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Chapter 18

Ecology in a Loop

Cyclical History and Alternative Epistemologies in Ella Hickson's Oil

Martin Riedelsheimer and Leila Michelle Vaziri

Although the discussion and representation of ecological issues in drama and performance has steadily increased over the last decade, "theatre, either consciously or unconsciously, has played [. . .] a minor role in ecocriticism" (Lavery 2016, 230).[1] One possible reason is that drama in many ways is an "anthropocentric" genre that puts interactions between human beings on stage, while another is the difficulty of portraying long-lasting and at the same time interconnected events in a medium that is itself restricted in time and space and thrives off the immediacy of performance. The problem of representing ecological scales and the complexity of ecological events has been frequently pointed out, for example by Rob Nixon, who asks: "How can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world?" (2011, 3; see also Morton 2016, 25; Davies 2016, 15–40; Clark 2012). For Nixon, the destruction of nature and its intersection with other forms of oppression directed against the human and more-than-human world is "slow violence," which is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2011, 2). While representing what happens "out of sight" is generally difficult and lacks easily graspable spatio-temporal anchoring points, in the medium of theatre, whose moment of performance is more fleeting than other modes of literary production, the representation of slow violence seems paradoxical or even impossible.[2]

However, there are plays that attempt such representations in aesthetically and conceptually innovative ways. One example is Ella Hickson's *Oil* (2016). The play stages a history of the "age of oil" (2016, 123), spanning the years 1889 to 2051, that delves into the exploitation of natural resources and its intersections with colonialism. This "epic" timeframe is encapsulated in the play's dramatic structure, which combines cyclicality and other structural repetitions across the play's five parts: while each part stands for itself, the characters, their stories, and the conflict between power, prosperity, and growth on the one hand and the exploitation of natural resources and other people on the other recur throughout the play. The anthropocentrism that fuels the characters' oil-driven progress (and eventually regress) is thus ever-present on stage and repeated in different configurations. In short, Hickson's play heavily relies on aesthetic and conceptual loop structures.[3] While these loops above all seem to underline the inescapability of the destructive power of fossil fuels, following Bruno Latour's arguments in *Facing Gaia* (2017), *Oil* can also be seen to make use of these loops as central epistemological tools that allow us to understand our "being of this Earth" (Latour 2017, 139). Our interrelations with the Earth, Latour argues, cannot be tackled by occupying an abstract "global" perspective that suggests an outside view, because such an outside view simply does not exist. Instead, he proposes engaging with the Anthropocene differently, namely through the epistemology of loops. In Hickson's *Oil*, the structural loops fulfill precisely this epistemological function: they envelop audiences in the dramatic world and make clear that all human beings are implicated in the repeating patterns of exploitation. Indeed, they project a future irrevocably changed by and entangled with the past and so exemplify what Jacques Derrida has described as "hauntology" (1994, 10; emphasized in the original). Hickson's "dramatic loops" then stage the repetition of the ever-same conversations around the exploitation of natural resources and so offer ways of understanding the underlying interconnections—and while the characters are oblivious to the repetitiveness of their struggles, the play's structure also emphasizes the need to disrupt this particular type of loop and prevent future exploitation through action in the present.

ALTERNATIVE EPISTEMOLOGIES AND/IN LOOPS

Given that the scales of ecological questions and the complexity of attendant patterns of interconnection seem almost ungraspable for human thought, the systems of knowledge we apply to ecological networks are of paramount importance in any attempt at engaging with the changing world we inhabit. This is reflected in the large body of theoretical work within the environmental humanities that argues that ecological degradation is caused not exactly

by humanity as an undifferentiated collective, as the term "Anthropocene" would suggest, but by specific human- or usually man-made power structures: colonial, patriarchal, or economical systems of exploitation.[4] As these power structures were created within the existing systems of knowledge and frequently are reproduced by them, new ways of thinking our human involvement in the non-human world are needed, so the argument made by, for example, Kathryn Yusoff (2018) or Latour, goes.

For Latour, a primary concern is the epistemic distance inherent in many environmental discourses that seems to allow for the detached and disinterested observation of planetary phenomena.[5] This is why he is critical of the term "ecological crisis": first, because a crisis implies that the situation is finite, and second because 'ecology' and 'environment' are terms that mentally distance us from the planet we inhabit. Instead, Latour rather refers to "*a profound mutation in our relation to the world*" (2017, 8; emphasis in original)—a mutation that, as he drastically[6] puts it, has passed humanity by when "we crossed a series of thresholds, we went through total war, and we hardly noticed a thing!" (2017, 9).[7] In order to further understand this "profound mutation," Latour rejects the distinction of culture and society from nature. For him, distinguishing humans from nature reveals a sense of alienation from and degradation of nature.[8] Besides, this distinction of nature and culture is impossible, as one cannot be explained without the other. Rather, Latour regards nature and culture as two halves of the same concept, while, crucially, a third vantage point is needed to distribute meaning between the two:

> Emphasizing this work of distribution makes it clearer that the expression "belonging to nature" is almost meaningless, since nature is only one element in a complex consisting of at least *three terms*, the second serving as its counterpart, culture, and the third being the one that distributes features between the first two (2017, 19; emphasis in original).

Therefore, the nature/culture divide is a concept that is unstable and as such unrewarding. What is more, this binary is overly simplistic. The list of existents implied in our relation to the world is not limited to two or three, but can be extended indefinitely, with indefinite possibilities of the existents relating to each other—as such, these quasi-infinite existents present us with their "dizzying otherness" that we need to "remain open to" (2017, 36) and that we must not eschew by withdrawing to the "safe" distance of abstraction.[9] For such a "distant shore [. . .] would have *no history*" (2017, 40) and simply does not exist, as Latour argues: there is no safe vantage point and no meta-perspective to which humanity can retreat as observers of the spectacle that is our planet going up in flames and drowning at the same time. It follows

that "from now on there are no more spectators, because there is no shore that has not been mobilized in the drama of geohistory. Because there are no more tourists, the feeling of the sublime has disappeared along with the safety of the onlookers" (2017, 40). This raises the question how humanity in general, and the theatre as a genre that is centered around an audience watching a spectacle in particular, can depict this "worldview" without employing the same techniques of voyeurism.

A tentative answer may be found in the temporal and spatial liminality of the epistemological processes that help us make sense of our relation to the world. What is central to Latour's critique of the notion of nature/culture is that although they are all part of the same concept, "there is an operator, an operation, that *distributes* object and subject" (2017, 17), nature and culture. This concept of an invisible and unnoticeable operator seems to be, at a synchronic level, an equivalent of what with regard to diachronic developments Jacques Derrida describes as hauntologies. In the Exordium of *Specters of Marx*, Derrida reflects on what it means to learn to live: "[L]earning to live," as he writes, "can happen only between life and death. Neither in Life nor in death *alone*" (1994, xvii). Between life and death then, for Derrida, is a ghost-like substance, "which is neither substance, nor essence, nor existence, [and] *is never present as such*" (1994, xvii). Crucially, this ghostliness is a feature of all kinds of in-between-ness, Derrida continues: "What happens between two, and between all the 'two's' one likes, such as between life and death, can only *maintain itself* with some ghost, can only *talk with or about* some ghost" (1994, xvii). This ghostly, ungraspable concept is in fact at the heart of any notion of justice: "No justice [. . .] seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead" (1994, xviii). The spectral presence of future and past in the present (which is of course between the two) leads Derrida to coin the term "hauntology," which intriguingly, in Derrida's description, assumes a cyclical form, one that includes a beginning and an ending in form of a loop:

> Repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost. [. . .] Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time*, makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a *hauntology* (1994, 10; emphasis in original).

The idea of such an invisible existent, as Latour calls it, or of a hauntology that connects the past and the future, is then in itself a repetition that can help to highlight a responsibility humans have toward nature and to explain our

historical and future implication in the ways the non-human world changes, that is, our ecological responsibilities.[10] Epistemologically, it can help to do away with the idea of nature and culture as two separate entities and instead install a system of mutual respect and responsibility. After all, in our responsibility for Earth, we are haunted by the future and the past alike, or by futures past.[11]

At this point, the argument must circle back to Latour. In the fourth lecture from *Facing Gaia* Latour engages in "the deconstruction of (the image of) the globe" (2017, 111). Referring to Peter Sloterdijk, Latour argues that our view of the world as an isolated globe is flawed.[12] There cannot be a system that has both, the planet as a globe at its center and humans as a sphere that surround said globe as another center, as such a system would inevitably have two centers. This conundrum can only be avoided if the interconnections of the Earth—and these necessarily are spatial and conceptual as well as temporal, as seen in hauntologies—are depicted through "a movement that turns back on itself, in the form of a *loop*" (2017, 137). Instead of conceiving of the Earth as an all-encompassing sphere that can be surveyed from a detached vantage point, Latour suggests that cyclical forms of thought are necessary to understand the importance of our actions and responsibilities: "We have to slip into, envelop ourselves within, a large number of loops, so that, gradually, step by step, knowledge of the place in which we live and of the requirements of our atmospheric condition can gain greater pertinence and be experienced as urgent" (2017, 139). In these loops, the hierarchy of the "global view" is then replaced by reciprocity and interconnectedness. It is through loop structures that a voyeuristic gaze at the Earth can be avoided and at the same time a presentation of the existential multiplicity that "being of this Earth" (2017, 139) entails can happen. By revealing the relations of the world, loops can also portray the unrepresentable, the marginalized relations and hauntologies that are inevitably linked to the "profound mutation in our relation to the world." Finally, Latour suggests, such looping epistemologies may themselves change our relation to the world, because "[a]fter each passage through a loop, we become *more sensitive* and *more reactive* to the fragile envelopes that we inhabit" (2017, 140).[13] This is then the epistemological potential inherent in loops.

HAUNTED BY OIL: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE WESTERN EMPIRE

This epistemological potential of loops as well as their aesthetic potential is central to Ella Hickson's *Oil* (2016), a play that has been described as "indicative of a new form of epic theatre that aims to explain the human story of the

Anthropocene" (Richards 2017, 583). *Oil* focuses on the characters of May and Amy, a mother-daughter duo the audience follows through more than 150 years of world history, tracing their relationship with and dependence on oil.[14] It is a highly political play that "reflects on the emancipation of women and the change in the power balance between colonial empires and the countries where oil reserves actually exist" (De Ambrogi 2016, e13). As Patrick Lonergan (2020) has already shown, throughout the play, several loop structures can be found in the overarching story, within shorter scenes as well as in the interscenes that connect the different parts; they can be traced in the language of the play as well as in the construction of dramatic space and time. Hickson's play, we argue, uses these loops as both aesthetic and epistemological tools to shape the way in which audiences may conceptually approach modern society's dependency on oil.

The play begins in 1889 on a farm in Cornwall. The life of the Singer family is dominated by dirt, cold, hunger and repetitive hard work, something that is also reflected in the language of the stage directions and the accompanying initial stage action: "JOSS *splits a log.* JOSS *splits a log.* JOSS *splits a log.* JOSS *doesn't take a break*" (Hickson 2016, 1). As the family sits down for dinner, the American salesman William Whitcomb visits and demonstrates the wonders of oil in form of an oil lamp. The dimly lit and sooty room is instantly covered in bright light and May is mesmerized by the new technology. This first act describes the renunciation of coal and the beginning of the era of and dependence on oil. While the Singer family is not impressed by Whitcomb's offer and the new technology, May seems to have found a route to escape the hard work and uncomfortable life on the farm. Three months pregnant, she leaves the hardship of farm life to follow the oil. This first part then describes the beginning of the age of oil, the beginning of a new loop, but also of the conflicts and exploitative practices that oil extraction likewise fuels—in May's words: "War started the day we decided that we had a right to be warm even when the sun isn't shining" (2016, 74). The following three acts are then set in Tehran in 1908, in Hampstead in 1970 and in Baghdad in 2021 (i.e., in the near future at the time the play was written), respectively, to demonstrate the rise, climax and gradual decline of the age of oil, or of what Stephanie LeMenager has called "petromodernity," that is, "modern life based in the cheap energy systems made possible by oil" (2014, 67). They do not just thematize human dependence on oil, but also continue to highlight the patterns of exploitation associated with "oil as the object of desire" (Fakhrkonandeh 2022, 113) and the intricate interconnection of oil extraction and colonial rule. These patterns repeat themselves: whether it is at the expense of Persian servants (act 2), Libyan revolutionaries (act 3), or the Iraqi people (act 4), the profits and power derived from extraction remain

with a small set of colonialist and capitalist companies—a group that May eventually succeeds in becoming a part of, while the oil-producing countries and their populations are increasingly drawn into conflicts.[15]

The last act is then set in 2051 and returns to the Singer farm from the first part. May, an old woman now, and her daughter Amy are in their house during a black patch, when Fan Wang, a Chinese sales representative, visits and introduces the Toroid, a new cold fusion technology that has superseded oil. This time it is Amy who is mesmerized by the new fuel source, and the play has come full circle. Amy and May only play a small part in the history of oil, and yet they contribute to its success. Even Amy, who is, at least in parts three and four, against exploitation, still benefits from oil throughout her life. As Sam Solnick writes, "Hickson's depictions of resource conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa that show the international human cost of domestic fossil fuel use are supplemented by an awareness that the hard-won social improvements in equality that Amy and May enjoy as the play progresses are themselves dependent on the petroleum industry that exports negative impacts elsewhere" (2021, 229). Feeling the consequences of the oil drying up and living a life that is reminiscent of the pre-oil era, Amy seeks ways to escape from the uncomfortable life without oil. However, the Toroid—itself a topological term for a donut-like, round shape, and hence another image of cyclicality—does not end human dependency on natural resources: it is powered by Helium 3, an element that has to be harvested on the moon. While both women utter concerns about the Toroid, Fan Wang is less fussed and thus embarks on another iteration of the play's cycle of exploitation and dependency:

> FAN If we harvested one thousand tons of lunar soil a day it would take two hundred and twenty billion years to decrease the mass of the moon by nought-point-one per cent. It would never effect [*sic*] the tides.
>
> AMY There will be dangers. Of course there will.
>
> FAN None that we know of. (Hickson 2016, 120)

Fan's lack of concern for the impacts of fuel extraction on the non-human world echoes that of oil salesman William Whitcomb, who in the first act declares: "[H]as God not also given us kerosene? We take trees from the forest without cost. We take air from the sky—water from the river and there is always more water. In America this oil is coming out of the ground faster than we can put it into barrels—we are bleeding it—sweating it in the middle of winter" (2016, 20). As this shows, the overall action of the play constructs a loop and the last scene repeats the mistakes from the beginning, while,

again, "the older generation is resistant to innovation" (De Ambrogi 2016, e13). At the end of the play, it is Amy who leaves her mother, presumably to follow the Toroid in search for an easier life. *Oil*'s depiction of history in the form of loops instead of through a globalizing view then demonstrates how the exploitation of nature is inevitably interlinked with the exploitation of humans and that thus nature and humans cannot be separated. The characters in the play and certainly the audience do feel the consequences of their own actions. As Latour writes, "[t]his is why it is so important to move from the Globe to the quasi-feedback loops that tirelessly design it in a way that is broader and denser each time" (2017, 139). The loop structure then emerges as *Oil*'s version of staging what Derrida calls "hauntology": it allows the ghosts of the reckless oil extraction of the past to encounter the ghosts of equally irresponsible future extractions and so haunts audiences with the image of a fundamentally flawed system of extraction, whose promises of eternal progress and growth it exposes as false.

Oil's overarching loop structure is mirrored throughout the play in smaller loops that provide a critical lens through which to look at capitalism and the exploitation of natural resources. One example can be found in a scene in part two that can be seen as an allegory for capitalist modes of exploitation: Samuel, an army officer, tries to get May's attention by giving her daughter Amy, who is only a child, sweets: first he gives her one piece of Turkish delight, then encourages her to take another and finally, as Samuel is now all focused on May, he "hands the box to her without thinking" (2016, 47). Samuel thus "buys" Amy's love as he wants her out of his way to continue flirting with her mother. This represents a fundamentally capitalist mindset that seeks to buy its way out of responsibilities without sparing any thoughts for the resources it handles and without caring whether this might have any consequences and disturb the balance of the underlying system. Similarly, Amy stands for a reckless, child-like consumerism—in the context of the play, the consumption of oil and other fossil fuels—that is oblivious to the consequences of its behavior. After a few minutes she returns on stage:

> AMY (*with her mouth full*) Mummy.
>
> MAY *suddenly spots Amy who had stuffed her face entirely with the Turkish delight—it's horrible somehow, she looks like she's going to be sick.* [. . .]
>
> SAMUEL *grabs* AMY *hard and smacks her—until she spits them out. May watches in horror—but doesn't intervene.* AMY *starts wailing, wailing—crying.* SAMUEL, *slightly absent-mindedly, picks up the teddy and gives it back to* AMY. MAY *can barely look at her she feels so guilty.* (2016, 49–50)

This scene describes a mise en abyme structure from the bigger loop described before: a vignette of a story that returns to the leitmotif of over-indulgence, unchecked exploitation of resources and its harmful consequences not only for the environment but also for human interconnections. In its allegory, this scene mirrors the self-harming lack of responsibility in the way in which particularly the Global North devours fossil fuels. Although May, whose powerless onlooking represents the way many societies react to the realities of climate change, feels guilty about the situation, there is nothing she actively does to solve the situation.

These patterns are also reflected in what so far has perhaps commanded the most detailed critical attention in Hickson's play, in the so-called interscenes. These dream-like short sequences separate the five acts and likewise seem to stage ecology's hauntology. They are "moments of performance poetry that represent the passage of time between parts" (Poore 2020, 29) by showing a woman and a child moving across time. Thus, the first interscene, at the end of the first act, reads:

> *A woman steps out into the night*
> *Carrying a single lamp*
> *She walks barefoot across freezing fields*
> *She walks and walks and walks and walks.*
>
> *She walks through lands, through empires, through time.*
>
> *A woman walks across a desert.*
> *The air is hot; the night is black.*
>
> *One newborn baby gasps for breath.*
> *A million newborn babies gasp for breath.* (Hickson 2016, 26)

As Lonergan observes, these interscenes "describe acts of repetition and return, but are themselves repetitious" (2020, 40). As they seem to be oblique comments on the preceding acts, they add another level of reflection to the play. But perhaps the most eye-catching phrase is "she walks [. . .] through time," which is echoed in the next two interscenes, where a female figure "drives through time" (Hickson 2016, 54) and "flies above time" (2016, 85). The interscenes thus suspend the linearity of time and so give *Oil* an epic quality that allows the play to represent the historical timescales of ecological change. In the fourth interscene, however, the temporal arc is inverted entirely, because now:

A child flies backwards into the future.

A child drives backwards.
A child walks backwards

Retreats, returns, retracts
Yestermorrow. [. . .] (2016, 101)

The temporal frame has now been turned into the loop of "yestermorrow," an expression in which the future is haunted by the past and the past by the future. The interscenes of Hickson's play are the in-between spaces where this hauntology is staged—and the descriptions of the woman and child indeed have something ghostly about them: they seem to suggest to audiences that there is no escaping either the past or the future. As such, they are perfect examples of the potential *Oil*'s aesthetic and epistemological loops may unfold: like the entire structure of the play, they turn upon themselves and so both encourage reflection on the underlying structures that created the "age of oil" in the first place and, hauntingly, implicate audiences in the present of the play.

Fittingly, *Oil* culminates and concludes in a final loop structure, or a fantastic mise en abyme: in the revelation that everything that had hitherto been presented was in fact part of a mechanically moving museum display. In the last interscene, the characters of the preceding fifth part freeze and it becomes clear they are inside a "snow globe, museum exhibit," a machine that only comes to life when Fan Wang feeds it with coins (2016, 124). As she does so, a recording plays, first in Mandarin, then in computerized English: "As the Age of Oil came to a close so this Western Empire fell into decline. The Western Empire, like the Roman Empire that had come before, made the false assumption that their version of modernity was modernity itself" (2016, 124). This final mise en abyme structure not only exposes everything that happened before, the entire play, as a historical exhibit, but also, by adding the perspective of future history, implicates the present-day audience in the play's critique. It makes superabundantly clear that in the ecological crisis, we are haunted by "the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead" and bear a responsibility "beyond all living present" (Derrida 1994, xviii). To do justice to future and past, *Oil* seems to imply, we must not behave like actors in a play or figures in a museum exhibit but break out of at least this particular destructive loop.

CONCLUSION

Oil's loops, then, are epistemological tools that challenge the way audiences may think. Through its loop structures *Oil* throws audiences into a future that leads back into the past. In this way, it may make them aware of the ways in which our past determines the world we live in and the future alike—what Latour, using the likewise "cyclical" term revolution, has put as follows:

> In an era when commentators are deploring the "lack of a revolutionary spirit" and the "collapse of emancipatory ideals," how can we not be astonished that historians of nature are the ones revealing, under the name of the Great Acceleration whose beginning marks the Anthropocene, that the revolution has already occurred, that the events we have to confront are not situated in the future but in a recent past? (Latour 2017, 39).

As such, Hickson's loops not only serve as alternative epistemologies directed against a linear and globalizing understanding of time, history, and human relations with the Earth, but also create an ethical appeal structure, a sense that "our responsibilities will outlive us" (Lonergan 2020, 44). They encourage reflection whilst, crucially, implicating audiences in the slick economies of oil, in the "intoxicating power of oil" and in the "the neocolonial thinking that sustains such intoxication" (Hess 2022, 208–9). In doing so, they make visible the otherwise hidden slow processes of attrition associated with oil extraction and their impact on both the human and non-human world and thus become a way of staging what Nixon has called "slow violence." While it is impossible to escape these loops in one sense, where they describe the ways humans are inextricably interconnected with the Earth and the way in which we are always caught between past and future and haunted by both, by presenting audiences with their future history they also encourage them to learn from this as yet only imagined history, by leaving the destructive loops of exploitation and entering more sustainable loops of interconnection.

NOTES

1. Although the number of publications that engage with theatre's ecocritical potentials pales in comparison with ecocritical writing on other genres, like film, poetry, or narrative fiction, there have been a number of notable publications on theatre and ecology in recent years. See, for example, Angelaki (2019), Caupert (2015), Chaudhuri (1994), Kershaw (2007), Lavery (2016), May (2007, 2021), and Woynarski (2020). For a more comprehensive overview, see also Middeke and Riedelsheimer (2022, 11–12).

2. On the difficulties of aesthetic representations of the Anthropocene, see also Eva Horn, who has identified as the three main challenges for any such representation "*latency*," or the imperceptibility (or, in Nixon's terms, slowness) of ecological degradation, "*entanglement*," or the complex interconnections between the human and more-than-human world, and "*scale*," or "the clash of incompatible orders of magnitude" (2020, 164).

3. For an exploration of the aesthetic potential of these loops in connection with Timothy Morton's "dark ecology," see Lonergan (2020).

4. Although the notion of our current geological age as that of the Anthropocene, where humanity has for the first time become a transformative factor at the planetary scale, was first introduced by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000, it has not yet been officially adopted as a geological moniker. Nevertheless, it has proved immensely productive in the environmental humanities where critique of the Anthropocene has resulted in the focal shifts expressed in Donna J. Haraway's terms Plantationocene and Chthulucene (2016) or Jason W. Moore's Capitalocene (2015, 2016). For a reading of Hickson's *Oil* that argues the play should be read under the auspices of the Capitalocene, see Alireza Fakhrkonandeh (2021); meanwhile Linda Hess has coined the term Petrocene in her reading of *Oil* (2022).

5. Traditionally, such discourses have adopted a "global view" by thinking of Nature or the environment as totalities (for a critique of such thinking, see Morton 2010, 1–19). Taking up a critical meta-perspective (that of the "globe") is therefore at odds with the focus on interconnectedness ecological thinking must have, because "the figure of the Globe authorizes a premature leap to a higher level *by confusing the figures of connection with those of totality*" (Latour 2017, 130; emphasis in original).

6. Latour's rhetorical style occasionally has elements of the theatrical, which may be due to the origins of *Facing Gaia* as a lecture series. However, this leads to a more general question about the connection of environmental discourse and performance: to what extent does environmental discourse have to rely on performance, especially if it wants to be politically activist? Conversely, the connection between environmental activism and theatrical performance is a long-standing one and becoming more and more popular, as can be seen for example in the Climate Change Theatre Action project (www.climatechangetheatreaction.com).

7. The inaction of past generations in combination with the prolonged destruction of natural resources is something Latour holds against humanity and that connects him to Rob Nixon's concept of *slow violence*.

8. A similar critique is also presented by Jason W. Moore in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* (2016).

9. The idea of an indefinitely extending relation of specific existents is also described, in a more sociological sense, by Moore (2016).

10. At this point the source, or ethical justification, of this responsibility—whether understood as the anthropocentric responsibility towards other human beings to preserve living resources, as in the notion of human "stewardship" for the planet (Horn and Bergthaller 2019, 153), or as a fundamental ethical responsibility for the other, i.e., a Levinasian notion of ethics expanded to include a responsibility for the

more-than-human word (see Edelglass, Hatley, and Diehm 2012)—is of secondary importance for the argument.

11. This is also reflected in the frequency with which, as Graham Huggan has observed, literary engagements with ecological change resort to the "future anterior" as their temporal mode (Huggan 2018, ix), i.e., to the presentation of a future that looks back to the present moment, a future in which it "will have been too late" to prevent human-made calamity (see also Marland 2021, 300–301).

12. Sloterdijk claims that the coinciding of the theocentric and the geocentric globe, as done in Christian theology, must be flawed, as a globe cannot have both God and the earth at its centre. However, this does not seem to be problematic for theology and philosophy alike. As Latour concludes, "[t]his is why it has become so awkward to relate any history of the planet—and still less any geohistory: as soon as philosophy believes it is thinking globally, it becomes incapable of conceiving of time as well as of space" (2017, 126). The detached, global view is, it would seem, not fit for the task of describing humans' interconnections with Earth.

13. At the same time, the temporal difference between passages of a loop turns that loop into a spiral, which itself is a figure representing the negotiation of difference in (deconstructive) hermeneutics (see Middeke 2009).

14. One of the central issues the play raises—albeit not the focus of this reading—is the intersection of gender, race, and exploitative practices. The two female protagonists become entrapped in the sexist, racist, and (neo-)colonial logic of oil extraction, both as victims and as profiteers, while their mother-daughter relation also points towards the future and the possible results of extractive slow violence. See also Fakhrkonandeh's two recent essays (2021, 2022) on *Oil* for a thorough analysis of the "epistemic, ethical, aesthetic and ontological facets of oil" in Hickson's play (2021, 7).

15. For a more comprehensive list of instances of repetition across the play's five acts, see Lonergan (2020, 43).

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