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# RACHEL CARSON, ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS, AND THE PUBLICITY OF AESTHETIC JUDGMENTS

BY BENJAMIN MANGRUM

In her public testimony before a Senate subcommittee on 4 June 1963, Rachel Carson answered questions about the implications of her book *Silent Spring*. The Senators on the committee convened the hearings in response to public outcry over the book's startling assertion that pesticides were compromising whole ecosystems and threatening public health. After surveying these perils to "man himself" and the "environment," Carson offered the following as her first and most urgent recommendation:

I hope this committee will give serious consideration to a much neglected problem—that of the right of the citizen to be secure in his own home against the intrusion of poisons applied by other persons. I speak not as a lawyer but as a biologist and as a human being, but I strongly feel that this is or should be one of the basic human rights.<sup>1</sup>

Carson's testimony frames the threat of pesticide use as a matter of public concern. The dispersal of toxic chemicals throughout porous ecosystems should not be kept secret; rather, citizens have the "right to know," a phrase she also uses in *Silent Spring*.<sup>2</sup>

While often acknowledged to be a key moment in the birth of the American environmental movement, Carson's work is also part of another underappreciated development in U.S. intellectual history. Her use of the vocabulary of rights and her advocacy for environmental regulations in a public forum were significant forces in the institutionalization of a novel idea after the Second World War—namely, the concept of "environmental rights."<sup>3</sup> The intellectual and cultural sources of environmental rights predate Carson's moment, but the concept only began to be codified as a legal and political category during the years after *Silent Spring*. In 1972 the concept was first formally theorized in a law review article by Christopher D. Stone and circulated within international law through a United Nations Conference on the Human Environment.<sup>4</sup> Prior to this moment of institutionalization, the language of rights encountered the natural world

almost entirely through debates about private property and resource management.<sup>5</sup> For example, Christopher Pastore shows how debates about the Narragansett Bay during the eighteenth century centered on protecting “the interest of small farmers over commercial endeavors, such as the millers, fullers, and blast furnaces that depended on the rivers for energy.”<sup>6</sup> Industrialization and economic expansion would soon weaken claims to such a commons, and the idea of water rights eventually became the site of contest between various mill owners, not fishermen or individual farmers. In other words, water rights signified the terrain for commercial debates about resource use. Wider debates about public health or human obligations to the nonhuman world were not part of this framework.<sup>7</sup>

Such early encounters between the language of rights and the natural world lacked a constitutive idea that would develop only later during the twentieth century: the idea of the *environment* itself.<sup>8</sup> As opposed to *wilderness* or the more general term *nature*, the idea of the environment emerged during the middle decades of the twentieth century as what the historian Christopher C. Sellers describes as a “compelling new object of defense” for urban and suburban Americans.<sup>9</sup> Like the older term *wilderness*, the constitutive object of environmentalism was forged in the crucible of social pressures and creative rhetoric.<sup>10</sup> Yet Sellers argues that the emergence of “environmentalism” was much more recent: it was not until after World War II that “the modern idea of ‘environmental protection’ as a public and political commitment first coalesced,” in large part because postwar housing trends “brought millions face-to-face with threats both to nearby natural lands and from industrial chemicals, hence, dangers to their own and their families’ health.”<sup>11</sup> Regarding the distinctiveness of Carson’s work within this suburban context, Maril Hazlett argues, “Since its beginnings around the turn of the century, the conservation movement had focused on the environment primarily in terms of resource management or wilderness preservation. In contrast, Carson used ecology to define people’s homes, gardens, and health as part of the natural world.”<sup>12</sup>

Of course, terms like environment and environmentalism were not coined during the 1960s, yet their meaning shifted in significant ways during the twentieth century. For example, a 1902 article in *The Athenaeum* defines the term “environmentalism” in much the same way as our current usage understands the notion of social determinism.<sup>13</sup> This earlier variety of environmentalism refers to the more general idea that “organisms” as diverse as humans and amoeba are “machine-built” and thus “operated . . . by forces outside themselves.”<sup>14</sup> In contrast,

Carson's sense of the term "environmental" is informed by concerns about how "dusts for lawn treatments by suburbanites are laced with chlordane" (24), even as these "suburbanites . . . continue to apply truly astonishing amounts of crabgrass killers to their lawns each year" (80).

The environmental public most often imagined in *Silent Spring* was rooted in the experience of towns, roadways, and domestic spaces. Behind this suburbanized experience was an emerging way of thinking, in which the environment is synonymous with the notion of a natural world but also serves as a template for understanding that world. This environmental understanding would inflect how modern readers thought about their lives in relation to nonhuman organisms, such that many postwar consumers came to understand their lawncare and grocery purchases as having effects throughout wider systems, as though they, too, were part of "managing vegetation as a living community" (81). This novel form of collective consciousness associated with the environment dilated the conceptual borders of what would be considered public. During the postwar era, the very idea of the public was expanding.

The notion of environmental rights began to cohere within this milieu, but its constitutive pressures were not only white, middle-class anxieties about chemical contaminants. Rights discourse enjoyed renewed vigor during the post-World War II era because of civil rights activism and a variety of internationalist movements, such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) and the 1955 Bandung Conference. Civil rights activists, in particular, reinvigorated the language of rights in complicated but widely influential ways.<sup>15</sup> Thus, when Carson associates *rights* and the *environment*, she presents a bricolage of already existing political ideas alongside a relatively novel way of thinking about the natural world. This essay shows how Carson makes the notion of environmental rights plausible by drawing on and adapting the conventions of a classically liberal public sphere. One result of these adaptations was that aesthetic judgments became a mediating and constitutive feature in the relation between rights discourse and the environment. In turn, this triangulation of rights, the environment, and liberal public-sphere discourse reveals major tensions underlying the idea of environmental rights.

#### I. RIGHTS DISCOURSE AND THE PROBLEM OF DISAGREEMENT

The relation of rights discourse to modern conceptions of a public sphere was shot through with conflict and contradictions from their

earliest formulations during the radical Enlightenment. As Lynn Hunt explains, two of the most enduring conflicts within this political discourse centered on how liberal democracies would *justify the idea of rights* and *resolve disagreements about the content of rights*. Hunt classifies attempts to respond to these conflicts as part of either the particularistic or universalistic tradition of rights discourse. The particularistic version includes “rights specific to a people or national tradition,” while the universalistic tradition refers to “rights of man in general.”<sup>16</sup> The theorists of the American Revolution used both discursive forms, although the *Declaration of Independence* depended on the universalistic tradition. For instance, Thomas Jefferson’s language in the *Declaration* claims that “the laws of nature and of nature’s god entitle” a “people” to create a “separate and equal station” when political authorities have become tyrannical.<sup>17</sup> In this recognizably universalistic view, natural law serves as the self-evident basis for a people’s rights.

Yet the later U.S. Bill of Rights showed that the rights afforded by natural law were not self-evident but instead needed to be codified in particularistic ways. Citizens of *this* government have *these* rights. The particularity of citizens’ rights and the universalism of natural rights coexisted and competed: one or the other tradition would surface within the era’s debates based on the exigencies of the political moment. And of course, these competing traditions had constitutive exclusions.<sup>18</sup> The philosopher Charles Mills claims, for example, that liberal rights discourse is marked by the “failure to document and condemn the enormity of the historic denial of equal right to the majority of the population ruled by self-styled ‘liberal’ states.”<sup>19</sup> For Mills, the political idea of rights performs a skillful kind of deception, constituting a white bourgeois public while exploiting and denying dignity to Black and brown bodies.

Another abiding tension in the history of rights discourse centers on a dynamic between the individual and the public as the constitutive unit of rights. One of Carson’s contemporaries, Hannah Arendt, calls attention to this dynamic in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. According to Arendt, the political philosophers and legal theorists of the radical Enlightenment imagined “Man” as a fiction to justify the organization of Enlightenment political forms.<sup>20</sup> Arendt explains,

Man had hardly appeared [at the end of the eighteenth century] as a completely emancipated, completely isolated being who carried his dignity within himself without reference to some larger encompassing order. From the beginning the paradox involved in the declaration

of inalienable human rights was that it reckoned with an “abstract” human being who seemed to exist nowhere, for even savages lived in some kind of a social order.<sup>21</sup>

The central political fiction of the rights of Man was predicated on autonomy but required an imagined collectivity. These rights implied not only the political fiction of mere humanity but also a certain implicit arrangement of the public sphere. In Arendt’s view, the public sphere was conceptualized as an arena of private people—a conceptualization that she says would not only generate political contradictions within liberal governments but also leave stateless persons vulnerable during the twentieth century.

This tension between the particularistic and universalistic traditions also demanded a higher-order arbiter for resolving public disagreement. As Arendt puts it, “Man” carries “his dignity within himself without reference to some larger encompassing order,” yet this larger order was precisely what was needed to secure the rights of individuals and minority communities. Without an institutional authority to protect or secure rights, individual human beings are thrown back onto what Arendt ominously describes as the “abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human.”<sup>22</sup> This vulnerability, for Arendt, threatens “our political life, our human artifice, the world which is the result of our common and co-ordinated effort in much the same, perhaps even more terrifying, way as the wild elements of nature once threatened the existence of man-made cities and countrysides.”<sup>23</sup> The problem of an authority that could at once physically guarantee but also conceptually justify rights would lead postwar theorists like Arendt to probe the boundaries of publicity itself.

As another contemporaneous heir to this fraught political tradition, Martin Luther King, Jr. used the language of rights to criticize the institutions of liberal democracy in the U.S. King affirms the juridical and political system that gives authority to the framework of rights while also invoking a divine order to correct the inequalities of that system. For example, in a 1957 speech at the Highlander Folk School, King argues for the importance of the Supreme Court’s legal traditions, citing first the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857, which gave “legal and constitutional validity” to the notion that “the Negro was an ‘it’ rather than a ‘he.’”<sup>24</sup> In this speech, King hitches the cart of rights to the horse of the judiciary. Yet King also moves between this particularistic pragmatism and a more universal argument. The universalistic mode is typified in passages in “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” where

King argues that a “just law” is “a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law.”<sup>25</sup> King invokes scales of the universal—natural and eternal law—to resolve contradictions within and disagreements about the particularistic tradition of rights afforded by the U.S. government.

King’s letter exemplifies a key point about the postwar resurgence of rights discourse: the scale of the universal persisted as part of a longstanding demand in the conceptual structure of rights discourse. According to the discourse’s structure, a higher-order arbiter still seemed necessary for resolving particularistic disagreements. King’s public invocations of Christian beliefs appeal to higher-order arbiters, which he variously terms natural or divine law. The persistence of this conceptual demand within postwar rights discourse is consistent with the longer history of the public sphere, in which rational deliberation mixes with beliefs, emotions, and non-rational techniques of imagining collectivity.<sup>26</sup> King’s public speeches therefore suggest how beliefs, affect, and universalistic scales of value were as constitutive of the discursive space of the public as, say, Immanuel Kant’s view that a public is uniquely conducive to “the spirit of rational assessment.”<sup>27</sup> The public sphere may facilitate rational debate about facts, but it’s also a space for the circulation of the non-rational.

Carson’s mode of calling an environmental public into existence has conceptual and structural affinities with these longstanding tensions in rights discourse. For instance, early in *Silent Spring*, Carson claims, “It is the public that is being asked to assume the risks that the insect controllers calculate. The public must decide whether it wishes to continue on the present road, and it can do so only when in full possession of the facts” (13). Carson presents the public as both the bearer of the consequences of environmental harm and the collective judge about how to evaluate that harm. These dual roles demand that the public have transparent access to “facts.” Carson’s view of the public in such passages recalls the work of classical liberals like Jeremy Bentham, who claims, “Without publicity, no good is permanent: under the auspices of publicity, no evil can continue.”<sup>28</sup> Bentham suggests that political and social institutions will conform to the norms of the collective “good” when their affairs are subject to being publicly known. Much like Bentham’s emphasis on the salutary effects of publicity, Carson often draws on the norms of a classically liberal model of the public sphere, epitomized in her influential assertion of “the right to know”

(13). In this view, going public with the “facts” is not only a right but the most certain route for attaining the collective good.

Yet Carson also recognizes how the structures of modern American public life are often at odds with the environmental concerns at the heart of *Silent Spring*. This is clearest in the higher-order arbiters that appear in the book—namely, the science of ecology and aesthetic judgments about the natural world. As I explain in subsequent sections, Carson appeals to these authoritative sources in much the same way that King refers to divine or eternal law. Such appeals to higher-order arbiters are based on a significant paradox: universal scales, from natural law and Christianity to aesthetic judgments about the natural world, are particularistic traditions dressed up to serve as universalistic authorities. In other words, the conceptual structure of rights discourse creates a moral and political paradox in which the requisite burden of appeals to higher-order authorities is to obtain the *aura* of universality. It’s as though particularistic value must operate as a universalistic authority to resolve disagreements within the discursive framework of rights.

How would ecology obtain this aura as a higher-order authority for a postwar reading public? What does the emerging sense of an environmental public tell us about the changing character of the postwar social order? And what role did aesthetic judgments play in this form of public-making? I explore each of these questions, in turn, across the next three sections of the essay.

## II. ECOLOGY AND THE EXPANSION OF RIGHTS DISCOURSE

Although the term ecology originated in the 1860s, the concept entered public discourse only as the effects of both nuclear technologies and insecticides became more widely understood. In an explanation of the former source for the popularization of ecology, Donald Worster writes, “The Age of Ecology began on the desert outside Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945, with a dazzling fireball of light and a swelling mushroom cloud of radioactive gases.”<sup>29</sup> Worster’s claim suggests that the idea of an ecosystem garnered public currency during the postwar decades in large part because of the existential threat of nuclear arms and their possible use within the political tensions of the Cold War.<sup>30</sup> As an early example of this view, the journalist Daniel Lang wrote several articles for *The New Yorker* during the 1940s and 1950s on the environmental consequences of nuclear testing, showing how atomic explosions created dangerous “drift” that would affect human and nonhuman environments.<sup>31</sup> Carson, too, established a rhetorical



connection between pesticides and nuclear fallout: “We are rightly appalled by the genetic effects of radiation; how then, can we be indifferent to the same effect in chemicals that we disseminate widely in our environment” (37). She even refers to pesticides as “chemical fallout” that has a “sinister touch” (156).

It’s hard to overstate the importance of nuclear testing and geopolitical anxieties to the shape and tenor of postwar environmentalism. Nuclear destruction made the scale of the globe newly imaginable.<sup>32</sup> The circulation and reception of Carson’s ideas, first in *The New Yorker* and then in a bestselling work of nonfiction, bear the imprint of these Cold War-era concerns about contamination, leaky borders, and a normative view of the health of the body, both personal and public.<sup>33</sup> Although they didn’t always operate on the scale of the global, anxieties about the nuclear destruction of a shared “ecosystem” helped make possible an “environmental” social imaginary within postwar U.S. culture.<sup>34</sup>

Yet this now familiar nuclear narrative tends to overshadow the extended genealogy of political forms and rhetorical tools that shape postwar environmental thought. The continuity of these tools and techniques is particularly evident in the second chapter of *Silent Spring*, titled “The Obligation to Endure.” Here, Carson first introduces the idea that the science of ecology requires that we update—but not break with—the modern instrument of rights: “If the Bill of Rights contains no guarantee that a citizen shall be secure against lethal poisons distributed either by private individuals or public officials, it is surely only because our forefathers, despite their considerable wisdom and foresight, could conceive of no such problem” (12–13). Rather than criticizing the “forefathers” for their anthropocentric values, Carson describes their “considerable wisdom and foresight” as simply predating the advent of industrial-scale chemical “poisons.” The problem with the Bill of Rights, in this passage, is not the document’s conception of human beings but rather the contingencies of its preindustrial formulation.

Federal and state agencies have an “obligation” to make up for this lack in the Bill of Rights, Carson argues, because the science of ecology offers new facts that ought to inform political structures. As she puts it, the government ought to circulate “knowledge” about these poisons and obtain “consent” from citizens who may be affected by their use (12). Thus, when Carson later discusses a “public water supply” that has been affected by pesticides, she claims that a community’s rights have been infringed upon, and they are consequently “forced either

to drink water containing poisonous residues or to pay out tax money for treatment of the water to remove the poisons" (50). In this adaptation of a classically liberal model of the public sphere, the idea of publicity functions as both a *right of citizens* to be consulted about the ecosystems that support suburban life and also as a *technique for going public* about the threats and pollutants to shared waterways. Carson represents those ecosystems as a matter of public concern; they aren't wilderness spaces existing apart from human development.

Borrowing from the French biologist and philosopher Jean Rostand, Carson frames this early triangulation of publics, rights, and the environment through the claim that the "obligation to endure gives us the right to know" (13). This formula implies that threats to our genetic future and biological reproductivity also make the environment a matter of public concern.<sup>35</sup> In this line of thought, Carson suggests that our status as a species carries a self-evident moral "obligation" that informs the content of rights. She moves from the fact that "in nature nothing exists alone" to the idea that the public's very existence is entangled with the industrial effluence introduced into interconnected ecosystems (51). Ecology thus creates a recursive loop between fact and value. For instance, Carson suggests that scientific studies of pesticides show that those communities affected by insecticides must have the facts put before them: "The public must decide whether it wishes to continue on the present road," she says, "and it can do so only when in full possession of the facts" (13). Facts inform the public value of other facts; scientific research shows why the public needs transparent access to more scientific research.

While Carson's discussion of rights and the public recall the ideas of liberal theorists like Bentham, her notion of civic obligation also echoes ideas in earlier American naturalist writing. For instance, some aspects of *Silent Spring* recall George Perkins Marsh's argument a century earlier, when he insists on revisions to "the most sacred of civil rights—the right, namely, of every man to do what he will with his own."<sup>36</sup> Like Marsh, Carson argues that the conservation of national resources should not be subordinate to private property rights. Also like Marsh, Carson develops her argument in the early chapters of *Silent Spring* along the lines of resource management. In this vein of American environmental thinking, private property is not a sacred totem. The demands of a nonhuman world supersede, or at least complicate, the rights of property owners.

Yet Carson's public imaginary and her language about rights both shift across *Silent Spring*. While the early chapters often oppose

chlorinated hydrocarbons from the perspective of resource management—for example, by presenting nonhuman life as necessary for human agriculture—later chapters begin to raise meta-ethical questions about the subjects or bearers of rights, duties, and obligations. The sixth chapter is a notable marker of this transition. At the beginning of the chapter, Carson says, “Although modern man seldom remembers the fact, he could not exist without the plants that harness the sun’s energy and manufacture the basic foodstuffs he depends upon for life” (63). Carson repeats her point about human economic systems being dependent upon ecosystems of plants, insects, waterways, and soil. However, she also introduces a notion that begins to push back against the logic of resource management and the argument from utility underlying U.S. conservationism. If modern communities “could not exist” without nonhuman ecosystems, how can our political vocabulary and public institutions operate in isolation from those other organisms?

While likely obvious for many twenty-first-century readers, Carson’s mounting insistence on the entanglement of the human with the nonhuman changes the kinds of collective political forms invoked for much of the rest of the book. For instance, later in the sixth chapter, Carson offers the following appraisal to “the town fathers of a thousand communities” who opt for chemical spraying to manage sagebrush rather than mowing:

were the true costs entered, the costs not only in dollars but in the many equally valid debits we shall presently consider, the wholesale broadcasting of chemicals would be seen to be more costly in dollars as well as infinitely damaging to the long-range health of the landscape and to all the varied insects that depend on it. (69)

In the disclosure-structure of this passage’s rhetoric, the calculus shifts to broader and non-anthropocentric frames of reference, moving from “dollars” to the landscape and insect life. The disclosure of these alternative frames of reference is marked by the notably larger scales of the “infinite” and the “long-range.” The short-term calculus of taxes and local resource management pale in comparison. Thus, while acknowledging arguments from utility and conservation, Carson begins to subordinate those frameworks to other scales of value.

Whereas Carson earlier introduces ecology into a classically liberal framework of publicity, her usage of ecology begins to rearrange and complicate that framework across *Silent Spring*. Elsewhere in the sixth chapter, Carson offers one of the most potent forms of this

rearrangement in the image of “the intricate web of life whose interwoven strands lead from microbes to man” (69). Developing moral implications from this image, she notes that the roadside vegetation so often sprayed in suburban towns are teeming with insects, which are “so essential to our agriculture and indeed to our landscape as we know it,” such that they “deserve something better from us than the senseless destruction of their habitat” (73). Ecological interdependence is a fact entangled with the value of how we understand what the nonhuman world “deserves.” There is a long history to the attribution of personhood to nonhuman life, but Carson’s specific use of the language of desert adapts this attribution for the moral-political framework of rights discourse.<sup>37</sup> What does the nonhuman deserve from the human? How might we sort out desert regarding the environment?

Carson often draws on the science of ecology as a self-evident source for answering these questions, but she also draws parallels between the human and nonhuman victims of toxicity to imagine a wider environmental collectivity. For example, in one of the more startling images in *Silent Spring*, Carson presents a scene in which DDT is sprayed over “the quarter-acre lots of suburbia, drenching a housewife making a desperate effort to cover her garden before the roaring plane reached her” (158). The passage establishes parallels between insects and the housewife, both of which are poisoned by chemical management. Much like the insects who suffer “the senseless destruction of their habitat,” the “housewife” finds herself in the unsettling and war-like experience of fleeing from the aerial technology of industrial-scale environmental management. These connected images ask us to imagine the housewife and insects as part of the same collectivity suffering from indiscriminate pesticide use. In this imagined community, the domestic is not the antithesis of the natural world but a space in which environmental awareness is born.

Carson’s question about what insects “deserve” lead into more detailed and complicated forms of moral reasoning about the consequences of ecology for the public’s sensibilities about the nonhuman world. In the seventh chapter, she considers “whether any civilization can wage relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right to be called civilized” (99). This is “a question that is not only scientific but moral,” Carson explains, because it involves human obligations within a seemingly universal scale of “life” itself (99). The “right” to civilizational dignity is determined by the ecological footprint of a particular civilization. In the United States, Carson writes that the evidence so far includes “the mute testimony of the dead ground

squirrels” and the “horned lark out of the sky,” both of which result from indiscriminate insecticide use (99).

Such passages suggest how Carson expands the community of moral consideration based on what she calls the “problem of ecology, of interrelationships, of interdependence” (189). A classically liberal model of the public sphere is secular, meaning in this instance that the public is comprised of individuals, who are understood to be the source of both social structures and all shared judgments of value.<sup>38</sup> Yet Carson dilates what counts as *public* to include nonhuman organisms whose existence is interdependent with human activity. As a key example of this shifting moral calculus, Carson responds to research on biomagnification in a passage marked by the rhetorical conventions of public-sphere discourse:

We poison the gnats in a lake and the poison travels from link to link of the food chain and soon the birds of the lake margins become its victims. We spray our elms and the following springs are silent of robin song, not because we sprayed the robins directly but because the poison traveled, step by step, through the now familiar elm leaf-earthworm-robin cycle. These are matters of record, observable, part of the visible world around us. They reflect the web of life—or death—that scientists know as ecology. (189)

Carson presents ostensibly descriptive science—that is, what “scientists know as ecology”—as the basis for a normative political arrangement. This appeal to the evidence of rational science and the natural world is consistent with the Enlightenment-era ideals and rhetorical conventions of the public sphere. For example, in *Common Sense* Thomas Paine writes, “One of the strongest *natural* proofs of the folly of hereditary right in kings, is, that nature disapproves it, otherwise she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule, by giving mankind an *ass for a lion*.”<sup>39</sup> Paine’s insult to George III depicts the monarchy as an unnatural ordering in which an ass occupies the role of sovereignty that “nature” reserves for the public itself. The natural order provides ostensibly unambiguous and transparent content for the political organization of the public. Carson’s passage about biomagnification likewise presents a certain social arrangement as a self-evident violation of the natural order. Carson also presents nonhuman organisms as “victims,” casualties of a violation present in the “visible world.”

John Muir makes a similar argument about the nonhuman world as a victim of human society in his essay on Yellowstone National Park: “[A]gain and again, in season and out of season, the question comes

up, 'What are rattlesnakes good for?' As if nothing that does not obviously make for the benefit of man had any right to exist."<sup>40</sup> Muir presents nonhuman life as casualties of narrow human values, and he even uses the language of the "right to exist" to articulate this criticism. Unlike the solitary Muir, though, who writes about a wilderness ideal, Carson uses the idea of ecology to reimagine what it means to be a public. Muir's question implies that rattlesnakes do not need to "make for the benefit of man," while Carson argues that nonhuman life does indeed matter to the public's conditions for life. She adapts conventional liberal ideals for newly wrought environmental ends. She cites "matters of record," the "familiar . . . cycle" of ecology, the logical "step by step" connections among organisms in a shared biological system. Much like Paine, Carson insists that reason, codified through what "scientists know as ecology," enables the reader to judge current arrangements for public life.

*Silent Spring* returns to the scientific "record" repeatedly, and each time Carson explains that it is a mistake to weigh the value of nonhuman life on the basis of whether "the suburbanite" is "instantly stricken" as a result of ecological harm (24). Instead, she argues that a web of life connects suburbanites with the ecological systems that at first glance seem so remote from them. Carson therefore imagines a novel social order, one in which a suburbanizing public is interdependent with its nonhuman environs. As Lida Maxwell puts it, Carson's rhetoric "depicts, and in depicting also solicits, a public that does not yet exist."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in order for the environment to be incorporated within the discursive structure of rights language, popular notions of ecology first needed to make plausible the idea of an environmental public. While Carson echoes the ideas of earlier writers such as Marsh, Muir, and Henry David Thoreau, she also revises these earlier versions of American thought by suggesting that ecological interdependence reconstitutes the borders of the public itself.<sup>42</sup> Rather than merely incorporating environmental threats into public discourse, Carson offers "the web of life" as a repository of metaphor for imagining the social order.

### III. ENVIRONMENTAL PUBLICS AND THE POSTWAR LIBERAL ORDER

This shift toward the environment as a matter of concern *within* the public sphere, but also as an image *for* the public sphere, is significant for what it suggests about the postwar liberal order. The growing awareness of environmental concern inspired by works like *Silent Spring* and Murray Bookchin's *Our Synthetic Environment* (1962) signify processes

of self-critique within the liberal order, as though the forms for making the political community imaginable were straining to accommodate new knowledge about its conditions of possibility. This process of self-critique recalls John Dewey's theorization of the public as a particular form for arranging collective life. For Dewey, "the public" is not a measurable entity but the shifting product of collective recognition: "Those indirectly and seriously affected for good or for evil [by collective action] form a group distinctive enough to require recognition and a name. The name selected is The Public."<sup>43</sup> Dewey argues that public-ness is moored in shared feelings, sensibilities, and a perception of collective harm. The "consequences of associated activity" create a public by making those consequences felt collectively.<sup>44</sup> Dewey rejects the idea that the public is an empirically verifiable scale. Instead, he presents it as a felt and imagined configuration.

Dewey's account of the public is useful for understanding the place of the emerging environmental movement within the wider postwar liberal order. Carson's depiction of the "consequences" of pesticide use helped imagine more than a wilderness in need of conservation; her work helped make available an environmental conception of the public—a collective form whose name is also the "web of life" (189). King, too, uses related metaphors in "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Based on "the interrelatedness of all communities and states," King writes, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."<sup>45</sup> Carson similarly claims, "As crude a weapon as the cave man's club, the chemical barrage has been hurled against the fabric of life" (297). Linda Sargent Wood describes these naturalized images of the social order as part of the ascent of "holism" during the postwar era.<sup>46</sup> Writers and activists presented images of society as fully integrated, whether nationally or globally, as a way of resisting or mending the deep divisions within the publics that piece together the U.S. For Wood, holistic imagery tries to make an integrated public imaginable through metaphorical associations with so-called natural systems.

This turn toward holism is not without major tensions and contradictions. If classical liberal theory imagined the public sphere as an arena of private, rational, and rights-bearing subjects, Carson's depiction of collective life increasingly tended to eschew, or at least query, that privatistic configuration. She asks, for instance, "[W]ho has made the decision that sets in motion these chains of poisonings, this ever-widening wave of death that spreads out, like ripples when a pebble is dropped into a still pond?" (127). Carson's answer to this

question includes the corporations that produce and sell chlorinated hydrocarbons, the academic and industry authorities who defend and approve of the chemicals, and the communities and consumers who use pesticides on their roadways and lawns.

Yet the broad sweep of responsibility for the “ever-widening wave of death” also highlights one of the central paradoxes of incorporating ecological thinking into the structure and metaphorical imagery of the public sphere. Both the parts and the whole of the liberal order were shifting, for environmental holism and civil rights activism leveled significant criticisms on both registers. The moral vocabulary of rights persisted as the principal idiom of justice within both movements, but that vocabulary imagined selfhood and the public sphere in ways that were at odds with the basic assumptions of interdependence and mutuality underlying images of ecological interdependence. If “in nature nothing exists alone,” how can an isolated individual be the basic unit for the designation of rights (51)? The individual rights-bearing subject of the public sphere ought to be at odds with the interdependent organisms that thinkers like Carson and Bookchin associate with ecology. The basic units of rights discourse and ecology appear to be the antitheses of one another, yet both are central to the moral and political vocabulary of postwar environmentalism.

How should we understand this confluence of competing political ideas and holistic metaphors in midcentury public discourse? In what follows, I will offer and then assess four possible explanations.

First, we might view this confluence as a manifestation of long-standing contradictions within the bourgeois model of the public sphere. In this vein of thought, Timothy Morton argues that “interdependence” is fundamentally incompatible with “the language of rights.”<sup>47</sup> For Morton, the latter is based on a notion of private property that prevents nonhumans from being bearers of rights, because nonhumans are also objects of private property. Morton says that trying to expand rights to nonhuman entities is therefore “absurd.”<sup>48</sup> In fact, Morton argues that the parameters established by bourgeois political forms preclude scrutiny of the fundamental conflicts of rights discourse. He insists that a public sphere of rights-bearing subjects cannot sustain the kind of self-critique that would challenge its most basic unit of value—that is, the private or secular individual.

Second, we might view the emergence of rights discourse within the midcentury environmental movement as an expression of an unsettled normativity trying to reorient itself. What I mean is that, to borrow from Michael Warner, liberal political “genres” like public dialogue and



civil rights have “social relations immanent to them” that are unavoidably normative.<sup>49</sup> A “sense of rightness” is “embedded in things and not just in sex,” such that political practices inscribe social norms and privileges.<sup>50</sup> To talk about rights, then, is to talk about abstractions that stand in for normative structures of power and authority. Uncertainty about the content and bearers of rights suggests a deeper uncertainty about a shared “sense of rightness.” Carson’s depictions of tainted milk supplies and poisoned estuaries were part of a wider unsettling of midcentury readers’ sense of normalcy. One might argue, then, that the political instrument of rights became a central expression of environmental thinking, because the norms of established social relations seemed under threat. The debate about environmental obligations, duties, and desert was an attempt to rework those unsettled norms and find a new or balanced sense of rightness.

Third, there may also be an explanation for the development of midcentury environmental rights rooted in the performative or spectacle-driven orientation of liberal democratic political institutions. In this line of thought, the forms of the midcentury public sphere (for example, Senate hearings and debates about the rights of citizens) had been organized historically and institutionally in such a way that would *perform* the gestures of a critical politics but that would in fact inhibit or circumvent the reformist aims of critical publicity. Jürgen Habermas, writing in the 1960s, expresses a version of this view when he argues there are “unmistakable” signs “pointing to the collapse of the public sphere,” because “while its scope is expanding impressively, its function has become progressively insignificant.”<sup>51</sup> More and more counted as “public,” but the institutions and capacities of publicity seemed to matter less and less. For Habermas, at least in the 1960s, it was as though a genre of politics continued to exist despite the disappearance or transformation of its institutional medium.

And indeed, when Carson appeared before the Senate subcommittee in June 1963, the Senators did not respond to her characterization of environmental harm as a “human right.” In fact, they avoided the language of rights altogether. When Senator Ernest Gruening, a sympathetic Democrat from Alaska, proposed a federal “department of ecology,” he reasoned it might “try to coordinate these conflicting interests”—that is, the interests of agricultural production, public health, and “fish and wildlife.”<sup>52</sup> The language of rights dropped out, and the problems of “conflicting interests” and resource management took its place. This verbal discontinuity would be symptomatic of the institutional emphases of the Environmental Protection Agency

during the twentieth century: rather than grappling with the notion of interdependence, this federal agency absorbed calls for reform and regulation, assimilating those public demands for established or economically palatable ends.<sup>53</sup> The interdependence of life recedes, and the coordination between partisan interests and private industries becomes its governing proxy.

While these three explanations are important frames of reference for the midcentury emergence of environmental rights discourse, I agree with Habermas's more general assessment that publicity remained "an organizational principle" that is "more and other than a mere scrap of liberal ideology that a social democracy could discard without harm."<sup>54</sup> Publics are constituted through a seemingly infinite variability of action and effect, association and recognition, and dismissing this collective political form as a failed or fundamentally corrupt kind of ideology would neglect that variability. In this vein of thought, the emergence of environmental rights is a sign or symbolic product of the constant making and remaking of publics. We might think about this process of collective revision and self-critique by borrowing again from Dewey:

To form itself, the public has to break existing political forms. This is hard to do because these forms are themselves the regular means of instituting change. The public which generated political forms is passing away, but the power and lust of possession remains in the hands of the officers and agencies which the dying public instituted.<sup>55</sup>

Dewey's account of the formation of public life presents a dialectic between established and emerging publics. This dialectic recalls the "counterpublics" described by Warner, and such a dialectic offers a fourth way we might account for the emergence of rights language within the midcentury environmental movement.<sup>56</sup> Emerging publics draw on established "political forms" to break with earlier publics, thus relying on the very forms of collective life that they seemingly oppose or seek to revise. In this view, the capacities for reform are given by the preceding arrangements of collective life, even though those arrangements are also being contested by new publics.

So, four ways of thinking about the development of the idea of environmental rights during the postwar era: as an expression of liberalism's enduring conflicts and contradictions; as an unsettled normativity trying to rebalance the social order; as a sign of the public sphere's institutional tempering of its own radical promises; and as a political dialectic internal to the publics and counterpublics of the modern era.

The next section focuses on an underappreciated aspect of the fourth of these explanations. I consider how an environmental public became imaginable in *Silent Spring* through aesthetic forms of world-making. The “existing political forms” of rights, to use Dewey’s language, were being recast in the image of aesthetic judgments about the natural world. In contrast to the Enlightenment-era “voice of reason” that regularly gendered and policed the public sphere, Carson elevates aesthetics judgments—which she also calls a “sense of wonder”—as a constitutive mode of deliberation for an environmental public.<sup>57</sup> The publicness of these aesthetic judgments certainly echoes earlier forms of social reform and naturalist writing, but Carson assigns a distinctive role to aesthetics in determining the public value of the nonhuman world. She presents a variety of environmental thinking in which aesthetic appreciation operates alongside the science of ecology as universalistic authorities for resolving disagreements about the content of political rights and public obligations. This public role for aesthetic judgments would influence many subsequent appeals to environmental rights.

#### IV. THE AESTHETICS OF WONDER AND THE ARBITRATION OF RIGHTS

A telling passage from the sixth chapter of *Silent Spring* illustrates how aesthetic judgments underwrite Carson’s conception of environmental rights. Carson cites Justice William O. Douglas’s account of a woman who opposed the spraying of sagebrush in her town because the wildflowers would be destroyed. “Yet,” writes Douglas, “was not her right to search out a banded cup or a tiger lily as inalienable as the right of stockmen to search out grass or of a lumberman to claim a tree?” (72). Douglas answers this question by asserting that the woman has the right to “esthetic values” (72).<sup>58</sup> He channels something like Muir’s idea that beauty and wonder serve as a source for determining our moral obligations toward wilderness. Yet Douglas applies this idea to a context quite separate from those imagined in Muir’s work: the suburban roadside. Douglas’s anecdote illustrates the novel application of an idea that is also fundamental to Carson’s argument—namely, he presents the appreciation of beauty as a universalistic arbiter for addressing particularistic disagreements in public discourse.

Carson returns to this idea about the inalienable right to aesthetic experience at several key moments in *Silent Spring*, but it’s evident from the very beginning. The book’s opening fable asks readers to think about environmental harm not in scientific but narratival terms. Carson

writes, “There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings” (1). This fable invokes familiar tropes of the modern pastoral, in which a peaceful and ideal landscape is characterized by natural harmony. This harmony appears in the form of Carson’s prose: “In autumn, oak *and* maple *and* birch set up a blaze of color that flamed *and* flickered across a backdrop of pines” (1, emphasis added). This use of polysyndeton conjoins beauty with interdependence—or, more precisely, the technique is a formal representation of how Carson views ecological interdependence as an intrinsic good. The syntactical relations embody Carson’s aesthetic sensibility of a natural world whose very harmony is a source of wonder. The form of the prose expresses an ecological imaginary, in which beauty is found in the connected relations among species of trees.

However, the ecological idyll soon falls apart, and life in the heartland has been spoiled: “Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change” (2). This blight remains unnamed in the opening fable, but it becomes clear that the destructive change comes from the introduction of chemical pesticides. These poisons not only alter the landscape in Carson’s fable; their presence also changes the prose form. In contrast to the frequent yoking and interdependent syntax of the fable’s opening, the sentences become paratactic: “Everywhere was a shadow of death. The farmers spoke of much illness among their families” (2). This syntax conveys a constricted and ominous reality; it also represents a form of life no longer ruled by the beauty of a natural world and its interconnections. In fact, after this turn in the prose of the opening fable, the rare conjoined subjects and verbs have devolved from earlier relations of beauty (“oak and maple and birch . . . that flamed and flickered”) to interconnected illness: “Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died” (2). Interdependent beauty is now shared death.

Such passages are formal expressions of the relationship between aesthetics and public deliberation. A sense of rightness is tied to an aesthetic arrangement of the environment. Carson presents such an arrangement elsewhere in *Silent Spring*:

Who has decided—who has the *right* to decide—for the countless legions of people who were not consulted that the supreme value is a world without insects, even though it be also a sterile world ungraced by the curving wing of a bird in flight? (127)

The just and the unjust, truth and error, each find themselves more clearly pronounced when juxtaposed with the beautiful (“the curving wing of a bird in flight”) and the ugly (“a sterile world ungraced”). This passage also represents how Carson calls an environmental public into being by reference to a sense of wonder. Much like the book’s opening fable, this invocation of rights language imagines a “world” in which the violation of beauty reigns: interdependence has been interrupted, and a certain conception of justice or normalcy has in turn been violated. Rights and aesthetics are closely linked, then, because the latter expresses a seemingly self-evident standard for the former.

This passage illustrates how Carson “worlds” environmental crisis. As Eric Hayot explains, literary writing in the modern era often recursively turns toward “the conjunction of literally world-shaping and world-shattering events,” a conjunction that “produces a concomitantly heightened awareness of worlds, worldedness, world history, world literature, the globe, globalization, and so on.”<sup>59</sup> According to Hayot, the advent of modernity generated a “theory of worldedness, of a particular kind of worldedness that it most commonly calls the ‘universal.’”<sup>60</sup> In this view, claims about universal scales of value and the world as such signal interlocking manifestations of a distinctively modern way of thinking. Aesthetics is particularly important for this modern way of thinking, because it invites writers to picture the world—to make it imaginable—while also diagnosing threats to that totality. Aesthetic judgments embody the duality between world-creation and world-upheaval. Carson’s ominous images of a “world without insects” and “a sterile world ungraced by the curving wing of a bird in flight” invoke this dual sense of worldedness. Modern aesthetics makes imaginable a world under threat by the conditions of modernity.

This dynamic between worldedness, universality, and aesthetics makes aesthetic judgments a powerful source for deliberating the content of rights in *Silent Spring*. The book’s title image is a telling example of this dynamic, for the threat of a “silent spring” anticipates the violation of a certain perception of worldedness. Carson writes,

Over increasingly large areas of the United States, spring now comes unheralded by the return of the birds, and the early mornings are strangely silent where once they were filled with the beauty of bird song. This sudden silencing of the song of birds, this obliteration of the color and beauty and interest they lend to our world have come about swiftly, insidiously, and unnoticed by those whose communities are as yet unaffected. (103)

This passage exemplifies how aesthetics creates an aura of universalistic value when worlding environmental crisis. On the one hand, Carson uses aesthetic loss to characterize a public community, as “large areas of the United States” are missing a key feature of their aesthetic and ecological identity (“the return of the birds”). On the other hand, the aesthetic values in this passage also move to a register much larger than the environmental rhythms of any one community. Carson says, for instance, that birds lend “color and beauty and interest” to “our world.” The aesthetic valuations throughout the passage imagine not just an environmental public but a wider sense of worldedness.

While the science of ecology makes visible the biotic connections across particular communities and ecosystems, aesthetic values frame the spread of toxicity throughout those connections as a “world-shaping and world-shattering” kind of event.<sup>61</sup> The world itself has become unnatural (“strangely silent”), as though the world’s constitutive norms have been distorted. The speed and severity of the distortion are startling: there is a “sudden silencing,” an “obliteration” of beauty, and changes that come “swiftly, insidiously.” Carson’s question about “who has the *right* to decide” about the value of biodiversity is thus closely tied to a sense of aesthetic rightness (127). Aesthetic rightness creates an aura of the universal by conveying a sense of the normative—or, in the context of environmental harm, by imagining the corruption of seemingly universalistic norms. What’s so strange about the silent spring is its deviation from an aestheticized kind of world—a violation of the rights and proper order of the world’s beauty.

The use of aesthetics to critique an industrial economy is not unique to Carson. Victorian social critics like John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, and Walter Pater often argued that manufacturing and economic expansion were corrupting British culture. Much of Thoreau’s work, too, centers on his insight that “trade curses every thing it handles.”<sup>62</sup> While such sentiments have major continuities with Carson’s argument, they also have important differences. For example, Robert Fanuzzi argues that Thoreau’s rhetoric “consistently assumed the lapse of civil intercourse or the disappearance of an ennobling social space.”<sup>63</sup> For Thoreau, the modern public only *seems* to be a space of collective exchange and political freedom, but in fact his invocations of public discourse present it as a kind of sham. As he writes in *Walden*, “The only coöperation which is commonly possible is exceedingly partial and superficial; and what little true coöperation there is, is as if it were not, being a harmony inaudible to men.”<sup>64</sup> Such skepticism about collective forms of life suggests why rights discourse may be so rare in Thoreau’s

writing: discussion about rights presupposes a public that, for Thoreau, is actually the source of so much of the modern world's trouble. The public's obligations and duties prevent it from "true coöperation." Whatever "harmony" may be available with the nonhuman world falls outside the auditory capacities of public discourse.

While the Transcendentalists are often cited as a major source for establishing the patterns of aesthetic appreciation in U.S. literary writing, Thoreau in fact criticizes the role of aesthetic appreciation in public discourse. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, for example, Thoreau laments how the development of a dam, canal, and factories "put an end" to the "migrations" of shad in the Concord waters.<sup>65</sup> "Poor shad!" he laments, "where is thy redress?"<sup>66</sup> Thoreau's answer to this question distinguishes his thought from formulations of environmental rights more than a century later. He advises not some kind of revision to the public but a rolling back of the public's infrastructure and constitutive norms:

Away with the superficial and selfish *phil-anthropy* of men,—who knows what admirable virtue of fishes may be below low-water-mark, bearing up against a hard destiny, not admired by that fellow-creature who alone can appreciate it! Who hears the fishes when they cry? It will not be forgotten by some memory that we were contemporaries.<sup>67</sup>

In a play on the etymology of "*phil-anthropy*," Thoreau claims that the love of humanity obscures other kinds of "virtue." Thoreau's dismissal of the "*phil-anthropy*" underlying civilizational development presents the public as built around species-centric love. Dams, canals, and factories are predicated on the public's "superficial and selfish" love of itself. He also depicts human judgment as bound up with—and inadequate to the task of redressing—the destruction of waterways and fish habitats. Paradoxically, perhaps, the "fellow-creature who alone can appreciate" the "admirable virtue of fishes" is the human species. Yet appreciation is the remainder of development, the capacity not deployed in response to the "low-water-mark" caused by dams, canals, and factory effluents. For Thoreau, aesthetic admiration may save the soul, but it won't stop the public from damming the shad.

Naturalists like Thoreau often gathered data and recorded observations about nonhuman life, formulating moral or transcendental ideals on the basis of those observations. The relation between ethics, politics, and aesthetic values in Carson's work is continuous with those techniques. Carson and earlier naturalists use aesthetics to move between empiricist practices of observation and evaluative judgments about

moral and political value. The tradition of naturalist writing thus set a precedent for Carson's elevation of the science of ecology to the status of a higher-order authority for thinking about the arrangement of the social order. For example, in a speech delivered to the sorority of women journalists in April 1954, Carson moves between scales of geological time and a social ideal of interdependence:

The pleasures, the values of contact with the natural world are not reserved for the scientists. They are available to anyone who will place himself under the influence of a lonely mountain top—or the sea—or the stillness of a forest; or who will stop to think about so small a thing as the mystery of a growing seed.<sup>68</sup>

Carson invokes aesthetic experience as a form of “pleasure,” one that begins with an appreciation of natural order (“under the influence of a lonely mountain top”). In this image, the individual submits herself to the vastness and independence of the environment. The “values of [this] contact” run across extremely large and small scales, from “the sea” to “a growing seed.” The scales of ecology thus become a source of transcendental content for those “who will stop to think.” As she says later in the speech, “Is it the right of this, our generation, in its selfish materialism, to destroy these things because we are blinded by the dollar sign? Beauty—and all the values that derive from beauty—are not measured and evaluated in terms of the dollar.”<sup>69</sup> Again, this critique of the values of an industrial economy predate what Hazlett describes as the “popular ecology” that developed after the Second World War.<sup>70</sup> Carson's critique of “the dollar” is continuous with earlier forms of what Lawrence Buell calls an “aesthetics of relinquishment.”<sup>71</sup> This earlier aesthetics prized a wilderness ideal and scorned the industries and public infrastructure that violated that ideal. Carson's appraisal of “the values that derive from beauty” similarly elicits an aestheticized kind of deliberation, in which humanity's “spiritual growth” is measured through responses to so-called natural beauty.

Despite these continuities with earlier environmental writing, there's a new and distinctive paradox underlying Carson's use of rights language—a paradox that highlights the limitations of aesthetics in deliberating the norms and public values encoded by the idea of environmental rights. Carson's appeals to an aesthetic sensibility try to move beyond particularistic frames of value and judgement, but claims about the aesthetic—Kant describes them as “judgments of taste”—have a long and notably vexed relationship to universalistic value in liberal political thought.<sup>72</sup> In *Critique of Judgment*, for example, Kant



aligns the faculty that makes judgments about beauty with “a common sense,” which he defines as “the effect resulting from the free play of our cognitive powers.”<sup>73</sup> Kant ties this “effect” to what he terms “universal communicability,” or the sense in which a judgment may be widely intelligible, if not necessarily agreed upon.<sup>74</sup> Kant explains that judgments of taste are “*singular*,” and yet announce themselves as universally valid for every subject; although they lay claim merely to the feeling of pleasure and not to any cognition of the object.<sup>75</sup> In other words, there is a *seeming* universality to aesthetic judgments, but that universal gesture is only a private or “*singular*” one. For Kant, an aesthetic judgment may announce itself universally, but it will never be anything more than a pretender to the throne of reason.<sup>76</sup>

This argument in the history of philosophy provides some context for the role of aesthetics in the development of environmental rights. Aesthetic judgments have the benefit of “universal communicability,” but at the same time those judgments cannot attain universal consent in the same way that reason purportedly is able to lay claim to “cognition of the object.” Aesthetic judgments can only “announce themselves as universally valid for every subject,” which is to say that they obtain the aura of universality. Aesthetics can make a world imaginable through this aura; aesthetic values can also pose as a universalistic arbiter in the midst of particularistic disagreements over rights and normative social arrangements. And for these reasons it’s not surprising that aesthetics often occupies the discursive role that was once reserved for ideals like natural or divine law.

Carson presents the beauty and grace of a “bird in flight” as appealing to a kind of “common sense,” a capacity available to any member of the public who “will place himself under the influence” of aesthetic experience.<sup>77</sup> The paradox of this sense of rightness, though, is that it is at once deeply powerful in its public appeals and yet entirely based in “*singular*” experience. It is based in a common sense that at best can only feel universalistic. The pragmatic bargain of *Silent Spring*, then, is to appeal to an authority with a universalistic aura—that is, the aesthetic sensibilities of “countless legions of people” (127). However, as a result of this bargain, the convergence of aesthetics, rights, and an environmental consciousness only reconfigures—but does not resolve—the structural ambiguities of a liberal public sphere.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Senate, Subcommittee on Reorganization and International Organizations of the Committee on Government Operations, Washington, D.C., *Interagency Coordination in Environmental Hazards* (4 June 1963), 207; 210.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Senate, *Interagency Coordination*, 210; Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 13, 278. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>3</sup> Recent political and legal theory distinguishes between “environmental rights” and the “right to the environment,” the former referring to obligations and entitlements owed to the environment while the latter designating human rights to clean air, water, and other aspects of a healthy environment. On the differences between these two formulations, see one of the distinction’s original sources in Dinah Shelton, “Human Rights, Environmental Rights, and the Right to Environment,” *Stanford Journal of International Law* 28.1 (1991): 103–38.

<sup>4</sup> See Christopher D. Stone, “Should Trees Have Standing?—Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects,” *Southern California Law Review* 45 (1972): 450–501. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 also marks a key moment in the institutionalization of environmental rights, but it’s worth noting that environmental law is a broader field of meaning than the narrower association between the environment and rights discourse. Regarding the currency of environmental rights beginning in the 1970s, see Chris Miller, *Environmental Rights: Critical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 1–22.

<sup>5</sup> See Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 32, 105–7.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher L. Pastore, *Between Land and Sea: The Atlantic Coast and the Transformation of New England* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2014), 206.

<sup>7</sup> See Pastore, 209–11.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor shows that Enlightenment conceptions of nature were a source for modern turns toward private identity. However, the reformulation of “nature” as “environment” during the twentieth century marks a departure from Enlightenment-era conceptions. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 355–67. For an overview of the differences between the post-1945 “environment” and its predecessors in the conservation movements of the Progressive era, see Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Escaping the Dark, Gray City: Fear and Hope in Progressive-Era Conservation* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2017), 246–60.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher C. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>10</sup> The classic texts on this issue include William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 69–90; William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton, 1991), 357–69; and Londa Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2004), 143–83. However, Dorceta E. Taylor has also demonstrated how urban residents advocated for issues of public health and land use in ways that anticipated the later environmental movement of the 1960s. See Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Environment and the People in American Cities, 1600s–1900s: Disorder, Inequality, and Social Change* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Sellers, “Three Eras of Environmental Concern,” *Modern American History* 1 (2018), 364. According to Sellers, locating the birth of environmentalism “in a turn-of-the-century elite-led movement for conservation,” rather than the 1950s

and 1960s, “obscures just how much of a social and political break that mid-century movement represented” (366).

<sup>12</sup> Maril Hazlett, “woman vs. man vs. bugs’: Gender and Popular Ecology in Early Reactions to *Silent Spring*,” *Environmental History* 9.4 (2004): 701. For some pushback to this conservationist/environmentalism divide, see Robert Gottlieb, “Reconstructing Environmentalism: Complex Movements, Diverse Roots,” *Environmental History Review* 17.4 (1993): 1–19.

<sup>13</sup> “Two Books on Evolution,” *The Athenaeum*, no. 3875 (1 February 1902): 141.

<sup>14</sup> “Two Books on Evolution,” 141.

<sup>15</sup> See Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: Norton, 2008), 117.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Manuscript of *The Declaration of Independence*,” in Julian P. Boyd, *The Declaration of Independence: The Evolution of the Text*, ed. Gerard W. Gawalt (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1999), 68

<sup>18</sup> Women, Indigenous communities, and non-white persons were not rendered “public” within this rhetoric of universality. According to Craig Calhoun, these active exclusions also included “artisan radicals” who were rooted in particular cultures, rather than a national or bourgeois culture. See Craig Calhoun, *The Roots of Radicalism: Tradition, the Public Sphere, and Early Nineteenth-Century Social Movements* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012), 152–80. See also Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 108.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Mills, *Black Rights / White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), 23.

<sup>20</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 291.

<sup>21</sup> Arendt, 291.

<sup>22</sup> Arendt, 297.

<sup>23</sup> Arendt, 302.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “*All Labor Has Dignity*,” ed. Michael K. Honey (Boston: Beacon, 2011), 9.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have a Dream*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 89.

<sup>26</sup> For example, see Jennifer Snead, “Print, Predestination, and the Public Sphere: Transatlantic Evangelical Periodicals, 1740–1745,” *Early American Literature* 45.1 (2010): 93–118.

<sup>27</sup> Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” trans. James Schmidt, in *Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996), 59.

<sup>28</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *An Essay on Political Tactics*, in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. John Bowring (Edinburgh: Stevenson and Co., 1839), 314. See also G. J. Postema, “The Soul of Justice: Bentham on Publicity, Law, and the Rule of Law,” *Bentham’s Theory of Law and Public Opinion*, ed. Zhai Xiabo and Michael Quinn (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014), 40–62.

<sup>29</sup> Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), 342.

<sup>30</sup> See Joel B. Hagen, *An Entangled Bank: The Origins of Ecosystem Ecology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1992), 100–121. Jennifer Fay argues that the

“microclimates” of early cinema and the “ecologized” poisonous gases used during the First World War also helped popularize the notion of ecology (*Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018], 27).

<sup>31</sup> Daniel Lang, *From Hiroshima to the Moon: Chronicles of Life in the Atomic Age* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 265.

<sup>32</sup> See Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2006), 25–44. See also a critique of the racial imaginary of this nuclear angst in Jessica Hurley, *Infrastructures of Apocalypse: American Literature and the Nuclear Complex* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2020), 39–74.

<sup>33</sup> There is an extensive body of scholarship on the circulation and reception of *Silent Spring*. For an overview of the book’s twentieth-century reception, see Craig Waddell, “The Reception of *Silent Spring*: An Introduction,” in *And No Birds Sing: Rhetorical Analyses of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring*, ed. Craig Waddell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2000), 1–16. Mark H. Lytle discusses the Cold War contexts of the book’s writing and reception (see *The Gentle Subversive: Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, and the Rise of the Environmental Movement* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007], 133–87). Drawing on Carson’s archive of letters and interactions with readers, Sarah L. Thomas considers *Silent Spring*’s contributions to the public role of science and civic participation in policy-making during the postwar era (see “A Call to Action: *Silent Spring*, Public Disclosure, and the Rise of Modern Environmentalism,” in *Natural Protest: Essays on the History of American Environmentalism*, ed. Michael Egan and Jeff Crane [New York: Routledge, 2008], 185–203). Building on an established body of work on the gendered attempts to discredit *Silent Spring*, Michael B. Smith argues that Carson’s status as an “independent” woman “placed her outside the nexus of the production and application of conventional scientific knowledge” (“Silence, Miss Carson! Science, Gender, and the Reception of *Silent Spring*,” *Feminist Studies* 27.3 [2001]: 733–52, esp. 734).

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed discussion of the proliferation of “ecosystem” discourse, see Heather Houser, “Ecosystem,” in *American Literature in Transition, 1990–2000*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (New York, 2017), 264–67; Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Feedback: Ecological Thinking in Seventies America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2019); and Benjamin J. Murphy, “Not So New Materialism: Homeostasis Revisited,” *Configurations* 27.1 (2019): 1–36. For more on the importance of “fallout” to the birth of the environmental movement, see Ralph H. Lutts, “Chemical Fallout: *Silent Spring*, Radioactive Fallout, and the Environmental Movement,” in *And No Birds Sing: Rhetorical Analyses of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring*, ed. Craig Waddell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2000), 17–41.

<sup>35</sup> Sarah Ensor argues that Carson’s “understanding of the future” is not heteronormative, for *Silent Spring* instead “challenges the notion of the future as a readily reachable and readily identifiable realm out there, as an entity that can straightforwardly appear or arrive” (“Spinster Ecology: Rachel Carson, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Nonreproductive Futurity,” *American Literature* 84.2 [2012]: 417).

<sup>36</sup> George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature; or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (London: Sampson Low, Son and Marston, 1864), 232–33.

<sup>37</sup> For a historical overview of the idea of “nature’s personhood,” see Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995), 180–218.

<sup>38</sup> For the complicated genealogy of this sense of the secular, see Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2019), 13–54.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, ed. Edward Larkin (Orchard Park: Broadview, 2004), 56.

<sup>40</sup> John Muir, *Wilderness Essays* (Layton: Gibbs Smith, 2015), 200.

<sup>41</sup> Lida Maxwell, “Queer/Love/Bird Extinction: Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* as a Work of Love,” *Political Theory* 45.5 (2017): 698.

<sup>42</sup> Carson’s bricolage of conservationist ideas and postwar structures of the public sphere differs in important ways from the wilderness ideal that William Cronon and others have identified with earlier periods in American environmental writing. See Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” 69–90.

<sup>43</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens: Swallow Press, 1991), 35.

<sup>44</sup> Dewey, 67.

<sup>45</sup> King, *I Have a Dream*, 85.

<sup>46</sup> Linda Sargent Wood, *A More Perfect Union: Holistic Worldviews and the Transformation of American Culture after World War II* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 5; see also 81–85. However, the idea of holism predates the postwar era. For an especially influential but controversial formulation, see Jan Christiaan Smuts, *Holism and Evolution* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1926).

<sup>47</sup> Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2016), 151.

<sup>48</sup> Morton, 151.

<sup>49</sup> Warner, 153.

<sup>50</sup> Warner, 194.

<sup>51</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>52</sup> U.S. Senate, *Interagency Coordination*, 223.

<sup>53</sup> See E. G. Vallianatos, *Poison Spring: The Secret History of Pollution and the EPA* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>54</sup> Habermas, 4.

<sup>55</sup> Dewey, 31.

<sup>56</sup> Warner, 76.

<sup>57</sup> Rachel Carson, “Help Your Child to Wonder,” *Woman’s Home Companion* (July 1956): 24–27, 46–48, esp. 27. Regarding the tension between wonder and reason, see Marie Fleming, “Women and the ‘Public Use of Reason,’” in *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*, ed. Johanna Meehan (New York: Routledge, 1995), 117–37.

<sup>58</sup> William O. Douglas, *My Wilderness: The Pacific West* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 160.

<sup>59</sup> Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 118.

<sup>60</sup> Hayot, 105.

<sup>61</sup> Hayot, 118.

<sup>62</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 378.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Fanuzzi, *Abolition’s Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003), 167.

<sup>64</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 379.

<sup>65</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 29.

<sup>66</sup> Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, 31.

<sup>67</sup> Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, 31–32.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Paul Brooks, *The House of Life: Rachel Carson at Work* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 325.

<sup>69</sup> Carson, “Exceeding Beauty of the Earth,” 325.

<sup>70</sup> Hazlett, “woman vs. man vs. bugs,” 713.

<sup>71</sup> Buell, 156.

<sup>72</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000), 91.

<sup>73</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 93.

<sup>74</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 94.

<sup>75</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 101.

<sup>76</sup> In his discussion of the public sphere, Kant links enlightenment with public reason, distancing the latter from affect, dogma, and aesthetic judgments. See Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?,” 58–64.

<sup>77</sup> Carson, “Exceeding Beauty of the Earth,” 325.