"LIKE REFUGEES IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY": RACIAL FORMATION IN POST-KATRINA U.S.[1]

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Abstract: The controversy that followed hurricane Katrina and its representation by the media revealed unresolved racial issues in contemporary United States. Present-day New Orleans has become an ideal site for the application of Michael Omi and Howard Winant's 'racial formation' theory, which challenges essentialist visions of race pointing to its sociohistorical construction. The present article makes use of this theoretical perspective to examine two pieces of fiction set in post-Katrina U.S.: HBO's TV series *Treme*, and Richard Ford's short-story "Leaving for Kenosha". Such an analysis unveils key connections between race and class, ideology, politics or the role of the media.
Keywords: Racial formation, Katrina, race, African Americans, mass media.

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Resumen: El huracán Katrina y su representación en los medios pone de manifiesto cuestiones raciales sin resolver en Estados Unidos. Nueva Orleans se ha convertido en un lugar idóneo para aplicar la teoría de la "formación racial" de Michael Omi y Howard Winant, un ataque a la visión esencialista del concepto "raza". Este artículo parte de dicha teoría para examinar dos obras de ficción situadas en Estados Unidos después del Katrina: la serie de televisión *Treme* y el relato de Richard Ford "Leaving for Kenosha". Tal análisis pone de manifiesto la relación entre raza y clase, ideología o medios de comunicación.
Palabras clave: formación racial, Katrina, raza, Afroamericanos, medios de comunicación de masas.

Natural disaster. Political negligence. Divine punishment. Hurricane Katrina has been interpreted in myriad ways since it hit the Gulf of Mexico in late August, 2005. A number of studies carried out by academics from several fields (sociology, history, political science) have analyzed the causes and consequences of the tragedy in order to explore the role of race in what they have labeled a man-made tragedy. The present article, which shares such an approach, aims to examine the concepts of 'race' and 'racial formation' in post-Katrina U.S. In doing so, this project will unveil the nature of race as a construction that cannot be fully understood unless studied in relation to concomitant aspects such as class, ideology, and the role of the media.

For the purposes of my analysis, I have selected two pieces of fiction which deal with the representation of African American experiences in the aftermath of the tragedy. The first one is *Treme*, a TV series set in the eponymous New Orleans neighborhood in the wake of Katrina. The show, created by David Simon and Eric Overmyer, was premiered on American cable television network HBO, on April 11, 2010. So far the series has completed two seasons. Resorting to multiple storylines, *Treme* deals with ongoing issues: from the situation of the housing projects to the process of physical and emotional reconstruction of the city.

The second object of study is a short-story entitled "Leaving for Kenosha", by American fiction writer Richard Ford. The piece, originally published in the 2008 March issue of *The New Yorker*, is set in New Orleans, two years after Katrina. In the story, a white lawyer named Walter Hobbes carries his daughter to the predominantly black Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood so that she can bid farewell to Ginny, a schoolmate who is about to leave the city. As the girls say their goodbyes, Walter meets Ginny's father and has an apparently trivial conversation with him.

These two pieces of fiction approach the circumstances that surround the everyday life of the victims of the disaster –black and white alike. Using a realist mode of representation, both *Treme* and "Leaving for Kenosha" pay attention to detail and the psychological development of characters. Both works set up a mosaic of individuals and actions (much more limited, of course, in the case of Ford's short-story) in which race plays a key role. My reading of these two texts bears in mind the importance of that concept both in the fictional worlds they depict and in the outside reality they try to reflect.

The methodology I will apply is based on Michael Omi and Howard Winant's theory of 'racial formation', a critique of the idea of race as a universal, biological category. Avoiding essentialist visions of race, Omi and Winant coin the term 'racial formation' to account for the process through which an individual or a community comes to be defined in racial terms, which are constantly changing. Thus, the authors emphasize the fact that race is not a fixed notion but a social construction that acts at the level both of individual identity (or micro-level) and the collective (or macro-level) (1994). Their redefinition of the concept of 'race' uncovers "an unstable complex of social meanings transformed by political struggle" (Omi and Winant 1994: 55). To a significant extent, Omi and Winant's concept of 'racial formation' overlaps with and reinforces the work of cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall, who describes race as a "relational signifier", an empty sign whose meaning varies depending on the context (Jhally 1997).

The application of this theoretical perspective will show what my primary sources reveal about racial formation in the United States. Interestingly, not only do the two pieces of fiction I have chosen unmask a genuinely North American racial tension, but they allegedly try to offer a racial conciliatory perspective as well. Before focusing on those two texts, I will first offer a short review of the most common perspectives regarding race after the Katrina disaster.

LOOTERS VS. FINDERS: GIVING MEANING TO THE TRAGEDY

During a live benefit concert, aired on September 2, 2005, rapper Kanye West famously broke away from the script and, after blaming the media for their racially biased coverage

of Katrina, declared that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" (cited in Czaja 2007: 59). In his broadcast rant, West made use of his position as a well-known figure of the entertainment industry in order to condemn both the criminalization of African Americans in the media and the lack of a proper official response in the aftermath of the hurricane: "You see a black family, it says, 'They're looting'. You see a white family, it says, 'They're looking for food' […]. It's been five days [waiting for federal help] because most of the people are black" (cited in Czaja 2007: 59).

The criminalization of African Americans, Alice Gavin argues, has been part of the neoconservative agenda since the Ronald Reagan presidency (2008: 326). Legal equality does not imply the disappearance of discrimination, and since the 1980s a "color-blind ideology" or "new racism" (Gavin 2008: 336) has gained prominence over a "classic", overt racism –which has not been eradicated either. Blacks in America have recurrently been associated with violent, immoral and animalistic behavior. This ideological agenda has had practical effects as striking as the massive presence of armed soldiers in New Orleans in the wake of Katrina, "as if the hurricane victims in the shelters had been criminals" (de la Peña et al 2010: 373). Moreover, as part of the neoconservative representation of class issues in racial terms, poverty has come to be seen as a natural outgrowth of African American history and culture (Gavin 2008: 330).

Those two derogatory images of blackness as violence and poverty are best represented by two myths widely spread during the Reagan years: the "welfare queen" and the "young black male 'gangsta'" (Giroux 2006 cited in Gavin 2008: 337). Due to their reproduction (favored by the hegemonic elite), these images eventually have come to join the set of beliefs and practices that Antonio Gramsci has labeled "common sense" (cited in Omi and Winant 1994: 67). Thus, an ideological project (macro-level) has specific results in everyday life (micro-level). Similarly, the "welfare queen" and "gangsta" stereotypes were uncritically reproduced during the aftermath of Katrina with slight variations. The former, as it was increasingly clear that the return home of the evacuees was inconceivable without official support and financial aid; the latter, as the violence that ensued in New Orleans was significantly magnified by biased media coverage, and the displaced groups that found shelter in adjoining states came to be depicted through a decidedly negative lens.

At this respect, social scientists Jason E. Shelton and M. Nicole Coleman describe Houstonians' attitude toward the predominantly black and poor arrivals from New Orleans as a combination of a) the colorblind racism hidden behind traditional American beliefs such as "equality" and "individualism"; b) traces of the American "old-fashioned racism"; c) an anti-immigrant feeling that makes Houstonians consider African Americans to be noncitizens (2009). This triple pattern exemplifies the diverse forms of oppression faced by this racialized group in contemporary North America.

The institutionalization of racism is largely based upon the role of the media. Biased media coverage at its most striking is exposed by the case of a couple of photographs from the agencies AP and AFP, published by the Yahoo! News web site the days following the storm (Media Awareness Network 2010). Apparently, there are no significant differences between the two images: both depict residents of New Orleans carrying goods as they wade through chest-deep flood water. The discourse that underlies each of the images dramatically differs due to the accompanying captions: in the AP photograph and caption, a black man

is "looting" a grocery store; in the AFP photograph and caption, two whites are "finding" bread and soda –it is, in short, the kind of weighted discourse fiercely criticized by Kanye West. As Stuart Hall's analysis of the working of the media underscores, an event is given a meaning once it is represented (1980: 129). Thus, whether these three anonymous individuals are actually "finders" or "looters" lacks any relevance for the purpose of the present study. On the contrary, what is significant is the racist discourse that results from the juxtaposition of the photographs and the captions.

Several articles, essays and web sites reproduce these photographs and make use of them to explore racial bias in media coverage (Gavin 2008, Kinney 2005, Media Awareness Network 2010). All of them put great emphasis on the verbs used ("loot" and "find"). However, they fail to notice another significant lexical choice. The white couple is described as "two residents", whereas the person of color is simply "a young man". This far-from-innocent terminology evokes Gavin's discussion of the media misuse of "refugees" instead of "evacuees" after Katrina. As she explains, the process of racialization affects not only individuals and groups but the nation at large.

In the context of a racialized nation, the term "refugees" evokes an idea of "denied citizenship which resonates disturbingly with black experience through American history" (Gavin 2008: 335-36). And this last example takes us back to the question of institutionalized racism and the founding of a racialized nation, as discussed by Omi and Winant. They argue that "U.S. society is racially structured from top to bottom" (1994: 50), pointing out that their country has been for most of its existence "a *racial dictatorship*" in the process of becoming "a racial democracy" (1994: 65-66; emphasis in the original). The perpetrators of the process of racial formation are the hegemonic powers better embodied by the media (as previously seen) and political institutions; no wonder the state is seen "as the preeminent –though by no means the only– site of racial contestation" (Omi and Winant 1994: viii).

Consequently, not only should politicians accept responsibility for the process of racial formation, but for the criminalization of racialized subjects as well. As stated at the beginning of this section, the (in)action of President Bush lies at the core of Kanye West's rant. For certain, West's views are better articulated by Jacob Weisberg, who attends, among other factors, to the limited weight of African American voters and to a historical tradition that suggests that Republicans' neglect of this racialized group has actually helped them in election time (2005). Weisberg concludes that "[h]ad the residents of New Orleans been white Republicans in a state that mattered politically, instead of poor blacks in a city that didn't, Bush's response surely would have been different" (2005). In other words, the simplistic depiction of Bush as a racist does not account for the historical, political or economic factors that marked his (lack of) response nor does it expose the ideological basis of racial formation. These are the kind of connections that I will make in my analysis of the issues of race, racism and racial formation in *Treme* and "Leaving for Kenosha."

TREME: LIFE (IN A BLACK NEIGHBORHOOD). A USER'S MANUAL

The two texts deal with the topics previously mentioned in various ways. I will begin this section with the *Treme* pilot episode. In one of the first scenes of the series, a British reporter sent to New Orleans interviews university professor Creighton Bernette (John

Goodman). The reporter questions the necessity of rebuilding the city, and alludes to the Federal financial aid that would be required to do so. Creighton's reply is eloquent enough: "Since when do nations not rebuild their great cities?" Viewers may wonder: Why would New Orleans be less worth rebuilding than any other city? Before venturing an answer, we should take into account some relevant factors.

The reporter's discourse seems to overlap with the Act-of-God rhetoric that painted Katrina as a deed brought about by divine wrath.[2] Such a narrative reveals the role of religion in racial formation. Data show that about one of every three people who lived in the areas hit hardest by Katrina was African American, while one of every eight people in the United States is African American (Shapiro and Sherman 2005). If the storm was an instance of divine intervention against a wicked city, and blacks were predominantly affected, an obvious racist implication follows. As Seneca Vaught puts it, religious sentiment is thus used to mask racial mores (2009: 417). Similarly, in the first episode of *Treme*'s season two, there is an interesting comparison between Katrina and the other most significant disaster in 21st-century America: 9/11. A New Yorker defends New Orleanians against accusations of their inability to quicken the rebuilding of the city: "People talk about the slow recovery of New Orleans, but Ground Zero's still a hole in the ground five years later". This comparison seems to invite an exploration of connections between Katrina and 9/11.

It is significant that while 9/11 has been widely (and superficially) regarded as a tragedy that united the whole nation and enhanced patriotism –for better or for worse– (Jackson 2011, Ross 2005), the aftermath of Katrina was characterized by different factions playing the blame game (Bibler 2008, Harris 2006). I would argue that this different treatment of the tragedies lies mainly on ideological aspects, and that race is part of the possible explanation. In New Orleans, African Americans were criminalized by the media and presented as looters, rapists, killers (Gavin 2008: 336). That disposition reinforces the hegemonic view according to which they do not fully belong to the American nation (exactly like Muslims). Michael P. Bibler puts it nicely when he points out that "[a]s the national media portrayed black New Orleanians, these weren't Americans struggling to survive, like we saw in New York on September 11, but rather people who fell victim to their own collective negligence and lawlessness" (2008: 16).

The reconstruction of the damaged city centers much of *Treme*'s action. The discourses concerning the rebuilding of post-Katrina New Orleans and the ordeal of the displaced groups that are not allowed to return constitute an invaluable laboratory where key connections between race, class and ideology are unveiled. The image projected by the show is one of a city where people have been displaced and infrastructures have been severely damaged. The difficulties faced by the evacuees on their way back to the city is a strong thematic element, and the scriptwriters resort to the character of Albert Lambreaux to represent the plight of those willing to return to New Orleans after the storm.

In season one, episode seven, Albert (Clarke Peters) takes up residence in the Calliope Projects as a form of pressure in order to make the Federal Government reopen the buildings. As depicted in the series, the housing projects, home exclusively to African Americans, had remained closed even though some of them had been hardly damaged at all. Although Albert attracts momentarily the attention of the media, his squatting ends up in disappointment as

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2   An inventory of some examples of that rhetoric is offered by Seneca Vaught (2009).

happened to several real-life illegal occupiers of housing projects, months and years after Katrina (Walker 2007).

In his comprehensive study *Treme: Race and Place in a New Orleans Neighborhood*, Michael Crutcher Jr. explains that much of New Orleans housing projects had been segregated and "stigmatized as a failed government handout for pathologically impoverished African Americans" (2010: 120). Consequently, a handful of politicians, speculators, developers and contractors saw Katrina as an ideal excuse to keep the buildings closed or promote their demolition. Meanwhile, private and "mixed income" development as well as rising rents prevented the return of many of those displaced (Gavin 2008: 338). This circumstance can be understood as a new step in the process of gentrification that, as Crutcher Jr. observes, has inevitably resulted in the deterritorialization of low-income African American residents (2010: 101).

The child of a white, wealthy family, Davis McAlary (Steve Zahn) is arguably *Treme*'s most interesting exploration of racial formation. Davis rejects his origins and, as a musician, writes the irreverent lyrics of several anti-establishment songs that bring to light racist and classist mores and ideologies. One of these songs is "Shame, Shame, Shame", from the eponymous episode in season one. After criticizing, Kanye West-style, Bush's lack of commitment with the people of New Orleans, Davis explains that "Now we got the people of New Orleans / Living on Air Force bases, / And in raggedy ass motels from Utah to Georgia. / And people in Washington / Talking about keeping the housing projects closed. / […] They don't want no more poor people / Coming back to New Orleans". Interestingly, with his lyrics Davis implies that the political inaction that allegedly ensued after Katrina concealed some specific goals and responded to the interests of the hegemonic powers.

The hidden political agenda for keeping the housing projects closed is bluntly summarized by one character in episode seven: "If New Orleans gets white, the state would turn from purple [i.e. a swing state] to red [i.e. Republican]", which explains why the Federal Government (at that time, the Bush administration) was not in a hurry to help the former dwellers of the project back. The show echoes the predictions of analysts and political consultants such as Roy Fletcher, who as early as October 2005 warned: "Louisiana has always been a swing state, a purple state that's both blue and red. You take the [predominantly black] Ninth Ward out of that equation and you get a real shot of Republicans winning statewide office" (cited in Alford 2005).

The limited political weight of African Americans in the U.S. has already been mentioned. *Treme* is peppered with political commentary that seems to reinforce that thesis, as in this confession by a Community Relations Division Sergeant to Albert Lambreaux during the latter's squatting:

> If people wanted the housing projects to reopen, I mean if *voters* wanted it, you'd see the politicians falling all over each other to demand it. But the people who vote in this town, black and white both, are keeping awfully quiet on this thing so far, don't you think?

Those two last excerpts from the show, along with Crutcher Jr.'s review of racial dynamics in the Treme neighborhood, are fine examples of how class, race, ideology and urban space intertwine in a complex structure that highlights power relations.

The second season of *Treme*, set fourteen months after the storm, shifts its focus from personal tragedies to the macro-level of politics, offering a larger picture of a desolated community with the in-depth treatment of land speculation. The show's writers resort to a new character in order to fully introduce this controversial topic: Nelson Hidalgo (Jon Seda), a property speculator from Dallas, Texas, who arrives in New Orleans attracted by the business possibilities offered by the city. Once he is established in New Orleans and makes the right acquaintances, Nelson is smooth enough to achieve a FEMA subcontract in the demolition debris removal business, along with inside information provided by his political connections. Thus, when Mayor Nagin appears on TV announcing seventeen targeted zones around the city for redevelopment, Nelson has already bought properties in the areas that have just increased their value dramatically.

Through the main body of episodes of season two, *Treme* depicts Nelson as an unscrupulous though successful character. Not only does he make money out of the tragedy, he likewise seems to cannibalize the culture of New Orleans. In that respect, he is depicted as the target for the "tourist economy minstrel show" which New Orleanian culture has become (as a New Yorker argues in an earlier episode). The reference to minstrelsy is not trivial. In episode seven, Nelson is invited (after a generous donation) to take part in the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club Mardi Gras parade. Interestingly, Nelson dons blackface as part of the official Zulu parade costume.[3] Regardless of the racial implications of this practice (it should be noted that some African American Zulus don blackface as well), it is difficult to dissociate Nelson's enjoyment of black traditions from his profiting from the Katrina disaster.

Nelson presents himself alternatively as a Democrat and as a Republican, depending on who his interlocutor is. Much as he denies it, Nelson fits the description of the post-Civil War carpetbagger (a figure that benefited from another conflict where, needless to say, race was a crucial element). Thus, Nelson's carpetbaggery contributes to the depiction of race in *Treme* as a "category with broad political and economic implications" (Ferguson 2007: 192). One can easily imagine Canadian author and social activist Naomi Klein meeting more than one Nelson Hidalgo during her stay in the recently hurricane-struck New Orleans; she remembers: "All that week Baton Rouge had been crawling with corporate lobbyists helping to lock in those big opportunities: lower taxes, fewer regulations, cheaper workers and a 'smaller, safer city' –which in practice meant plans to level the public housing projects" (Klein n.d.).

The two *Treme* characters that most explicitly embody racial confusion are Davis McAlary and Albert Lambreaux. Davis, a DJ and musician who cherishes above all the black tradition of his native state's jazz and bounce music, and a spokesperson for the black underclass, boasts about defending the purity of the neighborhood of Treme and New Orleans at large. Assuming that Davis' intentions are good, what makes him a problematic character? Mainly the fact that he is the son of a privileged white family, much as he regrets it. Davis enjoys performing "blackness": he adopts the standpoint of the oppressed black, despite the dismay of his (white and black) friends and neighbors. Ridiculous as it may

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3   For a discussion of the origin and meaning of Zulu in racial terms, see New Orleans American Experience (2006).

seem, Davis' performance exposes the social and historical construction of race as theorized by Omi and Winant.

A significant episode in the first season of *Treme* demands the audience's attention regarding Davis and racial formation. In episode five, after a second line parade that ends up in a shooting with two victims, a visibly drunk Davis is presented hanging out with two black friends in an uptown bar. There, in his typical fashion, he rants about how media will "freak the fuck out" and cops will look "for any excuse to clamp down on the [mainly black] second lines"; but bigmouth Davis also quotes musician Antoine Baptiste (a black trombonist played by Wendell Pierce): "New Orleans niggers will fuck up a wet dream", making reference to the prominent presence of violent gang members and criminals among those returning home. Because of his use of that pejorative term, Davis ends up being punched in the face by a young black man sitting at a nearby table. Just as interesting as the youngster's reaction is Davis' excuse for his using "the n-word": "Oh, bro, bro, I live in this neighborhood, so…" Viewers are compelled to complete the sentence: so Davis' 'authenticity' (which apparently stems from having his residence in Treme) allows him to use a term of racist abuse.

Davis is a character full of contradictions. As Aaron Bady asserts: "while Davis means well, sort of, he's not an Indian, not black, and his little campaign against the status quo lasts only as long as it amuses him to continue it" (2012). Davis performing "blackness" may remind viewers of minstrelsy. Even though he does not put on blackface, he does appropriate African American music, traditions, or even manners of speech. Whether his attempt manages to preserve or condemn those cultural elements remains questionable. But undeniably Davis is among *Treme*'s most complex characters.

Another good example of racial construction in the series is Albert Lambreaux and his Guardians of the Flame. Albert is the chief of a Mardi Gras Indian tribe –i.e. black groups from different New Orleans communities who organized in "krewes". According to the official Mardi Gras New Orleans web site, every "krewe" has its own internal hierarchy, and its members parade on Mardi Gras imitating Native American costumes and traditions (2011). Interestingly, despite their name Mardi Gras Indians are not Native American but African American. As *Treme* depicts, the reason why black neighborhoods in New Orleans organize their own alternative parades stems from their historical exclusion on racial grounds: "Historically, slavery and racism were at the root of this cultural separation". The Mardi Gras Indians named themselves after Native Americans as an appreciation for the support given to former slaves who were accepted into Indian society (Mardi Gras New Orleans 2011). Indian parades, then, challenge the audience's notions of racial boundaries. They do not show whites deriding African Americans by donning blackface, but blacks respectfully honoring a long-standing tradition through practices commonly associated with another racialized community.

Albert devotes a lot of his time helping his "gang" back to New Orleans, and he senses the hegemonic powers that relate race and citizenship and prevent a fair reconstruction of the city. Aware of the hardships that the members of his "krewe" have to face, Albert laments that "[h]alf of my gang are living like refugees in their own country". The realization that the official relief effort is slow and inefficient at best and that state and federal politicians avoid taking responsibilities will lead to the social activism that has Albert illegally occupying the

projects. However, the writers of *Treme* do not present Albert as a character self-consciously aware of his status as a figure of racial fight or reconciliation. His involvement with the attendance of the Indian tradition is such that he even disregards the 18th-century African tribal masks exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum as derivative compared to the Mardi Gras costumes of his "tribe": "It's clear to me they got that from us", he proudly states, contemplating a ceremonial mask one hundred years older than the Mardi Gras Indian tradition. He is, in short, unable to establish the connections between tribal and racial practices that the show implies.

However, for all the flaws these characters may present, both Davis and Albert are multi-faceted individuals who do not easily accommodate to traditional views of race. Their personalities contribute to the audience's constant awareness of race as an unnatural category, and of the implementation of social forces that effect racial control. In doing so, Davis and Albert (inadvertently) build bridges between racial groups.

"LEAVING FOR KENOSHA": "THE LAND FAR BELOW SEA LEVEL"

Unlike the creators of the *Treme* show (who are, it should be noted, white), Richard Ford does not attempt to convey the Katrina disaster through the perspective of a racialized group he does not belong to. However, it does not come as a surprise that race is a key concept in "Leaving for Kenosha". For one thing, it has been pointed out by Ford himself that race is one of his main thematic interests. As he explains why he left his native Mississippi when he was eighteen years old, Ford remembers: "I was quite aware at the time that race relations were reaching a bad pass, and that I –although not particularly a visionary– wasn't always on the side of my race, if my race had a side" (Guagliardo 2001: 16). This preoccupation has permeated his literary production, to the point that he admits: "I wanted [Pulitzer prize-winning novel] *Independence Day* to be about race" (cited in Duffy 2008: 68). In "Leaving for Kenosha" (as in his most celebrated work, the so-called Frank Bascombe trilogy: *The Sportswriter*, *Independence Day* and *The Lay of the Land*), the story's main character is a WASP 'everyman'. Consequently, it can be argued that the Southern writer resorts to the figure of the outsider for a better depiction of a racialized post-Katrina New Orleans.

"Leaving for Kenosha" is a third-person narration from the perspective of Walter Hobbes, a Mississippi-born lawyer who had attended law school in Chicago before moving to New Orleans attracted by "the oil-and-gas boom" (2008), which evokes the carpetbaggery of *Treme's* Nelson Hidalgo. Despite being from the South (or because of it), Walter does not seem to be at ease among African American people. This is not to say that Walter is an overtly racist character. The reader senses Ford's attempt to assign his protagonist a number of positive features: Walter is "good-natured", a keen though not always successful father, and votes Democrat –a political stance that acquires consistently positive undertones throughout Ford's fiction. Yet Walter cannot avoid some subtle form of racism in his thoughts and deeds –or, at the very least, race is for him a category his chain of thought never seems to escape from: "I risked my life going to Wal-Mart", exaggerates Walter, who did not fail to notice that the only clients at the supermarket were black. "That's racist" is Louise Hobbes' blunt reply (Ford 2008).

Despite some humorous situations, "Leaving for Kenosha" is all in all a gloomy story. Ford employs the best of his evocative prose to portray the remains of a ruined, godforsaken city in descriptions such as the following:

> Charbonnet Street was a long street of wreckages. Where the floodwater had hurtled through, houses had been flattened, others moved off their foundations, others had their roofs floated away […]. Most of the houses still bore a gray dirt stain of the high-water line –some above the windows– and many retained the same crossed axes left by the rescuers. One house had "No Pig Found/9-1" scrawled on its front door. Another house simply said, "One dead here". (2008)

The short-story's descriptions of New Orleans, like *Treme*'s constant visual references to broken ceilings, closed buildings or flooded areas, contrast with "all the talks of 'fresh starts' and 'clean sheets'" that Naomi Klein remembers in the period following Katrina (Klein n.d.). As Nelson Hidalgo would (and did) say: "Never let a disaster go to waste", a perfect epitome of Klein's idea of "disaster capitalism": the "orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities" (Klein n.d.).

It should be noted that this last section of the story is set in the Lower Ninth Ward –a 98%-black neighborhood according to the 2000 census (Greater New Orleans Community Data Center 2006), and an area badly damaged by Katrina. It was, in Ford's words, "the land far below sea level, the submersible land that had always been poor and black but had been a place to live" (2008). The stark descriptions of a wrecked city evoke the racial components of a tragedy that affected first and foremost black residents:

> They were driving out St. Claude Avenue, a wide parched boulevard through an old, mostly black section of shut-down schools, closed appliance stores with their wrecked appliances set out on the sidewalk, closed and boarded Burger Kings and Hardee's, distressed gas stations and shabby bars. Many of the passing ruined houses were still marked in the cruciform code of the National Guard from two years back. (Ford 2008)

The racist undertones of Walter Hobbes' perspective are accentuated by another comment that follows the description of St. Claude Avenue. He feels the need to drive with great caution because "[p]eople were in a bad mood here. And there were no police around to save you".[4]

Similarly, as his brief chat with Ginny's father is over and the girls finish their goodbyes, Walter quickly looks for shelter in his car and tries to attract as little attention as possible before leaving the neighborhood. It looks as if Walter has been inadvertently influenced by a neoconservative hegemony that links violence with blackness in an attempt to preserve the status quo. In Walter's defense, it may be argued that he is similarly the object of suspicious stares from Ginny's mother and grandmother. It is clear that Ford aims to portray a country where racial tension is a given. Louise informs her father (rather artificially) that her friend

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[4]   One wonders whether Ford's words about the New Orleans police protecting people are ironic, bearing in mind the NOPD long history of irregular activities. As Davis McAlary would say to Walter: "It's New Orleans, dude, the cops never come".

Ginny is "black and has a scholarship". This piece of information depicts more vividly the character of Ginny, but it also seems to highlight the same link between race and class that identifies the social relations portrayed in *Treme*.

In the Wal-Mart where he buys a greeting card for Ginny, Walter finds "[a] few souls, all black people […] trading in and out of the RETAIL entrance" (Ford 2008), which emphasizes again the link between blackness and poverty. Not to mention that, more generally, Walter is a white lawyer recently gone into private practice, while Ginny's father is a black U.P.S. worker who is given a transfer that forces him and his daughter to leave the city. So all in all it looks as if things are going better for white people in New Orleans, since it is black characters who suffer the drama of leaving their homes without knowing whether it will be for good.

More interestingly for the purposes of the present article, "Leaving for Kenosha" unmasks the category of 'race' as a construction. In some passages, it does so through minimal details. The people depicted on the Wal-Mart greeting cards Walter glances through before picking one are supposed to be African American, although in fact they are "mostly tan-colored, clean-cut black people", "more or less black", or "vaguely non-Caucasian". Walter predicts her daughter's reaction if he buys one of those: "Louise would loathe the black characters and undoubtedly conclude it was racist" (Ford 2008).

If those apparently innocent cards problematize the question of racial construction, real life is not easier in the slightest. While Ginny Baxter is black, her father is described as a "beige-skinned man", which makes the narrator utter the troubling recognition that the man "must've been Ginny's father (though the skin was wrong)" (Ford 2008). On the other hand, as Walter finds himself at a loss for words in the presence of Jerry, the narrator explains that nothing comes into Walter's mind "on the subject of what it was like to be a U.P.S. man, or the subject of being black, or about children or moving to Kenosha in the heat of an August day". According to this quotation, Walter deems Jerry as "black", maybe because in his binary categorization he is "non-Caucasian". Moreover, this episode is paradigmatic of Walter's train of thought. In his typical fashion, he lets the question of race enter his thoughts along with more 'prosaic' individual features such as profession or actions. So the recognition that it is not absolutely clear for Walter what racial group Jerry belongs to reminds the reader that race is a social rather than a natural category.

Ginny's father's uncertain race echoes the anecdote that Omi and Winant use as the leitmotif for the development of their racial formation theory, i.e. the Susey Guillory affair. Between 1982 and 1983, Susey Guillory unsuccessfully sued the Louisiana Bureau of Vital Records so that her racial classification would be changed from "black" to "white" (1994: 53). That incident, just like Jerry's "wrong" skin color, brings to light the construction of race as a category for social control and compartmentalization.

"Leaving for Kenosha" explores the extent to which racial interaction is still at stake in the United States. Louise asks her father where Kenosha is, and upon Walter's explanation, she replies: "Do you think there're a lot of black people there?" (Ford 2008). Louise is old enough to have realized that the boundaries between racial categories do not easily break. The final interaction between Walter and Jerry underscores the story's pessimism about the unfathomable distance that racial division creates between human beings. Walter and Jerry shake hands "with a not especially firm grip" and they do not seem to have much to

share –actually, the impossibility of a significant exchange is assumed by both characters. The uneasiness with which they conduct their small talk is summarized by Walter's way of ending it. After abruptly wishing Jerry a safe trip, Walter reaches his car without daring to turn his back on the black man: "Behind him his hand found the over-warm car door handle" (Ford 2008).

Ford refuses nevertheless to leave his readers with an image of complete isolation and lack of communication. Racialization as a barrier can be overcome in personal ways; thus, the interaction that seems to be inconceivable to Walter and Jerry is far from extraordinary to their daughters. Upon their encounter, Louise "took Ginny's hand and waggled her arm until Ginny said something and smiled" (Ford 2008). During their conversation, the girls walk with their arms around each other's waists, and Louise holds a lock of Ginny's black hair in her hand –in short, physical intimacy is not an inconvenience for them. The narrative voice makes a point of going beyond the color line highlighting that "Louise and Ginny looked alike in their school uniforms and tortoiseshell glasses and long straight hair" (Ford 2008). Louise and Ginny's union (both emotional and physical), the way they are "locked in their own fast privacy", is a powerful image of communion between races –but not the only one. If we assume that Jerry's daughter is the product of a mixed-race relation, it may be argued that Ginny herself embodies a possible understanding between black and white. Her body would represent the ultimate site for racial reconciliation.[5]

That is an example of what Ford nicely achieves in his short-story and what narrative usually tries to do: to reach greater meanings from anecdotes and individual circumstances. A passage that summarizes this goal reads as follows: "It had become fashionable to blame bad things on the hurricane –things that would've certainly happened anyway– failures, misdeeds, infirmities of character that the hurricane could've had nothing to do with. As if life weren't its own personalized storm" (Ford 2008). In a superficial reading, the narrative voice refers to how characters tend to use the storm as an excuse for their personal predicament. However, it is easy to interpret it as a parody of the Act-of-God rhetoric that explains historical or social malaises through essentialist visions of race, religion or cultural practices –the kind of hegemonic perspective that, I would argue, both *Treme* and "Leaving for Kenosha" are constantly challenging.

"WHAT A LAUGHABLE MISTAKE TO PUT A CITY HERE"

Data do not lie but are subject to different interpretations. Statistical information confirms the weight of race as a key factor in the physical and emotional reconstruction of New Orleans and its communities. Bill Quigley reminds us that, as to late August, 2011 (i.e. six years after the hurricane), New Orleans had become "whiter, more male and more prosperous"; that almost 48,000 houses remained vacant in the city; and that less than 10% of the more than 3,000 families that had occupied public housing apartments were able to return into new apartments –actually, as Quigley points out, only around 1,500 families "have even made it back to New Orleans at all. All were African-American" (2011). The

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5   It is not arbitrary that Ford chooses the female body as a possible site for reconciliation, nor that it is Ginny and Louise, two girls, who better symbolize a possible racial understanding, in contrast to their fathers. Unfortunately, the question of gender and racial formation goes beyond the scope and extent of the present article.

coldness of statistics does not seem to offer much hope about the present situation of New Orleans. Nor do the two pieces of fiction I have dealt with: stark narratives where racial problems related to institutionalized violence, displacement, media representation or denied citizenship occupy a prominent place. At the same time, *Treme* and "Leaving for Kenosha" vividly illustrate and call attention to controversial topics in the manner that art does best: offering particular experiences that shed light on wider topics.

On the one hand, *Treme*, with its naturalistic approach, offers a wider picture of a neighborhood where racial difference is an inescapable reality. However, characters like Davis McAlary and Albert Lambreaux challenge the audience's expectations regarding racial construction and in so doing anticipate exciting new possibilities. Needless to say, many aspects of the show related to the question of race would require further study: for example, the extent to which the series' wealthy black characters –such as the family-in-law of Ladonna (Khandi Alexander), who are Seventh Ward Creole acting "like they're a different fucking race"– are better labeled as white in socio-economic terms. Nevertheless, that would go beyond the scope of this article. On the other hand, "Leaving for Kenosha" confronts white and black characters in an attempt to find new ways of expression for the racial tension noticeable in New Orleans. Moreover, the social nature of the category 'race' is exposed by characters like Jerry, as the story refuses to provide him with a definite racial category.

In conclusion, the present article has shown that post-Katrina New Orleans supplies an ideal site for the exploration of racial formation in contemporary North America –either for the study of real life situations or the pieces of fiction it has inspired. An analysis of both the precedents and the effects of the disaster, along with its many interpretations, has allowed me to place current connections between race and class, ideology, religion or politics into a coherent history of racial formation in the United States.

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