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# George Bush May Not Like Black People, but No One Gives a Dam about Indigenous Peoples: Visibility and Indianness after the Hurricanes

C. RICHARD KING

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Shortly after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina became clear, NBC televised *A Concert for Hurricane Relief*, a star-studded event watched by more than fourteen million Americans.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most memorable moment of the evening had little to do with charity. Hip-hop artist Kanye West went “off-script” during a live segment of the telethon, voicing an opinion shared by many in the African American community: “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.”<sup>2</sup> In his brief interruption of the choreographed program, West captured the uneasiness and shame many Americans felt regarding not only the federal government’s response to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina but also the stark racial inequalities and class disparities hidden in plain sight in the contemporary United States. Whatever the veracity of his specific charge, West’s comments left an indelible mark on public discourse: race mattered in the social context that made the disaster and its tragic aftermath possible.<sup>3</sup>

Importantly, to the producers and viewers of the telethon, as much as to West, in the wake of the hurricanes that devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005 race mattered in a rather singular fashion, one that cast it in black-and-white terms and located it within impoverished areas of New Orleans. Consequently, the presence and experience of other racially marginalized groups received far less attention in the media. Native Americans, in particular, suffered beyond the glare of the media spotlight, rendered invisible by journalistic biases and public preoccupations. Ironically, although the mainstream media and its audiences all but erased American Indians from the unfolding story of the social crises wrought by Katrina and Rita, during the past two years Indianness

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has played an important role in the framing of New Orleans, the staging of America, and popular perceptions of the crisis. Specifically, although turning away from embodied Indians and their struggles, the media has displayed an abiding fascination with the Mardi Gras Indians, which are predominantly African American collectives, or so-called tribes, that integrate elements and images of Native American cultures into performances held in association with the annual carnival. In what follows, I unpack the uses and understandings of race, Indianness, and nation emergent from this pattern, arguing that as it reflects a long history of appropriation, misrecognition, and symbolic power, it also reiterates the urgency of politicizing representation.

### INVISIBLE INDIANS

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, as the other contributions to this special issue attest, had broad impacts in Indian country: at once visiting destruction and tragedy on tribes in their paths, fostering outrage at government bureaucracy and media neglect, and encouraging philanthropy and community. The American Indian media offer an important vantage point from which to observe the diverse ways in which these storms affected Native Americans. They also provide one measure of the significance of these storms for American Indians. A quick search of Ethnic NewsWatch, an electronic database of the ethnic and Native press, found 191 articles in Native American newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals devoted to Hurricane Katrina alone. Given the importance of the hurricanes within Indian country as well as their impact on six Native nations and the good deeds of countless American Indian individuals and organizations, one would think that the national media would have devoted considerable attention to these victims, volunteers, survivors, and benefactors. Sadly, this was not the case. Even though I used key terms to search ProQuest, a more comprehensive media database and the parent company of Ethnic NewsWatch, for coverage of Hurricane Katrina in US newspapers I retrieved not one national article devoted to American Indians. The search did find a commentary in a New Mexico paper that made passing reference to Native Americans en route to a bigger argument and two local stories, one on a powwow in Yakima, Washington, intended to raise funds for disaster relief and a second from New Orleans about the efforts of Elwin "Warhorse" Gillum, identified as a member of the Chahta Indians of Bonfouca, to stage a charity dinner in advance of Thanksgiving.<sup>4</sup> Only in alternative, politically progressive media outlets, such as New American Media and *Democracy Now!*, did a broader, national audience (limited by technological access and political ideology) have access to indigenous perspectives and experiences through a handful of stories or interviews that emphasized external neglect.<sup>5</sup> Before this special issue, academic interpretations of the hurricanes had yet to engage with their significance in Indian country.

A series of factors combined to render Native Americans invisible in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (and Hurricane Rita). Most importantly, the nature of the media, popular stereotypes of American Indians, and the black-white paradigm all played an important role in erasing indigenous people

during and after the storm. First, the structure of the contemporary media works against depth and understanding. Increasingly shorter news cycles, sound bites, and repetition limit the number of stories and perspectives presented and cement the framing of narratives ever more quickly. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, a central story line came together rather quickly (major metropolitan area faces and lives through catastrophe) and was reiterated often, and it was supplemented and revised as new events (botched evacuation or presidential visit) or characters (George Bush and Kanye West) warranted it. Moreover, New Orleans offered a seemingly unending series of “new” news stories, noteworthy for their immediacy and intensity. As a result, certain stories in New Orleans, along with the difficulties of travel to remote locations or rural areas, turned attention away from American Indians. Finally, most American reporters have no more familiarity with Native Americans, their cultures and histories, or the issues that face them than the average non-Indian person in the United States, which means they are no more likely to know what is happening in Indian country or to be willing and able to cover it.<sup>6</sup>

Second, the media and its audiences in the United States continue to misunderstand and misrepresent American Indians. From sports and cinema through history lessons and news coverage, false information and fake Indians crowd out the everyday experiences and lived identities of indigenous people. Furthermore, many Americans are unaware of the Native nations residing in the southern United States, and when Americans are aware they often associate the Native nations with casinos and/or question their authenticity. Add to this a failure to appreciate the problems and issues that Americans care about, and it is no wonder the news directors, reporters, and citizens believed that the impact of the storm was not newsworthy.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, reportage on and analysis of Hurricane Katrina were quickly framed by a black-white paradigm that makes sense of American history, race relations, and social problems through a binary model that privileges Euro-Americans and African Americans. Although one might want to excuse this move in light of the history and demography of the storm’s epicenter, the history of the region and New Orleans in particular have always refused such reductionism, exhibiting pronounced diversities that together have produced unique local cultures. In spite of this, the coverage of the storm foregrounded blacks and blackness, only marginally and retroactively inserting Latina/Latinos and Asian Americans into the grand narrative of the catastrophe and efforts to recover from it. Even scholarly accounts have fallen back on the black-white paradigm. Michael Eric Dyson provides an excellent illustration of how this analytic lens made it impossible to see the full picture. In his otherwise moving book, *Come Hell or High Water*, Dyson reflects on the circumstances that “colored” Katrina, making it a social and natural disaster of historic proportions, especially for African Americans in New Orleans. For the bulk of the book he focuses on African Americans before noting the untold stories of Latina/Latinos, Asian Americans, and American Indians, which he proceeds to summarize in three pages before returning to his central theme. So long as the black-white paradigm remains central to interpreting social life

in the United States, the uniqueness of indigenous experiences, identities, and histories will remain invisible to much of the American public.<sup>8</sup>

### EVER-PRESENT INDIANNESS

Although American Indians were all but invisible in mainstream media coverage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Indianness has come to be an important element of news reporting in the years since the storm. In particular, the Mardi Gras Indians, an increasingly visible component of the annual carnival, music scene, and regional heritage, have become key symbols of a city and nation in crisis, while providing testament to the resiliency of the human spirit in the face of adversity. In light of their unique history, the fact that the Mardi Gras Indians should emerge as such powerful cultural metaphors is puzzling at best.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, perhaps inspired by Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, working-class African American men in New Orleans organized in tribes or gangs and sought to remake self and society. Initially, violence and danger were attached to this emergent masculine subculture. Collectively, over time they have elaborated a folk idiom relying on their interpretation of Indians, distilled through songs, language, and social organization. Individually, they have fashioned new sequined and feathered costumes annually for Mardi Gras parades and, more recently, for other occasions. Many observers have argued that the Mardi Gras Indians have assembled a counterhegemonic tradition; speaking truth to power, they stake claim to social space, recuperate collective memory, and oppose dominant cultural categories. Although the signs of Indianness at the center of this tradition mirror and extend popular stereotypes, discussions of the Mardi Gras Indians have stressed the historical, genealogical, and symbolic ties between African Americans and Native Americans. Increasingly, as the tradition of masking has moved from the margins to the center, thus becoming a popular element of Mardi Gras, it has been transformed into something tourists associate with the annual carnival and through which the city markets itself. In a real sense, as their enactments of Indianness have become commodified and domesticated, the Mardi Gras Indians have become less oppositional and more symbolically open to appropriation and identification.<sup>9</sup>

One measure of the Mardi Gras Indians' appeal across boundaries once hostile to them has been the number of stories written about them in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In the past two years, at least twenty features have been done on the Mardi Gras Indians. These have appeared in local and national outlets, ranging from the *New York Times* and *Village Voice* to National Public Radio and CNN. Moreover, because a troupe of Mardi Gras Indians traveled on behalf of the Department of State to thank donor nations for their support, they received international coverage as well.

Undoubtedly, the media attention given to the Mardi Gras Indians derives from many of the same factors that encouraged the erasure of Native Americans: news operations centered in New Orleans, professional and corporate desires for newsworthy material (in this case, human interest

stories that could showcase struggle and triumph), and a black-white paradigm. Moreover, the Mardi Gras Indians allowed for a relatively positive focus, stressing the unique culture of New Orleans and the spirit of people committed to their communities and heritage. This positive focus also drew on and accentuated connections between the Crescent City and Mardi Gras, allowing for a framing that did not dwell on the excessive drinking, partying, or other carnivalesque behaviors that some readers would find offensive.

Whereas the Mardi Gras Indians once were quintessentially oppositional figures, abject others to the refined traditions of white and Creole krewes, today they are perhaps better read as metaphorical junctions, encouraging the transit of meanings and identities within and for dominant society. Perhaps most obviously, the meaning and practice of their masking has pivoted around the crossing of cultural boundaries, formulating a hybrid persona to claim value and validity, while challenging stultifying racial and class hierarchies. For Mardi Gras Indians, playing Indian has always grounded the enunciation of identity, creation of community, and capacity to speak truth to power. In media accounts and events staged by the Department of State and others, disembodied traces and signs of Indianness conjured and communicated through racialized bodies and long-marginalized traditions are not read so much as black people playing Indian or otherwise acting at or pretending to be Indians but as the creation of something authentic, bounded, and discrete. Authors routinely speak of the Indians, tribes, regalia, chiefs, and so on. In a sense the fundamental slippage is the willingness, perhaps even the desire, to see, if not celebrate, the Mardi Gras Indians as real Indians. They can stand in as such, furthermore, in part because of the attention to "tradition": descriptions of social structure, roles, and status; rituals; care and creation of regalia; and tribal history.

In a post-Katrina context, repeated references to cultural conventions encourage two stories about Indians. On the one hand, the devastation of New Orleans, the dispersal of people, and the collapsing of infrastructure put these unique cultures and practices in jeopardy. They are at risk of disappearing; the classic "vanishing Indian" trope. On the other hand, many other Mardi Gras Indians have been displaced and labor to save themselves through an adherence to the old ways they have brought with them. Oddly, the key narratives for accounting for the affects of conquest on indigenous people attach themselves with relative ease to this African American subculture through the magic of Indianness. Importantly, the devastated, remade Natives in media stories do not represent themselves but represent something deeper. In this case, their struggles correspond to the struggles of everyone touched by Hurricane Katrina; their survival denotes the survival of Mardi Gras; their culture and its fate comes to embody New Orleans and its future; and their resilience signifies the human spirit and its capacity to find joy and opportunity in the worst circumstances.

The decoupling of Indianness from Indians in post-Katrina narratives perhaps reaches its inevitable climax in the foreign tour of the Mardi Gras Indians sponsored by the Department of State. An eighteen-person delegation made stops in India, Sri Lanka, and the United Arab Emirates to express the

gratitude of the United States to the peoples of these countries. Once again the official rendering of the nation comes through enactments of the people displaced and demonized to create it. Worse, the performances exploited the energies of individuals among the most disadvantaged in the nation and from communities most devastated by government inaction to advance the interests of that same government. As during the cold war, these events surely sought to repackage the disaster and the nation. Moreover, press coverage of these performances all note the origins of the masking tradition, asserting that it emerged as a tribute by African Americans to Native Americans for their efforts to assist and protect runaway slaves. In keeping with the harmonic intent of this mission, such sentiments not only blunt past injustices but also smooth the rough edges of race relations today. Finally, at every stop, the Mardi Gras Indians shared the bill with traditional performers from the host nation, reiterating the Indianness of the American ambassadors, the naturalness of the United States, and the shared humanity of host and guest.

### CONCLUSIONS

If Kanye West is right that “George Bush doesn’t like black people,” then the corollaries must be that no one gives a damn about indigenous people in the contemporary United States, and that Indianness continues to have incredible symbolic power. The erasure of embodied Indians in the coverage of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita echoes the removals from the southeastern United States that so devastated its indigenous inhabitants and cleared the land for colonization. This is yet another removal of American Indians, reflecting the disappearance of Native nations from popular consciousness, while denying them equality and humanity. Meanwhile, the fictions of Indianness thrive, ever present in the prevailing preoccupations of the media and its audiences. They have yet to lose their force or their appeal, but then, why should they have, when they allow individuals to make claims about nation, community, and identity? The key, as activists and intellectuals have demonstrated over the past half century, is to politicize the representation of Indianness and in the process undo or redo it. Some have argued for rhetorical sovereignty that “aim[s] [to] recover the losses from the ravages of colonization,” pursuing “the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires . . . to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse.”<sup>10</sup> Such an approach surely resonates well with other efforts at decolonization in Native North America. However, I would argue, in light of the foregoing discussion, that the contours of race and racism in the contemporary United States, which racialize American Indians in unique ways yet remain caught within a black-white paradigm and ever-more complex mediascapes, demand a multifaceted approach. Such an approach would work toward rhetorical sovereignty, but it would seek to cultivate antiracist sensibilities and subjectivities. To be sure, this would mean furthering the work of advocacy groups such as the Native American Journalists Association, but it would mean something more as well. Such a broad-based approach would necessitate nurturing critical media

literacy, thereby giving authors and audiences a sophisticated toolkit with which to engage embodied American Indians and the world in which they live and through which to deconstruct dominant representations of both. However, it would demand concerted efforts to foster empathy for indigenous peoples, granting individuals and institutions the experience, language, and knowledge necessary not simply to give a damn but to make a difference.

## NOTES

1. "Stars Offer Heartfelt Performances in Benefit," <http://ori.msnbc.msn.com/id/9146525/> (accessed 1 April 2007).

2. Ibid. See also Erica M. Crzja, "Katrina's Southern 'Exposure': The Kanye Race Debate and the Repercussions of Discussion," *Souls* 9, no. 1 (2007): 53–71 and, more generally, <http://www.kanyewasright.org/> (accessed 4 April 2007).

3. Several commentators have suggested that a better formulation of West's assertion would be that over the past quarter century, neoliberalism, taking its most brazen expression under the Bush regime, has hurt poor people and people of color and encouraged Euro-Americans to champion the system while ignoring its racialized consequences. See David Theo Goldberg, "Deva-Stating Disasters: Race in the Shadows of New Orleans," *Du Bois Review* 3, no. 1 (2006): 83–95 and Douglas Kellner, "The Katrina Hurricane Spectacle and Crisis of the Bush Presidency," *Cultural Studies: Critical Methodologies* 7, no. 2 (2007): 222–34.

4. Helen Corneli, "My View: Katrina Exposes Caste System Here in America," *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, 23 October 2005, F3; "Storm Relief: Yakima Valley Reaches Out," *Yakima Herald-Republic*, 14 October 2005, C2; Sharon Sharpe, "Local Tribe Has an Early Thanksgiving Feast," *Times-Picayune*, 24 November 2005, 6.

5. C. Stone Brown, "Katrina's Forgotten Victims: Native American Tribes," [http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view\\_article.html?article\\_id=a58740ea9116f7315f40fe4eb23513fc](http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=a58740ea9116f7315f40fe4eb23513fc) (accessed 15 May 2007); "Indian Tribes and Hurricane Katrina: Overlooked by the Federal Government, Relief Organizations, and the Corporate Media," *Democracy Now!*, <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/10/10/1335220> (accessed 15 May 2007).

6. See Kara Briggs, Tom Arviso, Dennis McAuliffe, and Lori Edmo-Suppah, *The Reading Red Report. Native Americans in the News: A 2002 Report and Content Analysis on Coverage by the Largest Newspapers in the United States* (Native American Journalists Association and NewsWatch, 2002); Mark Anthony Rolo, ed., *The American Indian and the Media*, 2nd ed. (St. Paul, MN: National Conference for Community and Justice, 2000); Mary Ann Weston, *Native Americans in the News: Images of Indians in the Twentieth Century Press* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

7. The literature on the misrecognition and misrepresentation of Native Americans is massive. Good starting points include S. Elizabeth Bird, ed., *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Shari Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Andrew Jolivet, ed., *Cultural Representation in Native America* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006); C. Richard King and Charles F. Springwood, eds., *Team Spirits: The Native American Mascot Controversy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001); Carter Jones Meyer and Diana Royer,



eds., *Selling the Indian: Commercializing and Appropriating American Indian Cultures* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001); Devon Mihesuah, *American Indians: Stereotypes and Realities* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 1997).

8. Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Books, 2006). See also Grace Kao, "Where Are the Asian and Hispanic Victims of Katrina? A Metaphor for Invisible Minorities in Contemporary Racial Discourse," *Du Bois Review* 3, no. 1 (2006): 223–31.

9. A massive amount of literature has examined the history and significance of the Mardi Gras Indians. See Samuel Kinser, *Carnival, American Style: Mardi Gras at New Orleans and Mobile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 151–94; George Lipsitz, "Mardi Gras Indians: Carnival and Counter-Narratives in Black New Orleans," in *Time Passages: Collective Memory and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 233–91; Laura L. Lovett, "'African and Cherokee by Choice': Race and Resistance under Legalized Segregation," *American Indian Quarterly* 22, nos. 1–2 (1999): 203–29; Reid Mitchell, "Mardi Gras Indians," in *All on Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 113–30; Joseph Roach, "Mardi Gras Indians and Others: Genealogies of American Performance," *Theatre Journal* 44 (1992): 461–83; Michael P. Smith, *Mardi Gras Indians* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 1994); and Michael P. Smith, *Spirit World: Pattern in the Expressive Folk Culture of African American New Orleans* (New Orleans: New Orleans Urban Folklife Society, 1984), 81–105.

The Mardi Gras Indians fit into a larger history of playing Indian. Philip Deloria chronicled the centrality of this tradition to American culture and identity in *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998). Other important contributions include Alan Trachtenberg, *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1880–1930* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005) and Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native*. On the complexities of African Americans and this tradition see C. Richard King, "Estrangements: Native American Mascots and Indian/Black Relations," in *Confounding the Color Line: Indian-Black Relations in Historical and Anthropological Perspective*, ed. James L. Brooks (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 346–70.

10. Scott R. Lyons, "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?" *College Composition and Communication* 51, no. 3 (2000): 447–68.