

# Those Impacted by Colonialism Speak Out on the US's Legacy of Family Separation

By [Roberto Rodriguez Truthout](#) Published July 8, 2018



Thousands of people march in support of families separated at the US-Mexico border on June 30, 2018, in New York, New York.

Spencer Platt / Getty Images

Those crying children, separated from their parents and detained for crossing the US border, are part of the original peoples of this continent. They symbolize all of the children that have been ripped away from their mothers' arms since the era of colonialism.

To be sure, Donald Trump is doing what the US has always done best:

destroying and dehumanizing nations and peoples; destroying lives and peddling pseudo-religious-politico providential narratives. However, this time, it is the US itself that is imploding and being slowly destroyed by a would-be dictator and a spineless and complicit Congress.

On this continent, the crisis at the border began in 1492, and there is a direct line that begins with genocide, theft of a continent, theft of bodies, souls and even identities — all of which resulted in the destruction and enslavement of many peoples and cultures in many countries.

As Donald Trump's "zero tolerance" policy [continues to be challenged](#), it is worth examining the perspectives of those who have experienced similar treatment. There are powerful Indigenous voices arguing the US narrative regarding immigration is obscenely upside down.

In response to the "family separation is un-American" narrative, I reached out to many of my friends, mostly Indigenous mothers, who have a different assessment. Their voices are the ones heard below.

Since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was implemented in 1994, several thousand people who have tried to cross the US-Mexico border have been [found dead](#). Thanks to NAFTA, millions have streamed to the US from Mexico as a result of being unable to compete with cheap, US government-subsidized agriculture. Meanwhile, nearly [100 migrants](#) have been killed by Border Patrol agents since 2003. More so than many law enforcement agencies, these agents operate with virtually 100 percent impunity. Marla Pacheco, a Sonora Yaqui human rights activist, speaks about the recent killing of the [young Maya woman, Claudia Gomez Gonzalez](#), by a Border Patrol agent on the Texas border: "We know that the only person who is going to be protected is the border patrol agent. The impunity will continue and their families will never know justice in this system that continues to criminalize refugees and migrants."

The voices here, which are usually silenced and erased, may be difficult to

process emotionally, precisely because that trauma, dehumanization and de-Indigenization are still with us to this day. It is what is referred to as intergenerational trauma, which these children and families are in danger of [passing down](#) to future generations. Maria Molina Vai Sevoi, a Tucson mother of six and a member of the Yoeme nation and Nahua Tlalmanalcah peoples, says: “Whether to fight in wars, work as slaves, attend boarding schools or to be adopted out, the story is the same — they take our children.” This includes forced sterilization, she adds. “They took them before they were in our wombs. My ancestors migrated north to escape persecution by the Mexican government. They sought to erase our bloodlines. [The United States also] seeks to erase our bloodlines.”

The legacy of family separation is not limited to US history; this was also policy in Canada, where the last federally supported residential school for Indigenous children [didn't close until the late 1990s](#). Martha Many Grey Horses, a member of the Kainai First Nation of the Blackfoot Confederacy, speaks about her experiences in Canada: “I know all too well what it’s like to be forcefully separated from my parents, family, grandparents, as a child growing up on my family’s farm on the reserve – and placed into the government residential school. I find it challenging to read about the separation of these precious children from their parents and relatives. I see their images, and my tears start falling. There are moments when I wail for these little people. I see myself in them as a child. I’m one of them. I want so much to reach out physically and hug them.”

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Here, Leilani Clark, a Tucsonan of African and Dine’/Santa Clara descent, offers a glimpse of two worlds: “The policies of [‘Kill the Indian, \[and\] Save the Man’](#) very intentionally separated children far away from their families to begin the physically and emotionally violent process of forced assimilation

through the Indian boarding school system, which served to ‘domesticate’ and white-wash Native youth.

The legacy of lost familial roots weigh deep within the psyche of Black people in the US, when entire families, including children, were forcibly ripped from their family members after white slave-owners purchased and sold our ancestors to different plantations throughout the Southern and Eastern regions of the US; those little Black bodies worked alongside the adults in the fields.”

Mi’Jan Celie Tho-Biaz, an oral historian and cultural worker in New Mexico, makes a similar observation: “I am the direct descendent of stolen people, living on stolen, occupied land.... The United States has a steady history of separating and dehumanizing families that began with the transatlantic slave trade, and continued through forced boarding schools with Native Americans, Japanese American internment camps, and currently is practiced through youth detention centers for marginalized young people, targeted by the school-to-prison pipeline.”

The voices of mothers are difficult to read because the topic and these memories disturb our consciences. “I think of when my sister and I crossed this illegal border. We were five and one,” says Marisa Duarte, who is Yaqui and lives in Phoenix, Arizona. “As a mother, I am beyond angry to think that this could ever happen to anyone’s kids! It is also a continuation of the US’s war on Indigenous people by ripping away and terrorizing our most sacred: our children.”

Eva Alcalde, Xicana-Dine, says, “As a mother, my heart is broken, and I am sickened by the lack of love for humanity.... There is a pure wickedness in the very thought that a government would enforce such a great atrocity. A child’s bond with their parents and their family is sacred and should not be desecrated in this way. Where is the love in the world if we do nothing to protect our children from this outright act of evil?”

There is a clear linkage between historical practices and the [present](#). Nellie David of the Tohono O’odham Nation is an advocate for human rights. She notes: “The US government sponsored the kidnapping of young children and separating them from their Indigenous mothers as an official policy of indoctrination and assimilation. They were forced to stand for the pledge, speak English, and make way for colonial edifices in an attempt to maintain supremacy and control. In the modern era, history repeats; the United States is still using family separations as a form of psychological warfare to maintain supremacy and control.”

A similar observation is made by Alicia Nevaquaya, Choctaw/Comanche, of Oklahoma: “Separating Brown children from their parents by foreign invaders in the name of religion is nothing new to this hemisphere. It is as inappropriate now as it was then.” And she adds that the separation of children from their parents actually amounts to terrorism. “The dictionary defines ‘terrorism’ as the ‘unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims’.”

Michael Yellowbird of the Three Affiliated Tribes (Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara), is a professor of sociology at North Dakota State University. He agrees with Tia Oros Peters (Shiwi), executive director of the Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Peoples, that Trump’s family separation policy is an act of genocide under Article II, Section E of the [1948 UN Convention on the Prevention of Genocide](#).

Yellowbird says: “What’s happening reminds me of two instances in history when military leaders were making Indian policy. The first was Capt. Richard Henry Pratt who said: ‘Kill the Indian, [and] Save the Man.’ Today, the president and Attorney General Jeff Sessions are repeating this history. Only this time, it’s: ‘Kill the Children, Save This Bigoted Nation’.”

Gabrielle Tayac of the Piscataway Indian Nation of Maryland wonders whether tribes can do something, and proffers one possible solution: “Many Indigenous people are outraged and are ready to help; we’ve gone through the

incarceration of our kids, too. What is the practical solution right now? Can tribal people claim them? Offer asylum?”

Peters sees this issue as a test of Native sovereignty, an opportunity “to do the right thing by giving refuge – asylum to our thousands of relatives from the south who are fleeing the impacts of US ongoing settler-colonialism and imperialism in their homelands. This could help inspire other attitudes and practices of caring for one another, of responsibility, integrity, humanity and love – rather than basing our relationships or mutuality on economic benefit and capitalistic exploitation.”

Grandma Gloria Arellanes, a Tonga elder/Chicana from Southern California, makes an appeal: “I believe we are going through ‘selective racial cleansing’. The most innocent of all are the children ... I wish I could curse, scream and not cry.”

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