Sexual Violence as a Tool in the Conquest of California

Sexual violence has been a tool most used against Amerindian women since colonialism. When the Spaniards sought out to conquer the California region in the 1800’s they created missions that lead to the interaction with the Indians of the land. Sexual assaults were prominent during this period, which particularly brought trouble to the priest and missionaries because it went against the Catholic ways, and furthermore pushed the Indians away. When we reflect upon the history of California we learn, sexual violence isn’t just a tool of patriarchy, fear and control, but also a tool of colonialism and racism. As a result, Amerindian women have been forced to suffer abuse, which consequently has had tremendous damage to their identity.

Amerindian women have found themselves silenced. Silenced from fear and shame. Historically, sexual abuse is mentioned throughout history, and in many cases used as a form of conquest. Antonia I. Castaneda “points out that sexual assault is an act of domination and power in Western civilization and as such the soldiers used it as an act of war against a population it was seeking to conquer.” The reality of the horrendous acts that were happening to the Amerindian women by the Spanish soldiers completely contrast the missionary’s purpose and nature of the colonial missions. Furthermore, creating a relationship of dominance by the soldiers against anyone who potentially stood against what they deemed as their right in conquest. This rise of these acts was not isolated to one region or specific mission and/or set of soldiers, it was reported and known to have happened everywhere. Native women have seemingly been marginalized in patriarchal issues regarding colonialism, racism, and shame.

Why was the sexual violence allowed to continue? Why were the Spanish soldiers so immoral and undisciplined? Perhaps both could be applied to their behavior especially when the “sexual exploitation of native women and related violence threatened the political and military and religious objectives of the colonial enterprise in California,” (Major Problems in California History) The violence created even more distance and gaps within the uniting cultures. “The soldiers, priests, and settlers who effected the conquest and colonization of Alta California in the last third of the 1700’s perceived and acted toward Amerindians in a manner consistent with the ideology and history of conquest – regarding them as inferior, devalued, disposable being against whom violence was not only permissible but often necessary. (Major Problems in California History) The issue is not simply that violence against women happens during colonization, but that the colonial process is itself structured by sexual violence.