Hearing Their Voices:  
The Persistence of Violence Against Native American Women and Girls

Colonization to the Reservation

Why is history important? Why don’t you just get over it?  
It was a long time ago.

The effects of near-total genocide continue to directly affect our population. Many Native American people do not know the full history of their people even though the history directly affects their daily lives.

For example, the story of US history that is taught to children usually starts with Thanksgiving where the “Indians” welcomed the Pilgrims and shared a feast. The actual interaction between the Pilgrims and Native Americans was much more violent. English and Dutch mercenaries murdered 700 Pequot Tribal members as they gathered for their “Green Corn Festival.” The next day “A Day of Thanksgiving” was declared by the governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony and celebrated for 100 years.

The first historic perspective of colonizers towards Native American women has compounded onto each subsequent era’s perspective combined with genocidal actions to create an environment where almost ALL Native American women have experienced some form of sexual violence in their life.

1452-1825: Colonization and Confederation

Prior to European Contact, Native women played an active and high-status role in their tribes. They held and managed resources, and had autonomy in choices regarding sexual relationships. The political and sexual autonomy of Native women shocked and upset the colonizers who judged the social norms of the Native Americans as primitive and uncivilized. The autonomy that Native women had over their lives caused colonial men to view the women as highly sexualized beings whom one could assault without the attack being considered rape.

By way of law, Congress created a federal presence in tribal communities by setting up the Trade and Intercourse Acts. All trade with the Native Americans had to go through the federal government. Among other things, this made it so that Native Americans could not sell their land. This is still in effect almost 200 years later.
In 1884, under John C. Calhoun, the War Department created the Office of Indian Affairs created, which was renamed as The Bureau of Indian Affairs. This indicates a shift in viewing Native Women as primitive and sexually promiscuous to being a problem for the War Department.

Three Supreme Court rulings created “The Marshall Trilogy,” a set of laws for dealing with the Tribes. One put all Native-owned lands into trusts, another declared Native Americans “Domestic Dependents” and the third codified the Federal relationship with the Native Americans. These laws set the conditions for the government’s policies of genocide by legal means. These laws make it possible for the federal government to decide, without a tribe’s input, to allow pipelines to run through critical sensitive areas. This is also why we have the current problem where the tribes are unable to enforce laws broken by non-native people on reservation land.

**1829-1850: Removal Era**

After coming up with the legal “justification” and means to deprive Native Americans of their land, the government started removing Tribes from their lands and relocating them to areas occupied by other tribes. During this time we have the Trail of Tears, where five tribes were removed from the Southeastern region to west of the Mississippi. Of the nearly 60,000 people removed from their lands, between 8,700 and 17,000 died in the forced march.

Once the federal government set out to systematically deprive the tribes of their lands, the government and media started claiming that Native women were threat because they were very effective in defending their lands. News sources and authors started calling the women savage, ferocious, cruel, among other things not fit to repeat. Native women somehow transformed from beautiful primitive highly sexualized beings into a fearsome and deadly foe. All this after being deprived of land and systematically killed by the thousands.

**1850-1887: Reservation Movement**

During the 1860s through the 1890s government correspondence, documents, newspapers, and magazines depicted Native Women as dangerous “uncivilizing” influences. Therefore, there was no outrage when women were hunted, kidnapped, raped, slaughtered, and sexually mutilated by soldiers, settlers, miners, or ranchers. During this time also, a new genre of novels depicted Native women as extremely barbaric and deceitful, “The most savage of the savages.”

Federal law made it illegal, punishable by death, to leave the reservations. The government also deprived the tribes of food and other necessary resources.

**More**

This is a highly condensed version of the first two of four workshops that Patina Park gave in the early part of 2018. To see videos of each of the presentations, go to www.miwrc.org/events/ and find the “Hearing Their Voices” series.