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Writing in the Green: Imperatives towards an Eco-n-temporary Theatre Canon

Abstract: This article reflects on the sociopolitical, cultural, and health landscape(s) of our current moment in time, addressing how intersecting crises have delivered us to an unprecedented moment for drama, theatre, and performance. As communities across the world have had to dispense with staples of everyday life – attending live theatre performances being one of these –, so art, in all its forms, has never been more significant in its capacity to bring us together, even if modes of togetherness have shifted in their referentiality and locationality. As the article proposes, we need to take an intuitive approach to the appreciation of how our ecologies – in their broadest iteration – have been impacted and realigned by the COVID-19 pandemic in such ways that we can expect that our future scholarship(s) on plays, place, and landscape will and, indeed, ought to reflect this experience. Dialogues on theatre and environment, which are already intersectional, are now receiving yet another focusing lens through the pandemic.

The article also suggests that our understandings of how our ecologies have been adapted invite a consideration of new modes of engaging with the environment in our discourses – and of the very term itself and what it might encompass – and new economies in calibrating our discourses to reflect our radically redistributed individual and collective experiences. The text offers examples of categories that emerge particularly strongly where spatial liminality is key; in so doing, it asserts that in-betweenness is a central element towards understanding our contemporary role and responsibilities: from collapsing binaries (environment/economy) to the unmoored experience of our times.

Keywords: environment, liminality, COVID-19, in-betweenness, mobilities, Ella Hickson, *ANNA*, Duncan Macmillan, *Love Lockdown*, Rachel De-lahay, *Circles*

This article reflects the content of a keynote paper delivered at the conference to which this special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* is dedicated and, as such, aims to retain at least part of the liveness and tenuousness

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involved in sharing nascent research with a community of peers. It is also significant to frame the text that follows, with reference to the fact that the thoughts that informed the keynote, from its inception as a conference paper to its development into a publication, have had a longer journey than they might have normally had. As I query this contentious term, *normal*, and its derivatives, given that in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic they have been radically redefined, so I am mindful of the fact that I consider the longer gestation period from which this paper has benefited an event that I am now able to evaluate for any positive implications, which do not, however, stem from a positive root. I refer to a benefit on account of the fact that the field of reference has been expanded; the considerations have, hopefully, become richer. At the same time, I also wonder as to the version of this paper that never was and that cannot be: more polemical, perhaps, also more outspokenly activist. Rather, the paper has become more sombre, but also more layered; more empathetic on account of more exposure, more resilient in the face of more social and public health trauma, and, as such, also, hopefully, more sincere and more sentient.

The experience of COVID-19 has undoubtedly humbled us all, and, indeed, those of us working in and/or with theatre and performance. It has become essential, as one of its many aftermaths, to lean into the work – and into the world – more quietly and more patiently, more dialectically and more uncertainly, and to listen so that we might better absorb what it is we need to say. In other words, the world in which I received the invitation for the keynote, in the autumn of 2019, was very different from the one in which I delivered it, not in a conference venue, but in my living room, in the summer of 2021. Given that spatial and environmental concerns in their broadest iterations figure prominently in my work, and especially so in the context of the theme of the 2021 CDE conference, critical theatre ecologies, the poignancy of the experience expanded exponentially, as I continued to interrogate locality and unmooring, as well as in-betweenness, for both their challenges and their gifts. While the keynote itself was a domestic affair, its content was anything but; and even though it was informed by reference to the private domain, it also drew on the domestic experiences that became collective, forever unsettling the relationship between private and public realms and rendering it essential to recast what preceded the pandemic under the light of what happened next. We often make the claim that the theatre is the most dynamic of the art for(u)ms because of the compresence it compels – it became, then, compelling, to test its prescience and, this time, its own elasticity and adaptability to our rapidly emerging new states of (co-)being.

(Re-)Defining the Green: Imperatives and Clarifications

Since the spring of 2020, in the context of COVID-19 adjustments and restrictions towards the management of the global pandemic, our ecologies have shrunk on the same scale as they have broadened: dramatically. This is not a contradiction in terms, as what was lost in physical experience was gained in online presence, at the same time as the metaphorical usage of one of the terms that indicate internet popularity, *viral*, became displaced by its literal significance: the contagiousness in breath or touch. The room became the gravitational centre of our existence, remaining physical and tangible to us, each of its single owners, as it became virtual and unreachable to all others – those we communicated with in Internet contexts, whether personal or professional. Transport became largely reduced – or is it restored? – to that afforded us by our own bodies. We have hungered for contact and touch, but we have had to police ourselves and likewise be policed against them, as a gesture towards preserving the greater good. By retreating, we have preserved not only each other, but, also, our natural world. It took a virus as aggressive as this one and a context as critical to jolt us into action. Before this event, which will need to be judged historically for its effectiveness as a turning point, left to our own devices, we had largely failed.

I have investigated in previous research what the relationship between environment and economy can be, while also advocating for a dismantling of binaries (see, for example, *Theatre & Environment*); it is therefore particularly disconcerting that environment and economy appear to be the one enduring binary. Where one thrives, the other one suffers. It is the troubling of this binary that motivates a part of my current research, probing how, as theatre academics, we might also recalibrate our economies, namely, the economies of how we reflect on theatre. Our thematic, critical, and analytical balances require adaptation. The environment, in other words, ought to not be relegated to one singular section, in any piece of writing, for it is too nuanced and wide-ranging for that; it unfolds in different intersecting directions, which, since this pandemic, have become even more complex and unpredictable. Therefore, this paper calls for a disruption of extant ecologies of space and content distribution in academic writing on theatre and environment, towards a new practice of care towards the world and each other, enabling the environment to shift as a gravitational centre, which I imagine as a dynamic and pluralist gesture.

Even though the title of this paper still hinges on wordplay with the words *eco-* and *contemporary*, *eco-* has shifted since the original inception to indicate not only the ecological, but, also, the economic. After all, if two words share a

prefix, that must, on a certain cognitive level, imply that they were not always thought of as binaries; that if one such word represented the *discourse*, or *logos* (eco-logy), regarding the home (*oikos*), and if the other word represented the *rules*, or *nomos* (eco-nomy), that applied to managing this "home," then, combined, they stand to provide us with a methodology for balancing our modes of engagement with the world around us, but also with our immediate universe: our work. If COVID-19 has taught us how to manage lives from within the home and how to manage that home in the context, in direct accord, and with immediate bearing on what happens outside it, it is such synergies that we ought to apply to our scholarship, too. This would encourage the engagement with place, space, nature, landscape, environment, to become not merely the trope of a – however growing – specific group of scholars who have fostered this area in theatre studies, but of more of us, to the best of our capacities, and without sacrificing our individual sensibilities as thinkers.

In her recent monograph *Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology and Environment in American Theater*, Theresa J. May refers back to Una Chaudhuri's seminal work distilled in a methodological approach built on an "understanding [of] the ecological themes and implications in *any and all* plays and performances, not merely plays expressly about environmental themes" (9–10). I stand in complete agreement and also find it necessary to open up the question more broadly than "ecological themes and implications," which might still function on the hypothesis of carving out delineated spaces where we might detect the ecological, environmental, or nature-related theme (not to imply that these terms are interchangeable). That is, I also wish to advocate a dynamic reassessment of how we might proceed that might shift the dominant economies of analytical distribution. This concerns the appreciation of the fluidities that make up our contemporary experience.

I turn to May once more, reflecting on a rather significant critical, theoretical, and methodological position that she articulates in *Earth Matters on Stage*:

> Whether mainstream or grassroots, these plays [May's case studies], performances, and the stories they transmit have become part of not only *what* we think but also *how* we think, and how we understand our place in and kinship with the land. (13)

As May goes on to underline:

> At the heart of this braided history and play analysis is an assertion that the human imagination is an ecological force and that our stories have social and ecological consequences. The stories we tell touch the land. Storytelling becomes policy-making as stories told and enacted inform values and ideologies, which, in turn, shape individual and collective behaviors. In this way, theatrical representation participates in shaping perceptions, desires, behaviors, and policies towards the land and its biotic communities. (13)

May additionally stresses that her approach is "centrally concerned with how the dynamics of racism, sexism and economic inequity intersect with environmental concerns" (13–14) given that the ultimate purpose is "To underscore how theater might activate an eco-civic imagination" (14). She proposes her methodological approach as action towards meeting this aim, "elucidat[ing] the ways by which theater has represented the complex interweaving of ecological degradation and human oppression" and towards "mending broken relations (with the land and others)" (14). It is also important to note May's description of "theater as a site of civic discourse that has influenced and reflected society's relatedness to the land, and that might help us compassionately navigate the social changes that have occurred and will occur as a result of climate change" (14). Although in my own recent work I have purposefully ceased using the term *change*, replacing it with *crisis* or *emergency* (*crisis* does recur in other parts of May's book, though *emergency* does not), I am otherwise in full endorsement of her commentary here, not least because it facilitates a bridge to one of the most seminal discourses on literature and landscape: Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*.

Almost 50 years since its first publication in 1973, Williams's study remains a rigorous, considerate, and astute account of how literary output produces the society within which it is rooted, within which it sprouts, rather than merely being produced by it. That it does so by prioritising dialogues on land is of particular importance, because it serves as apt record of how our changing relationship to this land is a primary sociopolitical barometer. I have been reflecting on Williams's work afresh recently, in the context of my research on what I would describe as "interspace": the site in-between that is the ultimate locus of our experience and that has risen from "residual" to "emergent," undermining the binary orthodoxies of the "dominant" (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 121–127), to radically reshape, not least in the context of the pandemic, how we live our lives, and to invite us to produce new accounts of how these lives are lived. It also invites us to trace the seeds of this change in plays that can be thought of as pioneering, not merely capturing and registering, but also producing these in-betweennesses towards asserting the theatre's primacy in capturing the new ecologies of fluidity in the 21st century. This is a cognitive shift of transience and transition reflected in the in-between locales that so many of the most astute and formally innovative plays of the post-2000 period have engaged with, embedding, in their own structure, the seed of the uncertain, the mutable, the moving, the unmoored. "A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times" (1), writes Williams by way of introduction, throwing the binary into doubt, without, at the same time, undermining the distinctiveness of either of these spaces.

Williams is still a pioneer in his assessment of the relationship between economies and ecologies, managing to evade the – however founded – gloom-

iness of some studies that treat the symbiosis as profoundly uneven and antithetical, by attempting to account for the symbiosis as dialectical. Perhaps this is owing to his own experience featuring so vividly: "living and travelling and working, I have come to visit, and to need to visit, so many great cities, of different kinds, and to look forward and back, in space and time, knowing and seeking to know this relationship, as an experience and as a problem" (3). Such is the dynamic of the non-binary: it contains possibilities, not limitations; it is not closed up, it is prolific. It is in transit that the observation happens. The itinerant, therefore, matters. The itinerant is economy of time and space, while shaping an ecology of time and space. It is the in-between that produces the lucidity, the reflection, the distillation. The in-between is not incidental – it is not happenstance; it is the "how" and the "where" both at the same time. Without it, no centre holds – and it is this, forever shifting and always a matter of perception, that might even determine where that centre is, if there is a centre, or, indeed, whether there is even a purpose to seeking one – whether that very gesture does not, in fact, contravene the ecologies of the contemporary spatiotemporal distributions of our experience.

This article also reflects on the imperative to illuminate the dark corners – those lives, or aspects of lives, that might be passed off as marginal, minute, and/or immaterial – so as to do better justice to the shifting ecologies of our everyday. As May further argues: "These stories can build relationships, crack outdated ideologies, open new possibilities, envision futures, and help to (re)shape the social, political and ecological landscapes of our lives" (15). My current research focuses on stories with the capacity to perform this essential task, while illuminating the interstices. This is what I refer to as "interspaces," and I argue that these can be mental, physical, emotional, cultural, social, political, geographical, or their cross-iterations. Doing away with binaries without the erasure of individual characteristics, I am concerned with how the fluid, in-between space has the unique power, in its indeterminacy and, perhaps, owing to it, in its dynamism, to capture our complex contemporary ecologies and the transitions we are both experiencing and producing.

Neglect of the in-between equals neglect of the environment – because it is that which is there by default that we fail to see and its agencies that we fail to register. In *Reimagining Industrial Sites: Changing Histories and Landscapes*, Catherine Heatherington argues: "Often, when writing about the relationship between people and place, material things are overlooked, or left unexamined, with discussions of place identity or place attachment taking preference" (1). Nonetheless, as Heatherington also notes, it is crucial to account for "the states of flux that these sites are subject to" (1). Even though Heatherington's argument is tailored to a specific kind of landscape, I find expansive referentiality in and extensive affinities with statements such as the following:

> the nature of industry dictates that these [industrial] landscapes will be temporary: part of an economic and political system that determines when they are unproductive, no longer needed, obsolete (Orange, 2015). The company moves on, is closed down, forgotten, and yet the physical presence in the landscape remains, together with the men and women who worked and still live there. These people's past lives and memories are intertwined with the now increasingly derelict landscape. [. . .] materiality is only one aspect: people bring their own memories and histories to bear on these landscapes. (1)

This is why, as Heatherington observes, we ought to be concerned with "both the tangible and the intangible" (1). Conceptualised by Heatherington as a mutually inclusive pair, a non-binary, the tangible and the intangible are my concern here, too. That is, the flux that sites are subject to, which may be socioeconomically driven, is interwoven with the flux in human lives: lives that impact and are also impacted by site and landscape. The material entity reverberates with presence, even in the absence of the human; and, of course, it is its own site, both itself and a remnant of itself at the same time. It is such human and nonhuman fluidities, transitions, in-between states, and their complex ecologies that I am concerned with; it is these darker slithers that seek elucidation.

The title of this paper, "Writing in the Green," anticipates this approach: it is a mode of inscribing an ecological reading, a vibrancy, a growth of life, one with its inner rhythms, to contexts that might be thought of as barren, marginal, perhaps even irrelevant – to the in-between and overlooked. By ecological I do not mean only but, rather, also environmental: the green – the flourishing, the present, the fleshy – is a sign of life; but it does not reduce itself to the semiotic pastoral association that it might often have been affiliated with, somewhat quaintly and somewhat by default. If we are talking about the new economies in our methodological approaches to reading theatre, an understanding of ecology as more inclusive and expansive, then what is it that this "greening" inscribed in the interspaces might reveal to us? And how might we go about broaching these ecologies?

In the next part, therefore, I shall provide an indicative selection of certain areas where my present research is focusing on identifying the green, the sign of life, the flux that is no less important than a fixity or a certainty: the flux that becomes the standing point of reference, in fact, in the absence of a certainty – environmental, social, political, and/or economic. The flux that reveals that certainty and fixity are more a projection of desire than a reality, even though they have, nonetheless, asserted their dominance. In other words, the enquiry is motivated by querying the grand narratives of materialism and belonging, and allowing the elastic, the mobile, the illusive and elusive to claim their space. Within such an inquiry, for the purposes of this article, I will concentrate on three representative thematic clusters discussed in the following sections.

The Room

In his seminal work *The Poetics of Space*, which endures as paradigm for how we conceptualise our microverses in the context of our universe, Gaston Bachelard probes "The Dialectics of Outside and Inside." Drawing on this non-binary construction, I am interested in exploring the potentialities towards a revised dialectics of inside/outside, whereby the home and, within it, the individual room function as a framing device. Through it, we observe and experience the world, the room existing both within a broader geographical framework and as the core of our being. I am specifically concerned with how our experience of living in a pandemic has transformed our relationship to our intimate spaces and the function and locationality of these spaces within a social framework, due to the recalibrating and recentring that the pandemic has generated. This shifts the focus to the domestic, towards the creation of a new public sphere, hybrid by default. I am especially concerned, since COVID-19, with how the virus, too, might serve as a lens through which to re-view dialogues focusing on ecologies of duty, care, and protection of the self and of others – and of locating these terms in their contemporary sociopolitical context, newly charged and refocused.

The complex relationship of the inside to the outside world, whereby one both impacts the other and exists as separate from it, has long set the tone for stage representations of crisis in its different iterations. I am considering paradigms of what we might describe as intimate plays, perhaps ones that we might have previously described as even claustrophobic, before COVID-19 redefined confinement (which is not to imply that phobia and trauma have been ameliorated, or to disregard agoraphobia as another potential consequence of pandemic enclosure). The weight, therefore, lands on plays that can be read in the context of confinement producing an escalation, tilting the equilibrium heavily to the home as accelerator for events with a sociopolitical bearing. The process concerns an appreciation of how the domestic has become elevated to its own ecosystem, sometimes even involving scenarios of survival of the fittest, conceptualised both physically and mentally. As a framing note for what follows in the next and ensuing sections, I must add that this also operates on the methodological shift of analysing pre-COVID plays through a perspective that benefits from the reconsideration of private space that the pandemic has delivered.

Ella Hickson's *ANNA* (2019), co-created with Ben and Max Ringham, whose audioscape forms an essential part of the play, deals with a virulent social context: the virus is of a different nature than that of the pandemic, yet similar in that the plight of the broader social environment penetrates the domestic. The action takes place in 1968 East Berlin, in a couple's apartment, over the course of one evening. The eponymous character throws a dinner party, seemingly to celebrate

her husband Hans's promotion; in reality, the purpose is to frame as a traitor and deliver to justice the man who has taken a position as her husband's new line manager (known as Christian Neumann). There are complex personal histories – the man's complicity in her mother's death, most relevantly – that compel Anna to serve, not only as a member of the Party, but, also, according to her own moral compass.

The play's choreography is very delicate, in terms of plot as well as technology. Hickson's text exemplifies that perfect marriage of form and content; and the community mood that runs as thematic undercurrent is accentuated by the audience's involvement, as we all partake in the observation and preservation of the Other. One of the play's concerns is, also, precariousness, and that precariousness is felt viscerally. As spectators, we are together but also apart. As the bugged, spied upon bodies of each character are individually and collectively vulnerable, so are ours – we surrender more of our body than in the average play, and more of our body is made use of in different ways. The headphones that offer us binaural stage sound at the same time separate us from the sounds immediately around us.

The performance takes place behind a partition: it may be a transparent wall (signifying at least in part the windows in the couple's apartment), but it is also a real barrier; a form of pre-COVID social distancing. But what, in my view, is especially prescient about *ANNA*, is an event that occurs after the performance has concluded and as the cast take their curtain call. At that moment, they hold up signs, which at first carry the words "keep us safe," and then "no spoilers"; it is the only, arguably, lighter moment in what has been, otherwise, a charged and tense environment, riddled with political precariousness – which is, in itself, alluded to here, given the semantic ambiguity (clarified in "no spoilers"). The reference is to protecting the plot of the play, for avoidance of compromising the suspense. Reflecting on the production today, the words "keep us safe" do not only imply that as listeners – or fellow conspirators, perhaps – we are complicit in the action of the play, more than mere observers. In 2021, and also in 2022, drawing on the image of humans separated by a glass partition, visible and untouchable, while carrying the knowledge that the survival of that Other, a living, breathing mirror of ourselves – and yet someone else entirely, therefore another non-binary – depends on us, our thoughts are different. The critical ecologies and synergies of compresence are different in a world where we have absorbed, rehearsed, and executed instructions for a safer environment at a time of radical crisis.

There are, then, political viruses and physical viruses; the home is more than a refuge: it is charged and exposed. Isolation is a constant, irrespective of its root, and what *ANNA* contributes to these dialogues, that is quite nuanced and deep-reaching, is that the home might also become the centre of political operations, whose precarious ecology matches that of the household itself. At a time of

COVID, the personal is, of course, by default social and political, generating an additional dimension to such parameters. The city may be all Anna's own, as she comments at one point – "You know the great thing about Berlin. It's all mine" (18) –, but she gazes at it from the confines of her high-floor apartment, whose architecture is a manifestation of the political ideology of housing itself. The outside is already in. The inside is what maintains the status of the outside. But as, at the end of the play, Anna's marriage lies in tatters as a consequence of the enterprise she has just brought to a successful outcome, so the cracks in the political system itself are beginning to show.

The Virtual

The digital milieu is the definitive emerging space of our time, liminal by default. In our present environmental discourses, I argue that we ought to work towards establishing a dialogue between the pre-, mid-, and post-COVID era. The latter is understood here as equally a reflection of the experiences that have already been shaped during the pandemic and an anticipation of the state we might inherit as its legacy. I advocate for a sensitive approach to this kind of scholarship. I am concerned that the pandemic might be mined and monetised, not necessarily considerately; and I hope that the critical dialogues emerging from COVID-19 within our primary disciplinary intersections of drama, theatre, and performance will be such that will interrogate the phenomenon for the collective trauma – physical, mental, and emotional – that it has been. By this I indicate an interrogation of its pathologies and pathogenies within interdisciplinary scholarship in the humanities that both probes and grows roots in its enquiries, rather than treating the pandemic as a passing condition from which, once we have inoculated ourselves, we can fully move on. It is essential, rather, to consider the pandemic as a condition that we have now inherited – including its treatment as an ailment of an already sick planet.

   The links between COVID-19 and the climate crisis, then, ought to be pursued with consistency, bearing in mind that the COVID pandemic is an event that has happened to our generation(s), and that has, therefore, shaped us. Our knowledge of living with COVID, which, in many cases, will entail first-hand experience and, in multiple others, the everyday adjustment to a new way of being together, ought to refocus our discourses on plays that concern our public and private ecologies, including our most intimate ecologies and pathologies. This is especially significant in the context of how we will go on to read plays predating COVID that deal with virtual environments: as with any substantial, mass socio-literary-cultural-historical-political event, and COVID is all of the above; this, too, has left a

mark on our perception. It ought to feature in our discourses because it has generated a paradigm shift.

We discuss footprints, not least environmental, with the awareness that each one leaves a trace. Our virtual environments, further to our actions online, always traceable, also constitute emissions and consumptions of energy associated with the transfer of the vast majority of our activities to the realm of the web, creating a substantial footprint of their own in the COVID era. Such considerations ought to enter our discussions when it comes to accounting for how our electronic footprint has outgrown our physical one, while, at the same time, tracing the risks, visible and invisible, to our health – mental, emotional, and physical – and to that of the planet, on multiple levels. We ought, then, to rigorously query how our shifting relationship to the digital from 2000 onwards provides the basis for the ultimate in-betweenness: of the virtual both as gateway to the world and as destination unto itself, forever oscillating between the private and public domains. The latter leads to a further parameter with reference to my next example: that our ecologies have shifted online to such an extent raises the possibility of being surprised to re-encounter the physical world that awaits us. In that spatiotemporal context of confinement, in-between, our own attitude towards and engagement with the external, may have changed radically. Novel hesitations, or, in a darker scenario, phobias, may have arisen; new cohabitation ecologies, rhythms and balances, as well as new choreographies of sharing and consuming can, likewise, be reasonably expected to have entered the frame of our experience. The transition to the virtual may well have created new opportunities, but it has also, in some cases, fostered new exposures, new transgressions, and new ecologies of trauma.

In terms of recent performance texts, these states are astutely observed in Duncan Macmillan's *Love Lockdown*. Produced for the online platform of the Schaubühne Berlin during the early lockdown period of 2020, the piece tells the story of two characters, Lena and Ben, who begin Internet dating as the pandemic strikes, indeed, fully online because of COVID. Ben and Lena meet for a disastrous dinner, but they overcome its catastrophic awkwardness to actually date, fall in love, share moments of intimacy, and, ultimately, worn out by the practicalities of their remote-access love affair, break up. Their relationship traverses all the stages of modern courtship – except accelerated and entirely decorporealised. As Macmillan's text informs us "*A year or so*" after the end of their relationship, Ben and Lena make online contact again. Meanwhile, a significant event has taken place: with the pandemic largely in the past, Lena has caught a glimpse of Ben in the street by coincidence. Rather than speak to him in that moment, she reaches out to tell him of the encounter in that in-between space where their experience has, in fact, always been real: in their virtual world. Even though, throughout the

piece, Lena has kept referring to the "real world" as the physical one (three occurrences, in different parts of the text), her own actions now evidence that there had been much reality in virtuality all along – or, as Ben put it early on: "It *is* the real world, I really wish you wouldn't keep saying it's not the real –" As the pain of their charged separation seems to have healed, Ben and Lena return to familiar banter. The safe environment that they had created with each other allows their intimacy to begin blooming again. Once they establish that they are both interested, they make plans to meet again – or is it, in fact, for the first time, as they will now meet in public, in the physical domain, disrupting their respective ecologies of insularity for the risk, or, perhaps, the reward of forging a new ecology of coexistence and togetherness?

It is uplifting and even reassuring that a text written during the pandemic dares to imagine a post-COVID world. But *Love Lockdown* is also, and this is where Macmillan's intuitiveness as a playwright of the intimate interpersonal domain registers quite profoundly, an occasionally disconcerting text. For Lena, her equilibrium with the outside world has become severely disrupted. Life has continued, yes, but she views her environment – and herself within it – as tenuous. The precariousness of individual and environment, which was always mutually implicatory, but which we perhaps mostly viewed from an anthropocentric perspective of privilege, has finally been rendered reciprocal because of the pandemic. When each character confesses their feelings, the vastness of the trauma becomes manifest: "In the global scheme of things I'm / It's been fine / It's been a weird time / It's been hard," admits Ben. Lena goes even further: "I still feel like this is all a nightmare and I'm going to wake up. I feel so lucky. I feel like any second something much worse is going to start happening. I – I don't know how I feel."

The discourses on imminent crisis, linked to an environmental emergency already unfolding, had, of course, been highly publicised well before the pandemic. Yet there was an element of hubris in the almightiness of the human and in delusions of resilience and survival on a planet that was struggling to breathe. The latter is a state that Macmillan aptly captured in *Lungs* (2011), especially in Katie Mitchell's production for the Schaubühne (since 2013), quite literally (Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre*). It is only since 2020, in the face of the deserted cities, the forms of rewilding that we have seen, the injection of a radical uncertainty into our everyday, the absence of all that we might have taken for granted from an anthropocentric perspective, that a crisis is, finally, globally and collectively felt. Once the dystopian has set in, its possibilities are endless – such is the state that Ben and Lena, and, arguably, all of us, have inherited. We are tentatively beginning to repopulate our worlds, but our relationships to our environments are altered; even if we have muscle memory, the narrative has been disrupted.

Our ecologies are different now; the "real world" is no longer necessarily the physical one. Equally embattled, individual and environment must now reacquaint themselves with each other, on more equal terms.

In her essay "We Miss Each Other, but Do We Even Know Each Other?" literary scholar Katherine Mannheimer weighs our extraordinary recent circumstances as spectators and citizens to arrive at astute critical commentary. She asks: "[the] inability to go to the theater has inevitably raised the question of what theater does, and how: how might it be able to make sense of our shared experiences – in all of their anxiety and pain, as well as their joys – in ways that other art forms cannot?" Or elsewhere: "Can we trust our physical senses more than, or less than, our powers of intellectual comprehension?" and "How might the additional leap of imagination required by [. . .] the screen, either impede or enhance our ability to learn from [. . . theatre]?" As Mannheimer concludes:

> These months spent without access to in-person productions have already begun, [. . .] to offer us a new perspective on how theater works, and I am eager to find out what kinds of plays will result. I am looking forward to reading those plays, perhaps even seeing them streamed; but I am looking forward, too, to encountering them through live performance – to experiencing, again, that shared intake of breath.

Drawing on this rich range of concerns, I shall focus on two points: Mannheimer encourages, in the wake of COVID, alongside a critical enquiry of how it is that we connect with emerging types of online theatre, also a reevaluation of how we connect with theatre more broadly. It is such a methodology that I propose we ought to bring to plays that predate COVID, and, of course, plays that take place in virtual environments are to be prominent among these. But to conclude this section, what makes Macmillan's *Love Lockdown* particularly significant is that it is a play written for COVID times that can hold its ground after COVID, assuming that stage is reached: its dramaturgy is rich, and the text is not exclusively a response to the pandemic but a significant effort to capture the human condition at a time of radical crisis.

Such an attempt encompasses, returning to Mannheimer, the playwright's capturing of the "anxiety and pain" that emerges from viscerally, yet by default in a disembodied way, attempting to connect to each other. This includes the most intimate of relationships, our changing attitudes to which have been producing a considerable – and perhaps long-lasting or even permanent – alteration of the ecologies of our online environments in themselves and, additionally, of our positions within them. The plural, here, indicates that even though the online realm is singular, within it, infinite sub-environments proliferate. In turn, such an emerging ecology consequently alters the ecologies of our natural, physical, or what we might have formerly referred to as "real-world" environments, register-

ing our absence and anticipation, but also, perhaps, the trepidation and even fear associated with once more engaging with them in the future.

The Mobile

The final category that this article discusses concerns spaces that are entities unto themselves, without, however, having a rooted position. There is a similarity to the previous category in that, when interacting with these spaces, we are both there and not in a singular fixed place; we experience a flow. Specifically, this section will concentrate on the vehicle as both means and site, asking how transit may not necessarily imply mobility as a desirable condition, but as one that is at best a strategy of distraction, providing a form of narrative and rhythm to otherwise scattered lives, or, at worst, a mode of exploitation, functioning as the in-between space and catalyst of victimisation and oppression, as in human trafficking – in conditions of passivity and captivity. In COVID times, of course, it is also imperative to consider governmentally imposed stasis – lockdowns and mobility restrictions – which becomes an internalised, self-imposed regulation. With these new *stases* has come, at times, a healing and, at others, also a rewilding of urban environments. It will be important to follow how plays and performances emerging in the post-COVID era engage with this reality.

In its diversity, the mobility field within the broader intersecting domains of geography and sociology is fertile ground on which to draw. I shall keep my references brief by concentrating on the work of John Urry, whose transdisciplinary perspective facilitates a consideration of mobility ecologies, which, in turn, might be expanded to include parameters of confinement ecologies, including limbo, or states of transience, whether forced or self-selected. For the purposes of this article, I shall concentrate on a pattern that reflects both externally imposed, classed limbo, and self-determined limbo, the mobility option for the one whose limited privilege cancels out the option of being a *flâneur*, without, however, curbing the instinct.

Rachel De-lahay's *Circles* (2014), my primary example in this section, is concerned with this state – and with the city that both repels and fascinates: a city as fetish. The play largely takes place, in terms of plot, on Birmingham bus number eleven. The teenaged characters of Demi and Malachi, who meet and interact on the bus, provide a telling exchange of how the vehicle's circular movement is considered a means and end unto itself: "So where are you going? And isn't it a little past your bedtime?" asks Malachi. "Coming from you?" Demi retorts. "This ain't no open-top tourist thing, you know. It's the 11." Demi comes back with: "I know. *Your* bus" (32). In the most revealing comment in the play, arguably, Mal-

achi answers: "And don't you forget it. / I don't even go nowhere anyways. Especially at this hour. Just round and round through this dry place" (33). The choice of word here is fascinating: *dry* to mean uninspiring, but also barren. It is a term that serves well metaphorically but whose literal origin and associated imagery must not be forgotten: drawn from the land it denotes, it is soil and root that may no longer sprout, but that still serves as gravitational force.

Malachi then proceeds to give Demi an ironic tour of underprivileged city suburbs, which, for anyone familiar with the inner ecologies of the broader Birmingham metropolitan area, carries the potential of being equally humorous and painful. In these moments on the bus, real yet also suspended in space and time, Demi and Malachi exist both within and above the structure of the city. That is, Birmingham is both *in* them and functioning independently, perhaps even in spite of them, as its so-perceived barrenness is laid bare – or, perhaps, that very barrenness can be deemed a direct outcome of chronic human transgression, or even mere negligence. In their respective youth, Demi and Malachi are inheritors rather than perpetrators of these conditions, but the way in which the barrenness affects them is no less direct. As they are coming of age, they, too, have a choice to make as to the imprint they will leave on their city. In the meantime, their elective, aimless kind of mobility may appear environmentally transgressive, yet it is no less a mode of being *somewhere* without the illusory promise of a destination. The vessel, then, develops its own ecology; it becomes a self-contained system, which is, at the same time, embedded in a city. Eventually, it serves as one of the ultimate liminalities.

In the space of such dialogues, my concern is dual, involving both the liminality of mobility and its transgressive potentiality; in our future scholarships, it will be crucial to trace how COVID has resharpened these discourses. It will be purposeful to investigate, indicatively, how what Urry describes as "touring the world is how the world is increasingly performed, with many people being connoisseurs and collectors of places" might resonate in our collective, yet also disparate and diverse tomorrows (90). Here, I would also like to consider the following model by Urry, mindful of how the second and third decade (however in its early stages) of the 21st century have already marked a significant shift in how we predicate the climate phenomena embattling the planet:

> Central to global heating has been the reconfiguring of economy and society around "mobilities." [. . .] Large scale mobilities are not new but what is new is the development of this "mobility complex." This involves a number of interdependent components that in their totality remake consumption, pleasure, work, friendship and family life. These components are:
> – the contemporary scale of movement around the world
> – the diversity of mobility systems now in play
> – the especial significance of the self-expanding automobility system and its risks

-    the elaborate interconnections of physical movement and communications
-    the development of mobility domains that by-pass national societies
-    the significance of movement to contemporary governmentality
-    the development of places of excess that mostly have to be travelled to
-    the development of a language of mobility, the capacity to compare and to contrast places from around the world
-    an increased importance of multiple mobilities for people's social and emotional lives. (90)

Let us consider how this multiple mobility is, as we can easily imagine, a privilege, and let us also probe how the hypothesis might be applied to a context such as that which De-lahay examines in *Circles*, where the "multiple mobilities" are circular, repetitive, and inconclusive at the same time as they have an "increased importance [. . .] for people's social and emotional lives."

Bringing these discourses to our present, then, the fissures and mental-health gaps that COVID has created in its halting of mobility ought to factor into our reading of how nonessential but important mobilities have been impacted. That is, we ought to consider how the liminalities of vehicles have been replaced by the liminalities of rooms, seeking the impacts that both sets of ecologies have sustained, as one type of space has become overworn, while the other has grown underused. However antithetical the live rhythms of these sets of spaces might appear, their dynamism and exchange are provable by the mere fact of interdependence in their respective ecologies and of its reversibility upon a change of affairs (here I refer specifically to public health conditions, including the climate), whether gradual or abrupt. As our towns and cities have both welcomed our absence and – at least in part – withered as its outcome, I am concerned with how mobility plays can be re-read with a dual environmental and COVID-adjusted frame of reference. Relatedly, I wonder what the next stage in our mobility patterns might resemble and what new plays and productions might emerge that address our prolonged *stases* and novel arising perceptions of distances and interactional ecologies.

Conclusion

In the face of the shattering facts of climate change and other human-caused planetary biocides, *what if* the skills that you possess, the stories that you tell, and the forms through which you tell them could help to save lives, prevent suffering, heal destruction, reclaim worlds, and transform what it means to be a human animal in a diverse ecological community? (May 15–16)

In response to May, I would propose that we need new maps: we need to recon-ceptualise and reorganise our economies of space. We need to account for the redistribution of our experience – in the inter-, whether accompanied by personal or sectional – also as a result of the pandemic, and perform this very distribution in our scholarly discourses, as we have been performing it in our everyday lives. It is a considerable responsibility to arrive at any such claim, or at any of the claims that this paper has made, because one ought to consider a future of critical dis-course and theatre-making that at the moment we can neither be certain of, nor, to an extent, anticipate. If there is a convergence, I propose, then, that an ampli-fication of our environmentally geared methodologies that acknowledges the global trauma we have sustained, tracing its impact across different ecologies and environments, might be it.

The COVID-19 pandemic has unequivocally bruised us; anthropocentrically speaking, it has made our planet sick and suffering. But the pandemic has also had a positive impact on the nonhuman environment, which it has decongested from human presence. I am concerned, then, when our COVID discourses are riddled by denial. COVID is something that has happened to us, and so we are in a by-default state of historical, social, cultural, physical, and emotional transi-tion. It is these sites, individual, collective, personal and common, corporeal and disembodied, that we ought to claim, assess, address. This is a discussion about interstices, and about finding and attempting to inhabit and survey the space of impact, without, at the same time, crowding it. It is, rather, about allowing the space in question to tell (us) its own stories.

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Bionote

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