

Speculative Geographies and the Horizons of Performance Studies

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines performance in relation to speculative geographies, a term suggesting the search for and/or creation of worlds at once underdetermined and subject to the imagination. These endeavors might be utopic in the sense of envisioning new social formations or dystopic in the sense of connoting the effects of resource extraction and financial speculation. Building on a speculative geography called the Chinese Atlantic (based on a book of that name), the essay proceeds to elaborate Chinese transnational circulations in the Nordic region with an emphasis on the Arctic. In this vein, the Chinese Arctic is offered as another speculative geography that brings into focus emergent relationalities: between individuals, between nation-states, between human and non-human actants. These relationalities create the potential for social transformation at various scales with both life affirming and life negating effects.

Divided into six parts, the essay provides a survey on which to scaffold future research. The first part explains the genealogy of the analytical frame it offers and indicates how the writing in terms of both style and content is meant to function. The second situates speculative geographies in relation to selected writings on utopias. The third highlights selected performances that might serve as an antecedent to a Chinese Arctic paradigm. The fourth continues this move with an emphasis on Chinese investment in the energy and transportation sectors of Nordic countries as well as some of the soft power moves to support these efforts. The fifth section discusses the implications of speculative geographies as hyperobjects. The conclusion returns to events that generated the article and the implications for utopic thinking.

KEYWORDS

arctic, capitalism, China, geography, race

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Part I: Navigation, or How to Read this Article

I come to this journal as an invited guest, without expertise in its titular topic of Nordic theatre. That said, in preparation for this writing, I read through as many of its articles as time would allow in order to assess how my thinking and experience of transnational circulations of performance in my text *The Chinese Atlantic: Seascapes and the Theatricality of Globalization* might be useful to readers. That book illuminates Chinese flows in terms of people, finances, and products in given historical and material contexts, highlighting the Caribbean but also moving far outside that geography, to trace what I call Chinese-inflected globalization. Simultaneously, the book destabilizes the epistemology that renders such histories visible in positivist terms. The vehicle for this inquiry is the seascape. Its importance lies both in the fact that this art form emerged coincident with the rise of transnational capitalism during the Dutch Golden Age, and it helps to visualize the aesthetic dimensions of global processes, specifically highlighting their theatricality. Seascape names both the object of analysis and methodology. The elaboration of the latter takes two shapes: a discussion of what kinds of meanings might be produced when artists and others see the sea from particular perspectives and also an attempt to enact oceanic phenomena at the level of prose. This last point relates to my desire to unsettle more sedimented epistemologies. That aspect of my writing, particularly my valuing and extending the ocean's frequent opacity, has generated the most polarized responses to this project; in response to that critical current, I offer something akin to a nautical chart to navigate this essay.

The different parts of this article elaborate sections of *The Chinese Atlantic*. Part I mimics the preface, where I discuss the human and institutional networks that facilitated my research process, which involved time in libraries, in galleries and museums, in conversations with writers and curators, and on boats because I wanted to try and understand how we think not only about but through the ocean. Part II explicates my motivations for the article, and it points to the affective and material factors that facilitate, in this case, the transnational connections between this journal and the author. For some readers, this may not be a useful or appropriate point of embarkation. However, I want to emphasize that the conditions of possibility for my scholarship on global processes are the material and affective networks I am able to engage. Beyond this function, Part II argues that utopias constitute one type of speculative geography, a larger category which embraces the dialectic of utopic and dystopic discourse. Part III moves to more conventional academic prose and extends the first chapter of *The Chinese Atlantic* to investigate empirical evidence in terms of Nordic-Chinese relations enacted through the theatre. Part IV pushes the notion of performance into a wider frame in order to centralize what I call the Chinese Arctic within discussions of ecology and climate change both within and outside of theater and performance studies. Here Barad's notion of agential realism appears as a useful revision of my own oceanic framing: to think *with* the Arctic. Part V further elaborates these ecological concerns in terms of discourses of hyperobjects because Nordic scholarship in relation to the environment has significant capacity to intervene substantively in global theatre

and performance studies. The brief conclusion returns me to decidedly human relations to suggest why it might be important to generate models of scholarly inquiry that move across scales from the individual to the planetary.

This essay, like my book, demonstrates an inductive process. It offers a series of anchor points from which future research might be launched by those whose investments and skills best explain how Nordic theatre studies matters to the world at large. From my external understanding of the field, it promises to describe and perhaps enact utopic possibilities in a moment threatened by ecological collapse.

Part II Speculative Geographies and Utopian Thinking in the Wake¹

Despite the preoccupation with events—live or otherwise—scholars of theatre and performance studies often ignore the occasions that generate or encourage writing and revision. However, I address those conditions here as they have shaped my thoughts hereafter. I was honored with the invitation to deliver a keynote at the Association of Nordic Theatre Scholars' conference on utopia because of interest in *The Chinese Atlantic*.² During the summer when I was preparing my remarks, my father died. As I wrote this essay in the wake of the conference, one of the organizers, Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen, also passed away. Between these two men, one whom I knew perhaps too well and the other with whom I had barely become acquainted, I experienced the incommensurability of loss in the face of the most mundane of occurrences that is death. Indeed, Kim had written to me in August to offer his condolences, and I appreciated his generosity in allowing me to take time to dwell on someone who had run out of it. I had wished to thank Kim in person, but his time also expired. In this sequence of events I realized the importance of human recognition and reciprocity as well as the limited temporality of connection. Such considerations and their relationships to the utopic become obvious in the posthumous declarations that often follow someone's passing: for example, the deceased "is moving to another (often better) place." Such utopian imaginaries (which absent politics, perhaps in accordance with certain strains of this kind of thinking) led me to ask exactly what acts or what kinds of thought might develop such a harmonious place? Although such reflections may seem trite, they point to some of the critical concerns of utopia. What kinds of relations does the utopic enable and for whom? What do varying degrees of closeness achieve both in terms of spatial and interpersonal (or perhaps interspecies) interaction? How does our perception of loss affect our desires for what could be? How does one move from an individual notion of a better life (or afterlife) and the vision for an alternate social totality?

I write in a moment structured not only by two individual deaths, but also one marked by a series of crises including transnational recognition of state violence against Black populations, a global pandemic, and the latest invasion of a sovereign nation by an imperialist power. These disparate events nevertheless highlight questions of scale and throw into relief incommensurate factors that weigh the value of human life. Individual losses matter differently in light of this magnitude of mortality. The disjunctions between personal and societal, singular and plural, come into stark relief in the contemporary moment. In these regards, theatre and performance promise to bring such incongruent experiences together because these expressive cultural forms frequently connect large questions about relationality on various scales (individual to individual, individual to family, individual to nation-state, etc.) to particular enactments and/or representations either on stage or off. Theatre and performance have often developed microcosms, or ecosystems, of participant or putatively representative experiences as commentary on, or sometimes rehearsals for, social configurations that might offer alternatives

1 The title of this section gestures to the polysemous character of "wake." First I intend to evoke wake's associations with death, which occasions various performances (vigils and the like). Second, wake denotes a kind of rising of consciousness (as in awakening something). Wake also indicates the temporary traces left when something moves through a body of water, and so connects to my larger oeuvre in terms of oceanic paradigms as they relate to Chineseness. This research stream is itself informed to a degree by Christina Sharpe's notion that "to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (Sharpe 2016, 13-14). Part of that unfolding involves the effects of transnational capitalism given that the Atlantic Slave Trade served as a crucible for the formation of that system.

2 My thanks to Dirk Gindt in particular for the initial invitation.

to those currently inhabited by audiences.³ Insofar as theatre and performance aspire to visualize these possibilities as or in particular places, they facilitate speculative geographies.

As a term, speculative geographies might suggest the search for and/or creation of worlds at once underdetermined and subject to the imagination. These endeavors might be utopic in the sense of envisioning romanticized societies in which all members live in blissful equity, or at least within socialist systems that would imagine and realize an egalitarian distribution of resources. However, this very idealization raises questions about how and in whose interests such structures might exist; such queries have occupied cultural productions from Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* to Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek*. As a response, "speculative geographies" proves useful because it connotes the extractive dimensions of financial speculation. That element of risk might produce hope and fortune for some as much as despair and misfortune for others. Indeed, one might logically expect speculation to produce such contradictory outcomes—potential enrichment and peril—simultaneously.

The expansive rubric of speculative geographies includes utopias, even as it suggests the subjective manner by which any such spatialized imaginary might be evaluated. For example, speculative geography calls attention to the *optimism* that undergirds Jill Dolan's well known discussion of theatre's utopic potentials in which "live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world."⁴ It simultaneously conjures the *pessimism* regarding the present that underwrites an equally well cited formulation from José Muñoz's elaboration of queer performance: "Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present."⁵ Despite their different feelings about the moment in which we currently live, both scholars turn to performance because it offers a glimpse into how to enact utopia. Such brief visions constitute what Fredric Jameson has called the utopic impulse following his discussion of More and philosopher Ernst Bloch, the latter of whose writings also influenced Muñoz. Jameson locates such impulses in a wide range of quotidian forms of cultural expression and sets them apart from a utopian program, which invests in revolutionary praxis.⁶ These glimpses of a possible future remind us that, in Muñoz's words, "Utopia is not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility."⁷

Muñoz's mention of a horizon returns me to my own thinking about a speculative geography—namely the Chinese Atlantic—that I have previously expounded but without having pushed on the implications for utopic discourse despite discussing horizons quite explicitly. My reconsideration here of some of the ideas from my book responds to this provocation. As a reminder, I frame the idea of a Chinese Atlantic with the seascape. On the one hand, seascapes are marine views frequently based on purportedly empirical evidence. That said, the contingencies of human investment, not to mention weather and tidal movements, underscore the fictitious assertion that a seascape represents reality. Instead, like landscapes, seascapes perform ideology; they demonstrate to a viewer a perspective based on the (usually not visible) painter's or photographer's or algorithm's way of seeing, which is structured by class interests. As a genre, this category of painting emerged in the Northern Atlantic during the Dutch Golden Age when men took to the sea en masse to join ventures in nautical exploration and overseas plunder. Seascapes reflect perspectives on the ocean, and, in that regard, they are images that reveal and construct epistemologies. I further argue that they are events insofar as they involve action either on the part of the spectator or within the art itself because the seascapes of interest to me include paintings as well as corporeal practices, films, installations, theater, sculpture, and street art.⁸ These aesthetic forms sensitize viewers to the presence and experiences of Chinese people and things in the Atlantic as well as their discursive constructions and historical legacies. This reorientation of sensibilities further has the effect of creating new understandings

3 On theatre as ecosystem, see Kershaw 2009.

4 Dolan 2005, 2.

5 Muñoz 2009, 1.

6 Jameson 2005, 4.

7 Muñoz 2009, 97.

8 Metzger 2020, 17-27.

of Chinese-inflected globalization, a term that, as the book demonstrates, is highly theatrical.

To condense that argument here: globalization is like certain forms of theatre in that it engages the sensorium in an immersive manner to the extent that no capacity remains to imagine outside this totality. In this worldview, one thing substitutes for another, so, in a clear illustration, the cloud substitutes for actual hardware and undersea cables that create the internet. Globalization may thus be considered another kind of speculative geography that imagines from material circumstances and processes an abstraction that both does and does not correspond to empirical realities. Most often it represents new relations fomented by advanced capitalism. The Chinese Atlantic and globalization thus work in tandem as porous, layered speculative geographies that bring into relief certain dynamics of transnational flows and the planetary dynamics affected by such circulations.

Given limitations of space, I have chosen to elaborate two of the book's concepts and its epilogue that might further considerations about utopia through a nascent Chinese Nordic analytical frame. The discussions I continue here—about “reeling,” “incorporating,” and installation art that addresses environmental catastrophe—hope to inspire a pivot in Nordic theatre and performance studies to engage or reengage China in the context of its ascendance as an economic superpower and the specific implications of that phenomenon for the planet based on changing material conditions in Nordic countries.

Part III: Reeling Together Chinese Nordic Documentation

The first chapter of the Chinese Atlantic investigates the process of reeling understood in multiple registers: winding something together (for example, a fishing line), staggering as a result of some kind of stimulus, and assembling ostensibly real depictions in film. The chapter particularly analyzes the aesthetic mode of documentary precisely to destabilize the realism that anchors such narrative forms. Chinese Caribbean documentaries construct a vision of reality through either domestic ethnographies or synaesthetic solicitations that play with notions of the presence of Chinese populations throughout the Caribbean. Kinship structures much of the historical work as the majority of filmmakers trace on screen Chineseness through family genealogies. In terms of the utopic, although many films express uncertainty about what Chinese might mean in the context of the region and wonder about the future of Chinese people, goods, and money as they circulate through the Antillean archipelago, one documentary, *Finding Samuel Lowe: From Harlem to China*, provides a potentially utopic vision for at least some of the film's subjects. The producer, Paula Williams Madison, documents her long desired family reunion (which brings together relatives from the US, the Caribbean, and China) that later seems to energize an overseas network of capital structured through filial connections. For the long-lost Chinese relatives who might imagine more prosperous lives facilitated by investment from the West, the seascapes depicted in *Finding Samuel Lowe* promise both greater prosperity and greater unity moving forward. The emergent social and economic configuration implies a version of Confucian capitalism in which widely dispersed familial bonds activated through Chinese ethnic identification promise to materialize new social, political, and economic realities.

These sorts of familial networks and the entrepreneurial endeavors of people of Chinese descent in the Nordic context has received relatively scant scholarly attention, at least in English-language sources. Notwithstanding this trend, Mette Thunø's scholarship on Chinese in Denmark provides one consistent research stream that helps to identify changing migration patterns, particularly in relation to overseas Chinese students, migrant laborers, and entrepreneurs in the country.⁹ These quests for a better life encourage shifts in the host societies into which migrants enter. They proffer new forms of relationality at the interpersonal, communal, and state levels. For performance scholars thinking about utopia, the ethnographic stories might lead to the everyday acts that Chinese migrants perform in order to adapt to cultural norms in Nordic countries and to improvise new forms of belonging. Reeling such experiences together might eventually produce the kinds of visions one might associate with utopic social formations. Another way of asserting this idea is to contend that documentary practices such as direct observation and careful tracing of historical linkages yield heretofore

⁹ Thuno 2003. Other work in this vein includes Zhao & Li 2015.

unseen networks that might be activated to produce an alternative social formation.

However, the shifts in scale and faith in political efficacy that such studies might yield reveal some of the concerns about using individual actions as representative of larger social transformations. Given that the force of global capitalism serves to condition migration in our contemporary moment, the focus on an immigrant population will likely complicate and challenge utopic claims, even if a host country offers a vision of an idealized future for a new arrival. This point recalls Fredric Jameson's assertion that particular "Marxist traditions (...) characterized Utopianism as an idealism deeply and structurally averse to the political as such."¹⁰ Within such Marxists understandings, a societal revolution should not remain in perpetual ideation. Nevertheless, Jameson continues, "Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality."¹¹ Here then, theatre might facilitate an extension of theory into praxis, for certain forms of performance precisely imagine a social worldview and rehearse alternatives to it.

Within the context of Chinese Nordic theatre exchanges, such rehearsals can be witnessed in the repeated stagings of a figure like Ibsen's Nora.¹² Perhaps the best-known Western play in pre-Revolutionary China, *A Doll's House* ignited debates about women's roles in the country and how they might be reimaged in a new society freed from the shackles of feudalism. Nora's departure captured the imagination as writers generated theories about and variations of her story as it applied to modern China. The influence of the text suggests a move from a utopic impulse to its attempted realization through a utopic program. The historian Tani Barlow renders the temporality of such feminist moves in China in a less linear manner than might be expected from the usual teleology of utopic futurity. Rather Barlow turns to the future perfect tense—the "what will have been"—in order to think differently about how narratives of the past might produce multiple outcomes some of which have been sanctioned in official historiography (the what was) and others of which remained contingent on the realization of specific goals.¹³ Thus, the excitement of what happens after Nora shuts the door of Torvald's house, the potential for a gendered utopia in a new Chinese state, depends on what Nora does next and the conditions of possibility that structure her choices. In the case of China, the moves of the Chinese Communist Party to integrate women into the process of radical social transformation, even after the successful revolution in 1949, produced mixed results in terms of the lived experiences of women throughout the country. In contrast, if the focus remains on sanctioned mainstream representations, then women might be seen to occupy a central role in the creation of a new classless society. One famous example in this vein is the pas de deux danced by two revolutionary female soldiers in *The Red Detachment of Women*, which takes place on a beach on Hainan Island and thus arguably forms a seascape in itself.

What does it mean to reel such worldviews together? What is the relationship of genre—realism, socialist realism—to utopian constructions? What, if any, ongoing relationships exist between China and Norway in terms of state-sponsored feminist projects and what are their impacts? Certainly some research has begun in this vein, especially regarding the 2006 Year of Ibsen, but what we see depends on framing.¹⁴ Reeling surfaces various objects, entities, and narratives some of which might be assimilated into existing knowledge paradigms and others of which force a revision of the stories we tell based on the evidence we collect.

Part IV: Incorporating the Chinese Arctic

The Chinese Atlantic develops the concept of incorporating through Trinidadian artists that help articulate the meaning of "Chinese Trinidadian" not only as a term of national inclusion, but also as (and in some ways against, national structures) as a figure that signifies capitalism. Four artists—Nicole Awai, Carlisle Chang, Willi Chen, and Christopher Cozier—create seascapes in different media that visualize the extractive practices wrought through the plantation system and its legacies as well as the island's later energy industry in which China has recently invested.

10 Jameson 2005, xi.

11 Jameson 2005, xii.

12 Chien 1995. Tam 2019.

13 Barlow 2004.

14 Budde 2011.

Trinidad was the first site to experiment with Chinese coolie labor in the New World and so serves as an interesting case study. In the artists' works, Chinese people tend to disappear as processes of accumulation transform Chinese people into calculable units. The British Empire discursively and materially constructed the Chinese coolie as a transition from slave to wage labor in the wake of manumission, and it valued the coolie in relation to the supposed productivity of a field slave, which the coolie would replace. The artists address this figuration and demonstrate its influence on later constructions of Chinese people, goods, and finance in Trinidad. The seascapes both mark dominant understandings of what Chinese investments of money and labor might mean in the islands, and they visualize ways of recasting them.

One of the wealthiest per capita nation-states in the Americas, Trinidad and Tobago earns much of its income today through oil and gas, although commercial activity is centered in Trinidad as opposed to its sister island. To understand this investment, one must understand the picture of the sea surrounding each isle, for Trinidad has, since the mid-twentieth century, developed offshore drilling. The map of claims to undersea oil fields provides a picture of sovereignty as mediated between different nation-states and transnational corporations. Because of the reserves on and off shore (as an example of the former, Trinidad's Pitch Lake is the largest deposit of asphalt in the world), China's investment in this Caribbean country has increased significantly in the course of the last two decades producing new relations with both overseas Chinese people and the local population, which consists roughly of 45% Afro Trinidadians, 45% Indo-Trinidadians and a *mélange* of others including a population of Chinese Trinidadians.

In regards to a Chinese Nordic analytical frame, incorporating facilitates an examination of the ways in which China's investments, especially in the energy and transportation sectors, might transform Nordic performance understood in multiple registers. The Chinese Atlantic leads in this case to the Chinese Arctic. This new paradigm might highlight developments like the Polar Silk Road, mining interests in Greenland, and knowledge transfer based on geothermal management in Iceland. Such issues have emerged with force recently because of China's published arctic policy in 2018.¹⁵ Politics mediates these economic interests, and this framework might further enable analysis of the conviction of Chinese Swedish writer Gui Minhai and subsequent calls for his release. In this vein, the Nobel committee's awarding of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo also merits attention. Within such soft power discussions, one could also include inquiries about the inclusion of China's massive project in biopolitical management: panda diplomacy. Lumi and Pyry arrived, as might be expected, in 2018 in Finland's Ähtäri Zoo. Incorporating in Nordic theatre might bring together unlikely objects as political performances that highlight as well as obfuscate Chinese investments and extractive environmental practices.

The list above suggests some potential directions to consider in Nordic theatre and performance studies; it also presses on the larger field's more general centering and also questioning of the human. I include my own work here as that bias certainly informs the bulk of my scholarship. That said, I have had the fortune of working with a number of graduate students—Devon Baur, Sarah Lewis-Cappellari, Elizabeth Schiffler, and Clara Wilch—who in different ways have pushed my own thinking about the limits of such an approach.¹⁶ In this regard the speculative geographies of the Chinese Atlantic and the Chinese Arctic might reconfigure how we understand the interactions of human and non-human systems. Moreover, such considerations have become increasingly essential as we consider what utopia might mean in a world on the verge of ecological collapse.

15 State Council 2018.

16 I do not mean to suggest that these emerging scholars elide the human, but they offer different emphases in their work which provide insight into how human and non-humans might interact. The dissertations offer a broad range of interventions from the molecular to the hyperobject: see forthcoming work from Baur on olfaction, new media, and performance; from Lewis-Cappellari on sugar, taste, and alchemy; from Schiffler on food, terror, and theatricality; from Clara Wilch on Arctic icescapes and indigenous creative practices.

To elaborate some of these issues, Karen Barad's work proves useful.¹⁷ In a now well-cited theoretical elaboration, Barad describes "'agential realism' as an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that provides an understanding of the role of the human *and* nonhuman, material *and* discursive, and natural *and* cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices."¹⁸ Her first chapter notably pushes on theories of performativity and understanding of power-knowledge in which the discursive arguably obviates the need for rigorous engagement with material phenomena.¹⁹ This effort provides one pillar in an argument that provides a theoretical paradigm to investigate "the role that we play in the world's differential becoming."²⁰ In the context of Barad's work, incorporating can be productively recast in relation to a Chinese Arctic approach that brings Nordic theatre studies into dialogue with the material transformations wrought by China in the region.

The theatricality of such moves is already evident, for example, in the Chinese representation in the 2019 Barents Spektakel in Kirkenes.²¹ Such events herald a future that might appear utopic or dystopic in equal measures. In a promotional video, the artistic director of the festival described it as a platform for "speculating on the possible future of this region"; the framing here labels the event as a theatrical component of a speculative geography.²² The Barents Spektakel 2019 website further delineates these elements referring to the transformation of the site into the "world's northernmost Chinatown": "with new partnerships come both ambition and anxiety, alarming allegations of neo-colonialism go hand-in-hand with alluring promises of regional development. Nowhere is this tension more evident than in the Arctic."²³ The festival emphasized foodways and commodity circulations as much as art, affirming China's Belt and Road Initiatives that discursively invoke the Silk Road of a much earlier era. The kinds of experiences on offer from the algae pools in the central venue, Tang, to the exploration of self-care inspired by Eastern medicine and the inclusion of plant installations reveals a logic in the curation that coincides with Barad's insistence on the entanglement of matter. Whatever potential agency is produced in the meeting of China and Norway depends on how different matter comes to matter in this nexus. Put otherwise, the festival opens a discussion not only on the relations of people and nation-states, but also of ice, marine life, and indeed, the climate, which is shaped by those relationships and affects us all.

Part V: Speculative Geographies and the Utopian/Dystopian Perspectives through Hyperobjects

The epilogue of *The Chinese Atlantic* focuses on artist Cai Guo-Qiang's installation *The Ninth Wave* (2014), which borrows its title from a seascape by Ivan Aivazovsky, one of the preeminent artists from the nineteenth century working in this genre. Cai is perhaps best known internationally for his pyrotechnic displays at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Here it is worth recalling two elements from Cai's *The Ninth Wave*. The first was one of Cai's signature performances, "Elegy: Explosion Event" from 8 August 2014. Cai created a fireworks show above the Huangpu River, which resulted in enormous multi-hued clouds of smoke above Shanghai. For various reasons, Shanghai residents reportedly thought that some industrial disaster had caused huge plumes of potentially toxic fumes to transform the sky. The second is *Silent Ink* in which one gallery floor in the Shanghai Power Station of Art had been carved out and filled with a continuous stream of black liquid to create a massive ink well. Whatever else this spectacular exhibition of noisome fluid might have connoted, its image seemed to reference the toxic sludge lake in Baotou, Inner Mongolia.²⁴ Baogang steel and rare earth mining operations in Baotou have rendered the immediate vicinity (and who knows what else) a poisonous wasteland.

17 To be fair, I mention Barad's work because it has had some purchase in performance studies, although I also wonder if, for example, it might be put into productive dialogue with the philosophy of Arne Næss, whose work I must confess I only know by the most general citations in environmental studies.

18 Barad 2007, 26.

19 Barad 2007, 66.

20 Barad 2007, 396.

21 Staalesen 2019.

22 Barents Spektakel 2019: The World's Northernmost Chinatown.

23 Barents Spektakel 2019: The World's Northernmost Chinatown. About the Festival.

24 Maughan 2015.

These two examples both reference hyperobjects in Timothy Morton's understanding of that term.²⁵ Large-scale pollutants have transformed waterways and the atmosphere. Morton writes that hyperobjects exhibit viscosity; he uses the example that toxic chemicals stick to us. Hyperobjects extend temporality and space (think of radioactive isotopes present in the atmosphere following the onset of nuclear testing and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) through interobjective relationships.²⁶ In other words, humans do not experience the hyperobject as such but something like a symptom of what he calls the "primordial reality" of the hyperobject itself.²⁷ Following this logic, humans always perform with hyperobjects, but we do not usually think about them. For Morton, art should not only raise consciousness of the interrelationships that hyperobjects demonstrate, but it should guide people "through an inner space that is hard to traverse."²⁸

Given the scale of the Nordic region's own investments in the energy industry not to mention what will happen once Chinese financial and material resources become further enmeshed with these projects, a Chinese Arctic paradigm in which Nordic theatre and performance studies features prominently is urgently needed. Such theorization might investigate the actors/actants whose interrelationships have begun to change ecological systems at an ever-increasing rate. Questions about whether Jostedalbreen will experience the same fate (in English, rendered somewhat euphemistically as a "retreat") as Baishui Glacier No 1 where an estimated sixty percent of the ice has melted require creativity and material innovation. A utopian vision that not only awakens people to new possibilities of collaboration, but also invites and rehearses action might literally save the planet. Perhaps the stakes have never been so high for thinking about utopia in the Nordic context now.

Of course, I want to acknowledge that this kind of scholarship is already in progress. The 2020 issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies* on the Anthropocene was especially engaging to me as I researched how Nordic theatre has addressed climate change. As my own thinking on globalization and Chinese circulations through oceans has begun to shift via thinkers like Barad, Jameson, and Morton, I have felt an affinity in particular with the essay by Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen and Daria S. Nielsen entitled "Para-Anthropo(s)cene Aesthetics between Despair and Beauty: A Matter of Response-Ability." The authors discuss two artistic projects, which shade to the dystopic (not so unlike my own examples in the epilogue of *The Chinese Atlantic*) but nevertheless communicate "embodied knowledge of the ecological issues."²⁹ Such corporeal comprehension, primarily dependent on visual and aural immersion, although arguably the performances simultaneously elicit haptic sensations, return me to where I began this essay. How does the individual spectator of or participant in a performance move through scalar phenomena? What kinds of relationality emerge through performance forms and how might they be mobilized via utopian impulses and utopian programs? Under what circumstances are such moves valuable?

Part VI: Conclusion

I return to the questions above through the witnessing of death. I began this writing while dwelling on two European men thousands of miles apart who never knew each other. One of those men co-wrote compellingly of ways to raise visceral awareness of climate change. The other experimented throughout his life with alternative energy sources in a variety of building projects. The latter person, my father, I never understood; his life focused on pragmatic applications of technologies with which he often began working but then dropped. As technologies developed, the detritus of his building supplies surrounded his home. Decades of accumulated construction materials piled around the house to the extent that such trash could be seen from space via a computer program like google earth. Conceived as a model of sustainability, his house became instead a garbage dump for outdated technologies. As I began to contemplate cleaning up such a site of discarded materials in the wake of my father's

25 I thank Clara Wilch for introducing me to Morton's work.

26 Morton 2013, 1.

27 Morton 2013, 15.

28 Morton 2013, 184.

29 Skjoldager-Nielsen & Nielsen 2020, 46.

passing, I came across Skjoldager-Nielsen and Nielsen's essay, which theorizes how theatrical engagement might incite action or thinking in order to forestall or reverse climate change. They press on knowledge and emotional transfer as potentially generative for constructing new societies, maybe even a new, greener world. Both Kim and my father passed and with them their respective visions for a more sustainable planet.

My computer connected these experiences insofar as it facilitated reading a journal online and seeing pictures of an initially environmentally conscious construction project gone awry. As I have contemplated their respective deaths, I have thought how small the world can seem as two unrelated bereavements generate a new way of imagining and indeed materializing connections that might address the current ecological crisis. Such connectivity is perhaps more realizable than it has ever been, ironically because of a pandemic that has kept populations largely isolated yet networked through platforms like zoom. It has become much easier for me to imagine these two men inhabiting the same place. What is possible when we start to construct individuals as a singular plural unit even when they do not know each other and are separated by vast distances? Responding to this inquiry might be one move towards the utopic impulses that this moment has generated for me.

Again, such musings about individuals raise the questions of scale tackled in *The Chinese Atlantic*. The para-anthropo(s)cene focuses on non-human intra-actions as well as the ways in which non-human elements might affect or condition the understanding and experience of being human. Theatrical performance becomes a vehicle for shaping response-ability in audiences. Such critical moves extend some of my own thinking about China and its environmental impact as witnessed and potentially mobilized through changing seascapes. From the perspective of the Chinese Atlantic, what gets left out of the productive formulation of the para-anthropo(s)cene is race. Post-humanist discourse frequently proceeds as if the category of the human remains relatively consistent. However, my work in conjunction with other critical theorists of race render that assertion tenuous, for the human has long, if not always, been defined against the semi-human other. In this regard, I end with the mutual scholarly labor that I would undertake potentially with the Association of Nordic Theatre Scholars. If we are to envision utopian structures, or at least impulses, then we need to articulate what and who counts as human in different locations and places in addition to thinking through how that very human-centric idea actually depends on the intra-action of various sorts of matter, some of which we have the tools to perceive and others of which still require development. In this changing calculus of what constitutes "we," the enactments or performance of utopic impulses will necessitate a rethinking of whatever we choose to place centerstage.

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