

Opinionated Natures: Toward a Green Public Culture¹

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There is no reason to doubt our present ability to destroy all organic life on earth. The question is only whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction, and this question cannot be decided by scientific means; it is a political question of the first order and therefore can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians.²

Reality is different from, and more than, the totality of facts and events, which, anyhow, is unascertainable. Who says what is... always tells a story, and in this story the particular facts lose their contingency and acquire some humanly comprehensible meaning.³

Introduction

It is hardly unusual among political commentators to suggest (or more accurately, to mourn) the increasing loss of a democratic “public sphere” in which citizens engage one another in debate over issues of common concern. In Habermasian terms, the past 150 years or so have witnessed a decline in “the institutions that until [the mid-nineteenth century] had ensured the coherence of the public as a critically debating entity.”⁴ For Habermas, this narrative of demise is premised on the idea that a genuine, critical publicity involves the deployment of a particular kind of formal and deliberative rationality, one in which citizens engage in conversational, non-instrumental reasoning toward generally universalizing goals. With this ideal in mind, the current entertainment-world cacophony of talk shows, radio phone-ins, therapeutic encounter groups and chat rooms can only appear as monstrous perversions of a modern democratic ideal, a consumerist veneer of talk masking the absence of any authentic public culture.

By the same token, it is also hardly unusual among political commentators to suggest that new social movements—such as environmental movements—are the primary site of hope for any sort of renewed democratic public sphere. Specifically, thinkers such as Jeffrey Isaac understand particular kinds of movements as democratic “oases in a desert”⁵ of late capitalist globalism, consumerism, and “mass” society.⁶ In the desert of electoral politics and focus groups, “localist democracy” emerges as an active, critical practice in such oases as the environmental justice movement. For Isaac, environmental justice “began as a series of local responses to the problem of toxic waste disposal and blossomed into a broad-based movement, organized around issues of class, gender, and race, that has heightened public

awareness about environmental concerns, raised the cost of corporate negligence, and created an extensive network of organizing and information sharing”.⁷ In their movement from local reaction to analytic-activist network, Isaac sees both the kind of critical universality and participatory politics that indicate islands of invigorated publicity in a sea of mass apathy.⁸

Dana Villa has a somewhat different (and rather more pessimistic) take on this story. Specifically, he understands that Habermas’ emphasis on deliberative rationality as the defining characteristic of the public sphere overlooks other crucial and constitutive dimensions of public life, and thus causes many contemporary analysts to tend to *overestimate* the ability of movements such as environmentalism to generate a truly public culture.⁹ Indeed, he argues that “the (currently depleted) energies of social democracy may be occasionally stimulated by such movements as feminism or environmentalism, but ‘the return of the political’ that so many expect to be generated by the associational life of civil society will be far less transformative than presumed.”¹⁰ We need more than deliberative space and participatory politics to approach publicity, even in Habermas’ terms of a critical universality; we also need a uniquely “public” orientation to interpersonal interaction, to be juxtaposed to the modes and habits of privacy (as opposed, say, to a talk show publicity that circulates around people’s private lives).

Drawing on the works of Richard Sennett and Hannah Arendt, Villa argues that modernity has witnessed an increasing emphasis on the ultimate legitimacy of privacy, inner truth and intimate experience at the expense of the distinctively public virtues of impersonal interaction, performative greatness, and individual appearance. “The rise of a culture of intimacy,” he writes “means the decline of social theatricality,” the specifically performative and agonal quality that is, in Arendt’s terms in particular, a hallmark of public life as opposed to the private values of, for example, romantic love and personal morality.¹¹ Thus, for Villa, “it may be doubted whether single-issue movements or identity politics do anything to transform the interests they articulate into ‘a more broadly shared public or common interest’... [and may instead foster] an affinity-group culture, one that is inclined to view moral-political issues in terms of ‘who one is’ in the most rudimentary sense.”¹² Although I disagree strongly with Villa’s sweeping generalization about the single-issue and identitarian character of social movements, he thus raises a tremendously valid point about the *insufficiency* of deliberative participation (and community) and the *necessity* of a distinctive (and probably performative) orientation to generating and invigorating a truly public culture.

As I have argued elsewhere (and will return to below), some versions of environmental politics—notably, particular moments and strands of environmental justice—are, in fact, strongly oriented to the generation of a distinctively public culture of environmental conversation, even performance.¹³ By and large, however, “where environmental issues contain the possibility of constituting and mobilizing diverse publics and [sometimes] do so, as in the case of environmental justice, this potential

is seldom fulfilled because ‘the political’ is not located as a central element in most environmental struggles, as if saving the earth were a task that overrides the importance of democratization.”¹⁴ To account for this lack one can, on the one hand, certainly identify within the broad spectrum of environmental politics the sorts of problematic “single issue movements [and] identity politics” that Villa describes as more representative of community affinity than public culture. But on the other hand, I would argue, one can identify within environmental politics another trend that may be universalizing but that also has distinctly de-politicizing effects, namely, its epistemic organization around, and grounding of legitimacy in, scientifically generated *truths* rather than politically negotiated *opinions*.

In this statement, of course, I echo the ancient (and contested) distinction between philosophical and political speech or, as Plato would have it, between dialectics and persuasion. According to Arendt’s critical reading of the distinction, in the former the philosopher is oriented to the discovery of the (reflection of) the eternal, and converses by exchanging questions with a single other in order to draw out a truth.¹⁵ In the latter, however, the citizen takes part in a theatre of rhetorical persuasion circulating around multiple opinions, which Arendt describes as the production in speech of “the world as it opens itself to me... not subjective fantasy and arbitrariness, but also not something absolute and valid for all.”¹⁶ Crucially, opinion (*doxa*) is something that is revealed, contested and changed in the company of *multiple* others by way of a performance the persuasiveness of which is judged in the realm of appearances itself (e.g., aesthetics), and not with reference to either inner authenticity or external standard. Arendt understood that political persuasion began from, involved and engendered forms of knowledge that were qualitatively different from absolute and timeless truths. Moreover—and reversing the Platonic valuation of contemplation over action—she understood that the claim to truth destroys opinion by degrading both the specificity of the world “as it appears to me” (*dokei moi*) and the value of the realm of appearances in which such opinions are judged. To put it differently, the search for the truth that lies below appearance rather than in it degrades the knowledge that is created in appearance itself, that is to say, opinions created and contested performatively.

To cut a millennia-long story short, the starting-point of this paper is, in the first place, that most forms of environmentalism, in their reliance on scientific truth for validation (which is different in method but not truth-orientation from philosophy in Plato’s absolutist sense), negate the possibility of publicity because they close the spaces in which the world of “nature” potentially appears to individuals as the basis of *opinions*. In the second place, however, most environmental challenges to the dominance of scientific knowledges tend to draw their legitimacy from private “truths,” residing in intimate personal experience (such as deep ecology) or other private interest (for example, NIMBYism). While there is clearly room in environmentalism for a wide range of knowledges, motivations, and forms of speech, the ability of environmental movements to contribute to invigorating a genuinely public

culture (or, for that matter, to *create* a public culture of nature) relies on its ability to cultivate a space of possibility for appearance to multiple others to reveal, and be revealed by, one's environmental opinion.

Nature: Truth, Interest and Opinion

In his important book *Environmentalism and the Future of Progressive Politics*, Robert Paehlke takes up a position shared with many other environmentalists when he argues that the unambiguous first step to making consistently responsible political decisions about environmental issues begins in “developing the connection between environmentalism and scientific knowledge.”¹⁷ Further, he notes that the environmental movement has—relatively uniquely among social movements—tended to rely on natural science rather than social science as the foundation of its claims. As Phil Macnaghten and John Urry concur, “roughly speaking, the role of the social scientist [in environmental politics] is seen as that of addressing the social impacts and implications of environmental problems, which have been initially and accurately described by the natural scientist—a kind of “Biology First” model.”¹⁸

The ideal logic of this kind of science-based eco-political claim should be familiar: an “expert” delivers (or is asked to deliver) something like a certainty to the movement, the politician, the activist,¹⁹ whose job it is to enter the scrum of politics and emerge, preferably, with some policy or other action that represents the reorientation of the world in accordance with the scientific claim. In fact, writes Paehlke, “environmentalists have tended to use science to extrapolate fearsome futures, assigning to the political process the task of resisting their scientifically demonstrated scenarios.”²⁰ In singling out its natural scientific leanings (even if he also argues for the validity of social scientific insight), Paehlke also reveals that environmentalism is a bit higher up the positivist food chain than, say, feminism. Although the logic in which political action “follows” externally-generated truth is similar, in environmental politics we see, I think, the problem more starkly displayed precisely because natural science is, in late capitalism, rather more readily accepted as a reflection of the eternal truths of the world than is, say, social theory (if not, however, economics).²¹ There is, thus, also a greater *strategic* reliance on science in environmental than other social and political movements; to the extent that policymakers and private individuals accept any claims about the nature of the world and about environmental issues, science is better placed than philosophy to provide a window into truth, and certainly more than “mere” opinion.

There are many variations on the general theme of environmental politics “following” a truth-speaking science. In some cases, like recent struggles over local water quality in Nova Scotia (fuelled, I should add, by the E. coli tragedy in Walkerton, Ontario), an environmental issue is not an environmental issue until science can measure a toxin and draw a causal line from the problem to a source, say, nearby industrial livestock production facilities that produce thousands of tons of chemically-laced animal feces (read: common sense doesn't matter here). In other

cases such as the logging of old growth forests on Vancouver Island, a key political issue is *whose* science will emerge victorious; media campaigns and public meetings pit expert against expert in a contest of industry versus movement science, each side trying to discredit the methods—and, crucially, the biasing *interests*—of the other. In this respect, ecological science has become the bearer of the common environmental good against all other positions, which are framed as inherently limited and self-interested; a key tactic in many environmental struggles is, in fact, to demonstrate this bias by deploying one’s own science in the name of a greater and more universal environmental good.

That the critical space of environmental publicity is profoundly withered by this political logic is quite apparent; there is no space between truth and interest, and it is almost impossible to imagine what an environmental *opinion*, in Arendt’s sense, might look like. As Arendt pointed out some forty-odd years ago, the increasing complexity of scientific truth is also a barrier to forming an “environmental” opinion about nature; “the ‘truths’ of the modern scientific world view, though they can be demonstrated in mathematical formulas and proved technologically, will no longer lend themselves to normal expression in speech and thought.”²² The more environmentalists speak the language of chlorofluorocarbons and biodiversity as nature’s truth, *which is increasingly its only apparent commonality to all of us*, the less nature can appear to ordinary individuals as anything other than private, intimate experience.²³

Indeed, the more the truth of nature is understood to lie beyond individual sense-perception (and in the realm of, say, micro-organisms and/or geological time), the less nature’s commonality can “appear” at all. The truth is something singular, underneath appearance; what *is* known to individuals is understood to be personal, subjective, private and not in need of discussion. As Arendt wrote, without a world in common “to appear to me” there is no opinion, and without opinion, there is no meaning to be derived from plurality, no “common” sense; scientists’ truths about the world should thus not be trusted not because they are more or less “biased” but

precisely [because] they move in a world where speech has lost its power. And whatever men (sic) do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about. There may be truths beyond speech, and they may be of great relevance to man in the singular, that is, to man in so far as he is not a political being, whatever else he may be. Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves.²⁴

The political equation of scientific truth with nature’s commonality not only places the essence of nature—and environmental issues—beyond constitutive public discussion, but it also has the effect of forcing those sites and relations in which

nature *is* a subject of speech and meaning into the non-common world of private interest and intimacy. If ecological science has come to dominate the field in which nature is understood as “common,” then this “god’s eye view,” this representation of science in which the ecologist is understood as seeing impartially and for all, not only has the effect of delegitimizing the realm of appearances and collective debate about them but pulls the *possibility* of commonness out from under the individual’s feet. In a nutshell, in the absence of a public realm in which individual opinions can approach one another and achieve objectivity in common, then in a context like environmentalism in which the truth of nature is understood to lie outside the individual’s ken, the only position the individual’s view can occupy is that of a private, partial interest.

To be sure, as Sennett’s work demonstrates magnificently, the privatization of environmental issues in this sense has more than one cause; it isn’t science’s “fault,” the process is part of a web of relations by which the worldly realm of commonality and appearance is degraded. Here, the absence of a realm in which appearances are, as part of the “normal” course of things, considered ripe for artful persuasion and spirited debate corresponds to an increasing emphasis on personal authenticity and private interest as sites of primary identification and meaning, and of relativistic rather than relational understanding of the other’s perspective. And here also, given both a lack and a growing distrust of precisely the performative aspects of public life, conduct toward multiple others in the realm of “politics” increasingly takes the form of a celebration or defense of private interests against others’ interests. Thus it is probably more accurate to say that by and large environmental politics, despite their promise, do very little to create the necessary political space *between* truths and interests.

By way of an example, Julia Butterfly Hill’s heroic two-year tree-sit in a giant California redwood demonstrates quite magnificently the ways in which an impassioned environmental campaign was clearly grounded in claims to the authenticity of intimacy rather than appearance. Although it is certainly the case that Hill brought considerable public attention to her cause, the attention was not so much on the forest as it was on the fate of “her” particular tree, Luna. Hill publicly distanced herself from other tree-sitters (and especially from Earth First!) both directly in her statements to the press and indirectly by cultivating a public image of intensely intimate devotion to the tree rather than the more politically-infused anti-corporate discourses of the sitters whose work preceded (and originally supported) hers. Thus, Hill actively *refused* the politicization of Pacific Coast forestry by transforming a public protest (tree-sitting is an excellent example of ecopolitical theatre) into a personal quest to save Luna. Because of her charismatic and repeated insistence on her intimate relationship to the tree as the ground of legitimacy for her cause, members of the public were able to admire her personal courage and commitment without ever considering the political movement or forest activists who had, both conceptually and physically, enabled that relationship.²⁵

One can list a litany of examples in which environmental issues, in their emergence into popular awareness and political contest, take the shape of private interests rather than common concerns. The “Not in My Back Yard” character of many local struggles to refuse particular environmental hazards (landfills, incinerators, etc), while often striving to push a particular environmental concern into public life and common debate, just as often circulates around the defence of private property or other values of a particular community. The defence of a particular wilderness area is as often propelled by the desires of recreational users and local small business owners as it is by an overarching concern for the health of the nonhuman world in the face of global capitalism. In fact, as Macnaghten and Urry (among others) point out, much of the identity of contemporary environmentalism derives from a sense of *consumer* entitlement, in which individuals not only understand environmentalism as a lifestyle question (ranging from the three R’s to organics to voluntary simplicity) but consider “uncontaminated” water, air, soil and food as a consumer right rather than an ecological or social good.

“Politically,” Arendt writes, “interests are relevant only as group interests, and for the purification of such group interests it seems to suffice that they are represented in such a way that their partial character is safeguarded under all conditions.”²⁶ To put it another way, Arendt is arguing that the point of claiming an interest is to defend and solidify, against other claims, precisely the particularity of that interest. This is in contrast to opinions, which “will rise wherever men (sic) communicate freely with one another and have the right to make their views public,” views not only oriented to the scrutiny of multiple others but “formed and tested in a process of exchange of opinion against opinion.”²⁷ While interests are clearly important, especially in a context where basic questions of equity, access and justice are not close to being met in environmental or other terms, it remains important to distinguish acts of community defence and empowerment from the acts of political reflection and imagination that cultivate a common world. They may coexist, but they are not the same.

Public Natures: From Rationality to Performativity

Given what would seem to be the large political and ecological significance of something like a green public culture—meaning here a cultivated practice of reflection and imagination by which individuals’ opinions about nature might be debated and refined in public—I find it surprising that so very little attention has been paid to questions of these broadly *performative* dimensions of environmental politics. By and large, while there are many ecopolitical thinkers who address questions of democracy and citizenship, who argue for community access to scientific resources for ecological measurement and grassroots activism, and who address questions of representation and justice in their formulation of environmental issues,²⁸ there is a widespread assumption that environmental politics are always already “political” and that there are no particular conflicts between a

“Biology First” political logic and democratic political or epistemic goals. By and large also, few ecopolitical thinkers consider the intrinsic value of political practice as a mode of knowing nature in which environmental opinions might take prominence over scientific or philosophic truths; most environmental politics tends toward an instrumental conception of politics, in which “what is to be done” takes immediate prominence over the generative qualities of the doing.

Unlike most ecopolitical thinkers, then, Douglas Torgerson in his book *The Promise of Green Politics* argues strongly for the importance of a noninstrumental green politics, specifically, for “sustaining a process of ecologically informed discourse that through its agenda, presuppositions, and cultural images challenges the monological administrative mind and the prevailing discourse of industrialism.”²⁹ Using Arendtian thinking, he argues that green politics can be roughly divided into three parts that correspond to Arendt’s tripartite division of the qualities of the *vita activa*.³⁰ Functional green politics, meaning those struggles oriented to the maintenance of basic survival within current institutions, correspond to Arendt’s realm of labour, those activities oriented to the biological maintenance of the species. Constitutive green politics, struggles oriented to the development of entirely new institutions that reflect genuinely ecological values, correspond to Arendt’s realm of work, associated with the construction of artificial things that outlast the lives of their creators. Most importantly, however, Torgerson argues for the importance of a performative green politics, for noninstrumental political theatre oriented to the presentation of self in persuasive argument and debate. This is the kind of green politics that, for Torgerson, corresponds most closely to Arendt’s precious realm of action, of speaking and acting in concert on issues of the world, of revealing and debating opinion, and of performing and constituting oneself as an individual in the company of multiple and plural others.

It is precisely the noninstrumental character of such a performative politics—political debate for its own sake, theatre as intersubjective creation—that marks its radical necessity for green politics and that orients Torgerson’s argument in favour of a green public sphere as distinct from the green movement more generally (which he generally associates with more instrumental political forms). If one considers politics as an end in itself, a realm of activity on the self and in the world the value of which is not always overdetermined by other interests and goals, then the cultivation of a green public sphere necessarily includes such noninstrumental dimensions: “keep[ing] the conversation going and maintain[ing] the relationships that constitute it.”³¹ Which means, for Torgerson, that performativity is necessarily separate from both functional and constitutive green politics, perhaps familiar forms that are both precisely oriented to the institution of forms of green rationality (for example, ecocentrism) and derived from modes of analysis (biological/ecological science, philosophy, etc.) that lie outside the political realm itself and are “applied” toward either maintenance or transformation. Performative green politics are thus, for Torgerson, purely formal; acts of carnival, persuasion, argument and public theatre serve no

particular “green” purpose outside their own enactment and outside the relationships that are created as a result of political action itself.

A tension arises, however, when Torgerson tries to conceive of the relationships among these three political forms. If (as he suggests) some notion of ecological rationality or ecocentrism, however broadly conceived, is the thread linking environmental politics, then how can one think of genuinely *open* public environmental debate when “environmental” is already established as a term of reference? How can we think about a noninstrumental *green* performativity when the boundaries of “green” are formulated according to a language that derives largely from instrumental environmental concerns, and especially from notions of ecological rationality that would have us draw much firmer lines around understandings of the common environmental good than Torgerson, I think, would like? His resolution is to argue in favour of a very minimal conception of green rationality in order to keep the concept of debate as central as possible in the green public sphere:

Green politics serves to enhance and expand the public sphere by promoting debate conducted on the terms of green discourse. Though these terms themselves often remain vigorously contested, the emergence of a language of the environment offers enough commonality for meaningful discussion.³²

To be sure, this tension is part and parcel of the green political world that Torgerson attempts to describe and, by virtue of his obvious commitment to “the fragile promise... of the intrinsic value of politics,”³³ that he also seeks to challenge. But I think that his challenge does not go far enough. Specifically, despite Torgerson’s defense of the plurality of green political forms, he fails to stress that the performative does not only build on the prior existence of the instrumental (that is to say, a green public sphere as a space in which to debate an established green language formed from the constitutive legacies of the environmental movement) but *challenges its very foundational legitimacy as a mode of knowing the issues around and through which green politics are defined*. The tension between rationality and performativity is thus a *tension*. Where green rationality at the very least creates a common language from which to begin an environmental discussion (and generally operates much more teleologically than that, often closing down other forms of expression), green performativity challenges precisely the commonality of that language by grounding its knowledge claims in, and creating them from, different realms of experience. Simply, political performance is about the realm of appearances, opinions and public life.

Thus performativity is not purely formal; it is *alternatively constitutive*. Indeed performance, for Arendt, does not just involve debate even if speech is a form of action. Rather, it involves bringing new events into being *through* public performative speech and deed as a result of the creative abilities inherent in individuals (natality, the ability to begin anew), enacted when they appear to one another to

influence the world beyond their own selves and interests. In fact, one of the key elements in Arendt's understanding of action, of political performance in the company of others, is "the burden of irreversibility and unpredictability, from which action draws its strength."³⁴ The outcome of action cannot be predicted in advance; its conclusion is not determined by prior process. But neither is the impact of action self-contained or negligible; its stake is the *world*. And this combination is the risk, what I would argue is the crucial politicality of action, its unique creativity, its challenge to other forms of human activity that rely on sameness, continuance, function, and institutionalization. Action involves appearance and speech whose character is not guaranteed outside of itself instrumentally; only in the company of others, out of the plurality of congregated human experiences, can the world be made anew, and newness can only come into being in the company of others equally committed to exercising their freedom to act.

I emphasize my differences from Torgerson in order to underscore the unique importance of performativity as a creative act for environmental politics and not just as an add-on (however intrinsically valuable) to a politics of survival or even radical institutionalization. A green public culture that includes and fosters individual performance in the company of others enacts the importance of appearance, in other words, demands the creation—and the opinionated iterative expression—of a self in relation to the multiple others of public life. It opens up a world of debate and persuasion in which the object of discussion is not to arrive at truth but to reveal one's distinctiveness in relation to others, and thus also to witness the revelation of others' distinctiveness. It shifts the substance of environmental discussion from nature's truth to its appearance-to-me, an appearance that is necessarily partial and only achieves meaning and force in the company of others. Thus, the knowledge that arises from performative politics is qualitatively different from the truths upon which ideas of environmental rationality almost inevitably instrumentally rest. Simply, a green performative politics is about developing a different set of knowledge practices, a different set of relations to the world and the others with whom we inhabit it, and a different set of understandings of nature and environment as a result.

Giovanna Di Chiro, for example, has documented some of the ways in which community understandings of environmental issues are deployed within environmental justice (which she abbreviates to EJ) politics, as a way of destabilizing the truth-claims of epidemiological and other research and opening doors to the presentation and legitimation of alternative forms of knowledge.³⁵ Although this is only one moment of environmental justice politics, it is very important to note that this EJ strategy of grounding claims to environmental knowledge in common-sense perception is a way to return nature to the realm of appearance and thus indicates some of the tensions between opinion and truth, performative and instrumental action. Di Chiro describes one situation in which an environmental chemist, once firmly attached to the standard single-chemical testing models for

environmental contamination, changed his mind when he looked out of an activist's kitchen window to *see* three different factories spewing out three different, an obviously interacting, sets of airborne pollutants. Or another in which a community activist insisted on defining the effects of an environmental disaster as including the integrity of her daily experience of African-American cultural community, again something that appears to her and that can be rhetorically produced in public debate without recourse to a necessary rationality existing outside the political sphere itself. Or a third, clearly performative moment, in which a distinctly theatrical approach effectively undermines the oppressive uses toward which rationality is put in ecological politics:

So when I started this stuff on toxic waste and nuclear waste, I went back to the [North Carolina] General Assembly... and I said, "You're exactly right, We're hysterical, and when it comes to matters of life and death, especially mine, I get hysterical." ... If men don't get hysterical there's something wrong with them.³⁶

As Di Chiro notes, EJ politics often include at the same time an active strategy of developing community scientific expertise, a practice tinged with a clear understanding of the political dimensions of scientific study itself (especially risk science). Combined with its ongoing insistence on linking environmental issues with broader questions of social and political justice, this has the effect of situating scientific practice *within* political relations rather than placing science prior to political enactment, thus disrupting "Biology First" logic by a different means. Of course, neither of these strategies rejects science out of hand and neither explicitly prioritizes the development of environmental performativity; while I would still argue that additional elements are necessary for a more robust green publicity, I think it is also interesting to note that there are places where a realm of environmental appearance and performance is *already* the terrain of significant developments toward a green public culture, precisely by displacing the political logic by which science directs environmental politics in the main.

Green Public Culture: Plurality and Representation

For Arendt, political action is a mode of heroic appearance in which an actor demonstrates her or his distinct individuality by artistically fashioning a performance to others. Two crucial dynamics are at work here. In the first place, the actor becomes an individual (or "who" she is) by appearing to others, by bringing herself anew into the realm of appearances aside from the categorical and biological categories (or "what" she is) that organize her private life of labour and work. Political appearance, for Arendt, is thus not about the expression of private interest; it is about coming to be an individual connected to multiple other individuals through the cultivation of a distinct appearance, a distinct relationship to the public world that is the common creation of political actors. In the second place, of

course, the individual's appearance is only meaningful in the company multiple and equal other individuals. Thus, for Arendt, performative action is about the creation of an individuality-in-commonality through the performance and witnessing of opinions, and the public sphere is thus the realm in which the inherent human condition of plurality is able to be expressed.

Although many have criticized Arendt's emphasis on individuality (and pointed out that women and slaves were, in the original Greek formulation of this agonal *polis*, not individuals),³⁷ the fact is that for Arendt, the key value of action, of political life as opposed to any other activity, was that it necessarily occurred in the company of multiple others. Opinions, then, are not thoughts generated in private and defended against others; they are the *product* of appearance, of risking one's ideas in public and, through argument and critical interchange, of refinement from the perspectives of multiple others.³⁸ The validity of an opinion is not judged against truth; it is a product of plurality, its quality developed according to its ability to incorporate the perspectives—the “world-as-it-appears-to-me”—of multiple others. Arendt explains it this way:

I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind, the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place....³⁹

This quality of “representative thinking” is, for Arendt, a form of activity unique to public life. Thinking in the place of the other requires abstraction from detail, not intimacy,⁴⁰ but it also requires active participation in the realm in which the other appears, not disconnected reasoning about the other's potential based on “what” the other is. Representation also suggests a process by which opinion is multiply challenged and filtered, so that thinking actively includes the mark of the other as part of its dynamic. Representative thinking is thus a mode of knowing that derives from iterative and critical appearance; it is constitutionally public, multiple and reflexive.

Of course, representative thinking is a quality sorely atrophied in modernity both as a result of the predominance of contemplation over action and as a result of the incursion of “social” issues into the public domain,⁴¹ both of which place truth and authenticity outside the realm of collectivity, plurality and publicity. Common sense, although the basis for the revelation of the world-as-it-appears-to-me, all too often resorts to privately-generated ideas of the good (for example, personal

authenticity) or external standards of truth (such as reasoning based on probability). Without a desire for public argument and political theatre, without a forum in which to practice representation, and without an appearing and critically engaged plurality, is representative thinking even possible?

In my view, it is precisely this possibility that has been one of the greatest strengths of environmental politics, and here especially of environmental justice politics. Common sense is precisely the basis of everyday claims to know and speak nature. But to transform a problem of everyday nature (as it appears to me) into a subject for political conversation requires its rethinking according to some understanding of “commonality.” As I have argued, mainstream environmentalism *tends* to accept that the “common” is best represented by environmental science, and tends to avoid the messy business of agreeing upon the nature of the common, so to speak, as a result. But environmental justice, at least in its origins, has taken a different logic.⁴² In resistance to environmental politics that claimed nature (for example, wilderness) as a distinct and scientifically knowable subject apart from human relations, environmental justice politics have publicly produced nature as an open term around which to organize multiple and everyday claims to justice, freedom and expression; these are centred around but expressly not limited to anti-racist and civil rights struggles. This production of environmentalism leaves the subject of “the environment” open and legitimates the realm of appearance, making the process of contestation by which environmental issues appear a political rather than a scientific one.

The political logic of environmental justice is also not about imposing a singular definition of justice on the broad network of struggles that are connected under its umbrella of affinities. Justice itself is the subject of grassroots political debate. I would suggest that the logic is, broadly, to take NIMBY to “Not in Anyone’s Back Yard,” thus performatively forcing the particular community issue to appear as a common good but without a pre-existing understanding of how that “good” will work in any other situation, in other words, without a pre-political claim to the nature of the issue and without a definite idea of the shape of its resolution. Environmental justice politics thus invites the appearance of a variety of different claims to know nature and to know justice; without a clear sense of what an ecological rationality will look like before the process of debate and politicization itself, environmental justice thus suggests the necessary but critically interacting multiplicity of views on nature. And this strikes me as similar to the green public sphere I suggest above. If we don’t know in advance of the conversation what environmental justice will look like, then we have to pay very close attention indeed to how the world appears to the others with whom we share responsibility for its construction.

Conclusions

The typical response to the argument I make in this paper is one of critical incredulity. Surely I'm not advocating an environmentalism without science? Surely science is more complex than the political logic I describe? Surely some of the most articulate speakers of environmental opinion have been, precisely, scientists? Surely we can't trust opinion? Surely there are ecological truths that extend beyond individual awareness and that cannot be adequately addressed, especially given the severity of the problems and the complexity of the causes, by ordinary individuals with knowledges derived from appearances?

Like all of the ecopolitical thinkers whose work I cite in this text, I am actually advocating a strategy of healthy multiplicity for environmental politics. The political logic by which environmental scientists are able to "speak" for nature in ways that ordinary citizens cannot is not likely to disappear any time soon, and I make this argument secure in the knowledge that there are many who will argue with me about the continued relevance of this logic. But other relations suggest a more complex discussion as well. Current robust debates within science and science studies, for example, indicate to me a promising awareness that ecological science is a particular and socially located set of truth-making practices, and that the reified logic by which environmentalists claim "truth" from scientific work misrepresents the richness and complexity of scientific work itself.⁴³ In addition, as Raymond Murphy notes, environmentalism has many elements of a paradoxical relationship to science.⁴⁴ On the one hand, individuals are increasingly aware—perhaps especially in the context of widely-publicized biotechnological developments—of the risks of an unaccountable scientific practice and are thus deeply critical of science's ability to act independently in the common good; on the other hand, we remain reliant on science to develop the arguments with which to make science accountable.

In this context, the point of the paper is not so much to argue for the displacement of science as it is to advocate for the vital importance of something *else*. In fact, to continue the Arendtian turn, an environmental politics holding the display, cultivation and spirited debate of opinion at its centre would seem to suggest a new role—or perhaps a very old one—for science. For Arendt, the Platonic rift between politics and philosophy was based on a very particular reading of Socrates' trial, one that she would claim is extremely anti-Socratic. To Socrates, the philosopher is not a disembodied recluse contemplating eternal truths, but an actively engaged citizen whose pedagogical role is not to tell other citizens a singular truth but, through careful and dialogical questioning, to help them clarify, refine and develop precisely the truthfulness of their multiple opinions.⁴⁵

This *maieutic* practice, I think, could be actively embraced by environmental scientists and ecopolitical theorists alike to great effect. As a way of encouraging respect for the multiplicity of opinions through which environmental relations are expressed, as a way of returning appearances to politics, as a way of learning to

appear, to listen, to distinguish and be distinguished and, crucially, as a way of developing the precious faculty of representative thinking in the place of multiple others, environmental “experts” can and should take on the role of midwife rather than oracle. Ultimately, a green public culture should be neither a realm in which environmental truths, created elsewhere, are simply “played out” in political strategy, nor a realm in which expressive and carnivalesque performances have no effect on the world that is their subject and creation. Performance constitutes a world on alternative grounds, and those grounds are inherently multiple and imaginative. Ultimately, then, a green public culture is a realm in which the world can *appear* and be made meaningful in light of the opinions of multiple others thinking, reflecting and imagining in each other’s company.⁴⁶

As Villa indicates, however, this potential is not broadly realized within environmental politics, and I have attempted to demonstrate that the absence of a space “between” science and interests in mainstream environmentalism is a contributing factor in this failure. As I have alluded throughout, environmental justice politics certainly represent a promising terrain in which glimpses of a performative, opinionated green public culture can already be viewed. In addition to its important socialization of environmental issues—and its clear challenge to the idea of a “common” nature, the truth of which lies outside the realm of human influence and activity—environmental justice begins its claims to justice by pulling nature back into the political realm: of appearances, of everyday experiences, of recognizable and discussible problems. Thus, perhaps paradoxically, I firmly believe that the seeds of a green public culture in the way I have described it, if they are going to take root, will do so in articulation with environmental justice politics that begin in the realm of particular and discussible appearance and opinion. But I also think that the hegemonic logic of science “preceding” environmental claims combined with the compelling strategy of using the legal system to formulate, argue and defend measurable group interests, makes the job of holding onto the realm of opinion a particularly difficult one for environmental justice politics. Interests can be overwhelming; the promising performative logic I described above is crucial, but it is also very fragile when communities are at risk. Thus I think there is also a need within environmentalism more generally to focus on developing a challenge to the relations through which the common world of nature is increasingly understood as a collection of private interests working within a set of natural truths that only ecological science can see. The world, in Arendt’s sense, depends on it.

Notes

1 This paper was originally published in Bob Pepperman Taylor and Ben Minteer (ed.), *Democracy and the Claims of Nature: Critical Perspectives for a New Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

2 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 3.

3 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1963), 261-62.

4 Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Realm* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 162.

5 The phrase is originally Hannah Arendt's. "If we equate these spaces of freedom... with the political realm itself, we shall be inclined to think of them as islands in a sea or oases in a desert." *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 275.

6 Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 148.

7 *ibid*, 148.

8 Isaac is not claiming a Habermasian rationality for environmental justice; his ideas on publicity differ significantly from Habermas', even if both emphasize association, participation, and critical commonality.

9 Dana R. Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

10 *ibid*, 153.

11 *ibid*, 147-152. See also Arendt, *The Human Condition* and Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1976).

12 Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, 153. Note that he does not mean "who one is" in the Arendtian sense; she would use the phrase "what one is" to make Villa's point.

13 Catriona Sandilands, *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), especially chapter 7.

14 *ibid*, 154.

15 Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 73-103.

16 *ibid*, 80.

17 Robert Paehlke, *Environmentalism and the Future of Progressive Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 114.

18 Phil Macnaghten and John Urry, "Towards a Sociology of Nature," *Sociology* 29, no. 2 (May 1995), 204.

19 Paehlke actually notes that "environmentalists... have generally seen [the roles of scientist and citizen] as irretrievably linked," *ibid*, 114.

20 *ibid*, 114-15.

21 Of course, many ecological scientists (and Ulrich Beck along with them) would argue that science is *not* considered, in late capitalism, to be a source of absolute truths and that its legitimacy (and research funding) has been seriously called into question. While I agree with this analysis in a broad sense, I see in environmental politics (and political theory) a continued reliance on scientifically-generated scenarios as if science *should* be the most legitimate source of nature knowledge rather than a willingness to make more democratic use of any skepticism with scientific authority. The logic remains: one must have scientific certainty to make environmental political decisions. And of course, such certainty is seldom possible. But environmental politics tend to proceed as if it were not only possible but necessary.

22 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 3.

23 Indeed, when Paehlke argues that environmentalism also requires "that we must construct and use an appropriate, consistent, and humanly meaningful set of values," (114) he is able to produce a coherent list of 13 "central value assertions" that derive not from political discussion but from the writings of naturalists, philosophers, economists and political theorists. Although his inclusion of values clearly points to the political quality of environmental discussion—even of opinion—his reliance on another set of experts to tell us what environmental values are immediately closes the political space that the question of values might open up.

24 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 4.

25 I am indebted to Audrey Vanderford for this analysis. See “Can’t See the Forest for Her Tree: Activism, Celebrity and Julia ‘Butterfly’ Hill,” presentation at the University of Oregon, “Taking Nature Seriously: Citizens, Science and the Environment,” February 2001. It should be noted that Hill “saved” Luna by shelling out a cash fine, that the rest of the forest was still cut, and that Hill’s actions and celebrity are the subject of considerable criticism by the larger movement of forest activists on whom Hill so clearly turned her back.

26 Arendt, *On Revolution*, 227.

27 *ibid.*, 227.

28 One collection that includes many of these dimensions is Daniel Faber (ed.), *The Struggle for Ecological Democracy: Environmental Justice Movements in the United States* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1998).

29 Douglas Torgerson, *The Promise of Green Politics: Environmentalism and the Public Sphere* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 20.

30 Arendt’s description of the *vita activa* is, famously, located in *The Human Condition*. Although it is clear that she did not reject the *vita contemplativa* (it was the topic of her unfinished final book), she wanted to refocus attention and value on the activities of the world, and especially on the neglected realm of action.

31 Torgerson, *The Promise of Green Politics*, 156.

32 *ibid.*, 160.

33 *ibid.*, 168.

34 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 233.

35 Giovanna Di Chiro, “Environmental Justice from the Grassroots: Reflections on History, Gender, and Expertise,” in Faber (ed.), *The Struggle for Ecological Democracy*, 104-136.

36 Cora Tucker, cited in *ibid.*, 121. Originally in Robbin Lee Zeff, Marsha Love and Karen Stults (ed.), *Empowering Ourselves: Women and Toxics Organizing* (Falls Church, VA: Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, 1989), 5.

37 For a review of these arguments (notably from feminists) in addition to a more sustained discussion of the specificity of action for an *ecofeminist* politics, see Sandilands, *The Good-Natured Feminist*, chapter 7.

38 For Arendt, the opinion itself is already a product of having thought with and against oneself, the two-in-one conversation of thinking. So the key question of politics as opposed to contemplation is not conversation as opposed to solitude, but multiplicity as opposed to duality.

39 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 241.

40 Friendship is generally the metaphor used to describe the nature of political relationships in this sense. It is based on both particularity and equality.

41 See Sandilands, *The Good-Natured Feminist*, chapter 7.

42 The more institutionalized EJ politics have become, however, the less they seem willing to contest many aspects of this political logic.

43 Thanks to Peter Andree for pointing out to me that one can think of the practice of peer review as a specific practice through which science itself can be rethought as a realm of opinion.

44 Raymond Murphy, *Rationality and Nature: A Sociological Inquiry into a Changing Relationship* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 216-7.

45 Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 81.

46 I have argued elsewhere that thinking in the company of others can include nonhuman others, and that a performative public realm does not exclude, on the traditional bases of language and rationality, the appearances of non-human individuals as active agents. My example was orcas, who *do* speak, appear and perform, both to one another and also to human beings of their own free will (I don’t mean Sealand, here).