

What is a refugee? Art can explain



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A semantic discussion took place in our national living room recently about the word "refugee." While masses of people struggled to reach a semblance of shelter at the Superdome in New Orleans, and then later when they realized it was completely inadequate, other people whose feet were dry were wrangling with semantics.

In the midst of all the pain, all the ineptitude, a spat erupted about "refugee." I remember a woman saying on television, "These are not refugees, these are Americans." It made me get out my dictionary, which is never a bad thing.

My favorite dictionary, a Webster's New World, says that a refugee is, "a person who flees from home or country to seek refuge elsewhere, as in a time of war or in political or religious persecution." That seems to

describe the displaced Gulf Coast residents. The phrase "as in" implies potential uses, but not limitation.

Sometimes I check another dictionary or two before being convinced of a word's meaning, especially if it's in dispute, or if the meaning might have been neologized over the past few decades. In these instances, I next check the trusty old clothbound Webster's New Collegiate that I've been meaning to return to Churchill Junior High School.

It starts the refugee definition with "one who flees for safety," going on to say, "especially one who flees to a foreign country or power to escape danger or persecution." Again, it seems an appropriate word to describe the people who had to flee the dangerous flood waters for safety.

But it's unsettling when people whom I hold in high esteem, people like the Rev. Jesse Jackson and members of the Congressional Black Caucus, say it's racist to call people impacted by Katrina "refugees." *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Salt Lake Tribune*, among other newspapers, soon shed the word from their Katrina reporting. *The New York Times* and the Associated Press chose

to keep the noun, deeming it accurate.

The AP's executive editor defended use of the word and William Safire, whose wonderful "On Language" column runs in *The New York Times Magazine*, said of the discussion, "A refugee can be a person of any race at all. A refugee is a person who seeks refuge."

All of this came to mind when I visited Exodus, the premier exhibit at The Leonardo on Library Square in Salt Lake City. Photographs by world-renowned photographer and photojournalist Sebastiao Salgado, 300 of them, make up the show.

Immediately upon arriving, we are asked to ponder the word "refugee." Indeed, advance materials intended for classroom use before attendance at the exhibit ask teachers to pose questions to their students such as, "What does the word refugee mean?" If they mine the question for meaning as thoroughly as they might, they may never get to the exhibit.

And that would be a shame.

Maybe in the context of Katrina, refugee is a racist word, or maybe it's not. But the closely linked spheres of racism and economics, with a smattering of

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religious extremism, war and natural disaster have displaced a lot of the world's people, giving them painful lives and uncertain futures. Salgado has documented the exodus, the emigration, the banishment, the flight of people all over the planet, compiling a devastating photo exhibit that we all should see.

Here's what drove Salgado to spend six years in 40 countries to collect the images on display: He was a young college student, studying economics, when military rule swept through Brazil. He and his wife fled, and, as he says, "found ourselves to become part refugees, part immigrants and part students."

Part refugees. Even he finds the word problematic.

Salgado's deep, respectful interest in - people in transition, let's say - has led to this astounding collection of photographs. Perhaps his own experience has given him the gift of understanding that we are all the same.

A Sudanese boy herding cattle, a grandmother in Srebrenicza, a Brazilian economics student with a talent for photography. One day you're doing what you usually do, the next you can never again return to your home and your life is changed forever.

The show depicts people who have become separated from their homes in many ways. It's interesting to note that, no

matter what country, no matter what race, no matter what brought on the crisis, Salgado's people have much in common. Razor wire. Dirt. Physical disability. Shredded clothing. Worn children. Defeated elders. Lack.

It's a lot to take in, but any episode of "ER" is gorier than the photo exhibit. Children of 12 and up will probably do fine, although they're sure to have lots of questions. In fact, I have lots of questions. Seeing the show made me even more curious about disadvantaged people and how I can help.

Salgado knows this will happen. His message as we enter the exhibit: "I hope the person who visits my exhibitions and the person who comes out are not the same."

Barb Guy is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.