

Desire and disaster collide in New Orleans

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In *Desire & Disaster in New Orleans: Tourism, Race, and Historical Memory*, a book by alumnus Lynnell L. Thomas, the tourist trade in New Orleans is dissected and thoroughly critiqued. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

New Orleans has long been a place of desire, luring visitors to the city “to do things that they felt they couldn’t do in other places,” said Lynnell L. Thomas.

But along with the pleasures that New Orleans offers ? good food, music and other charms ? it is a city with a painful past and sometimes disastrous present.

In [*Desire & Disaster in New Orleans: Tourism, Race and Historical Memory*](#) (Duke University Press, 2014), Thomas examines how New Orleans is presented ? pre- and post-Katrina ? in tourism advertising and through the guided tours that thousands of out-of-towners take every year.

“All of those things that I talk about, I'm a product of and appreciate,” said Thomas, a native of New Orleans. “It is this strange thing of being an insider and also being critical.”

Thomas earned a [Master of Liberal Arts](#) from Tulane University in 1997, and then went on to get a PhD from Emory University. She is now an associate professor and chair of American studies at the University of Massachusettsâ?Boston.

Thomas began to research the mythologies of New Orleans tourism when she discovered “servant” dolls sold in French Quarter souvenir shops.

A tag on a brightly dressed doll, Cleo, Market Lady, described her “high station” in a household that she ran smoothly, “respected by the other servants and loved by the family she served.”

But, wait a second, thought Thomas. These attractive dolls ignore the fact that black women running households on a plantation before the Civil War were not “servants” but instead slaves performing “unpaid, coerced labor to sustain the plantation system.”

It is a disservice to the richness and depth of New Orleans culture to neglect, deny or distort the pain as well as the pleasure that is imbued in it, said Thomas. “It certainly won't help us preserve it.”

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—Lynnell L. Thomas, author and alumna