

## DEDICATION

*I would like to dedicate this book to all of my family —  
biological, through ceremony, and of choice —  
who always keep it real for me.*

*Jessica Yee*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*This book was a two year journey in the arms of someone who doesn't consider herself a writer at all — so I was incredibly blessed to have so much support along the way! I would like to first give thanks to my ancestors right on down the line for never giving up so that I and the next seven generations could be here today — I am here because you refused to back down no matter how hard it was. I would like to thank all the contributors to the book who are an incredibly gifted group of people who stood by me through the whole editing process and worked very closely with me to get this done: it was a mutually educational and nourishing experience. Thank you to the staff at the CCPA, especially the fabulous Erika Shaker who is jazzy and adaptable no matter what comes up and so willing to support, support, support — thank you! I would like to acknowledge the path-paving work of my Indigenous sisters Katsi Cook, Lee Maracle, Kim Anderson, Andrea Smith, Ellen Gabriel, and Beverly Jacobs — nia:wen ko:wa for what you have done for the people and communities, I wouldn't have the perspectives I have if it wasn't for your tireless work. Thank you ever so much to our amazing staff, board, and youth members of the Native Youth Sexual Health Network who have stuck through it all and give me more and more reasons every day to move forward.*

*Lastly I would like to say much love to all my family — biologically, in ceremony, and of choice — for believing in me and bringing me this far. Especially to my sister Jennifer, who designed the cover and is my personal source of strength and resiliency, and to my Indigenous feminist partner in crime, DJ, with whom I've finally started to find out what a healthy relationship means — and it's awesome.*



JESSICA YEE

## Introduction

I don't have a degree in university.

There, I said it. Phew. It's out in the open. In the printed word. No matter what I say or allude to, I just admitted I did not graduate from university — although it's true I went for about three months ... and then I left. So now I hope you will continue to read this — even if I did just drop a few points on the intelligence scale of where you might have thought I was — if you happen to have such a scale. It was important for me to be truthful from the onset. And I didn't think I needed a university degree to put this book together anyway.

Before I continue, I'd like to share two points of clarification about this book:

- It is not a hate-on of academia.
- It is not a hate-on of feminism.

In fact this book is what I would call some “truth-telling”; truth-telling about some uncomfortable truths. One of my favourite quotes from Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred goes: “There needs to be struggle in order to lay out a path to co-existence, and that the process of being uncomfortable is essential

for non-Indigenous peoples to move from being enemy, to adversary, to ally.” I think this book has some of that in there — not just in reference to Indigenous peoples, but in regard to the uncomfortable work that needs to be done by everyone if we are to have any hope of changing the effects of hundreds and hundreds of years of colonization and genocide that led us to the oppressions and inequities alive and well today that feminism is supposed to be “fixing”.

However we’re not really equal when we’re STILL supposed to uncritically and obediently cheer when white women are praised for winning “women’s rights,” and to painfully forget the Indigenous women and women of colour who were hurt in that same process. We are not equal when in the name of “feminism”, so-called “women’s only” spaces are created and get to police and regulate who is and isn’t a “woman” based on *their* interpretation of your body parts and gender presentation, not your own. We are not equal when initiatives to achieve gender equity have reverted yet again to “saving” people and making decisions for them, rather than supporting their right to self-determination, whether it’s engaging in sex work, or wearing a niqab. So when feminism itself has become its own form of oppression, what do we have to say about it? Western notions of polite discourse are not the norm for all of us, and just because we’ve got some new and hot language like “intersectionality” to use in our talk, it doesn’t necessarily make things change in our walk (i.e., actually *being* anti-racist). And I have to say that these uncomfortable processes have been worth the many paths that brought the different contributors of the book together to tell their sometimes uncomfortable truths — not just about feminism, but about themselves and where they are coming from.

Onondaga Chief Oren Lyons said it best: “If you are going to take a stand for our people, know that you are probably going to get shot in the back by arrows from over 200 years of colonization and oppression. You gotta be prepared for that.” When I listened to him say that this past April 2010 at the ninth session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues I felt like he was speaking directly to me — and, moreover, that I *needed* to hear what he was saying. So much of my own identity in the work that I’m involved in across Turtle Island (what is now known as “North America”) has been wrapped up in trying

to measure up to being a “good” feminist, even though it was never just about “women’s rights” for me — in my life I never had the option for it to be just about that, even if I tried. But now I’m going to take a stand and say that I’m constantly questioning what feminism even is, and I’m increasingly disturbed every day by the gate-keeping of who and what gets to decide the answer to that question.

So here’s another truth about me: I’m at a point in my activism where in many spaces I no longer feel comfortable just saying that I’m a feminist, full-stop, without adding a few words before or after. I say I’m a multi-racial Indigenous Two-Spirit feminist. I say I’m a hip-hop feminist, a reproductive justice feminist. Like many people, I feel like I’ve been burned out by the mainstream usage and representation of feminism and I’m not making any apologies for what I call myself, because I’m speaking the English language of the colonizer, and if it takes people a few extra words to give me my right to self-determination of what I want to be called in English, so be it. Being uncomfortable with this truth about feminism helps keep my fire alive to change it, and also helps me to not forget where we’ve really come from and where we’re really going.

My hope for this book is that while withstanding and fighting back against those arrows of colonization and oppression Oren was talking about, we would also take apart, or “deconstruct” what has led to the existence of “feminism” in the first place, and where feminism exists today. I wanted to learn about people’s understandings and experiences of feminism in real life and go deeper than the notion that it just exists within the walls of the academy — in big textbooks, universities and colleges, or other fancy institutions. Not because I now hate academia, but because I’ve lost count of the amount of times I’ve been asked by others — and asked myself the question that is now the main title of this book, “But what *is* feminism, for real?”

The responses I received when putting this very question out there to create the book demonstrated resoundingly that people did want to talk about this notion of “the academic industrial complex of feminism” — the conflicts between what feminism means at school as opposed to at home, the frustrations of trying to relate to definitions of feminism that will never fit no matter how much you try to change yourself to fit them, and the anger

and frustration of changing a system while being in the system yourself.

Last summer of June 2010 I shared the idea of this book with a dear friend and colleague Andrea Carmen, from the Yaqui nation, who is the Executive Director of the International Indian Treaty Council and the first woman to ever be in this position. We were driving to Alamo, California for the first International Indigenous Women's Environmental and Reproductive Justice Symposium when, upon hearing that I was putting this book together, she told me that she got her start in this work after completing a Women's Studies degree at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

And after hearing her tell me this story, that's when I knew for sure that this isn't just about feminism, academia, or even the book itself. It's about so much more.

**Andrea Carmen:** Well, it's interesting that you are talking about this, Jessica, because I graduated with a degree in Women's Studies.

**Jessica Yee:** What?! Really?

**AC:** Yes, I was part of the Women's Studies Collective at UCSC. The collective actually ran the Women's Studies department. We decided the budget, what we wanted to see as the curriculum, and which professors we wanted to hire. There were also no "grades" per se either — your professors had to write a report where they were connecting with and valuing the work you were doing.

**JY:** Wait, wait, wait. There was such thing as a collective actually RUNNING a Women's Studies department? Where students got to have an actual say in the education they were receiving before they got it?!

**AC:** Yes, there was a student advisor in addition to members of the collective steering committee. We hired people like Angela Davis, Women of All Red Nations (WARN) — I mean, we got to bring in really amazing groups of women.

**JY:** OMG, things like that don't even exist anymore. I mean, not to that extent that you are talking about.

**AC:** Actually every time I run into a current student at UCSC and I tell them about my experience at UCSC and the Women's Studies Collective, they don't believe it.

**JY:** Tell me about it!

**AC:** My reason for getting involved as a college student was because at that time in the 70s it was just coming out that Indian Health Service was sterilizing Indigenous women as a matter of United States government policy. We found out for example that Claremore in Oklahoma was one of the biggest institutions where it was taking place; it was happening in South Dakota, and all over. It was actual state policy to sterilize an Indigenous woman, including during childbirth, while under anaesthesia, or with the threat of other children being taken away, or welfare being cut off. I mean, there are so many stories of how it happened.

I actually experienced a similar kind of thing myself when I was in surgery at Stanford hospital which is a teaching university hospital. So a lot of this information was just coming out of our real lived experiences, and we wanted to form the Coalition Against Sterilization Abuse (CASA) to take action against it. We were able to find space to host awareness events, and get university credits by the Women's Collective to do this work.

**JY:** Wow, wow, wow. So this is where it all started for you, then, the concept of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)?

**AC:** When I first heard of FPIC, to me it was about medical procedures, something we won with the exposure and cessation of sterilization as government policy. FPIC in this instance means you have the right to feel fully informed (while awake) and to hear the pros and cons, the right to have a waiting period if you want it, and the right to hear about other options to sterilization that aren't forever — like birth control.

It's a really interesting history how it became central to our work and recognition of our rights as Indigenous peoples — the right to FPIC now relating to development on our territories, our

laws, to toxins being used on our lands, to cultural items, and it all started as medical term. It started with the right of women to say yes or no, to be fully awake and not under threat when they give their agreement to any kind of medication.

**JY:** So people were really supportive of this in your department?

**AC:** At the time I resisted calling this a feminist issue — people in our department were saying this was a “women’s rights” issue. I said no this is not a “women’s issue” — it’s a genocide issue. It happens to be something that is happening predominantly to women, yes, but we are really talking about genocide of our people as a whole.

It’s interesting that today we work a lot with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and FPIC is literally the hardest fought principle that we have been pushing for. In the United States’ so-called “endorsement” of the Declaration this past year, this is a clear item they are resisting because they are saying it’s up to their “interpretation” of our rights by doing “consultation”. Which is of course completely different, consultation is a meeting — consent means the right to say no or yes with whatever conditions you want to put.

**JY:** What did you think about feminism back then?

**AC:** I’m going to speak frankly. I think of it as a white woman’s movement. This was certainly the case when I first became familiar with the term and the “ism” white women identified with. Those of us who were Native American and Chicano women at UCSC felt isolated by that philosophy which seemed to be something that pit male against female, with the primary oppressor being the man. We came to realize that maybe for white women it was the white male that was the oppressor in their culture — but for us as Indigenous peoples it was the entire colonizer and colonizing society, and the male-female subdivision was not a predominant focus. It took time, sharing, and understanding for us to be part of a collective that identified with feminism rather than anti-colonialism or Indigenous rights.

It was always an interesting discussion and opportunity to discuss with them how, for example, in our communities we

refuse to see the oppression only being perpetrated by men. Our men have been affected by colonization — we aren't saying we don't see the violence against women committed by men, or rape, or domestic violence. However we see that in a bigger context — we don't see “men” to be the single primary enemy.

**JY:** I'm continuously intrigued by the siloing and compartmentalizing of feminism — as you mentioned before, what gets considered “feminist” issues, what doesn't, and by whom.

**AC:** We listened to white women speak a lot — there were some white women from poor and working class backgrounds who also put a class and economic spin in the primary ways they identified their struggles in their wage for justice. Some of them said they sometimes see the upper class white women as being more oppressive than the men. There is a lot of different shading and different ways to look at it.

Something that was always really important for me to try to come to grips with was how there could possibly be men like the Europeans who massacred — how could you create that level of brutality in men and create horrible atrocities towards Indigenous peoples the world over?

And then I learned about the history of Europe — that as Christianity moved north, midwives, nurses, and so-called “witches” were sought after in a campaign of genocide — about four million women were killed by European leaders. So the reason that European men could do this to our people is because they had already cut the umbilical cord in their homeland.

I began to see the reasons for the feminist movement as a healing for white women. As Indigenous peoples we never experienced our men doing to us what European men had done to European women. I have never identified myself as a feminist even though we are all strongly for the rights of our people. Some traditional cultures might tend to divide up the roles and responsibilities, it may be like we see in our ceremonies with the different roles of men and women, but I strongly respect the different ways we exist in the created world.

**JY:** What do you think about feminism today?

**AC:** A lot of the movement work that was going on in the 70s has changed. One thing you have to recognize is that's why we call it a movement — it changes. There is also a necessity to look at the gains — and sometimes the tendency is to say we don't need that anymore. People can forget the importance of keeping vigilant and keeping movement principles alive and applied to a new reality.

I know that they have taken away the Women's Studies Collective at UCSC but it's something that is worth learning from. What we did was taken to the whole collective and it was exciting in terms of empowerment. It was rigorous — maybe some people think we slacked off but we didn't. It was a student representative program, meaning we gave credits for working in the community on your own terms. My first job was working in a women's shelter in San Jose run by women of colour and Indigenous women — who were also the clientele.

Feminist philosophy is a historical reality for European women — some women of colour and Indigenous women identify with feminism and are helping to redefine it with their own cultural values. I think the work you are doing, Jessica, is a great example of this, when you ask for instance what does reproductive justice mean for Indigenous women who aren't even allowed to keep their own children? Many times we have been victimized not only by stopping pregnancies from happening as a policy, but because of larger environmental practices and policies in our lands that prevent us from having healthy pregnancies now, like spraying with pesticides, toxic mining, etc. It affects everything.

I want to say that I don't think we need to reject feminism though — I think we need to redefine it, find common points and common ground and involve Indigenous peoples and other communities of colour. As long as there is mutual respect and all of our cultural and historic realities are brought into the mix, we can create cross-cultural human movements.

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*Jesscia Yee is a self-described “Two-Spirit multi-racial Indigenous hip hop feminist reproductive justice freedom fighter”. She is the founder and Executive Director of the Native Youth Sexual Health Network — the only organization of its kind in North America that works within the full spectrum of sexual and reproductive health by and for Indigenous youth across the continent.*



Sign created by Jessica Yee