

**Commentary**

Jesse Russell

Jesse (Diana) Russell is currently working on her M.A. thesis in the School of Social Work at Carleton University. As both an "urban" Metis and a feminist, Jesse responds to Ron Bourgeault's article "The Development of Capitalism and the Subjugation of Native Women in Northern Canada" which appeared in Volume 6 of Alternate Routes (1983). Jesse hopes to stimulate an ongoing discussion of the problems Native women encounter within their own culture and within the larger dominant culture.

I would like to begin by describing my own particular social position which is in itself wrought with contradiction. As an urban Metis raised in Toronto, I possess neither Treaty status nor an Indian culture per se. Through my mother, however, I was able to glean a sense of what this culture is and to grasp the complexity of Indian issues. I was forced to deal with the difficulty of experiencing a female existence of subjugation directly, while indirectly dealing with the racism regarding Indian people in Canada. Never being identified with the latter, my natural inclination was to become an active member of the white women's feminist movement. After ten years of experience working alternatively with white women's centres (Rape Crisis etc.) and working on Reserves with Indian women, I felt a strong urgency to address the inherent incompatibility between the white women's feminist movement and the unique position (i.e. subjugation) of Indian women.

In response to Ron Bourgeault's article, I suppose the first issue I'd like to address is his conclusion that Native women would benefit from participation in the "white" feminist movement, and that the feminist movement should in fact be a working class movement that could echo the struggles of Native women. I sense Bourgeault is naive in two vital senses; that the feminist movement seeks solutions as a "class," and that Native women's assimilation into a white culture will resolve their problems. I fear Bourgeault has missed the point on both occasions. The feminist

movement, from my own experience, does not appear to be a class struggle. More importantly, Native women are far from being ready to participate in the white women's movement.

By and large, Native women's non-participation in the feminist movement is due neither to language differences, nor geography -- it is due to culture. The Western world-view, as I see it, has religious roots which emphasize a mastery over the earth -- an on-going battle to subdue the earth. There is a strong sense of 'self,' of 'individualism,' which creates a hierarchical relationship between men and men, men and nature. The label I use to conceptualize the Western world-view is "homo-centric," which basically refers to the Western belief that the homo sapien is separate from animal -- separate from nature. The Indian world-view differs greatly from this. It is "eco-centric" in the sense that Indian people see themselves as inseparable from nature. The Great Spirit or 'life force' is part of all that makes up the earth and its function is to maintain a balance or harmony in nature. There is no concern with conquering nature. Because there is no sense of 'separateness,' ownership is not a concept in Indian culture. Objects, even man-made objects, possess a spirit which negates the possibility of one's "using" it for something. Rather, in Indian culture, one 'interacts' with objects.

In the white women's feminist movement, the homo-centric world-view dominates. Individualism, in particular, is greatly stressed. Indian women cannot share the same strategies used by white women because of their eco-centric world-view. Becoming 'personally empowered' is alien to them, and using one's reproductive ability as a bargaining tool is unimaginable.

I think using women's reproductive ability is a good example of the importance of different world-views when we're talking about women's struggle

against oppression. In terms of the simple threat of extinction, reproduction for Native women is a moral obligation -- although I must stress here that 'obligation' is not the term these women would use to describe their thoughts about mothering. Again, what we have here is a very different view of biological reproduction. In eco-centrism, women do not see their reproductive ability as something they 'possess,' to withhold at any given time. The Indian culture has a verbal tradition which has been maintained through motherhood/mothering. In the Western world, mothering may be viewed as oppressive but, in Indian culture, it is the reproduction of life -- of nature itself; it is cyclical. Children are important.

To return to Bourgeault's article, I feel it also perpetuates the stereotyped image of Indian women as apathetic, and ignorant. I take exception to the portrayal of physically unaggressive women as weak in some way. Indian women historically have possessed a quiet strength which has enabled them to successfully resist assimilation into white culture.

Sexism does exist in Indian culture but its origin can be located in white culture. As Bourgeault correctly points out, egalitarianism (respect for women's labour -- both productive and reproductive) is part of 'Indianness'. Reclaiming 'Indianness' would mean reclaiming respect for women. So it is important that sexism be addressed within Indian culture first. This means bringing forward eco-centrism from its shadowy existence and re-asserting it.

In conclusion, I do not wish to presume what may happen regarding Indian and white women and their respective struggles for equality. I feel it would be elitist to suggest what should happen. If there is a commonality of issues -- equal pay for example -- then perhaps a joining of forces is a possibility. Perhaps as two distinct groups, a joining of alliances may be

effective. I do know that sexism cannot be addressed by abandoning one's Indian culture. Native women must find ways to fight their oppression in ways which are part of Indianness. Sexism, like racism and classism, must be defined by its victims. Solutions must be developed within this same dimension.