Paradox and Possibility: Voluntarism and the Urban Environment in a Post-Political Era

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Abstract
Environmental discourse in western democracies has become embroiled in a post-political crisis in which environmental problems that were once seen as public concerns to be debated openly are now defined as problems that are placed outside of politics. Meanwhile, a focus on urban sustainability has come to heavily influence both the management and the conduct of everyday urban life. This concurrence presents a paradox in which the de-politicization of the environment occurs even as environmental concerns are politically mobilized through various policy initiatives, consumer discourses, and environmentalist calls to action. In this paper, I consider the role of public engagement in the management of urban environments and its ability to undermine post-political discourses. In particular, I explore the ways in which the ethical propositions of an apoliticized environment are variously taken up uncritically, challenged, and sometimes modified through the public’s engagement with de-politicized discourses of environment management. Drawing from a case study in Philadelphia involving ecological restoration volunteers, I argue that volunteerism provides opportunities for the marginalization of the public, but also for confrontation and modification of expert knowledge. Volunteers contest the conceptual underpinnings and desired outcomes of environmental management even as they discipline themselves according to its goals.

Keywords
Urban Political Ecology, Philadelphia, volunteering, urban parks, governmentality

Introduction
Over the last several decades, large American cities have been cast as environmental spaces in which the traditional concerns of economic development are recontextualized such that the mechanisms by which urban systems meet human needs are increasingly understood to rely on or come into conflict with environmental processes. Like the environment itself, the environmental city is increasingly couched in apocalyptic terms, in which the hope of a sustainable way of life rests, at least in part, on whether the functioning of cities can be brought in line with the ecological limits of the planet. This framing has begun to take hold in policy circles and in the public imagination, where a focus on urban sustainability has come to heavily influence both the management and the conduct of everyday urban life. We can see its presence, for example, in the push for green building, local food movements, urban watershed management, and transportation planning - indeed in almost every aspect of urban life. As this movement gains traction, the public is enrolled into environmentalizing discourses through populist appeals, often actively courting local organizations and individuals for the everyday management and maintenance of the urban environment. At the same time, the public is frequently left out of the process of defining environmental concerns themselves, or their solutions. This phenomenon is often understood as a dimension of the broader neoliberalization of economic and social relations, a framing that holds sway especially in human-environment geography. Adding to this framing, Erik Swyngedouw has described a form of post-political urban governance as, meaning that environmental problems that were once seen as public concerns to be debated openly are now
discursively defined as primarily technical in nature, with solutions whose discovery lies beyond the capacity of the public and its politics (Swyngedouw, 2009, 2011a, 2011b). Consequently, the traditional mechanisms that have historically provided for meaningful public engagement in decision-making processes (i.e. public debate at all levels) are disabled, even as public buy-in is placed at the center of the conversation. In this new post-political condition, there can be no debate on fundamental matters, since environmental concerns like climate change and sustainability are framed not as political problems, but as technical ones. With the ethics of the matter so circumscribed, scientific and technical expertise is taken as the primary arbiter in environmental decision-making, and the traditional role of the public sphere - to help determine what matters and what to do about it - is sidelined.

Yet, the concurrence of these two phenomena, of the post-political moment and the environmentalization of the city, seems to present a paradox. As Swyngedouw observes, the depoliticization of the environment occurs even as environmental concerns are politically mobilized through various policy initiatives, consumer discourses, and environmentalist calls to action (Swyngedouw, 2011a). Consequently, the combined notions of the post-political and the environmentalized city reinforce a trend in urban environmental management to solicit public input and citizen participation in a way that doesn’t provide opportunities for actual intervention. Yet, this story of the post-political environmental city may go too far in its characterization of a denuded urban environmental public. That is, while it is important to recognize the increasing dominance of this paradigm, we should not lose sight of the messy and always-open nature of discursive regimes, and the diverse range of actors that simultaneously constitute and contest them. This paper explores the consequences of still-political environmental management through an examination of the mundane governance activities undertaken by everyday members of the public in urban parks through volunteer activities. Before moving to a discussion of the paper’s case study, I will briefly discuss the environmental governance literature and its treatment of the question of voluntarism and the post-political.

**Voluntarism: a Neoliberal Tension**

The varied forms of neoliberalization have long been a major concern in the environmental governance literature within and outside of geography (Heynen and Robbins, 2005; Heynen et al, 2007). Much of this literature has been focused on three general themes: property regimes under neoliberalism (privatization and enclosure), social resistance and activist movements against neoliberal reform, and the rescaling of governance (Himley, 2008). It is this third category, the reorientation of governmental responsibility, especially the reframing of environmental maintenance as an ethical imperative of the responsible environmental citizen, and the actualization of this imperative through voluntarism, that I explore in this article. According to Suzan Ilcan, voluntarism is part of a neoliberal governmental strategy that privatizes responsibility through “the re-consideration of the relations of public and private; the mobilization of responsible citizenship; and, the formation of a cultural mentality of rule” (Ilcan, 2009, p. 209). Volunteering one’s labor, within a neoliberal governmental frame, is more than a simple act of generosity and virtue; it is a governmental technology whose purpose is, as Vrasti and Montsion have it, “to align individual conduct with neoliberal capital's double injunction of market rationality and social responsibility” (2014, p. 336). While voluntarism is widely
recognized as having a central place in neoliberal governance broadly, most notably in
development and poverty alleviation, of special interest for the purposes of this paper is the
degree to which neoliberalism’s individualistic ethical framework is tied up with environmental
concerns, where efforts have helped to produce a sense of individual responsibility for
environmental health (Lorimer, 2010), or what Bailie Smith and Laurie call a form of
environmental citizenship (2011).

Much of the literature on neoliberal environmental governance has taken up the
Foucauldian notion of governmentality to examine this process of rescaling, especially for
understanding the state’s role in coercing urban publics into participating in infrastructure
management according to its own concerns (Castan Broto and Bulkeley, 2013; Jessop, 2007,
Kooy and Bakker, 2008; MacKinnon, 2000; Wachsmuth, 2012). Yet, Perkins is careful wary of
explanations that rely on a centrally-organized “shadow state”, and instead adopts the notion of
shared governance through neoliberal integration of governmental agencies and civil sector
groups, whose relations are governed by a neoliberal market logic (2009; see also Peck et al,
2013). Pointing toward the general messiness of such projects, Perkins has also shown that the
effects of neoliberal valorization of voluntarism can often achieve what may look on their face to
be contradictory aims, for example justifying the acquisition of land for public parks, while
slashing budgets and reducing a unionized maintenance workforce (2013).

Over the last decade, Erik Swyngedouw has offered a sustained diagnosis of what he calls
the “post-political moment” that attends our current era of neoliberal urban reform. This moment
is characterized most notably by the displacement of agonistic democratic practices, like
disagreement and debate, with a host of governmental technologies that aim for agreement and
consensus, emphasize the importance of accountancy metrics, and privilege technocratic
decision-making and problem-solving (2009). Or, as Davidson and Iveson put it, post-political
governmentality constrains political choice “by the constant invocation of necessity”, in which
the process of determining what is necessary with regard to urban planning, environmental
management, and other concerns previously considered to be politically “in play”, is sidestepped
through the deployment of those metrics and the assertion of technocratic expertise (2015).
Furthermore, despite the frequent attempt to include “the public” into its projects, this sense of
necessity - combined with a form of neo-populist, entrepreneurial defeatism - post-political
urban reform always aims, again, toward consensus rather than agonism, imposing severe limits
to democratic engagement with urban governance procedures (Paddison, 2009). This, above all,
leads to what Swyngedouw calls a “paradoxical situation [in which] the environment is
politically mobilized, yet this political concern with the environment … suspend[s] the proper
political dimension” (2011a, p. 255).

Clearly, the implications of the post-politicization of environmental management are vast
and profound, but the above diagnosis is not without its (often sympathetic) critics. While
McCarthy doubts the general claim that any post-political consensus is truly hegemonic (2013),
others have argued that despite the relative sway of these discourses, there are progressive
possibilities “in amongst the neoliberal canvas” (Williams et al, 2104). Underlying this line of
critique is a reengagement with Michel Foucault’s oft-cited theoritization of ‘government’ as ‘the
right disposition of things’ — that is, the arrangement and management of, and thus a political
orientation toward, people and objects that produce the material conditions that make particular
ways of being possible. These arrangements integrate both state actors and members of civil society to engage in struggles that are filled with ambiguity, ambivalence, and indecision as much as they are by closure and domination (Gordon, 1991). Arun Agrawal’s work on “environmentality” draws on this notion to show that, even as environmental problems are positioned as the domain of experts, the constitution of environmental objects of knowledge, and consequently of new objects of governance (including the self), requires the active participation of environmental subjects (2005). It is at this juncture that participation also presents new opportunities for engagement, collaboration, and change (see Lemke, 2002; Dowling, 2010). Along these lines, Macaraig has argued that the mobilization of voluntarism by post-political neoliberal discourses has, perhaps ironically, “provided an increase in opportunities for civil society actors to become key agents in both park planning and conservation” (2011, p. 357), while Ernwein suggests that government programs can be simultaneously neoliberal and progressive (2017). Finally, in a particularly notable case, with respect to this paper, Brownlow argues that voluntarism in urban parks in Philadelphia has provided a platform for “insurgent performances” that help to reclaim public space, expose injustice, and enact forms of citizenship that run counter to the atomistic model of citizenship associated with neoliberal governmentality (2011).

Environmentality, then, is a framework for understanding how environmentally-oriented governmental rationales that combine the ethical care of the environment with the care of the environmental self, suggesting that the formation of state and public subjectivities, and the discursive institutions through which they operate, are not (or not only) the negative effect of power wielded by the state or other institutions (2005; see also Ranganathan, 2015). Rather, the public, the state, and their respective concerns develop through mutual engagement. Thus, while the ethical propositions of an apoliticized, neoliberal environmentalism are often taken up unquestioningly, public participation simultaneously presents opportunities to challenge, and sometimes modify, them. This is precisely the kind of agonism that post-political strategies are meant to disable.

In this paper, I follow Agrawal’s lead in my examination of the formation of new environmentally-oriented urban publics, exploring how voluntarism can undermine post-political aims even as volunteers seek to carry them out, and concluding that voluntarism is coconstitutive with neoliberal discourses in shaping the material conditions of the city even as it works to undermine those discourses. Exploring this process through the case of ecological restoration in Philadelphia, I argue that volunteer participation in urban ecological restoration calls forth a certain relationship that allows volunteers to 'discover … the truth of their being' - as urban people who have specific characteristics vis-a-vis the city and the environment (Foucault 1990, p. 5). They come to understand themselves as environmental subjects through their participation in the maintenance of landscapes that are imbued with specific forms of cultural significance organized around the bifurcation of urban space and the space of nature. And while the features of post-political neoliberalism can be easily identified in this case, it is also clear that volunteers confront their desire to repair the city/nature interface with an equally-powerful desire to rethink the nature of that interface. The controversies that arise in the performance of environmental management make apparent the multivalent nature of subjectivity and the possibility, indeed perhaps the necessity, of subjects to inhabit multiple and contradictory positions vis-a-vis the
environment and the city.

This paper explores the public’s role in environmental management in parks and greenspace in the 'environmentalized' city by drawing on ethnographic research conducted with ecological restoration volunteers in 2010 in Philadelphia, PA. Here, as in so many other places, sustainability has featured prominently in the state's rhetoric in recent years. Focusing on one of Philadelphia's largest and oldest parks, I discuss contested land-use decisions within the context of park management and ecological restoration. As volunteer labor has become increasingly important to the management of the park system in Philadelphia, representatives of the state and the public find themselves in close quarters with one another, and providing greater opportunities for the state to marginalize public input by enforcing its views and enrolling publics into its designs. Formally, the role of volunteers is largely limited to the implementation of restoration plans as designed by restoration experts. But this arrangement also provides opportunities for volunteers to confront and manipulate expert knowledge and discourses of restoration and sustainability. Through that process, volunteers contest its conceptual underpinnings and desired outcomes as often as they discipline themselves according to its goals.

For the purposes of this paper, I focus only on park management as a specific subset of those concerns. In the next section, I contextualize the case of Wissahickon park, a subset of Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park System, the system under which all parks in Philadelphia fall. Among the hundreds of parks in Philadelphia's more than 9,000 acres of parkland, Wissahickon Park serves as the best expression of the intersection of wilderness as a management concern and a reliance on volunteer labor for restoration work in Philadelphia. Philadelphia itself serves as a bellwether for urban wilderness management, since its park system, unlike those of many other large cities, is managed to a much larger degree as a wild or 'natural' site.

Background
The Fairmount Park System, established in 1867, was pieced together through donations or appropriations of country estates, industrial sites, and agricultural fields. Its purpose was, in part, to protect the watershed that feeds the Schuylkill River, from which most of the city's water was derived, by resisting, preventing, and in some cases undoing the effects of the expanding city (especially waterfront development), and to ensure that urban people had opportunities to escape, however briefly, from the ills of urban industrialization. In this regard, it’s purpose was similar to those of other large parks established in major cities in the United States during the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

In Philadelphia, two parks were established in that initial round of park-making. One of them, Wissahickon Park, stretches in a 5-mile long corridor through northwestern Philadelphia, its narrow form encompassing a deep gorge through which the last five miles of the Wissahickon Creek run before joining the Schuylkill River. (The creek extends for an additional twelve miles upstream and outside the city limits). While there was already significant industrial development along the creek at the time of park formation, much of it remained wooded, and the gorge was much-discussed as a site of urban-adjacent wilderness, an object of fascination for Philadelphians seeking an escape from urban life. Today, Wissahickon Park is one of the most visited areas of Philadelphia's park system, in part because it is also one of the best maintained, most densely wooded, and to some minds, the most picturesque. On this latter point, images of
the Wissahickon often adorned the covers of publications of the Fairmount Park System in the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s. Its continued upkeep as a wooded park is in large part due to the activities of the Friends of the Wissahickon (FOW), an organization that has operated continually since the 1920s and has devoted much time and money to the protection of the site (Contosta and Franklin, 2006).

The Fairmount Park Commission and the Categorization of Urban Nature

Despite its historical significance and cultural importance for the city, the park system suffered from fiscal neglect in the mid-20th century as Philadelphia, like industrial cities, reeled from the consequences of deindustrialization. In an effort to push back the tide of neglect, the Fairmount Park Commission conducted a survey of its property holdings in 1983, which it used to develop a master plan for the management of its 8,700 acre park system (now more than 9,200) (Finkel, 1986). The resulting master plan was the first time in decades that a set of clear goals for the park commission were articulated, establishing guidelines for the preservation, administration, and future acquisition of park lands. Within a new a system of categorization, all park lands were designated as one of three types: recreational resources (which focused on active recreation, like ball fields and playgrounds), designed landscapes (city parks with ‘natural’ components like trees, fountains, and grass lawns, but characterized as a place to be used primarily for human enjoyment), and natural lands, some of which were acknowledged as being in use for passive recreation, but whose primary importance was defined in terms of ecosystem services, as well as their intrinsic value as sites of urban biodiversity (Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, 1983). In these terms, the types of park landscape found in the city were placed along a continuum based on the degree of contact between the human and the natural. For example, recreational sites were given over completely to human use, where the presence of non-human life was left out of the managerial calculus (except when targeted for removal, as in the case of persistent colonizing weeds on ball fields and other recreational spaces). In 'designed landscapes', non-human nature was highly managed according to human needs and desires (as in the case of manicured lawns and botanical gardens).

Of the 'natural lands' described in the master plan, a small subset of sites were considered to be relatively free from anthropogenic disturbance, and these were held up as ideals to strive for in the management of other natural, but 'degraded ', lands. Within this designation, the report identified areas which were of particular ecological significance (for example, those that contained rare ecological configurations), as well as ones that were in acute danger of disturbance as a consequence of forces associated with the built environment, like increased erosion from run-off from impervious surfaces. As a political intervention, the plan renewed managerial concern for the relationship between specific components of the park and specific activities for managers and users, identifying a set of urban-adjacent natural objects to be managed and used, and a set of human subjects to manage and use them.

While the master plan helped to position park lands within a coherent urban policy agenda, its specific goals languished for more than a decade because of a lack of funding, until a grant in the late 1990s helped to renew attention to a subset of its concerns, the 'natural lands' designation. This grant funded a new round of environmental assessments to be carried out under the new Natural Lands Restoration and Environmental Education Program (NLREEP).
These assessments, and the research strategy that underpinned them, drew a great deal from the then-emerging field of ecosystem restoration, which draws a clear distinction between humans and nature through the conceptual mechanism of disturbance (see Gobster and Hull, 2000 for more discussion on ecosystem restoration). While it was not new for surveyors, naturalists, foresters, and lay people in Philadelphia to talk about the park in terms of damage caused by human activity, ecosystem restoration lent scientific certitude to a managerial agenda that treated park users as antagonists in urban ecosystems, and supported a preference for particular types of park landscapes and the human activities that attended them. With a turn toward ecosystem restoration, park governance had become firmly grounded in an ecological science based on the notion of ecological succession, in which most of Philadelphia's ecosystem was understood as being in recovery from intensive farming in the 18th and 19th centuries on most of the land now encompassed by the Fairmount Park System:

People have controlled, reshaped and destroyed these lands as a means of supporting human life for thousands of years.... [In the mid-nineteenth century, n]atural lands were the prescription for the ills of the city. People were encouraged to go to natural areas and find solace, peace and redemption in the land. [...] Parks with carefully designed natural areas were planned and implemented throughout the country in hopes of saving mankind from itself. Natural lands in the Fairmount Park system were conceived through such thinking, and today a park system with natural lands is accessible to most every Philadelphian. The Fairmount Park system offers a variety of restorative opportunities for contemplation and meditation, as well as active recreation [...] The natural lands are important ... for lessening the environmental impacts of a highly developed and busy city. (Fairmount Park Commission 1999, p. I-9)
The first task under this new regime was to develop a database that would catalogue all of the park's natural land holdings, divided into what would become hundreds of discrete sites, and document their quality and character, including the type of disturbance at all locations in the park, as well as a list of animal and plant species that existed there. The full report, published in 1999 as the 'Natural Lands Restoration Master Plan' (Fairmount Park Commission), included individual reports for the seven major watershed parks in Philadelphia, produced by field researchers, many of them volunteers trained by the Fairmount Park Commission and the Academy of Natural Sciences. Fragmentation of urban forest canopy features prominently in those reports, since it meant greater exposure to 'external' influences emanating from the city, leading to higher mortality rates and shorter life spans for trees and other organisms. As stated in the report, '[b]ecause of the complexity of management of natural lands in an urban setting, goals for restoration need to be established to ensure common understanding and continuity of activities undertaken....The goal of restoration is to strengthen the viability of self-sustaining ecological communities containing native species appropriate to the region....' (ibid, p. I-18). Researchers' preferences for end-stage successional landscapes were clear in their descriptions. For example, one land parcel is described as having 'a large woods with some good, diverse canopy' while others are described as being 'scrubby' or 'overrun by invasives' (Fairmount Park Commission, 1999, p. 838). For the authors of the report, the purpose of the park remains much the same as in the 19th century; only now, this view had the weight of restoration science behind it. As such, it enabled managers to organize their activity around these new matters of concern.

The field reports and historical accounts produced through the NLREEP were subsequently compiled and inserted into a larger story about the state of the park; the report's conclusions reinforced and re-inscribed well-worn lines of demarcation between nature and the city, even as it became a rallying point for groups tasked with the maintenance of Philadelphia's ecosystems. The notion of disturbance became the center around which the NLREEP's activities revolved and, in the following years, the everyday activities of park managers and volunteers that put this new system of knowledge to work.

Volunteerism, Discipline, and Park Discourse
This new framework was especially relevant for the management of one of the city’s oldest parks, Wissahickon Park, in which 1755 out of 2000 acres were identified as natural land (Fairmount Park Commission 1999, p. 613). Not coincidentally, Wissahickon park is typically understood as a site of urban or urban-adjacent wilderness. At least since the early 19th century, the Wissahickon was a destination for Philadelphians seeking an escape from urban life. Today, it is one of the best maintained, most densely wooded, and to some minds, the most picturesque parks in the city. The high level of attention that it has enjoyed for official and unofficial land managers is in large part because of the activities of the Friends of the Wissahickon, which has operated continually since the 1920s (Contosta and Franklin, 2006; c.f. Brownlow’s work on Cobb's Creek, 2005, 2006). The reasons for the FOW’s relative success in terms of maintaining Wissahickon park in this manner, as compared to the declining nature of other parks in the city, are somewhat predictable. As a whole, the Fairmount Park Commission received a declining
portion of the city’s budget throughout the 20th century, despite expansion of the system from a few thousand in the late 1800s to 9,200 acres in 2015, and, according to most accounts, the quality of some park lands has declined as a result (Brownlow, 2005; Philadelphia Parks Alliance, 2008). During this time, park maintenance in Philadelphia came to rely more and more heavily on volunteer participation in the management of its parks (Contosta, 1992). Meanwhile, the FOW has long counted among its members various wealthy and politically-connected individuals, who have helped to finance the governance of the park in the vacuum left by the often cash-strapped Fairmount Park Commission (Contosta, 1992).

Despite its position vis-a-vis the city and the park commission, the FOW’s activities are still dependent on and driven by volunteers. Since its inception in the 1920s, it has always pursued an ethic of volunteerism. Most of its funding comes from donations, and most of the work it accomplishes, from trail restoration to wildlife monitoring, requires unpaid labor. By drawing on a discourse of volunteerism, it frames the challenges of maintaining a park as a communal concern, and consequently positions volunteering as an ethical imperative of responsible urbanites. Volunteer groups are encouraged to 'adopt' sections of the park for restoration, focused on removing invasive species or other activities in their adopted section. A story in a recent FOW newsletter, for example, celebrates the commitments of a volunteer group comprising members of a local food cooperative and grocery store. A member of that group is quoted as saying, 'We're not only concerned about the standards of our food....we're also concerned about community issues and the environment we live in' (McCabe, 2004). Here, the challenges of maintaining a park are framed as 'community issues' — issues that the residents of the neighborhoods bordering the park must face collectively (ibid).

This focus on collective responsibility in maintaining the park is especially visible in another set of articles the following year, describing the efforts of its members to repair historical monuments following major flooding 2005, in which individuals from surrounding neighborhoods are shown banding together in a time of crisis to repair damage and prevent further destruction.

**Floods and the Power of Water**

In the summer of 2005, two momentous rainstorms (on August 1 and September 28) caused significant damage to valued features of the Wissahickon, destroying 19th century stone bridges and severely eroding stream banks. The storms sparked significant interest among FOW members in water as a force that 'must be tamed' (Froelich, 2005, p. 4). 'Water has destructive power,' writes the FOW's executive director following the storms. 'With the urbanization of Philadelphia and its immediate suburbs in the Wissahickon watershed, storm water has developed incredible destructive power' (Pelikan, 2005, p. 3). Almost a full year after the storms, a new president of the FOW wrote about the struggle against the power of water as a heroic one, arguing that 'we are limited in our ability to affect these forces of nature, regardless of our planning and work. Still, we persevere....' (Lukens, 2006, p. 2).

This campaign was effective in mobilizing volunteers to the cause of preserving the park by mediating as much as possible the influence of the city. Through the construction of terrace steps to slow the speed of runoff from surrounding neighborhoods, for example, the damage done by water in this instance is framed primarily as an urban problem. The FOW's interventions
are meant, in a way, to transform urban water - which has a destructive impact on park conditions - into a form water that works to restore the park. Along those lines, another article acknowledged that, in addition to its power to destroy, 'water is powerfully resilient.... Despite the fact that the Wissahickon is one of the four most polluted tributaries of the Schuylkill and takes in millions of gallons of treated effluent from sewage treatment plants upstream – as well as a fair bit of waste from factories in Montgomery County [upstream from Philadelphia County] – the creek still supports geese and ducks, turtles, snakes, and fish of all kinds, from minnows to bass to trout' (ibid). At the same time, preservation efforts primarily concern human needs and desires: 'A creek less picturesque than the one flowing in front of Valley Green Inn [a restaurant housed in an historical building] would be bad for business. Water in which trout are not able to survive would not bring the fishermen to the Wissahickon. Stagnant water would not be subject matter for photographers and painters who draw inspiration from the Wissahickon...' (ibid).

The meaning is clear: through their efforts as volunteers, humans can become mediators between the forces of Nature and the park. By putting on display individuals or groups with a specific set of commitments and desires, and who engage in specific practices in the park, these stories integrate the ethical stance of volunteerism into the life of the urban citizen. Indeed, the connection between article and reader is often highlighted in side panels that provide information on how the reader can 'get involved' and 'do their part'. One notable example is a sidebar about how to participate in an easement program in which property owners cede development rights to the park commission. Other articles speak directly to readers, encouraging them to volunteer for trail repair crews, or enroll in workshops that teach participants how to slow soil erosion in the park. In this way, the newsletter functions as an active document that accompanies readers into the park.

The key to these efforts is the continuing conceptual separation of the city from the park, and the identification of a set of ethical and practical concerns associated with this conceptual bisection. While the FOW is ostensibly concerned only with park matters, it is clearly embedded within the larger frame of the interests of the city and, in practice, its work extends far beyond the park's formal boundaries. Concerns in the park connect seamlessly to a broader set of practices related to responsible environmental practice with respect to urban life. For example, an article entitled 'Stormwater Runoff and You' details how readers should behave with regard to runoff, including the proper disposal of hazardous materials, landscaping, use of rain barrels, and automobile care. Lawn care and its requirements of chemical inputs are set up in opposition to the needs of urban birds and other wildlife, whose migrations extend beyond the park but nevertheless stand in as representatives of park spaces (c.f. Robbins, 2007). Finally, new home construction is acknowledged as a necessary part of urban development and growth, but is also equated with a drop in water quality and an increase in environmental degradation.

These connections integrate with the FOW's programmatic objective 'to preserve the natural beauty and wildness of the Wissahickon Valley', a slogan which adorns its t-shirts, newsletters, and other promotional material. Storms, urban animal migrations, home construction, and lawn care all become sites of ethical decision making, necessary concerns for the nature-loving city-dweller, influencing not only how parks are understood and used, but also how urban space itself is perceived and performed. In recent years, these efforts to preserve wilderness have become closely tied to ecological restoration activities. The discourse of
ecological restoration becomes powerful as its ethical, political, and conceptual contours are continually drawn and redrawn in park publications, but importantly, also through the actual restoration of park lands. In the next section, I discuss findings derived from participant observation in park restoration activities and in focus groups with restoration volunteers that demonstrate the degree to which these commitments become integrated with urban environmental subjectivities, but also highlights the potential for contestation.

Practicing Restoration

Of the range of opportunities to invest one’s time or money in urban parks in Philadelphia, the option to volunteer for ecological restoration crews is one of the most direct. Volunteers have been a feature of Wissahickon Park’s management since at least the 1920s, but it wasn’t until the 1990s that these efforts were actively sought out by the Fairmount Park Commission as well. This was also when this work was explicitly framed within the language of ecological restoration. The typical restoration worker commits only a short amount of time, perhaps a few hours one weekend, to restoration, often as part of an organized corporate or non-profit group. The fact that volunteers have an interest in parks, but no particular experience or training, means that restoration crews present a unique set of challenges, as well as possibilities for the governance of urban parks.

There is a high degree of oversight by park employees of restoration crews, providing training, tools, and detailed plans to guide restoration activities. These specialists make an effort to frame the efforts of volunteers as a service to the city, but emphasize that volunteers should be realistic about what they hope to accomplish during what is often only a single 4-hour shift. Parks cannot be restored in a day, they explain, and it’s unlikely volunteers will see any dramatic changes by the end of their shift. Instead, they are encouraged to adopt smaller tasks, to identify achievable goals and projects, as an effort to frame their labor as a contribution to the larger purpose of the park commission. Often, volunteers will form small teams focused on one aspect of restoration, such as the removal of vines from a particular stand of trees, or the felling of a few invasive seedlings. By keeping expectations manageable, park volunteers can leave at the end of the day with a sense of accomplishment and ownership, while park employees can direct the long-term efforts to transform the park. But this arrangement didn’t always hold.

Removing vines and invasive trees proved to be an especially potent site for reinforcing the values associated with the discourse of ecological restoration. Clearing vines from overgrown sections of the park entailed a visual reworking of the landscape so that wooded areas could be better distinguished from trails and lawns, and this activity fit nicely into the park commission’s idea of achievable goals for a single day, and of a park that’s more “presentable” for the imagined user. The hard physical labor required to sort through tangled underbrush, release native shrubs from the curls of invasive vines, or chop and saw one’s way through a stand of invasive trees forged a strong connection between the goals of restoration and the minds and bodies of restoration volunteers. Indeed, vine removal often prompted vigorous discussions among volunteers about their entanglements with non-human nature beyond the park. For example, when one woman was startled by a rustling in the branches above her head as another volunteer struggled to pull down an especially persistent tendril, three others were prompted to discuss minor fears of wildlife around their homes and in their backyards. One volunteer told
about seeing an opossum in her hedgerow at home and her wariness in walking past it, for fear
that the animal may still lurk there, and might jump out at her at any moment. Another told of an
entire neighborhood that was 'terrorized' by raccoons who rifled through trash during the night
and left it scattered in the street in the morning. Of course, these stories are fairly mundane,
common to the suburban experience. But they were given new life as their telling coincided with
the work of restoration. Volunteers described their work to establish lines of sight through
wooded areas as an effort to prevent animals from encroaching into human spaces, as well as to
prevent humans from hiding in the park, presumably for illicit purposes. Overgrown areas have
often provided sites for dumping trash and engaging in a variety of illegal activities unseen. In
the words of one volunteer, restoration was important because 'people weren’t using the park [...] the way we wanted them to', and the changes brought on by restoration limited opportunities for undesirable uses. Restoration helped to correct the problem by making park visitors' passage from the city into the park less anxiety-provoking because of a perceived increase in safety through visibility.

**Challenging restoration**

Without the efforts of the FOW, and the Fairmount Park Commission more broadly, it would not
be immediately obvious what the park is for. I have written elsewhere about efforts to shape
public perceptions of parks during and just after their construction in the 19th century (Gabriel,
2011). To some extent, the efforts described here carry that tradition forward to the 21st. By now,
it’s commonplace to point out that the meaning of particular spaces and landscapes isn’t given,
but produced through the interplay between institutions and individuals, and the park is no
different. Shaping the park is carried out not only by institutions, but by individuals, who don’t
always adopt institutional intentions wholeheartedly. Park restoration offers many opportunities
to carry forward those intentions, but it affords the opposite, as well. While the park commission
and the FOW both flex their muscle in the shaping of park lands, their intentions are not
unchallenged, even by the people who voluntarily sign up to carry them forward.

For example, during one volunteer event, a group of men had taken on responsibilities to
remove a stand of invasive Ailanthus trees. The job would eventually take the better part of a day
to complete, but after an hour or two of cutting, volunteers and park employees alike began to
express reluctance over tree removal. Said one volunteer: 'I bet that’s the first time we’ve cut a
tree down in this project,' lamenting the gap left behind in the tree canopy, and noting the
tendency of the program to focus on the planting of trees. As the work continued, other
volunteers intervened, arguing that too many trees had been marked for removal, and that their
invasive status wasn’t sufficient to justify the effect their removal would have on the character of
the park. Meanwhile, the men who had initially taken up the job had begun to identify additional
(native) trees they they deemed in need of felling. The final result was much different from the
plan initially outlined by park employees. Some of the trees initially marked for removal remained, while others that had not been marked were be taken down. This moment of
contestation highlights not only the concerns of volunteers, but also their willingness to contest
'expert' opinion, and the willingness of some managers to acquiesce to the desires of volunteers.

The fundamental conceptual boundaries between the park and the city that restoration
required was itself not always beyond reproach by volunteers. During a follow-up focus group
with volunteers, when a restoration volunteer described the Wissahickon as a “wilderness”, another asserted immediately that “the Wissahickon is definitely not wilderness,” adding, “Have you ever even been in the [real] woods?” Some felt strongly that an entirely new category was necessary to describe the Wissahickon, which they saw as not fully removed from human activity in the way “true” wilderness would be, but not entirely “urban” either. Many participants thought in terms of degrees of wildness. While the Wissahickon was not like “city properties”, as one volunteer put it, like the public squares downtown, it was also not completely wild. Instead, the participant described the nearby John Heinz Wildlife Refuge as a “true wilderness”, one to which human access has been prohibited (nearly) completely. In his words, the wildlife refuge is “not a park for human beings, it’s not even like Wissahickon park…” For him, “it’s a question of who [or what] has priority”, or the degree to which human are allowed to modify the landscape to suit their needs. With regard to the general question about wilderness in the city, another participant said that while she doesn’t expect to find wilderness in the city, it would be “wonderful to find it” there. For her, while wilderness is distinct from urban-ness, she didn’t see any reason why the two couldn’t exist adjacent to one another. On the question of park management, one participant emphasized what he saw as conflict between the interests of the land and those of its users, and was pleased that the Fairmount Park Commission “worries about the land much more than it does about the user”. He believed that the land ought to be protected from human interference. In short, even when the binary relationship between the park and the city featured in volunteers’ discussions, it was by no means the final word, and volunteers were quite open to challenging it.

In focus groups and during participant observation, the effects of competing concerns in parks were most visible in the context of foraging from urban parks. Some participants held firm to the view that humans should refrain from foraging in the park, reflecting a view that predominates among park managers, arguing that foraging violated not only park rules but also the integrity of the ecosystems found in the park. This position is expressed clearest in a letter to the Philadelphia Inquirer from 2006, written by a one-time Program Administrator at the Fairmount Park Commission, who argued that

[Foraging reflects a] sense of materialistic privilege [that] is something we all must work harder to change. The notion that a public park is ‘mine for the taking’ must be turned into a commitment to respect the resources with which nature has blessed all of us for our collective enjoyment. Even fallen twigs and seeds provide habitat and food for forest dwellers. (2006)

However, many restoration volunteers were open to the idea of foraging, and expressed interest in learning more about edible plants in parks, even though they were not aware of their presence before participating in the restoration activities. Still others actively pursued a relationship with the park that included foraging, were regular collectors of edible plants prior to participation in the research, and questioned the wisdom of restoration activities aimed at eradicating plants like wineberry, which is both invasive and abundant. One volunteer said that the presence of the berry in the park was one of the things that made the park meaningful to him, suggesting that the prevalence of wineberries along the edges of the park has the power to connect park spaces with the people who live near them.
In another focus group, participants’ views on the question of foraging were nuanced, sometimes ambivalent. Many participants gathered, or knew people who gathered, wild foods, like mulberry, wineberry, or mushrooms. Others saw no conflict between restoration and the gathering of berries, which “would be eaten by birds anyway”. Still another participant felt that while harvesting abundant nuts and berries was unlikely to cause any damage to ecosystems, harvesting holly branches in the winter was probably more destructive. However, this comment prompted another participant to ask where she could find holly branches in the park, because she didn’t know they grew there, and would like to harvest them. Yet another research participant expressed guilt about her decision to remove samples of schist from the park for use as wedding decorations. Wissahickon schist is a unique form of sedimentary rock from which many homes in the area were constructed during the 18th and 19th centuries, and has become an iconic marker of the degree to which urban development in that period relied on the natural resources of the region. Though this particular research participant ultimately felt removing the stones from the park was justified, her hesitation and guilt highlights the ethical ambiguity of engaging in such transgressive acts.

Further underscoring this ambiguity among research participants was the tendency of participants, during the course of focus groups, to modulate their positions on harvesting plants for food or other uses from the parks. In one case, the shift began with a discussion about firewood, especially fallen branches for kindling. One participant explained that, “I’ve seen people collecting kindling along the edge of the park by my house. I’ve even done it myself. I don't see how that hurts anything.” As above, mushrooms seemed to fall outside of traditional concerns about over-harvesting, since they don't propagate in the same way as plants and, in the eyes of some participants, are therefore more resistant to overharvesting. As these conversations continued, participants commonly turned away from initial critical views about gathering and began to see such as activities as part of the fabric of their urban lives.

As the above examples demonstrate, restoration volunteers maintain a range of perspectives that reflect, overlap, and just as often contradict the perspectives of restoration experts affiliated with the Park Commission and the FOW. Yet, as implemented by these organizations, the practices associated with ecological restoration are meant to reinforce the notion of the park as a non-human, non-economic, non-urban space, and to achieve these ends through both the programmatic and discursive enrollment of park volunteers. We can see this in the park commission's efforts to encourage volunteers to remove weeds that are threatening the ecological integrity of the park but are economically useful, in the connections between discussions of ecological restoration and the park as a space of wilderness, and in the distinction that the park commission and some park users draw between “city parks” and others like the Wissahickon. Finally, we can see it in the framing of ecological degradation as a consequence of urban spillover effects.

Nevertheless, this framing is not intact in all times and in all places. It was frequently challenged both at the sites of restoration and later, in the thoughts and speech of restoration volunteers, as well as in their mundane, day-to-day activities. The effects of the Park Commission’s efforts to render its propositions beyond the realm of the political enjoyed uneven success, and the knowledges that inform them were anything but fixed. Their unmooring was often accomplished not by people who set out to intentionally undermine them, but also by those
took them up in good faith. Indeed, the enrollment of volunteers seemed to invite contestation, propelled by the inevitable political messiness of the everyday. Thus, the formation of governmental regimes and their effects are perhaps better understood as the result not only on the imposition of state or institutional power, but also brought into being by the unending experimentations and subversive performances of seemingly docile urban environmental subjects.

Conclusion
In a recent paper, Jodi Dean issued a dire warning that neoliberal appropriations of concepts like generosity and altruism has the potential to undermine and erode those concepts, as well as that of “community” itself (2015). Whether in the form of sustainability plans, appeals to an increasingly mobile and environmentally sensitive “creative class”, or investments in green infrastructure like parks, urban economic development is increasingly couched in environmental terms. As Erik Swyngedouw has argued, neoliberal governmental regimes tend to place the ability to decide what “the environment” means, the nature of its problems, or the solutions that might be implemented to correct them, further and further out of reach for open public debate.

Yet, as Arun Agrawal has shown, volunteerism relies on docile subjects who internalize and perform according to specific bodies of knowledge, even as the underlying epistemological positions of environmental management are frequently closed off to them. Yet, as we have seen, subjects are not always docile, but active and generative participants in the constitution of knowledge. In this paper, I have argued that promoting a scientific knowledge of ecological restoration in Philadelphia, and pursuing its aims through the technology of voluntarism, achieved a variety of effects in terms of how volunteers reproduced their parks. Within the ontological frame of ecological restoration, several environmental “objects” were fixed: ecological distress, the classification of native and non-native species, the location and function of various organisms, and so on. By including park repairs within this frame, voluntarism became an expert-driven governance framework that obscured the political work that had been done to secure the desirability of particular 'native' landscapes. The discursive politics of restoration work well-hidden, volunteers had no role in the initial decision-making process, including when, where, and how restoration would occur. Even so, as they became active participants in the production of the actual spaces of restoration, volunteers frequently challenged the basic assumptions of environmental restoration as well as the specific determinations of experts, thereby becoming key participants in the production of this knowledge through the everyday practice of restoration.

While I share the concerns articulated by Dean, Swyngedouw, and others about the dangers of post-political neoliberal governance, this paper suggests that the outcome of these forms of governance can be highly variegated not only because their reliance on volunteers presents opportunities for direct resistance and cooption, but because their very constitution is often contingent on the cooperation of a diverse range of actors, whose internalization and enactment of governmental desires is never done with perfect fidelity. In Philadelphia, this contestation produced urban park space in sometimes unanticipated ways, constituted through improvisational performance in, and engagement with, state actors. Insofar as volunteerism is a “technology of the self”, volunteers played a key role not only in self-discipline according to the
dictates of the state, but in shaping the knowledge that informed it. The logic of ecological restoration was transformed as it was taken up by volunteers. The contingent nature of this process - contingent, that is, on the interactions among volunteers and managers, among others - means that the logics that underpin volunteerism as a disciplinary technology are always subject to change through the activities of volunteers and the other actors with whom they engage. That is, despite the wide-ranging effect of restricting the public's ability to set the agenda for this new environmental urbanism, volunteers pursue a range of concerns beyond the narrow aims of the neoliberal state and related institutions.

Thus, this paper contributes to a growing recognition that to understand the field of power that shapes human-environment relationships in modern cities, as well as the more general effects of voluntarism as a tool of post-political governmental regimes, we need a broadened understanding of who governs effectively; limiting our view of “who governs” only to include the state and related institutions is to risk viewing more mundane practices of governance as mere products of a dominant regime, as ultimately ineffective modes of resistance to dominant powers or, at best, as merely hopeful examples of what could be. Expanding our notion of governance to include a more extensive range of governmental strategies and apparatuses wherever they operate brings to the fore sites of ambiguity, indecision, and possibility that accompany diverse and overlapping governmental rationalities. As McCarthy wrote about neoliberal discursive formulations, “I am not sure it is either accurate or helpful for those critical of them to cede even so much ground as to begin from the premise that such depoliciting consensuses are in fact truly hegemonic” (2013). Indeed, this is precisely the ground that postpolitical regimes require to be successful: the extent to which they are successful is the extent to which people, communities, and “the public” accept the assertion that there is no ground to stand on when it comes to defining the terms of discussion. The controversies that arise as citizens engage with state sponsored governance strategies enables us to see how publics can manipulate and undermine state power even as they become subject to it.
Acknowledgements
This paper would not have been possible without the assistance of members the Fairmount Park Commission and the joyful participation of hard-working park volunteers. I am also grateful to Kevin St. Martin, Eric Sarmiento, Sean Tanner, and Luke Drake, who provided invaluable feedback on earlier drafts. Finally, I also appreciate the comments of three anonymous reviewers, whose suggestions greatly helped in improving the final draft of this paper.
References


Alec Brownlow has written extensively on voluntarism in another large watershed park in Philadelphia, Cobbs Creek Park, as well as on the park system more generally. See Brownlow, 2005, 2006, 2011.

The seven parks are: Tacony Creek Park, FDR Park, Fairmount (East/West) Park, Pennypack Park, Wissahickon Valley Park, Poquessing Creek Park, and Cobbs Creek Park.