Publics of Animacy: Ecologizing Democratic Education

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This essay attempts to bring together conversations on how we ought to go about educating democratic actors and conversations on how we ought to ecologize education. While the field of philosophy of education has, in recent years, begun to embrace theories of ecological education, these conversations are currently happening separately from the ones on democratic education.[1] Democratic education espouses localized participation of students toward shared governance and community, and, in effect, prepares students to be democratic political actors. In other words, democratic education deals with communities and small publics that form around community problems. Environmental and ecological education, on the other hand, often deal with the big: the global, the biosheperical, and, even more nebulously, the atmospherical. However, ecological philosophers have made the important point that being ecological has to do with the minute activities of the everyday.[2] Robin Wall Kimmerer uses the helpful term "practical reverence" to describe acts of reciprocity and regard for all species, rather than only human people, that we might engage in day-to-day, moment-to-moment.[3]

I propose in this essay that there is a way to think ecologically in our everyday acts and in our localized communities toward democratic ends that serve all of life, not just human life. I also propose a conception of what I'm calling *publics of animacy*, a term inspired by Jane Bennett's political ecology of the nonhuman, which she calls vital materialism, and Robin Wall Kimmerer's notion of *animacy*: a regard for life as such, both human and more-than-human. Though Bennett and Kimmerer come from two—and some might say opposing—perspectives, I argue that the combination of new materialist philosophy and indigenous knowledge and spirituality provide an ecological framework that is both philosophical and intuitive; known and felt.

A number of scholars in our field have written on the urgent need to ecologize philosophy of education.[4] Clarence Joldersma writes that, in "their critiques on issues such as neoliberalism, consumerism, pluralism, and so on,"

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philosophers of education turn to political solutions. These solutions, argues Joldersma, "remain firmly connected to what Heidegger calls 'the *world,*'" and that these worldly analyses hover "above *earthly* issues of the environment and ecology." Joldersma calls for a supplementation or even perhaps a supplantation of our "worldly principles," like democracy, with an "earth ethics."[5] While I am in firm agreement with Joldersma that we desperately need something like an earth ethic or some such framework of engaging with the more-than-human that is responsible rather than destructive, and that our political solutions often do hover above environmentalism and ecology, I argue in this essay that democracy has something to offer ecological thinking.

Current political practices that concern nonhuman life are decidedly undemocratic: policies are imposed on nonhuman beings and spaces with the exclusive aims of human beings in mind.[6] Public deliberations often do not include or even consider the nonhuman: this flies in the face of democratic practices and education toward those practices. Richard Quantz wrote that democratic education is about guiding students toward "speaking and listening carefully, intelligently, fairly, and critically to those who share our public space in order to find ways for us to live and work together in these public spaces."[7] In order to ecologize democratic education we need to reconsider whom or what we understand ourselves to share public spaces with and reconceptualize what listening and deliberation can mean. Democracy and democratic education by extension is not a static concept. How we practice democracy has evolved to accommodate evolving conditions. Kathleen Knight Abowitz, in her writing on democratic education, has suggested fair and ethical practices in educational settings and elsewhere might require new mechanisms for democracy. Knight Abowtiz argues that we must cultivate particular habits toward deliberative democracy. She writes "habits are developed dispositions for established forms of action and thought."[8] This is a Deweyan conception of habits as not inherent but learned through experience. I argue that we cultivate new habits toward ecological consciousness—habits of deliberation, habits of language, and habits of consumption—that enable us to live together with other lives, human and non, more fairly and justly. I also argue that we ought

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to look beyond hegemonic and Eurocentric iterations of rational deliberation because, historically, this kind of deliberation has not only excluded the nonhuman but also human people who are nonmale and nonwhite.

In what follows, I first propose a rethinking of public deliberation via a reconceptualization of what a public can mean. I turn to Bennett's idea of vibrant materialism in order to reconceptualize the meaning of a political actor and to broaden our understanding of political participation. Then, I offer Kimmerer's *grammar of animacy* toward more equitable consideration of nonhuman life; lastly, I draw from Kimmerer's description of modes of consumption which honor the cycles and reciprocity of nature toward more ecologically democratic practices.

PUBLICS OF ANIMACY

We ought to expand our conception of democracy to include the things we live with, around, and next to. An ecological democracy accounts for not only human publics and their problems, but the ways those problems are related and connected to nonhuman publics. With the help of Bennett's theory of vital materialism—a "positive ontology" of the nonhuman which stretches concepts of agency and "sketches a style of political analysis that can better account for the contributions of nonhuman actants"—I will illustrate that nonhuman entities can and do comprise publics in the Deweyan sense and must be accounted for in our conception of democracy.[9]

A truly democratic education requires students to understand their position amongst and relationship to nonhuman life because their actions and habits impact those lifeforms just as they impact the lives of other humans. Quantz wrote that students need "to be integrated into a successive series of different communities."[10] The biosphere should be one of those communities. As Quantz points out, "delineations of public space does not address where the limits of such spaces might exist." Quantz wonders "when things become public, who must deliberate? Everyone? Or just those potentially affected by the decision?"[11] Although Quantz does not have the nonhuman in mind here, these questions are provocative if considered with regard to whether we can or ought to include the nonhuman in our public deliberations, and if students of democracy might be prompted to consider the more-than-human in policy considerations. In *Democracy and Education,* Dewey defined democracy as more than the mechanics of government; he defined it as associated living and shared experience.[12] To be sure, Dewey definitely did not have the nonhuman in mind. However, there is no doubt that we are associated and share experiences with the more-than-human. When seen through the lens that Bennett suggests, Dewey's notion of publics is amenable to the more-than-human.

Bennett explains that Dewey's "concept of conjoint action distributes responsibility to many different (human) actors;" therefore, "the naming of a *problem* (rather than an act of will) as the driving force behind the formation of a public," accounts for political action that "need not originate in human bodies at all."[13] In other words, a political problem need not be a strictly human problem. Most political problems are not exclusive to humans, in fact. For example, the farming and production of palm oil in Indonesia is disruptive to numerous plant and animal life, but also a major factor in the lives of the laborers who depend on this industry to subsist. We might think of the palm oil farmers as one kind of public that forms around the problem of depending on the palm oil industry for economic survival. But we might think of orangutans displaced by the forest destruction for palm oil farming as a public as well. The orangutan's have a shared problem; whether they come together consciously around this problem, I cannot know. However, if we alter slightly the way we think about identity and identity-groups, there is a way to conceive of an orangutan public and realize that this public is tied to our human publics. Bennett notes that "Dewey imagines a public as a set of bodies affected by a common problem generated by a pulsing swarm of activities."[14] If we momentarily leave aside, as Bennett does, Dewey's claim that publics are comprised of *persons* affected by a common problem, and focus instead on "the way Dewey defines members of a public in terms of their 'affective' capacity," we can begin to imagine what a nonhuman public might look like.[15] A public is simply a group of bodies harmed by the actions of others. In this case, the orangutans certainly meet that criterion. The demolished trees which formally inhabited the palm oil farmland meet this criterion, too, in fact.

The need for deliberation that Dewey posited for democracy also poses a problem for conceiving of nonhuman publics. Bennett is helpful here too. Bennett, in thinking through her theory of vital materialism, troubles what a discussion *is* and could be. She admits "there are many practical and conceptual obstacles here: how can communication proceed when many members are nonlinguistic?"[16] Further, she asks:

> Can we theorize more closely the various forms of such communicative energies? How can humans learn to hear or enhance our receptivity for propositions not expressed in words? How to translate between them? What kinds of institutions and rituals of democracy would be appropriate?[17]

Bennett turns to Latour and Ranciere for suggestions such as a "parliament of things," which Bennett admits the elusiveness of herself, and then Ranciere's "democracy as disruption," which is designed to open democracy not only to nonhumans but also to "the voices of excluded *humans*" as well.[18] "Compared to Dewey and Latour," Bennett says, "Ranciere is less concerned with how a public emerges than with the means by which its (apparent) coherence can be interrupted." True democracy occurs when an actor (perhaps a nonhuman one) "does something that exposes the arbitrariness of the dominant" *thinking, speaking, reasoning* group. Suddenly the *thinking, speaking, reasoning* beings seem only arbitrarily dominant and perhaps no longer dominant at all. According to Ranciere, this arbitrary divide has "been rendering some [beings] visible as political actors while pushing others below the threshold of note." The disruptive actor (the orangutans, the trees) "constructs a 'polemical scene' within which what was formerly heard as noise by powerful persons begins to sound to them like 'argumentative utterances.'"[19]

However, helpful as a starting point as Latour's "parliament of things" or Ranciere's "disruptive argumentative utterances" may be, they are both beholden to a social-contract-style deliberation in which nonhumans must "reason" themselves heard or not heard. Martha Nussbaum points out the problems with social contract theories for the inclusion of nonhuman animals in a theory of justice because of "their commitment to rationality as the ground of dignity."[20] The anthropomorphizing elements of "parliaments" and "argumentative utterances" are only symbolically and not materially helpful for including nonhumans in a framework of democracy. I find Nussbaum's capabilities approach more helpful and attainable. Within the seventh item on her list of capabilities "toward basic political principles" for nonhumans, *affiliation,* Nussbaum says nonhumans "are entitled to live in a world public culture that respects them and treats them as dignified beings."[21] Therefore, even sans the ability to reason, rationalize, deliberate, discuss, or even utter, by the very fact that beings exist, associate, and can be oppressed therein, make them a public concern. Dewey himself says that things do not have to be lingual to be associated: he discusses babies, birds, and other beings that associate with themselves or others organically.[22] Utilizing Bennett's refocusing of Dewey's notion of public actors as those *affected* by consequences, nonhumans can be included as meaningful actors in our political ecosystems.

Though, even if we accept Bennett's explanation of nonhuman publics capable of deliberation, we are still left without a concrete solution to the educational problem of how to regard the nonhuman. I turn next to Kimmerer, who suggests that the answer might lay in the ways we talk *about* the nonhuman.

HABITS OF LANGUAGE

In her book *Democracy of Species*, Kimmerer argues that there are rich prescriptions for equity, justice, sustainability, and democracy "in Native science and philosophy . . . lifeways and practices."[23] These practices might help us as a human species to "restore balance" between the human and more-than-human.[24] Says Kimmerer, "one of our responsibilities as human people is to find ways to enter into reciprocity with the more-than-human world."[25] This responsibility ought to be enacted in education and especially democratic education as we guide students toward ways of living in a pluralistic and multi-species society peaceably together. Kimmerer suggests that this can happen at the level of the everyday, "through . . . science, art, and in everyday acts

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of practical reverence."[26] With the educational experience of the everyday in mind, in what follows, I propose an examination of habits of language and habits of consumption. Kimmerer remarks that "only when people *understand* the symbiotic relationships that sustain" us can they participate in the "reciprocity that animates the world."[27] Understanding is cultivated through the words we use to talk about things; language shapes understanding.

Kimmerer offers indigenous knowledges and language structure as a way of reconceptualizing how we speak about and, by extension, regard the more than human. She invites us to share in the language of the Potawatomi which conceptualizes nonhuman others as people: "Imagine walking through a richly inhabited world of Birch people, Bear people, Rock people, beings we think of and therefore speak of as persons worthy of our respect, of inclusion in a peopled world."[28]

For Kimmerer, colonialism and the resulting destruction of people, places, and language is deeply interwoven with the breakdown of ecological-mindedness and compassion for the more-than-human. She theorizes some of the ways in which we might listen across the divide of speciesism toward a more justly shared world. She points out that one language tool we currently possess is science. However, "beneath the richness of [science's] vocabulary and its descriptive power, something is missing . . . Science can be a language of distance which reduces a being to its working parts; it is a language of objects."[29] Kimmerer posits a connection between the "profound error in grammar" in "the language scientists speak" and the "grave loss in translation from native languages of these shores."[30] Whereas what we are currently in need of, is a grammar of animacy. Such a grammar "could lead to whole new ways of living in the world, other species a sovereign people, a world with a democracy of species, not a tyranny of one—with a moral responsibility to water and wolves, and with a legal system that recognizes the standing of other species."[31] She turns to the indigenous language of Potawatomi as an example of a grammatical structure that does justice to the aliveness of the more-than-human:

> A bay is a noun only if water is *dead*. When *bay* is a noun, it is

> defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa*—to *be* a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live. 'To be a bay' holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise—become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, and there are verbs for that, too. To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things.[32]

While mapping human notions of decision-making, motivation, and choice onto nonhuman things might at first seem anthropocentric, what it actually does is allow us to conceive of a nonhuman being as an *agent* who acts, or, in Tom Regan's language, as the *subject of a life,* even if the actions do not fit within our epistemological frameworks.[33]

One way in which we might ecologize democratic education is in the way we teach the mechanics of language. Kimmerer points out that, in English, it is both grammatically inaccurate and disrespectful to refer to a human person as *it*: "*It* robs a person of selfhood and kinship, reducing a person to a mere thing. So it is that in Potawatomi and most other indigenous languages . . . the same words [are used] to address the living world as we use for our family."[34] This, for Kimmerer, is the grammar of animacy. She describes sharing this language with her field ecology students and one student in particular having one of those delicious moments in learning when the light of understanding suddenly bursts through the clouds of thought. The student says "doesn't this mean that speaking English, thinking in English, somehow gives us permission to disrespect nature? By denying everyone else the right to be persons? Wouldn't things be different if nothing was an *it*?"[35] Kimmerer describes this light bulb moment as more of a remembering than an awakening because, as she observes, "the animacy of the world is something we already

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know, but the language of animacy teeters on extinction—not just for Native peoples, but for everyone."[36]

> Our toddlers speak of plants and animals as if they were people, extending to them self and intention and compassion—until we teach them not to. We quickly retrain them and make them forget. When we tell them that the tree is not a *who*, but an *it*, we make that maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of a moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation. Saying *it* makes a living land into 'natural resources.' If a maple is an *it*, we can take up the chainsaw. If a maple is a *her*, we think twice.[37]

Kimmerer goes on to describe her students' concerns about anthropomorphism and ascribing human characteristics to other species: treating nonhumans as "people in furry costumes."[38] But she also describes her students arriving at the understanding that nonhumans can also count as persons, though nonhuman persons.

Kimmerer illustrates how such an education might look in practice. She explains that when she is in the woods with her students, teaching them the names and processes of plant life, she tries "to be bilingual between the lexicon of science and the grammar of animacy. Although the students still have to learn the scientific roles and Latin names," Kimmerer hopes that she is "also teaching them to know the world as a neighborhood of nonhuman residents, to know that, as ecotheologian Thomas Berry has written, 'we must say of the universe that it is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.'"[39] Regarding the more-than-human in this way calls for a rethinking of our everyday practices. In the next section, I take up consumption as one educative area for democratic ecological thinking.

HABITS OF CONSUMPTION

We don't typically think of students as consumers-in-training, but students' future consumption will be the biggest impact they as individuals have on society and the earth. Though students are not yet fully actualized political actors, they're forming habits of choice that will shape the democratic actors they become. Ecologizing democratic education also means interrogating the choices we make in our consumption habits and the realization that these choices are not made in a vacuum.

In the second chapter of *Democracy of Species,* Kimmerer outlines what she calls and what is known as the Honorable Harvest in indigenous ecological practices "that govern the exchange of life for life . . . They are rules . . . that govern our taking, shape our relationships with the natural world, and rein our tendency to consume."[40] Kimmerer writes of the Honorable Harvest that "unlike state laws" and "enforced legal policy," "it is an agreement . . . among people and most especially between consumers and providers."[41] In this case, the providers and consumers are both human and nonhuman, both agentic and both worthy of personhood.[42]

Kimmerer posits that the "traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous harvesters" was predicated on a reciprocity.[43] Indigenous harvesters do not take all that they might because they have the health of the population of plant life in mind as well as the health of their own lives because they understand that both lives depend on one another. The logic is one of reciprocity rather than abundance, or what Timothy Morton has referred to as agrilogistics: the machination of logistics which values abundance over all else and "establishes [a] thin rigid boundar[y] between human and nonhuman worlds by reducing existence to sheer quantity."[44]

Within the framework of the Honorable Harvest, "we honorably take only what is given."[45] For example, we can understand renewable sources of energy such as "solar, wind, geothermal, and tidal energy" as given because "we need not destroy the earth to make use of them."[46]

> While the digging of leeks and the digging of coal may be too far removed to see, we consumers have a potent tool of reciprocity right in our pockets. We can use our dollars as the indirect currency of reciprocity . . . Dollars become a surrogate, a proxy for the harvester with hands in the earth, and

> they can be used in support of the Honorable Harvest—or not . . . it can be too easy to shift the burden of responsibility to the coal company or the land developers. What about me, the one who buys what they sell, who is complicit in the dishonorable harvest?[47]

Though students, especially those in cities, "may be separated from the sources of what they consume," they might be taught that "they can exercise reciprocity through how they spend their money." Such principles are deeply needed in our present moment in which we are "caught in a trap of overconsumption."[48] For Kimmerer, to be morally awake means that we are attuned to the lives we extinguish on behalf of our own: "whether we are digging wild leeks or going to the mall, how do we consume in a way that does justice to the lives that we take?"[49] Kimmerer relays an immigrant student's description of the culture shock she experienced entering an American school stemming not from "language or food or technology, but waste."[50] She describes experiencing shock at the sheer waste accumulated in the school cafeteria. Indeed, food consumption in schools is one site at which democratic education can play out. In his book *Unpacking School Lunch: Understanding the Hidden Politics of School Food*, Marcus Weaver-Hightower discusses that the food choices students make in school cafeterias (or whether they have a choice) represent the policy decisions of adults. Weaver-Hightower traces the connections between policy priorities and what happens in school cafeterias by posing questions such as: "Are we privileging health or momentary pleasure? Are we privileging students' and society's long-term health or the short-term profit (for most, just solvency) of districts and food service providers?"[51]

I'm reminded of something I overheard a student say while waiting in line at a coffee truck near the campus where I teach: "there's no ethical consumption under capitalism," the student said. This thinking lacks the "practical reverence" that we all can have for the lives around us and how our choices impact those lives, no matter how seemingly indirect. Living in a democracy means that we make choices together in order to live better together. To dismiss the choices that we make every day as consumers is a poor example to set for students who will become consumers with values that impact the rest of biospherical life. We must ourselves "use dollars as the currency of good ecological choices" and guide our students to do so as well.[52] Equally important is to help our students understand that in the food deserts on the south and west sides of this city and many others globally, "there is no such choice, and the dishonor in that inequity runs far deeper than the food supply."[53]

Along with deliberation and language, habits of consumption are a politically meaningful area of examination and ought to be included in an ecologically democratic education.

CONCLUSION

In democratic education, we discuss being citizens of communities, we discuss citizenship as being politically active, we talk about being global citizens, but we ought to be talking about being biospherical citizens as well. We enact that biosperical citizenship through our consumption and purchasing power, but also in the way we talk and think about and regard the nonhuman. How is the more-than-human depicted in the literature, art, and sciences that we teach about? And when we talk with students about engaging in democratic deliberation, who or what are we said to be deliberating with? What shared problems cross lines of species or even animacy? These are urgent questions. I have also aimed in this essay to bring together two seemingly very different interpretations of experiences with the nonhuman. Although new materialist philosophies like Bennett's are post constructionist and critical of the linguistic turn, the power of language in our material and conceptual encounters with the nonhuman is undeniable. Language is so important to democracy and the way that we regard and treat others. We use language to speak and think about variations in gender, in racial, ethnic, and national identities, we acknowledge indigenous lands with language. So, I'm confident that language, the way we speak about the nonhuman and the way the nonhuman is represented in our speech and writing is critical to an ecological education.

Finally, Bennett's and Kimmerer's discussions of the intersection of political deliberation and ecology are but two iterations of what an ecologi-

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cally democratic education could look like. Undoubtedly there are countless innovative ways in which we can include the more-than-human in our public deliberations that thinkers from across disciplines have and will continue to think toward. This essay is a call for the continuation of this conversation, an invitation to consider the relationship between democratic and ecological education, to confront the ways in which our political systems are already ecological—that is, already interconnected to the more-than-human—and we need to catch up to that reality. By attending to not only ourselves but our neighboring species and things, accepting our interconnectivity, and deepening our understanding of democratic deliberation and action, we see that democracy is still the answer, but it has to extend further, wider, and deeper to include the more-than-human.

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31 Kimmerer, 21.

32 Kimmerer, 15.

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34 Kimmerer, *The Democracy of Species*, 16.

35 Kimmerer, quoting a student, 19.

36 Kimmerer, 19.

37 Kimmerer, 19-20.

38 Kimmerer, 20.

39 Kimmerer, 18.

40 Kimmerer, 33.

41 Kimmerer, 41-42.

42 However, Kimmerer's characterization of the Honorable Harvest has some limitations when it extends beyond plant life to nonhuman animals. While there is mutual benefit to plant and human life in the harvesting of fruits or vegetables, there is no mutual benefit in the taking of nonhuman animal life; the benefit is one-sided. Kimmerer attempts to extend the logic of the Honorable Harvest to the hunting of nonhuman animals: the idea is that the hunter takes only what he needs and takes only the life that quote "gives" or sacrifices itself for the cause. No sentient being who experiences fear, pain, and suffering willingly sacrifices themselves for the consumption of others, so Kimmerer's ecological philosophy has some limitations in this respect.

43 Kimmerer, 31.

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