Democratic Theory (2026), **13**, 145–147
doi:10.1017/S2332889425000077

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

On Voice, Attunement, and Generative Refusal

Vicki Hsueh

Department of Political Science, Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington, USA
Email: hsuehv@wwu.edu

The crises that spur *Earthborn Democracy* are all too familiar: ecological and environmental degradation joined with rising authoritarianism, populist anger and despair, erosion of institutional safeguards, decline in democratic norms, practices, and institutions, and the atrophy of citizen knowledge, experience, and fitness. In response, *Earthborn Democracy* offers both a visionary argument and a vigorous appeal for reimagining and regenerating democratic practices and possibilities as responsive not only to current concerns and anguish but also attuned to the deep and resonant aspiration for democracy recurrent across distant space and time. As the authors argue, "democratic capacities" are our "species inheritance and part of what it means to live a flourishing, earthly life."[1] *Earthborn Democracy* leads us through a wide range of practices of collective life—among them, cooperative systems, people's assemblies, and village councils—which offer revitalizing alternatives to the hollowed-out institutionalization of electoral politics and consumer capitalism. These examples reinforce a vision of democratic flourishing that is intimately and undeniably connected with ecological flourishing.

I learned an enormous amount in reading *Earthborn Democracy*: the authors move with agility through so many dimensions of various deep political wellsprings and sources, such as morphic fields, the conscious and the unconscious, archetypes of movement and community, myth and storytelling, and rituals of meaning. And I was drawn into the power and the depth of their argument and, in particular, by the richness of various examples in the book—the tactile, sensory features of Maple Nation, the durational and daily practices of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's land as pedagogy, the people's assemblies and responsive coops of Cooperation Jackson.

Earthborn Democracy also generated a number of questions for me as well. And I'd like to sketch out three areas that I'd love the authors to expand upon:

➔ I'd like to know more about the joint authorship of *Earthborn Democracy*. I imagine, as a collective effort, that this book was the result of a long and complex process of collaboration, mutuality, and even attunement. As I read it, I thought quite a bit about María Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman's classic "Have We Got A Theory for You!"—a feminist classic that I often read with my students, who find

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Jean-Paul Gagnon and Mark Chou. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000077 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Lugones' and Spelman's decision to situate and individuate their theoretical and feminist voices a powerful and revelatory one.[2]

For Lugones and Spelman, the decision to particularize their respective voices is deeply theoretical and strategic. Their differentiation of voice allows them to more fully illustrate the differences among women and how those differences are often silenced; to better illustrate the structural political, social, and economic inequalities between white women and Latina women and other women of color; to make explicit not only the features of friendship and allyship that brought them in dialogue, but also the discomforts, disagreements, and problems that posed important challenges to their conversation.

As they note, "we write together without presupposing unity of expression or of experience. So when we speak it unison it means just that—there are two voices and not just one." This dialogue, they later point out, "calls for circumspection, for questioning of yourselves and your roles …."[3]

I am curious what conception of authorship was at work in the writing of *Earthborn Democracy*? Do you see this work as unison through plurality? Did you think about differentiating voice and positionality in the text? Did you have concerns about structural inequality, silencing, and promoting unity? Was the process of writing itself a kind of democratic experiment in theorizing entangled life? To what extent was the creation of your shared voice part of the political project of the book overall? And are there features of the experiment in writing that were particularly notable/illuminating?

➔ Another feature that I found particularly gripping in *Earthborn Democracy* is attunement. I'd love for you to unpack in some more detail how attunement functions and how it is negotiated (if in fact it is). As you say, "attunement is the work of resonating with this structure (morphic fields) and drawing from its power—the accreted energy stored up through patterns of repetition and reiteration."[4]

To my mind, the concept of attunement links together care, resonance, and democracy in a powerful way. It seems right to me, as you propose, that a vital democracy requires a flourishing people and ecology and that for anything to flourish we must have attunement: skills and capacities of care and attentiveness that promote thriving—not mere survival—and which are antithetical to paternalist, dominative perversions of possession. You illustrate this vividly in your accounts of both Robin Wall Kimmerer's and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's writing and ongoing work. For both Kimmerer and Simpson, attunement is built upon indigenous deep knowledge, sensory and spiritual attentiveness, and the inhabitation and affirmation of a time scales shaped around ecosystems, not human frames.

Are there standards for attunement? Are there certain versions or practices of attunement that are better or worse? Do you have investments in how collectivities work out *what* attunement is among practitioners of different knowledges, skills, backgrounds, and capacities? Here I'm thinking a bit of what indigenous politics scholar Gina Starblanket argues when she says, that moving through the auditory mess of colonial settlement—the "riot of noise that is colonialism (citing Audra Simpson)"—requires "listening with a feminist ear" trained to hear, to decipher, to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000077 Published online by Cambridge University Press

identify that which is "out of tune, those jarring notes, those awkward stirring sounds of not being accommodated."[5] What responsibility do readers of *Earthborn Democracy* have in cultivating attunement, whether in listening with a feminist or decolonial ear or looking for or feeling out structural and other inequalities? To what extent are feminist, indigenous, anti-black, or other kinds of understandings needed for productive and careful attunement? Moreover, are there risks to promoting attunement *without* endorsing that kind of care and consideration? Can, for example, careless attunement slide into appropriation or even exploitation?

➔ Last, I find great power in how *Earthborn Democracy* thematizes refusal as generative. I am especially taken with your conceptualization of generative refusal as one no and a thousand yeses. The examples in your book are vivid, pulsating democratic experiments which call to mind what Kevin Quashie calls "aliveness" and these examples become places from which people can both activate their "democratic vitality" and make demands that push beyond critique or challenge and aim toward world-making—an affirmative enactment of another modality of being, a different way of relating to and within the world, and of negotiating difference across many fronts.[6] Sarah Schulman also reminds us that, even when times are exceedingly hard, efforts to build coalitions, to build alternatives, to envision other politics—whether they are short- or long-term—build political capacity. Short-term experimentsalso help to illustrate the violence, limitations, and exclusions of institutionalization. I'd like to know more about your vision about how to generate these yeses in the face of daunting nos. Does the scale and scope of the democratic experiment matter? Should these experiments be assessed in terms of success and failure? How can these experiments be better remembered and woven into collective consciousness?

Thank you for a wonderful read!

Notes

1. McIvor, David W., Joel Alden Schlosser, and Ali Aslam, *Earthborn Democracy: A Political Theory of Entangled Life*. United States: Columbia University Press, 2024, p. 27.
2. Lugones, María C., and Elizabeth V. Spelman. "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'the Woman's Voice.'" *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 6, no. 6, 1983, pp. 573–81.
3. *Ibid*., p. 581.
4. *Earthborn Democracy*.
5. Starblanket, Gina, editor. *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*. 3rd edition., Winnipeg, 2024, p. 104.
6. Quashie, Kevin Everod. *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*. Duke University Press, 2021.

Cite this article: Hsueh, Vicki. 2026. "On Voice, Attunement, and Generative Refusal." Democratic Theory 13 (1): 145–147. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000077

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000077 Published online by Cambridge University Press