

On Crawfish Boats and Taco Baskets

BY
JOHN T. EDGE

“So you’re saying my mother is a racist.” I heard weariness, not anger, in the voice of Jean-Paul Bourgeois, executive chef of two Southern-focused restaurants in Manhattan, as we commiserated over drinks this past December. Since the election, Jean-Paul has absorbed and endured the assumptions of New York City friends about the people of Cajun Country, where Trump bested Clinton, racking up fifty-point-plus parish leads. If his Manhattan friends believed (incorrectly) that all Trump voters are racists, they believed (also incorrectly) that his mother is a racist. When Jean-Paul connected those assumptions to his own family, the high-bank dam that separated his life today from his birth in Louisiana overtopped.

Back in Jones County, Georgia, where I was born, Trump won more than twice as many votes as Clinton. In Lafayette County, Mississippi, where I now live with my wife and our son, Clinton lost by nearly fifteen percent. No matter how I might define myself, Trump people are my people. And they are Jean-Paul’s.

During the campaign, I learned to despise Trump. Listening to him speak, watching him froth a crowd to violence, reading his churlish Twitter posts, I recognized a willfully ignorant man who used fear to bludgeon voters into warring camps riven by class and race, as well as ethnic, religious, and gender differences. As I write these words, Trump just appointed a cabinet of climate-change deniers and minimum-wage-hike foes that makes me want to gutter-spit. But I haven’t suffered the leap of logic that hit Jean-Paul. Here in Oxford, it’s clear that a vote for Trump was not merely a vote for racism.

Trump votes have fueled racist and bigoted acts. And Trump votes will abet all manner

of bigotry over the long four years to come. But Trump voters are not, by default, racists or bigots. (Nor are they fascists, despite the obvious tendencies of their chosen leader.) Instead, they are the neighbor who fetches my mother-in-law’s newspaper, the physical plant worker who repairs my office heater, the guy in the jacked-up pickup who lets me cut in front of him in my Fiat, the woman who manages the office at my father’s apartment building.

Like many in the region, I’ve struggled toward empathy during this discontented winter, responding to the moment with tacks lifted from an outdated Reagan-era playbook. Trump voters were duped, I told myself. They were baited and switched. They voted against their best interests. Trump led them toward darkness and hate. All of those responses were expected. Most were true. None were palliative. Like any good writer, I retreated to the library.

I dug into *Making Whiteness*, Grace Elizabeth Hale’s study of how whites forged cultural segregation and used the white-other divide to manage social change in the wake of Reconstruction. In *White Rage*, Carol Anderson helped me understand how the modern “trigger for white rage, inevitably, is black advancement.” She makes sense of why white-on-black violence has spiked and how Obama begat Trump. Both books offered clarity, but neither offered me a path toward empathy for the voters who delivered Trump’s yard sale of bigotry and bluster to my street.

An answer awaited in southwestern Louisiana. More specifically, I found a way forward in a book set there. John Laudun’s *The Amazing Crawfish Boat* focuses on Cajun Country, where my friend Jean-Paul was born and where he often returns to duck hunt. At its core, Laudun’s book chronicles the men who

prototyped and fabricated the amphibious vehicles that modernized crawfish farming and made their crop widely available outside southwestern Louisiana. Read another way, it’s a compassionate ethnography of a Trump voting precinct.

Three quarters of the way through, I called Laudun to talk through that second read. “A lot of people have ennobled them,” said the Lafayette, Louisiana-based folklorist, speaking of the niggling respect accorded the men he writes about and the work they do. “But few have empowered them.” Laudun—who previously wrote the study “‘There’s Not Much to Talk about When You’re Taking Pictures of Houses’: The Poetics of Vernacular Spaces”—knows the Cajun prairies and their built environments. He wasn’t talking about Trump voters. But he did isolate the issue. And he challenged me to think about the patronizing manner in which I talk about people who possess the knowledge to make my world work in new and better ways.

During that conversation, Laudun argued against economic incentives for the Louisiana film industry, which give tax breaks to movie producers who boost the economy when they hire skilled local laborers to execute their vision. That dependence on outside opinion and intellect, instead of homegrown talent and promise, is one source of the rage that enlivens Trump voters. They believe they lack a voice. They think they lack influence. Laudun grounded comparable failures of appreciation in the metalworking shops of southwestern Louisiana. And he wondered whether it might be possible to fund research and development projects driven by the men he met while researching his book.

A generation back, in similar tin-roofed and steel-framed buildings, men from these parish-



es adapted Russian army camp-stove technology to fabricate the stainless-steel pig-cooking boxes now sold as Cajun microwaves. They might imagine more, they might do more, Laudun suggested, if government invested in small, family-owned metal fabrication companies like theirs, and if the broader public valued their work as a creative response to the demands of landscape and the needs of people.

Not long after I moved to Oxford in 1995, NI became a frequent Cajun Country visitor, driving five hours south and two hours west to gambol up and over levee berms and scuff through gravel lots and claim seats at bunkhouse restaurants that locals call boiling points. I sucked heads and ate tails at the Guiding Star, on the fringe of New Iberia, where they cooked Atchafalaya Basin crawfish in Tabasco mash and draped the tables in day-old newspapers. I pilgrimaged to Hawk’s, a remote shebang tucked among the sinuous rice fields outside Rayne, whose owner, a fellow traveler of the crawfish boat confederacy, studied a technique developed at Texas A&M that makes use of an ingenious aerator to purge his crawfish of entrail funk, rendering a sweeter meat, worthy of a higher price.

As the years rolled by, I traveled less often to eat crawfish. Instead, the crawfish came to me. First one trailer, parked alongside the car wash north of the Oxford square, selling Atchafalaya imports by the bag. Then a second, with more dependable hours, fatter potatoes, and plumper corn, behind my dentist’s office. Now, six months out of twelve, four trailers in Oxford serve crawfish boiled in battered aluminum pots awash with red-pepper-flecked water and ladled from insulated coolers. In this college town, their arrival has made possible drunken fraternity fundraisers, and, for our family, easy Saturday afternoon porch parties.

A loose alliance of men who operate machine shops in the orbit of Lafayette, Louisiana—bending sheet metal, welding fuselage and paddlewheels, crafting flat-bottomed and cleat-wheeled crawfish boats that traverse dikes easily and maneuver shallow fields effortlessly—made everyday crawfish possible. Before those boats debuted, farmers harvested rice-stubble-fed crawfish while wading through flooded fields, dumping traps full of wriggling red bodies into plastic kiddie pools they pulled behind.

They had been small-time farmers, work-

ing a second crop for little return. Now, they pilot paddlewheel-cleated amphibious boats, conceived for their harvest and powered by motors created for the industry, with names like GoDevil, GatorTail, and Mud Buddy. Taking advantage of technology developed by the presumed Trump voters who inhabit the Cajun plains, farmers can now empty one hundred acres of traps in an eight-hour day.

With those innovations in mind, Laudun hints at the dismissive ways that many, including myself, too often characterize blue-collar folk. Instead, he lauds their virtues, and listens for promise in their lives and their work, writing: “The buildings that dot the landscape should not be dismissed as bastions of unthinking men bashing out bits of metal, but rather imagined as being akin to nurseries, places where the blue arc of creativity is protected, nurtured.”

What good can come of thinking and writing about farmers and farm goods and the creative processes that put food on our tables when the shit has hit the fan, rendering the South a pointillist scat storm? In the month since Jean-Paul and I compared hometown voting patterns, I’ve leash-walked that



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question, looking for affirmations that remain elusive.

Self-doubt is old cheese for me. I've written this column for this magazine for almost twenty years now, trying and mostly failing to prove that my interest in food is more than sybaritic. Food is a cultural product, I have argued, worthy of comparison to music and literature. An output of people working in a place, food offers a means to explore belief, creativity, power, allegiances, and differences.

Thinking about food offers access to both poles: Making food can liberate otherwise marginalized cooks, yet modern food systems, dependent on an underclass of workers, often thrive on subjugation. With those divides now rawer and realer, as calls of racism inherent in restaurant work ring through Manhattan and elsewhere, I struggle anew to apprehend the promise of the common table.

When I first began to write about food, I championed discussions that offered sneaky approaches to big issues. I borrowed from mentors John Egerton and Jessica Harris, framing the back doors of barbecue joints as portals to a reconciled South, and okra pods as totems of immigration, forever pointing their spiny-tipped way back to West Africa.

Now, faced with deepening insecurities and the dispiriting effects of the votes of my neighbors, I worry that my eating and drinking and writing has actually buried the truths that food-focused exchanges can reveal. By defining the table as a place for reconciliation but failing to save seats for blue-collar whites, I fear that I have squandered what little power I have to effect a better South. But then, at my nadir, as the Electoral College gathered to vote, I discovered a path through the thickets, along the sinuous dikes that curve the claypan prairies of Louisiana, once dedicated to cattle, then to rice, and now, increasingly, to crawfish.

The Amazing Crawfish Boat is a work of keen-eyed observation, an attempt to see clearly how a group of men, often overlooked and sometimes derided, works—and how they express their intelligence through labor. Laudun writes with empathy and emotion of these craftsmen who are “deeply in love with what they do, and are happiest when they are faced with a problem that only a piece of well-crafted metal can solve.”

I glimpse a similar empathy in my wife, Blair, who teaches poetry to University of

Mississippi students. Invariably, Blair says, her deer hunters and duck hunters are her better poets. They know how to be still. They listen closely. They interpret the natural world. They see clearly. (Judging by the stickers plastered to their bumpers, they voted for Trump, too.)

It's hard right now to see clearly. After Trump won, I resolved to get more involved in the political process. When the Lafayette County Democratic Party staged its first meeting of the new year, Blair and I joined. My hope was to connect with Democrats who were working through similar problems in their heads. Instead, the meeting devolved into an argument over Thirsty Thursday, a monthly gathering designed to convene a diverse crowd of local Democrats. The effort seemed harmless. Maybe even helpful. Until a white woman stood to question the purpose. And an emboldened black woman followed. During the squabble, it became clear that Thirsty Thursday was not a path to a solution. At best, Thirsty Thursday was a mere diversion. At worst, the gathering represented a willful failure to set a welcome table.

In the midst of a moment when the world

seemed to shift and then reverse its axis spin, talk of Thirsty Thursday left me angry. I couldn't pinpoint why, until I realized that, if Trump won because Democrats didn't turn out blue-collar white and black voters, then Thirsty Thursday, which tended to attract middle-class white Democrats, was a symptom of the problem. And moving the party to Buffalo Wild Wings, the fried chicken chain where the chair of the local party presumed black Lafayette County folk would feel comfortable, wouldn't do anything but expose the vague prejudices and well-meaning presumptions of privileged whites.

Blair and I went home that night, dejected. Two weeks later, hope sprang anew as a friend and I talked over chorizo-crowned *sopes* and tacos *al pastor* at Mundo Latino (also known as Taco Shop), tucked in the old Kroger shopping center on the eastern fringe of Oxford. While my friend spoke, I stole glances over his shoulder at a clutch of white guys, employed by a track hoe service, wearing do-rags and digging into tortas while, five feet away, three Mexican immigrants took a break from pouring concrete to feast on platters of fried fish and baskets of *lengua* tacos.

Like the Cajun Country men John Laudun evokes, these Lafayette County folk had grease beneath their nails. Sweat streaked their brows. They formed an ephemeral community of sorts, united by a shared hunger for tacos, vocations that demanded hard labor, and seemingly not much else. From my perch, I couldn't say who voted for whom. I couldn't imagine who might hold bigoted views about the other. I couldn't propose a way home, for Jean-Paul or me, through the briar patches of Trump-ignited bigotry and racism. But I can now say that I regarded those construction workers as James Agee regarded the white working folk of Alabama. I saw them, maybe for the first time.

A week later, I still didn't know how to make sense of the postelection narrative spinning in my head, but I did have a decent idea about what to do next. When I contacted our local Democratic Party chair to suggest that she convene the next Thirsty Thursday at Mundo Latino, I told her that, while I can't guarantee that the bicultural band of workers I glimpsed will be there when we gather, I can play my customary food savant role and report that El Mundo's salsa verde is righteous. 🌮

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