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Climate Anxiety in Cherrie Moraga's *Heroes and Saints* and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*: An Ecocritical Analysis

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Abstract

This paper analyses the concepts of climate anxiety and ecological trauma as they are presented in *Heroes and Saints* and *The Children*, employing ecocriticism and environmental theatre. It contends that both works grapple with environmental collapse as a thematic issue but also as a dramatic motor that animates character, structure, and audience engagement. It draws on the theoretical insights of figures such as Lawrence Buell and Timothy Clark in the field of ecocriticism, as well as theatrical ecologists like Una Chaudhuri and Theresa J. May, in considering the ways in which the stage acts as a site for ecological reckoning. The objectives are to: study it through representations of ecological degradation and social injustice; profile how climate anxiety works in character psychology and narrative tension; and analyse how theatrical devices inspire environmental consciousness in the spectators. Some key research questions are: How does this drama of the environmental crisis play out as lived, personal experience? What kinds of theatrical devices submerge an audience in ecological awareness or disgust? How do anthropocentric or capitalist ideologies get challenged in the plays? Through a qualitative, comparative textual analysis, the study determines that both plays give voice to the marginalized, women, the elderly, farm workers,

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as eco-witnesses to systemic decay. Non-traditional scenic composition, synecdoche of nature and intense human dynamics evoke the urgency of environmental collapse. The overarching contention is that theatre is capable of cohering climate consciousness, and that dramatic performance can thus be viewed as a political and affective site through which to navigate the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Climate Anxiety, Environmental Theatre, Cherríe Moraga, Lucy Kirkwood, Anthropocene, Theatrical Activism, Climate Grief

القلق المناخي في مسرحية "الأبطال والقديسون" لثييري موراجا ومسرحية "الأطفال" لوسي كيركوود: تحليل إيكولوجي نقدي

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المستخلص

تحلل هذه الأطروحة مفاهيم قلق المناخ والصدمة البيئية كما وردت في مسرحية الأبطال والقديسين لثييري موراجا ومسرحية الأطفال لوسي كيركوود، باستخدام النقد البيئي والمسرح البيئي. وتزعم أن كلا العملين يتعاملان مع الانهيار البيئي كقضية موضوعية ولكن أيضاً كمحرك درامي يحرك الشخصية والبنية وتفاعل الجمهور. وتعتمد على الرؤى النظرية لشخصيات مثل لورانس بويل وتيموثي كلارك في مجال النقد البيئي، بالإضافة إلى علماء البيئة المسرحيين مثل أونا تشودري وتيريزا جيه ماي، في النظر في الطرق التي يعمل بها المسرح كموقع للمحاسبة البيئية. والأهداف هي: دراسته من خلال تمثيلات التدهور البيئي والظلم الاجتماعي؛ تحديد كيفية عمل قلق المناخ في علم نفس الشخصية والتوتر السردي؛ وتحليل كيفية إلهام الأدوات المسرحية للوعي البيئي لدى المتفرجين. بعض أسئلة البحث الرئيسية هي: كيف تُعرض دراما الأزمة البيئية هذه كتجربة شخصية معاشة؟ ما أنواع الأدوات المسرحية التي تغمر الجمهور في الوعي البيئي أو الاشمئزاز؟ كيف يتم تحدي الأيديولوجيات الأنثروبوسينية أو الرأسمالية في المسرحيات؟ من خلال تحليل نصي نوعي مقارنة، تحدد الدراسة أن كلتا المسرحيتين تعطيان صوتاً للمهمشين والنساء وكبار السن وعمال المزارع، كشهود بيئيين على التدهور النظامي. يؤثر التكوين المسرحي غير التقليدي، والمجاز المجازي للطبيعة، والديناميكيات البشرية المكثفة إلحاح الانهيار البيئي. والافتراض الشامل هو أن المسرح قادر على تماسك الوعي المناخي، وبالتالي يمكن اعتبار الأداء الدرامي موقعاً سياسياً وعاطفياً يمكن من خلاله التنقل في عصر الأنثروبوسين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النقد البيئي، قلق المناخ، المسرح البيئي، ثييري موراجا، لوسي كيركوود، الدراما البيئية، عصر الأنثروبوسين، الحزن المناخي

1. Introduction

In the contemporary age of environmental crisis, literature and theatre have become increasingly vital in articulating the emotional, political, and ecological dimensions of living in the Anthropocene. A growing climate anxiety, defined as the perennial fear of environmental doom (Clayton et al., 2017), has been positioned as a critical humanities experience in which artistic forms register and resist ecological collapse. In this context, ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary examination of literature and environment, has become one such powerful lens through which to interrogate culture and affect around the abject of environmental degradation (Buell, 2005; Garrard, 2012).

This study examines the relationship between climate anxiety and ecocritical consciousness in two contemporary plays: *Heroes and Saints* (1994) by Cherríe Moraga and *The Children*

(2016) by Lucy Kirkwood. These plays, though culturally and geographically distinct, each stage the emotional aftermath of environmental damage, examining human complicity and ethical responsibility. *Heroes and Saints* surveys the plight of Latinx farm workers in California made ill by pesticide exposure, while *The Children* features a reunion after a nuclear disaster that examines tensions between duty, guilt and the intergenerational wheel of accountability.

This study is informed by Lawrence Buell (2005) and Timothy Clark's (2015) ecocritical paradigms and environmental theatre theory, specifically Una Chaudhuri (1994) and Theresa J. May (2007)'s assertion that theatre can present environmental crisis in sensorial and emotively proximate ways. Chaudhuri's notion of the "eco-theatre" illustrates that dramatic space and performance may represent the environment as a dynamic force rather than a passive backdrop. Three main objectives are pursued by the study: To examine how ecological trauma and systemic environmental injustice are represented; To investigate how climate anxiety is caricatured in the characters' psychology, relationships, and spatial play; To explore how the plays capitalize on strategies of environmental theatre (e.g., symbolic staging, spatial intimacy, corporeality) to invite audiences towards ecological reflection by and through performance.

The guiding thereof research questions are as follows: How do both plays dramatize the emotional and ethical contradictions of environmental degradation? What kind of theatrical devices do they employ to provoke an ecological attunement or discomfort in the audience? In what ways do these plays criticize wider systems like capitalism, industrialism or colonialism in the face of ecological collapse?

Through comparative, qualitative textual analysis, as a methodology, this study situates its selected plays in dialogue with broader discourses on climate crisis, environmental justice, and performance activism. In doing so, it contends that both texts push the limits of drama to not only represent eco-trauma but to mediate affective responses—anxiety, guilt, and moral ambiguity—and in so doing make the possibility that the theatre itself constitute a site of ecological witnessing and critique.

2. Literature Review

In the past decades, the ecocritical gaze has widened and included not just the representation of nature, but the intricate fold between narrative canons, ecological awareness and political configurations. Lawrence Buell (1995) highlights the transformative ability of literature, arguing that it is central to "shaping consciousness with respect to the environment" (p. 2). On these grounds, Timothy Clark (2015) reflects on the obstacles facing literary form in representing the Anthropocene, contending that traditional genres frequently falter in conveying the enormity, intricacy, and ethical ambivalence of climate change. This conflict can also be heard in today's drama, science theatre, wherein dramaturgy becomes environmentalist, a platform for consciousness-raising, for critique.

Environmental theatre, where the environment, the space, and the surroundings imply narrative, has become an increasingly important site for ecocritical performance. Cf Chaudhuri (1994) developed the notion of landscape theatre and argues that in this kind of site-specific, land is an "active character" in the drama. Eco-theatre Theresa J. May (2011) has taken a more expansive view of eco-theatre, written by playwrights specifically to highlight ecological concerns and sound the alarm about the planet.

Cherrie Moraga's *Heroes and Saints* has received a good deal of ecocritical attention for its visceral representation of environmental injustice and bodily suffering, particularly among Chicano communities in California's Central Valley. Rubóczy (2021) reads the physical suffering depicted in the play, including deformity, cancer, and barrenness, as allegorical of both environmental pollution and state neglect. This harm is not just physical but structural, something scholars call environmental racism, where marginalized communities are more exposed to ecological hazards.

Some ecofeminist interpretations of Moraga's writings emphasize the intersection of gender, race, and ecological violence. The pain of Chicana women is thus made symbolic and literal, augmenting the piece's overall political critique of capitalist patriarchy, which mindlessly feeds off the earth as much as it does the female form. When the crucified children rise from the dead in the play, they become visceral proof of the burden of sacrifice laid upon the oppressed, theatrical shock designed to shake a passive public awake.

In Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*, environmental catastrophe is mediated through the post-disaster domestic, reflecting the moral ambiguities and personal responsibilities that a techno-industrial society implicates. Almaarof (2024) provides a specific ecocritical reading of the play, arguing that it is "a theatrical meditation on ecological ethics and generational responsibility." The enclosed environment, close talk and lurking threat of radiation reflect the mental weight of climate anxiety, guilt and denial.

The introspective struggles of the characters reflect a broader moral issue: how responsible is the present generation for ruining the ecosphere? Almaarof and Madhi (2024) in their postmodern eco-critical approach also claim that the environment is part and parcel of a crisis of identity and responsibility, and that literature today dramatizes internal decomposition alongside the collapse of the ecology. You can see these themes in Kirkwood's characters, who are also haunted not just by decisions they've made but by the moral consequences of inaction.

The psychological aspects of environmental trauma also are coming under increased scrutiny in ecocriticism. But perhaps more importantly, the book portrays what we might call characters 'grappling with guilt and the weight of history, suggesting that climate is not only a political or scientific issue, but also a profoundly human one, as well as an existential one.

Recent scholarship has extended the eco-theatrical dialogue into discussions of postmodern and speculative fiction, fertilizing the conceptual richness and global presence of ecocritical drama. Almaarof and Madhi (2024) examine identity crisis in post-modern ecological novels and highlight how shattered selfhood tends to echo the degradation of the environment in literature. This dual crisis of self and world is one of the central concerns of Matthis's *The Children* too: the sense of purpose that the characters grasp for falls apart under ecological despair. Also exploring the environment in speculative texts are Abdullah and Abdullah (2021) who study environmental dimensions in speculative science fiction novels, such as *Dune* and *A Door into Ocean*, as reflections of the future of ecological ethics. Although not plays, the following works of eco-speculative discourse influence theatrical presentations such as *Heroes and Saints* and *The Children*, each of which extrapolates immediate concern into dystopian or allegorical realms.

Moraga and Kirkwood employ theatrical tactics to bring audiences closer to ecological truths. Moraga's blunt images in particular the visual metaphor of crucified children, present us with the limits of environmental injustice and require us to grapple with both the emotional and intellectual dimensions of systemic problems. Not so with Kirkwood, whose

is a more deceptively realistic style: her airless setting and dialogue-heavy action imprison viewers' psyche, leaving them to consider how guilty and passive they might be, right now, in the face of our environmental desecration.

These plays show how gender, race and generational conflict intersect with the ecological crisis. Moraga places the voices of Chicana women at the centre and demonstrates how the abuse of the environment exacerbates the women's historical and cultural subordination. Meanwhile, Kirkwood explores the moral ambiguities of privileged actors arriving at reckoning with their legacy and dramatizes the ethical reckoning of the Anthropocene.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is interrogated through two overlapping axes of critical lens, ecocriticism and environmental theatre theory. Collectively, they offer layered readings of how *Heroes and Saints* and *The Children*, stage ecological trauma, climate anxiety, and environmental justice.

Ecocriticism, according to Lawrence Buell, is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Buell, 2005, p. viii). Buell’s work suggests that literature, and hence theatre, can foreground ecological awareness by decentering the human subject and foregrounding environmental agency. It argues that one of the central contemporary arguments Buell makes about what makes a text environmentally oriented is that “the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (Buell, 1995, p. 7). This knowledge is particularly germane to *Heroes and Saints*, in which pesticide-poisoned land is not an inert backdrop but an instigator of suffering and resistance, and in *The Children*, where nature pursues the characters with radioactive consequence.

Timothy Clark’s legacy to ecocriticism complicates the reading of the Anthropocene and climate anxiety. In *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (2015), Clark cautions that conventional literary criticism might not be adequate to deal with the disorienting, planetary magnitude of environmental disaster. His solution, the “scale effect”, is that characters’ local, personal actions seem puny and meager beside the immense background of imminent global ecological collapse (Clark, 2015, p. 153) In *The Children*, this tension plays out in the tension between the characters’ small, domestic decisions and the way the fallout of the nuclear disaster they helped engineer cannot be contained. Clark speaks to climate anxiety as a kind of “moral confusion and paralysis in the face of systemic catastrophe” (Clark, 2015, p. 87), a feeling that aligns with what Kirkwood’s characters experience as they battle guilt and intergenerational guilt.

Buell and Clark’s theories that inform this study’s reading of climate anxiety as not only emotional distress but as a structural principle that governs character behaviour and dialogue and informs spatial design. These anxieties also intersect with environmental injustice, specifically in *Heroes and Saints*, where Moraga ties ecological destruction to oppression on the basis of both race and class.

Alongside ecocritical theory, this paper engages with the precepts of environmental theatre, particularly as developed by Una Chaudhuri and Theresa J. May, to articulate how eco-consciousness returns to theatre's ecological form. Una Chaudhuri was one of the earliest scholars tackling the discourse around “eco-theatre”, which she described as “a theatre that speaks for nature, with nature, and about nature” (Chaudhuri, 1994, p. 23). She ranges across anthropocentric traditions in theatre that treat the environment as static or symbolic to offer a model where nature is a “co-performer” in the dramatic event. In *Heroes and Saints*, nature

is both weaponized and wounded, a victim of poisoned fields and martyrs' bodies, nature becomes both an environment and a voice. In *The Children*, the receding ocean and radioactive decay turn the home ground into a volatile, unstable ecological territory.

For Chaudhuri, ecological theatre breaks narrative linearity and spatial realism to register environmental instability: "Theatrical ecology requires a renouncing of narrative mastery, and an exaltation of complexity, risk and ambivalence" (1994, 29). These features are present in the fragmented structure of *The Children*, wherein off-stage catastrophe bleeds into intimate conversation, and in *Heroes and Saints*, where surreal imagery and ritual performance defy naturalistic expectations.

Extending Chaudhuri's first two points, Theresa J. May argues for theatre as activism and embodiment. May explains in her book, *Earth Matters on Stage* (2021): "Eco-theatre must move beyond awareness; it must offer visceral experiences for its audiences, experiences that invite reflection and change" (p. 12). Her focus on the materiality of performativity, bodies in space, scenography, soundscapes, provides a framework for thinking about how both plays stage eco-affect. *Heroes and Saints* transforms human bodies into ecological signs, rendered in physical illness, sacrifice, and protest. In *The Children*, the creaky, fragile bodies of the protagonists mirror the gradual decay of the world they built.

As such together, these frameworks enable a nuanced analysis of how *Heroes and Saints* and *The Children*: Use performance space and structure as potential sites of environmental instability; Critique social and political systems (colonialism, capitalism, nuclear power, agribusiness) as drivers of ecological harm working on very deep, soul stuff that goes beyond intellect, trying to get the audience not just to know about disasters but to feel one's own emotions, one's own responsibility. By bringing ecocriticism together with environmental theatre theory, this study interprets not only what these plays say about the environment but also how they stage and embody environmental crisis through form, space and feeling.

3. Analysis and Discussion: *Heroes and Saints* and *The Children*: Analysis

From the Perspective of Ecocriticism and Environmental Theatre, *Heroes and Saints* represents Eco-Injustice and Embodied Climate Anxiety. Cherríe Moraga's play provides visceral dramatization of the environmental injustice which befell marginalized communities. Set in California's Central Valley, the play portrays a Mexican-American community reeling from the effects of toxic pesticide exposure. The nonhuman environment of this play is not a neutral background but an active abuser, culpable in racial, economic and ecological systems of violence. As Buell (1995) argues, an ecologically minded text has to treat the nonhuman world as "a presence that begins to imply that human history is implicated in natural history" (p. 7). This is clear from the opening scenes, in which the community's children are dying of cancers caused by agricultural chemicals.

Cerezita as a character, a teenage girl born without a body because of pesticide exposure, is an ecological symbol. She turns into a voice of defiance even while permanently stuck: "My body is the testimony of this war. Every time you look at me, you see what they've done to the earth and to us" (Moraga, 1994, p. 49). Here, Moraga joins together environmental and anthropogenic trauma, executing what Buell (2005) refers to as "toxic discourse", narratives that render the corporeal price of ecological degradation visible (p. 30). The play's fragmented construction, punctuated by political protests and surrealist imagery, exemplifies what Chaudhuri (1994) describes as eco-theatre that "refuses the realist illusion of control and wholeness" (p. 28). The images in its stage directions are haunting, including the body

of a crucified child, and it transforms the stage into a site of eco-martyrdom and confrontation.

Further, the environmental suffering is racialized and class-based, resonating with Clark's (2015) indictment of ecocritics for needing to "engage systemic scales of power and vulnerability" (p. 90). They are not in education as mere victims of environmental crisis, but are made disposable by intersecting systems of capitalism and colonialism.

The use of Spanish, Catholic iconography, and myth expands the ecological trauma within cultural and historical specificity. This land is not just poisoned, it is desecrated. The play calls attention to what May (2021) names the affective materiality of eco-theatre: "Environmental performance allows one's body to be both symbol and symptom of ecological wounds" (p. 67). Cerezita's body is not only a metaphor for environmental collapse but also a physical manifestation of it, rendering her mere presence on the stage an act of eco-witnessing.

The Children, in its turn, represents Post-Nuclear Guilt and the Ethics of Responsibility. Lucy Kirkwood's play is a subdued yet intense exploration of climate anxiety and ethical reckoning in the aftermath of nuclear apocalypse. The play takes place in a remote seaside cottage in England, where retired nuclear physicists Hazel and Robin are visited by an old colleague, Rose. The tension emerges from their common connection to a nuclear disaster and Rose's appeal for them to return to the power station and help clean up the radioactive muck, giving up their remaining years to protect the future. As Timothy Clark's (2015) notion of scale effect is particularly salient here: the characters' domestic investments, and their moral computation, is relentlessly undercut by the looming planetary scale of their activities. Against the backdrop of ecological collapse, Hazel's obsession with yoga and food and routine seems ludicrous. But this contrast only emphasizes the paralyzing disjunction between the experience of individual life and systemic disaster: "I'm just trying to have a life... I mean, out of what's left of one" (Kirkwood, 2016, p. 35). In this way, such disjunction energises Clark's account of the Anthropocene as a "threshold concept" that "disorients (or pushes aside) existing scales of meaning and accountability" (Clark, 2015, p. 13). The generational privilege of Hazel and Robin is central to the play's moral tension: Who pays the price for environmental failure? Rose's challenge to them is an eco-theatrical call to moral action. The play's setting, a quiet, rural home giving way to radiation and flood, becomes a theatrical ecology that mirrors the moral degeneration of its inhabitants. As Chaudhuri (1994) argues, environmental theatre should allow space itself to "speak" and register coexistence or environmental dissonance. Kirkwood accomplishes this with such quiet but hair-raising spatial signifiers as broken generators, creeping waters, and the lack of children onstage. This absence denotes the literal death but also the metaphorical silencing of the future.

Key to Rose's proposition is Theresa J. May's (2021) idea of "eco-activism through theatre," which is activated by Rose: "You have had your time. You had children. You lived. Now you owe something. Not in the abstract. In the practical" (Kirkwood, 2016, p. 61). This direct moral mandate, rooted in ecological urgency, transforms the play into an insidious yet impassioned appeal to climate accountability. It embodies what May (2021) identifies as theatre's potential to "transform affect into action" (p. 92).

Finally, if *Heroes and Saints* is grounded in community activism and ecological martyrdom, *The Children* is interrogating moral paralysis and individual responsibility in the face of abstract environmental horror. Moraga foregrounds the intersectional nature of eco-trauma,

connecting it to race, class and gender; Kirkwood's work dramatises existential climate guilt amid the trappings of the Western, post-industrial milieu.

Both plays deploy theatrical space not just to reflect but to make material environmental crisis. In doing so, they echo Buell's (2005) call for literature that renders "ecological emergency both legible and felt" (p. 46). The plays urge audiences to think again, to feel uncomfortable, and perhaps, to act ethically through corporeal performance.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how contemporary drama addresses ecological crisis and climate anxiety through the theoretical lenses of ecocriticism and environmental theatre. Focusing on *Heroes and Saints*, (1989) and *The Children*, (2016).

This analysis underscores that both plays, despite differing context and tone, sensationalize ecological suffering in such a way that materializes the environmental crisis for the audience, and makes it experiential rather than merely visualizable. In *Heroes and Saints*, she is concerned, specifically, about how intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender and ecology come to define the lived experience of the margins and how we look to understand environmental injustice from a marginal standpoint. The toxic atmosphere is incarnated in the figure of Cerezita and in the material blemishing of the community, bringing to the fore what Lawrence Buell (2005) describes as the corporeal dimension of "toxic discourse." The play's surreal and symbolic theatricality corresponds with Wilkerson's description of eco-theatre's phenomenological approach, as outlined in Una Chaudhuri, 1994, and others, as the spatial and corporeal fractures become a way of articulating the impact of environmental devastation.

In contrast, *The Children* sets climate anxiety in a post-nuclear, Western context, demonstrating the moral confusion and intergenerational guilt that is at the heart of Timothy Clark's (2015) discussion of the Anthropocene. The domestic setting, familiar and unobtrusive, morphs into a site of ecological reckoning, in which personal histories and choices have wider systemic repercussions. The dramatic tension and moral dialogue the play conveys exemplifies what Theresa J. May (2021) identifies as environmental theatre's potential to evoke "eco-affect" and inspire audiences to seek ethical reflection.

Taken separately, these plays show that drama can be a powerful kind of ecological discourse, one able to convey not just the bare bones of environmental crisis, but also the rich textures of emotion, ethics and social dynamics that run through it. They use theatrical space, character and embodiment to amplify the climate emergency in ways that traditional media or academic discourse might struggle to do. Due to this, they grapple with audiences using the tools of empathy and critical distance, nudging them to re-evaluate their position in ecological networks.

The study shows how both plays showcase theatre as cultural resistance and even environmental activism. In making ecological trauma visceral and personal, they are an important part of the burgeoning genre of eco-theatre and gateways for exploring the moral and affective contracts of living in an age of planetary crisis.

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