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From bounce to the mainstream: Hip hop representations of post-Katrina New Orleans in music, film and television

ABSTRACT

Kanye West's biting off-script comments about George W. Bush during the televised NBC benefit, A Concert for Hurricane Relief*, are probably the most remembered contribution by a hip hop artist to post-Katrina critiques of racism. Beyond Kanye's pointed remarks, other well-established rappers (including Mos Def, Jay-Z, Public Enemy, Lil Wayne and Juvenile) quickly employed hip hop music to speak out in sociopolitical protests against the overt neglect of New Orleans's poor black residents. In recent popular television and film representations, hip hop continues to play a significant role in how we remember the effects of Katrina. In the 2008 documentary film,* Trouble the Water*, Kimberly Rivers Roberts's hip hop lyrics affirm a sense of survivorship, shared and created through music. Similarly, in its second season (2011), David Simon's HBO television series* Treme *explores the role of hip hop in post-Katrina recovery processes through a storyline centred on local bounce music. Some scholars argue that post-Katrina hip hop responses can be viewed as 'disaster tourism', or as upholding stereotypes about New Orleans as a space of*

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either violent criminal activity or utopian racial exceptionalism. However, this article suggests that through rap music, Trouble the Water*, and* Treme*, listeners and viewers are exposed to the complexity, diversity and lasting impact of a city (New Orleans) and a musical genre (rap), both of which are often accused of 'selling out', 'watering down' or profiting from what were once deemed authentic black music communities.*

'George Bush doesn't care about black people'. These off-script words, from internationally recognized rapper Kanye West during NBC's televised *A Concert for Hurricane Relief* (2005), cemented hip hop's role in our memories of the critiques of post-Katrina recovery efforts. Coming after days of television coverage of the remaining black New Orleans residents who were represented as either suffering 'refugees' or criminal 'looters', Kanye's controversial statement relayed a simplified message that reached a mass audience. As it protested the inequities in the immediate reactions by the government and the media, the hip hop community continued to speak out and created a lasting body of work. Some of these songs indulge in what have been deemed stereotypical hip hop themes of violence and crime, and then others indulge in utopian stories about the recovery of New Orleans, leading listeners to question the motivations behind such musical responses. In fact, in *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans*, Matt Miller suggests that

> rap songs about Katrina and its aftermath have the potential to operate as a musical version of disaster tourism, continuing efforts under way before Katrina to market the image of a dystopic, corrupt, racist, and violent city and to sensationalize the struggles of its poor and working-class black residents.
>
> (2012: 163)

However, I argue that post-Katrina hip hop creates a more complex picture of the storm's effects on the black community for the listening and viewing public. In other words, hip hop responses to Katrina are not merely disaster tourism – instead, they provide complicated and sometimes contradictory messages that act as political protest and that breach regional and place-based musical boundaries.

When taken together, the hip hop community's diverse responses to Katrina – from local bounce to mainstream music – showcase feelings of anger, frustration and loss, alongside others of unity, love and faith. American Studies scholar Zenia Kish writes about the immediate hip hop responses to the storm:

> Folding individual stories of suffering into larger structural critiques of the human catastrophe, these musical responses both engaged the violence, racism, displacement, and vulnerability that came to represent the experiences of the Katrina diaspora and became a cultural force of identification and activism that intervened in constructions of the event as a national emergency.
>
> (2009: 671)

These musical responses also disrupt larger narratives about hip hop – namely its transition from a 1970s political protest genre to contemporary 'sell out'

pop music, and its rootedness in specific places, like East Coast, West Coast and the Dirty South (or Third Coast), which has led to regional beefs between artists. The immediate hip hop responses also created a lasting impact highlighted in other popular culture representations of the storm, most significantly in the documentary film *Trouble the Water* (Lessin and Deal, 2008) and the HBO television series *Treme* (2010–2013). Through rap music, *Trouble the Water* and *Treme*, listeners and viewers are exposed to the complexity, diversity and lasting impact of a city (New Orleans) and a musical genre (rap), both of which are often accused of 'selling out', 'watering down' or profiting from what were once considered authentic black music communities.[1]

'FUCK KATRINA': HIP HOP ARTISTS RESPOND TO THE STORM

When Hurricane Katrina hit on 29 August 2005, the devastation to the city, of course, also blighted the hip hop community; as Miller argues, 'Katrina affected every individual and small business associated with the New Orleans rap scene, regardless of whether they were already famous or virtually unknown before the storm' (2012: 161). In the early 1990s, when the East Coast–West Coast divide was thriving in hip hop, New Orleans was one of the major southern cities to disrupt those coastal boundaries as part of the 'Dirty South'. With the success of Master P's No Limit label and the Williams brothers' Cash Money label in producing mainstream stars, the city staked its place in the rise of southern rap.[2] Amidst the block parties of the housing projects, New Orleans artists had carved out their own style, bounce, which relies on short call-and-response lyrics often tied to specific neighbourhoods in the city, rendering it an extremely place-based and community-centred music. Underground bounce artists were some of the first to respond to Katrina's effects in lyrical form, but because bounce rappers were, like everyone else, evacuated from the city after the storm, the place-based genre was slightly revised. As Kish writes, the songs, produced in cities like Houston where many bounce artists relocated, 'served to reclaim community bonds and suggest strategies for getting home as to lodge criticism' (2009: 677).[3]

For instance, 5th Ward Weebie's 'Fuck Katrina (The Katrina Song)', as the song's title suggests, humorously recounts post-Katrina frustrations by targeting George W. Bush and FEMA, and then in bounce fashion, shouts out not only to specific New Orleans locales but also to the neighbouring Mississippi Coast (Kish 2009: 677). Mia X's 'My FEMA People' takes up similar themes, also calling out George W. Bush, FEMA, and the failed local educational system. Mia X shouts out to various parts of the city, including her own 7th Ward home, and while generally angry in tone, the song ends with a proclamation of sustained love for the wrecked city (Kish 2009: 676). Rich Paul Cooper describes 'My FEMA People' as exemplifying a political shift in the bounce repertoire, which he views as normally 'fatally happy and optimistic':

> What differs her song from 'pure' bounce is its *political commentary* converted into a danceable form […] She agitates not as a release but as an angry, defiant, challenge to all those who have abandoned the city and its people in their time of need.
>
> (2010: 544, original emphasis)

As just two examples of an outpouring from the bounce community, 'Fuck Katrina' and 'My FEMA People' challenge ever-present images of New

1. As a genre, hip hop has often been targeted as perpetuating stereotypes about black culture, and debates about the music's authenticity continue – from *who* has the agency to speak (or 'represent') about *what* aspects of 'black life' ('keep it real'), to what constitutes the definition of terms like 'gangster' and 'hood', to whether or not the music holds true to its 1970s political roots. In '"No Time for Fake Niggas": Hip hop culture and the authenticity debates', Mark Anthony Neal suggests that the notion that hip hop could still be considered an 'authentic subculture' is 'quaint', and that in fact, the genre was never as '"real" as we've been led to believe' (Forman and Neal 2012: 69). The essays that follow Neal's introduction in this section of *That's the Joint!* (2012) only serve to prove the diversity of hip hop's origins and voices on a global level. In this same vein, I argue that post-Katrina hip hop representations should be celebrated and acknowledged for a showcasing of diversity instead of wholly derided on claims of inauthenticity, exploitation or disaster tourism.
2. For more on the rise of the Dirty South in hip hop, see Miller (2008, 2012) 'Dirty decade: Rap music and the US South, 1997–2007' and 'Rap's Dirty South: From subculture to pop culture'; Sarig (2007); Westhoff (2011). For more on New Orleans hip hop specifically, see Miller (2012) and Cooper (2010).
3. For a complete overview of the

immediate hip hop response to Katrina – from songs to benefit records to activism – see Kish (2009). I am indebted to Kish's comprehensive compiling of post-storm songs and her arguments about the figure of 'the hustler'.

Orleans' black citizens as suffering victims and instead overtly express frustration and anger, coupled with love and a sense of loss that still presents a deeply local understanding, despite the rappers' distance from the city.

Mainstream New Orleans-based artists like Juvenile and Lil Wayne also released post-Katrina hip hop songs, but in addition to verbally attacking the government, these songs incorporated many of the pervasive – and seemingly negative – themes of hip hop. For instance, the lyrics of Juvenile's 'Get Ya Hustle On' uphold stereotypes of the street hustler, advocating crack production as a means of restoring income and explicitly referencing spending FEMA money on cocaine (2006). But the song and its video, filmed on location in the destroyed 9th Ward and dedicated to those lost during Katrina, also indict the local and federal governments and act as a call-to-arms to New Orleans citizens. As Cooper describes, the message of the song, which he reads as survival through the drug hustle, ultimately reinforces the (American capitalist) institutions which it tries to critique: 'The power structures don't care and a solution is not forthcoming […] Everything returns to the drug game, to perfected capitalism untainted and unaffected by the rule of law' (2010: 543). Similarly, Lil Wayne's 2006 'Georgia Bush', remixed over the popular 2005 Ludacris and Field Mob song 'Georgia', lets loose an invective directed at George W. Bush, but the second half of the song becomes a long-winded narrative about Wayne's material wealth and his rise as the king of hip hop (2006). Cooper suggests that when the song's political invective 'is contrasted with Lil Wayne's pop icon status and his emphasis on getting paid, it is hard to not take his claims with a healthy dose of cynicism' (2010: 543). In the end, some listeners may interpret Juvenile's song as reaffirming stereotypes of pre-Katrina New Orleans as a criminal haven or Wayne's rap as exploiting the tragedy to boost his own status in the mainstream. Still, like the local bounce responses, these songs also clearly operate in the protest roots of hip hop. The protest elements are significant to larger arguments related to the region's music too; after the rise of the Dirty South aesthetic in the early 2000s, East and West Coast rappers alike questioned not only the authenticity of southern rap (often citing southern rappers as 'minstrel show' MCs) but also harshly criticized the southern sound as the death of hip hop (Westhoff 2011: 4, 6).

However, from bounce to the mainstream, New Orleans artists expressed their views openly and exposed the more political side of the Dirty South sound. As Michael Eric Dyson suggests, Katrina opened new ways of viewing New Orleans and its hip hop community on a national level:

> It is perhaps ironic that wretchedly poor New Orleans is the birthplace of bling, the ostentatious flashy brilliance of jewelry and the lavish lifestyles on which it rests. And yet those same projects and slums about which these stars rap – and the invisible at any-other-time dwellers they shout out, and the attendant social miseries and pathologies that they meticulously detail – are hardly ever engaged or thought about, except as fodder for the local media's fascination with blacks spilling other blacks' blood, or to foster even more paranoia in largely white suburbs.
>
> (Dyson 2005: 158)

But post-Katrina hip hop by New Orleans artists revealed a diversity of responses through music, including not only Juvenile and Wayne's mainstream narratives but also the humorous and angry bounce anthems that forged a sense of community for displaced artists. Because of the storm and

its effects, the local shout-outs to the housing projects and the recognition of pre-Katrina socio-economic problems reached beyond local audiences.

In addition to the political responses of New Orleans artists, the national hip hop response challenged other characterizations of rap music's supposed regional boundaries, when Mos Def, Jay Z, and Public Enemy all recorded post-Katrina songs. Like New Orleans-based artists, well-established rappers used the overt neglect and racism revealed by the response to the storm as a platform to exercise the music's political roots. Mos Def's 'Katrina Clap' (later renamed 'Dollar Day') best collapses boundaries between regions as a remix of Juvenile's earlier hit 'Nolia Clap', a celebration of Juvenile's 3rd Ward home in the Magnolia Housing Projects (Kish 2009: 681). Like Kanye West's comments that referred to the black New Orleanians represented in media coverage as a unified 'us' and imagined the stranded residents as 'my people', Mos Def and subsequent East Coast rappers embraced the southern black community. For instance, both Jay Z's 'Minority Report' and Public Enemy's 'Hell No, We Ain't Alright' refer to the New Orleans black community as 'my people' and 'my kin', evincing how artists from outside of the region rallied behind the southern city and then used the example of Katrina to highlight national race and class prejudices and inequalities (Kish 2009: 685).

Both the local and national responses offer a diversity of perspectives that eclipsed hip hop's place-based boundaries in sociopolitical protests, challenging ideas that hip hop was solely about beefs and beats. Still, the national response might be interpreted as exploitative – as disaster tourism created from outside of the region – especially with the use of phrases like 'my people', which risk collapsing and co-opting individual experiences of the storm into an essentialist depiction of black suffering or anger. In addition, the stereotypical figure of the hustler that appears in much post-Katrina hip hop 'situates the music and its artists ambivalently in regard to many of [the] post-Katrina critiques of the violence of the biopolitical state, the production of categories of subhumanity, and the capitalist system of exploitation' (Kish 2009: 687). As Kish remarks, while these hip hop responses temporarily returned the music to its protest roots, that return was not lasting or large-scale (2009: 689).

As the outpouring of sociopolitical songs faded, another narrative – that of New Orleans's triumphant recovery – emerged in post-Katrina hip hop and continued in rap-influenced film and television representations of the storm and its aftermath. One of the earliest examples of this is found in the music itself in Lil Wayne's 2008 song, 'Tie My Hands'. Lil Wayne's earlier song 'Georgia Bush' poses harsh criticisms of the government and media, while Wayne simultaneously boasts about his position as the new king of hip hop. However, the anthem 'Tie My Hands', included on the 2008 Grammy-winning record *Tha Carter III*, somewhat revises these earlier narratives of the hustler and paints a picture of not only anger and loss but also positivity and recovery. The slow-tempo ballad bemoans the fate of New Orleans, offering images of uplift and hope, especially when Wayne raps 'first came the hurricane, then the morning sun' and incorporates his own narrative of rising up from the projects to stardom as an example of rebirth (Lil Wayne 2008). While both songs emphasize Wayne's climbing status in hip hop, the difference between 'Georgia Bush' and 'Tie My Hands' is in tone and narrative; 'Tie My Hands' shifts to a mournful tone, which underlies lyrics about positive recovery for New Orleans. The song evinces a more general shift in how the recovery of New Orleans is portrayed in hip hop responses; even if recovery efforts are still criticized as ineffective and unequal, popular listening audiences in

2008 were ready for a narrative of rebirth to replace narratives of government-mediated racist and classist neglect, which coincided with Lil Wayne's musical ascent to international mainstream acclaim.[4] Lil Wayne's performance at the 2009 Grammys only furthers this shift in post-Katrina hip hop responses. In the performance, Wayne raps the lyrics of 'Tie My Hands' against multiple background screens of the starkest images of the storm. Later, when the images of disaster disappear, Wayne is joined onstage by New Orleans jazz greats Allen Toussaint, Terence Blanchard and the Dirty Dozen Brass Band, and the audience moves out of their seats to dance and bounce in unison. Eclipsing angrier hip hop responses, this celebratory performance of 'Tie My Hands' suggests a narrative of the city's revitalization through musical collaboration, a narrative which subsequently appears in film and television representations.

TROUBLE THE WATER: AUTHENTICITY AND SURVIVORSHIP

Similarly themed but stylistically different from Lil Wayne's 'Tie My Hands', the music of New Orleans artist Queen Black Kold Madina, also known as Kimberly Rivers Roberts, guides her pre- and post-Katrina journey in the 2008 documentary film, *Trouble the Water*. Directed and produced by Tia Lessin and Carl Deal (best known for their work with Michael Moore on *Fahrenheit 9/11* [2004] and *Capitalism: A Love Story* [2009]), the film garnered much praise from reviewers, critics and popular audiences, leading to the Grand Jury Prize for Best Documentary at 2008's Sundance Film Festival, a 2009 Academy Award nomination for Best Documentary Feature and its 2009 cable premiere on HBO. While the couple's story is compelling in its own right, Roberts's role as a local hip hop artist showcases an important aspect of her personal recovery and response to the storm, with her original music comprising the majority of the soundtrack. While *Trouble the Water* may not be an intentional post-Katrina hip hop response, Matt Miller argues that the film 'chronicle[s] the toll that the experience of exile and return exacted on members of the hip hop generation, as represented by the film's central character, aspiring rapper Kimberly Roberts' (2012: 172). Viewing the film through the lens of hip hop calls attention to the way the documentary both builds on and challenges emerging utopian narratives about recovery by contributing to alternative narratives voiced by the hip hop community.

Based on Roberts's own storm coverage on a home video camera, *Trouble the Water* begins with a tour of her home in the 9th Ward, so that, as Roberts says, she can show 'the world that we did have a world before the storm' (Lessin and Deal 2008). As Geoffrey Whitehall and Cedric Johnson describe, the film's narrative arch – a sort of modern day, post-storm bootstrap story – appeals to all audiences: 'The film's theme of redemption resonates with the Christian Right, Obamanistas, and antiwelfare conservatives alike' (Whitehall and Johnson 2011: 61). The film follows Kimberly and her husband Scott as they live through the storm by climbing into their attic and later escaping from their roof, as well as their departure for Memphis, Tennessee and eventual return to New Orleans, where the couple leaves behind the drug deals of the past to prosper in new ways. Like Lessin and Deal's previous work, *Trouble the Water* also makes a political statement about the failings of the United States government in a crisis situation; the directors juxtapose Roberts's video footage against some of their own footage shot after the storm, along with media coverage of George W. Bush, Ray Nagin, and then

4. Because of his global success, some scholars contest Wayne's status as an 'authentic' representative of New Orleans. As Miller suggests,

> Lil Wayne's outlook, attitudes, and creative abilities were doubtlessly shaped by his experiences as a child in 1990s New Orleans, but his ties to the city and its local rap scene remain tenuous and qualified [...] His music and lyrics often reflect the ideas and values of globally mediated popular culture rather than the local, neighborhood culture of New Orleans.
>
> (2012: 169)

Cooper goes so far as to suggest that Lil Wayne's music cannot be considered 'Southern rap', let alone New Orleans rap (2010: 538). Yet, in 'I Will Forever Remain Faithful', writer and teacher David Ramsey attests to the significant influence of Lil Wayne on local high school students in the aftermath of Katrina: 'For my students, Lil Wayne is good times and good memories, and enduring hometown pride. All they ask of him is to keep making rhymes, as triumphant and strange as the city itself' (2008).

FEMA director Michael Brown, and voice-overs from not only these politicians and other media personalities but also from emergency calls when the rising flood waters threatened citizens' lives. With this overtly political overlay and the devastating images of the storm and the voices of its victims, *Trouble the Water* certainly risks – like the previously discussed post-Katrina hip hop responses – being labelled disaster tourism. But critics and reviewers refrained from this label, often praising the film as 'authentic'.[5]

This label of authenticity likely stems from the fact that, from the beginning, the film has a self-conscious feel, almost as if Lessin and Deal are aware that some viewers might perceive the white New York couple as exploiting the poor African American Katrina survivors for a voyeuristic audience. Because of this, the film includes Roberts's repeated identification of herself as an objective reporter of sorts when she consistently refers to the 'documentary' and the 'live and direct footage' she creates. Conversing with her neighbours on the day before Katrina hits, she tells them, 'It is gonna be a day to remember. That's why I'm recording […] I'll be having something to show my children. If I get some exciting shit, I might could sell it to them white folk. Ya heard me?' In the background, someone quickly responds, 'They'll be looking for shit' (Lessin and Deal 2008). Lessin and Deal's choice to include Roberts's speech about her intention to profit from her story lends credibility and a sense of 'authenticity' to the film – almost as if Roberts is the executive director and producer (although she is credited as a 'director of photography' on the film's website).

Roberts's depictions of the 9th Ward community provide a contrast to media coverage that showcased black residents as suffering victims and looting criminals. In *Desire & Disaster in New Orleans: Tourism, Race, and Historical Memory*, Lynell Thomas describes: 'More frequently, Hurricane Katrina survivors […] forged a community for mutual support and protection in the days following the storm, instead of waiting for the uncoordinated and ineffective national response to materialize' (2014: 15). Although both Roberts and her husband frequently discuss their roles as ex-drug dealers, the film represents this survivor mentality described by Thomas, especially in scenes where the Robertses unite with their supposed enemies to save others, and then later, after being turned away by the National Guard at an abandoned Navy barracks, they 'borrow' a truck to drive a group of more than twenty people to Alexandria, Louisiana to safety. As Christopher Schliephake describes, the film

> give[s] a face to the urban underclass which is not rendered as a menace or an urban other, but as citizens who had been caught up in a vicious circle of being both victims and victimizers, of being part of a human story long before Hurricane Katrina.
>
> (2015: 114)

In both Roberts's and her husband's discussions of their lives as drug users and dealers, viewers note that there is no sense of apology or shame for these roles but more straightforward explanation; the Robertses refuse to be cast as either criminal or victim – but instead emerge as survivors who are, as many reviewers noted, filled with hope and positivity.

This vision of survivorship is best exemplified in Roberts's music, especially during a scene recorded when the couple is temporarily living in Memphis, where Roberts gives an unplanned and unprompted performance

5. For instance, in his review of *Trouble the Water* (which is included in the liner notes of the DVD release), *The Times-Picayune*'s Mike Scott remarks,

> Though they might live at the opposite end of the socio-economic scale from some of the flooded-out residents of Lakeview and Uptown and Slidell and eastern New Orleans, it turns out that the Robertses are the perfect subjects to tell the Katrina story, because they *are* New Orleans.
>
> (Lessin and Deal 2009, emphasis added)

of her original song 'Amazing'. The flood waters destroy her music, but when a family member in Memphis brings a copy of one of her demos, Roberts revives her role as an artist, driven by 'Amazing', which undoubtedly takes on a new set of meanings for both Roberts and the film's audience after Katrina. As Roberts describes her journey from a childhood fuelled by drug abuse and then dealing (including her dangerous situations with predatory men), she continually affirms through the hook: 'I don't need you to tell me that I'm amazing/Cause I know what I am and what I am, what I be is amazing' (Lessin and Deal 2008). As Lessin and Deal describe in an interview with HBO, Roberts's

> spontaneous performance of the autobiographical song, 'Amazing' reveals her talent as a rapper in a performance that *Rolling Stone* magazine says has her 'destined for stardom'. […] We were just speechless as we captured the scene […] We hope it leaves the audience as breathless and inspired as we felt in that moment.
>
> (HBO 2009)

Certainly, Roberts's role as a rap artist contrasts from the immediate post-Katrina hip hop releases, which were mostly masculine, unflinchingly political, and glorified the accumulation of material wealth. The story narrated in 'Amazing' is a highly personal, feminine, and spiritual account of survivorship, which is palatable to not only Lessin and Deal but also to a larger viewing audience.

The other songs featured in the film, 'Trouble the Water', 'Bone Gristle', and 'Hustle and Struggle', provide a more aggressive account of survivorship infused with Roberts's experiences as a female hustler, selling drugs to pay the rent and to support her children. But, like 'Amazing', the lyrics also consistently champion a female community and an overarching belief in Jesus as saviour. For instance, in 'Trouble the Water', where the lyrics are transposed over a revised version of the gospel song 'Wade the Water', Roberts refers to the triumphing community of 'poverty stricken daughters' in the 9th Ward (Lessin and Deal 2008). Like the couple's statements throughout the film, Roberts neither apologizes for nor glorifies her role as a hustler. In fact, the term hustler becomes almost synonymous with survivor, where drug hustling becomes more about literal survival rather than the accumulation of material wealth and bling.

Some scholars have characterized *Trouble the Water*'s ending as utopian, and Whitehall and Johnson even go so far as to argue that the film participates in a neo-liberal narrative of individual achievement and a rise to the middle class:

> In a sense [Kim and Scott] are remade in the likeness of Middle America or at least an image that is more tolerable to the professed values of middle-class America […] The film's plot arch might refract a different message: that the black urban poor can be made respectable. Therefore, although the film portrays flood victims with dignity, it forecloses the possibility of alternative lives for New Orleans' laboring class, lives that transcend the crime, despair, and deprivation of urban poverty but also the insecurity, consumerism, and pretentiousness that accompany middle-class life.
>
> (2011: 61–62)

Janet Walker similarly argues that the film concludes with a 'utopian' narrative of racial integration: 'Scott's white boss is presented as a good person and mentor, and the "white folks" to whom Kimberly did sell her footage (or, presumably, reach some sort of positive financial arrangement) incorporated her music as Kold Medina amply into the film' (Walker 2010: 57). While the film might be viewed as utopian because the Robertses successfully adapt and recover, Kimberly's role as a female hip hop artist is more subversive. Hip hop may no longer be considered a musical subculture, but certainly New Orleans hip hop is not aligned with stereotypical middle-class values. By giving voice not only to Katrina survivors but also to women in the New Orleans rap scene, Roberts challenges perceptions of regional and national hip hop as the product of a male-dominated 'thug' culture.

At the film's end, viewers see Kimberly Roberts in a home studio setting, which leads to the later founding of her own production company Bornhustler Records. But, as discussed above, Roberts's version of the hustler is decidedly different from earlier portrayals in post-Katrina hip hop. In a 2012 interview recorded for the NOLA Bounce and Hip Hop Archive, Roberts describes the limited opportunities for all hip hop artists in New Orleans but especially for female artists due to the 'bureaucracy and systems that are designed to keep hip hop out', including a focus on music (like Zydeco) that is, in Roberts's words, 'not even really New Orleans music' (NOLA Hip Hop and Bounce Archive 2012). Her extended comments suggest that while city officials say that there is respect and appreciation for *all* New Orleans arts and culture, types of music that draw visitors are privileged, effectively shutting hip hop artists out of the tourist economy. Yet, similar to her message of survival in 'Amazing', she vows that New Orleans rappers will 'knock the door down' to be heard, 'with or without help' from the cultural tourism industry (NOLA Hip Hop and Bounce Archive 2012). While Lil Wayne's 'Tie My Hands' and the Grammy performance that accompanied it might have been a highly orchestrated celebration that spurred a narrative of recovery through musical collaboration, Roberts's film and music are infused with that same spirit of rebirth – from a female survivor speaking from an underappreciated art form in a neglected city during the country's worst natural disaster. What emerges, then, in *Trouble the Water*, is not an entirely utopian recovery fantasy or an example of disaster tourism – but instead a critical platform for the unheard voices of New Orleans rap artists after Katrina.

TREME: BOUNCE VERSUS THE TOURIST NARRATIVE

Trouble the Water's Kimberly Rivers Roberts appears twice in the span of the four-years HBO television series *Treme* (2010–2013): once in the first season when she reunites briefly with trumpeter Delmond Lambreaux's sister, Davina, at a homecoming second-line parade, and then again in the third season when she passes a DVD copy of *Trouble the Water* to Davina and Delmond after seeing them in the French Quarter. While the audience watches as *Trouble the Water* moves Delmond to tears, Roberts's music is never spotlighted in the series, perhaps due to *Treme*'s focus on what have been deemed more traditional forms of New Orleans music, including jazz, R&B and the music of the Mardi Gras Indians.

Treme, created and produced by David Simon and Eric Overmyer (best known for the critically acclaimed series *The Wire* [2002–2008]), has a polarizing effect amongst critics, reviewers and audiences. Many revel in the authentic feel of the series, which celebrates the revival of the cultural heritage

of New Orleans' music, food and parades, while also condemning the social and political corruption associated with the city's post-Katrina recovery efforts. For instance, in his blog about *Treme*, Tulane Assistant Professor of Music, Matt Sakakeeny, describes how the series establishes what viewers call 'treme-vu', a kind of déjà vu that viewers experience when seeing a real-life musical moment depicted on television:

> the separation between reality and TV-land becomes hard to maintain […] I experienced these events in real time and wrote about them before I ever could have known about *Treme*, and despite the occasional and irrational feelings of possessiveness I've mostly been excited to see these moments blow up on the big screen.
>
> (2011)

Comments like Sakakeeny's suggest *Treme*'s attention to detail in recreating authentic musical moments, specifically when the series spotlights tragedies like the death of Hot 8 Brass Band member Dinerral Shavers (2011).

However, despite David Simon's consistent comments that *Treme* does not reconstitute tourist narratives about New Orleans, many have criticized the series for an inability to move beyond what Lynell Thomas has labelled 'simultaneously desirous and disastrous' post-civil rights narratives about New Orleans's black residents and their cultural legacy (2014: 26). In her study of the city's tourism industry, Thomas suggests

> In advancing particular story lines, histories, and cultural productions – to the exclusions of others – the first season of *Treme* often disregards or glosses over New Orleans's history of racial conflict and injustice in favor of new narratives of cross-racial unity among Katrina survivors and paternalistic actions by white characters uniquely positioned to speak on behalf of all New Orleanians.
>
> (2014: 167)

Thus, even as a fictionalized representation of post-Katrina New Orleans, *Treme* is scrutinized in the same ways as the city it takes for its subject, and in the same ways that hip hop music has been scrutinized: celebrated as 'authentic' and derided as 'inauthentic'. Certainly, *Treme*'s focus on New Orleans's rich musical history invites this type of scrutiny because, through characters like Delmond, Albert Lambreaux and Antoine Batiste alongside a cast of real-life New Orleans musicians, the series seems intent on (re)telling the story of New Orleans as the 'Birthplace of Jazz', a catchphrase associated with post-civil rights tourism campaigns that establish the city as a space of racial exceptionalism.[6] In terms of how *Treme* handles bounce, however, I suggest that the television series represents the music in ways that are both 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' at once – offering viewers insightful glimpses at some elements of bounce while simultaneously neglecting (or, at the very least, oddly positioning) the overall cultural history of New Orleans hip hop.

Grantland writer Alex Pappademas, who describes the show's musician characters as 'talk[ing] like people reading liner notes', openly criticizes the series' initial neglect of hip hop:

> Seriously – Lil Wayne, who calls himself the best rapper alive and is basically not wrong, is from New Orleans, but in Season One, the

6. I have previously discussed the complexities that *Treme* recreates in its depictions of the New Orleans jazz community (George 2012). In the same issue of *Television and New Media*, Wade Rathke further discusses jazz narratives suggesting that *Treme* creates a 'sanitized' and 'caricatured' version of New Orleans music (2012).

> only people who listened to his music were strippers. Meanwhile, the show went out of its way to honor every other kind of indigenous New Orleans-music maker, giving speaking parts to local legends who couldn't act their way out of a sack of beignets […] It felt like rockism, or at least rootsism, by omission.
>
> (Pappademas 2011)

But in 2011's Season Two, through a plotline involving the character Davis McAlary, *Treme* does acknowledge the city's rich hip hop roots, even if in a sometimes farcical and ultimately failing storyline.

Actually, rap appears as background music throughout the four seasons of *Treme*, but audience members have to act as careful viewers to hear it. For instance, in Season One, Davis's satirically political song, 'Shame, Shame, Shame', is compared to 5th Ward Weebie's 'Fuck Katrina' in *OffBeat* magazine ('I'll Fly Away' 2010), and 'Fuck Katrina' makes a brief cameo on the radio as the character Sonny drives back from a trip to Houston ('At the Foot of Canal Street' 2010). Creighton Burnett also makes light of his teen daughter Sofia's consistent listening to local bounce, citing the rappers as her 'heroes' ('Meet De Boys on The Battlefront' 2010). Later, bounce artist 10th Ward Weebie's popular song, 'Drop and Give Me 50', acts as Sofia's rallying cry when she takes over her father's YouTube spots ('Accentuate the Positive' 2011). Typically, rap music is associated with a younger audience (like Sofia or later ProPublica reporter LP) or is heard in the background when criminal activity is spotlighted. As Pappademas suggests, the only *Treme* characters listening to hip hop are Davis's stripper neighbours, the residents of housing projects and the white elite, including Davis himself.

With Season Two's bleak plotlines – the increasing post-storm police brutality and corruption, and Ladonna's rape amidst other violent crimes like the deaths of Dinerall Shavers and Harley – Davis and his association with bounce music acts a source of comic relief, perhaps reflecting the role of humour in bounce music, which anthems like 'Fuck Katrina' instilled for displaced residents. The series also features well-known hip hop figures from the city: Don Bartholomew, son of Dave Bartholomew and owner of Bang N Records, as Davis's producer, and New Orleans rapper Ace B as Lil Calliope. Moreover, the recurrence of New Orleans's 'sissy' bounce stars, like Katey Red, Cheeky Blakk and Big Freedia, challenges notions that hip hop music is solely heteronormative. In the same way that *Trouble the Water* gives voice to female rapper Kimberly Rivers Roberts, *Treme*'s repeated acknowledgement of transgender rappers reveals the diversity not only of the New Orleans rap and music scene but also of southern (and American) hip hop more generally. As Miller notes, sissy bounce holds a specific attraction for listeners outside of New Orleans, where the rappers' 'appeal is narrower and more politicized, as they connect with audiences dominated by white, middle-class hipsters who wish to support expressions that counter the regressive sexual politics that are thought to characterize mainstream rap music' (2012: 170). *Treme*'s inclusion of transgender rappers then seems well-suited to a (mostly white, middle- and upper-class) HBO audience, as does the further exploration of bounce through the characterization of Davis McAlary.

From the beginning, Davis, the upper-class Uptown-born, late-30s-aged white male named after Confederate President Jefferson Davis, is ironically seen as a champion of the local hip hop scene. In the very first episode of the series, he taunts his two white gay male neighbours (whom he accuses

of gentrifying the Tremé with their classical music) with New Orleans rapper Mystikal's 'Shake Ya Ass' as it blares from speakers turned out from his windows ('Do You Know What it Means' 2010). In addition, Davis's repeated firing from radio station WWOZ occurs because he plays too much bounce and not enough traditional New Orleans music. In Season Two, station manager Darnell tells Davis to mix it up with 'Brass band, funk, trad jazz, and rock n roll', stating that 'a little bounce once in a while' is okay, 'just not non-stop' ('Accentuate the Positive' 2011). When Davis plays the Rebirth Brass Band/Cheeky Blakk song 'Pop that Pussy' on Thanksgiving morning, Darnell gets angrier: 'No more bounce, Davis. Not this early. Go somewhere else with it. I'm fucking serious' ('Everything I Do Gohn Be Funky' 2011). After Davis refuses to acquiesce during his DJ sessions, he is promptly fired (a fact that he later uses to try and establish some credibility with rapper Mannie Fresh when negotiating for a track on a CD sampler) ('Slip Away' 2011).

Darnell's actions – in firing Davis – highlight a more significant conflict in the New Orleans' music scene – one that Kimberly Rivers Roberts refers to when she describes hip hop as the city's excluded art form.[7] Writer Kelefa Sanneh also points out this conflict in a post-storm *New York Times* article about New Orleans hip hop as the city's 'most popular musical export' (2006). In his evaluation of post-Katrina tribute albums, which notably excluded the voices of hip hop, Sanneh writes,

> […] much of the [rap] music portrays New Orleans as a place of violence and decadence: expensive teeth, cheap women, 'choppers' (machine guns) everywhere. If you're trying to celebrate the old, festive, tourist-friendly New Orleans, maybe these aren't the locals you want.
>
> (2006)

In *Treme*, when Darnell fires Davis for playing too much bounce, he fires him for just this reason – not upholding the tourist narrative sustained by WWOZ's programming, a focus on the city's more traditional and audience-friendly music. While *Treme* might reveal this conflict, the way the series casts New Orleans hip hop, through the humorous and unsuccessful escapades of a white character, is questionable, especially considering the city's history of established black-owned rap labels like No Limit and Cash Money. In Season Two, *Treme* risks undervaluing the contributions of New Orleans hip hop, specifically bounce, which Miller has described more seriously as 'engag[ing] with, respond[ing] to, and challeng[ing] the social, political, and economic realities faced by young African Americans' (2012: 14). Ironically, just as Darnell limits Davis's airplay of bounce, *Treme* limits its airplay of bounce through this characterization of Davis.

Perhaps because Davis views himself as part of the 'real' New Orleans (which he associates with a black musical subculture), his character is chosen to take up the storyline that incorporates bounce music. But because *Treme* couches this plotline in Davis, audience members find themselves laughing at Davis rather than readily understanding the history and impact of bounce music in New Orleans. For example, when Davis tries to convince his Aunt Mimi to finance his new record label (which, for its first project, will record a sampler with two of Davis's songs from his own 'hip hop opus'), Mimi questions him: 'And you, yourself, are gonna be one of these hard core nasties? You, my little Uptown Newman-educated nephew?' Davis responds: 'Do not

7. For a discussion of the current status of rap in New Orleans (including a reference to airplay on WWOZ), see Holly Hobbs:

> While it is clear that the status of rap in the New Orleans public imagination is shifting, as evidenced by increased festival bookings, a wider array of opportunities across the board, and the movement of rap into historically non-rap spaces […], on the ground realities for most rappers in the city remain slow to change.
>
> (2015)

mock the sad circumstances of my birth. In my soul, I'm a 22-year-old thug from the Magnolia, throwing past motherfuckers with my flow. I am pure pale nastiness, so back up off me, bitch' ('Santa Claus, Do You Ever Get the Blues?' 2011). Davis appropriates the most stereotypical elements from narratives of local rappers, alluding to the idea that white listeners of hip hop readily appropriate and exploit black culture.[8]

Davis's interactions with his newly formed brass-funk-rap band, DJ Davis and the Brassy Knoll, provide another chance to poke fun at Davis's status as white outsider or 'poser'. After 'discovering' the band's front man, rapper Lil Calliope, Davis counsels Calliope on the significance of making political music in the post-Katrina era, passing him CDs by Public Enemy, Woody Guthrie, and The Clash ('Feels Like Rain' 2011). Pappademas reads this as a humourous – and serious – critique of 'the way well-intentioned white music snobs discount the political import of hip hop that fails to remind them of their own radical role models' (2011). Despite Davis's attempt to 'educate' Calliope, DJ Davis and the Grassy Knoll gains success not on the basis of Davis's political lyrics but instead on the rise of Calliope's bounce tune, 'The True', described by Calliope as a 'club banger' and by Davis as a 'really catchy dance song' ('What is New Orleans?' 2011), and Mimi sells Lil Calliope's contract to Cash Money Records for $30,000. While this plotline comments on the cultural appropriation of hip hop (and black music more generally) by characters like Davis and Mimi, *Treme* also risks furthering the narrative of hip hop as apolitical 'sell-out' music geared towards a profit-oriented industry and an unthinking audience.

As the band slowly replaces Davis as front man and guitarist with new members, he leaves DJ Davis and the Brassy Knoll in the Season Two finale. In his last performance with the band, Davis dresses in what might be considered typical white upper-class fashion (khaki pants, a polo-style shirt and a sweater tied around his neck) and mocks his Uptown roots before launching into a crowd-pleasing rendition of James Brown's 'Get Up' ('Do Whatcha Wanna' 2011). Viewers not only laugh at Davis but also sympathize with his plight as an outsider, feeling moved when he returns to WWOZ at episode's end to tearfully spin Louis Armstrong's 'Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams' ('Do Whatcha Wanna' 2011). By filtering the bounce plotline through Davis, who appropriates narratives of suffering and anger for his music, the creation of sympathy for a privileged white character arguably taints the role of post-Katrina hip hop in larger cultural memories and representations of the storm. The disbandment and dismissal of Davis's group also leads to the dismissal of bounce in the last two seasons. With the exception of the occasional appearance of Cheeky Blakk and bounce reappearing in scenes of L. P. Everett's criminal investigations or the death of Antoine Batiste's student Sharice, hip hop nearly disappears, and the series returns its focus to the recovering jazz and brass communities (and the accompanying narrative of the 'Birthplace of Jazz').[9] Through the characterization of Davis, the series invites HBO's white viewers to interrogate their roles in the cultural appropriation of hip hop and to seek out voices – like those of 'sissy' bounce artists – that depart from mainstream narratives of hip hop. But ultimately, *Treme* fails to holistically tell the story of pre- and post-Katrina hip hop – music that represents both the struggles and pleasures of New Orleans's black communities whose voices are often exploited and dismissed, even in the wake of a historic natural disaster that tragically affected these communities.

8. The issue of the cultural appropriation of bounce specifically (in contrast to other forms of hip hop) is muddied by Rich Cooper, who claims that,

> In 'pure' bounce the petty divisions of wards, projects, neighborhoods, and even the division of black and white, are effaced; they fade away and are replaced by expressions of unity [...] This is not merely an appropriation of black culture by white kids: New Orleans culture in general has always focused on outward aesthetic expressions, evinced by the inclination to dance together to bounce music.
> (2010: 530)

9. In the city itself, a new generation of brass bands influenced by hip hop is steadily bringing the music into their repertoires, and while *Treme* does not openly acknowledge the hip hop influence, it is worth noting that many of these artists are spotlighted in the series. Highly successful artists like Trombone Shorty, the Soul Rebels and the Hot 8 Brass Band (all featured regularly in *Treme*) not only acknowledge the influence of hip hop but also feel like there is little distinction between the genres. For more on this collaborative style, see Bruce Raeburn Boyd (2014).

CONCLUSION

Although post-Katrina hip hop can be reframed to represent another avenue of disaster tourism or the symbolic recovery of the city's black communities, I have argued here that the music reveals (and continues to reveal) a diversity of sociopolitical reflections that collapse local, regional and national boundaries. Now, ten years after the storm, Lil Wayne still reps the city, and references to Katrina and its aftermath are relatively common in rap music. In film and television, beyond the story of Kimberly Rivers Roberts and the bounce plotlines in the HBO series *Treme*, 'sissy' bounce star Big Freedia now has a reality show in its third season on the FUSE network. In post-Katrina literary novels, Mississippi authors like Jesmyn Ward (in *Salvage the Bones* [2011] and *Men We Reaped* [2013]) and Kiese Laymon (in *Long Division* [2013]) pay tribute to hip hop not only as an influence in their lives and on their works but also through characters who acknowledge the significance of the music. And with the creation of the NOLA Hip Hop and Bounce Archive in 2014 housed at Tulane's Amistad Research Center, scholar Holly Hobbs continues her work in archiving digital oral histories of bounce artists for scholars, teachers and listeners.

Writing in 2007 and 2011, respectively, hip hop scholars Roni Sarig and Ben Westhoff remained doubtful that New Orleans hip hop would regain its influence after Katrina. Yet, Miller contradicts that narrative, asserting that hip hop will certainly play a key role in the city's social reconstruction:

> The storm's effects were complex and continue to unfold, but it seems increasingly unlikely that rap in New Orleans will die out or become less distinctive and self-consciously local […] We can infer that rap's contributions will be multivalent, complex, incremental, and contradictory rather than unified, organized, and coherent.
>
> (2012: 16)

Although sometimes unacknowledged, questioned and criticized, hip hop – in its many incarnations – will continue to play a role in our memories of New Orleans and Katrina's aftermath by challenging and adding layers to other dominant narratives of survival and recovery.

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