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### Recommended Citation

Lynnell L. Thomas. "People Want to See What Happened': Treme, Televisual Tourism, and the Racial Remapping of Post-Katrina New Orleans" *Television and New Media* 13.3 (2012): 213-224.

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# “People Want to See What Happened”: *Treme*, Televisual Tourism, and the Racial Remapping of Post-Katrina New Orleans

Television & New Media  
XX(X) 1–12  
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1527476411433889  
<http://tvnm.sagepub.com>



Lynnell L. Thomas<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

[AQ: 1]

## Keywords

African American, black, culture, hip-hop, jazz, Katrina, race, tourism, tourist, *Treme*

I went to the premiere, and we saw it on a large screen. I felt like I was in the second line. If it feels like you're really there, they're getting it right.<sup>1</sup>

Donald Harrison Jr., *Treme* consultant

Donald Harrison Jr.'s endorsement of the HBO series *Treme* as a realistic portrayal of New Orleans black musical traditions proffers television viewers one of the most desirable, yet elusive, promises of New Orleans tourism: the ability to experience the “authentic” local culture that, according to the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Tourism Bureau, “make[s] New Orleans the singularly distinctive place that it has always been” (New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Tourism Bureau 2010). Harrison's authority as a New Orleans native, acclaimed jazz musician, and Big Chief of the Congo Nation Afro-New Orleans Cultural Group, serves as an imprimatur for *Treme* viewers who, like a recent visitor to the city, express delight at being able to eschew the tourist-oriented French Quarter in favor of locales and rituals where it

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“really feels like [they] are in New Orleans” (A Yahoo! contributor 2011). Not surprisingly, *Treme* has gained critical acclaim for its realistic portrayal of local traditions that have generally been practiced beyond the purview of most New Orleans visitors.<sup>2</sup> Yet, unlike the modern tourism industry that capitalizes on tourists’ inability to distinguish between real experiences and staged performances, *Treme* explicitly fictionalizes everyday cultural practices. Occupying the space between cultural reproduction and theatrical production, *Treme* offers an important vantage point from which to analyze the intersection of race, class, culture, and media representation animating New Orleans’s post-Katrina tourist identity.

As recent case studies of New Orleans tourism have demonstrated, tourist evocations of authenticity historically have relied on the interdependent allure of black expressive culture and containment of black cultural producers and their communities. In this way, blackness has been used to titillate and entertain tourists while validating, and even exacerbating, systemic racial and class inequities (Gotham 2007a; Souther 2006, 11–14; Stanonis 2006; Thomas 2007).<sup>3</sup> And yet, Harrison’s praise for *Treme* cocreators David Simon and Eric Overmyer attests to the fact that many white and black New Orleanians—myself included—watch each episode with appreciation and pride for the way it dispatches with some of the most banal tourist tropes to pay tribute to who we are and who we aspire to be (Anonymous 2010; Robertson 2010; Walker 2010). Harrison’s observation that *Treme*’s cast and crew “are getting it right” is especially salient in the context of post-Katrina and post-BP oil spill New Orleans where Brad Pitt’s Lower-Ninth-Ward-based Make It Right Foundation and BP Oil’s “We Will Make This Right” campaign symbolically bookend the manmade disasters that continue to disrupt New Orleanians’ lives and livelihoods.<sup>4</sup>

To get it right, *Treme* attempts to reconceptualize the typical New Orleans tourist experience by cultivating a particular type of tourist and tourist gaze among its viewers. The writers’ and producers’ attention to the minutiae of post-Katrina life—sounds of helicopters and construction equipment above characters’ idiomatic dialogue; visual effects simulating darkened streets and homes in nontourist neighborhoods; references to FEMA trailers, Baton Rouge commutes, insurance woes, levee breaches; and especially the actual performances of local musicians—give light and sound and voice to the everyday experiences of New Orleanians’ struggle and compulsion to rebuild. In the process, viewers are invited to share in this insider knowledge that separates them from boorish “tourists,” who are clearly identified and regularly, albeit lovingly, disparaged during the season. For instance, viewers are prompted to feel embarrassed alongside trombonist Antoine Batiste (Wendell Pierce) who is forced to take gigs at strip joints catering to drunken tourists on Bourbon Street and to join in a collective eye roll at the misguided Wisconsin voluntourists in episode two who explain, without irony, that they have come to “save the city.” Yet, the voluntourists attain salvation only after they abandon their church group for an all-night session of local music at the Bullet’s Sports Bar, located outside the “safe spaces” demarcated for tourists. The bar’s ominous name, its all-black clientele, and the subsequent dismissal of Davis McAlary (Steve Zahn) from his hotel desk clerk job for directing the tourists

outside of the French Quarter all code Bullet's as a black and potentially dangerous space, thereby solidifying it as the antithesis of a tourist trap. Like its nineteenth- and twentieth-century antecedents, this new *Treme*-inspired slumming is reconceptualizing race, tourism, and urban space in New Orleans.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, it is *Treme*'s very designation of Bullet's—and other local people and establishments—as nontourist that ultimately validates them as authentic sites and purveyors of real New Orleans culture, hence remaking them into tourist attractions for fans of the series and intrepid visitors seeking more authentic experiences (Fensterstock 2010; Tan 2010; de Turk 2010).

One sees in these instances the contradictory, fraught nature of a tourist city's double consciousness—the tension between how the city is experienced by those who live there and how it is presented to and perceived by those who visit, reflected in cultural historian Alicia Barber's description of the battle over place identity by local residents, marketing professionals, and business elites (Barber 2008, 3-11). This tension is perhaps most palpable in the final scene of episode three, "Right Place, Wrong Time." Against the backdrop of the ravaged Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood, Mardi Gras Indian chief Albert Lambreaux (Clarke Peters) leads fellow members of his "tribe" in paying homage to Wild Man Jesse, whose corpse was discovered outside his home months after the flood. In the face of tragedy and injustice, Lambreaux's tribe embodies the perseverance of the Mardi Gras Indians who remain committed to sustaining and retooling working-class African American folk traditions of costume design, songs and chants, and ritualistic performance. However, their traditions are threatened literally and symbolically as a tour bus loaded with camera-flashing passengers interrupts the traditional hymn "Indian Red" that opens each rehearsal and identifies each member's position in the tribe.

As viewers, we are rightfully outraged, and even ashamed at our own complicity in intruding on the most sacred, painful, and private aspects of people's lives. Yet, our viewership also attests to the bus driver's contention that "people want to see what happened." In this way, the scene illustrates the tension between the welcome recognition and celebration of New Orleans black expressive culture and its spectacularization and commodification. While the tour guide apologizes and departs with the tourists, we, as viewers, remain gazing on the disrupted memorial and the deserted neighborhood. Cocreator David Simon has said that the series "should not be a tourism slide show. If we do it right, it (will be) about why New Orleans matters" (Walker 2008). And yet, *Treme* takes up where the disaster tour bus leaves off, giving viewers—televsual tourists—access to purportedly authentic places, people, events, and experiences that exist beyond the tourist landscape and that suggest a racial remapping of the city.<sup>6</sup>

In his seminal study *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, social theorist Dean MacCannell explores the possibilities and limitations of tourists' desire to see and participate in cultural "back regions," the physical and imaginative spaces where local cultures are preserved and practiced in their authentic forms. In New Orleans tourism, these "back regions" are transposed with the city's "black regions." While New Orleans tourism has historically titillated visitors with sanitized, or

tourist-sanctioned, versions of black culture, the fascination with the back, or black, regions of the city intensified as the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath shifted the focus of national discourse onto African Americans. *Treme* is indicative of the proliferation of music, literature, television, and film commenting on the storm, documenting the city's progress, and representing its inhabitants in the years since Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans. This burgeoning of artistic, political, cultural, and social production has reflected and generated renewed national interest in New Orleans history and culture and has responded to the controversy over the racial and class inequalities exposed by the storm. Like other mass-mediated representations of post-Katrina New Orleans, *Treme* both resuscitates and revises dominant popular narratives of the city that have long defined its tourist identity, reassembling popular images and tropes of the city in new and familiar ways. Together, these post-Katrina productions create new tourism narratives in response to—and as a way to profit from—shifting understandings of authenticity in New Orleans culture. In this historical moment of racial, environmental, political, social, and economic rupture, the battles over place identity are especially pronounced as emergent tourist narratives invoke particular histories and memories (to the exclusion of others) and propose competing visions of New Orleans's past and future.

*Treme's* first season reflects this tension and is especially ambivalent about African Americans' national belonging. Familiar tropes of racial harmony and racial exceptionalism often render New Orleans's history of racial conflict and injustice invisible or subordinate to new narratives of cross-racial unity among Katrina survivors or paternalistic actions by white characters uniquely positioned to speak on behalf of all New Orleanians. While one prominent storyline from season one features Albert Lambreaux's valiant—and noticeably singular—efforts to block the demolition of a public housing complex, more often than not, it is the series' liberal white characters, who appear as exceptionally heroic, didactic, even fearless, in vocalizing the community's outrage against the President, the Corps of Engineers, the criminal justice system, and the media. By normalizing progressive racial and economic attitudes and practices among its white characters, *Treme* elides the deep-seated racial and class tensions that persist in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. As a result, white characters' acts of heroism or bravado often seem beyond the realm of possibility, or at least credibility.

For instance, when the drug-addicted street performer Sonny (Michiel Huisman) boasts about rescuing people from their attics in the Ninth Ward during the storm, it seems somewhat of a stretch, not just that he could procure a boat, but that he would venture from the safety of his French Quarter home into an unfamiliar, flooded neighborhood at a time when exaggerated reports of looting and mayhem stalled coordinated rescue efforts and exacerbated racial tensions. Sonny's Dutch identity and the intimation that he is not constrained by U.S. racism potentially make his Ninth Ward rescues more plausible. However, despite his outsider status, Sonny and his actions to defend New Orleans local culture and protect its most aggrieved residents become synecdoches for white New Orleans and post-Katrina race relations.<sup>7</sup> The character

Davis McAlary (Steve Zahn) presents an even more glaring paradox. A descendant of Confederate leader Jefferson Davis and a beneficiary of elite southern white social and economic privilege, McAlary antagonizes his upper-class New Orleans family by fully immersing himself in the city's black musical culture as a deejay, musician, and insufferable champion of bounce, a New Orleans-based rap genre originating from the city's poor and working-class black neighborhoods. While the sanctimonious McAlary castigates his gay white neighbors for being elitist and possibly racist for moving into the historically black Tremé neighborhood without respecting its history or its contemporary culture, he fails to acknowledge how his own access to black spaces, appropriation of black cultural traditions, and ability to return to the security of a gentrified section of Tremé or his family's uptown estate conjure up a history of slumming in black neighborhoods. Worse, the series itself fails to incisively challenge McAlary's self-proclaimed racial enlightenment. His unsubstantiated tirades against racial profiling and gentrification reduce these serious, complex issues to comic interludes, side-stepping their racial histories. Furthermore, other characters seem more tickled than ticked off by McAlary's incessant self-promotion and egregious behavior, even if at their expense.

In episode five, "Shame, Shame, Shame," though struggling to get back on their feet after Katrina, several musicians acquiesce to joining the aptly named "Team McAlary" band, a vehicle for McAlary to rail "against all that is unholy and corrupt in the government of New Orleans," despite the fact that the musicians will earn "next to no money at all." Later in the episode, a besotted McAlary parrots African American musician Antoine Batiste (Wendell Pierce) with his exclamation in a club full of black patrons that "New Orleans niggers will fuck up a wet dream." Like other forms of racial mimicry, McAlary's drunken rant rests on an "assumption of familiarity with 'blackness'" that masks the racial privilege that his skin color and ancestry represent (Lott 1995, 5).<sup>8</sup> While McAlary's outburst earned him a punch in the face from one of the bar's black patrons and may have taught him a lesson about the limits—or at least the expected decorum—of fully accessing "back" or black regions, it was a lesson learned at the expense of his black friends, forced to sheepishly endure his racially offensive tirade and, adding insult to injury, responsible for helping him up and out of the bar.

*Treme's* focus on New Orleans music and cultural producers likewise highlights this type of ambivalence and incongruity. As American Studies scholar Eric Porter points out, the promotion of New Orleans's black musical culture to generate economic and political capital may inadvertently participate in the neoliberal project of retrenching governmental programs designed to redress historical and persistent forms of inequality (Porter 2009, 593-97).<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, the first season of *Treme's* almost exclusive focus on heritage music—as opposed to the more explicit, militant, and youthful hip-hop-inspired bounce genre that also originated in the city—mirrored the music festivals and venues in post-Katrina New Orleans wherein "inequalities were obscured through an emphasis on history and an erasure of the present" (Porter 2009, 604).<sup>10</sup> On one hand, *Treme* celebrates and affirms the centrality of black history,

tradition, and culture in shaping New Orleans place identity and makes an implicit case that black cultural production and the communities that sustain them must be rebuilt and revived. On the other hand, as Porter explains, the exaltation of a black expressive culture more rooted in the past than the present “may have enabled a kind of ‘good Negro, bad Negro’ discourse that allows New Orleanians of various hues to revere, develop an affinity for, and even claim a possessive investment in black musicians and black music as necessary to the city’s reconstruction, but which still permits an aversion to another mode of blackness (and a large, frequently displaced population) deemed transgressive, violent, parasitical, and a threat to the city’s return” (Porter 2009, 610). New Orleans tourist practices have long sustained such a dichotomy by clearly distinguishing between tourist-sanctioned black performances and a menacing black culture beyond the tourist zones.

*Treme* participates in making this distinction even when the series shifts its focus to hip-hop and bounce music in season two. A central storyline features Davis McAlary inexplicably leading the charge as front man for the band Brassy Knoll, whose music he describes as “bounce-funk-rap with a brass band twist” and whose “message will be angry and political.” McAlary “discovers” rapper Lil Calliope, former resident of the Calliope Public Housing Project, and makes it his mission to politicize the young man who seems only to be interested in “dance music.” There’s no doubt that *Treme* satirizes McAlary’s paternalistic presumption that he can cultivate rage in a young man whose existence and survival in the most economically and racially polarized spaces of pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans have likely intimately acquainted him with anger.<sup>11</sup> In episode 19, it is even possible to interpret Lil Calliope’s strategic promotion of his own club song “The True” during a radio appearance with McAlary as a political act of dissemblance when he uses McAlary’s connections to push forward his own agenda, overshadowing McAlary in the process.

Yet, despite McAlary’s comeuppance, *Treme*’s satire falls flat because of the series’ silence around the proliferation of post-Katrina bounce music by African American artists that was both danceable *and* political. Lil Calliope and Davis McAlary would have had to be aware of—and probably influenced by—Fifth Ward Weebie, Tenth Ward Buck, Mia X, Juvenile, and certainly megastar Lil Wayne who fused New Orleans-style rap with scathing criticism of the public policies and racist histories that precipitated Hurricane Katrina’s devastation. Channeling humor, pathos, and indignation, these artists reached regional and national audiences with their politically charged lyrics, music videos, and performances of “The Katrina Song (Fuck Katrina),” “Your FEMA Number,” “My FEMA People,” “Get Ya Hustle On,” and “Georgia Bush.” Yet, this genre of bounce and its expression of black political rage is largely invisible on *Treme*; in its place is McAlary’s (mis)appropriation of black sound. Most troubling is the fact that while season two of *Treme* minimizes the force of bounce music’s *constructive* black rage, it simultaneously highlights *destructive* acts of black rage, most notably with a brutal rape and a heinous murder both perpetuated by anonymous black assailants. By muting the political rage channeled through post-Katrina bounce music,

*Treme* replicates the city's racialized tourist narrative that proffers a false choice between black culture and black criminality.

Tellingly, cocreators David Simon and Eric Overmyer have both advanced variations of a tourist-inflected music history. In an interview with television and media critic James Poniewozik, Simon ascribes the city's musical harmony to its racial harmony: "This thing could only happen because we're mutts. . . . It doesn't happen without European instrumentation and arrangement, and it doesn't happen without African rhythms and a pentatonic scale. It could only happen through the wonderfully miscegenated American experience." Overmyer explains in an email, "I do think the music scene in New Orleans, really going way back before integration to the turn of the last century, is, and has been, remarkable in its fluidity, if you will—musicians were crossing those lines long before anyone else. New Orleans is remarkably complicated, contradictory, and paradoxical racially and culturally. [C]reole-ization [*sic*]—New Orleans *embodies* America as a creole nation" [italics in original] (Overmyer 2010 [AQ: 2]; Poniewozik 2010 [AQ: 3]). Simon's and Overmyer's emphasis on New Orleans's musico-racial miscegenation and creolization highlights the challenge of balancing an acknowledgment of New Orleans's complex and incredibly painful history of racial injustice with an equally complex—and occasionally redemptive—history of inter- and intraracial contact and collaboration. In place of this complicated history attuned to systemic and cyclical conditions of exploitation and inequality, *Treme*'s creators and writers often promote a type of tourist-driven "gumbo pot" history that reprises de Crevecoeur's "melting pot" in the context of post-civil rights era notions of diversity, multiculturalism, and postracialism and that minimizes the material reality and continuing legacy of white racial privilege.<sup>12</sup>

In *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy*, sociologist Kevin Fox Gotham describes this "tourism discourse of 'diversity talk' that trumpets multiculturalism and ethnic heterogeneity, recognizing ethnic differences in a formal and abstract manner, but denying the specificity of social inequality and marginalized group experiences. What the local tourism industry seeks to promote," he continues, "is a simulated or ersatz culture and ethnicity of no offense. Tourism discourses highlight ethnic differences and diversity while ignoring social divisions, conflicts, and struggles. Thus, whether ethnic and cultural differences are 'authentic' or not is irrelevant, for tourism marketing seeks to efface social categories and identities of all meaning except the signification of pleasure" (Gotham 2007b, 207). Given *Treme*'s symbiotic relationship with the city's touristic culture, it is not surprising that tour companies have begun to profit from interest in the neighborhood that the series has generated.<sup>13</sup> In this instantiation of life-imitating-art-imitating-life, Tremé emerges as televisual tourism, heritage tourist site, and transitioning neighborhood.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, the neighborhood's post-Katrina transition has been expedited by both the television series and the walking tours that have, on one hand, expanded the city's tourist geography, making Tremé more appealing to tourists, middle-class gentrifiers, and preservationists drawn to the neighborhood's historic structures, storied past, and cultural



cachet. At the same time, the transition has also threatened the living culture of the neighborhood and the livelihood of its primarily poor and working-class African American residents, as exemplified by battles over public housing, live music, parading, aesthetics, and other practices that do not adhere to middle-class notions of decorum or respectability (Crutcher Jr. 2010, 114–26).

By seeking to extol and preserve only particular types of structures, histories, and cultural productions, the HBO series, and the walking tours inspired by it, run the risk of rebuilding a tourist Tremé at the expense of the real one.<sup>15</sup> If David Simon, Eric Overmyer, and the rest of the *Treme* writers hope to fulfill the vision of the show outlined in Simon's letter to New Orleans, which likened the series to "a fictional narrative [that] can speak in a powerful, full-throated way to the problems and issues of our time," then the series must move beyond replicating the city's age-old tourism narratives that exemplify what cultural studies scholar Ellis Cashmore refers to as "America's paradox," whereby the prolificacy of the black culture industry dissuades political activism and cultivates a false view of racial progress (Cashmore 1997, 181; Simon 2010). Big Chief Lambreaux seems to echo this sentiment when he posits, "Everybody loves New Orleans music. . . . New Orleans people?" Perhaps this question might be directed at *Treme*'s creators as well as its viewers as we remember to keep the focus on the people—the cultural producers and not simply the cultural productions—of Tremé, the Lower Ninth Ward, Gentilly, New Orleans East, and other newly recognizable neighborhoods (potential and newly emergent tourist sites)—featured on the series.

### Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Eric Overmyer for his gracious responses to my questions about *Treme* and my colleague Aaron Lecklider for his substantive comments that greatly improved the manuscript.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **[AQ: 4]**

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **[AQ: 5]**

### Notes

1. Quoted in Jarenwattananon (2010 **[AQ: 6]**).
2. For examples, see Havrilesky (2010) and Riccio (2010).
3. Adolph Reed Jr. also offers a useful critique of this "touristic discourse of cultural authenticity" in Reed (2011).
4. Brad Pitt founded the Make It Right Foundation in 2007 to redevelop the Lower Ninth Ward with sustainable, affordable housing. Nearly half of the 150 planned houses have

- been completed by this printing. BP Oil initiated a public relations campaign following former CEO Tony Hayward's highly publicized gaffes (Make It Right 2011 [AQ: 7]; Mouawad and Krauss 2010 [AQ: 8]).
5. For a study that examines how slumming reshaped race, sexuality, and the leisure industry in New York and Chicago, see Heap (2009).
  6. I am proposing here that *Treme* viewers represent a particular niche market, akin to that of the cultural heritage tourist, or in this case, the disaster tourist. Like creator David Simon's previous HBO crime drama *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Treme* has enjoyed critical success for its realistic portrayal of an American city but has failed to attract large audiences. Many commentators have attributed both series' poor ratings—as well as their loyal, passionate fanbases—to the series' complex characters and themes, esoteric language and cultural references, and social justice storylines, which are characteristics that have also motivated cultural heritage and disaster tourists (Adalian 2010; Adams 2011; McNamara 2010; Owen 2010; Pierce 2011; Seidman 2010).
  7. This process continues in season two with Sonny's reverent interaction with the Vietnamese fishing community, epitomized by his romantic pursuit of Linh, the daughter of a Vietnamese shrimper.
  8. In the finale to season two, McAlary pokes fun at his racial and class privilege, but does so in a way that provides more caricature than critique. For his swan song appearance with the band that has slowly ousted him, McAlary dons a preppy sweater and holds a martini glass for a stereotypical performance of "whiteness," punctuated by his announcement to the audience: "It has come to my attention that someone of my disposition cannot in fact bring the funk. There are those that say, 'Davis, are you not aware that you are from uptown?'" The scene concludes with McAlary's comically exuberant rendition of James Brown's "Sex Machine."
  9. Sociologist Herbert Gray's discussion of the post-Civil Rights public sphere provides an equally useful framework to contemplate the ways that black visibility is used to justify fictions of color blindness and meritocracy (Gray 2005, 186 [AQ: 9]).
  10. I am also indebted to my University of Massachusetts Boston, colleague Rachel Rubin for her observations that the relative absence of rap music in the first season of the series signaled a failure to reflect or validate the black community's justifiable rage (HBO's *Treme* 2010).
  11. For a reading of McAlary's arrogance as successful satire, see Pappademas (2011).
  12. In "Letter III" of his Letter from an American Farmer (1782), J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur wrote famously that in America "individuals of all races are melted into a new race of men" (Crèvecoeur 1904, 55).
  13. French Quarter Phantoms, Historic New Orleans Tours, Inc., and New Orleans African American Museum have all developed walking tours of Tremé since the HBO series began.
  14. Adolph Reed Jr. has already identified three Tremés in the context of New Orleans tourism: the documentary *Faubourg Tremé*, the HBO television series, and the neighborhood. I'm arguing here that the newly created heritage tours of the neighborhood constitute a fourth Tremé (see Reed 2011).

15. For an extended discussion of post-Katrina tourism and its ambivalent relationship to African American neighborhoods and culture, see Thomas (2009).

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**Bio**

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