soundings issue 1 Autumn 1995

Environmental images and imaginary landscapes

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Lola Young *discusses the work of photographer Ingrid Pollard, and looks at the extent to which environmental issues are racialised.*

As an accomplished photographer, and as a founder member of the Black Environmental Network (BEN), Ingrid Pollard has produced a body of work which encourages a reconsideration of certain assumptions about the relationship between humans, the land and the environment.[1] But before I discuss her images in detail, I want to raise some points about links between black immigration, national cohesion and identity, and discourses on the environment. Contemporary fears about the state of the environment tend to focus on a number of basic assumptions that often include the following: the havoc wreaked by the presence of humans; the dehumanising effects of living in industrialised societies; the malevolent advance of technology; and crucially, in the context of this essay, the belief that population needs urgently to be controlled.

1. The Black Environmental Network (BEN) was formed in order to encourage black people's participation in activities and debates about environmental issues.

This issue of population control and environmental degradation is very much linked to 'race' and immigration and has been for some time. In 1968, Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* tapped a rich vein of anxiety within the USA about the growth of urban (black) ghettos, and the deterioration of the Californian wilderness. These fears grew in the context of the demands for equality expressed by the civil rights movement and emergent Black Power activists, and what was seen as a proliferation of urban civil disorder. In Britain, Edward Goldsmith's *Blueprint for* Survival (1972) opened up the debate about the use and conservation of the countryside from being a parochial concern to wider issues of environmental management, and in doing so posited a radical approach. Like Ehrlich, Goldsmith found the main problem to be one of excessive population, and again it should be noted that at the time that Goldsmith's book was published, ferocious debates, and discriminatory legislation concerning black immigration into Britain were underway. As is the case in recent Green Party campaigning material, an ideal population for Britain is deemed to be 30 million - approximately half of what it is currently. Goldsmith's Utopian proposal was to construct small group settlements of around 500 people which would be part of larger communities of some 50,000.

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Central to these propositions for developing small communities is the notion that cities are by definition inferior places to live in, in comparison with the countryside. Cities are represented as breeding crime, disease and alienated subjects. The issue of population (its size, composition and location) provides much of the focus for what is sometimes termed 'eco-racism', which is a loose collection of ideas claiming that migrants and 'aliens' exacerbate environmental problems by their very presence, contributing significantly to pollution through their lifestyle, especially through their rate of reproduction. Additionally, these people (principally referring to those from Africa, Asia and countries like Turkey) are accused of diluting the sense of 'natural' national cohesion, leading to crime-infested, conflict-ridden, run-down ghettoes.

In Britain, *the* degradation of the English - rather than 'British' - countryside is seen as analogous to the alleged deterioration of the nation itself: the land is held up as a repository of values, culture and heritage which transcend class or

gender interests, all of which should be subordinate to the nation. So how is membership of the nation defined? In the 1993 Schumacher lecture, the financier James Goldsmith stated that:

> You can't bring together all sorts of people from all sorts of cultural and ethnic backgrounds and create a nation... It is the common culture, identity and traditions which create a nation's heritage and constitute a vital pillar of its stability. That stability takes a long time to develop.[2]

In Goldsmith's account, a multi-racial/multi-cultural country, which would be a falsely created nation according to his criteria, leads to the breakdown of the social structures which make a society stable and precipitates 'misery and ethnic conflict'.[3] Goldsmith gives an apocalyptic version of future events in which 'mass movements of peoples... will engulf those nations too weak to protect themselves.' Goldsmith's pronouncements are particularly interesting in the context of his daughter's subsequent, much publicised conversion to Islam and marriage to Imran Khan.

More recently, the questioning of allegiance of black British players in the English cricket team (in an article published in *Wisden),* and the desire for a national curriculum which promotes a sense of national cohesion dependent on 'traditional' British values, evidence the continued unease about what constitutes 'Britishness'. These anxieties can be detected in the subtext of the words of a plant ecologist:

> Perhaps dislike of alien species is indeed similar to racial discrimination - wanting to preserve the culture and genetic integrity of one's own stock (a natural human failing). Alien species are welcome in strictly defined areas (gardens) but must not be allowed to pollute the native culture (the wider countryside).[4]

The use of language here is highly suggestive in its echoing of racist discourses: indeed, it is difficult to locate precisely where the discussion is concerned with plants and where with people. The garden/countryside split and the phrases

2. James Goldsmith, 'Superstate of Europe', in Resurgence, July/August 1993, No. 159, pi.
3. Ibid. pl0.
4. J. Fenton, 'Alien or Native?' in ECOS, 1986, Vo.7, No.2 pp20-30 (quoted by Julian Agyeman in an unpublished paper, 'Heritage in Multicultural Society', May 1993).

'alien species' and 'must not be allowed to pollute the native culture' are particularly significant. In human terms, this passage may be interpreted as meaning that migrants may be just about tolerated in the cities because they provide a pool of cheap labour, but in the heartland, the countryside, they are invasive predators who have exceeded the spatial parameters set for them.

What about black peoples' participation in green politics? Such involvement is fraught with anxieties and difficulties. Freedom of movement, space and territory were problematised for colonial subjects in their own countries, and on their arrival in Britain restrictions on movement became even more emphatic. The organisation of space and territory meant that black people who came to settle in this country lived and worked most frequently in major conurbations. Generations later, this recent history of urban settlement, together with the folkish corr of green politics and its lack of engagement with racial issues, have resulted in many black people thinking that the countryside and the environment have nothing to do with them. It was the recognition of a need to address this situation which provided the impetus for setting up BEN.

Imaging the Landscape

Crucial to an understanding of Ingrid Pollard's work is the recognition of her perspective as a black photographer working in a society where images of black people invoke a different history from those of the white population. Although the range of locations and occupations in which black people may be found has expanded over the years, old stereotypes persist.

Images of the countryside have come to represent a rural idyll signifying space, freedom, health and community. But views of the landscape are, in part at least, constructed for us through a familiarity with a particular descriptive language and imagery that informs 'ways of seeing' the land and being in it. It is this set of common-sense ideas about the countryside that Pollard's past work has sought to critique. Much of her previous work has been concerned with the effect of inserting black people into what have hitherto been portrayed as quintessentially 'white' English landscapes where they become immediately visible 'outsiders'.

Pollard's photographic work on the Lea Valley in East London testifies to the complexities of the assumptions embedded in apparently obvious, apparently natural oppositions, such as old/new, nature/culture, country/city, natural/

artificial, traditional/ technological and so on, and broadens the scope of her earlier visual critiques of Lake district landscapes. In the Lea Valley project, Pollard's photography seeks both to extend and to redefine some of her previous perspectives through a different look at those oppositional couplets. This time her object of study is the 'country within the city' and since the city, and especially the 'inner city', is defined in terms of confinement through fear of crime, ill-health due to pollution and isolation because of the lack of a sense of community, linking the city with the country seems like a contradiction in terms,

Much of the disquiet about cities and the countryside, has to do with what is perceived as the rapid rate of visible, radical change: the intrusion of unsightly buildings, structures incompatible with the 'natural' landscape, and excessive motor traffic with its smells, fumes and noise pollution. (None of these problems are new: there have been references to smog, pollution and crime since at least the 16th century.) Yet, looking at the panorama (a section of which is shown on p105) which Pollard has constructed - the long views with sheep, cows, sheds, lorries, telegraph poles and pylons -1 was struck by how harmonious the elements of the images are and how, in the future, new generations would not necessarily see the man-made structures as architectural 'scars'. This may indicate the extent to which dissent about the trappings of modern life is partly engendered by what these structures signify - the meanings which have become attached to them - rather than what they actually are. They keep reminding us that there has been change, some of which is unsettling and disruptive: pylons, for instance, are not inherently 'ugly', but they remind people of the differences between an imaginary ideal past and a demonised present.

Of course, many of the eulogies about the ways of life prior to industrialisation and the modern city depend on the suppression of knowledge about the endemic poverty of life in the 'golden age'. Their rhetoric also relies on the notion of the 'naturalness' o inhabitants. Of course this is not true and the triptychs constructed by Pollard subtly question such myths through the juxtaposition of the traditional tools, the rangers posed in their working environment, and the close-ups of fragments of 'nature': the presence of the rangers indicates the extent to which these 'wild' landscapes are the result of the labour of women and men who rely on a range of

tools to assist in keeping the surroundings looking 'natural'. Pollard's of hand colouring emphasises the constructed character of all images and leads us to question the ways in which the eye of the photographer intervenes and constructs the way in which the spectator approaches the image.

Finding a black person in an historical setting outside of images of slavery is still unusual. The long history of black people's presence in Britain is most frequently ignored in favour of a myth which says that black people first came here in the 1950s. The placing of a black man in a nineteenth-century industrialised setting is just as unsettling as the image of the black person in the countryside: 'they' don't 'belong' in these contexts. Whether or not there *actually* was a black man working in the mill is largely irrelevant: this is not a documentary-style reconstruction. Again, the image serves to remind us of the partiality of official historical accounts and the unreliability of the photograph as a window on 'factual truth'.

There is much pleasure to be had from picking out details and constructing your own interpretation of this body of work. 1 have not covered all of Ingrid Pollard's images here: what I've tried to do is to suggest that there is both simplicity and complexity in her images and that her work functions to undermine the certainty of tire unthinking assumptions which underpin a certain view on the world.

Material in this essay was drawn from two previous publications: 'National Selection? Ideology, Environmentalism, "Race" ', in Cultural Studies from Birmingham, 1994, No.3, ppl51-169), and 'Looking at Ingrid Pollard's Images' for the exhibition 'Hidden Histories; Heritage Stories' at the Lea Valley Leisure Centre, London, September 1994.

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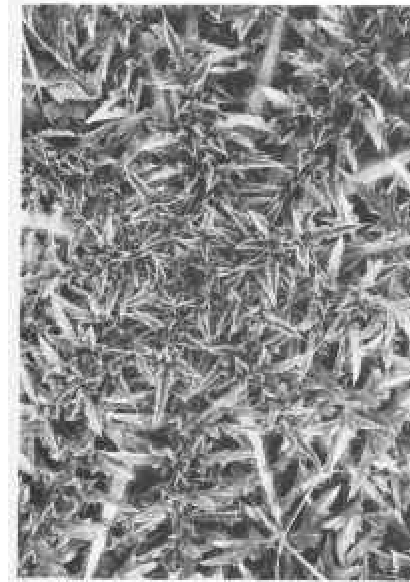

These photographs are part of an exhibition called Hidden History: Heritage Stories. Anyone who would like further information can contact Debra Reay at Lea Valley Park on 01992 717711.