

Introduction to American Theatre and Performance in the Anthropocene Epoch

The term “Anthropocene” entered general scientific discourse in 2002, when chemist-geologist Paul Crutzen published an article in *Nature* advocating that his colleagues adopt this name for the current geological epoch to emphasize the central role of humankind in shaping the earth’s biosphere and geology. Crutzen’s *Nature* article, which argued that the previous Holocene epoch had effectively ended at the industrial revolution, was widely read and cited; “the Anthropocene” began to appear in numerous articles and books. Many scientists agreed with Crutzen on the name for the present epoch, which derives from the Greek and means, roughly, “the human era.” They recognized that our activities as a species are now becoming the single most important cause of planetary change – from punishing weather patterns, to vanishing coastlines, the killing-off of thousands of species, and the threatened deaths of millions of human beings. Several scientists, however, emphasized different evidence than Crutzen and chose other starting points for the epoch. At this writing, the members of the International Union of Geological Sciences have yet to determine the beginning of the Anthropocene, but many geologists now favor a date after WWII, which accords with the “great acceleration” of carbon emissions into the atmosphere and radioactive Plutonium fallout around the world from the testing of thermonuclear bombs. Legal scholar Jedediah Purdy is right to note, however, that determining the start of the Anthropocene “is not a statement of fact as much as a way of organizing facts to highlight a certain importance that they carry.”^[1]

For authors Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and Francois Gemenne, writing in the introduction to their anthology, *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis* (2015), this new geologic epoch organizes facts around two compelling claims. First, state the authors, the Anthropocene “claims that humans have become a telluric force, changing the functioning of the Earth as much as volcanism, tectonics, the cyclic fluctuations of solar activity, or changes in the Earth’s orbital movements around the sun.” As a result, natural history and human history are now thoroughly interwoven. They add: “Modern humanities and social sciences have pictured society as if they were above material and energy cycles. . . . Now they must come back down to earth.”^[2] “The second claim is that the human inhabitants of our planet will face, in a time lapse of just a few decades, global environmental shifts of an unprecedented scale and speed, not [seen] since the emergence of the genus *Homo* some 2.5 million years ago. . . . It means inhabiting an impoverished and artificialised biosphere in a hotter world increasingly characterized by catastrophic events and new risks. . . . Reinventing a life of dignity for all humans in a finite and disrupted Earth has become the master issue of our time.”^[3]

With these realities in mind, I crafted a CFP that invited submissions from scholars to consider the past, present, and future of American theatre and performance through the lens of the Anthropocene. Working with Cheryl Black, President of the American Theatre and Drama Society, I also selected an editorial board for this Special Issue of JADT that I knew could help those scholars adventurous enough to investigate the intersection of a particular North or South American performance with an aspect of this new geological epoch. My thanks to all of those who helped me and the authors to put together this extraordinary group of essays.

I am pleased that our Special Issue begins with an essay by Theresa J. May, who coined the term “ecodramaturgy” in 2010 and has been a tireless advocate for its practice ever since. In “Staying with the

Trouble: Ecodramaturgy and the AnthropoScene,” May examines two plays, *Harvest Moon* (1994) and *Burning Vision* (2003), and the continuities and changes regarding ecological concerns and possible solutions advocated by each play. As you will read, *Harvest Moon* affirms the sustainable values of family and community as a viable source for progressive resistance to ecological disruption, whereas such sustainability is no longer possible in the broken, post-nuclear world of *Burning Vision*. May joins the somewhat divergent ideas of scholars Donna Haraway and Jeremy Davies to argue that American theatre and performance must “stay with the trouble” of the Anthropocene’s increasingly impoverished biosphere if we are ever to realize social and ecological justice.

Have you tasted the pollutants in smog? Performance artists at The Center for Genomic Gastronomy have offered smog meringues to international customers flavored with soot, sulfur, and hydrocarbons to capture the content of smog in Bangalore, Beijing, and Mexico City as a means of calling attention to one of the invisible consequences of industrial food production. Their meringues taste terrible. Shelby Brewster writes about Smog Tasting and two other “speculative” performances, The De-extinction Deli and Planetary Supper Club, that the Center has been producing since 2010 in her essay, “Food Futures: Speculative Performance in the Anthropocene.” As Brewster relates, The Center is attempting to realize Bruno Latour’s vision for a progressive common world in the Anthropocene, available to all, including a biosphere in which human food production, preparation, and eating are ecologically responsible.

Lisa Jackson-Schebetta has authored the first of the next two articles that feature performances in Latin America. As her title suggests, “Towards a Synthesis of Natural and Human History: Situating the Municipal and Ecclesiastic Viceregal Arches of 1680 Mexico City within the Lacustrine” examines the entrance of a seventeenth-century Viceroy through two decorated arches that depict the watery surroundings and lake-bed foundation upon which Mexico City was built. Taking up historian Dipesh Chakrabarty’s challenge to imagine our species as both historical and geological agents during the Anthropocene, Jackson-Schebetta deploys geologist Mark Anderson’s contemporary work on Mexico City to emphasize the Spaniard’s and, before them, the Nahua’s struggle to drain the basin of central Mexico so that its former lake-bed could provide habitable land for agriculture and city life. This allows her to reconfigure the 1680 viceregal entry as yet one more vain attempt in a string of performances that continues to the present day to overcome the ecology of Mexico City’s lacustrine limitations.

In “The Anthro(s)cenography of Ricardo Monti’s *Marrathon*,” Milton Loayza finds significant parallels between the situation of the marathon dancers in Monti’s Argentinian drama and Americans from both continents caught up in the historical myths of the Anthropocene. To understand the meta-theatrical levels of the play in production, Loayza turns to Marxist historian Jason Moore’s *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (2015). Attentive as well to Monti’s scenographic and dramaturgical layering, Loayza reads *Marrathon* through the lens of architect Kenneth Frampton’s concept of tectonics. The result is a keen analysis of the five myths that focus the action of *Marrathon* – conquest, independence, pastoralism, industrialism, and fascism.

Our final essay by Clara Jean Wilch proposes a website that can help progressives animated by the problems of the Anthropocene to communicate their performances with translocal, global audiences. Her “Searching for Solutions: Humanizing Climate Narratives in an Age of Global Change and Connectivity” draws on the insights of cognitive science to discuss the importance of avoiding groupish responses and inciting empathy and altruistic action with climate change videos. Although appreciative of several short videos produced by Oxfam and 350.org, she recognizes that sharing such performances on YouTube or

Facebook poses inherent difficulties and risks. This leads her to advocate the creation of a new platform that would encourage participants to share their personal stories and local experiences of climate change with others for the purpose of building collaborative communities across the globe.

We hope you enjoy this Special Issue of JADT.

Bruce McConachie, Emeritus Professor, University of Pittsburgh, Guest Editor

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[1] Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard), 2015: 2.

[2] Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and Francois Gemenne, *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking modernity in a new epoch* (New York: Routledge), 2015:3, 4.

[3] Ibid, 4-5.