

## ***Sacred Waste: Performance Pedagogy, Plastic Shamanism, and Ten Thousand Pieces of Trash***

Bonny McDonald

This article is too long, full to the hilt, brimming over with little bits and scraps and unwieldy glops and chunks of thoughts. And pictures. I keep trying to wrangle it in, to streamline it, but like a trash bin or a landfill, it keeps exceeding its boundaries, bursting. I want to write about *Sacred Waste*, the substance, the show, the script, the workshop, the community project, the installation, the pedagogical experiment, the scrambling around the streets after a football game picking up plastic bottle tops and making them into rattling ankle bracelets, but there isn't room for all of it. How can I leave out the way the HopKins Black Box green room looked piled floor to ceiling with milk jugs, Styrofoam coffee cup lids, and plastic grocery bags? The way theatre manager John Lebrecht, holding a straw he found under the risers told me, "You better get *every last piece* of this crap cleaned up after the run" in the most serious timbre I've ever heard him muster. How can I leave out the moment when a busload of high school students came to the dress rehearsal and told us the show was great, but that we stank? That we needed to wear more deodorant or something because it was "totally RANK up in there." I want to write about my gratitude for that, how no one else had had the gall to say it. I want it all to stick around, like the plastic does, for thousands of years, little pieces fluttering on the wind, on the waters, forever.

### **Initiation: Trashy Critical Performative Pedagogy**

*Initiates, it is good you are here! Tonight the illustrious Plastic Shaman gather to worship the Goddess Dasani, though she is known by many thousands of names. Some call her the Goddess Aquafina, the One King Coke-a-Cola, the High Priestess Nestle, His Greatness Gatorade. Tomorrow, we will call her our True Prince Proctor and Gamble, for the ritual is always new, and a once-used name shall never, ever be re-used. We gather to renew the abundance of Sacred Waste! Tonight, we ask Dasani for more and MORE! We gather to shape a New Nature!*



*From the Sacred Waste show poster. Photo by Max Trombly*

*Sacred Waste* was a two-tiered eco-performance project: an environmental arts workshop series for middle and high school students and a full-length theatrical production I directed at two locations in 2013. Both the workshop series and show address growing environmental hazards of single-use plastics. I have long thought that if we respect plastic's history as a petroleum substance formed across the vastness of geologic time and its future as a material bound to outlive us and most if not all conceivable future generations, then we might treat it with the greatest respect instead of as mere junk. Hence, the impetus to worship it as the immortal substance "sacred waste." Such worship is ironic, of course, since the use and manufacture of plastics poses grave health and environmental risks from reproductive cancers to air pollution to wildlife poisoning (Knoblauch).

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In both the workshop and show, I used a modified version of Augusto Boal's Image Theatre<sup>1</sup> techniques to defamiliarize the everyday, habitual actions that contribute to the proliferation of single-use plastics (purchasing, consuming, discarding). My goal was to make mundane consumption and discard practices hypervisible using slowed-down, over-the-top, and sometimes-symbolic images made by the bodies of participants<sup>2</sup> to describe their own behaviors. I began to think of the physical motions of buying single-use products, using them briefly, and casually tossing them away as what Boal calls "ritual gestures": habituated movements unique to every society, which take on a perfunctory quality through repetition, such as a military salute or taking a seat in a classroom. By examining these ritual gestures in kinesthetic and aesthetic ways, I hoped we might uncover "*visual expressions* of the oppressions to be found at the heart of a society" (Boal 194).

My vision was to gather groups of outrageously trashy gurus who, instead of being perilously thoughtless about their routine consumer practices, approach disposable plastic consumption with ecstatic relish. I hoped we could create elaborate dances based on ritual discard gestures that would expose the peril of heedless consumption and disposal. I wanted to bring attention to the ecological toll of the inattention that characterizes overdeveloped nations.<sup>3</sup> At the heart of *Sacred Waste* was an attempt to expose the false sense of security concerning fossil fuel abundance and an entitlement to consume and discard without regard for environmental impacts.

Rather than conceptualizing *Sacred Waste* as a presentational platform for revealing findings, the workshop and aesthetic performance foreground kinesthetic engagement as a strategy for teaching students, cast, and audiences about the ecology of plastics. From start to finish, the project functioned as critical performance pedagogy, as described by Elyse Lamm Pineau in her touchstone work "Critical Performative Pedagogy: Fleshing Out the Politics of Liberatory Education." Pineau distinguishes between performance practice characterized by the "body-as-a-medium-for-learning" and the "body-on-display," understanding the former in part as "the rigorous, systematic, exploration-through-enactment of real and imagined experience in which learning occurs through sensory awareness and kinesthetic engagement..." (50). However, I maintain

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<sup>1</sup> Boal's Image Theatre involves asking participants to create static images of ideas, feelings, and words using only their bodies, thereby externalizing what might otherwise remain unspoken or unconscious.

<sup>2</sup> Boal might call these participants "spect-actors," his famous combination of the terms "spectator" and "actor," by which he triumphs a theatre practice that blurs the lines between actor and audience and challenges participants to use theatre as a rehearsal for real life.

<sup>3</sup> Citing a sense of emptiness borne of supreme rationality and alienation from nature and community, Paul Gilroy refers to so-called "first world" nations as "overdeveloped."

that *Sacred Waste* operated as critical performance pedagogy in both classroom and aesthetic settings. Even as they were on-display, actors onstage struggled bodily toward an intersubjective engagement with others, concepts, objects, and spaces. Dancing covered in our own trash, repeatedly enacting movements we devised to describe our relationship with discard practices, and teaching audience members parts of our “ritual,” we continually voiced new revelations about our relationship to plastics, each other, and the earth. Although the nature of learning in primarily aesthetic and primarily pedagogical spaces is not the same, I hold that the live body does not stop learning just because there are other live bodies in front of it!

For me, heightened kinesthetic engagement is what distinguishes critical performance pedagogy from other forms of critical pedagogy<sup>4</sup> and what makes it particularly efficacious. In this article, as in *Sacred Waste*, I set out to explore this claim. Why bother with dancing around with trash? Instead of braiding thousands of plastic bags into costumes, instead of creating “seriously ridiculous”<sup>5</sup> plastic dance rituals for the stage, why not just ask a few hundred people to read the myriad articles about plastic pollution and be done with it? I argue here that the *doing* of performance was essential for the transformations of thought and behavior we sought to bring about in ourselves and our audience-participants. In my experience of *Sacred Waste*, such an engagement occurred between bodies and materials in ways that revealed our interdependencies within the greater ideological “body” of the earth. In both workshop and aesthetic production, we worked toward knowing ourselves in relationship to each other, the ecological systems of which we are a part, and our own waste. Echoing my process of moving from conceptualization to workshop to aesthetic performance, I proceed first with a description of my initial vision, then to our collaborative experiments, and last with a depiction of the staged production, allowing theoretical insights to unfurl from my narrative of those processes, just as they did in practice.

### **Inspiration: Plastic Shamanism**

*Sacred Waste* was inspired by two visual encounters in the Seattle Art Museum and in the Rothenburg Kriminal Museum in **southern** Germany: the shimmering aluminum installations by Ghanaian sculpture artist El Anatsui and a collec-

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<sup>4</sup> Rooted in the work and writings of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Henry Giroux, critical pedagogy positions democratic engagement, social justice, and the critical examination of power at the center of pedagogical practice. In this project, I am interested in ways power and pollution intersect: who has the economic privilege to overproduce waste? Whose bodies benefit and who are harmed by these taken-for-granted practices?

<sup>5</sup> So we claimed in the show’s playbill.

tion of fifteenth-century shame masks, heavy iron contraptions worn as punishment for minor crimes in medieval Germany. In both cases, I was struck by the incongruence of the material and its expression: street litter turned to fine art in the case of Anatsui<sup>6</sup>, and torture device with cartoonish visage in the case of the shame masks. Both shaped the basic building blocks of the show: a banal substance infused with artistry and a foolhardy mood cut with a particularly sinister edge.

Anatsui's massive, shimmering kente cloth-inspired designs made from discarded aluminum cans made me consider what it might mean to collect and arrange vast amounts of plastic trash into a similarly striking *mise en scene* for the show. The artist organizes teams of people to manipulate and arrange aluminum trash collected from the street into fine art displayed in galleries around the world (Anatsui). Likewise, I wanted to gather a cast and crew who would engage materially with plastic, making the stuff hypervisible in the form of beautiful, outrageous costumes. But I hoped our process would also be an experiment in what prolonged embodied engagement could teach us about our own practices of discarding everyday plastics.



*Medieval shame mask. Photo by Klaus D. Peter.*

I knew too that I wanted to make a shame mask out of plastic trash generated by my own buying habits. Like those in the Rothenburg Kriminal Museum, it would have a ridiculous, comical expression: part whimsy and part despairing. In fact, I wanted to produce enough plastic shame masks so that all sixty to one hundred audience members could wear one at some point during

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<sup>6</sup> For images of El Anatsui's work, see his artist page at October Gallery: <http://www.octobergallery.co.uk/artists/anatsui/>

performances. What would we be able to see while looking at one another through the masks of our “eternal” refuse? I had to find out. I dug under the kitchen sink for the stash of plastic grocery bags. I pieced together a fringed dancing cape. I made a foolish mask out of my own plastic refuse—a sushi plate, some bottle tops. I looked in the mirror and beheld a wild-eyed figure cloaked and masked in bits of toxic detritus, eager to lead us on a journey into the underworld of waste: a plastic shaman. Wearing a milk-carton mask and a grocery bag cape, the plastic shaman would sing the songs and dance the dances of the consumer age.



*Close-up of El Antsui's Man's Cloth. Photo by habnchen.*

In Conquergood's and Thao's famous study of Hmong shaman, he observes that the shaman “is the active agent of cultural process, dynamically exercising and mobilizing the core beliefs of the culture” (47). Yet the term “*plastic shaman*” refers to a false shaman, one who co-opts or steals indigenous knowledge and traditions to use it for her own ends, usually monetary ones (Aldred 343). “Plastic shaman” points to the false tribalism with which we approached the show, a critique of similar processes of exploitation inherent in the gross abuse of natural resources and indigenous lands for capitalist ends<sup>7</sup>. Wearing grass

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the plastic shaman in *Sacred Waste* conspicuously toys with what Dwight Conquergood calls the “custodian's rip-off” in his four-part designation of ethnographic pitfalls regarding the scholar's stance toward the other (*Performing* 5). In the custodian's rip-off, the admiring ethnographer plunders sacred traditions for good performance

skirts made from braided strips of plastic and headdresses of straws, the plastic shaman draws on old ways to make something cheap, flashy, and disposable. Her medicine bag is filled with Mardi Gras beads, her rattles made of Coke bottles, her gods the great spewing polyethylene factories.

And so the dance of the plastic shaman became a dance of ignorance and excess. A foolish dance, a dance of death. While we referred to *Sacred Waste* as a ritual of abundance, like Thanksgiving Day in the United States, the abundance we celebrated elides a litany of cruel secrets: secrets of the plastic plant, next door to the poorest neighborhood, making its inhabitants sick; churning out colorful bits, destroying. What the plastic shaman hope to do is move us from a commodity fetishism critique, where labor is the suppressed and hidden force of currency, to a fetishism of self-destruction, where the hidden cost of the marketplace is “ritual” suicide: our daily ablutions to the poisoning of a planet<sup>8</sup>. For hidden in our everyday consumption of plastics in particular is a movement toward self-destruction, of our bodies and of earth, of our ocean. We eventually named this double-edged force the Dragon Spirit for the way it hails the plastic factory, its spines of chemical stacks spewing burning plumes of fire. The plastic shaman would worship plastic, yet at the same time, in their tricky way, condemn it. We would imbue every bottle, every plastic screw top and container of yogurt with the whiff of death<sup>9</sup>.

### Inclusion: Secondary Workshop Series

It was the dream of masks which drove me to collaborate with Annelise Martinez, a talented artist and art teacher at a nearby public school down Highway 1 on the west side of the Mississippi River. Martinez teaches next door to DOW chemical at the Iberville Parish Math Science and Arts Academy, an institution that serves public middle and high school students, many of whose parents work in the plastic factory.

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material. While *Sacred Waste* is far from a formal ethnography, it is a fictive study of Western overdeveloped societies using costumes and drumming which recall tribal rituals. We stage the rip-off itself, rather than ripping off of a specific tradition. Our “desecration” (in Conquergood’s terms) of true shamanism is self-reflective: we use it to point out the same desecration of the environment and of indigenous cultures which are a byproduct of overdeveloped societies’ addiction to plastics.

<sup>8</sup> Mounting evidence shows emissions from plastic production and recycling are highly toxic and impoverished communities are disproportionately affected (Minter).

<sup>9</sup> Our project might be understood as a *mimesis unto death*, in the way Michael Tuassig treats the term in *The Magic of the State*, where even in rituals of colloquial magic, state power presents itself and is enacted on the bodies of worshippers.



*DOW Chemical plant*

On the first day of the three-week residency, I stood outside the art building at the Iberville Parish Math, Science and Arts Academy wearing an elaborate headdress made of plastic grocery bags, coffee cup lids, and green and white straws. I put on a Very Serious face as students passed me on their way into the art room. I held out my ten-foot ceremonial cape, strips of plastic bags catch the wind and flutter out behind me. Some students giggled with discomfort. Some averted their eyes. Some seemed intense with excitement. Some looked at me like I'm insane. I was ready to see what happened when I opened my mouth:

*This is a one-time song (circling with cape)*  
*This is a one-time dance (fluttering cape)*  
*This is a one-time ritual (outraised cape and stomping in center)*

The students were a mixed-age group, ages fifteen to eighteen: the older crop of advanced art students. Wearing bemused expressions, they studied the construction of my headdress. Their teacher instructed them to take notes, to jot down impressions of what they saw or heard.

*I am the Shaman Dasani. Today we celebrate abundance! We worship the singularity of creation! Indeed, I have grown tired of this ceremonial cape. (I throw it in the trashcan with relish). Initiates! I have come to you today to teach you the rituals of Sacred Waste. First, I must attune the energy and see who will hold the eternal rattles. Stomp your feet to awaken the earth energy, the earth from which we draw these materials, the earth must give way so we can call forth a great abundance of sacred waste!*



I handed out rattles made from plastic drink bottles filled with Mardi Gras beads. I dressed them in garbage bag capes and snack machine candy bag headaddresses, then asked them to imbue their spirits with their ceremonial costumes. On the first day, I performed for six different art classes, one after the other. In each, I lead the students through a series of warm-ups under the guise that we were readying our bodies for the ritual, before asking students to make moving images describing their relationship to plastic<sup>10</sup>. "It is your turn to worship sacred waste," I said. I asked everyone to create a series of still images of themselves buying, consuming, and throwing away a plastic container in "real life," then to create supremely exaggerated version of those actions, and finally to string them together into a "dance." I told the students that the idea here was to slow things down so we could take notice of our daily habits. Ideally, we would be imbuing routine gestures with added significance, thereby demanding that they be more consciously enacted thereafter.

In one middle school group, a single performer drank a "coke" in one fell swallow and then threw away the bottle in a long, slow motion arc. The other four members of her group crouched near the trashcan exhibiting much eager anticipation until the bottle entered the trashcan, whereupon they all erupted in shouts and sighs while simultaneously banging on the trash can. Then, they each took a turn throwing away coke to a similarly boisterous reception.

Another group performed intricate interpretive dances depicting various items' life cycles before nonchalantly throwing them away. For example, one group created a movement piece featuring a "Lunchables" box: A parent throws it into the grocery cart/a kid plucks it from a pantry/she eats the food items out of it at lunch / she throws it away, all in big exaggerated moves. I delighted in the idea of an elaborate recognition of an item's history preceding each act of discarding, and I saw an opportunity to get these students to think about where plastic itself comes from, not just plastic trash. I entreated other groups to join in. I asked, "Where did it come from before it was a Lunchable?" They eventually came up with "factory," so I asked a group to create a plastic factory dance. Then I asked where it came from before that. Someone said, "Fossil fuels, like oil." So I asked one group to do an oil field dance. And then somebody says but before that it came from DINOSAURS! "Great, dance that too!" I said. And then we put them all together. What they came up with shaped the structure of the entire show. Now I knew I something else: the framework for our ritual in

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<sup>10</sup> Though I give them short shrift here, I don't want to ignore the importance of theatrical warm-ups as a part of critical performance pedagogy. Moving the desks aside, standing in a circle, and shaking out our bodies, stretching, copying each other's strange movements, etc. creates a sense of what Victor Turner famously calls *communitas*, and thereby helps a class move into a more open, connected "liminal" state fit for exploring new ideas and ways of thinking.

the aesthetic performance would be a history of sacred waste, a mythical-shamanistic journey into the story of plastic.



*Left, the adult cast of Sacred Waste practices the stylized movement that an MSA student came up with in workshop, indicative of drinking deeply of an imaginary beverage. Right, assistant director and actor Douglass Mungin practices the move before the show opens at the New Orleans Fringe Festival. Photos by Bruce Fielding.*

Over the course of the third and final week of the residency, art teacher Annelise Martinez worked on a unit on up-cycling as an art form and mask masking as their class's up-cycled experiment. Each of Martinez's hundred students brought in plastic waste cleaned and collected at home, often with the help of their parents. Within just a few days, students were shocked at the enormous pile of plastic refuse in a corner of her already-cramped classroom. They set to work examining other artists' up-cycled plastic works on the Internet and creating their own trash masks. I put together a panel of local artists to judge an up-cycled plastic mask art contest, and on the day I returned with prize money and certificates, I was greeted with an incredible surprise.

When I opened the door to the art room, I stood before a fifteen-foot "dinosaur," as Martinez's students called it, made from about 2,000 plastic bags. It was swaying before me like a Chinese New Year dragon, held aloft by six exceedingly excited middle school students sporting proud smiles. I knew then that I would have to incorporate the dinosaur, especially since we had arranged a big field trip for Martinez's art students to come as creative consultants to our second dress rehearsal. While the dinosaur was a scientifically apt symbol for the compressed carboniferous life that constitutes fossil fuels, it seemed too literal an image for the conceit of a shamanistic journey. Instead, it would be a dragon.

When I asked how they felt about our workshops, student after student expressed a newfound awareness of single-use plastics as pervasive and damaging, saying, “I can’t believe how quickly the plastic piled up in our classroom,” “I see plastic everywhere now,” “I realized how I’m part of this problem,” and “I never used to think about the plastic itself, or where it came from; I was just getting a coke and now I’m like OMG I’m polluting.” Students emerged from the workshop series with a heightened critical awareness of their own consumption as well as the broader ecological toll disposable plastic takes. As one high school student summarized, “It’s cheap, so we make a lot of it, so we don’t think about it, but it’s a huge environmental problem, and a health problem too, and those are connected.”

### Integration: Behind the Scenes in Polyethylene

*We sit in an empty theater braiding up plastic grocery bags, we speak one after the other, like our plastic braids, weaving and knotting ends to ends, each picking up on the last word spoken, and so the last word is the first word and the first word is the last word, bound together by our work, I see that what I sow she reaps and what I reap she sows, and what she leaves I take and what she takes I know, and so we make the world together, knot by knot.*



*Tarnashia Russell and Cessali Fournier make beaddresses and skirts from plastic waste in the Hopkins Black Box at LSU. Photo by the author.*

Dwight Conquergood writes, “The shaman is the one who can wage life-long battle against the God of Death on behalf of others precisely because she or he has confronted it personally and survived the encounter. The initiatory sickness imbues the shaman with the authority of direct, immediate experience”

(*Shaman* 49). As is increasingly publicized, single-use plastic contains dangerous estrogen-like hormone disruptors BPA, etc. particularly when heated (Bisphenol A). Preparation for the show called for hours of knotting costumes, hot gluing bottle caps to plastic milk jugs, and practicing long, vigorous dances wrapped head to toe in plastic costumes for hours at a time, often under hot stage lights. The adult cast spoke regularly of the actual danger of heated plastic releasing toxic chemicals into our bloodstreams. Several cast members said to me: "I wonder how much BPA you have exposed us to at this point?"

While this was an ethical problem I did not anticipate, a true mimesis unto death, I admit I appreciated the way this sense of danger we were experiencing began to carry over into the performance. A tension grew between the beautiful show we had created and the real horror of the substance we critiqued. As the show's opening approached, our performances increasingly began to express a palpable grossness of spirit, the cultural madness inherent to the desolation of land and air for the over-developed world's incredible appetite for disposable plastic. Knotting and dancing knee deep in polystyrene made its proliferation beyond the boundaries of our bodies becomes more visceral as well. It began to get under our skin.

Cast members and MSA students repeatedly identified a visceral sense of anxiety over the substance in relationship to their own bodies. The plastic waste we all collected for our masks and costumes quickly piled up in our homes, cars, and classrooms. Many felt suffocated and constrained by their own accumulation of plastic junk<sup>11</sup>. Collecting, working with, and dancing with the material pushed many of us to at least interrogate our own waste-creation practices and at most make a behavioral shifts away from purchasing single-use plastics. There was even a push to rejuvenate the recycling club at MSA. To this end, cast member Cessali Fournier writes,

I remember not wanting to wear the plastic costumes until the very last moments of practice because I knew they would be uncomfortable. And when the time came to put on the dragon costume, I couldn't help but feel gross and dirty. After several days of being inside the dragon, which was also difficult to breathe in, I was sick of seeing large amounts of plastic. I began to think about my efforts, which seemed so small compared to the giant masses of plastic I imagined were just floating around the world, an idea that haunted me. I started feeling defeated if I had to buy something made from plastic materials.

As the show and all its plastic accouterment began to take shape, a strange sense of incongruity crept in: as the show became more aesthetically pleasing

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<sup>11</sup> I asked all cast members, many friends and family members, and MSA students to save all their plastic trash for use in the show, and to pick up any plastic bottle tops they found on the ground. Many designated bins in their homes which, they reported, overflowed the first few days they began to collect.

(through increasingly beautiful and intricate costumes, dances, and overall precision), our disgust with its object grew. In the midst of a growing joy and sense of interconnectivity in the project, the discomfort of the material itself served as a visceral reminder of our message. We struggled together for months making patterns out of this junk: sitting in circles, weaving, tying, knotting, dancing — this work became a “real” shamanistic journey, a real tango with death, the dance we did not anticipate, and one which infused the show with a sense of terror.



*Left, Brandon Nicholas in a costume made by Ruth Laurion Bowman from collected fertilizer bags. Right, Michael Hidalgo hisses at the audience. Photos by Bruce Fielding.*

And so a conceptual connection developed between our own bodies at risk and the risk we incur upon the “body of earth” via our own habitual consumption. When it came time to tell the tale to our community in the form of the show, a strong sense of collective revulsion impacted audiences as well. Coded in pseudo-mythological language and many of the elaborate movement sequences devised in student workshops, each scene of *Sacred Waste* features a different plastic shaman who tells part of the history of plastic, from fossil fuel formation to its manufacture and consumption and finally to its profoundly ecologically disruptive destination: the ocean. The stage becomes hugely messy with plastic, and a frenetic energy pervades. As one undergraduate audience



member wrote in response to the show, “I thought the show was going to be all fun at first, and it was fun, but finally, the sense of planetary doom was absolutely terrifying, and there I was, chanting along and whooping with glee at all this trash, especially when things got violent.”

### **Incorporation: *Sacred Waste* on Stage**

The theater doors open and sound pours out. Two drummers play hand drums, accompanied by a high flute made of PVC pipe and sporadic singing or chanting of the word “*More!*” Audiences’ separation from daily life is marked doubly: by a crossing of the threshold into a designated theatrical space, and by shaman-actors who verbally and physically draw audiences into their swirling dances. The plastic shaman repeatedly address audience members as “initiates,” make invitational gestures, pull them by the hands and arms into their seats, and compel them to dance along to the musicians’ drumbeats. Some audience members are dressed in “sacred waste” costumes by shaman who encourage them to “don your eternal robes.” Wearing knotted skirts made from plastic bags, large necklaces made of plastic bottle caps, etc., the plastic shaman leap and crawl about the room in an exuberant dance which gains more and more form as the audience is fully seated. The plastic shamans take positions on stage and synchronize their movements into those derived from the student workshops.



*The plastic shamans gather together for synchronized movement work after welcoming “initiates.”  
Photo by Bruce Fielding.*

The shamans gather onstage, moving as one, while one of their number remains in the audience to welcome the initiates, saying “The ritual of sacred waste begins with a story of creation, for it is best to know from whence the sacred substance came.”<sup>12</sup> One shaman wielding the dragon’s head and six dancing the body tell the story of a great dragon who lays his body down deep into the earth.

*And then, the Great Dragon pushed himself deep and deeper, into the belly of the earth! There, he willed himself into liquidity that he might spread his abundance in all directions. Then he waited, for those who would come next, and be new, for...progress! He sacrificed himself for those who would draw his spirit up from the earth in the form of sacred waste. Initiates! Each time we drink, we call forth the dragon spirit!*

The plastic shamans lift an imaginary bottle high above their heads, mime drinking it in ecstasy, all the while squatting low and shaking a hand behind them. Drums beat fiercely in semi-darkness, the dragon’s eyes are lit with orange orbs.



*Emily Graves wields the dragon head made by Annelise Martinez as she intones the story of a great dragon who lays his body into the earth, sacrificing himself for “what would come next, and be new:*

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<sup>12</sup> Dwight Conquergood and others identify the reenactment of sacred myths as a consistent practice of all world rituals: “to re-enact [origin myths] as often as possible, to witness again the spectacle of the divine works, to meet with the Supernatural and relearn their creative lesson is the desire that runs like a pattern through all the ritual reiterations of myths” (Eliade qtd. in Conquergood and Thao 50).



*sacred waste.” Six dancers manipulate the body made from 2,000 plastic grocery bags, by Martinez’s middle and high school students. Photo by Bruce Fielding.*

The main lights go out but for a small green floor Fresnel backlighting the forms of four dancers behind a large plastic screen. In a manic and celebratory tone, another plastic shaman<sup>13</sup> instructs the audience to listen to the shadow people, those the dragon honors with work and with death in his great factories producing sacred waste<sup>14</sup>. Dancers spin out into the audience proudly whispering names of the dead and at the same time handing out “sacred rattles” to each audience member. The rattles are made from hundreds of disposable water bottles, each filled with Mardi Gras beads and other plastic bits and decorated with colorful sprays of junk food bags. In all nine runs of the show, audiences begin shaking the rattles in time to the drums keeping a beat during the scene. A dancer emerges from behind the screen, depicting a body worked into a sort of mechanical submission, continually decaying, mixing ingredients, serving, drinking, stumbling. The shaman tells us the dragon spirits calls for the bodies of “another and another and another” of his shadow people, then asks the audience-participants to “Take up your rattles and *SHAKE THE EARTH!*”



*Tarnashia Russell dances behind a plastic sheeting wrested out of a trash can at LSU.  
Photo by Bruce Fielding.*

Equipped now with rattles, the audience-participants join in to the drums which continue across a dramatic transition wherein another plastic shaman

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Mungin, actor in and author of this scene, “The Shadow Factory.”

<sup>14</sup> The scene is meant to address the huge increases in reproductive cancers near plastic production facilities, a health risk which disproportionality affects people of color.

stomps loudly out to center stage. Without prompting, audiences shake their rattles along with each of his footsteps. In the fourth scene, “Faces of the New Nature,” the shaman instructs all to take up the plastic masks placed under their chairs before the show, entreating us to place it over our “old” face and breathe. Solemnly, he instructs us to turn toward each of the four directions: *Turn this way, and inhale the mighty Exxon Plastic Plant to the North, turn this way and inhale indomitable DOW to the West, turn southward and savor the monolithic Melamine Americas, now turn to the direction of all things new, Eastward, and breath in Four B Plastics, Inc!*



*I place a “plastic shame mask” made by MSA students on my face following the leading plastic shaman’s instruction. Photo by Bruce Fielding.*

One LSU undergraduate writes of this moment,

We were disgusted, grossed out about putting plastic from who-knows-where on our faces and then breathing it in repeatedly. I felt that this was effective because if plastic keeps piling up, future generations will, in fact, be suffocated by it. I keep thinking just how much waste there was in the theatre, and how that is not even a fraction of how much waste there is on earth. It was very sobering.

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*Now, imbue your ceremonial costumes with our earthly spirits . . . For unlike our fragile human bodies, this, your new face, will live on into the next and the next and the next and the next and the next and the next...*

The shaman repeats this phrase until the masked audience joins in with their voices and rattles and she keeps repeating “and the next,” pushing the audience’s and his own endurance, until finally ending with “generations!”

The next plastic shaman performs “The Bird Dance” in order to “honor the sacrifices of all animals who spread sacred waste across the earth, carrying tidings of the future in their very bellies to the four directions.” Birds are a traditional shamanistic symbol, suggesting flights of the spirit. The Bird Dance depicts the decay of bird bodies as they consume “bright bits of sacred waste<sup>15</sup>.” Dancers grow visibly exhausted as they move through the giant plastic wings manipulated by the center shaman.

*When they can fly no longer, they lay their bodies down. Feathers and entrails flutter away and melt into the ground, but the sacred waste they carry in their bellies remains scattered behind, forever, beautiful.*



*Jen Leblanc manipulates two twelve-foot wings of recycled plastic found in the dumpster outside Coates Hall at LSU. Photo by Bruce Fielding.*

The solemn scene describing decaying bodies ends in a surprise celebration. The lights come up bright and cheery as She Who Dances the Birds yells, “Lower the effigy!” and a plastic shaman lowers a large white bird piñata made with water jugs and bags and filled to the brim with unrecyclable plastic bits down to audience height. Offering a PVC baton, actors ask for a brave volunteer who will complete the ritual by “spilling its entrails.” Many hands go up; one initiate is chosen and blindfolded. The audience cheers while s/he whacks violently at the bird-shape. Its head flies off somewhere. This moment stood out

<sup>15</sup> Ocean birds, and especially the Albatross, increasingly suffer death and disease due to ingesting plastic waste.

for some audience members as particularly uncomfortable, evoking for them the keenest sense of guilt combined with complicity. As one audience member wrote, "When the volunteer destroyed the bird, I was cheering. It was like a piñata. But then I thought: this is sick. We are cheering for actual destruction."

The last scene, *Swirling in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch*, features one plastic shaman, center stage, spinning for several minutes in a costume made from long chains of plastic bottle caps strung on fishing wire. The lights go blue and weird. He sings a plaintive, nonsense song. His circular movements go on too long, hypnotic yet tense: he must carefully avoid the scattered caps at his feet while he grows obviously dizzy. Anthropologists site the ecstatic trance-inviting communion with spirits as the defining characteristic of shaman (Conquergood and Thao 47). The dancer appears increasingly possessed, spinning wildly, yet inviting people on stage to join him. One by one, actors come on stage, spinning along with him, inviting the audience-participants to join. The mood is solemn at first, but the drums pick up and all begin dancing. Once nearly everyone in the space is up on stage, the actors fling open the doors, leading the audience out saying "This way! The ritual is ever ongoing!" The audience does not get their usual chance to bookend the play by applauding. Many attempt to, but actors insist on leading them out to trashcans, or to bang wild rhythms on snack machines in the hallways. The plastic shamans keep it up, only saying "Go forth! Make more! Go and make the new nature! The ritual continues!"



*Andrew Davis spins in a costume made by Gail Stephenson of 520 plastic bottle caps at the New Orleans Fringe Festival. Photo by Bruce Fielding.*

**Invocation: Environmental Theater**

In both levels of the *Sacred Waste* project, we found that the fundamental component of kinesthetic engagement demanded we enter into visceral encounters between subject and self, subject and discourse, and subject and other bodies, whether human or material. Critical performative pedagogy lent itself particularly well to environmental justice themes including the interdependency of ecologies, the interconnectivity of species, and the role of individual bodies in vast ecosystems. From warm ups in rehearsal to sitting in a circle knotting hundreds of plastic grocery bags together to charged interactions with audiences in the form of dance, touch, and song, our kinesthetic activities felt transformative despite the irony of our worship or our plastic fork embellished costumes. As a classroom and workshop teacher of all levels for over a decade I have found that the immediacy of bodies in space in the process of “making together” has the power to shift interpersonal and conceptual relationships in the present in constructive, ethical, and critical ways. Largely this happens as a result of bringing participants fully into the present moment, and slowing everyone down to make room for self-observation and fellowship.

The act of working side-by-side to make something can be transformative in its own right, and I argue too that the sense of interconnectivity which comes from devising and staging performance is especially useful for environmental education projects such as *Sacred Waste*. On both tangible and metaphorical planes, such work asks us to experience firsthand the way ecologies work—as an interdependent web, rather than forcing us to digest environmental themes in the didactic mode we may have come to expect. For the *Sacred Waste* participants, group-oriented rituals of performance functioned as an anecdote to individualistic rituals of consumerism. Building ensemble performance or experimentation in a workshop is as practice of interdependency, one that lends itself well to conceptualizing how our actions affect one another outside of the performance moment. In “I am Shaman,” Conquergood identifies the lone adventuring hero as the symbol of American Individualism, writing, as Boal might, that “our separatist, individualist ethic gets enunciated daily” (45). This stands in sharp contrast to rituals of togetherness performed by the Hmong which feature, as did *Sacred Waste*, repetition, standing in circles, collaboration, and making-together. Staging performance as an ensemble pushes us to ask not who is the best, but what we can create together, how do we affect each other, and how much can we depend on each other—questions which we must also ask ourselves on a global scale.

When we foreground the body itself as a medium for learning about environmental themes, we are asked to conceptualize our own corporeal roles in broader ecological dramas. Since environmental performances often address material consequences of human action, incorporating materials (whether plastic, cars, plants, or cigarettes) into rituals of performance pedagogy opens up

liminal spaces in which to consider new possibilities for our relationships with those materials. In this vein, one audience-participant wrote of *Sacred Waste*,

The show weaves together stylized movement and dance, poetry, elaborate costumes, emotional plastic worship, and an almost frighteningly enthusiastic celebration of what is deemed "the new nature" which we are creating by covering the surface of the Earth with these amazingly resilient substances.  
(Licata)

Dancing with trash proved transformative. Whether via the workshop, costuming process, or audience-participation, we gradually begin to recognize our own daily contributions to an irreversible and emergent environmental crisis. A sense of physical interconnectivity with others and with what was literally our own waste left us more mindful of both. This mindfulness happened as we coordinated leg movements while sweating under a quilt of dragon-trash; while peering out of milk carton masks made by middle schoolers, while making up a dances about *Lunchables*. Covered in our own waste and that of our friends, we became conscious of how we are each implicated in the big picture. After each workshop, each show, we re-enter the world outside the classroom or play space with an altered sense of connection—a stronger sense of one another, and ways we act on and are acted on by the world. As many involved in *Sacred Waste* will attest, there's nothing like dancing under a quilted trash-dragon for an hour to make you rethink, at the very least, the paper or plastic question at the grocery store. When performance gets on and over and under our skin, we cannot go on in the same way after.

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