



## Dispatch

### “Refugee” as Metaphor in *Tripadvisor* Reviews

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While reading through *Tripadvisor* travel reviews for an article I was writing on the temporary housing of refugees in hotels, I made a curious – if not disconcerting – discovery. I noticed that when I searched the English language *Tripadvisor.ca* site with the keyword “refugee(s)” in any hotel review, without applying any filters to geographic regions, the term was most frequently used metaphorically.

Wanting to consider this further, I loosely measured this occurrence and its usage. Specifically, I read through 680 reviews and identified four general categories for the ways in which the word *refugee* was used:

1. *Positive proximity* describes reviews in which being in proximity or encountering refugees was depicted in a positive way. In some of these instances, reviewers sought to challenge or quell travellers’ concerns about the danger that refugees in the area pose. In others, the reviewers wrote about liking being close to refugee organisations or camps where they went to visit or volunteer.
2. *Negative proximity* captures the reverse sentiment, where encountering or being in close proximity with refugees was described as undesirable. In one example of a hotel in Paris, France, a reviewer wrote, “unfortunately, this hotel [is] surrounded by [a] bunch of refugee tents.”
3. *Miscellaneous* refers to reviews that had misspelled the word *refugee* when it was evident that what they meant was “refuge.” This misspelling could be because English is not a first or fluent language for many of those posting in English on *Tripadvisor*. This category also accounted for all reviews that were irrelevant or for which it was not possible to infer any of the other themes.
4. *Metaphor* applied to 380 of the 680 reviews, thereby representing more than half of all instances of the word *refugee* (see Figure 1). According

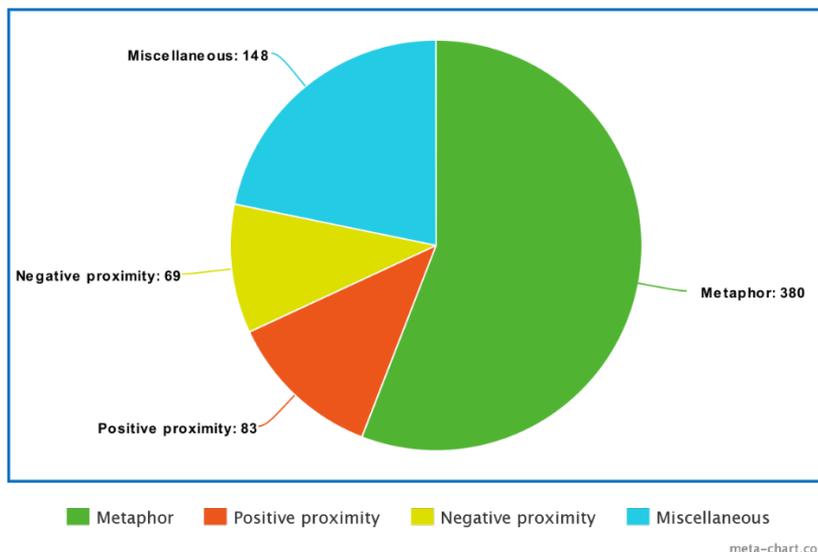
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to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED online, 2022), a metaphor is defined as follows:

1. A figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable;
2. Something regarded as representative or suggestive of something else, esp. as a material emblem of an abstract quality, condition, notion, etc.; a symbol, a token.



*Figure 2.* Four general categories of the use of the word *refugee*.

Although reviews that used the terms *refugee* or *refugee camp* metaphorically ranged widely in terms of location and included all types of accommodations ranging from luxury resorts to hostels, the terms were consistently used to communicate a dissatisfaction with the accommodations reviewers were provided. Some of the reviewers indignantly likened the facilities or the treatment they received to the ways in which refugees are treated. For example:

If you're a 3rd World refugee, you'll love it. (Austria)

... wasn't looking for a 5 Star treatment but I wasn't expecting to be treated like a refugee. (Saudi Arabia)

I was treated like a criminal or an unwelcome refugee. (Kenya)

I felt like a refugee. (Thailand)

...no point in making all the way to come here for living worse than a refugee.  
(Germany)

Often the term *refugee camp* was used as a way disparagingly to describe accommodations, other guests, or the surroundings that reviewers disliked:

A post 2nd World War refugee camp has better facilities. Trust me. (Antigua)

I have seen many budget hotels this one is worse than refugee camps. (India)

UN Refugee camps are better in the Gaza Strip. (U.S.)

It is like a refugee internment room. (Italy)

Breakfast in the morning was a horrific scene, like a refugee camp. (China)

Frankly I have seen nicer refugee camps on television. (U.K.)

## Discussion

What do we make of this publicly circulated metaphorical use of the term *refugee*? While some scholarly attention has been paid to what has been referred to as “dehumanizing” and “inundation” metaphors of “floods” of refugees coming in “swarms,” etc., (Taylor, 2021; Frouws, 2021), I believe that the metaphors I draw attention to here are operating at a more banal and therefore insidious level. According to Sharma (2009), these metaphors reveal how the notion of relegating some to bare life in order to maintain the lifestyles of others has become commonplace. Drawing from Marc Auge’s (1995) work on the difference between places that are “relational, historical, and concerned with [individual] identity” and “non-places” where anonymous groups of people pass through (i.e., the refugee camp) (p. 131), Sharma argues that the latter tend erroneously to be seen as exemplary of biopolitical regulation. Certainly, one can see how this metaphor serves to inform other travellers of the proper space and place for refugees, and in contrast the spaces such as hotels that ought only cater to exclusive and particular lifestyles (Fregonese & Ramadan, 2015).

The mere fact that this metaphor was so frequently and widely used demonstrates its discursive salience. As defined above, metaphors are used when something is regarded as representative or suggestive of something else. In this case, the term *refugee* is used a symbol to denote environments that are unacceptable for most, but not all. In other words, associating unfavourable, crowded, and poor conditions with refugees has become so normal that the word suffices to convey a clear message. These reviews reveal how *refugee* has become an accepted neologism that *naturally* distinguishes legitimate travellers and tourists from those who do not belong, whereby the comfort and

entitlement of the former are measured in direct relation to the distress of the latter. Such metaphors do not remain at the discursive level; rather, they have clear material implications. As Pugliese (2009) reminds us, in the second half of the nineteenth century “Africa” became the governing metaphor for making intelligible the differences between the “primitive” South and the “civilised” North which directly resulted in policies and practices of racial segregation.

Indeed, I propose that the prevalent use of this metaphor coupled with *Tripadvisor*'s wide reach (Jamerson, 2017) highlights its efficacy at shaping and reproducing racial logics, especially in terms of how it articulates a boundary-making through spatial discourses around race and class. In sum, the terms *refugee* and *refugee camp* work as a short and simple way of establishing a racialised marking of identity and space that divides those who are entitled to clean, proper, safe accommodations and decent food, from those who are not. If the governing metaphor for the free and entitled travelling subject has become its antithesis, the refugee, then it can be taken for granted that other readers of *Tripadvisor* would agree that the conditions deemed suitable for refugees are insulting to the rest of us.

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