

# H-Net Reviews

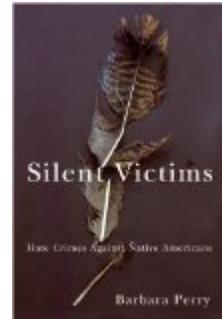
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Barbara Perry. *Silent Victims: Hate Crimes against Native Americans*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008. 176 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8165-2596-6.

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## Violent Realities: The Everydayness of Violence against Native People

“Racism is commonplace in the lives of the Native communities.

It is almost like the sky. It is always there, right above everything that

goes on, influencing your mood and your day, bearing down on you

and inescapable.”—a Wisconsin Native woman (p. 81)[1]

In Canada, it is estimated that over five hundred Native women and girls have gone missing and/or been murdered across the country over the last thirty years.[2] As Amnesty International argues, the social and economic marginalization of Indigenous women, along with a history of government policies have torn apart Indigenous families and communities, and have pushed a disproportionate number of Indigenous women into dangerous situations that include extreme poverty, homelessness, and prostitution. “The resulting vulnerability of Indigenous women” in Canada “has been exploited by Indigenous and non-Indigenous men to carry out acts of extreme violence and brutality against them.” The everyday violence experienced by Native women and girls in Canada is not a new concern—indeed, the Amnesty report discusses how Indigenous women’s organizations, government commissions, and United Nations human rights bodies have all called on Canadian officials to address the marginalization of Native women, and to ensure that their rights and safety are respected by Canadian police and courts. “Sadly,” Amnesty writes, “fundamental measures that could help reduce the risk of violence to Indige-

nous women remain unimplemented”—and violence continues to be an all too normal reality for Native women and girls in this country.[3]

The normalcy of violence in the lives of Native peoples has recently been taken up by Barbara Perry in her 2008 book, *Silent Victims*. Based on over 278 interviews or surveys conducted between 1999 and 2003 across the United States, Perry demonstrates that Native Americans are regularly targeted for hate-based crimes, that is, “acts of violence and intimidation that are not always technically criminal in nature, and that are usually directed towards already stigmatized and marginalized groups” (p. 11). Hate crimes, she argues, are to be understood “as a form of interpersonal and intercultural expression that signifies boundaries” (p. 12). Indeed, “hate crimes can be understood as a means of sustaining boundaries between Us and Them” and “often emerge as a means of responding to threats” to “carefully crafted sociocultural arrangements.” In this way, then, “it is a mechanism of power, intended to reaffirm the precarious hierarchies that characterize a given social order. It simultaneously recreates the hegemony of the perpetrator’s group and the subordination of the victim’s group” (p. 11).

Perry argues that “members of the subordinate groups are potential victims *because* of their subordinate status.” Indeed, “where the popular image of the Other is constructed in negative terms, as is frequently the case for Native Americans, group members may be victimized on the basis of those perceptions” (p. 11). For Na-

tive Americans, this subordination is rooted in histories of colonization (including land theft, genocide/ethnocide, forced assimilation, and sexual violence), and in the dominant belief that Native Americans are “uncivilized savages” who are morally and intellectually inferior, and prone to vice and taking advantage of the “benevolent” state (pp. 45-49). The persistence of these stereotypes, which continue to frame popular perceptions of Native Americans, is facilitated through a variety of mediums, including the education system, popular culture, and the media. As Perry argues, these “dehumanizing caricatures of Native Americans provided powerful rationales for colonial practices that denied the sovereignty of a people, as well as their related claims to their homelands” (p. 38). Importantly, Perry contends that such perceptions also justify violence perpetrated against Native Americans, since members of the subordinate group are “already deemed inferior, deviant, and therefore deserving of whatever hostility and persecution comes their way” (p. 11).

Perry’s findings suggest that hate-based violence is an ongoing and persistent experience for Native Americans. Indeed, the paramount theme that emerged during her study was the normalcy of violence in the lives of Native people: “regardless of the region, or town, or tribal community, there was a very strong sense among the people interviewed that racial violence–hate crime–is endemic” (p. 80). Perry found that violence permeates the everyday lives of Native Americans, in that most complained of multiple victimizations over the course of their lives. Rarely did they describe violent victimization as one-off affairs that touched them once and never again. There was always the sense, the fear, the expectation, that in the presence of non-Native Americans, they were vulnerable to harassment and attack.

In fact, “it is not seen as unusual to be harassed in places of business, to be subject to racial epithets and name-calling on the street, to be pushed around in the bar, or beaten in the city park.” Significantly, a consequence of this is that “there is a distressing fatalism in the general acceptance of the permanence of racism.” “Native Americans,” Perry writes, “expressed their belief that racism and its attendant forms of violence and harassment were so deeply embedded in the relationships with nonnatives that it would never cease to exist for them” (p. 83).

Another important finding of Perry’s study is that Native Americans were often targeted for “reactionary violence”: “When, on occasion, Indian people have chal-

lenged white privilege and asserted themselves through political activism,” she writes, “they have been victimized in order to silence their nonauthoritative claims.” Indeed, “efforts on the part of Native Americans to challenge the varied forms of oppression have elicited remarkably consistent patterns of such white reactionism.” This reactionary violence, Perry contends, “is a modern assertion of white privilege and dominance in the face of Native American efforts to maintain, if not redefine, their place as sovereign, rather than as a dependent people” (p. 85). This backlash is often framed as a “conflict of rights,” wherein Native Americans have been granted special rights, at the expense of the personal and property rights of non-Natives (p. 88). Significantly, there are profound examples of violence “perpetrated against those who are most visibly engaged in challenging white norms of behavior for Native Americans” (p. 90).

Finally, Perry argues that Native Americans experience tremendous violence during encounters with police. “Law enforcement agents are often the front line in efforts to keep the racialized Other within permissible boundaries,” she writes. “Indeed, police often play a leading role in legitimizing the use of violence against Native Americans and other minorities” (p. 91). Significantly, Perry found that “the police appear to need little provocation to intervene against Native Americans.” For Perry, “it is as if police are ready and willing to accept the mythology of the savage Indian, and act accordingly” (p. 94). Racial profiling, inventing charges, and assault were seen as widespread among study participants, and there was a dominant perception that the police had little interest in protecting Native American people.

The impact of this violence, Perry argues, has had serious long-term consequences for Native American communities. Many Native Americans feel disempowered by the constancy of violence and withdrawal to isolation and security of the reserve, resulting in the racial segregation of Native Americans. And though many Native Americans turn their anger outward against white Americans, Perry argues that many also internalize racism and direct their anger toward members of their own communities. Yet despite the cumulative negative effects of this violence, Perry is careful to detail the ways in which Native American communities are responding to anti-Indian violence, including education, community awareness, rights-based activism, and decolonizing strategies.

Perry’s work stands alongside the work of other scholars, including Andrea Smith, Ward Churchill, and David E. Stannard, who are examining the historical and

ongoing colonial violence directed at Native Americans in the United States.[4] For us here in Canada, Perry's work is suggestive of the lived realities of Native people in this country—indeed, the information on violence against Aboriginal women and girls in Canada presented in the introduction is evidence of this. Her study is invaluable because it sheds light on “silent victims,” as violence against Native people often goes ignored in mainstream society.[5]

I do, however, have problems with two of Perry's conceptual frameworks. Firstly, I challenge Perry's use of “hate crime” as a unit of analysis—not because I contest the term or the idea that this violence is hate based, but because this is a dominant term for violence birthed from problematic state-based legal and juridical frameworks. As Cherokee scholar Smith argues, “when organizing against racial and/or gender terror adopts the strategy of making this terror a ‘crime,’ it actually serves to reproduce patriarchy and white supremacy by masking the sexism and racism of capitalism and the nation-state.” By defining race hate as a crime, the state is permitted to intervene to protect those targeted by this violence. Thus, Smith argues, “the state, rather than being understood as defined through gender and racial differentiation and subordination becomes positioned as the body to recognize and protect racial and gender difference.” Significantly, then, “because these differences (race and gender) are recognized within the liberal multicultural nation-state, the difference that can be recognized as subject to protection are those differences least threatening to the State.”[6] Unfortunately, Native rights *are* particularly threatening to the state, as Perry has indicated in documenting the high degree of reactionary violence directed at Native Americans who continue to demand for sovereignty and self-determination. In a country founded on colonialism, the ongoing suppression of Native Americans' sovereignty and self-determination is *essential* to maintaining the colonial order of things. And as Smith points out, “because the state actually has no interest in gender or racial justice, [hate crime] laws are often used against the people they supposedly protect.”[7] In this way, relying on hate crime as a means of defining violence is a risky endeavor, for it too often replicates dominant systems of oppression.

I also want to challenge Perry's analysis of internalized and interracial violence. According to her analysis, there are those Native Americans who have internalized the bitterness and resentment related to this violence, and have then directed this self-hatred “towards like Others, rather than the self”—something Perry refers

to a “unique brand of hate crime” (p. 117). Yet as Sherene Razack's work on peacekeeping violence has demonstrated, compensatory frameworks explaining violence perpetrated by marginal members of society fail to address the seductive powers of domination. Writing about the participation of Native Canadian men in the torture and murder of a Somali man, Razack argues that membership in a white nation (like Canada or the United States) requires that the oppressed forget the violence done to them *and* agree to perform hegemonic masculinity in service of the nation. She argues, “while there can certainly be a compensatory element in the participation of men of color in racial violence (the violence provides a prestige that would not otherwise be available), it is important to see that racial men's participation need not spring primarily for an impulse of compensation. *If an ideal man is one who engages in practices of dominance, then all men have incentive to do so.*”[8]

Understanding interracial violence, then, requires moving beyond a simple internalized oppression and compensatory violence model and toward understanding the seductive power of hegemonic masculinity and domination. As a disempowered member of this society, the illusion of power and *entré* into dominance is incredibly attractive—and if this power requires one to commit violence, then many of us are willing to do it just to feel some of that power and dominance. A compensatory understanding of intragroup violence fails to consider the pull factors, such as the seduction of power and membership in the elite group, that also encourage minority peoples to inflict violence on others.

As Perry's book demonstrates, violence against Native people has been an ongoing condition of Western colonialism, and it will remain a fixture of Western society as long as it remains colonized. For as long as Native peoples, the original inhabitants of these lands, exist, they pose a threat to the colonial order of things and colonial fantasies of domination—and the colonial powers that be will continue to respond with violence to this threat. For Native Americans across the United States, this means violence will continue to be a normal part of their lived realities. And for us here in Canada, we will continue to have to bury our daughters, sisters, mothers, aunties, and grandmothers as colonial violence continues to claim our women one by one.

#### Notes

[1]. Throughout this review, I have used “Native” to collectively represent First Nation, Metis, and Inuit women in Canada. I chose this term to align myself with

Barbara Perry, who uses “Native American” throughout her book; although I also strategically chose not to use “Native Canadian” to acknowledge the sovereignty of First Nation communities. “Aboriginal” and “Indigenous” appear throughout this review, where they have been used by the original source, and function as a collective term like “Native.” Importantly, this use of a collective term is not intended to create a monolithic construction of Native people—I acknowledge the uniqueness of individual First Nation communities, and only use “Native” where a collective identity is needed.

[2]. Amnesty International, *Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada* (Ottawa: Amnesty International Canada, 2004); Amnesty International, *No More Stolen Sisters: The Need for a Comprehensive Response to Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada* (Ottawa: Amnesty International Canada, 2009); Native Women’s Association of Canada, *Voices of Our Sisters in Spirit: A Report to Families and Communities* (Ottawa: Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2008); Native Women’s Association of Canada, *Voices of Our Sisters in Spirit: A Report to Families and Communities*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2009); and Native Women’s Association of Canada, *What Their Stories Tell Us: Research Findings from the Sisters In Spirit Initiative* (Ottawa: Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2010).

[3]. Amnesty International, *Stolen Sisters*, 2, 3.

[4]. Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2005); Andrea Smith, “Unmasking the State: Racial/Gender Terror and Hate Crimes,” *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, 47 (2007): 47-57; Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997); Ward Churchill, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2004); and David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[5]. Robyn Bourgeois, “Deceptive Inclusion: The 2010 Vancouver Olympics and Violence against First Nations Women,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 27, nos. 2-3 (2009): 39-44; Kristen Gilchrist, “‘Newsworthy’ Victims? Exploring Differences in Canadian Local Press Coverage of Missing/Murdered Aboriginal and White Women,” *Feminist Media Studies* 10, no. 4 (December 2010): 373-390; Yasmin Jiwani and Mary Lynn Young, “Missing and Murdered Women: Reproducing Marginality in News Discourse,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31 (2006): 895-917; and Smith, *Conquest*.

[6]. Smith, “Unmasking the State,” 47, 51.

[7]. *Ibid.*, 52.

[8]. Sherene Razack, “‘Outwhiting the White Guys’: Men of Colour and Peacekeeping Violence,” *UMCK Law Review* 71, no. 2 (2002-2003): 331-353, quotation from 334 (emphasis added).

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