

# INDIGENOUS FEMINISM

## From Symposium to Book

*Joyce Green*

Over the years that I've been studying Indian<sup>1</sup> women's political organizing, I noticed that Aboriginal women who organized on apparently feminist issues rarely identified as feminist. Yet, I knew Aboriginal<sup>2</sup> women who had dedicated a large part of their lives to political activism who deployed an explicit or implicit feminist analysis. These women sought to claim rights for Aboriginal women. None sought to destroy their communities, their identities or their cultures: quite the contrary. All had witnessed or experienced patriarchal and colonial oppression in both the settler society and in their own communities. None were blind to the effects of colonialism and racism on Aboriginal men. They took gender seriously in the context of understanding the life experiences of Aboriginal men and women, and understood Aboriginal women to suffer from the particular ways in which racist and sexist oppression are brought to bear on that inalterably unified category.

Nor was this Indigenous feminism limited to Canada. A number of women from Indigenous communities in the U.S., Sápmi (Samiland), Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia also seemed to be using a feminist analysis, or drawing on feminist theories or organizing principles, in political and community activism and in their writings. Some of this work was carefully qualified as deriving from traditional Indigenous cultural values concerning women, but much of it melded an interpretation of traditions, or a critique of traditions and contemporary practices, with approaches that were clearly feminist in orientation.

The slim literature base on Aboriginal women contains virtually nothing by Aboriginal authors claiming to be feminists or to write about Aboriginal feminism. A number of writers unequivocally reject feminism for Aboriginal women. Some Aboriginal women activists and scholars privately identify as feminist but are cautious not to do so in their political statements and written work. Some of these women relate stories of being harassed and persecuted for their political positions. Despite this, these women were also catalysts for some very powerful and interesting political movements and for original and insightful academic work. It was obvious that this small but powerful critique deserved to be taken seriously as a valid political stance.

In Canada, since the 1970s, the academic literature has been strengthened by the emergence of a cadre of Aboriginal intellectuals, most of whom were gender-blind or hostile to gendered analysis. Non-Indigenous scholars began reading these contributions and uncritically accepting the proposition that feminism was inauthentic, un-Aboriginal and in other ways deeply problematic for Indigenous peoples. This led to a consensus in the thinking of scholars and others that feminism was an alien ideology inimical to the political and cultural objectives of Aboriginal women in particular and Aboriginal peoples in general.

In 2002, my interest in Aboriginal feminism and the opportunity to focus on it came together. I was spending a year at the Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy (SIPP) and had time to devote to organizing, research and writing. The conditions were right for me to organize a symposium by and for Aboriginal feminists. It seemed important to bring some of these women together to talk about being Aboriginal feminists. The Canadian federal government agency Status of Women Canada had funds available to community groups to pursue research activities, community building and similar kinds of tasks. I belonged to a feminist affinity group, the Kitchen Table Collective (KTC), and we decided to apply for funds to bring some Aboriginal feminists to Regina for the symposium.

With the sterling support of Lorraine Cameron, Director of the B.C.-Yukon regional office of Status of Women Canada; the technical support and assistance of one of her officials, Dena Klashinsky (herself an Aboriginal woman); and the support of the Alberta-Saskatchewan regional office of Status of Women Canada, the KTC submitted a successful proposal and grant application to hold the Aboriginal Feminism Symposium in Regina. Cameron and Klashinsky epitomized the best of feminist solidarity, in this case making it possible for the KTC to do what we may not otherwise have been able to. Thus, the organizing (and then the Symposium) was a good example of activists, a community group, a government agency and the university working together to make possible an event that involved political theory, public policy, feminist activism, empowerment, community building and exploration of citizenship capacity.

Some of the contributions to the symposium helped me to understand the parameters of and context for Aboriginal feminism better. Virtually all participants expressed the view that coming together was therapeutic, politically significant and interesting — and further, that we should make an effort to build on the Symposium. This book is part of that, and its purpose is to stake out some discursive space and to provide evidence that, for some Aboriginal women, feminism has some theoretical and political utility.

The Aboriginal Feminism Symposium, August 21–22, 2002, was comprised of self-designated Aboriginal feminists, who I had invited based on

either my own familiarity with their political and intellectual positions and activism, or based on references from other feminist Aboriginal women. The number of invitees was kept small, in keeping with a tentative first initiative. Thus, the participant list at the first symposium was not a result of representative or systematic invitations; rather it was developed from networking with the Aboriginal feminists I knew.

The symposium brought together twenty-four participants for a program that included panel presentations and round-table discussions on particular topics. This was a diverse group: participants included Inuit, Métis, First Nations and non-status Indian women; some women were firmly located in Aboriginal communities and cultures, others had more urban or hybrid identities. It included women whose first language was their Aboriginal language, and who continued to speak it, and women who spoke only English. It included women with graduate and professional education, and women with basic in-school education. Clearly, then, the shared interest in feminism transcended these other characteristics and was not alien or hostile to any of them. And yet, most of the women had endured much criticism and some had suffered direct physical abuse and political attacks by Aboriginal men and women as a result of defending Aboriginal women's interests. Some women had endured snide comments about their sexuality, about their authenticity as culturally located people, about their political integrity and about their motives.

The symposium opened and closed with prayer offered by Maliseet elder and Tobique Women's Group activist Shirley Bear, who was also a participant. This helped to focus us on the importance of treating each other, and our discussions, with respect and kindness. Some women had been asked to make presentations using their feminist analysis; the topics had to be relevant to Aboriginal feminism. Within those broad parameters, a number of issues relevant to identity, security and community emerged. The range of papers included children and self-government and treaty negotiations; the *Indian Act*; women and violence and psychological trauma; elder perspectives of race and racism; teaching in the racist, sexist academy; Aboriginal feminist activism; First Nations and Inuit constitution and political development; Aboriginal identity politics; Aboriginal and human rights; and racist and sexist misconstructions of Aboriginal mythology. Throughout, it became clear that these women experience a profound lack of security in their professional, political and personal lives as Aboriginal women and as self-conscious feminists; as racialized Others in a racist society; and as Indigenous persons located in (and sometimes, excluded from) colonized Indigenous communities. The very label "Aboriginal feminist" was fraught for symposium participants.

Speaking at the symposium about the pressures exerted against Aboriginal feminists, Sharon McIvor said once Aboriginal women identify publicly as feminist,

You don't have a place anymore because there's no one else around like you... so it is a very, very lonely place to be.... Even those women and men who support you can't do it publicly because it's not safe.... Even in the academic arena (when) you're presenting papers, it's unusual to do a presentation and not have an Aboriginal woman academic get up and challenge what you've said and invariably it will be "You're not traditional. You're destroying the foundations of our nations because you are saying what you're saying."

The few Aboriginal women who do identify as feminist are very cautious about claiming the label and about publicly invoking the analysis. This reality had impelled the decision to frame the symposium as a closed space, limited to the invited participants, to ensure that women would feel safe to talk to each other about being feminist, absent the disciplinary effect of having to justify their self-designation or their Aboriginal authenticity. The lack of intellectual and political space for the vigorous and free exchange of ideas, including critical and oppositional ideas such as feminism, suggests that Aboriginal feminists do not enjoy enough security to participate routinely in the freedoms of speech, thought and association that are considered minimums for expression of citizenship in contemporary Canada.

As the 2002 Aboriginal Feminism Symposium was closing, it became apparent to many of us that it had been important to come together to share views in a safe space with others of like mind, and the wish was expressed that this could happen again. The symposium participants agreed that the presentations should be collected into a book, and I offered to coordinate that project. However, over time it became apparent that life is too complicated and too busy for many women to find time for writing and editing. If the book was to be written, it would have to include authors who were Indigenous feminists but who were not necessarily at the symposium. Thus, this book includes both authors who were at the original symposium and authors who were not. It demonstrates that there are more Aboriginal feminists "out there" than those few who attended the symposium and that their intellectual contribution is powerful and original. The book also shows that Indigenous feminism exists throughout the settler states: our contributors are primarily from Canada, but they are also from the U.S., from Sápmi (Samiland) and Aotearoa/New Zealand. Had we more time and space, we could have included many more women from the international Indigenous community; the perspectives here are evidence that they exist.

Two non-Indigenous contributors participated in this book as acts of solidarity with Indigenous feminists. Gunhild Hoogensen, a political scientist at the University of Tromsø in Norway, translated Jorunn Eikjok's chapter from Norwegian to English. Alyssa Peel, a graduate student at the University

of Regina, served as an able editorial assistant, editing prose, fact checking, confirming references, providing technological support and otherwise making it possible for chapters to proceed to publication with as few copyediting problems as possible.

Readers will notice that not all contributors to this collection agree with each other on all matters. This diversity of opinion and perspective does not mean that there is no agreement — most authors are in general agreement on many issues. The differences do suggest that Indigenous feminism is a body of work, a set of theoretical perspectives and a set of political positions and practices whose practitioners take a general approach, and then make it specific. The contributors to this book deploy their feminism carefully, specifically — and differently — drawing on political, historical and cultural contexts and their own particular ideologies to form their feminism. Thus, each has a particular “take” on the topic, and this collection reflects that diversity.

The chapters in the book are divided into three parts: (1) the theory of Indigenous feminism; (2) particular political eras and issues where Indigenous feminism and feminists played a role; and (3) individual Indigenous feminists who talk both about their particular political struggles and about their feminism. Authors also consider issues using feminist analysis, or they explore what Aboriginal feminism is and what its strengths are. Joyce Green addresses the question of what Aboriginal feminism is. Verna St. Denis uses post-structural theory to reveal and condemn colonialism in education. Emma LaRocque writes about the ethical foundation for decolonization and feminism; LaRocque also contributes a powerful poem that has a manifestly feminist and post-colonial sensibility. Rauna Kuokkanen explores the transformational power of Sami feminism. Andrea Smith shows the lie in the proposition that Aboriginal women do not and should not use feminist analysis, by showing that patriarchal oppression isn't only a colonial imposition. Jorunn Eikjok writes of the power and peril of feminism for Sami women, thus also demonstrating the international power of patriarchy and colonialism. Makere Stewart-Harawira considers how Indigenous feminist analysis may be used to fight contemporary imperialism. Joyce Green documents the activism of Canadian Aboriginal women's organizations seeking justice, equality and participation in the process of defining constitutional change and constitutional rights in Canada. Shirley Green raises the vexed question of identity and racism in the Canadian context for those of us descended from both Aboriginal and settler forbearers, and shows how a healthy identity must include all of one's cultural inheritances. Kathie Irwin documents some of the powerful Maori women leaders and role models she has known. Denise Henning brings together her cultural experience as a Cherokee woman; her feminism, which is rooted in her matriarchal culture; and the need to teach

her daughters how to be powerful contemporary Cherokee women. Shirley Bear demonstrates the powerful nexus between politics and culture through her poetry and art. Tina Beads' interview with Rauna Kuokkanen explores Beads' thinking about Aboriginal feminism and violence against Aboriginal women, beginning with her politicization in childhood by the conditions in her life. Colleen Glenn's interview with Joyce Green focuses on Glenn's feminist solidarity and action with the Canadian organization Indian Rights for Indian Women. Sharon McIvor's interview with Rauna Kuokkanen focuses on McIvor's involvement as a feminist in politics and as vice-president of the Native Women's Association of Canada in the late 1980s and early 1990s. All this writing is wrapped up in the breathtaking art on the book cover by Métis feminist artist Christi Belcourt.

### NOTES

1. In Canada, "Indian" is a subset of the category of Aboriginal peoples, constitutionally recognized in Canada as "Indian, Inuit and Métis."
2. In this chapter and elsewhere I use the term "Aboriginal" to refer to Indigenous people in Canada. I also use the term "Indigenous," particularly when referring to Indigenous peoples from places other than Canada.