



Spring 2013

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Baxter, Isabella J., "Oppression, Sexual Violence and Their Effects on Native American Women" (2013). *Student Publications*. 87.  
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# Oppression, Sexual Violence and Their Effects on Native American Women

## **Abstract**

This paper is a response to the chapter “Sexual Violence as a Tool of Genocide” in Andrea Smith’s book *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. Smith argues that U.S. colonial culture strategically uses sexual violence against Native women as a weapon to ensure the oppression and marginalization of Native people. This paper details and examines Smith’s argument and also considers the influence of Native Women on White feminism. Despite the great influence Native culture has on White feminism, White Feminists’ perceptions of Native women is often skewed and biased, as a result of the systematic oppression that is utilized by U.S. colonizers on Native Americans.

## **Keywords**

Native American Women, Sexual Violence, Oppression, Colonization, White Feminism

## **Disciplines**

Indigenous Studies | Women's Studies

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WGS 214

4/2/2013

### Oppression, Sexual Violence and their effects on Native American Women

Andrea Smith's chapter "Sexual Violence as a Tool of Genocide" in her book *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* looks at the methods through which the dominant colonial culture has oppressed Native American societies. Colonial culture strategically uses sexual violence against Native women as a weapon to ensure the oppression and marginalization of Native people. This section of the book not only looks at the steps of this strategy, but also at its extensive lasting effects. One such effect is white feminism's skewed perspective on Native women and their power in their culture; often white feminists feel that Native women have a dire need to be "rescued" from the grips of a patriarchal system, when in fact they do not.

Smith begins her argument with an explanation of the importance of taking an intersectional approach when studying the system of oppression. She writes that "it is inadequate...to investigate the oppression of women of color by examining race and gender oppressions separately and then putting the two analyses together, because the overlap between racism and sexism transforms the dynamics" (7). This additive approach fails to understand the true workings of oppression against women of color and therefore must be substituted with the intersectional approach which looks at race and gender together and also how the system of oppression acts on these dynamics simultaneously. Smith urges that this intersectional approach

be used to look at sexual and domestic violence, especially when considering colonial relationships, which are “themselves gendered and sexualized” (8). Smith closely examines this specific relationship between the colonists and Native American women.

The colonists’ oppression of Native women influences perception of indigenous women’s behavior, beliefs, and views. This oppression acts on racial, gender, and sexual levels and also dictates the treatment of Native women. As Winona LaDuke writes in her foreword to this text, “as a Native woman, you always know that you will be viewed as a woman of color, hence your politics will be race based, your analysis marginalized, and your experience seen as limited” (xvii). Colonial based oppression has taken over the lives of Native people, until it exerts an influence—such as the one mentioned by LaDuke—in all areas of their culture and lives. Racism and oppression have, as Smith argues, become a “part of the social fabric” (8). According to Smith, racism is utilized as a method to eradicate certain enemies of the state; in this case, Native Americans.

This erasure can be seen through the seeming “absence” of indigenous people. Smith states that “Native peoples are a permanent ‘present absence’ in the U.S. colonial imagination, an ‘absence’ that reinforces at every turn the conviction that Native people are indeed vanishing” (9). It is through this racist lens that the common colonial depiction of Native people has been such that they are portrayed as “polluted with sexual sin” (10). Indians have further been described as prone to lying, deception, thievery, as well as people who are “idolatrous, libidinous, and commit sodomy” (10). Overall, they are depicted as dirty and sinful and because they are so, they are therefore “considered sexually violable and ‘rapable,’ and the rape of bodies that are considered inherently impure or dirty simply does not count” (10). Smith states that the manner in which Indian’s have been mutilated and sexually abused throughout colonization

“makes it clear that Indian people are not entitled to bodily integrity” (10). Colonial racism has perpetuated the belief that indigenous people are less than human and therefore cannot be treated in the same manner as white people, who are the members of the dominant society.

This dehumanizing process attacks the identity of Native people. Smith explains it as an equation: “colonization = thingification” (12); and the success of this process is seen by the apparent invisibility of the Native American in colonial culture and that they simply are not viewed as “real” people. The effects of this process extend further, as Smith states: “when the bodies of Indian people are designated as inherently sinful and dirty, it becomes a sin just to be Indian” (12). This sexual violence erodes pride in the indigenous identity, especially for indigenous women, for when “a Native woman suffers abuse, this abuse is an attack on her identity as a woman and an attack on her identity as Native” (8). A result of this process of colonization and degradation of the image of the Natives’ bodies is that “Indian people learn to internalize self-hatred, because body image is integrally related to self-esteem” (12). Naturally, the colonizers seize the advantage of this effect, and therefore “Native peoples are portrayed by the dominant culture as inherently violent, self-destructive, and dysfunctional” (13). However, the reality of this situation is that it is the dominant, “patriarchal society [that] is a system based on domination and violence” and it was “European societies [which] were thoroughly misogynistic,” not Native societies (17).

This sexual violence is crucial to domination of a society, especially one that is gynocentric as Native American culture is. Smith writes that “U.S. colonizers view the subjugation of women of the Native nations as critical to the success of the economic, cultural, and political colonization” (15). In Native culture it was “women [who] served as spiritual, political, and military leaders, and many societies were matrilineal”; they are the central to their

nations and any attack against them would truly begin the collapse of the society (18). Indian nations had very low counts of sexual violence before the arrival of the settlers, and for the most part were very peaceful, which is why Smith posits, that the colonists had to demonize Native tribes and Native women, by means of lewd sexual depictions, to keep white women from joining the Native tribes.

Towards the end of her chapter, Smith returns to the concept of misconstrued perceptions of women of color that exist in all aspects of our society as a result of colonial thinking. She writes that “even within feminist circles, the colonial logic prevails that women of color, indigenous women, and women from Global South countries are only victims of oppression rather than organizers in their own right” (25). This statement relates back to the additive approach and the limiting views it places on these women. It’s as if they cannot be more than one thing, the oppression from which they suffer and the viewpoints that it causes depict these women in a stunted light, not as they truly are.

One of the concepts to Smith’s argument that I feel is significant is that of “ethno-stress.” Although LaDuke mentioned this term in the foreword, and not in the chapter itself, I think that this term is a true description and representation of the effects of colonization and the tools of sexual violence and genocide. As LaDuke states ethno-stress is the summation of Native American women’s situations “which is directly related to the process of colonization, sexual violence, dehumanization and marginalizing of who [they] are” (xvii). Ethno-stress is the description of Native people facing threats and violence every day; the disregard that dominant white society shows them and the abuse that they are given by public and private institutions. It represents the accumulation of the effects that oppression and violence that has been bestowed upon them by the colonial culture.

Smith's point about the white feminists' misconceptions about women of color and their ability to act as organizers and leaders to motivate their fellow women reminded me of the realities of Native American culture and women's roles in it. It is very ironic when white feminists take this view as Native culture is actually gynocentric and white feminism was actually greatly influenced by indigenous women. As Paula Gunn Allen wrote, regarding traditional Native culture:

Femaleness was highly valued, both respected and feared, and all social institutions reflected this attitude. Even modern sayings, such as the Cheyenne statement that a people are not conquered until the hearts of the women are on the ground, express the Indian's understanding that without the power of woman the people will not live, but with it, they will endure and prosper. (212)

White feminists often believe that they are the ones inspiring Native women and other women of color to throw off the patriarchal yoke, when in fact it is these supposedly "lesser" indigenous women who possess a stronger historical connection to feminism than white women, as female power and agency is greatly reflected in Native culture. This idea is shown when Allen states:

The feminist idea of power as it ideally accrues to women stems from tribal sources. The central importance of the clan Matrons in the formulation and determination of domestic and foreign policy as well as their primary role in the ritual and ceremonial life of their respective Nations was the single most important attribute of the Iroquois, as of the Cherokee and Muskogee. (220)

In fact, the tribes demonstrated this concept of female power so strongly that it was they to whom early white suffragists turned for guidance.

In Sally Roesch Wagner's book *Sisters in Spirit*, the connections between the suffragists and the Native women is explained in detail. As Wagner explains, white women "living under the ideological hegemony of nineteenth-century United States...had no say in government, religion, economics, or social life" (37); they had no concept of feminism, so where did it come from? Wagner states that "many non-Native women studied and wrote about the Haudenosaunee" (34). These white women observed indigenous people's habits and their communities. They saw that the Women's Council existed in these societies and that women were central and well respected members in their nations. These observations showed these white women that "women's liberation was possible because they knew liberated women" (41). Therefore the modern notion that feminism is a new concept for indigenous nations is a misguided one, as it is really these nations who introduced the ideas of feminism to white women.

It seems that the concepts of the Indians' lower status that was circulated by the settlers has influenced our culture so much that we assume that Indian women don't know anything about feminism or women's power. The idea of them as the depraved savage who knows little has stuck in our nation's collective conscious, manifesting itself in assumptions such as the white feminists'. I think that the white feminist's perceptions, while perhaps not malicious or ill-intentioned, are a sign that the colonization era still exists today. If the reign of the colonizers had ended then perceptions such as these, which are assumptions based on race, would not exist to the extent that they do. The racial based classifications of Native women, in regards to feminism, demonstrate the lasting influence and persistence of the oppression instituted by dominant colonial society.



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