

“Access Denied: Slamming the Door on Housing and Hospitality”
A Panel Presentation at the International Conference on
Rebuilding Sustainable Communities for Children and Their Families After Disasters
University of Massachusetts-Boston, November 18, 2008
Panel Summary

On November 18, 2008 the panel on Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which was renamed *Access Denied: Slamming the Door on Housing and Hospitality* convened. One of the panelists, Tracie Washington, had a last-minute emergency and could not participate. Tiffany M. Gardner, a lawyer with the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI), and Lynnell Thomas, an Assistant Professor in the Department of UMass Boston presented papers. Barbara Lewis, the Director of the William Monroe Trotter Institute for the Study of Black History and Culture and an Associate Professor in the English Department, moderated.

Gardner, who works with housing issues, discussed the difficulties that many of the displaced residents in New Orleans and in the Gulf Coast, most of whom were poor, faced when trying to return to their homes. The situation was particularly exacerbated for those who had lived in public housing before. The decision was made to eliminate most of the public housing structures in New Orleans. The argument was that the buildings were too damaged to be habitable. A group of residents, many of whom had cleaned up their apartments and were again living in them, hired an independent consultant. According to the consultant report, there was some damage, but nothing that was serious enough to prevent these structures from being returned to usefulness. The report from the consultant was ignored and sidestepped principles of participatory action in which community members have a right to express their opinion with legal weight. For the buildings that have been replaced, a voucher system has been instituted. According to this system, the least infraction can result in housing being denied to families. Gardner recounted the story of a mother who was a post-Katrina activist. She had gone to the New Orleans Housing Authority on business. A guard recognized her and spoke to her harshly. She spoke back. In the back-and-forth, she allegedly used a curse word. That was grounds for denying the mother and her child housing. A right to a home has become questionable in post-Katrina New Orleans. Gardner chooses to look at this situation from a human rights context, which internationalizes the situation. Right after Katrina hit, some exchanges were arranged between members of the New Orleans Diaspora and men and women who were impacted by the tsunami in Thailand and Indonesia. Although the Asians had very few resources, they were able to rebuild their communities by pulling together and maximizing the skills of each person in the group. Those who had plumbing and carpentering and painting and labor skills moved from house to house and made the homes livable again. The progress that they made in Thailand and Indonesia put into stark perspective the lack of progress in New Orleans. Gardner contextualized the situation. What is happening in New Orleans is being repeated on a different scale in other cities in the country, for example in Minneapolis, in Chicago, in Atlanta and in New York as well as in Boston, someone in the audience added. Developers can make enormous sums of money in cities, and the poor are being pushed out of their homes, out of services, out of access.

Lynnell Thomas, who earned her doctorate from Emory in 2005, wrote her dissertation on the topic of tourism in New Orleans. She is now revising that dissertation for publication as a book, and her presentation on the *Access Denied* panel draws heavily from current research that re-examines the boilerplate tourist narrative. Before the Hurricane, tourists to New Orleans were shown only certain parts of the city, primarily the Latin Quarter, which is downtown and colonial in character. The story that went along with the tours had a *Streetcar Named Desire* feel in the sense of a longing for the wonderful days of slavery, a world of great comfort and cultivation that was rudely disrupted by Emancipation. In that story, blacks were both necessary to add color and do the back-room labor as well as amuse with their quick steps and quick fingers but their presence was carefully contained so as not to spoil the idyll of ease and comfort in the wide front porch plantation way of life, shaded by hanging moss and bougainvillea. One repercussion of the hurricane and the flooding has been an interest in disaster tourism. Many of the visitors to New Orleans now want to go beyond the Latin Quarter to see some of the areas that were hardest hit, especially those that remain devastated, principally the Ninth Ward. In many of the pictures that Thomas showed, there were homeless people everywhere. They were bundled up and sleeping beneath the Claybourne Avenue Bridge. One of the city's nicer parks, that was refurbished in the Latin Quarter, quickly redone so as not to lose the tourist dollar and also to attract further development investment, was then closed. Across the gates, there were two signs, one was official and one was not. The official sign indicated that the park was off-limits while it was being restored. In big black letters another message was scrawled on the sign, and it read: This Park Has Been Closed to Keep Out the Homeless. Authorities in New Orleans were eager to get the city back in visiting order, and they sent out public notices to the effect that the city was up and running and stood ready with open arms. That is a partial tale. Its incompleteness speaks to the tourist narrative that edited history to conform to the mythology that would be most appealing to culture consumers. In the wake of the flood, a gap opened and the story of the black residents in New Orleans, who had long been relegated to minor roles even though their minimal presence added juice to the whole, was made visible. For a while, the tourist narrative struggled to accommodate the change, and in its publicity materials it showed two images, a plantation lifestyle on top and a ruined Ninth Ward home on the bottom. Recently, however, that opening has disappeared, and the new tourist materials feature only a white woman in a long white dress carrying a white lace umbrella standing in front of a multi-columned white manor. The antebellum tale prevails.

In introducing the panel, Barbara Lewis, a cultural historian and Director of the Trotter Institute at UMass Boston, talked about a recent film, *Faubourg Treme*, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in the Summer of 2008. The documentary focuses on a legendary and historic part of New Orleans just outside the Latin Quarter that gave birth to the blues and jazz. For centuries, *Treme*, a neighborhood full of quiet gardens and hereditary homes has responded to challenge by creating something new and better from the old. After the premiere of the film in August, a New Orleans style band was hired to play as the people left the theatre. Their music was joyous but it was also a dirge; death was everywhere in New Orleans. *Faubourg Treme* was shown again on the

first night of the conference, and the images of New Orleans looked as though the city had been struck by war. Houses were knocked off their foundation. Shutters were unhinged. All was topsy turvy and mangled. The destruction was of biblical proportion. That was what Brenda Marie Osbey, the Poet Laureate of Louisiana, said. She had tears in her eyes when she spoke; and she used another word out of the Bible. Exodus. One of scattered peoples was Irving Trevigne, a carpenter. For all his life, he had been restoring houses, raising them from the dead. That was work worth doing, he believed. Those houses were full of memories and lives lived, and they deserved respect because they represented tradition. Children were everywhere in the film. They were most visible when the community danced. It was in dancing that the community renewed and healed itself. One of the more poignant views in the film was a street sign that seemed to defy the waters and refuse to drown. "Humanity Street" was its name. Often, out of death comes a new beginning. Perhaps that's why those musicians were playing outside the theatre in New York last summer. Like the father wearing beige work boots and keeping measure to the music as he carried his son tall on his shoulders, like the boys in white suits with garlands on their shoulders dancing in the documentary and the young girls in red majorette outfits vigorously pursuing the route of the parade, there is no percentage in stopping. Barbara Lewis ended with the paraphrased words of poet Brenda Marie Osbey, "wherever we go we take this city with us. We are bigger than any disaster. We hold tight to the knowledge that what matters more than anything else is feeding the will to live and to fight again."

Something died in New Orleans three and a half years ago. Was it a divided past? Out of those waters of change, has a new spirit emerged, one that remembers the past but has pushed beyond what once was into a new, more hopeful and fresher time? Or is the past still very much with us, being refurbished and revitalized and clinking the silver into its pockets once again? Those were the questions that guided discussion on the *Access Denied* panel. Both papers indicate that the divided past has not ended. It has reasserted itself in terms of limited housing options and in a renegotiated tourism narrative that marginalizes the black presence, with its rich history and cultural contributions. On the other hand, there are some rays of hope. Unlikely alliances have arisen. Organizations have combined forces in order to address the challenges they face. Lynnell Thomas mentioned Senator Vitter, a Republican, who has a reputation for not responding to the concerns of blacks in New Orleans. Thomas, who is from New Orleans and who lost a house to the flood, was trying to get funds from the Road Home program. No one was listening to her. No one was helping. There were reams and reams of forms to be filled out and the rules were constantly changed. As a last resort, she contacted Vitter, and he is helping her and her family. The global contacts that some New Orleans displaced persons have made with victims of the tsunami in Asia have created unexpected links and an understanding that the problems that New Orleans residents are facing have much larger implications, a significance that goes beyond national boundaries.

The audience was very responsive to the panel, and had many questions. One young man, who identified himself as a filmmaker, wanted to know about the legal foundations of what the developers and the politicians in New Orleans were doing. Another audience member was interested in knowing whether the framing of real estate

as commodity could continue in the economic climate that we are facing. Gardner responded that positioning the question of housing as a human right was the contextual framework that was most useful in thinking through the legal tensions that have arisen out of the catastrophe in New Orleans. In terms of tourism, one audience member, someone who had traveled often to New Orleans, asked about the kind of disaster tourism that Thomas mentioned. He said that he had gone on one of those tours, but that most of them kept the tourists inside the bus and didn't let them venture out into the streets. Would it be possible to do another kind of tourism? This question sparked a lot of debate. Is there such a thing as activist tourism, folks wanted to know. The consensus was that a new style of tourism needed to be initiated in New Orleans. Another audience member suggested a Boston model, *My Town*, in which high school students design and conduct walking tours focused on the immigrant, multi-cultural history of the South End and Lower Roxbury.

Three policy recommendations came from the *Access Denied* panel:

- 1) Research the steps necessary to impact federal law such that housing in disaster areas would be considered a right rather than a product for profit;
- 2) Establish a public commission to enforce participatory principles so that major decisions affecting quality of life must factor in community opinion; and
- 3) Reach out to management at Boston's *MyTown* with the objective of investigating the feasibility of creating a similar teen-based walking tour organization in New Orleans.