

Remembering the 4th of July: Indigenous Musings on the American Way

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An indigenous challenge to the legacy of the United States' 4th of July commemoration: genocide, racism and ethnic cleansing are nothing to celebrate.

When I was invited to write something for Over de Muur for the 4th of July, my first thought was to my time at the University of Sussex between 2010 and 2015. Every year, I was invited to Thanksgiving Day meals in November that were hosted by the American Studies department, and every year I'd decline the invitation. To be sure, the problem was not the company: the scholarly community at the University of Sussex was (and is) exceptional and it was a lot of fun to study there. The problem is that I am an indigenous person and I don't celebrate Thanksgiving, the annual commemoration of the arrival of English settlers to the land presently known as Massachusetts. The English waged genocidal wars of extermination against indigenous people after their arrival; what is there to celebrate in that? For similar reasons, I don't celebrate the 4th of July.

I am a métis Creole from New Orleans, Louisiana. My ancestors were not a part of the rebellion against Britain that is commemorated on July 4th in remembrance of the United States' Declaration of Independence in 1776. The United States colonized the land of my ancestors after the Louisiana Purchase, a land transfer between Napoleon and Thomas Jefferson, announced to the American people on July 4, 1803. The Louisiana Purchase was a disastrous affair for my people. The Louisiana Purchase Treaty stipulated that all the inhabitants of the Louisiana Territory be incorporated into the US and extended the rights of citizenship. However, because the government of the United States did not recognize people

of African descent or indigenous people as human beings capable of citizenship, my people –who were of both African and Amerindian heritage—were marginalized from full participation in the political life of the United States. That social convention endured, de facto if not de jure, until the Civil Rights Act of 1964. I, born in 1972, am the first generation in my family that was born with a protected right to vote.



The 4th of July does not invoke images American patriots staring down redcoats in a fight against the tyranny of King George, for me. On the contrary, the 4th of July makes me think of American tyrants ethnically cleansing Chickasaw Indians from their land at the present-day site of Memphis, Tennessee on July 4, 1836. The removal of the Chickasaw from western Tennessee was a consequences of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, a fateful piece of legislations signed into law by President Andrew Jackson, which resulted in the atrocity that the Cherokee remember as “*nu na hi du na tlo hi lu l*,” (in English, “the place where they cried,” or, as it is more commonly known in English, “[The Trail of Tears](#)”). Roughly 3,000 Creek Indians, 2,500 Choctaw Indians and 6,000 Cherokee Indians died on the Trail of Tears.

Those are the things I think about on the 4th of July. There is nothing about any of that worth celebrating.

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