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Creating Local “Public Spaces” in Schools: Insights from Hannah Arendt and Maxine Greene

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ABSTRACT

Hannah Arendt and Maxine Greene present similar visions of human freedom and possibility that hold great potential for the creation of more emancipatory school communities. This article argues that there are lacunae in the perspectives of both, however. By bringing Arendt and Greene together, I hope to exploit a synergy between their writings, each contributing aspects that seem missing in the writings of the other. At the same time, while Greene is cited often in the educational literature, she is often not engaged at the level she deserves as one of our most prominent comprehensive contemporary theorists of education. Taking Greene seriously requires us, I think, to engage her project *critically*, and as a *whole*—an effort toward which this article only modestly contributes. Arendt’s work provides an extremely productive standpoint from which we might grapple with her achievement. Finally, this article aims to clarify some of the complexities entailed in Arendt and Greene’s effort to promote the creation of what they call “public spaces.” Their effort to “open spaces” draws upon complex assumptions about the nature of human beings and collective action. If we truly hope to transform their theoretical musings into concrete educational actions, we must grapple with the tensions that lie at the core of each of their writings. Ultimately, this article does not attempt to provide a detailed model for the creation of public spaces in schools, however. Arendt and Greene’s visions of the “public” provide not *blueprints* for action but *perspectives* from which to rethink and retool, continually, the current practices of our myriad situated educational efforts.

Hannah Arendt and Maxine Greene have developed similar conceptions of human freedom and possibility that hold great potential for the creation of more emancipatory school communities. Yet, despite the power of their writings, it is often difficult to discern exactly how it is that what they call “public spaces” might be promoted in schools. This paper will argue that their conceptions of public space can be seen as complementary. By drawing together selected insights from each, I seek a coherent model for the creation of public spaces in educational settings that remains relatively true to each.

It is important to note that I use Arendt's slightly idiosyncratic vision of local "public spaces" in this paper. Arendt argues that actualizing distinct individual voices in the midst of collective action requires that public spaces be small enough that the unique contribution of each individual can be discerned by the others in that space. Large numbers by themselves, she is convinced, tend to encourage mass identities instead of plural spaces.¹ This contrasts with Greene, who generally does not make this distinction. Because I do not have space, here, to grapple with the complex issues that surround the relationship between local and broader "publics," this paper explores only the challenges entailed in the creation of *local* public spaces in educational settings.

I discuss two different and yet interrelated kinds of "agency" in this paper: "aesthetic" engagement and "public" action. While both Arendt and Greene address each mode, each emphasizes one, making a synthesis of their views especially productive. Although Greene draws extensively on Arendt in her writings on public space, her work tends to focus on aesthetic activity, in which individuals attend to the unpredictable and contingent details of artistic objects, situations, and other people, bringing these into contact with their own unique biographies. In this way, Greene hopes that people can break through the everyday, often shallow and stereotypical categories of their lives into a world of imagination and creativity.

Arendt's work, on the other hand, emphasizes that to achieve local public spaces in which multiple individuals can work together on common projects, these unique aesthetic perspectives must be transformed to become relevant contributions to shared efforts. Although this entails some restriction of individual visions, individuals still take unique "positions" with respect to their common project (just as, for example, a person can still take an infinite number of positions in a small room). Aesthetic engagement helps people construct unique visions, while public spaces allow unique individuals to join in collaborative efforts while still maintaining distinct "voices." Uncontrolled uniqueness, Arendt argues, threatens to splinter a public space apart, destroying any common point of contact between perspectives.

While Arendt's work contributes to Greene's thought a careful examination of the limits of individual actions in public spaces, Arendt has a tendency to disregard the subtle effects of "power" on the actions of all individuals. Arendt often glosses over the challenges entailed in efforts to overcome the domination inherent in modern society, leaving it unclear how public spaces of "freedom" might be achieved—an area where Greene's work is particularly strong.

Arendt and Greene's approaches to aesthetic engagement and public action, painting a picture of humans as beings whose unique backgrounds are actualized in different ways in different settings, are especially important to explore in educational theory today. Drawing from their work allows us to begin to talk coherently about agency while still rejecting Enlightenment conceptions of atomistic and precultural selfhood. While writers like Michel Foucault² have immeasurably improved our understanding of the

nature of social forces by teasing out the subtle ways that society constitutes us as subjects, they have also made it extremely difficult to conceptualize concrete approaches to individual and collective agency. While Arendt and Greene's work does not represent the only answer to this "Foucaultian" challenge,³ I think their visions of individual uniqueness and collective action can be especially useful for educators, allowing us to speak coherently about individual and collective empowerment (and perhaps responsibility) in educational settings, while still retaining the insights of Foucault and others.

I begin by discussing the theoretical foundations of Arendt and Greene's conceptualizations of public space, noting especially their shared vision of human uniqueness and their commitment to the promotion of individual voices in the midst of collective agency. I then explore the ways Arendt and Greene's projects seem to inform each other, bringing Greene's conceptualization of aesthetic engagement together with Arendt's careful "mapping" of the limits of individual action in local public spaces. This leads to a discussion of the tensions inherent in their understandings of the importance of a "common" cultural world, and to a synthesis of their different insights into the beginnings of what I will argue constitutes a coherent approach to the development of the skills of local "public" action in schools. I conclude, however, by discussing the limits and dangers inherent in any attempt to describe the *nature* of freedom. I argue that the approach to collective action I have synthesized from Greene and Arendt represents only one of a myriad number of ways individuals might empower themselves as individuals and groups. It is only by recognizing the inherent limits in any theoretical project such as this that we can hope to contribute to more emancipatory schools without engaging in subtle forms of cultural imperialism.

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Arendt and Greene share a number of basic assumptions. They believe that each individual human being is absolutely unique, they fear that this individuality may not manifest itself in our increasingly normalized modern society, and they refuse to accept simple liberation from constraints, the mere right to be left alone, as authentic freedom. Freedom, they argue, requires active engagement in a common world.

Both are convinced that each human being has the potential for a unique "voice." In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, Greene notes that "these men all belong to the same cultural matrix. . . . But having had different subjective experiences, each of them is in a distinctive situation and bound to interpret novel events in his particular fashion."⁴ Hannah Arendt also believes that because every human being is a new beginning (she calls this the condition of "natality"), each person is utterly unique. In fact, she says that "with respect to this somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before."⁵ Arendt argues that although one

cannot entirely control what happens in one's life, one's experiences and acts collectively constitute one's unique and developing "story." Thus, for both Arendt and Greene, individuals are unique largely because they have unique biographies.

But this uniqueness only guarantees that everyone has the potential for a voice. Unless one's history is actualized or brought to language it can *not matter*. A person can not have a voice and can *not know* she doesn't have a voice. This is because both are convinced that we live in a world increasingly defined by what Arendt calls the "social," or "normalized" society, and what Greene sometimes calls "commodification." In our normalized society, we can only choose from defined options and limited ways of being. There are few opportunities for creating unique positions for individuals that would allow them to become "the best they know how to be."⁶ Individuals can only take up positions defined by "identities" on what might be envisioned as a "grid" of social rules. We wear identities like masks that are created for us by society, and while Arendt, at least, believes *some* amount of uniqueness will always "sound through"⁷ the mask, both feel life in normalized society is extremely deficient. Greene notes, for example, that "much of the time . . . the individual teacher or student is not conscious of his standpoint. . . . He lives immersed in his daily life."⁸ Arendt agrees that modern society "expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to 'normalize' its members"; complex, unique and undefinable individuality is reduced to clearly defined "rank within the social framework."⁹ Both, therefore, seek ways individuals might escape these ranks and already created categories.

Finally, and most importantly, both refuse to accept the classic liberal definition of freedom as simply the "negative" right to be left alone. Achieving a unique perspective through aesthetic engagement is not enough. Richard Rorty's solution of a society of isolated "Prousts" quietly recreating themselves apart from the rest of the world in their cork-lined rooms—and doing nothing public with this "aesthetic" individuality—seems absurd to both.¹⁰ "Positive" freedom and public selfhood (in their definition of these) requires a common undertaking and the pursuit of common projects toward common ends. Thus Arendt argues, as Bonnie Honig notes, that "prior to or apart from action," from an appearance in public, a "self has no identity; it is fragmented, discontinuous, indistinct. . . . Arendt's actors do not act because of what they already are, their actions do not express a prior, stable identity; they presuppose an unstable, multiple self that seeks its, at best, episodic self-realization in action and in the identity that is its reward."¹¹ As Greene says, "It seems clear that most people find out who they are only when they have developed some power to act and choose in engagements with a determinate world."¹²

We take a risk when we insert ourselves into the public—never certain "who" we will appear as. Different spaces give us opportunities for different "voices" because different common projects allow us to coalesce into different interpretive positions. We receive as a result of our actions, through

participation in a common project, our selves. Thus, for Arendt, a *self is defined as a position one takes with respect to a common issue*. By taking different perspectives on their shared effort, those in a public space “appear” to each other in distinct positions. Although her vision of the public is less clear, Greene draws on this Arendtian vision of a public space that actualizes the distinct perspectives of participants throughout her writings. To develop public spaces, Greene says, students must struggle “in *collaboration* with one another, discovering together a power to act on what they are choosing themselves to be”; they must “name the obstacles in the way of their shared becoming” (DF, pp. 12 and 133). “Freedom,” Greene says, “shows itself and comes into being when individuals . . . have a project they can mutually pursue” (DF, p. 17). Importantly, the “locations” people take on in a public space are different from those of normalized selves trapped within a pre-determined cultural field. Although the common issues of the public precariously define a common space, individuals can still take up an infinite number of positions with respect to them.

In a local public space, then, people can take unique yet communicable stances on common issues. They can act with others, both by beginning something completely new and by bringing their unique potential to bear upon an already started common project. Unlike Jürgen Habermas’ vision of the “ideal speech situation,”¹³ those in public do not strive to achieve a transparent consensus. Each act with respect to a common effort often shows how fundamentally differently each participant perceives their project. Although those in public act “in concert,” each person contributes uniquely to their shared effort.

Despite their shared valorization of public action, both emphasize the unpredictable nature of the public. As Arendt says most poignantly in an interview,

We start something. . . . What comes of it we never know. We’ve all been taught to say: Lord forgive them, for they know not what they do. That is true of all action. Quite simply and concretely true, because one *cannot* know. That is what is meant by a venture. And now I would say that this venture is only possible when there is trust in people. A trust—which is difficult to formulate but fundamental—in what is human in all people. Otherwise such a venture could not be made.¹⁴

No one can control the outcome of one’s actions in a space filled with others who are unpredictable actors in their own right. All we can do is make promises that we may not be able to fulfil in a changing world, and forgive each other when our actions have tragic results.¹⁵

In formulating a vision of public space, Arendt and Greene make assumptions not only about the nature of the “human condition,” but also about the kind of selves and collective spaces we should strive to create. Their work explores both what *is*, and what *ought to be*—and they stress, especially, the importance of fostering the unique voices of individuals. As I note in this paper’s last section, however, despite the potential resident in this approach to promoting student and teacher agency in schools, their

approach is neither culturally neutral nor universal, representing only one of many possible strategies.

EXPLOITING A SYNERGY BETWEEN THEIR VISIONS

Despite the similarities discussed above, there remain important differences between Arendt and Greene. In this section, I focus on those differences that seem most relevant to the creation of public spaces in schools. Greene's writings provide a sense of how individuals might "break through" the normalized stereotypes that increasingly structure and limit our perspectives in the modern world. From Arendt, on the other hand, I draw an understanding of how these individual unique visions must be transformed into "positions" on collaborative projects if they are not to threaten the "common" nature of the public.

Greene argues that it is through essentially "aesthetic" encounters with the unpredictable contingencies of our environment, other people, and especially the arts that individuals learn to transcend the banal stereotypes of their normalized existence. She believes that by engaging with the details of everyday life, details generally covered over in our submersion in the familiar, we can discover some of the ways in which our usual ways of being-in-the-world fail to adequately respond to the world's complexity. "Ambiguous and unpredictable," she says in a phrase drawn from the *New Yorker*, "details undermine ideology" (RI, p. 95).

By allowing us to grapple with these ambiguities and sedimented meanings of our own pasts, aesthetic engagement allows us to reclaim our pasts. She notes that

The growing, changing individual . . . always has to confront a certain weight in lived situations, if only the weight of memory and the past. There are ambiguities of various kinds, layers of determinateness. Freedom, like autonomy, is in many ways dependent on understanding these ambiguities, developing a kind of critical distance with respect to them. (DF, p. 9)

And one's biography is never simply *revealed*; it is reconstructed in each attempt to authentically connect with one's surroundings.

Greene argues that to promote agency among their students, teachers must "deliberately challenge desires for certainty, for fixity" (DF, p. 126). Teachers must work together with students to make contact with the deep complexity that lies beneath all of our attempts to order the universe, helping them take a critical stance on the categories of normalized society. Through such efforts, students can begin to imagine a world that is different, while they discover the obstacles that stand in the way of their own "becoming."

For me, it is in Greene's discussions of aesthetics that her writing achieves its greatest power. Her essays themselves often provide a model of aesthetic activity as she engages with literature and art in the midst of her argu-

ments, showing some of the forms that aesthetic activity can take at the same time as she argues for its importance in schools. While Arendt certainly agrees that the ability to think through the nature of specific events and contexts in their specificity is crucial to the actualization of public spaces, and while her description of Eichmann's thoughtless participation in the Holocaust shows that the inability to concretely engage with one's unique situatedness was one of the fundamental components of evil, it is Greene who explores in detail the kinds of activities that can help people learn to overcome normalization.¹⁶

Greene notes that individual aesthetic engagement is not enough, however, that

encounters with the arts alone will not realize [the emancipatory possibilities of . . . education]; but the arts will help open the situations that require interpretation. . . . With situations opening, students may become empowered to engage in some sort of praxis, engaged enough to name the obstacles in the way of their shared becoming. (DF, p. 133, gloss from same page)

The arts nourish uniqueness, which *then* can be put in the service of common efforts. Because her work is often unclear about how such praxis might be engaged in, however, her work is not as helpful as it might be in pointing us to ways we might create actual public spaces in schools.

Because of her focus on the normalizing effects of power, however, Greene is much more conscious than Arendt that the mere appearance of a common space does not guarantee absolute freedom. We can not, Greene is careful to point out, escape the pervasive influence of culture, the fact that "freedom cannot be conceived apart from a matrix of social, economic, cultural and psychological conditions" (DF, p. 80). This is exemplified perhaps best in her description of the women's convention at Seneca Falls in 1848, which, while partially opening a space for women's freedom, still operated within the rationalistic language of "liberal individualism," and assigned the critical "actualities of [women's] lives to the domain of the worldless" (DF, pp. 69–70). For Greene, "democracy is forever incomplete."¹⁷ The "dialectic of freedom" is, as Merleau-Ponty notes, "partial, encumbered with survivals, saddled with deficits" (cited in DF, p. 8). Thus Greene points out that a public space is always a project, never quite achieved but always coming into being. One never reaches a final utopia of absolute freedom, never entirely overcomes the effects of gender or race, never achieves an entirely equitable public space—instead, one learns to struggle with the determining forces of one's culture while working with the situated reality of one's circumstances.

It is this understanding of the partial nature of the "freedom" achieved in public that is generally missing in Arendt's writings. Because we can never entirely escape the "marks" of our identities or the effects our social positioning has on us, Arendt's avoidance of issues of "power" and her belief that local political spaces could be created in which such normalized differences could be transcended becomes extremely problematic. It could

end up encouraging a kind of difference-blindness that allows those differentials in power that are not overcome to continue unchallenged. Not only does this mean, as Greene is careful to acknowledge, that we must continue to acknowledge the effect of group membership on our ability to participate in even the most egalitarian public spaces, but it also indicates, as Nancy Fraser argues, that only a myriad of different overlapping publics, where groups interact in different, sometimes conflictual ways, could hope to provide the contexts necessary to promote collective action across social differences.¹⁸

Yet, while Arendt generally fails to address certain challenges entailed in breaking through the limits of our normalized culture, she nonetheless provides a much more concrete vision of what a public space might look like, exploring the limits inherent in the kind of public space that both advocate. She describes a number of dangers that threaten the public, and I discuss two of the most important below.

First, people can allow *too much uniqueness* into the space with them—they can refuse to see someone else as a “position” on their common project, instead demanding to see them as completely unique beings. This “destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others.”¹⁹ She notes that intense individual subjectivity, especially in what she calls the “intimate,” “will always come to pass at the expense of the assurance of the reality of the world and men.”²⁰ Entry into what she conceptualizes as a local, plural, collaborative public, therefore, *always* requires some loss of individual uniqueness, enabling one to take a coherent location on a common issue and preventing the space from dissolving into anarchy. “The thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses,” Arendt argues, and she would include Greene’s aesthetic engagement in this list, must be “transformed, deprivatized, deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance.”²¹ “Public” comments must always be “relevant” to the topic under consideration.

A second threat is that people can bring *too much sameness* to the public. Actually, quite a lot of controversy has swirled around this aspect of her thought. Arendt said, for example, that what she termed “social” issues could not be brought into the public, and some have read her as meaning by this that those in public must avoid addressing issues of real consequence. While I think this reading misunderstands Arendt’s larger project, her statements about the “social” remain problematic aspects of her thought. She seems to believe, for example, that conditions like poverty and hunger were so intimately shared by all involved that individuals could not take unique perspectives on them, and that they therefore led inexorably to a kind of mass identity—as she believed they had during the French Revolution—and so could not be effectively grappled with in public.²² She also held an odd kind of faith in the power of neutral scientific experts to find absolute answers to issues like how much housing space a person needs to flourish, for example, arguing that “public debate can only deal with things which—if you want to put it negatively—we cannot figure out with certainty.”²³

If we accepted her conclusions, then collective public action would be unable to deal with those issues that are most important to our society. Given our (and even Arendt's) understanding of the constructed nature of social reality, however, it is no longer reasonable to assume that the experience of poverty, for example, will be exactly the same across individuals with different cultural and individual experiences. And few believe any longer in the kind of absolute gulf between science and public opinion that Arendt appears at times to have clung to, especially concerning issues like what constitutes decent housing. I think we must draw on Arendt's central insight about the limits of "public" action in a mass society from the specific manifestations it sometimes took on in her writings. When individuals are unable to discern the important but often subtle differences in their perspectives on a specific issue, the public as a space of plurality can collapse into a realm of mass identity. And her points about the threats poverty and hunger can pose to local publics are well taken if seen not as statements about the "true" nature of these conditions, but instead as a commentary on how the urgency of basic human needs can threaten, in many ways, our ability to trust each other and to expend the energy and time necessary to understand the perspectives of others, as collective action in the public demands. As Greene also notes, "it takes an easing of living conditions for the horizon to open, to be no longer restricted to immediate concerns" (DF, p. 115).

Given Arendt and Greene's initial assumptions, then, I think Arendt is right that local, plural public spaces that focus on actualizing the distinct voices of participants are always precariously balanced between the centrifugal forces of aesthetic activity, and the centripetal forces of normalization. The former leads, in the extreme, to a splintered space where no common effort at all is discernible, while extreme forms of the latter can lead to mass identities in which plurality has all but disappeared.

COMMON NARRATIVES: CONSERVING THE PAST, REACHING INTO THE FUTURE

But what constitutes these issues in Arendt and "obstacles" in Greene that permit public spaces to come into being? I think it is useful to think of them as common narratives that can be interpreted differently from multiple perspectives. Arendt argues, for example, that humans have the ability to form public spaces because they have, over time, carved a cultural, artistic "world" out of the chaos of nature. And this largely cultural world, "is always the 'dead letter' in which the 'living spirit' must survive, a deadness from which it can be resurrected only when the dead letter comes again into contact with a life willing to resurrect it."²⁴ The works that make up the cultural world have no meaning until they are "resurrected" in a new context for a new reason. Thus, as Greene also notes, the common world "will be created by story, by giving voice to personal perspectives,

listening to others' stories, seeking agreement, enlarging on it, and trying to expand the referent of what is shared" (RI, p. 68).

Arendt gives a good example of this, describing a conversation between friends as a discussion

about something that the friends have in common. By talking about what is between them, it becomes ever more common to them. It gains not only in its specific articulateness, but develops and expands and finally, in the course of time and life, begins to constitute a world of its own which is shared in friendship.²⁵

Thus, by contributing interpretations on their common effort, participants create a public space together.

Arendt's concentration on the already existent cultural "world," however, leads her vision of the public to be focused on a complex desire for the preservation of the past. For Arendt, as with her friend Walter Benjamin, the stories of the past bring the hopes and dreams of societies and individuals long past into the present—not unchanged, and yet retaining the power to engage us in "an act of remembering, in the sense of a creative act of rethinking which sets free the lost potentials of the past."²⁶ Arendt fears the loss of the "world," the destruction of complex and demanding narratives in favor of shallow "experiences" that can simply be consumed, that simply fill "empty time." Arendt fears that the complexity of cultural objects will be "rewritten, condensed, digested, reduced to kitsch in reproduction, or in preparation for the movies."²⁷

This is much the same thing Greene refers to in her discussion of the "kitsch" society of totalitarianism described in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (DF, p. 10). "Commodified" objects like these increasingly lose their power to serve as complex interpretive focuses for anchoring a public space. Yet, while Greene does speak of the need to overcome one's rootlessness to achieve a deeper and more personal connection with one's heritage (RI, p. 165), and while she agrees with Arendt that it is crucial to "take responsibility for keeping [an ongoing cultural story] alive,"²⁸ Greene is also generally more future oriented than Arendt, focused more on transformation and change than on conservation. As she says in her most recent book, "the democratic community, always a community in the making, depends not so much on what has been achieved and funded in the past. It is kept alive; it is energized and radiated by an awareness of future possibility" (RI, p. 166).

Given this difference between them, it is interesting that in her earlier work Greene has generally avoided commenting directly on Arendt's one major essay on education, "The Crisis in Education," a work that emphasizes the conservative side of Arendt's thought. In *Releasing the Imagination*, however, she finally does address this essay, and not surprisingly she questions Arendt's vision as too focused on "the task of renewing a common world" (Arendt cited in RI, p. 3). Greene points out that in our diverse society, we can "no longer assume that there is any longer a consensus about what is valuable and useful and what ought to be taught" (RI, p. 3).

In fact, however, Arendt herself is also not *only* conservative; in her other writings she does discuss the need for the creation of new narratives, new “kernels” from which public spaces might form. Like Greene, then, she allows for *both* the act of naming one’s obstacles, creating a new common narrative (initially either together or stemming from an individual), *and* coming together around, renewing, an older common narrative.²⁹ Despite differences in emphasis, then, in each thinker there remains a tension between the desire to conserve the achievements of the past, and yet not to be limited by them in our journey into the future. This is a tension I think is critical to maintain, a dilemma for schools that can not be solved but only struggled with in each contingent circumstance.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION: BEYOND “THE CRISIS IN EDUCATION”

In this section I will argue that bringing Greene and Arendt together provides the basis for a powerful emancipatory theory of education that begins to address the limitations inherent in each of their visions alone. I begin with Arendt’s work on education, especially her essay, “The Crisis in Education.” After noting its limits, I draw on Greene’s work and other of Arendt’s writings in an effort to construct a more balanced educational model.

In response to a question about education, Arendt writes in a letter to her friend J. Glenn Gray that:

It seems to me that the word education covers two entirely different tasks: (a) the responsibility for the development of the child, physical as well as psychological, and his particular gifts and (b) the child’s preparation to enter the world where it is supposed to assume certain responsibilities for it. In the first case our main concern is the well-being of the child. In the second case we are concerned with what is going to happen to the world when this particular child is going to enter it.³⁰

This passage contains a succinct statement of the logical implications of her thought for the field of education, and a summary of much of her “Crisis in Education.” The unique potential of the child is balanced against the precarious cultural world that the child is being prepared to enter.

As usual, critically important to Arendt in her sparse writings on education is the fact that children all represent new beginnings, have unique biographies. Only in the private, she argues, can uniqueness in all its aspects truly be nourished without imposing the strictures of public “appearance” on free exploration. In the privacy of the classroom, she is convinced that teachers should encourage “the free development of characteristic qualities and talents. This . . . is the uniqueness that distinguishes every human being from every other, the quality by virtue of which he is not only a stranger to the world but something that has never been here before” (BPF, p. 189).

As I have already noted, however, Arendt does not tell us how teachers might encourage this flowering of uniqueness. It is only through the writings of Greene that we can gain some understanding of the challenges and skills demanded by the intimate, as individuals attempt to make contact with their “sedimented” experience through their experiences in the world and with others. Only with Greene can we begin to think how to help students break through the banal sameness of normalized society and begin to realize their own unique visions, as they help others actualize their voices as well through dialogue.

But despite, actually *because of*, the incredible democratic and emancipatory potential that children represent, Arendt tells us that they cannot help but threaten the stability of the established and humanly created cultural “world,” which “needs protection to keep it from being overrun and destroyed by the onslaught of the new that bursts upon it with each new generation” (BPF, p. 186). Thus Arendt argues here that the teacher’s job is not only to help students develop their own unique potentials but also to instruct them about the “world.” Teachers must bring the past into the present for children in order to save the children’s cultural heritage.

The school, then, has the difficult job of mediating between old and new. “Exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world, which, however revolutionary its actions may be, is always, from the standpoint of the next generation, superannuated and close to destruction” (BPF, pp. 192–93). According to Arendt, however, teaching is not static; it operates in an ever-changing environment. As I have noted, then, Arendt argues that every telling of a story, every presentation of an artwork has the potential to be a retelling, a new reconstruction. True educators thus save the “world” “from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable” (BPF, p. 196). Teachers help students renew and appropriate these narratives in the safety of the classroom through the act of retelling so they might discover in these treasures of the past *tomorrow* and not just a repeat of yesterday.

Arendt presents good reasons for her conservatism. She argues that there is a real danger in thinking that children have a “world” even though they do not have access to the fund of cultural artifacts represented by their pasts. Providing them with nothing, she thinks, leaves them in the mass “solidarity” of other children, essentially “world-less” (BPF, pp. 181–2). They have no narratives available to them to form a public space for themselves. Refusing to supply social narratives to children simply extends the normalized worldlessness of modern society into the schools and ensures its reproduction, destroying the very possibility of politics later on.

Yet despite her emphasis on renewal, on first reading, Arendt’s essay on education can nonetheless sound almost like E. D. Hirsh and others in its canonicity. In fact, Arendt speaks at the beginning of her essay almost offensively, from Greene’s perspective, about the need for a “melting together of the most diverse ethnic groups,” noting that “schools not only

serve to Americanize the children but affect their parents as well, . . . here in fact one helps to shed an old world and to enter a new one" (BPF, pp. 175 and 177).

Jean Bethke Elshtain points out, however, that "The Crisis in Education" was meant more as a response to the criticism raised by an earlier essay, "Reflections on Little Rock" (which opposed the use of children in struggles over school desegregation, among other issues), than it was an attempt to write a general overview of educational theory.³¹ I think there is another more palatable hint of a theory of "multicultural" education in Arendt's work that would still allow the synergy with Greene that I have been seeking. For this different reading, I would draw on an essay of Arendt's on Karl Jaspers in which she points out that, "just as man and woman can be the same, namely human, by being absolutely different from each other, so the national of every country can enter this world history of humanity only by remaining and clinging stubbornly to what he is."³² Ideas of a mass unity of mankind "have brought us a global present without a common past, threaten to render irrelevant all traditions and all particular past histories."³³ The "unity" that this would bring would bury

the authentic origins of all human existence. . . . Its result would be . . . more than mere superficiality; it would be as though the whole dimension of depth, without which human thought, even on the mere level of technical invention, could not exist, would simply disappear.³⁴

Arendt argues in this essay, then, that the survival of "depth" depends "upon the possibility of bringing the national pasts, in their original separateness, into communication with each other."³⁵

In this altered version of an Arendtian educational vision, students could be taught multiple narratives, and different narratives would arise out of different students' experiences. This creates a much more complex vision of what "world" might mean in a society like the United States with many different people from different cultures. And this corresponds well to Greene's fear that "lacking imbeddedness in memories and histories they have made their own, people feel as if they are rootless subjectivities" (DF, p. 3). There is no reason why providing a "world" for children has to entail only a single set of narratives. But how does one build a common world out of these multiple narratives? Arendt really never grappled with this question and Greene isn't entirely sure it has some clearly definable solution.

Simply providing students with the "world" is not enough, however. Greene's comments on the "common" point us toward the future, toward the need to create new narratives, respond to new obstacles and not simply renew the narratives of our past. Again, we can find places in Arendt where she seems at least potentially in agreement. With Greene, Arendt fears that people in the modern world have lost the capacity to recognize and think through the contingency of the "new." Seyla Benhabib notes that this was a "moral and political" problem for Arendt because the

search for nomological generalizations dulled one's appreciation for what was new and unprecedented, and thus failed to confront one with the task of thinking morally anew in the face of the unprecedented. Politically this method also stultified one's capacity for resistance by making it seem that nothing was new and that everything had always already been.³⁶

What we have forgotten, Arendt thinks, is that abstract concepts arose out of particular experiences. If we think our concepts describe our world entirely, then we lose any ability to see things that are radically new, events that cannot be encompassed by our familiar ways of seeing, events that call for entirely new concepts—or that cannot be encompassed by a concept at all. Although she is less clear than Greene about how it is to be achieved, Arendt invites the kind of situated critical thinking that is necessary when we are called upon, in her words, to think “without banisters.”³⁷ To be successful, then, schools would need to teach students how to “think” out contingent events in their contingency, recovering this narrative, or in Greene's terms, aesthetic ability to see events as “new,” preparing students to confront events instead of simply subsuming them under categories provided for them.

Finally, I would argue with Greene that students and teachers must work together to develop the skills required for communal, public action. For a truly Arendt/Greene education, students would need to *practice* moderation, they would need to acquire the skills of seeing from others' points of view, the skills of listening closely to the unique opinions of others. They would need some understanding of the differences between the kinds of selves that one can take on in aesthetic and collective settings. These are practical skills gained only in activity, not methods to learn through rote training. Students would need opportunities to learn how to become “selves” in concerted action with others. This assumes, as Greene also points out, some common values; Greene notes that “the diverse perspectives that create the reality of the public space cannot encourage those that reject dialogue, encourage sexism or racism, insist on one-dimensional certainty,”³⁸ for example. Learning the skills of the public is a form of “civic learning.”

Thus, despite the fact that in “The Crisis in Education” Arendt would like to maintain the schools as a place for purely private self-discovery and initiation into a society's cultural/historical narratives, her own writings betray her. Without participating in some form of public as an integral part of schooling, students will leave schools both without the skills to form public spaces and without the desire to form such spaces, since they would not have experienced the shock of active selfhood that comes from “appearing” in a location around a common project. Greene is clearly correct on this point when she recommends that schools foster public spaces.

Education, from this perspective that draws together insights from Arendt and Greene, then, is at least partly an instrument of politics, designed to apprentice students into the learned practices of the aesthetic and the

public, among others. Classrooms would provide multiple opportunities for individual and group action, directed and formed by a teacher who would help provide the common texts for the class, and who would explore with students the skills required for both public and private self-creation. This does not refuse teacher authority; instead it allows for Greene's vision of teacher as collaborator, where the teacher works *with* the students to name new obstacles and create new public spaces. As Arendt argues, although teachers retain some authority to present the "world" to children, they can no longer depend on the "thread" of tradition to guide their interpretations—the children must learn to do this themselves. The students in this classroom would not choose between public and aesthetic; instead they would weave a fluid path between these options, among others, emphasizing their connectedness and interdependence, but allowing at the same time for the development of multiple and sometimes conflictual spaces. Education would be focused, first and foremost, on encouraging agency among students, on fostering students' individual and unique voices—both collectively and individually.

Efforts that seem reflective of the kind of effort someone operating from this perspective might pursue do exist in a range of educational settings in the United States.³⁹ "Public Achievement," a joint project of the Mayor of St. Paul, Minnesota, and Project Public Life, based at the University of Minnesota, seems an especially good example. As a part of the project, "teams of six to twelve young people work within their schools or other organizations, with coaches, to solve public problems that are important to them."⁴⁰ With the help of the coaches, these teams discuss rules, roles, and the scope of their problem, while researching the nature of the environment in which they intend to act. Although the project is less focused on maintaining individual voices in the midst of collective action than Arendt and Greene would recommend, students are nonetheless encouraged to create and tell stories about their own personal histories, attempting to relate their own pasts to the efforts they wish to engage in.⁴¹ One coach remarked as a part of his effort that his students "used to assume they couldn't do anything about the problems they see. . . . [Now they] have specific ideas, and there is a real feeling they can do something."⁴² By working together in local contexts on local problems that they define together, team members "develop a sense of individual and collective efficacy" even when their project does not entirely succeed.⁴³ This activity connects them to their larger community and encourages them to bring the multiple voices of their community into their small "public" as partners. And because different community sites and schools represent different environments, different contingent histories and circumstances, the project's model is appropriated differently in each context.

Projects like "Public Achievement" indicate that public spaces are not impossible to create in educational settings, only difficult. To succeed at such efforts, however, individual teachers as well as institutions like schools would need to see the promotion of "public" freedom as an integral part of their mission.

SOME LIMITATIONS OF THIS ESSAY

There are also dangers in taking on such a mission, however, just as there is a danger in outlining the *boundaries* of freedom and public action in the way I have done above. To conclude this article, instead of tying up all the loose ends, I would like to fray some out again, complicating the vision of public action that I have drawn from Arendt and Greene.

For those of us who accept that reality is socially constructed, it has become increasingly difficult to believe in descriptions of human action that present themselves as somehow free-floating and cultureless. I have already noted that the approach to collective and individual action explored here is dependent upon a particular way of framing the aims toward which human beings should strive. I want to extend this point a little further and argue that the conceptualization of local public space that I have synthesized here may subtly reflect the white, educated, middle-class backgrounds of Arendt, Greene, and myself, despite the other individual, historical, gender, and cultural gulfs that separate us.

Paul Lichterman's recent study of activist groups in America supports this contention. One of the groups he studied, local branches of the Green party, engaged in political practices reminiscent of both Arendt and Greene's perspectives on collective action. The Greens emphasized the importance of actualizing individuals' voices in their groups, and engaged in political efforts that "could allow individual identities and political wills to resonate loudly within collective accomplishments."⁴⁴ After looking over the recent history of activist groups in America, Lichterman argues that this emphasis on the distinctness of individual voices in group efforts developed largely out of middle-class, mostly white, educated "patterns of deciding and improvising one's way through the life course."⁴⁵ In contrast, Lichterman's examination of a community organization operating in a low-income, African American neighborhood, Hillsviewers Against Toxics (HAT) indicated a very different approach to collective action. In HAT, unlike the Greens, "it did not matter that some members—even core members—did not participate as often as individual contributors. In HAT, participation got defined in terms of a collective product much more than as a matter of individual contributions."⁴⁶

Problematically, each group in Lichterman's study, especially the Greens, seemed to view its own practice of collective action as "natural." Their commitments to different collective ways of being tended to splinter them apart from each other. Yet, as Lichterman and other scholars like Charles C. Euchner⁴⁷ have shown, each of these different approaches to collective action has its own possibilities and limitations. While the Greens were able to actualize individual "voices," they were often unable to act collectively with the kind of focused organization that the HAT group was able to achieve. The Green groups were much more precarious, much more likely to splinter apart as they lost any remnant of a common project. For its part, the HAT group, while it was able to muster a relative stability, was much less able to respond to unpredictable change, and had difficulty drawing mul-

multiple voices from its community that could challenge its own hierarchy when this became necessary. Thus, Lichterman argues that to promote truly multicultural, cross-class collective action, activists would need to engage in a kind of “translation” across different collective practices, while Euchner shows that successful collective action projects tend to draw from a range of different modes of collective organization as they meet a shifting collection of needs and challenges.

My goal in indicating this potential relationship between class, culture, and the practice of public action that I have explored is not to somehow essentialize myself as a white middle-class American. Nor can Greene and Arendt’s works (or lives) be submitted easily to any such categorization. It would be inaccurate to simply say that this model of public action is entirely limited to the middle class—both Arendt and Greene explore a range of different, often multiclass moments of public action across Western history. Instead, I wish to acknowledge, as Greene is always so careful to, the power of the normalizing society in which we live and have lived. The point of aesthetic and public action is to struggle *against* such forces, not to deny their existence. What Lichterman’s work, among others, indicates, then, is that modes of political action are tied in many complex ways to the cultural conditions from which they arose,⁴⁸ serving different purposes and encompassing different strengths and weaknesses. For example, the unpredictability and precariousness of public spaces that emphasize individual distinctiveness may seem much less appealing to marginalized groups who have, at times, found great strength in the kinds of solidarity that Arendt fears.

Thus, there is a subtle danger of cultural imperialism and oppression inherent in any effort to initiate public projects like these in specific schools without drawing from the myriad personal experiences and cultural ways of being of the teachers and students that already work and learn there. I think Greene’s understanding of some of these dangers explains, in part, why her work on the public is often much more vague than Arendt’s. Despite allegiances to Arendt’s vision, Greene is nonetheless careful to make it clear that “public” action, for her, is something that must be appropriated and reinvented by teachers and students in all of the myriad unique sites in which they live. Thus, her work explores multicultural settings of collective action that Arendt never touches on. Yet this kind of vagueness can also be disempowering in its own way. As Richard H. King notes in his book, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom*, “attempting to mobilize people without offending anyone, trying to appeal in too bland a fashion across all ideological boundaries, will succeed only in rendering the movement toothless.”⁴⁹ Without more concrete guidelines, Greene’s metaphorical statements about the need to “open spaces” in schools and to find “something common” can become merely empty words—as I think they often have in the extensive educational literature that draws from Greene’s writings on public space.

To succeed in Arendt and Greene’s larger project of freedom, I think we must find a balance between Greene’s desire to blur or break boundaries

and Arendt's tendency to create them. We must learn to map out the limits and possibilities of particular approaches to action, as Arendt has with hers, at the same time as we acknowledge the limitations of any such effort. We must build multiple "banisters," while heeding Arendt when she notes elsewhere that we must, in the end, live "without banisters" in a world without certainty, where, despite our best intentions, actions often turn to tragedy as soon as they leave our hands. Any search for the "nature" of freedom or of local, collaborative public action in general is doomed from the beginning. Efforts to conceptualize concretely achievable modes of empowerment that represent points in a constellation of possible freedoms remain crucial, however.

If they are to be useful at all, theoretical models must always be creatively adapted and sometimes even rejected by local actors in local contexts as they struggle, at the same time, to create entirely new forms in response to their specific needs and situations. While the vision of public action I have constructed from Arendt and Greene's writings may partly reflect middle-class ways of being-in-the-world, then, it nonetheless represents one powerful approach to collective action, among many others, for people in *any* context, encouraging us all to ask questions and opening new possibilities that might not have occurred to us otherwise. Perspectives like this one can continue to serve us as powerful tools in our efforts to understand what it means to create more emancipatory schools only if we realize that every theoretical project of this kind represents only a single strategy among many others, and that each strategy retains complex connections to the purposes and contexts from which it arose.

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NOTES

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 43. Arendt's point is not that local publics do not act into the social realm, but that, at best, a larger social movement or revolution would consist of many small local spaces working together in complex ways. See her discussion of a pyramidal system of councils in *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1963). In fact, a number of political scientists like Jane Mansbridge (and even philosophers like John Dewey) have struggled with this perceived gulf between the local and broader contexts in their work. See Jane Mansbridge, "A Paradox of Size" in C. George Benello, *From the Ground Up: Essays on Grassroots and Workplace Democracy*, ed. Len Krimerman (Boston: South End Press, 1992); John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens: Swallow Press, 1927).
2. For example, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

3. See, for example, Judith Butler, in *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), who shows how, by “performing” one’s identity, one can achieve a measure of agency.
4. Maxine Greene, *The Teacher as Stranger* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1973), 133. In this work from the early seventies, Greene uses “he” as the generic. Later on in her career she shifts away from this usage. Arendt also uses “he,” but did not (had no interest in) altering this practice. While Greene clearly considers herself a feminist, Arendt’s relation to feminism is complex to say the least. See Mary Deitz, “Feminist Receptions of Hannah Arendt,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), for a good overview.
5. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 178.
6. Arendt cited in Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988); subsequently referred to in the text as DF.
7. Hannah Arendt, “Sonning Prize Speech,” 1977, Hannah Arendt Collection, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., 13.
8. Greene, *Stranger*, 131–132.
9. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 40–41.
10. See Chapter 2 in Richard Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Rorty’s point is not that Proust shouldn’t “publish” his work (obviously) but instead that he should not emerge in public and participate as a unique citizen/participant in a common project.
11. Bonnie Honig, “Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995), 140–141.
12. Greene, Maxine, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 178; subsequently referred to in the text with page numbers as RI.
13. See Chapter 9 of Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1987).
14. Hannah Arendt, “What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Günter Gaus,” in *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 23; see DF, 46.
15. See Arendt, *Human Condition*, 236–247.
16. See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin, 1965). Lisa Disch argues in *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) that Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* was an attempt to model engagement in situated thinking, but that she failed to make this clear to her readers.
17. Maxine Greene, “Diversity and Inclusion: Toward a Curriculum for Human Beings,” *Teachers College Record* 95, no. 2 (1993), 218.
18. See Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), and Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). Arendt argued that identities could not be overcome in “society,” but appears to have thought that egalitarian political spaces were nonetheless possible. Her often cited distinction between the self-conscious pariah who rejects society, and the parvenu who attempts to assimilate (but must fail), in her *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, 3rd ed., trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York:

- Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1974), for example, was only relevant for her in the “social” and not in the public.
19. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 242.
 20. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 50. By drawing on her conceptualization of the “intimate,” I focus here on only one aspect of Arendt’s multifaceted conceptualization of what she calls the “private,” an issue that deserves a paper of its own. Seyla Benhabib begins to address some of the complexity of Arendt’s public/private distinction in *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996).
 21. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 50.
 22. See Arendt, *On Revolution*, Chapter 2.
 23. Hannah Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” *Hannah Arendt and the Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn Hill (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 317.
 24. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 169.
 25. Hannah Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research* 57 no. 1 (1990): 82.
 26. Seyla Benhabib, “Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative,” *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 190.
 27. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 207, subsequently referred to in the text as BPF.
 28. Maxine Greene, “Public Education and the Public Space,” *Educational Researcher* 11, no. 6 (1982): 8, gloss from same paragraph.
 29. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 189.
 30. Hannah Arendt to J. Glenn Gray, 29 June 1964, Hannah Arendt Collection, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. Arendt also notes here the need to also teach children technical skills beyond the more aesthetic and political practices described in this paper, something neither Arendt nor Greene would ultimately deny is also the province of schools.
 31. Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Political Children,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 267. Grappling with Arendt’s essay on Little Rock would be another paper in itself, and Elshtain has already done an excellent job.
 32. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, Publishers, 1968), 89.
 33. Arendt, *Dark Times*, 84.
 34. Arendt, *Dark Times*, 87.
 35. Arendt, *Dark Times*, 87, 88.
 36. Seyla Benhabib, “Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative,” *Social Research* 57 Spring (1990), 184.
 37. Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” 669.
 38. Greene, “Public Education,” 8.
 39. See, for example, Aaron Schutz and Anne Ruggles Gere, “English Studies and Service Learning: Rethinking ‘Public’ Service,” *College English* 61, no. 2 (1998).
 40. Melissa Bass, “Towards a New Theory and Practice of Civic Education: An Evaluation of Public Achievement” (Masters Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1995), 4. See also Melissa Bass, et al., *Making the Rules: A Public Achievement Guidebook* [manual-on-line] (St. Paul: Project Public Life, 1994, accessed 12

- December 1998); available from <http://www.cpn.org/sections/topics/youth/stories-studies/makingrules1.html>.
41. Although Public Achievement is useful for illustrating how one might begin to operationalize an Arendt/Greene approach to the creation of local public spaces, the project actually draws from a different, essentially “communitarian,” theoretical framework, which explains some of the difficulty involved in mapping Arendt and Greene’s ideas directly onto it. See, e.g., Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).
 42. Bass, “Public Achievement,” 4.
 43. Bass, “Public Achievement,” 9.
 44. Paul Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 24.
 45. Lichterman, *Community*, 149.
 46. Lichterman, *Community*, 116.
 47. Charles C. Euchner, *Extraordinary Politics: How Protest and Dissent are Changing American Democracy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).
 48. Many Critical Race Theorists and Feminists have made similar arguments. See, for example, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, and Gary Peller, *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1995), and Nancy J. Hirschmann and Christine Di Stephano, *Revising the Political: Feminist Reconstructions of Traditional Concepts in Western Political Theory* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).
 49. Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), xiii, gloss mine.

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