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Abstract

Throughout American history, sexual violence against Native Americans has been an all-too common phenomenon. This ranges from outright rape to less obvious examples, including the desecration of native bodies and the separation of native children from their parents, such as at the boarding schools. Analyzing "Sexual Violence as a Tool of Genocide" by Andrea Smith, along with a variety of other sources, this article argues that sexual violence against native peoples reinforces the colonial idea that they are subhuman and "rapable." Additionally, I also argue that this violence is used to subjugate not just native women, but all women, particularly white women.

Keywords

Sexual Violence, Indigenous Genocide, Colonization, MMIW

Disciplines

Indigenous Studies | Native American Studies | Women's Studies

Comments

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Dr. Sellers

WGS 214

20 April 2022

Sexual Violence as a Tool of Indigenous Genocide

Anyone who has followed the news in the last year or so has likely heard of Gabby Petito, a young woman who went missing in Wyoming in September of 2021. After a lengthy and highly publicized investigation, it was determined that she was killed by her fiancé, Brian Laundrie, with whom she had had a violent argument, which potentially shed light onto the abusive nature of that relationship (Maxouris). The highly publicized nature of her story has received criticism, not due to the coverage of the story itself, but in that the violent death of Gabby Petito, a white woman, received high levels of press for months, when Native American women, like Mary Johnson, who went missing in the same area only ten months earlier, received very little media attention (Ishisaka). In fact, between 2011 and 2020, over 700 native people went missing in Wyoming alone, without much in the way of media coverage (Ishisaka). Why does violence against one white woman make national news, while violence against hundreds of native people is largely swept under the rug? Largely, this is due to the hundreds-year long history of the oppression of native people, native women in particular, in the United States, a history in which violence against women plays a significant role. In “Sexual Violence as a Tool of Genocide,” Andrea Smith details the nature of sexual violence as part of the process of colonization, harming native women in particular due to their being situated at the intersection of gender- and race-based oppression. These two facets of oppression must be considered in

tandem, as “the overlap between racism and sexism transforms the dynamics” at play in these situations (Smith 7). This overlap is seen in the conjunction of the dehumanization of native people and the “rapability” of native women, used as tools not only to subjugate native women, but to control all women, in particular white women.

Throughout the process of colonization in the United States, colonizers have acted in ways that show a lack of respect for the bodily integrity of all native people. This can be clearly seen in the patterns of violence inflicted against them. Not only were thousands upon thousands of native people killed by colonizers in gruesome ways, such as the man from Conrow Valley who, in 1862, “was killed and scalped with his head twisted off” (Smith 23). The lack of respect did not stop upon the deaths of the people in question, rather their bodies were further disrespected by the colonizers. One man, White Antelope, was found without his privates, and a soldier joked that he would make a tobacco-pouch out of them (qtd. in Smith 11). Andrew Jackson oversaw the mutilation of hundreds of Creek Indian bodies- he was responsible for “cutting off their noses to count and preserve a record of the dead, [and] slicing long strips of flesh from their bodies to tan and turn into bridle reins” (qtd. in Smith 11). This violence, the desecration of dead bodies in ways typically associated with animals, shows a dehumanization of native people. This dehumanizing violence is not limited to the seemingly distant past of the nineteenth century- as recently as 1973, the United States committed dehumanizing acts against native people. In 1973, during the occupation at Wounded Knee, Mary Crow Dog gave birth to her son, Pedro (Crow Dog 162). Mere days later, Mary was arrested for her involvement in the occupation, and had it not been for the interference of Cheyenne Lamont, “the child would have [had] to be taken to a foster home.... [Mary] would never [have seen] him again” (Crow Dog

166). Due to her arrest, Mary, like many other native women, was regarded as being an unfit mother, to justify the separation (Crow Dog 166). The government's aim to separate Mary from her newborn son exemplifies the dehumanization of native people. Today, in twenty-seven states and Washington D.C., it is illegal to separate puppies under a certain age, usually seven or eight weeks old, from their mothers (Wisch). While these laws were not on the books back in 1973, it stands that dogs today have more of a right to their puppies than native women to their children. These violent acts against native people show that colonizers viewed them as without bodily integrity, and by extension, as dehumanized beings.

This dehumanization by the colonizers is not limited only to violence against native people; it is also taught as part of colonization. Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, Native American children were sent to boarding schools, where they learned western values and skills. In a strategy further exemplifying the colonizers' view of native people as without bodily integrity, one school official developed a strategy of "capturing children," utilizing "food and other enticements, such as singing" to lure children to school (Devens 285). Once at school, native children were treated terribly. Girls would arise before five in the morning to prepare food for the boys of the school, attend morning prayers, and do housework, followed by a full day of schooling (Devens 287). Though English was taught, the main purpose of the boarding schools was to teach cultural values; one school official remarked that "the book learning is after all not so important for them" compared to these cultural values (Devens 287). One of the cultural lessons taught by the boarding schools is that "Anglo-American history, morality, and health were inherently superior to and should replace those of" native peoples (Devens 287). In other words, boarding schools taught that it is "a sin just to be Indian" (Smith

12). In addition to being dehumanized by the violence of the colonizers, native people are taught that they deserve this dehumanization, that they are subhuman. The goal of these teachings is for native people to internalize the narrative of this dehumanization. If native people believe that they are “less than” the colonizers, like the colonizers do, it justifies, in the eyes of the colonizers, the colonization and genocide of native peoples.

Existing at the intersection of gender and race, native women’s dehumanization, particularly in regard to the lack of bodily integrity as perceived by colonizers, has a further dimension than that of the men- native women are seen as “rapable.” Christian colonizers frequently compared Native Americans to the Canaanites, who in the Bible committed acts of “sexual perversion”, as both groups, in the eyes of the colonizers, “personify sexual sin” (Smith 10). This view of native people, particularly of native women, as inherently sexually perverse, “they are considered sexually violable and ‘rapable,’ and the rape of bodies that are inherently impure or dirty simply does not count” (Smith 10). The film *Wind River* depicts the current reality of this ideology. This film follows the investigation of the death of Natalie Hanson, an eighteen-year-old native girl living on the Wind River reservation. As the investigation draws to a close, the viewer is shown the specific circumstances that led to her death. Natalie had been visiting her boyfriend, Matt, where he worked at an oil drilling site. The two have sex while Matt’s roommates are not home. However, when they return, they decide that they deserve to also have sex with Natalie. In the resulting conflict, she is knocked unconscious and raped; when she comes to, she runs six miles in the snow before dying due to the effects of cold air in her lungs. At the end of the film, Cory Lambert, whose daughter had been Natalie’s best friend who died in similar conditions, interrogates Pete, one of the perpetrators of Natalie’s rape, why he did

so. His response was to justify his actions, saying, “There’s nothing to do. No nothing. Ain’t no women, no fun! Just this fucking... this fucking snow and the fucking silence. That’s all!” (*Wind River*). Pete viewed Natalie not as a person with the right and ability to consent to sexual actions, rather as something to which he is entitled. When she did not want to have consensual sexual interactions with him, he slipped into the colonial ideology of native women, of Natalie, as “rapable.” According to Smith, this ideology serves a colonial purpose; if native bodies are inherently violable, so too is their land (12). In this way, the justification of the rape of native women also justifies the taking of their lands, highlighting its role in colonization.

Even in cases where one individual seemingly acts independently, the government is complicit in the perpetuation of the idea of native women as “rapable.” In many instances of sexual violence against native women, the non-tribal “local police make no effort to solve the cases,” and “the general response of the police to these murders is to blame the victims” (Smith 30). Furthermore, beginning in the 1950s, “the United States government sharply defunded the justice systems in Indian country, leaving many tribes... with no law enforcement” (Smith 31). Similar issues arose in *Wind River*. When tribal police reported Natalie’s death to the FBI, they sent one officer, the inexperienced Jane Banner, to determine whether the death was a homicide. The coroner’s inability to name the cause of death as “homicide” prevented Banner from receiving backup on the case. This lack of backup and resources provided by the FBI reflects the outside law enforcement’s lack of effort in the solving of these cases. In order to pursue justice for Natalie, Banner had to work with the tribal police, a total of six men. This situation demonstrates the lack of funding available for tribal justice systems; the tribal police was practically nonexistent. Without the help of Lambert, who was a hunter, not a law enforcement

agent, Banner and the tribal police would likely have failed to determine the guilty parties. The film ends with text reading, “While missing person statistics are compiled for every other demographic, none exist for Native American women” (*Wind River*). The government and police forces who would be responsible for the solving of missing persons cases do not even care enough to figure out how many women have gone missing, much less to make an effort to solve them. This lack of statistics, in conjunction with the lack of FBI assistance in the investigation and the small size of the tribal police force, demonstrate the government’s complicity in the perception of Native women as “rapable,” violable. When native women are viewed as violable, native lands are also viewed as such. Therefore, the government’s complicity in the violating of native women is a colonizing position, as it is inextricably tied to the violating of native lands that the United States has done in its mission of colonization.

The first purpose of this dehumanization and ideology of rapability is to subjugate native women. To highlight this, Smith lifts up a 1985 Virginia Slims ad depicting native women’s supposed modernization. On the left of this ad are cartoonish drawings of stereotypical depiction of native women with names such as Princess Wash and Scrub, and Princess Breakfast (Smith 24). The referring to these women as “Princess” highlights the colonial narrative of the perceptions of native women. Generally, native women are stereotyped into three groups: the Queen, the Princess, and the Squaw (Green). The Princess is depicted as “more ‘American’ and ... less barbarous than the Queen,” and is only bestowed on women who “save or give aid to white men” (Green 205; 206). In depicting the stereotype of the Princess as the only representation of traditional native women in the ad, Virginia Slims reinforces the notion that the typical, traditional native woman believes herself to be subservient to white men, and existing

only to give them aid. On the right half of the ad is a model dressed in a western outfit: short skirt and heels, with the caption “You’ve come a long way, baby” (Smith 24). This portion of the ad makes it clear that becoming more like the mainstream American beauty standard is an improvement for Native American women, who are “oppressed in their tribal societies, [and] need to be liberated into a patriarchal standard of beauty” (Smith 24). This so-called feminist narrative of liberating native women from oppression is a thinly veiled disguise for the true narrative at play: native culture is inferior to mainstream American culture, and native women are therefore inferior to mainstream American (white) women.

Sexual violence against native women in and of itself is explicitly a colonialist tool. According to Smith, “in order to colonize a people whose society was not hierarchical, colonizers must first naturalize hierarchy through instituting patriarchy” (Smith 23). This is seen in practice as many white men claim undeserved knowledge and ownership of native practices and beliefs. For example, in a 1990 discussion of potentially closing a museum that displayed the remains of native people, Illinois governor Jim Thompson claimed that “he was as much Indian as current Indians” and that “the remains were ‘his’” to do with what he pleased (Smith 11). In this way, “Indian identity itself us under the control of the colonizer” (Smith 12). Based on the aforementioned perception of native women as “rapable” beings without bodily integrity, sexual violence against women contributes to this imposition of a patriarchy as a tool for subjugating native women. In *Wind River*, Natalie was raped after she refused to have sex with her boyfriend’s roommates. She, a native woman, stood up to and refused the desires of white men. In response, to reinstate the patriarchy in which they have final say over her, they forcibly took what they wanted; they raped her. In this way, sexual violence, like other forms of violence, is a

tool to enforce the patriarchal subjugation of native women, as a contributing factor to colonization.

In addition to subjugating Native American women, the patriarchal sexual violence against them is used as a tool to control white women and maintain the patriarchal norms upon which western society is based. The first way in which this is done is in the vilification of native men, so that white women fear native men over white men. According to Paula Gunn Allen in *The Sacred Hoop*, one of the common stereotypes of Native American men is that they are “hostile savage[s] ... [who] mistreat their women brutally” (Allen 5). However, any truth to these stereotypes comes as a direct result of white men’s actions; “wife battering emerged simultaneously with the disintegration of Ojibwe ways of life and the beginning use of alcohol” (qtd. in Smith 20). The “disintegration of Ojibwe ways of life” in question is the forced assimilation of native people into mainstream American society by white men, meaning that white men introduced the action that they now so readily condemn. In reality, women face a larger threat of sexual violence from white men than native men. In 1779, General James Clinton of the Continental Army remarked that the native peoples “never violate the chastity of any women, their prisoners,” with the implication that this is unlike the practices of the white men (qtd. in Smith 18). Both historically and in the present day, “white colonizers who raped Indian women claimed that the real rapists were Indian men” (Smith 26). This projection of native men as the actual threat to white women hides the threat posed by white men, which controls how white women view them furthering “white male ownership of white women” (Smith 27). This ownership causes white women to, despite the actual threat levels, view white men more

positively than native men, reinforcing the social hierarchy that places white men at the top of American society.

The other angle through which we can examine violence against native women as a means to control white women is that white men do not want white women to see that they do not have to be the subjugated and abused societal group. As Paula Gunn Allen put it, “had white women discovered that all women were not mistreated, they might have been intolerant of their men’s abusiveness” (qtd. in Smith 23). Within Euro-American culture in the nineteenth century, a North Carolina judge ruled that it was a man’s right to beat his wife, since his role as the head of the household permits him to “use towards his wife such a degree of force as is necessary to control” her behavior (qtd. in Wagner 65). In contrast, a Haudenosaunee man who beat his wife would be made to beat a “red-hot statue of a female” until “sparks flew out and were continually burning him” (qtd. in Wagner 66). This disparity shows that, contrary to the popular ideology of mainstream America in which women were allowed to be abused by their husbands, the abuse of women was not universally tolerated. Had white women learned that not every culture’s women are legally abused en masse, they would seek to receive this treatment themselves, something that would pose a threat to white men’s position of power over white women in society. This suppression of alternative treatments in order to keep women subservient is in line with other actions by white men to control white women. In seventeenth century England, “the women targeted for destruction [in witch-hunts] were those most independent from patriarchal authority: single women, widows, and healers” (Smith 18). In this instance, as well as in the subjugation of native people in the United States, white men maintain their hierarchical position of power over women by seeking the destruction of those women who exist outside of their sphere of power,

whether that be the single women in seventeenth century Europe or Native American women who had more rights than their white counterparts. These dangers posed to women who exist outside of the white men's control incentivize the women within their control to remain there. In this way, violence against native women, who have traditionally had more power within their respective societies than white women, is used to maintain the control of white men over white women.

In "Sexual Violence as a Tool of Genocide," Andrea Smith discusses sexual violence as part of the process of colonization. This occurs both on the basis of race and gender; native women face issues unique to them due to this intersection of these facets of their identities. Many of the issues of this paper apply to Native Americans of all genders, and many apply to women of various races. However, some issues, particularly the perception of Native American women as sexually impure and, therefore, "rapable" are a direct result of their perceived natures as both Native American and women. The colonial results of this overlap in identity are present in the dehumanization of native people and the perception of "rapability" of native women, used as tools not only to subjugate native women, but to control all women, including and especially white women.

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code. Katy Elser.

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