

Theatricalizing Ecological Disaster:
The Ecodramaturgy of Ping Chong + Company's
Alaxsxa | Alaska (2017)¹

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the transformative potential of community-specific Indigenous theatre in reshaping socio-political and ecological landscapes, with reference to *Alaxsxa | Alaska* (2017) by Ping Chong + Company, one of the most prominent companies of the New York City theatre scene of the past fifty years. In conversation with recent theoretical and practice-oriented accounts of ecodramaturgy, the following analysis proposes: (1) to document the agenda of community engagement undergirding the play's development, production, and reception, drawing on ethnographic material; (2) to clarify its contributions to developing an Indigenized perspective on Alaska's history, with a focus on the impact of ecological disasters on its human and more-than-human worlds; and (3) to outline the afterlives of the project, particularly in and for Alaska Native communities, while reflecting on the broader implications of this legacy for contemporary ecologies of performance.

Keywords: ecodramaturgy, Indigenous theatre, community engagement, ecological disaster, colonialism

The Intersections of Community-Specific and Indigenous Ecodramaturgies

The contributions of community-specific performance to the development of an ecological lens in American theatre have been acknowledged since the early 1990s. Setting out to investigate how theatres were addressing the urgent issues of “toxic waste, overpopulation, acid rain, the greenhouse effect and other imminent ecological disasters,” Lynn Jacobson’s 1992 article for *American Theatre* highlighted how the movement toward an “ecological theatre” responding to such matters was led primarily by environmental theatre or “theatre of place,” namely “productions grounded in a specific landscape or locale.” Zooming in on the works of the Merrimack Repertory Theatre in Lowell, Massachusetts, the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Dell’Arte Players Company in Blue Lake, California, Jacobson argued that the burgeoning interest in staging such issues was inextricably linked to the scenes of environmental crisis taking place globally: “Only very recently, since the words ‘Chernobyl,’ ‘Exxon Valdez’ and ‘greenhouse effect’ have forced their way into our vernacular, have we seen unabashedly ecological works.” Using a selection of productions by Coatlicue Las Colorado Theatre Company, Teatro Nuestro, Underground Railway Theater, and Ukiah Players Theatre, among others, Downing Cless similarly suggested, with a now-famous phrase, that “the grassroots is greener,” noting that community-based works have been at the forefront of an emerging eco-theatre tradition in the US. Dramatizing such phenomena as logging and deforestation, the health hazards of pesticides and other toxic substances, endangered species and biodiversity, Cless’ case studies also shed light on the “links between economic/human exploitation and contemporary conditions of ecological disaster” (92).

In recent years, theatre scholars and practitioners have frequently returned to such community-engaged forms, finding them uniquely positioned to offer models that respond to urgent calls for a shift of paradigm in eco-performance. More specifically,

such calls have been geared toward refocusing attention from thematic accounts of climate concerns to the broader ethos, ecologies, and material infrastructures underlying the development and production of theatre. Coined by Theresa May in a 2010 article, the term *ecodramaturgy* is pivotal in this context, as it implies not just making theatre on climate topics, but a more expansive philosophy of “play-making (script development and production) that puts ecological reciprocity and community at the centre of its theatrical and thematic intent” (“Kneading” 6). Through her analysis of Canadian Métis playwright Marie Clements’ *Burning Vision*, May has illustrated the shift from theatricalizing climate issues to actively promoting an awareness of the human, more-than-human, and material resources involved in producing eco-theatre, while gesturing toward radical visions of “connectivity between and among people, and between people and the more-than-human world” (7).

In addition to the contributions of community-specific “theatre of place,” the recent scholarship and practice of ecodramaturgy has underscored the ways in which Indigenous performance is also well equipped to tackle complex questions of ecological sustainability. As playwright, director, and performer of mixed Indigenous origins, Jaisey Bates has noted in an essay for *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, “[i]n this Anthropocene Age of human-wrought catastrophic climate change, Indigenous people including US Native communities are center stage in dual roles: as those disproportionately affected by the escalating environmental devastation, and as those uniquely voiced with perspectives of vital importance.” Contemporary Indigenous ecodramaturgies have therefore called attention to the ways in which, through its distinct modes of relating to and interacting with the natural world, Indigenous ecological knowledge could provide vital answers to the global community’s efforts to address the climate crisis. Furthermore, as May, Courtney Elkin Mohler, and Lisa Woynarski have observed, the increasingly productive field of Indigenous ecodramaturgies has also been instrumental in supporting a decolonial vision illuminating the “interconnections between settler

colonialism, ecological subjugation and Indigenous oppression, while not appropriating marginalised voices” (Woynarski 2006).

Another feature that connects community-engaged environmental theatre and Indigenous performance is the heightened attention to the aesthetics employed in thematizing questions of climate and/or social justice. Thus, in his account of grassroots eco-theatre, Cless noted that “these pieces tend toward a high degree of theatricality, perhaps because puppetry, masks, commedia dell’arte, pageantry, and direct ways of implicating the audience (such as rap) lend themselves easily to the sizeable ideas that the environmental crisis engenders and the changes it requires” (80). *Mutatis mutandis*, the Indigenous methodology of storyweaving also implies, in the words of Muriel Miguel, founder and director of Spiderwoman Theater, a pioneering force of the Indigenous theatre movement in the US, “entwin[ing] stories and fragments of stories with words, music, song, film, dance and movement, thereby creating a production that is multi-layered and complex; an emotional, cultural and political tapestry” (qtd. in Mojica 165).

The present article operates at the intersection of these theoretical and practice-based threads, aiming to assess the transformative potential of community-specific Indigenous theatre in reshaping socio-political and ecological landscapes, with reference to *Alaxsxa | Alaska* (2017) by Ping Chong + Company, one of the most prominent and prolific companies of the New York City theatre scene of the past fifty years. In line with May’s theme- and process-oriented ecodramaturgy, the following analysis is energized by several interrelated goals: (1) to document the agenda of community engagement undergirding the play’s development, production, and reception; (2) to clarify its contributions to developing an Indigenized perspective on Alaska’s history, with a focus on the impact of ecological disasters on its human and more-than-human worlds; and (3) to outline the afterlives of the project, particularly in and for Alaska Native communities, while reflecting on the broader implications of this legacy for contemporary ecologies of performance.

Community Engagement: From the Development to
the Reception of *Alaxsxa* | *Alaska*

Since its founding in 1975 by influential multidisciplinary artist Ping Chong, the company has explored the intersections of macro- and micro-histories and insider-outsider dynamics in various historical contexts, using a wide range of artistic forms and media, and drawing from diverse traditions of cultural expression. From visually spectacular shows to the minimalist staging of the ongoing community-based series *Undesirable Elements* (1992-),² the company's work has always been inflected by an "anthropological viewpoint" seeking to defamiliarize conventional perceptions upon cultural processes from the refreshing and often-uncomfortable perspective of the outsider (Chong, *Interview* 87).

Directed by Chong and Ryan Conarro and written by the two in collaboration with Justin Perkins and Gary Upay'aq Beaver (Central Yup'ik), the multimedia storytelling experience of *Alaxsxa* | *Alaska* is richly infused with Chong's political and aesthetic sensibility, encapsulating the thematic and formal strengths of his oeuvre, but also venturing into a (geographical, cultural, mental) space that had not been previously explored by the company. In its artistic forays into Alaskan history, the piece employs a culturally specific perspective connected to the Indigenous experience, thus radically departing from the standard history of the state which had been typically narrated from the perspective of non-Indigenous outsiders, often leaving aside such disasters as "[d]isease, Christian missionaries, destruction of indigenous religions, forced Western-style boarding schools, restrictions on hunting, fishing and other subsistence practices, and the strict English-only policies" (Williams, "A Brief" 202). Apart from contributing to the larger effort of reclaiming an Indigenized Alaskan history which has almost miraculously survived successive waves of colonial and neocolonial violence, the play is also informed by a decidedly ecodramaturgical agenda pervading its development, production, and reception.

As the creative team shared in the talkback following the La MaMa premiere, *Alaxsxa | Alaska* is the result of a two-year process of development, which included interviewing communities in Alaska and conducting workshops at the Orchard Project (summer 2016), Lincoln Center in New York City (spring 2017), and several venues in Alaska (August-September 2017) (Chong et al., “Talkback”). Based on the dramatized stories of Beaver and Conarro as insider and outsider voices of the peninsula, respectively, the piece also incorporates documentary material in the form of four brief collages of said recorded interviews with Alaskans. Seamlessly integrating these manifold sources, the show creates a polyphonic assemblage of the lived experiences of old and new residents of the state, while lucidly reflecting on the current crises and possible futures of their communities. In privileging the stories of the community, the dramaturgy of *Alaxsxa | Alaska* serves not only as a testament to the company’s agenda of collaborative creation and community engagement, but also illustrates a central tenet of ecodramaturgy, namely its “commitment to responsible interculturalism that honours the authority of culture bearers and knowledge holders” (May, “Ecodramaturgy”).

The next step of the development process entailed theatricalizing the primary material through a variety of languages and media: songs, music, and choreography (Gary Upay’aq Beaver and Wassilie Berlin, Sr., Central Yup’ik), video projections (Kate Freer), puppets (Justin Perkins), masks (Philip Charrette, Central Yup’ik), lighting design (Marika Kent), the aforementioned interviews, and a soundscape (Lucy Peckham) specifically conceived for the show. While the aesthetic friction resulting from this *mélange* should come as no surprise for the connoisseurs of Chong’s arresting visual style, the multiple storylines and aesthetic forms woven into its structure also echo the heightened theatricality of both eco-theatre and Indigenous storyweaving, as previously discussed. This multifaceted tapestry configures a unique visual and sound universe, suggesting that without attention to the aesthetic,

socially engaged theatre offers a less rewarding and effective experience.

In addition to being grounded in such collaborative practices, the production was also complemented by several community programs meant to pave the way for and consolidate its nuanced reflection on Alaskan history. As such, the events organized in conjunction with the Alaskan presentation included a conversation between the creative team and students from East High School's Elitnaurvik Within East ("A Community in Conversation"). Similarly, the performances in New York City were enhanced by "Akmani | Meeting through Story, Puppetry, and Dance," a storytelling workshop in which young people learned puppetry and drum and dance from Alaska Native artists, and "Contemporary Stories of the Lenape Diaspora," a story-sharing session hosted by the Lenape Center and Ping Chong + Company, which I had the privilege to attend on October 21, 2017. In a research interview I conducted in the spring of 2018, Sara Zatz, the company's Associate Director and member of the Artistic Leadership Team,³ pointed out the importance of related programming in nurturing long-term relationships of trust and collaboration with the communities in question:

I always think the best-case scenario is when we are working with organizations that are already doing that kind of work and already have their own strategies for bringing people in. With the Alaska show, we tried to do a lot of community events and storytelling and pre-show events, and I think that helps people feel that they are part of the conversation . . . A mistake that more traditional theatres make is that they wait until they program the play by the Black author or the Latino author and then they realize that no one came . . . But they have not built those relationships, and so I also think that it is about relationship-building way before the tickets go out for sale. (Zatz)

Alaxsxa | *Alaska* premiered at the University of Alaska Anchorage in September 2017 and toured several other Alaskan cities, such as Bethel, Kasigluk, Nome, and Homer for additional

presentations. Later in the fall, on October 12, 2017, it opened at the legendary La MaMa ETC in New York City, a longtime artistic home for Chong, for a three-week run. Reviews of the La MaMa production praised it for its “sumptuous anthropological collage” (Snyder), “kind but didactic tone” (Shaw), as well as the powerful “emotive core found in its simplest scenes” despite the occasional tonal and stylistic shifts (Soloski). In October 2018, the production returned to Alaska for another tour, which included performances at the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts, Mariner Theater, the First Alaskans Institute Elders & Youth Conference at Denaina Center, as well as several schools. Such diversity of locales and audiences – from the Downstairs stage at La MaMa, which has historically offered a welcoming home to experimental US and international theatremakers, to school auditoriums in remote Alaskan cities – testifies to the company’s long-standing interest in introducing underserved communities to the medium of theatre and thus diversifying and expanding their spectatorship beyond off-Broadway aficionados.

Reflecting on the Alaskan reception, Candace Blas has noted the ways in which the production appealed to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences, in different yet complementary manners enabling the spectators to engage in productive conversations about communal life. In Blas’ words, “the information that the show revealed about cross-cultural encounters in Alaska established this reflective dynamic in the non-Native members and empowered the Alaska Native audience members to speak and share their truth” (qtd. in Freeman, “Heritage”). Articulating such truths also resulted in challenging the reductive tropes of Alaska which have dominated not only the popular imagination, but also the ways in which its narrative has been taught in Alaskan schools. As Artistic Director of Bunnell Street Arts Center Asia Freeman has clarified, “[t]he experience of presenting *Alaxsxa* | *Alaska* and witnessing its effect on audiences and communities has shown me that Alaskans are ready to push away from the Great White Narrative toward truer stories” (“Decolonizing”). As the following section of this article will argue, the truer stories at the core of the play amount to a

comprehensive political history of Alaska which naturally intersects with an even lesser-known environmental history punctuated by various crises and disasters.

Colonialism, Capitalism, and Ecological Disaster: The Entangled Histories of *Alaxsxa* | *Alaska*

Juxtaposing the Unangan word *Alaxsxa* (uh-LUK-shkuh), which translates as the “place the sea moves toward” (Ransom qtd. in Williams, “Alaska” 1), with its Russianized and later Americanized counterpart Alaska, the title anticipates the overarching theme of the piece, namely the historical and contemporary clashes between Alaska Natives and the newcomers to the land. The twenty-something vignettes are symbolically framed by a prologue and epilogue of Yurak drum and dance performed by Beaver, which serves as a reminder of the cultural endurance of Indigenous Alaskans in the face of a history plagued by colonial suppression, missionization, and assimilation. In the words of George P. *Kanaqlak* Charles (Yup’ik), “the *Yupiaq* culture is still alive through the *Yupiaq* language in the form of family remembrances, stories and songs, dances, rituals, and artistic expression” (59). The opening scene features Beaver wearing a ceremonial mask inspired by a Yup’ik mask historically connected to the arrival of outsiders in Alaska (Kurahashi 171), while the ominous line “Someone is coming” flashes rhythmically on the three video screens in the background. The ground is thus prepared for the first vignette, which revolves around the arrival of the Russian ship St. Peter on Alaskan shores in 1741. This first “meeting [of] the one with the other” (Chong et al., “Performance” 00:14:00-00:14:02⁴) becomes the leitmotif of the entire production, drawing together and giving coherence to its three major structural units: (1) historical and encyclopedic entries, (2) personal narratives, and (3) the choral voice of Alaskans emerging from a selection of recorded interviews conducted by the company during the development process, as previously mentioned.

The historical arc of the piece offers snapshots of the many cross-cultural encounters that have taken place in Alaska, from the aforementioned arrival of the “Russian Columbus,” to “Seward’s Folly,” or, the US purchase of Alaska in 1865, to the proposal to resettle Jewish refugees on its territory during the Second World War, to more recent ecological threats to the land. While “[t]oo often, in Alaska history, the stories we tell are too short, overemphasizing some dramatic event – after all, the landscape lends itself to dramatic events – and we forget to uncover the longer story that can make sense of the drama” (Willis 15), *Alaxsxa | Alaska* constructs that often-invisible and much-needed historical perspective, suggesting that the environmental woes of the region are the consequence of the entangled workings of colonialism and capitalism and their various historical manifestations. By shedding light on the causality at the core of the settler colonialism – capitalism – ecological crisis triad, the play critiques what has been frequently naturalized and too seldom acknowledged as the “‘mythos’ that prevents contemporary environmental disasters from being linked to the longstanding ideologies and economic systems that have come down from the Enlightenment” (May, *Earth* 212).

The selection of events making up this genealogy is of utmost relevance. Delivered by Perkins in a sage-on-the-stage manner reminiscent of a lecture, several of the historical-encyclopediaic scenes revolve around the figure of *Enhydra Lutris*, commonly known as the sea otter. Describing the otter’s biological characteristics and particularly its floating position in the first of these vignettes, Perkins explains that “it isn’t doing this to be cute; it’s doing this to conserve heat, the cuteness is just you [*pointing to the audience*] anthropomorphizing like you always do” (00:28:36-00:28:46). While the representation of the more-than-human world in *Alaxsxa | Alaska* is beyond the scope of the present article, this instance of breaking the fourth wall could be productively read in line with May’s calls for a “re-literalization” of the presence of animals on stage, problematizing the anthropomorphizing tropes which have traditionally treated them as props or metaphors for all things human, thereby denying their “ontological integrity” (May,

“Beyond Bambi” 100). The sea otter later appears in the context of the eighteenth-century Russian fur trade, which amounted to a veritable “fur rush” at the time (Solovjova and Vovnya), profoundly affecting all aspects of life in *Russkaya Amerika*, especially that of the Indigenous people. The production does not shy away from exposing the many layers of violence attending the “fur rush” and the larger process of Alaska’s colonization. In Perkins’ words:

The Russians enslave the Aleut people, who are masters of sea otter hunting. The Aleuts do the work, the Russians take the money, and they repay the Aleuts with torture, murder, and catastrophic epidemics. By 1911, the Spanish, the French, and the British join the slaughter, oh, and the Americans. That’s us. The sea otter population drops from 300,000 to less than 2,000. The sea otter, which used to live on land, as well as in the sea, changes its way of life. Now it lives its entire life in the water. We did that. (00:52:30-00:53:14)

Thus, the sea otter fur trade represented not only “Alaska’s first entry into the globalizing economy, its first boom-bust cycle, and a clear example of unsustainable resource exploitation” (Loshbaugh 199), as it is currently regarded by scholars, but also a deeply destabilizing environmental phenomenon, leading to changes in ethology (animal behaviour) prompted by human activity.

The failed Project Chariot, which is addressed in two powerful scenes, is another landmark event that planted the roots of environmentalism in Alaska. Part of the broader Project Plowshare agenda to develop constructive uses for atomic energy, Project Chariot was a US Atomic Energy Commission proposal to excavate a deep-water harbour by detonating a series of nuclear bombs at Cape Thompson on the northwest coast of Alaska (Williams, “A Brief” 208). Introduced by sounds of violent detonations and projections of archival photographs of mushroom clouds, the theatrical treatment of Project Chariot first features a parodic take on Edward Teller, the father of the hydrogen bomb, as he delivers a ridiculously shaky speech making use of the trope of Alaska as an

empty and barren place to circumvent the potentially disastrous consequences of such a project for the land and the Indigenous way of life. Set in 1960, a later scene stages the confrontation between a representative of the US Atomic Energy Commission and several residents of the village of Point Hope, whose concerns range from their status as new yet already second-hand US citizens to the integrity of their homeland to the environmental impact of the project, especially that of the radiation fallout on the safety of the whole ecosystem – people, fish, and caribou included. Through movement, gestures, and vocal shifts, this clash between “white Americans” and “Indians,” in the words of the AEC representative, skillfully captures the awakening of the Alaskan environmental consciousness in consonance with the arguments proposed by Peter Coates:

The Project Chariot story is a landmark in the history of conservation in the United States in three major respects: in connection with the origins of environmentalism, in the context of the emergence of the now ubiquitous environmental impact statement, and as part of the development of a more appreciative American attitude toward the Arctic as a natural environment. (393)

Although not treated extensively in the production, the construction of the Trans-Alaska Oil Pipeline is unequivocally framed as another clash between the Indigenous communal ownership of the land and the capitalist logic of economic profit: “in exchange for the land, Natives are given nine hundred million dollars; ten years later the state collects ten billion dollars in oil revenue” (01:17:55-01:18:06). The play also establishes the larger context paving the way for and ultimately legitimizing this massive infrastructural project: the 1971 enactment of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, which extinguished previous aboriginal treaties and land claims, turning Alaska Natives into shareholders of newly created regional corporations.

From the “soft gold” of the sea otter trade to drilling for “black gold,” the environmental history of Alaska comes full circle with the events of March 24, 1989, when the Exxon Valdez oil

tanker ran aground in Prince William Sound, spilling 11 million gallons of crude oil (Leacock 4), with a catastrophic impact on the fish and wildlife of the area. Ping Chong + Company's is not the first theatricalization of this event – one of the largest environmental disasters in US history – on Alaskan and international stages. As May recounts in an account of a 1991 conference on theatre and ecology, Juneau's Perseverance Theatre, the flagship Alaskan regional theatre, had already presented an artistic response based on Homer's *Odyssey*, not long after the oil spill (*Earth* 10). More recently, in 2009, as part of its 50th anniversary of statehood series, Anchorage's Cyrano's Theatre Company commissioned playwright Dick Reichman to write *The Big One: A Chronicle of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill*. Documenting the human realities of living amid an industrial accident, the play went on to be presented in Australia in the summer of 2010, just as the Deepwater Horizon marine oil spill, the largest in history, was unfolding in the Gulf of Mexico.

Unsurprisingly, *Alaxsxa* | *Alaska* also references the Deepwater Horizon explosion in the context of Exxon Valdez, thereby pointing to the violent recurrence of such manmade disasters in the absence of more sustained efforts to prevent them. The Exxon Valdez vignette emerges towards the end of the show, as an epitome of the scarring histories of colonialism and capitalism on Alaskan territory and their ramified impact on the shifting ecological and social landscapes of these communities' ancestral homelands. In line with the play's expressive strategy of combining live action and video material, the creators chose to dramatize the Exxon Valdez spill through projections of sea otters soaked in oil, the same species that had been decimated as a result of the fur trade started by the Russians. The live-action component focuses on an otter-puppet first held by Perkins and then slowly carried away by the other two performers wearing hazmat suits. The overall effect of the scene is amplified through the use of cold, fading lighting and a dirge-like soundscape suggesting a poignant act of mourning for the quasi-loss of the species.

In the good tradition of Chong's layered and intricate structures, these historical narratives are interwoven with the personal journeys of the performers Beaver and Conarro, which complement each other in recounting the difficult negotiation of insider and outsider positions on the peninsula. Working in a compare-and-contrast mode, this thread juxtaposes the two artists' different experiences with seeking roots and spaces of belonging in Alaska. Upon graduating from college, the *kass'aq* ("white guy" in Yup'ik language) Conarro goes "off the grid, off the map, off the plan" (00:18:03-00:18:07), settling in the Alaskan village of Kasigluk and trying to make a life there first as a volunteer and later as a teaching artist whose goal is to "serve the people" (00:18:09-00:18:11), a phrase that now self-consciously recurs in his discourse to suggest the critical distance acquired in the meantime. In a reverse mirror, Beaver, a Yup'ik song and dance instructor, recounts the hardships of growing up in a secluded village as well as his struggles with poverty, alcoholism, and depression, while dreaming of making a life somewhere else. Thus, if the former confronts his privilege as a non-Native in a Native community, the latter wonders about the ungrievability of Native lives in the bush, enmeshed as they are in a sense of perpetual crisis: "You're just a Native. Does your life matter? Are you even a human being?" (01:23:26-01:23:36). The Conarro-Beaver scenes are organized around a series of oppositions, the most prominent of which is that between mobility and stasis; the outsider relishes in "travel, motion, arrivals" (00:46:34-00:46:36), whereas for the insider, whose name Upay'aq means "to be still" (00:49:58-00:50:00), "there are no roads out" (00:47:25-00:47:28). Furthermore, the two narratives are symptomatic of larger cultural attitudes prompted by their insider-outsider status. On the one hand, pervaded by exoticizing wilderness tropes, the outsider's initial construction of Alaska is reminiscent of frontier romance in its emphasis on pristine landscapes and vast expanses of never-ending tundra, a blank slate in which to immerse oneself and collect experiences. By contrast, the insider's account calls attention to the bleak, palpable realities of the place, such as the sinking of the old

part of the village or the double bind of negotiating between the use of natural resources and the pressures of economic survival: “But hunting and fishing is messy nowadays: subsistence vs commercial, state vs federal, urban vs rural, non-Natives vs Natives, and it’s Natives vs Natives sometimes too” (00:48:01-00:48:21).

Having mounted a critique of the entwined legacies of colonialism and capitalism through the lens of their devastating ecological impact, the piece gestures in its final scenes toward the endurance of Indigenous cultures, “connected through shared experiences with oppression, tradition, and survival” (Mohler 12). While some of the snippets of recorded interviews included in the final section of the show gravitate around the challenges of preserving cultural difference in an increasingly globalized world, other interview fragments paint a more hopeful future that lies specifically in the transmission of Indigenous ecological knowledge, as facilitated by current technological developments. In the words of one of the interviewees: “fifty years from now, the kids will have everything, all the history documented ’cause their grandparents are videoing how to make a *mukluk*, how to make a fire with friction, how to gather blue ice for drinking water when you’re out” (01:28:57-01:29:17). Another phenomenon accounting for the continuity of Indigenous culture is its infinite adaptability and readiness to confront changing circumstances, as Beaver’s “Get ready” coda of Yurak drum and dance makes clear.

As with any collage, the cumulative force of *Alaxsxa* | *Alaska*’s components is more than the sum of its parts. By themselves, the historical entries would have offered too distant a perspective on the cultural and political forces that have shaped the history of the land; the personal narratives would have been, at times, too particular in the range of experiences recounted, and the interview puzzle-pieces too episodic in the larger economy of the play. Intertwined though, each thread lends depth and meaning to the others, with the overall effect of “excavating history so that people can see the stories beyond the official story,” as Chong et al. argued in the talkback after the La MaMa premiere (“Talkback”).

Beyond Theatre: The Social Afterlives of *Alaxsxa* | *Alaska*

As recent debates in socially engaged performance have stressed, the ethics of working with marginalized – underprivileged and underrepresented – communities has always been fraught with tensions stemming from the potential power imbalance between the theatre practitioners and the members of said communities. Questions pertaining to the ownership of stories and the impact of such projects within the community have been particularly salient, with critics warning against mining stories for the sole purpose of creating a piece only to break connections with the community afterwards. In response to such anxieties, the multiple afterlives of *Alaxsxa* | *Alaska* offer a model of continued engagement with the communities and histories woven into its fabric.

One of its companion projects is *Encounters: Alaska*, a web archive of oral histories, a medium (and methodology) that acquires a special significance in this context given that, as Charles points out, “[o]ral narratives and histories are intrinsic to indigenous identities and reflect their unique placement within the physical world and the cosmos” (56). Developed by the creators of the show and divided into three sections, this archive gathers: (1) Alaskan stories shared in the interviews conducted by the company but not included in the frame of the production due to its temporal limitations (in the “Stories” section); (2) reflections on cross-cultural encounters shared by audience members at the end of the performances (in “Conversations”); and (3) entries on Alaskan history written by theatre students from the New School in New York City, designed to serve as useful background for the play (in “Histories”). The process of creating a widely available online repository for this corpus of stories is consistent with other contemporary projects of rewriting the history of Alaska from Indigenous perspectives, constituting itself as a counter-history or counter-discourse vis-à-vis the traditional histories of the state which had marginalized or even erased such experiences. On the other hand, given the live, embodied, yet fleeting nature of theatre

in performance, an oral history archive provides a stable and reliable resource documenting the primary material collected by the company while developing and later presenting their show.

A more recent related project in the already-rich history of *Alaxsxa | Alaska* is an arts-based 9th grade social studies curriculum that delves into the diverse histories and cultures of Alaska, with a view to “creating artistic expressions of family and community stories that acknowledge and celebrate their OWN lived experiences as integral parts of Alaska’s unfolding history” (Bunnell Arts). Conceived by Ping Chong + Company in collaboration with other artist-scholars and the Lower Kuskokwim School District, *Passages Alaska* was introduced in late 2021 to students in Bethel, Napaskiak, and Tuntutuliak. The curriculum integrates an Indigenized perspective on Alaskan history, covering such units as Alaska’s Indigenous tribes and colonizing forces; statehood with its processes of inclusion and exclusion; the boarding school era; the impact of the Second World War and related processes of dislocation and relocation; as well as that of epidemics and pandemics. Alaska’s environmental history is also brought into focus, through such topics as the lasting impacts of the Exxon Valdez disaster, resource development and extraction in “America’s warehouse,” and climate activism. This pedagogical tool testifies to the productive intersections of theatre, education, and community work, extending the company’s long-established arts-in-education program in New York City’s public schools, with its emphasis on individual and community empowerment through storytelling.

Since the premiere and tours of *Alaxsxa | Alaska*, the company has returned to the state to develop several other projects that amplify the voices of Natives in Lingít Aaní (southeast Alaska) and Tahltan Territory (northern British Columbia): *Aan Yatx’u Saani: Noble People of the Land* (2018), the audio installation *Juneau Voices* (2019), and *When the Salmon Spoke* (2020), which had been originally planned for the stage and later re-envisioned as a digital work due to the onset of the pandemic. Through their distinctly Indigenous lens, all these productions contribute to

current decolonizing efforts in Alaskan historiography, while being supplemented by their own online archives of oral histories, or “story boxes,” to use the term employed by the theatremakers with a nod to Indigenous cultural practices. Among the several red threads circulating throughout this corpus, the company continues its exploration of (the causes and impact of) ecological disaster on Indigenous lands. *When the Salmon Spoke* incorporates video footage of the Mount Polley Tailings Spill of August 4, 2014, south of Tahltan Territory, one of the worst environmental crises in the history of Canada, which still triggers anxieties over similar disasters that might happen in the future with other mines designed in the same manner. Thus, in keeping with the direction inaugurated in *Alaxsxa | Alaska*, these later works’ representation of Alaskan history is not only grounded in a kaleidoscopic Indigenous experience, but also filtered through a compelling environmental lens.

While the scope of more traditional accounts of theatre has often been confined to close and/or contextual readings of plays and productions, the analysis offered in this article amply demonstrates that community-specific projects should be discussed as part of a larger continuum of social and artistic practices situated at the intersection of art and activism. More specifically, if mainstream theatre studies privilege examinations of cultural and historical contexts, thematic concerns, and aesthetic forms, a piece like *Alaxsxa | Alaska* opens up equally rewarding avenues of exploration pertaining to its development, reception, and ongoing afterlives in various media. From its collaborative dramaturgy to its companion projects to the communities of reception engendered through its various presentations, *Alaxsxa | Alaska* clearly illustrates the company’s commitment to long-term, wide-ranging engagement with the communities in and with which they create and present their work. If disaster has been a leitmotif of Alaska’s environmental history, cultivating such relationships of ecological reciprocity and community, as foregrounded in May’s principles of ecodramaturgy, might lay the foundation for more generous futures for the human and the more-than-human worlds of Alaska (and

elsewhere), translating into practice a sustainable, ethically-driven ecology of performance.

Notes:

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² For a process-oriented account of the series, with specific focus on one of the latest productions, *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ*, see Benea.

³ Following the retirement of Founder and Artistic Director Ping Chong and Executive Director Bruce Allardice, the company has announced a new Artistic Leadership Team consisting of Managing Director Jane Jung, Associate Director Sara Zatz, director Mei Ann Teo, performer and director Nile Harris, and playwright and director Talvin Wilks, a longtime collaborator of the company. Since 2023, the team has been engaged in a process of modelling collaborative leadership and transitioning “from a company identified with a single artist into one that supports a new generation of interdisciplinary artists” (“Ping Chong and Company Announces”). Milestones of this transition stage have so far included new productions of the *Undesirable Elements* series (*Generations Rise: Reston*, March 2023; *Undesirable Elements: Ukraine*, May 2023), events dedicated to Chong’s artistic legacy, community gatherings, as well as new work from the Artistic Leaders.

⁴ While I had the opportunity to attend the premiere and an additional performance of *Alaxsxa | Alaska* at La MaMa ETC, all the following time stamps refer to the recording of the performance on October 15, 2017, available on the *HowlRound Theatre Commons* Channel on YouTube.

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