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Sexual Violence and Self- Destruction: The Shameful History of European Colonization and  
its Effects on the Native American Population

Historically Europeans have perceived Native Americans as a serious threat to civilization. Mary Rowlandson, for instance, a European woman held captive by the Native Americans, wrote a detailed text of her experience titled "Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson" in which she aided the perception of the Native culture as barbaric. During the first evening of her captivity, she wrote " Oh the roaring, and singing, and dancing, and yelling of those black creatures in the night, which made the place a living resemblance of hell" (12). The following day she recalled, "another praying Indian- so wicked and cruel, as to wear a string about his neck, strung with Christians fingers" (17). The use of the two adjectives "hell" and "Christian" ultimately demonizes the Indian's action. It is sentences such as these that reinforced the perceptions attributed to the majority of Europeans of that time, that Natives were barbaric and in need of civilization. Consequently, the dominant culture believed the only way to fight such a barbaric group of people was to tame them with religion, or in other words civilize them through Christianity.

Interpretation of these captivity narratives by scholar Barry Pritzger, reveals the prejudice in Rowlandson's tone as she describes the Native American culture. Captivity narratives were the way in which the person held captive could be repatriated. As put by Pritzger in his article "Captivity Narratives," "for the captives to return and accept their own white community, the actual writers of the narratives made the Native American

community appear monstrous and terrible, using language to demean them as agents of the devil to emphasize or exaggerate their conduct toward the white captives” (1). As discussed previously, the text was intended to show exactly who needed to acquire divinity- the barbaric Native Americans.

Both historically and contemporarily, Christianity as an institution has taken deep pride in promoting the word of god; Mark 16: 15-20 of the bible tells Christians to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation”. This type of instruction, coupled with perspectives influenced by writers like Rowlandson, justified forcing Christianity on Native Americans. In a further offence, the Native American system of rule reflected matriarchal beliefs that rejected the patriarchal system of Europe. The Bible states that “I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet” (Timothy 2:12) and, “For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands” (Peter 3:5). This message from the Bible was internalized in European politics and was not challenged until the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1960’s. In contrast, Wilma Mankiller, leader of the Cherokee nation and author of *Everyday is a Good Day*, refers to the prevalent leadership of women in Native society. Mankiller states, “ Women have always had the responsibility and privilege of choosing the leadership among our people. When there is a difficult decision to make, they always call on the woman for their opinion” (98). The European school of thought did not include those values during colonialism, and consequently this type of gender equality within government was seen as implausible and yet another justification to civilize the Native Americans through Christianity. So not only were the Native Americans barbaric

creatures, but they represented a gender equality that would not be tolerated by colonizers, European politicians, or God.

How exactly did the colonizers translate their intolerance for Native American culture into a form of oppressive colonization? The answer to this question lies in the form of sexual violence: the routine rape of Native American women that has directly contributed to a self-destructive cycle within the contemporary Native American culture. Through government institutions, Native Americans were socialized into the gender roles supported by a patriarchal European society. The cycle of self-destruction will continue to exist until accountability is taken for the injustices of the past.

The colonizers used rape as a tool of colonization against Native American people. The following excerpt from the article, “Colonialism, Genocide, and Gender Violence: Indigenous Woman” outlines representative account of colonizers and encounters with Native women:

When I was in the boat I captured a beautiful Carib woman. . .I conceived desire to take pleasure. . . .I took a rope and thrashed her well, for which she raised such unheard screams that you would not have believed your ears. Finally we came to an agreement in such a manner that I can tell you that she seemed to have been brought up in a school of harlots.

Two of the best looking of the squaws were lying in such a position, and from the appearance of the genital organs and of their wounds, there can be no doubt that they were first ravished and then shot dead. Nearly all of the dead were mutilated” (3).

This excerpt exemplifies the magnitude of intolerance towards Native American woman. There text suggests not remorse, but a depth of cruelty on the part of the perpetrators.

While rape was the dominant form of sexual violence, public mutilation of female parts was also an active tool of colonization. As Smith documents in "Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide," it was extremely common for men to ambush tribes and not only rape the women, but also cut off their genitals and use them to cover their hats and saddles as an expression of superiority. Those unfamiliar with this school of thought would benefit from knowing that this type of female public mutilation stems from the perception that Native American women were contaminated with sexual sin (274). This ideology can be better explained by analyzing the psychology of the perpetrators.

As explained earlier, Native American's were considered barbaric, dangerous, matriarchal, and a burden on the Christian world. According to many religions, Christianity included, the world is a just place in which good things happen to good people. While within the religious community this interpretation may provide an incentive to live a holy life, it ultimately encourages hate crimes. In regards to sexual violence against Native American's, the concept of karma has allowed for justification by the perpetrators. As explained by psychologist Gerd Bohner in his research article "Perceptions of Stranger and Acquaintance Rape," "by believing that good things happen to good people and bad things happen only to bad people, one may maintain an illusion of the justice and predictability of one's subjective world (3). This justification correlates directly with Andy Smith's description of colonial patriarchal thinking; "Because Indian bodies are considered dirty, they are sexually violable and rapable" (276). From a colonizers perspective, the violent

behaviors were justified because the Native American race was ultimately dirty and deserved no better.

Furthermore, the perpetrators of sexual violence during colonialism embodied what is now described as “hostile sexism”, the negative feelings toward women who exist in non-traditional roles. The matriarchal Native American culture was exceptionally unconventional during times of colonization and raping the Native American women was an outlet for the hostility of the colonizers. This school of thought links Bohner’s “just world” to hostile sexism by assuming that only bad girls (in other words, girls who conform to non-traditional gender roles). As summarized by Boehner: “the differentiation between good and bad women appears to provide a means of justifying and/or excusing violent behaviors toward some women”(4). This justification ideology is a product of a Christian longing for a “just world”.

The colonizers had a systematic method of enforcing the destruction of the Native culture: justification ideology was translated into a systematic method of enforcing the destruction of the Native American culture. Institutions established by the government allowed for a place for the hate crimes to occur. In an attempt to tame the Native Americans, the Europeans created an educational system of Christian boarding schools, to which Native children were forcibly sent. Thousands of Native children were forbidden to speak their tribal language, contact their family, wear their preferred clothing, or partake in any activity related to the Native American culture. To re-enforce the ideology of the Christian boarding schools, the Native American children were forced to shave their heads and were often re-named with a “white” name. Ultimately, the colonizers used this

educational institute as the primary means of oppression against the Native Americans.

The Christian boarding schools were a desperate attempt by the Government to civilize the Indians. Barbara Perry, a sociologist of Northern Arizona University, argued in her article "From Ethnocide to Ethnoviolence" that, "by sending [the children] to distant boarding schools and by integrating them into white schools, educators sought to remake Native Americans into the image of the white man" (12). While Perry is correct in the colonizer's initial desire to change the Indian culture, she fails to address a particular facet: his capacity to rape as a form of oppression. Anthropologist Dr. Brooke Olson documents in her article "Culture, Colonisation, and Policy Making," that rape occurred extensively through out Christian boarding schools (3). When a student would become pregnant after being raped by a male teacher, the leaders of the school would banish her and the pregnancy would be her own fault. The severity of sexual violence can be presented clearly with John Boone, a teacher who raped over 142 children, yet was never prosecuted or even investigated on the claims of sexual assault made against him by Native children (Smith 274). Boone, like many other educators of Native American children, was the authoritative figure in the eyes of the young and impressionable youth. That authority figures could disregard the potential of Native American youth is truly heartbreaking. Further, rape as a leadership tool is bound to have its consequences, all of which are still evident in the Native American culture.

It should come as no surprise that the Native American boys who attended the boarding schools grew into generations of men who became rapists themselves. Sadie Willmon-Haque and Dolores Subia BigFoot explain in their article "Violence and the Effects of Trauma on American Indian and Alaska Native Populations" that, "even very young

children can be impacted by traumatic events, reinforcing the need for early intervention and awareness of violence to stop the cycle of trauma” (2); however, intervention was obviously not available for the Native American children during colonial times. Young boys witnessing rape as an acceptable form of engagement with women eventually began to embrace the actions of the leaders and mimicked what they saw, causing internal conflict within the Native population. The internal conflict between sexes within the Native culture took the spotlight over the external conflict between the colonizers and the Native Americans. This is where the cycle of self-destruction began.

The long-term effects of sexual violence are obvious in generations of Native American people. Dr. Olson refers to the Native American’s self-destructive cycle as “generational trauma” (3). She argues that the generations of Native Americans from the boarding school era have experienced the effects of severe sexual violence. While contemporary conservatives may argue there is equality in opportunity for all people in America, their position clearly overlooks the historical context from which the Native American population has been bred. The immediate effects of sexual violence within the boarding schools were depression, suicide, shame and substance abuse. The long-term effects have produced what is known as the “lost generation” who are still trying to find ways to cope with the abuse of the boarding schools (Olson 4). The long-term effect of Christian boarding schools is in essence the self-destruction cycle. In the course of colonization it was the white colonizers who performed acts of sexual violence against the Native American woman; however, as explained by Smith, after colonization and the forced attendance at Christian boarding schools, Native American men became the dominant perpetrators on Native American woman (Smith 278). There was a study

completed in September of 2010 that analyzed the effects of Christian boarding schools on previous students and according to Olson, the results showed that “the experience made them feel stupid, dependent, ashamed to be Native, angry towards authority figures and white people, and more prone to family break ups. They also reported low levels of self esteem, loss of respect for women, difficulties with sexual abuse, disconnection from community, loss of identity, alcoholism, and pride in being a survivor” (5).

The long-term emotional and physical effects of sexual violence have eroded the dignity of the Native American population. Abundant research supports the existence of a self-destructive cycle within the culture. According to “Broken Promises: Evaluating the Native American Health Care System,” written by the United States Commission on Civil Rights, “the most significant mental health concerns today are the high prevalence of substance abuse, depression, anxiety, violence, and suicide”(12). The report also found that “Native Americans use and abuse alcohol and other drugs at younger ages, and at higher rates, than all other ethnic groups” (12). The same study found that the suicide rate for Native Americans “is 190 percent of the rate of the general population” (13). The same result was found for poverty; Native Americans have a “poverty rate of 25.9 percent” (38). The following excerpt from “Broken Promises” outlines the depth of socio-economic disparity that exists in the Native American population:

On Indian reservations, poverty levels for Native Americans are significantly worse. Among the Navajo, for example, over 50 percent live below the poverty level and almost 50 percent are unemployed. More than 50 percent of homes rely only on wood burning for heating, 32 percent lack adequate plumbing, and 60

percent lack telephone service. On the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, the unemployment rate hovers around 80 percent and two out of three residents live below the poverty level (38).

As outlined above, the socioeconomic disparities of the Native American population are crystal clear; however, it is the connection between this disparity and mental health disorders that does not reveal itself so lucidly. Is it possible that a connection exists between Olson's findings and the previously outlined social statistics? According to the article "Colonialism, Genocide and Gender Violence", there is a link: "the high rates of alcoholism, violence, and suicide in Indian communities today can, in large part, be traced to the brutality of Indian boarding schools"(4). The self-destructive cycle as a product of sexual violence has clearly made its mark on the Native American culture.

Classical conservatives may disagree with the evidence on the basis of human nature. According to a classical conservative, man is inherently bad and unable to make good decisions; therefore rape is justified, perhaps, as a product of human nature rather than of the Christian boarding schools. The words of General James Clinton, however, written in "Colonialism, Genocide and Gender Violence", suggests otherwise: "bad as the savages are, they never violate the chastity of any women, their prisoners" (6). Clinton's words reveal that the Native American population was inherently non-violent. Given the high levels of rape within the contemporary Native American population, it is clear that the Christian boarding schools triggered the self-destructive cycle.

The link between historical sexual violence and the current degradation of the Native American culture is undeniable; however, this issue continues to be avoided by the

dominant group in society. This dominating group includes most middle class institutions within society such as the government, education, and healthcare, all of which fail to comprehend the data on Native American populations and recognize the need for accountability. The tendency to avoid uncomfortable truths such as the sexual violence in Native American history is reflective of human nature. In the contemporary society that exists not only is there obliviousness within institutions to the historical sexual violence itself, but also to the effects of the statistics on contemporary Native American generations.

Historically and contemporarily, the government supplied the health care that was available on Native American reservations. As identified earlier, Native American populations are at a much higher risk for suicide, poverty, depression, alcoholism, and drug addictions. The 1994 U.S. Commissions on Civil Rights report “Broken Promises: Evaluating the Native American Health Care System” revealed the extent of ignorance in the Health Care systems towards Native Americans. The data that exists shows the dire need for improvements in the Native American health care system; the effects of historical trauma clearly require medical attention. Yet, it was shown that “despite a significant demand for mental health services, there are approximately 101 mental health professionals available per 100,000 Native Americans, compared with 173 mental health personnel per 100,000 whites” (8). The greater need for medical help has resulted in the exact opposite and this falls under the lack of action umbrella that the government hides under.

The same ignorance can be applied to modern educational practices. It is extremely doubtful that any middle or high school student learned about the traumatic impacts of historical sexual violence on the Native American population during times of colonization.

The government is responsible for the historical sexual violence perpetrated on Native American women and the lack of accountability. The government, while it is not solely responsible for all education administration, it plays a large role in overseeing the curriculum. The government does not want to showcase their supreme abuse of power and lack of accountability in history textbooks. The following excerpt has been taken from *The American Journey: Early Years*, which is Florida's Middle School social studies textbook:

“European explorers found new lands and conquered Native American empires, including the Aztec and Inca Empires. They then proceeded to spread Christianity. The diseases that came with the Europeans were deadly to the Native Americans.”

This passage leaves out a large portion of important history. For example, it fails to enlighten the students that “spreading Christianity” is actually code for spreading oppression by brutally raping Native American women. While it is true that the Europeans brought deadly diseases to Native American populations, this passage overlooks the social disease (sexual violence) implemented through infrastructure by Europeans that continues to have severe implications on Native American culture.

As discussed, the government has failed to take accountability for the oppression of Native Americans and the implications it has bred today. This claim is clearly visible in educational and health care institutions in the United States of America. Historically, the Canadian government also participated heavily in the sexual violence and Christian boarding schools that has caused the downfall of the Native American population (Colonialism, Genocide, and Gender Violence”). According to the article “Canada

Apologizes,” the Canadian government has attempted to take accountability by issuing a “\$1.9 billion compensation package announced by the government in 2005 to benefit some 65,000 survivors of residential schools” (2). Furthermore, in 2008 Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an official apology to the survivors of the Christian boarding schools. There has been no apology made by the American government. While steps are being taken in the right direction, they are few and far between.

While the government may ignore the effects of historical sexual violence and the need for accountability, their lack of actions speaks louder than words; French philosopher Jacques Derrida first articulated this concept: “absence is presence theory”. Those unfamiliar with this school of thought would benefit from knowing that there is significant presence when something is intentionally ignored. In regards to Native Americans, there is substantial presence of their sexual oppression in the lack of action taken by the US government. When an individual is asked about Native American history, little is known of the beautiful and successful society they once owned. The following excerpt is from Paula Gunn Allen’s article, “Who Is Your Mother?”:

the Indian seemed free, to European eyes, gloriously free, to the Europeans soul shaped by centuries of toil and tyranny, and this impression operated profoundly on the process of history and the development of America. Something in the peculiar character of the Indian world gave an impression of classlessness, of propertylessness, and that in turn led to an impression of humanity unrestrained... in the exercise of liberty absolute (22).

As exemplified, the Native American culture has not always existed in a cycle of self-destruction. The same interpretation could not be made of Native Americans in modern society. The Native American population is no longer “gloriously free”, but rather they are plagued by generational trauma from historical sexual violence. The self-destructive cycle within Native American culture has contributed to the alarming rates of suicide, poverty, and alcoholism. These statistics show how detrimental sexual violence was during colonization to the Native American population. The worst aspect to this saddening tale of trauma is how far the oppression has come over generations. According to Paula Gun Allen, “the root of oppression is the loss of memory” (21). The ignorance of the government to address the truthful history of Native American peoples reflects Allen’s “loss of memory” claim. To deny the instrument of the Native American demise is to forget the brutal tool of sexual violence in colonization that created the “lost generation”. There is no greater oppression than denying the existence of an entire culture that began as “gloriously free” and was demonized by justification ideology that has produced the self-destructive cycle of the Native American culture.

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