

Introduction: Native Women and State Violence

Andrea Smith and Luana Ross

NATIVE WOMEN WHO ARE SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE OFTEN FIND THEMSELVES FORCED into silence around sexual and domestic violence by their communities because their communities desire to maintain a united front against racism and colonialism. At the same time, the white-dominated antiviolence movement often pits Native women against their communities, arguing that they should leave the communities in which their abusers reside. The reason Native women are constantly marginalized in male-dominated discourses about racism and colonialism and white-dominated discourses about sexism is the inability of both discourses to address the inextricable relationship between gender violence and colonialism. That is, the issue is not simply that violence against women happens during colonization, but that the colonial process is itself structured by sexual violence. Native nations cannot decolonize themselves until they address gender violence, because colonization has succeeded through this kind of violence. In part, this is because the history of colonization of Native people is interrelated with colonizers' assaults upon Indian bodies. It is through the constant assaults upon our bodies that colonizers have attempted to eradicate our sense of Indian identity. Consequently, violence against Native women is inextricably linked to the state. As Andrea Smith has argued elsewhere (Smith, 1999), Indian bodies have become marked as inherently "dirty" through the colonial process. They are then considered sexually violable and "rapeable," and by extension, Native lands become marked as inherently invadeable. That is, in patriarchal thinking, only a body that is "pure" can be violated. The rape of bodies that are considered inherently impure or dirty does not count. For instance, prostitutes have an almost impossible time being believed if they are raped because the dominant society considers the prostitute's body to be undeserving of integrity and violable at all times. Similarly, the history of mutilation of Indian bodies, both living and dead, makes it clear to Indian people that they are not entitled to bodily integrity (*Ibid.*).

In the history of massacres against Indian people, colonizers attempt not only to defeat Indian people, but also to eradicate their very identity and humanity. They attempt to transform Indian people from human beings into tobacco pouches, bridle reins, or souvenirs — an object for the consumption of white people. However, as Haunani Kay Trask's essay in this issue demonstrates, this colonized violence continues to manifest itself today in a variety of forms. Trask articulates the

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relationship between colonization and violence as “a quiet violence.” That is, the violence of colonization is evidenced not merely in the most obvious forms of the history of massacres against indigenous peoples in the Americas, but in the continuing institutionalized forms of racism, discrimination, and housing that manifest themselves on a daily basis in the lives of Native peoples. Through this colonization and abuse of their bodies, Indian people learn to internalize self-hatred. Body image is integrally related to self-esteem. When one’s body is not respected, one begins to hate oneself. Thus, it is not a surprise that Indian people who have survived sexual abuse say they do not want to be Indian (Smith, 1999).

Each instance of abuse suffered by Native people is another reminder that, “if you don’t make something pretty/ they can hang on their walls or wear around their necks/ you might as well be dead” (Chrystos, 1995: 41). With exceptional courage, Roxanne Chinook discloses in these pages her personal experiences of the complexities of violence, including rape, family violence, and the eventual removal of her children. Chinook must be applauded for her candid discussion of her experiences with tribal courts and what she terms her re-victimization. As well, she must be applauded for her determination to survive such horrendous treatment. Through her personal narrative, she broadens our knowledge about the reality of life for many contemporary Native women. Her story makes “real” issues that we grapple with as academics. As such, Chinook humanizes the violence to which far too many Native women are subjected.

Though the bodies of Indian men and women have been marked by abuse, Inés Hernández-Ávila notes that the bodies of Native women have been particularly targeted for abuse because of their capacity to give birth. “It is because of a Native American woman’s sex that she is hunted down and slaughtered, in fact, singled out, because she has the potential through childbirth to assure the continuance of the people” (Hernández-Ávila, 1993: 386). David Stannard (1992) points out that control over women’s reproductive abilities and destruction of women and children are essential to the destruction of a people. If the women of a nation are not disproportionately killed, then that nation’s population will not be severely affected. According to Stannard, Native women and children were targeted for wholesale killing to destroy the Indian nations. Consequently, colonizers such as Andrew Jackson advocated killing the women and children of Native tribes as part of massacres to ensure the destruction of the tribe. The constant sexual violations of Native women during such massacres further demonstrate the colonial desire to control Native women’s sexuality (Smith, 1999).

Just as Native women’s ability to give birth has historically targeted them for destruction, so today colonizers continue their attacks on the reproductive capabilities of Native women. Myla Vincenti Carpio’s article uses data from government reports, interviews, and letters in her examination of the unsanctioned sterilization performed on Native women during the 1970s. Carpio relates sterilization abuse to patriarchy and colonialism as manifested in the contemporary population control

movement, and discusses the consequences and implications of sterilization for Native communities.

It is clear that the struggle for sovereignty and the struggle against sexual violence cannot be separated. Thus, conceptualizing sexual violence as a tool of genocide and colonialism fundamentally alters the strategies for combating it. Since the first domestic violence shelter in the U.S. opened in 1974 and the first rape crisis center opened in 1972, the mainstream antiviolence movement has been critical to breaking the silence concerning violence against women and providing critically needed services to survivors of sexual/domestic violence.

The antiviolence movement first prioritized a response to male violence based on grass-roots political mobilization. However, as the antiviolence movement has gained greater public prominence, domestic violence and rape crisis centers have also become increasingly professionalized, and consequently are often reluctant to address sexual and domestic violence within the larger context of institutionalized violence. As a case in point, many state coalitions on domestic/sexual violence have refused to take stands against the anti-immigration backlash, arguing that this issue is not a sexual/domestic violence issue. However, as the immigration backlash intensifies, many immigrant women do not report abuse for fear of deportation. This narrow approach toward working against violence is problematic because it is impossible to seriously address sexual/domestic violence within communities of color without addressing the larger structures of violence, such as militarism, attacks on immigrants' rights and Indian treaty rights, the proliferation of prisons, economic neocolonialism, and institutional racism.

In addition, rape crisis centers and shelters increasingly rely on state and federal sources for their funding. Consequently, their approaches toward eradicating violence focus on working *with* the state rather than working *against* state violence. Mainstream antiviolence advocates are demanding longer prison sentences for batterers and sex offenders as a front-line approach to stopping violence against women. However, the criminal justice system has always been brutally oppressive toward communities of color. In addition, Luana Ross (1998) has demonstrated that the majority of Native women in prison are there as a direct or indirect result of abuse. As Stormy Ogden's article implies, the antiviolence movement, including tribally based programs, has often failed to be accountable to the women most vulnerable to violence — women in prison. Ogden bravely discloses her experiences of imprisonment for welfare fraud. She connects her personal biography to the larger societal structure, forms of imprisonment, and colonialism. Ogden's work indicates that it is essential for anti-domestic/sexual violence activists to develop strategies that do not further the victimization of women in prison. She also points to the contradiction of relying upon the state to solve problems it is responsible for creating. Native people are per capita the most arrested, most incarcerated, and most victimized by police brutality of any ethnic group in the country (Armstrong et al., 1996: 81).

Luana Ross' article in this issue focuses on the impact of prisons on Native women convicted of drug-related offenses. Her essay examines circumstances that lead to drug use among Native women, as well as the effects of tribal, federal, and state policies on those convicted of drug-related offenses. Current drug laws, welfare reform, and tribal policies destroy the lives of those convicted. The author emphasizes that the past and continuing forms of violence must be included in the analysis of Native women and substance abuse. The essay concludes with a discussion of an Indian reservation that banishes convicted drug felons and ponders what tribal communities can do to survive the chaos created by drugs. Her essay is instructive to the antiviolence movement because legislators often attach antiviolence provisions to repressive anti-drug legislation that is then heralded by the antiviolence movement as "feminist" legislation. Ross points to the human costs of uncritically supporting the appropriation of antiviolence rhetoric by right-wing anticrime legislation.

Many tribal communities are developing creative approaches toward ending violence in Native communities. However, as the essay by Roe Bubar and Pam Jumper Thurman argues, many barriers remain toward developing these systems of accountability in tribal communities. The authors employ existing survey data and interviews to investigate the impact of intergenerational trauma, federal policy, and community willingness to address violence against Native women. They reveal a host of community problems, including an unwillingness to deal with domestic violence. Bubar and Thurman suggest that Native communities must be prepared to adequately confront violence against women before programs can be effectively implemented. Sarah Deer's article on Native women and children further identifies federal policy as a major impediment toward developing proactive responses to violence within Native communities. She argues that, prior to colonization, Native communities had effective means for ensuring that violence against Native women happened rarely and was addressed effectively when it did — without the use of prisons. However, U.S. federal policy has eroded the ability of tribes to address violence effectively today. She proposes strategies for changing federal policy to allow for tribally based responses to violence, and suggests steps tribes can take today to develop comprehensive approaches to ending violence.

One project that seeks to organize around violence from an anticolonial perspective is the Boarding School Healing Project, described in Andrea Smith's article. This project seeks to rearticulate violence within Native communities as a continuing effect of state human rights policies in the form of boarding schools. Rather than look to the state to end gender violence, this project holds the state responsible for this violence as one of its continuing colonial legacies.

Although the colonial violence Native communities have suffered and continue to suffer is systemic and overwhelming, Renya Ramirez's essay reminds us that Native nations also have a long history of resistance to this violence. Ramirez concentrates on community response as an act of resistance. Her essay begins with

a discussion of the creation and purpose of images of indigenous people as violent. Ramirez specifically examines one community intervention, the American Indian Holocaust Exhibit II, located in San Jose, California, as one way that Natives can combat stereotypes. Ramirez uses this exhibit to exemplify the decolonizing efforts employed by Native people.

Through poetry, Lisa Poupart and Inés Hernández-Ávila speak their hearts and minds about resistance, power, and the violence experienced by Native women and children. In addition, Hernández-Ávila uses her words to remind us how important language is as a way to heal. Both Poupart and Hernández-Ávila dare to speak the unspeakable about the oppression of Native women. Their poetry is captivating and disturbing; hopefully, their words, along with the essays chosen for this special issue, will create an awareness of the violence in Native communities.

Combating violence against Native women requires more than the development of “multicultural” services. Rather, we require a new approach that focuses on political mobilization and does not rely solely on social service delivery. We require an analysis that does not separate racism and colonialism from patriarchy and gender violence. Moreover, we require interventions that address state violence while speaking to interpersonal violence. Many organizations concentrate on violence *directed at* communities (i.e., police brutality, racism, economic exploitation, colonialism, etc.), while many others deal with violence *within* communities (i.e., sexual/domestic violence). Yet virtually no organizations address violence on both fronts simultaneously. In combating personal *and* state violence, Native women face the challenge of developing strategies for ending violence that assure the safety of survivors of sexual/domestic violence while not strengthening our oppressive criminal justice apparatus. There are no easy solutions to this dilemma.

The Color of Violence Conference

This collection of writings emerged from “The Color of Violence: Violence Against Women of Color” conference held at the University of California, Santa Cruz, on April 28 and 29, 2000. This historic conference was organized to address the gaps within antiviolence and racial justice organizing in the U.S. and to tackle some of these difficult issues. The conference had three primary goals. The first was to develop analyses and strategies for ending violence that place women of color at the center. The second was to address violence against women of color in all its forms, including attacks on immigrants’ rights and Indian treaty rights, the proliferation of prisons, militarism, attacks on the reproductive rights of women of color, medical experimentation on communities of color, homophobia/heterosexism and hate crimes against lesbians of color, economic neocolonialism, and institutional racism. The final goal was to encourage the antiviolence movement to reinsert political organizing into its response to violence.

Workshops were held on colonialism and violence, media/cultural representations of violence, colonized bodies of women of color (which addressed sterilization abuse, dangerous contraceptives, and other attacks on the reproductive rights of women of color), militarism, globalization and violence, religion/spirituality and violence, law enforcement, challenging the depoliticization of the antiviolence movement, homophobia/heterosexism, and organizing against violence in communities of color. The conference featured over 60 of the most prominent women of color antiviolence activists/scholars, including Angela Davis (U.C. Santa Cruz), Kimberle Crenshaw (UCLA), Urvashi Vaid (National Lesbian and Gay Taskforce), Dorothy Roberts (author of *Killing the Black Body*), Renee Saucedo (INS Watch), Beth Richie (domestic violence activist), Anannya Bhattacharjee (Andolan), Gail Small (Native Action), Eileen Hudon (Mending the Sacred Hoop Technical Assistance Project), Luana Ross (author of *Inventing the Savage: The Social Construction of Native Criminality*), Loretta Ross (Center for Human Rights Education), and many others. Over 1,000 people attended the conference, and over 2,000 had to be turned away because of space limitations. The overwhelming response to this conference suggests that women of color (and their allies) are hungry for a new approach to ending violence.

Of particular significance was the prominent role indigenous women played in the conference. The large contingent of indigenous women, both in the program and in the audience, served to reframe much of the discussion about violence against women of color, even among non-indigenous women. First, indigenous women demonstrated that the antiviolence movement must embrace struggles over land rights because violence against indigenous women has been inextricably linked with the commodification and appropriation of our land base. Second, as Angela Davis noted in her keynote address, the state's continuing practice of genocide against indigenous peoples casts serious doubts about whether the state should be entrusted with the task of protecting survivors of sexual and domestic violence.

The situation of Native American women shows that we must also include within our analytical framework the persisting colonial domination of indigenous nations and national formations within and outside the presumed territorial boundaries of the U.S. The U.S. colonial state's racist, sexist, and homophobic brutality in dealing with Native Americans once again shows the futility of relying upon the juridical or legislative processes of the state to resolve these problems (Davis, 2000: 4).

Finally, because indigenous nations understand themselves as sovereign nations, they have been proactive in developing their own models for addressing violence within their communities. As such, they exist as models for other communities of color to develop their own programs for addressing violence within their communities that do not primarily rely upon the state for enforcement.

From this conference emerged Incite! Women of Color Against Violence. In-

cite! defines itself as a national activist organization of radical feminists of color, who are advancing a movement to end violence against women of color and their communities through direct action, critical dialogue, and grass-roots organizing. To receive more information on Incite and/or the Color of Violence conferences, contact Incite! Women of Color Against Violence (phone: 415-553-3837; e-mail: incite_national@yahoo.com, www.incite-national.org).

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