

POLS 350: The Politics of Gender: Close reading and interpretation activity

Winona Stevenson, "Colonialism and First Nations Women in Canada"

Andrea Smith, "Native American Feminism, Sovereignty, and Social Change"

1. "The European ideal of womanhood...revolved around female domesticity. The appropriate position of women was confinement to the household where they were enjoined to subordinate their wills to their fathers, husbands, or nearest approximate male relative, and to direct their energies to the efficient management of the resources their men provided. The ideal woman was characterized by the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity...The European ideal of womanhood was projected on Aboriginal societies throughout the colonized world where it functioned as 'the single most important criterion for contrasting savagism with civility.' Victorian morality was the severe standard against which Aboriginal women were contrasted and found wanting because almost everything about their being...was a violent affront to the European ideal" (Stevenson, 46).

In what specific respects, according to Stevenson (and Smith), were Aboriginal women's actual social roles unlike the ideal of European femininity? How does she suggest that the *subordination* of European women was connected to the *colonization* of First Nations women?

2. "Aboriginal women were understood and represented in ambiguous and contradictory terms—the 'noble savages' (Princess) or the 'ignoble savages' (Squaw Drudge). The former is the archetypal Indian Princess, 'a Pocahontas type who was virginal, childlike, naturally innocent,' beautiful, helper and mate to European men, and inclined to civilization and Christian conversion. Her antithesis, the Squaw Drudge, is characterized as a 'squat, haggard, papoose-lugging drudge who toiled endlessly' who 'lived a most unfortunate brutal life,' and 'fought enemies with a vengeance and thirst for blood unmatched by any man.' In contrast to her noble sister, the Squaw Drudge is also sexually licentious, ugly, beast of burden, and slave to men." (47)

How can these two contradictory stereotypes of Aboriginal women exist alongside each other? Can you think of contemporary examples or situations where these stereotypes are in play? How does Stevenson suggest they are connected to stereotypes of European women?

3. "If we successfully decolonize, the argument goes, then we will necessarily eliminate problems of sexism as well" (Smith, 121).

On what basis, according to Smith, do some thinkers make this argument? How does Smith argue against it?

4. The Boarding School Project "attempts to organize against interpersonal gender violence and state violence simultaneously by framing gender violence as a continuing effect of human rights violations perpetrated by state policy. Consequently, this project challenges the mainstream anti-domestic/sexual violence movement to conceptualize state-sponsored sexual violence as central to its work" (Smith, 126).

What histories is Smith drawing on when she refers to "state-sponsored sexual violence"? What do you think Smith has in mind as the "mainstream anti-domestic/sexual violence movement"? Why does she argue that its strategies will fail if one understands the state itself as an agent of gender violence?

5. "Native feminist theory and activism make a critical contribution to feminist politics as a whole by questioning the legitimacy of the United States [and Canada] specifically and the nation-state as the appropriate form of governance generally...[B]y making anticolonial struggle central to feminist politics, Native women make central to their organizing the question of what is the appropriate form of governance for the world in general" (Smith, 128-9).

How does Smith distinguish between the "nation" and the "nation-state"? What does she think "sovereignty" is? What is the politics of "taking power" vs. "making power"? Do you think (non-Native) feminists accept the nation-state as a unit of governance too uncritically?