

Eight Layers of Refuge in New Orleans

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I

In late 2015, the media hysteria about the “onslaught” of Syrian refugees began to seep into the public discourse of New Orleans, the city where I live. Anxiety and distrust concerning Syrian refugees—which first began in Syria’s neighboring countries before it spread to Western Europe and then the United States—had now found a home in Southeast Louisiana. On blogs, Facebook, and Twitter, the bleating grew louder: one particularly pervasive rumor had it that there would be 10,000 Syrian refugees arriving in New Orleans by the beginning of 2016. Even the Governor of Louisiana, Bobby Jindal, got in on the act. He conveyed apprehension about Syrian refugees, a group of desperate people who have been torn from their homes by civil war.

Bobby Jindal is no longer the governor of this state, but I couldn’t help but think about the fear that he and many others had about external threats when an act of domestic terror occurred in the city where he once held office—Baton Rouge, the state capital, just an hour or so north of New Orleans. Seemingly in response to an African American man killed by police officers outside a gas station, another young man killed three

police officers. There was a sense of terror in the days after that was palpable in Baton Rouge, but it had nothing to do with foreign extremism.

By the way: at the end of all this chatter about the threat of Syrian refugees—around late November 2015—there were only 14 in the entire state of Louisiana. There has since been no outside terrorism perpetrated by Syrians in New Orleans or anywhere else in Louisiana. This shows how the word “refugee” has, especially amongst xenophobes, become too readily associated with terror.

II

If we want to go by one of the dictionary definitions of the word, New Orleans has always been a place that people have taken refuge. When it was first settled by the French in the early 1700s, French men and women left their home country to seek freedom and opportunity in the New World, and by doing so set the foundations of the city. But as important as the roots they put down is the decision they made to leave somewhere, anywhere. When Louisiana became part of the Spanish Empire after the Treaty of Paris in 1763, another wave of Europeans arrived who were looking to leave the place where they were born. There was an undulating universe of reasons why someone would move from Europe to North America: from religious to commercial to romantic. The next layer of peoples that came to this city might be closer to what we understand by the word “refugee” today—the first Haitians. Some background: In 1804, the Haitian Revolution was achieved, and the world’s first and only successful slave revolution had led to the establishment of the world’s first black republic. A group of revolutionaries unlike any before—people who had been under the yoke of a brutal, at times genocidal form of the French colonial project on an island in the Caribbean—had defeated Napoleon and his army.

There are many other monumental events in universal history that deserve contemplation, but the fact is that the enslaved peoples of Haiti wrested their lives from an all-encompassing imperial force that wanted them dead —exterminated, gone, blood, bone, dust. Led by a set of courageous leaders, including perhaps the two most famous, Toussaint L'Ouverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the revolutionaries defeated the French forces and laid the foundation for a new nation. The ripples of this unprecedented moment in history spread out from the Caribbean through the rest of the world, including, perhaps most immediately and dramatically, New Orleans. At the time of the Haitian Revolution, New Orleans was still under Spanish control.

But the thousands of refugees, both French-speaking whites and free people of color (*gens de couleur libres*), that fled to New Orleans from Haiti imprinted French culture in the region. Many of the whites who came to New Orleans had ended up in Haiti because they were on the run from another revolution: the French one. This is the foundation of the French Quarter, a world away from the Las Vegas-like sheen parts of the neighborhood have today.

III

In his 2013 novel, *City of Refuge*, Tom Piazza constructs a narrative that relates to another recent connection between the word “refugee” and New Orleans. Piazza’s book brings to life the fractured post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans’ landscape by telling the story of two families, one black and one white, and how they reacted to the immediate effect of the storm: one family deciding to leave the city first for Mississippi and then on to Illinois, the other deciding to weather the storm at home in the Lower Ninth Ward. One of the costliest (in terms of both human life and property) natural and man-made disasters in U.S. history, Hurricane

Katrina left the majority of the city under water and federal agencies stumbling in their initial rescue attempts. New Orleans has long been seen as a regional outlier—one expert has described the city as “by almost any metric the worst in America: the deepest poverty, the most murders, the worst schools, and the sickest economy.” And the people who were forced to leave this place because of the worst man-made disaster in the history of the U.S. were referred to time and again in the media as refugees. Piazza’s book is important because, by showing these people as fellow Americans and not just people who all of a sudden were forced to leave a city 80% covered in water, as people who had to move to far-flung states and cities and did not want to be called refugees. (That’s not my interpretation; just Google “Katrina refugees” and you’ll see the sentiment of the people being labeled that way.)

IV

A couple of years ago, I met a South African in an Irish bar in the Uptown neighborhood of New Orleans. He had come to live here with his family because his father worked in the oil industry. As with many people who come to live in one country from another, whether they fit the United Nations definition of refugee or not, our conversation soon turned to the countries from which we came, and just how different those countries are from the United States, and, by extension, New Orleans. We talked about the different aspects of living in this city today: the next festival or a new restaurant. And then he said to me, out of the blue, “I bet you know a lot of South Africans.”

When I was young, about eleven years old, a large influx of mostly white South Africans came to live in New Zealand. Many were leaving because of the end of the apartheid regime and the election of the African National Congress, led by Nelson Mandela, and the movement of

political power from the white minority to the disenfranchised and alienated black majority.

He told me that his family had left because of the ANC's ascendancy, and that his family would never have what they used to have. He rued the changes in South Africa how the country had "gone to the dogs." I asked him if he considered himself a refugee, and he gave me a sharp look. No, he said, they were just "immigrants." He didn't seem to recognize the irony of his family leaving South Africa and its impending black majority rule only to settle in New Orleans, a place once dubbed "Chocolate City" by its black mayor, which remains a term endorsed by many of its black residents. How do you square that circle?

V

A couple of weeks ago, I ordered an Uber to head to a Vodou ceremony in downtown New Orleans. I have written articles and a dissertation about Haiti, a country I first went to when I was 25. At that age, I was confident I would find some special insight into the country that seemed to me, a place about as far from New Zealand in terms of history, culture, and physical appearance as possible (well, both New Zealand and Haiti are incredibly mountainous islands). I am pretty sure that I did not gain any special insight, but the trip convinced me that this corner of the Caribbean was fascinating. I have continued to write and read about Haiti, and that is what took me to the Vodou ceremony in an Uber on a Tuesday evening. I was talking to the Uber driver about the ceremony, about the little I knew at that time about the contemporary practice of New Orleans Vodou, about my experiences in Haiti. He asked follow-up questions, so I kept on talking, thinking that he might be interested in what I was saying. At the end of the trip, he turned around and in his American accent told me that he was born and raised in Haiti.

He was kind not to have cut me off earlier, and I thanked him, sheepishly, for letting me babble on.

VI

To be sure, Haiti, and the story of its founding, is a central thread to understanding New Orleans history. But if I am going to talk about the layer of Haitians, white and black, who fled the aftermath of a bloody rebellion to pursue new lives in New Orleans, then I also have to talk about another set of people who fled war and the hell that it leaves behind to come to this city: the Vietnamese immigrants to Louisiana in the 1970s. Vietnamese-American culture is an indelible facet of New Orleans, as deeply entrenched—if often less visible—as any other part of New Orleans’s complex and dynamic cultural multiverse. The first wave of Vietnamese arrived in New Orleans after the fall of Saigon in 1975, and the climate (hot) and majority religion (Catholic) were appealing to many. Most settled in New Orleans East, and today there are more than 14,000 Vietnamese-Americans who have made this city their home, while also making this city *this city*. And one significant part of their contribution is food, a fantastic blend of Vietnamese cuisine with French colonial influences. This is a big part of my life: I live down the block from Lilly’s, one of the best Vietnamese restaurants in the city. It is a blessing.

VII

I am not a refugee. I have never had to flee from the kinds of political strife and violence and persecution for which the term usually applies. I am from New Zealand, a country that was recently ranked the least

corrupt nation in the world. Apparently, New Zealand is a very desirable place for people to live, and I cannot begin to recall how many times people in New Orleans have been shocked that I chose to live in the American South over a beautiful set of islands in the South Pacific. The privilege that comes with choosing to live in a place—I desire to go here, so I will—is limited to a minority in this world. Last week, I received a Green Card, something that took hard work and time, but it was still wrapped up in the opportunities that I had by growing up in a middle-class family in an Anglophone country. So, as I began to write this, I started to think of the layers of people that have come to New Orleans, the ways that people have come here, the things they might have been running to, the things that they might have been running from. There are so many more layers, so many more connections to refuge in this city—the Germans, the Italians, the Hondurans. All the other layers that pile up here, in this place: New Orleans.