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Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Middeke, Martin, and Martin Riedelsheimer. 2022. "Co-mutability, nodes, and the mesh: critical theatre ecologies – an introduction." *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 10 (1): 2–25. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2022-0002>.

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Co-Mutability, Nodes, and the Mesh: Critical Theatre Ecologies – An Introduction

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2022-0002>

Critical theatre ecologies are a field within the environmental humanities. Ecology is usually understood as “the study of the relationships between living organisms, including humans, and their physical environment” (“What Is Ecology?”; see also Alaimo 100). It is therefore little wonder that notions of interconnectedness and interrelationality are at the centre of an endeavour that seeks to trace the theatre’s ecologies. We use the term *critical theatre ecologies*, rather than *theatre ecology*, to try to do justice to the multitude of approaches, methodologies, and text- and performance-related phenomena the ecological engagements of the theatre entail. When we speak of *critical* theatre ecologies, we imply that each of these approaches, each methodology, and each reflection on these aforementioned phenomena must always and necessarily entail a self-reflexive perspective that interrogates the avenues and the limitations of their theoretical horizons.

The environmental humanities have developed into one of the most important and innovative paradigms in the humanities and cultural sciences. The starting point of this field, and, consequently, the starting point of critical theatre ecologies, is the consideration that ecological and environmentally oriented problems and questions are not the sole domain of the natural and technical sciences. The theatre holds an important position in order to make an appropriately complex diagnosis of the present. This diagnosis, as we shall see in the articles collected in this special issue, is both aware of the past and oriented towards the future. The results of critical theatre ecologies are able to provide decisive answers and fresh perspectives to the central challenges of what the German sociologist Ulrich Beck has influentially called “world risk society.” This special issue corroborates that what is needed are inter- and transdisciplinary approaches and thus the explicit participation and profiling of the arts, of the theatre in particular, and of the humanities in general.

Critical theatre ecologies promise to unfold a double productivity in this: on the one hand, they open up a larger discourse for the theatre as a plurimedial

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form of representation, as they understand theatre studies as a transdisciplinary possibility of knowledge reflecting on the relationship between culture and nature. On the other hand, such a transdisciplinary approach gains its significance for the theatre by not simply subsuming contents and subject matter of (play)texts and (their practices of) performance under more general ecological themes and principles, but rather by focusing on the specific forms and functions of text and performance that have emerged in cultural evolution.

Critical theatre ecologies are not concerned with gobsmacked realisms: as the various articles of this special issue will prove, the texts/performances/performance practices they deal with do not function merely as illustrations of ecological ideologies of any kind. Rather, we attribute an ecological force to theatre, texts, and performance.¹ Critical theatre ecologies highlight and give a theoretical framework to the inherent dynamics of texts, performances, and stagings, which consequently can only be adequately appreciated when the functions of their aesthetic, formal, stylistic-historical, and genre-specific characteristics are taken into account. We will show in the following how text, performance, and staging reach and activate affective as well as cognitive channels of production and reception and, thus, centrally also undermine traditional mind/body dichotomies (see also Aragay, Delgado-García, and Middeke). It is a central gift of critical theatre ecologies and their transdisciplinary methods to explicate these interactions of rationality and emotionality, of inner world and outer world, of culture and nature, with particular urgency, diversity, and complexity, as they are already inherent in the aesthetic phenomena of text and performance.

To extrapolate from what Hubert Zapf has theorised on in many instances and what he has made known internationally as “cultural ecology” or “sustainable texts” (*Literature as Cultural Ecology*), the central ecological power of text and performance in theatre is to unleash a resilient, subversive, rebellious, or even destructive power on the one hand and, on the other hand, a regenerative power that can unfold with the prior suspension and abrogation of something that was, for instance, either handed down or declared invalid before. Texts, performances, stagings as well as reading, interpretation, all spectatorship, and, in fact, all knowledge production and understanding are characterised by such a deconstructive and ecological dynamics. Indeed, Timothy Morton has prominently asserted a structural affinity of ecology and deconstruction:

¹ Timothy Morton describes “ecological art” as “art that includes its environment(s) in its very form” and concedes that “*all art is ecological*” (*All Art Is Ecological* 18). This is certainly true for theatre and performance arts, as their formal setup includes at least the stage and audiences as environments. The many examples of ecological theatre and performance assembled in this special issue, of course, go far beyond that and are more explicit examples of Morton’s ecological art.

Texts are environmental, not simply because they are made of paper and ink that comes from trees and plants (or other terrestrial sources), or because they are sometimes about ecological matters. Reading is *formally* ecological, since in order to read we must take account of the dark sides of things, as intimately connected to the “lighter” sides as the recto and verso of a piece of writing paper. Reading discovers a constantly flowing, shifting play of temporality, and a constant process of differentiation – like evolution. All texts are environmental: they organise the space around and within them into plays of meaning and non-meaning. (“Deconstruction and/as Ecology” 292)

Deconstruction thus also confronts and infuses the theatre with this ineluctable “dark side” that is inherent in any act of knowledge, understanding, meaning producing, and any form of symbolic representation. We contend in the following that critical theatre ecologies must likewise acknowledge that in the fleeting act of reception and perception on page and stage, protentions (into and from the future) relentlessly change into retentions (into and from the past) in time (Morton, “Deconstruction and/as Ecology” 292–293). We hold Morton’s view that there is always a dark side to the production of meaning, a veritable “undecidability” in Jacques Derrida’s sense. Yet such irreducible difference and negativity, temporality, modality, and fluidity is also at the very heart of all change, transformation, regeneration, and imaginative creativity, as shall be argued further below. Life forms, as Morton rightly points out, contain codes (that is, RNA, DNA), just as language is coded, and, in acts of representation and understanding, these need constant decoding. Evolution, nature, ecology, just as language and all art, therefore, comprise repetitions with a difference – and, for that matter, *différance* (Derrida 1–29). Ecology highlights the fact that the dark sides of knowledge, meaning, and understanding are inextricably linked with the creative potential of temporality, inconstancy, uncertainty, traces, fluid nature, and of the mutable dynamics of meaning and unmeaning.

Hence, theatre and its components of text and performance practice constitute, like literature or art in general, an ecological and, at the same time, eco-critical lens and medium of reflection on contradictions which lay bare the utter complexity and heterogeneity of our (cultural) environment. In a symbolic way, theatre articulates in text and performance what is marginalised, neglected, or excluded in its wider civilisational frames. Theatre, text, and performance reflect how binaries of thought (self and Other, mind and body, culture and nature, etc.) are affectively and cognitively disturbed. By this very act of affective and cognitive disruption (Aragay, Delgado-García, and Middeke 11–14), a quasi-ecological process of renewal is set off, a process which is inherent in every single act of reception, every interpretation, every visit to the theatre, every reading – instigating ever fresh interactions and, thus, also contributing significantly to a sustainability of theatre, culture, and the world (Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecol-*

ogy; *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*; “Posthumanism or Ecohumanism?”).

The Mesh and Its Nodes

As a space of interaction, theatre can be regarded as a complex interface of human and nonhuman bodies, matter, spaces, temporalities, ideas, and languages. As such, it falls squarely within the remit of ecological modes of enquiry. If we follow the etymology of the word *ecology*, these modes of enquiry are centrally concerned with “households”: *ecology* derives from Greek *oikos* (‘household’) and *logos* (‘discourse’), and its etymological rootedness in the household seems particularly apposite with regard to the theatre. After all, *oikos* has a threefold meaning as (1) the house and related buildings, (2) the household goods, and (3) the members of the household, or family (Macdowell; see also Thür and Osborne): thus, it points towards place (the *oikos* as building and the situatedness of the household in its surroundings), materiality (the material objects that form the household goods), and relationality (the relations between the household members). In this sense, theatre constitutes an *oikos* in its own right, or better, a point of intersection – a *node* – or an interface of many households: theatre space is an ideal space of engagement and relationality, where the actors meet the audience, where the dramatic text comes to life on stage, and where human bodies, or entire households, come together in the reception of the play. But it is also a concrete material place that situates audiences in an environment and invariably relates them to this place. This has also been observed by Baz Kershaw, who uses the terms *theatre ecology* and *performance ecology* to describe “theatres and performances as ecosystems” (15) and finds that “theatre and performance in all their manifestations always involve the interrelational interdependence of ‘organisms-in-environments’” (16). Hence, given that theatre invariably exists in an environment and that it has seemingly forever been preoccupied with various households, theatre has perhaps always been “ecological”: from *Oedipus Rex* via the “two households, both alike in dignity” of the famous prologue of William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (c 1594) to more modern and precarious echoes of households, for example, in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1956) or *Endgame* (1957),² households have long featured prominently in and around the thea-

² For an ecocritical reading of the Theatre of the Absurd, see Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh’s collection *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd*.

tre. However, only relatively recently have there been tendencies in theatre and in theatre criticism to look beyond theatre's traditional anthropocentric scope (Lavery 230), beyond the exclusively human household, and to open up to what Morton has called "the mesh" of ecological thought. The articles in this special issue contribute to this opening up by engaging with the multiplicity and complexity of the theatre's households.

A by now well-established term to denote such complexity of ecological interrelations, the *mesh* is "infinite and beyond concept – unthinkable as such," and thus another example of Morton's deconstructive ecology ("The Mesh" 24). As Morton explains, the term *mesh* "can mean both the holes in a network and the threading between them" (24) and so stands for the ungraspable interconnectedness of life and matter. At the same time, one might add, the mesh cannot exist without the node, the point of intersection where various threads of a network meet. Such nodes are singular, they are mere points, infinitesimal compared to the mesh, and to merely pinpoint a node seems to require abstraction, a moment of zooming to a different plane than that of the mesh itself. Yet, like the mesh, nodes are also irrevocably plural meeting points of multiple ideas, influences, and claims. At the same time, nodes are constitutive elements of what Christoph Bode and Rainer Dietrich have called "future narratives": a future narrative, Bode writes, "does not only *thematize* openness, indeterminacy, virtuality, and the idea that every 'now' contains a multitude of possible continuations. No, it goes beyond this by actually *staging* the fact that the future is a space of yet unrealized potentiality" (1). Future narratives thus have a performative quality in that they "stage" a vision of the future as radically open. These future narratives are pervasive in ecological discourse and beyond, Bode and Dietrich observe (2), and, given the many ways in which theatre is "performing the future" (Tönnies and Pankratz 1), it would seem that the subject matter of critical theatre ecologies can likewise be qualified as such future narratives. The minimal unit of any future narrative is a node, which is here simply defined as a "situation that allows for more than one continuation" (Bode and Dietrich 1). The node itself, it would seem, carries the potentiality of the mesh inside, just like theatre does. Indeed, theatre is full of nodes: one might say that any moment of a performance transforms the stage into "a space of yet unrealized potentiality" that unfolds far beyond the immanence of this moment. In that sense, like ecological thinking, theatre is directed – and directs the communities that partake in it – towards a future. When we speak of nodes in the following, we mean to imply all these ambiguities: the singular position of the node within the network as well as its inherent plurality, the existence of the node in the present as well as its simultaneous staging of futurity, and the immanence of performance as well as the abstraction any such perspective-taking implies.

The theatre's *oikos* is (part of) the mesh – an infinite subset of an infinite set, one might say, if this was not already close to the “thinkable” or “conceptual.” Engaging with this theatrical mesh from the perspective of critical theatre ecologies then creates the problem – inherent to deconstructivist approaches – of thinking the “unthinkable as such.” Yet this is precisely what criticism must do if it wants to have any purpose at all. Necessarily, the criticism of critical theatre ecologies must focus on some nodes within the mesh, whilst at the same time being aware of its own inadequacy,³ of the impossibility to think the mesh and of the danger that a focus on singular nodes may end up tearing the mesh apart. The theatre's mesh-y households, then, have many stakeholders, both human (actors, audiences, playwrights, dramaturgs, stage designers, and many others, or, in short, all the people who keep the institution of the theatre working through their labour and assemble in and around the moment of performance) and nonhuman (the theatre building, the specific site of a performance, stage props, etc.). All of these stakeholders are intricately interlinked in ways that go far beyond the local community of theatregoers and the concrete situatedness of the performance and are implicated on a planetary scale. In view of the current planetary situation, a predominant topic of discussion within theatre ecologies certainly is the impending climate catastrophe, but while theatre ecologies are implicated in the climate catastrophe, they also look beyond this singular topic and pursue related lines of enquiry.

Given the scale, complexity, and multiplicity of the problem, it seems inevitable to ask “what can theatre do?” (Lavery). Critical theatre ecologies seek to trace the fibres of the mesh, the intricacies of the interrelations, and the complexity of the entanglements of the stakeholders in the *oikos*. Indeed, such reflection may be inherent in the notion of ecology, as Kershaw has argued before, as its etymology suggests not only study or discourse *of* the household but also *in* the household (of nature) and so “implies that organisms – including humans – are both a part of and apart from their environments, more or less reflexively alert to themselves as agents in/for environments” (16–17). In this process of reflection, however, critical theatre ecologies must take care not to assume a position of totality from which it would then “legislate” the interrelations it describes. Such a “global” view, as Bruno Latour has remarked, “*confus[es] the figures of connection*

3 In the context of theatre and performance, this has been theorised by Lavery, who, building on the work of philosopher Gianni Vattimo, calls this “weak performance” (230). As Lavery explains: “Insisting on weakness, but without for all that giving into nihilism or despondency, may permit theatre to refrain from perpetuating the type of Promethean thinking that has produced such things as climate change, species extinction, and toxic pollution in the first place” (232). The same holds true for critical theatre ecologies.

with those of totality” (130) and imagines a sense of control based on the assumption that ecological problems can be solved from afar, with analytical distance and abstraction, by compartmentalising the mesh and forcefully ripping apart its interconnections in order to focus on singular absolutes, never on the underlying problem of relationality.⁴ Critical theatre ecologies must then avoid taking such a totalising stance. Indeed, the field has long left behind neo-Romantic concepts of nature and moved “beyond bambi,” as Theresa J. May put it, but must always remain awake to the pitfalls of essentialisms in its own argumentation. In other words, if the claim that plays can “save the world,” made, for instance, by theatre activists Elizabeth Freestone and Jeanie O’Hare in the title of a recent publication, holds true, then critical theatre ecologies ask by what means, to what ends, and at what (and whose!) costs global redemption comes, how it can be sustainable, and how (discourses on) the theatre may assist in it. Even, or perhaps especially, some of the basic premises need to be critically (re-)assessed: in sustainability, “what is being sustained?” (Markley 45 and passim for a critical discussion of the term). What are the dangers of empathy, oft-conjured as a way of repairing our relationship with nature? What is the place of humans in a “radically eco-centric posthumanism,” should we give up entirely on the “narrowly anthropocentric humanism” of old –, and what can new concepts like “ecohumanism” contribute to the debate (Zapf, “Posthumanism or Ecohumanism?” 5)? It follows that the critique of critical theatre ecologies must always also be a self-critique and must at all times remain aware that it cannot escape the relations it describes, that it is part of the mesh.

What exactly are these relations, though, and how does theatre approach them? What are the nodes that critical theatre ecologies put their focus on? As the articles in this volume will show, the mesh of critical theatre ecologies engages with a plethora of theoretical positions and theatrical realities, each of which would deserve book-length studies in its own right. These nodes encompass dramatic space and place as well as theatrical temporalities; bodies and matter, or the materiality of performance, as well as transmedia configurations of the dramatic text and performance; the production and staging of plays – including questions of sustainability and what is usually described as “ecodramaturgy” (Arons and May; May, *Earth Matters on Stage*; Woynarski) –, as well as their recep-

⁴ This is identified as a central problem in many critical approaches by Latour, who puts the problem as follows: “as soon as philosophy believes it is thinking globally, it becomes incapable of conceiving of time as well as of space” (126). The crucial dimensions of relationality are simply lost in such totalising approaches. It would seem, then, as if Hamlet’s famous lines that “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (1.5.165–166) are in this critical sense proto-ecological: they point towards a plurality beyond totalisation.

tion, including patterns of self-reflexivity within plays and performances; questions of humanism and the posthuman as well as wider ethical reflections concerning theatre ecologies; immersive performance practices and theatre activism; the intersection of ecology with race, gender, and class; the various communities involved in the staging, production, and reception of a play and engendered in the play's storyworld; and the aesthetic consequences engaging with this mesh has for theatre and drama. In short, the nodes of critical theatre ecologies cover the full scope of the theatre's complexity, contingency, openness, and incommensurability, and its sheer imaginative power to produce future narratives.

One of these nodes that has received much attention in ecocritical discourse is temporality. This might not be surprising, as ecology's relationality also implies a fundamental changeability, and change is a function of time. Latour has emphasised this temporal dimension of ecological thought by calling the much talked about ecological crisis we find ourselves living through a "*profound mutation in our relation to the world*" (*Facing Gaia* 8). The mutability of our relation to the world seems to be directly linked to the mutable perception of time in ecological contexts: Robert Markley speaks of "different registers of time: experiential or embodied time, historical time, and climatological time" (53), which are all complexly interlinked and influence the way we conceive of ecological phenomena like global heating.⁵ What makes ecological temporalities so difficult to comprehend are their vastly different timescales: where historical timeframes are often enough beyond the grasp of human beings, who are restricted to the experience of embodied time, what Markley calls climatological time has also been called "deep time" and is measured on the hardly thinkable "timescales of tens of thousands or even millions of years" (Davies 20; see Marland 292). The mutation diagnosed by Latour blurs these distinctions, as the processes of "deep time" now happen within mere decades. The result is that we are affected by a "derangement" of scale (Clark 150) or "temporal disorientation" (Vermeulen 107). If "the time-scales of climatic change cannot be experienced viscerally but only imagined" (Markley 57), then the theatre, as all art, has its task cut out: imagining these timescales is certainly a central part of the theatre's ecologies and is not merely an epistemic problem but an ethical and political one.⁶ The perhaps best-

5 A similar point, with a focus on historical – and hence ultimately ethical, intersectional – conceptions of time is made by Dipesh Chakrabarty, who argues that human-made global heating conjoins "the history of the Earth system, the history of life including that of human evolution on the planet, and the more recent history of industrial civilization (for many, capitalism)" (49; see 23–67).

6 Timothy Clark sums up this connection of scales with ethics and politics by arguing that the puzzling scale effects of climate change "take the easy, daily equations of moral and political ac-

known term that tries to encapsulate the scalar derangement of ecological time is that of the *Anthropocene*, coined by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer to signify that humanity has now developed “into a significant geological, morphological force” (17). This adds a modicum of historicity, and ultimately also ethics, to the debate, as the term *Anthropocene* highlights causation and hence responsibility, which may be a reason why it has prompted many productive responses from the environmental humanities, such as Donna J. Haraway’s coinages *Plantationocene* and *Chthulucene* or Jason W. Moore’s *Capitalocene*.

These responses, in turn, point towards a number of further nodes in ecocritical discourse, which are typically subsumed under the “meta-node” of intersectionality. As we were writing this introduction, the Center for Global Development, a US think tank promoting international development, published a blogpost highlighting, once more, the extreme global inequalities in CO₂ emissions and the “climate hypocrisy” of the global North: for example, the report highlighted that the average US citizen’s daily CO₂ output surpasses the yearly emissions of an average person living in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and similar imbalances can be found for many of the world’s poorest countries of the global South (Ritchie). This shows how deeply problematic discourses on causation, on the “human-made” ecological crisis, are, when in fact it is only a small part of humanity that disproportionately causes the changes we witness in the Anthropocene, and a larger part of humanity is negatively affected by them in multiple ways. In other words, there is a clear correlation of the ways humans affect the nonhuman world with wealth and power, that is, with capitalist ways of life and through power structures embedded in the notion of social class, but also, and obviously, with racism and the legacies of colonialism, and with sexism and institutionalised misogynistic structures – ecological questions must hence be thought as intersectional questions (see, for instance, Haraway; Moore; Nixon; Yusoff for such intersectional approaches; and Woynarski 33–69 for examples of ecodramaturgical engagements with intersectional ecologies). The intersectionality of these critical ecological questions once more underlines their irreducible complexity.⁷

counting and drop into them both a zero and an infinity: the greater the number of people engaged in modern forms of consumption then the less the relative influence or responsibility of each but the worse the cumulative impact of their insignificance” (150).

7 These questions seem to have no simple answers and the traditional analytic approaches that seek to compartmentalise a problem and take the “global” view of it are not fit for the task, as Latour has argued (122–130). Instead, as a way to avoid the globalising perspective, Latour suggests to adopt self-reflexive, loop-like epistemologies to think about ecology (136–145). Similarly, Kathryn Yusoff has pointed to the dangers of repeating the structures that created the conditions for exploit-

For the theatre, specifically, this raises the question of how to imagine or represent such a vast mesh with so complex nodes that in so many ways transcend the frames of traditional theatrical aesthetics. Aesthetics certainly is a node in its own right here. As might be expected, there is no single, or singular, aesthetics of theatre ecologies. There are, however, some aesthetic tendencies to be made out, many of them linked to the nodes already discussed. For example, one may find a preponderance of what Graham Huggan has called the “future anterior” (ix), the orientation “towards a future which is always, already looking back” (Marland 301). In contemporary drama, this can be seen in the large number of near-future dystopias that premiered in recent years (Reid) and that, if they are to be understood as warning signals, can only be read as the future looking back at the present. Conversely, there is also a tendency to focus on utopian aesthetics and the hope for a more sustainable future. Other ways in which theatre engages with ecological issues include openly activist forms of performance, as, for example, advocated by Climate Change Theatre Action; aesthetics and practices that foreground the material, nonhuman, rather than the human and so attempt to eschew anthropocentrism; and experimentation with theatre space and the audience’s implication in it.

As this very cursory overview of (some of) the nodes of theatre ecologies shows, the mesh they are part of is truly “beyond concept,” and their singularity is already irreducibly plural to begin with. As Pieter Vermeulen has put it: “The Anthropocene present [. . .] is a palimpsest of (often only partly legible) criss-crossing forces that do not provide a clear point of orientation to navigate the complexities of planetary life” (107). Navigating this mesh seems impossible, and yet critical theatre ecologies seek to do precisely this.

Critical Theatre Ecologies: Mapping the Issue

Criticism itself is, of course, part of the mesh and its nodes, at the same time constituted by and constitutive of the entanglements that form the theatre’s *oikos*. Although in literary studies the critical engagement with the issue of ecology and/in literature has been discussed since at least the 1980s and has led to the establishment of ecocriticism as a theoretical field in its own right, (contempo-

ative relationships among humans and between humans and the nonhuman world in the first place and has demanded “epistemically not to reproduce those arrangements of power in the telling” (105). It would seem that the mesh that is ecological relations can only be thought from within, where the thinking itself is a part of the inextricable mesh.

rary) theatre and drama studies were mostly late to the ecocritical party: throughout the 1990s and 2000s there were relatively few, if all the more notable, publications on the topic of ecology, beginning with scholars in the US, where, already in the 1970s, Richard Schechner wrote on *Environmental Theater* (see also Julia Rössler's contribution to this issue). Una Chaudhuri ("There Must Be"), Bonnie Marranca, and May ("Greening the Theater"; *Greening Up Our Houses*, with Larry Fried) were among the first to tackle this topic, and other early publications include those by Kershaw, Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart, as well as Downing Cless. This has changed in the last decade or so with a flurry of publications specifically on the theatre and ecology. Besides numerous articles, these include a 2010 special issue of the *Canadian Theatre Review* on *Theatre in an Age of Ecocrisis* (introduced by Nelson Gray and Sheila Rabillard); 2012 special issues on environmentalism (*Research in Drama Education*, introduced by Deirdre Haddon and Sally Mackey) and ecology (*Performance Research*, edited by Stephen Bottoms, Aaron Franks, and Paula Kramer); and notable book-length publications by Wendy Arons and May; Carl Lavery, who is the editor of a 2016 special issue of the journal *Green Letters* on performance and ecology as well as co-editor, with Clare Finburgh, of an ecocritical attempt at *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd*; Chaudhuri and Shonni Enelow; Birgit Däwes and Marc Maufort (focusing on Indigenous performance); and, in performance studies, Richard D. Besel and Jnan A. Blau. Even more recent books, all published within the last three years, by Vicky Angelaki, May (*Earth Matters on Stage*), Linda Hassall, Lisa Woynarski, or – with a strongly social ecological approach – Marissia Fragkou, as well as Mohebat Ahmadi's forthcoming *Towards an Ecocritical Theatre: Playing the Anthropocene*, show that the ecocritical debate has not only finally arrived in this field but even developed considerable forcefulness.

It is against this backdrop that the thirteen articles in this special issue can be seen. They respond to, get entangled in, and place new nodes in the critical mesh of theatre ecologies. The first of these articles is Angelaki's analysis of "Imperatives towards an Eco-n-temporary Theatre Canon," in which she states that scholarship on theatre ecology must rest on the diagnosis of spatial as well as temporal liminality and, hence, is characterised by a productive in-betweenness. Studying and living with such in-betweenness is the basis, Angelaki argues, for an ethical as well as aesthetic understanding of our 21st-century roles and responsibilities. Experiencing in-betweenness and fluidity entails the challenging of binary oppositions and, particularly, the de-coupling of the environment/economy dichotomy. Drawing on Raymond Williams's groundbreaking *The Country and the City*, Angelaki calls for creating imaginative "interspaces" that make scholars, artists, readers, and theatregoers alike reflect and reshape their lives and their interaction with their environments. Fluidity and the fertile production of in-betweenness are

characteristic features of plays such as Ella Hickson's *ANNA* (2019), Duncan Macmillan's *Love Lockdown* (2020), or Rachel De-lahay's *Circles* (2014). While Hickson's play reevaluates the notion of togetherness or "compresence," as Angelaki phrases it, Macmillan examines structures of the virtual which transcend the physical world and, thus, open up avenues for alternative ecologies. De-lahay's *Circles*, moreover, is centred on the in-betweenness of stasis and mobility. Analysing De-lahay's play, Angelaki applies John Urry's emphasis on "how the world is increasingly performed" – a diagnosis that affects both our collective and diverse existences and futures.

The following five articles are all concerned with the ecological potentialities and materialities of performance. The methodology of Lavery's paper on UK movement artist Simon Whitehead follows a phenomenological approach which centres on the cusp between the need and the desire for home, on the one hand, and the notion of constant flux, constant becoming, on the other. Analysing its somatic potential, Lavery calls this oxymoronic condition "bec(h)oming" taking his cue from Karen Barad's methodology of diffraction. In quantum physics, diffraction denotes the phenomenon that appears when a multitude of waves encounter an obstacle upon their path and these waves overlap. It turns out that these waves have always already been overlapping and extending into one another. In metaphorical terms, this implies that consciousness and critical thinking must always be attentive to such overlapping, that is, to difference, diversity, and alterity. Whitehead's inspiring work for dancers, choreographers, and artists appears to be going beyond materialising and sedimenting effects by highlighting the fluidity and transitoriness – the becoming, as it were – of artistic production. Whitehead's artistic concept of the body, Lavery points out, goes beyond a gendered, sexed, racialised, or class-positioned body, but rather develops an ecological body that is characterised by being in flux and by perpetual change and is also positioned beyond a static sociohistorical location. Whitehead's "corporo-logics," therefore, appear as immanent relationality that is open to affecting and being affected at the same time, resonating with intensity (see also Massumi). Further linking the analysis to ecocosmopolitan thought (Heise; Chakrabarty; Nixon), Lavery identifies three phases in Whitehead's artistic practice, which rest on sensory experience, a somatic response to soundtracks, and a sense of nomadism, which implies border crossing, but at the same time a sense of belonging and becoming. Whitehead accentuates the locatedness of site-specific aesthetics, and he also produces time and space for audience attunement in participation. The body in space and time, thus, is always characterised both by haecceity – thisness, immanence, or the particularity of a thing, a body, a person – and by the temporary event of the performance. Particularity, immanence, and temporality generate ecological bec(h)oming in Whitehead's performances.

The dissolution of binaries such as person/thing, subject/object, self/Other is seen as the precondition of a theatre ecology in Simon Bowes's interpretation of Tim Spooner's performances. Concluding from Spooner's aesthetics, Bowes makes a thought-provoking distinction for theatre and performance practice as he differentiates theatre ecology from ecocritical theatre. While the latter, Bowes argues, is concerned with mediating an anxiousness about nature, the former entails a virtual reconstruction of nature, the aim of which is a staging of the revelation of an environment. When Bowes describes Spooner's aesthetics and dramaturgy as *artlike* theatre, the term is used as a denomination for a more primary aesthetics grounded in gestures and in the material conditions of theatre which rests on the interrelationship between *oikos* and *cosmos*, between the household and the universe. In other words, *oikos* is visible/tangible/discernible in *cosmos*, the particular in the abstract, the singular in the plural, nature in culture, and vice versa. Spooner's performances are indicative of an environmental relationship that, Bowes points out, drawing on Brian Massumi's theory of affects, denotes a material plane, but, at the same time is immaterial, ideal, and idealist. Engaging with further theoretical positions by Roberto Esposito, Latour, and Rosi Braidotti, Bowes concludes on the ethical potential of Spooner's performances which pay attention to duration, endurance, and the procedural aspects of nature. Spooner's artlike theatre calls for our attentiveness, which functions as the precondition of intentionality and, thus, of any (ethical as well as political) commitment on our part.

Jamie Harper's article deals with community-based theatre projects and live action role-play drama. Harper's examples are his own projects at the Trumpington Community Orchard near Cambridge in 2017 and at the Peartree Bridge estate in Milton Keynes in 2018. Live action role-play and, hence, participatory performance are seen as means of producing ecological resistance and reflecting on cultural practices. Harper proposes an "*anchorage-leverage*" model in order to raise resilience and eventual transformations of thinking and action. Such a transformation and an ensuing regeneration of community cohesion through the development of resilience implies, Harper argues, changes in what Pierre Bourdieu has called *habitus*. Live action role-play drama can incite the dynamic rather than static process of changing *habitus*. In other words, theatre performance and role-play can provide affective "shocks" or the experience of defamiliarisation and, as a result, can incite reflexive awareness of both resilience and change(ability) of situations and mind-sets alike. Any alteration of habits, Harper contends, requires a leverage/anchorage dynamics which participatory performance can provide.

Solange Ayache devotes her article to Simon McBurney's award-winning solo performance *The Encounter* (2015). McBurney is critical of the imperatives of glo-

balisation and their neoliberal and neocolonial capitalist ideologies. Ayache's own critical theatre ecology is centred on the idea of interconnectedness, which not only functions as an ecological principle, but also as a means of poetic and theatrical aesthetics interlacing multiple stories, voices, and media channels. Moreover, she lays bare the connection between intermediality (of a performance) and sustainability by interpreting McBurney's performance as an example of hybrid compos(t)ing. While the performance and its intriguing multimedia recreation of a jungle in the theatre space address us affectively, the play's intertextual and intermedia frameworks also confront us with an aesthetic theatre practice of compiling, recycling, and indeed textual as well as media composting. Cognitive capacities are as much addressed as affective ones, creating interconnected worlds which render humans, feelings/perceptions/thoughts, organisms, and inanimate objects as inextricably intertwined. McBurney's performance, thus, resembles the "making kin" and the "multispecism" that Haraway identified as the Chthulucene. This kind of performance no longer falls prey to the cynicism and the defeatism inherent in the discourses of both Anthropocene and Capitalocene. The strategy of compiling, recycling, interweaving, and infusing recreates the response-ability of being in the world beyond individualistic selves. In an aesthetic way, Ayache points out, the intermediality, the multimedia staging of interconnectedness and the stream-of-consciousness technique of narrative employed by McBurney create an epitome of what Mikhail Bakhtin famously phrased as "dialogicity": a perfectly polyphonic representation of our dialogic nature in what resembles truly "cosmological performances" (Haraway 14) advancing a "sym-poietic ecodramaturgy."

Next, Anna Street and Ramona Mosse are concerned with the dramaturgy of water and its potential as matter, medium, and metaphor in posthumanist performance. Building on theoretical groundwork by Braidotti, Haraway, Joanna Zy-linska, and Barad, they conceive of material dramaturgies as reconfigurations of time, space, and representation that in the manner of diffraction reexamine the interrelations between the human and nonhuman and question the metaphysical fixity of the material world and the meaning humans ascribe to it along the lines of Barad's performative posthumanism. Water serves as the matter that provides their prime example. Their first case study is the work of sound artist AM Kann-gieser, where water is not only mediated, but itself becomes a medium through which interconnections between the human and nonhuman world are explored. Kanngieser's soundscapes allow the nonhuman to perform and engage audiences in "pure sensing, rather than sense-making." In this way they make the inexpressible scales of ecology accessible to audiences. In their second example, a Filter Theatre production of David Farr's play *Water* (2007/2013), water is not only a metaphor for adaptability, but also aesthetically structures the play and blurs its

spatial and temporal boundaries as well as the determinacy of human meaning-making. This is supported by the production's creation of a visual and acoustic waterscape on stage, whose sound and light waves make tangible the work of diffraction inherent in material dramaturgies. The fluidity and liquidity of water thus become prime examples of the mutability at the core of all ecological relations.

The following two contributions, by Patrick Lonergan and Rössler, focus on ecologies of space in theatre. In his article, Lonergan reflects on the ecological implications of both the spatial and temporal configuration of theatre performances. He discusses the capacity of theatrical revivals to foreground ecological issues hitherto unnoticed or neglected in the staging of the plays. Specifically, Lonergan's focus is on a 2017 production of Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (2000) by Corcadorca Theatre Company on Spike Island, off the Irish South Coast. While the revival itself can already be seen as an engagement with the past and is implicated in the play's reception history – in the case of *Far Away*, Lonergan traces a broadening of critical readings of the play from an anthropocentric concern with power politics towards a sense of ecological imbalance and disarray –, the concrete situatedness of a performance in space, time, and a community endows it with a specificity that must influence the audience perception of the play. The production of *Far Away* on an island that is linked to a centuries-long history of “colonialism, nationalism, and incarceration” is, according to Lonergan, a way of connecting audiences and the local community involved in the production to a sense of ecological timescales as well as to the intersectional challenges of the ecological crisis, while also immersing audiences in the physical experience of a place where human and nonhuman actors are inextricably interconnected.

Rössler engages with dramatic spaces in a different way: she foregrounds the aesthetic reconceptualisation of space so as to create connections between humans and the world they live in. Rössler argues that contemporary American theatre, and in particular Adam Rapp's works, departing from the traditions of Gertrude Stein's landscape plays and Schechner's environmental theatre, has developed a theatrical mode that stages the deep interconnection of human subjectivity with places, resulting in what Chaudhuri has called symptomatic spaces. These are spaces that themselves are nodal points connecting the singularity of human subjects with the plurality of the nonhuman spaces and collapsing the nature/culture binary. Drawing on Chaudhuri, Rössler claims that Rapp's plays contribute to an “Anthropocenic imaginary” in American drama that is characterised by the adoption of new, ecological perspectives configured by the conceptual frame of the Anthropocene. In her discussion of *Faster* (2002) and *Ghosts in the Cottonwoods* (2014), she shows that while Rapp does not programmatically tackle ecological questions in an activist fashion, his aesthetic imagination of the ways

in which humans and nonhuman places are interlinked entices audiences to think ecologically.

The next two contributions focus on the ways in which theatre can engage communities and on drama as a counterdiscourse to prevailing exploitative discourses. In her article on “Kinship and Community in Climate-Change Theatre: Ecodramaturgy in Practice,” May discusses her notion of ecodramaturgy, focusing on ways in which the materiality of theatre itself may envision more sustainable material practices and ways of engaging with the world in and beyond the theatre and so can reimagine humanity’s place in the world. The theatre, she argues, is a uniquely positioned art form to foster a responsive attitude towards ecological crisis as it “exercises human capacity for imaginative risk-taking.” This predestines theatre to become activist and arouse empathy in its audiences for the human and more-than-human world beyond the theatre. May shows this in her readings of three plays, Marie Clements’s *Burning Vision* (2002), Chantal Bilodeau’s *Sila* (2014), and *Salmon Is Everything* (2006), written by May herself. All three discuss the ways in which Indigenous communities are affected by the exploitation of nature that is a direct consequence of settler colonialism, and all three make use of Indigenous systems of knowledge and modes of storytelling to cross national, temporal, and species boundaries in their reimagination of humans’ interaction with the world.

Rowland Chukwuemeka Amaefula similarly focuses on drama’s counterdiscursive potential and on its role as a force towards greater sustainability and community engagement. Taking Greg Mbajiorgu’s *Wake Up Everyone* (2011) as his case study, he addresses the theatre’s function as an eco-pedagogical tool, in particular in the context of Nigerian environmental politics. He thus contributes to the emerging field of ecocriticism in Nigerian theatre and drama studies. His analysis traces the connections between the capital interests of multinational oil corporations, local politics, and environmental degradation in the Niger Delta highlighted in Mbajiorgu’s play. Like May, Amaefula is interested in the connections between theatre and activism and investigates eco-drama’s potential as an eco-pedagogical tool that may create awareness and teach sustainability. Such sustainability, he suggests, is part of traditional Nigerian ways of life and cultural performance, which are both threatened by the effects of oil extraction on the environment. In *Wake Up Everyone*, this is reflected in the use of a play-within-the-play that is put on as a pedagogical measure by a climate activist to expose the consequences of the environmental degradation the characters in the play and the real-world audiences are experiencing. These meta-dramatic aesthetics, Amaefula finds, are then particularly important to create empathy and a connection between the various communities, fictional and nonfictional, involved in the reception of the play.

The final three contributions to this issue are all concerned with the ways in which theatre explores the various frictions between economy, ecology, and in particular capitalism's ecological impact in the Capitalocene. Like Amaefula, Linda M. Hess is interested in what she describes as the both toxic and intoxicating effects of our relationship with oil. She coins the term *Petrocene* to denote "the age in which human existence has become impossible to conceive without oil." The theatre, she argues, can make the irreducible complexity of oil infrastructures and their entanglement with the climate catastrophe and ecological disasters apprehensible for the audience. This can be seen in her analysis of Hickson's *Oil* (2016) and Leigh Fondakowski's *Spill* (2014). Again, audiences of both plays are drawn in to empathise with the characters and pushed to reflect on the underlying petro-culture and their own investment in it. Further, both plays highlight how unequally humans are affected by the ecological crisis: inequalities pertaining to race and social class are exacerbated by our dependence on oil, as petro-culture relies on and furthers (neo)colonial practices of exploitation and human supremacy. In this way, Hess concludes, Hickson and Fondakowski lay bare the devastating consequences of the anthropocentrism that drives oil extraction.

Christian Attinger examines the ecology of industrial plants in Philip Ridley's *Shivered* (2012) and David Eldridge's *In Basildon* (2012) from the perspectives of globalisation and the Capitalocene. Both plays corroborate the systemic and ideological implications of that system of power, profit, and re/production, and its notorious goal of producing "Cheap Natures" (Moore), that is, massive exploitation and precarity for under- or even unpaid "human resources," for the capitalist global project. Both plays see the world through decisively anti-capitalist and anti-globalist lenses. Ridley's *Shivered* addresses corporate social responsibilities. The industrial plant and the ensuing spaces of dilapidated factory buildings, toxic waste grounds, and run-down communal infrastructure symbolise the dystopian breakdown of a local environment and its capacity to produce biologically as well as socially sustainable life when human beings are reduced to commodities and their labour and life energy is absorbed by the exploitation of company and government. Similarly, in Eldridge's *In Basildon*, the decaying Ford factory functions as a synecdoche of post-financial-crisis Britain and its effect on the microcosms of family life hit by this crisis. Stage design and subject matter coalesce, Attinger argues, as the split auditorium echoes the divided family and, on a grander scale, of course, the class antagonisms in British society.

The last article in this issue also considers dramatic engagements with the Capitalocene. Leila Michelle Vaziri's "Alienation, Abjection, and Disgust: Encountering the Capitalocene in Contemporary Eco-Drama" discovers a structural parallel between the ways in which capitalism cheapens and degrades nature in

order to better exploit it and affective mechanisms of disgust and abjection – a parallel that she traces in the two eco-dramas that form the backbone of her analysis, Tanya Ronder's *Fuck the Polar Bears* (2015) and Dawn King's *Foxfinder* (2011). Both plays, she argues, make transparent to audiences how, in human perception, nature is rendered disgusting in order to reinforce the nature/culture dichotomy that is at the heart of the capitalist logic of exploitation. While in Ronder's play, this is exemplified at the individual level, with the protagonist's feelings of disgust towards objects he associates with nature, in *Foxfinder*, disgust plays a crucial role in forming an exclusionary community that turns against nature, which is perceived as abject and threatening. With her focus on abjection and disgust in capitalist discourses on the environment, Vaziri manages to draw attention to the affective dimension of ecological questions and of humans' interactions with the nonhuman world.

Co-Mutability, Togetherness, and Being Singular/Plural

A recurring theme and motif in environmental humanities, in critical theatre ecologies, and in the articles collected in this special issue is an emphasis on copresence, (inter-)relationality, interconnectedness, diffraction patterns, and other images of cross-linking, networks or networking, intercommunication, interconnection, or mesh. To describe the way the theatre, and likewise literature, involves its audiences/readers in these figures of interconnection, we suggest the term *co-mutability*. It is a blend of *community* and *mutability* and indicates that, firstly, what we have in mind when we speak of community for the theatre is drawing on what Jean-Luc Nancy has called an "inoperative community" or what Giorgio Agamben has denoted as the "coming community." Our ecocritical understanding of community describes a community that engages the singular (rather than the individual) and the plural at the same time. Like Nancy and Agamben (and in that vein also Maurice Blanchot or Esposito), we contend, secondly, that this ecological understanding of relationality between different actants in an ecosystem is never completed, always procedural, temporalised, fluid, and thus indeed "inoperative" (read: not to be worked, that is, finalised), and forever coming. Critical theatre ecologies reflect on such co-mutability. Networks and relationality describe a fluid community, in constant motion and ever-negotiable, that displaces clear-cut binary oppositions into a future of potential renewal beyond such distinctions of singular/plural, inside/outside, centre/margin, inclusion/exclusion, etc.:

Community means, consequently, that there is no singular being without another singular being, and that there is, therefore, what might be called [. . .] an originary or ontological “sociality” that in its principle extends far beyond the simple theme of man as a social being (the *zoon politikon* is secondary to this community). For [. . .] it is not obvious that the community of singularities is limited to “man” and excludes, for example, the “animal.” (Nancy 28)

Understanding the theatre’s households as “inoperative” and “coming” communities of being singular/plural and the way in which humans are implicated in these theatre ecologies as co-mutability has wide-ranging consequences and needs some further explanation (see also, for the following, Middeke 252–258). For Agamben, a coming community denominates a concept which singular beings no longer already occupy or relate to with respect to a certain property (such as, for instance, being French or being Muslim). The ecological perspective inherent in the coming community does not give a guarantee of meaning, identity, belonging, it does not offer any essence of a unified collectivity. This corresponds to Nancy’s idea of “community without community” – an inoperative community “without destiny and without essence, the community that returns is never present in the first place” (Wall 156). What we have in front of us is a concept of community that is forever an open and fluid community, perpetually in the state of coming without ever arriving at an end, let alone at closure. Co-mutability likewise means a project that can never be brought to a close, it must remain unworked, it is un-workable, it remains – inoperative.

All the contributions in this special issue – albeit to a varying degree and often with different argumentative targets – will locate the ecological potential of the theatre as well as the texts and performances at issue in the very inoperative nature of community: in co-mutability, that is, in the interruption of the myth of unity, completion, or consummation, the radical disruption of the phantasma of homogeneity, originality, and unchanging familiarity. Agamben and Nancy describe the coming and inoperative community as “a spacing within immanence” (Nancy 58) or as the “empty space in which its undefinable and unforgettable life unfolds” (Agamben 9). In much the same vein, we believe that at the heart of the concept of co-mutability, as we understand it, something similar to art is dawning. The spirit of community felt by Nancy and Agamben comes close to what describes the interrelations that take place in the theatre and that comprises its ecological force and potential.

Therefore, the theatre, stage/audience, text/reader interaction and interconnectedness share with co-mutability and the coming/inoperative community the dissociability of self and Other, singular and plural, the particular and the generic. Critical theatre ecologies, then, imply the same signatures as the inoperative community: singularity and negativity as well as temporality and finitude.

Just as the singularities of a coming, inoperative community and communication can co-appear only in the absence of a unified and logically coherent meaning, critical theatre ecologies must co-appear in that they agree on the heterogeneity of text and performance (practice). Negation and negativity are the basis and the onset of all ecological thought in and for the theatre, as negation and negativity as foundation stones of all interpretation and curious experience, are also the basis for all creative, imaginative, transformative, and regenerative renewal (Iser, *The Act of Reading* 228; Middeke 257). Negativity and temporality are basic constituents of text, performance, and, in fact, any communication; they are foundation stones for a co-mutable theatre ecology, as authors, (con)texts, readers, spectators, actors, and performance that precede intersubjective communications of meaning and their negotiability move along syntagmatic, plural, and temporal as well as paradigmatic, singular, and generic axes of text and performance (Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* 225).

On a final note, it can be stated that critical theatre ecologies are directed towards an uncertain and precarious future and must find ways to imaginatively engage its manifold scales, temporalities, and intersectionalities. Hence, rather than putting the case for one-sided and flat realisms or flat ontologies – no matter whether these are of a transhuman, posthuman, Anthropocene, Capitalocene, or Chthulucene kind – critical theatre ecologies must remain open and indeterminate. All the contributions to this special issue – to a varying degree and applying diverse methodological tools – prove that the theatre (as well as science, culture, art, and literature) on the one hand acknowledges the “co-agency of the non-human in epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic processes and creative practices” (Zapf, “Posthumanism or Ecohumanism?” 15). On the other hand, however, all these contributions – again, in more or less direct ways and to varying degrees – insist upon the activist, resilient, counterdiscursive potential of the theatre, of texts and performance (practice). In other words, all of these contributions underscore the transformative, regenerative process inherent in theatre. It becomes clear that critical theatre ecologies, just like environmental humanities, in a decisively ethical sense, (must) “remain aware of the irreducible role and responsibility of humans in these activities” and imaginatively work towards “a more equitable, sustainable, and ecologically aware culture and society of the future” (Zapf, “Posthumanism or Ecohumanism?” 15). This is one more thing that aligns critical theatre ecologies with future narratives: just as these “preserve the future *as future*” (Bode and Dietrich 1) by sustaining the undecidability of what is to come, so do critical theatre ecologies strive for the same kind of preservation. In the theatre,

one way or another, this is always a shared experience and a common challenge involving all the stakeholders of the theatre's *oikos*, the mesh and the nodes it partakes of – this is the theatre's co-mutability.

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