

From the Editor

By Lyn Miller-Lachmann

In families divided by religion or politics, the weather tends to be a popular topic of conversation because of its relative lack of controversy. That has not necessarily been the case this year, as violent storms in the Pacific Northwest; record snowfalls in Colorado, New Mexico, and the Plains; and warmth in the Northeast have disrupted and sometimes endangered lives. Most see the crazy weather this past winter as evidence of global warming, the buildup of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere that leads to an overall increase in temperature and a myriad of other consequences—a rise in sea levels, disruption of ocean currents, more intense storms, and so on. The summer 2006 documentary featuring former vice president Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth*, has added to our awareness and understanding of this phenomenon. The film describes ways that humans can reduce their environmental footprint, so that we no longer consume resources faster than they can be replaced or damage the planet beyond the point of repair.

In past decades the environmental movement has been dominated by white middle-class activists, many of whom have lamented the movement's lack of diversity. However, a parallel campaign for environmental justice has drawn in working-class people of diverse ethnic and racial groups whose health has been threatened by toxins in the air, ground, and water. At a conference in Albany several years ago, I had the opportunity to meet the African-American peace and environmental activist Damu Smith, who passed away in the summer of 2006 from cancer at the age of 54. The founder of the National Black Environmental Justice Network (as well as Black Voices for Peace), Smith campaigned for the cleanup of southern Louisiana's notorious Cancer Alley and conducted "toxic tours" of areas where residents were dying of cancer at rates far above the national average. The legacy of these polluting industries continues to reside in the soil of New Orleans and other areas contaminated by the flooding of Hurricane Katrina.

In October 2006 I attended the Co-op America Green Festival in Washington, D.C., the city where Smith last lived and worked. I was pleased to see the diversity of people attending the festival, where they exchanged information on redirecting public policy and living more environmentally responsible lives. Afterward, I e-mailed Alix Davidson, one of the festival organizers, to get her advice on broadening the range of people involved in the environmental movement. She sent a number of suggestions, including the following: showing people of color in advertising for events, recruiting businesses owned by people of color as exhibitors, partnering with local government to give free tickets to people who receive heating assistance, recruiting speakers of color, and reaching out to community groups and political organizations. The success of the Washington, D.C. Green Festival, after only three years of existence, is one that can be replicated throughout the country and with other groups as well.

Environmental justice activists like Damu Smith have pointed out that resource consumption and environmental destruction disproportionately impact poor people and those of color, both in the United States and around the world. From toxic waste dumping to global warming, the suffering usually falls on those who enjoy the fewest benefits of an ecologically irresponsible way of life.

This issue of *MultiCultural Review* focuses on two places affected by global warming. In the case of New Orleans, global warming has had a direct effect, leading to both the ferocity of Hurricane Katrina and the vulnerability of the low-lying city. In the case of the tsunami in Indonesia, global warming and the rise of sea levels were not a direct cause, as the deadly storm surge resulted from an earthquake on the floor of the Indian Ocean, but it contributed to the massive death toll of residents in ecologically vulnerable areas. As Vice President Gore described in *An Inconvenient Truth*, tens of millions of people living in coastal areas of China, India, and Ban-

Editor-in-Chief
Lyn Miller-Lachmann
mcreview@aol.com

Managing Editor
Deb Goldman

Art Director
Danielle VanCola

Copy Editor
Valerie Shea

Advertising
The Goldman Group, Inc.
Deb Goldman
deb@ggpubs.com
(813) 264-2772

Publisher
The Goldman Group, Inc.
Todd Goldman
todd@ggpubs.com
4125 Gunn Highway, Suite B1
Tampa, FL 33618
(813) 264-2772

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gladesh could perish if the melting of the poles leads to higher sea levels.

Two feature articles and the “Continuing Diversity” column in this issue address the current situation in New Orleans. Urban planner Kiara L. Nagel spent several months in the city after Hurricane Katrina interviewing civil rights leaders and residents of the historic Treme neighborhood who are trying to rebuild. She finds a legacy of neglect and destruction of long-standing African-American communities, which had been taking place before Katrina but has accelerated since the hurricane. She also describes residents’ dedication to preserving the neighborhood in the face of myriad obstacles, a dedication born of generations of struggle against slavery and discrimination. In her article, co-authored with J. Eva Nagel, “Losing Our Commons—Predatory Planning in New Orleans: The Importance of History and Culture in Understanding Place,” she introduces the concept of the commons as a way of understanding culturally diverse communities and their relationship to the built environment, and she describes the fate of Treme’s commons before and after Katrina.

Last summer, *MultiCultural Review* published an article by Matthew J. Paris and Marybeth Gasman entitled “Researching Historically Black Colleges: A History with Archival Resources.” At the time, I asked Dr. Gasman how well the archives located in New Orleans, such as those at the Amistad Research Center, fared and the fate of the historically black colleges and universities there. She shared my concerns and in fact had already begun to put together an article focusing on the rebuilding efforts of Dillard University, Xavier University of New Orleans, and Southern University of Louisiana. The result is “A Rising Tide: New Orleans’s Black Colleges and Their Efforts to Rebuild After Hurricane Katrina,” co-authored with Noah D. Drezner.

Another update featured in this issue is Pamela Salela’s “Continuing Diversity” column, which describes the efforts of *Louisiana Weekly*, southern Louisiana’s oldest continuing African-American newspaper, to report on the city for those who are dispersed throughout the country as well as for those who have returned. *Louisiana Weekly* was first featured in “From the Editor” in our fall 2006 issue.

Months before Hurricane Katrina, the world witnessed the deadly tsunami that struck Indonesia and other coastal areas. Books for young people about this tragedy are just beginning to appear, and “Indonesia: Helping K-8 School Librarians and Educators Understand Its Histories, Cultures, and Literature,” by Frank Alan Bruno and Patricia F. Beilke, presents those, along with general nonfiction, biographies, folktales, novels, and nature books. The Indonesians are no strangers to natural disasters, and many of the books describe earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and other natural cataclysms that preceded the December 2004 tsunami.

On a less solemn note, journalist Marie Loggia-Kee addresses the Latina equivalent of the ever-popular fiction

genre chick lit. “Chica Lit: Multicultural Literature Blurs Borders” contains interviews with up-and-coming writers and their editors, describing how Latina fiction has changed in recent decades and the relationship between mainstream chick lit and its ethnic incarnations.

Any gathering of young people usually involves music of some sort. For writers, music is often in the background, lending richness to the setting and depth to characters. For many writers, and especially for poets, music and language are in the forefront, intertwined. Nowhere is this truer than for African-American poets influenced by the blues and Cuban poets who have drawn their inspiration from the Afro-Caribbean *son*. Scholar and novelist Beatriz Rivera-Barnes (whose fourth novel, *Do Not Pass Go*, was published by Arte Público Press in September) analyzes the impact of blues and the *son* on the works of Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén respectively, and the influence these two mid-twentieth-century poets had on each other. “Cuban Blacks, Browns, and Blues: Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes” also discusses issues related to translation, as Hughes became Guillén’s translator and presented his work to a U.S. audience in the culturally conservative 1940s and 1950s.

After reading the articles on New Orleans and seeing the pictures that accompany them, you may want to do more. Community organizations in Mid-City, universities featured in “A Rising Tide,” and *Louisiana Weekly* all need your support. More information may be found on the universities’ web sites and www.louisianaweekly.com. Reading the latter will also direct you to organizations in the city that are trying to fight crime, assist returnees with their economic and emotional needs, and rebuild homes and neighborhood institutions. If you would like to learn about global warming and its consequences and to make changes in your own life to reduce greenhouse gases, visit www.climatecrisis.net. ☺

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