

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.¹

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.

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