

*Gathering fuelwood*

Photo: Elizabeth Smaller

*Elizabeth Smaller is a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Toronto. The photographs which appear throughout this issue were taken in 1986 in Himachal Pradesh, India as part of a study for her thesis on the effects of development on women in farm families.*

# Connecting

## *Race, Gender,*

by *Luanne Armstrong*

*L'auteure dénonce l'oppression qui est à la base de toute hiérarchie et elle établit des liens entre l'oppression des femmes, la dégradation de l'environnement et la discrimination raciale.*

Racism and sexism are structural and systemic forms of oppression within our society; their history is long and ugly. Both have deep links to our economic system, and their practice has benefited and continues to benefit only a small portion of the population. But these systems are also linked to another destructive force, the exploitation and degradation of the world's environment.

As Rosemary Brown points out, in the fall 1992 issue of *Herizons*, the exploitation, abuse, and degradation of the environment, the exploitation of cheap labour through colonization, slavery, racism, poverty, and systematized oppression, and the gender oppression inherent in the social, economic, and political structures of women's lives, are crucially interrelated. To understand this interrelationship requires the careful analysis of the tools and methods of each kind of oppression, and the places where they intersect, the similarities, analogies, and kinships between them.

The systematized oppression which creates racism and sexism also has deep links with how we regard nature, how we treat

animals, land, trees, water. The colonial attitude with which Europeans moved into many parts of the world saw the animals, and natural resources there as avenues for gaining wealth. Slavery turned people into a resource as well, putting them on a par with the animals and other natural resources. This attitude did not allow for the idea that the people, animals, and natural resources might have intrinsic interest, value, and worth.

Oppression presumes a hierarchy. Men are more important than women, adults more important than children, rich people more important than poor people, people with white skins more important than people with black, red or yellow skins, and all people are seen to be more important than animals. Many of these hierarchies are now being examined, and groups all over the globe are fighting different but interrelated kinds of oppression.

Historically, there have been many kinds of hierarchical systems. Not all hierarchies are patriarchal, but most of them are economically based. The present economic system which dominates most of the world—namely, capitalism or modifications of it—is essentially racist, hierarchical, and patriarchal. It is based on the exploitation of the natural resources of the world, without reference to other cultural, spiritual, and environmental values. It is also based on the continued colonization and subversion of other cultures, other values, other races of people.

This systematized, hierarchical attitude that creates and sustains racism and sexism also sustains our ability to exploit and devalue the natural world. Since, as humans, we see ourselves almost without question as superior to animals and to nature, we also believe we have an intrinsic right to use, manage, and exploit the natural world for our own benefit. Even in environmental circles, the idea that wilderness, that animals, trees, flowers, have an intrinsic right to exist independent of our use, our need, and our consumption of them, is rarely expressed. To do so, would require a major shift in the kind of deep thinking and conditioning we have all been brought up with. It would also require a genuine, un sentimentalized, and unromanticized understanding of the egalitarian world view and values of aboriginal people.

In North America, in particular, those of us who are non-aboriginal, non-indigenous people, are all, immigrants in a particular sense. As people who have come to the land, we are still learning about and beginning to discuss, what it means to live here, how to care for the land, and how to be connected to it.

Part of our task as people who have only lived here for a few generations, and particularly for those of us with white, European backgrounds, is to understand and analyze our own history, cultural roots, and heritage and what they, or more importantly, the lack of them mean to us. In

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# the Circles

## *and Nature*

particular, we must understand and analyze what racism has done to our relationships with the aboriginal people in North America. We need a much deeper, more open discussion and understanding of what racism means and does, what it does to those of us in positions of power, as well as those who have been its targets, and how it interferes with our relationships with aboriginal people. By doing this, we can begin creating the coalitions and discussions that are necessary for the growth of an understanding of what it means to belong to a particular place, and from that, we can develop the power to care for it.

The aboriginal understanding of and relationship to the natural world is one that the colonizers have both exalted and degraded. As a white descendent of European immigrants, I learned as a child to look to it as an ideal world—an Eden—which was impossible to return to, but whose mythologized existence was a source of comfort. As the environmental crisis in the world deepens, as wilderness disappears and the world's population grows, as people crowd in next to one another and cars and subdivisions grow, so too does our human alienation from nature. The irony is that our rhetoric about environmental issues grows as our alienation deepens.

What then, does it really mean to say, "we are all part of nature"? What could it mean to us, as non indigenous people to begin to actually think of plants, trees,

animals, insects, even rocks, as "all our relations," a phrase with deep meaning within native spirituality? It would certainly have a radical and drastic effect on our approach to development if we felt that the existence of the trees and rocks, plant life, birds, and insects had to be fully taken into consideration.

To say, that we are "part of nature," as current environmental rhetoric does, implies interdependence. It implies that we cannot separate our human existence from that of all the living denizens of the planet, and of the very stuff of the planet itself with its ongoing events—the air, rocks, fire and water, the soil, the minerals, the wind that blows dust, typhoons and tornadoes over the planet, earthquakes, floods, and the rhythm of the weather and seasons. Of course, if this is so, there is also a kind of equality implied which is created and made necessary by this interdependence. Without nature, we do not exist, except perhaps as alienated creatures in spaceships. Whether any of us really want to lead such a limited and doomed existence is moot.

But when, as members of an urban civilized society, we say we are part of nature, we encounter a contradiction. The growth of "modern" civilization has been premised on moving away from nature, on moving forward from the primitive, the savage, the "uncivilized," from the myths and stereotypes we hold about our ancestors. Popular myths and cultural as-

sumptions have it that our ancestors knew less than we do, that their lives were less comfortable, less aware, less technologically skilled, less healthy, and less desirable, that their institutions of government were clumsy, that what we have now is an improvement and what we have in the future will be even more of an improvement. At the heart of this contradiction is a refusal to come to terms with the actual meaning of the phrase, "a part of nature," and its implications. The idea is used superficially, to establish our sentimental and alienated relationship with nature, and to absolve us of responsibility for the impact of our behaviour within existing natural systems.

Unfortunately, cultural assumptions of superiority have often been based on misinformation and mistaken assumptions about the nature and cultures of peoples labeled as primitive, savage, and uncivilized for purpose of exploitation. These people are indigenous people, Natives, hunter gatherer civilizations, and in general, people with less economic and military power than more dominant civilizations.

It is difficult to examine the deeply held cultural assumptions about nature and our superior worth, about, for example, our right to decide the life and death of other creatures and to manage and manipulate life, about our economic systems and our commercialized and destructive standard of living. To change such attitudes would

***regard nature, how we treat animals, land, trees, water.***

require some fundamental shifts in our way of thinking. It is this fundamental shift which has been called for repeatedly by many writers and thinkers in this dangerous age as we move towards an increasing environmental crisis, but such a shift would shake our way of being in society to its very foundations. Such shifts take a very long time and are accompanied by great resistance and emotional and social upheaval. They run straight into the phenomenon of denial, fear, and backlash.

There is an important relationship between the kind of resistance and denial which any discussion of racism tends to elicit among white people, and the resistance and denial with which modern society holds onto its sentimental and destructive view of the natural world. It is a resistance and denial which diminishes and distances the reality of the subjects, whether it is the reality of aboriginal people and their ongoing historical struggle for survival, or the reality of the huge and awesome mystery and incomprehensibility of the natural world of which we are such an influential part.

Modern society also fragments issues, so that connections between them are difficult to see. Working on environmental issues is seen as separate from other issues. Feminist writers, however, have begun to address the connection between sexism and the destruction of nature under the heading 'ecofeminism.' This is an important step. The feminist movement has also moved strongly to address issues of racism, but we still need to go further, to decipher the roots of the problems of hierarchy, to find the connections between the ongoing destruction of the world's resources and the hierarchical, patriarchal, and racist value system that drives this destruction.

In addition, the problems of distancing

ourselves from nature, of our sense of alienation and lack of community connections remain as cultural obstacles to transformative understanding. In North America, these problems cannot be solved by borrowing from other cultures. As white North Americans, we must first examine ourselves, our own culture, our roots, and our histories before we can understand the connections we need to make, before we can envision, formulate, and articulate ways of living in our communities which

hand, and the fallen woman, the whore who is degraded and a source of defilement and temptation for men on the other. The earth as mother is a deeply spiritual metaphor, but we must also deal with the patriarchal and often hidden side of that metaphor. Mother can also mean someone inferior, female, something to be out-grown.

Indigenous people in North America and in other parts of the world have suffered from similar dichotomized thinking: the white version of the "Indian," either as a representative of "savagery" and the uncivilized, wild, "dark," scary side of humanity, or as a spiritual force, as the keeper of the spiritual bond between humans and nature, the holder of mystical secrets and unknown forces.

Our attitudes towards nature also fall into extremes of hate, love, and confusion, from people who identify and crave the solitude and spiritual solace found in communion with nature, to people who are frightened to be away from the perceived safety of civilization and the company of others of their species.

But regardless of these extremes, we can neither escape nature nor wholly identify with it. No matter how much we think we know and understand the behaviour of other species, no matter how much we learn about ecology and nature, it remains other, outside our sphere of comprehension. Women of all races, Indians, black people, Asians, white people, people from other countries and cultures are of one race.

We have in common our essential humanness, our way of being together, of making love, of giving birth, loving our children, of forming ourselves in various kinds of community, of creating language and tools. But finding commonalities with other species is complex and difficult.



Diana Thompson, *Woman in the Trees*, 1989  
Mixed Media, 22 x 30"

will realistically and genuinely take our relationships to all other living creatures into account.

Feminists from Mary Daly to Merlin Stone have noted that women have suffered from historical stereotypes as the pure virgin holy mother/goddess on one

One hidden factor that women, Native people, and other people of colour have in common is that their identification with nature, and therefore, their lack of identification with progress, civilization, and the value system representing the male, linear, logical, rational, and dominant position has been used as a tool to place them within a hierarchy and maintain their historical oppression.

This works in two directions: as a form of oppression, but also as an incentive towards solidarity. To be lower on the hierarchy means, in some sense, to identify with and have some sympathy for others who have been subjected to similar kinds of oppression. The identification of women and nature, and aboriginal people and nature, is very powerful, and very contradictory. It has become a double edged stereotype, powerful in its illumination for women of the possibilities in our natures and in our relationships and understandings of the natural world, but disguising our essential and prior alliance with all other human beings.

What is necessary now is a place for discussion of these difficult issues. Although ecofeminism blends the transformative insights of feminism with a new way of looking at the relationship between human beings and nature, there is no one term for the host of social, political, spiritual, psychological, and environmental ideas that are seen more and more as the alternative, not only to patriarchy, but to other ills in our society. If we are slowly and gradually turning away from the values of patriarchy and hierarchy, then it is to be hoped that what we are turning towards are the values and ideals proposed by feminism: inclusion, diversity, egalitarianism, individualism. Within feminism, the discussion of racism and exclusion and the de-

velopment of racism theory are becoming increasingly important and courageous.

But a discussion of environmental issues has not taken a central place in feminist discussion. The discussions that have been held have been on a more personal and spiritual, almost mystical basis. There has not yet been a development of the political relationship between women's issues and the economic exploitation of the natural world.

Whether feminism can make that enor-

society remains to be seen. But it is a necessary leap, crucial to the creation of a coherent and articulated vision of a possible future.

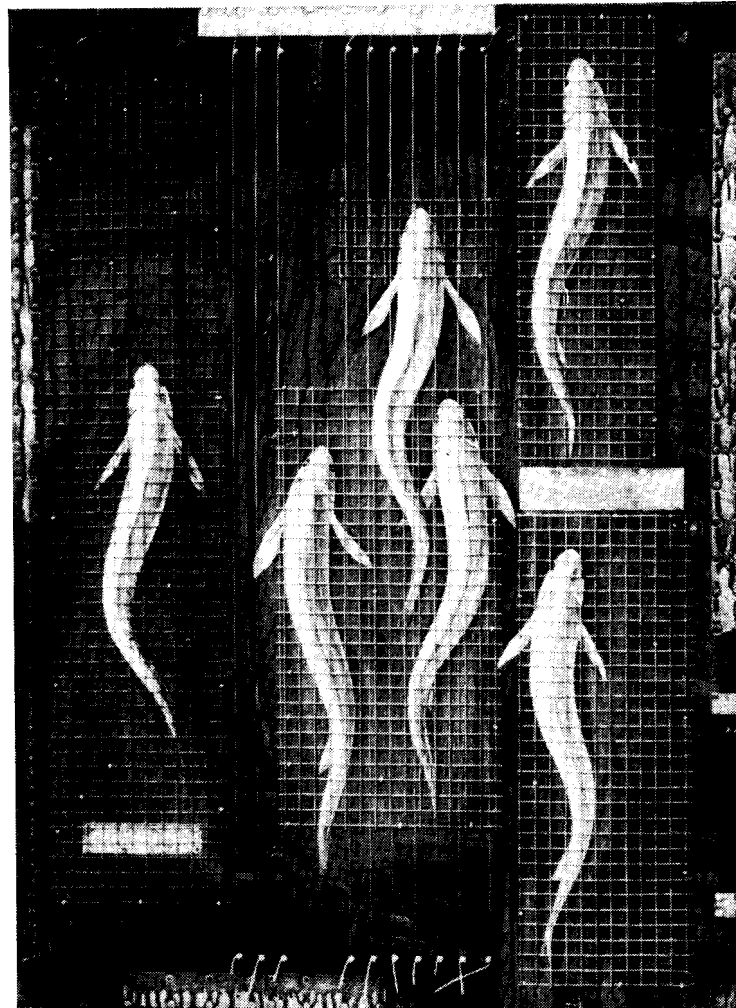
Over and over again, feminism asserts, and rightly so, that women's voices and women's perspectives are crucial to the kinds of social and economic changes that are necessary in order to have a healthy egalitarian partnership with the natural world. The historical oppression of women and of people of colour, and the ongoing exploitation of natural resources are related politically, as well as emotionally, spiritually, psychologically.

They are related, first and foremost, in terms of our survival, but they are also related in terms of justice and rights, in terms of the kind of future we are committed to forging for ourselves, a future that is egalitarian and whole. We cannot, in the long run, overturn one part of the patriarchy and leave others intact. Oppression on the basis of race and gender, and oppression of the natural world are all a direct result of the patriarchal and capitalist value system under which we have lived for so long. This system has been systematically spread to every part of the earth and used to justify and create the economic, legal, social, and spiritual exploitation of women, of other races, of natural resources.

We have inherited a legacy of thousands of years of assumptions about race, women, nature, and to transform them requires a long, painful, constant process. It sounds difficult. But there

are two factors assisting this change. First, the quantity and quality of social and political change dialogue and of discussions wrought by the feminist movement have been profound.

Second, we are clearly facing a crisis in our development as a species and we are



Diana Thompson, *River*, 1990  
Acrylic, wire, tin, screws on plywood, 33 1/2 x 24 1/2 "

mous leap to considering other species and other lifeforms as deserving and worthy of inclusion, as it has made the enormous, powerful, and demanding leap to the re-examination of race and class, history, power, money, and the role and place of women, children, and men in our

being forced to an awareness of this. It is natural, in a sense, for a species to colonize, for plants, animals, insects, shellfish, to take advantage of an ecological niche and expand. But we, as a species, have expanded to the point of destruction of other species and ultimately ourselves.

Those writers who have examined the issue of racism, who have tried to come to grips with it, find layer upon layer of embedded thoughts and behaviours that require time to sort through. Although society is now paying more attention to issues raised by the feminist movement, there has yet to be a parallel social discussion and awareness of the issues of systemic racism. And certainly, despite the vast philosophical and social gains made by feminism, these gains have not yet profoundly affected the major social institutions of our time.

Environmentalism also fights battle after battle, maintaining a park here, and losing a forest or a wetland there, but there has not yet been a social consensus on how to change our society so that environmental values are included at all levels of decision making. Instead, they are usually afterthoughts, the province of small groups of dedicated people.

We have yet to make the connection that we are, all in the same boat, or spaceship, or planet together. We are coming to this slowly. It is hard to break ancient habits, and it is especially hard to break the habits of colonization. Even our spiritual approach to nature sees it as something for our use—our spiritual use, but nevertheless a use, although one which is supposedly benign. We seem to remain consumers of nature, demanding that it fulfill our fantasies of whatever we wish it to be. Bound by our humanness, we make meaning out of nature only insofar as it pertains to human use, and this is the paradigm that ultimately must change.

One way to this change is the understanding that our fates are bound together, that no one group of people, one gender, or one species can dominate the earth to the detriment of other races and other species, that the times of colonization must end. The terrible knot of damage, pain, and terror wrought by centuries of racist and sexist oppression is one that we must continue to untangle. But for the good of our species and the good of the whole earth, we must also fully understand what effect the mechanisms of oppression that are the tools of racism and sexism have had, and continue to have, on our relationship with the world around us.

*Luanne Armstrong is a white, rural working class, lesbian feminist who lives in an extended family situation on an organic farm in B.C. She has previously published one book of poetry and numerous articles, short stories, and essays. She has just completed a feminist cowgirl novel and is now working on a full length manuscript on the connections between racism, sexism, and environmental issues. She teaches Creative Writing at a local college.*

## THE EARTH CHARTER

**Prepared by Non-Governmental Organizations  
Gathered Together in Rio de Janeiro**

**June 3-14, 1992**

### **Preamble**

We are Earth, the people, plants and animals  
rains and oceans  
breath of the forest and flow of the sea

We honour Earth as the home of all living things

We cherish Earth's beauty and diversity of life

We welcome Earth's ability to renew as being the  
basis of all life.

We recognize the special place of Earth's Indigenous  
Peoples,  
their territories, their customs  
and their unique relationship to Earth.

We are appalled at the human suffering, poverty and  
damage to Earth  
caused by inequality of power.

We accept a shared responsibility to protect and  
restore Earth  
and to allow wise and equitable use of resources  
so as to achieve an ecological balance  
and new social, economic and spiritual values.

In all our diversity we are one.

Our common home is increasingly threatened.