

## POLITICS

## The New York Times

# *The Painful Roots of Trump's 'Go Back' Comment*

By **Katie Rogers**

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WASHINGTON — Shelley Jackson was 7 years old the first time she heard it.

In the early 1970s, Ms. Jackson was among a group of 40 black children who were bused from one side of Los Angeles to integrate a majority-white school across town. One day, a playground squabble ended in a white classmate telling her to go back to Africa.

“That day was the first day that I became aware that maybe we weren’t supposed to be there,” Ms. Jackson, who was born in California, said in an interview, “or that wasn’t our place.”

On Sunday, President Trump used a version of a well-worn insult to tell four congresswomen to “go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came. Then come back and show us how it is done.” All but one are American-born, but all are women of color.

The president’s words reflected a love-it-or-leave-it sentiment that experts say has animated a sense of xenophobia since the dawn of the republic.

But fresh examples persist. Along with more than 4,800 other people who wrote to The New York Times to share their own experiences with the phrase in the hours since Mr. Trump wrote it on Twitter, Ms. Jackson said his words

served as a cutting reminder for scores of people who had encountered some version of that phrase throughout their lives, usually when they were speaking out in predominantly white spaces.

“It’s like having a cold glass of water thrown in your face,” Ms. Jackson said, adding that she feels Mr. Trump has emboldened a culture where “you get a pass now to just say the things you only thought before.”

Those who study language and rhetoric say the president’s “go back” comments — or, at least, the sentiment behind them — have roots beginning as far back as the 1600s, when dissidents were banished from American colonies for advocating total religious freedom. Later, a set of laws passed in 1798 allowed the deportation of noncitizens who were considered dangerous, were from hostile nations or had criticized the federal government.

Amos Kiewe, who studies rhetoric at Syracuse University, guessed that the president’s tweet was most likely meant to sow divisions in the Democratic Party — and perhaps kick-start another news cycle that reporters would breathlessly follow — but that it had the side effect of surfacing a phrase with a history that is particularly racially divisive.

“There has always been this xenophobia, fear of the other,” Mr. Kiewe said, “the foreigner, the person who looks different. It has hit different minorities for many decades.”

It was there in 1882, when the Chinese Exclusion Act sought to curb the number of Chinese workers and families entering the United States to find day-labor work, from building railroads to doing laundry. And it was there in the 1840s, when anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States led to the creation of a nativist political party designed to weed out foreign influence.

One of the prime examples of the “go back” sentiment has roots in the American Colonization Society, a white-led organization that sought to send freed slaves back to Africa. Fodei Batty, an assistant professor of political science at Quinnipiac University, wrote in a 2016 Washington Post analysis that some freed slaves went willingly because they were “disillusioned with the prospects of racial equality in America,” while others who wanted to stay argued that the effort to resettle slaves was a thinly veiled way to purge the United States of black people.

Descendants of those who stayed, Mr. Batty said in an interview, are now familiar with the sort of knee-jerk “go back” slur meant to immediately single out someone from a group where one trait — usually whiteness — is the default.

“You’re making this claim only to adopt a sense of place,” Mr. Batty said, “to put someone in a sense of place and give a sense of the other, that someone is different, without even having an understanding of the implications of those words.”

For African-Americans, the idea of returning to Africa, originally advocated by some whites as a better alternative than servitude, now persists as an angry slur. Outside a Trump rally in Cleveland in 2016, a man was filmed shouting “go back to Africa” at a black woman who was there to protest Mr. Trump.

“Y’all brought us here,” the woman retorted.

From the 4,800 responses The Times received, a common theme seemed to be encountering the slur when speaking up in white spaces, with the targets not limited to African-Americans. Samantha Edwards, a 47-year-old administrative assistant who grew up in Las Vegas, also wrote to The Times to share her story.

In the mid-1990s, she said she and her mother were chased out of a restaurant by two white men who screamed at them to “go back to Mexico.” She said she and her mother had been speaking together in English before the men chased them. Ms. Edwards, who was born in the United States but is of Mexican descent, said her parents avoided teaching her Spanish so she could avoid some of the discrimination they felt.

“It’s frustrating to have a leader of your own country talking like that,” Ms. Edwards said, referring to Mr. Trump. “He’s supposed to represent all of us and he’s not.”

Alanna Daniels, a 33-year-old business analyst from Waco, Tex., said that she often heard different variations of the taunt as a child, depending on which country people thought she was from. Ms. Daniels, who is mixed-race American with a white mother and a black father, said Mr. Trump’s tweet reflected back a version of a “kindergarten, exasperated” insult she has heard throughout her life.

She highlighted the irony that a president who has spent much of his campaign and presidency criticizing his country, often referring to it as a “laughingstock,” is turning that argument back on four congresswomen who have criticized it for other reasons.

“It was almost him saying that ‘this discourse is not for you,’” Ms. Daniels said. “It was almost saying ‘this isn’t yours, you have no skin in the game — literally.’”

On Monday, speaking at a Made in America event showcasing American-made sandals, hot sauce and motorcycles at the White House, Mr. Trump defended himself against assertions that what he said was racist, and that white nationalists were finding common ground with him.

“It doesn’t concern me because many people agree with me,” Mr. Trump said. “All I’m saying is that if they want to leave they can leave. It doesn’t say leave forever.”