

Continuing Diversity:

A Column of Periodical Reviews

by Pamela M. Salela

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I have been to New Orleans three times, all in conjunction with American Library Association (ALA) conferences. Each time I have experienced the city somewhat differently, based on my abode. The first time I stayed at Marquette House, a lovely little hostel in a rather rough neighborhood. Commuting “home” each night after the conference gave me some insight into the poverty and social problems of the city. For my next visit, I stayed in the Monteleone Hotel just inside the entrance to the French Quarter. The mood and safety factor here were considerably different. I explored Jackson Square and swayed to the rhythms of the excellent street musicians, delighted in the visual displays of the artists and acrobats, and indulged myself in having my fortune read (a foretelling, by the way, that actually came true—but more on that some other time). The energy and mood of this city shifts like a pendulum, and on entering St. Louis Cathedral, I immediately felt

a deep spiritual reflection. New Orleans is a city of contrasts and extremes: poverty and wealth, carnival and solemnity. And when I returned to post-Katrina New Orleans this past summer, it was apparent that the residents, who were so amazingly gracious and welcoming, were struggling with the reality of their daily existence (many of the service workers returned “home” at night to sleep in cars and hovels).

So on each visit the question has always come to my mind, What is it like to actually live here? What was it like and what *is* it like now, in the aftermath of Katrina combined with the catastrophe of FEMA? Who is she, really, this Crescent City, home of so many well-known cultural icons, one of the oldest cities in North America, a predominantly African-American and Catholic city. The whole world was watching, and we can continue to watch and stay informed by reading *The Louisiana Weekly*. Within these pages the essence of New Orleans as a people is dynamically represented and carefully tended through the evocation of her children—literally and figuratively. In these pages, one gets a sense of the quintessential social and spiritual conscience of New Orleans and southern Louisiana. Indeed, the editorial commentary of Edmund Lewis is intended to provide “cogent examinations of African Americans’ ongoing struggle for civil rights and equality in south Louisiana.”

Founded in 1926 by the C. C. Dejoie family, *The Louisiana Weekly* is a newspaper with the stated intent of articulating and reflecting the needs and interests of the African-American community in New Orleans and southern Louisiana. Their “reporting and commentary focuses on . . . issues of social justice including education, the environment, politics and protest, as well as profiles of people within [their] community who are setting extraordinary examples with their lives and work.”

Someplace Sacred

It is one thing to make a claim, and quite another to live up to it. But as I went about the task of exploring this publication, it became more and more apparent to me how very central this newspaper is to New Orleans

in particular and African Americans in general. Historical in nature, in a historical city, with historical (both past and present) figures contributing to its journalism, the newspaper has the feel of a community sanctuary, a place where the free expression of ideas is a weekly ritual—a holistic expression of what it means to be a community incorporating political analysis, spiritual sustenance, and information exchange built into a conscious structure.

It became abundantly clear to me, after reading articles by many different contributors, that this newspaper represents the culture and spirit of New Orleans in some quintessential sense—not strictly geographic in location, but somehow co-located in the hearts and minds of African Americans scattered across the country. The contents of *LW* spill out from the Crescent City and also pour in from African-American communities throughout the United States.

Structure

Included in every issue is news about New Orleans, with a focus on the “crisis in the public education system, the environment, civil rights, race relations and politics along with profiles” of key players in community politics, religion and activism. In-depth coverage about education in Orleans Parish is provided by Dr. Andre Perry, whose weekly podcasts from NPR’s “All Things Considered” are available from the *LW* web site. And to round out the importance of the central focus on children, there is a “Student of the Week” feature, highlighting the accomplishments of local students. There is the weekly editorial by Edmund Lewis, who provides many

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inspirational essays, such as “In My Solitude,” a reflective essay remarking on the joy of being and the simple things that make living worthwhile. He frequently provides constructive information about local and state programs and insights into ways for coping with life in general and New Orleans in particular. The Op-Ed col-

umn utilizes staff writers as well as guest columnists. These have included Marc Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League and former mayor of New Orleans; the current mayor, Ray Nagin; and George Curry, editor of the national Newspaper Publishers Association News Service. Christopher Tidmore’s “Inside Political Track” provides analyses of Louisiana politics. Also included are regular columns on business, sports, entertainment (“Jazz City” and “Musicians’ Spotlight”), local announcements, and a health section.

The spiritual conscience of *LW* is perhaps best reflected by the writings of Fr. Jerome LeDoux. “LeDoux’s former parish, St. Augustine, is noted for the important role it played in the history of Black Catholicism in New Orleans. Established in 1841 by free persons of African ancestry and their white neighbors, it has become an historical shrine as well as an active parish” (*LW*, May 29, 2006). He was known as “Mandela of the Tremé” before being transferred to a Texas parish. He composes such delightful and whimsical narratives as “The Small Delights of Our Lives” on the process of a vegetarian (himself) packing for a road trip. Obviously a man of strong spirit and conviction, he writes on the need for perspective in “Are you Safer in New Orleans than Iraq?” He addresses anger over the enormous number of deaths in Iraq while pointing out that there are far more terrorist murders in the United States as a result of poverty and racism. He asks why we, as a nation, aren’t distraught over this.

The newspaper is not dogmatic in its approach, reflecting many political points of view. This can be seen in the continuing coverage of Congressman William Jefferson, both in terms of the scandal that rocked the nation, as well as in his recent bid for re-election as Louisiana’s representative. The issues are presented in a multifaceted way to help the reader understand the complexities of the politicking process, thanks to the journalism of Tidmore and others. One can read about local responses and actions in the wake of the post-Katrina cleanup, and follow the people’s reactions to the re-election of Ray Nagin as mayor of New Orleans, pro and con, along with a later column written by Nagin himself.

Reporting

LW obtains many articles through the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA). “The NNPA, also known as the Black Press of America, is a 65-year-old federation of more than 200 Black community news-



papers from across the United States” that has no peer. These, in addition to many freelance regular contributors to *LW*, read like a veritable Who’s Who of local, state and national leadership of the African-American community—a testament to the quintessential importance of this newspaper. Following is a sampling of the regulars in *LW*.

- George E. Curry, NNPA editor-in-chief: “Appreciating Jesse Jackson” (10/30/06), “Citing Health Concerns, Farrakhan turns over Control of NOI to Administrative Body” (10/2/06), “Condoleezza Rice Pimps the Civil Rights Movement” (10/2/06), “It’s Time to Target Economic Terrorists” (9/18/06), “Bush Denies Race Was a Factor in Katrina Response” (9/4/06).

- Harry C. Alford, president/CEO of the National Black Chamber of Commerce: He writes “Today, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights is an anti-affirmative-action clique with a mission to neutralize the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and destroy what it can of the Voting Rights Act. It is anti-civil rights. It seeks to hurt and provide hurdles to those trying to diversify the American economy. Let’s look at their membership” (“Commission on Civil Rights Hits Rock Bottom,” 11/20/06). Touching on the Abramoff scandal, he exposes the lie of some American Native Corporations in “Taking Advantage of the Disadvantaged,” outlining how an ANC can maintain this status without having any American Indians as part of its makeup.

- Ron Walters, NNPA, columnist, Distinguished Leadership Scholar, director of the African-American Leadership Institute, and professor of government and politics: He has published several books, including *White Nationalism*, *Black Interests* and *Freedom Is Not Enough*. A sampling of his contributed articles includes “Immigration in a Larger Perspective” (7/6/06), “A Respectful Black-Hispanic Coalition” (5/29/06), and “Remember Darfur” (5/15/06).

- Earl Ofari Hutchinson, guest columnist: Hutchinson is a political analyst and social commentator who appears frequently on NPR’s “Talk of the Nation” and is a regular on CNBC’s nightly, the Dennis Miller Show, and Fox’s O’Reilly Factor; he is also the author of seven books on race and politics in America. His articles have included “Overplaying the Race Card: Immigration, Duke University and McKinney” (4/17/06), “No Requiem for a Black Conservative” (3/20/06), “Jesse, King and the Business of Black Leadership” (1/23/06), and “The Triumph and Tragedy of Rosa Parks” (10/31/05). In this last essay, Hutchinson tells us, “Parks worried and warned that young blacks had absolutely no sense and appreciation of the titanic battles that she and the civil rights leaders waged to make America live up to its much betrayed promise of justice and equality. In a reflective interview, years later, she did not absolve herself

and other blacks of her generation of blame for failing to pass on the torch. She called for a redoubling of the effort to make young blacks as she put it, know what it means to be black in America today.”

- Hazel Trice Edney, NNPA Washington correspondent: She provides the inside track on actions (or inactions) in our nation’s capital that affect us all, but especially with a focus on their impact on the African-American community.

- Marian Wright Edelman, president and founder of the Children’s Defense Fund: Her frequent articles in *LW* discuss educational concerns and provide uplifting stories of children succeeding in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

We have all heard criticisms regarding the government’s response to Hurricane Katrina, but here we can learn about the support that New Orleans is receiving from other parts of the world. For instance, *LW* reported in December 2006 that French president Jacques Chirac, once a student at Tulane University, has a serious passion for and commitment to the recovery of this city. “It is in the area of cultural activities, particularly cultural tourism, that the French Government is playing a massive role, assembling two exhibitions of items that have never left France previously” (*LW*, 12/4/06).

Conclusion

It seems remarkable to me that this weekly, with its high quality of writing that reflects from so many aspects of the African-American community, is not indexed in any major databases. This may be a result of not being syndicated; however, one would think that someone would have the presence of mind to pick this up. One can obtain the complete newspaper online in PDF format (www.louisianaweekly.com/read/PDF/index.php) going back a few months, or access text-only versions of major and selected stories going back (as of this writing) to May 2001. Through the text-only versions, the editors have provided a convenient “talk-back” feature so that readers can offer commentary that is sent directly to the newspaper. Minimal advertising in the PDF version and virtually no advertising in the text-only versions underline the social mission of this newspaper. For an interesting historical treatment of *LW* from its inception to 1994 see Bala James Baptiste’s master’s thesis entitled “The (New Orleans) *Louisiana Weekly*: Among America’s Oldest Black Newspapers.” It is held by Southern University at New Orleans and is available for checkout via interlibrary loan. 📖