

## **After Katrina, strength in a vibrant culture**

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“What is life without a home? And how long does it take to grow a new one?” asked writer and filmmaker Kalumu ya Salaam at the conference, After Katrina: Transnational Perspectives on the Futures of the Gulf Coast, held on the Tulane University uptown campus on Friday (Nov. 15).



The Cross the Canal Steppers strut their stuff at their annual second-line in February 2012 on Elysian Fields Avenue in the 7th Ward of New Orleans. (Photo by Cheryl Gerber)

Sponsored by the [New Orleans Center for the Gulf South](#) and organized by Anna Hartnell, a visiting scholar from the University of London, the daylong conference brought together local activists, artists, lawyers and academics.

“My research is attempting to trace the ways in which post-Katrina New Orleans might offer a commentary on the contemporary United States,” said Hartnell.

“The conference confirmed my sense that studying post-Katrina New Orleans cannot remain a purely academic endeavor: It has to engage with the perspectives of artists, activists and organizers “on the ground” who are directly experiencing the ways that the city has been reshaped after the storm.”

Ya Salaam pointed to the mental anguish that is still present in the community, with psychiatric units in hospitals running at capacity.

“It's an insane society that doesn't provide for its own mental health,” said Ya Salaam.

Panelists at the conference dissected propositions on how to repair a city that could still be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, despite the recent blossoming of the tourism and restaurant industries.

They questioned how to reconstruct New Orleans as a place to call “home,” and not an artificially preserved tourist destination, or as keynote speaker, Richard Campanella, a geographer and senior professor of practice in the School of Architecture, put it, “a Venetian-like boutique.”

Many speakers suggested that the answer lies in promoting safe and authentic cultural outlets, like street music, arts organizations and local businesses, in order to construct the fabric of a strong and vital community.

*Elisabeth Morgan is a freelance writer living in New Orleans. She graduated from Tulane University in 2011 with a BA in French and English.*