

## **New Orleans, Louisiana, USA**

In other words, political questions are disguised as cultural ones, and as such become insoluble – Antonio Gramsci. (1971, p. 149)

I find *Treme* mesmerizing in the same way I continue to find New Orleans mesmerizing after living there for years. That is because it captures the



distinctiveness, recreates the pace and distills, with alluring intimacy, the laissez-faire interactions that characterize daily life in the city. If we take *Treme* at face value as entertainment, it succeeds as ethnographic description of life 'on the ground' because it is so attuned to – even obsessively fixated upon – those 'only in New Orleans' experiences of second line parades, Mardi Gras Indian tribes, Creole cuisine and so on down the list. Creators David Simon and Eric Overmyer have a deep attachment to New Orleans culture and they wisely enlisted local writers and consultants to provide an insider's perspective.

Having only seen season 1 as of this writing, I nevertheless feel secure in saying that *Treme* at its center is a prolonged argument for New Orleans' exceptionalism, and if it is a particularly convincing argument it is by no means a new one (Eckstein, 2005). The uniqueness of local culture is the foundation of the city's identity; it is a ubiquitous theme in fictionalized accounts from Tennessee Williams' *Streetcar Named Desire* to Disney's *The Princess and The Frog*, and the marketing campaigns of the Convention and Visitors Bureau overflow with sounds of jazz and images of gluttony ('You're Different Here!'). *Treme* does not shy away from the darker side of distinction either – the corruption, the poverty, the violence – and much like the city's assets these problems are presented as peculiarly local. A black man brought to his knees by a policeman with a billy club? 'Naturally N'Awlins', as the colloquialism goes. A robber is beaten to death? 'Yeah you rite'. At least those still living can commiserate over a beer and a po-boy sandwich and dance their blues away at the second line.

What is new about *Treme* and other recent claims for New Orleans' exceptionalism is the specter of Hurricane Katrina, which vies with culture as the protagonist of the show and ultimately conjoins with culture to create a kind of Southern Babylon-meets-Atlantis über-site of exceptionality. The scene in episode 1 that sets romantic images of levees and riverboats against shots of 'big chief' Albert Lambreaux removing debris from his flood-ravaged home, all to the tune of homeboy Louis Prima's 'Buona Sera', raises the 'only in New Orleans' theme to new heights, topped only by the final episode's harrowing 'flashback' to 29 August 2005. Katrina was a signal event that remapped the landscape to a degree unseen in the United States. It displaced families and upset fragile social networks, and it threatened the most resilient of local traditions: *Treme* has managed to depict how lives, livelihoods and neighborhoods were stitched back together as evocatively as any piece of scholarly research or investigative journalism I have come across.

But I worry that by presenting Katrina as an unprecedented catastrophe in an extraordinary place, *Treme* masks the reality that New Orleans is an American city – one with all of the poverty, spatial segregation, racial marginalization and hyper-incarceration of, say, Baltimore – and that post-Katrina New Orleans, as disaster zones go, is thoroughly routine.



It seems hardly worth mentioning at this point the role of industrial deregulation in setting the stage for environmental disasters, but in *Treme* the machinations of governance and industry hover like phantom clouds or are presented as local issues. (I am thinking here of the billowing rants of Creighton Burnette, the music-loving Mardi Gras maven and fierce defender of everything New Orleans who ultimately succumbs to suicide.) Even though we come to understand the withdrawal of prisoner's rights in the tumult of the storm, and we meet good cops and bad cops, there is no sense of where they reside in a national prison industrial complex that has quintupled in three decades and will incarcerate one out of every six black men (Wacquant, 2009, pp. 58–69). We hear of corruption in local government but nothing about the hundreds of millions in no-bid contracts that went to companies that sitting Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld commissioned to rebuild New Orleans even as they continued to hold stock in them. (What does a Bechtel contractor have to do to get a plate of red beans and rice in *Treme*?) In the twenty-first century, these stark realities are as much 'Politics American-Style' as they are 'Naturally N'Awlins', but as they do not enhance the viewer's immersion into local color they remain mostly off-screen.

That is a shame because the close-up shot of New Orleans post-Katrina reinforces the misguided notion that New Orleans is somehow apart from America and that Katrina can somehow be isolated as a natural disaster due to precarious geographies and regional idiosyncrasies. What too often gets chalked up to an atmospheric disturbance followed by a series of human failures was in actuality a direct result of the success of neoliberalism, which as David Harvey writes, privileges 'private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations and financial capital' at the expense of citizens' rights and does so by way of 'deregulation, privatization and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision' (2005, pp. 3, 7; On post-Katrina New Orleans as a neoliberal laboratory, see Leland, 2009). One subset of neoliberalism, disaster capitalism, has developed into a particularly lucrative cottage industry. Naomi Klein has argued that what may appear to be improvised responses to crisis are more accurately 'orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events' (2007, p. 6). For one example, take the radical restructuring of the New Orleans public schools into a charter-based system. The state, which had been threatening a takeover of low-performing city schools since 2003, acted swiftly to pass legislation dissolving the teachers' union and firing 4700 members, an opportunity that only a crisis such as Katrina could make possible. For another, take the demolition of housing projects relatively undamaged by the flood. The calamity that transformed New Orleans into a giant laboratory for housing and educational 'reform' was not an aberration but a tenet of disaster



capitalism: ‘waiting for a major crisis, then selling off pieces of the state to private players while citizens were still reeling from the shock, then quickly making the “reforms” permanent’ (Klein, 2007, p. 7).

This panoramic view of post-Katrina New Orleans – the cinematic ‘wide-shot’ – is missing from season 1 of *Treme*. Of course, the show’s writers have no responsibility to situate New Orleans globally or Katrina systemically, and audiences of the show do not necessarily look to television drama for political critique. The frustration stems from the knowledge that Simon and company are so eminently capable of locating the struggles of individual subjects within sprawling and debilitating systems of power because they did it so well on their previous program, *The Wire*. Its stories of policemen, politicians, drug dealers, dock workers and school kids gave us insight into daily life in Baltimore but if they had done only that Simon would not have been judged a genius (literally, according to the MacArthur Foundation). What distinguished *The Wire* was its ability to uncover – dramatically and poetically – the place of individuals in institutional hierarchies and their strategies for asserting the limited power they have to shape those relations. *The Wire* made for great humanities and it also made for great social and political science, which is another way of saying it did what great art does: critically engage with contemporary social forces in the public sphere.

To this social scientist and New Orleanian, the unfulfilled promise of *Treme* is in its potential to harness the power of fiction to situate day-to-day experiences and intimacies at the subterranean level of global connections. Viewing a colossal disaster in a fascinating place through the lens of a genius can make for compelling drama, but when all the ‘otherness’ of post-Katrina New Orleans creates an intoxicating fantasy world of local culture, then the opportunity to challenge viewers about the state of the nation is diminished. New Orleans has never been an imaginary museum of curiosities – a thing apart – because it has long been tied to America and to the world through linkages that are not readily visible. I say an effort to unconceal them would make for more provocative art.

## References

- Eckstein, B. (2005) *Sustaining New Orleans: Postwar Literature and the Fate of an American City*. New York: Routledge.
- Harvey, D. (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Klein, N. (2007) *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt.
- Leland, J. (2009) This is America: New Orleans post-Katrina, post-urban, post-national. *Safundi* 10(2): 121–131.

Wacquant, L. (2009) *Prisons of Poverty*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Matt Sakakeeny  
Tulane University,  
New Orleans, LA, USA  
mattsak@tulane.edu