

# Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide

Reviewed by Judith K. Witherow

*Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*,  
By Andrea Smith.  
South End Press, 2005, \$18.00.

Without a doubt, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* has taken me longer to read than any book I have ever picked up. This didn't happen because it was a difficult read that defied understanding or was too academically inclined. The opposite was true for me. The pain and anger I absorbed poured off each page and kept me from reading until many of the wounds started to scab over. It's a book that keeps your head nodding in constant agreement. If you can absorb the information and walk away without a stiff neck, a lot of the information supplied didn't have an impact, or you have become desensitized to the horror that others are living with on a

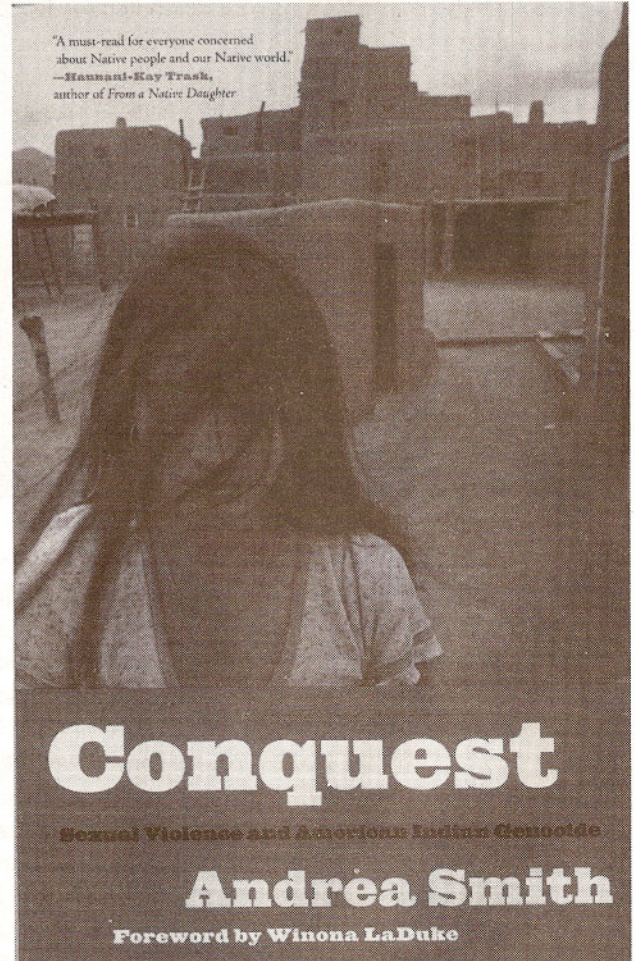
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daily basis.

Many of the incidents Smith writes about plague me personally or those I love, know or have read about throughout my life. If anyone can read the book and remain untouched her spirit was lost long before the centuries of abuse started. To know that we are still referred to as "other" should cause everyone to ask themselves, "Why?"

Case in point: Why don't you hear about the numerous tribes who were devastated when Hurricane Katrina hit the southern states? If you take this incident and work backwards through history you will get a clear picture of why Smith's book should be required reading. Many have lived the life and don't need anyone to tell them the facts. What is needed are books like Smith's to illustrate how we can start to recover from centuries of abuse of every type imaginable.



"In 1982 Stuart Kasten marketed 'Custer's Revenge,' a videogame in which players got points each time they, in the form of Custer, raped an Indian woman. The slogan of the game is 'When you score, you score.' He describes the game as 'a fun sequence where the woman is enjoying a

sexual act willingly.' According to the promotional material: 'You are General Custer. Your dander's up, your pistol's wavin.' You've hog-tied a ravishing Indian maiden and have a chance to rewrite history and even up an old score. Now, the Indian maiden's hands may be tied, but she's not about to take it lying down, by George! Help is on the way. If you're to get revenge you'll have to rise to the challenge, dodge a tribe of flying arrows and protect your flanks against some downright mean and prickly cactus. But if you can stand pat and last past the strings and arrows—you can stand last. Revenge is sweet.'"

In the foreword of *Conquest*, Winona LaDuke writes, "As a woman who has organized across movements in this country, some truths remain constant. These truths are related to conquest, to the process of deconstructing peoples, and deconstructing Native women to be of less stature and value than others. So it is that as a woman, you always know that you will be viewed as a woman of color, hence your politics will be race based, your analysis marginalized, and your experience seen as limited."

LaDuke explains her analysis of this dynamic in words that should be evident to all who truly wish to understand this concept. "As a

Native woman you can always count on someone 'little ladying' you, or treating you as a novelty. When I ran for the office of the Vice President of the United States as Ralph Nader's running mate in 2000, *The New York Times* referred to me as something like 'an Indian Activist from a reservation in Minnesota, who butchers deer and beaver on her kitchen table...and has stated that the US is in violation of international law.' *The New York Times* would not refer to me in the same context as my opponents, as, for instance a 'Harvard educated economist and author.'"

LaDuke further reinforces Smith's work by declaring, "The reality is that there is no way to build a real movement for justice and

intimately. Her astute reasoning should cause those who want a clear understanding of how racial and sexual politics play out in this nation eager to read what she has skillfully laid out.

Smith's background is firmly rooted in the various organizations that she worked in and helped organize. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, she worked with the Chicago chapter of Women of All Red Nations (WARN). She also worked with mainstream organizations such as the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and NARAL. When she became frustrated with mainstream groups' definition of various issues relating to violence and reproductive rights, and their inability to understand how oppressive they

were to indigenous women and women of color, she helped co-organize INCITE. This group of feminists of color works to address violence from a grassroots level instead of a "social service" delivery perspective. This group led Smith to become involved in the American Indian Boarding School Healing Project. The boarding school atrocities are

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peace, whether between people or between peoples and the land, without challenging the violence of historical and contemporary colonialism."

Andrea Smith never shies away from the evilness that some know

an abomination that should sicken and become another part of the education of everyone. The fact that the media and others have failed to address this issue openly answers its own racist question. Through the understanding of what has knowingly

been accepted an uprising of anger should spill over from those who profess to care about injustice. Abuse of American Indian children in boarding schools should be especially held in contempt because it involves the weakest of the weak.

“Because Indian bodies are ‘dirty,’ they are considered sexually violable and ‘rapable,’ and the rape of bodies that are considered inherently impure or dirty does not count. For instance, prostitutes are almost never believed when they say they have been raped because the dominant society considers the bodies of sex workers undeserving of integrity and violable at all times. Similarly, the history of mutilation of Indian bodies both living and dead, makes it clear that Indian people are not entitled to bodily integrity.”

**1885 Proctor & Gamble ad for Ivory Soap:**

We were once factious, fierce and wild,  
In peaceful arts unreconciled  
Our blankets smeared with grease and stains  
From buffalo meat and settlers’ veins.  
Through summer’s dust and heat content  
From moon to moon unwashed we went,  
But IVORY SOAP came like a ray  
Of light across our darkened way  
And now we’re civil, kind and good  
And keep the laws as people should,  
We wear our linen, lawn and lace  
As well as folks with paler face  
And now I take, where’er we go  
This cake of IVORY SOAP to show  
What civilized my squaw and me  
And made us clean and fair to see.

Throughout *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, numerous references are made to the colonizers’ constant need to demonize our race. If someone is deemed impure, sexually perverse, dirty, barbaric, rapable, etc. then justification for annihilation is not just a statement—it is permission to rid the land of any trace of the original inhabitants. Annihilation has continued without ceasing with the aid of the boarding schools. Those “physically” spared are done so because they are needed for menial labor and

culprits who took part in this barbarism or personally knows what happened to the innocent of our land? Why are our children allowed to be taken and misused in the most heinous of ways? How many more centuries will be required to instill the notion that those living in poverty love their children as much as anyone else, and no one should be allowed to remove these precious loved ones without absolute proof of abuse?

“In Minnesota, Indian children were 500 percent more likely to be in foster care or adoptive care than

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to be taught trades that pay next to nothing. Destruction of familial beliefs is readily used to apply shame to those who try to retain their former way of life. Students are used as property for pedophiles that inhabit boarding schools, missions, etc. Whether deliberately, or by anyone’s guess as to the cause, graves without number are found in close proximity to schools and churches. Who is going to find the

non-Indian children; in South Dakota, Indian children were 1,600 percent more likely to be in foster or adoptive care; in Washington State, 1,900 percent more likely; and in Wisconsin, 1,600 percent more likely. The hearings also found that the reasons children were taken from their homes were often vague and generally ethnocentric. In North Dakota, physical violence was present in only 1 percent of the

cases. Reasons that might be given for removal included ones such as children were 'running wild.'"

With this as the criteria it's a miracle that my sisters and brothers weren't taken from my parents. We were always looked down upon because we "ran wild." We never used that term. To our family it was the way you played when material goods weren't your means of entertainment, and the land was your playground.

When women are taught to be ashamed of their bodies they internalize that hatred and in numerous instances counselors are told, "I hate being an Indian" or "I don't want to be an Indian." They are statements I've used myself. When you are told that you are being raped because Indian women are hot blooded, it is ingrained in you that what is happening is because of something you encouraged. How many decades does it take until you understand that your demeanor has nothing to do with the way you are being treated? Apparently, until your last breath is drawn.

Smith does an excellent job of explaining why you should stop beating yourself up for events that continue with little sign of ceasing. Society is so much better at doing all of these horrible things because there is so many of them and they've had centuries of practice. If we could just educate the "educated" we might stand a better chance at survival through the protection of our families from the destruction of every aspect of our health. This will not happen as long as we have women who are capable of making the following remarks and see nothing wrong with what they are saying:



"To justify the bombing of Afghanistan, Laura Bush declared, 'The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.' (*The Guardian*, March 26, 2004). These sentiments were shared by mainstream feminists. Eleanor Smeal, former president of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and founder and president of the Fund for a Feminist Majority said, 'Without 9/11, we could not get the Afghanistan tragedy in focus enough for the world powers to stop the Taliban's atrocities or to remove the Taliban. Tragically, it took a disaster for them to act definitively enough.' (Fund for a Feminist Majority 2001) It seems the best way to liberate women is to bomb them. Meanwhile, the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), whose members were the very women who were to be liberated by this war, denounced it as an imperial venture."

"In 2001, a report issued by the Truth Commission on Genocide in Canada maintained

that the mainline churches and the federal government were involved in the murder of over 50,000 Native children through this system. The list of offenses committed by church officials includes murder by beating, poisoning, hanging, starvation, strangulation, and medical experimentation.

Torture was used to punish children for speaking Aboriginal languages. Children were involuntarily sterilized."

Andrea Smith has written a painful yet powerful book on the issues that have torn our nation apart since Europeans first set foot in the Americas. Each chapter covers the topic like a well made blanket. From the beginning she writes about sexual violence as a tool of genocide, boarding school abuse, rape of the land, the colonization of Native women's reproductive health, medical experimentation, spiritual appropriation as sexual violence, and anti-colonial responses to gender violence, and she finishes up with U.S. Empire and the war against Native Sovereignty. Each chapter is worthy of a book that could easily stand by itself. Reading her book will fill in a lot of the gaps that were omitted in other publications you may have read. I sincerely hope that you read the book with your eyes and mind open to the very real possibility that what was taught as history might be better suited for a book such as *Believe it or Not*. ♦