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American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Introduction: Beyond Invisibility and Disaster

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3076f7p4>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 32(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

2008-03-01

DOI

10.17953

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Peer reviewed

Introduction: Beyond Invisibility and Disaster

ANDREW JOLIVETTE

August 29, 2005 marked the worst natural disaster in US history. While millions across the world watched their televisions in horror and disbelief, a greater tragedy began to unfold. Centuries of neglect and disinvestment in the indigenous and tribal communities of Louisiana would reach an all-time high in the aftermath of the storm forever known as Katrina. This collection of essays draws on the work of scholars and Native community members from the state of Louisiana and beyond. Although Hurricane Katrina has had an enormous impact on Native American communities in the Gulf Coast area, it also highlights a reality that existed long before the storm struck the region. For mixed-blood communities like the Atakapa/Creole people from Grand Bayou, the storm was a reminder of the social, economic, and political underpinnings that have erased the voices of Native American peoples in the state. According to Atakapa/Creole tribal member Paul Sylvie:

There is a discrepancy. Some people say that we should know better than to live in a flood-prone, hurricane-prone area. They want to say that we “choose” to live on Grand Bayou. It’s not necessarily a way of choice. This is where we have been since before there even was a state of Louisiana or a Plaquemines Parish. Now they want to tell us we can’t apply for aid because of where we live. But as a group, this is our home. If they drive us out, what’s going to stop them from coming for you and your community?¹

Sylvie’s comments speak to the heart of the issue that Katrina has taught us. Issues of poverty, ongoing colonialism, and racism have dramatic impact on the ability of Native peoples to continue to live on their traditional lands and maintain important cultural practices. The community is well

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aware of the challenges that confront it and refuse to be rendered invisible as so many indigenous people of Louisiana have been since European contact first began.

There's been a lot of racial, social, environmental injustice perpetuated against our communities over a long period of time. As long as we were separate and fractured they were able to continue. Since the storm we have seen the benefits of coming together and partnering and forming alliances. I think it's a new day. But we have to fight this machine that was in place, and these people who have deep pockets and connections. But we know that what we're doing is right. We see the benefits of bringing human rights back to the people of Grand Bayou and other coastal communities. We're ready to do our part in the arena of justice for everybody.²

Rosina Philippe's (Atakapa/Creole) statement captures what is at the center of the themes explored within this special collection. How do tribal and mixed-blood Native people come together with other oppressed groups to withstand not just the tragedy of Katrina but also the ongoing struggle for social justice in the face of racial and ethnic discrimination? The first step to addressing the issues that Katrina has brought to the forefront is by acknowledging the diversity of Native groups and cultures in the South and by highlighting the fact that Indians are a large population that has contributed greatly to the history, culture, and contemporary identity of the Gulf Coast region.

Louisiana, to the surprise of many, has the largest population of Native Americans in the Eastern United States at 25,477.³ The Native American groups of Louisiana have contributed a great deal to the vast cultural diversity and uniqueness of the state and to the city of New Orleans in particular. Despite these two facts, Louisiana is probably the last place most Americans think of when or if they ever consider American Indians. The Gulf Coast landscape has long been ignored in terms of addressing the social, economic, and political concerns of Native Americans. The map below (see fig. 1) details just how many diverse tribal nations existed in Louisiana prior to the colonial period.

I have argued in other works that the colonial period in the Americas led to not just a physical genocide but also to a "bloodless" paper genocide that sought to dismiss the existence and survival of American Indians in multiracial America.⁴ Louisiana, like many of its Latin American counterparts has a multigenerational mixed-blood history that combines indigenous, African, and European cultures into new groups. The impact of this racial mixing has led to the false assertion that most, if not all, Indian communities in places such as Puerto Rico, Cuba, Louisiana, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic died out due to disease and European conquest. Smithsonian anthropologist John Swanton ignored Louisiana's Indian population in many cases because mixed-bloods made up the majority of most Native communities; thus Swanton assumed they were "black," "white," or that they were not "real Indians" unless they were full-bloods.

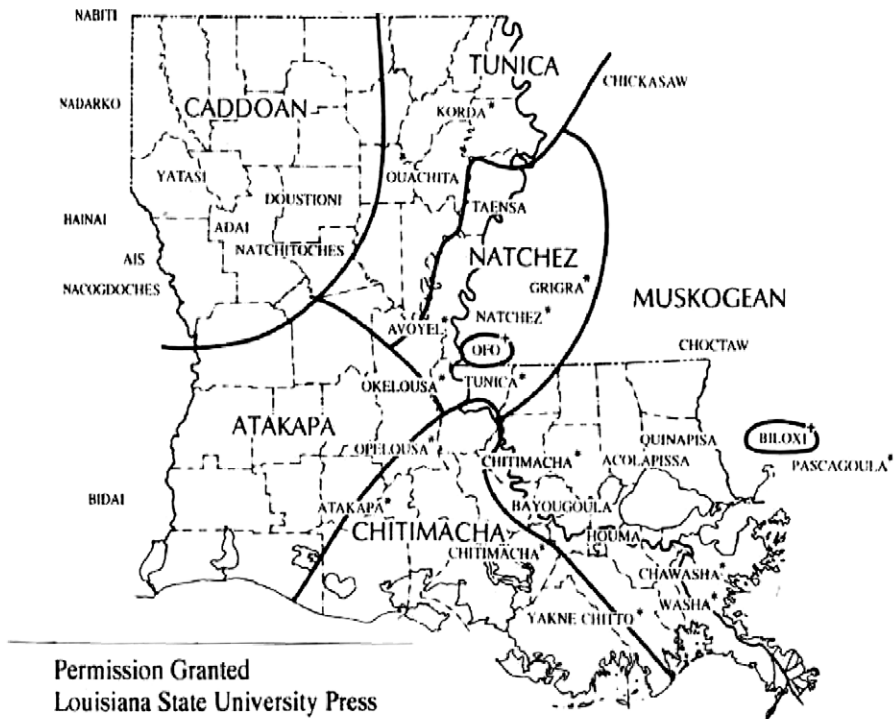


FIGURE 1. *Historic tribes of Louisiana. Map by Louisiana State University Press.*

This neglect has led to a lack of federal recognition for Louisiana's original inhabitants, the Atakapa, Houma, Clifton Choctaw, Choctaw-Apache of Ebarb, Caddo Adais, and East Baton Rouge Choctaw among others. Although the latter five have received state recognition, the Atakapa and their various bands such as the Opelousa have no recognition, as most members have blended into the Creole and Cajun communities of southwest Louisiana. Even the four tribes with federal recognition, the Tunica-Biloxi, Chitimacha, Coushatta, and Jena Band of Choctaw Indians have experienced racism and a lack of services from the federal government (see articles by Klopotek, Lintinger, Barbry, Collins, and d'Oney).

Factors such as regional location as well as ethnic and cultural hybridity each contribute to both the historic and contemporary invisibility of indigenous peoples in the state of Louisiana. The contributors to this collection each in their own way address Native invisibility, cultural group preservation, and mainstream media representations of the storm's racial context. I too can recall sitting in front of the television watching CNN and wondering where the other ethnic communities were. Is this a black-white issue only? As the articles in this collection demonstrate, the lack of government assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has left Louisiana's most vulnerable and least visible citizens in a state of disaster for the past two

and a half years. To address the current landscape of indigenous communities in Louisiana the volume has been divided into three distinct subject areas.

In part 1, "The Status of the Houma Nation Post-Katrina," J. Daniel d'Oney and Houma tribal member T. Mayheart Dardar offer two distinct perspectives on the current state of the Houma Nation. D'Oney's article, "Watered by Tempests: Hurricanes in the Cultural Fabric of the United Houma Nation," examines the history of hurricanes and their impact on the Houma Nation, and Dardar's article, "Tales of Wind and Water: Houma Indians and Hurricanes," gives a personal tribal perspective on Houma cosmology and community beliefs about hurricanes. Both d'Oney and Dardar demonstrate the ways that the Houma Nation has dealt with previous storms and how various tribal members have come together in the wake of Katrina to restore a sense of group cohesion.

The United Houma Nation suffered tremendous losses because of the impact of Hurricane Rita, which came shortly after Katrina. Of the tribes' 3,500 members, more than one thousand were left homeless, and, as Dardar and d'Oney argue in their articles, the tribe has a long history with hurricane disaster. Despite this experience with hurricanes, both Katrina and Rita have left the tribe fighting for resources that are still being denied by the federal government. As a state-recognized tribe it does not have access to the same resources as federally recognized groups. As articles by both d'Oney and Collins suggest, racism has played a central role in the failure to grant federal recognition to the Houma Nation.

As the tribe struggled to bring aid to its citizens and channel its few resources to their benefit another tragedy loomed on the horizon. Hurricane Rita entered the Gulf of Mexico and tracked westward towards Louisiana. At risk was the core of the Houma Indian population which resides in the lower bayou region of Lafourche and Terrebonne parishes. While we avoided the direct impact that devastated our eastern communities by Katrina, the "near miss" by Rita pushed a massive storm surge into the bayous and our more populous settlements in lower Terrebonne went underwater. The Houma communities of Dulac, Grand Caillou, Montegut, Pointe-aux-Chene, and Isle de Jean Charles were inundated with seven or eight feet of water. The tribe now had an additional four thousand of its citizens with houses devastated by the effects of this new storm.⁵

In part 2, "Media Invisibility: Understanding Race and Place," C. Richard King and Robert Keith Collins argue that the media's inability to recognize the unique and diverse identities of indigenous people in Louisiana led to a lack of Native representation in news coverage of how Indian communities were threatened by the storm. In his article, "George Bush May Not Like Black People, but No One Gives a Damn about Indigenous Peoples," C. Richard King asserts that critical media literacy would allow for a less-biased approach to covering the way race impacts communities outside of the black-white binary. King also asserts that the invoking of the Mardi Gras

Black Indians in New Orleans is ironically being used as a symbol of cultural survival. In a similar vein, Robert Keith Collins's article, "Fellow Americans Ignored: Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and Louisiana's Indians," attests to the bias in mainstream media and the impact that Native American newspapers and tribes have had in supporting one another. The articles in part 2 by King and Collins illuminate the stories of survival outlined in part 1 by d'Oney and Dardar. The Houma, Mardi Gras Indians, and Point-aux-Chien were all devastated by Katrina, and each group has suffered not just because of the storm but also because of a federal recognition process that has been slow to respond to the economic needs of mixed-blood Indians in Louisiana.

In part 3, "Preserving Culture, Rebuilding Lives," the contributors provide a discussion of the cultural practices, traditions, and responses of Louisiana's indigenous people not just to hurricanes but also to the notion that alliances must be built to preserve and rebuild a stronger Native community in the face of future disasters. Other tribal communities such as the Tunica-Biloxi (who struggled for federal recognition from the 1930s through 1981) have successfully leveraged their tribal status to assist displaced Natives after Hurricane Katrina. According to *Indian Country Today*, the Marksville-based tribe was recognized by Ernie Stevens Jr., chairman of the National Indian Gaming Association, for its contributions to hurricane victims.⁶ The Tunica-Biloxi who own and operate the Paragon Casino Resort established shelters for evacuees during both hurricanes, then provided school supplies for young hurricane victims. The tribe successfully partnered with the National Relief Charities to provide local educators with much-needed supplies. This is an example of how tribalism has continued to serve as a key factor in the survival of American Indian communities. Throughout history, indigenous communities have fought for citizenship, recognition, repatriation, and the very right to exist. Without the support and collaboration between tribal communities the situation in Louisiana could be even worse.

In their article, "Piles of Memories: Ordinary and Extraordinary Memories: Race, Place, and Tunica-Biloxi Experiences with Hurricane Katrina," Brian Klopotek, Brenda Lintinger, and John Barbry provide a historic overview of the Tunica-Biloxi people and how they too have been devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The Tunica-Biloxi tribe has also served as an important resource for other tribes in the area. The personal narratives of tribal members included in their article are similar to the accounts shared by T. Mayheart Dardar and demonstrate a qualitative and intimate ethnographic insight into what life was like before and after the storm. Carolyn Dunn's commentary, "The Last Indian in the World," along with John Brown Childs's "Recognitions and Invisible People: Reflections on a Choctaw Vision of Alliances Following Katrina," pick up on a theme expressed in the articles by Collins and King. Both Dunn and Childs assert that marginalized and oppressed people can only overcome discrimination by joining forces, building coalitions for recognition, and preserving their cultural traditions and practices. In the final article, "Brackish Bayou Blood: Mixed-Blood Indian Creole Identity: A Survival Guide," L. Rain Cranford emphasizes the importance of both the pieces by Dunn and Childs by illuminating the cultural significance of

basketry among mixed-blood Indians in south Louisiana. Cranford's article brings together the various aspects of the other submissions in the way that she weaves history together with culture to suggest that Louisiana's Indian communities can never truly be invisible as long as the traditions continue to be practiced.

The question that remains after almost three years is, how will the US racial topography shift to become more inclusive of all its citizens? How does this natural disaster remind us of the critical need for a human-rights agenda that recognizes the full humanity and sovereign rights of Native American peoples regardless of their degree of racial mixture? If we are to continue to see thriving indigenous communities in which shared pasts, stories, and cultural definitions of community are most central, then we must hold our federal government accountable in a higher international court. The passage of the UN Declaration on Indigenous Rights in September 2007, although not perfect, is a strong starting point for reclaiming the legal rights of American Indians so that we are never left to suffer such a human-rights violation again. The 143 members of the UN General Assembly voted for the declaration, which outlines the rights of some 370 million indigenous people worldwide.⁷

Not surprisingly, only the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia—all nations with large Native populations—voted against the text, expressing concerns over some provisions, including those on self-determination and rights to land and resources. The declaration's passage creates no new rights and does not place indigenous people in a special category, but it does define their rights in a number of areas (for example, culture, employment, and language) and prohibits discrimination against them. These international prohibitions of discrimination must be applied to the tribes of Louisiana which have for centuries suffered from racism, invisibility, and a discriminatory legal system that has denied them full recognition.

If we are to preserve that which is most vital—the land, culture, sacred sites, and the future of the youth—we must work with tribal communities in Louisiana and mixed-blood populations such as the Creoles to recognize their social, cultural, and legal rights as Native American peoples. As the coastal erosion continues along the Gulf Coast region, so too do the centuries of cultural, legal, and economic underdevelopment that has left fragile communities in a vulnerable position. Because there has been so much tragedy across the indigenous landscape of Louisiana and the Gulf Coast post-Katrina, there has also been the development of new group alliances between tribal bands that previously did not exist. Alliances must continue to be forged between the multiple as well as multiracial tribal and nontribal communities in order to create stronger infrastructures that will support indigenous visibility into the next millennium.

NOTES

1. Annie Ducmanis, "Stories from the Forgotten Coast: With the Katrina Anniversary Media Gone, the Hard Work Continues," <http://www.grist.org/feature/2007/10/23/forgotten/> (accessed 18 March 2007).

2. Ibid.

3. Maida Owens, "Other Cultural Groups," <http://www.pbs.org/riverofsong/music/e4-other.html> (accessed 13 December 2007).

4. Andrew Jolivet, *Louisiana Creoles: Cultural Recovery and Mixed-Race Native American Identity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

5. United Houma Nation Web site, <http://www.unitedhoumanation.org> (accessed 10 September 2007).

6. Brenda Norrell, "Tunica-Biloxi Recognized for Hurricane Relief," <http://www.indiancountry.com/content.cfm?id=1096411828> (accessed 13 December 2007).

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