

America Meet New Orleans

Elizabeth Underwood

2006

We live in a time and culture that does not understand, value, or manifest personal responsibility. The general doctrine is that even if you betray the rules of your religious practice you'll be forgiven your digressions when you die, if you ask nice.

So, what happens when you combine a deeply entrenched culture of anarchy and individual responsibility with a political system, bureaucracy, cultural climate that is currently breaking records for its utter lack of introspection or capacity to admit mistakes? New Orleans meet America.

This country as a whole has never philosophically understood New Orleans because of this difference in psychology. She's been a symbol of chaos & decadence, indulgence & crime, a place to have your bachelor party, a place where you could drop your pants, take a crap, and stagger off to the next pub, ad nauseum.

A place for back-alley drug deals and blow-jobs. Where politicians motivated by greed can jack off the city, the people, the system and get away with it. And all this stuff is true, hell I've participated in my own back-alley shenanigans, but it's only a perversion of a truer truth that is the foundation for all of this distorted behavior.

The truer truth? New Orleans is a city of anarchists: self-governing, pleasure-loving, hard-working human beings. Why is it we can have Mardi Gras year after year after year w/out mass murders, rampant violence, waves of rape and thievery?

Because we all know that would just make the bureaucracy that doesn't understand us look a little closer & start slapping a bunch of repressive laws on our traditions. Because we all love the party so much, the reasons for the party, and the feelings of sister/fellowship that are cultivated by the party. Not to say there's no dark side, there is, always, especially in a place that's been so abused by its politicians, so ravaged by classism you can't even pretend not to see it. But it's the only city in this country with such freedom, beauty, history, possibility, life.

This is made even more evident to me while spending time in Texas. All the rules? The "last call" when everyone starts screaming at you? The rules & regulations, lines & borders? An authority lording it over a serf? Why can't I, a free human being in a free country, just put my drink in a plastic cup & stroll on out to the taxi stand? Why can't I light up a cigarette in the bar? That shit just makes me wanna pound back the shots, smoke all the cigs in the world, drive my car onto the capital steps and stumble out to take a long hot piss right there.

No closing time? That makes a part of the psyche, the part that relies on someone else to make your decisions for you, relax. It asks that the part of you that wants to be individually responsible for your own destiny kick into gear.

You wanna be hungover like the ugliest drunk in the world? If that's what you want, go right ahead.

You wanna stay at home & cut out stencils so you can make some art? It's your call. This is how society is supposed to work.

And it's also why New Orleans is getting royally screwed by politicians right now. Not one of them, from the venerable Mayor Ray Nagin to the questionable Governor Blanco to the absurd Mike Brown to the pathetic President George Bush, understands their role as servants to their constituency or really understands this lifestyle of anarchy.

But they are doing this: tossing the responsibility like a steaming hot turd from one to the other while New Orleans, that romantic and gloriously unique city desperately needs action.

But why be surprised by our culture at large that rejects the basic New Orleanian citizen. The basic New Orleanian citizens who have been able to return are the only ones responsible for those streets, the cafes, the animals, the trash. They're doing the work because that's just what you do. And they're being abandoned & abused by a local & federal government that is too cowardly to behave with such grace.

So what this means is there's absolutely no actual critique of the disaster taking place. It's not being encouraged or initiated on a major bureaucratic level that can result in any real concrete change in any way, shape, or form. Which means? If care forgot her before, it's justice forgetting her now.

– 8 December 2005

A former denizen of Detroit's Cass Corridor, artist Elizabeth Underwood is a New Orleans refugee, living in Austin, Texas at press time. This piece was excerpted from her amazing online journal. <http://croweau.typepad.com>

fifth Estate

Elizabeth Underwood
America Meet New Orleans
2006

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/371-winter-2006/america-meet-new-orleans>
Fifth Estate #371, Winter 2006

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net