

**READING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE  
AS CITIZENSHIP  
AN ARENDTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

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## Abstract

*An apparent divide exists between leading proponents of environmental justice and ecological citizenship. The essay sets out to bridge this gap, on the premise that there is much to be learned by bringing together questions of justice and citizenship where ecological matters are concerned. The environmental justice movement has its roots in efforts to address distributive injustice, but many of its demands clearly encompass issues related to the institutions and practices of citizenship. Furthermore, an increasing body of scholarship has highlighted the role of a broader range of cultural factors in environmental justice mobilizations, suggesting that claims for recognition and meaningful public voice are key features of the movement's conception of justice. In order to understand these dimensions of justice, the paper draws on the political thought of Hannah Arendt, particularly as it relates to the connections between political action (or speech), plurality, and the constitution of the public spaces of human collectives. From an Arendtian perspective, where public action in the context of radical plurality is vital to the agonistic unfolding of a common world, these expansive aspects of environmental justice become comprehensible as alternate world-building endeavours. In the face of the universalism normally associated with citizenship, and the exclusion that such universalism conceals, it is argued that environmental justice struggles can be understood as spaces of "insurgent" citizenship. The subaltern world building of these insurgencies disarticulates dominant regimes of citizenship, and points toward new possibilities for reshaping the terms by which political community, and socio-ecological orders more generally, are defined.*

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## Introduction

In a recent edited collection on environmental citizenship (Dobson & Bell 2005), Julian Agyeman and Bob Evans (2005) present a highly critical assessment of the concept, viewed in their case from the perspective of environmental justice. Indeed, they assert that, "environmental citizenship is not, in our view, a particularly useful term on which to base political action"(186). If the notion of environmental citizenship is to find relevance, they argue, it will only be by locating itself in the broader context provided by environmental justice. Though indirectly, this judgement can perhaps be seen as a rebuttal to Dobson's (2003b) similarly pessimistic assessment of the concept of environmental justice, published, fittingly enough, in a volume edited by Agyeman *et al* (2003). Dobson claims to find little empirical evidence supporting the supposed link between social justice and environmental sustainability. Put in the concrete terms of landfill sites, his argument is that "there is no guarantee that dividing up landfill sites more fairly between rich and poor communities will result in an overall decrease of the tonnage of waste consigned to such sites"(91). This lack of easy congruence might not make it impossible to build coalitions between environmental justice organizations and more "traditional" environmental NGOs, but Dobson asserts that the two movements should be expected "to bicker as often as they bond"(94).

The apparent antagonism between theorists of green citizenship and those of environmental justice is perplexing, since in theory and in practice there seem to be various ways to understand justice in terms of citizenship, and vice-versa. Indeed, while I am largely in agreement with Agyeman and Evans that ecological citizenship needs environmental justice, the premise of this paper is that the reverse is equally true. Environmental justice is widely hailed for its potential to engender radical socio-ecological transformation (e.g., Castells 1997; Gottlieb 2001; Harvey 1996).

Nevertheless, within the movement itself, particularly in its North American birthplace, pressures for a narrowing of the agenda have arisen as a result of its partial victories. In the United States, limited government measures to address environmental injustice, such as those arising in response to Executive Order 12898 (Getches and Pellow 2002; Bullard and Johnson 2000), present a circumscribed but increasingly effective political and legal opportunity structure within which particular kinds of environmental justice claims, especially those related to race, may be pursued. The question is whether recourse to this structure will diffuse some of the more broadly defined mobilization efforts within the movement. A conscious politicization of the citizenship dimensions of environmental justice can be seen as key to staving off the potentially de-radicalizing effects of political opportunism within the adaptive structures of liberalism.

This paper offers one way of beginning to bridge the divide between environmental justice and ecological citizenship. It approaches this task from the justice side of the gap, and on this count should only be understood as an initial step in the construction. A successful bridge requires firm footing on both sides of a span, and much work needs to be done within theories of ecological citizenship to make a space for issues of social justice. Agyeman and Evans offer one place to start this work, but carrying that impetus forward is a project in its own right.<sup>1</sup> As such, the focus here is mostly on the relationship between environmental justice and citizenship more generally conceived. Specific connections to *environmental* citizenship remain largely imminent in the arguments below.

The analysis begins with an effort to characterize the scope of environmental justice. It is argued that, while the movement has its roots in issues of distributive justice, its contemporary political reach is much broader and clearly includes issues of citizenship. Though these issues can and have been addressed in the existing spaces of liberal citizenship, there are also signs that environmental justice struggles are increasingly becoming sites at which *alternative* citizenship discourses and practices emerge. It is asserted here that these alternate visions of citizenship can be linked to an increasing body of scholarship that has begun to highlight the role of cultural factors in environmental justice mobilizations, suggesting that locally situated identity building is a key feature of the way that activists perform their demands for justice. Drawing on the political theory of Hannah Arendt in order to explore the role of identity in environmental justice struggles, it is argued that they can be understood as spaces of “insurgent” citizenship. Within such spaces, the justice sought by poor and racially marginalized communities is expansive in character, encompassing issues of recognition and public voice. From an Arendtian perspective, where public action in the context of radical plurality is vital to the agonistic unfolding of a common world, these expansive aspects of environmental justice become comprehensible as alternate world-building endeavours. Such subaltern world building disarticulates dominant regimes of citizenship, and points toward new possibilities for reshaping the terms by which political and ecological community are defined.

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<sup>1</sup> I have undertaken this project elsewhere (Latta 2005), and currently continue to pursue it in other forums.

## From Environmental Justice to a Politics of Citizenship

The environmental justice movement was born as a result of clearly racialized patterns in the distribution of environmental harms in the United States. Discussions of environmental justice no longer exclusively relate to the U.S. context, and increasing importance is also given to other factors in discriminatory environmental policy (such as social class). Dobson (2003b) is adamant, however, that the movement remains focussed on issues of distributive justice. Taking the issue of landfills as an example, he writes, “the objective of the environmental justice movement is to have environmental ‘bads’ more fairly distributed across the country, so that wealthier communities have their fair share of landfill sites”(85). Proponents of environmental justice are apt to describe the movement in less simplistic terms (and Dobson does admit that his characterization could be viewed as something of a caricature). Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that distributional issues lie at the heart of environmental justice. Bullard and Johnson (2000), for instance, describe the movement as follows:

The environmental justice framework rests on developing tools and strategies to eliminate unfair, unjust, and inequitable conditions and decisions...The framework also attempts to uncover the underlying assumptions that may contribute to and produce differential exposure and unequal protection. It brings to the surface the *ethical* and *political* questions of “who gets what, when, why, and how much.” (559)

Dobson’s critique of environmental justice hinges on demonstrating that these political and ethical questions are quite different from the ones associated with properly *ecological* concerns, such as biological diversity. By his assessment, it is only in the context of *intergenerational* distributive justice, where future generations stand to enjoy fewer environmental options than the present generation, that a logical parallel can be drawn between social justice issues and environmental sustainability.

It is not my intent here to specifically address Dobson’s effort to debunk the assumption that social justice and environmental sustainability are “natural” bedfellows. Nevertheless, as a starting point for my argument about citizenship I do wish to refute his narrow reading of environmental justice, which is becoming an increasingly expansive concept and movement. If its roots are in distributional concerns, its branches, leaves, and flowers stretch into a range of other political spaces. The collection edited by Agyeman *et al* (2003), in which Dobson’s contribution appears, represents one effort to chart some of this expansiveness, drawing specific links between environmental justice and broader concerns of sustainability. A number of other recent collections push the frontiers of environmental justice in other directions (e.g., Mutz *et al* 2002; Stein 2004). These efforts follow on earlier work, which observed connections between environmental justice and class struggle (Harvey 1996); the re-imagining of human-nature relationships as a basis for community activism (Di Chiro 1995, Gottlieb 2001); and issues of culture, identity, and difference (Pulido 1998, 1996; Schlosberg 1999). If we consider environmental justice in these more ample terms, it is not difficult to find common ground with the politics of citizenship.

As a way of beginning to explore the theoretical aspects of this common ground, it is worth exploring a concrete example of the way that environmental justice activism can be read in terms of citizenship. Kurtz (2005) argues that multiple discourses of citizenship

played a fundamental role in the way activists in St. James Parish, Louisiana, perceived and organized in response to the siting of a polyvinylchloride facility in their community. She identifies three key citizenship discourses deployed by the local organization that led the community's resistance, which called itself "St. James Citizens for Jobs and Environment". Two of these discourses emerged from a liberal tradition of citizenship, the first focussing on distributive justice, with claims anchored in civil rights law, and the other focussing on procedural justice, utilizing tools available in environmental law related to water quality. Kurtz notes that these two aspects of liberal citizenship exist in tension with one another, since the distributive model essentially pushes such projects onto communities less able to resist them, while questions of procedural justice more significantly problematize the way that relevant bureaucracies make industrial siting decisions. In fact, however, the third discourse of citizenship identified by Kurtz is even more radical in its implications. Kurtz emphasizes that a *communitarian* discourse of citizenship was frequently evident in demands for participatory rights made by St. James Citizens for Jobs and Environment. Such demands went well beyond those of adequate individual input into bureaucratic decision making procedures, and instead called for greater local autonomy in economic and environmental planning. As Kurtz argues, this citizenship discourse advanced an environmentally embedded, collective notion of citizen rights, which stands in sharp contrast to the disembodied individualism of liberal participatory politics.

In the case of the St. James conflict, more limited standards of distributive justice eventually prevailed, largely as a result of the structures of political opportunity. St. James is a predominantly lower income, African American community. As Kurtz documents, the conflict was taken on by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as a test case of its new environmental justice framework, which takes a strictly distributive approach to the civil rights issues around industrial pollution (86). After significant delays in the EPA process, the company eventually withdrew its siting application in favour of a new application in another nearby community. Though economically similar to St. James, this second community is predominantly white, and Kurtz observes that "...these demographics mitigated against a second civil rights complaint"(89). Despite this unfortunate turn of events, which demonstrates the limits of environmental justice as a purely distributive paradigm, Kurtz concludes that the hybrid discourse of citizenship deployed by St. James Citizens for Jobs and Environment, as well as the emergence of a Louisiana coalition of similarly mobilized communities, speak to the more radical potential for change embodied by the environmental justice movement.

...EJ activists are in the process of combining elements of different citizenship traditions to sketch the outlines of a reformulated citizenship that might deal with geographical contradictions inherent in the grievance of environmental injustice. As local protest groups such as the St. James Citizens for Jobs and Environment continue to challenge the liberal system of environmental regulation that fosters an inequitable geography of industrial pollution, the reformulated citizenship they invoke and practice may have the potential to transform political institutions. (89-90)

What the example provided by Kurtz demonstrates is that environmental justice activism, while it may presently gain most of its substantive victories due to limited adjustments in

the application of existing civil rights law (with its distributional emphasis), is simultaneously a sphere in which new visions of citizenship rights and practice are being born. The understanding of citizenship presented by Kurtz is fundamentally dynamic, in that it reads activism, where the nature of citizenship itself is actively contested, as itself a kind of citizenship practice.

In the above example, challenges to the existing contours of citizenship are linked to the emergence of local community as a space where ambitions for meaningful political involvement in collective issues of economic development and environmental health can be pursued. This focus on strengthening local political community is a common feature of the grass-roots mobilizations associated with the environmental justice movement. Indeed, community serves as a kind of spatial and discursive node, connecting the range of economic, political, and ecological issues comprised by environmental justice. It is at this node that new political voices emerge, new livelihood strategies take shape, and alternate human-nature relationships become embodied. As Di Chiro (1995) writes,

Environmental justice groups, while strongly criticizing mainstream conceptions of nature, also *produce* a distinct theoretical and material connection between human/nature, human/environment relations through their notions of “community.” Community becomes at once the idea, the place, and the relations and practices that generate what these activists consider more socially just and ecologically sound human/environment configurations. (310)

Gottlieb (2001) argues along similar lines, linking an “ethic of place” to both environmental restoration and efforts to rebuild and empower communities (276). As both Gottlieb and Di Chiro note, however, local community building has limited political potential – and, I would suggest, limited implications for citizenship – unless it is tied into broader coalition building. In the example chronicled by Kurtz, local activists were also aware of this imperative, forming a coalition called Louisiana Communities United (LCU), with the aim of linking together communities along the Mississippi industrial corridor (89). This regional example also reflects trends in the broader movement. Stretching at least as far back as 1991, when the First National People of Colour Environmental Leadership Summit was held, environmental justice activists have actively engaged in coalition building as a key political strategy. What is perhaps more noteworthy in terms of citizenship, however, is the way that community and coalition building in the movement seems to have moved beyond the narrow envelope of strategy, becoming an end in itself. Indeed, it can be argued that just as the *specific* instances of environmental injustice are the product of *broadly* discriminatory social, economic, ecological, and political relationships, the “justice” of environmental justice seems to overflow the containers of the specific struggles where it originates, pointing in the direction of an equally expansive mobilization for more egalitarian socio-ecological orders. In this light, grassroots mobilization for community empowerment has truly radical implications for citizenship, considered not only in terms of rights and obligations, but more importantly with respect to the very shape of political collectives and subjectivities.

Two crucial (and related) aspects of the expansive notion of justice implied in the community and coalition building of the environmental justice movement are culture and identity. Particularly because of the specific origins of the movement in response to

racially-based discrimination, it is impossible to ignore the linkages here with a broader politics of difference. Laura Pulido (1996), for instance, argues that the construction and reconstruction of identity by subaltern groups is crucial in the quest for political agency, asserting that in any instance of collective action,

there is a clear need to form an identity, and in the case of marginalized groups this means the negative identity must be appropriated and reconstructed...It is the power of self that is the crucial first step in imagining the possibility of resistance or another reality. (p. 47, see also Peña (2003); Pulido (1998); Sandilands (2004))

Environmental justice advocates themselves also seem to be clearly aware of this dimension. In the preamble to the *Principles of Environmental Justice*, drafted in the context of the 1991 Leadership Summit, one of the stated goals is “to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world...”(as quoted by Di Chiro 1995). In the more concrete case of the LCU, the slogan of “unity in diversity” was invoked to describe the inter-community coalition (Kurtz, 89). Di Chiro also underlines the prevalence of a “unity in difference” approach in the grassroots mobilizations of environmental justice, suggesting that the notion even addresses the inclusion of non-human elements of community, such as other species and local ecosystems more generally. This attention to the shape of communities of resistance, and especially to their inclusivity, is key to the citizenship practices of environmental justice.

Schlosberg (2004) offers a sustained and highly instructive discussion of the role of culture and identity in the environmental justice movement. Critical of those who focus exclusively on the distributional aspect of environmental justice, he identifies three core elements within the movement: equity, recognition (or identity), and participation. Distribution is certainly central, but Schlosberg argues that recognition and participation are not simply add-ons to the distributional agenda. Indeed, in the case of indigenous peoples, he suggests that “...the first step towards justice is recognition”(526). Furthermore, issues of recognition and participation, he notes, are often difficult to disentangle. Indeed, rather than seeking to privilege a specific axis of the justice question, Schlosberg is adamant that “...these various forms of injustice are intricately linked, and all must be addressed simultaneously”(528). Strictly distributional models, and even those which focus on participation in the context of abstract universal frameworks (such as liberal rights), cannot account for the way that issues of identity and recognition condition the substantive and procedural dimensions of justice. Aiming to give greater substance to the notion of “unity in diversity”, Schlosberg advances a critical pluralist approach. What the “critical” is intended to add to the simple *tolerance* of pluralism is a dimension of *engagement* across difference. Scholsberg sees such engagement as a fundamental quality of both the network-based logic of environmental justice activism and the kind of meaningful participation that movement actors seek in shaping the socio-ecological orders that they inhabit.

Getting others to understand your experience and framework, and vice-versa, is how pluralistic notions are learned, understood, recognized, and accepted. This is the difference between a pluralism based in simple acceptance and toleration and a critical pluralism based in more thorough recognition and mutual

engagement. Such engagement is related to the necessity of combining recognition with participation in achieving environmental justice. (536).

By seeking mutual recognition and meaningful participation through engagement amongst a plurality of actors, environmental justice struggles clearly address themselves to the very nature of political community. Citizenship is the term most commonly used to describe the quality of belonging to a defined polity, or political community. While movements for environmental justice occur at a range of scales – many of which do not correspond precisely to the contours of existing “containers” for citizenship – it is difficult to deny that these mobilizations have immediate repercussions for existing institutions and practices of citizenship. This is true not only in the more limited sense of the formal structures of citizenship, but more crucially in the way that citizenship is embodied, experienced, and performed in concrete communicative relationships between political subjects in the context of existing and emergent socio-ecological communities. The rest of the paper is devoted to exploring one way of understanding how the intertwined dimensions of identity (or recognition) and participation in environmental justice condition the constitution of these eco-political citizen-subjects and collectives.

### **Arendt: Plurality, Appearance and the Common World**

Arendt does not often make her way into ecological politics, but several theorists have argued, from related but distinct perspectives, that she offers a unique perspective on political life which is particularly instructive for greens. Douglas Torgerson (1999), for instance, turns to Arendt in his effort to underline the importance of a vibrant green public sphere, where environmental questions can become the subject of wide ranging debate amongst diverse actors. Catriona Sandilands (2002) has also drawn upon Arendt in her critique of the way that certain kinds of knowledge claim tend to shut-down the possibilities of open debate over environmental questions. Finally, Mick Smith (Forthcoming) has drawn specific links between Arendt’s theory of political action and a vision of environmental activism that eschews the top-down prescription of obligations in standard accounts of ecological citizenship. Since her work is fundamentally concerned with the character of the actors and spaces of political life, Arendt offers important tools that can help illuminate the importance of the embodied or performed dimensions of citizenship – in terms of recognition and participation – that I have sought to locate in environmental justice. Specifically, Arendt can help bring into focus the role of identity claims (with their connection to practices of exclusion/recognition) in the constitution of both the subjectivities and the spaces of the “common worlds” of political collectivity. For Arendt, these common worlds are called into being through the dynamics of appearance, realized through speech and action that weave the relationships of commonality amidst human diversity. In its most expansive dimensions, environmental justice can become legible in Arendt’s terms as a kind of “calling into public relationship”, whereby subaltern voices draw links of solidarity between one-another, as well as reaching across the non-recognition of ecological injustice to demand the kind of critical pluralist engagement that Schlosberg speaks of.

The connection Arendt draws between public appearance and the reality of a common world has to do with what she identifies as the fundamental character of the human condition: plurality. As Bickford (1996) emphasizes, Arendt’s understanding of plurality revolves around a tension between equality and distinction. Arendt writes that, “we are all

the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live”(1998, p. 8). While humans are all equal at a level of biological needs, in this respect they are no more than animals. To realize their distinct humanness, they must enact the conditions of togetherness for a different kind of equality—political equality—which allows them to transcend the mute fact of *what* they are and demonstrate *who* they are (see Arendt 1998, 175-181; also Bickford 1996, 59-66). This transcendence occurs through individuals’ appearance as political actors, voicing opinions in the audience of their peers. Such a conception of political subjectivity is well suited to addressing the dimension of identity and recognition, and its relationship with participation, in the context of environmental justice. It is crucial to appreciate, however, that Arendt’s conception of political subjectivity is not simply about the expression of an already formed self, but rather concerns some kind of construction or consolidation of self *through* political action (Bickford 1996; Calhoun 1997; Honig 1995; Villa 1997). Hence, both political subjects and public spaces of appearance are *products* of the exchange of words and actions. In the context of environmental justice this perspective clearly points to the way that the movement’s speech and action can be understood to exert ongoing reconstitutive pressure on the institutions and practices of citizenship.

To approach a more profound appreciation for the character of these reconstitutive pressures, it is necessary to look more closely at Arendt’s conception of the unique qualities of political speech – since it is not any kind of speech that opens into the political dimension of life. For Arendt, *opinion* is the tie that binds the emergence of the subject and the emergence of the common world in political action. It is by the expression of opinions that individuals make possible their appearance as human subjects and also the appearance of a common world. By opinion, however, Arendt means to indicate a very particular kind of interested expression. As Bickford (1995) argues, “publicity, or communicability, are the conditions for opinion-formation”(320). Furthermore, in Arendt’s (1963) words, “no one is capable of forming his own opinion without the benefit of a multitude of opinions held by others...,” and “opinions are formed and tested in a process of exchange of opinion against opinion...”(228 & 230). Because the expression of opinion is inherently a public act, it requires *representative thinking*, the ability to think and express one’s own ideas while keeping in mind the viewpoints of multiple others. As Sandilands (2002) remarks, “thinking actively includes the mark of the other as part of its dynamic. Representative thinking is thus a mode of knowing that derives from iterative and critical appearance; it is constitutionally public, multiple, and reflexive”(127). Because of these conditions, politics cannot be based on the expression of pre-political private interests, but rather is the product of individuals appearing amongst their peers as they voice opinions that are directed toward an emergent and always contestable common interest.

Arendt is preoccupied with the demise of this common world in the face of private interests and unreflective, so-called “public opinion”, which today steers political agendas in the form of polling data. Sandilands (2002) suggests that fostering and promoting the development of a public sphere requires that we promote the kinds of political speech that actively transform private experiences of the world and its problems into properly political opinions, which address others “according to some understanding of ‘commonality’”(128). Bickford (1996), in part, takes a different tack, emphasizing the other half of the relationship by which appearance is constituted: listening. “Listening—as part of a conception of adversarial communication—is a crucial political activity that

enables us to give democratic shape to our being together in the world”(19). As Bickford suggests, the act of expressing opinions is necessarily an open-ended affair, whereby the speaker begins a chain of events but cannot dictate where these events will lead. “In exposing myself to the attention of others, I ‘act into’ a web of human relationships that may entangle me in unforeseen ways”(69). Because the actor’s appearance is so dependent on the active interpretation of her audience in the public sphere, the common world is also at risk when the collectivity is not attentive. “If not thinking is an ‘ever-present possibility,’ then with respect to political interaction, not listening is as well”(92). Bickford goes on to suggest that Arendt in part failed to make note of this danger because she did not appreciate the way that unequal social relations condition the quality of the political sphere.

Neither harmony nor dissonance is a natural phenomenon; a sound counts as harmonic or dissonant with respect to a structure and progression of chords which is culturally and historically specific...the political point is that social and economic power often choose our company for us, and permit the definition and perpetuation of certain non-neutral standards of “harmony” and “noise”...the forces that underlie social, cultural, and economic inequality block or distort attention in ways that prevent the kind of listening necessary for democratic politics. (92-93)

In the case of environmental justice, the radical impulse of the movement vis-à-vis citizenship can be perceived both in terms of the particular qualities of speech and action underlined by Sandilands and with respect to the failures of listening that Bickford identifies. In the first case, environmental justice seems to offer a perfect example of political speech that converts private experiences into properly public issues. In the case of the St. James controversy explored earlier, for instance, Kurtz (2005) highlights the way that female heads of households successfully politicized their families’ experiences of ill health, in spite of being cast as “just a bunch of housewives”(87). In other words, they were able to convert private experiences into the public speech of political opinions, in so doing also overturning efforts to cast them as exclusively private subjects. Furthermore, the community and network-building impulses characteristic of the movement, and the slogan of “unity in diversity” clearly demonstrate a consciousness of the need for a particular kind of speech and action that makes space for commonality among multiple viewpoints. At another level, calls for environmental justice can be seen as efforts to open the *broader* political community to similar kinds of representative thinking and acting, the absence of which is surely one of the preconditions for environmental injustice. At the root of demands for more inclusive participation in the decisions that affect their communities, environmental justice activists are essentially calling upon other (more socioeconomically powerful) actors to *listen* attentively to their concerns.

Kimberly Curtis (1999) is concerned precisely with the radical disconnections that allow those with socio-economic power to simply ignore the impacts of their prosperity on other humans, effectively consigning these others to a kind of oblivion. She suggests that Arendt propels us toward breaking through such oblivion and reconstituting a common world, through the eyes and ears of an attentive public. She notes that “Arendt’s thought reacquaints us with the thick dimensionality of political life born of the mutual active witnessing between particular others who share the world”(14). She goes on to

emphasize the importance of plurality to public life, suggesting that the recognition of plurality is the key to the ethical dimension of politics.

What guarantees our capacity to share the world, to instantiate it *as* something in common, is our responsiveness to the particular views of others and thus to the perspectival quality all things acquire in an appearing world. Responsiveness to human particularity is thus not ethically important for its own sake. It is important also so that we might continue to actively achieve a sense of belonging to a common world. And for this, for the world to be renewed as something vividly shared, we must solicit the presence of others.  
(16)

Curtis fears that contemporary human existence is increasingly marked by barriers to the perception of plurality and difference, and asserts that the central political challenge of our time is to cultivate a renewed attentiveness to the density of our daily experience of human particularity, “to teach us to feel quickened, awed, and pleased by it”(12). The subaltern voices of environmental justice activism reach out across the gates of oblivion, calling broader human collectives (at various scales) into awareness not only of injustice, but also of the plurality and difference that marks the human condition. Such voices demand awareness, appreciation, and respect for locally specific cultures of human-nature relations.

### **Becoming Political and the Politics of Citizenship**

For Arendt, as read by Bickford, Curtis, and Sandilands, the fate of the world rests in large part with our ability to be awakened by the voices of plural others, pulled into a mutual relationship of speaking and listening that defines our common humanity. Ironically, one political institution which has consistently been involved in a kind of anti-political turn *away* from plurality and publicity is that of citizenship. It might seem most logical to think of citizenship in terms of an inclusive practice, as that which binds together a diverse multitude (and I have thus far drawn on this understanding). Inclusion, however, is only comprehensible in terms of its opposite: exclusion. As such, citizenship has always been as much about shutting certain people out of the public sphere as it has been a mode of togetherness. In fact, it is precisely the paradoxical construction of exclusion *as* inclusion (cloaked in the language of universality) which has been the discursive strength of dominant groups as they curtail the sphere of public life in order to secure their private interests. As Engin Isin argues,

citizenship is that particular point of view of the dominant, which constitutes itself as a universal point of view—the point of view of those who dominate the city and who have constituted their point of view as natural by representing the city as a unity. (2002, 275)

Just as it is crucial to understand Arendt’s political subject in terms of the way that it emerges in relation with a plural public, the citizen has always emerged through the construction of its other, the non-citizen. In this relationship the political impulse is stifled, since citizen-subjects have typically depended on the other’s *silence* for their self confirmation, rather than on the other’s capacity to listen, and in turn to answer. As such, the citizen does not act into a web of human relationships in the same way as does the political subject. Rather, the citizen has constituted self by effacing plurality and hence

denying the possibility of a common world. The speech of the citizen-subject is thus fundamentally apolitical. This, however, is only half of the story.

The antipolitical impulse of citizenship can be carried to fruition only if the citizen succeeds in presenting him or herself as the universal. That is, citizenship spells the demise of politics only to the extent that the citizen's other accepts being silenced. Fortunately, it is rarely the case that such acceptance can be secured with absolute finality. As a result, citizenship is better understood as a domain of struggle between the anti-political impulse inherent in the desire for the unproblematic identity of citizen and the vital impulse of the citizen's other to stake a claim within the collective. For this reason Isin asserts that "investigating citizenship historically ought to require contrasting the claims of citizens against the claims of their others"(2002, 3). He suggests that the quintessential birth of politics—the instance in which subjects *become* political—is located precisely in the resistance of citizenship's others to the definitions of otherness and alterity imposed upon them.

Becoming political is that moment when the naturalness of the dominant virtues is called into question and their arbitrariness revealed...when a rank established between the superior versus inferior, high versus low, black versus white, noble versus base, good versus evil, is reversed, transvalued, and redefined...(275-276)

Following Holston (1998), we might call these actors, who rise up and challenge the existing ideological containment of the meaning and practices of citizenship, *insurgent citizens*. The insurgence of citizenship's Others is not only about claiming rights within the political domain as defined by dominant citizens, but rather involves a rearticulation of political being itself, including a search for new kinds of practices and modes of legitimate political speech. In this way, the history of citizenship is the history of a tension between the impulse to produce political closure and the struggles against that closure that give political being—and citizenship—successive waves of creative rebirth, along with new incarnations of the public sphere.

### **The Insurgent Citizenships of Environmental Justice**

Environmental justice locates its mobilizations in a very specific context of exclusion, where the oblivion to which subaltern groups are relegated is strongly defined by unjust distributions of ecological conditions. Nevertheless, the movement's actions and speech clearly overflow the narrow envelope of distributional justice, and situate it within a long history of struggles over the terms by which human collectives are constituted. The demands made in the name of environmental justice disrupt the false universality of the dominant ideologies of citizenship, making space for a new wave of citizen rebirth. This rebirth takes shape not only as claims to existing rights long denied, but also as community building efforts that begin to embody potential foundations for the emergence of alternate socio-ecological orders. We might even say that the activists of environmental justice are *nature's* insurgent citizens. As the human elements most closely connected to the demise of the earth's ecosystems, their voices demand a kind of listening that would perceive social justice as embedded in a dense array of more-than-social relationships – which encompass local and regional environments.

To make the link between human injustice and ecological ill-health is not to say that addressing one is a solution to the other. Dobson (2003b) is probably correct that there is no *guaranteed* link between social justice and environmental sustainability. From the

perspective of the theoretical discussion above, however, this could be viewed as cause for celebration, rather than criticism. An iron-clad logic of equivalence would be suggestive of a new universalism, perhaps a single “ecological” citizenship to be cultivated around the globe. In Arendtian terms, this kind of turn toward political closure would mean the demise of opinion and appearance. Obligation would replace speech and listening as the operative principle of political life,<sup>2</sup> and the common world of human distinction would slip from view. Instead, environmental justice offers the “unity in diversity” of a *multitude* of insurgent citizenships. In their “becoming political”, environmental justice activists build links of solidarity between a plurality of voices, and demand that the dominant universal of citizenship acknowledge this plurality. Furthermore, by seeking meaningful participation on the basis of recognition and respect for distinct experiences, cultures, and identities, the actors of environmental justice engage in dialogues where none previously existed, thus calling new ecological publics and subjectivities into being. If they do not guarantee sustainability, such publics and subjectivities nevertheless foment the ongoing politicization of nature. It is this impulse toward public formation and politicization, rather than specific victories in concrete cases of distributive injustice, that constitutes the movement’s radical potential. In the face of incremental accommodation within liberal conceptions of both distributive and participatory justice, it can only be hoped that this potential might resist being tamed.

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in Dobson’s (2003a) conception of ecological citizenship, the framework of ecological politics is articulated in terms of an overarching principle of obligation.

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