

The *Abolitionist* recently talked with Andrea Smith, author of *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* about the book and her work with INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, and the Boarding School Healing Project.

CR: How did *Conquest* develop as a book project?

AS: I used to work in the anti-violence movement, in social services, and I was struck by how the strategy and analysis wasn't really working for Native women. On the one hand, in Native communities there was a total reluctance to talk about sexual violence. So as people would speak out, because they had been sexually assaulted, the community would usually side against them. Since the Violence Against Women Act there has been money [going] into domestic violence but still relatively little into sexual violence. And then in the mainstream movement it seemed that all the approaches didn't really address the needs of Native women because [they weren't] really looking at how the sexual violence Native peoples have suffered is also a result of colonialism. There was no anti-colonial perspective in the mainstream anti-violence [movement], and it can be seen again in the reliance on the prison system and the criminal justice system as a primary strategy for trying to address violence. [The mainstream movement] is expecting the state to solve the problem that it actually benefits from and has created.

So this book was 20 years in the making of me thinking what we have isn't really working for Native women because what we have is a white-dominated analysis in the anti-violence movement and a male-dominated analysis in the sovereignty movement, and the needs of Native women aren't being centered in the thinking about this.

I used to be the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NCASA) Women Of Color Caucus chair, but me and other women of color were always getting frustrated by one, the racism against women of color, but on a bigger level how the anti-violence movement was so professionalized and dependent on Federal funding. And it was trying to be so legitimate to the state that it wasn't able to have a critique of it.

So these two interests converged and I thought about how we understand violence against Native women. And it seemed like the big mistake that was made was that we were looking at sexual violence as separate from state violence, or colonial violence, or white-supremacist violence, and we were not seeing that white-supremacy and colonialism [are] successful precisely because [they] operate through sexual violence. So if we don't address the two together, then either movement will miserably fail. So, in developing that kind of analysis, the question becomes what strategies do we use to change this situation? That is part of where INCITE! came from — rethinking how we develop an anti-colonial approach to ending violence against women and then conversely, a feminist approach to ending colonialism and white supremacy.

CR: For people who don't know about INCITE!, can you say a little about what the organization does?

AS: INCITE is an organization of feminists of color who are focused on organizing around intersections of state violence and gender violence and looking at it from an organizing rather

than a social service perspective. Some of the bigger things that happen are in terms of rethinking the criminalization approach towards addressing domestic and sexual violence.

CR: In Chapter 7 of *Conquest*, “Anti-colonial Responses to Gender Violence,” you discuss some models of accountability to deal with sexual violence, particularly against women of color. For people who may not have access to the book can you discuss some of those projects?

AS: People are experimenting with different kinds of things. We learned from the Northwest Network out with queer communities of color [about] working with pre-existing friendship networks to prevent violence from happening. Because violence tends to happen when there is isolation and abuse, the idea is [that] friends make a commitment to talk about their relationships on a regular basis so that when something starts to be off people are ready to intervene.

In India we learned about this group, Masum, where to intervene in violence they would go sing outside the perpetrator’s home until he stopped being violent. They do education, they do health, they do micro-credit, and they establish themselves as a community player so that people will listen to them when they talk about violence. That was a different approach than in the US where every service is segmented. They have a holistic community approach that gives them the credibility to intervene on issues of violence.

Other people, like Sista II Sista, were starting Sisters Liberated Ground [that] was informed by movements in Latin America, which [asks] how do you intervene not only after violence happens, but how do you make it not happen in the first place? Part of it is creating alternate governance systems that are based on equality and that change the way people act with each other. They work on models of consensus that reshape the way people interact, so they think to act in a way that is responsible for the group and not just for their own individual interests.

Communities Against Rape and Abuse was focusing on violence within progressive communities. They developed principles of thinking through each situation that help them come up with a strategy that might work for that particular context. This involves thinking, who are all the players involved? Who is everybody that the perpetrator cares about? How do you mobilize support to hold that person accountable? And how do you do that on an ongoing basis?

CR: One of the approaches that you talk about Communities Against Rape and Abuse taking that I think will be really interesting to people who read this paper is the idea of organizing and mobilizing around particular groups of women who aren’t necessarily well accepted by the mainstream.

AS: I think Beth Ritchie was the one that articulated well [in] talking about the problems within the anti-violence movement, and this is actually probably true for most social justice movements. They tend to organize around the people who are most likely to be acceptable by the mainstream. They look for the good poster child. The problem with that approach is it allows a co-optation of the movement where the poster children get set apart as worthy victims over and against the unworthy victims. What does it mean to organize around those who are seen as least acceptable? Because if you “liberate” them you liberate everyone else that has a higher status than them. Of course, this is easier said than done and this is not to make light of the difficult strategic

decisions people make when trying to build a movement. On the other hand, I guess if your goal is long-term liberation rather than short-term policy change, it makes sense to start thinking in those directions.

CR: And thinking about what elements need to be in place and working together for these styles of intervention to work, restorative justice is one of the things you cover in the book in really interesting terms. Can you lay it out a little bit for people?

AS: Restorative justice is a broad term that is used by a lot of different folks, from Native people to the Christian Right. The general principle is that instead of seeing a crime as happening between two individuals, it has to be seen as a breakdown in a community and hence requires a community-based response. If the problem is a breakdown in community, it doesn't necessarily make sense to take the "perpetrator" outside the community to prison because that won't really solve the problem or restore the community.

The reason the anti-violence movement has had a big issue with [restorative justice] is because a lot of the restorative justice models tend not to work in cases of violence against women, because for the community to hold somebody accountable they have to actually think that what happened was wrong. So therefore you can't rely on a romanticized notion of community or even assume that community actually exists. For a community-based response to be effective requires a political organizing component to it that actually creates communities that offer accountability.

The other thing that we became wary of is that restorative justice programs, while seemingly independent of the prison system are still tied to the state. And as such can have the same dangers of any other prison reform movement. As Critical Resistance has demonstrated, the problem is prison reforms have actually strengthened the prison system by increasing the number of people who get stuck within this apparatus based on violence and domination.

CR: Can you give people some background on your work with the Boarding School Healing Project?

AS: One of the policies of the US government starting in the 1800s, to a more intense degree, was the idea that we need to solve the "Indian problem" by civilizing them. So Indian children were abducted from their homes and transported thousands of miles away to off-reservation Christian boarding schools where they were malnourished and were physically, sexually and emotionally abused. They often had their tongues cut out if they spoke their native languages. They had to be Christians. And they wouldn't be returned until they were 18 years old, so they would come back and not even necessarily be able to speak the same language as their parents. And if you look at the disfunctionality in Native communities today you can almost always trace it to the boarding school generation, because prior to that most nations weren't patriarchal. But part of the Christian boarding school project was to instill patriarchy into our communities and also a lot of violence. Often these schools were so traumatic people often can't even talk about them.

The schools still exist today and there are still abuses going on. There have been at least two deaths recently and there is a report saying that the policies designed to curb sexual abuse at the

boarding schools have not ever been implemented. So there is rampant sexual abuse still in boarding schools.

In Canada there is a similar system called the Residential School System but there was a lot of outcry and documentation about these abuses and as a result lawsuits were filed. Some churches have been threatened with bankruptcy because of the number of lawsuits that have been filed. So, that system might not be perfect, but at least people acknowledge that it happened and there is some movement around redress. But in the US, there has been no documentation of this although the abuses are certainly as bad as in Canada.

So we wanted to do a document. Sammy Toineeta, from Rosebud, came up with the idea of having a documentation project that would then become the basis for us to call for reparations and redress. We wanted an approach that would be a collective remedy and also would be geared towards having people be involved in the strategies rather than somebody doing it on their behalf. And also to make healing central, because it wasn't good to have someone spill their beans and then have no support. So we have a healing infrastructure throughout the documentation and also educate both Native and non-Native publics about the legacy of boarding schools.

We are [now] focused on South Dakota and we are trying to finish the interviews up this year. [We] are looking towards trying to do an intervention maybe with the Inter-American Court or maybe through some other UN process to get the ball rolling around bringing this issue up. We [didn't] to go through the US domestic court because we want to approach it from a sovereignty perspective. We want to pursue UN strategies and we also wanted to see this as part of a larger reparations movement, so we had a joint strategy session with folks involved in African-American reparations movements. [We are] looking at this as an opportunity to educate our own communities about the other reparation struggles because, particularly in reservation areas, you may not have that same information available. So we want people to be lawyer-proof, not to have some lawyer take care of the problem, but to be involved in shaping the strategies themselves. This is all much easier said than done. It is a very long and slow and difficult process.

CR: Has it been hard to get people to participate in the project?

AS: They participate, but in a very traumatized way. So let's say we have a meeting for survivors ...South Dakota is very spread out and people don't have money so it takes a long time just to get gas or find a car to get anywhere. Then they have to drive 200 miles and they get there and they can't walk in the door, so that is part of the reality: how do you build a movement around trauma? Because a lot of our movements are based on the idea that when you come to the organizing space you're going to have your act together and be totally cool and happening and you don't get to discuss your problems. But what do you do if nobody actually is all-together and people have real issues? As a result of that I think social services get cut off from organizing. If you have a problem, go to a psychiatrist. And they'll put a Band Aid on it. And if you are organizing, don't talk about those problems. So it creates this gendered private/public split. How do we have a more holistic view of organizing so you can bring your whole sick, tired, and depressed person to the work and the movement can take you the way you are?

CR: One of the things we are trying to put out with all of our pieces are some concrete strategies that people are thinking about that others might take up or look into. You talked about some of the models from the book, but is there anything you want to add?

One key thing is to think what can *we* do. With violence a lot of times people think what can *I* do. If you think – What can I do? – it's call [the] police or do nothing. Our first work around community accountability came with doing these activist institutes because we thought prison didn't work, but we didn't know what else there was to do. So we have these community-based activist institutes to discuss what could we do and we actually found out [that] it was not hard to figure out what we could do. What we could do might depend on the different contexts, but people didn't have a hard time figuring out ideas. What I found around the country is that when people put their brains together and think creatively there are often plenty of things to do. I don't want to make it sound too easy, but in some ways it's not as hard as you'd think, either. So I think the key thing is just getting folks together in your community, however you define it, and say "if something happens what can we do?"

Also, a lot of times our tendency is to wait until something happens and then there is this panic, and emotions are high and it's hard to figure it out. Maybe all progressive movements or organizations need to think about what they would do if something happened within their organization before it happens, because it probably will at some point. In doing that you start to develop not just a strategy for intervening but also a culture of accountability that has an impact not just in terms of violence, but in terms of how to act together in a better way.