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The Last Indian in the World

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In June 2004, the American national media spent a considerable amount of airtime revisiting the events of June 1964 when three civil rights workers were murdered near Philadelphia, Mississippi on what was the fortieth anniversary of the murders. National Public Radio's (NPR's) *All Things Considered* devoted airtime to a story, "Truth and Reconciliation in Neshoba County," in which reporter Debbie Elliot went to Philadelphia, Mississippi, the seat of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, to examine how "people in Neshoba, both black and white, are grappling with their community's legacy."¹ The story goes on to look at the activities of the thirty-member Philadelphia Task Force and dissects the activities of this group as racial networking under the black-white binary that has become synonymous with the civil rights movements in the United States. The story overlooked the several members of the Philadelphia Task Force of Mississippi Band of Choctaw tribal members whose roots in Neshoba Country predate that of whites and blacks by thousands of years; thus framing the discussion of this particular issue in "black and white" and excluding any evidence of Indian in that mix.

That date stands clearly in my mind, as it was my older daughter's birthday. My daughter is a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and her middle name is Nashoba, named after not the county of her father's birth but after the clan from which that county takes its Choctaw name: wolf. It was a stark reminder to me of how Native peoples are completely taken out of a situation that is contextualized as a black or white issue, or when blacks and whites work together for the common good. There is no room for Indians in that scenario, according to the American media, because for so long the media has believed its own creation: that of the vanishing Indian whose voice no longer matters in times of national crisis or mourning. The only relevant news on American Indians the media sees as fit to broadcast follows a narrow definition of what is newsworthy: anything

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that has to do with casinos or tribal corruption warrants an “in-depth view” on the tracking of Indian country.

One year and two months later, the world watched as thousands of people were stranded in the New Orleans Convention Center and the devastation that occurred in the Gulf Coast following Katrina and later Rita. As the media reported on the looting of New Orleans, it became suspiciously clear who was looting and who wasn't. The subtlety of the images expressed that the racial divide was alive and well in America, and that when it came to disaster, look to the black folks to loot and the white folks to fly. Once again the discussion centered on black and white, and the world of poverty in New Orleans was exposed with its racial constraints and quotas, and the subliminal message was this: blacks can't be trusted to act properly in times of chaos.

Another message that was clear to me from watching this disaster unfold was that members of my own family were affected. On my mother's side our relatives were affected mostly by Rita; my in-laws were affected mostly by Katrina. The eight communities of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians suffered much damage. For days we tried calling home to Standing Pine and were unable to get through. When we finally did, we were relieved to learn that our relatives had survived the storm and were operating on generator power. Many in the community weren't as lucky as our family. Many other families, relatives of ours in the way that Indians are relatives to the rest of us in the diaspora, were still without power, food, and water in a Mississippi summer that, at best, was unforgiving. Tribes and nations banded together to help each other out, but still there were those who didn't have power months later. The Indians were the invisible ones, erased from the memory of America as the various news organizations set up camp in the Gulf. Only the Native media paid attention to the Indians who suffered, which is par for the course. Then again, who listens to Native media outlets other than Natives?

So many people express outrage over the (non)response of the federal and local governments for the refugees of Hurricane Katrina immediately preceding the hurricane's destruction of the Gulf Coast states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Indecision, lack of planning, intimidation, and genocide all have a historical presence in this country. We are sorely mistaken if we think that what occurred in New Orleans was not a forced relocation of a population. If people don't understand the stranding of people of color left to die as an organized method of genocide, then we need to look to our colonial past and present for clues.

Yes, genocide. In the comfort of our living rooms, the rest of the country (and the world) watched in absolute horror as people were left to die in the streets and in the convention center in New Orleans. Two weeks after the hurricane, many of the eight communities of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians were still without power and phone service; and according to Brenda Norrell in her 9 September 2005 piece in *Indian Country Today*, three-quarters of the Houma Indian population were directly affected by the hurricane's destruction. Louisiana's other tribes subsist primarily on the fishing industry, which is all but destroyed. Genocide is nothing new in Indian Country; the faces I saw on the news dying in the streets of New Orleans looked amazingly

familiar. These are faces I know in my bones. They are the ancestors left to die after a government promised them food, clothing, and shelter. They are the ancestors whose rotting bodies were left to the elements, sometimes snow, sometimes rain, and this time in heat and hostile waters. I was moved by the account of New Orleans refugee Denise Moore, trapped at the convention center with her mother, her niece, and her niece's two-year-old daughter. Denise spoke of being trapped at the convention center without food, water, and help; babies and elders dying around her, trapped there. Denise watched National Guard trucks filled with water drive by, weapons pointed at the trapped survivors. "The story became 'they just left us here to die,'" she told Ira Glass on *This American Life*.² How could the refugees have thought anything else? The federal government has a long and violent colonial history in which Native peoples were forcibly removed from ancestral homelands; sent away in the worst possible environmental conditions; left to die without food, water, shelter, or sanitary conditions; and forced to stay in a place that was supposed to be safe. Using guns, the National Guard forced back people that tried to leave the convention center in New Orleans. Those refugees knew that colonial history; they lived it day to day like Native peoples live it. The Japanese Americans interned during World War II on the west coast of the United States were forced out of their homes at gunpoint and sent to remote desert areas in California, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona. The army and the National Guard set up barbed wire and guards in towers to guard these Americans and keep them in camp. People died there. People died on The Trail of Tears. People died at Tippecanoe, where Andrew Jackson's regiment slaughtered thousands of Muscogee women, children, and elders, making bridle reins of skin and decorating them with the teeth and fingers of my ancestors. Wounded Knee, Sand Creek, Captain Jack's Stronghold, Indian Island, Marana, Topaz, and New Orleans . . . our ancestors reminded us of what was to come.

My late mother was Creole and Cajun; her family is from Opelousas, Marksville, and Alexandria. I consider Louisiana to be the old country, the nation that haunts me still, two generations later in California. The Creole diaspora has just had its latest migration, thousands of people expelled in a seeming instant. I was in New Orleans two years ago, with my aunt, my children, and my dear friend Paula Gunn Allen. We stayed downtown, did touristy things such as visit the French Quarter, drink chicory and eat beignets served by Vietnamese waitresses at Café Du Monde, walk through Jackson Square, and pose for pictures with the balloon man. However, I took my children to the riverwalk and looked out at the dark water. "This is our grandmother," I told them, "this is where we come from, me and your dad and you guys and your grandparents and great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents and great-great-great-grandparents all the way back to the Mounds and back to Acadia and back to France and back to Africa. This river is our grandmother." My children, at the time ages seven, two, and ten months, looked at the water, then my son said, "Yeah, ok Mama, can we get a balloon animal now?" We could have been Denise Moore and her mother, her niece, her great-niece. We could have been that family trapped by skin color and minimum wage existence in rising floodwaters. We could have been in Walnut Creek with our

family, living off canned food and generator power, or our other relatives who struggled for months as help kept getting put off, over and over. The Indians were, once again, off the radar. Unless it has to do with vanishing Indians on the prairie or casino kickbacks or Jack Abramoff, no one pays attention to us. Like Denise Moore, we survived genocide.

So how are things now, two years later? Politically, the Choctaws have been through a major change, having elected the first new chief in fifty years. As with any political governing body, there are praises as well as criticisms, spins, and truth. The tribe, in its quest to establish the ever-elusive sovereignty, still takes care of its own because it can afford to do so now. It is a step toward success in that ongoing battle.

My husband and I try so hard to provide a good life for our children. We learned that from our ancestors on bone and blood, on both sides of the Mississippi River. On both sides is a history satiated with colonial violence, survivance, and renewal. Natural disasters are nothing new to us. This we can cope with. This we know in our blood, in our bones. Unfortunately, we know genocide when we see it. I know about ethnic cleansing and population control, and it doesn't always happen in faraway places such as Bosnia and Rwanda. Safely in Los Angeles, if that can even be truly said, I watch and listen to the story I know that is going to be told. We have been told that words carry a life of their own; once they are spoken one can never "take them back." As people kept talking and talking about the horror and the devastation, children and babies and grandmas and grandpas and aunties and uncles and mommas and daddies died, waiting for help that never came. This is a familiar story. The other story, the one that not many people outside of Indian country know about, is the story of survivance within that death.

The Last Indian in the World

When all is
said and done,
there are no hearts left
in the world
but white heart beads,
fragments of broken glass,
china cups
chipped and worn in places where teeth
stain the delicate
turquoise rims.
We need the cups,
she says,
to remember the land,
to remember the place
where from before you came,
a distant memory
alive in the mines that
shine silver,

or some other precious
metal. Skin color,
perhaps,
named for the place
buried in the heart
of your mother,
where ashes now reside
bones picked clean by the
insistent digging of things
not claimed, but stolen,
and you will walk these streets
knowing your claim
will never be
acquiesced.
You speak
for the nation,
she said,
but how can I speak
when the words
cut from my mouth,
lost on a tongue
for whom language
has been lost?
the last Indian in the world
cannot speak for shit.

When she opens her mouth,
blood comes forth
and nothing
can ever replace
what has been lost,
broken,
mined for shine
that never will
be found.

I am certainly not the last Indian in the world, nor will I be, nor will my children be. The African diaspora grew over the last few weeks since Katrina, and those folks spread across the world won't be the last black folks in the world either. People of color know how to cope. It's in our blood, in our bones. The stories that live there continue on and are told over and over, so we don't forget where we came from. Nothing can replace what was lost, nothing can be found, but at least we're alive. At least the story doesn't end here.

NOTES

1. *All Things Considered*, 17 June 2004, National Public Radio, Washington: DC.
2. *This American Life*: "After the Flood," 9 September 2005, Chicago Public Radio.