

The Displacement of Black Families and Communities: San Francisco as a Case Study in Political Response: An Interview with N'Tanya Lee

Interview conducted by Tanene Allison

N'Tanya Lee is the Executive Director of Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth in San Francisco, California. Lee began working for social justice as a Black, thirteen-year-old, free-lunch kid fighting against Ronald Reagan's "ketchup is a vegetable" policy. Professionally, she has been the education policy advocate for the Community Service Society of New York City, street outreach director for Ozone House Youth Services, youth empowerment coordinator for the San Francisco Youth Commission, and a Ph.D. candidate in American Studies/African American History at Yale University.

Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth is a local community organization that works to transform San Francisco's services and policies in order to create a more family-friendly community. Through combining political advocacy, community organizing, and leadership development strategies, Coleman has created a powerful and cost-effective model for promoting social change and facilitating the participation of community residents (particularly youth and parents) in the city's policy-making process.

Tanene Allison of the Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy interviewed N'Tanya Lee on 15 January 2006 at her home in San Francisco.

HJAAP

What has led you to the work you do, and what are your present priorities as the executive director of Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth?

Tanene Allison is a master in public policy candidate at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Prior to attending graduate school, Allison worked in community organizing, with a focus on increasing the political access of marginalized communities. She also chaired San Francisco's Youth Commission and served for three years as an advisor to San Francisco's mayor and board of supervisors on children and youth issues.

LEE

I have pretty much lived my life around social justice issues since I was about thirteen. I grew up between parents, one who was in poverty and one who was upper-middle class. I was politicized by witnessing the differences between their economic statuses and opportunities and just the injustices that my mother faced, being poor, Black, and female.

I became executive director of Coleman Advocates after working there for five years on their youth organizing project, Youth Making a Change. And my primary focus is the organization's ability to do real justice policy work.

HJAAP

There has been a dramatic decline in the number of families in San Francisco, and this phenomenon is seen most strongly in San Francisco's Black community. What do you believe are the key forces that have brought about this exodus out of the city?

LEE

There are a number of causes. The number one reason is the lack of affordable housing, not just in the city but in the entire Bay Area.

The second thing is the concern middle-income families have about the quality of the public schools. We have a really high rate of middle-income families sending their kids to private schools in San Francisco, which is I think directly related to the issue.

And then the third, which—we don't have as much good data on, but lots of anecdotal information, particularly for poor and working-class folks—has to do with safety issues and people basically feeling really unsafe.

HJAAP

How do you see Black families fitting into those factors?

LEE

I think those factors affect almost everyone, from very low-income people to higher-income people. In regards to the African American community, there are a couple different things going on. Before World War II there was a very small Black community in San Francisco. During the war there was a surge in Black migration into the city and a surge in Black living-wage employment here. After the war, Blacks were basically kicked out of the employment that they were able to hold during the war.

That was the heyday of Black life in San Francisco, and it more or less hasn't returned. African Americans in San Francisco have never had a strong foothold in the city's economy. In terms of this city's economic development over the last 50 years, Black people have become marginalized. Oftentimes such marginalization comes along with displacement.

The city has evolved into this new Pacific Coast center for globalization; there's basically just no place for Black people here.

For the city at large, there's the issue of middle-income people choosing to leave. But for the African American community, the primary issue is around displacement.

HJAAP

Do you think San Francisco differs in that displacement reality from other major urban areas?

LEE

Something that's kind of obvious is that San Francisco is a very small city, and the fact that the real estate and the land here is so highly valued means that every plot of land is being sought for the maximum value. This is different from other cities where there may be a center of the city that's expensive, but there are still places, pockets, which are marginalized within the city; there are still ghettos.

San Francisco is a place where there actually does not have to be pockets or concentrations of urban poverty. Those pockets of urban poverty can just be pushed beyond the city limits. So people have to travel to the city to work in low-wage jobs and then live elsewhere.

HJAAP

In a recent article you were quoted as saying that "San Francisco is at a crossroads. It may have an infrastructure of children's services, but no children." What is it that you think has brought about that mixture of having a number of services that aim to aid children and families in the city and yet such a decline in children?

LEE

The micro answer is that the very effective child-advocacy strategies in this city for the last 30 years have really focused on pressuring the government to provide services that families need, and yet the basic bread-and-butter issues for families have not so equally been advanced.

We have great after-school programs; we have this incredible network of services that are essential but are no substitutes for people's basic economic needs around housing and living-wage jobs. Those are the two basic things people need, and those have not been the primary things that child advocates have focused on in the last 30 years.

There's this mismatch of sorts; you have housing advocates who have been organizing around affordable housing in San Francisco for decades, but it's not been the child advocates involved in the housing work. Now we're in a crisis mode; we have to make that a priority. And so now we don't talk about general "affordable housing" but "affordable family housing."

You could build one-bedroom, affordable apartments, and that wouldn't do anything to stop families from leaving the city, because families shouldn't live in one-bedroom apartments. Unfortunately, many of them actually do, but that's not how we want them to live.

Also, San Francisco is a very liberal-to-progressive city. But, similar to national Democratic politics, there's a divide between people advocating around what you might call "social justice" issues versus "economic justice" issues. And you can get farther around social justice issues when they don't push up against economic powers or the people in political power who have economic stakes in some things.

It's been politically more risky and costly for people to fight for economic justice issues. I think that's part of why we're in the situation we're in now.

HJAAP

What would need to happen to create change, or what policies would need to be implemented in order to at least maintain, if not increase, the population percentage of black families in San Francisco?

LEE

There would have to be a movement led by people of color to elect a mayor whose political base was independent of the downtown business community. That politically would be the answer. There's a bunch of housing policies that would need to happen, but none of them could happen without a political base. We would need a mayor who knew that he or she could get reelected in this city without the downtown business community, so that they could push policies that took on the developers, such as a stronger living-wage ordinance, and all the other things that would make it possible for working families to live here. It would take some major political risks, and it would take that kind of base.

In terms of the Black community, there would have to be a revitalization of Black political power in San Francisco, despite our declining numbers. There would have to be some serious investment in organizing so that city policy makers feel accountable to African American people's needs, because right now they clearly do not. And the fact that African American people are leaving the city disproportionately, frankly, is not seen to be a crisis for anyone but for Black people.

HJAAP

Do you see any correlations between what's happening regarding New Orleans, as far as Black communities and their ability to mobilize and get political power, and what is happening at a slower pace in San Francisco? Are there commonalities or shared lessons between the work here in San Francisco and the situation in New Orleans?

LEE

I'm not sure how well-connected all these things are, but the question makes me think of the fact that we had a War on Poverty in this country that obviously had extraordinary limits, given the level of poverty that still exists in the Deep South.

And the level of poverty, even here in San Francisco, exposes to me one of the biggest weaknesses of that era and of the War on Poverty, which is just a lack of a real analysis of racism in this country and the way that economic inequality is structured

according to race. And so without that analysis, there haven't been the kind of policies and the kind of urban-revitalization strategies that really are going to address poor Black people's needs, anywhere, but especially in the South.

And I think the problems that low-income African American people face here in San Francisco have some unique components to them, but it is basically the same status of a large percentage of Black people in this country who, kind of like I was saying before, never really got "incorporated"—but that's not quite the right word—into the modern economy in this country.

There was slavery, there was sharecropping, there's the very bottom of the industrial economy, and that's it! And when that bottom of the industrial economy left, there's nothing for that part of the American economy, and Black people are there. So the aftermath of Katrina shows the national state of what's happening with a big part of Black America.

Another literal connection is that New Orleans and San Francisco are both, to a large degree, tourist economies. And in order for a tourist economy to flourish, there has to be a really strong PR thing about the beauty of that city and the wonderful attributes of that city. Both of the cities share that, and people fly in from all over the world to enjoy all the beauty. And there's a huge amount of money expended in hiding the inequalities of those cities and denying the reality of what's happening. And as long as there's that denial, then there's no outcry for the need for massive public investment.

In San Francisco's Black community, you have levels of unemployment that *exceed the highest* level of unemployment in the Great Depression, but we have no Depression-level response. We have no massive public investment in job creation. In the Great Depression it was very clear, because it mostly affected white people: "Okay, we got a massive problem. The government needs to step in." And although some of the people in power were upset with that response, it ultimately did happen!

And that's what's needed, massive public investment. If New Orleans is going to be rebuilt, and if the Ninth Ward and all the Black folks who were there are going to have some decent opportunity, it's going to require massive public investment and not privatization. That is similar to what's happening here in San Francisco.

It's partially about the role of government. It's about how much can we really believe that government—despite the failure of government in Katrina, and, in San Francisco, despite the failure of government to really assert itself and check the housing market—can do better? Can we believe that government can play a more positive and vital role in reducing economic inequality and actually building economic opportunity for people?

HJAAP

What do you think both San Francisco's situation and New Orleans's situation, post-Katrina, mean for the future of Black communities in America as far as community organizing, political power, and the ability to get community needs prioritized?

LEE

That's a good question. I think African American communities all over the country need to do a version of what we're doing at Coleman Advocates, but in a multi-ethnic way—which is that we need a new era of leadership in terms of people of color. We need a new era of leadership that isn't just an inside, old-school, Civil Rights leadership strategy of lobbying.

We need a strategy where you have truly community-based organizations that are independent of whatever political machine dominates their city: organizations where there's leadership that has the skills to work inside strategy, work with those politicians, to get what you need in your community and to set an agenda, but leadership that also knows how to work the outside strategies and actually has a base—a voting base and not just a public opinion base—to put pressure on elected leaders to get demands met.

There's a serious lack of those kinds of independent Black institutions around the country, for a lot of historical reasons, and they are desperately needed. In San Francisco we're committed to building a multi-ethnic independent community organization that really is driven by what the community needs, that knows how to leverage relationships inside city government.

Ultimately the power to produce change is going to be based on power in the community. Elected officials will need to feel accountable to a mass of people, but, because of historical circumstances and where we are in history right now, it is a very, very difficult time for such organizing.

And just my reading of African American history painfully tells me that one of the things that might need to happen for there to be a new, stronger movement for independent organizing in the Black community is more Black people dying in Iraq—more young, Black men being killed in a war that a lot of Black people don't support. And, historically, Black people's service in the military has had a huge impact on Black politics and Black people's consciousness about what this country deserves. The loss of life in war has previously led to people reevaluating their sense of entitlement and quality of life in this country, and oftentimes that means fighting for better living standards.

I also think people in younger generations are more open to and more experienced than our predecessors in the African American community as far as working in alliance with other communities and racial groups, and that's going to be essential. We have to figure out stronger ways of working together and forming stronger political alliances, and even just stronger community relationships, so there's not so much divide and conquer, which is what happens now. But I feel hopeful about that part, because I think there's more folks coming up who believed in such coalitions and have the personal experience that can support them.

HJAAP

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

LEE

I don't know all the answers, but I know it's a big task ahead for Black community leaders who devote their lives to working with young people, and who work in the churches, and who work to improve the education of our children, and work on all these different battlefronts.

One of the prime tasks is to directly figure out how to take on the issue of gentrification and make that a Black community issue. Gentrification is not part of our historic politics; we don't have a Civil Rights framework to talk about displacement and gentrification. But it's core to what's happening in the cities; in San Francisco, 25,000 Black people have left the city since 1980. That's tens of thousands of votes, just in terms of political power; it's dispersed now.

When significant numbers of Black home owners lose their housing, which alters the terms of who invests in the community, who invests in the public schools, who invests in all the local institutions, our churches, our Black community organizations, there is a great challenge when a significant number of those people have left. And the consequences for the fabric of the community as well as the politics are really serious when people are displaced from their community.

This has to do with us really having a serious conversation, which many people are having, about the strengths and weaknesses of the Civil Rights movement and the tensions around "how much do we talk about race" versus "how much do we talk about class?" How much do we bring up the basic economic structures of American society and the things that Dr. King was starting to talk about in his final time here?

And we need to develop strong language on these issues in terms of community, politics, and policy. There are a lot of people in the Black community who are wrestling with these key questions. And I don't know if more African American students need to go off to policy school and learn about urban planning and these regional policies, but that certainly would help!