

# BUILDING ON TAINTED SOIL



A FILM BY  
ANNELEEN OPHOFF

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## SYNOPSIS

Augustine, Charmaine and Jim are some of the hundreds of thousands of Native American children placed in residential schools since the 1870s. The United States government funded over 360 boarding schools which systematically destroyed native cultures and communities. The philosophy of the US Indian Boarding School policy was brutal: “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.” Discover how three generations of boarding school survivors and their families are dealing with the fall-out of cultural erasure and reclaiming their culture.

## DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT

When I received the news that I would move to the Midwest of the USA for six months, I realised I had very little knowledge of what life was like in Missouri, the state where I would spend most of my time. Truth be told, my knowledge of the United States didn’t go far beyond current-day geopolitics and pop culture. For weeks, I’d run quick Google searches on whatever I could think of: the weather conditions, the rates of homophobic violence, which fashion styles are hip, whether Missouri had been affected by the opioid crisis, how rental car insurance works (again), good cycling routes...

One of my searches yielded very few results. Since I had worked extensively with indigenous communities in South America before, I wished to learn more about Native American nations in Missouri. To my surprise, little seemed readily available on the surface. Some websites even declared that barely any indigenous communities had lived in the region before its colonization, hence the lack of major Native American presence today. Fertile as the Missouri soil is, I found that hard to believe and my interest was piqued. Then, another mention caught my attention. Through Missouri ran a line called the Trail of Tears.

I remembered reading the basic facts on my way to the airport. In 1830, the United States Congress passed the Indian Removal Act. This law required native tribes to vacate their ancestral lands and relocate to reservations in Oklahoma, then simply called Indian Territory. And that same state, Oklahoma, would become the region with the highest number of boarding schools for Native American children. It would also be the state just next to the one where I’d live. It didn’t take long after my arrival for my first run-in with comments that showed deep-rooted prejudice against Native Americans. The history I had read, suddenly seemed to still be very current.

My birth country, Belgium, has its own colonial history. The state has been responsible for myriad atrocities during the colonization of what’s now called the Democratic Republic of Congo, and played a significant role in fueling intercommunal hatred in Rwanda which would ultimately result in the Rwandan genocide. As a child, I was taught very little about this part of our history in school. And without knowing where things once started, I found it hard to understand the current state of affairs.

In my documentary, I wanted to bridge that gap between past and present. So I spent countless hours on the highways between Missouri and Oklahoma and talked to several generations of boarding school survivors, to hear about how their experiences continue to influence how they view their culture, language, and traditions—and how young generations are reconnecting to their heritage.

It’s been an honor, and an immense learning opportunity to hear their stories. I hope they resonate with you, too.

Anneleen Ophoff

## DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Anneleen Ophoff (°1990, Belgium) is a cross media journalist with a passion for human rights. While she currently focuses on indigenous rights, land rights, and LGBTQ+ rights, she has previously produced award-winning stories on domestic terrorism and foreign fighters. She has worked for the Flemish-Belgian public broadcaster [VRT](#), VICE News, and the European media consortium [ENTR](#), and was the editor-in-chief of the independent magazine *Are We Europe*. When she was awarded a Fulbright Award in Journalism, she had the opportunity to spend six months at the School of Journalism of the University of Missouri. One of the stories she produced there looked at inequality during and after natural disasters and was awarded the Mark of Excellence by the US-based Society of Professional Journalists. The other, a TV documentary, examined the generational trauma caused by the US's boarding school policy for Native American children. She currently splits her time between Brussels, the Belgian capital, and Cambodia.

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Reporter	Anneleen Ophoff
Produced & Directed By	Anneleen Ophoff
Director of Photography	Anneleen Ophoff
Editor	Anneleen Ophoff
Additional Editing	Jochen Verstraete
Commissioning Editor	Udo Bremer
Sound Mix	David Baeck
Color Grading	Wim Heirman