

If the Coronavirus Is a Wildfire, Colonialism Has Fueled the Blaze

Scenes from a pandemic: 6

By [Taté Walker](#)

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(Photo: Jana Schmieding)

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The Nation* believes that helping readers stay informed about the impact of the coronavirus crisis is a form of public service. For that reason, this article, and all of our coronavirus coverage, is now free. Please [subscribe](#) to support our writers and staff, and stay healthy.



Something Is Happening *Here*

Indian Country—For Indigenous people there are two viruses.

One has been killing us for centuries. The novel coronavirus is biological and blameless, while colonialism is a man-made cocktail of historical and political toxicity. For the sake of metaphor, work with me here, because you cannot discuss the wildfire that is Covid-19 and the disparities it uncovers without recognizing how colonialism has fueled the blaze.

Something Is Happening Here is a collaboration between *The Nation* and Kopkind, a living memorial to radical journalist Andrew Kopkind, who from 1982–94 was the magazine's chief political writer and analyst.

Indian Country, the legal term for the 574 federally recognized sovereign tribal nations of the US mainland and Alaska, is disproportionately affected. Our communities tend to be in isolated rural areas with the [least Internet access](#). Big extended families often live together in small homes. Basic medical care and social services are limited and [always underfunded](#), if they exist at all. [Poverty](#) and [chronic diseases](#) are rampant. Some of our relatives have [no running water](#)—or [contaminated](#) water, the fallout of extractive industries—so washing hands can be a hardship.

This double virus explains why some headlines shout that Covid-19 could “wipe out” Natives. As of May 2, the [Navajo Nation](#) had 2,373 cases and 73 confirmed deaths, the highest infection rate after New York and New Jersey. With a total Native population of just over 5 million, Indian Country can't sustain numbers like that.

Many tribes have instituted strict measures to limit contagion.

The [Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe](#) of South Dakota, where I'm enrolled and many of my relatives live, enforces curfew, requires travel permits, and has checkpoints to control traffic in and out of its 1.4 million-acre reservation. Governor Kristi Noem—notorious for [snubbing tribes](#) before greenlighting pro-pipeline legislation—now

complains that the tribe did not first [consult the state](#), though it's indisputable that the safety measures work. Cheyenne River announced its first Covid-19 case on April 29, and our tribal chairman [credited the checkpoint system](#) for tracing the source of the virus to the victim's travel outside the reservation. Across the state, communities of color aren't faring as well. Noem disdained statewide collective protection as "[herd mentality](#)," and Sioux Falls became a virus hot spot, the [worst in the country from a single source](#). But that's just a coincidence, right?

People with a history of surviving state-led genocide are intimately aware of the power of a well-aimed germ—ask Natives about smallpox. Government inaction is thus not surprising, nor is its boundless opportunism. With public attention focused on the biological virus, the Interior Department decided to rescind the reservation designation of the [Mashpee Wampanoag](#) (of Thanksgiving fame) and strip them of their lands. When the tribe's chairman got the call from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, he'd expected the discussion to be about FEMA relief. A federal judge will hear the tribe's case May 7.

To say Indian Country distrusts the government is an understatement. We rely instead on culture and relationships—to one another, to our languages, to the land. The concept is foundational to Indigenous ways of being, passed down through ancestral knowledge—or what science calls epigenetics. Call it what you like; it has prepared Indigenous people to weather whatever the plural of apocalypse is. Surviving the very systems built without us in mind, or to destroy us, has forced us to expect and adapt to change.

This capacity for creative thrivance gives me hope, and examples of it shine through in today's bleak viral landscape—a reminder that medicine comes in many forms.

- [Social Distance Powwow](#) emerged on Facebook after stay-at-home orders shuttered two of Indian Country's largest powwows, Denver March and the Gathering of Nations. Now 170,000-strong and growing ([not without some pains](#)), this online space provides daily inspiration and prayer, and serves as a digital classroom and marketplace. This is especially meaningful to the artists, dancers, and revelers who depend on the powwow season both economically and culturally.
- Native storytellers—especially journalists at [Indian Country Today](#)—have been vital fonts of news, resources, and data in the crisis. They include educators helping our people reclaim Indigenous [food](#) and other [wellness knowledge](#).
- Artists showcase innovation via tradition. A Mniconjou Lakota television writer and educator in Los Angeles, [Jana Schmieding](#) learned to bead as a girl from her elders. She calls the bold face mask pictured above "NDN Quarantine Couture." For Schmieding and other artisans, beading is a near-ceremonial process; it steadies them in a chaotic world.

Proud as I am of our resiliency, I await the day Natives are no longer applauded for surviving. Living in a constant state of "what kind of colonizer bullshit will we have to endure now?" is not OK. To overcome this, we need [accomplices](#).

Now that privileged populations are experiencing the bitter taste of being confined to homes, blocked from earning money or going to worship, facing police action if you gather in groups, feeling the pressure of not having enough, and fearing contagion, maybe you'll support Indigenous and other marginalized communities and help us demand accountability. And when you learn, as we have always known, that the government is the problem, perhaps you'll go a step farther and join us in dismantling this colonial system and rebuilding communities of holistic well-being.

***Something Is Happening Here** is a collaboration between The Nation and [Kopkind](#), offering scenes from a pandemic—a series of dispatches from Kopkind's far-flung network of participants, advisers, guests, and friends. Edited by Nation contributor and Kopkind program director JoAnn Wypijewski, it will appear weekly on [thenation.com](#) and [kopkind.org](#).*

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