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Police Violence Against Native People

Indian Killers

by DAVID CORREIA

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In April 1974, three white high school students from Farmington, New Mexico murdered three Navajo men, Benjamin Benally, John Harvey, and David Ignacio. The teenagers bludgeoned the faces of the three men, and caved in their chests with basketball-sized rocks. They exploded firecrackers on their bodies and tried to burn off their genitalia. When authorities found the men, they were burned and beaten beyond recognition.

The brutal murders were nothing new in Farmington, where white high school students had been known to sever the fingers of inebriated Navajo men and display them proudly in their lockers at school. Murdering and torturing Navajo men and women in the border towns that surround the reservation even has its own name: Indian Rolling.

Protests erupted in the wake of the murders and lasted for months. One of the protest leaders, John Redhouse, explained Indian Rolling as a kind of blood sport:

“We didn’t see the murders as the act of three crazy kids. We saw it as a part of a whole racist picture. For years it has been almost a sport, a sort of sick, perverted tradition among Anglo youth of Farmington High School, to go into the Indian section of town and physically assault

and rob elderly and sometimes intoxicated Navajo men and women of whatever possession they had, for no apparent reason, other than that they were Indians.”

Indian Rolling is another word for lynching, and it’s a part of everyday life in Indian Country. According to a 2004 report by the US. Department of Justice, Native people experience violence at rates twice that of the rest of the population. The vast majority of this violence, more than 70%, is committed by persons of a different race. This is particularly true in New Mexico where, according to a 2003 study by the New Mexico Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Native people experience “acts of ethnic intimidation; threats of physical violence, assaults, and other potential hate crimes” as part of everyday life in border towns like Gallup, Farmington and Albuquerque.

Just this past summer, in the early morning hours of July 19, 2014, three Albuquerque teenagers wandered the back alleys of their neighborhood looking for homeless men to beat up. For months, in gangs of three and sometimes more, they hunted Native homeless men in a blood sport of violent beatings.

On that morning, they found three Navajo men sleeping on mattresses in the weeds of a vacant Westside lot. They gathered up broken cinder blocks and bashed in the heads of two of the men, Allison Gorman and Kee Thompson. A third man escaped. The boys finished Gorman and Thompson with metal poles. The survivor told police the boys had done this before and the boys—the oldest was 18 and the youngest 15-years old—admitted to police that they sought out Native, homeless men to victimize.

The only exceptional thing about these brutal murders is how common they are in New Mexico. In the towns that border New Mexico’s many Indian reservations, Native people are more likely to be poor, more likely to be incarcerated and more likely to experience violence than any other group. Since July of 2013, in Gallup alone, more than 170 Navajo citizens have died of unnatural deaths.

Albuquerque is just as violent for Native people. Of the estimated 25,000 Native people living in Albuquerque, 13 percent are chronically homeless like Gorman and Thompson. And many of them live in a part of town that Albuquerque police call the “War Zone.” According to the homeless Native people who live in that part of town, it’s a war waged by police against Native people.

A few blocks from the Albuquerque Indian Center — a place where homeless Native people can get a free lunch, connect with social services, and even pick up their mail — one man told me he’s constantly harassed and that it often comes at the hands of the police, not teenagers, “You know I’m an alcoholic and I drink on the streets, and [the police] picked me up and they brought me all the way down to the Bio Park and they beat me up, while I was in handcuffs, and then they unhandcuffed me and let me go.”

A few blocks away another man who told me, “I was walking on the street and [a cop] was following me. I’d go down the alley and he’d follow me. ‘Why don’t you go back to the Rez? You’re not welcome here in Albuquerque,’ he told me.”

A Jicarilla Apache man named Natani at a homeless tent camp had the same experience. “This is ours, our land,” he said. “And the cops they’ll say things like ‘Why do you want to bring the reservation our way?’”

When I asked how often harassment turns violent, he gave me an impatient look. “It’s usually,” he said. He showed me his wrists. They were covered in scabbed-over wounds. They were from handcuffs, he said. He pulled off his sunglasses. One eye was red and swollen. “They maced me in this eye. They walked up to me from behind and maced me like this,” he said, as he put his hand inches from my eyes to show me how it was done. “How common is this? Does this happen to everyone?” I asked. “Yes,” he said. “They handcuff you and then they beat you and then they take you to the hospital and say something like ‘We found him this way.’”

Days later near the Indian Center one woman told me a cop recently slammed her head to the pavement. “Then he just got back in his car and drove away.” Her friend described constant harassment. “They pull up and tell us to leave or they’ll arrest us for loitering,” she said. I asked where this happens. “Everywhere,” she said, “even when we’re waiting at the bus stop.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Native Americans make up 0.8 percent of the population, but comprise nearly two percent of the victims of police violence, a rate greater than any other racial group. And while police kill young black men more than any other group, they kill Native Americans at a higher rate.

Much of this violence happens in New Mexico, the state with the highest rate of police killing in the United States in 2014. And among New Mexico’s police departments, the Albuquerque Police Department has the highest rate of fatal police shootings, and one of the highest in the country. More than 20% of homicides in Albuquerque in 2014 were committed by police officers. Since 2010, Albuquerque cops have shot nearly 50 people, killing 28.

Navajo leaders sent the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission to Albuquerque in December to investigate last summer’s double murder. But commissioners were equally as interested in police violence. They scheduled a public hearing at the Albuquerque Indian Center on the treatment of Navajo citizens by Albuquerque law enforcement. Leonard Gorman, the executive director of the Commission, began the hearing by reminding people of the problem. “The role of the police is supposed to be to protect and serve, but our people tell us that we need to protect ourselves from the police.”

The first person to testify described constant harassment by Albuquerque police, “I was the Indian, so I was the bad guy, I guess. The police aren’t going to help us. They don’t care.”

Another person testified about police harassment of Native homeless people, saying “It happens whether we’re homeless or not. The danger is everywhere. But the homeless are just easier targets. Someone was shot to death on the streets recently and no one even heard about it. It wasn’t reported.”

According to a Department of Justice investigation, the Albuquerque Police Department routinely engages in unconstitutional policing and frequently employs unjustified fatal force. But

its scathing report from last April made no mention of violence against Native people. As recently as February of this year, Albuquerque Mayor Richard Berry, who refused to attend the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission hearing, told a local radio station that police violence in Albuquerque has nothing whatsoever to do with race.

Asked what explains the police violence and the indifference to Native suffering in New Mexico's border towns, Natani had a simple answer. "Prejudice," he said. "It's all the same from Farmington to Albuquerque. It goes a long way."