City Backdrop: Television and its Gentrifying Influence on a City's Black Community

Ana Hoshovsky
Santa Clara University, ahoshovsky@scu.edu

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Ana Hoshovsky  
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Abstract

This paper will focus on the issue of race representation in television and its implications to real life communities in the cities featured in television. Scenes from the comedy show Portlandia will be examined to determine the effects the show has on the black community of Northeast Portland, Oregon. Characters from HBO’s Treme will also be analyzed to assess the show’s claim of representing the struggles of locals in a post-Katrina New Orleans. The lack of diverse representation throughout Portlandia’s eight seasons has caused the show to help to fuel the gentrification in the city. Viewers of the show are left unaware of the city’s Northeast black community. As a result viewers moving into Portland as a result of Portlandia are unknowingly harming the black community of the Northeast area. In contrast to the black Portlanders, Treme locals suffers not from a lack of representation in Treme but from misrepresentation. Several of Treme’s main characters are privileged whites lack the ability to convincingly represent the neighborhood’s struggles post-Katrina. Likewise, Treme’s storylines of the local black characters leave much unsaid, and as a result fail to contextualize the issues that are represented. Both Portlandia and Treme display how, intentional or not, television’s lack of representation and misrepresentation can have negative impacts on the lives of minority residents within a city.
Introduction

Modern day society is heavily reliant on television with the average American watching “five hours and four minutes of television per day”\(^1\). As a form of entertainment television shows can provide a way to learn new things. Viewers are able to experience everything from learning practical life skills to sci-fi worlds. Shows which focus on our society allow viewers to be immersed into the lives of people they have never met and experience a different culture. Many viewers walk away from television with the desire to travel to new countries and visit new cities.

A popular setting for many drama and comedy shows is a city. Cities offer a dynamic background as a show gets to explore a variety of cultures and communities. Popular U.S. cities commonly featured in television are New York and Los Angeles. Despite the popularity and focus on large cities, smaller cities can be just as interesting of a background for a show. Regardless of the size of the city, it is a commonly used setting for shows. However, the impacts of using a city as a backdrop in television is not a commonly discussed topic.

While a city setting might just be a convenient backdrop for a story it can provide often unnoticed effects on viewers. A show’s portrayal can influence our perception of the people, places, and overall culture of city. Many people watch a show set in New York and are walk away inspired to move there. However, viewers can’t realistically hope to fully understand a city through its portrayal on television. But does this incomplete understanding of a city impact just the viewer? Unfortunately, the tendency to misunderstand a city because of television usually has an effect on the residents of the city. How a city is depicted in television and if the depiction is accurate or not can have life changing impacts on the people within a city. Minority

communities within a city are most vulnerable to the negative influences of a television show. Particularly at risk is a city’s black community which suffers from the lack of representation and misrepresentation in media. Racial representation in media is an ongoing conversation but thus far little of the conversation has focused on how television shows depictions of cities fits into this large conversation.

For this paper I will be discussing how the failure to represent a city’s minority communities, and particularly the community’s history, in television can cause detriment to existing minority communities in the city. In order to focus my discussion I will only be analyzing the representation of two specific black communities in two smaller American cities. Two shows which prominently feature their city backdrop with be considered: the comedy show *Portlandia*, based on Portland, Oregon, and the drama series *Treme*, based off the neighborhood of the same name in New Orleans, Louisiana. Analysis of *Portlandia* will focus on the show’s representation of the black community in Northeast Portland, giving particular attention to the Albina neighborhood. Since *Treme* focuses on the Treme neighborhood, my analysis will look at the representation of this specific black community.

Both shows fail to accurately represent the black community of their respective cities. *Portlandia* fails to represent the black community of Northeast Portland, instead advertising the area as a white neighborhood. *Portlandia* makes Northeast Portland appear white through its lack of a diverse cast. In addition, when tackling issues like diversity in government *Portlandia* fails to address the racial aspects of these topics. *Portlandia’s* portrayal of Northeast Portland is furthering the history of gentrification in the area by enticing white youths into the neighborhood and thus displacing the existing black community.
Treme in contrast does represent the black community of but does not accurately depict the community. The black community and culture of Treme are limited in its depiction, catering only to the tourist vision of the neighborhood. Treme glorifies the traditional view of black culture through its emphasis on jazz music while largely ignoring the evolution of the black music scene in New Orleans. In addition, Treme fails to contextualize the current struggles of the black community. No scenes are given which allow the audience compare Treme pre and post-Katrina. Lastly, the decision to use white characters to be the voices of outrage over the government handling of Katrina makes their anger seem less genuine. The white characters are largely people who did not feel the full effects of Katrina and are not the ones impacted by mishandling post-Katrina. Overall, Treme’s lack of representation for the black community’s struggles furthers the existing struggles of a community which was fundamentally changed after Hurricane Katrina. So, while representation is important, so is an accurate portrayal. Without accurate representation, television shows through their depictions of cities will continue to indirectly harm the minority communities in those cities.

What is Gentrification?

Minorities communities like a city’s black community are the most at risk to be negatively influenced by the increased gentrification which can be caused by television show depictions. But what is gentrification? Simply defined gentrification is “the process of repairing and rebuilding homes and businesses in a deteriorating area (such as an urban neighborhood) accompanied by an influx of middle-class or affluent people and that often results in the
displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents”\(^2\). While this definition is useful it does not capture the full scope of the impact of gentrification on communities within a city.

The influx of affluent people into a gentrified neighborhood often has impacts of the makeup of the community. Lance Freeman, a professor of Urban Planning at Columbia University, argues that “gentrification does not decrease neighbourhood-level diversity” in regards to both race and class\(^3\). Freeman goes further to suggest that “gentrification reduces income segregation” of neighborhood in cities\(^4\). While increasing diversity is a beneficial aspect of gentrification, the process can also have drawbacks.

One significant drawback is that gentrification can rapidly change the makeup of an area, often to the detriment of minorities communities. Peter Moskowitz, a Philadelphia based journalist, explains how talk of gentrification often focuses on the new aspects being introduced into a city like coffee shops and clothing stores. However, by focusing on the new things, talk of gentrification tends to leave the losses in an area undiscussed. Moskowitz incorporates this loss when he describes gentrification as “a void in a neighborhood, in a city, in a culture” which “cannot happen without this deeply rooted inequality”\(^5\). The “deep rooted inequality” which Moskowitz refers to the housing policies and practices in the United States which “denied people of color, especially black people, access to the same kinds of housing” as their white counterparts.

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\(^4\) Freeman, “Neighbourhood Diversity”, 2079.

The discriminatory housing policies practiced in the United States are inherently linked to older discriminatory practices like segregation, redlining, and urban renewal. America’s history of slavery and segregation has influenced the separation of races which “continues to be a feature of American life”\textsuperscript{6}. Redlining, which was started in 1937 by the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), was a practiced founded in racial inequality. Fullilove and Wallace note that “the presence of a single Negro family meant that an area was given the worst possible rating” and the influenced the decision to not invest in an area\textsuperscript{7}. Through the discriminatory practice of redlining the disinvestment of black neighborhoods became justifiable. Urban renewal efforts under the Housing Act of 1949 continued to justify the discrimination against black neighborhoods. In an effort to create new developments for cities across the country “one million people were displaced in 2,500 projects...75% of those displaced were people of color”\textsuperscript{8}. Housing and land policies like urban renewal and redlining are based in discrimination and unequally target and harm minority communities and people of color. Gentrification is one of the newest stage of serial forced displacement of minority communities\textsuperscript{9}. Unfortunately, unknown to most viewers, television shows are playing a role in increasing gentrification in the cities and continuing the history of serial forced displacement.

**Northeast Portland and the Albina Neighborhood**

\textsuperscript{7} Fullilove and Wallace, “Serial Forced Displacement”, 382.
\textsuperscript{8} Fullilove and Wallace, “Serial Forced Displacement”, 382.
\textsuperscript{9} Fullilove and Wallace, “Serial Forced Displacement”, 383.
To see the issues of television’s depictions of Portland a description of the city is needed. For this discussion only certain areas of the city will be discussed, Northeast Portland and specifically the Albina neighborhood. Northeast Portland is home to the Albina neighborhood. The Albina neighborhood is one of the city’s oldest black neighborhood, though it is home to “blacks, Latinos, Native American, recent immigrants, and whites”\(^\text{10}\). The black community of Albina was initially formed in the 1940s due to an influx of black migrants during WWII\(^\text{11}\). Housing policies and restrictions in the 1950s caused Albina to quickly become black majority neighborhood. Urban renewal projects from the 1950s to the 1980s continually disrupted the lives of blacks living in Albina\(^\text{12}\). The city of Portland continued to disinvest money into Albina, leaving the black community to struggle with issues like gang warfare, poverty and drugs\(^\text{13}\). Eventually starting in 1988 the city began to reinvest interest into Albina\(^\text{14}\). However, the investment into Albina caused gentrification to occur in the area, as whites relocated into the neighborhood they had abandoned and displaced the existing black residents. A decade after reinvestment in the neighborhood began, the racial makeup of Albina had changed where “Blacks owned 36 percent fewer homes” than previously\(^\text{15}\). Today the black community of Albina continues to try to fight the gentrification that has and is occurring in the neighborhood.

Sadly, the reality of gentrification and discrimination in Portland is left out of the city depictions in television. The history of race related discrimination in Portland is a hard issue to


\(^\text{13}\) Abbott, *Greater Portland*, 97.


\(^\text{15}\) Gibson, “Bleeding Albina”, 21.
capture in television. However, if a viewer is to truly understand why Portland exists as it does today its racial history must be addressed. The city’s history of gentrification is vital to understanding why the Northeast area is home to the city’s black community. If the audience is to gain an accurate picture of Portland all communities within the city must be represented. The black community must be represented in television, otherwise viewers will be unaware the community’s connection to the Northeast area. Unfortunately, *Portlandia*, a show centered in the Northeast area, fails in its representation of the city.

**Portlandia**

*Portlandia* is a comedy show that focuses on the weird, quirky and artistic culture of Portland, Oregon. Created by Fred Armisen, Carrie Brownstein and Jonathan Krisel *Portlandia* is a series which seeks to “dig even deeper into the absurdities of modern life”. The show utilizes a sketch format to create dramatic reenactments of the classic Portland life. The city of Portland is known for its culture which features progressive ideals, environmentally conscious consumerism, and a thriving art scene. Portland has embraced its signature lifestyle with the city slogan “Keep Portland Weird”. The show *Portlandia* play up the perceived weird culture of the city to an hilarious extreme.

One of the ways *Portlandia* plays upon the weird culture is by featuring novelty stores. Novelty stores featured in the show display local and unique art pieces which highlight art scene of the city. In the second episode of the show, a sketch is featured which plays on artsy culture.

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The two characters Bryce Shivers (Fred Armisen) and Lisa Eversman (Carrie Brownstein) travel to a novelty store on Mississippi Avenue in Northeast Portland. Bryce and Lisa are seen trying to create art by slapping a bird sticker on every object they find in the store. This episode created one of the show’s most popular quotes “Put a Bird on It!”. The sketch initially appears to be a harmless and funny play off of the DIY (Do it Yourself) and art culture of Portland.

On further inspection though there are several things missing from this sketch’s depiction of the city. One is that the sketch is filmed in Northeast Portland, an area known both for its art culture and its black community. However, nowhere in the scene does a black character feature. On further examination Portlandia’s episodes often feature an all-white or white majority cast.

Portlandia’s exclusion of black characters makes the city, and the Northeast area, appear to be white. While Portland is known as one of the least racially diverse cities in America, the black neighborhoods of Portland are predominantly located on the Northeast side of the city. So, while Northeast Portland includes some of the oldest black neighborhoods in the city Portlandia chooses to portray this area as yet another white neighborhood.

Portlandia’s portrayal of Northeast Portland has led viewers to believe the area is a white neighborhood which embraces the weird culture of Portland. While Portlandia’s decision to use Northeast Portland was “financially and culturally/narratively driven” its misrepresentation of the area is having consequences for the neighborhood. As a result of Portlandia, Northeast Portland has become a destination place for youths moving into the city who are looking to

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20 Folwer and Derrick, “Yipster Gentrification”, 198-201.
21 Folwer and Derrick, “Yipster Gentrification”, 189.
embrace the weird, quirky culture of Portland. A look at the demographics of those who are moving into Portland shows that they are white, college educated, progressive youths who are looking to embrace the “authentic” culture of Portland. The influx of white youths into Northeast Portland is causing a displacement of the existing black community. Because of the show’s portrayal the gentrification of Northeast Portland is continuing. By not acknowledging the black community’s struggle in the Northeast Portland area, the impact of the show goes unnoticed by most viewers. While Portlandia may appear to be light comedy show its lack of representation is causing the show to have real and devastating impacts on the black community of Portland. By creating an inaccurate portrayal of Portland, Portlandia is helping that inaccurate picture of the city become a reality.

Portlandia’s depiction of the black community of Portland becomes even more troubling towards the end of season one. In a episode titled “The Mayor Is Missing” the Mayor of Portland (Kyle MacLachlan) goes missing and leads Fred and Carrie go on a search for him. At the end of the episode the Mayor holds a press conference in which he reveals he is a member of a reggae band. The four other members of the band, all played by black actors, stand silently behind the Mayor as he explains his love for reggae. The scene depicts the Mayor as the expert on reggae, with the press directing detailed questions about the music genre towards the Mayor. Overall the tone of this skit seems to suggest the Mayor’s passion for reggae is shameful and had to be hidden.

This scene of *Portlandia* paints another concerning picture of the black community and black culture. Instead of depicting reggae as an respectable and legitimate music genre, the skit makes any interest in reggae appear to be shameful. The Mayor feels the need to disclose this dark secret love of reggae to the press. Given reggae’s roots in black culture, the scene’s negative depiction of the genre implies a negative association with black culture. The creators could have handled this scene in a way which celebrated reggae music. Instead, the Mayor’s disclosure of his “secret” gives another unfavorable view, of which there are already many in our society, of the black community.

*Portlandia’s* handling of the scene also misses out on an opportunity to develop a more diverse cast of characters. The introduction of the four black band members provided the show an opportunity to break from its traditional focus on white characters. However, *Portlandia* misses this opportunity as the black characters in the sketch are reduced to non-speaking roles. The black characters featured in this scene are there for comic effect, to contrast to the white Mayor. *Portlandia* settles for a comedic moment and furthers existing stereotypes. The white man is shown to be “all knowing” in contrast to the black characters. The stereotype of the uneducated black man is one which should not be further for the sake of comedic moment. Instead, *Portlandia* would have been off had the black characters been are given an opportunity to prove themselves equal in talent or knowledge to Mayor. With a different direction this scene could have helped *Portlandia* break away from the stereotypical black “representation”.

Even the plot of the episode could have been strengthened by the further development of the band members. The Mayor’s claim of being in a band might have been more believable had

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27 In Other Words Staff, “Fuck Portlandia”. In Other Words. updated on Sept, 20, 2016. [https://inotherwords.org/2016/09/28/fuck-portlandia/](https://inotherwords.org/2016/09/28/fuck-portlandia/)
there been more interaction between him and the band members. For people who are sharing in
his “secret” the band members to not appear to be close with the Mayor. More interaction
between the band members and the Mayor would have helped legitimize the Mayor’s status
within the band. Instead, by choosing a comedic moment Portlandia fails both to strength the
episode’s storyline and misuses an opportunity to create a more holistic depiction of the city.

One would hope Portlandia would have evolved its representation of the black
community over its eight years of airing. Sadly, this appears not to be the case. A scene from
season eight, the series’ final season, shows that Portlandia’s representation issues remain. In the
sketch titled “Portland So White” the mayor of Portland is confronted with a news headline
calling out the city’s diversity issues28. In an attempt to prove the article wrong the mayor
surveys his staff and discovers that his staff is all white. The only black male present in the
scene turns out to be a tourist. The sketch ends with the mayor being comforted by Fred and
Carrie in the knowledge that “Hardly anyone is 100% European”, according to DNA test kits29.

While this scene attempts to make light of Portland’s diversity issues, it only further the
notion of Portland being a white city. The skit brings the issue of diversity in government to the
forefront when the mayor learns his staff is all white. However, the sketch does not allude to the
consequences lack of diversity in government can have. Minority communities have long
struggled with getting their issues heard by local authorities. Most local leaders are not
connected with minority communities and therefore fail to recognize or address the struggles of

28 Portlandia, Season 8, episode 7, “Most Pro City.” directed by Bill Benz, written by Fred Armisen, Carrie
Brownstein, Jonathan Krisel, Karey Dornetto, Megan Neuringer, Phoebe Robinson and Graham Wagner, featuring
Fred Armisen, Carrie Brownstein and Kyle MacLachlan. Aired on March 1, 2018, on IFC.
https://www.ifc.com/shows/portlandia
29 See note 29 above.
these communities. By highlighting an all white local government, the sketch is opening the door
to the conversation on diversity and government. However, the conversation goes no further as
the scene turns the issue of diversity into a punchline. Rather than adding a critique of our
society, Portlandia settles for making a comedic moment out of a serious and underrepresented
issue.

New Orleans and the Treme Neighborhood

Similar to the Albina neighborhood, the Treme neighborhood in New Orleans has a
history of racial discrimination. Black neighborhoods in New Orleans have been historically
located near the Mississippi River\textsuperscript{30}. This same geographical segregation is true also in Treme,
where the poor are located near the river\textsuperscript{31}. The Treme neighborhood is one with a rich history
and culture. Treme is “America’s oldest black neighborhood” with residents who can “trace their
heritage in the neighborhood back four and five generations”\textsuperscript{32}. Along with its rich history Treme
has a rich culture with some notable aspects like second-line parades, jazz funerals and Mardi
Gras Indians\textsuperscript{33}. However, the neighborhood also has a darker history as well. Throughout its
history the neighborhood has been continually disrupted by urban renewal projects which
displace the black residents\textsuperscript{34}. In addition, the neighborhood has gained a reputation as
dangerous, with tourists being advised to “avoid certain parts of the area at certain times of the

\textsuperscript{30} Moskowitz, \textit{How to Kill a City}.
\textsuperscript{31} Michael E. Crutcher. \textit{Treme: Race and Place in a New Orleans Neighborhood}. Athens: University of Georgia
\textsuperscript{32} Crutcher, \textit{Treme}, 15-16.
\textsuperscript{33} Crutcher, \textit{Treme}, 16.
\textsuperscript{34} Crutcher, \textit{Treme}, 12-13.
All aspects of the neighborhood, whether good or bad, were altered in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Like many areas in New Orleans, Treme suffered from the results of Hurricane Katrina. Due to the geographical segregation of New Orleans black neighborhoods were the ones which got hit the hardest by Hurricane Katrina. Many black residents fled New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit. Based on historic treatment after past floods, black residents had little hope the city would help their neighborhood recover after Hurricane Katrina. As a result, many of the black residents who fled Hurricane Katrina choose not to return.

While people now claim that New Orleans is back to its pre-Katrina height a look at the city will show it has changed since. The racial makeup of the city is different, with a higher percentage of whites then previously. Gentrification has also caused whites to spread out into neighborhoods that have been historically black. Post-Katrina New Orleans has also made many changes to city policie. Institutions which previously help support poor blacks in the city like housing programs were altered or cancelled. Because of the changes that have occurred in New Orleans many black residents’ are still struggling. The ongoing struggles of the black residents are now largely left out of conversation about post-Katrina New Orleans, as people believe the city to be restored to its former glory.

**Treme**

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36 Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City*.
37 Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City*.
38 Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City*. 
The show *Treme* is an HBO drama series set in New Orleans, Louisiana after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The show which depicts the hardships that the people of the Treme neighborhood dealt with after Hurricane Katrina. The creators of the show intended *Treme* to be the authentic retelling of the neighborhood’s struggle after Hurricane Katrina.

Shedding light on the struggle of post-Katrina New Orleans through a television show could have proved beneficial to the city. *Treme* could have provided an authentic depiction of New Orleans and brought national interest into the city’s struggles at the time. *Treme* might have even contributed to bringing in help for the city. Unfortunately, *Treme*'s depiction of New Orleans post-Katrina failed to encapsulate the reality of the city’s struggle. *Treme* represents the black community in a way that overall does more harm than benefit.

A look at *Treme*'s depiction of New Orleans highlights issues with the show’s portrayal of the city. Most predominantly is the tourist aspect of the show which is displayed in the opening scene. HBO’s *Treme* opens with a quick black screen with the text “Three Months After”, a veiled reference to Hurricane Katrina. Similarly, the first couple minutes of the show contain passing references to Katrina. A passing frame features two white men in military cameo. A quick conversation between two of the characters makes a passing reference to the water line have been “Six- six and a half” feet tall, in the building they are inside, during the flood. However, the conversation quickly transitions into a different topic. The majority of the first minutes display a second line parade in the neighborhood. Traditional jazz music is

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incorporated into the scene and emphasis is given to the variety of musical instruments being played. As the residents dance and sing along to the music, the audience is given the feeling that happiness is spreading throughout the neighborhood.

While this opening connects the viewer to the neighborhood, it lacks the main premise of the show, Katrina. Only viewers aware of the premise of the show would understand that “Three Months After” is a reference to Hurricane Katrina. The passing shot of the military man appears out of context as the initial scene gives no imagery of the destruction of New Orleans. The line “Six-six and a half” is confusing in the opening conversation and left unexplained as the conversation shifts to discuss the second line parade. The destruction which occurred in Treme and other black majority neighborhoods is not shown within the opening minutes. The missing members of the neighborhood who fled after Katrina and are unable to participate in the second line are given no mention.

While claiming to provide an authentic portrayal of New Orleans, in reality Treme expands on the tourist depiction of the city. A focus on traditional jazz music reaffirms viewers assumptions about the culture of New Orleans. While the choice to introduce the audience to a neighborhood second line does stray from traditional tourist depictions of the city, it does so in a way that only recasts the city in a new tourist light. Without being introduced to any of the main characters first, the viewer feels more like a spectator than a participant in the parade. By showing an neighborhood tradition, the show presents itself as providing the audience with an exclusive view of the neighborhood. The show’s opening scene feels more like an attempt to

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create an “authentic” tour of Treme rather than an introduction into a community which was devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

At first glance the show appears to provide a realistic depiction of the struggles of the citizens of New Orleans post-Katrina. Indeed, some scholars have argued that Treme does create an authentic representation of the city. Treme is said to create an authentic experience is through way it uses two types of character personas: those who “come here” and those who are “from here”45. “From here” characters help to establish authenticity as they are locals, providing them with authority to accurately describe the city46. “Come here” characters are outsiders who come into New Orleans, lending them the opportunity to challenge the locals47. Tension between locals and outsiders provides the show an opportunity to prove its authentic experience. Locals can validate an outsider’s opinion on the food and music of New Orleans. In contrast outsiders can challenge the authority of the locals, thus proving to the viewer that their experience of New Orleans is authentic. While this “come here” and “from here” technique seemingly lets the show prove its authenticity in reality the “come here” characters further support the tourist image of the city. “Come here” characters allow the audience to connect with fellow tourists of the city. Instead, a sole focus on “from here” characters would have allowed the audience to connect with the struggles of the locals. While Treme attempted to create an authentic representation of post-Katrina New Orleans, the result fell short of reality.

On further look into the “from here” characters from season one shows that even their status as local authorities can be questioned. A look into the character Davis McAlary (Steve

45 Joy V. Fuqua. “In New Orleans We Might Say It Like This…: Authenticity, Place, and HBO’s Treme”. Television and Media 13, no. 3 (2012): 236.
46 Fuqua, “In New Orleans We Might Say It Like This”, 239.
47 Fuqua, “In New Orleans We Might Say It Like This”, 236.
Zahn) proves that not all of the “from here” characters should be considered authority figures on Treme. Davis McAlary is a white DJ for a local radio station and the first character the audience is introduced to. Davis’s status as a local is seemingly confirmed by his comment on the opening second line parade being the “first since the storm.” Davis comment suggests he has lived in Treme long enough to have seen previous second line parades. Early on in the season it becomes clear Davis has a passion for music, as seen is continually seen referencing various artists. Interestingly, Davis’s interest in music extends beyond the traditional jazz of New Orleans. The audience continually watches his disappointment at local musicians and music lovers who are unaware and uninterested of music outside of jazz. Davis’s character seems to be a way for viewers to experience critiques on the traditional view of New Orleans. Davis’s frustration of New Orleans extends beyond its music scene, as the audience listens to his frustration of tourist, the police, and even fellow locals who he feels abandoned the city after Katrina.

While Davis’s character seems to be a way for the show to give voice to locals’ critiques of the city, it is a strange decision on the part of the writers. It quickly becomes clear to the audience that Davis is not the same socioeconomic class as many residents of Treme. In the second episode Davis, struggling with money issues, goes to his father asking for a loan. Davis has the luxury of a family able to support his needs, which contrasts to other characters like the...
black bar owner LaDonna who is struggling to pay her gas and electricity bills\textsuperscript{52}. The decision by the writers to have Davis be the one offering criticism on the injustices within New Orleans seems odd given that he is not a part of the class who are directly influenced by these injustices\textsuperscript{53}. In light of learning about his background the decision to use Davis as the introduction to Treme seems strange. Unlike many actual residents of Treme, Davis cannot trace his family’s history in neighborhood back several generations. Due to his lack of history with the neighborhood, Davis status as a local of Treme is questionable. If he is not a local Davis does not seem the right choice to introduce Treme to the audience. Rather using a character who had long family history in the neighborhood would have been a more practical choice for the writers to make.

The writers of \textit{Treme} also misstep in their handling of the local outrage to the government handling of Katrina. Within \textit{Treme} the anger over Katrina is largely left to two characters, Antoinette “Toni” Bernette (Melissa Leo) and Creighton Bernette (John Goodman)\textsuperscript{54}. Toni is a lawyer famous for suing many people in the city for various injustices. Season one has Toni helping the bar owner LaDonna search for her missing brother. The search highlights the corruption and flaws within the justice department in New Orleans. Toni is repeatedly show being frustrated with the lack of information and help she receives from those in law enforcement.

Similarly, her husband Creighton’s storyline is one which pointedly fixes on the government’s poor handling of Katrina. Creighton is the first character to both express anger over the catastrophe and suggest Katrina’s flooding was a man made disaster. Creighton status as university professor writing a book on the Great Flood of 1927 is meant to show him as an

\textsuperscript{52} See note 41 above.
\textsuperscript{53} Thomas, “People Want to See What Happened”, 217.
\textsuperscript{54} See note 48 above.
authoritative figure on New Orleans history and politics. While his storyline gives the viewer vital information on Katrina, one wonders if his character was the best suited for the role.

Toni and Creighton are well off white people who reside on a better part of town. While others like Albert Lambreaux are dealing with the results of mass flooding, the Bernette’s only had to deal with a missing roof\(^5\). One wonders if they are able to truly understand the issues lower income people dealt with, like lacking insurance and living paycheck to paycheck. Their lack of understanding for the suffering of the others calls into question their outrage over Katrina and the government. The audience must wonder why they are the ones taking up this fight against injustice, given that they are not the main people who are affected.

In addition, the Toni Bernette’s storyline seems to embody the idea of the “white saviour”. Toni is the person struggle locals like LaDonna seek to help them. Unlike her clients, Toni is well connected with local authorities and often uses her connections to help her clients. The people who help Toni as she is trying to locate LaDonna’s brother are all white people in positions of authority. A viewer cannot help feel like Toni embodies a saviour character for the people of Treme, who without her would continue to struggle. For a show attempting to provide an authentic retelling, on the reality of post-Katrina, it seem strange to have two of the main characters to embody the “white saviour” narrative\(^5\). Not only is the “white saviour” narrative based on racial discrimination, it is also an unrealistic and does not properly show the struggle of the locals.

*Treme* might have been able to properly show an authentic local experience post-Katrina with their black characters. However a look into Albert Lambreaux’s season one storyline, one of

\(^5\) See note 41 above.
\(^5\) Thomas, “People Want to See What Happened, 216.
the main black characters, shows that the series once again is unable to capture reality. Albert Lambreaux, aka “Big Chief” (Clarke Peters)\(^{57}\), is a Mardi Gras Indian Chief and a resident of Treme. The audience is first introduced to Albert when he arrives back in New Orleans and surveys the destruction of his home\(^{58}\). Despite requests from his daughter, Albert stubbornly refuses to give up on his life in New Orleans. As admirable as this decision, the audience quickly realizes the harsh reality of Albert’s choice. All members of Albert’s tribe fled New Orleans and have not returned. Albert must wrestle with trying to repair his life while continuing on the tribe traditions, despite the lack of his own tribe.

While Albert’s storyline during season one is heartbreaking, there is a vital component lacking. Viewers never was able to experience Albert as the Chief of his tribe with his community around him before Katrina hit. As result, the impact of Albert’s struggles when trying to return to his life is lessened. The audience has nothing to compare Albert’s post-Katrina life with, and so are left to guess the severity of the changes to it. In addition, the first episode mentions Albert fled to Houston to avoid the storm. And yet, Albert’s time in Houston goes unaddressed. Once again the audience is left to their own assumptions as to the hardships Albert faced while in Houston. A more realistic storyline for Albert would have included both his life pre-Katrina and his life in Houston. The addition of these times would have not only made Albert’s storyline stronger but also connected it more deeply to the actual life of Katrina victims.

Many residents were forced to flee the city and had to decide whether or not to return to New Orleans. A look into how Albert came to the decision to fight to regain his previous life in New

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\(^{57}\) See note 48 above.

\(^{58}\) See note 41 above.
Orleans would have made his story resonate more with the audience and be a better reflection of the actual experiences of locals who faced a similar decision.

**Conclusion**

Representation for a city’s black communities in media can have dramatic impacts on the daily lives of these residents. Without representation in television a black community becomes vulnerable to the increased gentrification which can occur as a result of television. *Portlandia’s* representation of the Northeast area has contributed to the increased gentrification in Portland. Young viewers of *Portlandia* are inspired by the show to move to the Northeast area and are unaware of their role in the gentrification of these neighborhoods. In addition, *Portlandia’s* inability to create dynamic black characters and address real issues of facing the black community has furthered the negative impact of the show. In similar respects *Treme* has also failed to capture the daily struggles of the black community after Hurricane Katrina. Rather *Treme* slips into a comfortable and familiar tourist description of New Orleans. *Treme’s* locals do not accurately convey the harsh reality real residents dealt with in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Some of the white characters’ status as locals is questionable and as a result their complaints about the city seem unfounded. In addition, *Treme’s* handling of the local black characters’ storylines leaves too much left unsaid and does not provide a holistic depiction of their struggles. Lost within *Treme* is the ways in which Hurricane Katrina caused a restructuring of the city which was and still is detrimental to the poorer black residents of New Orleans. Both *Portlandia* and *Treme* failed to accurately capture their respective local black communities and in their failure helped further the issues facing these respective communities.
While this paper only dealt with the impacts of two television shows on two distinct black communities, more research into this topic can be done. Further work should explore if the conclusion drawn in this paper apply to other minority communities. Furthermore, scholars can continue to study shows and determine if the effects outlined above are seen in different settings. What impact does a television portrayal have on rural communities? Does television have the same impact on places outside of the United States? Does the genre of television influence its effect on a location? These questions and more will only be answered through further research into this field of study.

Television shows often fail to accurately convey reality. Whether or not an accurate representation of a city is the show’s goal an attempt to capture real life should still be made. When filming in a city television creators and producers should realize the impact their show could have on a city. Viewers will judge a city based on television depictions, regardless of whether these shows claim to be accurate. Intended or not, a television show will create an impact on the community. Failing to represent a particular community or properly contextualize their struggles can lead to devastating consequences for that community. In order to avoid these negative effects, an effort should be made by shows to try an accurately represent all aspect of a city. Television shows should strive to create an accurate depiction of the cities we all love visiting, even if the city is only a backdrop for a much larger story.
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