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Missed by the Mass Media: The Houma, Pointe-au-Chien, and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

ROBERT KEITH COLLINS

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, estimates from state officials and tribal leaders suggested that 4,500 Native Americans lost everything in southeastern Louisiana during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.¹ Was there mass media coverage of the effect of these hurricanes on Native Americans in Louisiana? If so, then where was it? If not, then why wasn't there any? What can be learned from a post-Katrina and -Rita examination of the media coverage about the inabilities of mass media to illuminate the impact the hurricanes had on Native Americans in Louisiana? Although it seems to have been a common journalistic belief that because the majority populations in many Louisiana cities covered by the media reports were either predominantly African American or Caucasian—therefore, small Native American populations will have their concerns addressed in the coverage of these groups—the problem with this formulation is that it may lend the illusion to the American public that African Americans and Caucasians were the only populations affected.

The significance of this issue becomes clearer when one tries to understand why the Houma and Pointe-au-Chien nations—like many others—raised serious questions about the limited media coverage they received shortly after the hurricanes struck and about the coverage they still do not receive as they continue to struggle to return their lives to normal. The standard discourse in the social scientific literature surrounding this problem suggests that few people were aware that Native Americans still lived in Louisiana; many are not federally recognized nations but are state-recognized nations and therefore not “real” Indians, or their appearances make it hard to distinguish them from the larger African American and Caucasian populations.² This lack of attention on the Native Americans is consistent with the waning of nationwide

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media attention on Katrina and Rita victims. For those who take federal Indian policies, racial appearance, and mediocre mass media coverage as viable—holistic—conveyors of human conditions, these rationales may be sufficient; however, what remains elusive in all this discourse is how the excessive focus on African Americans and Caucasians overshadowed the effects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and Native Americans in Louisiana.

The need for coverage and discussion of the experiences of Native Americans with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita has been made with great attention to detail and first-person experiences in local Louisiana newspapers, Native American-run newspapers (in print and online), and the *Democracy Now!* radio program. However, despite such efforts, little discussion has occurred in the mass media or academy regarding the experiences of Native American nations with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.³ Perhaps this is because reporters and academics alike have found that the investigation of the conditions of Native Americans requires a break from conventional practices of generating news from majority populations, assessing identity from skin color, and assessing who is really Native American strictly from legal federal definitions of being Native American (for example, blood quantum and enrollment in a federally recognized tribe), and asking the people—without prejudice—how they were affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and whether they still struggle to return their lives to normal. Inspired by the lack of mass media attention given to Native Americans in Louisiana who were affected by the hurricanes, this article is an attempt to illuminate the preliminary findings I made while researching this issue. The findings presented here are part of a newly established comparative study of the relationships between mass media coverage and Native American and African American concerns. The focus will be on the narrative discourse given by Houma and Pointe-au-Chien tribal leaders, so that the study of this relationship is more amenable to ethnographic description and future investigation of the experiences and concerns of tribal leaders from other Native American nations in Louisiana.⁴

SEEING NATIVE AMERICANS IN LOUISIANA

Louisiana is home to many Native Americans (both federally and nonfederally recognized) from around the United States; however, state-recognized groups, such as the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw of Louisiana's Lafourche and Terrebonne parishes, Choctaw-Apache, Clifton Choctaw, Four Winds Tribe Louisiana Cherokee Confederacy, Pointe-au-Chien Indians, and the United Houma Nation, and federally recognized tribes and nations, such as the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians, Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana, Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana, and Tunica-Biloxi Indian Tribe of Louisiana, comprise the descendants of Louisiana's original and diverse Native American population.⁵ Observing them in public or looking at the photos from their tribal Web sites, it is easy to note the Creole heritage that they also embody. Along with this Creole heritage, one cannot help but recognize the incredible variations in phenotype indelibly printed on their skins. These appearances seem not only to be common but also to be commonsense understandings for the people,

as they are testaments to the diversity of their histories and blended Native American, African, and/or Caucasian heritages.⁶ American race-making practice, however, usually tells us that this variation in skin color is not an indicator of “real” Native American heritage. Such stereotypical reductionism is relevant to understanding the practice of heritage negation that is still part of the color-conscious American custom of making race by ascription.⁷

Raymond Fogelson alluded to the implications of this practice in “Perspectives on Native American Identity.” He suggests that “identity struggles were more social than individual psychological phenomena. Identities are negotiated through interaction with another person or group.”⁸ Andrew Jolivet’s recent work, *Louisiana Creoles: Cultural Recovery and Mixed-Race Native American Identity*, engages—with Creole, Native American, and black-Indian voices—the impact that such negotiations can have by generating barriers to identity maintenance.⁹ Over the past ten years, pioneering work by an interdisciplinary cadre of scholars has grounded such discussions in a growing body of literature on Native Americans in Louisiana. Major themes in the literature comprise culture-specific discussion of the actual existence of Native Americans in the state and provide a comprehensive view of the history of the nations; the diverse relationships that the nations have had with the state of Louisiana; and the social, economic, and psychodynamic effects of being negated as Native Americans.

OVERLOOKING LOUISIANA’S INDIANS AND THE HURRICANES

This article’s larger issue is a controversial one that has been largely unexplored in Native American studies and anthropology: to what extent did the mass media overlook the effects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on Native Americans? This question is central because it intersects what Native Americans in Louisiana experienced, the populations that mass media focused on, and assumptions about Louisiana Natives based on phenotypes. Rothenbuhler and Coman allude to the importance of this issue: “The investigator’s intention to achieve a deeper understanding of other people’s life experiences thus counts for as much as the actual details of research procedure.”¹⁰ The implications of this statement further complicate the limitations of common investigative practice found among media reporters and academics alike. Thus, if the media reporter or academic is not intent on covering a particular segment of a population, does not know that a particular population exists, or views a population through a particular cultural lens (that is, race), then the actual narrated lived experiences and reflections of individuals within a population on their life events may not be investigated.¹¹ Houma Nation Principal Chief Brenda Dardar-Robichaux summarized the significance of this statement when she said, “We are an Indian tribe here that is falling through the cracks.”¹²

Despite Rothenbuhler and Coman’s detailed studies and Chief Dardar-Robichaux’s passionate statement, few media reporters and even fewer scholars have investigated why Native Americans in Louisiana were overlooked and what caused this oversight. In the social sciences and anthropology this

practice is discussed as negation.¹³ To what extent were the experiences of Native American populations in Louisiana negated? Is negation (defined as “the act of denying”) an active component of reporting that manifested itself in the lack of attention given to Native Americans affected by the hurricanes? Or was negation a consequence of mass media reporters and enterprises that have been trained to cover events in the United States merely in terms of African American and Caucasian populations? As Chief Dardar-Robichaux pointed out, “Nobody has made contact with us except the native media.”¹⁴

If negation is an active tool of reporters and media organizations for structuring what constitutes viable “news,” then the academic challenge is to investigate and explain the practice of negation by reporters and media enterprises and how it limits holistic explanations of events. Many Native American journalists and scholars in the growing field of media anthropology have adopted this approach and stress a synthesis between traditional practices for obtaining data in the fields of journalism and ethnography.¹⁵

If negation is the result of individual reporters merely not recognizing the Native American populations because of the large frequency of Creole/ Native American admixture or because of the belief that Native Americans in Louisiana were either African American or Caucasian and not really “Indian,” then the academic challenge is to investigate the cultural models (that is, racism and policy reification) that may limit the individual reporter’s ability to generate unbiased reports of events.¹⁶ This scrutiny of bias—although often self-regulated—is found in discussions of journalism theory and ethics. A person-centered approach examines the lived experiences of the individuals and the limitations of media coverage from the perspective of those who lived through the event. The individual is not only taken as an active agent in his or her life but also as a cognizant being that understands the dynamics of the events that he or she lived through.¹⁷ This is the approach taken here. What can the published media reports of Native Americans in Louisiana tell us about their concerns and experiences with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and why do they feel that they were overlooked?

THE STUDY

This case study investigates the media discourse from Houma and Pointe-au-Chien tribal leaders in Louisiana on their experiences with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This next section briefly engages the discourse as discernable from the reports found in Native American and non-Native American news media. Included is a brief yet close examination of these media reports and interviews that occurred shortly after Katrina and Rita struck, as well as discourse from the Web sites of the Houma and Pointe-au-Chien nations. The analysis is then followed by a discussion of the similarities and differences in experiences with Katrina and Rita and the implications that the reports and interview discourse hold for the central questions of this study.¹⁸

The Houma and Katrina and Rita

Historically, the Houma Nation lived in and around the modern-day capital city of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Commonly referred to as “Red Sticks” (the name from which the city of Baton Rouge took its name) because of the customary boundary markers used to distinguish their territory and hunting grounds from that of their neighbors, they migrated south to Lafourche Post in the mid-1700s and later into Terrebonne and Plaquemines parishes.¹⁹ In the 1930s and 1940s little attention was given to the Houma and their needs for schools, health care, and economic opportunity. Consequently, many Houma moved to New Orleans where educational opportunities were possible.²⁰ Today, the Houma comprise approximately sixteen thousand tribal citizens, with some 3,500 located throughout the lower Plaquemines, lower St. Bernard, and lower Jefferson parishes.²¹

In 2005 Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and caused many satellite Houma communities to experience the same devastation that the rest of New Orleans experienced (for example, extensive flooding, death, and displacement from family and loved ones). The severe wind and floodwaters that destroyed their homes left more than a thousand tribal citizens homeless. As if things could not get worse, the heart of the Houma Nation was devastated a couple of weeks later by Hurricane Rita. Broadsideing the Houma from the east, this hurricane, according to Chief Dardar-Robichaux, brought the same extensive flooding to the Houma bayou communities that Katrina brought to New Orleans and affected the lives of approximately 4,250 Houma tribal members.²²

Despite the flurries of weeks-long media attention on Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the \$6.1 million plus promised from Wachovia and the Red Cross, and the \$51.8 billion federal aid package promised, when interviewed by *Democracy Now!* reporter Amy Goodman, Chief Dardar-Robichaux pointed out that the

aid we have gotten has been from people who are upset with the administration, from people who feel that they did not act quickly enough and properly, and people who want to come out and make a difference. And we are humbled and blessed that they have come to our rescue. They have been providing us with much needed services to be able to recover from the storm, and it has been Indian tribes and Indian organizations throughout the United States that has come to our aid, as well.²³

When asked whether or not the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) offered assistance to the Houma Nation, Chief Dardar-Robichaux stated: “When FEMA came out, they just told me to call my congressman. Then, they came back out and asked, ‘Did you call your congressman?’ By the third time they did it, it was all that I could do not to throw them out of the relief center.”²⁴ An extensive slide show of the damage can be found on the nation’s Web site.²⁵

The implications of Chief Dardar-Robichaux's statements are profound. On the one hand, her statements illuminate the lack of consistency between the allocation of funds for Katrina victims and distribution practices, raising the question of whether or not the funds actually reach the intended populations. This is a common thread one can read and hear about from hurricane victims even to this day, which was also addressed by Spike Lee's HBO documentary film *When the Levees Broke*.²⁶ On the other hand, it suggests that Native American organizations such as the National Congress of American Indians, which sent \$15,757.45 in aid, are more in touch with Native American issues than the mainstream mass media. This disconnect raises a serious question about the potential bias that exists in news reporting, particularly where Native Americans are concerned, especially rural and nonfederally recognized nations.²⁷

When asked by Goodman whether or not she believed that federal recognition might have changed the situation of the Houma Nation, Chief Dardar-Robichaux suggested that

We have been in the federal recognition process now for twenty-one years and we still have not received what is called the final determination from the federal government. And that has hindered our relief efforts, as we, because we're not qualifying for certain money, certain funding, certain relief aid that would be out there if we were a federally recognized tribe. And so we are having to do this on our own. And as I said earlier, we are blessed that Indian tribes and Indian communities and people from throughout the United States have come to help us in our relief efforts.²⁸

Pointe-au-Chien and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

Pointe-au-Chien Indian tribe members are, traditionally and historically, fishers, farmers, and hunters (for example, alligator hunters); number approximately 680; and are descendents of Chitimacha, Acolapissa, Atakapas, and Biloxi Indians. A determined people, they have overcome many obstacles to their self-sufficiency. Historically, policies enacted by the state of Louisiana and the federal government prohibited Pointe-au-Chien children from attending high school until the late 1960s. Although creating great barriers to education, economic development, and health care, Pointe-au-Chien resilience weathered out the storms of these policies; however, the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita would prove to be an even greater challenge.²⁹

Located just sixty miles southwest of New Orleans, the Pointe-au-Chien Indian tribal community was, in the words of Tribal Chair Charles Verdin, "covered by water" in 2005 by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This community, neither protected by a levee system nor natural barriers, found their homes devastated by the floodwaters. "We had anywhere from eight to nine feet of water." Hurricanes Katrina and Rita also wreaked havoc on the traditional subsistence economies of the people, specifically their crab, shrimp, and oyster industries. When reporter Goodman asked whether or not FEMA had

visited the area, Tribal Chair Verdin stated, "FEMA has visited a couple of families, and a couple of families have received some help. But most of our members have received nothing and have not even seen FEMA."³⁰

The significance of Tribal Chair Verdin's statements provides a new dimension to the effect of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on Native Americans of Louisiana, particularly the destruction of normal sustainability mechanisms that might have enabled the Pointe-au-Chien to recover from the devastation. Although the Pointe-au-Chien community received assistance from the Poarch Band of Creek Indians out of Alabama and the Mennonites, it was not enough to replace what had been lost. Tribal Chair Verdin summarized the aid:

They have made no promises yet but they're in our area, you know, looking and talking with people and see what kind of help they could give us. . . . But they did send some mattress down to our area, because we still had some people that were sleeping on the floors and some of us were sleeping in their cars and staying by their home, where they could do some cleaning up during the daytime, and nighttime it either smelled too bad or just plain too hot.³¹

More than two years later, the Pointe-au-Chien Indian community is still in need of building supplies, volunteers to build, and funds to assist the tribal members in their rebuilding efforts. Oddly, however, one is hard-pressed to find mention or discussion of these needs on television. Photographs of the damage and information regarding needed assistance can be found on both the nation's Web site and the Web sites of concerned tribal members.³²

According to Census 2000, 17 to 25.9 percent of the population that lives in the vicinity of the Pointe-au-Chien is in poverty, and 80 percent of the Native American population in southern Louisiana is believed to live below the poverty line.³³ With the Pointe-au-Chien living by traditional subsistence economies, one should expect that such devastation by the storms, combined with virtually little to no media coverage, would depress their spirits. Yet the spirits of the people remained remarkably upbeat despite the floodwaters that blanketed the land in a shroud as bleak as the mass media's silence regarding the Pointe-au-Chien. As Tribal Chair Verdin told Goodman, "A lot of them, you know, just have been through this ordeal already. And, you know, we rebuild." Further into the discussion, he mentioned the lack of enthusiasm for rebuilding among the Pointe-au-Chien elders:

You have some of our older people that's just tired. They're getting too old to do this cleanup job like this, and some of their spirits are down. And some of them talk about getting out, you know. But we tried to get some kind of relief to help them rebuild higher. And when I talked to them about this, they were all for it. And some older members again are—they don't like the idea of going too high up. The home would have to be picked up about 10–12 foot high, and it would be hard for them to go up and down.³⁴

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This brief article presents the concerns and the sentiments of Houma and Pointe-au-Chien Indians in Louisiana, as discernable from the interviews given by their tribal leaders to Amy Goodman.³⁵ What remains an open area for further inquiry are the lived experiences of individual tribal members and the further insight that their subjective experiences can shed on the limitations of media exposure and the limited FEMA assistance.

The narratives of the tribal leaders in this case study and the lack of locatable information in mainstream newspapers on the effects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on Native Americans in Louisiana indicate that they were overlooked as much by the media as, tribal leaders suggest, by FEMA. This situation seems to be confounded by their lack of federal-recognition status. The common practices of news deliverance lent the illusion of comprehensive coverage on the extent of Katrina's and Rita's impact on Louisiana residents; however, this was not found among the narrated lived experiences of Houma and Pointe-au-Chien Natives. Chief Dardar-Robichaux and Tribal Chair Verdin revealed a depth of concern for their people not unlike other victims of Katrina: how can resources be obtained so that the people—particularly those who lost everything—can put their lives back together again? Further, the commonsense notions that FEMA would be a competent entity to address the needs of hurricane victims effectively underscore the pivotal significance of why it is important to question the intention behind media coverage.³⁶

A closer examination of the tribal leaders' concerns illuminates the importance of not just federal recognition or state recognition but also mere acknowledgment in general. In sync with Rothenbuhler and Coman's point that the intent of an investigator will shape the comprehensive nature of the subject covered, this study also brings to light the reality that media investigators may not have pondered or known of the situations of tribal people in Louisiana. In a similar vein, this raises a potential question of whether or not mainstream media sources found the stories of tribal people enticing for major news stories. Further, knowledge of the locations of tribal people may have been piecemeal, active expression of concerns for their well-being seemed an afterthought, and preconceived notions about what constituted Katrina and Rita victims may not have included Louisiana's Native Americans.

For the tribal leaders in this study and the people that they represent, the importance of telling their story seems to have become a prerogative because the devastation caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita encroached on their ability to be self-sufficient. Neither leader sought idol charity but rather the assistance guaranteed to them as citizens of the United States through FEMA, only to be disappointed when that promise failed. If the conclusions drawn here are correct, then the intention that media, FEMA investigators, and even scholars hold with regards to the subject of their investigations may falsely presuppose that the subject is best investigated according to conventional practices.

Unexamined human conditions and situations, because of extensive focus on racially visible populations, are a major problem that continues

to plague both US media coverage and social scientific scholarship.³⁷ Such practices allow inattention to populations that are not within the scope of the investigators' intentions or attentions. Expectations of comprehensive coverage through majority or racially visible populations divert attention away from the importance of holistic investigations of events and the severity and depth of subjective lived experiences with these events.³⁸ If there is any moral assumption that can be taken from this study, it is that all Americans, whether African American, Caucasian, or Native American (state-recognized or federally recognized), have the right to be seen in the same manner in which they see themselves, within the space that they call their country, their home. Do not the Houma and Pointe-au-Chien exist regardless of which entity or person chooses to acknowledge them? Who, other than those who do not have the privilege to call them "fellow Americans," has the right to ignore them?

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