



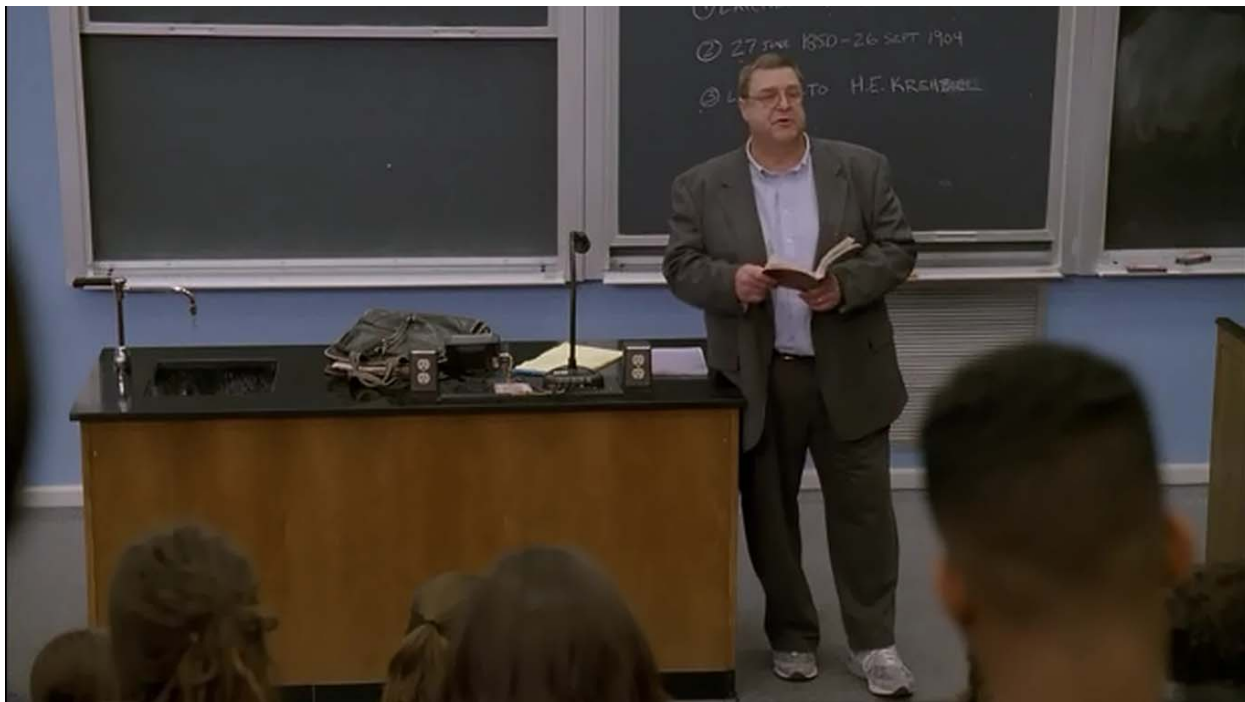
# "Is Space Political?": Oppositional Strategies in Treme

By Katie Moylan

Fredric Jameson's pointed question<sup>1</sup> from his 1997 essay is persistently examined and explored throughout David Simon's Treme (HBO, 2010-). Indeed, Treme asks **how** space is political and in response incorporates multiple figurations of negotiations of public spaces in post-Katrina New Orleans. Like Simon's The Wire (HBO, 2002-2008) before it, Treme functions as a sustained critique of the ways in which city spaces are used by both disenfranchised individuals as well as political and corporate elites. For Simon, the local is the primary point of departure for systemic political critique. While his New Orleans narrative/s may be flawed at times and are, perhaps, primarily based on learned knowledge rather than acquired through experience (as in The Wire), Treme nonetheless provides a sustained spatial critique at the level of the local. Storylines turn on the ways in which central characters struggle to reclaim their place in the city, whether through finding a new place to live, locating exiled friends and family, re-building a business or simply dodging disaster tourists. As in real life, individual strategies for surviving in the city after the storm are predicated in Treme on the degree of privilege prior to it; the ways in which social advantages, or the lack thereof, inform everyday life after the hurricane is traced and contrasted in overlapping character narratives.

**'Sometimes the battle worth fighting for is the one you know you're going to lose'**

Treme's variegated ensemble of characters allows for multiple and contradictory readings of their disparate, often overlapping uses of city space. In particular, the responses of Albert Lambreaux (Clarke Peters) and Creighton Bernette (John Goodman) to the post-Katrina paradigm in Season One can be read in opposition to each other within a narrative that does not otherwise mine binary representations. In different ways both Albert and Creighton are performers; in his role of tribal Chief of the Mardi Gras Indians,<sup>2</sup> Albert performs the role majestically in ritual finery, yet he also retains attendant political and community responsibilities throughout the year. In his role as an English literature professor, Creighton performs lectures to audiences of undergraduates; in his nascent role as post-Katrina pundit, he delivers critiques of the city's decaying infrastructures and of local and national responses (or lack thereof) to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on YouTube.



## Creighton Bernette teaching class (1:7). (Screen Grab)

Creighton's performances are not interactive, with the relative exception of his lectures where students ask the occasional question. Increasingly he rants, but he does not engage. Initially it appears that his rage-fuelled YouTube broadcasts provide some catharsis to other NOLA residents when he is congratulated by young men in the cafe where he buys his coffee, and when he is saluted by a resident eminent intellectual who observes that 'sometimes, rage is the only response.' Yet Creighton's pronouncements come from a privileged distance; unlike other residents and other central characters of Treme, his family's house was untouched by the storm, located as it is on 'the isle of denial'. It becomes clear that Creighton's rants are performative without political object, eventually losing even the initial cathartic function they provided for him as he sinks further into depression and apathy.



Creighton Bernette recording for YouTube (1:5). (Screen Grab)

Treme ultimately holds Creighton's eventual abdication by suicide up for critique; where others continue to struggle in the city after the widespread, sustained physical and psychological damage of the storm, he just 'quits', as his incredulous wife Toni (Melissa Leo) puts it: "He quit. He goddamn quit. A whole city down on its ass, all of us still here, one day after the next. Can't dance for him when he quit." Creighton's final day in New Orleans before his suicide is spent indulging in the city's recognisable, reified pleasures: eating its signature cuisine, listening to Annie (Lucia Micarelli) and Sonny (Michiel Huisman) busking on Jackson Square and slipping them a 20 dollar bill. Because of his suicide, his abdication, Toni refuses to fulfil his desire for the Second Line to play at his funeral, or to have a funeral, a celebratory ritual, at all.

Through this figuration, it is made clear in Treme that recognition and enjoyment of the normative cultural capital of New Orleans is not enough, nor is a single individual action, dramatic though it may be. Indian chief Albert is depicted negotiating with NOLA infrastructure to provide water for the bar in which he is squatting, rehearsing, working, and living. Later in the season, his actions incorporate concern for collective rather than individual survival and well-being, when he challenges the city's enforcement of federal control of the abandoned but still sound and undamaged housing projects, speaking for the wider, now homeless, community, even when his efforts land him in jail on Mardi Gras.



Albert in jail (1:8). (Screen Grab)

As he says: "Sometimes the battle worth fighting for is the one you know you're going to lose". Alongside these political activities we see Albert getting his 'gang' of Indians back together, as members return slowly to the city, begin rehearsing traditional songs and dances, and sew elaborate feathered costumes in preparation for the St. Joseph's parade. While each sighting of a Mardi Gras Indian is shown as a glorious spectacle that can be (simplistically) read as an embodiment of an anarchic, colourful New Orleans spirit, Albert transcends his performance as 'Chief', seeing within the role a political mandate to share a collective responsibility beyond the performative and celebratory.

In the final episode of Season 1, the Indians emerge in vivid feathered costumes to 'masque' to progress down the streets costumed, singing and dancing, on St Joseph's Day. The Indians are framed in long shot as they leave Albert's bar/home fully costumed, against the drab, still dilapidated background of bungalows and damaged streets. The dancing Indians are filmed later in medium shot from the side, bringing us closer to them. Later in the episode, a confrontation between the tribes breaks out, with their respective Chiefs facing off against each other. As their chanting increases in speed during the dancing challenge, their eyes lock; their intent faces surrounded by swirling bright red and yellow feathers, producing a striking spectacle alongside the tension of the confrontation. The gloriously vivid image is all the more powerful because previous episodes have represented Albert primarily in the politicised figuration of his activism, yet as shown repeatedly in Treme, the Indian tradition of costume, song and dance remains deeply rooted in political solidarity and action.

#### **'Way past midnight on the first St Joseph's day after the storm'**

A montage, also in the last episode of Season 1, foregrounds character uses of space, depicting discovered strategies of negotiating the city in the post-Katrina paradigm. In addition to its narrative purpose the montage also functions (as many moments in Treme do) as a fleeting portrait of how the city is experienced by its residents. The montage is framed by the song 'My Indian Red' by Danny Barker and the Baby Dodds Trio, which begins by saluting 'the Big Chief' of the Yellow Pocahantas tribe of the Mardi Gras Indians. The song is played on the radio by Davis the DJ (Steve Zahn), 'way past midnight on the first St Joseph's day after the storm' to accompany those Indians working through the night to complete their costumes for the next day's pageantry. Shots of Albert and the gang stitching and singing along, of Antoine (Wendell Pierce) losing a card game, of Davis at his mixing desk and of LaDonna (Khandi Alexander) throwing out drunks at closing time, are contrasted with the shot of Annie checking into an anonymous hotel room on Canal Street and of Jeanette (Kim Dickens) booking a one-way flight to New York via her glowing laptop screen; both women removed from a recognisable New Orleans context in these moments.





Albert Lambreaux (and Lula Pritchett) at work on the costumes (1:5). (Screen grab)

This montage depicts the different ways each character shown has reclaimed space, with varying degrees of success and failure. The glimpses of characters give way in the montage to a succession of empty New Orleans streets and spaces; a deserted Canal Street, an abandoned church with the defiant message of 'we'll be back' on the board outside; a factory with the lights still on within. The montage ends with dawn breaking over the Mississippi River and a police car pulling up alongside Creighton's abandoned SUV. At its best, *Treme* achieves a wider-reaching critique through its focus on the intensely local problems faced by its characters, framed through the efficacy of their different responses. Following up on the question posed at the start, Jameson argues that,

"[T]he empirical institutions and situations of the city stand as allegories of the invisible substance of society as a whole; while the very concept that citizens are able to form of society as a whole becomes allegorical of their empirical possibilities, their constraints and restrictions or, on the other hand, their new potentialities and future openings."<sup>3</sup>

Creighton ultimately sees society as comprising an audience for, or students of, his (informed, politicised) observations of the sustained damage done to New Orleans; in the end, his individualised actions cannot save him, nor do they impact profoundly on anyone beyond his grieving family. In contrast, Albert's activities, foregrounding collective rather than individual needs, emerge from his traditional role as Chief, but stretch to respond to the 'new potentialities' necessitated by the aftermath of the storm.



## Making deals on how to rebuild the city (2:1). (Screen Grab)

Treme's second season (as of May 2011) has introduced a darker, more direct critique which foregrounds the lack of repair and rebuilding resources provided by local and state organisations. Where the first season charted the dramatic territory of the city mere months after Katrina, the residual damage (infrastructural, psychological, fiscal) and ongoing lack of resources provided for rebuilding is starkly evident thus far in Season Two, as evidenced in part through the identification of business opportunities by opportunistic investors in the first episode of the new season. David Harvey notes a long-established 'association between city life and personal freedoms,'<sup>4</sup> which has, arguably, historically characterised New Orleans in particular. Yet the aftermath of Katrina means the spatial logic of the market gains greater purchase, reinforced and sustained in a city in which:

"...the citizenry as a whole is denied any collective choice of political system, of ways of social relating, or of modes of production, consumption, and exchange. If the mess seems impossible to change then it is simply because there is indeed 'no alternative.'"<sup>5</sup>

While Treme continues to negotiate a contested authenticity in its representations and figurations of New Orleans, it does at the same time continue to attempt and sustain a multifaceted critique of the post-Katrina paradigm. In these attempts, its focus shifts to the machinations within local and regional spheres of elites (iterations of similar interrogations in The Wire) that, like previous figurations, can usefully be read allegorically.

## NOTES

1. Jameson, Fredric. "Is Space Political?", Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory, ed. Neil Leach. London/New York: Routledge, 1997.
2. The 'Mardi Gras Indians' comprise a series of self-selected tribes of African American residents of New Orleans, although tribal allegiance can also be hereditary. They prepare for Mardi Gras but also parade on St Joseph's Day. See also John Sinclair, "St. Joseph's Night in New Orleans: Out After Dark with the Wild Indians (1997)," 7 September 2010. <<http://www.satchmo.com/ikoiko/js9703b.html>>.
3. Jameson. 256.
4. Harvey, David. Spaces of Hope. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000. 158.
5. Harvey. 154.



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Katie Moylan is a Lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of Leicester, UK, and previously lectured in media at the University of Ireland, Maynooth. She previously worked as a features journalist and arts and film reviewer across Irish print and broadcast media before completing her PhD in 2009. Her forthcoming book, Broadcasting Multiculturalism (Intellect, 2012), explores the representation and participation of new migrant communities in Irish radio and she is developing research on community radio in the UK. She also writes on science fiction television and representations of regional space/s in US television drama.



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