

Defying Adversity, Wherever We Are

A Guest Editorial by Richard Campanella, published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, January 30, 2010

Metaphors relate unfamiliar or abstract concepts to things that are known and concrete. Local lexicon abounds in them: New Orleanians have adopted various metaphors to describe the adventures of the post-Katrina era, while outside observers have adopted New Orleans itself as a metaphor for troubling worldwide trends. Only recently have these “place metaphors” become positive and inspiring—and that’s where the Saints come marching in.

Think of the vocabulary of the past five years. We used the metaphor “wiped the slate clean” to describe (erroneously, as it turned out) the effect of the floodwaters on the cityscape. We spoke of “the green dot map,” “shrinking the footprint,” and the “jack-o-lantern effect” to grapple rhetorically with the bitterly controversial proposal to close down certain neighborhoods (which didn’t happen), and the problematic pattern of piecemeal recovery (which did). “Sliver by the river” and “the bowl” became geographical and topographical metaphors. “Chocolate city” and “brain gain” became demographic metaphors. “The chicken-and-egg problem” described the dilemma of whether businesses should reopen in depopulated neighborhoods. Postdiluvian New Orleans became, well, awash in metaphors.

A similar tendency occurred worldwide. Countless politicians, activists, and keynote speakers have, since 2005, invoked the name of our city as a metaphor for everything from federal neglect, urban decay, environmental deterioration, and American decline, to poverty, bigotry, disparity, and iniquity. Do a Goggle search *on* the metaphor [“New Orleans is a poster child for”], and you will see New Orleans invoked *as* a metaphor for “global warming,” “economic insecurity,” “urban vulnerability,” “the harm done by blanket government social programs,” “human arrogance in the face of nature and disregard for the environment”—and that’s just the first five hits.

Pretty grim stuff.

But recently New Orleanians have metaphorically turned the tables on this rhetorical trend. Consider, for example, the poignantly enigmatic slogan, “Be a New Orleanian Wherever You Are.” How interesting: here we are ascribing certain positive characteristics to the people and culture of this place, and advocating that they be recognized, appreciated, and adopted in other places. Exactly what those characteristics are goes cleverly unexplained. For some it may be love-of-place; for others it’s festivity, creativity, musicality, *carpe diem*, or simply greeting a stranger on the street—an act, incidentally, viewed as bizarre or even threatening in some cities. New Orleanians as metaphors for something positive, something good, something from which the rest of the nation can benefit: now we’re on the right track.

And speaking of nations, consider the “Who Dat Nation.” Here we have a metaphorical nationality in which citizenship depends not on borders or birthplace, but passionate love

of the Saints—and, right behind that, of New Orleans. It's no coincidence that, while the chant "Who Dat" dates back decades, the phrase "Who Dat Nation" appears to be mostly a post-Katrina phenomenon. Why? Because the cheerful defiance of adversity has universal human appeal. The Who Dat Nation defies four decades of franchise frustration, four decades of municipal decline, and, most significantly, four recent years of bad memories. "Who Dat Nation" offers an alternative to the use of New Orleans as a metaphor for despair. To those who dismiss sports as a trivial and illusionary distraction, consider the civic narratives at work here: Unity. Resilience. Optimism.

Pretty powerful stuff.

The appeal of these themes has expanded the Who Dat Nation beyond national borders. A colleague of mine in Paris, Julie Hernandez, informed me of the street celebrations erupting near Notre Dame "when the game finished around 4:30 am, which is the deadest time of night in Paris (especially on Sundays): no cars, no sounds.... We biked back from the Left Bank and heard people cheering and Who-Dat-ing at the top of their lungs."

She added thoughtfully, "The interesting thing was that a lot of people were rooting for the Saints but very few actually had any ties to New Orleans."

They were being New Orleanians wherever they were—metaphorically.

Tulane geographer Richard Campanella is the author of "Bienville's Dilemma," "Geographies of New Orleans," and other books. He may be reached at rcampane@tulane.edu