

Reproductive justice – for real, for me, for you, for now

By Native Youth Sexual Health Network

Reproductive justice saved me, I think. Beyond being a term that some might associate with various organizations or non-profit industrial complexes, or a theory that exists on paper that people still struggle to apply in real-life, discovering what RJ was and what it means today saved me. It saved me from a relentless, life-long battle of trying to articulate in English what it means, as an Indigenous person, to never singularly look at one issue with our bodies or spaces being disconnected from each other – or all others for that matter. It saved me from having to play the game with different funding/institutional/governmental policies and practices who make it difficult if not impossible to get all the things our communities need simultaneously since Western society has long dictated to us that we ought to focus on essentially one or two things only – and leave the rest to someone else. It saved me from the stereotypical response I was getting from so-called feminist groups when I brought up Indigenous realities in sexual and reproductive health who (still) say to me, “Sure, we care about sexual/reproductive health but that, (insert something outside the clinical/medical model) that isn’t our issue” of isolation, individualism, and capitalism. It saved me from trying to cover all the bases myself in either what my previous jobs wouldn’t pay me for or the particular activist circles I belonged to refused to accept as equally pressing intersectional issues. And even in reality if what I just wrote you don’t support at all – I can honestly say that coming to terms with RJ saved me in my mind, body, and spirit. And only I would know that to be true for me.

So what’s this thing called “reproductive justice” anyway? Reproductive justice as defined by Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, one of the founding organizations of the term is, “The emotional, physical, mental, economic, social, and political and recognizes that the governmental control of reproductive systems and bodies violates all eight categories of human rights.” SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, also a founding organization of the term, breaks it down to three things: the right to 1) Have a child; 2) Not have a child; and 3) Raise children in safe and healthy environments. RJ goes beyond the usual rhetoric of “pro-choice” to just focus on abortion, and it addresses the systemic oppression of women of color and Indigenous women who have historically been excluded from the movement and whose realities are far too often ignored.

Today our work at the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN) INCLUDES everything from comprehensive, culturally safe sexuality education to reproductive justice to environmental justice to violence prevention and awareness, sex work outreach, prison in-reach, and so much more. We are honored to work with an incredible network of youth, elders, and communities all across the United States and Canada who tell us exactly why we shouldn’t back down from working on all these issues together, or if separate at least related. Of course we experience so

many of them at the same time – because since when isn't land connected to bodies connected to spirit?

Erin Konsmo, a young Native feminist and our Media Arts Justice and Projects Coordinator at NYSHN, explains how RJ to her is based off of the importance of these connections:

“Reproductive justice to me means having my cycles as a woman being connected with the cycles of nature, it means having that connection be strong and healthy. It means being able to make decisions over that health including when and if I have children, the ability to make decisions to not follow full term with a pregnancy.

It also means having the ability to sit and listen to my kookum (grandmother) tell me in her own indigenous language (which she lost) with my feet in the dirt and hands planting seeds how my reproductive system is interconnected with the earth. It is not some foreign white concept written on cleaned up white paper, it is poetry, beautiful and real. Beautiful with my feet in the dirt.” Erin Konsmo, Metis Nation

I'm not insinuating whatsoever that RJ is totally perfect and it certainly is not without its problems, however the very concept of RJ has allowed us to take a stand and resist the hierarchal imperialism of state manufactured healthcare by centering our self-determination to decide what's best for our bodies, communities, and human rights in a way that acknowledges where this all went wrong in the first place. Krysta Williams, our Advocacy and Outreach Coordinator at NYSHN puts it into perspective what this means to her in our work:

“For me, reproductive JUSTICE fills a huge gap in 'feminist' conversation about previous (and current) injustices that dictate how we are able, or not able to make informed choices and what those options might look like. Specifically, it helps us acknowledge that colonization comes in many forms and is currently one of the strongest forces that dictates choice for Indigenous women and communities. Without acknowledging that our native voices have not been listened to, and without understanding the injustice that we deal with on a day to day basis, there can be no peace, and no choice. This ignorance and lack of will to listen comes not only from oppressive forces, but from feminist and activist communities as well.

It pisses me off when conversations about agency and self determination are left out, or when communities of colour and indigenous communities are painted as "in need" of: assistance, information, solidarity etc. I think we all need to do our own work, and allow communities to reclaim their self determination and traditional knowledge which is what has always allowed us to survive and thrive.” Krysta Williams, Moravian of the Thames First Nation

RJ really is something that we as Indigenous peoples have been believing in, living, and practicing for quite some time now and I often think of RJ as a useful tool in getting people who

are only too used to erasing and invisibilizing us to see our knowledge packaged up nicely now and go, “Oh! That’s what you are talking about!” Because when people continue to so largely romanticize who we are as Indigenous people or pretend like we aren’t here anymore, our teachings aren’t recognized as credible or even legitimate, especially about sexuality and self-determination over our bodies and spaces. There aren’t university degrees that will simply recognize the centuries of knowledge our Elders have about the ceremonies, medicines, and women’s societies that existed for us to know and control our own reproductive and sexual health and take it seriously. Even the various waves of feminism in North America still won’t acknowledge that the white suffragettes saw gender equity and balance in our communities, took what they saw, and ran with it without so much as a “hey, thanks!” This is exactly where the train of appropriation leaves from – because when you give a gift to the world or invite someone in to learn from you and expend the energy to teach them – you need to honor and be real about where it’s really coming from.

I asked my friend and colleague Theresa Lightfoot who is also a member of our National Indigenous Young Women’s Peer Advisory to tell me about her frustration as an Indigenous person of when people treat these things like abortion rights, sex education, gender fluidity, or being sex positive as if they are entirely new concepts:

“I hate how the people out there are clapping their hands at the non-native pro-choice movement, and totally ignoring our long standing and well documented history of self control over reproductive choices. It’s disrespectful to pretend like RJ wasn’t alive in our communities. They treat it as if it’s the first time it’s being done, saying things like, “Look how progressive we are!” but they totally ignore the fact that before contact we were more egalitarian than them, but their indoctrination/colonization has manipulated things so that we weren’t allowed to follow the way we always did things. Our RJ was made illegal on purpose, but that’s never mentioned anywhere.

The other thing that makes me mad about these organizations ignoring and dismissing our history is if they do finally admit there are 'some cases' of Native people practicing autonomy over our own bodies, the argument then turns to, “Well it’s not modern pharmacology” or “Well ok, natives had an idea but they didn’t 'scientifically understand what biological effects those herbs were having.” Theresa Lightfoot, Labrador

RJ is all over the place now. Sure many people and communities don’t know about it, but it is no longer something that only a select few people are talking about (and it really wasn’t ever, even if it wasn’t in a “published toolkit” yet). RJ has been taken up by students, midwives, men, Two-Spirited people, sex workers, mothers and daughters, pro-life and pro-choice activists. It has been shifted and expanded from its original inception on paper by younger generations,

challenged into reclaiming traditions by older ways of thinking, and it continues to be something that means different things to different people and communities.

However some of the perspectives I get to witness first-hand living and working on both sides of the colonially imposed “border” of Canada and the United States is how RJ gets thrown around in a way that not only do people not know anything about Indigenous understandings of RJ that were in place way before RJ was articulated as a theory, they don’t know where, when, and how it became defined when the mainstream pro-choice movement wasn’t cutting it for women of color and Indigenous women.

Loretta Ross, one of the founders of SisterSong shared with me how she sees this occurrence of ignoring RJ’s beginnings happening:

“In 1994 we as black women decided to take up what is now known as reproductive justice – we did it and offered it to the world. What seems to be happening now is that people want to claim RJ without understanding where it came from. It’s more than anti-black racism that’s going on by doing that – you don’t claim something and not acknowledge where it came from. We aren’t saying only black women or women of color can use it, but it feels like theft! RJ is for every group to claim and re-define – it was our gift to the universe. A gift is something you acknowledge you got from somebody – you don’t steal a gift!

But at the same time every person has to figure out what do human rights mean for me – my situation, and my community. It’s supposed to be personalized, it’s not a one size fits all approach. In claiming RJ and shaping it for yourself, for example sovereignty issues look different than enslaved issues within an RJ framework. What we see is the failure of the pro-choice movement to analyze how white supremacy has affected them. You cannot do RJ without analyzing white supremacy – you just can’t.” Loretta Ross, Atlanta, Georgia

Now I’m never one to do the Canada/United States comparison of what’s better or what’s worse in either place because I often equate that to the same question of what’s worse; subtle racism or extreme racism? (and it’s a completely pointless question anyways). What I have noticed is that in both countries, several organizations seem to insert RJ now as the progressive “badge” of attempting to be equitable, even if they still operate within a hugely oppressive stronghold of refusing to accept the fact that for many people, there are no choices to begin with, or treating a specific reality of someone completely separated from everything else about them without even asking. RJ appears to be this “add-on” of “it looks good to have it” so even if it’s included in an organization’s mandate, their policies, procedures, and practices don’t change. For example I’ve seen abortion rights organizations say things like “We support RJ!” but then say the most racist, Islamophobic statements about women in hijab needing to be “saved” from “extremism” or “taught” about “true women’s rights”. That’s not real RJ to me because to

me, it starts with respecting self-determination and knowing that you can't be the expert about someone else's life.

What I find interesting about Canada though is this deeply-entrenched reluctance to adopt RJ at all. I remember some 5 or more years ago when I first started getting involved in the RJ movement in the United States, coming back to Canada so filled with inspiration and hope that RJ could be used to change the white supremacist, medical/clinical model of care and the largely white pro-choice movement's continuous refusal to work on anything that didn't directly benefit white, middle-class cis-gendered able-bodied women, and being repeatedly shot down. Whenever I brought up RJ or tried to teach about it, I would get responses like, "Well, that's a US thing because you know, they have real racism there and we don't" or "You weren't around when the pro-choice movement was started in Canada so you don't really get it".

And the most fascinating thing I see now is that fast forward a few years, some people are starting to hear about RJ and are taking it up in a way that not only treats it as if it's an entirely new concept, but the real history of it is not known, and there appears to almost be a wilful ignorance about it. I've attended several presentations as of late which present RJ as this innovative school of thought, in which there is total silence of its origins, and no truth telling about oppressive pro-choice organizing in Canada that's still happening.

So I decided to do some digging around and ask other young people of color in Canada what bothers them most about this. Fifteen year old high school student and amazing youth activist Rayna Farr told me not only what RJ definitively means to her, but the most irksome thing about what the mainstream pro-choice movement still assumes about her:

"Well right now RJ means that I have access to the health care that I need, and the resources to have a healthy family of whatever size I choose. It also means that I am trusted to make the choice, at whatever age, of whether or not I am ready to have a kid.

*The thing that bothers me most about this history of reproductive rights in Canada, *especially* with racist pro-choicers? Well I find that, as a girl of colour (or half colour) people, including pro-choicers, tend to make the assumption that I am going to fuck up my life. Because... you know... I'm black, (kinda) and therefore am at a disadvantage. Drugs and teenage pregnancy somehow seems to seek out racial minorities. (yes I'm being sarcastic here)*

If people were able to separate the ideas of poor education and race, the world would be a much better place." Rayna Farr, Ottawa, Ontario

I then asked Ainsley Jenicek, a young woman of color in Quebec to tell me what RJ means to her having just recently learned about it herself:

“It means prioritizing pro-choice mobilization around the fact that people who have an expired Quebec health card or have lost their card are made to pay for abortion services.

It means getting racialized, migrant, indigenous, poor, queer, "obese" and dis/abled women-identified and trans people around a table to discuss their particular reproductive and sexual health needs and where the system is failing them. We need to draw links between our struggles.

It means rejecting universalizing statements about levels of access to different services and breaking down reality to see how access is racialized, classed, heterosexualized, ableist and gendered (and I don't mean just "women" and "men").” Ainsley Jenicek, Montreal, Quebec

Let me be clear: I’m not saying that no one in Canada knew about RJ at all before 5 years ago, or that there aren’t people who know about the real history and haven’t been working on their own versions of RJ for quite some time now (because of course many have/are!). What I am saying though is from my point of view on an organizational, NGO, and non-profit level, as well as in activism – actualizing RJ beyond a hot, new buzz word still has a long way to go and it has to start with being honest about where we are at and what’s really going on in terms of racism, sexism, classism, white supremacy, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and more – not just systemically, but what we ourselves are complicit in as well. And that is of course 100% true about the United States as well.

I don’t think that anyone has the right to “police” what RJ is or is not, and it’s important to be critical of the hierarchies that exist within our RJ movement today of who is the better activist, or who “gets” RJ more. There are many ways that we reproduce colonial notions of justice when aren’t ready to “check ourselves before we wreck ourselves” as the saying goes and just because we apply RJ to any situation doesn’t mean we don’t escape white supremacy or colonialism ourselves all together. When we try to equalize power among us, it also means keeping ourselves in “check” in whatever ways we do in fact have power and ask ourselves when using the RJ framework, “What powers does my association and/or social location of RJ itself bring with me?”

I am very excited that reproductive justice is in Canada, has taken off from the United States, but most importantly of all that people across borders are always redefining what it means to them every day. We need to truly look to our young people’s leadership on this so that it does live on no matter how we see it or disagree about it. As Ainsley Jenicek very matter-of-factly told me from her perspective as a young person who wants to move beyond theorizing and get more directly involved with RJ,

“For me, reproductive justice means less rhetoric and more action on integrating anti-oppression into all reproductive and sexual health initiatives.”

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