

10-1-2006

Book Review: Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide by Andrea Smith, Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005, 250 pages, ISBN: 0896087433

Brian J. Trautman
Fielding Graduate University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj>

 Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Trautman, Brian J. (2006) "Book Review: Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide by Andrea Smith, Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005, 250 pages, ISBN: 0896087433," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 4 , Article 2. Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol4/iss4/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Leadership: The Online Journal by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository.

Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide by Andrea Smith, Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005, 250 pages, ISBN: 0896087433

Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide by Andrea Smith, Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005, 250 pages, ISBN: 0896087433

Reviewed by

Brian J. Trautman M.Ed.

Doctoral Student

Educational Leadership and Change

Fielding Graduate University

The American colonial project, which is founded on human exploitation, elitism, and white supremacist patriarchal ideals and practices, continues to structure and influence different modern-day American institutions, including many federal and state governmental agencies and for-profit corporate entities. It is no surprise, then, that given the nature of the membership and goals of these institutions, different hegemonic and propaganda tools have been created and nurtured to convince the average non-Indian American that the acts of genocide committed against Native Americans are “old history,” and that any kind of early American state involvement in committing such acts has long since ended. As long as the documented historical and contemporary evidence implicating public and private entities in the premeditated rape, torture, and murder of untold numbers of Native Americans continues to be trivialized by government officials and the media, or worse, remains hidden from the general public, most Americans may never make the important connection between historical colonization and the modern-day use of violence to subjugate American Indian people and lands.

In her latest book, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, Andrea Smith (Cherokee), prominent Native American author, activist, and scholar, deconstructs and reports on the continued use of corporate-sponsored and state-sponsored violence, namely sexual violence, to control Native women and Native culture and lands. This analysis includes an examination of the numerous and complex manifestations of sexual violence and how sexual violence is used as a tool for patriarchy, racism, and colonialism in the United States and in Canada. Smith’s gender

analysis includes an in-depth analysis of the myriad ways sexual violence serves the political, economic, and social power interests of the colonial project, and how it functions as a major building block of empire and capitalism. Conquest offers credible historical and contemporary examples of how sexual violence has been used to subjugate Native American women, including the consequences and implications of these acts for Native communities as a whole. Significantly, the book also considers the broader implications of sexual violence for all women of color. According to Smith, sexual violence against Indigenous populations is deeply rooted in colonial thought, theory, and tradition—an inherently brutal building block of the colonial project, a project founded upon the conventional European principles of hierarchy, patriarchy, and white supremacy. Smith acknowledges that by historical comparisons the violence committed against Native Americans today while less overt still carries genocidal intentions and implications. Sexual violence is used more today as a tool for suppressing Native American history and culture and for advancing the tyrannical and profit-driven agendas of government and private enterprise. The changing face of the nature of the violence committed against Natives, however, must not be interpreted as meaning that Native women are any safer or less a victim as compared to times past: “While the era of Indian massacres in their more explicit form has ended in North America, the wholesale rape and mutilation of indigenous women’s bodies continues” (27).

In her brief but profoundly gripping and heartfelt foreword to *Conquest*, Winona LaDuke, prominent Native American activist, environmentalist, and writer, explains that social movements, i.e. movements for social justice and change, must organize and operate under the principles of “dignity, love, and life” (xv). Such movements, LaDuke argues, like the American Indian anti-violence movement, must be grounded both in healing and in honesty, and must ask the critical question of how to build and nurture change. LaDuke applauds Smith for drawing together the voices and experiences of Indigenous women, and for deconstructing and reporting on the complexity and causes of gender-based violence: “Smith has taken the mythology of dominance head on, putting voice to experiences we all feel, acknowledge and struggle with” (xviii). LaDuke refers to Smith’s writing on Native American resistance to domination and struggle for justice as “clear and fierce” (xviii).

Each of the eight chapters of *Conquest* considers the role of sexual violence in the colonization process, beginning in the book’s first chapter with an overview of how and why sexual violence—in its most familiar form (i.e. rape and other bodily violation)—is used as a tool for domination, assimilation, oppression, and genocide. Smith notes that while large-scale acts of aggression against American Indians have been condemned, and are no longer prevalent, sexual violence against women of color and non-white communities continues today—one example being the growing problem of global human sex trafficking of women and children for prostitution and slavery.

According to Smith, colonial thought and theory regards Native peoples as inherently “rapable” and “violable,” a colonial belief that stretches beyond the physical bodies of Natives, to Native

sovereignty and lands as well—sexual violence against mind, body, and property. One of the reasons sexual violence has been such a powerful tool of the colonizer is because hierarchal, patriarchal command and control systems of societal management are seldom found within Indigenous societies. European colonizers, on the other hand, have long relied on these mechanisms to subdue and instill fear in their people. Sexual violence, therefore, serves the colonizer as one way of assimilating Native women into Western society, which, consequently, increases Native susceptibility to gender violence.

One of the most interesting and provocative aspects of *Conquest* is Smith's inclusive definition of sexual violence. This definition incorporates the traditional meaning of sexual violence, but also includes and places emphasis on other forms of aggression (e.g., control and abuse of women's reproductive rights), which are at least as perverse and ubiquitous as the archetypal form. Significantly, the fundamental constituents that breed these different forms, Smith argues, are not mutually exclusive. Rather they must be recognized as being interconnected and interdependent. This will engender a clearer understanding of the full scope and complexity of the problem.

Smith's contention that sexual violence manifests through many different forms is addressed and supported throughout the book. Chapter Two provides a tangible example of one of these forms: the severe physical, mental, and emotional abuse of Native children in boarding schools. Smith refers to the problem as an "epidemic of sexual abuse" (38)—a colonial effort at cultural genocide. The indoctrination of colonial norms into the minds of young Native females, Smith argues, is one aspect of this abuse: "The primary role of this education for Indian girls was to inculcate patriarchal norms into Native communities so that women would lose their place of leadership in Native communities" (37). Smith makes a strong case for government reparations, classifying boarding school abuses as human rights violations and citing the widespread consequences and implications (e.g., substance abuse, loss of culture, unemployment, and increased depression and suicide rates) of historical and modern-day boarding school abuses.

Another state-sponsored form of sexual violence discussed in the book is the ongoing use of environmental racism and sexism to degrade Native peoples and their lands. Smith refers to this type of violence as a "rape of the land." According to Smith, such violations of Native lands are committed largely because of the racist colonial belief that Native peoples are "inherently impure and dirty" (77), thus morally subject to having toxic waste and other hazardous biological and chemical poisons dumped on their environment. Smith cites energy resources as an example of the primary material driving force for Indigenous genocide: "The vast majority of energy resources are on indigenous lands, and almost all uranium mining takes place on or near Native lands" (180). Environmental degradation has not only caused irreparable harm to Native lands but also to the short-term and long-term physical health and well-being of the land's occupants.

The colonization of the reproductive rights of Native women and medical experimentation carried out on Native bodies are two further examples of the complex nature of sexual violence and

state-sponsored aggression against Indigenous peoples. The ability of women of color, including Native women, to become pregnant and give life beyond their own is in great jeopardy because of the planned population control mechanisms, i.e. sterilization caused by biological and chemical toxicity and long-acting hormonal contraceptives (e.g., Depo-Provera and Norplant), formulated and manufactured by Western pharmaceutical companies and endorsed by the FDA and other government agencies. Population control methods, such as the aforementioned, continue to be used today against Native women and other women of color: “Women of color are particularly threatening, as they have the ability to reproduce the next generations of communities of color” (79).

Another form of sexual violence addressed in *Conquest* is spiritual/cultural appropriation of Native beliefs and traditions. The use of spiritual appropriation as a form of sexual violence demonstrates that the genocide of American Indians “operates not only on the physical but on spiritual and psychic levels as well” (119). In this chapter Smith addresses the continuous undermining of Native sovereignty through the exploitation of Native beliefs and traditions by non-Indians: “From New Agers claiming to be Indians in former lives to Christians adopting Native spiritual forms to further their missionizing efforts” (122), little importance is being attached to protecting Native communities and lands, wherein the foundation and essence of these spiritual beliefs and practices are found. Smith writes, “The primary reason for the continuing genocide of Native peoples has less to do with ignorance and more to do with material conditions” (121).

Another important aspect of *Conquest* is its focus on Native American struggle for self-determination and unification—toward the creation and promotion of effective resistance movements. Smith believes that the ongoing colonial assault on American Indian sovereignty through different acts of gender violence must be addressed together: “The struggle for sovereignty and the struggle against sexual violence cannot be separated” (137). To effectively fight violence and colonialism, Smith argues, we (Native Americans and supporters) must break free of separatist principles in order to build and nurture grassroots movements in smaller communities. Only in this way, Smith points out, will movements have the underpinnings needed to grow and spread to larger communities.

Conquest also scrutinizes the different agendas of several of the more popular mainstream movements for change and justice, particularly those focused on eradicating gender violence and sexism against Native women and women of color. Smith believes many mainstream movements mistakenly disunite issues which should not be considered mutually exclusive, issues that are important to tackle simultaneously, especially when attempting to effect change and restore Native sovereignty and protect Native peoples from colonial aggression. Many movements, according to Smith, fail to address colonization’s impact. The conditions of Native peoples will be ameliorated only when efforts at decolonizing established systems are made the foremost goal and initiative of these movements: “Native and non-Native communities must meet the challenge to develop programs which address sexual violence from an anticolonial, antiracist framework”

(169). Movements that address violence against Indigenous communities must not only acknowledge that sexual violence is a result of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism, but also that meaning must be attached to the inherent interconnectedness of these fundamental ingredients of hate and violence. Smith offers several “possible remedies,” or alternative approaches, to some of the more common techniques used by mainstream movements to combat gender violence. One remedy suggested by Smith is “anchoring violence against women within the larger context of racism, colonialism, and inequality” (154).

In the book’s final chapter, Smith highlights the ongoing hegemonic and imperialistic ventures of the United States (i.e. the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq), referring to these ventures as efforts at furthering the colonial project of domination and oppression: “Bush’s war against terrorism is a clear attempt of the U.S. government to assert military and economic power throughout the world” (182). Smith stresses that “we cannot end violence in Native communities, or in any community for that matter, while supporting violence in other countries” (183).

At the conclusion of *Conquest*, Smith provides a valuable information resource guide for her readers—a well-developed list of community, state, and national projects, funds, and organizations whose primary mission is to advocate for the rights and welfare of Native Americans and/or women of color (e.g., the Boarding School Healing Project, The Indigenous Women’s Network, and *Sista Il Sista*). This section also offers a list of leading and independent American Indian journals, such as the *Native American Times*, which specifically focus on bringing readers information on the important issues facing Native American communities today.

The nature and scope of anti-Indianism, including grassroots anti-colonial and Native American resistance to it, is the focus of many important books on the subject. While several of these books, such as Al Gedicks’s *The New Resource Wars: Native and Environmental Struggles Against Multinational Corporations* (1993) and Winona LaDuke’s *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (1999), examine the effects of environmental sexism/racism and Native resistance to environmental and cultural degradation, others, such as M. Annette Jaimes’s (ed.) *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance* (1992), Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s *Anti-Indianism in Modern America* (2001), and Four Arrows’s (ed.) *Unlearning the Language of Conquest: Scholars Expose Anti-Indianism in America* (2006) address the racist and sexist politics, policies, and principles of the colonial model as well as resistance options. And while these books are excellent resources for raising the public’s awareness of the continued genocide of Indigenous peoples, Andrea Smith’s *Conquest* gives special attention to the historical context of sexual violence, and how, through its many manifestations, it continues to be used to control, marginalize, or altogether eliminate, Native women and their communities.

Although this book has few weaknesses, there are three worth mentioning. First, the segmentation of interrelated ideas allows for the book’s main thesis to, at times, become blurred. Second, while Smith does include a critique of mainstream feminists’ support of the Bush

Administration's "war on terror," and that this support is fueling the agenda of the "Christian Right at home" (178), it would have been insightful and interesting to hear more about the various ways in which religious fundamentalism and theocracies support racism, misogyny, homophobia, and gender violence. Third, Smith's text could have been enriched by a discussion on how globalization and the spread of capitalism are not only changing the nature of violence committed against Indigenous women but also leading to higher incidences of gender violence globally.

Andrea Smith's *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* is a thought-provoking and persuasive book. Smith's well-researched, well-developed, and impassioned gender analysis inspires critical reflection on the historical and contemporary value-system and priorities that have guided the leadership and policy-making decisions of this country. The evidence Smith offers to demonstrate state-sponsorship and private forms of sexual violence challenges many of our assumptions regarding the nature and scope of the violence committed against Native communities.

Conquest is intended for a wide-ranging audience, from college students to activists/educators to government legislators. For college students, particularly students interested in women's and gender studies or Native American/Indigenous studies, this book is a must read. *Conquest* provides an important educational resource on the diversity of issues facing Native populations, both historically and today. This book will provide students the information and tools needed to begin to deconstruct, decolonize, and inform their beliefs and assumptions about the nature and impact of colonialism, and about the extent to which sexual violence against American Indians is responsible for American Indian genocide. For activists/educators, this book provides practical information on how to build and nurture movements for justice and change. For lawmakers, this book serves as an excellent educational tool for learning about the problems and circumstances facing Native communities in America, and can be used to draft, introduce, and pass legislation to end the ongoing domestic "terrorist" acts committed against Native Americans and their lands.

VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]