In Zora Neale Hurston’s visionary 1937 novel, Janie Crawford and her boyfriend, Tea Cake, a day laborer, refuse to evacuate their small, unsteady house before a deadly hurricane batters the Florida Everglades, near where I currently live.

“Everybody was talking about it that night. But nobody was worried,” wrote Hurston. “You couldn’t have a hurricane when you’re making seven and eight dollars a day.”

It turns out you could have a hurricane, and other disasters too, even if you’re making considerably less than that. And if you manage to survive that hurricane, you might end up with nothing at all. No home. No food or water. No medical care for
your sick and wounded. Not even body bags or coffins for your dead.

Americans have experienced this scenario before. Not just in prophetic literature or apocalyptic blockbuster movies, but through the very real natural disasters that have plagued other countries. Catastrophes that are eventually reduced to single, shorthand images that, if necessary, can later be evoked. Take, for example, visions of skyscraper-size waves washing away entire crowds in Thailand and other Asian countries devastated by the December 2004 tsunamis. Or remember Sophia Pedro, the Mozambican woman who in March 2000 was plucked by a South African military helicopter from the tree where she had clung for three days and then given birth as the floodwaters swirled beneath her? And let’s not forget Haiti’s September 2004 encounter with Tropical Storm Jeanne, which left three thousand people dead and a quarter million homeless. In that disaster, patients drowned in hospital beds. Children watched as parents were washed away. Survivors sought shelter in trees and on rooftops while corpses floated in the muddy, contaminated waters around them.

As I watched all this unfold again on my television set, this time in the streets of New Orleans in the summer of 2005, I couldn’t help but think of the Bush administration’s initial response to the Haitian victims of Tropical Storm Jeanne the year before Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans: sixty thousand dollars in aid and the repatriation of Haitian refugees from the United States back to the devastated region even before the waters had subsided. New Orleans’ horrific tragedy had been foreshadowed in America’s so-called backyard, and the initial response had been: “Po’ man ain’t got no busi-
ness at de show,” as Zora Neale Hurston’s Tea Cake might have put it.

In the weeks that followed Hurricane Katrina’s landing, I, immigrant writer and southern coastal city resident, heard many Americans of all geographical persuasions, pundits and citizens alike, make the case that the types of horrors that plagued Katrina-ravaged New Orleans—the desperation of ordinary citizens, some of whom resorted to raiding stores to feed themselves and their families; the forgotten public hospitals where nurses pumped oxygen into dying patients by hand; the makeshift triage wards on bridges and airports; the roaming armed gangs—are more in line with our expectations of the “third world” than the first.

Turning to the Kenyan CNN correspondent Jeff Koinange on American Morning a week after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, the anchorwoman Soledad O’Brien said, “You know, to some degree, when you were watching the original pictures . . . if you turned the sound down on your television, if you didn’t know where you were, you might think it was Haiti or maybe one of those African countries, many of which you cover.”

“Watching helpless New Orleans suffering day by day left people everywhere stunned and angry and in ever greater pain,” echoed Time magazine’s Nancy Gibbs. “These things happened in Haiti, they said, but not here.”

Not to be outdone, even the Canadians got in on the act. Chiding her fellow citizens for their self-righteous attitude toward American poverty, Kate Heartfield of the Ottawa Citizen nevertheless added, “Ottawa is not New Orleans. And it is definitely not Freetown or Port-au-Prince.”
It’s hard for those of us who are from places like Freetown or Port-au-Prince, and those of us who are immigrants who still have relatives living in places like Freetown or Port-au-Prince, not to wonder why the so-called developed world needs so desperately to distance itself from us, especially at times when an unimaginable disaster shows exactly how much alike we are. The rest of the world’s poor do not expect much from their governments and they’re usually not disappointed. The poor in the richest country in the world, however, should not be poor at all. They should not even exist. Maybe that’s why both their leaders and a large number of their fellow citizens don’t even realize that they actually do exist.

This is not the America we know, chimed many field reporters who, haunted by the faces and voices of the dying, the stench of bloated corpses on city streets during the day and screams for help rising from attics at night, recorded the early absence of first responders with both sorrow and rage. Their fury could only magnify ours, for if they could make it to New Orleans, Mississippi, and Alabama and give us minute-by-minute accounts of the storm and its aftermath, why couldn’t the government agencies find their way there? Indeed, what these early charged news reports offered was a passport to an America where one does not always have bus fare, much less an automobile, where health insurance is as distant a dream as a college education, where poverty is a birthright, not an accident of fortune. This is the America that continues to startle, the America of the needy and never-have-enoughs, the America of the undocumented, the unemployed and underemployed, the elderly, and the infirm. An America that
remains invisible until a rebellion breaks out, gunshots ring out, or a flood rages through. Perhaps this America does have more in common with the developing world than with the one it inhabits. For the poor and outcast everywhere dwell within their own country, where more often than not they must fend for themselves. That’s why one can so easily become a refugee within one’s own borders—because one’s perceived usefulness and precarious citizenship are always in question, whether in Haiti or in that other America, the one where people have no flood insurance.

I don’t know why it seems always to surprise some Americans that many of their fellow citizens are vulnerable to horrors that routinely plague much of the world’s population. After all, we do share a planet whose climate is gradually being altered by unbalanced exploration and dismal environmental policies that may one day render us all, first world and third world residents alike, helpless in the face of more disasters like Tropical Storm Jeanne and Hurricane Katrina. Let us also not forget the ever-looming menace of 9/11-like terrorism, which can potentially have the same effect, landing thousands on street corners and in Astrodomes asking themselves how they came to be there.

The poor and displaced are indeed sometimes better off in places far from their impoverished homes. But in the end, must poverty also force us to live deprived of homestead, birthplace, history, memory? In the case of Hurricane Katrina, was it really a flood that washed away that nuanced privilege of deciding where one should build one’s life, or was this right slowly being stripped away while we were already too horrified to watch?
One of the advantages of being an immigrant is that two very different countries are forced to merge within you. The language you were born speaking and the one you will probably die speaking have no choice but to find a common place in your brain and regularly merge there. So too with catastrophes and disasters, which inevitably force you to rethink facile allegiances.

Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Masood Farivar, a former Afghan mujahideen who received part of his education in a madrassa in Pakistan, wrote, “As an Afghan, I’d never carried the black, red, and green flag of my own country. Suddenly though, I wanted to feel what it was like to proudly hold a flag, wave it at passing ambulances, police cars, and fire trucks. It would be a good way to show my solidarity with Americans. It was my way of saying, we’re in this together. I’m with you. I share your pain.”

“I come from the so-called Third World,” wrote the Chilean novelist and memoirist Isabel Allende after September 11, 2001, a day that also marked the twenty-eighth anniversary of a U.S.-sponsored coup d’état against her uncle, Salvador Allende. Still, she writes,

Until only a short time ago, if someone had asked me where I’m from, I would have answered, without much thought, Nowhere; or, Latin America; or, maybe, In my heart I’m Chilean. Today, however, I say I’m an American, not simply because that’s what my passport verifies, or because that word includes all of America from north to south, or because my husband, my son, my grandchildren, most of my friends, my books, and my home are in northern California; but because a terrorist attack
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destroyed the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and starting with that instant, many things have changed. We can’t be neutral in moments of crisis. . . . I no longer feel that I am an alien in the United States.

After the horrible carnage of September 11th, hadn’t the world echoed Farivar’s and Allende’s sentiments and also declared, through many headlines in newspapers across the globe, that we were all Americans?

At least for a while.

Among the many realities brought to light by Hurricane Katrina was that never again could we justifiably deny the existence of this country within a country, that other America, which America’s immigrants and the rest of the world may know much more intimately than many Americans do, the America that is always on the brink of humanitarian and ecological disaster. No, it is not Haiti or Mozambique or Bangladesh, but it might as well be.