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Encounters in the Chthulucene: Simon McBurney's Theatre of Compost

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Abstract: Looking at Simon McBurney's award-winning solo performance *The Encounter* (2015), this paper examines the play's contribution to environmental humanities through an ecocritical study of its combined use of state-of-the-art sound design and the age-old art of storytelling to address the link between the ecological and spiritual crises that we are facing. *The Encounter* relates the real story of the American photographer Loren McIntyre who lived with the Mayoruna tribe for six weeks in 1969 after getting lost in the Amazon rainforest. Relying heavily on sound design to take us deep into the jungle, the show addresses our relation to nature and technology and elicits our empathy to denounce the dictates of a globalised world ruled and threatened by neoliberal and neocolonial capitalistic ideologies. As the brain – and the stage – become the forest, *The Encounter* challenges the notions of distance and separation from the Other in favour of a deep sense of interconnectedness. Using Donna J. Haraway's 2016 book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, this paper sheds light on how *The Encounter* invites us to recognise the urgency of defining what it means to live together in “response-ability on a damaged earth” (Haraway 2) and how the intermedial, hybrid qualities of the play found not a “post-human” but, on the contrary, a “com-post” theatre piece (11).

Keywords: Simon McBurney, Theatre de Complicité, The Encounter, Donna J. Haraway, Staying with the Trouble, Chthulucene, ecodramaturgy, eco-theatre, eco-poetics, ecocriticism, environmental humanities, intermediality, interconnectedness, entanglement, compost, terran

He looked at them. They looked at him.
The moment was wonderful and unrepeatable.
(18)

Simon McBurney's solo performance *The Encounter* is an award-winning, internationally acclaimed show which premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival

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in 2015. The play relies heavily on sound technology to take us deep into the jungle as it relates the real story of the American photographer Loren McIntyre among the Mayoruna tribe, with whom he lived for six weeks in 1969 after getting lost in the Amazon rainforest during an expedition to Brazil for *National Geographic*. Through McIntyre's experiences of disorientation, confusion, exhaustion, drug-induced hallucination, and telepathic communication, the play questions our common representations of time and space and addresses our relation to nature and technology, while eliciting our empathy to resist the dictates of a globalised world ruled and threatened by neoliberal and neocolonial capitalistic ideologies. As the brain – and the stage – become the forest, *The Encounter* takes us on a mind-expanding journey, challenging the notions of distance and separation from the Other in favour of a deep sense of interconnectedness, which is presented both as a fundamental ecological principle conditioning our lives on Earth and as a poetic and theatrical principle shaping the play by interweaving a multiplicity of stories, voices, and mediums to tell its story.

This paper examines McBurney's contribution to the environmental humanities and eco-theatre through an ecocritical study of the play's combined use of state-of-the-art sound design and the age-old art of storytelling to address the link between the environmental and spiritual crises that we are facing. As the play aims to evoke a visceral empathic response in the audience – and, thus, to foster change – through a deliberate hybridisation of means, I propose to look at the play both as a theatrical experiment and as an activist enterprise using Donna J. Haraway's proposition to “stay with the trouble,” as the title of her 2016 book suggests. Her work will help shed light on how *The Encounter* invites us to be “mortal earthlings in thick copresence” (4) and to recognise the urgency of defining what it means to live together in “response-ability on a damaged earth” (2). Haraway's work will be used to reflect on how McBurney's piece participates in offering new ways of relating to one another and of “making kin in the Chthulucene,” to quote the subtitle of her book. Haraway's term for this new era is based on the idea that we, as “chthonic ones” – who are “beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the minute” (2) – need to create unprecedented hybrid forms of multispecies, multimodal, and transgenerational collaborations in order to survive the exterminating forces of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene. I will argue that McBurney's play contributes to founding a theatre for the Chthulucene, with and for the chthonic ones.

To do so, this paper will first look at how *The Encounter* resorts to both pre-recorded natural sounds and sound effects to evoke the sensational presence and overpowering threat of the jungle on the stage and uses embedded voices and audio technology to give the audience a sense of the telepathic type of communication which occurred between McIntyre and the headman of the village, Bar-

nacle. We will see that the intermedial, hybrid qualities of the play contribute to making an empathic show which is not a “post-human” but, on the contrary, a “com-post” theatre piece (Haraway 11). I will then show that, by compiling, recycling, interweaving, and infusing a variety of storytelling materials, McBurney’s eco-drama brings us back down to earth and to who we are, along with the protagonist – “response-able” interconnected *humans* as in *humus*, “coming together as earthly ones” (Haraway 136) in a world where thoughts, feelings, and objects communicate and interact with each other beyond the visible and ordinary boundaries of the individual self. In addition to Haraway’s concepts and principles, I will introduce and combine a number of tools from the fields of literary theory, psychology, biology, and quantum theory around the interdisciplinary notion of uncertainty to propose an intricate yet consistent worldview to analyse McBurney’s ecodramaturgy. Hopefully, this will provide a useful hybrid interpretive framework to reflect on the critical contours of the eco-dramatic forms that can actively contribute to making theatre for the Cthulucene today.

Intermediality and Dialogism: Staging Interconnectedness

The Encounter is adapted from a 1991 book by Romanian-American writer Petru Popescu, *Amazon Beaming*, which relates McIntyre’s real-life experience. Popescu’s writing style already plays with different voices and viewpoints, placing the narrative under the seal of hybridity in its form itself. The narration alternates between the first and the third person, as Popescu uses multiple existing sources, such as articles, letters, books, and photographs, to document McIntyre’s story, while also including material from interviews with McIntyre, whose answers, recorded on tape, became the book’s first-person sections. These two narrative modes found their way into McBurney’s theatrical adaptation, explaining the multiplicity of voices that he performs and plays onstage, which also correspond to different layers of time and positions in space. This allows the piece to suggest that everything is interconnected and to convey the disorientating experience of McIntyre, who depended upon the Mayoruna people for his survival.

While McBurney is alone on stage, *The Encounter* is also performed by two sound operators in charge of live sound mixing. McBurney uses different types of audio devices, including a binaural microphone which looks like a human head with ears, to create the voices of five different characters as well as to play ambient environmental recordings – the sounds of the jungle that he and his team went to capture during an immersive trip through the Amazon rainforest. The

soundscape of the play designed by Gareth Fry is thus made of those voices along with a variety of live sound effects created onstage, as well as pre-recorded material and voices played on a mobile phone, an iPod, and other speakers, using loop pedals and other off-stage sound technology to create polyphonic effects. As McBurney explains, his intent was to evoke the physical impression of the presence of what is not there or what is far from us – people, places, actions – by triggering our sensory imagination.¹ Because it is able to capture sound just like real human ears and to provide the listener with a 3D stereo sound sensation, the binaural technology in particular allows the audience to “feel like the jungle is all around [them]” (“Simon McBurney Gets Inside Your Head” 01:24–01:27) while experiencing, with the headphones that they are asked to wear for the entire duration of the show, a feeling of separation evocative of McIntyre’s isolation, mirrored and embodied on stage by McBurney’s solo performance.

The impression of an internal form of sound triggered by the binaural dummy head also allows the audience members to feel like McBurney is whispering in their ear in a one-on-one conversation and thus to get a metaphorical idea of McIntyre’s telepathic experience with Barnacle when he perceived the headman’s silent messages “beaming” in his mind. This “strange case of apparent thought transference,” as McIntyre calls it in his introduction to Popescu’s book (20), is conveyed on stage through McBurney’s use of embedded voices, as he alternately plays the Actor (who tells and performs the story, using both direct and indirect speech), Loren McIntyre (the protagonist), and Barnacle (whose voice is “*heard as Loren McIntyre’s voice reverberating in his own head*” 4). Technically, McBurney’s voice as McIntyre is altered live by a pitch shifter while his voice as Barnacle (“LOREN *voice-over*”) is pre-recorded, which enables the audience to distinguish between the three voices. Thus, the words used convey two kinds of inaudible material, as the mind-to-mind dialogue between Barnacle and McIntyre – made of thoughts unheard and unuttered from both ends – alternates with McIntyre’s metalinguistic comments – which he makes internally to try and rationalise his experience but does not say out loud:

ACTOR: He remembered how Barnacle had said that some of the Mayoruna were friends. But the headman had not spoken. Or had he? No, he hadn’t spoken. Not in English and in fact, not at all.

BARNACLE (LOREN *voice-over*): *Some of us are friends.*

ACTOR: It felt like a message [. . .].

¹ “I wanted people to feel the presence of the absent, which also happens because you start to see somebody there, although they’re not there, because you hear them there, and you place them in space” (McBurney, “*The Encounter* Simon McBurney | *Complicité*” 04:15–04:30).

The beamed message faded. Maybe being so near to him explained the sensation. His mind then unconsciously adding words in English afterwards.

He had an idea. He strained and applied focus, not on the words of his next thought, but on the content. Instead of thinking . . .

LOREN: Hey buddy, I am a friend too, you can trust me . . .

ACTOR: . . . he tried to fill himself with the feelings of that thought. Then he waited.

BARNACLE (LOREN *voice-over*): *I know.*

ACTOR: . . . somehow appeared in his mind. Or maybe it was just the feeling of the answer with his own words, in English, hurrying in to illustrate it.

Suddenly the headman rose and held out a finished arrow. It was a gift, he took it. [. . .]

There were so many things here in their pure state, why not thought, too? Why not the simplest form of human contact – mind to mind. No, for goodness' sake. But then it had been ratified, because he had been given a gift. (26–28)

This silent form of communication between McIntyre and Barnacle is the play's most powerful illustration of the kind of co-creative entanglements, at the intra-species, human, level that our times command. It is an almost literal example of what Haraway calls “tentacular thinking,”² where the illusory, limiting belief in an isolated and autonomous I falls apart and is replaced with the open experience of a moving interconnectedness between the “critters” involved.³

The stream-of-consciousness technique used to evoke McIntyre's thought processes enacts the notion of flux at the core of the play. This convergence between form and content around the notion of fluidity, which is both a thematic and structural motif in *The Encounter*, is a key component of its eco-poetics. The tribe's own livelihood being encroached on by deforestation, the Mayoruna, whose name, as it has been suggested, might originally mean the “river people” (Flowers), flee through the forest to go back to the source of the Amazon – and back through time, too, as they believe that the source of the river is time's own beginning, time sharing with water its leaky and life-giving qualities. Thus, reaching this location would allow time to run backwards, just as using fire to burn their belongings means removing themselves from the life-destroying present – a question of survival since, as Popescu explains in his foreword to the play, “the present meant the oil prospectors who invaded their grounds and were erasing their tribal life.”

² In chapter 2 of *Staying with the Trouble*, entitled “Tentacular Thinking,” Haraway reminds us of the Latin roots of “tentacle,” “which comes from *tentaculum*, meaning ‘feeler,’ and *tentare*, meaning ‘to feel’ and ‘to try.’” The “chthonic ones” are the “tentacular ones”: they try as they feel; they feel as they try (31).

³ The religious notion of creation found in “creature” is removed from the word *critter*, providing an earthlier way to refer to “microbes, plants, animals, humans and nonhumans, and sometimes even to machines” (Haraway 169n1).

As they arrive at their final destination, McIntyre understands that, just like Barnacle's mind, "from that source comes a message. It is wordless but so gigantic that it breaks all boundaries. It fills all the space outside [him], inside [him] and fuses the source and the beginning into one notion" (58). This provides a meaningful parallel between two forms of porosity which threaten McIntyre's sense of self: that of his mind in its encounter with the Other and that of his body in its encounter with the river. While the immediate communication that takes place between the two men shatters the generally accepted and unquestioned boundaries of individual thought and feeling that underlie the Western conception of the human mind, similarly, the river itself eventually dissolves the lines of separation between the self and the Other, the outside and the inside, time and space. The journalist's experience of his own mind as part of a wider ecosystem of transsubjective consciousness thus mirrors his immersive journey within the extremely complex and biodiverse ecosystem of the Amazon rainforest.

The hybrid, integrative narrative structure and the enunciative entanglement that characterise the play's ecology reflect, to an extreme degree, what Mikhail Bakhtin has identified as "our dialogical natures" and the "miracle" of polyphony, as Wayne C. Booth shows (xxi). Indeed, according to Bakhtin, dialogue, by nature, does not occur between "interacting monads,"⁴ for "neither individuals nor social entities ever constitute a monad. They are much looser, 'messier,' and more open than that. The most interesting and unfinalizable aspects of any interaction arise from the relative disorder of the participants," as Gary S. Morson and Caryl Emerson explain (50). Instead of being "wholes with clear boundaries," Bakhtin believed that "neither individuals nor any other social entities are locked within their boundaries. They are extraterritorial, partially 'located outside' themselves" (Morson and Emerson 50). In his "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book," published as an appendix to his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin remarks that, in front of "the expression in an artistic work of the writer's *I*," what is required is "not an analysis of consciousness in the form of a sole and single *I*, but precisely an analysis of the interactions of many consciousnesses; not many people in the light of a single consciousness, but precisely an analysis of many equally privileged and fully valid consciousnesses" (287). He posits the concept of "nonself-sufficiency," defined as "the impossibility of the existence of a single consciousness" (287), and explains:

⁴ Federico Pellizzi explains that *monad* is a word borrowed from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz which Bakhtin was fond of and which refers to "a single unit that constitutes a viewpoint over the world and is therefore the whole world from a certain viewpoint" (204).

I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness (toward a *thou*). Separation, dissociation, and enclosure within the self as the main reason for the loss of one's self. Not that which takes place within, but that which takes place on the *boundary* between one's own and someone else's consciousness, on the *threshold*. And everything internal gravitates not toward itself but is turned to the outside and dialogized, every internal experience ends up on the boundary, encounters another, and in this tension-filled encounter lies its entire essence. (287)

McBurney's play stages precisely this "tension-filled encounter" with another's consciousness, which tears apart McIntyre's self-concept. Intended for Dostoevsky, Bakhtin's words can thus be applied to the journalist: "A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks *into the eyes of another* or *with the eyes of another*" (287). Indeed, in *The Encounter*, McBurney wanted to denounce the illusion of separation and create a form and use tools that would give us a sense of the relational nature of everything, including the self. In a striking echo of Bakhtin, he explains:

Our idea of distance, crucially the distance between one person and another, is also challenged. The notion of a "separate self," so precious to our contemporary notion of identity, is undermined to the point that it becomes, for McIntyre, utterly illusory. One self, one so-called individual consciousness, he discovers, is not necessarily separated from another by language, time, or distance. We are possibly interconnected in ways to which we are, mostly, blind in the modern world – a world in which, paradoxically, we are more connected by technology than at any time in history. (qtd. in Popescu 12–13)

In other words, although Bakhtin believed that only novels could provide a "representation [. . .] of human 'languages' or 'voices' that are not reduced into, or suppressed by, a single authoritative voice," McBurney successfully translates "the inescapably dialogical quality of human life" into theatrical form (Booth xxii). In *The Encounter*, the radical dissolution of the "monolithic quality" of verbal expression that Bakhtin points out in conventional drama (17) speaks of a profound paradigm shift and a necessary new understanding of reality as we are faced with unprecedented challenges. While in 1929, Bakhtin considered that "the whole concept of dramatic action, as that which resolves all dialogic oppositions, is purely monologic" and that "a true multiplicity of levels would destroy drama, because dramatic action, relying as it does upon the unity of the world, could not think those levels together or resolve them" (17), McBurney's play manages, on the contrary, to renew the dramatic form by substituting the traditional, outdated, principle of unity inherited from Aristotle with the notion of ecological interconnectedness which our times of global crises both reflect and call for. Instead of

resolving oppositions, the play invites us to “stay with the trouble” and, thus, to adopt a more realistic position with major political implications as “entangled and worldly” critters (Haraway 4).

From the Sky to the Ground: Becoming a “Chthonic One”

As the communication resumes between the headman and the photographer, who just saw his camera being ripped apart by a monkey, Barnacle’s messages leak deeper into McIntyre’s mind, heart, and comprehension. In doing so, they explicitly reveal the threat which causes the Mayoruna to move deeper into the forest:

LOREN: Once we were alone, the communication started again. Smooth and implicit. And even though he was a few yards away, he communicated to me that: *You are sad because what was in the dark should have stayed in the dark.* It was so clear, I couldn’t believe he hadn’t spoken. Was he talking about my camera? No, how could he be? But it was so much like speaking . . . [. . .]. Barnacle communicated something like:

Here’s the forest; if you run away right now, I’m not going to stop you. [. . .]

Other white people have been here. They brought death.

[. . .] He said:

BARNACLE (LOREN voice-over): *We have been moving around.*

LOREN: I tried to communicate back: have you been attacked?

BARNACLE (LOREN voice-over): *Yes. By white people that came down from the sky.*

LOREN: So where are you moving to?

BARNACLE (LOREN voice-over): *We’re going to the beginning.*

LOREN: What beginning?

BARNACLE (LOREN voice-over): *The beginning.* (34–35)

While “the dark should have stayed in the dark” – referring to the film containing McIntyre’s best shots, which should have remained protected from the light – so should the white people have stayed where they belonged and left the natural resources of the Amazon untouched and the Indigenous tribes alone in the shadows of the rainforest. What Barnacle denounces in this passage is the border-crossing and boundary-trespassing of a neocolonial narrative that is still ongoing, causing human and environmental destruction, the Indigenous peoples being the first and most direct victims of what has been called the “ecocide-genocide nexus,” to emphasise the connections between “ecocide, genocide, capitalism and colonialism” (Crook et al. 300).

Despite the Mayoruna’s efforts and determination, the presence of McIntyre represents the impossibility of actually erasing the present and the unavoidable

obligation to “stay with the trouble” for both parties. Their improbable encounter mirrors the troubled, mixed-up reality of our intertwined ongoing collective stories as well as the new interactions between the natural elements that reconfigure the landscape of the Amazon rainforest and its disrupted ecosystem, as the Mayoruna burn all their material possessions (fire) before undertaking a journey towards the river (water) to try and counterbalance the threat of the “white people [coming] down from the sky” (air), taking McIntyre deep into the jungle (that is, down to earth). In her speculative fabulation “Terrapolis,” Haraway imagines a fictional multidimensional and multispecies place which “is not the home world for the human as *Homo*, that ever parabolic, re- and de-tumescing, phallic self-image of the same” but for the human as “worker of and in the soil,” where the “critters are beings of the mud more than the sky” (11). This is precisely the transformative journey that McIntyre, who cannot go back to his plane and eventually finds himself “reduced to just a body” (33), falling “on rotten leaves” (41), is forced to go through. Moreover, “Terrapolis” is precisely a place which “makes space for unexpected companions” (Haraway 11) and where the chthonic ones, driven over the edge of extinction, rely on and grow together from their ability to “[craft] safe enough ways to tangle with each other in conflict and collaboration” (150).

It is, therefore, particularly meaningful that the main piece of information at the core of the first exchange between McIntyre and Barnacle quoted above revolves around the notion of being friends, which is then practically enacted by the headman’s gesture and material offering. Indeed, despite being another white man coming from the sky and representing a threat, McIntyre’s own endangered life and uncertain becoming place him in a position of extreme vulnerability, which mirrors that of the tribe at the collective scale and reverses the power relationship at stake. It is crucial for his survival to befriend at least one member of the tribe, just as “making kin” with “companion species” (Haraway 2, 4) is necessary in order for us, human and nonhuman critters alike, to be able to overcome together the threats that we are faced with and to think “more livable politics and ecologies in the times of burning and extraction called the Anthropocene and Capitalocene” (90). In exchange for their help, McIntyre is endowed with the mission of being the Mayoruna’s “authenticator” and of “proving that it is real” (56). Almost half a century later, McBurney, in turn, is asked by Lourival, the headman of another Mayoruna village, to “tell the world that [they] have survived. [. . .] But whether [they] all will survive . . . that is another matter” (McBurney “We See Only What We Want to See”). By engaging in such “risky comakings,” they all play a part in one of those intricate “cosmological performances” which characterise the Chthulucene (Haraway 14).

Interestingly, it is by taking some altitude (air) again that McIntyre realises what it means to be a chthonic one (earth), and it is the motif of the ocean (water)

which illustrates how this cosmological performance is orchestrated and how much more precious it is than fossil fuels (fire), thus inviting us to reflect on how the four basic elements are interrelated. The notion of interconnectedness, where borders and boundaries are transcended, and visible and invisible interactions eventually form a unique ecosystem, is explicitly revealed to him during a lucid dream:

Each sentence below is looped, overlapping with the next, creating a dreamlike effect.

LOREN: One fifth of the world's fresh water is here. The river, four thousand miles long. A thousand miles to the east, the mouth. Connected. Flowing to the ocean. The Arctic. Where does it begin?

ACTOR: Loren McIntyre was flying, suspended, airborne. Hovering above a vision of the jungle and mountains. Like an oversized map. It was a dream and in the dream he knew it. A vast stretch of jungle spread out beneath him and to the east, the two-hundred-mile-wide mouth of the Amazon River, and the ocean flowing all the way to the Arctic. Clouds hanging in the sky, heavy with water vapour. And the source of the Amazon was somewhere in the mountains behind him. The forest, phosphorescent as if lit from underneath. The phosphorescence was the forest's rich life forms, its treasure. The Christian conquistadors were wrong. Pizarro was wrong. Francisco de Orellana was wrong. The oil prospectors, the rubber tappers, the missionaries with their faith had all been wrong. They were all looking for something else, but in his dream McIntyre recognised instantly, although it didn't have any words.

LOREN: It's the intricacy of the forest . . . that's the treasure.

ACTOR: Something suffused the greenness of the jungle, all fed by a single source. Hidden somewhere in the mountains. An invisible force; all interconnected, pregnant with a captive message. (23)

In McIntyre's dream, the source of the Amazon River is the focal point of all life, invisibly connecting everything together through the water cycle and indirectly attracting explorers, colonisers, missionaries, and prospectors from all places and times. However, while everything natural is in the right place, everything human moves for the wrong reasons. Later in the play, it is no longer McIntyre's mind which provides him with "a vision of the jungle," but the jungle which provides him with a vision of his mind. Lost in the forest, inebriated, and slightly hallucinating after drinking the juice of a wild vine, McIntyre eventually feels like "the forest becomes [his] brain and [his] brain the forest," to the point of having "the sensation of seeing [his] thoughts" (40).

From an ecodramaturgical point of view, the play's sound design and, in particular, the use of loops to create overlapping effects allow McBurney to evoke the parallelism between "the intricacy of the forest" and that of the protagonists' minds, which form but another kind of forest, itself deeply rooted in and interwoven with the story of the Amazon basin. Their thoughts and feelings interact in a transpersonal way, like the roots of trees communicating with each other below

the surface, sharing vital information (such as “are you my friend or my enemy?”) and helping each other survive. Extending the symbiotic model in biology to the spiritual plane, such visions converge with the enlarged, holistic view that supports what it means to be “terran,” according to Haraway (101).

Sympoietic Ecodramaturgy: Compos(t)ing for the “Terran” Stage

Because “Diverse human and nonhuman players are necessary in every fiber of the tissues of the urgently needed Chthulucene story” (Haraway 55), the Chthulucene needs “sympoietic”⁵ art practices that both foster tentative “knottings” (97) between vulnerable and co-evolving critters and tell the stories of their co-creative encounters. Haraway writes:

We relate, know, think, world, and tell stories through and with other stories, worlds, knowledges, thinkings, yearnings. [. . .] Critters are at stake in each other in every mixing and turning of the terran compost pile. We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities. [. . .] Critters – human and not – become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding. (97)

Haraway derives her conception of sympoiesis largely from the work of biologist Scott F. Gilbert, whose study of the “significant interactions of animal and plants with symbiotic microorganisms that disrupt the boundaries that heretofore had characterized the biological individual” led him to refute the very notion of “biological individual” in favour of “symbionts” (Gilbert et al. 325). Particularly striking examples of this type of relationships in living systems include the way trees and fungi form partnerships known as mycorrhizas, whereby trees in forests and other ecosystems communicate and cooperate through subterranean circuits of fungi fused with their roots, and the way lichens allow two living organisms from different species to function as a single and stable unit, as the fungus and the alga that they are made of live in a symbiotic way. Gilbert et al. conclude their article by stating: “For animals, as well as plants, there have never been individuals. This new paradigm for biology asks new questions and seeks new relationships among the different living entities on Earth. We are all lichens” (336).

⁵ Haraway defines “sympoiesis” as the art of “becoming-with and making-with a motley clutch of earth others” (137).

In addition to the “Dream” scene, *The Encounter* offers multiple images of interdependence and symbiotic growth, which correspond to the biological mode of existence of living organisms in the animal and plant kingdoms alike, while also echoing the spiritual mode of transmission of telepathic thoughts and feelings that McIntyre experiences in his own body and mind. As he wakes up scratching one morning, he realises that “the bugs have found [him] again, laid their eggs in the open cuts left by the thorns” (38) – just as Barnacle’s thoughts found their way into his mind, opened by their shared need to communicate as a result of their life-threatening circumstances. Such unavoidable experiences, which may either serve or hinder his survival, force McIntyre to “stay with the trouble.” His flesh becomes the soil where plants and animals alike leave their mark, infusing and hybridising his body as a functional element in the ecosystem where he becomes a natural and effective part. Finding himself at a crossroads between two diverging trails in the jungle, he is aware that, just like his alliance with Barnacle, “either one could lead to life or death. Death is already here. It’s always here in the wilderness” (38). Forms of compost, confusion, superposition, and mongrelising between living and nonliving objects, human and nonhuman bodies, the biological and the technological, nature and culture, thus infuse the images that both feed the protagonist’s visions and make the language of the play. Such is the case when McIntyre mistakes his roll of film for a “black creeper” (33), hanging from a branch after monkeys took the roll out of his camera, and this poetics of entanglement reaches a climax when he is confronted with a process of decomposition and scavenging:

I see a thick rope on the floor, a cable, and then I realise it’s not a cable, but a traffic of army ants. I follow the procession away from the anthill and find . . . a watch. [. . .] I start running, along the freeway of ants and I find . . . four bodies. [. . .] They’re piled on each other. A baseball cap, jaws without gums, teeth stained by tobacco. And they seem in some sort of motion, as the ants crawl over them. (39)

Faced with a natural phenomenon of epic and traumatising proportions which he cannot properly recognise and identify at first, McIntyre uses his own frame of cultural references to try and make sense of what he perceives. The “tentacular” images that he uses to describe the procession of ants is evocative of and borrowed from our busy modern lifestyles and, more specifically, from the military field (the thick rope, the cable, the traffic, the army, the freeway). This scene of horror and its subjective depiction both convey the journalist’s feeling of defamiliarisation and overwhelm at the appalling sight of what he realises could also happen to him and point at the dreadful consequence of the improbable and life-threatening encounter of two worlds. But the war between the capitalist greed of the oil prospectors, heirs of a long line of colonisers in turn colonised by the living

forces of nature, and the wilderness of the Amazon jungle and its human and nonhuman guardians, leads to a fecund superposition and hybridisation, both from a biological and a poetic point of view, within the rainforest ecosystem and the play's eco-poetics. This is precisely what living on the edge in the Chthulucene means: "Chthonic ones are monsters in the best sense; they demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters. Chthonic ones are not safe" (Haraway 2). In particular, Haraway explains that:

Ants and acacias are avid for association with critters of all sorts of sizes and scales, and they are opportunistic in their approaches to living and dying [. . .]. These species in all their complexities and ongoingness both do great harm and sustain worlds, sometimes in association with human people, sometimes not. The devil is truly in the details of response-able naturecultures inhabited by accountable companion species. (125)

From the cable to the colony of ants, from the watch to the human bodies, and from the baseball cap back to the ants, the monstrous associations that McIntyre witnesses and his description of them blur the boundaries between life and death, between natural and man-made objects, composing, decomposing, and recomposing the multispecies ecosystem in which they participate.

Similarly, in their mental and affective "compost pile," thoughts and feelings not only circulate between the reporter and the headman but break down and re-emerge in new configurations through their interactions and reciprocated acknowledgment, allowing unprecedented forms of intertwined living and mutual care to take place in a sympoietic way between the two strangers as they become friends. And, as a story and as an enterprise, *The Encounter* itself is an illustration of these necessary forms of organic cooperation and interdependence, which play out at several different levels and in arborescent ways – between the tribe and their natural surroundings, between McIntyre and Barnacle, between Popescu and McIntyre, between Complicité and the Mayoruna, between McBurney and his audience, between Western ecologists and Indigenous peoples, etc. In other words, McBurney's eco-drama founds a "theatre of compost."

The sophisticated sound arrangements co-created and orchestrated in real time by him and the sound technicians also mirror and add to these patterns of risky cooperation and ecological interdependence. In particular, McBurney's use of "loop pedals to create [both] exterior soundscapes and the interior worlds of the characters" (3) offers a complex aural experience for the audience, where intricate polyphonic effects tend to blur the boundaries between the emitting sources and their origins, the inside and the outside, the natural and the artificial, the subjective and the objective. And while the audience is invited to feel like they are in the middle of the jungle because of what they hear, what they actually see is a different story, as there is no army of ants but real cables crawling around McBurney on

the stage and among the audience to connect microphones and headphones with the mixing desk.

As a result, *The Encounter* is not a piece of immersive theatre, but one that creates, to a certain extent, the illusion of immersion – a body immersed in nature and a mind immersed in another – by resorting to intermediality to suggest immediacy, using technology to create intimacy, and evoking proximity to address universality. By playing with multiple levels of closeness, blunting the arrow of time, and emphasising disorientation to give us a sense of familiarity, McBurney's piece and hi-tech show invite us to share McIntyre's mind-expanding journey from resistance and denial, ironically expressed in self-contradictory terms – “A thought suddenly howls, savagely. I was never part of nature. No, I'm not!! [. . .] We're human beings. We're not part of nature” (40–41) –, to more peaceful realisations and self-aware images of hybridisations with the plant and animal kingdoms: “And then a thought is planted in my mind”; “And then a thought blooms in my mind” (52); “And although I haven't taken any of the drug I feel like I'm turning into an animal” (56).

The play thus explores many kinds of monstrous “sympoietic arrangements” (Haraway 59) by creating what could be called a sympoietic ecodramaturgy. By “composting” Popescu's account of McIntyre's story and bringing the sounds of the jungle onto the stage, intermingled with voices and perspectives from different times and spaces which create the theatrical vision and experience of a multi-species, transgenerational, and transcultural ecosystem, McBurney's hybrid eco-performance nourishes a fertile soil for eco-drama as an unstable, undefined place, which invites us to “stay with the trouble” and co-create from there. Planting seeds of awareness and care in the audience, it participates in renewing the forms and purpose of the theatre for Haraway's *Terrapolis*, thus providing a piece of *theaterra*.

Gilbert's observations in the field of biology echo Bakhtin's remarks in the field of philosophy and literary theory: the idea of independent entities with discriminated, rigid boundaries securing and separating individual bodies and agencies from each other is no longer an operational scientific concept. Haraway explores and promotes the motif of interrelatedness in her work, turning it into a social agenda and an eco-ethical proposition. McBurney answers the call and uses it as an ecodramaturgical tool and a principle for eco-theatre-making.

Twenty years ago, in a 2002 paper entitled “Are We Really Interconnected? Ecophilosophy and Quantum Theory from a Postmodern Perspective,” Serpil Oppermann already pointed out that “the global environmental crisis today compels

us to review an essential principle of reality which has been insistently articulated by ecophilosophy as a comprehensive vision of the fundamental interrelatedness of all life” (51). Using deep ecologist Michael Zimmerman’s definition of “the internal relatedness of all things, that is, that particular entities are but contemporary knots in an interconnected cosmic web” (qtd. in Oppermann 51), she then quotes quantum physics pioneer Niels Bohr who noted that “in our own century the immense progress of science has [. . .] given us an unsuspected lesson about our positions as observers of that nature of which we are part ourselves” (qtd. in Oppermann 56). This remark echoes oceanographer David Farmer’s statement in *The Encounter* when he mentions the necessary “recognition that we are actually part of nature, and that the whole system is interacting” (40) – his pre-recorded words being repeated several times as McIntyre is still in denial. Indeed, the scientific experiments conducted in quantum mechanics have revealed that “we can no longer speak of the behavior of the particle independently of the process of observation,” to quote Bohr’s famous friend and colleague Werner Heisenberg, who explains the “observer effect” as follows:

When we speak of the picture of nature in the exact science of our age, we do not mean a picture of nature so much as *a picture of our relationships with nature* [. . .]. Science no longer confronts nature as an objective observer, but sees itself as an actor in this interplay between man and nature. The scientific method of analysing, explaining and classifying has become conscious of its limitations, which arise out of the fact that by its intervention science alters and refashions the object of investigation. In other words, method and object can no longer be separated. (qtd. in Smolin 93)

Commenting on this principle of interconnectedness, which also highlights our co-responsibility in the determination of our reality, Oppermann adds:

The fact that this view finds its scientific validation in quantum physics points to a profound transformation in human thought and the discourses of the human sciences. The ecophilosophical view of the environment based on the interrelational, or in other words the holistic perception of reality is generally referred to as the new paradigm. (51)

While Oppermann argues “for the need to assimilate the emerging new paradigm into all of the human discourses” (52), *The Encounter* provides a convincing example that the contemporary British stage is playing its part. By inviting its audience to empathically connect with McIntyre’s story while technologically connecting with McBurney’s voice, it develops a hybrid form of *theaterra* for the Chthulucene, reminding us of our nature as “intra-active entities-in-assemblages” (Haraway 101). Using intermediality to suggest that we are all in this hot “compost pile” together (55), it allows us to journey with the Indigenous tribe and to share, to some extent, the protagonist’s mind-expanding experience of interconnectedness

with his surroundings. Devising what could be called a quantum eco-poetics – or sympoietics – for the stage, the show combines the physical presence of a single performer, voice, and body, with a sophisticated use of hi-tech devices, bringing technology and nature together in a hybridised format urging us to *care, make kin, and be friends*. Just like the Mayoruna see “the oil underneath the ground as the blood of the Earth” and are “concerned that if you suck out the blood, [. . .] then the earth will cease to exist” (53), *The Encounter* encourages us to nourish a holistic vision and experience of life and to ultimately take action to preserve our planet’s multispecies ecosystem. For, as much as we can no longer ignore that “we are at stake in each other’s company,” as the ecological philosopher and ethnographer Thom van Dooren highlights (qtd. in Haraway 39), we also “render each other capable in actual encounters” (Haraway 126). And this compost-like intricacy of life forces – “that’s the treasure,” indeed (23).

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Bionote

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