Historicizing the Mardi Gras Indians in HBO's *Treme*: An Emancipatory Narrative

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Abstract: This study examines the process of historicization of the Black Mardi Gras Indians in the HBO drama series *Treme* produced by David Simon and Eric Overmyer. Grounded in a critical cultural perspective, and relating fiction to reality through historical truth, we analyze the manner in which the producers recreate this minority's collective narrative as cultural performance of struggle and survival in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. We base our analysis on series narratives and interviews with members of the Black Mardi Gras Indian (artist) communities. We also rely on local experts and historians using a form of "demystifactory" or "prophetic" criticism in which artists comment on the artistic and historical representations of the Mardi Gras Indians as a unique subculture of the heterogeneous African Diaspora. Our analysis suggests how the Mardi Gras Indians' narrative speaks to the values of resistance and resilience in an otherwise White dominant social order. Further, the characterization of the Mardi Gras Indians reveals an emancipatory and liberative narrative necessary to their cultural survival. Finally, we address limitations of the study and directions for future research.

Keywords: Historicization, emancipatory narrative, Mardi Gras Indians

1. Introduction

Most people who are familiar with New Orleans know of the Mardi Gras Indians' visual representations of the carnival season and parades. Yet few Mardi Gras revelers have a deep and accurate understanding of their identity and cultural practices. In fact, it is a culture embedded in a strong sense of secrecy and privacy (Smith, 2007). However, giving pre-eminence to a Western European, commodity-based perspective on cultural groups and communities, film and television programs have largely ignored the Mardi Gras Indian experience and their socio-historical contribution to the cultural identity of the city. Further, hooks (1992) argues that mass media are responsible for controlling and maintaining race images that perpetuate a system of racial domination. In order to develop an emancipatory and liberative representation of the heterogeneous black experience, West (1993) proposes a "demystifactory" or "prophetic" type of criticism in which artists comment on the artistic and historical representations of their unique subculture in the heterogeneous African Diaspora.

David Simon and Eric Overmyer, producers of the HBO television series *Treme* took on the task of bringing authenticity to the series' characters, including the Mardi Gras Indians' story in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Overmyer, personal communication, December 3, 2010). The series is set in the *Faubourg Tremé* neighborhood of New Orleans, known for

its early engagement with the civil rights movement and known also as the birth place of Jazz. *Treme* focuses on its music and cultural scene and its political controversies in the aftermath of the hurricane. The first season was broadcast on HBO starting in April 2010. Episode 1 began in October 2005 a few weeks after the levees broke (8/29/2005) and flooded New Orleans leaving much of the city under water. The first season ended soon after Mardi Gras 2006, some six months after the flood.

The *Treme* series is David Simon and Eric Overmyer's act of love and respect for the City of New Orleans, using historical facts and fiction to create a drama about the real actors of Katrina disaster and the city's recovery. The series offers a fiction grounded in historical truth through the perspective of fictional characters (Dessinges, Gendrin & Hajjar, 2011). This truth does not rely as much on authentic historical facts as it does on historical themes: "we have tried to be honest with that extraordinary time — not journalistically true, but thematically so" says David Simon (HBO's 'Treme' creator, 2010). Among them, the Mardi Gras Indian narrative plays an important role in conveying one of the political intents of the series that is a message of socio-historical struggle and cultural survival. Attentive to the realism and historical believability of their characters, we examine the historicization of the Black Mardi Gras Indians in *Treme*, first, by exploring the historical roots and cultural heritage of this unique culture in the United States; then, by linking this historical and cultural background to their fictional representations in the series; and finally, by proposing a critical analysis of the manner in which the producers represent these peoples' lives, values, rituals, struggles, and their future.

2. Historical Cultural Background

2.1. Cultural Origins

As an urban community, New Orleans is unique because of its diverse cultures and ethnicities. Among the cultures of New Orleans, the Black Mardi Gras Indians find their roots in the early development of a Creole community settled by the French in the eighteenth century (Midlo-Hall, 1992). They are best understood as "contemporary urban Maroons." (Smith, 2007) "Maroons" is a term used to refer to communities of enslaved indigenous and African peoples who escaped from bondage and established viable communities, while fighting to maintain their freedom (Agorsah, 1994). In what was then called Louisiana Territory, these former slaves fled New Orleans to live, among others, with the Houma and Chitimacha Native American Indians living in the swamp areas surrounding the city (Evans, 2011; Breunlin, Lewis & Regis, 2009).

Mardi Gras Indians are not all Native Indians. The first appearance of Mardi Gras Indians dates back at least to the 1880s, and was likely influenced by the Plains Indians imagery represented in the Buffalo Bill show (Mitchell, 1999; Lipsitz, 2001; Smith, 2007). The first tribe on record was the Creole Wild West led by Chief Becate who was known to be of mixed African and American Indian descent. The practice of "masking [costuming] later spread to Black men and women of New Orleans who had no discernable Native American blood. By 'masking Indian' African Americans could create an identity of strength in the

face of great adversity" (Breunlin, Lewis & Regis, 2009, p. 65). Thus, Mardi Gras Indians are Black people who represent themselves as Indians through costume, music and dance (Smith, 2007).

2.2. Mardi Gras Traditions

The maintenance of Mardi Gras traditions stems out of the organization of mutual aid societies as early as 1780 (Smith, 2007). Similar to the Freemasons and the Knights of Columbus organizations, these mutual aid societies were secret societies that were fundamentally patriarchal. They provided members with basic needs such as food, shelter, and money. Mardi Gras Indian organizations are said to be the prototypes of all mutual aid organizations because they retain the essential features of the early processions of Afro-Creole people. Since the Reconstruction after the American Civil War, Black Mardi Gras Indians have had to survive as a marginal community. Today, these organizations are better known as Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs. They focus on making Indian "suits" and preparation for carnival season.

'Masking Indian' has long developed into an art form. It involves the creation of an elaborate suit of beads, sequins and feathers whose cultural and artistic roots are grounded in the traditional Indian dress of the Plains Indians, the beadwork of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, and additional influence from Africa by way of the Caribbean (Breunlin, Lewis & Regis, 2009). The making of a suit is both a personal, passionate creation of an individual and the involvement of a guild-like tribe working together. It can also be the work of some individuals who never mask. Beadwork imagery tells stories of Native American history whose contemporary meaning is grounded in the everyday struggle of Black workers trying to survive in the city of New Orleans.

Mardi Gras Indian processions include second lines and carnival parades. The second line is a parade composed of dance and music sometimes following a funeral. During Reconstruction (1865-1877), the emergence of a racialized society in New Orleans led second liners to parade along the dividing line between the uptown and downtown communities, for protection against the "other" (Gill, 1997). In addition, the population of Black New Orleans grew from 25 to 60 thousand between 1860 and 1880, largely the result of rural to urban migration after Emancipation (Mitchell, 1999). Consequently, African Creoles and African Americans constituted a fundamental rivalry in the city as did Creole Downtown and American Uptown factions. These rivalries often led to violent confrontations. According to Mitchell, the sad part about these confrontations is that they were directed against other tribes who were as underprivileged as they were, "Whatever the symbolic rebellion against White institutions that was embodied in assuming the identities of free and proud braves, in fact it was [B]lack bodies that received the blows the Mardi Gras Indians inflicted on one another" (p. 122). Throughout the 20th century, physical confrontation was replaced by aesthetic competition in the creation of the more beautiful suits, better songs, and more intricate dances (Lipsitz, 2001).

Mardi Gras Indian parades bring together the historical, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual elements of the greater African American community and are expressions and celebrations of freedom (Smith, 2007). These parades would not be complete without the second liners strutting, dancing, and twirling their umbrellas to the tunes of the brass bands

parading through the streets of Black neighborhoods. Second lines, whether celebrating the life of the deceased during a funeral procession or parading during Mardi Gras season, function to affirm the sacred and secular nature of the community. They resonate with spirituality and African and Indian celebratory practices. Although they are visual and narrative representations of the Native American Indian culture, they have little connection to it (Mitchell, 1999). During a parade, Mardi Gras Indians march through neighborhoods, stopping at family homes and businesses to honor people for their community services. Along the way, support systems provide the second liners with refreshments. Everyone is welcome to join the second line, regardless of race or group affiliation. In Smith's (2007) words, "such marches would have constituted a unified and formidable form of resistance to hostile authority" (p. 51). The Mardi Gras Indian parades that we know of today are expressions and celebrations of this community's cultural heritage, freedom and political advancement among Blacks in New Orleans.

Unlike traditional Western carnivals whose aim is to release desire and let go of tensions, the Mardi Gras Indians carnival is a renewed expression of core values and beliefs that operate in the everyday life of Black workers in New Orleans. Gates (1989) argues that Black Mardi Gras traditions developed "free from White people's gaze" with a unique vernacular structure, using "double play" and "signifying on" White parade traditions. While Carnivals in general are about play, Black carnivals are about double-play. For example, the Zulu parade exemplifies double-play, that is, it is African American in form, yet it is modeled after White parade traditions. Signifying refers to the repetition and revision "fundamental to Black artistic forms," says Gates (1989, p. 24). That is, the Mardi Gras Indian traditions are infused with such repetition, from the chants and dances perpetually revised, to the creation of a new suit said to be essential to each year's celebration. The parade of Indian tribes claims ritual space through aesthetic spectacle in the context of Black ethnicity and community rivalries.

2.3. Mardi Gras Indians Today

Nowadays, regardless of income, all groups—including the Black Mardi Gras Indians—devote much of their free time and money to the creation of these very elaborate "suits" as the means to create ceremonial identity during carnival season. Currently it is reported that there are some 38 tribes of Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans, each with 10 to a few dozen members. In spite of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina new tribes have continued to form even "demonstrating the fierceness and vitality of this cherished local tradition" (Sakakeeny, 2009, no page). They come from all of the Black neighborhoods in the city, and in addition to masking on Mardi Gras day, they also parade on St. Joseph's Day in March, and they are featured as part of New Orleans Jazz Festival in April/May. Today, they are widely accepted for their performance which includes intricate handmade suits, song and dance. Although the City of New Orleans promotes the Indian spectacle to tourists, it gives little back to the tribes themselves.

3. Theoretical Framework

Our analysis of the historicization of the Black Mardi Gras Indians in *Treme* is grounded in the concept of culture as a form of resistance through its own rituals and everyday practices.

As we investigate a unique culture marginalized by the dominant society, we first rely on Stuart Hall's concept of culture. That is, a form of resistance through its own rituals and everyday practices. However, in a problematic world "culture must perforce take complex and heterogeneous forms, not at all free from contradictions." (Clark, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1976, p. 10) In the context of the African American culture, Allen (2001) contends that any analysis of the African American experience must be grounded in an understanding of African cultural and Western hemispheric political realities. It must address the social, cultural, and political issues that enable and constrain cultural emancipation.

Second, in articulating the experiences of non-dominant groups living in the United States we rely on bell hooks's (1992) fierce critical interrogation of a dominant culture constructing images that deny the very existence of people of color, particularly in the media. Hooks sees Black culture as oppositional in a history of colonization, and Blackness as an "ontological" symbol of what oppression means in the United States. However, she also argues that loving and affirming Blackness is a step toward emancipation and liberation from racial domination. Her critical approach to culture is used to analyze Mardi Gras Indians' narratives in the context of the heterogeneous Black experience. In addition, West (1993) proposes a "demystifactory" or "prophetic" type of criticism in which artists comment on the artistic and historical representation of their unique subculture of the heterogeneous African Diaspora. Hence, a critical analysis of the historicization of Black Mardi Gras Indians must take place within the broader socio-historical context of the African and Indian experience marked by a history of exclusion, slavery, racism, and survival. It is to be articulated by the very 'artists,' to borrow West's expression, who are actively engaged in the representation of their subculture.

Finally, we rely on the work of cultural critics who link culture, memory and performance when explicating Black Indian culture in the United States. Roach (1996) defines cultural performance as the result of a process of surrogation. "Culture does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relationships that constitute the social fabric [of the community.]" (p. 2) For example, the Mardi Gras Indians' cultural performance rests in the events of circum-Atlantic cross-cultural encounters. These performances represent counter memories or "the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences" (p. 26). According to Pollock (1998), "performance proves purposeful; history proves affective, sensual, and generative. Together, they expand the performance field to include a broad spectrum of everyday practices and social structures and raise endless questions about the role of spectacle in the production of social selves." (pp. 2-3)

Lipsitz (2001) refers to cultural performance as narrative of collective identity. He states, "The Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans represent the most enduring popular narrative in the modern world." (p. 234) This collective creative process of performance has been shaped by a history of colonialism, segregation, and racism, compelling the ongoing re-creation of a collective identity. In other words, they are emancipatory and liberatory in nature. As a way of liberating themselves from the racial order in a White-dominated New Orleans, enslaved and free people of color were empowered by the Native Indians' history of resistance to social and racial oppression. People of colors' desire to fight oppression emulated Native Indians' history of defiance of White American laws. According to Brooks (2002),

> African Americans propagated the image of the rebellious Native American in their families and an expression of their own resistance to both slavery and legalized segregation. They also used the image of the savage Indian to resist indirect ordinances and satiations that would have been dangerous for them to oppose openly. (p. 199)

Indian imagery became "liberative symbols in a land where Indians seemed to be the freest people of color" (Bird, 1996, p. 142). Mardi Gras Indians' vocal and musical performances, their "masking Indian" in elaborate colorful hand-sewn suits "constituted living artifacts, spirit-world messages passed on through the medium of [their] performance. Occupying and transforming the streets in the 'back of town', an Indian in his new suit on Mardi Gras morning is ambulant architecture, a living *milieu de mémoire* [site of memory]." (Roach, 1996, p. 198)

4. Methodology

Analyzing the historicization of the Mardi Gras Indians through fiction could be a challenging task, but in the case of the *Treme* series, it appears very relevant because the series has been acclaimed for its realism. In a previous paper, we defined the genre of *Treme* as Dramatic Realism, and we demonstrated how the series draws its authenticity from the everyday lives of people who share experiences with the characters who represent them (Dessinges, Gendrin & Hajjar, 2011).

By historicization, we refer to the enunciation of history in a narrative discourse built around fiction (Ricoeur, 1983). That is to say we study the narrative inscription of historical facts and events in a fictional story. The fictional world represented in *Treme* is a potential world conceptualized as a dual structure resulting from the combination of a fictional universe and reality (Pavel, 1988). According to Pavel, a fictional narrative implies that an imitation of the real, or imaginary stories is generally analogous to a real basis, and that its expression is guaranteed by likely fictional characters.

Because history gives believability to invented narratives, history is omnipresent in the fictional story (Esquenazi, 2009). In the series, David Simon and Eric Overmyer wrote dialogue to remind the viewer of the circumstances in which Mardi Gras Indians have been segregated, abandoned by the city in the past, and after Katrina. In *Treme*, historical facts are necessary conditions for a fictional world and structure the fiction, even if some situations are invented. Thanks to the Katrina context, fundamental elements of the narrative are justified: specific space and time, the Mardi Gras Indians characters and their actions. With these historical referents in mind, we elaborate on what Schaeffer (1999) calls the "incursion of reality into fiction" (p. 142) that is the manner in which the process of invention is "affected" by semiotic reference. To do so, we borrow the concept of historical truth from Esquenazi (2009). This concept allows us to study fiction within a historical context. It refers to the real basis of the story, its purpose, and the significance of the events, actions, and characters throughout the narrative. Historical truths depend on the degree of realism of their fictional representation. The revelation of historical truths unique to *Treme* will lead us to understand Mardi Gras Indian culture and circumstance in the context of their own recovery after Katrina.

In order to establish the historical and cultural authenticity of the Mardi Gras Indian

narrative we address three specific areas of historicization of the Mardi Gras Indians story. The first and second areas analyze critically the resistance to power structures and resilience of the Mardi Gras Indian community against forms of domination, and the third area discusses the future of the Mardi Gras Indians. To inform our analysis, we rely on our transcription of the series, scholarly work, and interviews with real Mardi Gras Indians, Cherice Harrison-Nelson, Big Queen of the Guardians of the Flame, and Walter Harris, Flag boy of the Seminole tribe who plays the role of a Mardi Gras Indian in the series. The interviews establish reactions of members of the Mardi Gras Indian Community to this unique narrative.

5. Analysis

5.1. Main Characters

For the purpose of this analysis, we focus on Albert Lambreaux, the pivotal character in *Treme*, whose actions are deeply rooted in historical reality. In *Treme*, Albert's character, played by Clark Peters, is the Big Chief of the Guardians of the Flame, one of the 38 tribes making up the community of the Mardi Gras Indians. His character is a composite of all Indian Chiefs. Although modeled after real Mardi Gras Indians, Lambreaux's story remains fictional. In David Simon's words,

> There are moments that the character (Albert Lambreaux) has that aren't like what (Harrison) [Donald Harrison, Jr. Big Chief of the Guardians of the Flame and consultant for the series] knows to be indicative of his late father and other chiefs. He has to sort of hold his breath and go, 'This is fictional. This didn't happen.' But at the same time, he provided us with a lot of interior logic that (helped us) create the characters (Walker, 2010).

Albert is the father of two: his daughter Davina (played by Edwina Findley), who lives in Houston, and his son Delmond (played by Rob Brown), a professional jazz trumpet player working in New York City. As the big chief of his tribe he is also a leader of his community. Having lost his home to flooding, he squats at Poke's bar, the pre-Katrina meeting place for Mardi Gras practices. His narrative connects to family, friends, community, and government institutions (Dessinges, Gendrin & Hajjar, 2011). It speaks to critical issues concerning post-Katrina recovery: a long standing struggle with police authorities, a generation gap between father and son, and the future of the Mardi Gras Indians.

5.2. Resistance to Power Structures

The history of Mardi Gras Indians is a history of resistance to White supremacy which has always defined Black communities (Lipsitz, 2001; Smith, 2007). The terms "resistance theater" and "street warrior" apply to Mardi Gras Indian traditions; at least since the end of Reconstruction, "the New Orleans white elite used a biological argument about race to impose racial hierarchies and control; they did this both by civic symbol (the Mardi Gras parade) and by

violent action" (Brooks, 2002, p. 199). Even if Big Queen Cherice (personal communication, May 25, 2011) of the real Guardians of the Flame tribe prefers the term "cultural warrior" to "street warrior," or even "freedom fighters", most Mardi Gras Indians present themselves as street warriors, striving for "the control of urban turf and of spaces of freedom maintained against the will of the local police" (Ostendorf, 2000, p. 218).

The Mardi Gras Indian narrative is about resisting institutional framing of their community and observance of their cultural rituals. For example, when commenting on city authorities overseeing Mardi Gras Indian ceremonial processions, Big Queen Cherice (personal communication, 2011) feels that "[The Mardi Gras Indians] shouldn't pay fees or get a permit to parade […] They shouldn't be penalized." She feels that police authorities lack understanding and knowledge about Mardi Gras Indian culture. In the *Treme* series, this perspective is illustrated through several scenes where the police demonstrate an unwillingness and/or lack of cultural understanding about Mardi Gras Indians. The most meaningful interaction takes place between Albert and the New Orleans Chief of Police the day before Mardi Gras:

> *Chief of Police: "I am using every street cop…taking a free shot if they wanna."*
> *Big Chief (Albert): "You saying your people coming for us?"*
> *Chief of Police: "No. I'm saying that I am worried. Last year I watched this thing spin out of control. Now, maybe because of that, maybe because of what happened after with Big Chief Tootie…I was told to come up with a tactical plan for this year to stop it all from happening again."* (Episode 8)

This interaction references past violence between the police and the Mardi Gras Indians. Traditionally, Mardi Gras Indians paraded freely in segregated black neighborhoods, affirming their independence from the social order (Smith, 2007). However, on March 19th 2005, the New Orleans police shut down the annual celebration of St. Joseph's night arguing that the Indians did not have a parade permit, a new requirement in the city (Reckdahl, 2005). Subsequently the outrage that followed the decision on the part of the Indians and other concerned citizens led the City Council to call a special hearing to address reports of police harassment. In a packed council chamber Big Chief Tootie Montana of the Yellow Pocahontas, the Chief of Chiefs of the Mardi Gras Indians for five decades, recounted a long history of police repression tied to racial discrimination. Shortly thereafter, Chief Tootie Montana collapsed to the floor from a heart attack (Katzman, 2006). Tootie's last official speech was sending a message of refusal to bow to the police. This message is articulated by the Chief of Police character who reminds Albert of this event to justify his warning that the Police will crack down on the Mardi Gras Indian parades if there are any signs of skirmishes:

> *Chief of Police: "I do remember before you fell out of the council meeting, how Chief Tootie was talking about the old days, talked about how the police would be tightening the straps on their batons and he would tell his gang not to look at them, to surpass the fight if they could."*
> *Big Chief (Albert): "Big Chief Tootie died on the battlefield. Might be the council chamber to you, but it was the battlefield for us."* (Episode 8)

Albert's character is not only the Big Chief of his tribe, he is also a composite of the spirits of all the Big Chiefs of Mardi Gras Indians, past and present. His posture reflects not only his leadership status as the Big Chief but also his moral obligation to demand respect for his tribe in a society that compels people of color to submit to a White dominant social order. His stance emerges out of the dialectical tensions experienced in the United States in interracial encounters (Allen, 2001). Historically, these tensions have rendered the experience of people of color in general almost nonexistent. For the Mardi Gras Indians, "the Indians' disguise brings out into the open dimensions of repression that the dominant culture generally tries to render invisible." (Lipstiz, 2001, p. 238)

This invisibility stems from "White unconscious privilege" which ignores the double consciousness of African Americans having to deal with racial oppression on a regular basis. W. E. B. Dubois, (1989[1903]) states, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (p. 3). Albert's refusal to see himself through the eyes of the authorities illustrates his resistance to this double perspective. His only perspective is one which asserts his identity as a Mardi Gras Indian. In the following scene, we see an example of Albert's determination to fight for his cultural identity. In the scene, Albert illegally occupies an apartment in a Housing Project protesting its closure. He wants to force city authorities to reopen it, in spite of the Housing Authority of New Orleans's (HANO) refusal to allow it (Flaherty & Vitry, 2006):

Big Chief (Albert): "No Sir, I will not [leave the house].
Police Officer: "On your knees! Your hands on your head! You are under arrest!"(Repeated twice)
Big Chief (Albert): "I'll not bow. You want to cuff me, go ahead." (Albert extends his hands to be handcuffed).
Police Officer: "You mother f… YOU don't get to decide how you go to jail; WE decide how you go to jail. On your f…. knees"
Big Chief (Albert): "No humbow." (Another officer reloads his gun) Police Office: "F… that Indian sh…" (Then the officers proceed to beat him brutally.) (Episode 7)

Albert's act of resistance tests the police expectation that he will abide by the law. Instead, animated by a sense of human agency, he develops counter-strategies to resist subordination and vulnerability (de Certeau, 1994). In hooks's (1992) terms, he attempts to create his own emancipatory narrative.

5.3. Resilience

Cornel West, who visited New Orleans several times shortly after Katrina said that, "The history of black people in America is one of unbelievable resilience in the face of crushing white supremacist powers" (Flaherty, 2008, p. 34). Through the series, Albert's narrative focuses on the resilience needed to resume life in New Orleans and Mardi Gras Indians' everyday struggle in the devastated city. Although deeply shaken by the destruction of his neighborhood and his home, the Big Chief is determined to revitalize the traditions of "masking Indian" in spite of others' scepticism.

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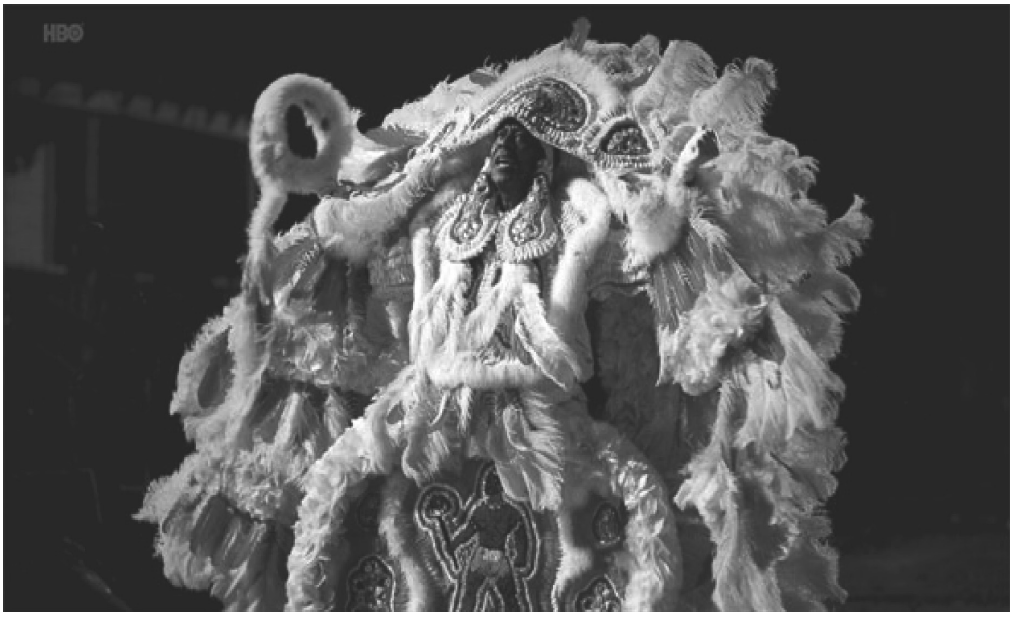
After Katrina, Mardi Gras Indian culture was largely in exile and its survival depended on getting its people back (Perdomo, 2006). From episode 1 to the end of the series, Albert's character demonstrates how his resilience is at the heart of his responsibilities as a leader (Taylor & Mitchell, 1993). Early in the first episode, his first act is to hang a picture of himself in his chief suit alongside pictures of past Mardi Gras Indians, a symbolic act suggesting his role as purveyor of the culture (Episode 1). In a pivotal scene, when he implores a fellow Indian to help him revive practice sessions for the upcoming Mardi Gras parade, he wears his magnificent suit, as a manifestation of his cultural self (Allen, 2001), reminding us that he is infused with the spirit of the tradition:

> *Big Chief (Albert): "I'm Big Chief with all the power […]. I'm Big Chief with fire […] I'm Big Chief, Guardian of the Flame, Mardi Gras day shoot fire in the name. I make them go to St Louis cemetery, […] get down to tombstone, wake up the dead. […] I'm looking for a trail chief. Got fire can't put it out."* (Episode 1)



In Episode 2 he insists on the parading ritual taking place "every year"—whatever the circumstances—and regardless of the reticence he finds even within his own community. In episode 1, when he asks for help from Robinette, a fellow Indian, the latter tells Albert that he is not his Chief, Big Chief Monk Boudreaux of the Golden Eagles tribe, is. To which Albert chants back:

> *Big Chief (Albert): "I'm looking for a trail chief. Got a heart of steel." Robinette: "Oh Chief, that's pretty, that's real pretty. Wondered if I was gonna see something like that again."*
> *Big Chief (Albert) (*ignoring his friend's reply): *"I'm looking for a trail chief. Got a heart of steel."*
> *Big Chief (Albert)* (continues chanting over his friend's comment that there may never be a carnival this year): *"....Ain't nobody home. Ain't nobody thinking about no Indian trail* [...] *Won't bow. Don't know how." Robinette: "Alright. Put your suit away chief. I'll be around the bar tomorrow afternoon."*

Albert's resilience manifests itself through his cultural narrative by rejecting his friend's rational arguments, responding instead by referencing a strong Native Indian value of resistance to White domination (Brooks, 2002). His posture of resilience takes place every time someone expresses scepticism about his endeavours. Albert's resilience is a political message addressed to institutions to reclaim the right of the Mardi Gras Indians to their public space, a place of identity. It is also a type of resilience that is necessary to revive intra-communal ties, as when the community is at risk (Agorsah, 1994).

5.4. The Future of the Mardi Gras Indians

5.4.1. Inter-Generation Perspectives

David Simon and Eric Overmyer reveal the future of the Mardi Gras Indians through several narratives. The first narrative focuses on the generation gap between Albert and his son Delmond. Other narratives deal with the revival of the community.

Unlike his father, Delmond Lambreaux, a career jazz musician in New York, does not want to return to New Orleans. In his words, "*I am from New Orleans, but I am not New Orleans*" (Episode 4). Katrina compels him to return to the city, at his sister's (Davina) insistence. Driving toward the airport, Delmond apologizes to his father for leaving,

Delmond: "Sorry I can't stay for practice."
Albert: "You ain't never really care for it."
Delmond: "That ain't true. I loved growing up with the traditions but the Indians. That's your thing. Always was." (Episode 2)

This exchange illustrates a father-son dissonance experienced by young men growing up in the community and the conflict they feel trying to balance their involvement with Indian traditions, and the need to make a living. In the words of Walter Harris (personal communication, May 30th, 2011), an Indian musician and flag boy in the Seminole tribe, "It is a struggle to maintain family traditions and make a living at the same time." Harris explains that while he developed his identity growing up in the Indian tradition, his love for music became his passion, and took him beyond his neighborhood into a larger sphere of opportunities.

This generation gap is expressed in another episode when Delmond tells his father that he eventually needs to go back to New York to play:

Delmond to his father: "I've got gigs. But I'll definitely be there Christmas day."
Albert: "*In and out like always. Couldn't ever stand to be around us for too long*."
Delmond: *"Oh man, come on. It ain't like that. In fact I'm going to stay around a couple of more days. I've got a recording session (with) Toussaint*."
Albert: "Toussaint, huh? You deigning to play local?"
Delmond: "*Yeah I'm deigning. I can play straight up New Orleans R&B in my sleep*."
Albert: "But can you swing? Not all you modern jazz cats can, you know."
*Delmond: "You sound lik*e *Wynton* [*Marsalis*]*."*
Albert: "I hope so." (Episode 2)

This latter exchange expresses the emotional struggle both father and son feel about making different life choices. Delmond struggles to convince his father that he is still attached to the musical traditions of New Orleans while Albert questions this same attachment. This generation gap seems to subside in the last episode of the season when Albert plays a jazz tune on his upright bass and Delmond plays along on his trumpet, two instruments, two musical traditions, two generations converging toward greater understanding. In this scene, Albert acknowledges

for the first time, the role of both of his children in helping him organize the parade: "*Wouldn't have made it without y'all*." (Episode 10)

5.4.2. Rebuilding of the Mardi Gras Indian Community

The revival of the Mardi Gras Indian community is undertaken by the older generation of Indians, with their unshakable faith that the community will come back and endure. Albert's character is the prototype of this faith and loyalty to the culture. From Albert's perspective, the revival of the community will occur by bringing back all Indians to the city. For example, he actively searches for close Indian friends, inquires about others; he offers his hospitality to another who has no place to stay. He even refuses a FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) trailer, and goes to jail on behalf of his Indian friends who have lost their homes in the Caliope Housing Project permanently closed by the local authorities after Katrina.

Another perspective offered is information and education for the larger community, New Orleanians, and outsiders to the city. For instance, the series reveals the introduction of the teenager, Darius, to Indian practices when Albert invites him into the tribe's private space, Poke's Bar, to help with the making of the suit. In the last episode (10), Delmond takes the young man under his wing and teaches him about respect while following the parade. As Darius attempts to draw closer to see the Big Chiefs from different tribes challenging each other in a dance, Delmond holds him back and says: *"Respect…This is about respect."*

Big Queen Cherice (personal communication, May 25, 2011) refers to the role of education as the driving force in transmitting Mardi Gras Indian culture. Master classes teach community members "to see themselves as part of a bigger world [connected to its African roots]." Children are socialized early into Mardi Gras Indians culture by learning unique ways of being, knowing, and behaving. Further, the preservation of Mardi Gras culture against forces of ignorance also requires Indians "to educate the city [and] speak out whenever possible. Big Queen Cherice speaks out to the chief of police and city representatives whenever she feels it is necessary. Intergenerational perspectives allow positioning of the characters with respect to the future of Mardi Gras culture. On the one hand, traditionalists want to maintain the rituals regardless of the challenges presented to them from the local authorities, the lack of money, and time investment necessary to maintain them. On the other hand, the younger generations manifest a certain detachment to roles, goals and values of the traditional Mardi Gras Indian society.

They attempt to find their place in two worlds: one traditional, one contemporary; one cultural, one economical; one Mardi Gras Indian, one mainstream. Within this universe of doubt, the *Treme* series gives hope that the community will maintain its tradition through the next generations. As stated by Big Queen Cherice (personal communication, May 25, 2011), the specificity of this tradition is passed down to the children, active participants from a very young age. They are the actors of the future as they are elements of the process of cultural transformation and surrogation (Roach, 1996). In substance, Big Queen Cherice says that Mardi Gras Indian culture is socially determined. It is the result of the imprint set by society on the individual, and it represents the social inheritance of individuals (Linton, 1986). According to her, in transmitting traditions from an early age that is the *habitus* of their tribe, Mardi Gras Indian socialization ensures the reproduction of the tribe from within the community (Bourdieu, 1980). However, in the series, David Simon and Eric Overmyer substitute this determinism by one of selection whereby individuals can make choices and take a distance from the cultural roles and values they have been taught. They show in subtle ways that in contemporary times, socialization is a complex process that oscillates between external constraints and individual initiatives (Lahire, 2004). The concept of *"plural man"* borrowed from Lahire is very useful to define Delmond's development, for example. The latter is affected by various influences which multiply his cultural experiences and preferences and render more complex his decisions to stay rooted in the cultural model from which he comes. As a result, Mardi Gras Indian culture is able to enrich itself from diversified cultural and musical influences to which young people are exposed (Episode 10).

6. Conclusion

David Simon and Eric Overmyer produced a "(hi)story" linking fiction to historical truths (Esquenazi, 2009) through the incursion of reality into fiction (Schaeffer, 1999). Although not all details included in the series are authentic, the producers have linked real people, in real time, and a real place to a history of struggle and cultural survival. *Treme* depicts a living culture that is surviving, in spite of the challenges experienced from local authorities, and contrary arguments that the Mardi Gras Indians are dying as a community. The Mardi Gras Indians' collective narrative represented through Albert Lambreaux's character suggests that the

community's attachment to the traditions will survive because of their resistance and resilience to institutional authorities. It is a narrative of heroism in light of oppressive conditions (Lipsitz, 2001).The cultural performance of parading after Katrina is an act of defiance to remain "[an] other," and a form of empowerment reclaiming Mardi Gras Indians' collective identity and reaffirming their freedom.

Thus, the Mardi Gras Indians' narrative is also emancipatory and liberative. It is emancipatory in that it gives them a voice rooted in reality. It documents an oral history which has no place in a culture of forgetfulness that relies solely on historical documents to be legitimate. As hooks (1992) asserts, it serves to "decolonize" the viewers' mind by portraying a living culture that manages to recreate itself through a process of surrogation, cultural performance, and the renewal of a collective identity. It is liberative in that it "contributes to a process of remembering that is essential for the political recovery of colonized and oppressed people" (p. 193).

This analysis presents two important limitations however. First, this study relies on a small number of interviews conducted with Mardi Gras Indians. The data collected through these interviews give us a limited amount of information concerning Mardi Gras Indians' perceptions of their own representations. Media accounts of Mardi Gras Indians' views of the series are very limited, and access to actual tribe members remains challenging because of the secretive and private nature of their communities. Additional interviews are warranted for a deeper analysis of the historical representation of this unique cultural group of the heterogeneous African Diaspora.

A second limitation of the study is derived from the first. While *Treme* is the first television series positioning Mardi Gras Indians at the center of their own narrative, this positioning begs the question of the producers' degree of success in representing Mardi Gras Indians as one of many representations of Blackness. Critical cultural theorists, such as Gray (2004) and hooks (1992) have argued for a type of television that moves away from a hegemonic and normalizing perspective on race representation toward a transformative perspective that acknowledges struggle and active resistance. According to Gray, representing "difference" must be "articulated with the localities and positionalities of audiences, and discourses about race in the United States" (p. 196). Hooks states "when retelling the past, the colonizer invariably minimizes [Native Americans, African Americans, and survivors of the holocaust's] suffering" (p. 187). Yet this study does not directly address the effect of the series on the minds of its audiences.

Hence, an important direction for future research is to examine how different audiences view the representation of Mardi Gras Indians and the extent to which the series succeeds in "decolonizing" their minds about race. In other words, it is necessary to determine the extent to which the series reflects a dominant ideology from White producers and production executives or whether it privileges a critical cultural representation of race. Tucker and Shah (1992) argue that it is important to examine the producers' racial ideology within the framework of a cultural production, and the creative choices they make that reflect their membership in the dominant White culture. This type of production might enhance the value and divergent representation of socio-cultural groups often underrepresented or distorted by the media (Saucier, 2010).

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This paper is the second of a series of papers written about the television series *Treme*.