

## The Place of *Treme* in the Film Economy

### *Love and Labor for Hollywood South*

*New Orleans is about the story. And it's about embracing the story. I think that's what you are looking for is how do you embrace the story. Everyone sees what they want out of Treme.*

CONTRACTOR, MALE, AGE 38

Over the course of my research into the New Orleans film economy, one television series seemed to dominate my discussions with other people about Hollywood South. Though the title *Treme* (2010–13) refers to a single neighborhood, the HBO program was a valentine to the entire city, according to its auteur David Simon. In particular, Simon and his creative team showered their love on fellow cultural producers in the city: the writers, the musicians, the chefs, those who performed cultural rituals in the city, and their enthusiasts. Charting the stories of these proxies for “creative economy” workers after Katrina, the series heavily promoted New Orleans as an irreplaceable part of the United States with a unique and worthy culture. It ended with an abridged fourth season after it failed to attract sustained national interest, from either pay-TV subscribers or television critics. Locally, however, no other film or television program did as much to represent New Orleans as a special place—one under threat and in need of defenders.

In terms of the contemporary film economy, *Treme* was exceptional. The fact that producers touted the program as one made about and for New Orleans replicated the public rhetoric of filmmakers and their boosters as described in chapter 1. Unlike other high-profile films shot during the same period, such as *Green Lantern* (2010) or *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), in which the city was simply a backlot, *Treme* was one of the few projects not only set in New Orleans but also created with the city at the center of the narrative. Simon and cocreator Eric Overmyer said they had planned to do a program about musicians in New Orleans before



FIGURE 17. Eric Overmyer, on a panel exploring the literary nature of *Treme* at a Tulane University event, October 28, 2010. Photo by Sally Asher, Tulane University.

Katrina, but then reframed the concept around themes of urban recovery and redemption in the flooding's aftermath. "This show will be a way of making a visual argument that cities matter," Simon said.<sup>1</sup> From its beginnings, the producers established a moral basis for local expenditures, hires, and philanthropy as integral to the production project.

At the same time, *Treme* was entrenched in the same tendencies as every other major Hollywood production incentivized after 2002. Producers' spending morality was thus supplemented by state tax credits, which at the time equaled approximately one-third of HBO's investment, with an extra 5 percent for local hires. The project's LLC, Fee Nah Nay, certified about \$7.5 million in expenditures for the pilot alone in 2009; this figure ballooned to over \$40 million for the rest of the first season. Like other productions, as detailed in chapter 2, much of that money was spent on payroll and housing for crew coming in from outside the city; nearly \$400,000 went to hotels, accommodations, and per diem for them alone. Out of the total certified budget, the city recaptured less than 1 percent of the state's money in the forms of public space permits and police security details. In return, *Treme* in the first two seasons used more than 10 percent of the *total* public space used for *all* film location shooting from 2007 to 2010.<sup>2</sup> Like the framing of New Orleans in relation to other American cities, the program was framed as both the exception and the archetype of all runaway productions. It would be impossible to understand Hollywood South without addressing this production and how residents felt about it.

*Treme* was written, shot, and aired during a time when many residents in New Orleans were at the crossroads between hopeful recovery and what was known as Katrina fatigue, "a type of exhaustion that can only come with the feelings of sheer hopelessness over the loss of a life one will never get back."<sup>3</sup> This liminal state, according to medical anthropologist Vincanne Adams, was aggravated by the unreliable and unaccountable response of government at all levels in helping residents return to their homes. The private outsourcing of federal and state disaster relief alongside the local privatization strategies for new development "made trauma feel normal and made the 'normal' that people once knew feel like an imagined dream."<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the city had embraced the film economy as a central strategy in its recovery–transformation. For residents struggling for ways to navigate and narrate the "new" normal of life in New Orleans, *Treme* was one of the few media texts that personally hailed those who felt fatigue and loss to "Wrap your troubles in dreams, and dream your troubles away."

Indeed, that was the title of the *Treme* episode I watched with the individual whose insight opens this chapter. The title quotes a popular tune penned to deflect attention away from the impacts of the Great Depression; yet it might as well have described the uncanny zeitgeist in the backyard where this contractor's friends gathered weekly to watch the show about post-disaster New Orleans projected on the side of his own damaged house. I came there looking for the reasons why people loved *Treme*, how it reflected the city's political economy, and what they were dedicating to the series' success despite their own conditions. For, despite my critiques of the film economy, this multigenerational New Orleanian reminded me that I also longed for catharsis—a way to embrace the story of a place that felt like

home—despite all the ways the film economy itself made me uneasy. This chapter focuses on the ways *Treme* helped many viewers construct their sense of New Orleans as home, even as its production became an alibi for the film economy's roles in historical and spatial displacement.

#### AN ARCHIVE OF STORIES ABOUT OUR COMMUNITY AND OURSELVES

Reflecting on the city's recent past, Simon aptly compared the contested nature of personal memories and official histories in writing about New Orleans to that of a diaspora. Paralleling his own lineage in a Jewish community that argues each “point, counter-point, and counter-counter-point” of its own formation, New Orleanians are defined by a struggle over their identities. According to him, “Every shard of your civic history is balanced precariously on the head of two dozen different bundles of personal memory, family history and political argument.”<sup>5</sup> These rifts between memories and histories became public during group viewing events, on message boards and social media, and in the sociable conversations that make up local coffeehouse culture. The program thus became one site among many in the post-Katrina city in which the “struggles of distribution and recognition are played out” in an imagined space that political theorists call the “public sphere.”<sup>6</sup> By talking about *Treme*, viewers talked about New Orleans, its symbolic boundaries and members, as well as the civic rules that bound them to the city.

I became familiar with these discussions as an insider and outsider to these times and spaces. I had lived seven years in the city when *Treme* began airing. I knew the stories being recounted on the screen weekly and was personally embedded in the networks of people working on and watching it. Working from rather traditional sociological objectives to foster demographic diversity and objective neutrality, I launched a reception study in 2010 to capture a random sample of sixteen interviewees whose voices represented different social groups in the city: black, white, creole; working-, middle-, and upper-class; men and women; Uptown and Eastside. I attended many public screenings, which gave some local residents access to the pay-TV program. After I was invited to speak on the program in a public forum, however, it became undeniable that I too was a participant in this local circuit of production and consumption.

During broadcast of the next two seasons, I treated *Treme* as a kind of “home-work,” a way of bridging my private life and my public work world to understand more deeply why so many people around me were so drawn to this one show.<sup>7</sup> I attended screenings at friends' houses and organized focus groups in my own. Undoubtedly, these groups were less representative of the entire city than the first-season interviewees had been; in particular, they were whiter and more

middle class. Yet they debated and offered diverse opinions of *Treme*'s roles as quality entertainment, as a "bard" for the city's recovery, and as a model production in the local film economy. They also represented the program's target labor force and audience, in that all of the later interviewees were involved in the local creative economy, from artists and creators to performers and academics. In all, I spoke over an hour each with more than forty residents who saw *Treme* as fans, critics, workers, or all of the above.<sup>8</sup>

Much of my initial discussions with others seemed to hinge on an investment in the city's authenticity: the special and unique character of New Orleans and, by extension, its people. From the airing of the pilot episode, *Treme* gave its viewers an opportunity to take a stand on what they love and hate about the mediatization of New Orleans. In general, viewers dismissed the media representations of the city as inauthentic at best. Another short-lived post-Katrina TV series, *K-Ville* (2007), drew mockery for its faux southern drawls and made-up cultural traditions, such as "gumbo parties." At worst, films set in New Orleans perpetuated damaging stereotypes, especially of an undifferentiated South. One interviewee elaborated this in a personal way:

It's painful to me because New Orleans has a lot to offer [filmmakers], but we get passed over and typecast as a regional area. Sometimes we get lumped in with people from Texas or Alabama because the accents are indiscernible to a lot of people in the country. [. . .] It hurts when people from Hollywood come here and want to do sets of plantation homes and magnolias. (Technology worker, male, 29)

Following literary conceits, films set in New Orleans have historically stigmatized the place as an ugly or exotic twin of other American cities, thus representing the city as one end of the binary between "hedonism and piety, beauty and death, illusion and reality, and cosmopolitanism and provincialism."<sup>9</sup> According to interviewees, the tax-credit policy didn't necessarily assist in elevating better portrayals, more often erasing any sense of the local place, either behind green screens and generic sets or by redressing the city as somewhere else, such as Jackson, Memphis, or even the *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (2014). In contrast, *Treme* self-consciously sought to reflect the place, or at least hold a mirror to one of its reflections. In interviews and focus groups, speakers' first comments mimicked those that could be found in the local newspaper, which translated and praised the program's faithful archiving of local culture.

Nearly everyone compared *Treme* to this long roster of past films and programs based in New Orleans. Fans cited the authenticity of the smallest details, from the proper pronunciation of particular words in a neighborhood dialect, to the restaurant regular who is called to be in a scene filmed there.

Like when [the Mardi Gras Indian chief character] Lambreaux holds out his finger and says "Feel that," because a real Indian has calluses from doing their own sewing.

It's just a very minor detail, but then the program apologizes when they don't do something that's not absolutely accurate.<sup>10</sup> (Lawyer, male, 58)

[I remember] the blue tarps and contractors blowing off the work [of rebuilding the city]. That detail stuck with me because I was working for a contractor then. (House-cleaner, female, 37)

The way they treat costumes [on *Treme*]. I mean I have a closet full of costumes and it's not just for Mardi Gras. It's just part of living here. (Barista, male, 47)

It's like New Orleans *Cliff Notes*. (Interior designer, female, 31)

[It's] like a little classroom every week. (Student, male, 22)

These details indexed an archive, a collection of concrete details that pointed to the local culture. Sometimes these facts were so arcane that viewers had to go to the newspaper, the HBO website, the Facebook page, or fan blogs for translation. One twenty-two-year-old described introducing the program to his parents, “who had no clue about the show,” because he thought they could help him decipher the details. “I said, ‘Oh my God Mom, you have to see this. You might know some of the people on it and some of the terminology better than I do.’” As a result, he watched the program with his family each week.

*Treme* showed that within a community, an archive is more than a collection. In every episode, musical performance, food traditions, parade cultures, and accurately accented vernacular sayings were categories for understanding home as a coherent physical place—one under the threat of disintegration. “The show felt like home because I went through those things,” said one woman in her mid-forties who was simultaneously telling her Katrina story. Through the verisimilitude and the public circulation of those relatively minute or ordinary details, the *Treme* archive communicated the exceptionalism of the city and its people. Through it, Simon and the other *Treme* creators joined the ranks of the city’s literary “vernacular kin,” such as William Faulkner, who used “voices of its racialized and displaced citizens” to create a community based on “improvisational acts of affiliation, across difference, between persons dedicated to the local, the regional, and the vernacular.”<sup>11</sup> With respect, if not reverence, viewers called cultural references they recognized in *Treme* “loving,” “diligent,” and “engaged,” thereby calling attention to both the items and the program creators who stitched them into the fabric of the script.

Public screenings gave viewers the opportunity to perform their recognition of subtle, if not arcane, knowledge buried in a phrase, a guest talent, or a musical number. One bar that hosted the weekly broadcasts tried to broaden this community of “those in the know” by distributing episode guides, complete with synopses and character summaries. Yet the more instructive cues to the meanings embedded in the program came in vivo, when audience members publicly laughed, booed, or made pithy gestures. These particular screenings were made all the more authoritative by replicating the rules of a library; once the program

started, all unrelated commentary to the archive was shushed in reverence to the contents. At these moments, silent at times with their sudden emotional eruptions, I felt suspended between my own personal study of the archive and the communal solidarity of entering the archival space together.

This tension between the personal and the public archiving of New Orleans culture in the show was especially salient in the context of the post-Katrina diaspora. Diasporas use archives as a way of rallying a sense of community, especially in the face of exile or even extinction. Archives make those communities visible, affirming their existence, legitimating shared knowledge, and helping imagine utopian futures.<sup>12</sup> For the members of the diaspora, archives provide a repository of things to hold on to if they have to leave the city, or if they are not present at the time of disaster. Yet archives also give people something to identify with and embrace when they come to the city. The influx of migrants to the city post-Katrina frequently looked to the television archive of the city in becoming part of the community. The solidarity forged by all of these diasporic New Orleanians defending the culture was “magical and amazing,” according to one female at a coffee-shop conversation, because it showed “a sheer love of the city.” Others hoped optimistically that, together, they would recover, restore, and renew the most endangered pieces of the culture. With little or no prompting, interviewees added their own stories to the archive they entered through the screen.

#### TREME AND ORDINARY TRAUMA

Another recurring feature in my research was when interviewees schooled me about New Orleans as a place. They would frequently start by telling me how New Orleans is, before telling me how *Treme* “gets it” right or wrong. For example, one interviewee, an older African-American gentleman, started to tell me, as many others would, “New Orleanians have their own authentic culture.” He then said with a smirk, “Like when [the local actress] Phyllis Montana tells her husband [in a scene in *Treme*] that he came home that night ‘smelling like cigarettes and pussy,’ that was her line. Nobody outside of New Orleans could have thought of that anyway.” At the moment, I think he was trying to catch me off my guard, but what really shocked me was how he could have divined that it was her line—that she had created it. Then I knew he was not kidding. A former mailman, this interviewee said he knew Montana because he used to deliver disaster-aid checks to her flood-ravaged neighborhood in New Orleans East.

By virtue of beginning the series and its storyline so soon after the disaster, *Treme* encouraged survivors to reflect similarly on the smallest details of their own post-Katrina stories.

[In my FEMA trailer] my shower didn’t work. My refrigerator didn’t work. The heat was off in the middle of the winter. It was just irritating. We kept calling these people,

and we're dealing with the contractor, and we're screaming at each other because they said they're gonna show up and they didn't. There was all this constant frustration. Everyone was going through that. The first season [of *Treme*] was so good. When [the character] Ladonna cut into her roofer to do the work, I thought, yes, I've had those. I've had screaming battles with my contractor. It was a very intense time. (Landlord, female, mid-60s)

I could hardly help from being moved [by the show]. There were little nuances in there that I didn't even recognize. Some of the ways we talk. Some of the things we say and no one else says. And [the characters] said it in just such a way like we would. Like when the trombone player asks, "How's your mama?" He's not just saying that line. He's truly asking it. [. . .] Katrina put me in a place where I was willing to help people. We became a community like never before. (Barista, male, 47)

While these highly personal stories differed, they also spoke to viewers' own archival impulses, in making sense both of New Orleans as a place and of their own experiences there. Beyond the temporality of the program's broadcast, *Treme* seemed to elicit those impulses through conventions that resonated with residents' sense of home. Simply put, "The show was close to home," a viewer and tour guide told me. "There was a connection."

Even as loyal viewers scoured *Treme* for inconsistencies, factual errors, and lapses in creative license, they related to the details emotionally, if not therapeutically. The retelling of the past in terms of the present should come as no surprise. In classic psychoanalytic theory, the archive and therapy are codependent. The therapist records the patient's external utterances—vocal, corporeal—in an effort to later reread the archive as a window into an internal state. The archive is thus a technology for storing not just the evident past, but all of the traces that later can be reordered in some future story.<sup>13</sup> Many interviewees clearly wanted this reordering of the details, citing the city's people, including themselves, in their mental notebook. These stories were thus alternatives to the more epic and linear narratives of struggle, recovery, and rebirth. They tapped into a surplus of emotions—including sorrow, anger, and joy—that often exceeded the timescale of the program and its periodization of trauma. In some cases, viewers read the contemporary program through a thicket of historical details that sometimes carried back to the founding of the city. In other cases, not necessarily exclusive of the former ones, our conversations focused on current recovery efforts as the traumatic source.

With the exception of a few sporadic flashbacks, *Treme* was set in the period that locals still refer to as "post-K." In doing so, the program largely avoided representing the traumatic event. The montage of stills and clips in the opening credits combined a few iconic storm images in a scrapbook of other scenes drawn from daily life or ripped from the headlines. The absence of this weather specter was comforting to many viewers who were fatigued after numerous documentaries proceeded to repackage, even memorialize, disaster. Rather, they expressed relief

that the program tackled the emotional weight of traumatic events that happened in the years following the event, including those referenced in the previous chapter. “The first two months were so intense, and I think the show shows that in a really accurate way, just how intense everything was,” as one viewer explained.

The uncanniness of these fictionalized scenes based on reality and laid out in seemingly real time generated their own returns to interviewees’ repressed emotions. One woman in her thirties, who watched with her friends, said the show was part of her own “grieving process” after the storm. She said she wanted to view the series with a group with whom she felt safe, because she still cried when an episode revived an old memory. The friend sitting by her side agreed, adding that his own tears were less forthcoming than they were in the past, but that the years since Katrina in *Treme* still felt like the present. In a similar way, another viewer thought *Treme*’s fictional world was “more healing . . . unguent” than documentaries, because it got her to laugh about her past. “You can’t really joke about something you’re hurting about,” she explained. As if to repeat these returns, a few viewers mentioned the desire to watch the same episodes again in the search for more embedded nuances that they might ponder and cherish in the future. More commonly, interviewees expressed the desire to linger in the story itself. Fans talked how much they appreciated the slowed temporality and languid pacing in the program, especially in the first season. The long takes without rapid cross-cutting between scenes and characters evoked the sense of time stretched out. In these moments without much movement, the past seemed still like the present, the future foreshadowed but far away. Fans of the program countered critics of this languid pacing. “Things happened kind of slowly back then,” recalled one viewer. Another compared the sensation of living in the city after Katrina to “Waiting for Godot,” referencing a story in which the rescuer never arrives.

At its best, the combination of narrative elements and synchronic slowdowns in *Treme*’s fictional world evoked an emotional realism that imitated the conditions of perpetual crisis that have defined life for residents in New Orleans since Katrina. From episodic disasters to ongoing political and economic scandals, the era of what literary scholar Lauren Berlant calls “crisis ordinariness” infers that the media representation of crisis as a moment to be overcome has become normalized and diffused into everyday feelings of anxiety and unease. While most media still revel in portraying crises that victims face and surpass, any media representation of an impasse or a stalemate staves off the feeling, at the very least, of either resettling into normalcy or hurtling into the next crisis. For Berlant, media stories that feature stasis or avoid closure can be progressive alternatives to a reality so grim. Their spectators can find peace in the times when they can reflect without having to act.<sup>14</sup>

These temporal impasses were the subtexts in my focus groups when members debated the ongoing social problems that were not only threaded through

the storylines in *Treme* but that also exceeded their diegetic timelines. Poor schools and the “charter-ization” of public education, the decline in services for the infirm and mentally ill, the absence of local grocery stores with fresh food options, and the ordinariness of everyday violence against citizens were common themes in these discussions. Many *Treme* interviewees agreed that Katrina had just accelerated the injuries caused by political corruption, economic inequality, and social injustice. In the words of one viewer and native resident, “New Orleans is cyclical. . . . Political leaders have wanted to keep the people hungry and uneducated, angry and malleable.” In this sense, watching *Treme* was a time to reflect on the political impasse implied in the term *recovery*.

At the same time, *Treme* was part of the emotion economy that motivated viewers to act on the feelings that surfaced through the show. This is the cruel optimism that faith in the future can cure what ails the individual at present, according to Berlant. My interviews that followed a screening were always the most dramatic when viewers plotted themselves in *Treme*’s post-K timeline as the future defenders of the city. The host of the backyard screenings (quoted in this chapter’s epigraph) suddenly took the floor after nearly an hour of quietly sitting while others talked. He said:

I’m a fourth or fifth generation New Orleanian. This house and everybody here has a tie to this house. [Pointing at another man] He’s like my phoenix. He talked me into rebuilding. The rebirth of this house is a lot of him inspiring me to do these things and really do a kind of monument to my family. Everything in this area was built by my great-grandparents. And I’m the last owner of the whole house here. I sat in this house after Katrina. I came back after a month. It was here. And it was dead quiet. Nothing’s happening. *Treme* kind of reminds you of those times but also of the rebirth of the city and what it could be. (Contractor, male, 38)

While cueing his past and present memories, *Treme* also motivated him to envision a future for the city in which people could be preservationists or innovators, entrepreneurs or intermediaries, but each individual was responsible for defending the culture of the place. The projection of hope onto the urban hero was evident in public *Treme* screenings when the fictional characters directed their wit, charm, and anger to disarm anyone who was critical of the city in real life. I remember one screening during which the chef character Janine Desautel pitched a cocktail in the face of a restaurant critic playing a cameo. The critic in real life had written a scathing review of the city’s food culture pre-Katrina, rhetorically asking “what exactly is it that we’re trying to cherish and preserve” about New Orleans?<sup>15</sup> As if to answer him and anyone else who dissed the place, the crowded bar erupted in cheers and jeers for Desautel as their heroic proxy.

In its most overt call to help the city’s recovery, *Treme* recruited residents to be part of its archival strategies by joining the production. Before the series even aired, many locals told me of their desire to be extras on this set but no others.

By the end of the first season's broadcast it was "the trend to work on the set, to be on the set, to be an extra, or have a friend that was an extra," said an African-American student who grew up in an affluent neighborhood Uptown. Said another devotee and would-be extra, "I would have to take off work and spend the day sitting around, but I would do it for *Treme*." These two statements encapsulated two sides of what would be *Treme's* moral economy. On one hand, being an extra meant supporting the place through the program. On the other hand, extra-ing meant sacrificing time, and perhaps other earnings, in order to actually *do* very little, both somatically and symbolically.

In this regard, *Treme* was no different from other entities that directed the excess of emotions after Katrina toward a philanthrocapitalism based on corporate efforts, private volunteerism, and cheap or free labor. In the moment, the outsourcing of public disaster aid to private firms post-Katrina was already largely obscured behind empathetic and well-meaning volunteers who were channeled into the recovery.<sup>16</sup> Popular media, including *Treme*, were central to this ideological mission by making recovery into a personal duty. One newly arrived migrant to the city, a retired media professor, said he became an insider to the city's trauma by watching *Treme* weekly with a group of Katrina survivors:

That experience certainly changed [my and my wife's] relationship to the show both in terms of the knowledge gained but also a sympathy towards it. People talked about how, you know, in the opening credits, there's the patterns of mold, and people said, "Yeah, that one looks like the one I have in my [flooded] house." And so you get connected to the show in ways that are very unusual. But *Treme* has been and continues to be this booster for New Orleans as a city. And right after Katrina that was critical. So I was a worshipper of *Treme* at that time because I felt people had given up on New Orleans, I mean really had given up. (Retiree, male, 61)

In the above passage, boosterism took on an almost spiritual devotion to the city as portrayed through the program. The spiritual alignment with *Treme* stemmed from an imagined belonging—first, to a community of empathy with the residents of a traumatized city; and second, to a television program imbued with the agency to help in the recovery. The production cultivated these feelings among viewers, and then exploited them.

#### PUTTING THE LOVE OF *TREME* TO WORK

The rhetoric of helping ordinary people in New Orleans was always part of *Treme's* promotional strategy, from playing the role of the bard in the post-Katrina landscape to tithing local musicians and nonprofits that supported local culture. Among the virtuous acts that the production sponsored were charity balls for the corporate social venture Habitat for Humanity, where, for a \$100 donation, one had the chance to see the cast in person as well as bid on local goods in a silent

auction. The fine line between the celebration of ordinary culture and the celebration of the Hollywood-grade actors in the program was frequently crossed in these events in the name of social causes. Many of the program's stars became associated with local charity causes, from schoolbook and musical-instrument drives to home restorations in historically black neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup> By the time the shooting wrapped, Simon publicly claimed that *Treme* had tithed more than \$500,000 to local charities.<sup>18</sup>

While celebrity philanthropy was certainly not unique to this television program,<sup>19</sup> the linking of each star's image to local and black culture followed the same recipe advocated in the city's own economic development plans for tourism. This odd confluence was especially evident during the 2013 Bicentennial celebration of the Tremé neighborhood. Aside from the obvious mutuality between the place and the series, city planners referenced the show by sharing the same print font in order to promote the history of the "oldest Black neighborhood in the U.S." Banners showed the late Uncle Lionel, a brass-band player and personality of local musical culture, who also, as it happened, had played cameos on *Treme*. Lionel's ubiquitous image seemed to imply that the line between celebrating local culture in the public sphere and selling local culture in the private market was often indistinguishable.

The contradictions that surrounded the profiteering from local culture and its preservation were most evident in the enrollment of Louisiana labor for the series. On one hand, producers knew that local hires accrued cost savings. Their payroll earned an extra 5 percent in tax credits. Local hires could save money on housing, transportation, even meals. On the other hand, the presence of so many locals in the program itself lent to producers' claims about the authenticity of the show. In particular, extras, also known as "background actors," did not need to do anything but hang around with others to give credence to the idea of New Orleans as a unique place—for example, a place where people congregate every day in their favorite bars and dark alcoves animated by old-timey jazz riffs and refrains. Merging these two agendas, *Treme* producers framed local hires in terms of a moral economy. In it, the basis of the exchange relation between the company and the employee was founded in a social relationship that recognized the individual's unique role *in* the place and, thus, value *to* the place.<sup>20</sup>

The moral economy for *Treme* involved a series of ethically righteous and economically efficient trade-offs. In a phone conversation, the hiring director for the series explained to me that he learned that hiring residents was "the right thing to do" when he was a crew member on *The Wire*. Shot in his hometown of Baltimore, the director recalled feeling resentful when the production hired outsiders. In contrast, he said that *Treme* hired 220 crew from in state, compared to only 40 from out of state, in 2011. As stated in the previous chapter, an in-state hire does not necessarily mean that the person has been in the state for a long time. *Treme*,

however, made a rare effort to collaborate with a community media nonprofit in sponsoring workforce training workshops. The workshops benefited both new and native New Orleanians, but the hiring director said that while the migrant hires brought more expertise to the project, the native hires brought added value in terms of their “natural knowledge” of the city. Local crew members streamlined the production schedule because “they know the Teamsters, and the bureaucrats, and also the residents. So they don’t mind as much when you invade their neighborhood.” Like soldiers in a battle to beat the budget, he said local hires helped “win the hearts and minds” of citizens about the program. Still, he added, his biggest challenge was to maintain continuity in the ranks. Nearly all of his skilled crew members left in 2010 to fill better-paying and higher-status gigs in major film projects. To avoid future turnover, the director said he began appealing to his weekly employees to develop a shared sense of loyalty in lieu of a fatter paycheck. “We’re asking people to commit to us, and we will commit to them,” he said. “People aren’t in our production for the money. [. . .] You have to want to be here for what *Treme* is about.”

In talking with the local residents who understood what *Treme* “is about,” there was no doubt they thought the series participated in a moral economy that respected the place and its residents. Some said the production crews were especially courteous in notifying them about the closure of local streets. Others said they were unique in thanking residents with neighborhood parties, barbecues, and screenings. Local workers said they felt that fellow crew members treated them more respectfully than in other productions, such as by simply remembering their names or, in one case, helping an aspirant actor become part of the Screen Actors Guild. Although the wages for *Treme* did not deviate from union scales, workers mentioned that the production displayed other economic virtues, in what one punned was usually a “right-to-exploit state.” Extras, in particular, said the program set a high bar by paying them \$108 for a full day of work, and they were paid even if they were allowed to leave after a half-day. This figure, though tiny in relation to the size of production budgets, seemed meaningful to extras who were accustomed to as little as \$80–100 for twelve to sixteen hours on set, with most of that time spent waiting around. In sum, the anecdotes told by local residents cast *Treme* as a different kind of film production from the others they had become familiar with in the city.

These ethical entreaties used in hiring local extras further defined New Orleans as a different kind of place from others that had a film economy. For one, the ethics of mutuality between producers and their employees substituted the usual “dues paying” mythology that saturates the Hollywood gig economy. In the myth, which was proffered historically by the trade press, temporary self-exploitation would eventually lead to a stable career in industry. In Southern California, this tale leverages a steady oversupply of cheap and willing labor.<sup>21</sup> *Treme* offered no

## TREME: FILMING IN YOUR AREA

SET: PAYNE MEMORIAL CHURCH/JAZZ FUNERAL

FILMING: TUESDAY, MARCH 31

Dear Residents and Business Owners.

"Treme," a television pilot for HBO, will be filming a JAZZ FUNERAL PROCESSION in your neighborhood on TUESDAY, MARCH 31 early afternoon. We will be POSTING NO PARKING in the 2200 - 2300 BLOCKS OF LOUISIANA and the 3300 - 2900 BLOCKS OF LASALLE, 2200 - 2300 BLOCKS OF TOLEDANO, THE 3300 - 1900 BLOCKS OF S. LIBERTY, 2200 - 2300 BLOCKS OF 7<sup>TH</sup> STREET, 2900 - 2800 BLOCKS OF LOYOLA, 2300 - 2100 BLOCKS OF 6<sup>TH</sup> STREE, 2100- 2200 BLOCKS OF WASHINGTON AVE. We thank all of our neighbors for their assistance in relocating their cars for the day as necessary. We are planning a thank you for the neighborhood and will keep you posted on the details. This will be our last visit to your neighborhood for the Pilot. Should we go to Series we look forward to working with you in the future. Thank you all for your great support. We have met wonderful people. Thank you for having us in your neighborhood.

Please let us know of any anticipated inconvenience so that we make work out a solution before it is a problem. We are working with the Mayor Office of Film and Video. Jennifer Day, the Director of the Office may be reached at 504-329-0665 to verify our credentials if we have not yet had the opportunity to meet you.

We are also working with the New Orleans police to effect traffic control and monitor safety. During filming, we will be performing temporary traffic control and a Closure as before on Third Street and Danel for safety.

Please be aware however, particularly if you have young children and pets, of the increased activity in the

FIGURE 18. Flier distributed in a neighborhood for the *Treme* pilot. Residents noted the production crew's respectful tone in exchange for heavy use of their place.

such imaginary pathway. Instead, extras "worked" simply by being themselves. As one 2011 poster advertised:

HBO's *Treme* needs "Festival-Goers"!

Come and be a part of filming scenes to re-create a 2007 outdoor

Music Festival [ . . . ]

WE NEED YOU!

Let's show the world how New Orleans does it! [ . . . ]

FREE Entry! FREE Festival Food! FREE Music!<sup>22</sup>

Despite the call to have fun and enjoy free food and music, the plea "WE NEED YOU" also echoed the rhetoric of political recruitment. In the exchange, extras got more than a free show, they got the chance to convert their everyday lives into political capital. The producers made it clear not only that extras' ritual performance of the everyday was the source of their exchange value, but that showing everyday living in New Orleans on television was potentially a collective act of resistance to its erasure. By fusing the sense of the everyday as meaningless repetition with the sense of the everyday as a unique engagement with the world,<sup>23</sup> the production merged local cultural production and consumption for the series into a shared political project—as if watching the show, being on the show, and then promoting the show through one's social networks would help sustain other local circuits of music, art, or performance.

This call to do work was appealing to most extras, who told me that their labor was hardly laborious because they simply had to be themselves. Catching extra gigs during her off season was easy, according to a tour guide:

One of the days I did extra work I was down on Frenchman street, which I go to all the time, and I went to the Spotted Cat [bar] and watched the Jazz Vipers [band], who are now the Cottonmouth Kings. Now [in season 2] a lot of my buddies have been on the show so chances are if I do it again, I'm going to hang out with them and get paid for it. (Female, 30)

Similarly, extras told me how they brought their friends, angled to see certain bands, or ate their fill of the decent smorgasbord, as if the job was more like a social event, if not a form of local tourism. Even the lead screen actress Montana said she did not feel her job was “like work [. . .] because I’m playing a character that’s so much like myself.”<sup>24</sup>

At some point, however, even regular extras realized how “extra boring” it was to repetitively be the kind of New Orleanian that producers wanted in the background.<sup>25</sup> In the age of reality programming, the directive to “be oneself, but more so” implicitly values stressing the parts of one’s personality that fit the dramatic requisites of the program. In most cases, the result is that screen performers walk the line between representing themselves as unique individuals and reaffirming the stereotypes already associated with race, gender, and class.<sup>26</sup> On *Treme*, the extras needed to embody the features of its New Orleans archive, from ways of dressing and walking on screen to the postures and practices off screen. One interviewee, a schoolteacher and native New Orleanian, described these eager extras as a particular type she called “the super-New Orleanian.” She explained, “They go to everything more than the people born here. They are the ones who know the musicians. They have all the connections. They are kind of in love with something they want to embrace much more than in the natural way [. . .] They can be almost arrogant about the *real* New Orleans.” Even if exaggeratedly, these extras represented what it meant to be New Orleanians by becoming proxies for a place that they imagined was both outside of and part of themselves.

As a project that people saw as “more than just a film shoot,” *Treme* articulated a complicated politics of belonging, to both its audiences and its potential workers. Fusing the sense of “being” and “longing,”<sup>27</sup> the series spoke to fans’ yearnings to *belong* to a place—and to an identity in it—that felt stable despite the crises. To be an extra on the program allowed viewers to actualize their belonging to this partly real, partly fictional place. Extras spoke of a kind of doppelgänger effect, in which they already saw themselves living in the story.

You’re just looking around. It’s like when I saw the big protest march in the last episode, I just keep seeing all these people from different parts of my life. They were all there. They were all extras so I joked that it was kinda like looking at a Sergeant

Pepper album cover, you know, to see all these people you recognize. (Nonprofit worker and singer, female, 47)

I kept expecting to see myself in the background because the scenes were so real to me. [. . .] I think there's some weird thing in my brain that I think I'm already a part of it. I think that would be really neat to be historically there and on film, to be part of New Orleans. (Composer, male, 47)

Both of these interviewees had moved to the city just a few years before Katrina. Now they wanted to not only “be in it because everyone else is in,” as the first interviewee put it, but to be *remembered as being in it with everyone*. Whether represented by an album cover or a film, belonging expresses a reliance on its popular memorialization. Seeing their own lives unfold on the screen, these viewers wanted to be in the program, as if to merge the lived and its representation.

*Treme* offered the chance to memorialize the merger of self and image, to fix an attachment to the place even as its population moved and the city kept changing. This could be seen as a utopian project that allowed viewers to imagine alternate forms of belonging in modern life, a point that Elspeth Probyn makes in defining her own queer identity.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, *Treme* froze the dynamic movement of belonging and attachment through its own standard production practices. That is, once some fans signed on to be extras in the production, they no longer had equal footing with the community they projected on the screen. In this way, the film economy flattened the viewers' fantasies of belonging into a less satisfying exchange relation.

In illustrating how the program severed the utopian possibility between constructing the place and the desire to belong to it, I talked to extras about who was included and who was excluded from episodes based on real events. Two women, for example, decided to volunteer their vacation time for the 2011 season's reproduction of the 2007 Jazz Fest, as described in the call for extras above. For the women, Jazz Fest was an annual festival they had attended since its beginnings and when they began annual pilgrimages from their hometowns of New York and San Francisco. Although they were gainfully employed female professionals and had never before been extras, they said they wanted to belong to the community that they felt *Treme* shared with them. They woke up at 6 A.M. that morning, prepared their bags, and trudged down to the city fairgrounds on an unseasonably cold day. They spent the entire day there, a gift of themselves that they felt was hardly reciprocated by the crew. Instead, said one of the two, “What they did was the ever-present, self-referential, congratulatory New Orleans shit. You know which you just never hear the end of.” More interesting to them was who was in the crowd.

*Female 1:* It was a very interesting mix of people in there.

*Female 2:* Just like New Orleans. Only more black people attended that [*Treme*] festival [set] in 2007 than you would ever dream [did in real life].

F1: Right. There were a lot of black people. They brought in schools. They brought in a couple of schools.

F2: You know there're no black people at Jazz Fest. It's too expensive.

VM: Yeah.

F2: [. . .] New Orleans is extremely integrated in flocks. I understand, you know, the thing about having to make that scene. But the reality is not really that. So I thought this was going to be a version of that today too [at the Jazz Fest shoot].

VM: And yeah that was interesting. I mean . . .

F2: I said to [my friend], "Now listen. They're probably going to make us leave, so just be prepared to be rejected you know the minute we arrived." But it was no problem.

F1: They took everybody who showed there.  
[. . .]

F1: What I saw was that people were just excited. The combination of Jazz Fest and *Treme* [. . .] It is very, very ideological almost.

F2: Also another thing that would never, in a million years, happened at Jazz Fest. This black boy's school, pretty little boys, ages ten, eleven, twelve. They did [. . .]

F1: Mosh pit. They did a mosh pit.

F2: In the Blues Tent. And they did this incredible dancing, this line dancing. They were wonderful, but then they just started jumping. You know that would be dispersed immediately if you ever even saw that many black people or young people at the Jazz Fest.

VM: So was that part of the narrative?

F2: No.

VM: That was spontaneous?

F1: There wasn't even a camera on site. They had a lot of school buses, had a lot of kids come. They had this tiny little bunch of kids in uniform. They were so cute and Big Sam [the musician on stage] did the Hokey Pokey with them [off stage].

F2: I had pictures.

In this passage, the women illuminated a politics of belonging to the place evoked in *Treme*, one that seemed to overemphasize the racial diversity of its members, but that nevertheless excluded the young, black boys in the production. While the women expected to be turned away initially from the shoot as cultural outsiders, they felt like they succeeded instead in witnessing the most authentic performance of the day.

It was in these moments of asserting their belonging to New Orleans but not to its representation that many extras felt unmoored in describing the gap between *Treme*'s version of "home" and their own social lives, what Probyn terms television's *unheimlich* home.<sup>29</sup> In other words, collecting Facebook likes and cheers of recognition at a bar screening may have consolidated the meaningfulness of appearing on the show with the importance of rebuilding the city. Yet, to quote an essay likening New Orleans to one of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, the television show could not reconcile images of a city that "was more difficult to explain to the tourists" but nonetheless had given them a "postcard" of its everyday.<sup>30</sup> Another disappointed attendee at that particular Jazz Fest shoot said she had felt tricked into working for free and left the fairgrounds early, as if a spell had been broken from a curious disease: "It was Jazz Fest fever. You're in Jazz Fest and [the *Treme* signs] say come back tomorrow for more music so I went. It was a trap."

It was this sense of the *unheimlich*, or the uncanny, that seemed to unravel both these workers and viewers enamored with the healing powers of *Treme* over the place they called home. The uncanny speaks to experience of strangeness in modern life, reminding us that, even at home, social forces operate to pull us apart. For the medical philosopher Andrew Edgar, the uncanny is a natural feature of human life, but one that is typically repressed under experiences that we deem more "authentic" or "everyday."<sup>31</sup> Although the *Treme* archive celebrated the everyday and authentic, its production around town ironically leveled these elements into objects that seemed strange, inauthentic, and unlike home. Herein Edgar poses the political potential of the uncanny, not just to reveal the myth of an "authentic" culture, but also to reveal the political and economic structures that alienate people from their sense of place.

#### NAVIGATING UNEASY FEELINGS IN THE PRODUCTION OF THE BIG EASY

Over the years that *Treme* was shooting on location in New Orleans, the series became wrapped up in the daily lives of people who came into contact with the program through experiences that could seem commonplace. The wide geographic scope of the project, the enlistment of local employees, and the voluminous integrations of the signs of the place all contributed to this uncanny merger of culture and film economy—not least for those already working in the city's creative sectors. For them, the extremely personal address of the show, in a place where they felt at home, felt distinctly *unheimlich*:

[My boyfriend] was driving around town and I looked over and I saw along Saint Claude [Avenue] that there were a couple of [Mardi Gras] floats. And this was the middle of summer. And I'm like, "What are these floats doing here?" I thought it was a prank and somebody stole them. And then I saw they had the same themes as the

floats from that year [after Katrina]. And then I'm like, "What the hell is going on?" Because they reused this float. And then we found out later that they had recreated Mardi Gras because [the *Treme* crew] was looking for extras for that scene. I was like, "Oh *now* it makes sense." I see more and more of that all the time. (Recycling coordinator, female, 46)

You know what it is? It's like a map of your life. Like [. . .] Oh, this clearly shows that other people value the set of downtown experiences that I value because they're going to the same place. They're filming at [places like] BJ's and the Hi Ho and Saturn Bar and Satsuma and, like, they're building a world out of the places I live in. So it's like a fictionalized map of my time in New Orleans. (Teacher, female, mid-40s)

While many residents of Los Angeles no doubt experience the uncanny in their daily encounters with film productions, New Orleans residents spoke of a particularly fraught return of the repressed. *Treme* provided a jolt to viewers' sense of self in a place that was so available to being represented, rescripted, and revised, and that, at exactly the same time, the film economy participated in that transformation. For all of the creators' embedded commentaries on local politics and culture, the ghostly presence of the film industry itself created quite a bit of reflection on what could not be part of the archive because it was unspeakable.

"There is like stuff you go out and see and experience every day of the week and all of a sudden, it's on tape forever," said a middle-aged man in a group setting. "Like it's the really cool stuff you can't . . . articulate, but it's right there and you can enjoy it whenever you want." He postulated that the program helped those still exiled from the city maintain a connection with a place they loved. By imagining these viewers as those who were displaced, viewers in the city could see the program as supplanting a sense of place that was still relevant to the city without being the whole city. After all, the speaker spoke of going to the places that *Treme* references. Another male sitting next to him agreed, saying that the show was a testament to preserving people's memories of a place that has already been lost to "condos and these yogurt places around." Although he was referring to urban renewal and gentrification in any number of other American cities, these trends, also present in New Orleans, could speak to the displacement that anyone in the city might feel from the place memorialized by the television program. In one of the focus groups at my house, a friend of mine explained how watching *Treme* reminded her of a place she could no longer experience even though she lived in the city. She had a new baby and a full-time job, but she recognized the local culture she loved on the television program. She said, "Some of these things [on *Treme*] show that even if we don't use the culture—and I can be uptight, and work too much, and I cannot go out late just any night—but just knowing the people in the next block live like that makes me happy here." The contrast between her *life*, which could be anywhere, and that *place*, where people live as in *Treme* implied an unusual affection for a culture that surrounds the place but not all its residents.

In this way, the archival qualities of the show were animated, but also outside of everyday life, for people whose social conditions seemed to prevent crossing into that other world.

My conversations often revealed the thin line between personal memories of the city and *Treme*'s memorialization of New Orleans as a place that blurred the line between what was familiar and what was strange. The feeling of the former could be tucked away, a comforting reminder that this was one's home. In talking about what made New Orleans a place, interviewees repeatedly stressed both the ephemerality and the routineness of unique, everyday encounters in a unique public culture that celebrates difference, diversity, and tolerance—what has been characterized as “creole urbanism” that makes the city exceptional in relation to the rest of the United States.<sup>32</sup> While some speakers harked back to some origin stories about the city's exceptionalism, what became evident in all cases is that they saw themselves the constituents of the exception. The flip side of their understandings of this place as intimate, unique, and authentic was their assumptions about social relations in the city in terms of race, gender, and class. Comments about race relations, for example, could easily manifest what the literary critic Santiago Colás calls the “creole symptom” in that they express desire for a utopian creole identity without acknowledging the colonial relations that produced it.<sup>33</sup>

In viewer interviews, the creole symptom was expressed as a fantasy of cultural interconnectedness. One of the most popular games around *Treme* screenings was the retelling of who knows who, what, and where in a way that showed the intimacies with the New Orleans diaspora. Through these games, I learned that the real person that a character was based on in the program was the roommate of my friend's baby daddy. I found out that he had tried to seduce my friend, but he also taught her daughter music at her charter school. On further inquiry, I then knew his sister, who works for the same institution as I, and that he later dated someone else whom everyone apparently knew. Similar games connected me with the chiefs and the chefs, the creatives and all of the other character roles on *Treme*. This was one sense of community integration. It marked a particular milieu in the city of musicians and teachers, lovers and parents. It was intergenerational, polyamorous, and even multiracial within this shared habitus. As one viewer had remarked to me, “New Orleans is extremely integrated in flocks.”

At the same time, viewers' desire for the creole could not be believably sustained in the program. Many interviewees commented on the lack of well-rounded characters hailing from the city's black middle class, or from its gay and lesbian communities, as a major oversight in understanding the mixing of different social groups across racial and class lines. In group screenings, audience members rejected the ways in which the program dissolved the degrees of separation between social groups through the trope of intermarriage. In these instances—for example, uniting a Dutch musician with the daughter of a Vietnamese fisherman; an ambitious

Asian-American musician with a lazy, white “trustafarian”; and a creole dentist with an African-American bar owner—the dream of creolization was simply too far-fetched to be believed. Residents felt that these integrations were neither familiar nor a fantasy that could be imagined in the real New Orleans. These were people, in other words, who did not share the same place. For them, *Treme*’s New Orleans was different from the one the viewers felt at home with.

Most people simply expressed these aspects of the show as strange or unreal, setting up a dichotomy between what was real and what was authentic. For these same people agreed that *Treme* was authentic, more so than any other portrayal of the city. Yet the ways in which the show animated these authentic details could still not match reality. For example, an African-American business owner, artist, and native resident of the city explained to me his take on an episode the night before.

You know, [*Treme*’s creators] have the D.J. Davis talking [on the radio] to Manny Fresh, who’s a local rapper. [Fresh] was a part of Cash Money [Records] and the Hot Boys [rappers] and stuff like that. But the way Davis was talking to him seemed to me a little condescending to me. And Manny was dissing him a bit. *I think if that exchange went on in reality it wouldn’t have gone anywhere like how they portrayed it.* Manny would be like, “Hey fuck you. Don’t even waste my fucking time on the phone.” And that would have been the end of it.

Because, you know, I’m like from a poor neighborhood in New Orleans. The one thing that can get you is that people have to think you’re being sincere, especially when you’re doing the racial dynamics. So if there’s even a small hint you might be kind of phony, if you know what I mean, then forget about it. It ain’t going to happen. And in that little exchange on *Treme*, the dude just seemed phony as hell. [emphasis added]

Although this particular viewer said that *Treme* was the closest that any media program had come to resonating with local viewers, it fell short in capturing what he called the “layers” of cultural exchange in the city. Drawing on his own organic knowledge of communication scripts across racial and class lines, his example highlighted one such exchange between a real rap star, who rose to celebrity from a poor black neighborhood, and a *Treme* character, a white hipster from an affluent background. The cameo appearance in the program perhaps made it even more important for the fictional character, based on a real local elite and recreated by a celebrity outsider, to *recognize* the rapper’s race and class status. In a similar critique, this viewer rejected a scene in the same episode in which local policemen beat a black musician in public for bumping into a squad car. “I’m not saying that would never happen, but it’s the exception,” he said, adding that such police brutality would be more likely to happen across class lines, such as when “you have all these new people coming in and calling in to complain everyday” about street musicians in front of their private property. Inadvertently, interviewees such as

this one implicated the new gentrifiers that *Treme* attracted to the city as the ones who would transform race relations in the city.

These somewhat oblique critiques of the film economy recurred in the interviews as the uncanny feelings stimulated by a particular scene. Another middle-class woman talked about a bar scene in which the pole dancers were dancing silently in the background, but the bartender in the foreground had an eloquent recitation on the state of crime in the city. She wondered why the male bartenders and service workers got to be bards for the city, while the women were voiceless props. She summarized, "There's a whole segment of the popular, the people, or maybe several segments missing." As it turned out, her daughter was a dancer, occupying one of the most lucrative jobs in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Meanwhile, those viewers who worked for the love of program had their own strange encounters. One recurring extra on the set, a white woman in her fifties, said the crew was one of the "nicest" she had ever met. Even so, she was excluded from every shoot that was supposed to be in "a black part" of town. "I found out they are a bit choosy how they put people together," she said. "They just pointed at all the black people and say we want you and everyone else can go home." While this wasn't a problem, she said, there was at least one time she felt slighted when producers came to a free, weekly screening of the show in her neighborhood. The episode replayed an emotive scene she recalled in her own life before the producers combed the audience to be extras in another scene drawn from real events. "I said I was there the night [the musician] Glen David Andrews was arrested.<sup>34</sup> [The producers] didn't really believe it too much, you know. They thought that was kinda strange, but [one of the mothers of the band members] came out and said she was glad I was there. That meant more to me than the money." Here the feeling of estrangement from the production itself was recouped by another member of the crowd who was a Tremé resident and a *Treme* viewer.

In writing about the uncanny as a natural feature of modern life, Edgar also sees it as a political phenomenon. While the feelings of displacement or that things are out of place may seem existentially wrong, even something that has to be recuperated or made whole again, the person feeling the uncanny may react both by internalizing their feelings—as in the case of the extra who endures being cut from the scene—and externalizing their feelings by telling others.<sup>35</sup> The uncanny reactions that viewers had to *Treme* unraveled a mythical creole urbanism, belied the creole symptom, and gave texture to real events that the film economy had flattened in the process of representing them. This potential seemed to me to be the most radical affront to the film economy that *Treme* could muster.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the most eloquent critique of *Treme* came from someone who worked with the industry, whose sense of place and displacement were conjoined with the success of a local film economy. I was complaining to her that the series felt the need to have a Mardi Gras episode each season.<sup>36</sup> That



FIGURE 19. An example of *Treme*'s detailed archive of the city's history and culture. Here, the blue tarps of traumatic Katrina memories are repurposed as carnival suits for an episode portraying Mardi Gras 2006, which were then displayed in a local art museum as a tourist attraction. From "Well Suited: The Costumes of Alonzo Wilson for HBO's *Treme*," The Ogden Museum of Southern Art, January 24 to March 31, 2013. Photo by Vicki Mayer.

may be, she responded, but *Treme* could never capture the temporal feeling of everyday life:

[T]he manic intensity of the place: the fresh donut sign, and the politician is there having lunch . . . and Ken is playing the tuba in the neutral ground with a dancing baby in front of him . . . and then one of the stand-still silver guys comes riding a bike down the street. Like all of the craziness that just happens constantly because of the construction of the city. I don't think that sense of the daily insanity comes through, and [*Treme*] I guess reifies the traditional concepts through Mardi Gras, which is that we party a lot.

*Treme* created a place that reified lived experiences by making them into static goods for sale. This was a critique that came up in numerous conversations, often punctuated with the word *corny* to detect words that are opposite of culture. People also used terms like *commodity*, *product*, and *cartoonish*—words that point to what happens when authenticity is a mode of marketing places. The distillation of time in exchange for a rapid travel through space spoke to an economics of *Treme*'s archive, in which everything (and space) was flattened to have the same value. But "that moment of magic isn't sellable in the same way."

In these ways, the critiques of *Treme* grounded a popular distancing from the local tourism economy, while also realizing how the film economy hailed them to be tourists in their own place. Despite the careful collecting of details in the show, the whole was actually less than its parts, showing "all the bling and flash of New

Orleans [without] any real depth,” said one artist who hated the show. Many viewers felt that the program played its own role in gentrifying and selling the spaces discussed in chapter 2, especially those associated with a sense of folksy authenticity.<sup>37</sup> Another resident who did not watch *Treme* regularly lived in its namesake neighborhood and witnessed its transformation into a cultural tourism hub. She defended the show as a form of consciousness-raising publicity for outsiders:

Even if it's not bringing any dollars into the economy, it's a good thing to show our neighborhood [. . .] So when people come to the neighborhood, they get a little sense of it. They go to a bar and experience something. They feel good. Maybe they ask new questions because they're surrounded by something foreign. (Community outreach organizer, female, 35)

Like a music-festival promoter or an ecotourism guide, *Treme* used the allure of its foreignness and entertainment value to educate outsiders about the specific places worthy of their dollars rather than the city's economy as a whole. The TV show gave visible evidence of which people, practices, and places mattered most for the city's public-private redevelopment.

As those dive bars, clubs, and corner stores came to stand for New Orleans in heritage tourist circles, some viewers recognized—often with a reflexive sense of hypocrisy—how they also went there. In fact, their unique place was *not* exceptional at all. For an ultra-reflexive friend of mine, this political recognition was a process:

A bunch of my friends actually just came back from Puerto Rico and I realized the tone of the white traveler in them. The [sense of] “I've discovered something” and “I went to these places” and these are the very specific places. You know, I would never go on a cruise. I would never go to the Hard Rock Cafe. I would only go to these places that I deemed to be authentic. And they're authentic because they belong to brown people, and they have very specific names to them, and I know them now. I know that that was me too. Like when I moved to Mexico, I felt a possessiveness over Mexico that only the white traveler can have. And it's similar to that. David Simon and I, viewer of *Treme*, we can identify these places as real places. And I can therefore understand them and also feel like I have a glimpse into another world that's different and distinct from me because I know these things. And I mean, God, I have a bunch of ambivalence too. Your neighborhood has changed. Our neighborhood is actively going through that change right now. (Teacher, female, mid-40s)

Even as interviewees frequently bemoaned how *Treme* told all their cultural secrets, they could also recognize their own complicity in making places into their secrets and trading them as insider knowledge about others. All the while, interviewees were aware that at the end of the night, home was somewhere else. If these critiques of the structural forces that construct and then reify the creole were latent in my conversations with others, they were always just below the surface.

Conversations about these contradictions were in some ways the most difficult I had with viewers, particularly my friends and acquaintances. They involved the recognition that *Treme* hailed a diaspora that no doubt filled the requisites of a niche audience. Educated and overwhelmingly white in my own sample, these viewers were able to either afford the premium channel subscription or they easily entered the social venues where the program was free, but the drinks and the discussions were bound to the social milieu. They knew this. I knew this. The show ultimately generated an excess of emotions around this fact that could not be contained by it and, luckily, would not be. The series ended, but the conversations have continued.

#### *TREME* AS HOLLYWOOD SOUTH'S ALIBI AND INSTRUMENT

*Treme's* production was self-referential in commenting on Hollywood South's role in the city's future. From the beginning, Simon challenged the industry to show a national audience how New Orleans culture was "about something much bigger [. . .] in the context of all the political [news] and all the problems and all of the distopic things that have happened post-Katrina—if you can't [make] a story out of that, shame on you."<sup>38</sup> The LLC hired workers who insisted it was different from all the other productions because it left people "with a better feeling for New Orleans," in the words of a creative director. *Treme* gave visible evidence of Hollywood's power to shape a city through its representation.

For four years, *Treme* advertised culture under an urban policy that needed more consumers. It expanded viewers' vocabularies to include second lines and Mardi Gras Indians, while seeing the damaging harm caused by police profiling and market exclusion. In an era in which neighborhoods needed to prove their economic value for reinvestment, the program broadened the map for film locations by purposely seeking areas of the city no one had filmed in before.<sup>39</sup> It gave everyone the rationale to support New Orleans's recovery through cultural consumption. Like the tourism industry, the series defined positive urban development in aesthetic and emotional terms. No other media production before or since *Treme* has so thoroughly illustrated such synergies with the aims of the city's post-Katrina development strategies.

The politics of representation, however, had its limits. One question that stumped everyone in my many years of discussing *Treme's* realism was why the series never represented its own industry's presence in the creative economy. This absence was most glaring to me in an episode that dwells on the scandalous use of details to distract police from their duties, with nary a mention that Hollywood South is the biggest detail buyer, as relayed in chapter 2. The omission, while



FIGURE 20. Local synergies in selling the city back to itself via the series *Treme*. Photo by Vicki Mayer.

perhaps understandable as an oversight, reinforced how *Treme*'s archive of cultural contexts was incomplete. In fact, the series referenced the film industry only once in its four-year run. That instance was in a victim-to-victor vignette about Tia Lessin, a “self-described street hustler” whose amateur video footage of the hurricane and its aftermath resulted in a Hollywood red-carpet premiere.<sup>40</sup> For all its realism, *Treme* chose to tout and not trounce Hollywood's most cherished myth of meritocracy.

It was a faith in the merits of a local film economy that perhaps brought the cruelest optimism to those who believed that the show's success portended their own futures and fortunes. In the words of a twenty-something New Orleanian looking for stable work in the creative sector: “I guess we want the show to justify us being here, you know. People ask us [why we are here after Katrina] and we can say, ‘the arts’ and all. We certainly know the drawbacks of being here too. If the show is doing well, we all feel like we are doing well.” This cathartic case, however, hurts more than heals. Optimism in the face of a film economy politically designed to allow the monopoly of public resources depends on a race to the bottom “driving down pay rates, benefits, and job satisfaction for media workers around the world.”<sup>41</sup>

Hope for this creative economy based on supply-side subsidies has done little to relieve the everyday precariousness of its workforce. In one poignant example of this from my research, one of the local cultural-heritage celebrities featured in an episode of *Treme* never saw her own cameo, because she could afford neither to pay HBO nor to fix her car on the day she was to watch it at my house. From the vaunted musician to the supporting service worker, the local creative labor force has served the concentration of private wealth with its flexibility to move from “security to insecurity, certainty to uncertainty, salary to wage, firm to project, and profession to precarity”—all these workers performing “with smiles on their faces.”<sup>42</sup> *Treme* may have got “it right” in lionizing cultural workers and highlighting their struggles, but it could never “make it right” for them by being the poster child for creative boosterism, philanthropic charity, labor volunteerism, and the redistribution of a small portion of its public dividends back to a few select artists. These efforts may have made citizens feel good about the potential of Hollywood South, but they did little to reveal (if they didn’t actively obscure) the Faustian bargain New Orleans made with the film economy.

