**University of Richmond**

**FYS 100**

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**Watching *The Wire*: Urban America, Race, and Television**

**Wednesdays 3-5:40**

**Dr. Andrea Simpson, Dr. Paul Achter**

**Fall 2015**

**MRC LL1 (Learn Lab) – Boatwright Library**

**Contact Us**

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**Goals and Objectives**

The objectives of this First Year Seminar (FYS) are 1) to examine the structural racism that corrupts American institutions; 2) to understand our status positions as citizens and television viewers in regard to the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality; 3) to analyze how *The Wire* makes institutional problems in the U.S. come alive in a novel and affecting way.

**Academic Honesty: Pledging**

Students are expected to pledge the following statement on all assignments turned in for credit, including exams, papers and laboratory reports: "I pledge that I have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work." Academic honesty is—defined broadly and simply—the performance of all academic work without cheating, lying, stealing, or receiving assistance from any other person or using any source of information not appropriately authorized or attributed. The University of Richmond and your professors take academic honesty very seriously.

All students are responsible for maintaining the highest standards of honesty and integrity in every phase of their academic careers. The penalties for academic dishonesty are severe and ignorance is not an acceptable defense.

For more information on URʼs commitment to building intellectual integrity, visit:

<http://studentdevelopment.richmond.edu/student-handbook/honor/the-honor-code.html>

**Why *The Wire?***

Frequently hailed as television masterpiece, *The Wire* created a vivid and detailed portrait of Baltimore that tells the story of the decline of cities through the characters in law enforcement, the drug trade, shipping docks, city hall, public schools, and newspapers. In the series, which ran from 2002-2008, Baltimore stands for the parts America “where drugs, mayhem, and corruption routinely betray the promise of ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ that is so ingrained in our political DNA.” According to its creator, David Simon, the show’s unflinching depiction of urban America was intended as an act of dissent against the prevailing notion that the American experiment is working, against narratives of progress that assume in America justice has been achieved. Simon argues that “*The Wire* was not a story about America, it’s about the America that got left behind.” *The Wire* asks us to look at, and to grapple with, places and people that mainstream television customarily ignores.

*The Wire* is an unsparing depiction of America at its worst, yet it is critically acclaimed and venerated by those who watch it. Why is it that so many people like a show that doesn’t like them?

In this course, we will ask, what makes *The Wire* distinctive as a television show? How does *The Wire* get us to see, and to feel, conditions in urban America in a unique and emotionally moving way? How does the show work as an act of critique and dissent? And where does it leave us, in terms of our ability to solve problems in urban America?

One of the goals of the FYS is to expand and deepen your understanding of the world and of yourself. *The Wire* is our portal into the lives of America’s expendable people, the people who have been forgotten and left behind, but it also takes us into the lives of those at the top, the people who run the police departments, newsrooms, schools, and governments, and we watch as they are corrupted, stifled by bureaucracy, forced into bad decisions. *The Wire* asks people like us to change our attitudes about the state of the American Dream.

The intersection of race, gender, and class in America is crucial to understanding ourselves, and it is crucial to understanding the characters in *The Wire*. You will learn to analyze the show by reading an introduction to television criticism that introduces you to the processes of television production, reception, and representation, including the fraught and crucial issues surrounding how black and queer bodies are represented on TV. At times our analyses of the show will challenge you to face prejudices, and we will push you to examine your assumptions and privileges. In exchange for your hard work, you will learn to think, write, speak, and watch more critically.

**White Fragility and Learning About Structures of Racism**

This course and our class discussions are going to make some of you uncomfortable. As your professors, we ask that you try to embrace your discomfort as a part of the learning process. We will not pander to you, and we will not sugarcoat class discussions so that you can have a “nice” experience to tell your friends about later. We will share data that might make you second-guess what you thought you knew about equality in America. We are also caring people who enjoy our work (that’s why we teach!) and we understand that some of what we talk about is difficult. We watch *The Wire* in amidst crisis, a time of targeted violence and mass inequality, and the most vulnerable among us are people of color and sexual minorities. White racism and anti-gay attitudes have been with us a long, long time, and this class brings these issues out into the open, which is not always easy.

There’s a term, “white fragility” that we’ll talk about a little in class, but the gist of it is this: when “white” people learn about race and racism, we often react with denial, ambivalence, and sometimes anger. This is natural and learned, depending on how diverse your world was before you arrived at UR. White fragility doesn’t mean all whites—like all racial categories, this one is helpful to understanding our world, but not all that accurate. But the point is, let’s try not to be too fragile about what we learn. To paraphrase Michel Foucault, sometimes education cuts. Learning is a process.

**Assignments and Exams**

1. Journal Article Analysis Paper (100 points). Students will write a 3-4 page paper elucidating and explaining the argument put forth in a selected journal article and its relationship to the content in *The Wire*.
2. *Wire* analysis Paper (100 points). Students will write a 6-8 page paper analyzing a scene or episode from the show that addresses the problem/issue developed in the one of the five seasons.
3. Curation Assignment (100 points). We will assign one student or a pair of students to curate (to select, to organize materials) for the course each week. We will proceed as follows: The curator/s will write a blog post of 500-750 words that *summarizes* the episodes we watched and *responds* to them. This post should integrate 5-6 other pieces of media and expand on some aspect of the week's episodes or readings--add new stuff, give us history, expand it into a different community or issue, whatever. This post must be up on the blog within 36 hours of our class meeting. By the night before class, students who are not the curator need to a) post a 250 word response that has a main point, using the readings in some way, and addressing the big picture stuff brought up by the curators and b) respond to any comments on their own post. Curators are required to comment on everyone's post. The curator will lead that week's class discussion. Curators should prepare questions about the reading to pose to the group, and are encouraged to bring an outline of the day’s readings to hand out. The curator is the expert for the week.
4. Midterm Exam (100 points)
5. Presentation. (100 points) Students will present the content of their analysis paper during the last few class sessions.
6. Participation (100 points). Based on in-class and online discussion. (see explanation below)

**Course Materials**

1. *The Wire*, Seasons 1-5. To acquire the series you should either a) register or sign in to iTunes and purchase the complete series ($74.99); b) buy the DVDs on Amazon ($105); c) use your HBO GO package to stream it; or d) find used or library copies of the series. The show is our main text for the course.
2. *Television Criticism*, Victoria O’Donnell, Sage, 2013.
3. Library Research Guide is online: <http://libguides.richmond.edu/watchingTheWire>

**Readings in PDF (find on Wordpress)**

1. Achter, Paul, “Have you Seen *The Wire*?” *Huffington Post*, July 22, 2015,

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-achter/have-you-seen-the-wire\_b\_7840604.html

2. Atlas, John and Dreier, Peter. “Is the Wire too Cynical?” *Dissent*, Summer 2008: 79-82.

3. Chaddha, Anmol, William Julius Wilson, and Sudhir A. Venkates “In Defense of The Wire,”

*Dissent*, Summer, 2008: 83-86.

4. Chaddha, Anmol, William Julius Wilson “The Wire’s Impact: A Rejoinder” *Critical Inquiry* 38,

2011:227-233.

5. Chaddha, Anmol, William Julius Wilson, “‘Way Down in the Hole’: Systemic Urban Inequality

and *The Wire*,” *Critical Inquiry* 38 (1): 164-188.

6. Gray, Herman, “The Politics of Representation in Network Television,” in Darnell Hunt (Ed.),

*Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 155-174.

7. Hall, Stuart, “Encoding, Decoding,” in Simon During (Ed.) *The Cultural Studies Reader*,

(London: Routledge, 1993): 90-103.

8. Hall, Stuart, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” in *Gender, Race and*

*Class in Media,* (Eds.) G. Dines and J. Humez, (Sage: London, 1995): 18– 23.

9. Hsu, Hau (2010), “Walking in Someone Else’s City: The Wire and the Limits of Empathy.

*Criticism*, 52 (3-4): 509-528.

10. Jagoda, Patrick (2011). “Wired.” *Critical Inquiry* 38: 189-199.

11. LeBesco, Kathleen, “ ‘Gots to Get Got’; Social Justice and Audience Response to Omar Little” in

*The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*, 2009, New York, Continuum Press.

12. Lippman, Laura, “The Women of the Wire (No, Seriously),” In Rafael Alvarez (Ed.) *The Wire:*

*Truth Be Told*, (New York, Grove Press, 2009): 54-60.

13. Marshall, Courtney D (2009). “Barksdale Women: Crime, Empire, and the Production of

Gender,” in Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall (Eds.) *The Wire: Urban Decay and*

*American Television* (New York: Continuum Press, 2009): 149-161.

14. Ott, Brian and Mack, Robert L., “Queer Analysis,” *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction*

(Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009): pp. 196-218.

15. Simon, David (2013, Dec. 8): “Two Americas: My Country is a Horror Show,” *The Guardian*

http://bit.ly/1dbxgJw

16. Simon, David. “Letter to HBO,” in *The Wire: Truth Be Told.* In Rafael Alvarez (Ed.) (New York,

Simon and Schuster Books 2004): 35-40.

17. Wallace-Wells, Ben (December 13, 2007). “How America Lost the War on Drugs,” *Rolling*

*Stone*.

18. Zorzi, William F. “The Politics of Baltimore,” In Rafael Alvarez (Ed.) *The Wire: Truth Be Told*,

(New York, Grove Press, 2009): 272-280

**Grading**

In-class exercises/quizzes and homework cannot be made up for any reason. No assignments will be accepted after class on the due date except by prior arrangement or in the case of authentic, verifiable emergency. If a student does not turn in an assignment on the due date and has not made arrangements with the instructor beforehand, the student will receive a “0” (zero) on that assignment. Late assignments are docked one letter grade for each class day late. After four late days, a late assignment will automatically be given a zero. After a grade is returned, students have one week to resolve questions about the grade with the instructor. Questions about a grade must be submitted first in writing. After one week, the grade is final.

**Late Work**

Turning in late work reflects poorly on you. Please avoid it at all costs. Any late work receives a letter grade deduction for each class period it is late.

**Attendance**

Students are responsible for all information in the class, regardless of their personal attendance. If a student is absent, it is his or her responsibility to inquire about what they have missed. Absences due to university activities (e.g., sports, mock trial, etc.) must be discussed with the instructor before the relevant class period(s). An official notice must be shown to the instructor. Arrangements concerning absences are entirely at the instructor's discretion.

Please be on time for class to avoid unnecessary disruptions of speeches, lectures, and discussions.

We live in a digital age and you may need your laptop, tablet, or other device to take notes or to do in-class research. We will also do a lot of class discussion, so please be ready for us to ask you to put your screens away.

**In-Class Participation**

“A” for class participation is awarded when students regularly initiate discussion. This means coming to class thoroughly familiar with the assigned reading and, therefore, prepared to raise questions, to open discussion, to identify topics of interest in the reading, and actively engage other students in the discussion. We also factor in your performance on the assigned presentations made on weekly viewing assignments. (This does not mean monopolizing a discussion, or shutting others out, or talking for its own sake rather than to make a point about the topic). [90-100 points]

“B” for class participation is awarded to students who participate regularly and productively in class discussion, who are prepared, and who are willing to engage. B discussants differ from A students in that the latter are self-starters who do not rely on the instructor's questions to set the agenda for discussion. [80-89 points]

“C” for class participation is awarded to those who participate on a regular, but less frequent basis than the B student. C discussants will be prepared for class, but their contributions will indicate that less thought has been given to assigned materials. [70-79 points]

“D” for class participation is given to those who contribute infrequently to the discussion and whose contributions do not appear to arise from thoughtful consideration of the assignments. [60-69 points]

“F” for non-participation in class discussion. Of course, participation is impossible if you donʼt attend class. Frequent absences mandate F grades. [0-60 points]

**Grievance Procedures**

Occasionally, students are unsatisfied with some dimension of the course. In such cases, you should first provide a written argument in support of your position to the instructors and request a meeting. All grade appeals on specific assignments must be made within one week of the return of the assignment.

\*\**Any students who need accommodations for learning or who have particular needs are invited to share these concerns or requests with the instructors as soon as possible.*

**Tentative Schedule**

**August 26**

**Read:** David Simon, “Letter to HBO.”

David Simon, “Two Americas: My Country is a Horror Show.”

Achter, “Have you Seen *The Wire*”

**Watch**: #1, “The Target”

**September 2**

**Read:** O’Donnell, *Television Criticism*, Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2.

Wallace-Wells, Ben (December 13, 2007). “How America Lost the War on Drugs,” *Rolling Stone*, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/how-america-lost-the-war-on-drugs-20110324>

Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall, “I Am the American Dream”

**\*We will watch episode #5, “The Pager,” in class**

**Watch:** #2 “The Detail” / #3 “The Buys” / #4 “Old Cases” / #5 “The Pager”

**Curator/s:**

**Visitor Robin Mundle ’85, Administrative Coordinator for RHCS Department**

**September 9**

**Read:** O’Donnell, *Television Criticism*, Chapter 3

Hall, Stuart (1993) “Encoding, Decoding”

**Watch:** #6 “The Wire” / #7 “One Arrest”/#8 “Lessons”

**Curator/s:**

**Due**: Journal Article Paper

**September 16**

**Read:** O’Donnell, *Television Criticism*, Chapter 4

Ott, Brian and Mack, Robert L. (2009) “Queer Analysis”

**\*We will watch episode #13, “Sentencing” in class**

**Watch:** #9 “Game Day” / #10 “The Cost” / #11 “The Hunt” / #12 “Cleaning Up”

#13 “Sentencing” (end of season 1)

**Curator/s:**

**September 23**

**Read:** O’Donnell, *Television Criticism*, Chapters 4 and 5

Courtney D. Marshall, “Barksdale Women: Crime, Empire, and the

Production of Gender”

**Watch:** #14 “Ebb Tide” / #15 “Collateral Damage” / #16 “Hot Shots” / #17 “Hard Cases” / #18 “Undertow” / #19 “All Prologue”

**Curator/s**:

**Boatwright Library Orientation**

**September 30**

**Read:** O’Donnell, *Television Criticism*, Chapters 6 and 7

Simon, “The Politics of Baltimore”

**Watch:** #20 “Backwash” / #21 “Duck & Cover” / #22 “Stray Rounds” / #23 “Storm Warnings / #24 “Bad Dreams” / #25 “Port in a Storm” (end of season 2)

**Curator/s:**

**VISITOR: Dr. John Moeser, Senior Fellow, UR Center for Civic Engagement; Professor Emeritus of Urban Studies and Planning, VCU**

**October 7**

**Read:** O’Donnell, *Television Criticism*, Chapters 8, 9, and 10

Hall, Stuart, (1995) “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media”

**Watch:** #26 “Time After Time” / #27 “All Due Respect” / #28 “Dead Soldiers” / #29 “Hamsterdam”

**Curator/s:**

**October 14**

**Midterm Exam Due By End of Class Period**

**October 21**

**Read:**  Atlas, John and Dreier, Peter. “Is the Wire too Cynical?”

Chaddha, Anmol, William Julius Wilson, and Sudhir A. Venkatesh, “In Defense of *The*

*Wire*”

Chaddha, Anmol, William Julius Wilson, “‘Way Down in the Hole’: Systemic Urban Inequality and *The Wire*”

Chaddha, Anmol, William Julius Wilson “The Wire’s Impact: A Rejoinder”

Walton, Anthony. 2009. “The Rules of the Game”

**\*We will watch episode #37, “Mission Accomplished” in class**

**Watch:** #30 “Straight and True” /#31 “Homecoming” / #32 “Back Burners” / #33 “Moral Midgetry” /#34 “Slapstick”/#35 “Reformation” / #36 “Middle Ground”/ #37 “Mission

Accomplished” (end of season 3)

**Curator/s:**

**October 28**

**DRAFT OF ANALYSIS PAPER DUE**

**Read:** Jagoda, Patrick (2011). “Wired.”

**Watch:** #38 “Boys of Summer” / #39 “Soft Eyes” / #40 “Home Rooms / #41 “Refugees”

**Visitor Dr. Thad Williamson, Director of the Office of Community Wealth Building, Richmond VA**

**Curator/s:**

**November 4**

**Read:** LeBesco, Kathleen, “ ‘Gots to Get Got’; Social Justice and Audience Response to Omar

Little”

**Watch:** #42 “Alliances”/ #43 “Margin of Error”

**Curator/s:**

**Presentations: 1.**

**2.**

**3.**

**4.**

**November 11**

**Read:** Simon, “David Simon on Jamie Hector as Marlo Stanfield”

**Watch:** #44 “Unto Others” / #45 “Corner Boys” / #46 “Know Your Place”) / #47 “Misgivings” / #48 “A New Day” / #49 “That’s Got His Own” / #50 “Final Grades” (end season 4)

**Curator/s:**

**Presentations: 1.**

**2.**

**3.**

**4.**

**November 18**

**Read:** ------

**Watch:** #51 “More with Less” / #52 “Unconfirmed Reports” / #53 “Not for Attribution / #54 “Transitions” / #55 “React Quotes” / #56 “The Dickensian Aspect” / #57 “Took”

**Curator/s:**

**Presentations: 1.**

**2.**

**3.**

**4.**

**November 25**

**NO CLASS, THANKSGIVING BREAK**

**December 2**

**Read:** Hsu, Hua. 2010.“Walking in Someone Else’s City.”

**Watch:** #58 “Clarifications” & #59 “Late Editions” #60 “-30-” (end of series)

**We will watch episode #60, “-30-” in class**

**Curator/s:**

**Presentations: 1.**

**2.**

**3.**

**4.**

**FINAL PAPER DUE TBA**