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Lyndsey Nuebel
University of New Orleans

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LOSS AND RENEWAL: MY SICILIAN ROOTS IN NEW ORLEANS

by Lyndsey Nuebel





Lyndsey dressed up for dance when she was a little girl. Photograph courtesy of the Nuebel family.

What is Normal?

Slidell, Louisiana is a place I have never thought to analyze because it is considered to be “normal,” and is an example of what other places considered to be “not normal” are compared to. In regards to its proximity to New Orleans, how could a place only across the lake from one of the most culturally-rich areas of the country be so androgynous? Cultural diversity within Slidell hasn’t completely washed away. In the midst of big-box stores and chain restaurants, there are locally-owned seafood stores, Italian bakeries, Vietnamese restaurants, and cafes serving Creole cuisine. It can also be felt during crawfish boils in the summer and the few parades during Mardi Gras season.

But when I think about how I am connected to Slidell, the cultural connection is never the first one I make. The first connection I make is the one connected to the larger pattern of migration. Like many white, middle-class residents of various parts of the city, my parents moved to Slidell from New Orleans East and Gentilly because they simply deemed the city as unsafe. They only had the best intentions for my siblings and me when we were growing up. They

wanted to empower us, but growing up in Slidell, for me, was not empowering. White-flight migration from New Orleans created a general “whiteness” Answers to these questions lay within the trends of “Americanization” and assimilation.

In the ethnography, *Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middle-Class, and Female*, Lorraine Delia Kenny states that “girls occupy an ambivalent and at times contradictory position in relation to the norm. At times they can appear fully ensconced on the inside, but upon closer examination there is something not quite normative enough about their identity” (Kenny 2000: 2). Drawing upon Kenny’s statement, I feel as though I exist in the in-between of Slidell and New Orleans. I find it difficult to examine my suburban home. It is not difficult because it is familiar, but it is difficult because, as Kenny states that “white middle-classness thrives on not being recognized as a cultural phenomenon. It’s culture is a culture of entitlement in which the Self does not question its position within the dominant, normative group and instead accepts all the privileges of race and class that seem to naturally come her way” (Kenny 2000: 1).

In high school, I took a psychology class and during a discussion about the “nature versus nurture” debate my teacher asked us if we felt like we were a product of our environment. I remember thinking to myself, “Oh, hell no!” If I was not a product of Slidell, then what was I a product of? I didn’t exist in space or in a vacuum. Kenny states that, “I knew my girlhood experiences were neither unique nor idiosyncratic, but by-products of post-war, anti-Other suburbia, with its history of exclusion and investment in constructing a normative, homogenous, and heterosexual familial culture” (Kenny 2000: 7).

Growing up, I knew I did not understand the Republican values held by most of my elders, and I did not have the same interests as most of my peers. Even as a preteen, I was aware of the level of conformity in my society. The majority of my adolescence and teen years were spent competing in dance competitions across the southeast region of the country. Though I



Lyndsey with her grandfather, Jack Pasternostro. Photograph courtesy of the Nuebel family.

loved to dance, the competition team at my suburban dance studio was the only accessible place to receive a “dance education.” Though I was taught basic technique of multiple styles of dance, my dance education focused on flashy costumes and routines, learning the “wow” tricks, and how to be ultra-feminine. In a sense, suburban dance studios taught me how to fit the mold of a white, middle-class woman.

Now that I am in my twenties and about to graduate from college, I have a greater understanding of neoliberal policy and how these policies have shaped suburban lifestyle. The culture that was held by past relatives has now become a family history, one that has, for the most part, been nonexistent during my years of growing up.

In Slidell, I grew up with a slate clean of most of my family’s cultural history that was so prevalent just one generation before our migration to the Northshore. My family’s history began in New Orleans. My family moved to the city in 1910 from Sicily. As a child, I was always intrigued by my Italian grandfather, whom I call “Papa.” Papa is quite the character who has been singing the same lyrics to the same Dean Martin songs for decades now. He is proud to be Italian, and he will make sure anyone around him knows

it. I always loved being around him and observing his quirks, and occasionally asked my papa and my great-grandmother, Maw-Maw Mary, about their history. All I can really remember Papa telling me is that my ancestors are from Palermo. Maw-Maw Mary would tell me how we are related to Dean Martin, or how our family was a part of the mafia, only the latter possibly being true.

I did an interview with my papa, whose name is Jack, and my grandmother, Barbara, in order to come back to my family’s Sicilian roots. The interview took place in their home in Kenner which they have now lived in for roughly 20 years. Though the interview is focused on my papa, since he is the Sicilian one, my grandmother is heard throughout the interview as she has known my papa and his family for most of her life, and reflects on the accuracy of the statements my papa makes.

Migration

Jack Paternostro: Our family first came to New Orleans around 1910. The Penninos are from Corleone and the Paternostros are from Palermo. Ok? That’s ya great-great-grandfathers. Both of em were beautiful.



Barbara and Jack Pasternostro. Photograph courtesy of the Nuebel family.

Lyndsey: Do you know why they came to the United States?

Jack: Mussolini. Second World War. You know what I'm talkin' about?

Barbara: "Jack they didn't come over during the Second World War!" That was before the war right?

Jack: She studied that in school, man! Second World War...Mussolini was a dictator in Italy. Ya grandfathers' had property over there alright? Grandfather Pennino had a bunch of stores. Mussolini took all the stores away. Grandpa Paternostro had vineyards. Mussolini took all that away. So both of em picked up their families. Grandpa Pennino's family had my Uncle Frank and Aunt Rosie. They were already kids when they came over on a boat around 1910.

Barbara: They had your mother, too!

Jack: My motha' wasn't born in Italy! Geeze! She was born in the United States! *[Laughs]* Oh boy, you made me laugh, dahlin.

Barbara: Well, I'm glad.

Jack: Uncle Charlie, Uncle Joe, Uncle Ed, and my mama was born in the United States. Aight? Grandpa Paternostro came over on the same boat. Grandpa Pennino and Grandpa Pternostro were friends in Italy. So Grandpa Patty came over with Uncle Angelo and Aunt Lucy. They were two of the oldest ones. Now I'll tell you the rest that were born. You want to know all that?

Lyndsey: Yeah!

Jack: Alright. On the Pennino side, it was Uncle Frank and Aunt Rosie who came over on the boat with his kids, and Uncle Joe, alright, one of your great uncles. And then... Uncle Eddy. And then Uncle Charlie and then your Maw-Maw Mary was the youngest one. Your Uncle Sal was in the Second World War. He was the only one that went to Germany. The reason why my daddy and all my uncles came over to New Orleans was because of the Higgins shipyard and built the PT boats and the landing barges.

Barbara: His daddy's name was John by the way.

Jack: What?

Barbara: Ya daddy's name is John; she didn't know your dad!

Jack: I know that!

Barbara: I'll be quiet.

Jack: Your other uncle was Uncle Sam, alright? He helped build the Panama Canal. You know about that, huh? They're all Italian, baby, that's what I am talking about. You gotta great history. Alright, after the Second World War, my daddy, your great-grandfather and the rest of em tried to go back to Italy, alright? They didn't make it. They tried to get in touch with certain people over there about their property, before Mussolini took it over. All the papers, all the documents, were burned. They had all kinda property, baby. They couldn't find nothing so my grandfather Pennino started buying up property. He had

a real estate business New Orleans. He owned the whole block he lived on, baby.

Lyndsey: What block did he live in?

Jack: 2300 block of Ursulines.

Lyndsey: So is that where they moved to whenever they came from Italy?

Jack: Right on Ursulines. Grandpa Pennino bought a lot and built a chicken house where he had about 75 chickens. In the front, all of that was screened off. In the back, he had vegetables, raised corn, and all kinda stuff. I used to go back there as a kid and pick tomatoes and walk in the chicken shit! My cousin was Joycelyn, and we were raised up together. She wouldn't go over there, man. She would say, "I'm not goin' over there by those stinkin' chickens!" Grandpa Paternostro went across the river to Marrero, and he owned a farm. Your great-great-grandfather had cows and everything else.

Lyndsey: So Pennino, he was a pretty good entrepreneur, and he had a lot of money. He was doing well. But in those days, weren't Italians racially discriminated against? Do you know if he faced any racial discrimination?

Jack: Oh, no!

Barbara: Oh, nooo! He was a short, little old man who demanded respect. He wasn't ugly, he was very kind, but you knew when you spoke to him, he commanded your respect. As a matter of fact, I'm gonna tell you something. When Papa was in the service, I was so scared and I didn't know what to do. I didn't have any money. We were young, young people. So he said I could go visit Papa in Texas, but I didn't have any money. Maw Maw Audrey didn't have any money. Papa said, "Go and ask my father for some money to get on a train and to come see me." He used to call me Baba which meant stupid [*Laughs*].

Jack: He couldn't say Barbara. He was trying to say Barbara but all he could say was Baba!

Barbara: I said, "Jack wants me to come visit him but I don't have any money for plane-fare. He said to ask if I could borrow money from you." And he said to me, "I will give you the money to go see him, but you have to pay me back." And I did! Because I was afraid! And he was just this little bitty man, but he said you have to pay me back!

Jack: He could be the godfather! All the houses that his kids had, including your great-grandmother's, he bought them all houses. But, the same thing! They had to pay him back! See what I mean?

Jack's Family

Barbara: You might want to tell her that your parents' marriage was kinda, sort of arranged.

Jack: I'm gonna get to that! In the mean time, Jacob Paternostro and John Pennino somehow got together when Maw Maw was born and when my daddy was born and they matched them together in order to stay in the Italian family. So, me, your papa, is 100% Sicilian. My daddy and my mama got together, and she was 17 when they got married. I was born one year later when she was 18. And here comes Jackinno! I was the favorite of the family at the time.

Barbara: She wants to know about your parents—

Jack: Awwwww, why don't you go sit in the other room!

Barbara: She wants to know about your grandparents and your parents!

Jack: My bed was up in the big house and I shared a bedroom with my grandfather. I had my own bed and he had his own bed. My grandmother had the big bedroom next to us. He taught me how to say my prayers at night. If I got in bed first, I would just lay there waitin for my grandfather to come to bed. If I fell asleep first, he used to wake me up and make me say my prayers. One night I'm in my own bed and my grandfather is in the bathroom. He is taking a bath and all that and I fell asleep. My grandmother

said "Jackino! You need to say your prayers!" I said "No, I'm sleepin!" And she said "No! You wait for your grandfather! You gotta say your prayers!" She was beautiful. Her name was Angelina, and that was my heart. She used to look after me, boy.

Barbara: She raised him.

Jack: My godfather was Uncle Eddy. He lived right down the street; he was like my second dad to me. I didn't really have a relationship with my dad at all. Back in those days, the godfather in the Italian way was very sacred. If anything happened to your parents, then ya' godmother and ya' godfather takes over and would be responsible. My dad was never there when I was growing up. When I had my ballgames, it was my Uncle Ed, my godfather, who would be there for my baseball games, my football games, and took me to fights and everything else. It was just beautiful people. Every time I start talkin' about it, I just break down just like that.

Jack's School Days

Lyndsey: So whenever you went to school, did you have a lot of Italian classmates? Were there a lot of Italian kids?

Barbara: No! There was diversity in public schools in New Orleans.

Jack: In fact, my elementary school was only two or three blocks away from Ursulines. It was Benjamin Franklin and William Moore Rogers.

Lyndsey: You went to Benjamin Franklin?

Jack: Not that Benjamin Franklin, it's downtown. And, in fact, *[points to Barbara]* her great-aunt taught me in second grade. My name is Jacob Paternostro, and I didn't know it was Jacob. They used to call the role, and Jackino or Jack was all I knew.

Barbara: There was no division of race, except for blacks in other schools, but there was no division of



—Photo by Ray Muro, Jr.

MARRIED IN ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH, Mrs. Jack E. Paternostro is the former Miss Barbara A. Kirn. Her parents are Mr. and Mrs. Wendlin S. Kirn.

nationalities when we went to school.

Jack: Everybody was immigrants back then, babe. They all came from Germany, France, Italy, all over. All my buddies were going to Warren Easton. In the meantime, they had Cats and the Frats, and those were the gangs. The Cats had the black leather jackets, and slicked back hair with the curls in the back, you know what I'm talking about? *[Laughs]* Well, that was me. And the Frats, they had the crew cuts, and they wore white shoes. We used to wear boots and black shoes. And every time we ran into each other, we would get into fights. My old man said, "You not goin' to Warren Easton." He got a brochure in the mail for an academy in Arkansas. I got sent out of town, and was off to a boarding school.

Barbara: It was a boarding school for their religion!

Jack: Be quiet! My mama was Catholic, and my dad was real Catholic. In fact, he was an altar boy. When my mama and daddy got married, my grandfather Pennino changed over to Seventh Day Adventist, and he got caught up in the religion. Anyway, I thought it was a boy's boarding school, alright? Well, when we got there, we saw that they had dorms on one side and dorms on the other side, and my daddy said, "What's that dormitory?" And they said, "Well, that's where the girls stay." What!?! [Laughs] We thought it was an all-boys boarding school.

I spent two years there, graduated, and went to Southwestern Junior College in Texas. I played ball and all that kinda stuff. Now we had a football game and it was around Thanksgiving. I was the quarterback, okay. We beat them 22-13, alright. They had scouts along the sidelines. They tried to pick guys off to go to the big school. There was one from Texas, one from SMU, and one from Arkansas. SMU came up to me and they stayed with me a loooong time: "We want you to come and we gonna pay for this and pay for that, you don't have to worry about nothin, alright; we will call you when we want you to come." I stopped at SMU before I went home. I stayed there for three months and played three games as a quarterback on the freshman team. At the end, they said, "We will give you a call and let you know if you got a scholarship." Boom.

Jack's Marriage

Jack: I came home and worked during the summer at Pan-American Life Insurance Company. I started off as an office boy, and it didn't pay that much. They said if I worked there, and I went to college, I would be hired. In one month, I got promoted to the second floor in the group insurance office. In the meantime, your granny was on the second floor, too. She was on the other side of the floor, and I was on this side of the floor. She used to walk down the aisle, and I would look up and she would give me a big smile. I would look at her and I would be like, "Where y'at, boooy!" I would be on my calculator going boom, boom, boom, and I would say, "Shit! there she is!" We went

on a date to the bowling alley, and she was wearing yellow short-shorts, and all the guys were just lookin' at her. I was sittin' there and I felt two arms come around me, and she said, "Babe, you want a beer?"

Barbara: I didn't do all that!

Jack: You did! I said, "Damn! yeah I'll take a beer!" And that's how we started. We started dating for four or five months. In June, we were engaged.

Lyndsey: So y'all were engaged for a year?

Jack: Yeah. So the coach at SMU calls me up, alright. "Jack! We're ready for you! You got your scholarship; you are gonna start in two weeks." I said, "Coach, I don't know if I wanna play ball anymore. I just met a little girl and we plan on getting married." He said, "No problem, I'm gonna hold your scholarship till October. When October comes around, if you don't call me or if you don't come, that's it." And he called me. I didn't go back. I had an SMU scholarship in Dallas, Texas.

Barbara: And now he has a wonderful family!

Jack: [Laughs] That's right! You wouldn't be here! I left Gentilly Boulevard when I married your grandmother. We were 19 years old, and we got married at St. Joseph's Church by my cousin, Frank Pennino, who was a priest. When I got back from the war, your uncle was born, January 10th, 1961, which was nine months later. How you like that? Perfect. And then ya mama came along a year and a half later. And then a surprise came along, Miss Kimmy, two and a half years later. I was like, "Oh no, you kidding me!" She was a screamin eagle, boy! And...that's my life!

Coming Back to New Orleans

After interviewing my papa, I learned where his care-free, rich, and loving personality stemmed from. His grandfather owned the entire block of 2300 Ursulines Avenue, and in a way he was marking his territory of Italian-Sicilian identity. My papa was, in my granny's



Lyndsey on pointe at the end of her years at N.O.C.C.A. Photograph courtesy of the Nuebel family.

words, “the king of the castle,” and his childhood was rich in the sense that he was surrounded by his grandfather’s success: a beautiful family, neighborhood, and a heritage my papa felt he could be proud of. Being able to run free through the neighborhood and city he felt was his produced a lot of autonomy for him. His identity that originated on the block of 2300 Ursulines Avenue was the identity that he has carried with him through his life and has given him strength.

Until I interviewed him, I was never aware of the caliber of his memory, and how he has held the memories of his childhood so dearly to him. During the interview, my grandmother and I consoled him while

he cried after remembering how his godparents would attend every baseball game he had as a child and after explaining how in his Sicilian culture, the family was considered to be a sacred aspect of life.

Roots

My firsthand connection to New Orleans truly began when I was accepted into the dance department at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (N.O.C.C.A.). Being accepted into N.O.C.C.A. meant that I had to become vulnerable to a lot of the fears that the social environment instilled in me as I ventured across Lake Ponchartrain into the unfamiliar terrain that is the city where plenty of the suburban fears stem from.

As much as I was fascinated by the city, I was deeply intimidated by it. After I finished my classes at Slidell High School in the morning, I had to drive myself across Lake Ponchartrain, whose shimmering water was rather meditative as I prepared my anxious mind for what lay across the lake. When I made it into the city, there were sights and sounds I have never experienced before like people knocking on my window at stop lights on Elysian Fields asking if I had a cigarette, or hearing the alarming megaphone of “Mr. Okra,” the local vendor who sells his produce by driving around neighborhoods. I could see the industrial buildings of the N.O.C.C.A. complex nestled alongside the Mississippi river, I simply could not believe that I received such a daunting opportunity. The unstructured sense of the city environment was chaotic and exhausting for me.

My experience at N.O.C.C.A. was even scarier. The first few months I was there, I experienced culture shock. I was introduced to various techniques of modern dance, African-originated forms of dance, and the most foreign of all, improvisation. I was bewildered when I saw the girls in my department not dancing “like girls.” My first week at N.O.C.C.A., we were told to improvise. I saw girls running across the studio frantically, others contorting their faces, and some doing repetitive mechanical motions. Meanwhile,

I was nervously turning pirouettes and doing those tricks I learned from competitive dance. I was thrown into an identity crisis because that was the only way I knew how to dance. I had to relearn how to dance in ways that were representative of me, personally. I did not have to learn how to perfect the notion of being “sassy,” but I did learn Vaganova ballet, which made me stronger both physically and mentally in ways that I did not know were attainable.

I did not learn the tricks that are key to winning dance competitions, I learned about Martha Graham whose choreography technique is inspired by the expression of vulnerability and control, and aimed at redefining femininity as powerful. Through my experience at N.O.C.C.A., I essentially learned how to dance into myself. I learned how to let go of the black-and-white worldview that I gained through living in Slidell, and learned to embrace free and abstract movement that I was so fearful of at first. Those same sights and sounds of New Orleans that were so alarming to me during my beginning days of venturing to N.O.C.C.A. became the sights and sounds that I identified with. I learned the rhythm of the city and found that the rhythm coerced with my own sense of being limitless.

Even though my N.O.C.C.A. days are over, my days in New Orleans are not. The year at N.O.C.C.A. was a transition into the city that I am thankful for as I was able to interact with girls my age from all across New Orleans and the surrounding areas, and in this was I learned how to not exoticize the city since I was able to learn about its residents. I was also able to learn that there are infinite examples of what a “woman” is supposed to be.

Going back to the conversation held in my psychology class in high school, I can say that I am a product of my environment that has been New Orleans during the period of my early adult life. If I stayed in Slidell, I would be a different person than who I am now. I may have also not been an anthropology major because the stark contrast between Slidell and New Orleans in terms of cultural diversity, race inequality, and gentrification is what first sparked my interest in



Portrait of Lyndsey, courtesy of the Nuebel family.

understanding these phenomena through an anthropological lens. If I would have never moved to New Orleans, I may have never understood my position in my society as a white woman who has spent the majority of her life living in suburbia, and how this is both a privileged and disempowered position to be in.

After interviewing my papa, my perspective on my connection to New Orleans broadened, but also became much more intimate. Much of the strength that I have is owed to him and the people who raised him. Not only do I owe the city of New Orleans for who I am now, but in a sense I also owe the 2300 block of Ursulines Avenue as well.