The Wire

RACE, CLASS, AND GENRE

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EDITORS

for the family hero, Lynn Shapiro Macy,
and for Nancy

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The Wire and Its Readers

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What is *The Wire* to American culture? What work does it perform? Which actions, which actors, does it set into motion? Which discourses and practices are channeled, challenged, or stabilized by this television series?

Such questions, though hardly esoteric, were rarely asked in early analyses of *The Wire*. Instead, the importance of this text—the importance of its arrival on American screens and the importance of its aesthetic innovations—was taken for granted by most writers. Early commentators on *The Wire* treated such questions as if they were already answered or their answers only in need of exemplifying confirmation. Much was certain before the various "studies" set out to do their work of explication, even as the show was still running. *The Wire*, one could read, revolutionizes American television with dense storytelling. It paints an uncompromising image of the institutional, economic, and racial dimensions of inner-city decline. In painstaking detail and epic breadth, it brings to light what the American media have so far kept in the dark. It formulates a sophisticated indictment of postindustrial capitalism. It critiques the state of a nation that thinks it can afford to ignore these harsh realities. In a word, *The Wire* is "the best television show ever."

How did everyone know?

By watching *The Wire*, no doubt. But what does that mean? When Jacob Weisberg, in his influential *Slate* article on September 13, 2006, called *The Wire* "surely the best TV show ever broadcast in America," he (and other commentators making similar assessments at the time) did not, properly speaking, initiate this topos.[1] True, a look at the first

published reactions to *The Wire* reveals that journalism and the blogosphere were influential in setting the tone and agenda of many subsequent academic discussions (probably indicating the growing alignment of both spheres, not least in the shrinking time available in either for written reactions).[2] But before any so-called external observer ever offered an interpretation of the series, the series did so itself—and not only in the sense of providing an occasion for exegetic follow-up, simply by being itself, but in the more active sense of producing self-descriptions that have steered its cultural work and activated narrative practices outside its textual boundaries.

The following chapter is part of a longer essay that discusses (1) the ways in which *The Wire* has been reading itself, (2) the ways in which Anglo-American scholars have been reading *The Wire*, and (3) the ways in which serial self-descriptions and critical practices have been interacting within the larger system of American (popular) culture. The present volume reproduces the second section of this larger work. Altogether, I argue that *The Wire*'s aesthetics and its academic reception fulfill mutually dependent functions within an overarching sphere of national auto-reference. A brief summary of the first section ("Serial Self-Descriptions") serves to explain why I refer to *The Wire* as a serial text that comprises both the television narrative of the same title and the public discourses accompanying it.

Serial Self-Descriptions

Can a text read itself? Can a text read anything? Not like an intentional person, for sure, but then the question can be turned around: How many texts, how many readings, are present in a person's intentions? And is their presence not an active one—one that produces further dealings and motions? Who is acting when a writer "follows" an aesthetic decision she has made? Effective in that decision, as in its consequences, are always other agencies, some far removed from the person acting, some not known to her, some not even human.

I am, of course, advocating a concept of agency as developed and employed in actor-network theory.[3] With regard to a television series—inevitably multiauthored, produced and consumed in many-layered systems of responsibility and performance, always dependent on the material demands of its technological medium—it seems particularly

appropriate to think of agency (and certainly authorship) as something dispersed in a network of people, institutions, technologies, objects, and forms.

So, yes, a text can read itself, especially if it is a serial text. Personal vision and intentional choices are no doubt of consequence in serial storytelling, as are copyrights and proper names, but a television series is never authored by any *one* writer, producer, or even company. There are many reasons for this, among them the fact that serial publication by definition overlaps with serial reception. A series, unlike a finished oeuvre, can observe its own effects on audiences as long as the narrative is running. Moreover, it can react to these observations, making adjustments in form and content, just as audiences can become active in a narrative's development if the narrative is still unfolding—if it is a serial narrative, that is. The commercial framework of such transactions further complicates our established distinctions between production and reception, authors and readers, intentions and objects.[4]

Thus, instead of proceeding from the assumption that *The Wire* is "David Simon's *The Wire*" or "HBO's *The Wire*," we can ask how the show came to be perceived this way—and what the practical (that is, action-bound) consequences of such perceptions are in terms of its relation to itself, to its viewers, and ultimately to the larger cultural system from which it draws and to which it contributes. As befits a work-net of agencies—and as befits a commercial series—*The Wire* is busy describing itself at different levels of public discourse, setting in motion different actors and deploying different textual modes.[5] For one thing, paratextual commentaries by producers (of whatever status), in interviews or on DVD special features, suggest how the series wants to be read. Moreover, *The Wire* already interprets itself in its narrative and the very act of telling a story. In fact, any popular series is forced to keep creating identities in reaction to understandings and ascriptions brought forth by its continued existence. To the extent that a long run keeps involving ever more actors in the narrative—or keeps enlisting ever more involved actors—the boundaries between text and paratext are in need of constant revision if a series wants to maintain control of its public actions.[6]

The larger work from which this chapter is taken delineates three identities constructed by *The Wire* for itself: its institutional identity (as an HBO Original Series), its artistic identity (as journalistic fiction),
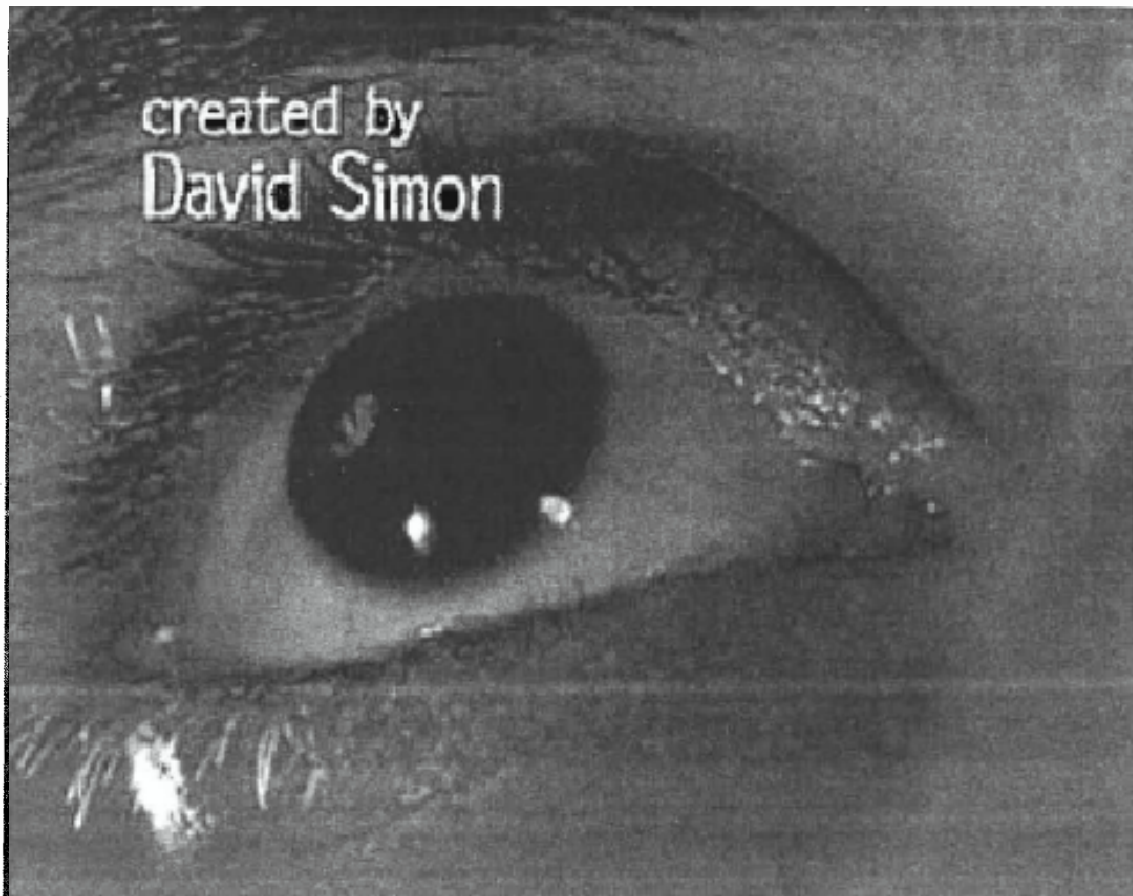
An image from the opening credit sequence of *The Wire*

and its narrative identity (as a complex serial). A few points on these issues:

1. *The Wire*'s identity as an HBO Original Series is characteristically conflicted. The series takes care to distance itself visually, atmospherically, and by other means from shows such as *The Sopranos* or *Deadwood*, even as it profits from institutional and artistic associations with these "complex" series.[7] Thus, in text and paratext *The Wire* repeatedly claims that it does not compete with other quality productions on American television, including HBO's own, but rather transcends the medium of commercial television altogether. To underline this point, the show resolutely foregrounds its economically counterintuitive decision to tell a story largely centered on the black underclass of a city as unglamorous as Baltimore. The implicit contention that this is "not TV" (while other HBO shows supposedly are, despite their channel's slogan) is not entirely wrong; many people working on the series are re-

ally from Baltimore and many are really television outsiders. But what does that mean? I suggest we approach *The Wire*'s claim of maverick authenticity, not as a matter of fact nor as a false pretense that hides other motives, but as an action tied into other actions. Just as the conspicuous display of local knowledge by David Simon and other personnel lends credibility to the show's aesthetic operations, so the show's credibility and aesthetics give incentive and guidance to the ways Simon and others can present and understand themselves as Baltimoreans. This circuit of actions is not restricted to industrial producers; it continues in public and academic responses to *The Wire*, where the local credentials of those who speak—that is, the questions: where are you from? what do you know? what have you seen? and so on—gain significance and channel further doings.[8]

2. The show's widespread description of itself as, in essence, a piece of literature is equally ambiguous. On the one hand, *The Wire* pays tribute to novelistic forebears and profits from their prestige and aesthetics. The model in question is not so much the social realism of Dickens and Balzac—notwithstanding public declarations to the contrary—but literary naturalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[9] Many ruling assumptions of the series, such as its appreciation of scope and precision in representation, its fascination with the lower classes, and above all its belief in the priority of environment over character, derive from (American) naturalism's philosophical investment in scientism, antigentility, and determinism. On the other hand, *The Wire* confronts the naturalistic novel as a contestant, trying not only to live up to its example but to supplant it. Thus, the show repeatedly claims that it *uses* fiction in the service of factual reportage.[10] *The Wire* is deeply confident that privileged access and sustained attention to the underside of urban life guarantees accuracy of coverage. This is a reporter's confidence in the transparency of social reality; the aspiration is to capture unfamiliar life by sheer force of local knowledge. Such an ethos strongly tends to identify reality with what is hidden away from view, while viewers are offered the gratification of feeling like insiders themselves: to join the few who have seen the show, or seen it first, or shared its knowledge, or shared it most knowingly.

3. A pervasive topos in descriptions of *The Wire* holds that everything that happens in the narrative is somehow "connected" and "remembered," suggesting that all events follow the rules of a complicated

but coherent plot or "game." Of course, memory is a mechanism of retrospective selection, so it is quite challenging to imagine a narrative in which all happenings were actually remembered. And true, like any series, *The Wire* creates many of its effects of unity retroactively, by taking up and explaining clues introduced earlier. This is not to minimize the range and sophistication of unity-building devices in *The Wire*. But we can view the show's interest in enacting the identity of a complex "serial" (rather than a sprawling "series") as conflict-ridden. Even in its self-contained, crypto-novelistic structures—most notably in its canon-bound materialization as a closed DVD set, complete with modes of storytelling that count on exactly such a type of distribution and reception—*The Wire* generates evolving structures with a vested interest in reproduction: a "series" playing a "serial" (in the industry definition of these terms). Continuation is the name of the game, not just organization. Or put differently: The show's investment in the organization of complexity is inevitably bound up with the complications of serial proliferation.[11] While aiming for the status and the practices of a unified oeuvre, the series thus remains structurally geared toward its own return and multiplication. Bringing to the flow of television the concentration and slowdown of self-contained works—and this with notable success—*The Wire* cannot help but engage in incessant movements forward and outward.

If one privileges *The Wire*'s journalistic idea of itself, all of this can be explained as strategy; that is, as the necessary practice of fiction enhancing the effectiveness of sociological reportage. I propose, however, that seriality is a major force in the cultural work of *The Wire*. To understand what this show is *doing*—to understand what it contributes to the culture it draws from—and to understand why it has become the darling of contemporary American (media) studies, its momentous serial agency needs to be taken into account. In more abstract terms: the performance of complexity in (and by) *The Wire* amounts to paradoxically repeated attempts at narrative totalization. Not only in its uneasy (initial) identity as a police procedural, the show hopes to render uniform a dense and multilayered structure in which "all the pieces matter."[12] As a series, too, it provides comforting reductions of the narrative complexities it has produced, and produced for the explicit purpose of organizing and reducing them.[13] Finally, in terms of subject matter, *The Wire* is busy organizing the intricacies and entanglements of the

neoliberal city at the beginning of the twenty-first century into recognizable patterns—patterns that can be serially reproduced in follow-up narratives, stories within and without the serial text, political convictions, ideological positions, rallying cries of identification. *The Wire* makes followers.

Hetero-descriptions

Serial stories, with their feedback loops of production and reception, are force fields of connection. They activate practices and mobilize practitioners far beyond their textual bounds. Thus, in turning now to academic discussions of *The Wire*, my point is not that scholarship merely repeats the show's images of itself but that it continues the conflicts present in these images into national arenas of self-identification.

Of course, to read public readings of *The Wire* as active within the narrative's own cultural work complicates many of the certainties put forward by the series and its observers. This, however, is not meant as a way of "exposing" scholarship's "complicity" in this or that ideological hazard of *The Wire*. Rather, I wish to track how American (media) studies participate in the activities of their objects—or, more ambitiously put: how American (media) studies and American (media) practices act as interdependent forces of a larger cultural system called American culture.

Why this stress on America? It is a fact well known but worth repeating that scholars of contemporary texts are always doing more than simply analyzing those texts, especially when they operate within and on the same environment as their texts—which is the case when Americanists from the United States produce knowledge about America. Whatever else their goals and results, these types of study are always also acts of cultural self-description—and they can be analyzed as such, to trace dependencies between a culture's knowledge and performance of itself, ideally from a perspective not directly contributing to such self-identifications.[14]

The question, then, is not simply why *The Wire* has generated so much admiration among academic commentators, but which shapes this admiration takes, which transactions it stimulates, which debates and assurances it enables. Needless to say, few of the positions identified in the following can be attributed unambiguously to single contri-

butions that would contain no other dispositions. But there are some pervasive trades between *The Wire* and its readings in the United States and other English-speaking countries. (The divergences between U.S. and non-U.S. analyses will be discussed at the end of this chapter.) I distinguish the following moves: competitive duplication, downward identification, activist concern, upward recognition, and analytical dislocation.

Duplication

In its thematic selections and interpretive interests, English-language scholarship on *The Wire* is to a large degree dependent on prior discussions in the press and on the Internet. These journalistic discussions, in turn, exhibit a pronounced tendency to duplicate isolated self-descriptions of the show, relying on David Simon's interviews, HBO public relations material, and other journalistic pieces. Such circularity certainly reflects the time pressures of daily text production. But self-reinforcing as these communications are, they do not simply repeat the show's interests. Rather, they *speed up* its cultural activities. By condensing discordant aesthetic identities into easily reproducible meanings and quick formulas (such as "televised novel," "complexity," "authenticity"), they may decrease their object's aesthetic density, but what *The Wire* loses in terms of experiential wealth it gains in terms of public effectiveness. Commonplaces culled from the show's repertoire of identifications give currency to its text, turning it into a versatile object of public exchange.

At first glance, it would seem inappropriate for scholarship to engage in this kind of reductionism. It would seem more fitting to trace the show's simultaneous buildup and diminution of complexity rather than to perpetuate auto-references with regard to only one side of the equation. But then, studies of popular culture are by definition confronted with a confusing array of daily growing material. They are continually challenged to bring informational order to such proliferation. Often working as archivists of the present, scholars of commercial culture are under an obligation to document "what is out there"—which can result in analyses that read like consumer reports with a cultural studies vocabulary.

Even so, when academic publications (under which category I in-

clude everything published with an affiliation to institutions of higher learning) duplicate statements from the show's paratexts, they often transform them into statements of fact or treat them as if they were results of analysis. Sometimes quoting David Simon verbatim, without always acknowledging or realizing they are doing so, contributions maintain that "In *The Wire* there is no such thing as good and evil as clear-cut moral categories," "The structure of the programme itself is that of an epic novel," "[*The Wire* is] a modernized and American version of Greek Tragedy," and "Simon was writing a televised novel, and a big one."[15] In particular, statements about the complexity of *The Wire* have taken on a mantra-like quality, paradoxically draining the term "complexity" of complexity.[16]

Such reductive duplications help to assimilate *The Wire* in a more or less fixed manner to public and scholarly convictions, many of them perpetuating the show's own narratives and attachments. In this way, competing (political, epistemological, even theological) positions can deploy *The Wire* as an exemplification of their own assumptions and beliefs. The serial text is turned into an intermediary for public contest, a stable currency for dissimilar purchases: *The Wire*, we read, "illuminates," "embodies," "reveals," "harmonizes with" ideas of critical pedagogy, urban development theory, "theoretical conceptions of black masculinity," libertarian conservatism, "Marx's critical engagement with primitive accumulation," "Catholic teaching in the 20th century [and] readings from church documents," Paul Tillich's "structure of hope," human resource management, and "the roles and behaviours of managers in the UK's National Health Service."[17]

Sociological and ethnographic approaches in particular have absorbed the series' claims to realism, attempting sociological or ethnographic analyses less than they are using *The Wire* to illustrate their own methods and results. In fact, the majority of examples quoted above are taken from the collection *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* and the conference "*The Wire* as Social Science Fiction?" organized by the Leeds Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change in the UK. Both ventures declare that they are interested in the connections of *The Wire* to the social sciences, especially urban sociology. However, with a few telling exceptions, contributors understand such connections not in terms of mutual dealings between the series and urban sociology (texts contextualizing each other) but in terms of the show's use-value *for*

urban sociology. The ruling assumption is that there exists a sociohistorical background of facts that is represented—reported, in fact—in the show's surface narrative. Hence, *The Wire* can be employed as a convenient shortcut to observing social life in action: "a useful visual tool for . . . criminologists," "the best ethnographic text on the US today," or even "an illustrative example of the kind of non-fictional case study that social scientists might ideally aspire to."[18]

This last description is interesting for the chiasmus it performs. If I understand the argument correctly, it likens *The Wire* to a veritable case study of social life, while the show's narrative power is held up as a model for sociological writing. Unwittingly, such acceptance of *The Wire*'s documentary pretenses highlights the fictional base of many social science accounts—especially in the United States, it should be added, where these accounts are in intense competition for public attention and political relevance. The actual exchanges between sociology and *The Wire*, which are visible in such publications, invite investigation into the narrative dimension of sociological knowledge production itself.

For the actors involved, however, such mutuality mostly serves as a source of embarrassment, judged by the compulsive way in which they return to the fiction/fact dynamics and try to collapse one term into the other. When William J. Wilson and Anmol Chaddha taught *The Wire* in a sociology class at Harvard—a move guaranteed to draw some public attention—they explained their motivation as follows: "[Teaching about] urban inequality . . . we get some help from Bodie, Stringer Bell, Bubbles, and others. . . . [*The Wire*] shows ordinary people making sense of their world."[19] Such sociological interest in the show's realism conflicts with the show's identity as a television series in at least two ways: Stringer Bell and Omar are hardly "ordinary," nor are they "people." To be able to treat them like people, that is, to use television series as "new fictional sources," sociologists and ethnographers have to explain the text's practice of storytelling as insignificant for their research interests.[20] Strategies to do so include talking about fiction not as a set of multiauthored social acts but as a finished, onetime *translation* of reality into a textual medium;[21] conceding that *The Wire* is fiction, but then proceeding as if it were not (summarizing plotlines as evidence of what is wrong with municipal politics, talking about Carcetti as if he was the real mayor of a real city, and so on);[22] taking up David Simon's sugges-

tion that narrative is a *tactic* in the service of social reportage;[23] claiming that the show is reflexively "blurring the boundaries" between fact and fiction, but concluding that in doing so it establishes some kind of "superior story" that weds the emotive force of narrative to the authenticity of documentation.[24]

These uses of *The Wire* single out specific self-descriptions at the expense of others, mostly drawing on the show's journalistic identity as promoted by Simon. On the one hand, this attests to the text's cultural force, its ability to contribute to ongoing social debates. On the other hand, the activities of the series are limited to those that can be easily assimilated to the reader's own chosen sphere of action. In principle, there is nothing wrong with that; one can always legitimize such limitation as a matter of research interest and focus. But the text's other activities will not be put to rest. What is more, they carry on *within* the exclusions of such allegorical readings, opening them in turn for (self-) investigation and ultimately challenging the scientific range of methods unable or unwilling to engage in such investigation. A sociologist who excludes the agency of fiction from her understanding of American society—or an Americanist who regards TV narratives as illustrative mirrors rather than influential makers of American culture—will almost certainly produce insufficient knowledge, and unnecessarily so. In the end, to duplicate *The Wire*'s claims to realism serves to confirm what a discipline already knows about reality. Such duplications invite questions about the culture-making force of fiction itself: questions about where the prior knowledge that guides these observations actually comes from.

Downward Identification

If some of the readings quoted above appear more plausible than others, this is because they stay close to what is already known about the series. Transforming auto-references into external observations, they exhibit a strong tendency towards self-confirmation, both concerning an observer's explicitly held convictions and the veracity of public knowledge in general. Have local witnesses repeat often enough that *The Wire* looks exactly like Baltimore and this will become a matter of experiential fact even for people who have never visited the city or lived in it.

However, stories mobilize not only knowledge but also sentiments.

They are forces of conviction and identification alike, able to substantiate what is already held but also to bring near what is emotively distant (or to configure what they bring near as new feelings). In this regard, one of the main achievements of *The Wire* is how it inverts entrenched routines of racial representation on American television. Featuring a majority of African American characters (rather than the token ethnic representative typical of American ensemble casts), arranging them over a wide social spectrum of shifting moral properties (rather than focusing on one class and affirming middle-class values even in depictions of the urban poor), and portraying members of the black underclass as individualized subjects of ambiguous actions (rather than objects of police work or sentimental victims), the show is engaged in a "de-centering of whiteness" unusual in contemporary popular entertainment.[25]

Some critical discussions are content to register this politics of representation and to approve its motives. More accept the show's invitation to identify with its underclass characters and continue the emotive work of *The Wire* into scholarship. Only a few contributions raise questions about this type of identification, and when they do, it is usually to stress their own privileged association with the social world presented or to distance themselves from what they perceive as illegitimate appropriations.

In all these cases, the affiliation of academic scholars with inner-city characters exhibits strong traits of downward identification, no matter the ethnic or social origin of the writer in question. In fact, most scholars are acutely aware of their present remoteness from the world shown in *The Wire* and, significantly, perceive it as a deficit to be explained, excused, or neutralized. This puts them under constant pressure to state their own relations to a (representation of) social reality explicitly removed from their own.

Alignment between reader and characters can be achieved in a number of ways. One rare example, published in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, selects a particular figure (Omar) and sets him up as a model that can be emulated in situations socially distant but ideally close to the daily struggles of middle- and upper-class biographies: "we Omar wannabes" can draw on this "free spirit . . . who live[s] unconcerned with what others expect" in order to fight our own "unending battle with the *status quo*."[26] At the other end of the spectrum are descrip-

tions that turn characters more or less openly into *objects of desire,* as in a gay reading that applauds the show's "eroticization of the hood."[27]

To understand why the series is able to push the boundaries of narrative into ever wider fields of public practice, it is important to see how its emotive offerings encourage readers to write themselves into the story and to publicly behave like characters of the show. Not a few scholars simulate closeness to their favorite fictional gangsters and junkies by reproducing their slang in the middle of critical analysis, freely quoting from their sayings, or referring to them like old acquaintances—which for all practical purposes, as serial characters, they are. Another, more powerful, strategy is to establish one's autobiographical credentials as an African American, Baltimorean, former member of the proletariat, minority speaker, or other identity , all the while reproducing the show's insistence that privileged access yields authentic knowledge (not "where you're at" counts but "where you're from").[28]

Accordingly, at the 2009 conference in Leeds, the participants from Baltimore were scheduled early in the program. Similarly, the collection *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television,* after gently cautioning against the "documentary fallacy" in the volume's introduction, offers as its first contribution the memoir of a former inhabitant of Baltimore's Eastside, now a published poet and holder of an endowed chair of English, who reminisces about the people that inspired leading gangland characters in *The Wire.* He creatively refers to them by their fictional names: "[Proposition] Joe and I were attending junior high school at the same time. We might have known each other . . . When Omar was a young teenager in the mid-1980s . . . I was a blue-collar worker in the city before going off to Brown University's creative writing program."[29] Carrying on the serial narrative into his recollections of the city, the writer thus includes himself in the fictional story-world ("Proposition Joe and I")—a move that draws attention both to the lived relevance of *The Wire*'s urban representations and to the operations of fiction in any sort of temporal self-identification.

According to the same logic, self-consciously white writers can name themselves as such, admitting that their attitude to the show is guided by a need for "sharing" and calling this need "white" (but then quoting "my friend Winston," presumably an African American, to authenticate the speaker's position).[30] In another turn, self-consciousness

about self-consciousness can yield irony, as in Christian Lander's—not exactly scholarly but obliquely critical—inclusion of *The Wire* in *Stuff White People Like,* a compendium of taste more revealing about class-bound and national embarrassments than ethnic ones.[31] This confessional mode is not restricted to American writers who identify as members of larger groups in order to tap into—or mock—the show's group-intensive gratifications; it easily crosses national borders, at least into other English-speaking countries.[32]

Evidently, all these identifications are dependent on the assumption that *The Wire* paints an accurate picture of race and class in Baltimore and, by extension, America. The series itself stresses its documentary credentials by reminding viewers again and again that single events are based on "true stories" "heard by" Simon (the truth of the story residing exactly in the fact that it was heard by, and most probably told to, a reporter).[33] Casting policy, too, provides much-publicized proof of credibility. Not only are approximately 65 percent of the cast black, but many characters are actually played by amateurs from Baltimore, some of them real-life inspirations for other parts, some of them "real gangsters," in that revealing conjunction of reality and outlaw existence popular in American storytelling.[34] The two most famous correlations between Baltimore people and serial figures are convicted murderer Felicia "Snoop" Pearson playing the character of Snoop, and the marriage of Don Andrews (reportedly a model for Omar) and Fran Boyd (a former junkie and informant for Simon's *The Corner*), described in one academic article as "a real-life fulfillment of the promise the series at times presents to the viewer."[35] In striking contrast, three leading characters, McNulty, Stringer Bell, and Tommy Carcetti, are played by English and Irish actors who first had to learn how to speak with a Baltimore accent.

These eye-catching "blurrings" of the fact/fiction divide are frequently read as reflexive gestures, in which the series "raises some issues surrounding the notions of performance, authenticity, and 'otherness.'"[36] However, in terms of their foreignness to Baltimore, there is little self-reflection in Dominic West's performance of McNulty and none in Idris Elba's of Stringer Bell or Aidan Gillen's of Carcetti. On the contrary, the naturalistic styles of these actors significantly reinforce the show's feel of realism. More interesting than their nationality, then, is the reason why they were selected in the first place. Simon says he switched to British players for the parts of McNulty and Stringer Bell

because all Americans who auditioned for the roles had watched too many American cop shows and copied them in their performances.[37]

This is a revealing statement and it rhymes with *The Wire*'s media philosophy. To a large degree, the show's effect of authenticity depends on canceling the presence of American television from its representational identity. To make a convincing case for realism, *The Wire* has to subtract its own (medium's) activities from the social world it depicts. In this sense, to have a gangster played by an actor unspoiled by American television corresponds with the decision to represent Baltimore's social reality as one in which television plays no part. *The Wire* treats its viewers to a world in which cops and criminals are blissfully ignorant of, and thoroughly uninfluenced by, the ways cops and criminals behave on TV—a supposition actually shared with most conventional television drama: realism at the expense of realistic (self-)representation.[38]

Unlike many of its HBO competitors, then, *The Wire* has remarkably little to say about television. Apart from a few inside jokes that serve to underline its distance from both traditional series and other quality programs (when a gangster prefers network fare to *Deadwood* or when another points to the self-referential absurdity of *Dexter*), watching television does not feature as a social practice in the series. When the media finally do play a role in season 5, the question is typically one of representation versus misrepresentation; the final season suggests that the decline of journalism is epitomized by reporters making things up. The underlying assumption is that the media convey reality, either correctly or incorrectly. Since *The Wire*'s own claims to realism are strongly tied to the notion of accurate translation, the show has no interest in treating the media, and hence itself, as actively shaping the things they represent.[39]

It is interesting to note that such discrepancies have led one sociologist to invite "real thugs" to watch the show with him—and write about it in a nine-part article series for the Freakonomics blog linked on the *New York Times* website. Sudhir Venkatesh's experiment and its rhetoric deserve an analytical essay of their own. I shall restrict my remarks to saying that the gangsters' engagement with *The Wire*, as filtered through Venkatesh (a former student of William J. Wilson), points at once to the idealized nature of the series' narrative and to the ways in which this narrative mobilizes emotionally charged self-performances among those reportedly represented.[40] The self-described "rogue soci-

ologist" looks on to report dangerous knowledge gleaned from the show and "a group of gangland acquaintances," now operating as if in unison as a collective actor. Noting that *The Wire* "accorded with my own fieldwork in Chicago and New York," Venkatesh claims that watching it with "a few respected street figures" is the best way "to ensure quality control." Confirming the results of fieldwork through fieldwork on his informants' reactions to what he takes to be an illustrative version of these results, Venkatesh winds up suspended between amused monitoring and representations of toughness that surpass even *The Wire*'s claims to brutal authenticity. Dutifully reminding his informants that it is only a TV show (when one of their favorite characters is killed) does not get him out of this tautological round—perhaps the problem is in the word "only"—but further into it: "I was thrown a "f—k you" stare that only men with deep knowledge of hand-to-hand combat could give."[41] Deep knowledge about a rough existence: Venkatesh's rhetoric marks downward identification as a dead serious matter.

Activist Concern

Among academic readings of *The Wire*, there is one small group that deviates from the generally admiring tone of scholarship. These contributions largely share the show's interest in reportage but question its correctness and effects. Assessing the series against the background of its own critique of capitalism, they hold that *The Wire* does little to mend or counteract the social conditions it so forcefully condemns.

The first sustained—and, to date, most nuanced—formulation of this argument appeared not in a scholarly article but in a 2008 essay published by Michael Bowden in *The Atlantic*. Bowden quotes Yale sociologist Elijah Anderson, author of studies such as *Code of the Streets*, *Streetwise*, and *A Place on the Corner*, who called the series "an exaggeration. I get frustrated watching it." Bowden concurs: "[Simon's] political passions ultimately trump his commitment to accuracy or evenhandedness." Taking up Anderson's diagnosis of "a bottom-line cynicism" in *The Wire*, he describes the series as "relentlessly . . . bleak."[42]

Remarkably, this critique, too, draws on one of the show's auto-referential topoi, if disapprovingly so. The term "bleak," habitually reproduced after Bowden's article to mark the series' more disillusioned

aspects, calls to mind—and was probably inspired by—Charles Dickens's *Bleak House,* one of the major references for the show's literary ambitions. Similarly, some scholars complain about the "fatalism" of social vision in *The Wire,* acknowledging the text's self-definition as Greek tragedy updated for postmodern times.[43] Almost all these readings accept David Simon as the authoritative source of textual meaning (in the case of Bowden explaining central features of the narrative as results of the author's mental conflicts). Altogether, they function like special cases of the sociological duplications described above, singling out separate images of the series, accelerating them in public discourse, but this time not to ally themselves with them but to formulate distinct counternarratives.

Counternarratives have a way of illuminating deep-seated contradictions of the stories they are written against. In this, they can be sharp tools of analysis.[44] At the same time, to tell a story with the explicit purpose of proving another story wrong usually presupposes commitments of a more systematic kind than expressed even by the term "conviction." Such dedicated critiques are often spoken from the position of exceptionally strong and extensive obligations, like a religious faith or a formalized political ideology: supernarratives that confront other texts not only with an impulse of integrating them but as direct rivals in world-explanation. Thus, to complain that the society presented in *The Wire* is "irredeemable"—a key term among concerned activists—means to hold a vision, and probably a plan, of social redemption.[45] In its more pragmatic form, focused on concrete troubles in concrete localities, this type of critique combines praise for *The Wire*'s ability to "raise awareness" with indictment of its failure "to offer any understanding that the problems facing cities and the urban poor are *solvable.*"[46]

It is a normative project, both in its doctrinaire and its reformist shape. These readings would want to *change* the text. "What is needed," one critic writes, is to take up "the moral appeal of [Simon's] tragic argument" but employ it for "additional engagements" and "affirmative articulations of political and social problems capable of transforming the tragic conditions of the city."[47] Ultimately, this amounts to blaming the series for what it is, advocating not just different or more critical readings but hoping for different narratives to replace it. Again, there is nothing wrong with that; it is an incentive to cultural production. But as scholarship, these readings sometimes show little interest in inves-

tigating the real work done by a real narrative. At their most extreme, they reduce actions to an agenda. Their continuation of the series is instrumental, often attempting to discontinue what they see as its harmful effects.

Small wonder, then, that activist accounts approach textual structures in a decidedly selective manner. They note, correctly, that the final episode shows social roles reproducing themselves "fatalistically" through new agents (Michael takes Omar's position, Dukie becomes a second Bubbles, Sydnor replaces McNulty) but ignore that McNulty and Bubbles "go home" in the end, and how this has prompted many a commentator to describe the finale as highly satisfying and life affirming. One viewer's bleakness is another viewer's hope. But it is possible to ask how such discrepancies can exist at all, how the narrative enables these dissimilar effects, and what the co-presence of closure and continuation tells us about the serial text, its cultural doings, and the culture it helps sustain.

While activist readings challenge the accuracy of *The Wire*—an "exaggeration," says Anderson; no community activists, no black working class in this fictional Baltimore, say others[48]—they accord with the case-study approach of Williams and Venkatesh in excluding the productivity of mass-media storytelling from their notion of social reality. Consider that the inversion of racial and hetero-normative stereotypes in and by *The Wire* already has an activist dimension. Designing an openly homosexual outlaw character like Omar may not be a feat of social realism, but it is a forceful intervention in the representational customs of American television.[49] This is true for many characterizations and constellations in *The Wire*: they work on existing social practices. To ignore this means to regard these practices not as practices at all but as handy symbols of social realities to which they are true or not.

In turn, concerns about the activist value of *The Wire* have affected the show's self-understanding, probably even before they were first voiced by external observers. The makers of *The Wire* are, by necessity, highly sensitive to charges of social irresponsibility, because the uniqueness of their product rests to a large extent on its claims of political dissent. For Simon, something even more personal is at stake, as season 5's thinly veiled attacks on Bill Marimow and John Carroll, senior editors of the *Baltimore Sun,* have backfired into a debate about different types of journalism. At heart, this debate is about effective

and ineffective forms of social commitment. The *Columbia Journalism Review*, interviewing both sides, pointedly concludes that there is indeed a difference "between Simon's broad sociological approach and the rifle-shot approach taken by Carroll and Marimow, and rewarded all over the country by the Pulitzer board: the latter approach demonstrably affects—possibly even saves—individual lives."[50]

Perhaps the tenacity with which *The Wire*, despite its proclaimed boredom with moral dichotomies, takes sides against bad institutions, bad corporations, bad superiors, bad elites, and bad Emmy committees, compensates for a feeling of comparative futility. As if hoping for a purpose that would channel the diffuse serial proceedings of their creation into more targeted kinds of action, six writers for *The Wire* issued a statement on March 5, 2008 (over Time/CNN no less) in which they declared "War on the Drug War" by the following means: "If asked to serve on a jury deliberating a violation of state or federal drug laws, we will vote to acquit, regardless of the evidence presented." Associating the "American dissent" of "jury nullification" with Thomas Paine's somewhat inaccurately summarized spirit of "civil disobedience against monarchy," they brought out heavy artillery for an unlikely fight.[51] I suggest we read this resolution, explicitly connected to *The Wire* in its title and marketing, as the reentry of activist concerns into serial self-observation. Serial producers, too, have an interest in keeping their product handy and controlling unpredictable ideological sprawl.

Upward Recognition

In addition to the readings discussed so far, *The Wire* has attracted, as all cultural artifacts seem destined to do, interpretations inspired by large explanatory systems commonly classified as Theory. I am talking about model-type academic discourses with ambitions of virtually unlimited applicability. Sometimes correlated with formalized beliefs or explicit political convictions, they are not necessarily determined by a social agenda nor bound by disciplinary methods (as is the case-study definition of *The Wire* described above). Instead, Theory aspires to an essentially philosophical project of truth, even when it claims to have left behind such notions, typically justifying its performative contradictions by declaring that any transcendence requires repetition of the thing to be transcended. Highly dependent on the charisma of

individual master-thinkers, Theory offers to the time-pressed humanities an attractive repertoire of argumentative shortcuts both prestigious (because of their performed depth and difficulty) and efficient (because of their secure reproducibility, once mastered). In scholarship on *The Wire*, the writings of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and to a lesser degree Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord are the most active such models. A typical proposition reads:

> [*The Wire* is] the most Foucauldian show on television, the show which reveals the most about the technologies and techniques of contemporary discipline and punishment. We can map Foucault's theories about institutions fairly directly onto the Baltimore presented in *The Wire*, demonstrating how his ideas about power and discipline remain vitally important for social theory.[52]

The logic of this passage, representative of much critical practice in this vein, is tautological: The reader deploys Foucault to make sense of the narrative, then finds the narrative to mirror Foucault's "ideas" (this is not only a Foucauldian reading but the series itself is Foucauldian), and finally concludes that such agreement indicates the accuracy of these ideas. While the phrase "the Baltimore presented in *The Wire*" suggests that the object is, in fact, a media artifact, the distinction between artifact and exegetic tool is collapsed again in the concluding "demonstration" that Foucault's ideas are important for social theory *because* they are present in a television series. The question is: important in which ways? To understand what is happening here, consider that this passage is not interested in asking how and why Foucauldian notions of power have entered American commercial narratives. Rather, their presence there proves these notions to be correct.

On the one hand, this is another approach that takes for granted that *The Wire* "offers a comprehensive, faithful portrait of contemporary urban life, an essential case study for any theory of social organization."[53] On the other hand, Theory readings, judged by their argumentative economy, are less interested in illuminating the conditions of inner-city life with the help of televisual illustrations than they are in proclaiming that "the truth of [Foucault]" is "nowhere else in contemporary culture . . . so apparent as in *The Wire*."[54] The rhetorical thrust is clear, repeatedly juxtaposing scenes from the show with authoritative

quotations from the master texts: "In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes how . . . ," "*The Wire* confirms another of Foucault's maxims . . . ," "law enforcement as depicted in *The Wire*" exemplifies and ultimately proves "[a]n axiom of Foucault's theory of discipline," so that the series "merely illustrates with surprising accuracy his argument."[55] These recognitions establish the narrative as a powerful allegory, connecting it upward to nothing less than axiomatic truth.

So far, I have found no readings that would trace the actual trades between this truth's content and the self-descriptions of *The Wire*. However, given the ease with which Foucault's texts can be applied to the series' social vision, it seems likely that the plausibility of such applications rests on more than just their philosophical aura. McMillan points to the narrative's "affinity with the social theory of Michel Foucault," but then refrains from investigating the terms and conditions of this affinity by declaring that "in [a] general sense, the concerns of Foucault and *The Wire* are identical."[56] What is meant is that Foucault's concerns include, like a framework, the concerns of the series. This reading essentially distinguishes between two *types* of texts, one offering a complex reconstruction of philosophical truth, the other playing out the philosophy's maxims as story.

It is the second type of text, the narrative, that is seen as doing something, but its doings are serviceable to the conceptual showings of the first type. All of this is quite in accordance with philosophical models of textuality that regard a text's practices (its rhetoric, its local involvements, its historical dealings) as part of its ephemeral nature, necessarily inferior to the universal (limitless) propositions of thought. To deprive Foucault's writings in this manner of their cultural occupations—their rhetorical business connections—means to privilege them as unmoved movers behind the busy exchanges of storytelling. This works even with philosophies that speak up for dissemination and currency, such as those of Derrida or Deleuze. Conversely, a television series associated with such metanarratives can participate in the prestige of timeless writing: *The Wire* is "not simply great television, but *great art*," we read, because it does more than mimic social reality: it dramatizes its essence.[57]

If the narrative deviates too conspicuously from the axioms of the framework, there are a number of possibilities to account for this: One can proclaim a countertruth of fiction that is said to "resist" such theo-

retical reduction (a position not yet established in the literature, as far as I can see). Alternatively, one can limit descriptions to those elements that harmonize with the master-theory. For example, McMillan grounds his notion of victorious institutions and failed heroism in a quite partial—"Platonic"—concept of heroism, disregarding the presence of existential modes of heroic perseverance in *The Wire* (well documented in audience reactions that privilege the theme of individualism).

In addition, one can describe the narrative as differentiating, modifying, or extending the theoretical framework (preferably extending it onto other master theories). Thus, McMillan enhances his Foucauldian reading by saying that *The Wire* redefines the modern totality of surveillance for the more fluent conditions of postmodern society. He explains that the show depicts individuals subverting the "panopticum," but in doing so they are creating their own networks of surveillance. Thus, the postindustrial weakening of central institutions is reintegrated, via Deleuze and Guattari's concept of machinic "assemblages," into a Foucauldian allegory of all-powerful institutions.[58]

Similarly, and finally, one can align the narrative with the doctrines of another master thinker and have it engage in a truth struggle by proxy. The dialogic nature of this strategy invites examinations more dynamic than those offered by an integrative single-truth model. Thus, a suggestive reading of the show sets Foucault's motif of the panopticum in critical exchange with Debord's concept of the spectacle. Correctly noting that surveillance in *The Wire* is a messy and often futile affair, Joseph Schaub finds the show to be about "the failure of disciplinary surveillance" because it privileges the "low-tech gaze" of patient observation over the power of high-tech control. Possibly helped by the comparative informality of Debord's concept, Schaub can utilize this insight for descriptions that are relatively uncommitted to framework axioms but sensitive to the particularities of media (and other) effects. Thus, the spectacle's affinity to "narcissism" allows investigation into *The Wire*'s relations to contemporary docudramas and reality TV—and, theoretically, to itself and its audiences.[59]

The productivity of Theory-inspired readings in literary, media, and cultural studies is immense. With the help of their framework model of textuality, even secondary insights can be granted master-theoretical status, for example when the constructive role of institutions in identity formation is presented as "Foucault's truth" or when an approach

is called Foucauldian merely for maintaining that relations of power are important in social life. *The Wire* actually shares many of these insights, but it may have arrived at them by other routes, some of them possibly intersecting with the activities and translations of Foucault's texts. Ultimately, this raises the question of how these intersections are being traveled and by whom, which narratives and assumptions are shared or developed, and which transactions between *The Wire*, American sociology, and other truth agencies are actually taking place.[60]

To enable such descriptions, it seems useful to accord to one's objects and tools alike the status of culturally effective interactors. Narratives exist not as phenomena in need of model explanations, but explanatory models are implicated in our narrative worlds, and both are probably better served by lateral association than upward recognition. However, to make such associations requires a degree of self-awareness, not to mention breadth of contextualization, usually not available to individual writers but accessible only in the collective effects of mutual observation. A less costly and time-consuming method is enacted by a fourth class of approaches.

Analytical Dislocation

Analysis—understood as attention being paid to the ways in which interrelated parts construct or simulate a whole—can dislocate an object from the knowledge it holds and distributes about itself. Through this, analysis can disarticulate commonplaces in favor of critical redescriptions, breaking habits of meaning-making by making them explicit. Readings of *The Wire* that put such concerns at the center of their efforts are obviously close to the approach chosen by this essay. This makes it more difficult for the present writer to bring to bear an analytical perspective on them, but a few patterns can be discerned.

In general, analytical redescription is always more likely to challenge than to accept *The Wire*'s depictions of itself, regardless of their adequacy. Often this leads to suspicion about ulterior motives. Thus, many critical readings understand "critique" as an uncovering of hidden purposes or latent determinations, frequently in conjunction with philosophical framework theories such as those discussed above. Dan Rowe and Marti Collins, for instance, conduct a rigorous content analysis (of the first season) that questions the show's alliance with Foucauld-

ian concepts of governmentality but not the empirical veracity nor the superior epistemological status of these concepts.[61] In this manner, analytical dislocations can be relocated within prior assessments—and *The Wire* can be judged ("critically") by its secret deviation from axiomatic norms of dissidence. A ruling figure of thought in this regard describes the show as "complicit" in the very acts of power it condemns. Thus, the series' own practice of social critique, heavily invested in the notion of disembodied authorities working behind the scenes, is applied against itself and surpassed by the explanations of an even more critical observer. Not rarely, this observer concludes that such complicity proves power to be so total that it always incorporates its own critique—a conclusion that actually parallels *The Wire*'s own simultaneous indictment of and aspiration to total vision.

It should be noted that such critical readings, despite their reliance on philosophical text models, prove highly perceptive when it comes to identifying the recursive doings of *The Wire*. They also have an interest in tracing connections between self-descriptions and hetero-descriptions. Sara Taylor looks at HBO's distribution policies, the role of fandom, and "parafilmic material" to disclose "the presence of both reflexivity and compliance to the principles of neoliberalism in *The Wire*."[62] This perspective, whatever its partisan commitments (particularly to Lisa Duggan's understanding of neoliberalism), enables Taylor to link the show's narrative complexity to its commodity operations: full appreciation of the story requires the purchase of a complete DVD set.

Similarly, a Foucauldian frame allows Ryan Brooks to illustrate how *The Wire*, despite its insistence on being no cop show, works to produce a powerful notion of "good police" that contrasts the skillful and intuitive labor of individuals with the damage done by judicial checks and balances. In fact, the show's visual and narrative structures establish a "hierarchy of information" that ensures that the viewers usually know *more* than the gang members and *less* than the police. In other words, a self-propelling series: "there is always more delinquency to uncover." Brooks draws a conclusion that relates the show's inward affiliations (with itself) to its outward affiliations (with its audience):

> *The Wire* dramatizes the effects of power while simultaneously denying its own power, as a literary entity, to regulate the behavior of its viewers. . . . [T]he show also disavows its own rhetorical strategies by con-

trasting this rigid discipline with its own authentic knowledge or truth. . . . [T]hese treatments should be understood as part of the narrative power game of *The Wire,* which is an attempt to train viewers to critically question these hierarchies and which, like a police surveillance unit, must remain hidden in order to have its coercive effect.[63]

Other formal analyses are less devoted to detecting "coercive effects." This is not to say that they are disinterested—or should (or even could) be. In fact, they are frequently carried out by television scholars with a keen interest in defining and defending their field of studies. Much argumentative energy is spent on issues of disciplinary identity. In this context, discussions of *The Wire* in terms of its novelistic or literary qualities are likely to be seen as including "a demeaning attitude towards television."[64] A deep investment in the quality of television combined with a necessarily ambivalent attitude toward the concept of Quality TV (when it associates the medium with more esteemed precursors) imparts to these studies a pronounced sense of disciplinary competitiveness. In this manner, their pervasive concern with televisual complexity and medial self-reflexivity parallels the ambiguous strategies of identification and distinction employed by many contemporary television series themselves. Media studies of this type even participate in the same processes of competition and one-upmanship so characteristic of their objects, for example by pointing to the material superiority of television over literature or cinema when it comes to telling extensive stories.[65] In fact, of all agents of continuation, American television studies are most directly involved in the formalization, acceleration, and dissemination of *The Wire*'s cultural work.

In terms of analytical intelligence, such proximity can be advantageous. Media scholars and Americanists bring to bear an elaborate historical and formal knowledge on their understanding of *The Wire*—knowledge that is particularly suited, if not indispensable, for exploring the cultural movements of an American television series. Whatever their motivations and judgments in terms of disciplinary (and other) identities, these accounts almost inevitably shed light on the narrative's interaction with other narratives, media, and players. For example, *The Wire*'s claims of innovation can be recontextualized—and made explicit as time-bound ambitions—on a wide field of actors, as in Marsha Kinder's consideration of the show's engagement with movies such as

Francesco Rosi's *Salvatore Guiliano,* Sidney Lumet's *Serpico,* Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (cited by Simon), Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend,* and, especially, Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront,* whose divergent representation of dock workers hints at "the rivalries between movies and television for hyper-realistic representation and systemic analysis, as if the narrative format of cinema is now insufficiently expansive for covering the complex networked society."[66]

Similarly, Jane Gibb and Roger Sabin ask "how new is 'new'?" and suggest "ways in which *The Wire* may be part of a genre tradition" that spans from *Kojak* through *Hill Street Blues, Miami Vice,* and *NYPD Blue* all the way to *Homicide.* Unexciting as this claim may seem at first glance, its analytical argument manages to historicize the show's antigeneric self-image and with it the ideas of timeless textuality and reportorial authenticity that play such a central role in scholarship: "[I]n ten, twenty years time," the authors argue, "*The Wire* will look as creaky as those shows appear today." It bears mention that *Dragnet,* the mother of all police procedurals, which appears now like a caricature of television noir, was heralded in the 1950s as the pinnacle of television realism, actually beginning each episode with the line, "Ladies and gentlemen, the story you're about to see is true," followed by a montage of urban locales—an iconographic network—over which the narrator intoned the sentence: "This is the city." Mindful of such transactions, Gibb and Sabin suggest a descriptive approach that is richer in detail and more attuned to the cultural dynamics of its object than sociological duplication, downward identification, activist concern, or upward recognition: "*The Wire* remains the latest in a succession of crime shows that have had a dialogue with each other, as well as with their broader sociological context, and in so doing have allowed America to talk to itself."[67]

Another example of interactional analysis can be found in Jason Mittell's groundbreaking article on *The Wire*'s connection to computer games. Skeptical of Simon's literary comparisons—and hoping instead "to celebrate" *The Wire* "on its own medium's terms"—Mittell phrases his argument in a cautious manner, almost like a thought experiment, but even in such guarded terms it transcends the concerns of disciplinary identity with which it starts. Reminding his readers that "there were many key televised precedents for long-form gradual storytelling for [Simon] to draw upon," Mittell expands this backwards perspective

onto present times and charts *The Wire*'s exchanges with its immediate media environment. In so doing, he identifies a crucial arena for contemporary American reality production: "a spectatorial game, being played on-screen for the benefit of an audience."[68]

Thus, the series' creative usage of serial memory—its simultaneous increase and reduction of complexity, in the parlance of this essay—becomes visible as a matter of "ludic joy" and "replayability," that is, as procedural training that actively involves viewers in the storytelling (and, by implication, in reality construction) even as it seeks to foreclose popular interference.[69] "The show demands audiences . . . invest in their diegetic memories by rewarding detailed consumption with narrative payoffs," writes Mittell, and as with any productive account, there are a number of ways to proceed from here. Say, by investigating television's commerce with the connectivity of digital competitors or thinking about what it means for cultures when their storytelling media converge around a paradigm of interrelated procedures and short-timed tasks for long-timed continuations. In either case, analytical dislocation enables perspectives that are particularly responsive to the historical agility of serial narratives.

Examples of this kind of approach are rare.[70] What is more, based on my corpus it seems evident that British, Irish, and Australian scholars are more likely than American scholars to challenge the self-images of *The Wire* or set them in dialogue with the series' other involvements.[71] American contributions that do so often subordinate their acts of redescription to an ultimate confirmation of the show's social vision or to proclaiming its status as a masterpiece of television.

So far, only non-American contributions have begun to ask how American writings about *The Wire* relate to the series' cultural activities and conditions. Even so, this is by no means a common question—an indication, perhaps, of the influence of American rehearsals of American studies over practices in other countries. At the 2009 Economic and Social Research Council conference, according to the paper abstracts, only three presentations (out of fifty) were dedicated to such questions, one of them evidently caught up in a national agenda of its own: David Hesmondhalgh (from the University of Leeds) analyzed how the critical reception of *The Wire* in the United Kingdom "has been marked by a reverence of US production" that is said to go hand in hand with disrespect for British television. Natasha Whiteman (from the Univer-

sity of Leicester) examined how critics and academics "mark their affiliation to the series" through configurations of its quality, comparing such receptions to "modes of identification with media texts evident within online fan communities." Finally and most remarkably, Rebecca Bramall (from the University of Brighton) and Ben Pitcher (from Oxford Brookes University) concluded that *The Wire*'s "appeal to left-wing academics working in the fields of sociology, cultural studies and cognate disciplines" derives from the show's "beguiling projection of sociological desire, providing a totalizing vision of and orientation to the social, a fantasy of the intelligibility of contemporary urban life." According to this reading, *The Wire* resonates with the self-perception of academic practice, defined by its belief in the social value of detailed observation, methodological commitment, and systematic explanation. The show encourages identification among scholars by echoing back to them an "idealized representation" of what they think about themselves.[72]

The fact that the dominant discourses in the United States differ, sometimes dramatically, from such accounts is not a sign of their deficiency or negligence. Rather, it expresses their participation in the cultural doings of the series, that is, their status as American self-studies. As such, they are open to an American studies analysis. It can be asked: What are *The Wire* and its readers doing in and for American culture? How do *The Wire* and its contestations contribute to a larger cultural system that calls itself, not entirely correctly, America? For this geographically vast, socially incongruous but in no way continentally comprehensive formation to achieve and maintain a sense of its reality, mass-produced commercial narratives are crucial agents of continuity. Their performances create unlikely coherence on a daily basis. Starting from these observations, it becomes possible to read *The Wire* as a serial narrative and a junction of narratives whose cultural work—a work on needs and conflicts of self-definition—makes (and has) a national home.[73]

Notes

1. Jacob Weisberg, "The Wire on Fire: Analyzing the Best Show on Television," *Slate*, September 13, 2003, http://www.slate.com/id/2149566 (accessed

August 19, 2010). Almost simultaneously, Brian Lowry wrote in *Variety*: "When television history is written, little else will rival *The Wire*, a series of such extraordinary depth and ambition that it is, perhaps inevitably, savored only by an appreciative few" ("The Wire," *Variety*, September 2006, http://www.variety.com/awardcentral_review/VE1117931487.html?nav=reviews07&categoryid=2352&cs=1&p=0 [accessed June 1, 2010]).

2. How often do we advise a colleague or are told by one: "You should publish this before someone else does"? The implications for academic knowledge production are interesting. For the present essay, I have surveyed a sample of approximately 200 publications from newspapers, Internet sources, and academic venues, compiled with the help of Anne Clausen, to whom I wish to express my gratitude. The bulk of these contributions appeared between 2006 and 2010, with a significant academic reception starting in 2008. The contributions published in the present volume are not part of my corpus.

3. See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), especially 43–50, 213–18.

4. See Frank Kelleter, "'Toto, I Think We're in Oz Again (and Again and Again)': Why Popular Culture Loves Repetition," in *Remake | Remodel*, ed. Kathleen Loock and Constantine Verevis (forthcoming). Many of the themes discussed in the following have been developed in the six-project research unit "Popular Seriality—Aesthetics and Practice" at Göttingen University, http://popularseriality.uni-goettingen.de. For serial authorship in particular, see the project "Authorization Practices of Serial Narration: The Generic Development of Batman and Spider-Man Comics," directed by Daniel Stein and myself.

5. For the coinage "work-net," see Latour, *Reassembling*, 132. My interest in self-description is obviously indebted to Niklas Luhmann's understanding of the term, although this essay treats self-descriptions not under systemic but pragmatic considerations; see Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 879–93.

6. This is especially true for long-running series that may be older than their contemporary human actors (the term "actor" referring here to any force involved in a series' continuation). New writers have to perform their authorship against the limiting background of established roles and rules within the narrative (for example, what are a hero's superpowers, which character traits are possible, and so on) and often in competition with established ownership claims outside the narrative (see Bob Kane's jealous guardianship of the original Batman character); long-term readers can challenge innovations with an authoritative appeal to "continuity" (notice the effect of the *Comic Book Price Guide*, first published in 1970, on superhero storytelling). For these and additional examples, see again the project "Authorization Practices of Serial Narration" by Stein and myself. *The Wire* does not follow the format of the open-ended series frequent

in comics, but the disruption of text/paratext distinctions is no less visible in so-called serials that work with progressing story-arcs. In general it can be said that the difference between a "series" and a "serial," well established in Anglo-American media studies since Raymond Williams's *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974) is less clear-cut than even suggested by the usual heuristic disclaimers. In the following, I will use the adjective "serial" as a general term for all types of commercial seriality, not just narratives extending story arcs over many episodes. In fact, my own distinction between series and oeuvres makes such "serials" into a subtype of the first category (whereas so-called miniseries—preestablished structures with a limited number of episodes usually produced en bloc prior to their initial reception—fall under the category of oeuvre or work).

7. The best discussion of narrative complexity in contemporary American television is one of the first: Jason Mittell, "Narrative Complexity and American Television," *Velvet Light Trap* 58 (2006): 29–40.

8. It is worth mentioning that *The Wire*'s wish to distance itself from other HBO competitors felicitously feeds back into HBO's business model. In fact, this feedback plays a decisive part in the show's sustained success—a success that cannot be measured in ratings or Emmys won, but might well depend on the fact, often emphasized, that the show won no Emmys and had remarkably low ratings. (Things might look different for DVD sales.) In the subscription model of television, prestige can translate directly into money.

9. On the influence of naturalism on *The Wire*, see also J. M. Tyree, "*The Wire*: The Complete Fourth Season," *Film Quarterly* 61.3 (2008): 36; and Ryan Aiello, "*The Wire*: Politics, Postmodernism and the Rebirth of American Naturalism," M.A. thesis, California State University, Chico, 2010.

10. Hence *The Wire*'s conspicuous aversion to the idea of inventing things. When, in the fifth season, the hierarchy of fact and fiction is inverted, as if by way of experiment, the results are perverse representations. A bad reporter, Templeton, makes up imaginary informants and a serial killer to advance his career. Significantly, *The Wire* associates this wickedness with realist *fiction*: The man is in search of "the whole Dickensian aspect" when he spends a night with the homeless to get the feel of the street. ("The Dickensian Aspect" is the title of episode 56; the newspaper's executive editor tells Templeton that this is what he expects from him.)

11. Altogether, *The Wire*'s acclaimed multiperspectivity is not fundamentally different from the pliability of conventional serial ensemble casts. Characterization in *The Wire* puts a premium on charisma and physical beauty (Stringer Bell, McNulty, Kima); contrastive couplings are common (McNulty and Bunk, Stringer and Barksdale, etc.); free agents (Omar, Cutty) are positioned in heroic counterpoint to the constraints of institutional systems; "framing" figures map the show's moral universe (the Greek, Marlo, and the newspaper

editors as "the natural endpoint[s]," respectively, "for corner culture," global-ized capitalism, and media corruption). Omar, the desperado, is clearly modeled on legendary Western characters, down to his shotgun, duster, and personal code without specification to what it entails. Omar's initial quirks—buying Honey Nut Cheerios in his pajamas—are considerably toned down in later seasons in favor of mythological resonances immediately comprehensible to a media-savvy audience.

12. See detective Lester Freamon in *The Wire*: "We're building something here . . . and all the pieces matter." This sentence, spoken within the diegesis, at the same time lets the viewers know how the series wants to be seen (or watched)—and quite successfully so, judged by the frequency with which it is repeated in analytical articles. For the term "narrative totalization," compare John Kraniauskas, "Elasticity of Demand: Reflections on *The Wire*," *Radical Philosophy* 154 (2009): 27, published in this volume.

13. Compare Andreas Jahn-Sudmann: "An essential function of any series consists in reducing self-generated complexities or organizing them in such a manner that they are narratively clear and comprehensible" ("Serienzeit und serielle Zeitlichkeit," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft*, March 2011, http://www.zfmedienwissenschaft.de/index.php?TID=54 [accessed May 20, 2011], my translation).

14. It is a question of a different order, although important, how discourses of American TV reverberate in other countries. This question can be ignored in the present context because scholarly activities in non-English-speaking countries are largely irrelevant for research practices within the United States. In the United States, the field of American studies is only rarely compelled to imagine itself open to competent outside descriptions, especially if they are phrased in foreign languages. The field tends to conceive of American studies outside the United States, not as offering the possibility of epistemologically advantaged redescriptions, but, if at all, as part of its own transnational diversity (see Kelleter, "Transnationalism: The American Challenge," *Review of International American Studies* 2.3 [2007]: 29–33).

15. Angela Anderson, "No Such Thing as Good and Evil: *The Wire* and the Humanization of the Object of Risk in the Age of Biopolitics," *darkmatter* 4 (2009), http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/no-such-thing-as-good-and-evil-thewire-and-the-humanization-of-the-object-of-risk-in-the-age-of-bio-politics/ (accessed October 7, 2010); Blake D. Ethridge, "Baltimore on *The Wire*: The Tragic Moralism of David Simon," in *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-television Era*, ed. Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (New York: Routledge, 2008), 155 (Ethridge makes direct reference to Simon); Lawrence Lanahan, "Secrets of the City: What *The Wire* Reveals about Urban Journalism," *Columbia Journalism Review*, January–February 2008, 24.

16. For example, "*The Wire* presents a complex and nuanced portrait

American urban culture that transcends cynicism with a faith in the complexity of people and circumstances." Ralph Beliveau and Laura Bolf-Beliveau, "Posing Problems and Picking Fights: Critical Pedagogy and the Corner Boys," in *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*, ed. Tiffany Potter and C. W. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2009), 102.

17. Beliveau and Bolf-Beliveau, "Posing," 102; Peter Clandfield, "'We Ain't Got No Yard': Crime, Development, and Urban Environment," in Potter and Marshall, *The Wire*, 37–49; James Braxton Peterson, "Corner-Boy Masculinity: Intersections of Inner-City Manhood," in Potter and Marshall, *The Wire*, 107–21; Peter Suderman, "Tension City," *National Review*, April 21, 2008, 59–60; Jason Read, "Stringer Bell's Lament: Violence and Legitimacy in Contemporary Capitalism," in Potter and Marshall, *The Wire*, 124; Boyd Blundell, "Social Justice and the Wire," Department of Religious Studies, Loyola University, first-year seminar syllabus, n.d., http://img.slate.com/media/8/WireSyllabus.pdf (accessed July 8, 2010); "ESRC Conference: *The Wire* as Social Science Fiction?" November 26–27, 2009, Leeds Town Hall, ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, n.d., http://www.cresc.ac.uk/events/Wireconference.html and www.cresc.ac.uk/events/wire_programme.html (accessed October 15, 2010). Papers from this conference were published in the journal *City*, 14.5 and 14.6 (2010). The show can also disprove positions: Dawinder Sidhu uses it as "an element of practical reality" that "challenges" the constitutional theories of Charles Posner ("Wartime America and *The Wire*: A Response to Posner's Post-9/11 Constitutional Framework," *George Mason University Civil Rights Law Journal* 20.1 [2009], http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1414006#%23 [accessed August 28, 2010]).

18. "ESRC Conference." At its broadest and least concrete, this argument underlines the didactic value of *The Wire* "as a conversation starter about crises of the human condition" (with all the troubling implications this phrase holds for an auto-utilitarian notion of didacticism). At least one contribution to the ESRC conference feels it has to stress that *The Wire*, despite its utility for the classroom, "should not be regarded as a replacement for qualitative ethnographic research."

19. William J. Wilson and Anmol Chaddha, "Why We're Teaching 'The Wire' at Harvard," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2010, http://www.hks.harvard.edu/newsevents/news/commentary/teaching-the-wire-at-harvard (accessed October 12, 2010). Wilson's participation is interesting because his sociological work has criticized popular media for covering urban poverty chiefly as a problem of individual lifestyles ("culture of poverty"), with little room left for narratives and images that stress systemic conditions or larger economic frameworks (see Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* [New York: Knopf, 1996]). Thus, Wilson is very much aware of fiction's power to shape

social attitudes, and he is in a good position to recognize—and applaud—*The Wire*'s achievements in challenging representational conventions of race and class. (Walter Benn Michaels's endorsement of the series follows similar insights; see "Going Boom," *Bookforum*, February–March 2009, http:www.book forum.com/inprint/015_05/3274 [accessed October 7, 2010].) All the more striking is Wilson's and other critics' readiness to downplay the fabricated character of a commercial story-world that is an active player in the very society they are describing.

20. "ESRC Conference."

21. The ESRC conference describes the television series as a "popular culture laboratory," where "ethnographic research on the city" is "translated" into fiction. Thus, *The Wire*'s representation of Baltimore's educational system is described as "one of the ideal frames where the fictional side of the show turns into reality" ("ESRC Conference").

22. See David Alff reading *The Wire* as "a televisual annotation of regional history." David Alff, "Yesterday's Tomorrow Today: Baltimore and the Promises of Reform," in Potter and Marshall, *The Wire*, 26.

23. Compare Simon: "The story is labeled as fiction, which is to say we took liberties in a way that journalism cannot and should not do." David Simon, introduction to *The Wire: Truth Be Told*, ed. Rafael Alvarez (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2009), 1–31, 29. Compare the definition of *The Wire* as an "obsodrama": a documentary that has been fictionalized to remove legal constraints ("ESRC Conference"). See also Clandfield about the show's "constructive use of fictional license" and "legitimate tactical response to the misrepresentation of inner cities" ("We Ain't Got," 44).

24. "ESRC Conference."

25. See Jane Gibb and Roger Sabin, "Who Loves Ya, David Simon?" *darkmatter* 4 (2009), http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/who-loves-ya-david-simon (accessed October 7, 2010). Even the representation of sex is driven by an attempt at inverting stereotypes: Sexual relations between white characters are marked by a passionate loss of control, whereas sexual relations between black characters are largely depicted as caring and sensuous affairs. (I am indebted to Markus Engelhardt for this observation.)

26. Harvey Cormier, "Bringing Omar Back to Life." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 22.3 (2008): 205–13.

27. James Williams, "The Lost Boys of Baltimore: Beauty and Desire in the Hood," *Film Quarterly* 62.2 (2008): 58. Williams continues: "[*The Wire*] evokes at times the imagery of black homo-thug gay porn websites." Gangster hunks and dashing officers "in their heightened availability and vulnerability [constitute] one of the great unavowed pleasures of *The Wire*. What is one person's urban nightmare is another man's fantasy" (59).

28. Daniel McNeil, "White Negroes and *The Wire*," *darkmatter* 4 (2009), http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/white-negroes-and-the-wire/ (accessed October 7, 2010).

29. Afaa M. Weaver, "Baltimore before *The Wire*," in Potter and Marshall, *The Wire*, 16–18. For "documentary fallacy," see Courtney Marshall and Tiffany Potter, "'I Am the American Dream': Modern Urban Tragedy and the Borders of Fiction," in Potter and Marshall, *The Wire*, 9.

30. Judd Franklin, "Common Ground: The Political Economy of *The Wire*," *darkmatter* 4 (2009), http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/common-ground-thepolitical-economy-of-the-wire/ (accessed October 15, 2010).

31. Christian Lander, *Stuff White People Like: The Definitive Guide to the Unique Taste of Millions* (New York: Random House, 2008), 108–10.

32. "We, *The Wire* Discussion Group at the University of Leeds" takes collective hold of the drama of marginalization, declaring that "the series also came to symbolise our own problematic relationship with an academic institution in which we all play, at best, marginal roles" ("ESRC Conference").

33. Marshall and Potter, "I Am," 13.

34. Lisa W. Kelly, "Casting *The Wire:* Complicating Notions of Performance, Authenticity, and "Otherness,'" *darkmatter* 4 (2009), http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/casting-the-wire-complicating-notionsof-performance-authenticity-and-otherness/ (accessed June 7, 2010).

35. Marshall and Potter, "I Am," 12. The *New York Times* called the wedding "a street version of Cinderella and Prince Charming" (Ian Urbina, "From Two Broken Lives to One Beginning," *New York Times*, August 9, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/09/us/09baltimore.html?pagewanted=all [accessed September 30, 2010]). Simon himself pitched the story to the *Times*, insisting that there would be not only an article but also a "Vows" piece (see Margaret Talbot, "Stealing Life: The Crusader behind "The Wire,'" *New Yorker*, October 22, 2007, http://www.www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/22/071022fa_fact_talbot [accessed July 9, 2010]).

36. Kelly, "Casting *The Wire*." See also Marshall and Potter, "I Am," 10.

37. Marsha Kinder, "Re-writing Baltimore: The Emotive Power of Systemics, Seriality, and the City," *Film Quarterly* 62.2 (2008): 54. See also Kelly, "Casting *The Wire*."

38. See Kelleter, "Serienhelden sehen dich an," *Psychologie Heute* 38.4 (2011): 70–75; similarly Ash Sharma, "'All the Pieces Matter': Introductory Notes on *The Wire*," *darkmatter* 4 (2009), http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/editorial-all-thepieces-matter-introductory-notes-on-the-wire/ (accessed October 7, 2010).

39. In a similar manner, the final season's wrap-up ending—"an almost absurdly exhaustive festival of closure"—reinforces *The Wire*'s ambitions toward narrative totality (Adam Sternbergh, "Sternbergh on 'The Wire' Finale: The

Anti-'Sopranos'," *New York Magazine,* March 10, 2008, http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2008/03/sternbergh_on_the_wire_finale.html   [accessed August 19, 2010]). The deceits of the fictional *Baltimore Sun* that are told about *in* the final season ultimately emphasize the veracity *of* the show's own naturalistic reportage.

40. Venkatesh's gangsters would like to see more winners and losers in the story, not everyone defeated (which they take to be typical for a narrative authored by a white writer), more sex, especially between black and white characters, more dominant female characters in the ghetto, less concession to the serial demands of suspense and revenge plots ("In the ghetto, you never have this kind of thing last so long. People kill each other right away, or not at all"), and less stress on the complexity of business transactions ("The one thing I don't like about this show is you never make plans when you're hustling. Not for more than a few days anyway"); see Sudhir Venkatesh, "What Do Real Thugs Think of *The Wire?* Part Seven," *Freakonomics,* February 22, 2008, http://freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/02/22/what-do-real-thugs-think-of-thewire/ (accessed October 20, 2010).

41. Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Venkatesh, "What Do Real Thugs Think of *The Wire?" Freakonomics,* January 9, 2008, http://freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/09/what-do-real-thugsthink-of-the-wire/ (accessed October 20, 2010); "What Do Real Thugs Think of *The Wire?* Part Three," *Freakonomics,* January 25, 2008, http://freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/25/what-do-real-thugs-think-of-thewire/ (accessed October 20, 2010).

42. Mark Bowden, "The Angriest Man in Television," *Atlantic,* January 2008, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/01/the-angriest-man-in-television/6581 (accessed October 7, 2010).

43. See Simon: "I enjoy Shakespeare but *The Wire* is definitely not influenced by the good-evil continuum that seems to begin with Shakespearean drama. It's more about fate and systematic predestination, with the Olympian gods supplanted by postmodern institutional authority" (Talbot, "Stealing Life"). For academic reproductions of the Greek drama connection, see Ethridge, "Baltimore on *The Wire.*" Reihan Salam holds that the show's fatalism "transcends ideology: it strengthens the hand of paternalists of the left and determinists of the right. In that regard, the show is frankly destructive" ("The Bleakness of *The Wire,*" *American Scene,* January 1, 2008, http://theamericanscene.com/2008/01/01/the-bleakness-of-the-wire [accessed October 29, 2010]). Erika Johnson-Lewis, oddly to me, sees a contradiction between *The Wire*'s interest in institutional structures (its fatalism) and the supposedly detrimental effects of extended serial storytelling on activist empathy: "it wallows far too long in the decay and dejection of contemporary urban life" ("The More Things Change. the More They Stay the Same: Serial Narrative on *The Wire,*" *darkmatter* 4 [20

www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/the-more-things-change-the-more-theystay-the-same-serial-narrative-on-the-wire/ [accessed October 7, 2010]).

44. See Salam: "I'm struck by how many of my friends believe they have more refined moral sensibilities because they watch and swear by *The Wire*, as though it gives them a richer appreciation of the *real* struggles of inner-city life, despite the fact that they are exactly as insulated as they were before" ("Bleakness"). Similarly, Johnson-Lewis argues that the show "leave[s] the viewer to feel secure in his or her moral superiority for watching the gritty realism of *The Wire*" ("The More Things Change").

45. For "irredeemable," see Johnson-Lewis, "The More Things Change."

46. Peter Dreier and John Atlas, "Bush-Era Fable about America's Urban Poor?" *City & Community* 8.3 (2009): 332 (published in this collection). The authors see *The Wire* as "similar to much of American sociology" in this regard, "which, despite its reform impulse, is better at describing the various forms of inequality and injustice in society than at identifying the political opportunities that make mobilization and reform possible" (331).

47. Ethridge, "Baltimore on *The Wire*," 163–64.

48. Bowden, "Angriest Man in Television"; Dreier and Atlas, "Bush-Era," 332–33.

49. The record may be less impressive for female characters. For Omar as "a kind of *agent provocateur*," see Kathleen LeBesco, "'Gots to Get Got': Social Justice and Audience Response to Omar Little," in Potter and Marshall, *The Wire*, 217.

50. Lanahan, "Secrets of the City," 29.

51. Ed Burns, Dennis Lehane, George Pelecanos, Richard Price, and David Simon, "*The Wire*'s War on the Drug War," *Time*, March 5, 2008, http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1719872,00.html (accessed October 7, 2010).

52. Alasdair McMillan, "Dramatizing Individuation: Institutions, Assemblages, and *The Wire*," *Cinephile* 4 (2008), http://cinephile.ca/archives/volume-4-post-genre/dramatizing-individuation-institutions-assemblages-and-the-wire (accessed June 10, 2010).

53. Ibid.

54. Alasdair McMillan, "Heroism, Institutions, and the Police Procedural," in Potter and Marshall, *The Wire*, 53.

55. Sophie Fuggle, "Short Circuiting the Power Grid: *The Wire* as Critique of Institutional Power," *darkmatter* 4 (2009), http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/shortcircuiting-the-power-grid-the-wire-as-critique-of-institutional-power/ (accessed October 7, 2010); McMillan, "Dramatizing"; McMillan, "Heroism," 54; William Rodney Herring, "'There's Never Been a Paper Bag for Drugs. Until Now.' Or, What Is 'Real Police Work'?" February 18, 2008, http://locus.cwrl.utexas.edu/herring/node/111 (accessed June 24, 2010).

56. McMillan, "Heroism," 51.

57. "[It] doesn't simply reproduce or 'comment' upon social reality, but sets out instead to unravel the twisted fabric of social assemblages" (McMillan, "Dramatizing").

58. Ibid. Also see Herring about *The Wire*'s potential "to resist discipline" ("There's Never Been"). Compare also Sharma, "All the Pieces Matter."

59. Joseph Schaub, "*The Wire*: Big Brother Is Not Watching You in Bodymore, Murdaland," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 38.3 (2010): 126. Schaub writes: "The fact that *The Wire* uses the banner of 'fiction' to tell stories premised on reality should hardly come as a surprise in an era when the banner of 'reality' is so often used to market shows with an obviously fictitious premise" (130). Schaub does not address *The Wire*'s own narcissistic promptings within and without its narrative. Instead, he accepts season 5's self-characterization as media-critical "watchdog for democracy" (130).

60. See section 3 of the larger essay from which this essay is drawn (to be published separately).

61. See Dan Rowe and Marti Cecilia Collins: "our study found that *The Wire* was not entirely successful at avoiding clichés and stereotypes that are entrenched in most procedural crime dramas." At the same time, the study describes Foucault's concept of governmentality as "one of the most useful . . . explanations of power" because it demonstrates "that Western liberal democracies have systematically found ways to assert control over virtually every aspect of life" ("Power Wire: Understanding the Depiction of Power in TV Drama," *Journal of the Institute of Justice & International Studies* 9 [2009]: 182).

62. Sara Taylor, "*The Wire*: Investigating the Use of a Neoliberal Institutional Apparatus and a 'New Humanist' Philosophical Apparatus," *darkmatter* 4 (2009), http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/the-wire-investigating-the-use-of-aneoliberal-institutional-apparatus-and-a-new-humanist-philosophical-apparatus/ (accessed October 7, 2010).

63. Ryan Brooks, "The Narrative Production of 'Real Police,'" in Potter and Marshall, *The Wire*, 73. The following quote is on pp. 64–66.

64. Ted Nannicelli, "It's All Connected: Televisual Narrative Complexity," in Potter and Marshall, *The Wire*, 190.

65. See Nannicelli declaring that *The Wire* is less conventional than the cinematic "network narratives" analyzed by David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson (ibid., 195). On the tendency of serial narratives to surpass or outbid each other, see the project "The Dynamics of Serial Outbidding *(Überbietung)*: Contemporary American Television and the Concept of Quality TV," directed by Andreas Jahn-Sudmann and myself as part of the research unit "Popular Seriality" (n. 4 above).

66. Kinder, "Re-writing Baltimore," 54.

67. Gibb and Sabin, "Who Love's Ya." For *Dragnet*, see Jason Mittell, '

the Game: *The Wire,* Serial Storytelling, and Procedural Logic," in *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives,* ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardip-Fruin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 434; *Television and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 181; and especially *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 121–52.

68. Mittell, "All in the Game," 429, 434, 431. Quotations in the following paragraph are from pp. 433, 432, 435.

69. Compare Simon: "We are cautious about allowing any feedback to induce us to appease or please viewers . . . [V]iewers generally don't know what is good for them as an audience, or for *The Wire.* . . . So I'm afraid we are not at all open to suggestion or petition when it comes to character or story" (Jim King, "Exclusive David Simon Q & A: Personal Interview," *Borderline Productions,* August 16, 2006, http://www.Borderline-productions.com/TheWireHBO/exclusive-1. html [accessed June 7, 2010]).

70. In addition to the contributions mentioned in this chapter, there are only a few attempts to discuss *The Wire* in such terms, mostly focused on generic configurations. Linda Williams, for example, taught the series at UC Berkeley with regard to its melodramatic aspects (see Drake Bennett, "This Will Be on Midterm. You Feel Me?" *Slate,* March 24, 2010, http://www.slate.com/id/2245788/ [accessed July 8, 2010]). Amanda Ann Klein examines the show's adherence to and deviation from conventions of melodrama and sentimentality ("'The Dickensian Aspect': Melodrama, Viewer Engagement, and the Socially Conscious Text," in Potter and Marshall, *The Wire,* 177–89).

71. Let me be clear that "more likely" does not mean "generally predisposed." Celebratory readings prevail in non-American settings as well, including my own academic culture in Germany.

72. "ESRC Conference."

73. These issues are taken up in a third section ("Habits") of the longer essay from which this chapter is derived. Like almost all stories America has told about itself, *The Wire* stages and engages basic issues of national existence: What, in America, constitutes reality? What constitutes society? What constitutes identity? Consistent with the approach followed so far, the answers offered by *The Wire* to these questions should be regarded, not as the series' actual meanings, but perhaps its most lively ones: effective commonplaces of cultural reproduction.