

Why Do We Hate Immigrants?

Whether we are indigenous to this land, whether we came in the hull of a slave ship or landed at Ellis Island, our government's brutal response to the migrant crisis is an affront to us all.

By Kevin Powell
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Catalina Saenz wipes tears from her face as she visits a makeshift memorial near the scene of the mass shooting in El Paso, Texas. (AP Photo / John Locher)

- I am not an immigrant. Nor am I the child or grandchild or great or great-great grandchild of immigrants either, although my people did travel to America aboard cruel and merciless ships, across a death-inducing ocean, from a land far away, with a language other than English as their mother tongue. My ancestors were brought to this continent as slaves, which means I am the product of ex-slaves, the unheralded bodies that worked for free for two-and-a-half centuries and built the economic foundation of these United States. We were captured and kidnapped from our native land. We were chained and detained in the hulls of those ships, then chained and detained once more after we made it to the borders of what has become this nation, be it via New York City, or Charleston, South Carolina, or New Orleans, or some other port of entry.
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- 10 Across the span of the American journey we, black folks, have known the total absence of freedom, what it feels like to be held against our will. We have known starvation and premature

deaths. We have known families being torn asunder and children left parentless. We have known torture and abuse and trauma handed from generation to generation like a permanently stained and unwanted birthright. We have known forced movement—from plantation to plantation; from
15 slave master to slave master. We as a people have survived from slavery to Reconstruction, from Reconstruction to the horrors of segregation and Jim Crow; from random accusations against our beings to the strange-fruit hangings of our bodies. We have had our own internal immigration within the borders of America—“the Great Migration”—from the South to the North, from the South to the Midwest and West Coast. We have come and gone, searching high and low for
20 freedom, searching high and low for equality, searching high and low for justice. Thus, except for indigenous people, and given what we have endured from the first Africans who were brought to Jamestown in 1619 until now, with all the shape-shifting we have had to do simply to be, if anyone knows and understands America at its raw and naked core, in the depths of its belly and soul, it is black folks.



A migrant sits with his children as they wait to hear if their number is called to apply for asylum in the United States, at the border on January 25, 2019, in Tijuana, Mexico. (AP Photo / Gregory Bull)

25 Because, quite honestly, America would not have made any progress, nor would we have been in a position to welcome the Italians, the Jews, the Irish, and so many other immigrants, if it had not been for the free or cheap labor and the sacrificed lives of blacks, during slavery, during segregation. We built the melting pot; our fingerprints are all over that symbol of democracy and diversity. Through the many slings and arrows we’ve withstood in the United States, we have
30 made opportunity possible for others, while we still stand, at least partially, on the outside looking in—like those nameless migrant faces in those detention centers as you read this.

So you can guess how shocked and demoralized I feel in the aftermath of the mass shooting in El Paso, Texas, by a young white man who, just moments before he unleashed death and violence, posted a hate-filled, anti-immigrant manifesto that speaks of a “Hispanic invasion of Texas.” You can guess what it looks like to my eyes when I see the heartrending images of immigrant children and their families being held in detention centers. You can guess what it sounds like to my ears when I hear people—even some of our politicians—describe these immigrants in the most animalistic and anti-human ways. And you can guess what it feels like inside my heart to hear of the abuse, the neglect, and the pain we are inflicting on those we do not want inside of America, just because they are different from us in some way.

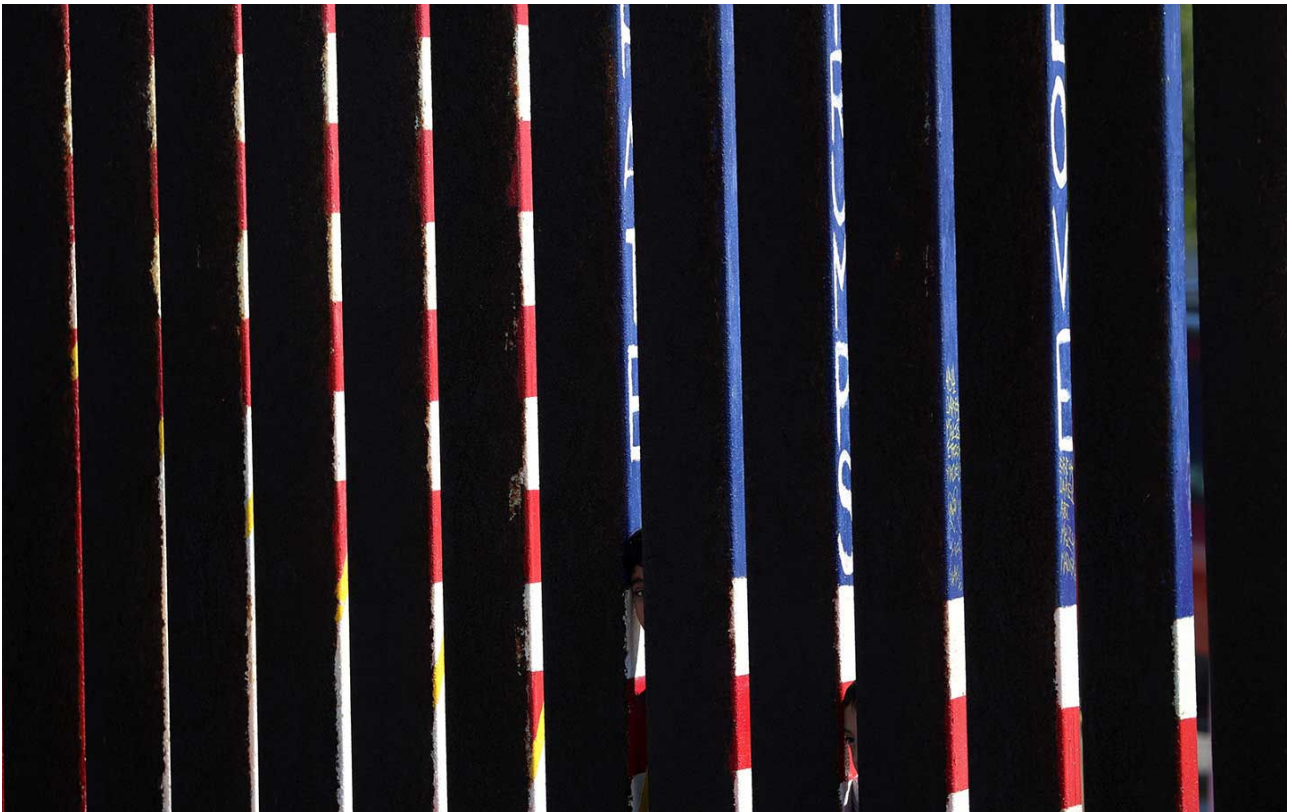
We lose when we exclude people, when we fear and push away and detain people, because of who they are. We lose when we support racism with our words and with our deeds, and we support racism when we say or do nothing at all. As a black person, I cannot imagine being silent in the face of such violence and blatant bigotry and injustice. If they are the victims of a mass shooting, then I am the victim of a mass shooting. If they are being detained, then I am being detained. If they are being denied proper food and medical attention, then I am being denied proper food and medical attention. If they are facing ICE¹ raids at their jobs and in their communities, then I am cowering in fear of the authorities’ sharp knock on my door. If they are lying and sleeping in their own vomit and feces in freezing-cold detention centers, then I am transported back to the hulls of those slave ships where my ancestors were forced to be and lie and sleep in their vomit and feces too.

America is not merely a nation of immigrants—each time we say so we are disrespecting and ignoring the histories of both Native Americans and black folks on this land. What America is, to me, is a nation that is, thankfully, not what it once was, but still not the nation we *can* be, either. America is a place where different people from different groups battle daily to forge a space where we can be all of who we are, no matter who we are, even as some try to strike us down because of our identities. Because, tragically, some of us do not see diversity and inclusion as love, as a blessing, as a way to learn and a way to teach, but instead as something to fear and loathe, something to crush and put away. Because, tragically, as we black folks know so well, every single time we seem to take a step forward, there are mean-spirited and reactionary forces that will take us back over and over again, to the hate and fear and division and violence that has been with us from the very beginning.

No wall and no detention center can ever stop the massive flow of human beings as they seek out what they need and want for themselves and for their children—that want and that need are as old as humankind itself. As I witness these caravans of 21st-century immigrants walking, driving, crawling, swimming toward a better life in America—so they hope and pray—how could I not think of, say, my mother and two of her sisters cramming their lives into three tiny suitcases in their home state of South Carolina, climbing the steps of a Greyhound bus, and heading to a strange new world in the North, in search of freedom and in search of themselves? I am here, alive, college-educated, a writer, a doer, a dreamer, because my ma dared to dream for me, even when there were those who did not want her around, who tried to detain and contain her with

¹ ICE: Immigration and Customs Enforcement

their hate and fear and ignorance, who told her she was nothing and that her child, her son, would be nothing as well.



Children peek through the border wall fence along the US-Mexico border wall at Border Field State Park in San Diego. (Reuters / Mike Blake)

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There is no other way to say this: We are living through a new and ugly chapter in the history of racism in the country. Because in denying freedom and possibilities to these immigrants, these refugees and asylum seekers, we are also denying it to ourselves. As has always been true in the long history of oppression and liberation in this country, a history lived by my parents and grandparents and great grandparents and great-great grandparents, a history continued by us today: If they are not truly free, then neither are we.

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