Crisis of Imagination: The Anthropocene

The anthropocentric sense of life has been shaken. [...] There is a universal feeling, a universal fear, that our progress in controlling nature may increasingly help to weave that very calamity it is supposed to protect us from, that it may be weaving that second nature into which society has rankly grown.

— Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*¹

With the advance of globalization, the question of where and how the US and other developed nations dispose of their waste has become increasingly vexed. Centuries of colonial and neocolonial exploitation have left much of the developing world politically, economically, and infrastructurally crippled. It has also become clear that these same developing nations will bear the early brunt of the detrimental effects of climate change brought about by the more developed nations’ unrestrained greenhouse gas emissions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Impoverished African countries are the most vulnerable to devastating droughts and low-lying, coastal, Southeast Asian countries to floods. We have entered what many scientists have come

to refer to as the “Anthropocene,” the proposed designation for the present geological epoch, one in which human activity has made the most lasting impact on the changing planet, acidifying the ocean, altering the atmosphere, and bringing about mass extinctions of plant and animal species. In 2018 the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a report describing the disastrous effects of allowing the atmosphere to warm just 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by 2040, as we are currently on track to do: food shortages, the dispersal of invasive species, the loss of biodiversity, melting polar icecaps, rising sea levels, the spread of disease, and an increase in catastrophic isolated extreme weather events. In essence, for a child born today, the world will likely have been consumed by fire, flood, and tempest by the time she comes of age. According to the UN report, we can avoid such an outcome only by totally and immediately transforming the world’s economy. Even once coal power is eliminated, existing emissions will linger in the atmosphere and continue to cause damage for years.

It is all but inconceivable that we will transform the world’s economy quickly enough. Any hope we had evaporated with the election of Donald Trump, who has said that the notion of climate change is a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese to make US manufacturing less competitive. The US has contributed more than any other country to the atmospheric carbon dioxide that is responsible for rising temperatures, but in 2017, Trump announced his intention to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement on climate change, “absent the identification of terms that are more favorable to the American people.” He has devoted

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his presidency to eviscerating regulations designed to promote conservation domestically and frequently promises that his administration will “bring back coal.” During the G7 summit in August 2019, as the Amazon rainforest burned, Trump declined to even make himself available for a meeting on climate change attended by the other six world leaders present.

In his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh argues that the impending climate catastrophe represents not so much a crisis of nature as a crisis of culture. Climate change poses a problem so enormous that the human imagination is confounded by it, with few artists able to address its consequences or imagine possible alternatives to our current suicide run. It is a reality that only becomes real when it is too late, when one’s home is already underwater. The government of Maldives, whose 350,000 inhabitants live on a collection of coral islands an average of just 2.1 meters above sea level, staged one of the most powerful performance art pieces about climate change to date when in 2009, cabinet members in scuba gear held a meeting underwater to sign a document calling on all countries to cut their emissions in preparation for a UN climate change conference in Copenhagen. Their plea read:

We must unite in a world war effort to halt further temperature rises. Climate change is happening and it threatens the rights and security of everyone on Earth. We have to have a better deal. We should be able to come out with an amicable understanding that everyone survives. If Maldives can’t be saved today, we do not feel that there is much of a chance for the rest of the world.6

The imbalance between those nations responsible for producing the bulk of the waste and the nations now struggling most

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desperately with its disposal was, perhaps inadvertently, underscored by *Holoscenes*, an ambitious project that Lars Jan’s company Early Morning Opera installed in Times Square in June 2017 as a part of the World Science Festival. Without explicitly citing it as an influence, *Holoscenes* echoed the aesthetics of the Maldives cabinet meeting/performance at considerably greater expense. The performance took place inside a twelve-ton aquarium in the middle of the pulsing heart of the consumerist West (it costs companies millions of dollars monthly to rent advertising space on some of Times Square’s larger LED screens). A rotating cast of individual performers entered the empty aquarium and began going about some piece of daily business such as reading a newspaper, making the bed, or tuning a guitar. Then a powerful custom hydraulic system would gradually flood the aquarium and the performers would struggle to complete their tasks as the water rose above their heads.

The title *Holoscenes* puns on the warped, slice-of-life vignettes presented by the performers in shifts and the Holocene, the geological epoch. According to the International Commission on Stratigraphy, the body of geologists charged with determining the absolute ages of the earth’s rock layers, the Holocene began approximately 11,700 years ago and encompasses the entire history of human civilization up to and including the present. Other scientists believe that the Holocene has come to an end, and the philosopher Timothy Morton has suggested that the Anthropocene began with the invention of the steam engine in 1784.\(^7\) The stated aim of Jan’s project was to offer “an elemental portrait of our collective myopia, persistence, and for both better and worse, adaptation” in the face of climate change.\(^8\) While the piece successfully conjured a vision of a future that might find wealthy New Yorkers inconvenienced by a soggy morning *Times*, it failed to take into account the irony of concocting

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such an extravagantly wasteful ecologically-minded spectacle. In terms of environmental and aesthetic impact, the Maldives cabinet’s performance is clearly superior, even if they lacked the resources to put together a production on the scale of Jan’s.

This imbalance is not accidental. When Lawrence Summers was vice president of the World Bank, he wrote a memo suggesting that since many countries in the less-developed world “are vastly under-polluted,” wealthy nations such as the US could afford to pay poor countries to accept toxic waste products that we would prefer not to have decomposing in our own backyards. While the unequally distributed effects of pollution almost certainly pose the greatest long-term challenges for the planet, other forms of global inequality are not merely a thing of the future. Sixty-million tons of food (approximately $162 billion worth) are wasted each year in the United States. One-third of all the food produced in the world is never consumed. This wasted food would be more than sufficient to feed all of the world’s 870 million hungry people.

**Chekhov and His Discontents**

Anton Chekhov’s 1898 *Uncle Vanya* marks the beginning of Western theater artists’ attention to issues of ecology. Chekhov’s plays are also early exemplars of a dramaturgy of waste in that so much of what is of interest transpires in what goes unspoken, missed, squandered. There is often a kind of hole in Chekhov’s dramaturgy: dramatic activity is organized around non-events rather than events. *The Cherry Orchard*’s Lopakhin never proposes to Varya. *The Three Sisters*’ Prozorov women never make it to Moscow. The thematic tug of war between love and work, *eros*

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and civilization, is the crux of Chekhov. Here, the latter is always reached for as a kind of palliative for the former. This *agon* between pain and boredom, loneliness and disgust, is always present. Where love (or the dream of it) is, like life, fleeting, work is, like death, permanent. Love flourishes only at the expense of work. Because work must eventually resume, love must end.

All dreams suffer a similar fate in Chekhov. While issues of ecological waste and climate destruction are not the central concern, they loom over several of the plays, foreshadowing the havoc soon to be visited on a world privileging short-sighted, unsustainable rates of growth, productivity, and consumption. In *Uncle Vanya*, Astrov is a doctor who tends to the ailments of his fellow human beings, people whose pain can only be alleviated temporarily. He also thinks about longer-term interventions into the suffering of the world. In his spare time, Astrov maps the countryside, comparing the footprint of the forests in successive generations and noting with concern the effects of deforestation and other manmade affronts to nature. He is a vegetarian. He plants trees. He is an early environmentalist with an alarmingly prescient outlook on the trajectory of human life on earth:

> All our great woodlands are being leveled, millions of trees already gone, bird and animal habitats destroyed, rivers damned up and polluted—and all for what? Because we’re too lazy to look for other sources of energy! […] You have to be a barbarian to burn all that beauty in your stove, to destroy something that can never be replaced. We were born with the ability to reason and the power to create and be fruitful, but until now all we’ve done is destroy whatever we see. The forests are disappearing one by one, the rivers are polluted, wildlife is becoming extinct, the climate is changing for the worse, every day the planet gets poorer and uglier. It’s a disaster!11

An overemphasis on productivity and short-term profit lay waste to the unquantifiable. Astrov embodies the best ideals of *homo faber*. His conservation work is intended to benefit subsequent generations, to spare what is beautiful in the world from waste, from being trampled over by successive generations of laborers unable to spare a thought for the future.

Invoking the limitations of “shallow” ecology as contrasted with “deep” ecology, Una Chaudhuri finds that Astrov’s (and Chekhov’s) vision falls short. Articulated by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, the concept of “shallow ecology” focuses on short-term fixes without questioning the consumption-oriented values and methods of the industrial economy that threaten the planet. These palliative measures might include the adoption of recycling programs or more stringent standards for automotive efficiency. “Deep ecology” refers to a radical reappraisal of humankind’s place in and relationship to the environment, learning to see the environment in terms of its intrinsic value, not as merely a repository of resources of potential value for human use. It emphasizes the pressing need for restructuring society according to a philosophy that ascribes to every living thing the same dignity, importance, and right to exist that we automatically ascribe to human beings. “For all his innate love of the forest,” Chaudhuri argues, “Astrov cannot read his eco-maps ecologically, as a visual narrative of the ongoing destruction of nature by human beings; rather, he reads them as records of cultural deficiency.” For him, the only transcendent virtue is “beauty,” and his ecology, Chaudhuri says, “supports the fiction — convenient to a consumerist economic system — that nature is an eco-machine, a virtual factory pouring out a stream of raw materials to be transformed into commodities.”

But beauty is not the enemy, and the pursuit of beauty need not be rejected as reifying a harmful division between nature

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14 Ibid.
and the human. If we understand beauty to require a beholder, then indeed, it would appear that Astrov’s dream is to have all the earth handsomely arrayed before spectators like himself, those refined enough to appreciate nature as a work of art. But beauty is not beauty because it is beheld. The sort of beauty Astrov is after is Kantian, “purposiveness [...] without any representation of a purpose.”

What Astrov adores about the forests is that they exist for their own sake, perfect unto themselves. They do not seek to be other than what they are. Unlike human beings, trees are not twisted up with anxiety about the meaning and purpose of their lives. Any purpose they have aside from being itself is projected onto them from without. Humans chopping them down and converting them into useful products is what destroys their beauty. The trees are unplagued by the desire to shape the landscape according to their vision and will and, accordingly, will never be beset by the shame of having destroyed something with a stronger claim to existence than them. For this, Astrov envies and admires them.

Human beings, on the other hand, demand more. They are forever making improvements, forever raising their standards, and they create for themselves lives that increasingly require more work to be sustained. Work occupies a central place in the imaginations of Chekhov’s characters. It is scourge and salvation and everything in between, different things to different people, but always fundamental. Inquiring about the time Astrov invests in tending to the forests, Yelena asks, “it’s important, I suppose, but doesn’t it interfere with your real occupation? Being a doctor, I mean?” to which Astrov responds, “my real occupation? God only knows what that is.” Yelena, assuming that only the work one does for money can be a “real” occupation, is the opposite of inspired, industrious Astrov. She is constantly complaining of ennui. “If I don’t find something to do, I’ll die of boredom,” she says.

16 Chekhov, *Uncle Vanya*, 216.
SONYA: There’s plenty to do. You just have to want to do it.
YELENA: Like what?
SONYA: Help out around the place, or go teach school, or go be a nurse. Isn’t that enough? Before you and Papa came, Uncle Vanya and I used to take the flour to the market ourselves.
YELENA: I don’t know how to do those things. Besides, I’m not interested. Going out to teach the poor, nursing them, all those high moral ideals — that only exists in books. What do you expect me to do, run out and teach, just like that?
SONYA: Frankly, I don’t understand how you can not do something. You’d get used to it after a while.  

For Sonya there is never any question of whether to work or what to do. “We’ll take whatever fate sends us,” she tells Vanya in her closing speech, “[w]e’ll spend the rest of our lives doing other people’s work for them, we won’t know a minute’s rest, and then, when our time comes, we’ll die. And when we’re dead, we’ll say that our lives were full of pain, that we wept and suffered, and God will have pity on us.”

Soviet ideologues have interpreted the play as an allegory of imminent class struggle, offering readings that identify Sonya as the *lumpenproletarian* who has partaken of the opiate of the masses and mistakes herself for some kind of martyr. For her, taking Christ as her pattern, life has meaning precisely because she has been persecuted and exploited. Yelena is the useless, decadent bourgeois, and Astrov, the revolutionary. He sees his medical practice as being relatively inconsequential, the treatment he provides for the suffering of individual men and women as being woefully short-term, compensatory, inadequate to the larger challenges of his age. He is prepared to dedicate himself to working towards a goal that may not be achievable in his lifetime. But the Soviet reading is overly anthropocentric.

17 Ibid., 232.
18 Ibid., 253.
Astrov’s great love is not humanity, neither the bourgeoisie nor the workers. As Bataille’s prehistoric man revered the animals he painted with greater care than he took with his self-portraits, Astrov reveres the trees, sees them as superior beings, perceives himself and all his kind as waste polluting their domain. This may be the deepest ecology of all.

“The Economy is the Crisis”: Ibsen and Ostermeier’s *Enemy of the People*

While Ibsen is not a deep ecologist, the plot of his *An Enemy of the People* (1882) also turns on questions of environmental waste, public health, and the priorities of civilization. After the play’s titular “enemy” Doctor Stockmann discovers that his town’s public baths have been dangerously contaminated, he attempts to make his findings public. Expecting to be hailed as a hero for blowing the whistle, Stockmann instead finds himself assailed from all sides by members of the community intent on preventing such a disclosure out of concern for the possible repercussions on the town’s tourism economy. His brother and principle antagonist Mayor Stockmann opens the play trumpeting that said baths “will become the very life-principle of our town.” The brothers were both instrumental in the creation of the baths. The doctor is more of an idea guy, while the mayor was the one responsible for working out the practical details. Theirs is a fraternal quarrel which complicates the relationship between capitalism and self-interest. The mayor is a proponent of what will be referred to in another place and time as “trickle-down” economics. “The taxes for public welfare have been cut by a comfortable margin for the propertied classes,” he explains, “and will be still more if we can only have a really good summer this year — hordes of visitors — masses of invalids who can give the baths a reputation.” The mayor appears to represent the

20 Ibid., 90.
voice of common sense. The ailments and injuries of others are inarguably good for business. For the propertied classes.

During Doctor Stockmann’s first tête-à-tête with his brother we learn that the two men are of different temperaments. The Mayor makes no attempt to conceal his disapproval of his brother’s extravagant lifestyle. Offered roast beef and a hot toddy on an evening visit, he demurs in favor of bread, butter, and tea as “it’s healthier in the long run — and a bit more economical too.”

He is faintly repulsed by his brother’s newfound joie de vivre. “I’ve been feeling so buoyant and happy,” Doctor Stockmann exclaims controversially, “I can’t tell you how lucky I feel to be part of this life that’s budding and bursting out everywhere. What an amazing age we live in! It’s as if a whole new world were rising around us!”

Having suffered through the pecuniary anxieties of the protracted adolescence that is graduate school, followed by a stint working a less lucrative job in a provincial town, Doctor Stockmann at last finds himself in a position to live large. While the doctor’s drinking buddies fancifully aspire to being “Vikings” and “pagans,” Mayor Stockmann efficiently conveys that he finds his brother’s fondness for entertaining guests over meat and liquor to be both wasteful and immoral. This petty contest primes us for the real conflict; Doctor Stockmann is planning to publish an article about the baths, making public the contamination he has discovered. His motives are not entirely pure — the doctor’s article will be an indictment of his brother’s implementation of the plans for the baths but will leave his own contribution, the general, sweeping vision, unsullied.

Doctor Stockmann is confident in his ability to persuade the town to rally behind him in part because he has faith in the “independent press.” The motives of the press, however, are not entirely pure either. An editor tries to coerce Doctor Stockmann’s daughter Petra into a romantic relationship on pain of his turning public opinion against her father. The lower-level

21 Ibid., 88.
22 Ibid., 93.
23 Ibid., 100.
editors who are so very enthusiastic about publishing the doctor’s exposé are more interested in driving up readership with sensational material than with the actual public health crisis at hand. After languishing for some time at a sleepy local news bureau, the prospect of a “big scoop,” whatever the consequences, is their primary motivator. Doctor Stockmann is also compromised by a conflict of interest between his sense of altruism and his ego. As the newspapermen are reviewing the proofs of his article, Stockmann cannot help but interject about the “parade” the townsfolk might be tempted to throw for him and how he hopes to be able to enlist all available help in quashing such a spectacle. His integrity is called into question when he reveals himself to still be, at heart, the underachieving little brother, hungry for recognition.

By Act Four, Doctor Stockmann has outgrown his ambitions as an environmental crusader; he has evolved into a radical philosopher, a self-styled, Nietzschean Übermensch. Effecting specific changes in his local community no longer appeals to him; he has bigger fish to fry, namely the transvaluation of all values. But at the town hall meeting he convenes, we hear speculative murmurs in the pre-show audience about how there might be a concealed “strain of insanity” in the family or about how “the man drinks.” Afterwards, Stockmann is paid a startling visit by his father-in-law Morten Kiil, a wealthy man whose not very eco-friendly tannery sits just upstream from the polluted baths, itself apparently responsible for much of the contamination. Kiil has just purchased newly cheap shares in the baths, sinking all of Mrs. Stockmann and the children’s inheritance money into the very business venture Stockmann has spent the play trying to destroy. If he wants to guarantee the financial security of his family, Stockmann will have to renege on his crusade. The abstract good of clean water for all must be balanced against the concrete evil of poverty for one’s own family.

The talent of the visionary is the ability to perceive the abstract as concrete, but Ibsen places equal emphasis on the bur-

24 Ibid., 173.
den that must be borne by the realists working to preserve the existing order, which the visionary too often forgets requires constant vigilance and effort just to maintain. At the end of Ibsen’s play, after the entire Stockmann family has been put out of their jobs and ostracized for its patriarch’s politically bungled attempt at whistle-blowing, Stockmann comes to the triumphant conclusion that “the strongest man in the world is the one who stands most alone.” His specific act of civic magnanimity is relinquished in favor of a great utopian project of progressive education, which he will pursue in the new world. Ibsen takes care to suggest, however, that this new visionary undertaking also stands a good chance of foundering on the shoals of reality. “Ah, come here, Katherine,” Stockmann says to his wife, full of pride and hope, “look at that sunlight, how glorious, the way it streams in today. And how wonderful and fresh the spring air is.” “Yes,” she responds, “if only we could live on sunlight and spring air, Thomas.” The “new world” beckons, but in the new world, freedom is equated with “free” enterprise. Stockmann’s wife and child will have to subsidize his refusal to capitulate to the will of the masses by living in poverty.

Ibsen wrote *Enemy of the People* immediately after his iconoclastic play *Ghosts* was met with a storm of reactionary criticism, and he almost certainly saw parts of himself in Doctor Stockmann. The saviors of the people will be perceived as enemies if they advocate for radical change, even if it is necessary change. But Ibsen is critical of Doctor Stockmann’s deficiencies as a politician. Stockmann may welcome instability as a creative opportunity, but to achieve anything, he must understand that the majority will never respond well to the threat of chaos.

In his 2012 Schaubühne production of *Enemy of the People*, German director Thomas Ostermeier drives into this latent theme of the democratic political process. With large-scale ecological catastrophe presenting a far more pressing concern than it did in 1882, Ostermeier turns Ibsen’s town hall scene into a

25 Ibid., 198.
26 Ibid., 196.
frame-breaking debate on the state of contemporary capitalism, with spectators encouraged to square off against the performers and each other. Ostermeier augments and updates Stockmann’s town hall speech with references to the 2008 financial crisis: “The economy isn’t in crisis. The economy is the crisis!” He also rails against the over-prescription of productivity-enhancing drugs such as Ritalin, European austerity programs, and the dis-integration of the public sphere. As the production remains in the repertoire and tours, the catalogue of contemporary maladies evolves and expands.

Even as originally written by Ibsen this scene violates the economics of production by demanding a crowd of people onstage in a play that otherwise calls for only nine actors. Dramaturgically speaking, Ostermeier’s town hall scene is a “wasteful” moment. If no one in the audience chooses to speak up, or if what they have to say is banal, irrelevant, or badly expressed, Ostermeier runs the risk of seeing his taut drama go slack. This was partially the case when the production toured to the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2013. When large groups of strangers (the Harvey Theater seats 874) attempt to engage in open dialogue about their collective priorities, the result cannot but be somewhat chaotic. The voices that come to dominate are seldom the voices of the most informed. Complex and unfamiliar ideas take more courage and charisma to introduce successfully. It is easier to build consensus around negative observations than around positive proposals, easier to generate applause by calling for revolution than by laying out a plan for precisely how to balance the competing demands of economic development and environmental protection. Critique therefore carries the day, and it begins to become clear why policymaking is best conducted behind closed doors by a handful of specialists. Still, time-consuming as it is, articulating what a community does not value is a key step on the way to articulating what a community does value. The Times critic Charles Isherwood felt that the Brooklyn iteration of Ostermeier’s town hall scene “derailed” the pro-
duction. But in creating a space for the messy, inefficient, and at times boring process of politics in a democratic society, Ostermeier eloquently demonstrates that wasted time is the price that should and must be paid to control the ecological waste threatening the townspeople of Ibsen’s play, and, now, all of us. The shortsighted prioritization of efficiency and profits quickly turned will be far costlier in the long run. To survive, we must all become visionaries, capable of perceiving the abstract as concrete. Deep down, however, it seems we do not wish to survive.

Despoiled Shores

Heiner Müller’s 1981 Despoiled Shore Medea-material Landscape with Argonauts is a landscape play in Gertrude Stein’s sense. It is not that the landscape is a character; the play is a landscape. As such, it asks spectators for a different kind of engagement. Rather than presenting a human audience with representations of themselves to identify with, empathize with, project onto, the landscape play asks spectators to wander through, removing human subjectivity from the center of the event to the greatest extent possible. In our anthropocentric world, the landscape play offers spectators the increasingly unfamiliar opportunity to experience themselves as incidental.

In Despoiled Shore, unpardonable crimes against humanity are set beside crimes against nature. The modern world is a wasteland strewn with “torn menstrual napkins,” “dead fish,” “[c]ookie boxes,” and “[f]eces.” It is populated by “children lay[ing] out landscapes with trash,” “dead negroes,” and “[z]ombies perforated by advertising spots.” Müller, who regularly works with scraps of the classics, chooses Euripides’ Me-

29 Ibid., 134–35.
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dea as an intertext here, giving us as our primary recognizable human being a mythological mother known for murdering her own children for spite. She is our image, the one we pretend we cannot see as we continue murdering the futures of subsequent generations, bringing the earth ever-closer to uninhabitability. Müller’s stage directions note that the third part of the play, “Landscape with Argonauts,” “presumes the catastrophes which mankind is working toward. The theatre’s contribution to their prevention can only be their representation. The landscape might be a dead star where a task force from another age or another space hears a voice and discovers a corpse.”

Earth’s star has gone out. The undead survivors of the twentieth century who linger on are phantoms, beams of light that were extinguished long before they entered our field of vision. It is too late to put things right: “The youth of today ghosts of / The dead of the war that is to happen tomorrow / YET WHAT REMAINS IS CREATED BY BOMBS.”

Humankind has fully relinquished control of its destiny to the technologies of destruction it has wrought. When Müller speaks of planned obsolescence, he refers to television sets and to bodies slated for the expiration in the predicted nuclear holocaust. Müller melds Medea with the despoiled landscape in this play; she speaks univocally with the earth. “A woman is the familiar ray of hope / BETWEEN THE THIGHS / DEATH STILL HAS HOPE” is her dark manifesto. Hope for death? For an escape from death? This mother/earth refuses, as Bonnie Marranca puts it, to be “eternal,” a utopia. She will no longer be an inexhaustible trove of resources for man, for children, for the imaginary of an exhausted civilization.

Pathological Superiority: Grasses of a Thousand Colors

Wallace Shawn has observed that, *pace* Darwin, humans “still haven’t fully incorporated into our souls the idea that we’re a

30 Ibid., 126.
31 Ibid., 134.
32 Ibid.
part of nature.” As a species, we have developed certain extraordinary abilities, and throughout history we have been more or less exultant about those special abilities and all that they have allowed us to accomplish. “Then in the twentieth century,” Shawn says,

it became clear that our special abilities made us capable of something unknown among the other species of the world—we seemed to have the ability to exterminate ourselves. Now in the twenty-first century, we see that our special abilities enable us to extinguish all living things and life itself. So the period of crowing about the marvelousness of our species has sort of come to an end.  

This stubborn and pernicious conceptual divide between nature and the human is perpetuated by capitalism. Jason Moore argues that the Anthropocene is still not specific enough a term to describe the epoch of self-destruction in which we are currently living, proposing “Capitalocene” as a preferable alternative that takes into account capitalism’s accumulation strategy: “Cheap Nature. For capitalism, Nature is ‘cheap’ in a double sense: to make Nature’s elements ‘cheap’ in price; and also to cheapen, to degrade or to render inferior in an ethico-political sense.” Donna Haraway goes further still, suggesting “Chthulucene” as a better name, one that deprivileges the tragic human story and acknowledges that there was life before us and will be life after us. Our demise is not the end, only perhaps an end. The Chthulucene is made up of “ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fall-
en—yet.”

Even if our time is up, we can and should still work to improve the lot of those other beings. To ignore our kinship with them is to insist on bringing what we call the natural world down with us. In his *Grasses of a Thousand Colors* Shawn imagines a world finally expiring after suffering through the long illness of this imposed nature/society binary.

*Grasses* is narrated mainly by Ben, played by Shawn in the 2013 Public Theater production. Early on, Ben informs us that his own dick is his best friend, perhaps his only real friend. The most significant relationship Ben has with a separate life form is his intense, sexual relationship with a cat named Blanche. The play juxtaposes narrated scenes of wild, interspecies, orgiastic rites with piecemeal hints at the novel method the human race has found for exterminating itself. In addition to being a man of rather peculiar sexual predilections, Ben is a megalomaniacal scientist who doesn’t see himself that way. His optimistic generation of fixers and improvers “solved” the problem of food scarcity by engineering a set of biological and ecological modifications that made it possible for animals (and, we are left to assume, humans) to live off the flesh of their own kind and to multiply at accelerated rates. Ben’s scientific contributions to the new cannibalistic world order have made him wealthy — and backfired spectacularly. With the food chain disrupted, animals are dropping dead in droves and humans are heading in that direction, incapacitated by increasingly frequent bouts of vomiting. Such eventualities were made to seem not at all improbable by rhyming real-world events that began appearing in the news after *Grasses* premiered — half of the endangered Saiga antelope population mysteriously dying in the space of two weeks in Kazakhstan in 2015, for example. As Elizabeth Kolbert demonstrates in *The Sixth Extinction*, by the end of the twenty-first century, human activity will have resulted in the elimination of twenty to fifty percent of all living species on earth. *Grasses* presents an impressionistic picture of the Anthropocene (or

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Capitalocene or Chthulucene) period unfurling; the fact that “humans change the world” is our distinction if not our honor.  

Though in Grasses, Ben is presented as the principle architect of this cataclysm, he disavows all responsibility, and the play instead focuses on his extensive erotic adventures and misadventures. With world hunger vanquished, it seems overpopulation no longer presents the threat it once did, and the libidinously turbocharged planet seems determined to go down in a blaze of orgasmic glory. The basic drives — for food and sex — have been thrown out of whack. Perhaps the body revolts at the suggestion that it could experience both hunger and sexual desire for the same kind of creature. In Grasses it is as though sex (in all kinds of surreal and occasionally unvisualizable configurations) comes rushing in to fill the void left by nourishment of the caloric variety. The farther the human race gets from “nature” or the “natural order,” the closer humans are, perversely, drawn back to it. The play ends in a swamp of abjection, and it ultimately becomes impossible to distinguish between the human and the animal. In the Public Theater production, projections of Julie Haggerty, the actress playing Ben’s wife Cerise, show her slowly morphing into a cat (the cat?) as she sends messages from a refuge in the countryside where she has fled to escape the horrors of the pandemic. All that remains is the residue of humanity, the traces of the destruction the human species has left in its wake. Just before the end of a play, Cerise/Blanche shows Ben a photo album, the book of his life, a record of his legacy. The photographs show only “black landscapes, covered with — naked? — well, they were dead animals, I guess, cats and other animals, but the bodies were misshapen, bloated, the skin was broken.” Shortly thereafter, Ben adds his own corpse to the pile. In contrast to the violent, painful deaths of the animals, Ben’s demise is depicted as peaceful, welcome, even beautiful; Cerise/Blanche leads him out to an open field and soothingly explains as he lays himself down that “while vomiting was awful,

and suffering was awful, death in itself was a trivial process, [...] She herself had been through it a number of times, and it was literally nothing.” Blanche/Cerise seems to exist on some kind of magical morphological continuum that transcends the confines of time and space. She is woman, animal, dead, alive, animate, inanimate, past, present, and future. Ben is bounded by his body, wholly identified with his penis and its hopes and dreams. “Most things,” Blanche/Cerise continues, “aren’t alive in the first place, and they never were, [...] it’s not particularly tragic to be a chair or a rock, and obviously the spark of life which occasionally flares up will inevitably go out, and it’s not a problem, and it doesn’t call for a hysterical response.” 38 Human, Shawn posits in Grasses, is a kind of generalized hysterical condition, rather than a superior, or even distinct, kind of organism.

What has long been considered superior about the human species ends by tipping over into its opposite. As Benjamin’s angel of history confronts us with the products of human progress, the waste of progress, Grasses stages the terminus of human evolution, suggesting the possibility that perhaps humanity has been merely a great cancerous growth that spread, devouring everything its path. Aware on some level that we are sick, that we are a sickness, we divide and divide, seeking to keep at least one group between ourselves and the animals with whom we must deny kinship. Only the need for food and the need for sex persist as constant reminders that we are made of the same stuff. We need the lie but feel ashamed for needing it, so are always on the lookout for those whose repudiation of animality, of nature, can be identified as insufficient, flawed, and therefore subhuman.

Posthuman Otherness

Woman has historically been seen as closer to animality and therefore less human than Man. For Aristotle, women were more impulsive, inferior to men in strength and virtue, and less

38 Ibid., 88.
prone to shame. Throughout the medieval period, women were believed to have “weak intellects.” For Freud, the trouble was that women took a “very circuitous path” to psychosexual developmental maturity and were consequently left only imperfectly capable of sublimation. The gendering of Shawn’s radical gesture towards the posthuman in the figure of Blanche/Cerise recalls Müller’s treatment of Medea or The Task’s lady Liberty. Like Müller’s men, Shawn’s Ben epitomizes a particular totalizing, ossified, outmoded genre of male subjectivity, one that is shown in Grasses to be a contributing cause of the end of life on earth. In the final moments of Grasses, as in Despoiled Shore, Woman’s otherness is sought out as a last resort—only after the white, bourgeois, heterosexual male narratives appear to have exhausted themselves. This is a dramaturgical move at least as old as Faust, drawn ever-onward and -upward by his “eternal” feminine. Having long interpreted their experiences through those of men, the ones that get written down and called “neutral” or “universal,” women are always already (at least) bilingual. An authentic encounter with alterity, Emmanuel Levinas writes, is the most revealing experience of our own humanity that it is possible to have; we experience ourselves as profoundly responsible for the other, “infinitely responsible.” It is a responsibility, he writes, “to which I am wanting and faulty. It is as though I were responsible for his mortality, and guilty for surviving.”

In psychoanalytic terms, survivor’s guilt emerges from the self perceiving itself as excessive, unjustified, and somehow existentially unjust—waste, a remainder rendered meaningless without those to and for whom he was responsible. When Woman is simply called in to clean up after the men have made a mess of things, we see “responsibility” flowing, again, in just one direction, and from the Levinasian perspective it is precisely the wrong direction. Finally, they each in their own way arrive at a

40 Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise Than Being, trans. A. Lingis (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1974), 91.
reconciliation of Levinas’s dictum that “ethics precedes ontology” and the possibilities of posthumanism. A posthumanist worldview admits that the human is not the center of existence. Humans have never been entirely distinct from animals, and they are coming to more closely resemble machines with each passing day. Individual human beings are forged in the differentiating crucibles of culture and history. The posthumanist takes the view that there is nothing universal about the human essence and that, therefore, humanism is both theoretically and practically incoherent. Fukuyama may have been right. But if we are post-history, it is not because we are post-ideology but because we are post-human.

Rachel Rosenthal’s Ecofeminism

A growing body of research suggests that climate change skepticism is bound up with antifeminism. Climate change deniers perceive that the real threat is to a certain kind of modern industrial masculinity and not to the environment.41 Egalitarian concern for the latter is seen as feminine, while the observation of a hierarchical separation between humans and nature is seen as more masculine. The ecofeminist performance artist Rachel Rosenthal thematizes this strand of misogyny, harnessing her myriad experiences of otherness to conjure transformative empathy for the earth. If women have been thought to derive their superior compassion — their intuition of the interconnectedness of all things — from their experience of realized or potential maternity, Rosenthal deconstructs this essentialism. She does not celebrate the pleasing or pleasurable aspects of womanhood. Instead, she elevates the difficult, and even mortifying dimensions of occupying her queer, female-gendered body. It is her suffering that connects her with the suffering of the world, and she claims the earth as her kin while distancing herself from

the conventional signifiers of femininity. In Rosenthal’s 1990 solo piece *Pangaean Dreams: A Shamanic Journey*, she overlays a meditation on the sundering of the original single continent of the earth, Gaia, with autobiographical rage and revelations having to do with the more humiliating and revolting aspects of being female. Rosenthal engages in a dialogue with the chronic pain that plagues her, rendering that pain as a character she calls the Autonomous Being. She places her broken body in conversation with the broken world and finds affinity in their shared finitude.

Performing solo into her seventies, Rosenthal asked spectators to confront the specter of the aging female body in a way seldom required of them. Our culture has turned the post-menopausal female body into a kind of *memento mori*. William Viney has argued that when we consign an object to the garbage can, we are situating ourselves within a narrative of “use-time.” As something becomes waste, “[m]atter, and thus time, becomes organized in relation to our activities of human use and non-use, by a temporal separation structured by what is considered unproductive and uninhabited.” Rosenthal recognizes that this temporal separation is applied to the bodies of women and their perceived expiration dates as well. In her piece *L.O.W. in Gaia*, Rosenthal identifies herself as the “Crone,” hated by all because her body, unable to bring forth life, conjures death. Even while the evidence of female fertility in the form of menstrual blood is among the most feared and loathed of human waste products, the infertile female is herself consigned to the category of human waste. For the Crone reminds us, as Rosenthal puts it, not of heroic or “meaningful” death, but of the decidedly unglamorous deaths most of us die, preceded by disease and decrepitude, a slow slide into mortifying passivity and obsolescence. Rosenthal uses her dying body as a metaphor for the dying earth, a victim of masculine violence, attempted commodification, and exploitative technologies.

Stifters Dinge: Posthuman Theater

Samuel Beckett is quoted by one of his biographers as saying that “[t]he best possible play is one in which there are no actors, only the text. I’m trying to find a way to write one.” The German composer and director Heiner Goebbels may have come closest to achieving Beckett’s dream with his 2007 performance installation Stifters Dinge, a play for a posthuman world. Inspired by the writings of the nineteenth-century Austrian writer Adalbert Stifter, the piece is performed by five mechanized pianos on a dynamic set that evokes the world without us. Goebbels is less interested in Beckett’s formal perfection than in the implications for culture of the self-inflicted extinction of the human being.

Stifter’s writings are distinguished by their tremulously vivid and detailed descriptions of the natural world. Long passages tracing the changing light reflecting off of a glacier, the veins of a leaf, or the texture of a stone assume more narrative prominence than any account of human action or awareness. The revulsion Stifter felt for industrial modernity manifested itself in his texts as a profound reverence for things, animate or inanimate. His landscape writing created a context for letting the diverse insentient beings of the world be, to let being itself be, as Heidegger would put it. As capitalism advances and accelerates, pulverizing and clearing that which cannot be commodified, Stifter’s humble, elegiac observations rescue things from being captured and either exploited for profit or destroyed. Cradled in his receptive consciousness, things become eloquent, their very lack of subjectivity elevating them to a plane of existence surpassing perfection, the plane of the sublime.

Goebbels translates Stifter’s prose for the stage into music and images that invite the spectator to reduce her customary pace to the speed of insects, growing moss, melting snow. The sounds

issuing from the disemboweled pianos include harsh sounds of machinery, snatches of Bach melodies, mysterious percussion, and recorded human voices speaking or singing across time and space in a variety of languages. A long, recorded passage of Stifter’s prose is played, describing the sound of thousands of frozen tree branches rattling against one another like so many bells chiming. The first and last time we see human beings is when two unobtrusive technicians dressed in black enter at the top of the show to sprinkle what appears to be salt or sand into shallow troughs covering the floor of what we would call the “playing space” in a different kind of production. The technicians leave, and hoses fill the troughs with water. The mise-en-scène is then dominated by rippling smoke on water, projected images of landscape paintings, and the slow, eerie movement of entire set. The elaborately mutilated player pianos sit on platforms out of which barren trees also grow, and this whole apparatus gradually glides on a track towards the audience, until it is just feet from the first row. Its approach feels like the imminent end of the world. But then, unexpectedly, the trees and pianos recede, eventually resuming their original position upstage. As we witness this movement, we hear the recorded voice of Claude Lévi-Strauss say, “I don’t believe there is any reason” to have faith in humankind. The trees and the music of the icicles cracking and falling from their branches will persist even after we have exterminated ourselves. The spectator, the excess, the human is incidental.