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**The Sun Never Set Upon The Blues: Reading and Honouring Clyde Woods, November
2012**

**Bearing Witness: Mahalia Jackson and the Sanctified Bounce (for Clyde
Woods)**

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The everyday realities of New Orleans citizens prior to Hurricane Katrina stood in stark contrast to America's view of itself, particularly before the financial crisis that brought the world to the brink of economic collapse. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, nearly 20% of the city's 450,000 residents lived below the poverty line. Among the black residents in the city, about 30% of that population was below the poverty threshold - though the national average for black Americans was about 25%. The national poverty levels for all Americans was 12.7% in the year before Hurricane Katrina (see Simo 2008). The financial collapse had come to many in the city of New Orleans - and many more parts of the American South - well before September of 2008; hence the prescient nature of Young Jeezy's classic album *The Recession* (Def Jam), released only weeks before the financial crisis of 2008.

The musicians who toiled in New Orleans represented their unique cultures nationally and internationally. Their music was often a way to bear witness - to testify, if you will - on behalf of

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the city's people and their spirit of resistance. Though the sanitized image of one of those musicians - gospel legend Mahalia Jackson - stood in striking opposition to the decidedly secular, sexual, and profane sounds and images of New Orleans, Jackson's musical sensibilities, like those of many of her peers born and raised in the city, always bore witness to its spirit(s). This despite the efforts of Jackson's recording labels Decca and Columbia to contrive an image of 'Black Respectability' on her behalf. Add to this, the rhythms and melodies of New Orleans music are tied to basic issues of survival, as the livelihoods of many of New Orleans working class and working poor communities were and are inextricably tied to their roles as service workers in the tourism industry, of which the appeal of 'authentic' New Orleans music is critical.

For many with a regular, if not fully livable, wage, tourism was the city's primary industry, much of it related to the activities of the French Quarter and seasonal events like Mardi Gras, the Sugar Bowl, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and the occasional Super Bowl. In other words, for much of the year, some sections of New Orleans were little more than underdeveloped outposts - not of some so-called 'third world' nation but right in the United States. As Lynell Thomas writes, the city's tourist industry "invites white visitors to participate in a glorified Southern past. Black residents, if they appear at all in this narrative, appear as secondary characters who are either servile or exotic - always inferior to whites and never possessing agency over their own lives" (2008: 256). Thus perceptions of the black poor on display at the New Orleans Convention Center or in the Louisiana Superdome were framed by a national imagination that had historically viewed them as service workers or, at best, entertainers. In many ways, the coverage of Hurricane Katrina survivors functioned as little more than a national travelogue.

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In his essay 'On conjuring Mahalia: Mahalia Jackson, New Orleans and the sanctified bounce', Johari Jabir (2009) suggests that it was this very travelogue quality of New Orleans culture that led to Jackson's now signature performance in the film *Imitation of Life*. In the Douglas Sirk film, Jackson is featured performing 'Troubles of the world', a classic New Orleans funeral dirge. Citing Laurent Berlant's (2008) reading of *Imitation of Life*, Jabir (2009: 666) notes that Sirk deliberately framed Jackson's image as grotesque. The director described Jackson as a "large, homely, ungainly" woman when he witnessed her at a performance at UCLA, bringing to mind how ineffective Jackson's recordings were in controlling how white audiences read her. Indeed it was this grotesque image of blackness writ large that Sirk aimed to present as a means of highlighting, ironically, black humanity in the face of immense tragedy. As Jabir writes, "[w]hen Mahalia enters the film with her New Orleans dirge interpretation of 'Troubles of the world', we are reminded that, at any moment, centuries of historically repressed crying, 'weeping and wailing' buried deep in the souls of black folk, could erupt" (2009: 666).

In contrast to the kind of natural emotional release that Jabir himself bears witness to, the invocation of New Orleans cultural and musical history in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was more akin to regional branding. In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the levees in New Orleans, there were many high profile efforts to raise awareness about the cultural legacy of New Orleans. Many of those efforts centered on the exaltation of New Orleans jazz, with many events aimed at providing shelter and support for jazz musicians dispersed by the tragedy. New Orleans jazz seemed the most important resource to be protected in the months after Katrina, even more so than the people who made the city such a vital, important, and ever evolving cultural outpost. Lost in the focus on New Orleans jazz - arguably one of the nation's most important cultural exports - are other forms of musical expression that

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were and continue to be crucial to the survival and spirituality of New Orleans and its citizens, including those who have yet to return.

Though jazz was a critical component of black political discourse and intellectual development throughout the 20th century - jazz musicians like John Coltrane, Billie Holiday, Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln are some of the most resonate examples of creative intellectuals - New Orleans jazz is often depicted as being tethered to some imagined past, in which race relations and the power dynamics embedded in them were far more simplistic. Indeed, films like *The Princess and the Frog*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, and the television series *Treme* (despite its progressive political critiques) contribute to a nostalgic view that New Orleans jazz is a dated, static musical form that offers an 'authentic' alternative to more commercially viable forms of popular music like rap and R&B. Much of this has to do with the relationship between New Orleans jazz and the leisure and tourist industries that were so vital to the city's economy. In this context, mainstream desires to save New Orleans jazz and to protect its musicians are less about strengthening the links between jazz and black cultural resistance - a resistance that historically fermented in New Orleans - and more about maintaining the economic vitality of what Jabir (2009: 653) calls the "theater of tourism" in which black bodies are rarely thought of as citizens but laborers, servants and performers.

In his editor's introduction to *In the Wake of Hurricane Katrina: New Paradigms and Social Visions* (a special issue of *American Quarterly*), the late scholar Clyde Woods places New Orleans jazz in a much broader context, as part of what he has famously described as a "blues tradition of investigation" (2009: 429). As Woods notes in his essay, 'Katrina's World: Blues, Bourbon, and the return to the source', historically the city of New Orleans and the region was "latticed with resistance networks that linked enslaved and free blacks with maroon colonies

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established in the city's cypress forests swamps" (2009: 431). These traditions of resistance would manifest themselves after Emancipation and beyond in the form of "societies and benevolent associations; churches, second lines, pleasure and social clubs; brass bands, the Mardi Gras Indians" and of course New Orleans jazz (2009: 436). Two practices also linked to resistance in New Orleans are Bounce music and what Jabir (2009) refers to as 'sanctified swing', embodied in the genres of Rap music and Gospel respectively.

One piece of post-Katrina cultural expression that gives voice and presence of the kinds of resistance that Woods highlights is the documentary *Trouble the Water*, a film which troubles the national memory of places and spaces such as New Orleans. Indeed there's a haunting presence about *Trouble the Water*, a presence that is immediately felt by anybody who has had the chance to journey across the city of New Orleans in the past few years. While tourists retuning to downtown New Orleans and the French Quarter blandly commenting on the status of some of the city's more authentic haunts and the Lower 9th Ward continues to serve as the most lasting monument of the destruction, portions of the city remain a decidedly barren reminder of the vibrant living cultures that once existed in the city. Of course where there is no people, there is no culture, and the still slow pace of recovery in the city (despite nearly every scholarly organization finding reason to conference in the city) suggest that something more sinister might be in play. Nevertheless, if Hurricane Katrina offered the rationale for what might be the most contemporary example of ethnic cleansing in the United States, then the power of *Trouble the Water* comes from its brazen ability to summon the voices and spirits of those - who by force or choice - have *not* returned. As such *Trouble the Water* is a striking intervention, for a city that lacks the bodies - and the political wills that such bodies possess.

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Trouble the Water tells the story of Kim Roberts, a 24-year-old New Orleans resident and aspiring rapper, and her husband Scott. Roberts documents their experiences before and after the hurricane on a hand-held video camera. Produced in collaboration with Tai Leeson and Carl Deal, the very fact that the film exists speaks to the economic realities of so many Katrina survivors. As Roberts told *The Brooklyn Rail*, “We’d run out of money. We had about a hundred dollars left, and we was like, ‘We ought to try to see what we could do with this tape; we might find somebody we could give this tape to; well not give it, but either sell it, or license...you know, see what it’s worth’” (quoted in Cole 2008). Robert’s comments capture the DIY ethic that has informed much of a particular generation of hip-hop expression and also taps into more traditional African American sensibilities that can be best captured in the notion of ‘make a way out of no way’. If we think about survival as distinctly improvisational mode of navigating in the world, *Trouble the Water* finds its grounding by harnessing the rhythms of black improvisation via Robert’s audio and visual narration.

There is a telling scene early in the film, when Roberts walks the streets of New Orleans, alone, shortly before the storm, and sings to herself ‘On my own’ in reference to the Patti LaBelle recording. Seemingly a random utterance, the reference would have a particular resonance to African American audiences familiar with Labelle, who possesses iconic status in many black communities. Robert’s citation of Labelle speaks volumes about feelings of abandonment and isolation - which were always already present within the discourses of Black New Orleans in relation to the city and its built and natural environment. Mirroring the sampling practices of contemporary hip-hop, the film is littered with such references, offering audiences the possibility of gaining greater literacy in Black New Orleans culture and African American culture more broadly. In the same way, the Roberts’ family dog is named ‘Kizzy’ in reference to a popular character from the groundbreaking mini-series *Roots*. Within black vernacular expression, the

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term has been utilized as a metaphor for overburdened black women. In fact, Roberts' deployment of African American vernacular culture as part of the metaphorical shelter that she and her comrades construct in response to Hurricane Katrina helps establish Roberts as the most credible interlocutor in the film - despite her claims to the contrary early in the film when she refers to herself as a 'stupid bitch'. Roberts' use of black vernacular culture is akin to what Woods more formally describes as the “blues tradition of investigation and interpretation” (2005: 1008). According to Woods, “the blues began as a unique intellectual movement that emerged among desperate African American communities in the midst of the ashes of the Civil War, Emancipation, and the overthrow of Reconstruction” (*ibid.*). More specifically in the context of Roberts' narration, *Trouble the Water*, “draws on African American musical practices, folklore, and spirituality to reorganize and give a new voice to working class communities facing severe fragmentation” (*ibid.*).

Roberts' narration of *Trouble the Water* is also notable because it illuminates the gendered realities of Katrina survivors. That Roberts is an aspiring hip-hop artist, using rap music - a decidedly male-centered cultural space - as a vehicle to express the specificity of her life as a black woman, speaks to the extent that *Trouble the Water* succeeds in disturbing 'official' readings of black urban life. Though Roberts does not openly discuss some of the specific challenges faced by women survivors of Katrina, her visibility in the film's narrative allows for productive speculation about what exactly those challenges were. In New Orleans many black women head households as single mothers and were particularly vulnerable to the economic and physical displacement experienced by many Katrina survivors (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2005). In addition, issues of childcare and parenting, for a population typically overburdened by such, were made tragically more difficult. Kathleen Bergin (2006) suggests, though, that it was the submergence of sexualized violence disproportionately experienced by

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black women that particularly highlights the gendered dynamics of the storm. Ironically the circulation of false rumors about bands of black male rapists - directly related to the production of Katrina survivors as 'moral panic' - undermined what were legitimate cases of sexual violence and rape against black women. According to Bergin, “[t]o deny the violently sexualized reality of Katrina on account of previous false reporting only compounds the horror of the storm for both black men and black women” (2006: 539). Ultimately Bergin holds the state at fault for its failure to anticipate a well known phenomenon: “The reality of gender specific violence, particularly sexual assault, is so predictable during times of catastrophic upheaval that major human rights instruments that address the needs of refugees and displaced persons...presume a heightened risk to women” (2006: 547).

Though Roberts and her husband survive the hurricane (relatively speaking), *Trouble the Water* still serves as tribute to those who were lost in the storm and, I'd like to suggest the film serves as a kind of 'second line' performance - the parade of dancing, shuffling bodies that occurs, often after a funeral. According to musician Michael White, “at the time of their origin, these parades offered the black community an euphoric transformation into a temporary world characterized by free open participation and self expression through sound, movement and symbolic visual statements” (2008: 93). White adds that “impositions and limitations of ‘second class’ social status could be replaced by a democratic existence in which one could be or become things not generally open to blacks in the normal world: competitive, victorious, defiant, equal, unique, hostile, humorous, aloof, beautiful, brilliant, wild, sensual, and even majestic” (*ibid.*). As such *Trouble the Waters* serves as a critical intervention into a national memory that would rather ignore the cultural gifts that New Orleans gave the young country, the dead bodies that were sacrificed in the midst of catastrophic circumstances, as well as the possibility of rebirth that those bodies dispersed by Katrina and the floods embody.

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Mahalia Jackson knew a great deal about second lines. According to jazz historian Robert Marovich (2011), Jackson was “exposed to, fascinated by and, most assuredly a participant in the second line of New Orleans marching and funeral bands”. Though Jackson came to prominence in Chicago, the legendary gospel singer was born and raised in New Orleans’s Lower 9th Ward. Jabir suggests that one of the reasons Jackson is rarely thought about with regards to New Orleans has to do with “the ways the canon of New Orleans music is recognized exclusively through the lenses of blues and jazz” (2009: 649). More importantly Jabir (2009: 650) writes, the impact of New Orleans music on Jackson - what she called “a rhythm we held on to from slavery days” - allowed her to bring an element of 'swing' (associated with jazz) to the decidedly anti-secular gospel tradition of the mid-20th century.

Using the example of Jackson’s often-recalled performance of 'Didn’t it rain' at the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival (for which she was heavily criticized by the 'true believers'), Jabir suggests that Jackson’s performance of the song anticipates the Hurricane Katrina disaster that occurs more than thirty years after her death. Jabir is not so much suggesting that Jackson had the capacity to tell the future - though the history of the region might suggest otherwise - but that the 'sanctified swing' that marked her music and others like Duke Ellington (or Wynton Marsalis if you listen to *In This House, On This Morning*) is “a heartbeat, a pulse driven by a persistent rhythm” adding that “if music were a living organism, the pulse would hold the music steady, sustaining life in the midst of various rhythms” (2009: 655). Ultimately, according to Jabir, Jackson’s performance of 'Didn’t it rain' is a “tenacious hope that finds the singer describing the disaster, accepting it, and living in spite of it” (2009: 658) - a gift to those who would come well after Jackson who could grab hold to the 'sanctified swing' when faced with their own survival.

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Robert Marovich offers even more distinct connections between Jackson's New Orleans roots - or routes, if you will, to sample a bit from political scientist Richard Iton (2008). Marovich (2011: 55-56) specifically cites five such examples in the rhythmic pulse or 'bounce' of Jackson's music, her use of thematic variation and improvisation - what Amiri Baraka (1971) has classically called the changing same, Jackson's mode of attack - accenting the first note the way a jazz trumpeter might start a solo, the physicality of her performance, akin to the frenetic energy she witnessed during second-line celebrations, and finally her trafficking in black southern church vernacular.

Even less regarded by the mainstream consumers of New Orleans music is rap music, as most popularly represented by figures with regional ties such as Lil' Wayne, Juvenile, Master P, Mystical, and others. Yet Clyde Woods suggests that even hip-hop culture in New Orleans is an articulation of the 'blues tradition of investigation', particularly in the form of the regionally specific genre of bounce music. Woods connects bounce to earlier forms of New Orleans musical expression, as harkening back to "critiques of the plantation bloc found in the Calinda song and dance tradition perfected on Congo Square [the 'birthplace' of jazz] during the 18th century" (2009: 445). According to Matt Miller in his recent book *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans*, "[m]usically, bounce relied on tempi between 95 and 105 b.p.m. and multiple simple percussive patterns repeated within a cellular structure and combined in a layered, polyrhythmic structure and combined in a layered, polyrhythmic fashion" (2012: 90). As Miller further explains, "operating within a remarkably consistent cultural particularity, African Americans in New Orleans took the idea of rap and made it their own - a syncretic process of creolization and experimentation led to the emergence of [a] distinctive musical style and forms of identification" (2012: 3).

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As embodied in Kim Roberts and Mahalia Jackson, bounce simply became the latest iteration of New Orleans musical culture that bore witness to the realities - both tragic and celebratory - of the region. In her essay 'My FEMA people: Hip-hop as disaster recovery in the Katrina diaspora' Zenia Kish (2009) notes that as bounce created an autonomous New Orleans based riff on hip-hop, it informed hip-hop's responses to Katrina including Mia X's 'My FEMA people', 5th Ward Weebie's 'Fuck Katrina (the Katrina song)' and The Legendary K.O.'s now famous 'George Bush doesn't care about black people'. Though mainstream rap artists like Jay Z, Lil' Wayne, Kanye West, Mos Def, and Juvenile ('Get your hustle on'), offered responses to Katrina, Kish suggests that tracks like those from Mia X and 5th Ward Weebie offered a "collective first-person perspective" of the "frustrations, humiliations, and pleasures grounded in specifically local knowledge of the multiple socioeconomic disasters that intersected with Katrina" (2009: 675). Not surprisingly in the aftermath of Katrina, some of the most visible bounce artists were the so-called 'sissy rappers' - proponents of a styles known as 'sissy bounce' and most personified in the figures of Big Freedia and Katey Red (both black men in drag), who not only continue to offer specific gendered frames on bearing witness to post-Katrina New Orleans, but highlight the role of drag, more broadly, when one considers the elaborate costuming that accompanies the carnival-esque nature of public culture in New Orleans.

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