

What Does It Mean To Be a New Orleanian?

Richard Campanella December 8, 2013

This editorial, which was published on the front page of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* as well as on *The Lens* and *Nola.com* websites on December 8, 2013, was written by the author in response to a request to explore this question from the editors of *The Lens*.

Bumper stickers don't always provide healthy nourishment for the mind. But "Be a New Orleanian Wherever You Are," which has been posted ubiquitously in the past few years, strikes me as an exception. I find myself mulling that slogan and its implications, and in the process, exploring exactly what we mean when we say "New Orleanian."

Blake Haney of Dirty Coast coined that slogan in the autumn of 2005, as encouragement to hundreds of thousands of displaced New Orleanians to keep their cultural flame burning. Now, eight years on, settlement decisions have been made, and by most measures, newcomers outnumber returnees in the postdiluvian population. Thus the slogan has taken on new implications, chief among them that being a New Orleanian does not require local residency, much less nativity. Haney also refrained from posting suggestive iconography on the sticker, such as parasol-twirling second-liners or saxophonists leaning against lampposts. This leaves the slogan wide open for anyone to ascribe their own meaning and take personal ownership of the results — hence its universal appeal.

We do, however, have a sense of where the author intended to steer us. Being a New Orleanian, I suspect, implies tolerance, open-mindedness and making peace with the differences that divide us. It permits indulging in the pleasures of life here and now and not worrying too much about the unknowable tomorrows. It means narrowing the gap between who you say you are and who you really are. It's dancing in the street without feeling self-conscious, greeting strangers without a sense of threat, enjoying good food and libations without feeling profligate, and being at once dashing, warm, laid back and zesty. It's the *tout ensemble* of *laissez faire* plus *carpe diem* with a little *joie de vivre* thrown in as *lagniappe*. I have to borrow words from other languages to express what I sense the author, and most people, take "being a New Orleanian" to mean.

As open-minded as these arguments for local identity may be, they are also paradoxically exclusionary. Is there any room for introverts in this characterization of "New Orleanian"? For nerdy wall flowers who'd rather not dance? For worrywarts, teetotalers and traditionalists? Or does everyone have to be an outspoken *bon vivant* sashaying in the streets? I bet modest folks exist here in numbers commensurate to elsewhere, and if we're as inclusive and cosmopolitan as we say we are, they too are "New Orleanian."

The slogan has more explicit problems. If being a New Orleanian means exhibiting a certain spunky spontaneity, then why must people be instructed, or even encouraged, to so be? Shouldn't "being a New Orleanian" happen, well, spontaneously? Like eccentricity, those who try to possess it cannot, because the very fact that they are trying betrays them as calculating, manipulative and anything but eccentric. The same can be said of another bumper-sticker slogan, "Keep Austin Weird:" a *bona fide* weirdo would never think to issue such advice, much less follow it. "If you seek authenticity for authenticity's sake," existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once said, "you are no longer authentic." I'm inclined to suggest that folks just be themselves, and let the chips fall where they may. If Austin really is weird, it will keep that way. And if being a New Orleanian really means something, it will become self-evident. No need for directives.

Another problem entails the "wherever you are" half of the slogan. This clause detaches the cultural characteristics of a people from the physical space and historical depth of their place. It severs them from informing sources and nourishing tap roots. The live oaks, the heat, the humidity, the sinking soils, the

termite-infested shotgun houses, the tragedies, the triumphs, the uncertain future: all are now declared optional ingredients in the rendering of the New Orleanian. The clause reduces local culture to a conveniently portable lifestyle choice that can be affixed like, well, a bumper sticker, and driven to higher, safer latitudes. It presumes that the actual city has finished evolving and is no longer capable of reinventing itself in the future, or of rethinking its past. It de-localizes local culture and franchises it out globally, and in the process, inadvertently insinuates that New Orleans may not be as *sui generis* as we supposed. And it naively pretends all is well among all New Orleanians, that there are no problematic traits *not* worth exporting.

We like to think that pluck and tolerance define local identity, but they are trumped by, I believe, plain old geography. Put simply, you've got to live here — you've got to *cast your lot here* — to lay unconditional, nonfigurative claim to the demonym “New Orleanian.” It's not just a state of mind. It's a state of place.

But it's in the realm of geography that being a New Orleanian — and the credential-like power of civic standing that comes with it — gets prickly. Is being a New Orleanian predicated purely on residency, or is it enhanced and strengthened by having been born here? Does someone with deep local roots have greater claim to “New Orleanian” than someone with shallow or transplanted roots? Is having attended high school here the nativity litmus test? Do pre-Katrina transplants speak with more authority than post-Katrina brain-gainers? What about those displaced by the flood? And how do we handle the spatial and temporal gradations of both residency and nativity: does a transplanted resident of many years have more or less standing than a returned native who's been away for many years? Distance-wise, what's close enough (Kenner? Covington? Thibodaux?) or too far to count as “here”? Time-wise, what's a sufficiently early point of arrival (1700s? 1850s? 1980s?), and what's too recent? My ears are open to all sides of this public discussion, but I suspect — indeed I hope — the jury will forever be out. The true answer probably lies more in the eternal debate than in any one strident, absolutist response.

Like ethnicity, local identity is highly personal, and we should resist the temptation to police its margins, even as we recognize it has an undisputed core. Self-identification is probably the best answer: You're a New Orleanian if you think you are, say you are, live where you say, and mean what you think. *Joie de vivre*, a *laissez faire* attitude, and a penchant for gumbo and second-lining may be appealing and picturesque traits in our civic imagination, but they are not, I believe, critical to local identity; a vibrant metropolis should embrace all types, and impose no personality test at the city gate. And if you live elsewhere and feel strongly that you carry a piece of New Orleans with you, we have ways to articulate that sentiment that graciously fall short of an unconditioned “New Orleanian” — for example, “I live in so-and-so *but I'm really a New Orleanian at heart*,” or “I'm from New Orleans and hope to return there.” Tennessee Williams probably said it best, calling New Orleans his “spiritual home” in the times he did not reside here.

Blake Haney, who enlisted me to write an essay on this topic in 2012, is pithier than I am. His “Be a New Orleanian Wherever You Are” is a thoughtful and appealing gem that deservedly sells well. But if I were so graceless as to rephrase it, it would read “Be a New Orleanian. Live here and just be yourself.”

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