Over the past twenty years, regional governments around the world and global film industry corporations have collaborated, if not colluded, to provide a steady stream of workers for film location shooting through legislated incentives. Seeking to reduce labor costs in relation to other fixed expenses, industry executives have successfully used incentives to reduce budgets. Meanwhile, regional policymakers have looked to film and television production as a panacea for anemic economic growth and declining employment indices. Together, governments and industry have made labor into one of the primary fault lines in the political economy of film production.

For the former constituents, film employment may boost jobs numbers on annual reports but have not produced sustainable economic growth. As critics of film incentive policies point out, the vast majority of these film jobs have been transient, low-wage, or both. At the upper end of the employment spectrum, the highest-skilled workers moved with productions. They have had the same economic impact as business elites, taking their earnings with them as they move from one fancy hotel to another. The larger proportion of film location workers, however, has not been so mobile. These workers—mostly in trades and services—have seen wages driven down. The adoption of right-to-work laws in the United States has put film unions in competition with antishop labor, especially in states that lack sufficient members to meet demand. Economic development offices frequently count service jobs, such as hotel, catering, and transportation staff, as multiplier results of the film economy, knowing that voters will not see the vast quantity of these low-wage, high-turnover jobs as quality careers. To mitigate the political fallout that film incentive policy has caused since the 2009 recession, local
boosters typically promise that film jobs will attract other kinds of financial investors in the future, espousing a kind of optimism that has made the policy itself as precarious as the jobs it has generated.

For the film industry, the downward pressures for more abundant reserves of cheaper laborers have not abated. Producers have faced the stress of raising money and cutting costs. They have to weigh the money saved by producing outside Southern California or another major center against the investment in transporting resources, particularly the highest-skilled workers, to the location. Production budgets for labor are stratified, with decreasing studio investment distributed disproportionately to a few workers with star or brand name recognition. The move to reality television has marked an increasing reliance on talent that is either unpaid or underpaid. Volunteers, in the guise of endless levels of interns and assistants, have become part of the production apparatus. Producers have begun to face difficulties in stimulating a labor pool motivated to work for free. Workers have become jaded, even litigious; they now know that these exploited forms of labor rarely lead to stable career paths, particularly outside a global media and entertainment industry hub. In the face of a potential policy upheaval, the uncertainty of finding workers has to be strategized in new ways.

This chapter examines one strategy in the face of this emerging uncertainty in the current film labor regime. Specifically, it looks at the New Orleans–based production of the quality HBO television drama *Treme* (2010–2013) and its ability to create a moral economy for low-paying or unpaid film jobs. This strategy relied on a particular kind of call to work as a form of boosterism for the local economy and the culture that both sustains and emerges from it. The strategy succeeded because it fit well in the context of the current political economy as well as an imagined community of like-minded citizen-workers in the future. Based on conversations with series workers, primarily extras, this chapter provides a lesson about the labor strategy based on those workers who occupy the most precarious jobs in locational shooting.

**The Treme Moral Economy**

In 2013, Louisiana surpassed California as the primary location for the production of major Hollywood motion pictures. The state, one of the poorest in terms of the per capita poverty rate and median income, also outpaced Hollywood film shooting in other countries, including Canada and Ireland. This locational outsourcing, often derided as runaway production, has been a point of pride in Louisiana. There, media producers and policymakers alike have seized on film jobs as a cornerstone in the economic renewal of the entire Gulf Coast after a series of devastating environmental disasters, including two hurricanes and an oil spill, destabilized the political and economic infrastructure of the region. The city of New Orleans, which evacuated its entire population of nearly half a million people
in 2005 after Hurricane Katrina and subsequently lost many longtime residents, has depended heavily on the growing film economy to bring new migrants and jobs. A 2012 *Forbes* article summarized the recent political economy: “Aggressive tax incentives have also been beneficial in luring new recruits, entrepreneurs, and large business to New Orleans. In 2002, a foundation for a new film industry had been established with a tax credit program for movies produced in the state. However, it wasn’t until after Katrina that more production crews committed to continuing their work with Louisiana, and quickly saw the benefits of working in the region. In addition, the productions were pumping millions of dollars into the city’s recovering economy, and providing jobs to those who wanted to get into the industry.”4 Ten years after the storm, the city still acknowledges the scars of Katrina—press articles still refer to the “post-K” era—while touting the power of the most generous film tax incentives in the United States to aid future recovery.

In this context, a television series that would focus on the city’s unique vernacular value and cultural resilience in the post-K era drew special attention. The auteur television producers David Simon and Eric Overmyer said they had wanted to create a program about New Orleans music long before the storm, but that the disaster brought a sudden moral imperative to make a general concept into a story. “Even ordinary scenes played out against a backdrop of this city three months after the storm take on an incredibly different dynamic. An ordinary scene . . . is about something much bigger,” said Simon, while waiting for the green light from the HBO network in 2009. Arguing for the symbolic importance of viewers witnessing a second-line parade in the months after the storm, Simon explained, “Just as a visual tableau, that’s an incredible statement of human endeavor. And you place it in the context of all the political (news) and all the problems and all of the distopic things that have happened post-Katrina—if you can’t (make) a story of that, shame on you.”5 Within weeks, Fee Nah Nee, the local production company for *Treme*, would begin the process of certifying the applicable tax credits for producing the series.

For four years, *Treme* indexed the tight imbrication between the film economy and New Orleans through a program focused on ordinary life and an extraordinary local culture. Music, food, and public performance took center stage in the weekly narrative, which broadcast via the subscriber channel for three and a half seasons. Beyond this, the program’s producers were active in charity and volunteer efforts dedicated to local musicians and the musical cultures of the region. Production crews threw block parties in some of its affected shooting locations and helped host screening parties for residents who could not afford premium cable television service. Newspaper columns deciphered the careful cultural details and historical referents stitched into the story lines, and social media organized fans to participate in the interpretative community. From this base of avid viewers and admirers, *Treme* set out to hire local residents as part of its ethos. The hiring director, who had worked as a local on the Baltimore set of the earlier Simon/Overmyer collaboration, *The Wire*, told me he was always irked by film companies that
shot in his hometown but hired outsiders. *Treme* would aim to hire residents, he explained, touting his efforts to support a local training clinic for film crew certification, because “it’s the right thing to do.”

It was also the most economical thing to do. Louisiana residents received an extra 5 percent in state tax credits, bringing their total discount to 35 percent of the budget. Locals do not have to be housed in hotels. They go home each day without a need for a per diem or transportation. On the set, the same director told me that the local hire brought added value to the decision-making process. They have “natural knowledge” that streamlines the production schedule. He said, “They know the Teamsters, and the bureaucrats, and also the residents. So they don’t mind as much when you invade their neighborhood.” In the battle to beat the budget, he said locals helped “win the hearts and minds” of the citizens.

This odd pairing of the ethically right and the instrumentally efficient was the labor strategy in *Treme*’s moral economy. Mark Banks sees moral economies as a counterweight to the alienating and individuating tendencies of marketplaces. In them, the basis of the exchange relation is founded in a social relationship that recognizes the worker as a unique individual rather than an object for exploitation. By offering to restore a measure of recognition to workers’ identities and experiences, these exchange economies seem to thrive in precarious settings that have already been ravaged by the worst excesses of neoliberal policies. In New Orleans, for example, privatization of recovery efforts shunted the responsibility for basic human services onto private corporations, which could then monetize relief and promote it as a form of corporate social responsibility.

Media industries since 2005 were at the forefront of using Katrina story lines to generate both advertising revenues and corporate goodwill, often based on their ability to harness and channel the free labor or charity of others. This was particularly apparent in a spate of reality television and talk show programs that frequently promised to improve the well-being of the ordinary people brought into the production. These genres often claimed that their staff and crew were part of a family that left the local population better off. In the meantime, the programs were effective at cutting production costs by appropriating local settings and enrolling local residents, often in the form of volunteers. Although *Treme* followed this trajectory of corporate social responsibility, it also went beyond in imagining a more sustained investment in the lives of New Orleans’s creative workers than a single television episode or promotional event.

To their call to help New Orleans through media labor, extras responded in droves.

**A LITTLE EXTRA WORK FOR A LOT OF EXTRAS**

In this calculus of righteous spends for the right costs, extras had a particular function in *Treme*. Extras, known by the euphemistic oxymoron “background artists,” have historically been the most abundant local hires. Since the early twentieth
century, studios have relied on the ever-renewable reserves of people flocking to Hollywood. They lured them with promises that they might “break in” to the industry if they worked hard and were lucky. Even today, the trade lore generated in Los Angeles describes how people working as extras gain a foothold in the industry by building a resume and a social network, which then leads to a stable career. Despite the low probability of Hollywood fulfilling these promises even in the classical age of production, labor unions have struggled to organize the waves of everyday people who work only irregularly, if at all. As a result, extras on a set have been the most plentiful but also the cheapest hires in the labor force. In New Orleans, extras may put in up to sixteen hours a day, only to receive as little as fifty or a hundred dollars, depending on the size of the production budget. Most of the labor then involves waiting for a chance to be in a scene.

In a local economy characterized by low wages and precarious employment, *Treme* set a high bar. One extra said he made $108 for only ten hours on the set; when the crew no longer needed him, he was dismissed but still got paid for a full day’s work. The daily contracts were particularly attractive to workers in other cultural and service industries in the city, especially during seasonal or cyclical lags. As a freelancer in the arts scene explained, “If you make $100, that’s great. You can get your groceries, and your beer, and your cigarettes and go on to the next gig.” Beyond this, however, *Treme* drew on a reservoir of eager would-be extras based on the *ethical* promise of the program to the local cultural economy. Some of these extras had lived through Katrina, but many were new migrants who simply felt that they were contributing to something larger than a daily gig. Some even described doing extra work while visiting New Orleans, adding that they would do such a thing only for the love of *Treme*.

I came to these insights somewhat haphazardly in what began as separate studies of the program’s production and reception, which gradually merged when I realized that in forty interviews, nearly every self-proclaimed fan of the show I spoke with, about half my sample, had worked as an extra, intended to be an extra, or had friends who were *Treme* extras. While this was a representative sample neither of all viewers nor certainly of New Orleans writ large, my research subjects opened a window into the deep feelings the program evoked and then put to work. These emotions demonstrate tensions in the moral economy of the production, illustrating the challenges of sustaining any local film economy that would recognize its most localized but least visible workers.

**TO BE (AN) EXTRA**

“It’s the trend to work on the set, to be on the set, to be an extra, or have a friend that was an extra,” said an African American student who grew up in an affluent uptown neighborhood. The excitement, he posited, came from the narrative itself.
“The show has the potential to be truthful and realistic to the city,” he said. This appeal to the real and to fundamental truth-telling about the city in the post-K era was a frequent logic for joining the production. In this, extras were no different from fans in loving the show’s careful attention to vernacular culture, regional musical and culinary traditions, and painstakingly accurate archive of the urban cultural geography. Moreover, extras described, in very emotional ways, the solidarity they felt with the series creators in telling the story of a city under threat of disintegration. As a recent resident, a retired professor who became an extra, explained, he felt like he became an insider to the city’s trauma by watching *Treme* weekly in New Orleans with a group of Katrina survivors:

That experience certainly changed [me and my wife’s] relationship to the show both in terms of the knowledge gained but also a sympathy towards it. People talked about how, you know, in the opening credits, there’s the patterns of mold, and people said, “Yeah, that one looks like the one I have in my [flooded] house.” And so you get connected to the show in ways that are very unusual. But *Treme* has been and continues to be this booster for New Orleans as a city. And right after Katrina that was critical. So I was a worshipper of *Treme* at that time because I felt people had given up on New Orleans, I mean really had given up.

Here the speaker’s desire to work for the show was imbued with a near spiritual investment in the city as portrayed through the program. Inevitably, the labor of being an extra could never live up to these lofty aspirations of being real, telling the truth, and satisfying souls.

The emotional solidarity with *Treme* served the labor needs of the production well. They stemmed from an imagined belonging, first, to a community of empathy with the residents of a traumatized city and, second, to a television program imbued with the agency to help in the recovery. By generating a community of empathy with New Orleans, the number of people who could imagine themselves doing extra work stretched beyond a period of residency or even the geography of city boundaries, bringing in new residents and even regular pilgrims to the city. These people could believe in New Orleans as a standpoint or a way of being expressed in a popular T-shirt: “Be A New Orleanian Wherever You Are.” The motto, which recognizes the real exile of New Orleanians throughout the world, could also recognize anyone who felt the same passion as Simon and Overmyer did. One of my interviewees, commenting on a nonnative friend who regularly appeared on the program, called these extras the “super–New Orleanians,” those residents who “go to everything more than the people born here. They are the ones who know the musicians. They have all the connections. They are kind of in love with something they want to embrace much more than in the natural way. . . . They can be almost arrogant about the real New Orleans.” These extras put to work their shared dispositions toward the city precisely by being the kinds of culture bearers
and bards that the show spotlighted as authentic. The program succeeded in promoting and preserving this vision of the city and its citizenry in part because so many people were willing to be part of the drama’s background.

For extras, however, their personal experiences were in the foreground when they considered why they would take off work or spend their leisure time working at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy on a Hollywood production. People spoke of how Treme had become part of their own traumatic stories: “I guess just living here and having been through Katrina and coming back. The first two months were so intense, and I think the show shows that in a really accurate way, just how intense everything was” (female, thirty-seven, housekeeper). “The show was close to home. There was a connection” (female, thirty, tour guide). In these quotes, the locational shooting of Treme became part of their own temporal and geographic locations: respectively, Katrina and home. This close siting of the series meant for some people that they felt they had to appear on the program. Extras spoke of a kind of doppelgänger effect, in which they already saw themselves in the story, and thus wanted to memorialize it. A middle-aged man who lived through the storm spoke of audibly laughing or sobbing through scenes, replaying them as he did his own memories: “I kept expecting to see myself in the background because the scenes were so real to me. . . . I think there’s some weird thing in my brain that I think I’m already a part of it. I think that would be really neat to be historically there and on film, to be part of New Orleans” (male, forty-seven, barista and composer).

This emotional and psychological investment in the series spoke to a heightened expectation for Treme that locals did not express for other productions around the city, even those specifically focused on Katrina. On one hand, the investment spoke to the role of media in memorializing tragedies. Amanda Lagerkvist, for example, has written about how television recurrently reminds viewers of its own heroic role not only in broadcasting the tragic events of September 11th to global audiences but also in dealing with the traumatic aftermath in nationally specific ways. Seeing their lives unfold on the screen, Treme viewers wanted to be in the program, as if to merge the lived and its representation. One interviewee, a local musician, related her uncanny feelings about the program and her desire to work for it to looking at a Beatles album: “You’re just looking around. It’s like when I saw the big protest march in the last episode, I just keep seeing all these people from different parts of my life. They were all there. They were all extras so I joked that it was kinda like looking at a Sergeant Pepper album cover, you know, to see all these people you recognize” (female, forty-seven, nonprofit worker and singer). Extras wanted to not only “be in it because everyone else is in it,” as one said, but to be remembered as having been in it with everyone. Extras merged the politics of their labor recognition with the politics of belonging to the city and its historical record.

Treme’s labor market and strategy for so many extras thus relied on larger processes of popular memorialization, which on this particular program, championed
the “super–New Orleanian” as the authentic representative of the city’s recent past. As proxies for the city’s local culture, extras were tasked with being in and engaging with the city in a way that others would see as authentic. According to one tour guide who did extra work during a slow period, this aspect of the job was hardly a burden: “One of the days I did extra work I was down on Frenchmen Street, which I go to all the time, and I went to the Spotted Cat [music club] and watched the Jazz Vipers. . . . Now [in season two] a lot of my buddies have been on the show, so chances are if I do it again, I’m going to hang out with them and get paid for it.” The proposition of getting paid to hang out takes a postmodern spin on the idea of labor, as if being an extra is not really working or somehow subverting real work. At the same time, it was where and with whom that imbued the extras with an exchange value in the first instance. Producers did not need the extras to do anything but hang around with others who could give credence to the authenticity claims for New Orleans as a particular kind of place, where people congregate every day in dark, musty alcoves animated by old-timey jazz riffs and refrains.

Beyond work on the set, the personal commitment on the part of avid viewers transformed extra work into a political project to do more hours and types of media labor off the set. Although production crews frequently refer to themselves as a “family,” in the case of the Treme, the city at large was often seen as part of an extended production family. Crew members volunteered themselves and solicited others to manage charity and thank-you events in some of the neighborhoods with heavy location shooting. In an era of compulsory volunteerism at work, many extras saw free labor as a way to build their social network in the film industry, while being recognized by others as a participant in Treme’s moral economy. Collecting Facebook likes and cheers of recognition at the bar screening consolidated the public meaningfulness of appearing on the show with a veneer of participating in the preservation of local culture. By equating being on set to hear some music with urban recovery, they could pretend that watching the show, being on the show, and then promoting the show through social networks would sustain other local circuits of cultural production.

Meanwhile, for some extras, familial tensions emerged. Not everyone could embody the kinds of authenticity sought by the program. A white university student hailing from the East Coast claimed she was picked immediately and placed prominently in the camera’s view, while many people of color with less capital were turned away. Conversely, extras reported that crews excluded white extras when producers decided that the location should be African American. These occurrences led to various conversations about the politics of race in the production versus the city. Although no one would argue that there are still many segregated spaces in the city, production decisions at times clashed with extras’ expectations of realism and truth-telling. Some of these conversations expressed bemusement, as if to reaffirm the extras’ local knowledge contra the creators. In one instance,
two white, middle-class retirees who had spent the day waiting with a crowd of hundreds for a restaging of a music festival pondered why the staff would have brought in buses of black, working-class school kids. Citing the increasingly unaffordable ticket prices and the overwhelmingly white audiences at the festival since Katrina, the interlocutors wondered privately if the decision was aspirational, a vision of how the festival should be populated. Other decisions about extras were more poignant, leading to hurt feelings when producers told extras that they did not belong in a restaging of a moment from their own lives.

If extras had a sense of the uncanny watching the show, they also had moments when their memories were edited for the screen. An extended example illustrates the disconnect on a production that attracted workers with a sense of connectedness. I met one of these super–New Orleanians at a public discussion on Treme that I led at a coffeehouse. She was a white woman in her fifties. I knew her from several moments in my own cultural repertoire in the city, and I knew that she knew much of the informal cultural economy portrayed in Treme. Her regular presence in the Treme neighborhood was also felt in public Treme screenings, which in the first season allowed non-HBO subscribers to see the program. Treme cast members and production personnel were known to drop in. After one powerful screening, the crew combed the crowd to enlist extras for an upcoming scene drawn from real events. The woman recalled telling the crew she was there the night Glen David Andrews was arrested. “[The producers] didn’t really believe it too much, you know. They thought that was kinda strange, but [one of the mothers of the band members] came out and said she was glad I was there. That meant more to me than the money.” Here the slight inflicted by the producers was recouped by another member of the crowd, a Treme viewer who was also a Treme resident. The incident illustrates the difficulties for extras who gave of themselves only to find that Treme did not reciprocate or took too much in return.

**CONCLUDING FUTURES?**

Despite the added compensation, both material and symbolic, that Treme provided its workforce, the production demanded a lot from its eager extras. In making the series speak to the worthiness of the city’s recovery and renewal, producers sought extras who could speak to New Orleanians and for New Orleanians. Extras had to be highly invested in those vernacular details that made up Treme’s carefully crafted mise-en-scène. The moral politics of recognition as a worker depended on whether extras could act both as referents and as bards for the place known as New Orleans. These roles could involve more labor, often for no payment, but they also raised the specter of reification when a musical number took front stage, leaving the performances of the extras in the background. In its most extreme formulation, the labor of being an extra could be framed as a gift,
which perhaps unavoidably led to hurt feelings when the gift was not recognized or reciprocated.

None of these aspects of extras’ labor are registered in the quantitative analyses of jobs produced by film tax credit policies. They do, however, add nuance to the terms local and labor, which motivated these policies as well as provided fodder for both political consensus and critiques. The strategies that production companies, such as Treme’s Fee Nah Nee, use to be more moral and just while holding the bottom line may ultimately result in other costs. If the production includes only individuals with enough free time to do the work, either paid or unpaid, then the policies cannot be said to be building toward sustainable economies. In fact, it could be that the presence of so many extras with entitlement helps drive down the day rates of those who lack the time or the proper social networks to be desirable employees in the future. At the same time, the role of production companies in promoting themselves as instruments of urban economic recovery merely furthers the notion that private companies are the best managers of the public good. In an era of endless crises—political and economic—it is worth remembering that film production companies’ reliance on cheap or free labor undermines the economic bases for public services that all workers need, such decent public schools, health care, and wages that bring the majority above the subsistence level. Until these needs are integrated more seamlessly into the New Orleans film economy, it will be no wonder if production companies continue to put their most marginal workers at the center of their most moral employment strategies.

NOTES


10. See, for example, Melissa Gregg, Work’s Intimacy (London: Polity, 2012).