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### Article

**Citation** (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

**Doughty, RJ (2017) The Buppie and Authentic Blackness: Middle-class cultural producers in Spike Lee's Bamboozled and HBO's Treme. Film International, 3-4 (14). ISSN 1651-6826**

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## **The Buppie and Authentic Blackness: Middle-class cultural producers in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* and HBO's *Treme***

By Ruth Doughty

Keywords: Spike Lee, *Bamboozled*, *Treme*, buppie, yuppie, Chitlin Circuit, New Orleans, jazz

### **Race and class**

The term 'buppie', meaning the 'black yuppie', can almost be considered an oxymoron. Whereas the traditional Caucasian yuppie is concerned with rising through the ranks in a display of sheer individualism, black identity, regardless of class, is permeated with the notion of community. Black culture, at its very core, is aligned with the folk; the working class. Therefore, tensions occur when the producers of black culture are no longer rooted in the community. This study considers the characterization of Pierre Delacroix (*Bamboozled* [2000]) and Delmond Lambreaux (*Treme* [2010–13]) as middle-class artists. In particular, how these fictional buppies reveal deeply entrenched problems concerning the conflict of producing authentic black culture as a middle-class African American.

The historian Ira Berlin, writing in *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, claims that '[r]ace is not simply a social construction; it is a particular kind of social construction – a historical construction' (1998: 1). Berlin controversially believes that race originated as an ideological construct to impose class divisions, 'if slavery made *race*, its larger purpose was to make *class*, and the fact that the two were made simultaneously by the same process has mystified both' (Berlin 1998: 5,

original emphases). Accordingly, race has historically been read as a signifier of class; more specifically black pigment is often read as an indicator of working-class status.

African American culture has traditionally been marked as a working-class phenomenon. From the slave stories, negro spirituals and customs of the Southern plantations to modern-day urban graffiti, street dance and rap performances, black culture is typically a product of the folk. Conversely, white American culture is a product of white, middle-class canonical elites. An overview of academic writing on black art forms confirms a preoccupation with folk art. For example, Houston A. Baker (1987) employs a Blues Ideology as a model to interpret African American literature, the blues being a genre synonymous with early working-class black culture. Similarly, Henry Louis Gates Jr (1988) uses the folk tradition of signifying as a device to decode the literary black vernacular. Predating these texts that privilege the folk element in black art is Langston Hughes's seminal article 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain' (1926). Here, Hughes discusses the anecdote of a young black artist:

[o]ne of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, 'I want to be a poet – not a Negro poet'; meaning, I believe, 'I want to write like a white poet'; meaning subconsciously, 'I would like to be a white poet'; meaning behind that, 'I would like to be white'. And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America – this urge within the race towards whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible. (Hughes 1926: 167)

Hughes's metaphor of the insurmountable mountain identifies the difficulty faced by black cultural producers, in that they must root their creativity in a black folk aesthetic in order for it to be deemed credible by both black and white consumers. He states that '[f]or racial culture the home of the self-styled "high-class" Negro has nothing better to offer. Instead there will perhaps be more aping of things white than in a less cultured or less wealthy home' (Hughes 1926: 168). Rather than acknowledging bourgeois black art forms as legitimate, Hughes dismisses such productivity as worthless. However, Martin J. Favor critiques this attitude, stipulating that '[i]f the uniqueness of African American culture lies in its folk forms, then the authenticity of folk identity is privileged in the discourse of black identity' (1999: 4). He continues, '[t]his is a powerful model for scholarship, but can it also account for the presence and products of the black middle class?' (Favor 1999: 4).

Herein lies the problem: class distinctions within African American society have long been a source of contention. Such frictions can be traced back to the social groupings of field slaves and house slaves; the former group tended to be comprised of darker-skinned Africans who were subjected to hard labour whereas the latter roles were typically allocated to lighter-skinned, often mulatto, slaves who were responsible for domestic duties. Consequently, house slaves can be considered as an early example of the black middle class. E. Franklin Frazier was one of the first academics to discuss the emergence of the black middle-class in his seminal text *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a Middle Class*, first published in 1957. Interestingly, Frazier notes that

[t]here have been only two really vital cultural traditions in the social history of the Negro in the United States: one being the genteel tradition of the small group of mulattoes who assimilated the morals and manners of the slaveholding aristocracy; and the other, the culture of the black folk who gave the world the Spirituals. (Frazier 1965 [1957]: 112–13)

Once more it is evident here that authentic black culture is being aligned with the folk, whereas middle-class identity is inextricably linked to ideas of hybridity and white culture: cultural mulattoism.

### **Cultural mulatto and passing**

The term mulatto is used to describe someone of mixed racial heritage. Within literature and film production, the mulatto has been consistently depicted as a tragic figure caught between the economic opportunities offered as a result of their pale, Caucasian complexion and the rich cultural and familial heritage provided by the black community. Tales of the mulatto are often referred to as the ‘narrative of passing’, where the mulatto protagonist attempts to pass as white. The tragedy ensues when their racial indiscretion is discovered, which often culminates with the mulatto being physically abused or in a number of cases taking their own lives.<sup>1</sup>

The phrase ‘cultural mulatto’ is not used to describe biological hybridity, but instead is applied to an ideological position. It is ascribed to middle-class African Americans who have grown up in white neighbourhoods and attended white schools. Trey Ellis states that ‘[j]ust as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world’ (1989: 235). He goes on to state, ‘[w]e no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to appease either white or black people’ (235). However, the tragic mulatto of the past and the modern-day cultural mulattoes are comparable as they occupy a precarious middle ground

caught between black and white society, and unfortunately susceptible to criticism from either side.

Whereas the mulatto has typically been explored through the ‘narrative of passing’, the middle-class black artist can similarly be linked to the notion of trying to pass. The stigma of being both bourgeois and African American can present itself in a similar experience to the mulatto; being too black for white society and too white for the black community. The bourgeois cultural producer is similarly caught attempting to ‘pass’ between the economic opportunities of the white modes of production and the black forms of ‘authentic’ creativity. Ellis confirms this, stating that ‘[t]oday’s cultural mulattoes echo those “tragic mulattoes” [...] when they too forget that they are wholly black’ (1989: 235).

Ellis’s article ‘The New Black Aesthetic’ accounts for the emergence of a new brand of black cultural producers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Invoking the analogy of an Oreo, a chocolate biscuit with a white filling, he explained how texts that were regarded as being authentic, infused with folk inflections and working-class concerns, on closer inspection were funded by white institutions and created by middle-class black Americans (1989: 234–43). This tension is ever present for the black bourgeoisie: in spite of the ability to ‘navigate’ the white world and gain access to funding, there is a conscious decision to root creativity within the realms of the folk. In order to create authentic black culture, middle-class producers return to the working-class heritage of their ancestors. Rather than instilling a pride in their economically elevated position, ‘[a] minority instead affect a “superblackness” and try to dream themselves back to the ghetto’ (Ellis 1989: 235). Ellis implies that for some there is almost a sense of shame attached to the status of being upwardly mobile; a cultural perception of disinheritance that ironically manifests in a conscious immersion and celebration of black folk identity for the accused. This faux adoption of ‘superblackness’ can be seen as an attempt to deflect reproach and also a way to forge imaginary ties to the

struggling black masses. To complicate matters further, poor black artists who manage to climb their way out of the ghetto are similarly criticized for turning their backs on the communities where they grew up. Therefore, no matter where an artist learns his or her craft, in the black ghettos of LA or the predominantly white suburbs of New York, there is an expectation that one's work be infused with the voice of the African American working class.

The residual unease between the black working class and the black middle class is frequently explored artistically through the notion of 'selling out'. Many rap artists accuse performers of rejecting their black heritage and ghetto roots once they have become famous. Ice Cube's 'True to the Game' (1992) illustrates these sentiments:

Message to the Oreo cookie  
Find a mirror and take a look, G  
Do you like what you see?  
But you're quick to point the finger at me  
You wanna be the big fish, you little guppy  
Black man can't be no yuppie  
You put on your suit and tie and your big clothes  
You don't associate with the Negroes  
You wanna be just like Jack  
But Jack is calling you a nigga behind your back  
So back off genius  
I don't need you to correct my broken English  
You know that's right  
You ain't white  
So stop holding your ass tight  
Cause you can't pass

So why you keep trying to pass?

With your black ass

The lyrics, penned by Ice Cube (O'Shea Jackson), epitomize many of the difficulties faced by the upwardly mobile African American. As Ice Cube avows '[the] Black man can't be no yuppie', and this claim can be corroborated by the widely accepted term 'buppie' – an amalgamation of the words 'black' and 'yuppie'. The term was apparently coined by the American sociologist Harry Edwards in the 1980s and is used to describe 'young African Americans with high incomes or aspirations, and middle-class integrationist values that other black people may see as a rejection of their roots' (Herbst 1997: 40). The description alone alludes to the incompatibility of being both middle class and black, as the explanation conflates the idea of economic achievement with the sense of rejection. The impossibility of buppiedom for the black artist can be attributed to the yuppie desire for individual economic progress, whereas black culture is typically defined as a communal art form. Larry Neal, a key figure in the Black Arts Movement, stated:

[t]he Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from the community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. (Neal 1971: 257)

Adopting a communal voice, by its very nature, is at odds with the ideology of the yuppie, which is more concerned with individual advancement. Ironically, black middle-class producers attempt to adopt authentic folk culture as their entitled racial heritage whilst working-class artists are conversely unable to reject their ghetto upbringing for fear of

recrimination. Therefore the symbiotic, and to some extent mythic, relationship between black authentic culture and working-class folk is perpetuated regardless of the industrial realities of white funding and bourgeois producers.

Bryant Keith Alexander favours the term ‘boojie’, a play on the word bourgeoisie, rather than buppie, Oreo or the cultural mulatto epithet. Once more connecting class to the idea of passing, he states:

[t]o call someone boojie is an accusation of passing, as in the perceived lack of adherence to a set of social and performative executions of identity that are seen as less in association with black culture and more with white culture. The uttered descriptive of someone as being boojie is a kind of black performative act, one that declares a particular critique of the performative otherness of the person at whom the term is directed, while claiming the authenticity of the blackness of the person hurling the accusation. (Alexander 2011: 320)

Here, Alexander alludes to a two-way relationship between the artist and the black community. There is a sense of communal judgement and cultural responsibility where the folk are invited to respond to and to question the authenticity of an artefact.

In order to explore the underlying conflict of the buppie as a cultural producer, torn between the ‘authentic’ heritage of the folk and the economic pull of the middle classes, I will consider the Spike Lee film *Bamboozled* and the HBO series *Treme*. Through close examination of key characters, familial relationships and career choices, this study intends to complicate and interrogate the notion of the black middle-class artist and their affiliation, either concrete or imagined, with the black working class.

## **The buppie and the wigga**

Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* focuses on the buppie character of Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans). Educated at Harvard University, Delacroix writes for the fictional CNS television studio. However, his shows get cancelled as they are deemed too middle-class, too Cosby-esque. Delacroix's nemesis comes in the form of the white studio boss Mr Dunwitty (Michael Rappaport). Although pitted against each other as binary opposites, their relationship is more complex as they are more like a mirror image; a racial Yin Yang (rather than the traditional East Asian gendered diametric). Delacroix has consciously erased his poor upbringing. He enunciates his words to perfection, recreating a pseudo English accent with no trace of black speech patterns.<sup>2</sup> He has changed his name from Peerless Dothan to the more European-sounding Pierre Delacroix. Ultimately he has attempted to shed his working-class, folk roots in favour of fabricating a bourgeois sensibility in a professional environment predominantly staffed by a white workforce. Dunwitty similarly reinvents himself by adopting the black vernacular. Irrespective of his white heritage, he feels that he has an insight into black identity, as he is married to an African American woman and has two biracial children. He decorates his office with pictures of famous black historical icons and ridicules Delacroix for not being as black as himself. This is the classic example of what Greg Tate calls a '[w]igga – the so-called white nigga' due to his appropriation of black culture, body language and speech patterns (2003: 8). Significantly, it appears that both these characters are attempting to pass – to transcend the racial barriers that society has enforced. In placing these two characters in such close proximity, Lee is raising questions concerning race: its performance and its appropriation.

Although Dunwitty is Delacroix's line manager, he performs an identity that is infused with street swagger; a conscious adoption of a lower-class sensibility. Furthermore, he adamantly believes that he knows the black audience and their viewing likes and dislikes,

more so than the black writer. In response to Delacroix's cancelled shows, which documented middle-class African American life, Dunwitty exclaims:

The material you have been writing for me is too white-bread. It's white people with black faces [...]. It's too clean, it's too antiseptic. It's too white. Delacroix, wake-up brother man. The reason why these shows didn't get picked up is because nobody, no mother-fuckin' body, niggers and crackers alike, wants to see that junk. People want to be entertained.

Through his jive-style retort, Dunwitty is equating black creativity with the working-class. He implies that there is no entertainment value in the boogie tales that Monsieur Delacroix is penning. Instead, it is suggested that prime-time audiences want to see two-dimensional, ghetto stereotypes to which they have become accustomed, rather than middle-class tales equitable with white society and culture. The underlying message is that American audiences want to see 'authentic' working-class black characters rather than 'successful' professional individuals.

### **Chitlin Circuit and minstrelsy**

Delacroix's personal working-class roots are established when he goes to visit his father Junebug (Paul Maloney) performing in a parochial comedy club. We are introduced to Junebug via a series of crude, sexually explicit jokes that form his comedy routine. The small, independently owned circuit of black clubs that Junebug tours is a far cry from the commercial world that his son inhabits. Referred to as the 'Chitlin Circuit', Junebug, like many black entertainers, performs in venues that specifically cater for the black community.

Many such theatres are a tribute to the legacy of segregation where the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA) would find venues that were accepting of African American performances. The term 'Chitlin' is a gastronomical reference. Whereas white people would get to eat the prime cuts from a pig, black folk would often suffice with pigs' intestines as a cheap, basic offering. Henry Louis Gates Jr explains:

[t]he intestines of the pig are the source for the delicacy known as chitlins; it is a good example of how something that was originally eaten of necessity became, as is the way with acquired tastes, a thing actively enjoyed. (Gates 2001: 140)

Accordingly, black acts on the Chitlin Circuit are typically regarded as somewhat coarse and vulgar. Junebug's skits are littered with gratuitous use of the 'n word', a complete departure from his son who consistently refers to African Americans as 'negroes'. The choice of terminology reveals a great deal about the two characters and their attitudes.<sup>3</sup> Although Junebug's adoption of the 'n word' may be deemed offensive and his skits include misogynistic statements and phallic references, Delacroix's father is working within a historical tradition of boorish humour. Langston Hughes explains that 'certain aspects of the humor of minority groups are so often inbred that they are not palatable for outside consumption' (cited in Boskin and Dorinson 1987: 116) or, as Gates advises, 'these Chitlin Circuit plays carry an invisible racial warning sticker: for domestic consumption only – export strictly prohibited' (2001: 142). Accordingly, Junebug's performance can be considered as an authentic form of folk culture, aimed specifically at the black community, whereas Delacroix produces artefacts for national consumption.

In an attempt to be fired from the studio, Delacroix chooses the most offensive form of blackness he can conceive of: the minstrel show. Interestingly, the depiction of minstrelsy in *Bamboozled* is complex. The film manages to create a dialogue that is both critical and celebratory of its blackface performers and its history to which the text alludes. The film is clearly damning of the reprehensible stereotypes that function as the characters in the New Millennium Minstrel Show, namely Mantan, Sleep 'n' Eat, Aunt Jemima, Topsy, Lil'nigger Jim, Sambo, Rastus and Jungle Bunny. Yet, at the same time, the performances delivered by Savion Glover, Tommy Davidson and the rest of the minstrel troupe demonstrate talents in the areas of singing, dancing and exquisite comic timing. Therefore, it is too simplistic to dismiss minstrelsy as an archaic morass of racist, deplorable imagery. The film is successful in paying tribute to the uncomfortable dichotomy that minstrelsy is both problematic yet also entertaining due to the skills of the performers.

Minstrelsy has a long complex history of exploitation, exaggeration and appropriation. Thomas Dartmouth 'Daddy' Rice was responsible for bringing minstrelsy into its most recognized form following his performance of Jim Crow in Pittsburgh around 1830 (Lott 1992: 24). There are many suggestions as to Rice's inspiration for the show, but most stem from the idea that he witnessed a black man named Cuff, who may have been disabled, singing and dancing in a strange and unfamiliar manner. Rice exaggerated Cuff's stylistic traits and manufactured the performance into a spectacle for the public. However, the irony lies in the fact that Rice was probably unaware of the comparative fascination that white folks provided for the black community. The dance that Rice witnessed would have been most likely Cuff parodying white dance patterns. This idea is strengthened when considering the genesis of the cakewalk, a famous example of black dance. Robert C. Toll in *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*, discusses the origins of the cakewalk, stating, '[t]he cakewalk was not a performance [...]. It had originated on Southern plantations

when Negroes dressed in their masters' and mistresses' discarded finery and competed for a prize, usually a cake' (1974: 263). Black society found entertainment value in copying and amplifying codes of white behaviour. This leads to questions concerning which culture was responsible for creating the minstrel show.

To some extent, historical exploitation and appropriation is present in *Bamboozled*. Delacroix, the (fake) middle-class producer, exploits Man Ray and Womack, the street performers living in a derelict building struggling to feed themselves. In the same way that early African American performers wore blackface and imitated the dance routines of high society, Mantan and Sleep 'n' Eat also invert their class status by playing the dandy in the carnivalesque monstrosity. The characters easily traverse their class status through ostentatious costumes and grotesque humour. Yet in spite of the complex origins and historical participation of gifted black performers such as Bert Williams, minstrelsy is not necessarily considered an authentic folk culture. Instead it is seen as a cultural embarrassment due to the derogatory representation of black identity.

The Chitlin Circuit echoes the political incorrectness of the minstrel shows; it breaks all taboos and regurgitates stereotypes that are typically considered too offensive for mainstream productions, yet it is considered as folk art. The cultural theorist Amiri Baraka comically warned Henry Louis Gates before attending a Chitlin performance: 'You're about to step into some deep doo-doo' (2001: 140). This alludes to an elitist enjoyment of communal art that is almost a guilty pleasure to be enjoyed away from white society; free from the constant pressure of having to uplift the race through worthy productions. Gates confirms this by stating, 'Here, in this racially sequestered space, a black audience laughs uninhibitedly, whereas the presence of white folk would have engendered a familiar anxiety: *Will they think that's what we're really like?*' (2001: 140, original emphasis). This sense of

shame is an admittance that Chitlin performances are not crucially considered commendable art, but instead are puerile, vulgar and politically problematic.

The practice of communal black theatre, musical and comical performances still retain their popularity. Akin to the ‘straight to video’ films that provide home entertainment for African Americans yet never receive formal, mainstream exhibition, the Chitlin Circuit similarly feeds black neighbourhoods and affords entertainers a safe space away from white prying eyes. In 1998, August Wilson attended Princeton University to address the Theatre Communications Group’s eleventh biennial conference. Here, he announced the following:

[t]here are and have always been two distinct and parallel traditions in black art: that is, art that is conceived and designed to entertain white society, and art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America. The second tradition occurred when the African in the confines of the slave quarters sought to invest his spirit with the strength of his ancestors by conceiving in his art, in his song and dance, a world in which he was the spiritual centre. (Gates 2001: 132)

Wilson controversially appears to be calling for a separatist stance in cultural production, as art created for a larger inclusive, white audience would be considered inauthentic. This highlights a complex dialectic regarding black culture, authenticity and class.

Returning to the figure of the buppie, one of the first representations of the black middle-class male dates back to minstrelsy. The dandy caricature, sometimes referred to as Zip Coon or Dandy Jim, saw the blackface performer adorned in top hat and tails in an effort to feign a higher-class status. The comedy was achieved through verbal malapropisms in addition to the visual shock of seeing an African American in fine clothing. The dandy was a

farcical character that highlighted the inability of class transcendence. However, underlying the characterization Webb alludes to a greater tension:

[m]instrelsy's choice of the dandy as satirical matter is itself evidence that dandies posed a threat to the social order. The black dandy dared to claim humanity, and all dandies rejected a commoner's class status providing minstrel performers with the setup for an eagerly accepted joke. (Webb 2001: 13)

In minstrelsy, the dandy was a figure of ridicule and farce. In *Bamboozled*, Delacroix functions as the butt of the joke. His attempts to navigate the white realms of power are cringe-worthy and not too far from the verbal clumsiness (comic mastery) of the minstrel performers. Within the narrative, Gary Bird the radio DJ tells him, 'Your show has created a strong impression in the community. You have been called a traitor, an Uncle Tom, a sell-out.' These are criticisms often aired against the buppie, who is caught between the authentic roots of the community and tempted by the ideology of assimilation and 'passing' in order to find recognition from white society. Yet, as always, Spike Lee is not content with merely pointing his finger at the boogie studio executive.

Mos Def's character, Big Blak Af, provides an example of Ellis's Oreo that endeavours to dream himself back into the ghetto. Big Blak Af has clearly attempted to reinvent himself by changing his name. His sister Sloan (Jada Pinkett-Smith) challenges this move, which leads to the following exchange:

BIG BLAK AF: You keep calling me by the slave name of our government, it's disrespectful, man.

SLOAN: You know what? I hope you don't think I'm a call you Big Blak Afrika? [...] Mommy and Daddy named you Julius so that's what I'm gonna call you.

BIG BLAK AF: It ain't like it's disrespect for Mommy and Daddy. It's about I got a name that I chose for myself.<sup>4</sup>

Although Sloan and Julius's parents are absent from the narrative, Big Blak Af, like Delacroix, is looking to distance himself from the nurturing environment that was responsible for producing the strong-willed, intelligent, professional Sloan. However, Julius chooses to reject his background, once more alluding to the impossibility of being both black and middle class. Big Blak Af feels a sense of shame regarding his upbringing and accordingly assumes an identity aligned with ghetto culture. Lee ridicules Big Blak Af and aligns his adoption of the Gangsta persona with the application of burnt cork worn by the blackface performers. The composer, Terence Blanchard, achieves this through the use of musical leitmotif; the blackface theme that is always used as an accompaniment to the ritual of applying blackface first appears as Big Blak Af enters the screen. In turn, Lee presents an un-archetypal buppie in the form of Mos Def's character, but interestingly this adds further layers to the problems that trouble the black middle class.

Delacroix consciously looks to 'pass' beyond his working-class background through the adoption of a fake identity dissociated from his father and everything he stands for. In the conclusion of *Bamboozled*, Delacroix experiences hallucinations as a result of guilt and self-hatred. Frazier discusses such emotions as a symptom of the black bourgeoisie:

[t]his self-hatred often results in guilt feelings on the part of the Negro who succeeds in elevating himself above his fellows. He feels unconsciously that in rising above other Negroes he is committing

an act of aggression which will result in hatred and revenge on their part. The act of aggression may be imagined but very often it is real. (Frazier 1965: 228)

This act of aggression can clearly be seen through Delacroix's demise. In response to the violent outburst witnessed at the conclusion of the film, Armond White points his finger at Spike Lee, whose own background mirrors the characters of the film. Lee can be considered a cultural mulatto. He typically has access to funding for his productions from white studios. His films are often rooted in a working-class folk aesthetic, yet this is not the life he experienced as a youngster. White's criticism is that

[r]ather than deal with the modern dilemma of black middle-class advancement epitomized by his own career, Lee inspired more class and caste disruption. His confused movie appeases the bitterness of those who hate hip-hop, as well as those who hate buppies, hate whites or those who just hate. (White 2002: 13)

Although White is justified in his response to the film, it does appear that the complex layering of race and class that underpins the film seems to have been overlooked at the expense of criticizing the director and his upbringing.

Spike Lee has consistently been criticized for his middle-class background as the films he produces more often adopt a communal, folk sensibility. As the most renowned African American director in history, Lee is still hounded for being able to traverse the realms of white funding and black storytelling. Yet he is constantly criticized. Akin to Delacroix, Lee looks to draw attention to his racial heritage over his affluent upbringing. He

always dresses in sports clothing, with a particular affiliation to the Nike brand and the New York Knicks team.

Spike Lee has historically had a tumultuous relationship with the white owned studios. On occasions funding was withdrawn prior to the completion of specific film projects. More recently, Lee is looking to detach himself from the white studio system of funding. On 22 July 2013, the director launched a campaign on the funding website Kickstarter. The aim was to secure \$1,250,000 in the space of 30 days to finance 'The Newest, Hottest, Spike Lee Joint'.<sup>5</sup> On the site, he justified this move by openly talking about how he has channelled his own money into previous productions and also how he has assisted young film-makers at New York University through financial measures. Lee testifies that he was using Kickstarter before there was Kickstarter. Here he is referring to *Malcolm X* (1992) and *Get on the Bus* (1996), for which he secured financial backing from prominent African American musicians, actors, sportsmen and entrepreneurs. The Kickstarter project secured the funds required and was released in 2014 under the name *Da Sweet Blood of Jesus*.

However, in the context of the argument foregrounded here, it exposes once more the problematic tension experienced by professional, successful African Americans, in that there seems to be a desire to retain a connection with the community. Lee managed to secure the funding<sup>6</sup> needed for his project, but the majority of the backers on the website appear to be white. This is not in itself a problem, but it does suggest that Lee's work may no longer be deemed authentic. The 'new joint' is not necessarily being backed by black people, in the same way that his two earlier ventures were not funded by the community, but instead by the black elite.

***Treme: Albert and Delmond Lambreaux***

The HBO series *Treme* further problematizes the buppie as a cultural producer, by raising questions concerning heritage and authenticity. Albert ‘Big Chief’ Lambreaux (Clarke Peters) can be considered the integral heartbeat of *Treme*. Having fled in the wake of Katrina’s wrath, he returns to the city in order to rebuild his life within the community. Albert is the chief of the Guardians of the Flame, one of the Mardi Gras Indian tribes of New Orleans. The Mardi Gras Indians are a throwback to the alliance that was forged between African Americans and Native Americans prior to the Civil War. As chief, Albert endeavours to get his scattered tribe back together in time to perform for carnival and St Joseph’s Day. The fictional Lambreaux family is steeped in a tradition that has been passed down through the generations. It involves a practice called masking, which sees members of the tribe design and sew elaborate tableaux depicting Native American culture. These are then attached to ornate, intricate tribal costumes that are worn by members as they parade the streets of New Orleans. It is believed that the ‘[b]eadwork 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’ (Gendrin et al. 2012: 292). From this account, it is evident that the Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans are working class. The practice of sewing, chanting and strutting is a folk pastime. The Mardi Gras Indians are a somewhat subversive spectacle. They do not promote when or where they will be performing on specific days, which is counter to the tourist performances witnessed at Mardi Gras. The Indians instead perform for the folk in the poor, local neighbourhoods. On the commentary that accompanies the episode ‘I’ll Fly Away’ (Season 1 Episode 10), David Simon, the creator of the show, is heard saying:

This is a unique American culture that has reached a point maybe not even shy of religion. I mean, that’s how deeply entrenched this level of culture is and it’s particular to the black working class. It’s a

working-class thing. Among upper-middle-class/upper-class Creoles and people of colour, among some people, there's actually a tonality of looking down on it. Of, oh 'I don't mess with that Indian stuff'. It was looked upon as vaguely disreputable and still is in certain quarters of New Orleans.

David Simon is white,<sup>7</sup> therefore regardless of his goals to preserve and showcase the legitimate folk culture of the city, to some extent his intentions mirror those of Dunwitty in *Bamboozled*. Simon is responsible for enriching the mythic imagination of New Orleans. However, there are some critics that accuse the white creator of further feeding the tourist machine. Although the series critiques the tourist trade, Simon could be considered as part of the problem. Yet it is irrefutable that *Treme* problematizes the relationship between performing for the white sightseers for profitability and the intricate relationship between race and class.

Class tensions are explicit when considering the fraught relationship between Albert and his son Delmond. The character of Delmond Lambreaux (Rob Brown) is loosely based on a number of musicians such as Wynton Marsalis and Christian Scott. Unlike his father Albert, who has stalwartly remained located geographically and culturally in New Orleans, Delmond has been tempted away from the city in order to pursue a career as a professional musician. Based in New York, the trumpet player spends a great deal of the time on the road touring with other performers. This raises an age-old predicament that affects the jazz musicians of New Orleans. In order to gain financial and artistic recognition as an accomplished musician, it is necessary to leave the birth place of jazz for the New York and Chicago jazz scene. Although New Orleans is acknowledged as the home of jazz, the most progressive players that push boundaries of improvisation and generic conventions are to be found in the urban metropolises of the North. Once the craft has been mastered in the hometown, the financial opportunities and critical acclaim are typically achievable outside

the confines of the Crescent City. Delmond laments at the situation in the episode ‘Right Place, Wrong Time’ (Season 1 Episode 3):

DELMOND: New Orleans, they hype the music, but they don’t love the musicians. I mean, look at how guys gotta leave to get their due. Pops, Prima, Wynton. I mean, the tradition is there, but that city will grind you down if you let it.

FELLOW MUSICIAN: Look, man, we done been around the world. Y’all know we done played every type of gig you can think of. But there’s no place like New Orleans.

There is a sense of historical provenance on the jazz circuit and that provenance is attributed to jazz families. Musicians that are the offspring of established jazz performers are guaranteed, to a certain extent, a label of authenticity. New Orleans can be considered a training ground for young musicians who eagerly wait in the wings in hope of an invitation to play with their mentors onstage. There is a clear culture of exchange and education that is located within the dark venues of the Crescent City’s nightlife. However, once these young musicians have acquired their training in the traditional styles associated with New Orleans, many choose to turn their back on their heritage and head to New York and Chicago where they can forge careers that challenge the very traditions on which they were nurtured. One of the reasons for this migration, which is referred to on a number of occasions throughout the narrative of *Treme*, is the lack of economic opportunities for musicians in the city. On the accompanying commentary to the aforementioned episode, Wendell Pierce claims:

Yeah, that's it! That's the tale of two cities when it comes to New Orleans. The birth place of such great culture, but one of our great inadequacies is not really embracing the culture and revering it the way it should be.

This situation was exacerbated following Katrina as many musicians lost their instruments and numerous live music venues were closed. Once more the class divide became apparent as middle-class musicians with means of transport were able to flee the city, unlike the lower-class performers who were unable to comply with the mandatory evacuation. Yet, tales of jazz artists living below the poverty line in New Orleans predate 2005. The third episode of Season 3, 'Me Donkey Want Water', raises awareness of artists not being given royalties for their performances on reputable albums. This exploitation of artists within New Orleans acts as a further factor leading artists to move away from their home.

### **Traditional vs modern jazz**

Amongst many jazz aficionados there is a distinct separation between the old school, Dixieland traditional jazz typically performed for the tourist trade in New Orleans, and the progressive, modern, hard-bop strains heard in New York. Whereas the music in New Orleans is deemed authentic in the popular imagination, in that it is rooted in a culture inherently informed by African American historical lineage, Dixieland has to a great extent become a genre of jazz that many musicians attempt to dissociate themselves from. When Wendell Pierce's character, Antoine Batiste, is struggling to earn money to support his family after the storm, he takes a job on Bourbon Street, renowned as a hub for sightseers due to its mass of live music bars (rock 'n' roll, zydeco, blues and Cajun not just trad jazz), and sleazy strip joints and sex shops. Despite his reservations, fellow musicians commiserate with the

repeated tongue-in-cheek adage ‘there’s pride on Bourbon Street’. Once the location of the district of Storyville, the original birthplace of jazz, Bourbon Street now operates as a party zone with 24-hour street drinking permitted. Yet the historical lineage that links the locale to its early jazz roots, functions as a justification for legitimacy. Antoine is conflicted because Bourbon Street on one hand is in part the authentic folk heritage of New Orleans music, yet it functions as the commercialization of jazz for the benefit of middle-class tourists.

Round the corner from Bourbon Street is Preservation Hall, the oldest jazz venue in the city. Here, musicians perform in the traditional style to eager listeners sat on old benches. The dark, ramshackle venue consists of exposed beams and peeling plaster work, which exudes a sense of history and authenticity. Interestingly in *Treme*, Delmond becomes riled when (unnamed) fellow New York white musicians refer to Preservation Hall and its musical heritage in a disparaging way:

– He’s a New Yorker now, an expat like Wynton [Marsalis] and Harry [Connick Jr] and Branford [Marsalis] and Christian [Scott].

– That’s what I like about your record. Listening to it, I wouldn’t know you were from New Orleans.

DELMOND: You wouldn’t?

– She’s right. It transcends New Orleans, like all you ex-pats do.

DELMOND: Transcends?

– Well, maybe ‘transcends’ isn’t the right word, but...

DELMOND: And Wynton embodies New Orleans, by the way.

– Not necessarily. I mean, yes and no. Wynton is a curious case. A deracinated synthesis of New Orleans trad jazz and big band swing.

DELMOND: I don't know what you're talking about, but I think you just dissed him.

– Well, let's put Wynton aside. You know what I mean about New Orleans style jazz.

– Right right, that Dixieland shit, Preservation Hall.

DELMOND: (A) It ain't Dixieland; it's trad jazz. (B) There's a lot of great players at the hall.

– No doubt.

DELMOND: Great players.

– No doubt and no disrespect, but caught in that tourist economy like a minstrel show.

DELMOND: Whoa, 'minstrel' – I don't know about that.

– Trapped in Amber though.

DELMOND: OK. It's a living tradition.

– But you don't play trad jazz.

DELMOND: You don't think I call up New Orleans every note I play?

– Well, honestly, no, I don't.

DELMOND: Ask Donald [Harrison], Wynton, any of us. All tell you the same thing. Everything we play, everything we play.

– Yeah yeah, inflected with the blues; it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing; New Orleans is a great big gumbo. We know the rap, the buzzwords.

– Yeah, I know you guys all feel like you have to say that shit, but hey, you're here, not there. I mean, proof's in the pudding, right?

DELMOND: Fuck y'all. Y'all don't know what the fuck you're talking about.<sup>8</sup>

This exchange reveals a great deal concerning the way New Orleans and its musical traditions are considered within elitist jazz circles. It also complicates the position of middle-class, successful New Orleanian musicians. There is an argument that suggests that leaving the city leads to a sense of ‘deracination’; performers are literally pulled from their cultural roots, which in turn could lead to questions regarding authenticity within performance due to an isolationist stance away from their birthright. Yet, at the same time, to remain in the city signals a lack of ambition and a career based around entertaining the mass tourist trade; an act that one of the New York musicians likens to being a minstrel performer. To leave is to chase the route of individualism, economic and artistic achievement. To stay is to foster a sense of community; a community exploited by the hordes of visitors attempting to experience the ‘true’ birthplace of jazz. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that this binary between New Orleans/New York, trad jazz/modern jazz, community/individualism is set up within the fictional narrative of the television series. Therefore, these binary oppositions are imposed by the screenwriters. Yet, there is a long-established practice of musicians from the Crescent City migrating north to New York, therefore this fabricated familial stress epitomizes real life economic decisions affecting successful musicians looking to develop their careers.

*Treme* is celebratory in depicting a more multifaceted argument for the city of New Orleans and its musical culture. Rather than developing an overly simplistic binary between traditional and modern jazz, the series looks to showcase a greater wealth of musical culture with the inclusion of the blues, zydeco, rhythm ‘n’ blues, modern brass bands (Rebirth and Hot 8) and New Orleans’s unique brand of hip hop known as Bounce. Furthermore, for every high-profile, successful expatriate mentioned, or seen, in the show, real-life musicians feature to highlight the possibility of a career within the city’s confines. In particular, Kermit Ruffins, Dr John, Allen Toussaint and John Boutte are regularly seen playing themselves and performing musical sequences that give *Treme* its local feel. Unlike the middle-class, clean-

cut representation of Delmond Lambreaux<sup>9</sup> and the New York musicians, these local performers who inhabit the city seem very much part of the community rather than aligned with the pursuit of individual success. However, it is key to remember that these musicians have been written into the fictional television narrative, yet there does seem to be a connection with the locals and a sense of giving back to the city.

Delmond, throughout the trajectory of *Treme*, seems to be at odds with his buppie existence and is constantly trying to find a way to alleviate his guilt, guilt that to a great extent is instilled by his father. Albert Lambreaux sees his son's decision to reside in New York as a desertion of family, New Orleans and the Mardi Gras Indian culture of his birthright. He frequently chides his son for his style of musicianship and questions his ability to play 'New Orleans' music. In order to resolve any misgivings and self-loathing, and in an attempt to appease his father, Delmond decides to make an album that merges the modern hard-bop style of New York with the chanting, Indian modes of his familial heritage. The response to the album is somewhat mixed. Delmond's reaction is clear in the following conversation with his agent James Woodrow (Jim True Frost):

DELMOND: Most of the critics are just happy to write that it's about New Orleans and it references Katrina. They got no clue about the Indians or what we tryin' to do.

JAMES: So now it's not enough to get a good review. You need the reviewer to actually understand the work? [...]

DELMOND: It's just that I bumped into Wynton [Marsalis] a moment ago at the bar and he gave me one of them Wynton compliments, you know, he called it an interesting amalgam, not quite jazz but intriguing for what it is.

JAMES: Delmond, you told me when you started this the jazz literati are going to hate it almost as much as some of the Mardi Gras Indians are going to resent it. Speaking of which, I thought your father would've come up here for the release.<sup>10</sup>

This exchange reveals a lot of tensions carried by the buppie Delmond. Firstly, he cannot please the white elite or placate the Indians of his father's tribe. Furthermore, Albert may be willing to perform on his son's album, but he is not willing to leave the city in order to attend the album's launch party as he is so entrenched in New Orleanian culture.

## **Conclusion**

Both *Bamboozled* and *Treme* highlight the impossible position of the buppie as a cultural producer. Ever attempting to scale the 'racial mountain' of white acceptance and critical recognition, yet on approaching the summit, the base (the folk) are beyond reach. The media has been instrumental in perpetuating a black culture that is fixated on criminality and the struggle of the working class. Accordingly, such representation is typically accepted as authentic, which results in the buppie producer feigning 'super blackness' in order to get material authorized by the white funding bodies. Other than in comedic and light-hearted romantic narratives, we rarely see middle-class artistry on-screen. One exception to this is jazz: '[j]azz is one black middle class response to the threat of racial inauthenticity, its trump-card rejoinder to the equally problematic assumption that urban poverty is singularly constitutive of legitimate African American subjectivity' (Jackson 2011: 17).

In spite of this claim for jazz as a legitimate middle-class art form that asserts authenticity, *Treme* draws attention to the class dependent rifts that exist between musicians in New Orleans; namely, those who are in a position to leave the city and those who remain.

This local dilemma can be read as a metaphor for the position of the buppie and also expose a very real problem in black culture. When an artist attempts to progress and challenge black culture, their work is often criticized as being informed by whiteness and they are accused of selling out. Yet, to return to a folk sensibility could be seen as paying lip service, feeding the tourist trade and perpetuating the working-class aesthetic. The emphasis on preserving the historical heritage of the black folk severely constrains the possibilities of a unique and enriched cultural future. Consequently, the buppie as cultural producer is condemned to a career underpinned by guilt, trepidation, stasis and nostalgia.

### **Contributor's details**

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> In Oscar Micheaux's *God's Step Children* (1938), Naomi the mulatto commits suicide after attempting to pass, whereas the character of Sarah-Jane in *Imitation of Life* (1959) is physically assaulted by her boyfriend once her racial heritage is revealed.

<sup>2</sup> This could be in reference to Sidney Poitier who attempted to erase his Bahamian accent after being told by Frederick O'Neal of the American Negro Theatre, 'You can't be an actor with an accent like that' (Iton 2008: 225).

<sup>3</sup> The father and son are visually coded as incompatible. Whereas Delacroix is semiotically linked to the colour blue throughout the narrative, Junebug wears a garish, almost fluorescent orange suit; the costumes signalling that they are at opposite ends of the social spectrum.

<sup>4</sup> This sequence echoes the scene from *The Women of Brewster Place* (1989), where Cicely Tyson scolds her daughter (Robin Givens) for changing the name she inherited from her slave grandmother, stating, 'You had to reach into an African dictionary to find a name that would make you proud.'

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/spikelee/the-newest-hottest-spike-lee-joint>. Last accessed 6 December 2016.

<sup>6</sup> The campaign reached a total of \$1,418,910.

<sup>7</sup> David Simon is Jewish and there are a great many similarities in the black American and Jewish American experience. These debates are raised in Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (1996).

<sup>8</sup> Season 2 Episode 1: 'Accentuate the Positive'.

<sup>9</sup> A far cry from Albert wearing gangster-style cornrows in his afro hair as seen in Season 3.

<sup>10</sup> Season 3 Episode 1: 'Knock with Me – Rock with Me'.