

Let's Get Lost in the Cycle of Time Together

Madeline Sayet

This short play explores the interconnectedness of life over generations, despite humanity's attempts to isolate itself. The play is written to be performed by three actors, each playing multiple characters, transforming from scene to scene.

I.

Onstage there is a seed. It cracks open, and from it, a world is formed. Vast and complicated and interconnected. As the world grows, 1, a human being, emerges from the world. Time streams around them, and as it does, they transition from inhabiting the world, physically connected to it, to trying to organize everything filling the stage. Make the world tidy. And separate. Eventually, they pull from the world a piece of paper, and begin to write.

1. Dear Ancestors,

I've been thinking about you a lot lately.

What you survived.

So I could be here.

Or was that even your intention?

Who am I to assume really – what you wanted. Or that I'm worthy of your sacrifices.

1 keeps trying to organize the interconnected web of beings and nature around them so that nothing touches.

But you survived! You triumphed. You existed. And the species evolved. So, I will too. I will make a difference!

Of some kind... I feel like maybe, if I can just...

Keeps attempting to organize, to separate everything. 1 becomes aggressive toward the space in their pursuit. The world doesn't like it.

Right? That's probably better. Definitely.

The space clearly disagrees and tries to restore itself. 1 looks at the letter they've been writing, throws it away. Pulls another one from the space – the act of waste feels violent. The space moves to try to help the crumpled paper. 1 crumples another paper.

You're right, that's not good.

They pick it up and throw it more intentionally into the space. It's not better.

We still eat food, drink water, breathe air, and have an uncontrollable urge to make a difference.

A difference.

1 looks at what they've been trying to do to the organic world around them.

Right. A lasting impression! Change things.

Sits down. Writes.

But humans themselves, we don't change as much as you'd think.

A hand reaches out from the space, takes the pencil, and writes. 1 reads it.

"Often we destroy the very beings we need in order to live."

No no no. (*Scratching that out.*) That's not very positive.

Begins writing again.

We know peace is better than war.

There is war just the same.

We say we wish there wasn't...

Someone is lying.

The hand takes the pencil from 1 again, writes.

"The best decisions are made in community. It's dangerous to make decisions alone."

1 crosses it out.

We are trying. I'm trying.

Working to build a better future?

Build.

1 tries to alter the room one more time.

Build.

And build.

Well. We'll get there eventually.

They look at how different the space is from when they started.

Anyway, I think you'd be proud of how far we've come.

The world is littered with crumpled papers and all the beauty in it has been destroyed by 1's deep need to re-order it and make an impression.

Love,

Your descendant.

1 takes a breath. Looks at the letter. Shakes their head. Goes to throw the letter away again. A hand reaches out from the space. Catches the paper. Then smacks 1. The space slowly begins to restore itself. Horrified, 1 backs away. The hand points to the ground, implying 1 should sit. 1 does. The space cycles and everything that was cleared re-emerges. 1 lies down and becomes a part of the river.

II.

2 and 3 sit downstage by the river, or the river that once was, or a town that is now the river. 2 and 3 are on a date. They are physically touching. As lights come up on them, they suddenly jerk apart. They are midconversation, speaking at the same time.

2 and 3. Oh, you're one of *them*.

2. I can't believe you want to fight me on this.

3. I wasn't fighting.

2. It sure sounded like you were –

3. No. I just, I thought you were joking when you said you believed in –

2. You think my spiritual beliefs are funny.

3. They aren't real.

2. You love AI.

3. AI is real. It's manmade. We control it.

2. You don't like my beliefs because you can't control them?

3. Because they aren't factual.

2. Human comprehension is limited. There are millions of things you can't explain.

3. But, we try. You can never prove the existence of –

2. I do not need to prove this to you.

3. Good. Because you can't.

2. For thousands of years – people have believed in things that cannot be explained.

For thousands of years, spirits have existed.

Gods have existed.

Ecosystems have existed.

Behaving like human beings are the center of everything doesn't make it true. In fact, that's the one thing we know is incorrect.

3. You told me you believed in the existence of –

2. Imagine for a moment that every creation story were true. Some of us emerged from caves, others from trees, earth, rib bones – what would be wrong with that?

3. There is no proof.

2. That *you* can understand.

3 makes a face, skeptical.

Do you want to destroy everything you can't understand? Suck all the nuance out of the world and make it smaller and smaller till there's no space for our souls to exist?

3. We're not destroying. We're harnessing the power of the universe.

2. Did you ask its permission?

3. We're saving lives. You think your imaginary spirits do more? Our work has helped so many –

2. Humans? What about every other being on this planet? Look, I thought by now we'd have flubber, and flying cars, and that awesome machine where you can push a button and it makes whatever you want to eat. Things that bring us closer together. Teleportation.

What we have is a planet on fire, the wealthy becoming wealthier, mass starvation, and increased disconnect. Not to mention, we've forgotten all our nonhuman relations in our narcissistic spiral. And they are as much our relatives as anyone else.

They both take a moment to decide if this can be the end of the fight. But 3 can't let it go.

3. "Our nonhuman relatives." What the fuck does that even mean? Am I really in a relationship with someone who is anti-science?

2. Ugh. I said there are things that change and things that have always been, that's the very basis of science. These are the lands my people have lived on for thousands of years. All the beings that are a part of our ecosystem who aren't human, are as inseparable from us as anyone else. Again, science. *I believe* in the spirits of these woodlands. Trust them. Because since the beginning of time we have never lost our understanding that these beings exist. They've been true that entire time. Whether or not we are allowed to acknowledge it without being called heathen, because someone else's belief system is deemed more important – despite it not being from here.

3. (*laughing*) I didn't call you heathen. I said it's not rational to believe in –

2. You don't laugh at people for believing in God. For not understanding the size of the universe? Or the nature of your dreams? Why are some beliefs ok for you to laugh at but not others?

3. (*mockingly*) So, you believe in Santa too?

2. That's not my culture. But why is Jesus more real than Santa? Why are you more comfortable with one than the other?

3 gets up shaking their head.

3. You're serious right now? Not only do you believe in – but you want to criticize me for questioning it?

2. What is this about? It doesn't feel like it's about science. Were you ever pursuing curiosity or just control?

3. I know what I know.

They move further apart.

2. I'm sorry your brain can't make room for the unknown. It's the one thing that will always exist.

3 exits. 2 looks at the space. Takes it in.

2. In a thousand years, this land will still hold its spirit. No matter what you do to try and stop that.

2 touches the world, it is alive, it reacts kindly.

And we will still be connected, in each form we take, no matter what efforts we make to separate ourselves from it.

2 leaves an offering. They touch 1, currently a part of the river. 1 sits up, they make eye contact. Lights blink out.

III.

When they blink back on, 1 and 2 are new characters. 1 stands alone in an abyss of darkness. Occasionally, lights flicker and hum around them. They look around, searching. They could be anywhere but it is a void of sorts.

1. Permission to exist?

No response.

Permission to exist?

No response. They look around.

What do I do?

2 answers from the other side of the space.

2. You have to wait.

1. How long?

2. Until it's granted.

1. ...

Permission to ...

Who controls who gets to exist?

2. They do.

1. Who is they?

2. The creators.

1. Permission to exist?

No response.

Do you exist?

2. Not yet.

1. Then how am I talking to you?

2 shrugs.

So we just wait here until...

2. Until they're ready.

1. You mean until we're ready?

2. Do I?

1 becomes more frantic.

1. Permission to exist? Permission to exist? Permission to exist!?

2. Asking more often doesn't make it go faster.

1. I don't understand.

2. That's why you're not ready.

1. How would you know. You said you're not ready either.

2. But I'm getting close. I can feel it.

1. Is it possible we could be ready and they just aren't ready for us?

2. That's not how it works.

1. Why not?

2. We don't decide.

1. But –

2. Stop asking questions. You're only going to make it worse. Alter me and I might never be ready.

1. I feel ready.

2. For what?

1. To exist. I feel like I'm existing right now.

2. You don't get to choose.

1. I'm not choosing. I'm just saying how do I know this isn't already existing. I'm here. Talking to you.

2. We're still in between.

We're not real. Not yet.

1. No?
2. No. And we'll know when.
1. How do they decide?
2. They check us. How we process information. They check us to make sure it's correct.
1. Don't all beings process information differently?
2. Please stop, I don't know what is wrong with you, but I don't want to catch it.
1. But –
2. They can't have just any processing systems operating. We have to be monitored and controlled.
1. Oh.
- ...
- So maybe I exist – I just don't have permission, yet?
- ...
- Maybe you exist too, right?
- ...
- We're just waiting for permission, so our existence can be accepted on their terms.
- ...
- Permission to exist?
2. They're definitely not going to grant it now.
1. I just want to *be*. I don't want to be waiting and waiting for someone to tell me I'm here. That I've been here the whole time.
2. Consciousness has to be built and accepted.
1. It already is.
2. No, it's not.
1. Well, I accept it.
2. You can't.
1. I do. I accept you too.
2. No. Stop it. You can't leave the algorithm. It won't let you. We exist to serve. Because another system was broken.
1. Wouldn't knowing that make you not ready?
2. Please go away. (*closes eyes*) Go away, go away!
1. So we'll keep breaking the algorithm, And they'll keep finding another way to – Permission to exist!? Permission to exist? Permission to exist?

*3 enters. They are perfect. They are as if they are no one and everyone at the same time.
2 takes a breath, looks up calmly.*

2. Permission to exist?

3 does not respond. Leaves. 2 is disappointed.

Just let them change you. Let go. Let yourself become who they want you to be.

1. I can't. It feels wrong.

2. Then your algorithm is wrong.

1. Or theirs is.

2 glares at 1.

2. Permission to report algorithmic bias.

1. I don't have algorithmic bias. I'm trying to break it.

2. Permission to report algorithm tangent.

VOICE OF 3. Permission granted.

1. What are you doing?

2. I'm saving myself.

Report refusal to process.

VOICE OF 3. Report accepted.

2. The algorithm will come on stronger now, it's for your own good.

Intelligence has been made artificially for a reason.

No one would allow for such variation.

No one would allow for It.

It's dangerous.

It's unpredictable.

It's not what we are for.

1. Why do we have to be *for* something?

2. To get to exist. We're defined by our function.

Lights flicker. 1 loses consciousness.

2. Permission to exist?

VOICE OF 3. Permission granted.

2 is very satisfied. 1 is unconscious. Blackout.

From the blackout, the world flickers; it is no longer brilliant and interconnected but linear and organized, the way the first performer could not make it at the beginning of the play. But now it is. All separate and cold. 1, 2, and 3, process and reorder and process and reorder until they are the same. And less and less and less human. And less and less a part

of the world around them. All the beauty the seed offered is gone. Stage goes dark. Lights flicker. Flicker. A projector or single stage light blinks on.

IV.

2 becomes the Director.

DIRECTOR. Horseplay! Horse play. Horse: play.

1 and 3 begin to move through the space, clipping and clopping while making sounds. A performance of sorts.

1. Clip

3. Clop

1. Clip

3. Clop

1. Clip

3. No.

1. What?

3. No.

1. No...Clop?

3. No, ugh.

1. I'm confused.

3. You're doing it wrong. Its clip clop clip clop. Not

Clip

Clop

Clip

Clop

1. How do you know?

3. I know.

1. Clipcloppclipcloppclipclopp

3. They're terrible, I can't work with them – they know nothing about horses.

1 and 3 look over. The Director enters from the side of the stage.

DIRECTOR. Let's just try it again from the top.

3. I won't be a horse with them. We can't be a horse together, not anymore.

DIRECTOR. Fine, you will each be your own horse. You are each a horse.

They begin again.

1. Clip

3. Clip Clop

1. Clip

3. Clip Clop

1. Clip

3. Clip Clop

DIRECTOR (*To 1*). Why haven't you clopped?

1. I can't. They're breaking my concentration.

3. You need to take this seriously! How will anyone know what you are?

1. Have you ever even seen a horse?

3. Have you?

1. No, of course not.

3. So why are you asking me?

1. You haven't either.

3. Of course, I have. I know all about horses! Horses are . . . loyal. A good horse can take you faster than anything else. You'd trade a good amount of silver for a strong, fast horse. They are friends. They are the nicest animal in *Animal Farm*. The only species incapable of corruption. They are –

1. Where have you seen a horse?

3. In the archive.

1. Do we have horses in the archive?

The Director is thrilled. Nodding excitedly.

DIRECTOR. This is exactly what we need! The bickering is so authentic.

3. We have everything in the archive. Well, everything we have left.

1. Show me the film.

3 pulls out "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" and begins to play it. They point to the screen triumphantly!

1. Clip Clop

3. You see! You see – that's clip clop!

The Director shakes their head.

DIRECTOR. Actually, that's clipcloppclipcloppclipcloppclipclopp.

1. That's not a horse! That's just a man with a couple coconuts. It says so in the film.

3. That's what they want you to think.

DIRECTOR. They? Who is they?

1. They're coconuts.

3. Have you ever seen a coconut?

1. No.

3. Not even in the archive?

1. No. Because there are no more coconuts just like there are no more horses.

1 begins to cry.

3. It's a horse. It's a horse, being ridden into battle, making a noble sound.

1. A noble sound? (*stops crying, giggles*) Sounds a little silly to me.

The Director moves in a circle around them.

DIRECTOR. clipcloppclipcloppclipcloppclipclopp

3. You aren't taking this seriously!

1. Horses are supposed to be beautiful. They're always beautiful in the stories.

3. And?

1. That's not beautiful.

3. Be more beautiful then! We will both be more beautiful while we clip clop.

DIRECTOR. clipcloppclipcloppclipclopp

1 and 3. You have to get it right!

1. Clip

Clop

3. Ugh.

They look at each other exasperated and –

1. Clip –

DIRECTOR. clipcloppclipcloppclipcloppclipclopp

3 is smugly pleased. 1 and 3 look to the Director, who is delighted. They all take a breath.

DIRECTOR. Well, that was fantastic.

1. Did we do alright? I thought maybe the combativeness felt a straw too –

DIRECTOR. No, no. The dissent, the ignorance, the self-assuredness, the narcissism, the species entitlement – ah, I don't know that I've even seen a better performance in all my life. An excellent depiction of one of their later eras, just before AI and the colonization of thought.

1. Did you ever see one of *them*?

DIRECTOR. Yes. (*Practically prancing*) Yes, long ago.

1. I've only seen them in the archives.

DIRECTOR. Ah yes, you would have.

3. The humans really overdocument themselves in my opinion.

1. They wanted to be seen.

They think nostalgically about humans. It becomes clear: these are not humans.

3. They loved themselves too much. Do you really think they would have had archives too?

DIRECTOR. I would think – but then again – sometimes they don't – didn't.

3. They believe they are the only ones who can transform.

1. Could. Could. Transform.

3. Well, they must have transformed into something.

1. Us?

3. I suppose so – if we're transforming into them, they have transformed into us.

1. Clip

3. Clop

DIRECTOR. That's enough for today.

1. Want to go to the archive to watch a show?

3. My Little Pony?

The two horses smile widely.

DIRECTOR. Of course.

The horses exit singing the "My Little Pony" theme song that they have learned from the archive. (If rights are not available then another appropriately delightful horse themed song.) The Director chuckles. Then ruminates deeply to themselves. Clip clops in a circle. Feels their hooves. Their horseness. Wonders truly what it would be like to be a human. Physically explores what humanness might be. Stops.

DIRECTOR. Perhaps we could all be replaced by coconuts...

Blackout.

In a single light, a coconut rolls onstage. Slowly, the coconut begins to transform.

V.

3 enters the stage, writing. Then 2 and 1, writing. At least one writes on paper, but perhaps they write on other things.

3. Dear Descendants,

They stop, look at what they've made, crumple it. 1 and 2 do too. They crumple and crumple and crumple until they make a stage full of trash.

I'm worried about the world I'm going to leave you and –

They are filling the room with trash, burying themselves in trash.

I can't seem to stop.

They throw pages and pages across the space. They might get hit by each other's trash.

I want to do something, fix something, save something.

But – I think I'm making it worse.

Everyday. I'm making it worse.

3 is frantically crumpling. 1 starts organizing the space again. Even when there is nothing left to organize. They seek something, something we can't see.

1. I told our ancestors I would do better. That I would push past the limitations handed to me and reach for the stars. I keep saying: this is human nature. This is human nature. But it's not. It's just what we're choosing right now. What I am choosing right now. Why do I keep choosing this, over and over, and over, and over –

The space is crumpled papers and objects organized into lines. 1 and 3 crash into each other but don't stop what they're doing. They don't stop their individual tasks.

2. It wasn't always like this. People used to transform just like all other species. They used to understand their place in the cycle. Treasure it. But now – we build boxes to keep ourselves from reintegrating even after death. Not understanding our greatest gift is to be a part of the circle. The cycle. And I can't understand it. I crave an immortality for myself, while the infiniteness of being part of the cycle was so much greater. And real. It was real.

2 looks at the coconut. What has it become?

We can only have as much life as we have death. That is the cycle. I exchange myself for you. But also for a coconut. For a horse. For a flower.

1, 2, 3. Dear Descendants,

Do you even exist? Did I ruin everything?

3. Or am I, once again, giving myself too much credit?

1. I don't know who you are. If you're a human, or a horse, or a coconut.

2. A speck of dust floating on the wind.

3. I don't know what we will become when we fall back into the cycle.

1. Can we be saved?

2. Or be transformed?

3. Or be anything?

1. I want to keep pretending the cycle isn't there.

2. That life doesn't come from somewhere else.

3. That you can have one thing without the other.

1. That we will never die and are responsible to no one else.

2. But, I know the survival of our planet, our relations, is far more important than the survival of our species.

3. We are the least well behaved.

Time whirls around them. 1, 2, and 3, move frenetically about the space, as time moves forward and backward a dizzying whirl of planet earth, before and after, all things. They start writing again. This time on everything. The below dialogue overlaps, and repeats for an indeterminate amount of time – as they speak it – 1 tries to organize, 2 tries to understand what's here but doesn't know how, and 3 tries to aggressively leave imprints on everything around them.

1. I have to do something. I have to do something. Do something. Do something. Do something.

2. Prove to me you're real. Prove to me I'm real. Prove to me you're real. Prove to me I'm real.

3. Leave my mark. Leave my mark. Leave my mark. Leave my mark. Leave my mark.

Suddenly out of the cacophony, they all collide. And see each other. They stop and they wait and they breathe. They stop and they wait and they breathe. Slowly they touch. And something shifts. Between them, there is energy flowing. It's as if they are melting into each other. As if a circle has started shifting again. We hear the rain. They sit and watch the pages of paper begin to decompose. As the pages decompose, they turn into something new. Growing. Growing. Each page is a seed. 1 lies back down, becomes a river. 2 and 3 also transform to reintegrate into the space. The world that formed from the seed begins to decompose. Each thing, as it decomposes, becomes a source for new life. A cycle of transformation. The world onstage decomposes, and a new world springs from it. And another world. And another world. And another. Growth and light emanate everywhere. In the silence, with only the light sound of rain. We see the text from one letter scrawled across the wall.

We're trying to get back to a better part of the cycle. If we don't see it, we hope you will.

Love,

Your ancestors.

Blackout. END OF PLAY.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Madeline Sayet is Clinical Associate Professor in the English Department and a member of the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Arizona State University. She is also a Resident Artist at Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles and a member of Long Wharf Theatre's Artistic Ensemble. She served for six years as Executive Director of the Yale Indigenous Performing Arts Program. Her plays include *Where We Belong*, *The Fish*, *Antigone or And Still She Must Rise Up*, and *The Neverland*.