



PROJECT MUSE®

The Sun'll Be Hotter Tomorrow: Growing Up with Climate Chaos

Una Chaudhuri

Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities, Volume 2,
Number 1, Winter 2014, pp. 115-121 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5250/resilience.2.1.010>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/583713>

The Sun'll Be Hotter Tomorrow

Growing Up with Climate Chaos

UNA CHAUDHURI

Whenever I hear the phrase “climate change” linked to the word “children,” I reach for my copy of *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. The first chapter of Lee Edelman’s contentious polemic is entitled “The Future Is Kid Stuff,” a title that could serve equally well for an article about how recent plays and movies are deploying the figure of the child in dealing with climate change. A small sampling: *Earthquakes in London* (2010), in which Mike Bartlett gives us the prophetic grandchild of a doom-mongering scientist, countering the real grandchild he advises his daughter to abort in view of the worsening world; *Take Shelter* (2011), in which Jeff Nichols gives us the deaf daughter whose future her visionary father must sacrifice if he cannot remain blind—and deaf—to the ominous signs of climate chaos that all his fellow citizens are busy ignoring; *Snowpiercer* (2013), in which Bong Joon-Ho gives us a postapocalyptic apocalypse whose sole human survivors are two children; and *Interstellar* (2014), in which Christopher Nolan gives us a world-redeeming child who anchors the film’s time-travelling (and death-phobic) plot.

Are these “cli-fi” (climate-fiction) kids similar to or different from the ones who anchored the inescapably conservative politics of reproductive futurism that Edelman fiercely denounced in *No Future*? For Edelman, the politics of futurity used the figure of the innocent child to outline an ideal of health and wholeness that criminalized all nonreproductive sexuality, especially queerness. In his reading, Orphan Annie’s belted out “Tomorrows” became the coercive battle hymn of a (self-)re-

pression (often disguised as self-affirmation) that was practiced on behalf “of a future whose promise is always a day away.”

Well, Annie’s back, not only on Broadway but also in the cli-fi plays and movies I mentioned above, as well as, with appropriately ironized book, music, and lyrics, in *The Great Immensity*, by Steve Cosson and Michael Friedman. Annie’s back but with a difference. She has grown up some—in fact, she’s that other disorderly demon of conservative mythology: a *teenager*! And she is, as one of the show’s postmodernistically allusive lyrics has it, “legion.” The play’s plot centers on a representative group of the world’s children—quite literally representative: one each from every UN-member state—who commit a reverse act of hostage taking by disappearing themselves and refusing to return until the adult world of nations does something concrete about climate change. Their plan, in a lyrical nutshell, is as follows:

We are young.
We do not forget.
We do not forgive.
We are more powerful than nations.
We can stop them.
We can fuck up everything.
We are legion.

The pluralization of the formerly lone—sentimentally, heartbreakingly lone—troped child of Edelman’s analysis is joined in this play with a kind of literalization that is characteristic of ecological discourse: a wariness about (and weariness with) the use of nature as metaphor and symbol. As one of the young protagonists asserts, “I don’t use metaphors, Karl. I always mean what I say.” A devotion to actualities and specifics also characterizes the show’s lyrics, starting with its very first song, where the usual *Inconvenient Truth*–style PowerPoint presentation about climate change is exquisitely transformed by the simple expedient of having its captions sung out instead of spoken:

This is a picture of a jellyfish, the *Aurelia aurita*.
This is a nuclear reactor in Sweden.
And as oceans acidify,
The jellyfish proliferate
And overwhelm the pools that keep the plant from melting down.
This is the picture of an island sinking down into the sea

After lasting for 200 million years
And to catch the world's attention, they hold meetings underwater,
And their ministers make votes in scuba gear.

Instead of “No Future,” then—“No Metaphors.” And instead of one child—many. In this way, *The Great Immensity* confronts—and partially overcomes—two of the main temptations facing climate change art: figuration and individualism. The former is one of the most powerful tools of the imagination; the latter, a tenacious tenet of humanist art. Dismantling rather than redeploying these features—trying out the power of the literal rather than the metaphor and of the collective rather than the individual—seems to be a promising strategy for ecoart, in this work and elsewhere.

The threatened futurity that Edelman tracked in the figure of the endangered innocent child is no longer, in this new context, a convenient fiction. It is a deadly near certainty, and giving persuasive voice—and form—to that certainty is one of cli-fi's greatest challenges. (The dramatic discourse, like the public one, has now moved beyond the problem of proving that climate is happening; the question now is how to get people to pay attention to the proven reality.) In another move that is characteristic of climate change theater (see *Carla and Lewis*, by Shonni Enelow, and *Gaia's Global Circus*, whose creative team famously involved the philosopher Bruno Latour), the play reflexively incorporates the representational dilemma it faces. Now that the more drama- and narrative-friendly plot—the conflict over scientific factuality—is no longer relevant, the problem is one of representational strategy. Thus Julie, one of the teenage protagonists, informs us,

Before we started on this trip around the world, we got like media boot camp. Like how to make whatever we're doing a story. A good story that gets traction. Because it's not just about information, especially about climate change. The information is already there. It's about hearts and minds, you know. And for that, you've got to establish a compelling narrative framework.

Besides the search for a “good story”—an engaging, involving, galvanizing account—the protagonists are also in search of the right tone, the right mode of address. As Julie goes on to say, “I don't want people to think I'm too scheming. I need people to think I'm like innocent and likeable.” Scheming to resemble the galvanizing innocent figure in the

old politics of futurity, Julie in fact helps to demystify that figure, rescuing it from its sentimentalizing role and political regressiveness. In this moment of showing the innocent child growing up, the play's choice of using teenagers—rather than younger children—as its protagonists pays off. Or to be more precise, the choice allows the play to have its sentimental cake and eat it too. The teenagers can still be thought of as “the ‘We Are the World’ kids” (as the skeptical Phyllis calls them) and thus used for the emotional blackmail they are plotting. But the play also shows them to be, like Julie, a bunch of scheming, media-savvy, and adult-manipulating political actors, turning the grown-up world's own hypocrisies against it.

That adult world, unfortunately, tends to seep into and weigh down the action, draining the liberating energy that a “legion” of international, wired-in kids might unleash. The teenagers' plot is nested within a far more conventional one, which is as implausible as the former but with much less imaginative potential. Whereas the teenagers' plot could be imagined as a modern-day Children's Crusade, complete with the bizarre vitality of that episode of mythical history, the main or frame plot involves a tedious married couple, one of whom (the wife, Phyllis) comes equipped with a whining dream of “reproductive futurity” so insistent that when her husband (Karl) runs off to help the plotting teenagers, he leaves behind a vial of his sperm for her. Sadly, nothing in the play ever counteracts this dispiriting account of love (and marriage and sexuality and life). For a play about teenagers, *The Great Immensity* is remarkably lacking in libido. This is surely an unfortunate deficit, especially given the cast of lively characters—not only the teenagers but also groups of field scientists, hackers, and others—who deliver the play's wonderful songs with great charm and wit.

Charm and wit, however, may not be the best stylistic registers with which to approach that feature of climate change that the play's title names—its vast scale. The enormity of this problem sets it apart from all other geopolitical problems our species has ever faced, including nuclear destruction and global war. The play's strategy in dealing with this fact cleverly ironizes its general commitment to literalism by making “The Great Immensity” the name of a gigantic container ship, explaining the oddly redundant name as a “Chinese name that translates badly.” Equally clever and ironic is the fact that Karl misremembers the name as “Big Bigness,” which Phyllis in turn misreads as “big business,”

momentarily revealing the skein of associations between climate chaos and its chief cause.

The play's forthright embrace—in its title—of what makes its subject so resistant to representation (and so susceptible to sentimental metaphors) is bracing and exciting. Among its strategies for dealing with the immensity of climate change is to create a multidimensional and multimedia scenic discourse, figuring the complex time space of globalization while forging an illuminating dialectic between stage space and screen information, between live action, recorded imagery, and (staged) virtual presence. The multiplicity that this scenic discourse captures is full of dramatic—and theatrical—potential, and it is disappointing indeed to see that potential exchanged for a thoroughly conventional ending. In the final scene of the play, the turbulent energies of a kooky children's crusade are nowhere to be felt. Instead, we have a group of—of all things—the *parents* of the self-disappeared kids, with Phyllis making an explanatory speech to the audience, who must now stand in for the TV audience she is addressing. The play ends with a song solo by Karl, in which he compares himself to a “Little boat floating / Alone in the sea / As a great ship goes by / Never noticing me.”

The forlorn image Karl paints returns us to a politically diminished and psychologically isolated position in relation to climate change and its immense challenge. It seems a far cry from the exuberance of the teenagers' “We are legion” that had, after all, moved Karl to such decisive action. How shall we, the audience, read this distance between what he did and what he now feels about it?

To avoid answering that question with utter negativity, I turn to the play's very last lines (which are also the final song's chorus):

But I'll just keep looking for what I can see,
Trying to look for each contingency,
For the next fifty years,
For the next million years . . .

These words return us to an early—and most delightful—moment in the play, when the idea of a contingency was explained to Karl by one of the field scientists in one of the play's two main fictional locales, “a tropical research center located on an island in the Panama Canal.” The scientist, a Colombian paleontologist named Marcos, tells Karl about

the contingency, or “random event,” that made the human race what it is today (the event was the joining together of the once-separate land-masses of North and South America). The amusing lesson he draws from this story (and sings) is: “We are all Panamanian.” This assertion of a common species identity is then contrasted to another, more recent, commonality: “We think the world should be more convenient. That is our contingency.” Speaking of the irony of cutting a canal through the very place that made us who we are, Marcos says that our reason for doing this—convenience—may have far-reaching results that “might not be so . . . convenient.” Besides invoking Al Gore’s seminal climate change movie, this passage also balances our current precarity with a brief vision of human concord, making us “all Panamanians,” all inhabitants of the marvelously generative land we have shared with the play’s characters. One of those characters—a plant scientist named Allie—had described the Panamanian rainforest as “a fantastic complexity” full of “little stories and little lives going on all the time.”

The Great Immensity gives us many “little stories and little lives” and does so with great ingenuity, encapsulating and communicating a remarkable swath of the current discourse on climate change. We emerge well informed about the complexity of the planet we inhabit and the challenges it faces. What the play stops short of, however, is a fully theatrical realization of the crazy kids’ plot at its heart. That wild fabrication, fuelled by youthful energies, is the play’s best invention. It is the play’s own contribution to what it so clearly identifies as the need of the hour: new ideas, no matter how risky, crazy, implausible, courageous, outrageous they may be. In *The Great Immensity*, that idea hinges on taking collectivity seriously, on embracing the wisdom of what the kids call “the hive mind.” The play’s final image—a lone figure on stage—shies away from that embrace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Una Chaudhuri is a collegiate professor of English, drama, and environmental studies at New York University. Her publications include *No Man’s Stage: A Semiotic Study of Jean Genet’s Drama* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986); *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); *Rachel’s Brain and Other Storms: The Performance Scripts of Rachel Rosenthal* (London: Continuum, 2001); and *Land/Scape/Theater*, coedited by Elinor Fuchs (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002). Chaudhuri is a pioneer in the field of ecotheatre—plays and performances

that engage with the subjects of ecology and environment—and helped to launch that field when she guest edited a special issue of Yale’s journal Theater in 1994. Her introduction to that issue, entitled “‘There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake’: Theorizing a Theatre Ecology,” is widely credited as a seminal contribution to the field. Chaudhuri was also among the first scholars of drama and theater to engage with another rapidly expanding new interdisciplinary field, animal studies, and guest edited a special issue of TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies, on “Animals and Performance.” In 2014 she published books in both these fields: an animal studies book entitled Animal Acts: Performing Species Today, coedited with Holly Hughes (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press); and an ecocriticism book entitled The Ecocide Project: Research Theatre and Climate Change, coauthored with Shonni Ennelow (Basingstoke: Palgrave). Besides her scholarly work on theater, ecology, and animals, Professor Chaudhuri participates in collaborative creative projects, including one ongoing multimedia collaboration entitled Dear Climate that was featured in an exhibition on art and climate change in Dublin in the summer of 2014 and at the Dumbo Arts Festival in Brooklyn that fall.