



Green is not the only colour

Reflections on the state of anti-racist environmentalism in Canada

By Beenash Jafri & Karen Okamoto

CAN THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT in Canada continue to organize on an agenda of “green” politics, devoid of any critical engagement with issues of race? Given Canada’s multicultural reality and the long-standing history of colonialism and racism in this country, we think not. The history of environmental justice activism sends this clear message: the movement must evolve by linking environmentalism to counter-colonial, anti-racist struggles. In other words, there is a need to redefine “green.” Eco-feminism has made significant changes to environmental politics, connecting feminism with environmentalism. We want to see a similar transformation towards an anti-racist grounding for the environmental movement.

Seven years have passed since we organized an anti-racism committee in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University, but our struggles go beyond these seven years of

academic activism. As women of colour, we have been battling with Eurocentric education systems and organizing strategies in Canada for most of our lives. Today we continue to challenge white middle-class environmentalism and white environmentalist scholarship for their failure to systematically address racism and colonialism.

These problems are not new, nor are we alone in our fight. The centuries of indigenous struggle against the colonization of the Americas are part of anti-colonial environmental justice work. We also draw our strength from the work of our predecessors and contemporaries, from Africville activists in Nova Scotia to the Bus Riders Union organizers in Vancouver. In this article, we would like to reflect on our anti-racist organizing experiences in order to shed light on the complexities and challenges facing anti-racist environmentalists in Canada.

Storming the ivory tower: Environmental studies in the 1990s

THE EARLY '90S IN ONTARIO WERE RIFE with political and cultural activity. The environmental movement was injected with new energy by the 1992 Rio Earth Summit; funding was available for the arts and community projects such as Desh

The blockade campsite in Grassy Narrows, Ontario—currently the longest-standing blockade in Canadian history. The blockade was initiated on December 3, 2002, to stop the clear-cutting of the surrounding forests by the world’s largest manufacturer of newsprint, Abitibi Consolidated. As well as being forced to take action against clear-cutting practices, the Ojibway Nation has had to deal with the effects of environmental racism in the form of mercury poisoning from a nearby pulp mill. In 2002, 86 per cent of Grassy Narrows residents tested showed signs of mercury poisoning.

Pardesh, a Toronto-based South Asian diaspora festival of culture and politics; and the NDP was in power provincially, funding anti-racist projects through an anti-racism secretariat.

This contributed to a productive period for environmental studies, reflects Dr. Andil Gosine. Now a professor at York University, at that time Gosine was an undergraduate student in the newly established Bachelor of Environmental Studies program at York. He was drawn to the Global Development, Peace and Justice program and found that his experiences there were positive and enriching. "The program director was very committed to giving individual attention to each student. It was really an exciting time. Everyone in class was motivated by the work that was being done."

The program and the broader field of environmental studies, however, were not willing to seriously engage questions of race and racism. Dr. Ann Phillips, a PhD student in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at the time, notes that both the program and the field were "still steeped in very traditional Western approaches to knowledge. Issues of race, class and gender were for the most part placed on the back burner and not seen as important factors in a truly environmental analysis." Phillips sought to introduce the idea that population and development discourse were informed by questions of race and racism in her tutorial sessions, but found there was little interest or analysis of how racism and environmental issues were connected. She notes that "older white male professors . . . did not want to change the status quo in the faculty."

What is environmental racism?

THOUGH IT'S SELDOM ACKNOWLEDGED in mainstream discourse, environmental racism is a reality in Canada. Wealthier, predominantly white communities are protected by the state and dominate and control the environmental movement, whereas communities of colour, First Nations, immigrant and low-income communities bear disproportionate environmental burdens. These communities face racial discrimination in environmental policy-making and the enforcement of regulations and laws; they are deliberately targeted for toxic waste facilities, have the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants officially sanctioned in their communities, and have historically been excluded from meaningful participation and leadership in the environmental movement.

Organizing against environmental racism, the anti-racist environmental justice movement believes that all people are entitled to a healthy environment and the right to develop, implement and enforce environmental laws, regulations and policies. The concept of environmental justice challenges the environmental movement to integrate issues of race and class by learning from and supporting the struggles of communities of colour, First Nations, immigrant and low-income communities.

Anti-racist environmental justice recognizes the social, economic and political dimensions of environmental issues—and creates a new agenda for change.

Adapted from the website of the Anti-Racism Environmental Coalition (<http://www.yorku.ca/arec/ej.htm>).

This inertia and lack of academic interest in questions of race in environmental studies prompted some students to organize around the intersection of social justice and environmental issues. Gosine read Robert Bullard's work on environmental racism for the first time while in his third year of the program. He wondered why environmental racism had not been mentioned earlier in the courses. He approached the curriculum committee about this, only to be told that environmental racism had nothing to do with environmental studies in Canada.

Since, however, the program director was supportive, he gave Gosine the opportunity to give a lecture on environmental racism for a first-year course. The onus was ultimately placed on students to do anti-racism work that the faculty should have otherwise been prepared to take on. Groups such as the African Caribbean Environmental Studies Students and other ad hoc groups emerged to encourage the faculty to raise questions about race and racism in environmental studies. Contextualizing this activism within the larger political culture in Toronto, Gosine remembers that anti-racist undergraduates in environmental studies felt entitled to have the faculty address questions of race. These students participated on many committees to demand change.

What came out of this activity? An anti-oppression coalition that enveloped race concerns was established, recalls Gosine. Phillips also notes that the main accomplishment of this activity was having the faculty "bring in a pair of anti-racist consultants to facilitate a process of getting the faculty as a whole to look at race and anti-racism issues."

Progressive gains in Ontario started to unravel by the mid '90s with the election of Mike Harris' Conservative government and the "Common Sense Revolution." As undergraduate students, we saw the effects of cutbacks on the public education system—particularly in universities, with rising tuition fees, larger class sizes, and the increasing emphasis on technical, professional skills, rather than on critical thinking. We started our studies at York in 1998 within this political climate. Little did we know that we would be taking up anti-racist struggles that had been ongoing in the faculty for many years.

We, the two co-authors of this article, each had different but convergent motivations for doing environmental studies. Beenash Jafri came to the Faculty of Environmental Studies because she was interested in international development, cities and sustainability. She was dissatisfied with her experiences in formal education and sought a place where she could think critically about learning and social change. Jafri had just come back from a seven-month exchange program in Manitoba and Cuba. As a result of some discomforting experiences during the exchange, she was starting to question Canadian nationalism and whiteness.

Karen Okamoto, meanwhile, knew of two environmental studies students who had started an organic community garden in her working-class Toronto neighbourhood of Jane and Finch, and was looking for an activist-academic program to support her political work. Okamoto also wanted to challenge mainstream white environmentalists who focused mainly on conservation issues while ignoring urban race, class and gender struggles.

It was a difficult but inspiring time to be a young activist of colour in environmental studies. By the late '90s, the culture of

neo-conservatism was being met with increasing resistance. In 1999, anti-globalization protesters rocked the Seattle meetings of the World Trade Organization; this was followed by the Québec City protests against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas in the Spring of 2001. Many of us became politicized around those events—if not around the protests themselves, then around the anti-racist critiques of the anti-globalization movement that were being levelled by people of colour. Colours of Resistance, a Montréal-based group that “consciously work[s] to develop anti-racist, multiracial politics in the movement against global capitalism,” developed many of those critiques, providing not only solid analysis, but also unity for people of colour (and white allies) resisting capitalism through an anti-oppressive framework. The group drew attention to police brutality and racial profiling at protests, the privilege tied to the practice of “summit-hopping” (jumping from large-scale protest to large-scale protest without dedicating time to the thankless work of day-to-day organizing), and the false separation of the processes of colonization and globalization. While privileged anti-globalization activists often saw globalization as a new threat, many activists of colour understood it as the continuation and extension of the processes of colonization people of colour have been resisting for years. The connections made by Colours of Resistance supported and motivated our own work.

By 2000, students of colour who were already involved with activism and organizing outside the university—and who were disenchanted with the silence around environmental racism in the environmental studies field—decided to organize in the faculty itself. We called ourselves the Anti-Racism Committee and we met regularly to develop and implement our multi-pronged strategy. Some students joined the faculty’s curriculum committee and others tried to join the hiring committee. We pushed for curriculum change to include questions of race. We also wanted to hire more professors of colour. It was an uphill struggle just to get a course on race, racism and environmentalism approved.

Progress was slow. It often felt like we were losing ground. The millennium arrived with the Mike Harris Tories still enforcing their “Common Sense Revolution.” Neoliberalism was in full swing and funding for social programs and the arts was being cut back. York University was paralyzed by a 76-day long strike by part-time faculty and graduate assistants at the end of 2000. In these dismal times, we struggled for support from the Dean for our activities. We organized a speaker and video series on environmental racism through funds that we raised. The Dean wouldn’t offer us support beyond free parking passes for our lecturers. Everyone was fighting for crumbs.

In 2001, the Anti-Racism Committee was often referred to as the “diversity committee” by some faculty members. To the members of the committee itself, their naming of anti-racism concerns as a diversity issue meant ignoring questions of power and domination, shifting the focus to a sterilized discourse of multiculturalism and plurality and a vacuous celebration of difference. Meanwhile, other faculty members were enthusiastic about anti-oppression workshops, but failed to comprehensively examine issues of race and racism in their research or course syllabi. To them, anti-racism was associated with politically correct behaviour rather than an intellectual, critical, extended engagement with questions of race

and racism in the field of environmental studies.

To be fair, there were some faculty members who were more supportive. But, as Gosine remarks, “The university is slow to change . . . and the field [of environmental studies is], too.” At the hiring level, he notes, changes could be made if professors who are doing work in environmental racism were hired. There is opposition, however, from those who want to preserve traditional, exclusionary environmental studies and conservation movements. Approval for a race and environmentalism course in the faculty in 2001 was a milestone. Other crucial developments have unfolded since. The Canada Research Chair in Sustainability and Culture at the Faculty of Environmental Studies recognizes the links between environmentalism, justice and equity issues. As well, recent deans for the faculty have been more supportive of environmental justice concerns. Change is possible, but slow.

Challenges & frustrations beyond the academy

BY 2001, HOWEVER, WE WERE DISENCHANTED BY the faculty’s lack of concrete commitment to anti-racist change, and had grown tired of doing what had begun to feel like grunt work for the program. The World Trade Centre attacks that year were followed by the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and at home against perceived Muslim and Arab “terrorists.” In the face of all this, pushing for institutional change didn’t always appear glamorous or sexy enough for other activists, even as anti-racism was gaining momentum in the lead-up to the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism. For better or worse, state funding for youth anti-racism projects offered us new opportunities and avenues for our activism beyond the university’s walls.

As a result of all this, we made the decision to refocus our efforts on the broader Toronto community, and became the Anti-Racist Environmental Coalition. The main goals of the Anti-Racist Environmental Coalition centred on movement building (providing spaces to facilitate mobilization, supporting environmental justice struggles and working in collaboration with other groups) and consciousness-raising (drawing attention to relevant issues and offering critical analysis). Although some of us kept up a presence at the faculty, our central project as the Anti-Racist Environmental Coalition was the Redefining Green! Conference. We organized the forum in Toronto for September 2002.

The conference was the first of its kind in Canada. For many of us, it was our first experience organizing such an event. We scraped together just enough funding to cover our costs. We built links with many different communities, bringing in supporters ranging from anti-racism groups to environmental groups, social justice organizations to unions. We were pushing the envelope, challenging popular conceptions of the environment and environmentalism, but also, we thought, creating a space where dialogue could happen.

Of course, that was easier said than done. Because we were speaking to the mainstream environmental movement, and the dominant voices in the movement were white, we saw more white people at the conference than we expected. We had not planned to pull out our anti-racist education hats, but this is what happened—not only to us, the organizers, but also to some participants of colour. They were there to learn and build links,

Resources for education and action

"Colours of Green," Alternatives Journal, 2003, volume 29, number 1.

A groundbreaking issue on environmental justice.

Anti-Racist Environmental Coalition (AREC)

www.yorku.ca/arec/index.htm

Although no longer updated, this site includes useful links and a bibliography on environmental justice.

Bus Riders Union

www.bru.vcn.bc.ca

A Vancouver-based labour/community organization working on public transit issues.

Environmental Justice Resource Centre
www.ejrc.cau.edu

Based in the United States, EJRC is "a research, policy, and information clearing house on issues related to environmental justice, race and the environment, civil rights, facility siting, land use planning, brownfields, transportation equity, suburban sprawl, and Smart Growth."

Environmental Justice Kit

www.youthactioncentre.ca/English/actionresources/guides.htm

A project of the Youth Environmental Network.

Indigenous Environmental Network

www.ienearth.org

Established in the United States, IEN addresses economic and environmental justice issues.

Constructions of Environmental Justice in Canada

Edited by Julian Agyeman et al.
Forthcoming from UBC Press.

Stories Less Told: Environmental Justice and Racism in Canada

Andil Gosine and Cheryl Teelucksingh (eds).
Forthcoming from John Edmond Montgomery Press

Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots

By Robert Bullard, 1993. South End Press.

but instead wound up as defacto facilitators of white environmentalists' education on issues of race.

We noticed similar patterns two years later at the Green Justice retreat, organized by the Youth Environmental Network. The retreat brought over 50 young environmentalists from across the country to Saskatoon to develop strategies to fight racism within the movement—a lofty but important goal. Anti-Racist Environmental Coalition members were invited by the Youth Environmental Network to take a leadership role in organizing the retreat. By then, we had learned from our experiences with Redefining Green! and were more forthright in naming white privilege as a system of power that reinforced the prioritization of particular issues, strategies and goals within mainstream environmentalism. In retrospect, however, we weren't prepared to really deal with the responses this would provoke. Our energy went mostly into dealing with the racism that manifested in interpersonal dynamics, leaving little time to look at how environmental institutions were perpetuating it, let alone strategizing to dismantle race-based systems of privilege.

Since 2003, the Anti-Racist Environmental Coalition has been on indefinite hiatus. Members have changed cities, started work on different projects and movements, and are dealing with the activist burnout that comes from expending energy while getting little in return. This, ultimately, leads to the big question: if people of colour are consistently caught in the role of educating white people on naming and dealing with their privilege, how can we possibly get around to actually building the environmental justice movement we so badly want and need—one that draws on a radical analysis of power, builds community, and is based on respectful solidarity with Aboriginal peoples?

We don't necessarily have the answer to that question, but we have some ideas. Reiterating some of the themes that we have raised in this article, we need to think about how to strategically manoeuvre our way around the systemic barriers that inhibit movement building, strategizing, and dialogue among people of colour. For example, activists of colour may want to re-evaluate our investment in and approach to educating and doing anti-racism and anti-oppression workshops, strengthen solidarity and the exchange of ideas with

one another and with Aboriginal communities, and, lastly, attempt to build coalitions and lend each other support.

Conversely, it is also imperative for traditional environmental organizations to take a critical look at how they do environmental work and operate as organizations. This might involve:

- moving away from a denial of the existence of racism within environmental movements;
- making linkages between environmental activism and anti-colonialism in order to support Aboriginal struggles for self-determination;
- doing internal work and research that genuinely seeks to change the organization, and creatively strategizing how to do anti-racist, anti-colonial work within the confines of non-governmental organization funding structures and bureaucracies (particularly in the context of limited resources and institutional divisions between environmental work and social justice work);
- learning how to listen and how to be an ally;
- and finally, understanding that uniting our struggles will strengthen our movements, while failing to do so will make our goals impossible.

We are not interested in getting burnt-out again, but we are interested in connecting struggles taking place across the country and continent. There are obviously a limited number of support structures and frameworks from which to facilitate environmental justice movement building. Meanwhile, the issues remain as pressing as ever. As our struggles continue, we hope that critical dialogue can happen between the people and communities who are fighting for environmental justice in various spaces: on the ground, in the realm of theory, and within organizations. **b**

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