

by Pablo Bose

## Is this what an environmentalist looks like?

Somewhere on the streets of Seattle, on a brightwinters day in 1999, someone called me an environmentalist. I still haven't quite recovered from the shock.

After all, I wasn't tied to a bulldozer or blockading a logging road. I wasn't protesting in front of an aquarium or splashing red paint on a fur-ensconced socialite. No, instead I was ambling along the sunny streets of Seattle's university district, a tasty falafel wrap dulling any nascent revolutionary rumblings I might have had. Turning the corner towards the rusty turnstiles of Husky Stadium, who should I have run into but one of my mother's friends, a self-described environmental activist from BC who fit just about every stereotype there was about 'tree-huggers.'

"Fancy meeting you here!" she exclaimed, "I didn't know you were an environmentalist. Funny, I never figured you for one..."

I pondered this observation for a moment and took in the sight she presented. Sandal-clad she was, hair-adorned with a flower or two (though in truth the crisp air alone should've told her that the summer of love was long since past), and the hint of tie-dye peeking out from beneath a raincoat. And there she stood, surveying me in all my shaven-headed, brown-skinned, black-clad, be-ringed glory, wondering where my regulation-issue environmentalists' gear might be, looking at me with a mixture of faint apprehension and even fainter approval.

"I didn't know you were an environmentalist," she repeated, still waiting for a response.

"Actually," I began rather lamely, "I'm here for the rally and the march against the WTO."

"Well I know that," she replied "We're all here to protest against the WTO. But who are you with?"

"Umm, well, I'm not really with anyone," I stammered, "Except my friends over there," and I motioned vaguely in the direction of my companions.

"—I'm a guest with the 'Turtles'" she interrupted, pointing proudly towards a group of green-costumed protestors.

I didn't quite know what to make of this. After all, what does one say to an honorary amphibian? Luckily, she saved me from having to come up with any further witless stammering by clucking her tongue disapprovingly at a passing SUV and acidly remarking that the driver must be rushing through the streets on his way home to an expensive dinner of Chilean sea bass (genetically modified, of course).

"Be safe," she told me, as she bestowed a blessing and walked back to join her Turtle companions. I turned to see that my friends had already moved into the stadium by now, and ran to catch up with them, still puzzling over why she had assumed I must be an environmentalist if I was here.

I looked around the rapidly filling stands and wondered what her eyes had seen. What I saw was fairly chaotic and hard to characterize solely as an environmental protest. I saw a decrepit stadium, filled to the rafters with a surging, swirling, incoherent mass of people, signs and banners. Most carried messages decrying the threat that the WTO and its cabal of market-mad commissioners posed to the environment and to workers. Some declared allegiance or membership to this organization or that. Others carried a simple, blunt statement: "WTO Kills", "Fair Trade not Free Trade", and—ironic in a sea of mostly white activists—"Whitey Must Pay."

My reverie was soon interrupted by the beginning of the speeches. If I had thought the scene had been confusing before, things were about to become a whole lot more surreal.

Many usual suspects were there—Vandana Shiva prominent amongst them—only they had not become so familiar to me yet. After all, this was December 1999. This was long before I became used to the sight of environmental, labour, human rights, and other social justice organizations coalescing together for marches in Washington and Davos. This was a time when all I knew of Quebec City was that it had lost a hockey team and given us poutine, when the only thing I knew about Genoa was salami.

But the message that came pouring forth from the stage that day was nowhere near as (semi-) coherent or predictable as the steps to the anti-globalization dance have become these days. No, instead we had indigenous activists from Latin America telling us of the devastating effects that neo-liberal economic policies were having on their communities in one breath, and labour leaders from Texas telling us we needed to keep out illegal aliens from stealing their jobs in the next. We had Thomas Kocherry, a social justice advocate from southern India raging against '400 years of colonialism and

racism' one moment, and Jimmy Hoffa Jr. urging an acknowledgement of labour's 'place at the WTO table' in another. The latter claim was punctuated by a large contingent of Teamsters rising to their feet and chanting, "Hoffa! Hoffa! Hoffa!" near the front of the stage. Turtles to the left of me, Teamsters to the right, stuck in the middle of what, I still wasn't sure.

I'm still not sure. I still find it hard to self-identify as an environmentalist, not because I'm not passionate about environmental concerns, but rather because I'm not entirely sure what one is. On the streets of Seattle that day, I heard the chant, "This is what democracy looks like!" I haven't heard a similar one coming from environmental protests, and that's probably a good thing. After all, I certainly know what the mainstream media thinks an environmentalist should look like—probably a lot like the stereotype I slotted my mother's friend into—but I don't look like that.

I'm not just talking about the Birkenstocks that don't gird my feet, or the plaid shirt that isn't draped about my shoulders. I'm not talking about my inability to carry the tune to 'kumbaya', my unwillingness to bond around a campfire or commune with lichen. I simply have never really shaken that feeling that I got from those first few times I went to anti-logging demonstrations to save our BC forests. When I looked out at the crowds of people that had gathered, it was still overwhelmingly white and overwhelmingly middle-class. All those criticisms that were levied at the environmental movement in the 60's seemed to have been left untempered by the struggles for social justice and against environmental racism that have arisen in the decades since.

And yet there I was in Seattle, lumped by an outside observer into the category of 'environmentalist.' Why not labour activist, I wondered? Or student protestor? Disgruntled youth? I suppose some of those categories hadn't become fashionable yet. Anti-globalization chic hadn't made its way into the malls and fashion runways and video game screens yet. But what made her single me out as an 'environmentalist?'

Today, it's much easier for me to claim that mantle, if I want to. I teach and do research in a faculty of environmental studies. I have paychecks and registration fees and nametags and business cards that say that I do. My rings are stored in a little box on my mantle, my black jeans are faded from washing them in warm water, and my hair has grown out into a tsunami-like coif. Yet I'm no easier with the idea of environmentalist, if it means being slotted into the stereotype.

Why do I need a label at all, one might ask? Why not simply accept and live with—indeed revel in—the contradictions and the confusions of life? I am very much inclined towards such an attitude. I know, broadly speaking, that I fall into the camp of the 'anti'—anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-colonial—rather than under the banner of the 'neo'—neo-liberal, neo-imperial, neo-conservative. I prefer this idea of general tendencies. I don't want to live a label, with a set of prejudices and proclivities pre-loaded into my system. But I suppose there is a certain safety and security in categories, in the sense of a coherent community.

The danger arises when one begins to insist upon a static unity of purpose, a monolithic and singular way forward. Such stances bulldoze over the multiple meanings and parallel motivations that bring people together into coalitions. "We are engaged in similar struggles," said Vandana Shiva after Seattle, "But they are not identical ones."

For me, the strength and the possibility lies in that multiplicity of meaning, the creative potential coiled around difference. And that is to what I turn, as a child of the diaspora, a Canadian of South Asian heritage who is only now coming to terms with the privilege and power that accrues to me due to circumstances of gender and class and sexuality. I don't look for universals—for they are, as the theorist Nancy Fraser says, simply particulars that masquerade as everyone's interest.<sup>1</sup>

And so that is why whenever someone asks me today if I am an environmentalist, I think back to a winter's afternoon in Seattle and remember a chaotic and contradictory mass of people—though one that was still overwhelmingly white—and hesitantly say, "well, sort of." Not the most stirring response, I will admit. But when I think about it, I'm still really in the same position I was back then. Standing in a crowd, Turtles to the left of me, Teamsters to the right of me, stuck in the middle with who?



1 Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition*. New York: Routledge, 1997.