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Angels of Denial: White Injury, Racial Transposition, and the U.S. Politics of Family Separation

Jamie Longazel¹

Abstract

This paper critically analyzes a June 2018 Donald Trump administration press conference, carried out in response to public outcry over U.S. policies designed to separate migrant children from their parents. The press conference featured a large group of so-called “angel parents” – the parents of children who were killed by undocumented immigrants – who argued that because they are permanently separated from their children, they have it worse than parents who had their children taken away only temporarily by the U.S. government. Despite the speakers honoring a diverse group of victims, qualitative analysis of their speeches reveals a rhetoric that coincides with the ideology of white injury (Cacho, 2000). I account for this using the concept of racial transposition (HoSang & Lowndes, 2020), which suggests that such multiculturalism actually helps right-wing movements create a façade of racial innocence as they further deny state violence, criminalize migrants, and justify tough-on-migration policies.

Keywords: Family separation; angel families; Donald Trump; far-right; multiculturalism

Introduction

On May 7, 2018, the Donald Trump Administration announced it would begin intentionally separating migrant children from their unauthorized parents. Under this “zero tolerance” policy, parents would be prosecuted and detained / deported while their children were placed in Department of Homeland Security (DHS) custody. In the blunt words of U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, “If you are smuggling a child, then we will prosecute you and that child will be separated from you as required by law... If you don’t like that, then don’t smuggle children over our border” (Sessions, 2018). DHS reports suggest that from early May to mid-June of that year, the government took 2,342 children from their parents’ custody after they crossed the U.S.-Mexico border (see, e.g., Domonoske 2018). Many of these children remained separated from their parents for months – if not years – held captive in notoriously harsh conditions (e.g., Hallett & Longazel, 2021). As of October 2020 – 2.5 years later – 545 of the kidnapped children reportedly remained separated from their families (Ainsley & Soboroff, 2020), while those who have been reunited are suffering deleterious consequences (Alvarez, 2019; Levin, 2021). In short, the Trump administration’s family separation policy is without question an act of state violence (compare Starr & Brilmayer, 2003).

By mid-June of 2018, public outcry over the family separation policy was robust. Disturbing photographs,² reports that children were being held in cages, and sounds of youth crying for

¹ Jamie Longazel, John Jay College, City University of New York. E-mail: jlongazel@jjay.cuny.edu.

² Perhaps most memorable was a widely-circulated photograph of a two-year-old Honduran girl in tears as her mother is handcuffed by what appears to be an ICE agent (e.g., Kirby, 2018).



their mothers (see, e.g., Kelly, 2018) prompted the collective uproar. Media coverage of the issue spiked,³ tens of thousands of people posted on Twitter using the hashtag #KeepFamiliesTogether, and the largest Facebook fundraiser in history (at the time) was dedicated to family reunification (French, 2018). Public opinion polls showed about two-thirds of the American public opposed the family separation policy. Even among Republicans, more disapproved than approved (O’Neil 2018).

While family separation,⁴ deportation, and other forms of state violence had been ongoing in the United States, it seems the visibility of these attacks on migrant children and their caregivers brought the conversation across a sympathy threshold. As scholars have noted, mainstream media discourse often dehumanizes migrants, presenting them as threatening caricatures, as criminals (e.g., Chavez, 2001, 2008; Caviedes, 2018), or describing them using water metaphors (e.g., “flooding across the border”) (Santa Ana, 2002). Here, however, there was a growing realization, reflected in the media, that these policies were harming real people – innocent children at that (compare Best, 1993).

But rather than trying to appeal to conventional morality in response to public condemnation,⁵ the Trump administration acted with *moral indifference* (Cohen, 2001).⁶ On June 22, they hosted a press conference in the South Court Auditorium of the White House, honoring those who refer to themselves as “angel parents” – the parents of people who were killed by undocumented immigrants. At the event, fourteen mothers and fathers lined up behind a podium, most holding an enlarged photograph of their deceased loved one. Nine of the angel parents were given about a minute each to speak, and together they delivered a clear, consistent message that their losses are *more severe* than those parents who were separated from their children at the border.

What’s notable about this public relations event, and what I focus on in this paper, is how the Trump administration enlisted a multicultural group of grieving parents to fend off critics. More than half of the parents spoke about victims who were immigrants and/or people of color. Despite this, their rhetoric was highly racialized, depicting a clear ‘us’ and ‘them’ and aligning with what Lisa Marie Cacho (2000) has called the *ideology of white injury*. In denying state violence and justifying hardline enforcement, they used racial tropes to criticize the parenting of separated caregivers, to accuse undocumented immigrants of receiving special treatment, and to reinforce a faulty narrative which suggests undocumented immigrants are crime-prone. To account for this, I use Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph E. Lowndes’s (2019) concept of *racial transposition* – the shifting of racial meaning from one group or context to another. From this perspective, the victims’ identities do not rule out the possibility of nativist discourse; rather, it bolsters it, creating a façade of racial innocence and taking advantage of the symbolism associated with the subaltern figure.

³ This is according to a Google Trends analysis.

⁴ The Trump administration had been running a pilot program that separated families at the border, as far back as 2017 (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2020).

⁵ In one of the few instances of his presidency when he caved to public pressure, Trump did sign an executive order directing DHS to halt the practice of separating families on June 20, 2018. However, even then he directed blame for the policy elsewhere (see, e.g., Southern Poverty Law Center, 2020).

⁶ According to Stanley Cohen (2001), moral indifference is one of many ways in which human suffering is denied. Interestingly, just a few days before the press conference, on June 17, Secretary of Homeland Security literally denied that children were being separated from their parents (see Southern Poverty Law Center, 2020).



Although there has been some research on migrant family separation in the United States (e.g., Wallace and Zepeda-Millán, 2020), no one (to my knowledge) has studied the rhetoric / symbolic politics surrounding it. Yet this is important because the angel families have been something of a right-wing political force in the United States, sharing with President Trump what Kenneth P. Vogel and Katie Rogers (2018) of the *New York Times* call “a mutually beneficial bond.” Trump appeared publicly with angel parents on more than a dozen occasions (Vogel & Rogers, 2018).⁷ The angel families have two higher profile organizations, Advocates for Victims of Illegal Alien Crime (AVIAC) and the Remembrance Project (which the Southern Poverty Law Center designates as a hate group). Through these groups, they have successfully lobbied the Trump administration to establish the Victims of Immigration Crime Engagement (VOICE) office – whose mission is to “support victims of crimes committed by criminal aliens.” Thanks to their pressure, the Trump administration also designated October 30, 2020 the National Day of Remembrance for Americans Killed by Illegal Aliens.

More broadly, I see this paper as contributing to research racialized criminalization / demonization in the realm of migration. Specifically, I bring this particular form of othering to bear on conversations about how the forged relationship between migration and crime is rooted in racism (e.g., Provine & Doty, 2011; Longazel, 2013; Longazel, 2016) and not reality (e.g., Martinez & Lee, 2000; Adelman et al., 2018; Feldmeyer, 2018). Similarly, I engage peripherally with literature on violent enforcement patterns by noting the importance of paying attention to the performative aspects of enforcement which take place behind the scenes (compare Amelina and Horvath, 2020). Here we see how various representations and discourses are strategically deployed from the halls of power in order to justify hardline migration enforcement.

I want to caution against seeing this as simply a phenomenon of the Trump administration. Far-right political movements have ascended across the globe in recent years, with leaders in many cases borrowing tactics from their international peers (e.g., Koulish and van der Woude, 2020). And in the U.S. specifically, selective multicultural incorporation has been part of the right-wing project well before Trump came along (see, e.g., Bolick 1990). Thus, I use this paper to fire off a flare, alerting migration scholars to be on the lookout for such symbolic politics especially as racial formations begin to shift and far-right movements gain traction.

The ideology of white injury and racial transposition

What Lisa Marie Cacho (2000; see also 2012, 2014) calls the *ideology of white injury* is a longstanding method of concealing and sustaining the racial hierarchy, functions by flipping the script on racial discourse. In the context of migration politics, the ideology of white injury depicts white middle-class citizens as victims of all sorts of wrongdoings allegedly committed by migrants. At the same time, it renders “illegible” (Cacho, 2012: 8) any pain and suffering migrant groups feel as a result of actual imperialism and systemic racism. It deploys a colorblind rhetoric which insists that race is not a factor, while also evoking a coded narrative wherein a highly racialized ‘us’ is threatened by an equally racialized ‘them’ (compare Longazel,

⁷ Maryann Mendoza was forthright about the close relationship the angel families have with the Trump administration. “If anybody has been a victim of illegal alien crime,” she said, “contact us because we have close connections with Barbara Gonzalez at ICE and John Feere. We have connections at the Department of Homeland Security that we are trying to get people the help that they need, and sent in the right direction.”

2016). The potential for white victimization is thus elevated and expanded while actual victims of racial violence are vilified. In this context, the efforts of law enforcement and those who espouse tough-on-migration policies are cast as heroic, receiving high praise for their efforts to ‘protect the public’ and quell the so-called migrant threat.

But how do we understand the ideology of white injury when it is used by a multi-racial/ethnic group of grieving parents? Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph E. Lowndes’s (2019) concept of *racial transposition* is instructive in this regard. By racial transposition, they mean “a process through which the meaning, valence, and significance of race can be transferred from one context, group, or setting to another” (12). For instance, the authors use the example of public employee unions to show how tropes initially established to demean and depict poor Blacks as drains on the welfare state have been recycled and used to fuel attacks on a more diverse class of public sector workers.⁸ In the case at hand, the transposition happens when a discourse that originally focused on migrants harming white citizens gets redeployed, this time with a focus on a diverse set of victims. But as I’ll show, even though the target population (Schneider and Ingram, 1993) changes, the consequences remain the same: clear racialized lines are drawn which legitimize “the containment, exploitation, and surveillance of communities of color” (Cacho, 2000: 415).

Victims of color are notably evoked in a context like this “*on the condition*” (Cloud 1996: 116) that their evocation does not threaten white supremacy (Bell, 1993). So long as these conditions are met, HoSang and Lowndes argue that multiculturalism enhances the power of this narrative.⁹ The inclusion of diverse populations in far-right movements, they write, “allows a certain racial innocence – a plausible deniability of open racism” and “it is often the powerful symbolism of subaltern figures that gives the far right some of its constitutive force” (104).

“This is permanent separation”

The backdrop for the press conference was a navy blue wall with the phrases “PROTECT OUR COMMUNITIES” and “SECURE OUR BORDERS” scattered about. In each phrase, the word ‘our’ was highlighted in red. The room contained roughly 200 people, most of whom appeared to be law enforcement agents (many clad in cowboy hats), administration officials, and press. President Trump kicked off the event with remarks that set the tone. He complained about the media, exaggerated undocumented immigrant criminality, and praised law enforcement for their efforts. The event then featured a diverse group of nine speakers, some of whom are ranking members of AVIAC and some of whom had made appearances in the media and with the president in the past. Five out of the nine victims mentioned were either people of color, the children of immigrants, or both. Agnes Gibboney is a formerly stateless refugee from Hungary whose son was murdered; Sabine Durden – an immigrant

⁸ They importantly note that “The transposition of particular characteristics from one group to another does not transform group-based structures of racial power and domination.” (14)

⁹ They write: “Reaching back to the nation’s founding, it is clear that the form of white supremacy peculiar to the United States is oriented not simply toward commitments to racial purity and stock but also toward a vision of a multiracial nation premised on racial hierarchy and white domination. This vision, paradoxically, depends on the visibility and participation of non-white racialized subjects as it advances forms of authoritarianism and exclusion that facilitate racist attacks on specific groups today: Muslims, undocumented immigrants, Black Lives Matter activists, and the Black and brown poor more generally” (104).



from Germany – lost her son, a Black police officer; Ray Tranchant, who noted being the son of an Irish immigrant, lost a Hispanic daughter; a dark-skinned Latino man named Juan Piña spoke about the 1990 murder of his daughter, Christy (notably, he appeared to be the only speaker of color); and rather than focusing on his own story, Don Rosenberg – the President of AVIAC – recounted the case of a Latina victim of domestic violence and homicide.

Durden’s comments align with the concepts of white injury and racial transposition quite well. When it was her turn to speak, she spoke about her son Dominic, who a drunk driver killed in 2012. She began by saying...

I’m one of your legal immigrants. I came the right way. I paid lots of money. It took me five years to become a citizen, a proud citizen. And I didn’t drag my son – he named himself “German Chocolate”; he was born in Germany – I didn’t drag him over borders, through deserts. I didn’t place him in harm’s way.

Notice how Durden uses the classic “I came the right way” motif to separate herself as a ‘good’ / deserving immigrant from those ‘bad’ / undeserving migrants who entered the country illegally. She does this in a way that directly criticizes undocumented parents who were separated from their children. Her words imply that these parents are guilty of wrongdoing – specifically, of *dragging* their children over borders and across deserts and placing them in harm’s way. The victimization of the separated parents is never acknowledged. Instead, Durden taps into a long-held racialized and gendered stereotype of Latina mothers as “unfit” (see, e.g., Ayón et al., 2018; Rosenthal & Lobel, 2020) while drawing clear racialized distinctions.

Note also Durden’s conscious placement of her son’s identity. You can see how this detail is used not to express solidarity with other victims of color but seemingly to give her words more credence vis-à-vis the separated parents. It is as if to say: she too is an immigrant who parents a child of color, only she did it ‘correctly.’¹⁰ Ray Tranchant’s commentary follows a similar pattern. Observe how he blames the parents, outright denies the existence of state violence, and insists that people like his Hispanic daughter – not separated families – should be the point of focus.

I had two little girls, Tessa and Kelsey, and they had a bigger brother, Dylan. And I raised them – and their mother and her mom is Hispanic, and so Tessa was Hispanic. And they lived near the border, as well. Tessa was 16; she was a dreamer, and so was her friend Allie Kunhardt... Those are the dreamers that the United States should focus on. I can’t make an opinion about the young people that are here illegally because their parents brought them. But I can guarantee you the government had nothing to do with that. And everybody wants to blame, but the parents of those children are to blame.

¹⁰ Four out of the five parents whose deceased children were immigrants or people of color mentioned their status and/or their early struggles explicitly. The only one who didn’t was Juan Piña, whose ethnicity is more visibly evident.

Speakers' widespread use of the phrase 'permanent separation' and a marked emphasis on the permanence of death¹¹ had the same effect: undermining the parents who had their children taken and allowing the angel parents to claim the mantle of victimhood for themselves. Angel mom Michelle Root, for instance, said "Again, my separation is permanent. Sarah is never coming home. I never get to take a selfie with her again." According to a logic that denies undocumented parents' pain and constructs them as undeserving, the message seems to be that 'temporarily' separated families have no right to complain. As Laura Wilkerson put it, "We weren't *lucky enough* to be separated for 5 days or 10 days. We're separated *permanently*" (emphasis added). That a 5 or 10-day forceful separation from a child is considered luck speaks volumes about the treatment they are suggesting these parents deserve.

Another method of denial in the data is the notion that immigrants and people of color are the recipients of 'special' as opposed to equal treatment (e.g., Longazel, 2014). Some evoked the media attention separated parents were receiving as unfair, complaining, as Steve Ronnebeck did, that "you don't hear [our] stories, and some of our media won't talk to you about it." Durden went on to draw more contrasts between her own family and undocumented immigrants, except this time implying that the law and legal institutions – because they are supposedly favorable toward undocumented folks – never mind the realities of legal violence against migrants (e.g., Menjivár & Abrego, 2012) – are putting people like her at a disadvantage. From her perspective, she did everything right yet still fell victim to unchecked undocumented immigrant criminality while such 'villains' received protection:

I protected my child from harm, but I couldn't do that on July 12, 2012. He was 30 years old. I couldn't protect him because an illegal alien from Guatemala, with two felonies, one deportation, two DUIs – he was protected. Riverside, California: sanctuary. The judge, the DA, they knew who he was. They gave him probation after his second DUI. Five weeks later, he killed my child.

Durden's words also evidence the hyperbolic way in which the angel parents spoke about undocumented immigrant criminality. In reading that passage you get the sense that the problem is too big and too overwhelming to be contained. "The public needs to know, and they deserve to know that this could happen to each one of you at any given second," she continued. Ronnebeck and others similarly inflated the size of the problem: "This isn't a problem that's going away. It's getting bigger." There was not a sense that some undocumented people offend, some don't. Quite the contrary: their speeches clearly established an association between documentation status and criminality. Take Maryann Mendoza's remarks:

As you know, they could fill this stage up every day for the next five months of victims of illegal alien crime, and it would just keep going. Unfortunately, we are members of a club of our children, our loved ones who've been killed by illegal aliens, but there's hundreds of thousands of victims every year who are affected by illegal

¹¹ "[I]f that wasn't enough to deal with," Durden said, "this is my only child. I have no family. That's it." Others used similarly stark imagery of death to make this point. Durden pointed to a locket containing her son's ashes that she wears on a necklace. "I brought my son," she said. "This is what I have left – his ashes. I wear his ashes in a locket. This is how I get to hug my son." Ronnebeck similarly noted: "This is permanent separation. For his birthday, I go to his grave. For Christmas – we set up a Christmas tree on Grant's grave."



alien crime — rape, assault, identity theft. These are things that go unreported, unchecked. You know, if the public would go to IllegalAlienCrimeReport.com and see the magnitude of crimes being committed against your fellow Americans by illegal aliens allowed to stay in this country, you will be sickened.

Nearly every speaker began by sharing the details of their children's deaths, some in graphic detail (e.g., "the neighborhood thought a bomb went off"; "she was kidnapped, strangled, stabbed, raped, and sodomized"; "he was brutally tortured, strangled over and over. He was set on fire after death"). While of course incredibly tragic and indeed grotesque, when paired with the ideology of white injury, such pronouncements have implications beyond these individual incidents. I would argue that they do the work of enhancing the alleged monstrosity of potential perpetrators and imply a certain dangerousness among people who are undocumented more generally. They also work to further hide – or, to remain "invincibly ignorant" of (Feagin, 2010: 147) – state violence by further centering the experience of the angel families. Even if it comes into view, the family separation policy looks insignificant by comparison to these brutal murders and gory accidents caused by what's depicted as unfathomable and widespread dangerousness.

This is where the manufactured heroism comes in. The angel parents offered a full embrace of the Trump administration and law enforcement agents for their work in quelling this so-called threat. Every participant thanked the president, vice president, and/or law enforcement, indicating a special affinity with them. "You guys know the permanent separation," Wilkerson said. "Thank you for fighting this fight with us," said Durden, adding "I'm still waiting for that shovel to help build the wall at the border." They described the famously egotistic president with words like "supporting," "caring," "committed," "loyal," and "integrity."¹² "He has been there from the beginning," Root declared, "He never left our side." What's significant here is that the people they are praising are the literal perpetrators of state violence. The separation of families at the border is thus not only denied but welcomed and praised.

Conclusion

Even as the U.S. transitions out of the Trump Era, there is reason to believe this line of political attack will remain. As HoSang and Lowndes (2019: 128) predict, "incorporations of multiculturalism on the far right will likely increase in the future, and grow in their sophistication and effectiveness." This extends beyond the realm of migration, too. In a 2020 Super Bowl advertisement, for example, Trump used the story of a Black woman named Alice Johnson who was released from a life sentence for a non-violent drug offense to tout his accomplishments on criminal justice reform. Reactions to the Movement for Black Lives in the U.S. have likewise lifted up Black folks who vocally support the police (Esposito and Romano, 2016). Thus while multiculturalism is often uncritically praised, these examples illustrate how it is also a tool that can be strategically deployed to justify hierarchy-reinforcing policies of state violence that produce incalculable social harm.

¹² Durden went so far as to say that the president saved her life: "I was going to end my life; I had no purpose. But President Trump, coming down that escalator that day and talking about illegal immigration, stopped me in my track."

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