

2019 Seminar Abstracts: Eco-materialism and Performance
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“Paleo Hamlet”

Craig Dionne, Eastern Michigan University, cdionne@emich.edu

This paper interprets *Hamlet* from a new materialist ecocritical perspective, approaching cognition as an adapted evolutionary process. For linguists, recursion is considered a fundamental mechanism of human language, a sequence formula that requires its "output" as a component of its first step, hence the analogy of sourdough yeast (you need sourdough to make sourdough). Hamlet's conceit of habitual memory--Osric's "yeasty collection"—calls attention to the regenerative performative elements of his own memory work. As an emblem of plasticity, Hamlet's replicating word-coinage and his spontaneous citing of myths as shorthand for affective postures reflects the recursive nature of our self-replicating "yeasty" cognition.

“Snow Globes”

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This paper enters the ephemeral “Ice Globe” of Jukkasjärvi, Sweden: an Elizabethan replica built entirely from blocks of the Torne River's frozen banks in 2003. That year, the National Theatre Beaivváš produced a shortened version of *Hamlet* in the Sámi language. With temperatures hovering around -40°C, the play's preoccupation with cold “air [that] bites shrewdly” was surely felt by outdoor audiences in attendance. Gauging these material “air[s]” of the play and in performance, as well as the (polar) playhouse's physical materials, helps to magnify, I suggest, the globe's vanishing snow and the peoples (particularly indigenous communities) most impacted by it.

“Environmental Theater? In Shakespeare's London?”

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While Richard Schechner's concept of “environmental theatre” is clearly a product of 20th century experimental theatre, most historical forms of theatre prior the rise of theatrical realism in the 19th century featured at least some elements of “environmental theatre” as Schechner would later conceive it. Shakespeare's Theatre, for example, might be considered a form of “environmental theatre” insofar as the audience members were not removed from one another's field of vision through the darkening of the theatre during performances. It also might be considered an environmental theatre insofar as performances featured extensive interaction between actors and the audience. Most importantly, as I argue here (and in my related book project), Shakespeare's Theatre might be considered “environmental” because historical modes of embodiment conditioned the audience and actors alike to understand the performance environment as a materially shared space. Building off these preliminary considerations, “Environmental Theater? In Shakespeare's London?” outlines the ecocritical implications of recasting the Shakespearean Theatre as “environmental theatre,” particularly as these implications concern the historically situated environmental and public health concerns of early modern Londoners.

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**“Timon’s Terroir:
 Toward a Culinary Hermeneutic of Shakespeare”**

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This essay reads *Timon of Athens* for its culinary and ecological knowledges, grounding my analysis in a dinner-seminar conducted with a group of chefs, farmers, authors, and food activists, in which the participants collectively planned, cooked, and ate a meal derived from the play while discussing the play’s three eating scenes (1.2, 3.6, and 4.3). Using cooking, eating, and performance as a hybrid hermeneutic to analyze the play produces new insights about *Timon’s* conceptions of hospitality, community, and commensality, as well as about the relevance of current food policy to Shakespeare’s work.

**““The silver spring where England drinks”:
 Shakespeare’s Sewers and Bodily Ecopolitics”**

**Laurie Johnson, University of Southern Queensland,
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Separating bodily processes from the world in privies and water closets resulted ironically in a staggering rise in effluent in England’s waterways. Measures by the crown to improve flow also shaped a link in the ecopolitical imaginary between water, property, and governance. Playhouses participated in this process by concentrating populations in spaces draining into a sewer. Sewer Commission records thus help locate playhouse sites but also bear witness to these mechanisms of regulation. This paper pinpoints moments when such regulation affected playhouse business, and discusses plays bearing traces of these processes (*Edward II*, *1Henry IV*, *2Henry VI*, and *The Tempest*).

“Coriolanus in the Clouds”

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My paper asks an old question again, and it’s about the empty stage. As part of an attempted cognitive turn in my approach to ecostudies, I want to narrow in on what exactly changes in the performer/audience interaction when a material scene is added. How, that is, can we theorise the difference between experiencing the bare stage auditoriums and the curtains and sliding scenes of the restoration theatres? Or the immersive projections of 21st century designers? What are the cognitive processes at stake in imagining, re-imagining or witnessing? And what do they tell us about our relationship with the material world and the nonhuman environment? Concentrating here, in my 12 pages, on the bare stage, I’ll take *Coriolanus* and *The Winter’s Tale* as starting points.

“Action with things: Shakespeare, Ecology, and the Aesthetic”

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Ecological awareness marks a return to the aesthetic. Yet in being ‘attuned’ to object worlds and veering towards art, the object oriented ontologies of Morton (and Harman) have drawn

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largely on poetry rather than performance. This paper recasts the ‘ecological space of attunement’ in a playful dimension. Asking the ‘how now’ of how things exist inside/outside the ecological intimacies of performance.

“Shakespearean Walkscapes”

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This essay draws on recent work in pedestrian aesthetics and the phenomenology of perception to argue that the affordances of the Shakespearean stage—its texts, techniques of footwork, technologies of footwear, and built environmental design—worked to unsettle a hylomorphic conception of human agency orientated towards the head and hands by means of an aesthetic walkscape that reorientated bystanders’ understanding of everyday modes of movement in the world through its enactment of a play-world performed and perceived through the feet. It considers Shakespeare shoes not solely as static, finished objects of “material culture,” defined by their form and function as artifacts of handicraft, but as things worn with the feet in an ongoing processual activity of transitive and intransitive wearing in, on, through and by an enviroing, ever-transforming world. The worn shoe continually undergoes a transformative process of conformation and deformation through an ongoing conjuncture of materials-in-movement in the world. These materials-in-motion include not only shoe leather (and other materials used in shoemaking), but also the wooden boards of the stage, and the skin, sinews, and bones of the feet and legs. The act of treading the boards transforms the contours and is transformed by the affordances and constraints of these and other materials assembled in performance, which must therefore be studied relationally.

**“Ecological Adaptation in Montana:
Timon of Athens to Timon of Anaconda,”**

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By Act 4 of *Timon of Athens*, the titular character has retreated to the woods and declared himself a misanthrope. Seeking roots, he digs in the earth, but in an ironic twist Timon discovers not life-sustaining food, but gold—the agent of his own ruin.

Although the play has received scant attention from eco-critics, there is much to be said about its complex interweaving of economic and environmental systems. Inspired by the particular moment of Timon’s digging, however, I am embarking upon an ecologically grounded reading of *Timon* that will develop into a site-specific performance. This staging of the play will be set in Butte, Montana, once dubbed “the richest hill on earth” because of its vast deposits of ore, especially copper, which became a crucial supplier of North American electricity throughout most of the twentieth century. When the mining industry collapsed in the 1970s, however, what remained was an economically depressed town, thousands of miles of tunnels beneath the surface, and a massive open-pit mine that filled with toxic water and became the largest superfund site in the US. The boom and bust economic cycle of Butte has thus been accompanied by a dark environmental history from which it is nearly impossible to emerge. For some time I have been interested in how the similar story of Timon can provide an imaginative way to engage with Butte’s history and possible futures on the far side of catastrophe. My paper for the SAA “Ecomaterialism and Performance” seminar will discuss

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the workshops/readings in which I am engaging seven professionally trained and experienced actors. I will be chronicling the impetus for the project, the ecological reading of *Timon*, my script-cutting process, and the challenges and insights rendered by the Butte concept. My purpose is twofold: to work toward a performance of this play in the summer of 2019, and to engage in broader discussions about the rewards, pitfalls, and ethical imperatives of projects like this.

“The Logic of Circulation in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*”

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This essay draws on the history of London’s waterways and their entanglement with the playhouses to re-evaluate the role of water in Thomas Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. Despite increasing civic efforts to control London’s water, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* illustrates how the relentless circulation of water both on and offstage blurs the boundary between the city and the natural resources on which it depended. Circulation, I argue, functions as a “material-discursive practice,” performed by both London’s waterways and the play’s most successful characters, including Moll Yellowhammer, a character who is usually dismissed as passive. Moll’s movement through London’s gutters to the Thames gives her privileged knowledge of London’s logic of circulation, which she uses to move from her father’s house to her new home with Touchwood Junior. In meditating on the relationship between the city and its waterways at the Swan Theatre, the only playhouse open south of the Thames in 1613, *Chaste Maid* also explores how the circulation of London’s waterways impacts both the Company of Watermen and the theater industry, which was slowly relocating to playhouses north of the Thames.

“Horses, Humans, and Domestic Knowledge in *All’s Well that Ends Well*”

Hillary M. Nunn, University of Akron, nunn@uakron.edu

All’s Well That Ends Well deprives audience members of visual evidence both monumental and miniscule as its action unfolds. Battle and bedtrick scenes take place beyond our view; similar practical necessity keeps scenes of medical examination and treatment offstage as well, yet audiences are nonetheless invited to imagine the King’s “notorious” fistula and Helena’s skill in curing it through a “showing of a heavenly effect in an earthy actor.” The play depends on the audience’s ability to understand or at least accept these unseen elements, big and small, as it challenges notions of human bodies as distinct from their environments. Early modern recipe books provide a valuable glimpse of how seventeenth century viewers might have pictured the interconnectedness of human and animal bodies, in health and in sickness, even when such interactions took place out of sight, on the biochemical level. These books make clear that some cures for fistulas could be used on humans or on horses, and the medicines themselves relied on animal products, and at times on veterinarian practices. Such medicines take as a given the human body’s embeddedness on its surroundings, even though the detailed workings of those interactions play out beyond the practitioner’s view. This paper explores how the play invokes the audience’s knowledge of the manifestations, treatments, and cures for disease, even though all prove invisible to the naked playgoing eye. How do notions of early modern domestic health practices, and its interface with the animal, affect the

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play? And how might understanding the dramatic spaces these interspecies medical practices occupy enhance our thinking about medical therapies and ethics today?

“Upcycling *As You Like It* in the Summer of Plastic”

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As the autumn evenings of 2017 autumn nights grew dark, television audiences in the UK tuned into David Attenborough's *Blue Planet*, incensed by images of plastic pollution in the world's oceans. By summer 2018, when Max Webster's *As You Like It* played in soaring temperatures at the Open Air Theatre in Regent's Park, what had come to be known as the 'Blue Planet effect' ensured that plastics troubled a new wave of environmentally-concerned citizens. Webster's production tuned into this preoccupation, featuring a polluted water moat, which separated the stage and audience, and from which Arden was an upcycled escape. The production was variously reviewed in terms of an 'ecoconscious' 'ecoparable' or 'ecocomedy', about 'the sufferings of Mother Earth' and 'environmental catastrophe'. Thinking with Jane Bennett's prolific work on trash in *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Stacy Alaimo's work on oceanic plastic pollution in *Exposed* (2016), and the material remnants of Webster's production – predominantly the daily show reports kept by stage management – this paper will seek to trouble the relationship between scenography and waste during the summer of plastic.

**“The Bishop, the Devil, and the Playwright:
 Responding to Air Pollution in Early Modern England”**

Chloe Kathleen Preedy, University of Exeter, C.Preedy@exeter.ac.uk

Early modern London was notorious for its increasingly poor air quality, and contemporaries linked atmospheric pollution to negative material and spiritual consequences. I will explore how contemporary dramatists responded to such converging anxieties, with the “polluted” playhouse providing a space to evaluate the causes of - and potential cures for - London's atmospheric woes. By comparing William Haughton's *The Devil and His Dame* to Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare's *Sejanus*, *Volpone*, and *Macbeth*, I will suggest that the King's Men's reportorial focus on environmental disaster and response distinguished their dramatic output from that of their Rose- and Fortune-based rivals.

**“Toxic Masculinity: The Environmental Consequences of Patriarchy
 in *The Taming of the Shrew*”**

**McKenna Suzanne Rose, Georgia Institute of Technology,
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This paper takes as its starting point a claim about nature that Katherine makes in her final speech. Women's disobedience, she contends, is as much a threat to the environment as early frosts, “whirlwinds,” (5.2.144), and polluted drinking water. As a result of Petruccio's taming regime, Katherine suggests that a return to a natural gender divide is the only thing that can preserve nature. And yet the sheer amount of stage properties deployed across the whole of *Taming of the Shrew*—the broken glasses and luxury commodities of the Induction,

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Petruccio's monstrous apparel and "house-hold stuff" (3.2.231), the pedagogical instruments, and all sorts of uneaten food—suggest that Katherine's claim is inconsistent with the processes that produced it. That is, not only are seemingly natural gendered categories created through an impress of artificial objects, but also the mass quantity of material objects required to produce, however briefly, the categories that divide men from women in *Shrew* threaten to deplete the same natural resources they claim to preserve.

“Staging the Cave: Dwelling in Nature”

Dr. Jeffrey S. Theis, Salem State University, jtheis@salemstate.edu

This paper will be an extension of my ongoing ecocritical project on dwelling in early modern England. My focus will be on stagings of “natural” dwellings in *Cymbeline* (the Welsh cave) and *The Tempest* (Prospero's “poor cell”). What are some of the possible ways of representing these places in contemporary performances of the plays and how might these representations help us think about being at home (or not) in the world?

“Oceanic Ignition: Ships Ablaze and Audiences All Afire”

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When Ariel “flames amazement,” in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, risk and prospect merge the play's audience with the performance's storm, just as that storm engulfs the Italian mariners. The effect is at once terrible and captivating: when Miranda laments what she has seen from land, Prospero responds, “Be collected”—as though his daughter, even as a spectator, is in danger of breaking apart like a ship at sea. Taking Shakespeare's language of amazement and spectral ecology as a jumping-off point, this paper investigates how the theater inflected the relationship between early modern mariners and their flammable ships. Juxtaposing contemporary accounts of St. Elmo's fire or *corpo sancto* (e.g. John Davis, 1605) with the East India Company's dreadful taxonomy of oceanic ignitions (“fired,” “blown up,” “burnt”), I explore how early modern audiences could have found themselves implicated—in amazement, and at risk—in the language and performance of ships ablaze.