

The Chameleon Fallacy

by Shane Norwood

Part 1. New Orleans

One of the names people use for New Orleans is The Big Easy. It's a good name. It sounds like what it is. A fine spicy hot stew, a mint julep, a big lazy muddy river, a bittersweet city with a bite to it, a human filé gumbo, a *Homo sapiens* cocktail concocted from the descendants of people from the four winds. An ever-changing flow of humanity moving over a landscape as unpredictable as the sandbanks in the Mississippi, where things are never what they seem, but where it is easy to see them not as they are, but as you wish them to be. Until, that is, the hornet hiding in the perfumed magnolia stings you on the nose, and the southern belle turns out to be a gator in disguise.

When people of such diversity come together, something happens. You get friction, sure, and you get your fair share of Stormy Mondays and Black Fridays, not to mention Fat Tuesdays, but you also get something else. You get hybrid vigor, and crosspollination, and an exchange of ideas and blood and spirit that eventually develops its own special mojo. A unique culture and identity. And in this particular case, you get jazz, baby.

Another of the names people use for New Orleans is the Crescent City, because of the shape it makes on the littoral. New Orleans is on and of the river. The river defines it. Without the river it wouldn't be New Orleans and it wouldn't be the Big Easy. Of course, history is a matter of perspective, and often depends upon where you're looking at it from. Which means that to a great many of the people who have lived there over the centuries, New Orleans wasn't the Big Easy at all. It was the Big Badass, and the crescent was a bite mark.

In 1706, a group of people who called themselves the

Chitimacha was sitting on the banks of the Mississippi, where they had been living for six thousand years minding their own business, when the French Navy rocked up and told them to haul ass. The customary unpleasantness ensued, with the usual consequences, and by 1786 the Chitimacha didn't have any asses left to haul.

This was when Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville founded a city in the delta and, in a flagrant piece of kissassery, called it New Orleans, after the Duke of Orléans, who was running the show in France at the time. So up to that point it was a pretty straightforward case of colonial subjugation—exploitation, rape, pillage, etc., etc.—but then the story got a tad complicated. It went something like this...

The Seven Years' War kicks off and the French get handed their asses by the Brits so they turn Louisiana over to the Spanish, but the Americans whup the Brits and start waving the Star-Spangled Banner around. Then Napoleon fires a few cannons at the Bastille and the French make him the big *fromage* so he buys back Louisiana from the Spanish, which he tries to keep under his little cockaded tricorne hat. The Americans get wind of it, so Napoleon sends an army to secure New Orleans, and the Americans start to worry in case the French decide to free all the slaves. The Americans start making noises about duking it out with the French, but then the Haitians start their own revolution. They kick French butt with the help of a little yellow fever—and Napoleon, who is about to embroil his nation in yet another bout of fisticuffs with the Brits, throws a hissy fit because he can't get his grasping little Gallic hands on the sugar and decides to wash his hands of the whole damn show.

Get the picture? No, me neither, but anyway, this is when Thomas Jefferson makes a sucker out of Napoleon with the Louisiana Purchase. Old Boney was hell on wheels when it came to an international punch-up, but in the real

estate business he was a serious *schlemiel*, and Jefferson chiseled him out of all or parts of what are now Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, New Mexico, Texas, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Louisiana, including New Orleans, with a couple of bits of Canada thrown in for good measure, for the modern equivalent of half of what it cost to build the Mercedes-Benz Superdome. Way to go, Nappy!

So, since who owned the joint was pretty much sorted out, the next point of contention was what language they were going to speak. Officially, English had the nod, but most of the Creoles spoke French, and boatloads of disenfranchised Francophones from Haiti started sailing up the river, so it was *de facto* decided to just let it roll with the lingo and see how it panned out. When the Irish and the Germans started showing up in numbers, nobody knew what the fuck they were talking about anyway, so it didn't make much of a difference.

On the subject of language: It is amazing how a trite little piece of eco-speak like "Triangular Trade" can disguise something as abhorrent as slavery, but that's what the good old Europeans called it. It was a doozy of a plan, and easy too, if you had a couple of ships handy, and some guns, and a length of chain or two lying about. All you had to do was gather together a few beads, a couple of mirrors, a bolt of calico, and a few substandard muskets, and sail over to West Africa. You find some king or other who has been busy devastating the countryside and capturing everybody, and you trade all the gewgaws for a shipload of men and women. Then you chain them all together and set sail for the Americas, so that the ones who survive the trip under inconceivably horrendous conditions—"The Middle Passage" was the nice little turn of phrase used there—can be swapped for sugar and cotton, so that the chained-together people can be forced to grow more sugar and cotton. Then all you have to do is sail back to Europe, sell

the sugar and cotton for a usurious profit, use some of it to buy more doodads, and away you go again.

Being a seaport at the head of a mighty river that stretches right into the guts of the country, New Orleans was a great spot for sending the chained-together people up into the country, and the sugar and cotton back out of it. In fairness, there was a lot of less-reprehensible business going on as well, and many of the black residents of New Orleans were referred to as *gens de couleur libres*, or free people of color, which is a lot better than what they get called today in some quarters—but it's undeniable that a lot of white folks got mighty rich from chaining black folks together, and, as a consequence, by 1840 New Orleans was the richest city in the land.

Things began to change some when the difference of opinion between the States began. New Orleans was occupied by a Northern army under the command of one Major General Benjamin F. Butler, also referred to as "Beast" or "Spoons." You don't come by handles like that by dancing with the old ladies at church socials. It seems some of Spoon's Yankee boys got slapped around in the streets by some southern belles on account of their practice of making free and loose with the ladies' household goods. Apparently Spoons came to the conclusion that the French language was responsible for this distinctly un-American behavior, so he abolished it. Of course, you can't stop people from speaking their own language altogether, but he did manage to put something of a dent in it. It never fully recovered, and the issue of what language was going to be spoken in New Orleans had been by and large, if not amicably, resolved.

In 1872, just to show there were no hard feelings about all that chaining-people-together business, P. B. S. Pinchback, a man of African descent—well, African-ish, or one-eighth to be exact—was elected Governor of Louisiana. But it seems that even one-eighth was just too much for

the white folks, and he even had some Injun blood in him too, which was never gonna fly. So Jim Crow and his pal Mr. Segregation came to town and stayed until the sixties, until the Civil Rights Movement kicked their asses the hell out, and Norman Rockwell got to paint little Ruby Bridges going to school with the white kids. It's a pretty picture.

Later in the decade, New Orleans started to get outmuscled by the other big dogs in the gulf, and the saints went marching out. New Orleans started to drift backward, back toward its days as a sleepy backwater. The tourists kept it alive. Mardi Gras, Preservation Hall, the French Quarter, lies and legends, plastic voodoo, plastic beads, watered-down hurricanes, imported oysters, Dr. John, hammered varsity jocks puking on the corners and tipsy cheerleaders flashing their tits from the ornate balconies, Mr. and Mrs. Buttleft Wyoming picking their way through streets filled with winos and mule shit, trying to get to the heart of the night, not realizing that it doesn't have one. But, in its own way, that's a pretty picture too.

The real deal wasn't so pretty, and never is. There is no Mr. Bluebird on your shoulder, in New Orleans or anywhere else. There is no Big Easy, and there never was. It's just that in New Orleans, at certain times of the day, in certain kinds of light, under certain kinds of sky, or in the hot nights when the heady heavy heavenly smell of blooms is in the air, and the moon looks down like the eye of Yahweh, and the ghost of Buddy Bolden can be heard blowing his golden horn from across the levee, it seems like there might be.

But it's an illusion. And it's also a good place to start, because that's what this story is really about: illusion.