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Aesthetic Innovation and Activist Impetus in Climate Change Theater: Beyond a New Formalist Reading of Chantal Bildoeau's One-Actor Play *No More Harveys* (2022)

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ABSTRACT

Canadian-American playwright and activist Chantal Bilodeau finds that we need innovative plays that meld climate change into the aesthetics, arguments, and social fabrics of drama and performance. Testing Bilodeau's suggestion, this essay focuses on the poetics of her newest full-length play, *No More Harveys* (2022). This reading of climate change theater and in particular of Bilodeau's one-actor play applies Caroline Levine's New Formalist method, which strives to read aesthetic and social forms simultaneously and non-hierarchically, and which raises pertinent questions as to how activist theater manages to balance aesthetics and (political and/or scientific) argumentation. While Levine's New Formalism offers a productive analytical angle on small- and large-scale forms, it cannot cover all literary and social phenomena single-handedly. The analysis offered here proposes to demonstrate the usefulness of complementary readings that take into account (a) decolonial and ecocritical concepts of planetarity, (b) a historically informed understanding of monodramatic and of autobiographical generic practices, and (c) the affordances of climate change theater at the present moment. As this contribution argues, Bilodeau employs and modifies elements of form and genre in a manner that allows multiple narratives of social injustice, violence, and detrimental hierarchies across large swaths of time and place to bleed into each other.

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KEYWORDS

Climate change drama, New Formalism, planetarity, monodrama, life narrative, abuse of women, Indigenous Alaskan women, cross-species empathy, agency

In 2015, Canadian-American dramatist Chantal Bilodeau called for “a new consciousness” and “a new aesthetic” (“In Search”) with which to respond to the horrific impact of an anthropocentric worldview. She translates this challenge into her endeavor to move from addressing climate change in her dramatic works “to writing plays that *are* climate change – plays that embody, in form, content, and process, the essence of the issues we are facing” (“In Search”). Among the six trends that she identifies in the oeuvres of like-minded artists, she names the foregrounding of Indigenous cosmologies of “interconnectivity,” the incorporation of “science and policy,” and a “shift from a concern for the individual, [sic] to a concern for communities” (“In Search”). Her advocacy for a change of artistic approach resulted, among other things, from her experience of developing the first play of *The Arctic Cycle*, her eight-part series focused on climate change. “All of the plays in the *Cycle* deal with community” (Bilodeau, “Writing Plays” 40), as Bilodeau explains in an interview.

In the first two dramas, *Sila* (2015) and *Forward* (2017), the tug-of-war between community and individuality is – among other things – embedded in multi-person character constellations that imply connectedness either via geographical space or historical time period (“Writing Plays” 40).[1] Although the third play, *No More Harveys* (2023; premiered on 1 April 2022 in Anchorage, Alaska) features only one human actor on stage, “the connecting tissue [which reaches beyond the protagonist] is a shared experience of abuse caused by the legacy of patriarchy and extractive industries” (40). In addition to linking the main character to (fictional and real) others offstage, the playwright aims at enabling audience members not only to live through “a self-reflective and generative process” during the performance, but also to “move one step closer to being actively engaged in solving the climate crisis” (46). This hope is based on the assumption that people who decide to watch a climate change play are already concerned about the threatening situation. What they need, then, is a nudge towards considering options for their personal contribution to preventing the worst-case scenario from happening.

The central character in Bilodeau’s *No More Harveys* is a battered woman who decides to put as much geographical distance as possible between herself and her husband. She leaves New York City on a bus after her husband hit her in the face again and severely injured one of her cheekbones. The protagonist, who manages to travel

[1] For detailed analyses of these plays, see the three articles by Balestrini in the Works Cited.

to Anchorage, Alaska, remains anonymous. We only learn that her name is *not* Renée – a telling name that challenges potentially facile notions of rebirth or re-invention of one's approach to life, for that matter, but the *ex negativo* statement does not, of course, offer clues about her actual name. Her state of not being named counteracts the unavoidable focus of a one-actor performance and lets her come across as representing innumerable abused women. Beyond that, she links herself with anyone severely affected by various types of violent oppression and the literal, social, and metaphorical 'climates' attached to such predicaments. The titular Harveys stand for, first, the protagonist's abusive husband; second, for "Harvey the hurricane" that "hit Texas" and Louisiana; and, third, for "Harvey the Hollywood producer" (Bilodeau, *No More Harveys* 6) – and the list is extended through the topics addressed in the course of the play.

Bilodeau's call for innovative plays that meld climate change into the aesthetic, argumentative, and social fabrics of developing a drama, the drama itself, and its performance raises the question as to which theoretical approach is suitable for unraveling the poetics of *No More Harveys*. In her well-received volume *Forms*, which does not address contemporary theater, Caroline Levine rejects the idea of "reading aesthetic forms as responses to given social realities" and instead asks "how both aesthetic *and* social forms act . . . in the world" (xi). By avoiding hierarchical and sequential thinking, Levine encourages a method of reading that prefers simultaneity and reciprocity, that avoids privileging the political or the aesthetic as stimuli. Perceiving the social and the aesthetic simultaneously is pertinent to theater because of the centrality of encounters, conflicts, and communication in dramatic texts and in performance situations. At the same time, activist theater – which is quite prevalent in the context of climate change drama – struggles with the question as to whether the aesthetic must huddle in the back seat in order to assure that the political message becomes clearly discernible. Climate change theater grapples with another related quandary, that is, whether scientific knowledge and dramatic aesthetics necessarily compete for audience members' attention or whether they can be complementary and thus mutually supportive. As I will argue, *No More Harveys* does not push aesthetics to the margins in favor of conveying sociopolitical issues or scientific insights, including a clarion call for change. Instead, Bilodeau employs and modifies elements of form and genre in a manner that allows multiple narratives of social injustice, violence, and detrimental hierarchies across large swaths of time and place to bleed into each other.

The concern with climate and climate change provides a logical playing field for this endeavor, as climate is a systemic phenomenon whose current manifestations can only be understood within an immense historical and spatial network of weather

patterns, human activity, and evolutionary change. Thus, Bilodeau's references to the roles of science, politics/policies, and connectedness (inter-human and otherwise) concretize central elements in this web of relations. In *Sila* and *Forward*, the playwright addresses, for example, settler-colonial economic policies, clashing notions of self and community, patriarchal oppression, the impact of Western scientific inquiries on Indigenous peoples and on Arctic environments, and attempts at transcultural or otherwise boundary-permeating interrelations.

While Levine's New Formalism offers a productive analytical angle on small- and large-scale forms, it cannot cover all literary and social phenomena single-handedly – and understandably so. Thus, I propose to show that a more nuanced reading of *No More Harveys* can result from taking into account three complementary components: (a) decolonial and ecocritical concepts of planetarity, (b) a historically informed understanding of monodramatic and of autobiographical generic practices, and (c) the affordances of climate change theater at the present moment. Ultimately, I will illustrate how Bilodeau's one-actor climate change drama realizes her above-described innovative goal. *No More Harveys* "is" – to modify the playwright's words – "climate change" in the sense that "climate" serves as a term that references multiple superimposed patterns of sustained and systemic abuse (of the planet, of women, and of other oppressed or violated beings) and that laminates weather systems over time (i.e., the Earth Science definition of climate) with social climates of exploitation. The play uses a three-world aesthetic as well as a decidedly absent fourth wall in order to achieve audience immersion. As the protagonist explicitly verbalizes, the strong relational bonds experienced between her and the theatergoers help achieve a change of "climate" in the theater. The performance strives "to be" the kind of connectivity that allows the fictional protagonist to go on with her life, that allegorizes sociality, solidarity, and friendship as prerequisites for fighting climate change, and that exerts an impact outside the spatial and temporal limits of the theater and the performance.

Levine's New Formalist Approach

In partial disagreement with Michel Foucault's pessimistic vision of social forms that tend to "converge in massive regimes of coordinated power" (xiii), Levine approaches such forms as more variegated and, thus, more hopeful. She directs our attention to forms in isolation *and* to "workable, progressive, thoughtful relations among forms – including containing wholes, rhythms of labor, economic, racial, and sexual hierarchies, and sprawling, connective networks of capital" (xiii). Instead of studying literary and social forms consecutively, as she finds new historicists to have done, she scrutinizes them in conjunction with one another and with the same method (1). Thus, Levine writes, "[f]orm, for our purposes, will mean all shapes and

configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference" (3). Her "new formalist method," she claims, thus unites "social and aesthetic forms" (3) as well as the ways in which we research either one.

While form as such is obviously not a new concern in literary studies, synthesizing understandings of form as "*containing*, *plural*, *overlapping*, *portable* and *situated*" (6) as well as borrowing the term "affordance" from "design theory" (6) is meant to enable researchers to keep both minute details and broader formal characteristics in view. The concept of "affordance" requires that we think about "potentialities" (6) and limits, which – again – may not have been discussed from this very perspective of functionality. In the context of my case study, this raises questions as to the affordances of specific dramatic forms that Bilodeau uses, expands, manipulates, or redesigns in *No More Harveys*. At the same time, Levine's perspective on specific forms and on interactions between them, as well as on extant formal features and the leeway for change and innovation, invites comparison with multiscalar, relational, and planetary ecological thinking.

In addition to the simultaneous study of aesthetic and social forms as singular and as built into meaningful interrelations, Levine emphasizes "effect[s]" that result from "colliding" forms, arguing that such collisions may offer "a new understanding of how power works" (8). In other words, while forms separately serve purposes of organizing things, processes, people, and so on, forms can also "meet" in ways that are collaborative or mutually disruptive (16–17).

What is new, then, in Levine's approach? She argues:

> Though we have not always called them forms, they are the political structures that have most concerned literary and cultural studies scholars: bounded *wholes*, from domestic walls to national boundaries; temporal *rhythms*, from the repetitions of industrial labor to the enduring patterns of institutions over time; powerful *hierarchies*, including gender, race, class, and bureaucracy; and *networks* that link people and objects, including multinational trade, terrorism, and transportation. (21)

The challenge that literary scholarship faces is not to consecutively proceed from, first, perceiving sociopolitical forms to, then, identifying them in artistic representations. Rather, it is necessary to discuss such 'real-life' patterns parallel to and in conjunction with possibly comparable literary counterparts.

Bounded Wholes: Spaces

Levine's method of identifying and discussing social and aesthetic "bounded wholes" lends itself to identifying at least three thematic strains in Bilodeau's play which indicate that material, physical, political, and social patterns are integrated with artistic, dramatic patterns: (a) references to and depictions of spaces, (b) relations within and across spaces, and (c) a specific material artifact with meta/physical

characteristics. These categorizations look neater and more distinctive than they actually are. Throughout the play, boundaries between bounded wholes are punctured and transgressed. In addition to being questioned conceptually, some bounded wholes are critiqued for their potential oppressiveness. Reconfigurations of and alternatives for well-established bounded wholes create Levinian collisions, some of which encapsulate the play's sociopolitical impetus towards future-oriented productive bounded wholes.

Spaces addressed and experienced in the play include geographical locations and psychological states related to the protagonist as well as the theater as a place that comprises a stage and an auditorium. In the first category, the protagonist reminds us of the United States of America as a nation and of the spatial separation between the 48 contiguous states and Alaska. On a figurative level, her journey from the East Coast to Anchorage emphasizes that geographical distance serves as a spatial analogue to the need to escape a physically threatening predicament in order to think for herself. Within the world of the play, she manages to detach herself from New York and from her marriage with the help of her Indigenous Alaskan female friends, who understand the need for self-esteem, community, and a sense of belonging. In the theater, the protagonist both addresses the audience and physically traverses the boundary between stage and auditorium, thus creating a bounded whole by breaking the fourth wall. Switching scales, the protagonist's physical journey to a location that is especially vulnerable to climate change connects the psychological journey she experiences to larger, global narratives: Her own story of a battered wife makes her think about the victimization of other women through the impacts of patriarchal hierarchies, of climate change, of environmental pollution, and of a lack of agency.

This multiplicity of bounded wholes all of which combine physical and mental spaces is prefigured in Bilodeau's explanation that "[t]here are three distinct worlds in this play: the theatre where the woman is speaking to the audience; her physical journey across the United States; and her internal emotional journey" (Bilodeau, *No More Harveys* 3). Thus, the worlding in *No More Harveys* comprises multiple bounded wholes with boundaries that are zones of collision as well as permeability.

The motif of traveling and of being in various locations – which occurs both in recognizable geographical settings and within the inner world of memory, feeling, and thought – evolves into an understanding of the verb "to migrate" as facilitating a different state of mind, which, in turn, is necessary for survival and for agency (10–11, 16, 38, 45, 47, 56). At the end of the journey depicted in the play, the protagonist perceives herself as able to work towards changing her mindset and her everyday actions – and this is what she wants audience members to emulate. When the protagonist breaks the fourth wall within the spatial micro-level of the performance space,

she invites her viewers/listeners (as a collective and, thus, as another bounded whole) to be her friends whose individual empathy and solidarity make her courageously outspoken self-representation possible. This invitation, then, is an incentive towards effecting a change of social climate by opening a conversation and addressing how supportive this experience can be. This change is to spill across the temporal and spatial boundaries of each performance to the future and the world outside the theater.

Bounded Wholes: Relationships

Bounded wholes further contribute to how the play juxtaposes various kinds of relationships. Positively connoted relationships are depicted as fostering experiences of crossing primarily cultural and species boundaries. Such cross-boundary connectedness, in turn, may occur with the help of artistic and sensory elements (sonic, visual, and haptic) experienced by the protagonist and by audience members.

The first bounded whole in terms of traditional relationships that the play introduces is marriage (ideally based on love and respect), but it introduces it in an already shattered state. The constellation of three female friends – the protagonist and her Indigenous Alaskan friends Teri and Sonya (9–10) – offers an alternative network of solidarity and friendship that, from Harvey-the-husband's perspective, collides with and thus threatens his ability to control the closed system of the marital dyad. The trio of female friends is transformed when Teri dies of cancer caused by environmental pollution; I use the word "transformed" because the bond of friendship and solidarity remains unsevered. Rather, Teri continues to be connected to the protagonist and Sonya. This is indicated by yet another instance of showing the elasticity or permeability of spatial bounded wholes, in this case the physical and the metaphysical, the human and the non-human: While traveling on a ferry to Whittier during the night of Teri's passing, the protagonist interacts with a raven (49–50). As Teri belongs to the Raven clan within her tribe, the bird comes across as an emissary of her spirit, especially when the woman realizes that Teri died the night the raven visited her on the ferry to Alaska. The protagonist and the raven do not speak – or croak – the same language; nevertheless, the protagonist senses a connectedness beyond words, thus evoking another set of contrasting bounded wholes or, in this case, semiotic systems (43–45, 49–50). Also, she strokes the bird's feathers (50) and sees the same black-and-blue shimmer in them (43) as in the night sky (49). The raven's otherworldly associations offer an alternative reading of these hues than the obviously violence-based colors visible in the protagonist's face.

The protagonist's encounter with the raven veers strongly towards offering artistic, or at least aesthetic, perception as a pathway towards accessing connectedness,

thus implicitly creating a mise-en-abyme effect that audience members may consider in hindsight when thinking about the mental and emotional impression exerted by the play. The raven's croaking becomes a semiotically inaccessible narrative in an avian language or a message from beyond earthly communication in which boundaries between species as well as between the metaphysical and the physical partially dissolve.

The most extensively developed cross-species motif in *No More Harveys* is the protagonist's fascination with whales. She narrates the story of whale evolution and finds that whale songs, which are heard in several segments of the play, soothe her when she needs to calm down in moments of collision between hyperawareness of multiple threats and the need to turn inward. Whale evolution and songs provide an inkling of the agency and strength that she sees in female whales. Again, bounded wholes can also provide connectedness, not just internal coherence within one singular entity.

The protagonist understands (particularly female) whales as exemplary in the sense that they have shown a maximum of evolutionary adaptability: first, through migration across immense distances and, second, through evolving physically from land animals to ocean-living mammals (16). She sees this development as a conscious, self-directed process, ascribing "a winning strategy" (17) to these animals that, beyond all of these achievements, produce sounds that humans have described as songs (17). This partial anthropomorphizing of female whales as mistresses of their evolutionary fate becomes an inspirational emblem, especially when the protagonist dances to Gloria Gaynor's (here oddly Darwinian) "I Will Survive." She also sings part of the song a cappella (23) when she reflects on questions of self-sacrifice versus victimization (27), and when she depicts female whales as more aware and prescient than herself in the sense that they recognized a dire crisis early enough to survive through massive change (30). But, as in the scene with the raven, the play does not indulge in kitschy cross-species understanding. Her desire to immerse herself into 'whale-ness' notwithstanding, the protagonist acknowledges that she cannot really know what it means to be and feel like a whale (32, 35–37) and that she cannot tell whether "whale[s] ha[d] a vision of the future" (38). As it were, her actual inspiration for tackling the future are her friends Teri and Sonya (38–39) rather than the biggest animal on the planet, which currently is an endangered species (see, for instance, "Meet"). Visualizing the physical size, grandeur, and significance of whales in the play, the stage set of the 2022 Anchorage production included an immense whale-shaped prop (not stylized but rather striving for realism) and blue lighting. The protagonist moved around and along the large sculpture, caressed it, and reclined on it (see Bilodeau, "No More Harveys [US]").

The centrality of Teri as a figure of strength highlights the inextricability of a material work of art and its immaterial implications. As the weaver and wearer of a Tlingit ceremonial blanket, Teri demonstrates how a seemingly ‘dead’ physical object can be ‘awakened’ and can fulfil its vital function. This is the case when the wearer of the blanket moves in a performance that is part of community life. Teri’s work of art transcends functionality in a purely physical sense as much as it crosses the boundary between action and interaction: “Teri weaves history books. She weaves her own migration path away from the Harveys” (45). According to the protagonist, Tlingit woven blankets – a system of threads and patterns – need to be worn and danced in to share their stories. Similar to the three worlds in the play, which are connected to the categories of space and relationality, the design and the danced narrative of Teri’s blanket convey the immaterial, non-physical components of thought and emotion. As a result, individual agency and community-building narration can reside in visual images on a blanket, in the kinesthetic features of a dance, as much as in a dramatic monologue. It thus does not surprise that, in the published version of the play, Bilodeau’s author’s notes include the remark that “[y]ou might consider incorporating movement to support the storytelling” (4). Just as the raven’s visit transcends the protagonist’s rootedness in her own time and environment, whale songs and knowledge about whale evolution link beauty, science, agency, and hope for the future. And, later in the play, spending time outside and observing plants and animals has a positive effect on the unnamed protagonist’s psyche (51–53). According to the stage directions, she “*interacts with the things she discovers*” (51) rather than just observing them. All in all, the physical and the metaphysical, the human and the more-than-human, the aesthetic and the scientific are presented as necessarily and beneficially intertwined throughout *No More Harveys*.

The play culminates in a double confirmation of valuable collisions of bounded wholes. Discerning the song of an approaching whale tears the protagonist out of a state of immense grief: “*She listens. Her inner world and the present merge*” (54). Her exultation upon seeing “[t]he great big whale from fifty million years ago” leads to an experience of seemingly merging with the whale, of diving into deep time, and of experiencing “other whales / my kin / my community” (55). Having decided to stay in Alaska and not to be defeated by any Harveys, she thanks the audience for instilling courage in her (57). Not only does she sing “Amazing Grace,” but “*The whale joins her*” (57) as if confirming her newfound insights and her appeal to the audience to avoid, prevent, and overcome Harveys.

No More Harveys engages with bounded wholes in a manner that intertwines the social and the aesthetic, and in ways that link up with questions of hierarchy (Levine’s third concern) and with competing networks (Levine’s fourth concern). Regarding

hierarchies, Levine finds that they "includ[e] gender, race, class, and bureaucracy" (21). In Bilodeau's play, these occur particularly through the discussion of how patriarchy can foster sexual abuse and of how extractivism, environmental pollution, and economic oppression produce poverty, illness, and death among Indigenous people. Such hierarchies closely align with equally destructive networks, which the protagonist strives to counterbalance with alternate networks of mutual understanding, solidarity, and hope. Levine defines networks as "links [between] people and objects, including multinational trade, terrorism, and transportation" (21). Transportation (by bus, car, and ferry) is crucial to the protagonist's journey, and her solo travel is punctuated with men who accost her and size her up as a "fox" (16, 33) to the extent that she mistakes a kind man for a potential Harvey (46). The banking system intersects with gender hierarchy when she realizes that her husband canceled her credit and debit cards in response to her decision not to return (42). Most importantly, climate as a system of weather patterns comes across not only as the ultimate network that, from a planetary perspective, connects all places and beings but also as a network whose change for the worse can only be halted by neutralizing the ill effects of the hierarchy-network nexus that powers the play's allegorical Harveys.

Rhythms: Dramatizing Emotion, Technology, and Evolution

While my understanding of hierarchies and networks in Bilodeau's play mostly references plot elements (e.g., journey, failed marriage, and friendship), character constellations (e.g., protagonist and husband; protagonist, Teri, and Sonya), and character development (e.g., the protagonist's insights about interconnectedness and agency), Levine's second concern – rhythms – is especially attuned to the aesthetics and dramatic strategies of *No More Harveys*. As quoted earlier, Levine emphasizes "temporal *rhythms*, from the repetitions of industrial labor to the enduring patterns of institutions over time" (21). This definition overlaps rather bafflingly with a statement in Bilodeau's prefatory instructions in *No More Harveys*: "The juxtaposition of highly contrasting rhythms and emotional states, and finding ways to transition from one to the other, are key to this play" (3). While Levine highlights collisions, Bilodeau examines border crossings.

First of all, *No More Harveys* addresses social rhythms, particularly those related to the performance of gender roles and of hierarchical structures within marriage; then there is the ebb and flow of violence and forgiveness, of violence and non-violence; and the danger of regularity and circularity leading to passive acceptance. In the case of the protagonist, these social rhythms surface in how she treats her mobile phone as the remaining communicative link to her husband: She turns the phone on at the beginning of the play (5); she checks her messages but

initially is afraid to do so (5–6, 11, 20, 21, 24, 47); she sometimes ignores the dinging of her phone, which jolts her out of her inner world (7, 10, 11, 16, 26–27); she panics when the phone rings (28); for a while, she forces her phone onto an audience member for safekeeping (28, 37); the act of hanging up on her husband while the audience can hear him screaming at her signals the end of her willingness to communicate or return (48); at the end of the play, she discards the phone and confirms the value of supportive friendship as experienced with the audience (57).

Habits and the breaking of personal habits are contrasted in the play with the irregular rhythm and the shifts in the evolution of species. The emphasis is on responding pragmatically to changing existential circumstances; on the willingness to transform oneself through physical, mental, and emotional adjustments; as well as on agency and goal-oriented action. The prime example is the protagonist's narrative of whale evolution, which serves as a model for her decision to reorganize and refocus her own life, choose a new social environment, and speak up for causes that involve long-term and massive social change.

That aesthetic rhythms are closely intertwined with social rhythms can be seen in the varying characteristics of the protagonist's interactions. Interacting with her husband and most other men follows a rhythm of, first, trying to ignore potential Harveys; second, conversing with them as sparsely as possible; and, third, giving them a piece of her mind in a manner that does not follow rules of politeness. That this rhythm does not solve the problem and that the third strategy may harm a non-Harvey also becomes clear in the play which, to my mind, does not promote a simplistic female–male antagonism.

The protagonist also interacts with her Amazon Echo named Alexa. The fact that AI is programmed by humans but able to work somewhat independently can be discussed through Levine's category of affordances and can shed light on the bounded whole of the monodrama. While Alexa is a piece of contemporary technology and thus not human, the stage directions refer to "Characters" in the plural: "WOMAN, in her thirties or forties, of any race or ethnicity, whose name is not Renee" and "ALEXA, an Amazon Echo. ALEXA should be fully functional. She is a character in the play and what she says or doesn't say informs the two characters' relationship" (3). Bilodeau adds that, while the "unpredictab[ility]" of Alexa requires "improvis[ation]" skills on the part of the human performer, "a lot of Alexa's answers can be preprogrammed" (4). The use of Alexa is not just a gimmick that provides some comic relief. It rather highlights the temporal expansiveness of the play, which reaches from an era 50 million years ago in which predecessors of whales were land animals and experienced a major transformation, to the current twenty-first-century moment of our co-

existence with digital technology and AI, that is, with devices that resemble new limbs or at least new functionalities.

The rhythm of moving among the three distinct worlds (that I mentioned earlier on) shifts the monodrama towards an argumentative trajectory rather than providing a descriptive, linear narrative of a person's experience. Examples are that the sections set in the protagonist's "inner world" resemble spoken word poetry, that they include meditative self-observation of physical details like her heart-beat, sense perceptions, and emotional responses, that the actor's body language replicates the physical motion during traveling on a bus or boat as well as when struggling to breathe during a panic attack, and that some of the inner-world segments include a whale-song soundtrack. Transitions from such representation of the protagonist's inner world to unpleasant encounters, especially with Harvey-like men, either involve tearing off or putting on her pandemic-related mask or indications of how a man who accosts her disrupts the flow of her thoughts and feelings.

As shown, using "forms" as an approach to aesthetic and sociopolitical phenomena can be immensely helpful. First, such an approach acknowledges how "art" and "life" – or "the aesthetic" and "the experiential" – are inseparably intertwined, willingly or not, consciously or not. Second, "form" becomes a category that characterizes not only the human realm but more expansive material and immaterial worlds. It allows us to oscillate between production and perception of forms, and to contemplate notions of order whose impact ranges from the oppressive to the liberating. Finally, in terms of my understanding of literary and cultural studies and of the humanities as a whole, Levine's new formalist method demonstrates options for interdisciplinary epistemologies and collaborative efforts to gain and use insights for social and political change in service to the good of humanity.

Decoloniality, Planetarity, and Autobiographical Monodrama: Approaching Relationality in Social and Dramatic Forms

Chantal Bilodeau's project of writing eight plays for the Arctic Cycle comprises multiple scales: climate change as a global threat, the eight countries that make land claims in the Arctic, the predicaments of local communities, and the personal struggles of individuals. The anonymous protagonist of *No More Harveys* eventually grasps the connectivity between her personal situation and climate change (in the multiple senses discussed above). The playwright harnesses the possibilities of theater to achieve the feat of layering multiple crises encapsulated in the plural Harveys: "I gave myself the challenge to draw links between these seemingly unrelated events and I chose to do it by having multiple women exist in this one body on stage" (Bilodeau, "Writing Plays" 40). Bilodeau's approach counteracts the seemingly counterintuitive

decision to write a single-actor play about issues that pertain to multitudes across the globe. Using the affordances of monodramatic form to contemplate various aspects of relationality makes *No More Harveys* a drama that resonates with recent theorizations of planetarity and of decolonial enunciation.

A planetary perspective reveals “an incessantly thickening, historically unprecedented web of relations among people, cultures, and locales” (Elias and Moraru xii; see also Spivak; Miyoshi). One consequence of this focus on interrelatedness has been recent theorization of “a multiscalar method” (DeLoughrey 2; see also Chakrabarty). Studying multiple scales simultaneously pursues the goals of working against a predominantly Eurocentric universalizing logic (DeLoughrey 2, 4) and of contemplating coexisting cosmologies and epistemologies (see, for instance, Teves 136; Simpson, “Anticolonial” and “Indigenous”; Cajete for arguments in favor of opening up to Indigenous systems of thought).

The multiscalar relationality inherent in planetarity is central to Bilodeau’s play and its performance. This shows in the shifts between three distinct worlds and between protagonist-specific and large-scale issues of social relations within the globe as an ecosystem. It also pertains to depicting the relation between grasping an issue and acting upon one’s insights. The latter, then, applies to the central character’s emotional as well as mental journey and to the hoped-for experience of the theatergoer. As Stephanie Nohelani Teves argues from an Indigenous worldview, “[p]erformance creates knowledge through action; by creating subjectivities, it is a process of world-making" (137; on the connection between creativity and knowledge see also Cajete 45–46 et passim). According to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Indigenous notions of relationality provide the basis for “resurgence” (“Indigenous” 22–23). On a broader plane, an analogous mechanism lies at the heart of activist theater or any theater context in which theater-makers and theatergoers are open to “moments of transformation” (Dolan 455).

This kind of personal engagement invites an understanding of activist climate change drama whose principal conceptualization coheres with those of decolonial analysis, particularly because it underscores the fact that non-Western individuals are more drastically affected by the consequences of climate change. While decolonial theory does not center around the deep time of Earth history, it does emphasize the kind of historical depth that relates to anthropogenic climate change and (still inconclusive and controversial) definitions of the Anthropocene. As Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh argue:

> Decoloniality denotes ways of thinking, knowing, being, and doing that began with, but also precede, the colonial enterprise and invasion. It implies the recognition and undoing of the hierarchical structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class that continue to control life, knowledge, spirituality, and thought, structures that are clearly

> intertwined with and constitutive of global capitalism and Western modernity. . . . Decoloniality . . . is not a static condition, an individual attribute, or a lineal point of arrival or enlightenment. Instead, decoloniality seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought. (17)

In tune with such a comprehensive and dynamic process, Mignolo and Walsh promote a "relational way of seeing. It challenges the reader to think *with* (and not simply *about*) the peoples, subjects, struggles, knowledges, and thought present here" (17). Referencing Gloria Anzaldúa, they also point out that this approach facilitates "think[ing] from and with struggles" (20), thus highlighting that the struggles rather than a scholar's vantage point are crucial to the analytical angle and perspective.

Such a method of non-hierarchical active engagement is vital to understanding theater as performing social relations on stage and as encouraging them in the entire performance venue. A one-person play seems particularly suitable to foreground such a process of thinking and rethinking, of thinking with and – relationally speaking – through the experiences of others. The focus on a single voice invites contemplation of how the solo performer balances a focus on herself with specific ways of depicting others.

Multiscalar thinking is central to reflections on the protagonist and her personal Harvey. Thinking about the latter, she uses the metaphor of Harveys as having woven a huge "web . . . around us" (28). Having voiced this thought, she experiences a panic attack; her accompanying monolog addresses threats that range from large-scale climate change and environmental destruction to the racist, sexist, and classist abuse of individuals (29–30). In the course of the play, the protagonist links small and immense scales in order to persuasively argue in favor of using the survival skills of whales as an inspiration for the current moment. Thus, the movement of the bus evokes a swaying ocean (8); a multiplicity of phone screens recalls the perceived blueness of an ocean: "Blue light from small screens / speckle [sic] the dark / like bioluminescent plankton" (8). Experiences of migration connect humans and animals (16). While the singing of one whale is rhapsodized as extending across the globe and across millions of years – "Her song reverberating / from the Eocene to the Anthropocene / from the equator to the pole . . . Millennium after Millennium / she stays the course" (19) –, the woman is aware that as soon as individuals cannot migrate to any other places, "the survival of the species is threatened because individuals no longer have access to what they need" (47). The protagonist's decision not to return to her husband tears a hole in the powerful net spun by the Harveys. But the potential predicament of running out of options still needs to be prevented.

As indicated earlier, Teri is an exemplary figure for the protagonist because she unites creativity and knowledge. The protagonist first encounters her when the

Indigenous artist-scholar lectures at a university (21). As a basketmaker, weaver, and expert on nature (21), she tells (hi)stories and "weaves her own migration path away from the Harveys" (45) rather than relying on someone else's predetermined map. Thus, Teri's work plays a significant role on large and small scales. As the protagonist seems to realize, finding a path out of a predicament requires knowledge; accordingly, when she engages with the natural world in Alaska in her search for healing, she consciously "*interacts with the things she discovers*" (51), as emphasized earlier. This experience of cross-species relationality then continues in the epiphanic sense of merging with the mythical whale (54) and in joining "Amazing Grace" with a whale song (57).

Relational thinking *with* rather than *about* is what the protagonist tries to achieve in the whale scenes, and the culmination is a sense of delightful togetherness (55), as in the joyful recognition of various specimens of local flora and fauna (51–53). When depicting her two Alaskan friends, Teri and Sonya, and contemplating their Harveys, the process of "thinking with" (20) possibly occurs because of the protagonist's own experience. But differences remain, as the Indigenous women were subject to contextually different and centuries-long forms of abuse. Thus, the protagonist primarily learns from the other women's courage (38) and eventually dares to tentatively take her first independent steps in Alaska.

Transcending Genre

As indicated earlier, Bilodeau's monodrama represents part of her endeavor to create a play that *is* climate change rather than a play that only *addresses* climate change. In the following discussion of *No More Harveys* as a one-actor play, I will be less concerned with the boundaries of genre and focus primarily on form in Caroline Levine's sense. Levine argues that form is more stable than genre (13) because genres are "customary constellations of elements" that we recognize in "groupings of artistic objects," whereas "forms are organizations or arrangements that afford repetition and portability across materials and contexts" (14). This far-reaching conceptualization of form is immensely useful for transcultural, planetary, and relational perspectives on climate change theater, as it implies the possibility of transcending genre-related features that are embedded in more circumscribed cultural histories.

Moreover, the activist impetus of climate change drama coheres with the nuanced and future-oriented optimism of New Formalism: "Paying attention to the full range of affordances of literary and political wholes will challenge the assumption that all totalities must be disrupted or broken. In fact," Levine argues, "we cannot do without bounded wholes: their power to hold things together is what makes some of the most valuable kinds of political action possible at all" (27). Perceiving the link between

bounded wholes and the critical mass and momentum needed for "political action" implies the destructive and constructive potentialities of "totalities." To repeat: Bounded wholes are not per se to be rejected. Rather – just like rhythms – we need them (36), but they must be critically assessed and selected wisely. For a creative artist, then, the "strategic uses of form" (39) are crucial for whatever argument they want to make.

Activist theater, of course, uses the bounded whole of a performance with the goal of encouraging social change. Obviously, such bounded wholes are not meant to be poststructurally dismantled. Instead, as the playwright herself envisions, ideally a play "opens the door for a self-reflective and generative process. It can potentially help sidestep heated politics and entrenched ideologies by drawing attention to individual humans trying to find their way in specific circumstances – circumstances that we can hopefully all relate to" (Bilodeau, "Writing Plays" 46). Ultimately, contemplating the relation between an individual dramatic character and specific bounded wholes is the prerequisite for transformation of thought and/into action.

In monodrama as conceptualized, for example, in the early twentieth century by Nikolai Evreinov, the stage performance's intense focus on one character's inner world produces the illusion in the audience that they share that character's experience and perceptions (Taroff, "Home Is Where the Self Is" 326–27; Taroff, "The Mind's Stage" 90, 92, 94–95, 103). Monodrama in this sense can be a one- or a multi-actor drama, as long as the focus lies on one specific character's perceptions, experiences, and thoughts (Taroff, "The Mind's Stage" 103, 157, 191). According to Taroff's nomenclature, *No More Harveys* would be a "[s]ingle-actor spoken monodrama" (195). Beyond such subdivisions, Taroff advocates that the concept of monodrama can serve as a methodological lens rather than as a genre description. But the incentive in Bilodeau's play is neither Evreinov's kind of twentieth-century expressionism nor the duplication of earlier iterations such as the nineteenth-century Romantic "tragedy of the self" (Taroff, "The Mind's Stage" 44) or Jean Jacques Rousseau's musical drama *Pygmalion* of 1766 (4, 7). While the performance definitely encourages audience members to engage with the protagonist by listening to her story in the role of a friend, the experience of ostensibly perceiving the world through the central character's perspective goes beyond the connectivity between performed dramatic character and audience members during the performance in the theater. Rather, the protagonist's muted, yet palpable optimism at the end of the play is meant to spill over into the thoughts and actions of the audience members after they leave the premises.

Bilodeau's use of digital devices in her one-actor play confirms Taroff's notion that "[p]erhaps the field offering the most potential for the future development of monodrama is the intersection of theatre and technology" ("The Mind's Stage" 364). In *No*

More Harveys, technology is not simply a nod to the current moment, that is, to the ubiquity of cell phones and to the growing presence of artificial intelligence. It rather serves to stress relationality (and its negative and positive impacts on the protagonist's psyche) and the permeable boundary between the human and the humanoid. *No More Harveys* includes technology as a communicative channel (cell phone) and as a character (Alexa). Texting as well as phone calls evoke the presence of physically absent characters, which adds to the central character's chagrin at being abused (as seen in her husband's aggressively yelling at her and in his manipulative use of written language and emojis) and to the comfort of being connected to Teri and Sonya. Discarding her phone (57) is thus a symbolic act of "defeat[ing] a Harvey before it becomes a Harvey" (56).

In contrast to the conflict-focused exchanges between the protagonist and her husband, the physical technological object and audible voice of Alexa allows on-stage dialogue focused on questions and answers, which may or may not be harmonious, as well as moments of holding on to or setting aside the gadget, as if Alexa were a person. Importantly, the play features two moments in which Alexa speaks without having been prompted. The first one is a conflict situation in which the woman tells Alexa to "Shut up" – to which the machine responds with an annoyed "What did you say," "*a loud and obnoxious sound*," and the unprompted admonition to practice "[g]ood behaviour and respect" (34), which is exactly the phrase that the woman uses in her story about a whale who gave herself up to hunters that showed her this very conduct (27). In contrast to this altercation, Alexa comforts the protagonist after she has just learnt of Teri's death (50). Unprompted, she plays Carol King's "You've Got a Friend" (51), after which the woman "*picks up ALEXA and hugs her*" (51) – maybe because there are no human friends on stage and because this action emblematizes 'cross-species' compassion with a contemporary cyborgian twist.

The variegated use of the predominantly threatening cell phone and the somewhat moody, yet more amenable Alexa prevents a romanticization of technology; it depicts a broad range from care to harassment via light-hearted banter. To complement Taroff's suggestion about bringing monodrama into the present, I would also argue that Bilodeau's depiction of technology-based communication should be read in conjunction with the above-mentioned representation of non-human 'language' that emotionally affects the protagonist (as happens with the croaking raven and the singing whale). Ultimately, the play deeply contemplates but also reaches out far beyond the inner world of a single character through its multiscalar and planetary argument. I thus agree with Taroff's assessment that "monodrama still stand[s] as an impetus for new work, or perhaps even new forms" ("The Mind's Stage" 362).

The One-Actor Play as Life-Writing Performance

Similar to Taroff's suggestion that one can use monodrama as an analytical lens for certain plays rather than strictly as a genre designation, Jenn Stephenson picks up on life writing scholars Sidonie Smith's and Julia Watson's notion of autobiography as a "generic practice" (2) and not as a neatly defined set of features that extends across time and space. The fact that we only see one human actor on stage in *No More Harveys* invites discussion of how the study of self-life writing as a discursive strategy sheds light on dramatic character presentation. As Stephenson argues, an autobiographical perspective on drama allows reading "dramatic autobiographers" – that is, characters who tell their (real or fictional) life stories on stage – as engaging in "an evolving process of self-creation and transformation" (4). On the one hand, she discusses how "various self-performance strategies . . . engage major questions in the field of autobiography studies," on the other hand, she "demonstrate[s] the at times paradoxical ways that the fictionalizing act of self-storytelling can bring about profound actual-world effects" (4). Stephenson's focus on fictional stage autobiographers – she dubs such plays "meta-autobiography" (11) – ties her main incentive to the effect of monodrama as defined by Evreinov and to Bilodeau's goals. Such plays harness "the transformative power of autobiography" (Stephenson 11) in the sense that they address an ongoing "crisis" through the act of autobiographical discourse that connects retrospection, the present, and the future (16). As shown, this rings true for the multiple crises (ranging in scale from the personal to the planetary) addressed in *No More Harveys* and tied to an equally multiscalar perspective on time and space.

Related to this understanding of dramatic meta-autobiography and crisis, Stephenson's discussion of metalepsis as disruptive to a smoothly evolving self-life performance (17) confirms my earlier reading of Bilodeau's three-worlds strategy as a dramatic method that uses the collision of bounded wholes to depict the protagonist's experience of violence and attempts at healing. Tying this to the elimination of the fourth wall yet again emphasizes the communicative scenario inherent in theater and, as Stephenson argues, in autobiography (17). Furthermore, this approach implicates each audience member as an "active ethically responsible audience-witness" (45) who reads the play as a "powerful political act" because a "single story takes the stage and holds the attention of the audience" – an "encounter [. . .] rife with possibility – for understanding, for insight, and for tolerance and acceptance" (154). The open-endedness of autobiographical performance, thus, inherently nudges the viewer towards the future (22, 169). This orientation coheres with the encouraging closing appeal of *No More Harveys* and with Levine's cautiously hopeful New Formalist approach which allows for the possibility of sociopolitical change.

Concluding Thoughts: The Limits and Vistas of New Formalism

Combining Levine's New Formalist literary studies method, which is strongly rooted in the social sciences, with aesthetics- and discourse-focused approaches that provide a handle on one-actor plays as immersively transforming viewers (be it from the perspective of monodrama or autobiography) strengthens the nexus between theatrical form and political impetus. Bilodeau's *No More Harveys* does not simply fit into a preconceived notion of how a play can embody climate change. The work rather manages to instigate thought and action through playfully engaging recognizable social and aesthetic forms.

The protagonist's namelessness goes against the decided non-anonymity of autobiography. Her self-narrative provides psychological depth without navel-gazing. It prevents her from being a two-dimensional figure whose experience nevertheless is to function as an allegory for myriad humans and other beings. The multi-scalarity that Bilodeau achieves is one located between the (meta-)autobiographical I of the protagonist and the representative quality she assumes through redefining herself as a person seeking out types of relationality that allow her (and, by implication, her audience) to tread this path towards the future. She moves from the oppressive dyad of her marriage to a relational and even planetary sense of self that embraces empathy-based friendship and that transcends a single human's time and space through cross-species temporality and mobility. Why does the protagonist emphasize that her name is not Renée? Possibly to counteract an allegorical reading of her experience as one of an autonomous self's rebirth, which would fit into the pattern of famous men's autobiographies during the Enlightenment. Instead, she stresses evolution, knowledge, in-depth thinking, relationality, and hope.

The three-world approach expands an otherwise potentially less complex analytical focus on metalepsis. Two dualities – first, stage vs. auditorium and, second, the protagonist (inter-)acting in the material here and now vs. the protagonist living, remembering, feeling, and thinking in her inner world – add complexity to the scales as well as the spatial and temporal elements. When the protagonist appeals to her audience or even deposits her phone with an audience member and later retrieves it, she shows vulnerability, the search for solidarity, and eventually the beauty of sharing her newly gained strength. Similarly, moving between the inner and outer worlds entails being accosted by potential Harveys and provides soothing retreats from such experiences. At the end of the play, these worlds appear harmonized or balanced, and the protagonist advocates "*preventing*" Harveys through efforts to "defeat a Harvey before it becomes a Harvey" (56). While crises and threats will continue to develop, she now feels primed to sniff them out early and respond accordingly. Recognizing forms enables her to avoid or to engage with specific bounded wholes,

rhythms, hierarchies, and networks. For audience members and readers, drama and theater aesthetics builds experiential and interpretative bridges directed at the stage and at the world beyond the end of the performance, the theater, and the last page.

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