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# Compass of Compassion: Reflections on a Choctaw Vision of Alliances and Unrecognized Peoples Following Katrina

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At the height of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, Choctaw writer Cedric Sunray wrote in his *Native American Times* essay, "Similarities between Tribes and the Ninth Ward":

> The word tragedy can hardly signify the extent of the pain being suffered by many in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. While America comes to grips with the enormity of the despair, people, many of them Black, in the previously unheard of Ninth Ward of New Orleans (one of the country's most impoverished ghettos) already understand the touch, taste, and sound of generations of poverty. A poverty created by a very real caste system, which exists here in the United States of America. And Indians are no exception. Indian country has its own Ninth Ward of . . . individuals and families who have been some of the hardest hit over the course of the past week. . . . As communities of primarily impoverished and identifiable Indian people, we have never had the best of what America has to offer. The prosperity parade doesn't march down the roads of our communities. And neither will assistance. Our lack of federal recognition has placed us at the mercy of federal bureaucrats and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. We are the neglected of the neglected. You see, it is easy to forget about people, when you marginalize them and pretend they no longer exist. Just ask the people in New Orleans Ninth Ward.[1]

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Sunray is notable in his awareness of connections among differences. The similarities facing much of the Ninth Ward and Indian country are emphasized in a way that one seldom sees. From my vantage point this is what I call a "transcommunal" way of seeing. As I note in my other writings, transcommunality is an approach that respects and celebrates distinctive rooted communal locations, viewpoints, and agendas while also emphasizing the way in which people can reach out to one another drawing from their own places of sense and senses of place as positive foundations for cooperation.[2] Sunray's essay moves along a path of connectedness that we need more of, if we are to form alliances to enhance the future of millions of marginalized and vulnerable peoples in the United States and around the world. I am also struck by another related but distinctive element in the Sunray essay. He writes that "our lack of federal recognition has placed us at the mercy of federal bureaucrats," and that "it is easy to forget about people, when you marginalize them and pretend they no longer exist."

The term *federal recognition* refers to the vexed and politically contentious issue of the US government sanctioning Native communities by legally recognizing Indian identity. Other writers have analyzed and discussed this vital issue in great detail. The lack of recognition has clear consequences for the several Native communities on the Gulf Coast that were severely impacted by Katrina and by the societal response or lack thereof. As Carolyn Dunn, the Muskogee Creek, Seminole, French Creole, and Cajun writer who is also a member of the Mankillers drum group, wrote, "Two weeks after the hurricane the Band of Choctaw Indians were still without power and phone service; and according to Brenda Norrell in her September 9 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." She further writes,

> The faces I saw on the news, dying in the streets of New Orleans looked amazingly familiar. These are the 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. . . . 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 so stay in a place that was supposed to be safe.[3]

As with Sunray, we see in Dunn's words recognition of the uniqueness of Native American realities and a compassionate recognition of connectedness to others as in—"these are the faces I know in my bones." In his essay, Sunray is obviously referring to the impacts of the legal meaning of recognition which is also described by Dunn as a bloodied history. Like her, he does not stop there. He immediately links the political issue of recognition of Native

nations to the related but broader sense of nonrecognized people forced to the margins of society. In that linkage he and Dunn remind me of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, which begins:

> I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who have haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.[4]

Sunray's "marginalized people"—those whom society "pretends do not exist"—are cousins to Ellison's "invisible" people, reduced to being "figments" of others' imaginations. Marginalization that leaves people vulnerable to an unresponsive government, rather than being aided by it, is a dilemma to be found across the country in a wide variety of different communities. Consequently, millions of people in the United States have more in common than they might think or are being led to believe. Sunray's thoughtful outward-looking approach is an important Gulf Coast example of this nationwide commonality existing in the midst of heterogeneity. It is to this commonality in the midst of diversity that I aim this article.

Let us take as one telling instance of this commonality the crisis faced by many of the elderly in New Orleans, some incapacitated in nursing homes, others simply not able to move easily from their own places of residence. Calls from local government for people to evacuate totally ignored their living conditions. The government's belief in the simplistic "move to higher ground" mantra leading to thousands of people evacuating with ease to places of refuge like the Superdome and Coliseum (both of which were inadequate) displays a vast *a priori* ignorance about, and disregard of, the plight of elders by all levels of government whatever the "race" of the officials or the elderly residents.

As Andrea Steiner, advocate for the elderly, wrote in 2005:

> Who was most likely to die? After the casualties of falling telephone poles and crashing roofs, it would have to be people who could not get out. Caught up in the water and then the 110 degree heat, it would be hospital patients, prison inmates, the residents of nursing homes. . . . To a large extent it would be the elders.
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> It was five days before the public eye even noticed, five days of silence and invisibility followed by shock/horror reportage and official-sound rationalizations of the inequalities and lost histories made plain on our television sets. The shock and horror included: St. Rita's Nursing Home with its thirty-four wheelchair-bound residents [trapped and] huddled at the door, no doubt clamoring for help or an exit, will forever be the icon of that. . . . In terms of evacuation, the elders living on their own were in the same boat as the rest of their neighborhoods, although probably many had a relatively greater

> need. That greater need never translated into a higher spot on the evacuator's priority list.[5]

Importantly these horrific images are part of a larger phenomenon of non-recognition of the elders, and of many others, now being forced more and more to the margins of society and toward increasing vulnerability. The 11 December 2003 *New York Times* editorial "Disabled and Waiting for Justice" stated that

> the worsening bureaucratic delays at the chronically underfunded Social Security Administration . . . have kept hundreds of thousands of disabled Americans from the timely receipt of their Social Security checks. As laid out by Erik Echolm in *The Times* on Monday, the backlog of applicants who are awaiting a decision after appealing an initial rejection has soared to 755,000 from 311,000 in 2000 . . . during the long wait their conditions may worsen and their lives often fall apart. More and more people have lost their homes, declared bankruptcy, or even died while awaiting an appeals hearing.
>
> The blame for this debacle lies mostly with the Republicans. For most of this decade, the administration has held the agency's budget requests down and Republican-dominated Congresses have appropriated less than the administration requested.[6]

Many of the 755,000 elders hit hard by this Social Security (or Insecurity) mess have become vulnerable, ignored, and unrecognized in much of what has become the politics of invisibility in the past several decades.

There are many other forms of this "debacle," which Katrina and Rita for a while illuminated. As Bob Herbert, the African American columnist for the *New York Times*, wrote: "The elite honchos in Washington and their courtiers in the news media are all but completely out of touch with the daily struggle of working families. Thirty-seven million Americans live in poverty and close to 60 million others are just a notch above the poverty line. An illness, an auto accident, the loss of a job—almost anything can knock them off their rickety economic perch."[7] The invisibility of the poor and working poor renders them susceptible to economic disaster at any time. Below are additional examples of people who are virtually invisible to the all-seeing/not-seeing eyes of government bureaucrats and politicians.

In early 2006, the Sago Mine disaster killed thirteen West Virginia miners. As the United Mine Workers union pointed out, the number of inspectors for the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) has been cut in recent years, thereby limiting the effectiveness of that agency's oversight. Moreover, the head of MSHA comes from the ranks of the mining industry rather than the workforce or the scientific safety-research community. Sago and MSHA are parallel to Katrina and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in that "Anti-big government/anti-regulation" conservatives have deliberately undermined both agencies. As the *International Herald Tribune* pointed out in its 6 January 2007 edition:

> Government investigators must waste no time in ascertaining the actual cause of the blast, for the Sago mine was notorious for a long list of safety violations and fines. The mine, with more than 270 safety violations in the last two years, is the latest example of how workers' risks are balanced against company profits in an industry pervasive with political clout. . . . Political figures from both parties have long defended and profited from ties to the coal industry. . . . [T]he Bush administration's cramming of important posts in the Department of the Interior with biased operatives from the coal, oil, and gas industry is not reassuring about general safety in the mines.

The article concludes with a telling comparison of Sago with Katrina: "Just as Hurricane Katrina forced Americans to look at the face of lingering poverty and racism, this mining tragedy should focus everyone on another forgotten, mistreated corner of society. . . . The dozen dead miners deserve to be memorialized with fresh scrutiny of the state of mine safety regulation."[8]

The many Native American peoples who have had numerous battles with the Department of the Interior about land use will be familiar with the analysis above. From our perspective here, let us note the emphasis on the unseen—"the forgotten, mistreated corner of society"—that Americans should now be forced to look at. We are reminded here of the Diné uranium miners in the Southwest who, along with their families, suffer from the effects of working in that poisonous business, along with the many others who cannot afford health care. When President George Bush, responding to calls for a system of national health insurance, said that people did not need this type of support because if they were ill they could easily "go to emergency rooms." We know that emergency rooms cannot provide preventative care. As Dr. Elias Zerhouni, director of the US National Institutes of Health, told Congress in 2007, the continuous rise in health care costs required a "more predictive personalized and pre-emptive form of medicine."[9] This sort of medicine cannot be found in emergency rooms no matter how good they are.

In late 2007, a multiparty suit was brought against the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for undermining the implementation of its own regulations, which are supposed to provide protection against the release of industrial toxic chemicals into the environment. The *New York Times* writer Anthony De Palma reported:

> Twelve states, including New York, New Jersey and Connecticut sued the Environmental Protection Agency yesterday for weakening regulations that for two decades have required businesses and industries to report the toxic chemicals they use, store, and release. . . . Attorney General Andrew Cuomo of New York, who is leading the plaintiffs said, "The E.P.A.'s new regulations rob New Yorkers—and people across the country—of their right to know about toxic damages in their own backyards." Mr. Cuomo added that the lawsuit sought to restore public right to information about chemical hazards, "despite the Bush administration's best attempt to hide it."[10]

Although this list could go on, simply drawing from mainstream media sources as I do here, I want to end it with one last example.[11] In December 2007 another *New York Times* writer, Gardiner Harris, reported that "the nation's food supply is at risk, its drugs potentially dangerous, and its citizens' lives at stake because the Food and Drug Administration [FDA] is desperately short of money and poorly organized, according to alarming reports by agency advisers." Harris continues,

> the F.D.A. Sciences Board, an advisory panel [with ninety scientific advisors] that reports directly to the agency's commissioner . . . concludes that, over the last two decades, the agency's public health responsibilities have soared while its appropriations have barely budged. The result is that the F.D.A. is falling further behind in carrying out its responsibilities and understanding the science it needs to do many jobs.
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> F.D.A.'s inability to keep up with scientific advances means that American lives are at risk, the report stated. . . . Barbara J. McNeil, a professor of health care policy at Harvard Medical School and one of the report's authors, said she was stunned by the agency's sorry state. "This was the first time that a group of people got together and looked at all the areas that the F.D.A. has to cover," Dr. McNeil said. "We were shocked at how little its resources have increased and were surprised at the conditions those in the F.D.A. work under."[12]

Later in December 2007 I noticed two succeeding headlines in the Business Section of the *New York Times* that read: (1) "U.S. to Pressure China on Food and Product Safety at Coming Trade Talks" and (2) "China Agrees to Post U.S. Safety Officials in its Food Factories."[13] If only the United States would agree to post more safety officials in factories in this country; China should have made that part of the negotiations.

## CONCLUSION: TOWARD A VISIBLE ALLIANCE OF THE INVISIBLES

> *The world is alive. Everything lives, including the stones and the mountains. What makes us see this as one people, whether it is called "Indian" or not, is that our elders understood who the human being is in the world.*
>
> —Art Solomon, Odawa elder, Ontario, Canada[14]

Many people are invisible within and to the wider society. An adjunct aspect of that situation is that the marginalized are also invisible to one another. This "mutual invisibility" undermines the possibilities of cooperative transcommunal alliances. It is Sunray's and Dunn's positive rejection of such mutual invisibility and their emphasis on shared circumstances that make their words so important. The more aware we are of one another in ways that recognize distinctive locations, while also being alert to commonalities, the more we will be able to create, positively and constructively, modes of cooperation that work for justice. Cedric Sunray's contribution lies in his positive and

constructive direction that is fully cognizant of the indigenous dimensions of Katrina while also reaching out with compassionate recognition to the African Americans of the Ninth Ward. We see the same spirit in Dunn's writing. Obviously there are many differences between the Ninth Ward and Sago Mine. Rather than simply writing off stories such as Katrina as something that happens to "other people" or perhaps "those people," we can see these terrible moments as sharp flashing illuminations of the many challenges and crises faced by millions around the nation and the world. Sunray and Dunn move in that expansive direction using a compass of compassion. Hopefully their work and similar approaches will be steps toward a broad-ranging cooperation cognizant of both difference and commonality that will aid us in developing a "transcommunal interweaving of the diverse forms taken by the spirit of justice and freedom among the many peoples of the world."[15]

## NOTES

1. Cedric Sunray, "Similarities between Tribes and the Ninth Ward," *Native American Times*, 6 September 2005, 1.

2. John Brown Childs, *Transcommunality: From the Politics of Conversion to the Ethics of Respect* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

3. Carolyn Dunn, "In Our Blood, In Our Bones," in *Hurricane Katrina, Response and Responsibilities*, ed. John Brown Childs (Santa Cruz, CA: New Pacific Press, 2007), 15e.

4. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1947), 3.

5. Andrea Steiner, "Loss of Heritage, Discovery of Injustice, Elders and Premature Babies," in Childs, *Hurricane Katrina, Response and Responsibilities*, 39–40.

6. Editorial, "Disabled and Waiting for Justice," *New York Times*, 11 December 2007, A32.

7. Bob Herbert, "Recession? What Recession?" *New York Times*, 10 November 2007, A27.

8. Editorial, *International Herald Tribune*, 6 January 2006.

9. Matthew Arnold, *Financial Times* [of London], Arts and Life sec., 13–14 October 2007, 2.

10. Anthony De Palma, "E.P.A. Is Sued by 12 States Over Reports of Chemicals," *New York Times*, 29 October 2007, A16.

11. I emphasis the "mainstream media" here because the seriousness of the issues discussed in this essay can be evaluated in part when we find repeated patterns of alarm and criticism in that very media. Close and persistent readings of the mainstream media help to expose the depths of the problem.

12. Gardiner Harris, "F.D.A. Advisers Say Agency Puts Lives at Risk," *New York Times*, 1 December 2007, A12.

13. *New York Times*, 7 December 2007, C3, C6.

14. Jose Barrerio, "Visioning Geneva, the Dream of the Earth," *National Museum of the American Indian* (Winter 2007): 47.

15. Childs, *Transcommunality*, 77.