local environment, its devastation, and the environmental injustices that the hurricane exposed. While Chan's production is site-specific, though, it also extends beyond its New Orleans location, inviting national considerations of environmental justice and governmental regulations and agencies, as well as global considerations of climate change.

Given that theater is always already mediated and that, after a performance ends, a whole audience disperses as disparate individuals from different neighborhoods, regions, and

sometimes countries, even the most site-specific theater extends beyond the local. However, theatrical narratives, and community gardens alike, that only seek to restore a local environmentalism do so in blatant disregard to the regional and global politics and networks that affect and are affected by local practices. Performing what I call "urban idyll," such narratives may romanticize urban plight and imply that one single horticultural intervention can remedy it entirely. They may also suggest that local gardening initiatives can function independent of external factors, from regional gardening practices and considerations, to state and federal programs and laws, to international seed production. For instance, returning to the example of Detroit, journalist Mark Bittman marvels, "Read the paper, and you see a wasted landscape; go there, and you see the sprouts emerging from the soil." While Bittman recognizes and questions the apocalyptic tone of journalistic portrayals of Detroit, the counter-narrative he proposes is equally as extreme, an urban idyll in which governmental mismanagement and environmental injustices are transformed into a "model for self-reliance and growth" (Bittman). Not only does such a narrative minimize the governmental mismanagement that bankrupted Detroit, as well as the correlated international corruption that prompted the Great Recession of 2008, but it romanticizes local gardening initiatives as wholesale solutions to far-reaching environmental injustices.

Certainly, food sovereignty and self-sufficiency are inspiring and worthy aspirations, yet it is crucial to remember that local gardens and farmer's markets can only make up a minor percentage of all vegetal needs (McClintock 113). Community gardens, and theater about such gardens, offer experiential and collaborative practices that make a visible and edible contribution to food justice. However, as urban geographer Nathan McClintock suggests, "The passion and vigor with which food justice activists break new ground…must extend also to rethinking and

rebuilding the entirety of the metropolitian and regional food system—production, processing, distribution, retail, and waste recovery—in both urban and peri-urban areas" (113). Historically, the pastoral literary mode in American literature has represented nature as bucolic and remote, the antithesis of city life. Urban food justice initiatives serve to shift the focus to city centers, a crucial realignment given that "rapidly growing urban areas are expected to absorb virtually all of the global population growth projected between now and 2050" (Christensen et al). However, city-centered efforts must extend outward if micro-scalar progress is to complement and influence macro-scalar change, rather than work against it.

In considering multi-perspectival approaches to environmental injustice in different American cities, *rbGb* offers multivalent narratives, some of which conflict with others and ultimately lead the performers to embrace improvisational, flexible ecological practices. Even as the piece zeroes in on local politics and personal experiences, it also intercuts between and across cities, performing what Edward Soja calls "community-based regionalism," a form of environmentalism that takes both a local and regional perspective (23). Although Marc Bamuthi Joseph's "Life is Living" adage could, on its own, be interpreted as romantic, vague, and universal, the maxim is expanded and flexed to take on different meanings based on divergent needs and locales. In contrast to *rbGb*, which suggests that ecological practices must be adapted to address local and regional concerns, *Guardin' Roots* is primarily concerned with creating a local sense of community and a self-sufficient "ethnic enclave." Indeed, the play ends with its protagonist Dontae proposing to the community gardener Lorraine and promising to be the head of his family's house (*Guardin' Roots*). While both performances end with a celebration of home, the metaphorical and scalar exploration of divergent homes and cities in *rbGb* extends the representational possibilities of the shotgun house from an individual home to several disparate

cities to earth itself. *Guardin' Roots*' representation of home, on the other hand, is limited to the South L.A. community in which the story takes place; the neighborhood marriage and the restoration of the patriarchal home combine to assert a traditional, insular resolution. Focused inward—on a marriage between neighbors and on one individual home—both acts bolster the local community, as well as Dontae's place within it. Furthermore, the play's grounding in realism roots it in one particular setting, whereas the nonlinearity in *rbGb* allows it to transect several different locales.

This is not to say that urban idyll narratives, like the one performed in *Guardin' Roots*, do not inspire local change, but rather that their insular focus limits the geographic reach of local environmental initiatives and at times works against larger regional efforts by disregarding the unavoidable interconnections among the local, regional, and global. As Heise argues, although environmentalists may attempt to "reterritorialize" culture and place, in the digital age, deterritorialization is, for most, an inevitable aspect of daily life, "shaped by structures, processes, and products that originate elsewhere" (53-54). Even the most carefully planned local gardens are influenced by global factors, like colonization, which introduced new vegetal species to regions where they were non- native, and ongoing climate change and seed production. One example of horticultural globalization is Monsanto, a multinational chemical and agricultural biotechnology megacorporation that makes up ten percent of the commercial seed market and roughly ninety percent of the genetically modified organism (GMO) industry (Carruth 14-15).[63] The company's monopolizing reach has made it nearly impossible to avoid Monsanto products, despite micro-scalar seed saving banks and practices. By acknowledging the regional and global networks that shape and are shaped by local food justice and theater for social justice practices,

[63] Although the U.S. Department of Justice began an antitrust investigation into Monsanto's monopolizing practices in 2010, it was mysteriously dropped nearly two years later.

city-centered initiatives can better critique uneven globalization, such as Monsanto's anticompetive takeover of the seed market, and can complement existing regional and global environmental practices.

Many metaphors have been enlisted to describe spatialized interconnectivity of the local and the global in the twenty-first century; for instance, geographer Neil Smith visualizes spatiality in terms of geographical scale (54) while theater scholar Marcela Fuentes, along with Heise, imagines digitally zooming in and out of spatial perspectives (32). However, because food justice initiatives and community-oriented theater are first and foremost local practices, I suggest a metaphor that speaks to this local emphasis more specifically: tree rings. Although the most effective environmentalism considers both the micro- and macro-scale, it is often more tangible, accessible, and likely for community gardeners and theater practitioners to begin with the former and extend outward. The growth rings that annually form on trees begin at the tree's center, though, much like disparate communities, the rings' common axis may in fact begin at an off-center point. Similarly, the concentric circles that gradually form are often uneven, their diametric growth dependent on environmental factors such as the climate and surrounding plants. Thus, while the tree's growth begins at a common point and extends outward, its pattern is determined by external forces. Furthermore, pith rays, like fine ribbons or tissues that begin near the tree's core, vertically cut across the concentric circles in order to transport food throughout the tree. These botanical characteristics resonate with an environmentalism that begins with one's own community but extends outward in various directions both gradually (as with the horizontal tree rings) and more directly (as with the vertical ribbons). Just as each tree's growth pattern reveals historical fluctuations in the environment, local to global economic and

ecological networks can and must be tracked, even when their routes are faint or deliberately obscured.[64]

Tree rings provide a useful metaphor and goal for community-oriented theater and food justice practices, in that they speak to the importance, centrality, and accessibility of local initiatives while also constantly extending, morphing, or pressing beyond any one locale. This balance is crucial given that theater and environmentalism alike are informed by particularities of place, which can be erased if one zooms out to the global too drastically. At the same time, to truncate local environmentalism from broader geographical considerations can ultimately do more harm than good, particularly in the Global South. Tree rings, with their multi-directionality and simultaneously centered and extended spatiality, offer a model for tracing shifting local and global structures and rethinking community-oriented food justice and theater for social change.

In order to continue exploring the ongoing exchanges and, at times, frictions between the local and the global, I now turn to one last ecological practice: the guerrilla gardening movement, which advocates illicit—as well as licit—gardening. Thus far, I have largely focused on tacitly legal community gardens and their on stage representations; although both *rbGb* and *Guardin' Roots* suggest that urban gardening is a human right, regardless of city or government approval, they are far more concerned with the act of gardening than its legality. Guerrilla gardening, on the other hand, is as much interested in the political contestation of land access and distribution as it is in material gardening practices, and, for this reason, offers a prime means of analyzing the uneven, concentric circles of spatial and horticultural injustices, as well as their local and global manifestations. In his analysis of global natures, geographer Bruce Braun

[64] Take, for instance, the recent 2014 organic egg shortage in the U.S. National Public Radio reporter Dan Charles investigated the shortage only to find that, though the chickens are raised in the U.S., their organic cornmeal and soybean diet is imported from China, India, and Argentina, because not enough American farmers sow organic crops. Thus, while the U.S. ships conventional soybeans all over the world, it imports organic chicken feed, so that organic consumers can eat what they believe are local eggs.

concludes, “Environmental knowledge turns out to be neither monolithic nor settled, commodity chains never escape heterogeneous projects of space and scale-making, and global conservation takes shape only through the friction of encounters and interactions between residents, nature lovers, scientists, and policy-makers alike” (652). The spatial, rhetorical, and material politics with which the diffuse, international guerrilla gardening movement engages raise timely questions about the local and global significance of guerrilla gardening, the geographic expansion of food justice, the privatization of public spaces, and uneven access to city green spaces.

Guerrilla Gardening

At first glance, the guerrilla gardening movement does not seem to share *rbGb*’s ecological practice of celebrating life flexibly and improvisationally. Its focus on gardening, with or without permission, may seem like a single issue incompatible with *rbGb*’s broader focus on sustaining African-American life in cities, homes, and gardens. However, as George McKay argues, the movement “can actually touch on a multitude of contemporary questions” about access to private and public space, “food production and consumption,” and political empowerment (192). It can also raise questions about sustainability, given that many illicit gardens are destroyed soon after they are planted, as well as considerations of native and non-native species, since some plants are better suited to certain environments than others. Nonetheless, because guerrilla gardening is, of necessity, a diffuse and unregulated movement, these questions and their potential answers often vary based on local guerrilla gardening practices. Indeed, the movement’s very definition varies from gardener to gardener. Some, like Richard Reynolds, insist that guerrilla gardening is “THE ILLICIT CULTIVATION OF

SOMEONE ELSE'S LAND"[65] (16), while others, like David Tracey, are more flexible, defining it as "gardening public space *with*[66] or without permission" (4).

Most often, though, the urban guerrilla gardening is defined as illegally planting on someone else's land, typically neglected city property. Although the movement is highly diffuse, there are now over 41,000 self-professed guerrilla gardeners worldwide.[67] When gardeners want to plant in inaccessible, fenced off areas, they throw "seed bombs," consisting of compost, seeds, clay, and water, over the fence. By throwing seed bombs in restricted areas, gardeners can make a horticultural intervention that disrupts boundaries of public and private space. However, without further tending, many seed bombs may fail to grow. Unlike community gardens, typically authorized and thus longer-lasting, guerrilla gardens tend to be illicit and hence ephemeral, operating simultaneously as activism and performance. For example, the movement's creation of terms like "seed bombs," or "seed grenades," and its use of code names not only draw on military references but performance tactics as well. Deploying playfulness and hyperbole, guerrilla gardening can serve to highlight the unequal privatization of land, the mismanagement of city grounds, and the regulation of seemingly "public" spaces.

Not only theoretical, though, it can also make a vegetal intervention, improvisationally filling vegetal gaps, particularly in areas with high food insecurity: neighborhoods lacking nearby supermarkets and adequate transportation to grocery stores further away.

However, since guerrilla gardening is by necessity a diffuse movement, some gardeners are less interested in "greening" neighborhoods than they are in forcing people to rethink "green" and rethink spatial distribution practices. As McKay notes, there is an ideological split between

[65] Reynolds capitalizes this definition himself.

[66] Emphasis added.

[67] This is according to Richard Reynolds' GuerrillaGardening.org community forum.

activists who emphasize the "guerrilla" aspect of the movement and those who emphasize the gardening aspect (189). I argue that this split is crucial for differentiating between guerrilla gardeners more preoccupied with militant terminology than gardening and those who deploy such terminology only to politicize their performance practice. Although the ideological split is not always clear, I would suggest that the most effective guerrilla gardening is that which hyper-performs its guerrilla aspects only in order to advocate for both the environment *and* the people in it. This is an important distinction, given that guerrilla gardening continues to gain mainstream popularity with its metaphoric possibilities and its illicit appeal, to the point that it now runs the risk of being completely commodified.

For example, pricey "garden bon bons," like seed bombs but shaped like fine chocolates, are now for sale on Etsy and are marketed for private rather than collective gardens. Similarly, seed bombs have become a popular party favor for those who want to [quote] "throw n' go" without returning to the scene ("Wedding Favor"). Such products may capitalize on guerrilla gardening but they disregard the very ethos of the movement: to upset spatialized boundaries of private and public and to share one's work with others. The products' marketed "throw n' go" methods also fail to strike a balance between short-term guerrilla gardening performance and long-term cultivation practices. Thus, it is more important than ever to investigate the situational and geographical multiplicities of guerrilla gardening, as well as the relationship between guerrilla gardening discourse and practice. Since guerrilla gardening ideology can be deliberately ambiguous, I provide a brief history of the movement in the U.S. before analyzing the militant performance tactics of three distinctive radical gardeners: Liz Christy in 1970's New York, Richard Reynolds in London, and Ron Finley in Los Angeles.

Little Wars

Considering that guerrilla gardening can be the simple act of dropping or planting seeds on land that one does not own, its history is likely as long as that of gardening itself.[68] However, it was not until 1973 that the term "guerrilla gardening" was coined by the Green Guerillas[69] group, which was founded by artist Liz Christy and her friends when they began gardening in derelict lots in their Manhattan neighborhood. They first planted in an abandoned lot on Elizabeth Street on the Lower East Side, but the garden was soon paved… to put up a parking lot (Ferguson 83). Undeterred, the Green Guerillas took over the nearby corner of Bowery and Houston, and, after a publicized battle with the City (Ferguson 83), the group was able to rent the space for one dollar a month ("Houston"). Unusual for a guerrilla gardening project, which is often destroyed by the city soon after it is planted, the Green Guerillas' work still exists to this day and is now called the Liz Christy Garden. The corner of Bowery and Houston evolved from a radical, illicit garden to a community garden, which, rather ironically, now has a fence and limited operating hours.

While the transition from a short-term garden to a long-term one speaks to a continual commitment to the plants, the fence around the garden's perimeter and the "business" hours reassert the very boundaries of private and public space that the 1970s' Green Guerillas sought to upset. When the group first began planting, the Lower East Side was a dilapidated area in a bankrupt city, necessitating the group's illicit intervention; however, as the once diverse, working class neighborhood rapidly gentrified, so too did the Liz Christy Garden. For instance, when Avalon Bowery Place, a luxury apartment complex, was erected nearby in 2007, the

[68] For instance, over 1,000 years ago, the Romani people traveled from northwestern India to the Balkans and, eventually, to Europe. As they traveled, they dropped potato seeds on private and public land, knowing that they would return to harvest the crop later (Tracey 20).

[69] The Green Guerillas spell "guerrilla" with one "r."

garden was in danger of being destroyed, but, by working with Avalon, the Green Guerillas were able to preserve the garden. The company gave money to the restoration of the garden following its apartment construction and replaced the garden's unique 1970's fence with a homogenized Parks and Recreations' fence. While this working relationship helped preserve the garden, it also speaks to the ways in which the garden has been absorbed into and altered by its now upscale neighborhood. Nonetheless, the gentrification of the Lower East Side has led the contemporary Green Guerillas group to expand beyond its own neighborhood, providing seedlings, funding, and programming to currently disenfranchised neighborhoods in central Brooklyn and the South Bronx. Thus, what began as a local community project has gradually expanded across divergent New York City boroughs.

Although the group is now a self-described "nonprofit resource center," its beginnings were far more improvisational and illicit ("Our History"). For example, a 1973 Green Guerilla Fact Sheet offers "seed grenade" recipes and instructions for launching. Gardeners are advised to "assemble" either old glass Christmas ornaments or balloons and fill them with water, peat moss, fertilizer, and seeds. Then, gardeners should "[c]hoose a lot that has a fence and is legally inaccessible. Calculate in advance how many grenades will be needed to cover the area. Check carefully before throwing. Observe all normal safety precautions. Suggested throwing techniques are: for Christmas ornaments—use an underhand throw; for the water balloons—use an overhand throw" ("Green"). The sheet is a playful and improvisational amalgam of gardening and military terms. The list of ingredients, the grenade diagram, and the seed list—which explains when certain plants are most seasonable—all suggest a seriousness of task. At the same time, the militant language, such as "assemble the ingredients" rather than gather the ingredients, and "grenade membrane" rather than balloon or ornament, is rendered comical by its own hyperbole

and its juxtaposition with the recommended throwing techniques ("Green"). While the suggested use of ornaments and balloons, not to mention chemical fertilizers, reveals a historical lack of understanding about non-biodegradable materials, it nonetheless, along with the recommended throwing techniques, evokes an improvisational tone. As ironically ill-suited as balloons and ornaments are now known to be for gardening, their use is suggestive of what Michel de Certeau calls the art of "making do" through everyday practices (29). Deploying performance tactics that make use of what's available and take action in quite literal gaps and cracks, the 1970s' Green Guerillas upset boundaries of private and public space.

And, yet, despite the playfulness of the group's fact sheet, and of recent gardening manifestos, it is crucial to consider the full significance of applying militant terminology to gardening. The Green Guerillas' deployment of the term "guerrilla" in 1973, like the San Francisco Mime Troupe's deployment of it in 1965 for "guerrilla theater," was inspired by Ernesto "Che" Guevara's 1961 handbook *Guerrilla Warfare* (Doyle, Reynolds 17).[70] Etymologically, the Spanish word "guerrilla" means "little war," and insomuch as radical gardeners are waging improvisational, localized wars against unequal, limited access to land, the term is useful. Just as R.G. Davis's guerrilla theater sought to provoke artists to lead a U.S. countercultural revolution, guerrilla gardening intends to revolutionize the act and art of gardening, as well as to interrogate the privatization of land (Doyle). As Adam Purple explains of his renowned Garden of Eden,[71] "The city was doing nothing with that land, they were ambushing it…Why would I bother getting permission from them? It's the people's turf. I made

[70] Particularly influential was the occupation of the People's Park in Berkley in 1969, when students and police clashed over the University of California's ownership of the park.

[71] In 1975, Adam Purple began creating his garden on five vacant lots on Eldridge Street in Manhattan. The garden, more of a large earthwork, became an international tourist attraction before being demolished in 1986 (Ferguson 87-88).

that garden for everybody" (qtd. in Ferguson 87). Inspired by Guevara's call for "agrarian reform" and just, equitable distribution of land, guerrilla theater and guerrilla gardening both reimagine public space and subvert privatized space. In 1967, for instance, Davis explained that guerrilla theater must destroy the entire structure of private property, something exemplified by the San Francisco Mime Troupe's reclamation of public parks for its theater productions (Doyle). Similarly, guerrilla gardening is a material performance that can expose unfair land distribution and create more egalitarian access to green space. Thus, the term "guerrilla" is useful in contesting the privatization of land and emphasizing the ways in which, as David Tracey writes, "every plant is political" (32).

However, guerrilla gardening's capitalization on "Che," part of a global commodification of the figure, calls the movement's claim to subversive alternativeness into question. Indeed, Alberto Korda's iconic photograph of Guevara has been featured in Taco Bell and Smirnoff vodka ads and plastered on t-shirts, pins, and even haute couture bikinis (Caspari).[72] Such commercial misappropriations displace the cultural and historical significance of Guevara, turning a controversial individual into an empty signifier. Although the application of the figure's name to contemporary revolutionaries—such as the "Guevara of Gaza," Palestinian Mohammad Al-Aswad—may be more germane, it still makes troublingly misleading parallels (Selbin 38). As political scientist Eric Selbin notes, even if such appellations "are illuminatory, they just as often prove obfuscatory and limiting, encouraging us to interchange, even interpolate, people, places, events, and processes" (38). With regard to the guerrilla gardening movement specifically, the thrill of illicit behavior for a perceived greater good may obscure the systematic environmental injustices which necessitate intervention in the first place.

[72] Korda and Guevara's family have begun suing companies like Smirnoff for what they see as a misappropriation of Guevara's message.

Take, for example, a white Seattle writer's gleeful recount of her first foray into guerrilla gardening; after describing herself as a law-abiding citizen who doesn't even speed, Elizabeth Kwak-Hefferan playfully writes, "But, I realize now that all along, I've just been waiting for the right weapon with which to battle The Man. Wildflowers, of course." Like the Green Guerillas before her, the writer relishes the illicit allure and subversive militancy of guerrilla gardening, throwing her self-made seed bomb over a fence while muttering, "Take that!" Even as Kwak-Herfferan's narrative, and the larger guerrilla gardening movement, highlights the fact that gardening, land distribution, and its management are all political, it simultaneously obscures the specific politics, preferring to facetiously, vaguely wage war with "The Man," rather than consider land politics' connection to race and class. Of course, playfulness is a crucial tactic of the guerrilla gardening movement and serves to parody and critique divisions and regulations of land; however, the movement's fetishization of guerrilla tropes limits its political specificity and efficacy. Referring to herself as Marlon Brando, a "modern-day Janie Appleseed," and a "true rebel," the writer is able to experience the thrill of rebellion while still maintaining her position as a good, white citizen. Thus, while guerrilla gardening can expose environmental injustices, it can just as easily deracialize and conceal them beneath vague, generalized battle cries and an overemphasis on anarchy for its own sake.

Furthermore, while activists' application of the word "guerrilla" to gardening may highlight the political, improvisational, and spatial aspects of illicit gardening, it can also conflate war and gardening, following Guevara's own conflation in expressions like the "fruits of destruction" (Reynolds 20, 27; Guevara). For example, white guerrilla gardener and author Richard Reynolds grows bellicose in *On Guerrilla Gardening*, as he extends his battle with the

city of London[73] to the land itself: "My crime was gardening on public land without permission and battling whatever was in the way…Our gardens are scenes of savage destruction. Animals uproot, frosts cripple, winds topple, rains flood. The guerrilla gardener shares this constant battle with nature with other gardeners. But we have other enemies and ambitions" (9). Here, Reynolds gradually returns to the enemies who privatize and mismanage city spaces, but not before reinforcing the familiar "man versus nature" conflict. Although he counteracts an idyllic representation of nature, in which all species magically exist harmoniously, Reynolds goes too far in the opposite direction, pitting nature and people against each other. Rather than force nature to do one's bidding, guerrilla gardeners might choose plants and their location based on the existing ecology and climate.

Reynolds goes on to compare gardening to war: "In both exploits you wrestle forces beyond your control, you shape the landscape and you get messy. There are winners and losers. Both war and gardening are creative as well as destructive. Flower and power go together; they are not opposites" (27-28). Not only does such a fusion anthromophorize the land, projecting human violence onto it, it also reasserts the very land ownership it seeks to subvert. By suggesting that there are "winners and losers," or victors and victims, in gardening, Reynolds echoes normative notions of land possession rather than alternative notions of collective land. Arguably, Reynolds intends for guerrilla gardening to subvert more traditional gardening practices in which land and wealth are linked. However, his joyfully ubiquitous employment of military jargon—"arsenal," "armament" (121), "warfare," "horticultural weapons" (122), and so on—only serves to further conflate war and gardening. While linking the destruction of war and gardening may bolster and aggrandize Reynolds' mission, it also turns the garden into a site of

[73] Although this project primarily focuses on case studies in the U.S., Richard Reynolds is a very influential figure in the guerrilla gardening movement and thus warrants consideration.

violent contention rather than a site of collective performance. As David Abrams and Michael Hardman argue, in stressing guerrilla gardening's resistance to powerful city bureaucracies, Reynolds disregards the ways in which spatial meanings are altered and affected by every new performative action (7). Thus, even as Reynolds makes spatial interventions with his improvisational gardens, he continues to emphasize what he sees as homogenized management and use of city space. Such an emphasis discounts the constant fluctuation of spatial meanings, particularly as they are horticulturally performed.

And, yet, given Reynolds ongoing struggle with his south London council, his focus on contested space is understandable. Living and gardening in Elephant and Castle, a major road junction in south central London, Reynolds must contend with traffic congestion, pollution, and construction. Several upcoming high-rise tower projects also give Reynolds reason to fear the destruction of his guerrilla gardens, as well as the gentrification of his largely working class neighborhood. He has had a number of run-ins with the Southwark Council, which has even destroyed three-year-old gardens for which Reynolds first gained permission. Such concerns have largely led the guerrilla gardener to turn to small pavement openings in sidewalks where, in well-maintained neighborhoods, trees are traditionally planted. Growing bite-sized, colorful guerrilla gardens in such openings, Reynolds not only contests access to public space but horticultural homogeneity. Thus, although his aggressively militant discourse reinforces binaries of private and public, Reynolds' material performance works to blur such divisions.

Gangsta' Gardeners

Reynolds is not the only guerrilla gardener to deploy militant language, though; as varied and individualized as the guerrilla gardening movement is, it is fairly consistently laced with

military metaphors. While radical gardeners run the risk of, like Reynolds at times, reinforcing the very ideas they seek to upset, they also have the potential to reclaim and repurpose otherwise violent metaphors. For example, Los Angeles guerrilla gardener Ron Finley, a self-titled "gangsta' gardener," gained acclaim with his 2013 TED talk. Two years prior to the talk, Finley and his collaborators founded L.A. Green Grounds, a volunteer organization that plants vegetable gardens in dilapidated parkways, strips of land between the sidewalk and the street. The group's first project was the stark parkway right outside Finley's house in South L.A., a neighborhood made up of Latinos and African Americans disproportionately affected by urban decay, particularly a dearth of green space and fresh produce. Finley, tired of traveling over 45 minutes for organic produce, planted everything from pumpkins to kale, much to the delight of his neighbors, with whom he shared his harvest. It didn't take long for the L.A. Bureau of Street Services to fine Finley for "illegally" planting on city property without a permit. However, neighbors and fellow guerrilla gardeners joined Finley in protesting the fine, and, so far, the garden remains intact.[74]

Estimating that L.A. city owns 26 square miles of vacant lots, Finley urges people to grow their own money—a.ka. produce—and make their own art by gardening. In the spirit of guerrilla gardening, he suggests that sociocultural transformation occurs, first and foremost, through the dirt: "To change the community, you have to change the composition of the soil" ("Ron Finley"). Unlike Reynolds, Finley casts guerrilla gardening as "defiant" *and* "therapeutic," thereby highlighting its function as both a political act and a restorative one ("Ron Finley"). However, while Finley's message is seemingly simple, his deployment of the term "gangsta' gardener" is multilayered. Explaining his reasons for using the phrase, he exclaims, "We got to

[74] As a direct result of Finley's public protest, the Los Angeles City Council has changed its gardening guidelines. As of October 23, 2013, urban gardeners may plant in parkways as long as they observe existing street safety requirements (Fox).

make this [gardening] sexy. So, I want all of us to become ecolutionary renegades, gangstas, gangsta' gardeners. We gotta' change; we gotta' flip the script on what a gangsta' is. If you ain't a gardener, you ain't gangsta'. Get gangsta' with your shovel and let that be your weapon of choice" ("Ron Finley"). Like many other guerrilla gardeners, Finley attempts to convert urbanites to gardening through hyperbolic, provocative, and rebellious language. Whereas Reynolds depicts guerrilla gardening as a battle that is waged for (and against) the earth, others, like David Tracey, play up and take delight in the criminal risks involved in illicit gardening.[75] Finley, meanwhile, draws on popular culture's glorification of criminal gangsters and gangster rap in order to make gardening "sexy," even as he simultaneously attempts to reclaim the term by flipping "the script."

While there is immense potential in reclaiming "gangsta" identity and interweaving it with gardening identity, it is also crucial to be cognizant of the term's laden history and the ways in which it may be misappropriated by others. As Judith Butler posits in response to the nineties' impulse to reclaim queer identity, "The expectation of self-determination that self-naming arouses is paradoxically contested by the historicity of the name itself: by the history of the uses that one never controlled, but that constrain the very usage that now emblematizes autonomy" and by the possibly oppositional deployments of the term in the future (19). Not unlike the pejorative word "queer," the word "gangsta" has been lobbed at one particular group—young, African American males—in order to call, name, or interpellate that group (Butler 18), and, thus, the expression "gangsta gardener" may be misunderstood or misappropriated. Indeed, some of the articles following Finley's TED talk were quick to imitate his "gangsta gardener" tone. Take, for instance, one *New York Times* article title, "Urban Gardening: An Appleseed with Attitude,"

[75] Tracey writes that readers can go to jail for guerrilla gardening before explaining that "the warning was just a ruse to get the naysayers out of the room" (3). Nonetheless, he provides new guerrilla gardeners with a list of "10 Lines to Try if You Get Stopped in the Middle of a Planting Project" (32).

which immediately codes Finley as African American. Later in the article, journalist David Hochman writes, "Neat rows of zucchini are for grandmas. [Finley's] gardens have spirals, color, fragrance and curves, and, to him, soil is sensuous," thus not only echoing the masculine tone of Finley's "gangsta gardening" ethos but also adding a note of exoticism.

Like Reynolds' use of military terminology, Finley's use of gangsta culture seeks to aggressively masculinize gardening's perceived image of feminine domesticity. However, his deployment of "gangsta" identity is contextually meaningful in his South L.A. neighborhood from which street gangs like the Bloods and Crips began. By taking up a term synonymous with violence and redefining it as a therapeutic, collective, and artistic act, Finley begins the slow task of reclaiming it in order to get people gardening. As he bluntly puts it, "If you want to meet with me, come to the garden with your shovel, so we can plant some shit" ("Ron Finley"). The TED talk's final emphasis on gardening rather than on "gangsta" reveals that the latter is a tactic to change misconceptions about the act of gardening and the identity of gardeners. In de Certeau's words, "the space of the tactic is the space of the other. Thus, it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it" (37). Not only does Finley play on the seemingly pejorative "gangsta," he also plays on the stereotype of the white, bourgeois gardener. Like Reynolds and other guerrilla gardeners, Finley exposes the environmentally unjust underpinnings of land distribution and accessibility by pushing the boundaries of private and public space, but he also begins to transform his neighborhood from a state of food insecurity[76] to a food collective by only growing edible plants. Finley and his collaborators actively work to lessen the imbalance between the "haves" and the "have-nots," not by taking from one and giving to the other, but by making city-owned places—which were once more collectively shared and utilized—public again. Creating a

[76] Between May and June of 2013, two Kroger-owned Ralphs' grocery stores closed in South LA. Residents protested the second closing but to no avail. Residents also protested the South LA stores' lack of fresh produce and cleanliness ("Shame on You").

degree of food justice in South L.A., Finley invites neighbors to freely take from the garden, but, more than that, join in the gardening. Most importantly, while Finley's illicit gardens begin as creative improvisations, they continue as durational performances, maintained and protected but never fenced off.

In this section, I have touched on three distinct guerrilla gardeners, none of whom are without their critiques, but all of whom reveal the contextual multiplicities of guerrilla gardening discourse and practices. As Abrams and Hardman insist, there is no singular guerrilla gardening identity, and I would add no fixed urban space (10). Rather, gardeners like Christy, Reynolds, and Finley deploy highly specific, situational, and improvisational performances based on local, socio-spatial gaps and cracks. And yet, to varying degrees, all three actively work to correct environmental injustices by turning nominal "public" spaces into materialized actualities through gardening performance. The three gardeners suggest that guerrilla gardening can not only denaturalize land ownership norms but also create and, where possible, *maintain* collective gardens.

At the same time, McKay notes that guerrilla gardening has "metaphoric appeal" for subversives who appreciate "the sheer interstitiality of it all," the gaps and margins that guerrilla gardening fills (187). Hopefully, this interstitiality leads guerrilla gardeners to consider the local, regional, and global circulations of the movement, as well as the deep-seated environmental injustices that necessitate horticultural intervention. Alternatively, though, the "metaphorical appeal" of the illicit, militant movement may cause guerrilla gardeners to generalize their rebellion and abstract ecological and economic particularities of place. Like *rbGb*, the best guerrilla gardening simultaneously exposes sedimented environmental injustices and enacts ecological practices that adapt and improvise based on geographical and environmental

necessity. It has the potential to highlight the unequal privatization of land, the mismanagement of city grounds, and the regulation of seemingly "public" spaces by making tactical, material interventions. Ultimately, though, I would suggest that if guerrilla gardening is to be an egalitarian practice that benefits diverse people and plants, rather than a privileged game for some humans, a balance must be maintained between improvisational, guerrilla tactics and long-term gardening performance.

In this chapter, I analyzed Marc Bamuthi Joseph's *red, black, GREEN: a blues*, the food justice movement, and the guerrilla gardening movement and their shared deployment of theatrical and horticultural ecological practices like improvisation, flexibility, and adaptability. I argue that such practices foster a sustainable environmental justice performance that, while locally situated, extends outward to consider regional and global significance. In the following two chapters, I shift from land politics to water politics, but I will continue to examine the concentric, shifting spatialities of environmental injustice, as well as to suggest additional ecological, material practices for theater and performance.

Chapter Three
Spacing and Displacing the Los Angeles River

"Smog typhoid celery like a ghost splashing out of a beaker" (59). This is how poet Standard Schaefer describes the Los Angeles River, alluding to its pollution and technocratic management. By and large encased in concrete, the river, like the base of a grooved celery stick, snakes below and, at times, alongside an interstate freeway. Angelenos[77] themselves are often unaware of the river's existence, despite the fact that it flows fifty-one miles from the San Gabriel and Santa Monica Mountains, through the San Fernando Valley, past downtown Los Angeles (L.A.), and out to the Pacific Ocean (Fletcher 36). However, nearly everyone, from locals to people who have never been to L.A., has seen the river, because it's been featured in over one hundred movies and countless television shows and commercials. In dry seasons, the riverbed serves as a drag race strip in films like *Grease* (1978) and *The Italian Job* (2003), and, in wet seasons, a potential savior in disaster films like *Volcano* (1997), in which Tommy Lee Jones's character attempts to divert lava into the river. A site for chase scenes, mutant creatures—as seen in *Them!* (1954)—, body dumps, and covert meetings, the L.A. River has sundry filmic iterations, many of which are rarely traced back to the river itself. Like many sites in and around Tinseltown, the river gives visitors a sense of déjà vu, provoked by both its ubiquity in film and its displacement as a free-flowing river.

This displacement is a hotly contested issue for a minority of Angelenos who eventually hope to remove the concrete from the river's bed. To that end, the L.A. City Council adopted a Revitalization Master Plan in 2007, developed by a team of architects, engineers, government agencies, and entrepreneurs. In his opening letter, then Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa envisioned

[77] Like many distorted Spanish names in the Southwest, "Angeleno" is a misspelling of "Angelino" or, even more accurately, "Angeleño."

the river as an "emerald necklace" of parks, bike paths, and walkways to be developed over the next twenty to fifty years. The Master Plan led the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), which finished converting the river into a flood channel in the Fifties and still manages it today, to write its own comprehensive Feasibility Report released in 2013. Although changes to the river are being made at a slow pace, they are occurring nonetheless, making the river a multivalent site of shifting ecologies and narratives. A palimpsest of Hollywood settings, environmental histories, and ongoing environmental action, the L.A. River is paradoxically both a highly site-specific place and a non-place; it is both here, local and contextual, and not here, a stand-in for whatever site Hollywood needs it to be and a half-hidden flood channel on the city's periphery.

The L.A. River's fluctuating spatial significance makes it an ideal tool of analysis to explore urban spatiality and its negotiations. Adapting Henri Lefebvre's and Edward Soja's spatial theories, I argue that the L.A. River is a highly spatialized site with a multiplicity of shifting spatial narratives, all of which shape and are shaped by local, regional, and global considerations. Lefebvre posits that space is often represented as universal, fixed, and abstract, when, in actuality, it is an unfixed variable constantly being produced and reproduced. In order to combat what he sees as a constructed gap between abstract and concrete space, Lefebvre proposes an interconnected spatial triad made up of spatial practice (perceived, mental space), representations of space (conceived, social space), and representational spaces (lived, physical space) (38-39). The constant tension among perceived-conceived-lived spaces can serve to undermine the domination of generalized, absolute space and, with it, the abstracted, capitalistic production of space (57). As Lefebvre warns, "(physical) natural space" will increasingly be "lost to *thought*" (30-31), abstracted and commodified if the production of space is not

denaturalized. The spatial triad is taken up by Soja who, paraphrasing Lefebvre, refers to it as "the center-periphery relation […] between the 'conceived' (*concu*) and the 'lived' (*vecu*)" (*Third* 30). Lefebvre "saw these two dialectical pairings (center-periphery, conceived-lived) as homologous, arising from the same sources, and often mapped them directly on one another" (Soja, *Third* 30). Lefebvre's notion of perpetual mapping is applicable to the L.A. River, which simultaneously occupies the center and the periphery of the city and conceived and lived spaces onscreen and off. For the spatial triad to effectively reveal the production of space, though, it cannot be reduced to a dualism (such as space/place or abstract/concrete), or it becomes locked in a hermetic system of oppositions (Lefebvre 39). Likewise, if the triad is only deployed in abstract terms, space yet again becomes lost to thought (Lefebvre 40). Thus, through the analysis of three uniquely spatialized performances, I investigate some of the spatial tensions and negotiations between conceptual and site-specific iterations of the L.A. River.

In deconstructing the production of space, Lefebvre highlights bodily labor erased by capitalism; by reconnecting spaces of production to finished products and places, he forces a revaluation of the processes by which space is constructed and an acknowledgement of the human, animal, and environmental figures that move in space and thereby produce it. Grounding Lefebvre' theory, Soja argues for a "spatial justice," a "consequential geography" directly connected to social and political action (*Seeking* 1-2). Taking a spatial perspective of social justice, Soja considers how justices and injustices alike become spatially embedded in local and regional geographies. In order to analyze the spatialization of social justice and build on existing environmental justice practices, which advocate for equal access to clean air, water, fresh food, and parks, I use what I call "spatio-environmental justice." With this term, I combine the

environmental justice movement's emphasis on humans and their shared environments with Soja's focus on the spatializing practices that forge and alter such environments.

The performances analyzed in this chapter are, to varying degrees, concerned with spatio-environmental justice in and around the L.A. River. However, they offer disparate interpretations of the river's spatialized production and emphasize different historical and ecological aspects of its spatialization. The first performance, the 1974 film *Chinatown*, focuses on environmental corruption and places the properties of the L.A. River center stage, while the second, Vlatka Horvat's 2010 durational piece *This Here and That There*, displaces notions of fixed, definitive spaces and spatial identities, emphasizing spatial fluidity within site-specificity. The last performance, Cornerstone Theater Company's 2009 production *Touch the Water: A River Play*, exposes uneven spatio-environmental injustices but also posits a multi-perspectival approach to the river and its revitalization. Displacing some representations and foregrounding others, the three works perform multivalent narratives of the river and take multiscalar approaches to it. Together, they suggest a variety of perceived, conceived, and lived ongoing spatial representations and understandings of the L.A. River.

The three performances also obliquely or directly refer to two of the biggest water controversies in L.A.'s short history: the Owens Valley water acquisition and the L.A. River's concrete channelization. The former is so infamous that a common expression in U.S. water politics is, "We don't want another Owens Valley" (Libecap 2). Meanwhile, the concrete beds that line the L.A. River have been so successful in suppressing the water's flow that, up until recently, even Angelenos forgot that it existed. Geographers, historians, and economists have written at length about both controversies, but none has focused on the role performance has

played in shaping Owens Valley and L.A. River narratives and activism.[78] Hence, this chapter deploys a spatial perspective in order to consider how water—and the politics that surround it—might be highlighted and reimagined through spatialized performance. I will discuss the Owens Valley controversy as it relates to, and differs from, *Chinatown*, but, since the spatial histories at work in the three performances are, at best, partial and fragmented, I first begin with a brief background of the river and the rapid changes it underwent throughout the twentieth century.

The River Then and Now

Until the completion of the L.A. Aqueduct in 1913, which will be discussed in relation to *Chinatown*, the river was the city's primary source of drinking water and was used to irrigate the city's first orange groves and vineyards. However, despite its immense importance to the development of the city, the river was never a selling point for easterners heading west. As geographer Blake Gumprecht argues, the river was always more significant to the city economically than it was aesthetically, which explains why it was so utterly exploited by industrialists and residents alike ("Who" 123). Eastern settlers unaccustomed to L.A.'s semi-arid climate were unimpressed by a river that looked more like a stream nine months out of the year; it was only during the three winter months that the river surged and often flooded, destroying the houses foolishly built on its banks (Gumprecht, "Who" 118-19).

The L.A. River significantly flooded in 1815, 1825, 1884, 1914, and 1938, and 177 people died from the 1914 flood alone. Although floods were always common to the L.A. River, they were not always as devastating. The railroad, built in 1869 only a half mile west of the river,

[78] While most Owens Valley scholars at least touch on the impact that the film *Chinatown* (1974) had on public opinion, few go into much depth. Sociologist John Walton is unique in that he not only highlights the influence of the film but also of early twentieth century literature that dramatizes the Owens Valley events.

destroyed the agricultural land near the river and prompted urban development in the area: factories, warehouses, and small houses soon sprung up alongside the train's depot (Gumprecht, "Who" 131). Historically, flash flooding could change the entire course of the river; in fact, one 1825 flood was so powerful that it "shifted its mouth twenty miles down the coast" (Gumprecht, "Who" 130). Since L.A. was still relatively undeveloped at that point, such a move was not too problematic; however, by the late nineteenth century, it proved catastrophic. Floods, exacerbated by the city's rapid deforestation, now wreaked havoc where they otherwise would have been relatively harmless.

Although the city considered flood control measures after the particularly severe flood in 1914, there was simply not enough funding to initiate them (Gottlieb 140). Furthermore, while some plans, like the one proposed by Harlan Bartholomew and Frederick Law Olmsted in 1930, proposed environmentally-friendly flood control strategies, the proximity of industrial and residential development to the river made such non-engineering tactics unfeasible (Gottlieb 141). After another devastating flood hit in 1938, its damage worsened by deforestation, river mismanagement, and development along the river, the USACE began covering the fifty-one miles of river with a concrete bed and walls. 3.5 million barrels of cement, 147 million pounds of steel, and 460,000 tons of stone later, the already damaged river had become a flood control channel for storm drain runoff (Elrick 73). While there is no question that the USACE acted drastically in its construction of the concrete channel, the severity of yet the latest flood required prompt action. Certainly, the USACE's intervention was forceful and hasty, and its single-minded goal to quickly direct water from the San Gabriel Mountains to the sea left no room for environmental or aesthetic considerations. However, as Gumprecht makes clear, the USACE, so often blamed for the L.A. River becoming a concrete channel, only put the final coating on a

river that had already been destroyed by exploitation and contamination (*Los* 5). Long before the USACE intervened, the river had already been gradually destroyed: its top soil stripped for farmland, its water drained by underground pumps, its sand and gravel hauled out for construction, and its bed turned into a common dumping ground. Thus, while the USACE's flood control strategies were extreme, it was Angelenos' disregard for the river in the first place that necessitated such strategies.

Today, the river's bed and banks are still encased in concrete (except for three small sections), and the river remains dry more often than not, leading many to joke that it exists in name only. However, the effects of rapid industrialization and deindustrialization have left their mark on the river and its neighborhoods, especially those east of the river. Indeed, most industrial waste sites are located in East L.A. where, according to the 2010 U.S. Census, 97% of the population is Latino. This environmental injustice can be traced back to the 1920s when zoning laws and swift increases in manufacturing forced Latinos and industry from downtown to the eastside of the L.A. River, a lucrative location for developers at the time, because the railroad already ran along the river and labor unions—like those forming downtown—did not exist in East L.A. (Pulido 26-27). Today, East L.A. remains a highly toxic area as a result of the environmental injustice of the 20s and 30s, and because 20% of the land on the Eastside is still zoned as industrial (Pulido 32). The river, meanwhile, remains on the outskirts of the bustling, sprawling city; as aerial views of the river reveal, the railway and I-5 freeway run alongside it, often separating it from street level and infrastructure more central to the city. As we will see, much of the environmentalism surrounding the L.A. River emphasizes restoration and revitalization, a return to an idyllic time when the river was central to Angeleno life. However, as Gumprecht insists, such a time never existed; thus, while L.A. River narratives often pinpoint the

USACE's concretization of the river as a moment of sudden loss, its devastation was far more gradual, just as its ecological improvements will likely be.

Welcome to *Chinatown*

If the USACE's channelization of the L.A River has become a tale of paradise lost, the buy up of Owens Valley to create the L.A. Aqueduct is often deemed a tale of treachery, a narrative cemented in the 1974 film *Chinatown*, directed by Roman Polanski and starring Jack Nicholson and Faye Dunaway. Although it is one of many films that have been shot in and around the L.A. River, it is unique in that it is not only set in and near the river but also stars it and the water politics surrounding it. While the film is set in L.A. in 1937, its story is actually based on the California Water Wars, which took place throughout the first quarter of the century. Highlighting the convoluted corruption surrounding water politics in California, *Chinatown* speaks to the subterfuge embedded in the California Water Wars. While much of the chicanery depicted in the film is fictionalized, *Chinatown* nonetheless underscores the inescapable fact that "metropolitan interests appropriated the Owens Valley for their own expansionary purposes through the use of blunt political power" (Walton 232). Drawing attention to past and ongoing spatio-environmental injustices in Owens Valley, *Chinatown* sparked renewed protests in the 1970s and confirmed a new generation's perception of the California Water Wars. Inaccurate as it otherwise may be, the film captures the uneven power relations at play in water acquisition and distribution.

Much has been written about *Chinatown* already. Scholars like Glenn Man emphasize the fallibility of the central character's subjective point of view (*Radical* 144), and Phillip Novak goes so far as to argue that, despite suggestions to the contrary, the film critiques the

protagonist's cynicism rather than endorses it (257). Other scholars focus on the unknowabilty of the femme fatale (Maxfield 127), and her connection to the equally indecipherable Chinatown (Belton 945-46; Shetley 1102). However, while *Chinatown*'s characters have been closely analyzed, the environmental history in the film and the role of water as a character in its own right have received far less attention. Thus, after describing the film, I consider its interpretation of the Owens Valley controversy before turning to the film's spatialization of water and, lastly, its displacement of the titular Chinatown.

The neo-noir film follows private detective J.J. "Jake" Gittes (Jack Nicholson), who is seemingly hired by Evelyn Mulwray to find proof that her husband Hollis Mulwray, chief engineer for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP), is having an affair. Gittes spies on Mulwray, first observing him in a town hall meeting where the engineer opposes the construction of a new dam and later taking photos of him with a young woman. He gives the pictorial evidence to "Mrs. Mulwray" only to see it on the newspaper's front page the next day. The *real* Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) comes to see Gittes, demanding to know why he claims that she hired him. The investigator quickly realizes that he was tricked by someone who wanted him to smear Mulwray's reputation and call his professional credibility into question. Before Gittes can alert the engineer, Mulwray is found dead in the Oak Pass Reservoir. Thus, the detective soon learns that nothing is quite as it seems, but, the more he discovers about the murky machinations of water moguls, the less he can actually do about it.

After visiting the dry LA River, only to find that water gushes into it at night, Gittes realizes that the city is not actually experiencing a drought, despite the LADWP's claims to the contrary. In a subsequent visit to the San Fernando Valley, the detective is run off the road by angry farmers convinced that he is from the LADWP and is there to poison their wells and blow

up their water tanks, as other intruders have done. While both incidents suggest a misappropriation of water, it is the phone call that Gittes receives from Ida Sessions (Diane Ladd), the woman who posed as Evelyn Mulwray, which offers the greatest clue. Distraught over the engineer's death, Sessions suggests that Gittes check the paper's obituary section for insight into Mulwray's murder, but, when the detective visits her home to follow up, he finds her dead body. Based on Sessions's tip, though, he gradually discovers that nearly all the land in the San Fernando Valley has recently been purchased in the names of residents of the Mar Vista Inn retirement home. However, the residents themselves know nothing of the transactions, and one of the supposed "buyers" has purchased land postmortem. With Evelyn Mulwray's assistance, Gittes connects the misuse of the elderly people's names to Noah Cross, Evelyn's father and Hollis Mulwray's former business partner. As occurred historically as well, the land in the valley is being cheaply purchased by rich tycoons who know that its value will rapidly multiply once the valley has unlimited access to water.

Gittes suspects Noah Cross of Mulwray's murder, but his suspicions shift when, after following Evelyn, he witnesses her appearing to confine and quiet the young woman from the photographs with Mulwray. Once again considering the possibility that Evelyn killed her husband in a bout of jealously, Gittes's thinks his suspicions are confirmed when he finds what he believes are the engineer's glasses in the Mulwrays' saltwater pond. The detective reports Evelyn to his former police partner, Lieutenant Lou Escobar, before violently confronting her himself. Evelyn finally admits that the young girl, Katherine Cross, is both her sister *and* her daughter, the product of incest. As Gittes reels from this revelation, Evelyn mentions that the bifocals the detective found do not belong to her husband. Deducing that the glasses belong to Noah Cross, the investigator tries to help Evelyn and Katherine flee him, as well as the police. In

the denouement, which leads all the central characters to Chinatown, Evelyn shoots her father in the arm and drives away with Katherine, only to be killed by a police officer for fleeing the scene. As Evelyn's body slumps forward, Katherine's screams are muffled by her illicit father, who will now gain control of the girl and the water. Thus, Noah Cross's murky crimes of water corruption and incest will not only go unpunished but will likely be repeated.

Chinatown and the Owens Valley Purchase

What makes *Chinatown* so compelling is that much of its narrative of corruption and greed is inspired by actual events. Although the film is fictional, its focus on the politics and topography of water distribution highlights how "the spatiality of (in)justice…affects society and social life just as much as social processes shape the spatiality or specific geography of (in)justice" (Soja, *Seeking* 5). By recalling the acts of L.A. water imperialists in the early twentieth century, the film accounts for the spatialized conditions of its own time, the 1970s. Indeed, a second aqueduct south of Owens Valley was completed in 1970, just four years before *Chinatown* was released, suggesting that the spatio-environmental justices begun in 1900 were still very much in effect seventy years later. Thus, *Chinatown* is both a critique of prior injustices and of ongoing water politics.

Early on in the film, Gittes observes Hollis Mulwray at a public hearing on the proposed Alto Vallejo Dam, a fictional stand-in for the L.A. Aqueduct, which, in actuality, was constructed from 1908-1913, and, at 233 miles, was the longest dam to date, stretching from the northeastern Owens Valley to Los Angeles (Prud'homme 152-3). Gaining permission to undertake such a project took money, power, and position. It was the combined clout of Frederick Eaton, then mayor of L.A., and William Mulholland, self-made engineer and mayor-

appointed superintendent of the LADWP, that made the aqueduct possible. Beginning in 1900, the two men envisioned that, with unlimited water, L.A., then a small desert city with a population of around 100,000, could be developed into a thriving metropolis to rival Chicago and New York in size and influence (Prud'homme 151). Owens Valley, with the Inyo Mountains to its east and the Sierra Nevada to its west, had immense potential as a water source, and, at 200 miles northeast of L.A., was the closest option. However, the Bureau of Reclamation, "the federal agency responsible for water management in the West," had already agreed to assist Owens Valley farmers by creating an irrigation system (Prud'homme 152). If Eaton and Mulholland were to be successful, they would need to stop the irrigation project before it began. With the support of investors like the publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*, Harrison Gray Otis and his son-in-law Harry Chandler, Eaton and Mulholland got Theodore Roosevelt's administration to suppress the irrigation initiative. Eaton, concerned that speculators would soon descend, began covertly and cheaply purchasing land and water rights in Owens Valley (Prud'homme 152).

Eaton and Mulholland managed to keep their activities quiet until 1905, by which point it was too late for Owens Valley residents to alter the Bureau of Reclamation's abandonment of the irrigation project. However, this did not stop residents from running Eaton and his son out-of-town when the story broke, an event which only marked the beginning of the townspeople's wrath (Nadeau 21). This tension between L.A. moguls and valley farmers is twice depicted in *Chinatown*. The first time is at the public hearing that Gittes observes, which is disrupted by a farmer and his baying sheep; the former calls out, "You steal the water from the valley, ruin the grazing, starve my livestock—who's paying you to do that, Mr. Mulwray, that's what I want to know!" (Towne 12). Although the farmer is dressed in a blazer, his overalls, newscap,

shepherd's staff, and wooly companions make him a stark contrast to the dark-suited bureaucrats. Like the rest of the courtroom, Gittes laughs at the unexpected appearance of the farmer and the sheep, and the scene, viewed through the investigator's eyes, ends on a dismissive, comical note. However, as with many other revelations in the film, the significance of the farmer's protest does not become evident until much later.

The film's second depiction of the farmers occurs after Yelburton of the LADWP claims that the water Gittes saw gushing from the reservoir was to help irrigate Owens Valley farms, and the detective decides to investigate for himself. Passing numerous "SOLD" signs in the valley, he pulls into a grove marked "PRIVATE PROPERTY," only to be shot at by suspicious farmers. Gittes's car crashes into a tree, and, echoing an earlier shot in the film, his radiator ruptures. A crippled farmer beats the investigator with his crutch, leading Gittes's to call the men "dumb Oakies." This further inflames the farmers, and the leader asks whether Gittes is with the "Water Department or the real-estate office" (Towne 89). When the detective explains that he is there to see if the land has been getting irrigated by the Water Department, the farmer exclaims, "Irrigating my land? The Water Department's been sending people to blow up my water tanks! They threw poison down three of my wells! I call that a funny way to irrigate" (Towne 90). While there is little historical evidence to support this particular claim, the scene nonetheless speaks to other injustices that incited the wrath of Owens Valley farmers.

To begin with, Fred Eaton and city officials posed as "cattle buyers" in Owens Valley in order to buy up the land without alerting farmers or speculators of their true intent: to build an aqueduct which would prodigiously increase the land's value (Nadeau 17). The Owens Valley residents were further angered by the fact that, while he served as both a head engineer for the Reclamation Service *and* a consultant to the LADWP, J.B. Lippincott negotiated with Eaton and

Mulholland in 1904 (Nadeau 16, 22). Even though Lippincott insisted that the aqueduct project had to be publicly owned, thereby truncating Eaton's own plans for financial gain,[79] his concurrent federal and private practices were a direct conflict of interest, as well as illegal (Nadeau 16, 22). Owens Valley residents were not appeased when Lippincott was gently asked to resign his Reclamation Service position, since he suspiciously acquired a high-paying post with the L.A. Aqueduct immediately after (Nadeau 23). Lastly, when news of the aqueduct broke in 1905, Eaton and Mulholland claimed that it would only be used in the city of L.A. domestically; they failed to mention that it would also supply the arid San Fernando Valley, which had already been cheaply bought up by investors like Chandler and Otis (Prud'homme 152).

Despite these highly questionable power plays, Owens Valley farmers chose to sell their land, just as Angelenos chose to repeatedly approve bond measures to build the L.A. Aqueduct (Walton 232). The farmers certainly received less than they thought was fair for the land and water, and less than what the LADWP was forced to pay for water from the Colorado River (Libecap 155). However, LA did not steal the water; this was simply the dominating narrative that came out of the controversy (Libecap 154). That said, by misleading Owens Valley farmers and Angelenos and by gradually diverting the entire water source, the LADWP caused long term spatio-environmental damages that have only reinforced public and court censure.[80]

Although, within *Chinatown*'s timeline, the Water Department is still awaiting voter approval of a bond that will allow it to begin building the dam, the film's depiction of the

[79] It is important to note that, although Fred Eaton intended to make money from the Owens Valley purchase, he failed to do so and died penniless.

[80] After building the aqueduct, the LADWP continued to divert more and more water to meet its needs. Creeks that had originally fed Mono Lake, just north of Owens Valley, were diverted to the aqueduct in the 1930s and 40s; this resulted in decreased water levels and increased saline and alkaline in the lake. A Mono Lake Committee was formed in the seventies to protect the dying Mono Lake ecosystem. The committee took the LADWP to court, and, in 1983, the California Supreme Court ruled in favor of the committee.

farmers' wrath speaks to a later moment in the California Water Wars. As time would reveal, the majority of the Owens Valley water was actually used to irrigate the San Fernando Valley, leading L.A. to annex it in 1915, and, with the city and San Fernando Valley continually increasing their water consumption, Owens Valley gradually became desertified (Prud'homme 153). From 1924 to 1927, the residents, now largely unable to farm, sabotaged the aqueduct; they dynamited certain sections, commandeered a couple of water-control gates, and attempted to divert water back to the valley (Prud'homme 153). While the film suggests that it was the LADWP that tampered with the valley's water supply, in actuality it was farmers who, desperate to water their crops, resorted to vigilante justice. Despite their efforts, though, L.A. had gained control of 90% of the valley's water rights by 1928, and agriculture in Owens Valley soon became a thing of the past (Prud'homme 153). Hence, *Chinatown*, released in 1974, offers retrospection not only colored by the spatio-environmental injustices of the California Water Wars but also by future injustices, like the LADWP's second aqueduct from Owens Valley, built in 1970. As Soja posits, "Justice and injustice are infused into the multiscalar geographies in which we live," and they create "lasting structures of unevenly distributed advantage and disadvantage" (20). The film's temporal layers—the time in which it is set (1937), the time of the events it recreates (1905-1928), and the time in which it is made (1974)—reveal how spatial injustices are compounded, reproduced, and magnified over time.

In order to convey the enormity of the injustice done by the LADWP, Towne interlaces the water corruption plotline with one about incest. As he explains, "'Maybe it's because America's a puritanical country I felt that the way to drive home the outrage about water and power was to…cap it with incest'" (qtd. in Eaton 64). However, Towne was not the first to equate the Owens Valley Water Purchase to rape; in his popular 1932 book *Los Angeles*,

journalist Morrow Mayo includes a chapter entitled “The Rape of the Owens Valley,” in which he claims that the valley was physically restrained by the federal government as L.A. raped it (246). Mayo’s book is no less fictionalized than *Chinatown*, yet it, along with several sensationalized novels of the early twentieth century, cemented the water purchase as thievery and rape in the public imagination. Thus, long before *Chinatown*, there existed a well-established narrative in which the evil, masculine city took advantage of the naïve, feminine country. While such a polarizing trope has been effective in generating and maintaining public disapproval of the LADWP’s purchase, it has also reduced the Owens Valley land and water to commodities. By paralleling Evelyn Mulwray’s rape to the valley’s purchase, *Chinatown* not only fetishizes both acts but also depicts the valley’s appropriation as a sociocultural rather than a spatio-environmental injustice. As a result, while the film emphasizes how the LADWP’s corrupt practices harm the humans in Owens Valley, it diminishes their effects on the nonhuman environment itself.

“Water on the Brain”

While Owens Valley is largely reduced to a resource rather than a living place in *Chinatown*, the representation of water is far more textured and multifarious. Although the central characters in the film are J. J. Gittes and Evelyn Mulwray, water acts as an omnipresent entity, enigma, and motivator. Indeed, the plot’s neo-noir mystery hinges on a distinction between freshwater and saltwater: Mulwray’s body is found at the Oak Pass Reservoir and is full of saltwater, leading Gittes to assume that it was dumped in the ocean. It is only when Evelyn’s gardener reveals that the Mulwrays’ pond contains saltwater, not freshwater, that the detective realizes where the murder actually occurred. In another scene, the investigator is puzzled by the

coroner's insistence that a drunk man drowned in the LA River, protesting, "Well, he ain't exactly gonna drown in a damp riverbed…I don't care how soused he was" (Towne 48). The incongruity of a man drowning during a drought leads Gittes to examine the river more closely and discover that, though it is "bone-dry" by day, it has gallons of water dumped into it by night (Towne 48). Thus, unraveling the film's complex plot depends on particularities like the salinity and quantity of water.

In the rare scenes of *Chinatown* where water is not discussed, it is still aurally or visually prominent. Just as the engineer Hollis Mulwray has "water on the brain," visiting several reservoirs a day in order to uncover Cross's scam, so too does the film (Towne 16). From dripping faucets to streaming showers, from radiator ruptures to car washes, water features in nearly every scene, never letting Gittes and, through him, the audience forget its significance. Ironically, water is never more present than when it is only an offscreen sound effect. Take, for example, the scene in which Gittes's discovers Ida Sessions's body: Ominous, dissonant music sets the tone, as the investigator slowly creeps toward the kitchen, where Ida and her groceries are sprawled out on the floor. Gradually layered over the music is a steady, dripping sound eventually revealed to be the kitchen faucet. The leak not only heightens the scene's dramatic tension, but it also acts as a literal reminder of why Ida was killed. Water corruption and misappropriation are at the film's center, and aural cues like this one ensure that, even when water is out of sight, it is never out of mind.

Water corruption is visually highlighted in another scene, in which the detective is getting his hair cut and reads the inaccurate newspaper headline "Department of Water and Power Blows Fuse," just as a passing car's radiator overheats (Towne 19). This moment is echoed when the detective's own radiator bursts in the drought-ridden valley. The spurting coolant in both scenes

visually imitates the gushing water secretly being released from the reservoir at night, discovered by Gittes when he stands in the reservoir and is swept off his feet by a torrent of water that knocks him into the chain-link fence. The repetitive images of water bursting free of its mechanized containment are instances of what Maria Kaika calls the "urban uncanny" (51), moments when unexpected leaks and ruptures cross erected boundaries between "good" water and "bad" water, inside and outside, culture and nature (54). The coolant that shoots from the two vehicles in *Chinatown* interrupts the human drama in order to emphasize the ordinarily hidden production and properties of water. Similarly, Gittes's fall in the reservoir, an isolated site fenced off from the public and below street level, demonstrates both the water's powerful flow and its (mis)management. As the drenched detective scrambles out of the reservoir, his one remaining water-logged, leather shoe squeaks, offering yet another instance of the urban uncanny. Taken together, the three scenes highlight the pressure, flow, and production of water, qualities that are typically concealed within or beneath the city. The water's surge from its contained spaces, in this case a sleek automobile and a remote reservoir, is an unexpected reminder of the sociospatial management, necessity, and *presence* of water in the city.

Art historian Homay King links the film's emphasis on dirty water seepage to its fear of immigrants when he writes, "The water in *Chinatown* is already contaminated: stolen and rerouted, but also accented, "bad for glass," and infused with the salt of the Pacific Ocean that separates the Asian continent from the American one" (87). In other words, just as water in the film bursts through pipes, so too might immigrants flood the city, breaking tenuously constructed boundaries between water and its containment, L.A. and Chinatown. On one hand, the latter is marginalized, despite being the movie's title (Man, "Marginality"). Only the last scene occurs there, and the film's use of foreboding music and broken neon lights to signify Chinatown not

only foreshadows Evelyn's imminent demise but also reinforces Hollywood representations of Asia as inscrutable and enigmatic. For Gittes, Chinatown is convoluted and unlucky; he vaguely tells Evelyn that he once failed to save a woman there, and, by the narrative's end, he has failed yet again. Towne himself saw Chinatown not as a place but as "Jake Gittes's fucked-up state of mind" (qtd. in Evans 257). Thus, on the other hand, Chinatown permeates the film, albeit abstractly, and is simultaneously represented as an overdetermined hyper-performance of Asian stereotypes and an empty signifier. John Belton argues that since Chinatown is not seen until the last scene, "its meaning—i.e., what it designates—floats. The object or place to which the word refers remains unseen, enhancing its status as place of mystery and enabling it to function abstractly" (946).

While this abstraction is at odds with the film's grounded, textured representation of water, there are two moments in particular where otherwise marginalized bodies and water properties converge. In the first, referenced by King above, the Mulwrays' gardener (Jerry Fujikawa) mumbles the phrase "bad for glass," meaning "grass," while probing at the overflowing pond (Towne 33). The first time Gittes overhears the gardener, he misunderstands and dismisses him outright: "Yeah sure. Bad for the glass" (*Chinatown*), sarcastically emphasizing the latter two words. As King points out, the scene reaffirms some Hollywood clichés, disregarding ethnic difference by casting the Japanese American Fujikawa as a Chinese gardener and emphasizing the character's pronunciation for comic relief (80). At the same time, it suggests that, from the very beginning, the gardener knows something that the protagonist does not. Quick to dismiss the Chinese laborer, Gittes fails to understand him until much later in the film when the gardener elaborates, "Salt water velly bad for glass" (Towne 123). This off-camera revelation, delivered to Gittes's back, stops the detective in his tracks; slowly turning back

toward the gardener, he finally realizes that, if the pond is in fact saltwater, than Mulwray's body may just as easily have been drowned there. In King's estimation, "Some encoded form of knowledge resides with the Chinese gardener. As a result, the gardener's off-hand, accented remark takes on an unexpected authority, and the film's enunciation gets an accent" (80-81). Although Gittes mocks the gardener's seeming linguistic mistake, it is he who ultimately fails to understand correctly. Not only does the gardener possess the crucial information that the detective needs to solve the case, but he is also the one to fish the evidence—Noah Cross's bifocals—from the pond. During their first encounter, the gardener probes the overflowing pond with a pole, pulling out a clump of dead grass, and, during the second encounter, it is he who steps into the knee-length water, rolls up his sleeve, and searches for the glasses, wound around yet another clump of grass. Meanwhile, the dry detective stands above him waiting. Thus, the gardener's seeming mispronunciation is validated as grass and glass become entwined, together offering essential literal and figurative clues. "In *Chinatown*," King posits, "the film's enunciation seems to side with the gardener, not with Jake, in this exchange" (83). Creating an affinity between the saltwater and the gardener, the film suggests that it is Gittes who fails to see[81] and hear clearly.

I would argue that *Chinatown* again sides with a marginalized character over its white, male protagonist in an earlier scene between a Mexican Boy (Claudio Martínez) and Gittes. The latter stumbles down an L.A. River embankment in search of clues, and his leather-clad shoe sinks into the muddy, shallow water. In his pin-striped suit and soaked shoe, the detective is clearly out of his element, in contrast to an approaching boy on horseback who, in a loose, cotton tunic and sombrero, seems far more at ease. On the horse, the boy is at eye level with Gittes, but

[81] Much has been written about vision and doubled vision in *Chinatown*; for instance, Man argues that Gittes has "limited vision" which is "clarified" too late (*Radical* 144-45).

is not only physically elevated but also more knowledgeable about the river than the clueless detective. Gittes spied the boy telling Mulwray something before the latter was killed, and now he wants to know what it was. However, the boy hesitates to answer, leading the detective to impatiently ask, "Speak English? Habla Inglés?" (Towne 49). Just as in his encounters with the gardener, Gittes assumes that it is the other character who lacks language when, in fact, it is he who misunderstands and fails to see clearly. The boy finally chooses to reveal that the water "comes in different parts of the river—every night a different path" (Towne 50). The detective watches the boy's slow retreat before confusedly turning to face the camera; as he takes in the rubble under the nearly dry Hollenbeck Bridge, Gittes struggles to comprehend how the boy's knowledge fits with the urban blight before him. Like the gardener, the boy possesses an understanding of the water that the citified detective cannot possibly grasp, and, thus, the film grants him a literally and intellectually superior position to Gittes. Furthermore, by juxtaposing the boy on horseback with the polluted river, *Chinatown* contrasts a bygone agricultural era in L.A. with the exploitation of the river first by Spanish settlers and then by Americans from the Northeast, thereby alluding to the city's colonization and subsequent corruption. On one hand, the film privileges the Chinese gardener's and the Mexican Boy's embodied knowledge, undercutting the authority of the traditional noir protagonist with that of peripheral, ethnic characters. On the other hand, though, *Chinatown*'s conflation of the Chinese and Mexican characters with nature, particularly water, marks both as marginalized others, "innately" one with nature and, thus, equally as managed by the city as the river itself.

Ultimately, the film's abundance of water sounds and images reveals the ubiquity of water but simultaneously questions how long it can last, in light of deeply embedded water exploitation, mismanagement, and overconsumption. Unequal access to water is also highlighted,

as in the scene in which Gittes pointedly takes in the Mulwrays' verdant grass, streaming fountain, and gushing gardening hose. Through the detective's eyes, the camera exposes the disparity between the city's water restrictions, enforced during the drought, and the Mulwrays' own excessive water consumption. Through such instances of aural and visual repetition, the film attempts to put water on the brains of everyone, including the audience. Not only is such a detailed focus on the actual properties of water unique in film, but it is also unique in academic fields like ecocriticism and urban geography. In Bruce Braun's estimation, "A great deal is written about water, but nary a word is said about the *properties* of water, and how these might influence the sociospatial development of cities. Water flows." (Braun 645). By emphasizing the qualities of water—the flow, changeability, and salinity—*Chinatown* suggest the major role that water has played and might continue to play in the uneven spatio-environmental development of L.A. Furthermore, by highlighting the Chinese gardener's and the Mexican Boy's experiential knowledge of the river, the film alludes to the embodied labor that built the city and was subsequently marginalized by it.

Spacing and Placing the L.A. River

Like *Chinatown*, which offers a combination of highly spatialized and highly abstracted representations, Vlatka Horvat's 2010 *This Here and That There* practices both placement and displacement. However, unlike the film, this seemingly site-specific performance intentionally focuses on how one makes and unmakes place and what such spatializing practices might signify. While Horvat's durational piece engages with the environmental particularities of the L.A. River, it also suggests some of the ways in which performance can engage with space by producing it, being produced by it, and demystifying the act of spatial production. Thus,

expanding on Lefebvre, I analyze Horvat's piece in order to consider how an emphasis on spatiality in performance can uncover the hidden, palimpsestic production of spatio-environmental injustice.

Horvat's physically intensive performance is, in many ways, a material expression of Lefebvrian theory, because, for the philosopher, the only way to deconstruct spatial binaries and abstraction is through embodiment:

> In nature, whether organic or inorganic, symmetries (in a plane or about an axis) exist wherever there is bilaterality or duality, left and right, 'reflection,' or rotation (in space); these symmetries are not properties external to bodies, however. Though definable in 'purely' mathematical terms—as applications, operations, transformations or functions—they are not imposed upon material bodies, as many philosophers suppose, by prior thought. Bodies—deployments of energy—produce space and produce themselves, along with their motions, according to the laws of space….Here then we have a route from abstract to concrete which has the great virtue of demonstrating their reciprocal inherence.
>
> (171).

By maintaining a deliberate focus on the laboring bodies that produce and are produced by space, Lefebvre emphasizes the processes of spatial production rather than the products. Building on this concept, eco-theater might highlight the spatial labor of human and more-than-human bodies in order to highlight the production of *both* space and nature. Indeed, performance, as an embodied practice, is uniquely positioned to highlight the "reciprocal inherence" between the abstract and concrete (Lefebvre 171). As May, citing Bakhtin, writes, "Theater is the place where drama 'takes on flesh' (250). Theater scholars bring key perceptions about the way the body

functions as medium between material and metaphoric worlds and the ways theater audiences influence performance in an organic exchange of meaning-making" ("Greening" 85). The physically grueling, site-specific *This Here and That There* fluidly traverses the abstract and concrete through embodied labor, and, thus, is a prime example of Lefebvre's perceived-conceived-lived triad in action.

The piece, set in the L.A. River, contains fifty uniform chairs that the artist moves for eight hours, carefully arranging them in expansive, geometric configurations. The artist's body is signified by the space she is in, specifically the L.A. River below the Fletcher Bridge in Elysian Valley. The exact locale of the performance undoubtedly colors the way Horvat performs in space and the way she is received in it, as evidenced by the several drivers on the bridge who put down their windows to inquire about the event. At the same time, Horvat also produces space, her perpetual formation and dissolution of geometric patterns serving to blur distinctions between "here" and "there," place and space. Thus, even as Horvat creates conceptual spaces with her geometric patterns, she also concretizes space through the arduous task of configuring chairs for eight hours. As the artist states: A "piece tends to morph in relation to the site where it is being performed by bending, taking on some of the resonances of the place itself" (Interview). Not only, then, do the historicity and environs of a particular place influence Horvat's configurations, they also affect how observers of the performance associate and interpret the abstract shapes that are perpetually forming and dissolving.

This Here and That There highlights what Soja, building on Lefebvre's spatial triad, calls the interdependency of "spatiality-historicality-sociality" (*Third* 3). In other words, if each body "produces itself in space and also produces that space," it stands to reason that each body is also produced *by* socialized spaces that have been constructed by prior bodies (Lefebvre 170). Indeed,

at the time of Horvat's performance, the river was rife with both previous spatial productions and misrepresentations. A few inches of water, coupled with the green foliage and bicycle path that lined the banks, implied that the river was a well-managed space, despite its checkered environmental history. Meanwhile, the nautically-themed misnomers ascribed to the nearby streets, "Clearwater" and "Ripple," combined with the name of the river's entrance, "The Great Heron Gate" and its presence in "Elysian Valley," all seem to connote an idyllic scene. However, many a passerby, aware that the river suffers from pollution, was more affected by the fact that a person was *actually* in the river, risking contamination, than the seemingly scenic landscape. Thus, even before Horvat left her mark on the space, there was already a stark contrast between the conception of a river and the uneven actuality of the L.A. River.

Not only do the romantic names, greenery, and rare presence of water conflict with the river banks' and bed's concrete container and its urban runoff, but the surrounding neighborhood also intensifies this contrast. The area is largely industrial; boxy, uniform auto shops and parking lots dot the nearby streets, while power lines flank the river's bank. It is roughly four miles from Chinatown, recently abandoned by art galleries, and five miles from downtown, itself polarized by megalomaniacal skyscrapers which loom over the homeless sequestered in Skid Row.[82] To further complicate the site's iterations, the L.A. River has been featured in sundry films and television shows, from the aforementioned *Chinatown* to *Jackass*. Prior to Horvat's performance, then, the space was already a negotiation between conceptions and actualizations, foregrounds and backgrounds, abstractions and embodiments. As a site contested by developers, environmentalists, and cinematographers, the river has been subject to multifarious representations of space that seek to reimagine and reinscribe the lived place.

82 For more on the militarization of Los Angeles's downtown area, see Mike Davis's chapter "Fortress L.A." in his book *City of Quartz*.

Horvat's performance adds its own layer of complexity to the already palimpsestic space, mapping and remapping space on top of space. Each new geometric design takes over twenty minutes to assemble and perfect, particularly because, after the artist has exactingly placed every chair, she then assesses the arrangement and readjusts each chair so that it matches the other forty-nine chairs precisely. Horvat's intense absorption in her task draws observers' attention to her every movement, so that, eventually, they too are mentally correcting the slight flaws in her chair lines, or are willing her to adjust that one chair that is just an inch out of line. The importance that Horvat bestows on her task temporarily invests it and the audience with a sense of magnitude in which the minute becomes monumental, the misaligned chair a glaring spatial error. The concentrated attention Horvat gives her task demonstrates that space is a social *practice* rather than an *a priori* absolute; the artist's detailed, thoughtful positioning of objects in space highlights the spatiality inherent in all social processes and demonstrates how the slightest shift in space can change the aesthetic and social significance of a structure. In Soja's words, "Social reality is not just coincidentally spatial, existing 'in' space, it is presuppositionally and ontologically spatial. *There is no unspatialized social reality*. There are no aspatial social processes. Even in the realm of pure abstraction, ideology, and representation, there is a pervasive and pertinent, if often hidden, spatial dimension" (*Thirdspace* 46). Horvat's unconventional and intensive rearrangement of fifty chairs reveals the ways in which the environment of the East L.A. River has itself been spatialized. Meanwhile, the seeming incongruity between the stark office chairs and, at first glance, the natural environment gradually exposes the river's own construction. As Chaudhuri argues, "By making space on its stage for ongoing acknowledgments of the rupture it participates in—the rupture between nature and culture…—the theater can become the site of a much-needed ecological consciousness"

("'There'" 28). Juxtaposing the inorganic chairs with the partially inorganic river, Horvat plays with perceived-conceived-lived understandings of space and challenges simplistic categorizations of nature and culture.

Here, There, and Everywhere?

In the process of blurring boundaries between space and place and nature and culture, *This Here and That There* calls the here-ness of here and the there-ness of there into question, which runs the risk of displacing the river itself. Looking at the abstract geometries that Horvat creates, it is tempting to examine the shapes through a conceptual, ahistorical lens—to imagine that the artist is producing a previously unmarked space, or that her work is too nonrepresentational to be contextualized. There is, admittedly, an open-ended quality to Horvat's configurations; fifty chairs in a line, circle, or square may signify anything and, thus, require observers to make their own connections. For instance, one design features a vee, with twenty-four chairs in each line. One row slants out toward the bridge while another row slants out to scraggly bushes along the far riverbank. Despite their proximity at the top of the vee, the two lines of chairs never touch. An eight-foot gap keeps them apart. Does this gap represent a (literal) failure to connect? Is it meant to draw the viewer's eye to what lies between the gap—a riverbank dotted with occasional tufts of grass that have broken through the concrete? The relativity of Horvat's configurations highlights the instability of place, as well as the variability of spatial perspective. In Marc Augé words, "The place/non-place pairing is an instrument for measuring the degree of sociality and symbolization of a given space;" there is no absolute place or non-place (viii). Place and non-place are relative, in that what seems like a non-place for someone may be the most definitive place for someone else.

Horvat's configurations may suggest particular places, scenarios, dialogues, encounters, or conflicts to the viewer, but, as the chairs remain empty, the compositions remain relative. Each design could represent any range of socialized places—offices, buildings, parks, and planes—and, with those places, imagined interactions which might occur in them. Insomuch as the empty chairs are never occupied, they suggest endless virtual projections and potentialities in space. On one hand, this spatial instability draws attention to spatializing *acts*, like those of the USACE seventy-five years ago and those of the river today, rather than to seemingly preexisting, fixed spaces. It unsettles place and transforms space from a noun or state into a verb or process. On the other hand, in creating transient configurations that are spatial and representational question marks, Horvat may not only unhinge spatial norms but also the particularities of place, namely the East L.A. River under the Fletcher Bridge.

The degree of *This Here and That There*'s site-specificity is further jeopardized by the fact that the 2010 performance in L.A. is not the piece's first iteration. Prior to then, Horvat performed in a large pool of water fronting the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures) in Berlin (2007) and in a vacant urban plaza in Essen (2009). However, Horvat is not alone in her repetition of seemingly site-specific work; the practice has become standard for many artists, leading Miwon Kwon to ask, "Is the unhinging of site specificity, then, a form of resistance to the ideological establishment of art, or a capitulation to the logic of capitalist expansion?" (31) The transportability of Horvat's piece suggests that the answer may be "both." According to the artist, though, *This Here and That There* is unscripted and changes with each location: the only chair arrangements she plans are her first and last of the day, and everything that happens in-between is improvised, based on the location and the previous chair arrangement (Horvat).

Images of the three performances do, in fact, reveal nuances of difference, which gain significance commensurate to one's knowledge of the locale. For instance, the Berlin performance is set in front of a 1950s institution which had hoped to be a meeting place for various world cultures; to that end, the institution not only houses cultural exhibits but also conference rooms. However, while many people visit the grounds of the institutions—having picnics by the water—few actually visit the House of World Cultures itself. Thus, the perpetual chair arrangements and disarrangements may be interpreted as a failed attempt to stage a meeting of cultural minds. Meanwhile, the performance at Essen takes place on lined concrete in front of a former coal mine, and, for those aware of this fact, the performance may be read as a mechanized production of labor which, in Horvat's performance, ultimately produces nothing. That said, while the environmental history of a particular place may shape the artist's configurations and affect how viewers interpret the performance, the piece itself remains extremely transportable. The fact that Horvat uses nondescript office chairs in every version of the piece and the fact that the geometric patterns are so similar to one another problematically hints at both a modernist universality and a postmodern placelessness. The L.A. version's total separation of artist and audience—with the former more than fifteen feet below in the river and the latter above on the bridge—is particularly problematic as it creates a landscape, albeit a perpetually shifting one, rather than an experiential environment. As Val Plumwood points out, terms like "cultural landscape" can create a "meta-level of reflection" whereby the subjects—the audience members—are superior to the objectified land (123-24). Horvat's performance may function as such a landscape, in that viewers are entirely removed from the action; they visually survey and consume the piece, including the river and the artist, from a heightened vantage point.

Furthermore, from an eco-theatrical stance, the environmental impact of *This Here and That There* is limited, because it is not specifically created for the environment in which it takes place and because it maintains such a stark separation between the audience and the environment. However, insomuch as the performance draws extended attention to the specific site, it creates potential for future, more experiential engagements with the river. Most importantly, the artist's protracted process allots the viewer time with the entire site, not just with Horvat and her chairs. Generally dismissed as a concrete ditch, the river receives little attention from the majority of Angelenos,[83] but, as Yi-Fu Tuan suggests, "each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place" (6). The prolonged, labored pace of Horvat's performance offers a respite from the chaotic bustle of city life, and, within an alternate time and a shifting space, the river and its construction can be observed rather than hurriedly passed. Through the artist's embodied labor, the river is foregrounded and, as May succinctly puts it, "Space speaks" ("Greening" 96).

Horvat's performance draws on the environment—the water, the concrete riverbed, the bridge, and the crowds above coming and going—in order to challenge previous perceptions and uses of the space. For instance, the bridge is not conventionally used by pedestrians but by drivers who race across it, often oblivious to what lies below, but the artist's labor slows traffic and attracts an ambulatory crowd, thereby demonstrating an-Other spatiality. The fact that *This Here and That There* never results in an end product, or configuration, also suggests an-Other spatiality at odds with normative spatial commodification. Although the artist makes deliberate and careful choices in her various designs, she never preserves her compositions but dismantles them almost immediately after they are complete. No sooner has she arranged every single chair

[83] Thanks to efforts by Friends of the L.A. River and other nonprofit organizations, environmental and recreational interest in the river is gradually increasing; this will be further explored in the next section.

to her satisfaction than she begins to deconstruct her work. With each new demolition, it becomes increasingly clear that she is readying the space for an event which will never occur. Thus, for lack of an "event," the non-event—preparing a space—takes precedence, and the ordinarily hidden spatial dimension is made manifest in Horvat's piece, in which, for eight hours, a person makes serious decisions to put "this here and that there."

The layered spatiality of Horvat's performance highlights a dialectical, rather than an oppositional, relationship between abstract and concrete space. Rather than thinking in terms of binaries—space and place, conceptual and physical, nature and culture, global and local—we need to understand that, as Kwon argues, such "seeming oppositions" are in fact "*sustaining* relations" (166). Horvat's arrangements traverse the concrete and the abstract and her lengthy navigation and renegotiation of space invite viewers to reconsider their own positionality in space and how they themselves produce and are produced by space. Although the piece is not without previous iterations, the artist's body, the epitome of lived space, nonetheless puts emphasis on the physical labor of producing space rather than on a finished product. It is Horvat's excessive "deployment of energy" (Lefebvre 171), as she cuts through water to form geometric designs that are temporarily mapped onto the existing space, which foregrounds the site of the L.A. River. Sometimes the artist carries two chairs upon her hips and other times she lifts a single chair directly above her head. As she steadily treads through the resistant water, she leaves temporary traces of her movement in the rippling river, highlighting the properties of the water in the L.A River.

The transience of Horvat's configurations imply that, although spatial productions never really disappear (the embedded river and greenery, for instance, struggling to resurface through the cracks in the concrete), they do change shape and fade. While a finished product can be

destroyed, leaving behind traces of its presence, the labor which produced the space is often erased altogether, since commodification truncates the space of labor from the final product. However, since Horvat's designs are never fully finished but are constantly transformed into new spatial possibilities, they never transition from the space of labor to a commodified space. Thus, the artist thwarts commodification with her refusal to produce a finished product; indeed, her last design of the day (the only shape, aside from the first, that is planned) is a scattered jumble of chairs. After producing neat, sharp geometries—any of which, from a conceptual perspective, could be deemed "finished"—Horvat leaves her space in a state of disorder, so that even after her performance is "done," the space is left undone.

The artist's persistent reformulation and re-contextualization of space not only emphasize the labor inherent in the production of space but also the comedic absurdity. Horvat earnestly, painstakingly maps and organizes space, only to disorganize and reorder it minutes later, and to eventually leave the space in utter disarray. Such an incongruity speaks to other social-cultural attempts to manage space, particularly the mismanagement and exploitation of the L.A. River. Horvat's perpetual re-creation and renegotiation of space both hints at the hidden production of space and suggests that space is not *either* abstract or concrete, *either* undone or done. Rather, spatiality, interwoven with historicality and sociality, is always in flux, never quite here or there despite representations to the contrary.

Imagining the L.A. River: Cornerstone Theater's *Touch the Water*

Whereas *This Here and That There*, as its name suggests, is transportable from site to site, the 2009 production *Touch the Water: A River Play* is firmly tethered to its location. The play was written by Julie Hébert for the L.A.-based Cornerstone Theater Company, and, like

most Cornerstone productions, it features amateur actors and activists from the local community, who play a wide range of characters with varied, conflicting intentions toward the L.A. River. The characters include the comically pretentious eco-activist who goes by the code name Roger Vadim!, the well-meaning but sometimes misguided experts Joe Swift (an Army Corps biologist) and Jade Kenton-Denton (a green architect and activist), the ticket-toting Parks and Recreation's officer, and the wide-eyed, curious students. In addition to the human characters, there is a chorus of flora and fauna led by Maniisar, a ghost of a Tongva[84] girl. Two of the other featured characters are animals: the poisoned turtle, Ridley (named after the olive ridley sea turtle), and an imposing crow, Corvus (named for the crow's genus name, *Corvus*). While *Touch the Water* is undoubtedly a biodiverse ensemble piece, its story centers on the river and two characters who live along it: Luis Otcho-o, who witnessed a murder and refused to testify, and Isa Pino, the woman whose little brother was murdered. At the play's start, Luis has just been released from prison and has returned to his mother's condemned house, reigniting Isa's anger and guilt. He arrives in time to witness Roger Vadim!'s attempt to "free the river" by taking a jack-hammer to its concrete bed (Hébert 2). The activist unwittingly calls the ghost Maniisar, who floats up through the hole in the concrete, and remains until she helps Luis and Isa begin to find peace with each other, themselves, and their environment. Thus, *Touch the Water* promotes a reciprocal relationship between humans and the environment, but it also asks who represents, and who should represent, the river and its interests. The play warrants closer analysis, because it considers spatio-environmental justice in the L.A. River and stages site-specific, multi-vocal debates about the river's past, present, and future.

[84] The Tongva people, later called the Gabrielinos after the Spanish founded the Mission San Gabriel in the eighteenth century, lived near the river for centuries. People had lived around the river for 8-10,000 years prior to Spanish colonization, and the Tongva people were only the most recent settlers. Today, the Gabrielino-Tongva tribal council is still active in Los Angeles. The role of the "Tongva spirit," Maniisar, will be discussed later in the chapter.

Insomuch as *Chinatown* and *This Here and That There* take place in and around the L.A. River, they are site-specific. However, as previously discussed, the former emphasizes the properties of water over the properties of place while the latter has a transportability that limits its site-specificity. It can be dangerous to rank performances in degrees of locality, because, as Kwon points out, a desire for the nostalgic return to the local is just as susceptible to commodification as are the postmodern nonplaces of the global market (159).[85] At the same time, though, a key component of eco-theater is an emphasis on the particularities of place, and, thus, what most distinguishes *Touch the Water* from the other two pieces is its singular focus on the L.A. River and on Angelenos. The play's site-specificity is very much in keeping with the practices of the community-oriented Cornerstone Theater Company, which has been tackling issues of social relevance to the Angeleno community for over twenty years. Frequently casting residents from the towns in which productions are staged and collaborating with local organizations in the area, the company emphasizes collective activism. For *Touch the Water* in particular, Cornerstone collaborated with Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR), Metabolic Studio/Farmlab, and South Asian Network (SAN). FoLAR, a major river proponent founded in 1986 by Lewis MacAdams,[86] led free pre-show river walks for those interested and, at the end of every performance, circulated a petition to protect the river. Thus, the production, part of a four year Justice Cycle, was very much a community effort that included local artists, actors, environmentalists, scholars, and residents.

Like *This Here and That There*, *Touch the Water* actually takes place at the L.A. River., less than a mile west of Horvat's performance. However, whereas the one woman, durational

[85] The locavore food movement is a prime example of the ways in which notions of "the local" can become oversimplified and commodified. While producing some foods locally is an excellent way to cut down on carbon emissions, not all foods are native to a region and trying to produce them regardless can be harmful to the land.

[86] FoLAR was co-founded by Lewis MacAdams's fellow performer activists, Pat Patterson and Roger Wong.

piece is, at times, highly conceptual, Hébert's play is extremely concrete. Indeed, *Touch the Water*'s use of geographical monikers, such as Frogtown, would be unfamiliar to people outside of L.A. By situating the narrative and the characters on the banks of the L.A. River, the play literally and figuratively places the river center stage. However, the production itself complicates this specificity by not taking place in the play's exact setting. *Touch the Water* is set in Elysian Valley or, as it is locally known, Frogtown and draws on the area's history of industrialization and its recent gentrification. The production, meanwhile, takes place in Rio de Los Angeles State Park, which neighbors Frogtown. Furthermore, while the production is indeed performed on the bank of the L.A. River, its set includes a shallow, rectangular box of water that runs the length of downstage and serves as a surrogate for the nearby river. The very proximity of the production to Frogtown, a mere mile away, and the river, feet away from the set's stage left entrance, is confusing and frustrating in light of the play's many site-specific references. Whereas Hébert suggests that environmental change that is effective in one neighborhood may not be appropriate for another, the production's location—close but not quite right—undercuts this idea.

Similarly, a model river, placed at a ninety degree angle to the actual L.A. River, acts as a miniaturized stand in for the latter. Two inches of collected rain water fills the long box made of reclaimed wood, and, on the floor of the river set piece, are alternating black and silver squiggly lines that hint at both the L.A. River's flow and its toxicity. Characters frequently walk, dance, wash, drink, and even kayak in the miniature river, suggesting the many potential uses for the actual river. Although it seems rather absurd to place a model of a river on the very bank of that river, this spatializing choice highlights the long-term inaccessibility of the L.A River, and it is almost fitting that a model stand in for a river that has historically been disregarded by Angelenos, closed off by the USACE, and recast as countless other places by Hollywood. The

use of a surrogate, abutting the material river, makes clear that the play's vision of the river is just that: an imagined future rather than an idyllic past or a fully realized present.

The river set piece reveals the disjuncture between the play's hopes for the river and the river itself. The latter is still relatively inaccessible, many parts of it thirty feet below street level, and undesirable, particularly when it is dry. Indeed, the production team that chose the location immediately ruled out the river, because it would have been unsafe and inaccessible to the cast and audience (Woolery).[87] Furthermore, being in the river, aside from kayaking with someone licensed by the USACE, is still illegal, because the water is not yet considered safe or clean enough for swimming, fishing, or drinking, and, during flood season, it is particularly dangerous. This is why much of the current efforts of organizations like FoLAR center on changing Angeleno's perception of the river. A similar endeavor is at work in the production where the imagined plays out on the (literal) edge of the real. The locational shifts between the setting of Hébert's play and the site of Cornerstone's production, while confusing, are also illuminating, creating a metaphorical and material play space so close to the river that the realization of a healthy river seems just within reach. Ironically, then, even though Horvat's performance takes place in the L.A. River while Cornerstone's production only takes place near the river, the latter is more site-specific, because it raises awareness of spatio-environmental injustices unique to the area. By setting the production in the "wrong" site, Cornerstone highlights the need for improvements to the "right" site. In contrast to the postmodern spatial relativity of *This Here and That There*, *Touch the Water* quite literally asks its characters—and audience— to imagine touching the waters of the L.A. River in order to reconnect with themselves and their environment.

[87] One of the cast members was in a wheelchair, as were several audience members, so the river would have been completely inaccessible to them (Woolery).

Multivalent Approaches to Spatio-Environmental Justice

The strength of Hébert's writing lies in its ability to consider the variety of perspectives that the characters, people and animals alike, have toward the river without dismissing anyone's viewpoint. Take, for instance, the play's portrayal of the debate between those who advocate removing all of the concrete from the river at once and those who favor more cautious measures. At one end of the spectrum is Roger Vadim!, so desperate for a "real" river that he is willing to take matters into his own hands: "Let the people see Nature, man, let them touch it, it will heal them. Free the river from her concrete corset!" (Hébert 2). Here, Hébert mocks Vadim!'s gendered personification of the river, as well as his appropriation of the code name Roger Vadim!, a real-life French film director. Emulating the director's sartorial style and French dialect, the activist attempts to imbue his cause with European, artistic sophistication. However, in taking on Vadim's name and mannerisms, the activist also imitates his misogyny. Arguably most famous for directing actresses in highly sexualized roles and subsequently marrying them, Vadim goes so far as to recount his intimate experience of the women in *Bardot, Deneuve, Fonda: My Life with the Three Most Beautiful Women in the World*, a self-serving account of how he educated and rescued the actresses before liberating them. Similarly, *Touch the Water*'s Vadim! wants to rescue the feminine river, freeing her from her "concrete corset." Just as the real-life director hyper-sexualizes women in his films, the eco-activist imagines the river as an unbridled, untamed woman simply in need of a male liberator. Thus, Hébert subtly critiques activists like Vadim! who gender nature, simultaneously casting it as helplessly passive and wildly uncontrollable.

However, despite the playwright's comedic critique of Vadim!, and many of the other characters, she never outright dismisses the eco-activist or his ideas, no matter how flawed they

are. For example, just after Roger has been derided by the other characters for ludicrously telling them to call him "River Boy," he breaks out of his affected French persona (Hébert 53). Sans accent and hyperbole, he confesses that he is really from the San Fernando Valley where his part of the river is barren: "The river is more than water, it's a way of sustaining our spirits. I've lived in L.A. all my life and I will die here—I can't wait fifty years, or twenty years—I need my water now" (Hébert 55). Thus, Hébert cleverly establishes Vadim! as a misogynistic, excessive eco-activist only to later subvert this image. Roger suggests that he took on the role of Vadim! simply to draw attention to the river's condition, but, in dropping the act, he realizes that his own experience as an Angeleno is far more influential. Like everyone else in the play, Roger needs to connect with the river and has his own views on how best to do it.

At the other end of the spectrum is the biologist Joe Swift, who works for the USACE. Compared to Roger Vadim! and sustainability architect Jade Kenton-Denton, Joe is hyper-rational, occasionally telling the other two to calm down and mistaking their metaphoricalization of the river for scientific error. Advocating small, gradual changes to the river, the biologist is viewed with distrust by many of the other characters, largely because of the way in which the USACE turned the river into a concrete channel without considering less drastic measures. The fact that the USACE still regulates the river is a further source of discontentment for those Angelenos who feel that flood control officials are a part of "'a concrete cult'" unsupportive of greening initiatives (Gumprecht, "Who" 116). This ideology is apparent in a claim made by Roger: "When people say there is no center in Los Angeles, no *there* there... what they don't know is the *River* is the center-- and she has been eclipsed, hidden under a concrete shroud. But the Mighty Los Angeles is not dead, she flows underground" (Hébert 1). Vadim! suggests that underneath the concrete, there is a vibrant river that only needs to be released from the coffin to

which the USACE wrongly confined it. He implies that if the concrete were removed Angelenos would *again* recognize the river as the center of the city.

However, as Gumprecht convincingly argues, there was never a point in the city's short history that the river was viewed as the center of life, even when L.A. was primarily agricultural. While the river was indeed central to the Tongva people who lived along it prior to Spanish colonization in the eighteenth century, it was not central to Angelenos (Gumprecht, "Who" 118). Indeed, the fact that the railroad and, later, the I-5 freeway follow the river suggests not that it is the center of the city, but that it is the outskirts. Thus, Joe must contend with both Angelenos' legitimate complaints about the USACE's river management and their nostalgia for a river that their own ancestors helped destroy. Jade, who—as a professional sustainability architect—appears to be more well-informed than Roger, also blames the USACE for the river's demise: "Our defining geologic feature is the Los Angeles River, which—before it was so rudely interrupted by men short on vision and long on concrete—flowed in a natural cycle for nine thousand years" (Hébert 14). Hence Jade too disregards the fact that the environmental damage to the L.A. River took place over an extended period of time, rather than with one solitary act. Hébert does not undermine Jade's and Roger's stance, thereby failing to acknowledge the full history of the river's degradation.

Although Hébert does not focus on the mutual destruction of the river, instead merely hinting at the USACE's short-sightedness through Jade and Roger, she does emphasize the need for collective action now. Just as the playwright adds shades of complexity to Roger's character, she depicts Joe as someone who is genuinely intent on improving the river for everyone. Rather than reinforce the familiar vilification of the Army Corps, she complicates this image through Joe, who claims that the USACE is becoming more environmentally-conscious: "We're

changing, we have to. We want to adapt the system so it works *with* Nature instead of trying to control it. As always, our main objective is to protect the city from flooding, but we can do that and add greenspace" (Hébert 20). The character's statement is reflective of a current trend within the USACE, L.A. District, which has united with the city and with non profit organizations to generate strategies to improve the river's environment without increasing flood risks.[88]

However, although Joe (and, through him, the USACE) seems to understand that human and environmental needs are intertwined, he nonetheless privileges the river over its inhabitants. This is evidenced by the fact that, within the play, the greenspace USACE wants to add will require tearing down a condemned house, the home where Luis grew up and now squats. Hence, the greenifying vision of both Joe and Jade is in tension with the needs of the actual residents. As Isa exclaims, "What if I started 'improving' your neighborhood—so me and my friends could hang out there—parked in your driveway, tromped through your yard, took pictures of you in your natural habitat—gang member Latinos down by the river, right? Both 'local' and exotic.' Do you wonder if I'm Mexican—a citizen?" (Hébert 21). Comically, Joe misses Isa's point, instead assuring her that the army is not concerned with her citizenship status. While both Joe and Jade express interest in the community's wishes, they fail to recognize how their visions for the river might conflict with the community's day-to-day needs.

Never is this learning gap more apparent than when the biologist and the architect are preparing to take apart Luis's home. The house now belongs to the city, which has given permission for a pocket park to be built on the grounds. Unable to save his childhood home from demolition and desperately in need of work, Luis asks if he can help tear down the structure. Although Joe readily agrees, the irony of the situation is not lost on the inquisitive teenager

[88] For instance, in 2006, the USACE, L.A. District began collaborating with the city on the L.A. River Ecosystem Restoration Feasibility Study, part of the city's L.A. River Revitalization Master Plan.

Cachoo, who is doing a video documentary of the river for school. When she asks Joe and Jade why they would tear down someone's house, Jade replies, "There have to be a few sacrifices" (Hébert 50). Tellingly, though, the sacrifices are not made by those outside the community but those within it. Unable to find work as an ex-convict, Luis cannot risk losing a potential job and merely tells Cachoo not to ruin this opportunity for him. The contrast between Luis's economic straits and Jade and Joe's ecological vision is jarring: When Luis asks, "So, how's this supposed to work?," the biologist and architect provide a lengthy explanation of the greening process only to have Luis respond with, "I meant how're we supposed to take my house down. You got a sledgehammer?" (Hébert 48). In this quintessential moment, Hébert exposes the fact that environmental injustice can not only be found in projects that pollute an area but also in those that hope to clean it up.

While most literature on environmental justice focuses on how people of color are unequally and unfairly exposed to air, water, and waste toxins, *Touch the Water* suggests that sometimes the solution can be worse than the problem, especially if the solution only addresses the environment and ignores the people within that environment. Not only can greening projects literally destroy existing habitats, like Luis's home, but, as Isa fears, they can also gentrify a place to the point that it becomes unaffordable for its own residents. This is one reason why Kwon, drawing on Iris Marion Young and Jean-Luc Nancy, argues "against the common notion of the community as a coherent and unified social formation—equally valorized by neoconservatives and the liberal left—which often serves exclusionary and authoritarian purposes in the very name of the opposite" (7). Although Hébert ends the play with a rather pat call for communal action, prior to that, she juxtaposes various positions that not only highlight the friction between the neighborhood and the outside environmentalists but also between

neighbors themselves. Particularly through Joe's and Jade's privileged positions, Hébert demonstrates the dangers of treating social and environmental injustices as separate issues. As urban political ecologists Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika, and Erik Swyngedouw suggest, "Urbanization is very much a process of socio-metabolic transformations" (3), and, thus, effective urban environmentalism must account for shifts and scales of difference when attempting to create spatio-environmental justice.

Perhaps what is most troubling about the environmental injustice at work in the play is the way in which it is spatially and historically compounded. As Isa tells Joes, "My mother's family has lived here for four generations—Chavez Ravine before Elysian Valley, Sonora Town before that. When I-5 got built—we lost our doctor's office, the grocery story, the bakery" (Hébert 21). The construction of Interstate 5 through Elysian Valley was just one instance of the area's dilapidation for the sake of "development." Indeed, in her article, "Rethinking Environmental Racism," Pulido summarizes six L.A. studies,[89] all of which found evidence that environmental racism—in the form of environmental hazards like air toxins, toxic waste, and waste management—disproportionately affects Latinos, especially in East L.A. (20-21). Thus, through the character of Isa, Hébert connects past injustices (like the destruction of local businesses to make way for Interstate 5) to present ones (like the destruction of a man's house for a greening project), and she suggests that environmental improvement is no different from industrial development if it lacks a holistic approach. In addition to Isa's remarks, the production's setting also speaks to East L.A.'s material history of industrialization and deindustrialization: the set itself is littered with tires, shopping carts, and trash collected from the

[89] The six studies (one at the city level and five at the county level) are: the United Church of Christ (1987), which examined abandoned toxic waste sites; Burke (1993), which examined facilities emitting air toxins; Szasz et al. (1993), which also examined facilities emitting air toxins; Pulido et al. (1996), which examined air toxin emission clusters; Boer et al. (1997), which examined transfer, storage, and disposal facilities; Sadd et al. (1999), which examined air toxins (Pulido 20-21).

surrounding area, while the power lines overhead highlight the engineering of the river. Even where traces of environmental injustice are invisible, though (as with the area's air toxins), the landscape still bears a layered history of spatio-environmental injustice, or, as sociologists Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro call it, the "sedimentation of racial inequality" (5).

A question of prime importance in revitalization projects, then, is who is improving the quality of life for whom and for what purpose. As Braun cautions, what is needed is a relational understanding of locality rather than a hermetic understanding disconnected from global flows and networks (640). A local environmentalism that fails to consider regional and global effects runs the risk of simply relocating environmental hazards and exacerbating spatial injustice.[90] Hébert clearly shares this concern in her focus on a variety of human and animal perspectives, from within and outside the neighborhood. In *Touch the Water*, Luis is just one example of the many people who will be displaced if Jade and Joe's project, which entails greening seven hundred streets, is completed. While the USACE initiative will most likely improve the river quality for flora and fauna, it may adversely affect neighborhood residents who are already neglected. Not only will Luis lose his home, but, as Isa points out, locals will now have to contend with an influx of curious visitors eager to enjoy the beautified river (or gawk at its residents). Furthermore, individuals like Ruth Betsy, who lives in an abandoned car in the river, will no doubt be displaced at some point during the revitalization project.

[90] One such example is that of car batteries, which, according to the EPA, must be recycled according to strict guidelines. To get around this, companies simply recycle batteries in Mexico, which has far laxer environmental standards (Rosenthal).

Not only are many of the play's residents unaware of the project, apparently approved without their consent,[91] but they—like all Angelenos—are banned by the Army Corps from swimming, fishing, or navigating the river unattended. However, since the Environmental Protection Agency's landmark 2010 decision that the river is a "Traditional Navigable Waterway" (Blumenfeld), supervised summer kayaking has been permitted by the USACE. To date, though, only two organizations are approved by the USACE to lead tours.[92] Because the project is only in its fourth summer and tickets are limited, all of the dates sell out within minutes of becoming available. In the words of *L.A. Times* journalist Chris Erskine, who took a tour in August 2012, "Welcome to the Los Angeles River, America's least likely recreational area. And the hottest ticket in L.A." The tickets, which go for around $25 for two hour trips and $50 for four hour trips, are most often purchased by people who do not actually live near the river.[93] Thus, while tourists have begun to have limited access to the river, people living along the river are still waiting. This irony is not lost on Hébert, who opens the play with Jade leading a group of bourgeois kayakers rapidly snapping photographs of the river and its inhabitants. The juxtaposition between this scene and a later one, in which a local man is ticketed for fishing for his dinner, suggests that, thus far, the river has only become legally accessible to those who can afford to pay for it.

Although Hébert is critical of Jade and Joe's project for its failure to consider the people of Frogtown, she nonetheless emphasizes the need for environmental change in the area.

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[91] According to Joe, USACE representatives went house to house explaining the greening project to people, but, tellingly, Isa—who lives in a gated apartment—and Luis—who has just returned from jail—were never informed. Furthermore, characters like Ruth Betsy, who lives in an abandoned car, would also be uninformed, since they do not live in a "house" (Hébert 21).

[92] The organizations are the L.A. Conservation Corps and L.A. River Expeditions.

[93] I took a tour in September 2012, and, of the eight people there that day, half were out-of-state tourists and the other half were writers.

Presenting both sides of the issue, she calls for respect of existing habitats and inhabitants while also acknowledging the river's need for environmental improvement. For instance, the failing health of Ridley the sea turtle serves as a warning of the danger of leaving the river in its current condition. Poisoned by urban runoff like oil and antifreeze and choked by a plastic bag around his neck, Ridley gradually dies. The turtle's fate illustrates the need for greening projects like Joe and Jade's, which involves filtering street runoff into a gravel catchmen basin underground (Hébert 48). Such a project might not only improve the quality of life for the water, flora and fauna, but also for human residents, many of whom swim and fish in the water, despite citations from Parks and Recreation. Thus, Hébert highlights the importance of greenifying projects, even as she suggests that the most beneficial environmental changes are wrought by an equal collaboration between the community and environmentalists.

The complex ecology of the urban L.A. River means that, in addition to considering multivalent human perspectives and needs, any improvement project must also consider the many native and non-native species that have amalgamated in the river over the years. Architect David Fletcher uses the word "freakology" to describe the river, because it is a seamless blend of organic and artificial elements (42). For instance, the river is often referred to as an "impaired river body," since overdevelopment and toxins, like pesticides and fertilizers, have degraded the ground water and soil (Fletcher 42). Meanwhile, "Los Angeles moss" (plastic bags) hangs from trees along the river; shopping carts dot the waterscape, with twenty-five of them once found within a sixty-foot circle; and "graffiti universities" reside under the river's bridges (Fletcher 42). Although pollution cannot be said to benefit the ecosystem, it has nonetheless been integrated with the environment. As Fletcher points out, "recent studies suggest that, although trash obviously has its own hazards for ecology, it has become a vital component to the riparian

ecosystems; loose debris gets incorporated into the vegetative community, binding and forming a structural substrate that holds organic nutrients and silts" (42). Examples of this are visible in the production's set, where wiry plants grow out of tires, through paper cups, and around an abandoned car. Of course Fletcher is not suggesting that the debris should remain perfectly intact, but rather that greening projects should consider the needs of the actual environment rather than attempt to return to a river paradise that never was. For instance, several exotic plants have sprung up or been planted along the river over the last two centuries. To uproot all of these plants simply because they are not indigenous is to traumatize the complex river ecosystem rather than to embrace it in all of its urban uniqueness (Fletcher 46). Thus, in addition to considering the needs of human and animal residents, river environmentalism must strive to improve rather than overhaul the existing ecosystem.

The Dangers of "Being" the River

Regardless of the correctness of their warring agendas, all of the play's characters are sympathetic because they each depend on the river in their own way. One of the characters, Omar, fishes for sustenance even after he has received a ticket from the Parks and Recreations officer, while another, Ruth, lives in an abandoned car in the river and feeds her duck companions daily. Meanwhile, Isa and Luis were born and raised along the river and now need to reconnect with it if they are to forgive themselves and each other for the past. While the human characters have a vested interest in the river, so too do the animals and the spirit Maniisar, all of whom highlight their own dependency on the river. Perhaps, though, it is the poisoned Ridley who is most urgently in need of a healthy river; indeed, as he is close to dying, he call out, "Touch the water, I need to touch the water" (Hébert 57). Whereas some of the human

characters' desire to connect with a clean water source stems from a metaphoric or nostalgic need, Ridley quite literally dies without a safe, watery haven. All of the characters rely on the river in various ways, though, and the polyphony of voices and needs within the play demonstrates a mutual dependence on the river for physical and spiritual sustenance.

However, although most of Hébert's characters are complex, containing flaws, strengths, and desires, two are under—or, in some cases, over—written: the spirit Maniisar and the river itself. The former is summoned from the river's concrete bed only to vanish once she has helped Luis and Isa forgive each other by appealing to their shared love of the river. A combination of healer and spiritualist, Maniisar uses lyrical music to lead the characters to "channel the river" (Hébert 39). Thus, the seemingly omniscient spirit, who knows the characters' needs and desires better than they do, acts as the play's spiritual and environmental guide. It is not surprising that Maniisar, as a spectral figure from the afterlife, would be represented as more in tune with the river than the living characters. Depicted as a three foot puppet in a long shroud and an inanimate mask for a face, Maniisar is operated by two women who also give her voice.[94] In her puppet form, she is more abstracted than the human and animal characters, all played by people, and is more ethereal than material. The puppeteers hold her by stick arms and bob her about in the air, floating her towards and away from the other characters. Some of Maniisar's comments are cryptic—like her initial "Who called me?"—and the operators' eerie delivery only makes them seem more mysterious (Hébert 4). The spirit is already marked by her otherworldly demeanor, but her Tongva heritage, which she mentions early on, also separates her from the living human and animal characters. When she sees the water, Maniisar asks, "What have they done to my river?" (Hébert 7). Calling herself a "river-ghost-girl," the spirit's attunement with the river is contrasted with Luis's disconnection with the water and himself (Hébert 7). Although this

[94] The overall effect is similar to a Bunraku puppet.

representation is not without some basis, the dualistic alignment of Maniisar with a pristine, pre-contact paradise and the other characters with a devastated, urban environment essentializes the ghost and, by proxy, the Tongva people.

As anthropologist Shepard Krech argues, the stereotype of the "Ecological Indian" as "ecologist and conservationist" has been a staple of American and European literature and art since the beginning of North American colonization (16). It is a deeply problematic trope, because it equates Indians with nature and white men with culture, thereby oversimplifying both. Furthermore, the representation of nature as harmonious and balanced—and Indians as one with nature—is now considered inaccurate, since, as ecologists of the last thirty-five years have noted, ecosystems are not always balanced and self-regulating (Krech 23). They, like humans, are susceptible to "random external events" that can have unanticipated effects (Krech 23). This means that the environment is changeable, dynamic, and unpredictable, thereby undercutting the essentialized representation of Indians as balanced and constant. However, as a figment of a time in which nature was untouched, Maniisar calls for an impossible restoration: "With beauty before me, may I wade/ With beauty behind me, may I wade/ With beauty above me, may I wade/ With beauty all around me, may I wade" (Hébert 6). As a "river-ghost-[Tongva]-girl," Maniisar is not only signified by her heritage and ghostliness but also by her gender (Hébert 7). In Noël Sturgeon's words, the generalized category of "indigenous woman" is often seen as the "ultimate ecofeminist," since, historically, both women and indigenous peoples have been linked to nature (115). Because of this, it is difficult not to interpret Maniisar's call to peace and oneness with the river as essentialized acts.

Although the Tongva character is problematically essentialized, she is also somewhat grounded by Hébert's use of historical and creative specificity. Maniisar's knowledge of Tongva

words and traditions insures that the character is not vaguely indigenous—and therefore not vaguely spiritual and ecological—but rather specifically Tongva. Her personal story of the day she died is particularly unique: She stole the shaman's medicine, Datura (a sacred hallucinogenic used by many Southwest tribes), because it was only given to boys and she wanted to try it. In her altered state, she drowned in the river. This story strengthens the connection between Maniisar and the water, suggesting that the link may have been forged by personal experience rather than by a gendered or racial heredity; having died in the river, Maniisar has a unique affinity for the river and the surrounding area, where she lived until her abrupt death. Thus, although the spirit character is highly romanticized, she is also defined by her specificity of place and experience.[95]

However, if Hébert's portrayal of Maniisar becomes somewhat fleshed out, her representation of the L.A. River remains fairly static. On one hand, without the distracting anthropomorphism of verbal representation, the river and its set surrogate are more discernibly present—spatially and thematically highlighted in the performance without being ventriloquized. On the other hand, the fact that the ensemble eventually verbally identifies with the river undercuts this choice and suggests that a connection with the river entitles one to speak for it. For instance, the play ends with all of the characters identifying as the river: Maniisar calls out, "Speak my river, speak!" and the ensemble responds by drinking or touching the water and declaring, "I am the river" (Hébert 71). In unison, the group states, "We are the river…the holder of water, the keeper of consciousness. We are the griever, the giver, the taker, bestower of all that's blessed" (Hébert 71). The danger of such collective identification, of course, is that, as

[95] At the same time, it is important to note that Maniisar probably lived in a pre-colonial time period. Her references to growing up along the river suggest that she preceded Spain's founding of the Mission San Gabriel in 1771 and undoubtedly preceded American colonization in 1851. Just as *Touch the Water* blurs the river's history, juxtaposing a "pre-contact paradise" with the concrete channel, it also neglects the colonial and (post)colonial history of the Tongva people.

Hébert's play so complexly demonstrates, Angelenos have contradictory ideas about what the river and communities along the river need. Certainly, the simultaneous identification implies that animals and humans are united in their joint identification, but their previous actions suggest otherwise. More insidiously, the declaration "I am the river" swallows the river whole, assimilating it with the other characters. While some degree of anthropomorphization is unavoidable if eco-theater is to represent and engage with animal and environmental others, it is nonetheless important to constantly consider what it means to represent nature, which cannot speak for or represent itself. In the words of Cilano and DeLoughrey, "This doubleness—the articulation of complicity and of the need for representation—encourages a self-reflective ambivalence over the ability to know the other, thereby introducing an element of provisionality into any ecocritical reading" (76). Not only is such ambivalence necessary when reading an eco-performance but also when first creating it. The cast's emphatic delivery of "I am the river" leaves no room for doubt or conditionality; instead, it asserts its representation of the river as definitive and permanent.

Claiming to represent the environment but only drawing on oneself to do so suggests what I call a "false eco-empathy," a belief that one is feeling what an environment experiences when one is actually only projecting her own feelings onto it. This phenomenon is visible in a scene in which Maniisar instructs Isa to "channel the river" rather than her own anger and guilt (Hébert 39). Assuming that Maniisar means that she should alter the river as the USACE did, Isa respond, "The river's been channeled too much" (Hébert 39). Isa's misunderstanding suggests that she cannot consider the river beyond its concrete channelization. Maniisar clarifies, though, by stretching her arms to the river and the sky and urging Isa to "learn the ways of the water" (Hébert 39). However, Isa's attempt to channel the river only leads her to project her own anger

onto it: “The river wants to flood, wants to kill. The river wants vengeance” (Hébert 40). Unable to imagine the river beyond its channelization and, more tellingly, beyond her own grief, Isa learns nothing from it—the way it moves, the way it survives, the way it adapts to constant change. When Maniisar tells Isa that *she* is the one who wants vengeance, not the river, the woman defiantly responds, “I am the river,” only to finally admit that, in her current emotional state, she cannot channel anything but her own anger and grief (Hébert 40). Isa’s confession illustrates the central problem of speaking for another; it is impossible to do without one’s own feelings and beliefs coloring the representation. In Isa’s case, her presumptions about the river only reinforce her own world view.

In the above scene, Hébert highlights the limits of representation and suggests that all identification is questionable. She does this elsewhere throughout the play, slyly sending up many of the characters’ tendency to gender or personify the river, in order to expose the ways in which people cast the river in their own image, or in the image that is most helpful for their own purposes. For instance, to Vadim! the river is feminine and mystical, fighting through her man-made entrapments, while, to Luis, the river is masculine in its brute strength, anger, and power. The latter imagines the river as himself whereas the former imagines the river in a helpless, weakened state that will make people more sympathetic to it. Luis needs the river to fight back where he himself failed to do so, while Vadim!, as his chosen code name suggests, needs the river to play damsel in distress to his heroics. Just as Hébert suggests that some environmental action is misguided, she implies that some environmental representation is misrepresentative or hyper-representative.

At the same time, the playwright insinuates that, while humans should not pass their own emotions off as the environment’s sentiments, they can nonetheless experience catharsis through

environmental connection. For example, after confessing that she cannot channel or call the river beyond her own anger, Isa picks up a stone to throw at Luis's house. Maniisar urges her to place the stone in the river, singing: "Pour out your rage and fury, drain all your righteous wrath/The water's never judge or jury, it's just seeking out the easiest, the simplest path" (Hébert 41).[96] While Isa has previously attempted to improve her environment, starting a straggling community garden on the river's embankments, her anger and grief leave her disconnected from the river, the garden, and her neighbors. Consumed by guilt and resentment over her brother's death, Isa cannot grow a healthy garden—or unite a community around it—until she forgives herself and Luis. Catharsis only comes for Isa when she lies down in the river: Maniisar asks her to "Look beneath the surface. Take in the water, what do you see?" (Hébert 65). "*Surrendering*," Isa lays down and replies, "I see...Nothing. Drown me in absolution" (Hébert 65). This scene is the first in which Isa attempts to connect to the water without exhibiting false eco-empathy. Rather than claim to know what the river feels without pausing to consider it or touch it, Isa admits that she cannot even see it. In considering how one can speak of a traumatic past without betraying it, Cathy Caruth suggests that witnessing begins from a place of incomprehension, a place of not knowing and not seeing from the site of trauma (56). Prior to this moment, Isa vehemently insists that her brother Rana's death was Luis's fault, just as she insists that the river is furious over its channelization. It is only when she physically connects with the water, laying down in it, that she can relinquish her preconceptions and resentments.

Through material contact with the river, Isa begins to reestablish her connection to her environment and herself. Early in the play, she violently plants white sage in remembrance of her brother, but the sage, like the rest of the plants in her private "community garden," refuses to grow. It is only when Isa touches the water that she can relinquish what she thinks she knows

96 Music by Shishir Kurup and lyrics by Kurup and Hébert.

and begin to develop a more expansive, holistic sense of place. Once she releases her anger, the sage, known to the Tongva people as a blessing plant, rapidly grows with the help of Maniisar. Hébert thus suggests that a reciprocal relationship with the environment cannot be forged without a physical connection to place that continuously extends beyond oneself and one's private patch of land. It is not enough to act upon or for the environment, as Jade, Joe, and Isa believe they do. Without recognizing their interdependence with the community—the river, plants, animals, and humans—Isa and the other characters only give or take, without establishing mutually beneficial relationships. Although Hébert's ending, with its collective "I am the river" claim, detracts from the play's overall complexity, Isa's and Luis's personal interactions with the river give them—and the audience—a material, communal, and expansive sense of place. Advocating a multivalent, flexible understanding of local and regional environmental needs, *Touch the Water* foregrounds the particularities of place and celebrates human, animal, and environmental interactions.

Producing Space and Touching Place

Kwon argues that the uneven conditions between one place and another, one person's spatial experience and another person's, is what current site-specific work must address or else sites really do become "one place after another" (166). Focusing on the environmental, material, and imaginary production of space in the L.A. River, this chapter not only highlights spatial particularities unique to the L.A. River, but also exposes disproportionate scales of spatio-environmental justice, suggesting that, while human history may forget or neglect these injustices, they remain embedded within the river's ecology. The three performances analyzed here represent the river in radically different ways: *Chinatown* highlights the properties of water

and the marginalization of ethnic others; *This Here and That There* emphasizes the ongoing processes of spatial production in the river and beyond; and *Touch the Water* offers multi-perspectival, material interpretations of the river. Despite their differences, all three deploy socio-spatial practices that foreground the historically displaced, abstracted L.A. River and highlight its ongoing spatial production. By emphasizing the river's particularities of place—its water properties in *Chinatown*, its fluidity in *This Here and That There*, and its multivalent representations in *Touch the Water*—the three performances turn the typically invisible site of the L.A. River into one of heightened visibility.

To varying degrees, they all interact with and in the river, casting it as a pivotal character in the action rather than a mere backdrop. For instance, in *Chinatown*, the urban Gittes must go down to the river and observe it closely in order to unravel the city's water corruption; stumbling down the river's steep slope until his loafer-clad foot plops into the water, the detective is taken out of his element—the concrete city above the river—and forced into contact with the river's elements—its changeable water levels, salinity, and scattered rocks. Meanwhile, *This Here and That Here* creates a much more extensive interaction with the river, exploring a reciprocal relationship between a woman at work for eight hours and a river that's waters resist and yield to her efforts. In tension with one another, woman and river shift and react to each other's force, thereby participating in a dynamic, fluid relationship. Lastly, *Touch the Water*, staged on the banks of the L.A. River, is a meditation on the necessity and joys of establishing a lifelong relationship with the river. Fostering multivalent understandings of the river, the play imagines a future in which all people may engage with it more fully—swimming, fishing, and navigating its waters. Together, the three performances stage alternative, highly spatialized relationships with

the L.A. River; closely engaging with and in its waters, they ask audiences to see the river buried under concrete and below freeways—to see it and to spatially interact with it.

Chapter Four

The BP Oil Spill and Performances of Ecological Irresolution

Then he skipped again to anticipate the predictions and ascertain the date and circumstances of his death. Before reaching the final line, however, he had already understood that he would never leave that room, for it was foreseen that the city of mirrors (or mirages) would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments, and that everything written on them was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more, because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth.

--Gabriel García Márquez

It is more than a little ironic that the prospect in which the *Deepwater Horizon* oil rig exploded on April 20, 2010 was named Macondo, after the city of mirages in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. García Márquez's Macondo, in which history circles and repeats, ends in "a fearful whirlwind of dust and rubble being spun about by the wrath of the biblical hurricane" (422). Signs of its impending demise, like that of the BP prospect, can be seen early on, though. For instance, when the gypsy Melquíades introduces the amazed villagers of Macondo to magnets, the novel's patriarch José Arcadio Buendía tries to use them to mine gold (2). Trading valuable livestock for the magnets, not unlike trading soil for oil, José Arcadio only unearths a rusty "suit of fifteenth-century armor" and fails to recognize it as a relic, or perhaps a precursor, of Spanish imperialism(2).[97] Instead, the would-be-inventor becomes consumed with Melquíades's latest wonders, a telescope and a magnifying glass, and attempts to turn them into weapons of war (2-3). Literary critic Brian Conniff argues that the Macondo villagers, particularly José Arcadio, view science, magic, and technology as intrinsically valuable and see the outside world that possesses it as superior to the "primitive," town, thus justifying and

[97] Time is nonlinear in the novel, which begins when "the world was so recent that many things lacked names," but sprinkles references to modern history and events throughout (García Márquez 1).

anticipating their oppression by an imperialistic government, as well as foreigners' exploitation of their town's natural resources (146).[98]

This recurring theme of imperialistic exploitation is just one of the similarities between *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the 2010 BP oil spill, joined in more than name only. In no way do I wish to strip García Márquez's work of its Latin American context and specificity, but, in light of the BP oil spill, the largest in U.S. history, the name "Macondo" has taken on new meaning, reflected and foreshadowed by the author's famous city of mirrors. Like the Macondo villagers, oil companies and the U.S. government assume that new scientific technologies are synonymous with progress and advancement. Early on in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Melquíades, demonstrating the use of the telescope, brags, "'Science has eliminated distance'" (3). Such a claim is eerily familiar, echoed throughout the Space Age and now throughout the age of deep sea drilling, when BP and other oil companies continue to plumb deeper into the unknown with no regard for consequence. Little effort has been made to improve hazardous clean up technology over the last twenty years,[99] because the focus is on drilling ever deeper—eliminating distance and lining pockets. Thus, as in the novel, the end result of unchecked exploitation, fueled by science, can only be destruction. As Fredric Jameson famously put it, "[I]t seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism" (xii).

Just as the villagers forget the past and Macondo itself is eventually "wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men" (García Márquez 422), the Macondo blowout has

[98] In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, The Banana Company abruptly sweeps into town, wipes out all of the village's bananas, and abruptly leaves, but not before colluding with the government to massacre thousands of union strikers.

[99] See, for instance, Henry Fountain's article, "Advances in Oil Spill Cleanup Lag Since Valdez." Fountain suggests, though, that there are several reasons for the lag, from tight regulation to funding.

already been forgotten. Indeed, the U.S. moratorium on drilling in the Gulf of Mexico lifted only a year after the spill and drilling has since then only intensified.[100] Similarly, although Macondo's oppression necessitates its demise, José Arcadio cannot foresee this, because "his horizon is determined by the interests he serves," unfettered advanced technology (Conniff 145). The consumptive, imperialistic drive at work in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* gives way to the new, equally consumptive empire of petrocapitalism. This growing neoliberal empire, like the imperialism foreshadowed and followed in García Márquez's circular narrative, poses disastrous corporate and environmental risks.

I begin with this rather unlikely comparison between *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the BP oil spill, because, in both, Macondo is illusive and disillusive, visible and invisible, repeatable and unrepeatable. More pragmatically, somewhere in the middle of the BP oil spill news coverage, the spill took on historical significance, its catastrophic scope and absurd plot twists in keeping with the epic scale of García Márquez's narrative. Thus, I am less interested in the spill itself, than I am in *how* the spill was and still is represented by news outlets, artists, and BP itself. For much of the news media, and certainly for BP, the spill's narrative trajectory began with utter shock that such a seemingly unlikely, unexpected event had occurred. For many, it seemed to end when BP, after 87 long days of mishaps, succeeded in partially capping the leaky well on the Gulf's ocean floor. However, I would argue that, in many ways, the spill was overdetermined, predictable, and all too common, and, as the plays and Tweets I will later analyze suggest, the sealed well does not represent a narrative resolution but rather a continued ecological irresolution. This distinction is crucial. The near complete drop-off in media coverage after the well was partially capped inadvertently implied an end to the disaster while BP's

[100] Drilling in the Gulf is expanding to Cuban and Mexican waters, where a spill would affect U.S. shores: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/05/business/deepwater-oil-drilling-accelerates-as-bp-disaster-fades.html

intensive ad campaign during and after the spill continues to suggest a narrative resolution and, with it, an ecologically impossible return to the status quo. Although the *Deepwater Horizon*'s spectacular explosion and gushing oil captured media and public attention, the subsequent slow violence—the long-term effects of the sunken oil and Corexit—has not. Slow violence, according to ecocritic Rob Nixon, is that which "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Indeed, since the 2010 BP disaster, there have been thirty-eight international spills, many of which have received little to no attention, highlighting the need for extended representations of the slow petroviolence that precedes and follows spectacular bursts like the 2010 BP disaster.

In order to better explore the contrasts between representations of slow violence and spectacular violence, visibility and invisibility, and narratival irresolution and seeming resolution, I begin by giving a very brief history of deep sea drilling before turning to the TV news media's coverage of the spill, which, like BP's own representation, largely drives toward dramatic resolution. I then analyze four performances of the 2010 spill, which, with one exception, strive to undercut the grand narrative of ecological resolution proposed by both BP and the majority of news outlets. The first, the verbatim docudrama *NOLA* staged two years after the spill, visits Louisiana residents several months after all of the news cameras have left in search of the next big story. Whereas *NOLA* reveals the uncertainty, loss, and irresolution that still permeate those ecologies affected by the disaster, the second performance, BP's own commercials following the spill, promotes a false ecological and economic return to the status quo. In response, the third performance, tweets from a hoax Twitter handle[101] imitating BP's

[101] Twitter is a real time social media platform. Twitterers have usernames, which serve as their Twitter handles, as with @BPGlobalPR, the hoax BP handle. Twitter users can follow other Twitterers and be followed.

public relations department, works to digitally undercut the oil company's bravado in real time. Lastly, Caridad Svich's play *The Way of the Water* extends its exploration of the spill's affects beyond humans to include affected animals and the Gulf itself. In contrast to the grand narrative of disaster resolution represented in BP's own commercials, and in much of the spill's news coverage, these alternative performances resist linear narratives and, with them, the drive toward resolution, when the well was capped, the Corexit had submerged the bulk of the oil, and "all was well." Instead, they focus on the slow violence of material performance remains—infected bio-organisms, watery tar balls, toxic air—urging us not to forget, because there is no "second opportunity on Earth" (García Márquez 422).

Spectacular Disaster

On April 20th 2010, the *Deepwater Horizon*'s drilling rig exploded, killing eleven people, and, several days later, a large leak was discovered. In the ensuing months, the media tracked the story as one attempt after another to plug the well failed. By the time the well appeared to be permanently sealed five months later,[102] 4.9 million barrels of oil had been spilled. From Louisiana to Florida, entire ecosystems—animals, plants, water, and people—continue to suffer from their exposure to crude oil and the dispersant agent Corexit. Although the narrative surrounding the BP oil spill began with the question, "How could this have happened?" the U.S.'s history of oil production and consumption makes it clear that the more appropriate question is, "How could this *not* have happened?" In order to fathom how the *Deepwater Horizon* explosion could occur, one need only consider the years of deregulation and oil

[102] The well was sealed with a cap on day 87 of the spill, and this is when coverage of the spill began dwindling in the media. However, the well was not permanently sealed with cement until day 153.

consumption that made deepwater drilling seem like a plausible solution to oil shortages. Offshore drilling was first made viable through two pieces of legislation passed during the early days of Eisenhower's administration[103] (Freudenburg and Gramling 1). Since then, land-based drilling has become far less lucrative than deepwater drilling, for which technology rapidly continues to advance. For instance, in 1998, only twenty-four exploratory oil wells in the Gulf of Mexico extended beyond 5,000 feet; in 2008, that number almost reached 300 (Safina 4). With no end to oil consumption in sight, companies continue to intensify their exploration, riskily drilling deeper and further below the ocean floor, confident that the spoils of drilling will outweigh the cost of any spill.

While lax government regulations and consumer dependency on oil feed the exploitative cycle, so too does the short-term memory of the mainstream news media. On one hand, the coverage of the spill lasted longer than usual; the constantly unfolding drama made the spill the dominant story for 100 days ("100 Days"). However, but for a few largely local exceptions, news coverage of the spill rapidly declined following the well's partial sealing on July 15, 2010. Once the leak was plugged and the oil sunk, exited from sight by the aptly named[104] Corexit, the crisis appeared to be finished and evidence of its damage cleaned up.

In addition to curtailing their coverage of the spill, many TV news outlets told identical, similarly dramatic narratives. This can partly be attributed to the joint efforts of BP, the Coast Guard, the National Guard, and local law enforcement to restrict journalists' access to all affected areas (McClintock); as a result of the media blockade, news shows often featured the

[103] Eisenhower oversaw the passage of the Submerged Lands Act of 1953, which allowed coastal states to offer subsea drilling leases up to three nautical miles off the coast, with the possibility of expanding that distance to nine nautical miles (something that only Florida and Texas eventually won in court). In the same year, Eisenhower also helped pass the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act, which permitted the Department of Interior to auction offshore leases for the water beyond state jurisdiction.

[104] The link between Corexit's name and purpose was first suggested to me by Elizabeth DeLoughrey.

same images and interviewees. However, the similarity in dramatic narratives can also be ascribed to the proliferation of new media, which makes it increasingly difficult for TV news networks to break a major story. In lieu of being the first to deliver the message, news programs often resort to sensationalism in order to capture viewers' attention. Building on Guy Debord's "society of the spectacle,"[105] Douglas Kellner argues that "media spectacles are increasingly commercialized, vulgar, glitzy, and," as a result, "important arenas of political contestation" (76). Because they are seemingly unexpected and often massive in scale, disasters like the BP oil spill lend themselves to a certain type of spectacularization that is dramatic, apocalyptic, and driven.

Communications scholar Tamar Liebes suggests that, when disasters occur, news outlets turn into "disaster marathons…broadcasting from the moment when the disaster strikes (or immediately after) until the redressive ceremonial closure" (72, 74). In the case of the BP oil spill, the false sense of ceremonial closure came when the well was partially capped on Day 87 of the disaster. The problem with such disaster marathons, according to Liebes, is that they often incite mass hysteria, thereby leading the government to make hasty, ill-informed judgment calls (83). More damagingly in this case, I would argue, is the false sense of resolution created by the disaster marathon's obligatory drive toward "redressive, ceremonial closure."

For example, BP's disaster marathon largely began with news footage of the explosion played ad nauseam before the visual focus shifted to the cleanup, particularly of birds and sea animals, and, finally, to BP's many failed attempts to stop the leak. Indeed, with the media largely restricted from the containment areas, footage from BP's so-called "spill cam" dominated the TV screen. Anne McClintock suggests that "[t]his spectral, nightly close-up became a form

[105] However, whereas Debord's society of the spectacle is hegemonic and omnipresent, Kellner's "spectacle is a *contested terrain* in which different forces use the spectacle to push their interests and agendas" (78).

of blindness." The murkiness it depicted became a metaphor for the murky, de-contextualized coverage of the spill, while the gushing oil became a monopolizing crisis in need of immediate resolution. Thus, because the leak was a dangerous, unfolding drama, it took center stage in news coverage, to the point that, when it was mostly plugged, the story of the spill seemed to be over. What remained were unknown long-term ecological and health problems and convoluted lawsuits and appeals, none of which were as easy to spectacularize as the explosion and massive oil leak.

While the media's tone, dubbed "full strength catastrophe" by journalist David Shukman (*NOLA* 5), certainly garnered the spill national and international attention, it also limited the extent of the media outlets' investigations. Full strength catastrophe and disaster narratives are certainly compelling, yet their very urgency and intensity can result in sweeping language and heightened drama, incompatible with details, multiplicities, and irresolution. As ecocritic Greg Garrard points out, the news media often casts environmental disasters in an apocalyptic light, "because news more easily reports events than processes," but, in so doing, it reduces "long-term issues" to "monocausal crises" with short-term solutions and temporary villains. (105). Thus, nonlinear, multivalent narratives like those presented by the theater company Look Left, Look Right offer vital alternatives to the monocausal, event-driven news coverage of the *Deepwater Horizon* (*DWH*) disaster.

Multiple Perspectives and Irresolution in *NOLA*

In contrast to much of the TV news coverage of the spill, *NOLA*, a 2012 documentary play on the spill and its aftermath by English company Look Left Look Right (LLLR), offers a multitude of perspectives on the event, from those who worked on the *DWH* rig, to families

whose loved ones were killed in the explosion, to Louisiana fishers, lawyers, activists, and conservationists, and even to an anonymous BP executive. *NOLA*'s multi-perspectival verbatim documentary acts as both a critique of news programs that focused too narrowly on the spill, ceasing their coverage once the well was plugged, and a thorough, thoughtful examination of the ongoing effects of the disaster throughout Louisiana and beyond. LLLR's comprehensive and polyphonic approach in *NOLA* is reflective of the company's larger ethos to "look left, look right…[to] always try to listen to as many different viewpoints" as possible ("About Us"). This ethos is very much at work in the play, which intercuts different agendas, positions, and priorities, from suing BP to rescuing pelicans, from fishing in toxic water to mourning those who died.

By intercutting various voices verbatim and giving them a similar amount of time and attention, the company refuses to rank the crises. For instance, the Director of the Bird Conservation National Audubon Society in Baton Rouge emphasizes the effects of the spill on the Gulf Coast's pelican population, while the Field Monitor of the Gulf Restoration Network focuses on the widespread damage to the coastline, and an ear, nose, and threat doctor foregrounds the infected humans who were ignored by a news media fixated on affected birds and sea life. Rather than give one issue priority over the others, the company gives equal weight to all of them. The voices flow from one into the other with no interruption, except for a slide that introduces each new voice. By ultimately refusing to privilege one voice over another, or to reach a final conclusion, *NOLA* forces the audience to make its own connections among the various voices.

Ironically, the play's greatest strength—deliberate irresolution—was criticized by some reviewers of the 2012 Edinburgh Festival production. One faults *NOLA*'s "lack of narrative

drive" and a "central story" (Bell), while another complains that the production's "story of the disaster lacks any resolution" (Strachan). These reviewers' expectations speak not only to a desire for dramatic resolution but for ecological resolution as well. However, such resolution is impossible, since the Louisiana Bayou and its human and animal residents have been irrevocably altered. Nor could the play offer a resolution in which justice was served, because, when the company interviewed victims six months after the spill, no legal settlement had been reached and, more to the point, no monetary amount could replace the lives lost or fully restore the environment to what it once was. Instead of forcing a false resolution, LLLR offers a multitude of voices. Eschewing simple narratives, singular voices, and sentimentality, the company provides what few media outlets did: an examination of the spill that possesses both breadth and depth.

The play begins with crew members of the offshore supply vessel Damon B. Bankston recounting the explosion aboard the *DWH* and their rescue of rig workers.[106] *NOLA* intercuts the recollections of Captain Gervasio and Chief Engineer Landry, of the Bankston, with that of Mike Williams, the *DWH*'s Chief Electronic Technician. It juxtaposes the different perspectives, cutting from those who witnessed the explosion to someone who felt it, from those who rescued *DWH* crew members to someone who jumped ninety feet from the rig to the rescue boat below. Despite the varying viewpoints, rescuers and rescued alike share a collective memory of confusion and chaos in the moment of crisis. As Landry recalls, "We all knew what had happened, but what had caused it…" (*NOLA* 4).

This shifts the play's focus from the event itself to the long and ongoing aftermath. Directly following Landry's last remark, a civil litigation lawyer, Keith Jones, speaks. The

[106] The play only mentions the first two people rescued by Damon B. Bankston crew members, but, in actuality, the boat crew helped the Coast Guard rescue 115 people.

transition from the event to a litigation lawyer suggests that Jones is representing victims of the spill; however, it soon becomes apparent that he is a victim himself, having lost his son aboard *DWH*. This unexpected turn is one of many throughout *NOLA*, as the play overlaps diverse, sometimes oppositional, memories and perspectives. For instance, Jones' numbing loss is directly followed by a journalist's description of the media frenzy that temporarily descended on the area. Similarly, accounts of the oil-drenched pelicans and the toxic coastline are interlaced with accounts of financial loss described by an anonymous BP executive and a stock market analyst. Such rapid shifts in perspective shatter the news media's representations of the spill as singular and univocal.

However, LLLR not only weaves together different perspectives but also different locations throughout Louisiana. Intercutting an interview with a Hopetown, Louisiana boatyard owner with that of a New York university toxicologist, or shifting from a family oyster company in Golden Meadow, Louisiana to a medical doctor in Raceland, Louisiana, *NOLA* gives equal weight to fishers and doctors alike. Crucially, it also contextualizes the spill by briefly interviewing Texans connected to the Texas City BP oil refinery explosion of 2005. What might at first glance appear to be a detour in *NOLA*'s inquiry is in fact evidence that environmental injustices and deregulatory exploitation are not limited to one single, "unexpected" event like the oil spill but are in fact widespread and commonplace. Furthermore, the diversity of cities and towns to which LLLR travels adds a sense of polyphonic place to the play's polyphonic voices. Indeed, the last interviewees introduced in *NOLA* are two female activists: one is a mother of six fishermen from New Orleans and one is a fisherwoman from Tegan, Texas. Thus, the play's diversity of locations—both physical and ideological—is multifarious.

Building to a polyphonic palimpsest, *NOLA* never merges, unifies, or synchronizes the distinct voices and perspectives, but rather allows each to lap upon the audience's ears, before being overtaken by another. Take, for instance, a series of voices heard in quick succession. Alan Smith, the Chief Executive of Capital Asset Management Pension Fund in London, recalls that BP share prices fell 50% following the spill (*NOLA* 7). His voice is followed by that of David Shukman, a BBC Science and Environment Correspondent, who found it striking to see "these huge billboards erm put up by lawyers advertising erm their services you know for sort of compensation claims" (*NOLA* 7). This memory is contrasted with one from Melanie Driscoll, Director of the Bird Conservation National Audubon Society in Baton Rouge, who claims, "It still haunts me. I remember the first pelican I saw rescued, I remember every bird I saw rescued, and I remember the distress" (*NOLA* 7). Together, the three voices represent some of the vastly different value systems surrounding the spill, its media coverage, its litigation, and its affected ecologies. Smith's statistical statement is juxtaposed with Driscoll's emotional recollection. Significantly, even though she claims to remember every single bird rescued, Driscoll does not give a total count, emphasizing each individual bird instead of a lump sum. Whereas numbers are everything where the BP share prices are concerned, the distress of each bird remains with Driscoll, regardless of the quantity. Meanwhile, Shukman's voice, elsewhere more sympathetic to the spill victims, intercuts that of the asset manager and the bird rescuer. As an Englishman, Shukman is struck by the abundance of litigation advertisements, a particularly American phenomenon. His words, sandwiched between those of the asset manager and the conservationist, create ambiguity and remind the audience that there are countless agendas surrounding the spill, not all of which can be trusted. Thus, although *NOLA* undoubtedly offers more voices that condemn rather than excuse BP, Transocean, and Halliburton, its thoughtful,

multi-perspectival approach prevents the play from turning into a diatribe against any one company. Instead, by combining, juxtaposing, and interlacing distinct perspectives, LLLR puts the onus on the audience, forcing it to grapple with the spill and its ongoing effects in a manner that is complex and multilayered.

However, because it is a docudrama play that features a number of diverse perspectives, *NOLA* automatically raises questions of representation—the extent to which the memories of interviewees can be trusted, as well as the edits and interventions that LLLR made in its interviews. The role of representation is always a consideration in docudrama, but it is of doubled significance with *NOLA*, given the play's consideration of media representation of the spill. For instance, many of the interviewees remark on how quickly the media descended on Louisiana and how quickly it vanished once the well was capped. Furthermore, since LLLR did not interview local residents until six months after the spill, many of them had already become practiced in giving interviews. Two Hopetown residents recall taking "groups of foreign newspaper people and radio people out" on the bayou and explaining the difference between a soft and hard boom (*NOLA* 9).[107] Meanwhile, a Golden Meadow resident tells LLLR that his son normally does all of the interviews (*NOLA* 10).

Although some of the residents' statements seem rehearsed, a repetition of what they have told so many reporters before LLLR, other remarks speak to new health and fishing hazards, discovered long after the media stampede ended. For instance, one boatyard owner explains that, after Louisiana seafood was officially deemed safe to eat, residents were still warned not to eat any fish that smelled like oil and to limit themselves to four shrimp a week,

[107] Whereas the hard boom was used as a barrier to contain the oil and keep it away from the marshes, the soft boom was used to absorb the oil. Both were found to be ineffective, though, as oil traveled over and under the former and was too excessive for the latter.

even though there are "more than four in a po-boy" sandwich (*NOLA* 9).[108] Arriving after the media dust had settled and public interest had declined, LLLR heard more than residents' initial reactions, no doubt already captured on countless TV news programs. The company heard about the uncertainty surrounding the safety of the seafood, the anger when BP no longer needed workers to clean up the mess, the mass exodus of the pelicans, and the ongoing health problems, which were rarely reported on and remain little understood. Revealing the confusion, unaccountability, and misinformation that still persist, LLLR undercuts the notion that the spill was in any way resolved by the capping of the well.

While TV news coverage of the spill plummeted after the oil leak was stopped, the initial media frenzy was dramatic and unrelenting. Shukman, the BBC correspondent, recalls that, although it took the media about ten days to realize the potential significance of the spill, after that, there was a media overload:

> By late May Louisiana was a ridiculous scene! Just sort of taken over by TV! I mean there must have been I'm guessing 20 or 30 live positions erm media trucks just kind of everywhere. There were local fishermen lining up to be interviewed. I mean, they were so used to what the media wanted. It kinda became, it was almost routine. I don't think the sort of fish dock at Venice Harbour had ever seen so much hairspray. The story had been granted the sort of fully fledged status of a major national crisis, erm you know sort of like a hostage situation, this was now a numbered crisis with days…their language was just it was sort of 'full strength catastrophe'. I got onto a helicopter which flew over the spill sight which was unbelievably dramatic.
>
> *NOLA* 5.

[108] Making the issue even more complex is the fact that the EPA, FDA, and NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association) all have different standards for evaluating the safety of the seafood. See http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=did-bp-oil-spill-ruin-gulf-seafood.

While the media's tone of "full strength catastrophe" served to draw attention to the crisis, it also limited the extent of the media outlets' investigations. The drama centered on capping the well: Will the latest method work or will it too be an abysmal failure? The major story was will it or won't it; will BP succeed in plugging the leak or not? Once this plotline was resolved, the story was over. The more complex questions—How did deregulation overdetermine the spill? How did an American dependence on oil lead to the spill and to BP's ongoing drilling in the Gulf of Mexico? What can the U.S. and its citizens do to prevent this from happening again?—were rarely asked.

Certainly, capping the well was of utmost importance, given that it was leaking 62,000 gallons of oil every day. However, because it was a "numbered crisis with days," the crisis seemed to be resolved on Day 87 when the well was capped (*NOLA* 5). This impression was strengthened by the huge drop-off in media attention following the capping, from 25% of all U.S. news coverage to a mere trickle (*NOLA* 6). In the docudrama, an anonymous BP executive unhappily recalls the media barrage, "When you have something that's a monster in the deep and is unstoppable and it goes on for at least 87 days," it becomes the only story (*NOLA* 6). While such focus serves to keep attention on the spill, it also neglects other aspects of the story: loss of human and animal lives, water and air toxicity, and ecological destruction. Indeed, these effects are more difficult to comprehend and calculate, because they are not numbered crises with days but rather ongoing. However, as the BBC journalist Shukman recalls, once BP capped the well, it "stopped the appalling sight on the nightly news in the States, so that was a huge triumph" (*NOLA* 8).

When the *NOLA* actor playing Shukman first appears onstage, he wheels out a TV showing media coverage of the spill. After BP's "huge triumph," which gets the spill off of the

news, the actor exits and takes the TV with him. In a docudrama with a minimal set, consisting only of barrels of oil, and minimal visual effects, other than the occasional Powerpoint image, the appearance and disappearance of the TV serves to illustrate how the majority of media, attuned to a singular narrative and in need of a concrete resolution, tapered off after Day 87.[109] A Golden Meadow oysterman observes, "It's not in the news anymore. It's move on, let's move on and the fast paced, work world pace, means people don't have time to care" (*NOLA* 11). Such an observation highlights the fact that it was the public who first lost interest in the spill, with the news media, attuned to the slightest shift in TV ratings, only following suit. However, the prioritization of ratings above all else not only created a steep decline in the media's attention to the spill but in the quality of its news coverage. In addition to largely abandoning the spill when it was no longer a grand narrative but a messy aftermath, much of the TV media spectacularized the leak, attempting to gain viewer attention by exclaiming the loudest rather than by thoughtfully considering the spill's context. Thus, plays like *NOLA* are invaluable for their ability to look left and look right, when everyone else has already stopped looking. By examining the spill's many unresolved sub-plots, LLLR defies the sweeping, singular dramatic arc so often embedded in "full strength catastrophe" narratives and suggests that more is to be learned from the continued irresolution and ignorance surrounding the spill's effects than is to be learned from the resolution of the well's sealing.

Disrupting Ecological Resolution

News outlets were not the only ones to offer sweeping, grand narratives driven toward resolution. BP executives, more than anyone else, were motivated to emphasize resolution, even

[109] It is important to note that although the oil spill no longer has its own section in online newspapers, as it did during the first 87 days following the spill, it still receives a small amount of attention either when a new legal development occurs or on the anniversary of the spill.

when there was none to be had. While interviewees in *NOLA* frequently touch on journalistic representation of the spill, few mention BP's response to the media bombardment. However, the play's anonymous BP executive admits that the company's public relations department was completely unprepared for the magnitude of the event: "I was working with Tony Hayward everyday, trying to, trying unsuccessfully to keep him out of trouble. It was the worst period of my professional life. Um because it, one felt helpless, I mean, the whole thing was chaotically set up, there was no, great sort of strategic guidance" (*NOLA* 6). Indeed, following the spill, former CEO Tony Hayward made several public gaffes, which provided endless fodder for political satirists. Even as oil continued to gush from the well, BP attempted to stem the tides of public disapproval, creating sundry apologetic TV and radio commercials and print ads. In fact, between April 1 and July 31 2010, the company, according to its own admission, spent over 93 million dollars on advertising, triple its usual amount (Durando). BP flooded the airwaves with commercials featuring an apologetic, remorseful Hayward, at odds with the Hayward who infamously said "I'd like my life back," a sound byte that was gleefully replayed throughout the media. Once BP plugged the leak on July 15, 2010 and fired Hayward on July 27th, the company continued its media blitz, but moved from apologizing to extolling its own efforts and the "rise" in tourism around the Gulf of Mexico.

In contrast to BP's cathartic ads, tweets from the hoax Twitter handle @BPGlobalPR, begun by an initially anonymous comedian and activist later revealed to be Josh Simpson, parodically undercut the company's desired sense of closure. Particularly active during the 87 days it took for the well to be capped, @BPGlobalPR tweeted in the bureaucratic voice of a BP employee and ended many tweets with the hashtag #bpcares. Often ironic and sarcastic, the tweets acted as sharp barbs undermining BP's sunny, singular narrative of regret and redemption.

An analysis of two of BP's commercials—one released at the height of the crisis and one a year later—juxtaposed with several @BPGlobalPR tweets reveal two very different narratives: the former linear, singular, and resolved and the latter nonlinear, multiple, and unresolved. Just as the multi-perspectival *NOLA* provides an alternative to single-issue media coverage, the @BPGlobalPR tweets undermine BP's image repair efforts. Acting as miniature, digital pinpricks, the tweets, released at strategic moments throughout the numbered crisis, serve to interrupt and deflate BP's grandiose narrative of reconstruction.

The 2010 BP commercial, released only days after Hayward's latest public gaffe, is careful to apologize without accepting blame and to emphasize the company's clean up efforts without mentioning the mess in need of cleaning. Although the commercial begins with a wide shot of the Gulf, including dark blobs in the water, the focus is on the boom already in place. The distance between the darker sections of the water and the boom gives a sense of containment, at odds with the fact that, at the time, oil was still gushing from the well and oozing over and under booms. Hayward's voice accompanies the image of the booms: "The Gulf spill is a tragedy that never should have happened" (climatebrad). Like the rest of the commercial, this initial statement operates as a partial acknowledgement; it recognizes that the spill should not have happened but does not go so far as to suggest that it was preventable. BP comes closest to accepting blame when the camera cuts from the ocean to a mid-shot of a serious Hayward, who claims, "BP has taken full responsibility for cleaning up the spill in the Gulf" (climatebrad). Significantly, the company is, belatedly, willing to take responsibility for cleaning up the mess but still fails to take responsibility for creating the mess in the first place. Beyond limiting liability, the emphasis on clean up rather than causation again suggests an unwillingness to consider how spills can be prevented. Even as the BP commercial claims to take full

responsibility, it depicts a Gulf already on the mend. While Hayward speaks, the soothing sound of seagulls and ocean waves belies the severity of the spill. A shot of healthy pelicans atop rocks overlooking the ocean further suggests that the spill has already been contained. The clean, tranquil pelicans stand in sharp contrast to the oil-drenched seagulls that featured so heavily in most news coverage.

The commercial quickly shifts from a half-hearted apology to several action photos: from a beach clean up crew dragging heavy trash bags, to a boat crew placing a soft boom in the ocean, from call center volunteers speaking with aggrieved callers, to U.S. soldiers working on the beach. Together, the scenes emphasize collective action on the part of BP, the affected communities, and the U.S. army, and they suggest that containment and clean up are completely under control, which, given the fact that the Macondo well continued to gush 62,000 barrels of oil a day, could not have been further from the truth. Replacing harsh figures of people killed, barrels spilled, and days passed with more flattering figures, Hayward claims, "More than two million feet of boom, thirty planes, and over thirteen hundred boats are working to protect the shore line" (climatebrad). Interwoven shots of booms firmly in place and workers laying more booms visually reinforce a false sense of security and protection. Hayward admits that, "Where oil reaches the shore, thousands of people are ready to clean it up" (climatebrad). However, this present tense statement fails to acknowledge that oil had already reached the shore, and the accompanying shot of beach workers clad only in tee-shirts and jeans with no tar balls in sight undermines the toxicity and pervasiveness of the oil and the dispersant agent Corexit. Most importantly, by emphasizing the number of volunteers and the number of resources dedicated to cleaning up the spill, the commercial attempts to supplant other numbers, like the death toll and

the spilled barrels of oil, a constantly rising figure. Turning a "numbered crisis" into a numbered solution, BP suggests that the latter can adequately fix the former (*NOLA* 5).

The commercial finally does include the word "sorry," but, tellingly, it is on behalf of Hayward rather than the entire company: "To those affected and your families, I'm deeply sorry" (climatebrad). This apology, for the effects rather than their cause, is immediately undercut by an image of the seashore in summer; colorful umbrellas dot the beach, families lounge on the pristine sand, and children play in the waves. Already, the crisis is forgotten, life has resumed its usual course, and the Gulf is restored to its prior state. Thus, even as the commercial ends with Hayward's claim that we will "do everything we can so this never happens again," it is difficult to believe him (climatebrad). The commercial's emphasis on organized action stands in sharp contrast to BP's initial refusal to take action for fear of claiming liability, and the company's chaotic disorganization and ineptitude when it finally did take action. Furthermore, images of healthy birds and pristine beaches imply a resolution at odds with the oil well that was still gushing at the time and the ongoing ecological and health concerns. The images of action and restoration, as well as the sounds of peaceful waves and birds, combine with BP's partial recognition of fault to create catharsis, a sense of purification, cleansing, and resolution that seeks (an ecologically impossible) return to the status quo rather than a change in business practices.

In contrast to the BP commercial's cathartic drive toward resolution, the @BPGlobalPR tweets are deliberately irresolute. Undercutting BP's image-conscious claims with sarcastic rebuttals and links to news articles that directly contradict the company's statements, @BPGlobalPR not only humorously undermines the company's believability but also leads followers to more accurate information. For instance, tweets like "We'd like to be remembered

as the company that saved the Gulf. What we saved it from is not important. #bpcares" serve to disrupt BP's narrative of restoration and closure with short but powerful digital interruptions. Such disruptive tweets sent periodically throughout the day directly counter BP's own narrative; often created and tweeted in response to the latest BP claim or gaffe, the tweets create an immediate and ongoing alternative to BP's version of events. Furthermore, because @BPGlobalPR tweets material from several contributors not just creator Josh Simpson, the tweets, while all in the ironic voice of a BP talking head, are actually multi-voiced. Since @BPGlobalPR also often responds to its followers' tweets and encourages contributions from them, it creates a dialogue in which a large number of people influence the Twitter handle's content and visibility. In contrast to BP's pre-packaged, finished commercial, created and distributed by the company itself, @BPGlobalPR is open, participatory, and unfinished.

These qualities are not exclusive to @BPGlobalPR but are common to many social media deployed to disrupt singular narratives and corporate agendas.[110] Such acts are what Rita Raley calls "tactical media," which, though they may often vary in digital form and content, are intended to create "disturbance" (6). As Raley posits, "In its most expansive articulation, tactical media signifies the intervention and disruption of a dominant semiotic regime, the temporary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible" (6). By being "set into play," dominant corporate messages and narratives are no longer hermetically fixed but are set in a digital topography in which they can be teased, altered, disrupted, negated, or subverted.

Because @BPGlobalPR tweets in the bureaucratic tone of BP executives, it tactically subverts the company's own corporate voice and, initially at least, caused followers to attribute

[110] It is worth noting that Twitter itself is a for-profit corporation. However, I am not suggesting that it is always used as an intervention tactic; indeed, it is often used to promote products and individuals. However, it has the potential to be disruptive, as in the case of @BPGlobalPR.

its sarcastic messages to BP itself. Many of the Tweets expose and mock BP's lack of knowledge, accountability, and sympathy. For instance, the very first @BPGlobalPR tweet sent on May 19, 2010, over a month into the spill, is, "We regretfully admit that something has happened off of the Gulf Coast. More to come." The ambiguity and nonchalance of the tweet comically reflects BP's initial reluctance to take any action to stop the spill for fear of appearing responsible for it. Hyper-performing BP's ineptitude and entitlement, @BPGlobalPR exposes the absurdity of the company's response to the spill, both in the media and in the Gulf.

And, yet, @BPGlobalPR's performance is not that hyperbolic when compared to that of actual BP executives. The news reporting website *The Daily Beast* highlights the similarity between the two in an article in which readers are asked to guess whether uncredited statements were made by @BPGlobalPR or BP itself (Mascarenhas). Hayward's actual statement, "What the hell did we do to deserve this?" (qtd. in Krauss) is, if anything, more shocking than @BPGlobalPR tweets like, "People are really out to get us. I haven't seen the public attack somebody this unfairly since poor Jay Leno had to move his timeslot." By comically heightening BP's misplaced sense of injustice, and contrasting it with the company's actual ill-treatment of the Gulf and its residents, @BPGlobalPR exposes the egregiousness of the company's aggrieved, indignant stance. While the tone of some of @BPGlobalPR's tweets is intentionally out of BP's corporate character, the tone of many others is easily interchangeable with that of the oil company. For instance, on May 14, 2010, Hayward claimed, "The Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The amount of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume" (qtd. in Webb). Imitating Hayward's tone, @BPGlobalPR tweets on June 4, "We've modestly made modest changes to this modest gulf. This modest incident will blow over and you'll forget how modest we were. #MODEST." Not only does the tweet, weeks after

Hayward's statement, remind followers of BP's incredibly short-sighted and disingenuous stance before its "apologetic" commercial was released, it also predicts that people will eventually forget about their outrage over the spill.

The disruptive Tweets both expose BP's lack of awareness and juxtapose the cost of the spill's cleanup with the corporation's exorbitant wealth. Take, for example, this May 10 tweet: "Here's the thing: we made $45 million A DAY in profits in 2009. This really isn't a big deal." Indeed, despite the fact that the company was forced to downsize following the spill, chief executive Robert W. Dudley recently claimed, "'As of two or three years ago we were a weaker company…Now our balance sheet is strong again'" (qtd. in Reed "Spill Claims"). Thus, while the U.S. government so far has done a better job of holding BP responsible than it did Exxon after the 1989 *Valdez* spill,[111] oil companies' deep sea drilling profits continue to outweigh their financial costs. Thus, the tweets are reminder that, as long as there is more to be gained than lost from a financial perspective—certainly not from an environmental perspective—companies like BP will continue to drill.

However, @BPGlobalPR not only contrasts BP's profits with the monetary consequences it will likely pay for the spill, but it also critiques the company's corrupt management of politicians and its online image. Whereas the mainstream news coverage generally scrutinized the White House's response to the spill, it largely failed to consider state and federal-level legislature *before* the spill. In contrast, @BPGlobalPR exposes BP's efforts to buy judicial and corporate support, thereby disrupting and undermining the company's ability to control the narrative and its drive toward resolution. For instance, tweets like "DO NOT ask your reps to support Clean Energy. Buying their votes back will take a lot of money away from the cleanup

[111] Hopefully, this will prove true over time. By continually appealing, Exxon was able to reduce its punitive damages from five billion in 1989 to five hundred million by 2008. BP has already sued the EPA for its federal contract ban and will no doubt contest future claims made by the U.S. government.

effort. #bpcares" remind followers that, while the 87 days of gushing oil drew attention to the Gulf, it should also have drawn attention to policy makers and enforcers in Washington D.C. Even as it parodies BP, @BPGlobalPR also disparages the politicians who permitted deregulatory and lax legislature in the first place.

Similarly, after news broke that BP bought up search engine phrases to control readers' access to oil spill information, @BPGlobalPR criticized both Google and BP: "Proud to announce we've partnered with Google to turn the Information Superhighway into a Corporate Bus Route. #bpcares." Revealing the ways in which the seemingly open access Internet is highly commercialized, @BPGlobalPR urges readers not to be fooled by tainted search results; a search engine results page does not necessarily feature the top news articles but purchased keywords. Instead of limiting its critique to BP, @BPGlobalPR extends it to politicians, companies, and the general public. Thus, in addition to disrupting BP's redemption narrative, the Twitter account disrupts the U.S.'s claims to plausible deniability, revealing the ways in which we Americans were complicit in the spill.

Whereas the bulk of news coverage centered on oil containment, BP, and the White House—in that order ("100 Days")—the @BPGlobalPR tweets extend their criticism to include an American dependency on oil. While the unprecedented mainstream criticism of an oil company like BP is noteworthy, particularly given that, historically, the American environmental movement has emphasize personal rather than corporate accountability, it nonetheless allowed the media to skirt the larger issue of our national addiction to a dwindling resource. In the words of cultural theorist Imre Szeman, "Oil capital seems to represent a stage that neither capital nor its opponents can think beyond" (806-7). However, rather than simply mock BP and its inept media relations department, @BPGlobalPR subtly expands its critique to include its own Twitter

followers. Tweets like May 10th's "Feeling down? Why not take a long drive and blow off some steam? #bpcares" and June 10th's "If you want to help clean up, drive your cars fast and often. Let's melt those glaciers and dilute this mess! #bpcares" pointedly remind followers that, even as Americans condemn BP's actions, we refuse to acknowledge our own complicity in the spill. This lack of reflexivity causes what eco-theater scholar Baz Kershaw calls a "double bind," wherein Americans' urge to stop environmental destruction is at odds with our dependence on oil (13). @BPGlobalPR's reflexive tweets refuse to allow Americans to forget our own role in the spill as consumers of BP and other oil companies' products. Thus, the tweets not only disrupt BP's driven narrative of ecological resolution but also Americans unwillingness to acknowledge our own complicity in petrocapital.

@BPGlobalPR also holds Americans accountable for our short term memories. By celebrating the inevitability of Americans losing interest in the spill, the tweets exhort followers to do just the opposite. For instance, one June 10th tweet bluntly predicts the expected end of the story, if people do not hold on to their ire: "SPOILER ALERT: The leak stops eventually, everyone forgets about it and we all buy another vacation home. #cantwait." A tweet later the same day similarly doubts Americans' ability to hold BP accountable in the long term: "We respect your outrage, we just don't believe it's sustainable. #exxonvaldez #bpcares." The tweet twists the term "sustainable," a recent economics buzz word, in order to suggest that, while the general focus has been on sustainable resources and practices, what has been neglected is the lack of sustainable public interest.

In her critique of "the proliferating, sanitized term *sustainability*," ecocritic Stacy Alaimo argues that it "is frequently invoked in economic and other news stories that do not in any way question capitalist ideals of unfettered expansion" ("Sustainable This" 559). Indeed, BP itself

published a "Sustainability Review" in 2012, in which it focused on how it would meet growing "demand affordably, sustainably, and securely" (11). Despite the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* spill and the 2010 BP oil spill, among many others, the term "sustainability" continues to signify increased, extended consumption even as it masks itself as environmental conservation. At the same time, while the @BPGlobalPR tweet, in the voice of a "sustainably-minded" BP executive, dismisses American ire as unsustainable, it dares and provokes followers to maintain their anger, lest history repeat itself. The reference to the *Exxon Valdez* spill in Alaska reminds followers of the biggest U.S. oil spill prior to *Deepwater Horizon* and urges them to remember how that turned out. Although long term effects of the *Valdez* spill continue to this day, Exxon Mobil, after several court appeals, was only held accountable for a fraction of its initial damages.[112] By linking the two events, @BPGlobalPR urges followers to resist the immediate resolution of the capped well and to extend their attention to the legal battle and ecological consequences to come.

Perhaps even more important than the historical links that the Twitter handle made were the transnational links. In addition to critiquing Twitter followers' short term memory, @BPGlobalPR highlights the fact that, had the BP oil spill occurred somewhere other than the U.S., it would likely have received little to no attention from Americans. Tweets like, "We feel terrible about spilling oil in American waters, we'll make sure the next spill happens where the terrorists live. #bpcares," not only expose the unequal value that the Global North places on its lives, livelihoods, and environments but also remind followers that oil spills occur on a regular basis in the Middle East and Africa. Another tweet goes further in highlighting the lack of attention given to spills in the Global South: "We honestly didn't think this was going to be a huge deal. No one cares when this happens in Nigeria." It provides a link to a news article that

[112] The initial punitive damages figure was five billion, but Exxon Mobil repeatedly fought to have the number lowered, in the end to $287 million in actual damages and $507.5 million in punitive damages.

claims that more oil is spilled in the Niger Delta "'every year than has been lost in the Gulf of Mexico,'" yet there have been no legal repercussions in Nigeria (Jardin).

Tweets like these reveal that what really shocked Americans about the 2010 spill was less that it had occurred at all but that it had occurred *here*, in the U.S. As postcolonial ecocritics Cara Cilano and Elizabeth DeLoughrey suggest, since Americans are positioned within the powerful, influential U.S., they are best situated to critique the U.S.'s global exploitation of people and the environment (80). Such critiques are rare, though, and the @BPGlobalPR tweets expose Americans' self-interest. We are adept at out of sight, out of mind practices that disregard environmental hazards *out there*, beyond U.S. borders, but the tweets are a sharp reminder that, when it comes to environmental exploitation, there can be no separation between here and there. Just as the slow petroviolence in Nigeria has been largely invisible to American audiences, the sunken oil and Curexit have been equally as invisible, quietly reemerging in Louisiana marshes, inhabitants' respitorary systems, and in marine life. As the long term effects of the BP spill continue to be uncovered, it becomes increasingly clear that the spill's toxicity will not be constrained by national borders but will insidiously, pervasively spread throughout the Gulf of Mexico, which touches the U.S., Mexico, and Cuba, and through exported seafood. Thus, if Americans continue to disregard spills "out there"—in Africa and the Middle East—we ignore our shared dependence on the earth and its finite resources, as well as our ecological porosity. In connecting the 2010 oil spill to international spills like those in the Niger Delta, @BPGlobalPR suggests that the BP spill is not an isolated or exclusively American disaster but a transnational concern that extends beyond any one particular spill.

However, although the ecological and human affects of the 2010 are still being uncovered, @BPGlobalPR, much like the TV news media, has, for the most part, stopped

following the story. A tweet on April 20, 2011 commemorates the anniversary of the spill: “One year ago, we thought that this terrible PR disaster would never go away. We were wrong. #StayStrongTEPCO.” The tweet not only critiques the total media shift from the spectacular disaster of 2010—the BP oil spill—to the spectacular disaster of 2011—the Tokyo Electric Power Company Fukushima nuclear disaster—but also connects the two, both caused by a lack of oversight and both likely to be forgotten in the wake of the next large-scale disaster. Furthermore, the tweet, in the voice of BP, speaks to the relief the company must have felt when another environmental disaster took center stage, pushing the oil spill to the recesses of people’s memories. While @BPGlobalPR’s coverage of the spill was far more disruptive and provocative then most news coverage, it too dramatically declined after the well was capped. However, although @BPGlobalPR may have gone the way of most news outlets, at least it had the audacity to predict and critique followers’ disinterest, even if it too eventually conceded to it. By emphasizing ongoing irresolution and tactical disruption, interventions like the @BPGlobalPR tweets act as mini-protests to BP’s restorative, consumptive drive. Extending the conversation beyond the immediate disaster, they privilege multivalent, ongoing narratives over numbered crises with clear-cut resolutions.

Unsurprisingly, though, it is BP that continues to “report” on the Gulf, determined to have the last word where the spill is concerned. One 2012 commercial, “Come Back to the Gulf,” features tourism bureau representatives and prominent business owners from Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana extolling the Gulf as an ideal getaway spot. The commercial begins with the sunny proclamation, “Last season was the Gulf’s best tourism season

in years!" (bellingrath1932).[113] The tone of the commercial is optimistic and bright, as people from different Gulf states playfully compete with one another to lure tourists to their hometowns. The overall message is that the Gulf has not only recovered but is better than ever with "More suntans!," "More fun on the water!," "More people, more good times!," and more "deep sea fishing" (bellingrath1932). Featuring several shots of seemingly pristine beaches and water, the commercial belies the fact that, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the "deep sea ecosystem may take decades to recover" from the spill (McCarrier et al.). Advertising a return in tourism, the commercial also implies an impossible ecological return to a pre-spill state. The spill and its toxic clean-up raise difficult questions about that which remains—tarballs, mats of oil, harsh chemicals, and infected human and marine life. Careful to avoid explicitly addressing such environmental concerns, BP's tourism commercials go beyond promoting a return to the status quo, instead repeating words like "more" and "better" to emphasize consumption over conservation. In the last few seconds of the commercial, the camera hovers on the BP logo while an off camera local enthuses, "Brought to you by BP and all of us who call the Gulf home" (bellingrath1932). Linked together, BP and Gulf residents are represented as working together to save their shared home, while viewers are urged to do their part by visiting the Gulf. Putting the onerous on the consumer not to conserve resources but to consume more of them for the greater good, BP, without a hint of irony, suggests that the cure for an environmental disaster caused by over-consumption is, in fact, more consumption.

Long after the bulk of TV news coverage and @BPGlobalPR tweets have ceased, BP's relentless press continues to transform its catastrophe narrative into one of redemption, even salvation. The running theme in BP commercials is that, thanks to the company's efforts, the

[113] New Orleans experienced a huge boom following a BP-sponsored ad campaign. Other areas, like Dauphin Island, Alabama were much slower to recover (Jones). More insidiously, by participating in BP-sponsored ads that insist that tourism is better than ever, states undermine business owners' ongoing settlement claims (Robertson).

Gulf is better than ever, which goes so far as to suggest that the spill may even have been a fortunate accident. Driving the spill's narrative to a false sense of ecological and economic resolution, BP, like its logo, casts a green hue over its oily activities. And, yet, by emphasizing material remains—sludge, tarballs, toxins, diseased or dead marine life—performances like *NOLA* and the @BPGlobalPR tweets act as a tangible protest and resistance to BP's restorative, consumptive drive.

The Way of Water

BP advertisements would have the public believe that the spill brought people, including the oil company, together, united in a shared clean up effort. Of course, the way in which the company immediately fired its clean up crew after the job was "complete" and the way it now battles compensation claims tell a different story. I would argue, though, that events like the BP oil spill do temporarily unite people, animals, and the environment—just not in the way BP would hope. The literal remains of the spill are highly toxic, the oil dispersant Corexit perhaps more dangerous than the oil itself, and this toxicity permeates the Gulf's ecology. No respecter of persons or animals, the toxins infiltrate the ocean, the air, and the local organisms, be they vertebrates or invertebrates. While *NOLA* and the @BPGlobalPR tweets both highlight the irrevocable damage of the spill and its ongoing irresolution, Caridad Svich's 2012 play, *The Way of Water*, goes a step further, not only emphasizing the spill's material remains but also revealing how such toxic remains physically link human, animal, and environment. Svich's play is a fitting note to end on, because, even as it stresses the same irresolution as *NOLA* and @BPGlobalPR, it also gestures toward a shared vulnerability, an irresolution that is in no way lessened but is shared across species and environments.

On one level, *The Way of Water* is about four people struggling to survive after the spill. On another level, though, the characters are only a starting point to explore the interconnection of water, humans, and animals. Although Svich focuses on the spill's disastrous effects on one local ecosystem, she also makes connections to other translocal and even transnational environmental disasters, thereby suggesting that the oil spill is not an isolated incident but part of a pattern of environmental exploitation. Firmly rooting the play in the local environment of Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, Svich slowly extends outward, tracking and tackling the spill's transmigration and ripple effect across species, states, and countries. Such an extension not only exposes the insidious and pervasive effects of the spill, but also suggests that moments of crisis can temporarily lower species divisions and spatial boundaries, revealing a mutual permeability, always present but rarely acknowledged.

Dropping Anchor

The Way of Water is set in a small town in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana several months after the 2010 BP oil spill. Fishermen Jimmy and Yuki spend most of their time on their fishing boat dreaming of the next big catch or the next big meal, neither of which ever arrives. They know that they cannot survive as fishermen anymore, because the water is still contaminated, fish are scarce, and no one is buying what they occasionally do catch. However, the two men cannot give up their livelihood, so they sit in their boat and wait for their fishing lines to tug. Meanwhile, their wives—Rosalie, married to Jimmy, and Neva, married to Yuki—alternate their time between thinking of creative ways to make money and falling into despair. Rosalie and Jimmy are already behind on their mortgage when the latter's health, deteriorating ever since the spill, puts him in the hospital. Without any health insurance, the couple goes further into debt,

and their house falls into foreclosure. Meanwhile, Neva and Yuki also continue to struggle, their fear for the health of Neva's developing fetus largely unspoken but palatable. Protests against BP take place offstage and all of the characters except Jimmy, who doubts the protests' ability to effect change, consider participating in them. By the end of the play, Rosalie and Jimmy have crammed their car with as many meager belongings as they can manage and are about to leave for Waxahachie, Texas, where Jimmy's cousin, badly burned by a chemical fire at his plant, has said they can stay. On their way out of town, the couple decides to stop by the protest for the first time, marking a small but significant change in Jimmy's perspective.

The play's ending may be said to provide a resolution of sorts: Jimmy finally begins to protest the injustice of the spill rather than continue to bitterly resign himself to it. And, yet, if anything, this small act of resistance indicates a deliberate irresolution, a refusal, several months after the spill, to pretend that an ecological or economic reparation has or can be reached. In many ways, *The Way of Water* reads as a classical tragedy, its central characters exiled from Plaquemines Parish, forced to uncertainly wander. While Jimmy and Rosalie intend to stay with family in Texas, the move is temporary and transitional. Jimmy asks what they will do if their car dies before they reach their destination, and Rosalie simply replies, "Then we'll end up where we end up" (Svich 119). However, in deciding to protest with a hastily made sign before exiting Plaquemines Parish, Jimmy resists his fate and, more importantly, the notion of fate altogether. While *The Way of Water* is more representational than the presentational *NOLA*, it too rejects catharsis; Jimmy's humble protest occurs at the very moment when a more linear narrative concludes with acceptance. By ending *The Way of Water* with characters who demand justice for their ongoing health and economic woes, Svich contests BP's and the TV news media's drive toward resolution and suggests that the play's ending is only a continuation. It thus

reveals that, long after the oil leak was plugged, the future of the Gulf ecology remains more uncertain than ever.

The Way of Water's deliberate lack of closure begins with the local before subtly extending itself to make transpecies, translocal, and transnational connections to the oil spill. Svich situates the local environment of Plaquemines Parish by not only demonstrating how the spill has particularly affected the characters but also how, even prior to the spill, the impoverished characters were subject to environmental injustices. Like the once coal-rich West Virginia, the third poorest state in 2012, the oil-rich Louisiana, the eighth poorest state in 2012, has suffered rather than benefited from its abundance of natural resources.[114] By highlighting the irony of a state rich in natural resources being unable to provide for its own residents, Svich reveals the ways in which poor people and the environment are mutually exploited. Even before the characters are exposed to oil and Corexit, they are exposed to food injustices, particularly a lack of access to fresh produce and a lack of nutritional education, both of which are only exacerbated by the spill. For instance, when Jimmy and Yuki are on the water and hungry, they fantasize about going to McDonald's; when Rosalie and Neva are thirsty, they reach for a soda. Trying to save money wherever she can, Rosalie buys the generic brand of Coca-cola, but, as a result, finds that she and Neva have to drink twice as many sodas to get the same "effect." In nearly every scene, Svich features the characters either discussing or consuming unhealthy food products, thereby highlighting the multiple levels of toxicity at work in Plaquemines Parish.

While lack of nutritional education plays a part in the characters' dietary decisions, poverty plays a far greater role. Indeed, the extent of the characters' poverty becomes evident when Jimmy unexpectedly invites Yuki and Neva to have dinner with Rosalie and him. He urges his wife to bring out the Hotpockets she has microwaved only to have her embarrassedly explain

[114] For the full list of the ten poorest states, see: http://www.cnbc.com/id/101068491

that there are only two. Even though the couple went grocery shopping two days previously, they do not have enough money to buy more than a few items at a time. Rosalie awkwardly offers to bring popcorn out, the only other food she has in the house, but Yuki and Neva claim that they are not hungry. Struggling to make ends meet before the spill, the characters are devastated by the sudden loss of income caused by the spill.

In yet another scene, the two women discuss the lack of fresh produce available at their local corner store, which sells outdated, processed food. Since Rosalie and Jimmy only own one car, the former must bicycle to the grocery store when her husband takes the car to work; thus, the corner store is her only nearby option. Sadly, Rosalie's situation is all too common. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, 100 percent of the Plaquemines County population has low access to a "supermarket or large grocery store."[115] Of that percentage, 21.7 percent are low income and 14.7 percent do not have cars.[116] The play's focus on preexisting social injustices in addition to the effects of the oil spill demonstrates how injustice tends to be compounded, "infused into the multiscalar geographies in which we live" (Soja 20). Poverty-stricken people like the play's characters are doubly affected by the spill; already vulnerable because of their lack of fresh food, health insurance, and financial security, they are devastated by the toll the spill takes on their health and economic income.

Svich's inclusion of underlying concerns that preceded the spill not only stands in stark contrast to standard disaster narratives but also to the dramatic structure of most plays based in realism. The typical disaster narrative often begins with an event that interrupts the status quo, bringing chaos and destruction to what was otherwise an average, sleepy, or perhaps thriving

[115] An area is deemed low access if a large grocery store or supermarket is more than a mile away.

[116] The United States Department of Agriculture obtained this information from the 2000 Census of Population and Housing.

town. By establishing the ordinary ubiquity of a setting, be it actual or fictional, disaster narratives serve to highlight the cataclysmic effects of the unanticipated event. While such a technique may be dramatically compelling, it nonetheless implies that the setting had no real problems prior to the event and that the event could not have been predicted or avoided. *The Way of Water*, however, not only begins well after the event (and its presumed resolution with the cap sealing), but also interweaves the characters' pre-spill injustices with their post-spill injustices. In her synopsis, Svich writes that the play is about the spill and "poverty in America" (2). In linking the two, she stresses the ways in which environmental disaster is connected to and anticipated by preexisting patterns of abuse—food injustice, low wages, subpar healthcare, environmental exploitation, and drilling shortcuts. By showing how the spill greatly exacerbated existing injustices, rather than suggesting that it caused all of them, Svich exposes "lasting structures of unevenly distributed advantage and disadvantage" (Soja 20). Or, in other words, *The Way of Water* reveals the many ways in which the poor get poorer. Already infected by toxins in their highly processed food, the characters become doubly infected following the spill, which destroys their livelihood, further limits their ability to buy food, and exposes them to additional chemicals.

Trans-Species Parity

In exposing the multiple forms of toxicity at play in Plaquemines Parish, *The Way of Water* tracks preexisting socio-environmental injustices and shows how the spill exacerbated them. As Stacy Alaimo writes, "Tracing a toxic substance from production to consumption often reveals global networks of social injustice, lax regulations, and environmental degradation" (*Bodily* 15). Through Jimmy's poisoned state, Svich traces the oil and the equally toxic Corexit

to other sites and other species. More than products of their environment, the characters *are* their environment, and nothing makes this more apparent than the toxins that have infected every bio-organism in Plaquemines Parish.

Of course, humans have always been made up of their environments. As Haraway points out, human genomes only make up about ten percent of cells in the human body; the other ninety percent are "genomes of bacteria, fungi, [and] protists" (3). And, yet, despite such biological evidence, we humans persist in maintaining a false distinction between ourselves and the environment. This artificial divide allows us to continue to disregard our ecological vulnerability and interconnectedness, and, with it, our environmental impact. Maintaining a false sense of human sovereignty allows us to see ourselves as separate from and superior to the environment, itself merely regarded as a resource for our consumption. Furthermore, the notion of hermetic humans, impenetrable and unaffected by seemingly external environmental changes, permits us to imagine the environment as alien, distant, *out there* rather than *within* us.

The Way of Water cuts through such pretensions, though, insisting not only on a shared permeability between humans and the environment but also between humans and other species. If humans are always already made up of their environment, disasters like the BP oil spill, as horrific as they may be, serve to expose such human porosity and vulnerability. The spill's toxic environment only underscores the connection between people and place and highlights the permeability shared by all organisms in an ecosystem, be they unicellar or multicellar. For instance, while Jimmy, who often succumbs to hacking and shaking fits, is most visibly affected by the crude oil and Corexit, the other characters are clearly infected as well. Neva suffers from rashes, which likely effect her growing fetus, Yuki suffers from nausea, and Rosalie is mysteriously unable to conceive. Even as the characters succumb to the spill's side effects, there

is a sense that the true extent of their infection remains unknown but ominous: Jimmy may die and Neva may lose the baby. In the face of such hazards, it becomes impossible to deny that environments indelibly mark their inhabitants; thus, Svich reveals the ways in which the oil and Corexit not only spilled into the ocean but seeped into the surrounding land, air, and organisms.

In his state of vulnerability, Jimmy becomes increasingly aware that his condition is not unique but is shared by everything around him. For example, in a moment of magical realism, he vomits fish, but the other characters only see him heave up blood and bile. So poisoned is Jimmy that he no longer separates his own infection from that of the fish, and, as his health continues to decline, his connection to the toxic water and sea life intensifies. In another moment of seeming madness, Jimmy envisions infected humans gradually transmogrifying into dead dolphin:

> Like us, we'll say,
>
> Just like us
>
> As we look at their vacant eyes
>
> N take each other by the hand
>
> N lie down next to the dolphins
>
> While the vultures peck at our carcasses
>
> N the dolphin skin becomes our own (Svich 57).

Here Svich explores trans-species toxicity, digestively and materially linking humans and dolphins through mutual infection. Tellingly, Jimmy imagines people with dolphin skin rather than with fish scales, suggesting a greater affinity with the marine mammal. Perhaps it is easier to relate to an animal that is not hunted in the U.S.[117] than it is to relate to one's prey, or perhaps the many shared biological characteristics of human and marine mammals link them more than

[117] With the enactment of the Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1972, it became illegal to harass, hunt, capture, collect, or kill a marine mammal.

humans and fish.[118] Nonetheless, the imagery of spewing intact fish and taking on another animal's dead skin[119] speaks to a porosity and interchangeability heightened by toxic exposure.

Alaimo uses the term "trans-corporeality" to describe the way in which substances, particularly toxins, can spread across and through a variety of species (*Bodily* 15). While she explains that the term is not meant to centralize human bodies but the networks in which humans and nonhumans interact (16-17), her interest in reinserting the corporeal into feminist and environmental discourse, as her title *Bodily Natures* suggests, emphasizes bodies. Adapting Alaimo's theory to include more biodiverse exchanges, not only between bodies but between other substances as well, I propose the use of the term "trans-materiality." In that material is matter, substance, *stuff*, it emphasizes physicality just as "trans-corporeality" does. However, in that it could be applied to any matter—water, air, dirt, bacteria, and so on—it speaks to the ways in which substances travel across, through, and into both environments and bio-organisms. With regard to the BP oil spill specifically, a trans-toxicity travels across all nearby matter, creating biological equality through collective infection. Indeed, the trail of oil left in the Gulf is only the starting point from which to begin tracing the spill's pervasive toxicity.

Prior to the spill, fish economically and bodily sustained fishers, but now both are in the same boat—figuratively speaking. Poisoned by polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) present in oil and Corexit dispersant chemicals, Jimmy, the ocean, and the marine life are similarly affected. As Jimmy's condition continues to deteriorate, his trembling fits and dizziness intensify. What begins as a subtle tremor rapidly turns into an uncontrollable shake, and, the

[118] It is also important to consider how dolphin visibility has shaped public opinion. It was shows like *Flipper*, in addition to live dolphin shows, that led people to disapprove of dolphin hunting.

[119] The fact that dolphins shed their skin nearly every two hours, a rate that is nine times faster than humans, also suggests a constant changeability.

more disorientated Jimmy becomes, the more he understands his interdependence with the ocean:

> I see it. I fuckin' see…
>
> A dream of water
>
> Hot
>
> Burnin' up a spark
>
> lettin' itself through me.
>
> A dream of…
>
> Floatin
>
> In the sludge of sticky crude on cane (Svich 56).

Jimmy's vision speaks to the spill's oily remains, the unknown quantity of oil and dispersant left behind after skimming, burning, and evaporating techniques were employed (Ramseur 1). As Jimmy's toxicity level increases, the fisherman begins to see what none of the other characters do: material, mutual human, animal, and environmental deterioration. Identifying with the Gulf, now "the sludge of sticky crude on cane" and other infected species, Jimmy burns up much like the spilled oil; as toxins spread throughout his body, he senses them simultaneously spreading throughout everything around him. For instance, in the final scene, he witnesses an acid rainfall, while Rosalie, standing right next to him, sees nothing. The fisherman's infection gradually makes him aware of how the same infection runs through the Gulf, marine animals, and the atmosphere. Through Jimmy's vulnerable state, he realizes, as Haraway suggests, that "to be one is always to *become with* many" (4). However, the constructed binary of "nature" and "culture" and the illusion of seemingly concrete bodily casings, epidermis, or shells insinuate that containment and unity of self are possible. Indeed, the other characters worry that Jimmy's

visions mean that his health is worsening, but, strangely, his contamination and feverishness invoke a clarity that allows him to see his becoming with the dolphins, fish, and water. His hold on "reality" may be slipping, but, since his—and most people's—constructed reality is one in which humans are separate from and above the rest of their ecosystem, Jimmy may actually be seeing reality clearly for the first time. When he vomits whole fish, he is not only discharging the contents of his stomach but also the misconception that human and nonhuman toxicity are separate concerns. Becoming the skin of a dolphin and spewing forth fish from the ocean, Jimmy imagines a transmaterial exchange wrought by a mutual susceptibility to poison but maintained by a shared, mutant state of becoming other.

Translocal and Transnational Ripples

The *Way of Water* not only highlights the mutual dependability of all the organisms in the Plaquemines ecosystem, but it also connects disaster in one city to disaster in another, namely Waxahachie, Texas. Long before Rosalie and Jimmy decide to relocate to Waxahachie, they are linked to the city. As Jimmy tells Yuki in the first scene, his cousin Ray was recently burnt in the 2011 Magnablend Chemical Plant explosion, for which he received "hush peanuts" (Svich 7). Tellingly, Yuki does not know where Waxahachie is and has heard nothing of the fire in the news; thus, Svich uses Yuki's unawareness of the event to highlight the failure of national media outlets to report on the fire. By putting the Magnablend explosion in conversation with the BP oil spill, Svich exposes the negligent regulations and underlying environmental indifference that link the two disasters. Although the incidents are separated by over a year and vary in their environmental magnitude, both were caused by lax policies that permitted potentially dangerous and harmful practices. In the case of the oil spill, the fact that BP was able to drill the deepest oil

well in history only 40 miles offshore, even though its safety precautions were from the 1970s, reveals a disregard for socio-environmental safety. Similarly, in the case of the plant explosion, Magnablend's freedom to mix large quantities of harsh, industrial chemicals and its lack of safety precautions led to the October 2011 explosion. Although both companies are now facing citations and fines,[120] there is no way to fully know the extent of the socio-environmental damage or to recompense people and the environment for what both have suffered.

Although *The Way of Water* is set in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, its main characters—Jimmy and Rosalie—may be said to live both there, where the devastated ecosystem can no longer sustain them, and Waxahachie, Texas, the highly industrial city where Jimmy's cousin has room for them. While the play's setting never shifts to Texas, Jimmy's and Rosalie's continual mention of Waxahachie as the site of another disaster and, eventually, as the only place to which they can relocate, establishes the city as a secondary setting. By relating the large scale explosion in offshore Louisiana to the, comparatively, small scale explosion in Waxahachie, Svich implies that the two have much in common. Even though the former received international attention and the latter mostly only received local attention, Svich suggests that the two disasters deserve equal awareness, as both were caused by socio-environmental negligence. While the 2010 spill is simply the most recent (and largest) in a long history of oil spills, the media, environmental regulators, and the U.S. public tend to forget previous disasters and ignore the

[120] In March 2012, Magnablend was cited with seven violations by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. However, the company was only fined $45,000, even though it failed "to conduct a hazard assessment, install a sufficient ventilation system, train workers in specific hazardous chemical protection procedures," and several other serious violations (http://dfw.cbslocal.com/2012/03/30/magnablend-chemical-co-cited-by-osha-over-explosion-fire/). Similarly, the Interior Department cited BP for safety and environmental violations in October 2011, but it is yet unknown how many billions of dollars the company will be fined (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/13/us/us-cites-bp-and-contractors-for-deepwater-horizon-spill.html?_r=0). A civil lawsuit brought on behalf of businesses and individuals affected by the spill was also settled in March 2012 for at least for an estimated 7.8 billion dollars.

high likelihood that they will be repeated if regulations do not change.[121] As Jimmy says, "First in Valdez way back when—remember that?—My daddy said, 'This time for sure somebody's gonna take them to task.'…Big news for a while, then it faded away; like everything else…memories like sieves in this country" (Svich 5). Although the *Valdez* oil spill is mentioned here, Svich chooses to make parallels between the seemingly unrelated oil rig explosion and chemical plant fire, instead of between the two oil spills, in order to expose an endemic, deep-seated disregard for environmental well-being. Soja, like many eco-scholars, points out the dangers of a local environmentalism that disregards regional and global environmental issues, and he argues for "the mobilizing concept of *community-based regionalism*," wherein environmentalists take both a local and regional perspective (23). By making connections between two disasters in two different towns, Svich highlights their shared preventability. Just as her characters transfer from one site of environmental degradation to another, the playwright travels between and across the two sites, without lessening the play's particularities of place.

The play also explores transnational connections, hinting at the collective vulnerability of endangered islands. For instance, in one scene, Jimmy and Yuki, waiting for fish that will never come, pass the time by discussing the latter's Japanese heritage and the snow in Iceland. In another scene, they discuss "Aussie style" steak and eggs and the country's red desert (Svich 25). Subtly but significantly, Svich suggests that the toxins in the Gulf can spread to far-reaching waters and, more assuredly, that the 2010 oil spill is not an isolated or insulated incident. Islands like Japan, Australia, and Iceland are already prone to extreme weather, but global warming has dramatically heightened these weather shifts through rapid rises in sea levels triggered by

[121] Perhaps the most eerie instance of oil spill history repeating itself is documented by Rachel Maddow. In 1979, a small oil spill took place in Alaska on the same day that a much larger spill took place in the Gulf of Mexico. Similarly, only a month after the 2010 spill in the Gulf of Mexico, a smaller pipeline spill took place in Alaska. The same techniques used to contain the spill in 1979 were applied to 2010: airplanes dropped hazardous chemicals on the oil that did as much, if not more, damage than the oil itself.

melting ice caps. Jimmy and Yuki, however, fail to recognize the connection between their parish and the islands they imagine; take, for instance, the following exchange about Iceland:

YUKI: Strange country. All snow and ice and…

JIMMY: Been?

YUKI: Seen. On Youtube.

JIMMY: Man, I hate snow.

YUKI: It's a bitch, right? […] Lucky here.

JIMMY: Hot as all get, but at least we ain't freezin' (Svich 10-11).

To the characters, the islands they casually discuss are remote, formed more fully in their imaginations than anywhere else; Japan is simply the land of *manga*, "Aussie" is merely the way Jimmy likes his steak, and Iceland is only snow. To Svich, though, the islands are deeply connected to Louisiana and one, if not all, of them could be the site of the next environmental disaster, as indeed Japan was in 2011.[122] Just as the mutual exposure of Plaquemine Parish's ecosystems to toxicity created a shared vulnerability, the islands' defenselessness against rising sea levels connects them to the Louisiana disaster. Like @BPGlobalPR's comparison of oil spills in the Niger Delta to the one in the Gulf, Svich's subtle reference to other countries extends the significance of the spill to include not only trans-species and translocal relationalities but transnational ones as well.

Not only does *The Way of Water* itself explore transnational relationalities, but its mode of production is transnational in scope. Svich created a free reading series, so that anyone could stage readings of the play in April and May of 2012. Throughout the U.S. and several other countries—such as Brazil, Germany, South Africa, Australia, Canada, England, and Scotland—

[122] The March 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, the largest nuclear disaster since the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, was initiated by a tsunami and earthquake.

readings were staged at universities, theaters, and even homes. The transnationality of the reading series speaks to the magnitude of the disaster, suggesting that the BP oil spill is of local, translocal, *and* global concern. Like water, the implications of the environmental and human disregard exhibited during the spill and its aftermath have rippled throughout the U.S. and beyond. *The Way of Water* and its transnational readings reveal the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and environments and show that the most effective way to track environmental disasters like the BP oil spill is with local, translocal, and transnational tactics.

In Svich's play, the aftermath of the BP oil spill may be the main focus, but collective vulnerability is the common center around which concentric circles form. The way of ocean water is to move—to travel and flow, to come in and out—and Svich suggests that, even as the spill spreads its oily toxicity across several ecosystems, it reveals a socio-environmental connectivity that extended across species, states, and nations. Such interdependence and fluidity of bio-organisms were always there beneath the water, but the spill created a rippling effect, not only highlighting a shared toxicity but also a mutual need for protective, socio-environmental ethics. In emphasizing transmaterial relationality, *The Way of Water* also stresses a collective irresolution and indeterminacy. Like @BPGlobalPR and *NOLA*, the play refuses to end with closure, preferring to highlight performance remains—oil, illness, poverty—over a fabled ecological restoration. Where the tweets disrupt BP's and the news' overdetermined narratives and the docudrama upsets linear, singular narratives, Svich's play defies fixed identities, her characters continually morphing with the rest of their environment. Jimmy in particular mutates, and, in a constant state of becoming, he discovers what always was. His contamination strips him of his illusion of sovereignty and singularity and reveals an underlying ecological interdependence, an unfinished becoming.

It is only fitting that I end it with the Final, *Final* Frontier[123]: deep sea drilling. Just as the name of the Macondo Prospect is significant, so too is that of the *Deepwater Horizon* oil rig, which speaks to the oil industry's terrifying sense of endless limits and resources. Embedded in this country's foundation is the belief that there is always more to be had, and this mentality has carried over from the "pioneering" of land, outer space, and sea. As with the colonization of land and the occupation of outer space, the exploitation of deepwater shale relies heavily on representative language. All three name in order to claim, dividing and personalizing arbitrarily spatialized "prospects," or, in the case of the 1969 moon landing, planting an American flag. Indeed, one need not look far to find similarities between deep sea drilling and earlier "frontiers:" for instance, oil companies conduct "exploratory searches" to find pockets of oils, and they use "moon pools," drilling platform openings through which they lower instruments into the sea. The greatest similarity, though, is the misconception that there is always a new—or, in the case of deep sea drilling, a deeper—horizon. Events like the BP oil spill, as disastrous as it is, are reminders that there are limits to spatial horizons and natural resources. Perhaps more importantly, such moments topple human hubris and reveal the underlying interdependency of all life forms, an interconnection that was there all along should we choose to acknowledge it.

[123] Of course, even as Earth's resources become entirely exploited and depleted, there is the commercial optimism and arrogance that there will always be another final frontier. Indeed, Alaska has now been dubbed the last frontier.

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