

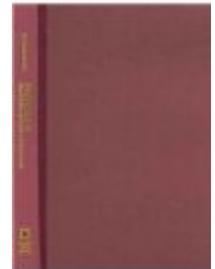
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Andrea Smith.** *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide.* Cambridge: South End Press, 2005. ix + 229 pages. \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89608-743-9; \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89608-744-6.

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## Making History by Reclaiming our Bodies

Andrea Smith's work, *Conquest*, is both provocative and painful in terms of illustrating the active degradation and destruction of Native women's bodies. The book accomplishes many tasks and is intensely interdisciplinary, drawing on activist history and a legacy of women and men of color writing about colonization in all forms. Smith's role as co-organizer of "IN-CITE! Women of Color," as well as involvement in other feminist-activist groups, allows her a unique perspective from which to write *Conquest*. She notes that the main purpose of the project is to focus on sexual violence, in the historical context and the present, as a tool of patriarchy and colonialism in indigenous communities. This fits her project neatly into a gap in gender studies in which redefinition and reconception of sexual violence and the strategies employed to erase gender violence are necessary.

As the foreword by Winona LaDuke notes, dignity, love and life are the unifying features of the social movements found throughout Andrea Smith's book. Dignity, love and life are also the ways in which the reader is bound to the text and the ways in which we, as indigenous women, as women of color, as humanists, are bound to each other. Dignity, love, and life are the connectors that give activists purpose, that temper the gendered balance of power in her first chapter, that connect land, people, and spirituality, and ultimately give indigenous women the power to fight back against gender violence, sexual violence, and genocide of people and land.

The content of Smith's text is immense. Her chapters read as a road map for genocidal initiatives, primarily on the part of the United States government: sexual violence in both a theoretical and historical framework, boarding school abuse and how reparations must be viewed (not as monetary compensation, but as a movement to reevaluate colonial economic dependencies), rape of land and how land equals bodies, indigenous reproductive health and medical experimentation (including forced sterilization), spiritual appropriation as a form of sexual violence, gender violence, and the struggle for sovereignty within anti-colonial activism, and, finally, the United States government and its perpetual war against expressions of native sovereignty and her call to action.

Although seemingly multifaceted, her chapters link together with an ease that should incite all readers to action. In no way should violence against women's bodies be so easily linked across such a vast terrain of subjects, places, and peoples. Chapter 1 establishes Smith's historical understanding of genocide. She discusses the treatment of bodies, particularly Native bodies, and how they have become "rapable and violable" over the course of history (p. 10). Patriarchy is the institution by which control is established over Native women's bodies. Sexual violence exists to such an extent, according to Smith, that the "phenomenon indicates the extent to which our communities have internalized self-hatred" (p. 13).

Chapters 2 and 3 are the case and place examples for such violence. Boarding school systems in the United

States as a tool for genocide and rape/sexual dominance, as well as the focus on reparations for such wrongs, encompasses her articulation of “abuses from a reparations framework” that is necessary for coalition-building and active sovereignty (p. 53). Smith uses the conceptualization that land equals body and self in the next chapter, to build on the power of dominance. Environmental destruction has a direct impact on traditional women’s roles, such as the midwife, as well as the ways women’s bodies are negatively affected by the environment. Therefore, environmental racism (particularly toxins, mining, and population) becomes another form of sexual violence in which women are neglected when any kind of clean-up takes place.

Chapters 4 and 5 emphasize women’s bodies as an experimental ground for reproduction and medical testing. An example of the direct violation of women’s reproductive rights was when the “Indian Health Services initiated a fully federally funded sterilization campaign in 1970” (p. 81). Less direct are the effects of strong contraceptive campaigns that do not fully disclose the ramifications of using birth control, both on a physical as well as a spiritual level. By extension, the use of Native communities in drug trials and experimental medical techniques is explained, by Smith, because “Native people have been seen as rapable because they resemble animals to the colonizers” and animals are less than human (p. 117).

Chapter 6 is a fabulous introduction to why spiritual appropriation can be a form of sexual violence. While I wished for more discussion, the chapter posits that spiritual appropriation of all forms constitutes a power struggle and bodies are discussed more in terms of world view than in their physical forms.

Chapters 7 and 8 serve as Smith’s call to action and awareness. Gender violence is represented in personal stories and how those stories translate to the state level. “Communities of color often pressure women to remain silent about sexual and domestic violence in order to maintain a ‘united front’ against racism” (p. 151). This power struggle between racialized power and sexual violence becomes a point of contention within indigenous communities when they are negotiating another form of power with the nation-state. The drive toward sovereignty for Native communities is implicit in her

call to action for Native communities to come together. Smith provides strategies through antiviolence that tips the balance of power in favor of indigenous bodies and communities.

I am most intrigued by the simplicity with which Smith links sexual violence to land to bodies to spirituality, in such a way that you can see the cause and effect of colonization on each link which then influence the other links. It is a circle that is hard-pressed to be broken or to know where to begin the healing and repair. What makes Smith’s text so powerful is her illustration of a cycle of violence and genocide that has a long history and what looks like a long future, especially when colonial attitudes of violence, rape, and power are being internalized in our Native communities. “All women of color,” Smith notes, “live in the dangerous intersections of gender and race” (p. 150). The beginnings of a solution to this internalization of colonial ideas is to be found in the adoption of antiviolence strategies that are cognizant of the dominant ideologies of hate and violence in the world.

Smith ultimately calls into question the infamous feminist quandary commonly associated with African-American feminisms: Can you be Native and feminist? In this way, the text is accessible to generations of feminists and is a powerful tool to broaden the scope of feminist struggle and activism. The counterpart to that is how effective will this text be in reaching the more ambivalent and current “4th Wave” feminists today? Can a young Native woman educated in the Western traditions understand the power struggles and gender negotiations that may not affect her personally, but have a definite effect on her people as a whole?

Smith ultimately completes what she sets out to do in *Conquest*: look at sexual violence through the lens of indigenous women and acts of aggression on the part of the state which perpetuate gendered, racialized violence. The linking of more obvious forms of sexual violence such as forced sterilization, abortion, and child abuse in boarding schools, to spiritual rape and destruction of land that have direct links to Native women’s bodies and their capacities for choice and control over their own bodies, is what makes Smith’s book so complex and ultimately such a powerful tool in itself for awareness and action.

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