

Cutting Families Apart at the Border, We Find Ourselves...

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[Americans] believe in a universe of divine justice where the human race is guilty of sin, but they also believe in a secular justice where human beings are presumed innocent. You can't have both. You know how Americans deal with it? They pretend they are eternally innocent no matter how many times they lose their innocence. The problem is that those insist on their innocence believe anything they do is just. At least we who believe in our own guilt know what dark things we can do.

From *The Sympathizer*, by Viet Thanh Nguyen (p. 189)

I cannot remember what had brought to mind one morning, in what I recall as an otherwise tranquil period of my analysis, the fear of tornados I had for a time in my childhood. It was a fear, I realized, closely linked to another: of Communists, entities I understood even less than tornados, but which I knew had had something to do with why my family had left Cuba a couple of years before and come to live with my aunt. Tati, as we called her, had left the country perhaps a year earlier, following her husband's path, in the hull of a cargo boat pretending to transport bananas, but packed instead with other refugees of the aftermath of the revolution. I was afraid that the Communists – whoever these strange beings were – would steal me away from my family, apparently like the violent winds of the Texas twister that had ripped the roofs off of houses in a nearby town and had sucked small animals and even a cow into the void, according to stories.

The fear I experienced in the analytic hour intensified, and was unlike other, more defined anxieties I knew. This was diffuse, a thick oppressive atmosphere. The specificity of my childhood “red scare” had long ago dissipated, but what had clearly not dissolved — and only now became nameable, though I had experienced it many times before at the sight of uniformed frontier guards, however friendly the international border — was a fear of that great object too little discussed in our theories: the State.

As this came into focus, another wave of feeling began rise up beneath it, a terrible ocean of sorrow. I had experienced this tidal surge for the first time, consciously, about a half-year before, at a screening of a film whose title I recall as “*Havana Sonata*.” Through interlocking stories, the film depicted the struggle between those who stay and those who leave; using almost no dialogue, the movie was a layered montage of scenes from the city where I was born and where we lived until my third birthday. The climax I remember involves an ambivalent man who finally chooses to emigrate: it is shot at the Havana airport, clear in my memory from return visits. There, departing travelers are separated from those who remain by a glass partition. Though transparent, that green-tinged glass is a crystalline gulf for me. As the images accumulated in the film, I felt the same rising wave of overwhelming sorrow I was now experiencing in my analysis. At the film, I had left my friends — suddenly, without explanation — and literally ran to my car, where, in the enclosure of a dim parking garage, I broke down violently, uncontrollably. So too now, in the analysis. Here, however, accompanied and with time, I could eventually narrate the breakdown which had already happened, more than half a century earlier, to that boy who was separated from his beloved nursemaid, Laude.

Mine is a small story: my parents crossed that glass partition with me, and contained the rupture. Laude was beloved but not my mother. And yet that green-tinged glass cut something, indelibly, into

my psyche that marks me still. Perhaps it is a screen memory, a condensation of the rippling complexity that the trauma of leaving Cuba has been for me and my family.

What then of the children who have no such buffers, whose parents are torn away, who have no bridge over the void left in the wake of the severing arm of the State? "Borders are sharpened more and more like the blade of a guillotine," writes the poet Patrick Chamoiseau: [\[1\]](#)

"Around them, those who come as humans toward other humans, whose only crime is to be human and call out to their brothers and sisters from the depths of a very human distress, find themselves faced with systems which no longer know how to recognize a human being."

The Trump administration began considering family separations as early as March 2017 [\[2\]](#). But Attorney General Jeff Sessions effectively initiated the strategy in May 2018 when he announced a "zero tolerance" policy of criminal prosecutions for those attempting to illegally cross the border (never mind that seeking asylum is not a crime). By June 9, more than 2,300 children had been separated from their parents. [\[3\]](#) The policy was part slap-dash bravado pandering to a hungry xenophobic base, part Machiavellian gambit to strong-arm Congress, but it was entirely lacking in human caring, blatantly cruel. There is no need in these pages to document the damage that such trauma can do to a mind in development. The public outcry was loud and swift. In June, a Quinnipiac poll showed two-thirds of the American voting public disagreed with the policy. [\[4\]](#) Yet again, we struggled to assimilate the barbarity of the Trumpian State. And lamented what had become of the nation. Already in December 2017, Senator Kamala Harris had posted to her Facebook feed what many thought: "It's moments like these we have to look in the mirror and ask, who are we as a country?"

Who indeed?

The immigrant, the "alien," the other, always troubles the supposedly intact identity of the "native." Look long enough, psychoanalysis tells us, and the mirror inevitably shows how foreign we are to ourselves, always reveals the stranger underlying the illusion of self-sameness.

It was only a matter of time, then, before a rash of articles appeared in the press about the long history of family separations in US policy. [\[5\]](#) The decimation of black families under slavery, when children could be sold, mere chattel, away from their parents, the State willfully deaf and blind to any bonds of kinship. Or the forced assimilation of Native American children, often forcibly taken from their families, after Congress passed the Civilization Fund Act in 1819, which attempted to "civilize" them according to founding Army officer Richard Pratt's formula: "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man." [\[6\]](#) Or again, during the so-called Mexican Repatriation of the 1930s, when, in the wake of the Great Depression, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, living in the US (and mostly citizens) were pressured to move "back" to Mexico, separating many families. [\[7\]](#) That is not to count the Japanese internment camps, which may not have systematically separated families but systematically incarcerated them, echoing now the fear of a foreign menace which must be segregated lest it infect [\[8\]](#). Or — what I have experienced more directly working in community mental health — the disproportionate removal of poor children of color from their homes by welfare agencies, undoubtedly working with the best intentions to protect but occasionally mired in the twisted legalism of a system shadowed by racial prejudice and cultural misunderstanding. [\[9\]](#)

In short, "we" have separated families, for political and economic expediency, for quite some time.

Less aberration, and more the mushrooming strange fruit of a troubling and dissociated history (like so much that has emanated from this troubled and deeply troubling administration over the past 20 months), family separation is actually nothing new.

Let's consider this from the vantage of a social psychoanalysis. By this I mean not only a renewed strain of psychoanalysis that refuses to consider a person without consideration of her social context [10], but also one that can read in a person's private suffering the symptoms of social malaise. It is a psychoanalysis that seats the unconscious not only in the repressed organismal life of the subject but just as powerfully in the structural histories to which that individual is literally subject, in "pathologies of power." [11] This means going beyond an appraisal of the damage done — perhaps for generations to come — to families separated at the border, to the thornier question of what it means for the American collective that we have repeatedly separated families in our history.

Blood, the saying goes, is thicker than water. But the ties of kinship are franked by the State (consider inheritance, miscegenation, gay marriage). If the border materially demarcates the domain of us as a people, the State's recognition of what constitutes an inviolable family tie defines a different kind of frontier. The systematic separation of families as a matter of policy has not been indiscriminate, the guillotine of the border has not fallen on just any kind of family. Can it be merely coincidence that this painful history is the history of black slave families, of Native American, Mexican and Asian families? [12] The rallying white supremacist cry of "blood and soil" honors only a particular consanguinity, and vilifies the rest. Isn't the pernicious phantasm haunting the American unconscious a mythology of familial whiteness? One that obscures and seeks to erase the strains of an American history that has actually been rooted, and from its earliest beginnings, in a profound multiculturalism, that from its very origins has always been polyglot and interpenetrated by miscegenation, that was sprung from immigrants, and was always, since it was ever first the United States of America, soaked in the blood of those who were not white? To claim this history is to honor a different genealogy than the mythological whiteness of a Leave-It-To-Beaver America.

Seen from this perspective, the recent separations at the border are not just a horror for those families directly affected, they are a return of our dissociated past. They are a symptom — that painful messenger — of how we have deemed some family ties irrelevant and inconsequential, and, precisely on this basis, drawn a bright border around those ties we consider inviolable, sacred, and inalienable in a collective fantasy of the mythological American family. This is what social psychoanalysis helps us see: the history behind the current symptom and how dissociation from that history serves to sustain a particular collective identity. It helps us widen the lens, but with this broader perspective comes enormous complexity and a host of very difficult questions. We must consider our relationship to collective identity and to what of it we carry within ourselves, usually not very consciously: what is the depth and what are the limits of responsibility for coming to consciousness and for bearing the burden of a collective inheritance? Psychoanalysis will not allow us to rest on idealization or reactionary vilification. We may aspire to a harmonious global family, but psychoanalysis compels us think about the complexity of what happens at any boundary, including those organized by the State, as the anxious zone of delimitation between inside and out. When I hear the cries of the child separated at the border, it is social psychoanalytic thinking that magnifies my disturbance. Not only because of my identifications with that child or my understanding of trauma and its pernicious effects, or because of a cultivated sense of empathy born of daily labor in this practice, but also because it does not allow me to simply lay this indefensible practice at the feet of the brute currently in office.

Social psychoanalysis impels us to act, as many psychoanalysts have: learning how to do asylum evaluations, voicing professional protest about the psychological damage of family separations, working with the families and communities affected. But, like traditional psychoanalysis, it urges us to speak for what is not acknowledged or known, to open up the difficulties of history, to push towards

the horizon of questioning and investigation over the rigidity of knowing with vehement certainty. As horrible as the recent family separations have been (and continue to be: many children have yet to be reunited with their families), we must look deeper than the draconian machinations of the current administration, to histories we might rather forget.

[1] Chamoiseau, P. (2018). *Migrant Brothers: A Poet's Declaration of Human Dignity*. Yale University Press, p. xiv.

[2] Madrigal, A.C., June 19, 2018. "The Making of an Online Moral Crisis.: *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/06/the-making-of-a-moral-problem/563114/><https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/06/the-making-of-a-moral-problem/563114/>

[3] Kim, S. M. June 19, 2018. "7 questions about the family-separation policy, answered." *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/q-and-a-understanding-the-controversy-over-separating-families-at-the-border/2018/06/19/8a61664a-73fb-11e8-be2f-d40578877b7b_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.822ccc84001b

[4] June 18, 2018 - Stop Taking The Kids, 66 Percent Of U.S. Voters Say, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds. <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2550>

[5] See for example: Contreras, R., June 20, 2018. "Other times in history when the U.S. separated families." *Chicago Tribune*. <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-family-separation-history-20180620-story.html> ; White, B. S., June 25, 2018. "Our Long History of Family Separation." The Aspen Institute. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/our-long-history-of-family-separation/> ; Kaur, H., June 24, 2018. "Actually, the US has a long history of separating families. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/24/us/us-long-history-of-separating-families-trnd/index.html>

[6] Bear, C., May 12, 2008. "American Indian Boarding Schools Haunt Many." NPR. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16516865>

[7] Gross, T., September 10, 2015. "America's Forgotten History Of Mexican-American 'Repatriation': Interview with Francisco Balderrama." Fresh Air. <https://www.npr.org/2015/09/10/439114563/americas-forgotten-history-of-mexican-american-repatriation>

[8] Takei, G., June 19, 2018. "'At Least During the Internment ...' Are Words I Thought I'd Never Utter." *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/19/at-least-during-the-internment-are-words-i-thought-id-never-utter-family-separation-children-border/>

[9] Racial Disproportionality and Disparity in Child Welfare. November 2016. Child Welfare Information Gateway. https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/racial_disproportionality.pdf

[10] Layton L. (2006). Attacks on Linking. In: Layton L, Hollander NC, Gutwill S, editors. *Psychoanalysis, Class and Politics: Encounters in the Clinical Setting*. New York: Routledge.

[11] Farmer, P. (2004). *Pathologies of Power*. Berkeley: Univ of California Press.

[12] Even immigration laws explicitly privileging family ties have a more complicated history as they were used to establish the quota system which restricted or prohibited immigration by many people of color. See Wolgin, P. E., February 12, 2018. "Family Reunification Is the Bedrock of U.S. Immigration Policy," Center for American Progress.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/news/2018/02/12/446402/family-reunification-bedrock-u-s-immigration-policy/>