Check for updates

Article

"You Can Help Yourself/ but Don't Take Too Much": African American Motherhood on *The Wire*

Television & New Media
14(5) 386–401
© The Author(s) 2012
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1527476412452797
tvnm.sagepub.com
SAGE

Elizabeth Ault[1]

Abstract

Despite *The Wire*'s (HBO, 2002-2008) successful, interesting structural analysis of urban politics and problems, its (few) portrayals of African American mothers exhibit a view of black motherhood as irresponsible, irrational, and emasculating, a view that hearkens back to that of the Moynihan Report. In this article, I look at the fourth season of the show to examine how mothers' desires are presented as being central to the negative outcomes their sons face, as well as unrelentingly and sexually pathological. This aspect has been paid little if any attention in the show's overwhelmingly positive critical reception; I explore the show's political economic network context and the effects of *The Wire*'s self-proclaimed "authenticity" in furthering this discourse among its viewers. The treatment of these characters, encouraging mothers to "help [themselves], but [not] take too much" imbricates *The Wire* in the discourses of personal responsibility and self-governance that undergird neoliberal regimes it critiques.

Keywords

critical media studies, race, gender, television, United States, cable television

Shots of bleak West Baltimore blocks, populated by drug dealers and abandoned row homes, consistently drunken and cursing police officers, politicians not even pretending to act in the public interest, and graffiti welcoming viewers to "Bodymore, Murdaland": this must be *The Wire* (2002-2008). The September 2006 premiere of the show's fourth season, bringing attention to the failures of public education by dramatizing the

[1]Independent scholar

Corresponding Author:
Elizabeth Ault, Box 90660, Durham, NC 27701, USA.
Email: aultx013@umn.edu

experiences of four eighth-grade boys, brought impassioned, near-universal acclaim from mainstream television critics.[2] Since then, the program's repute has only grown, as creator David Simon and his "somewhat angry show" continue to be lauded and dissected by fans and academics alike (often making the former out of the latter), in forums from in-depth blog posts and satires to a co-edited volume, *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*, and William Julius Wilson's Harvard course, "HBO's *The Wire*: Racial Inequality and Urban Reality." The show's reputation was cemented by Simon's receipt of a MacArthur "genius" grant in late 2010. Indeed, there's no denying the show's often-searing social criticism (some of it inspired by Wilson's work), high production values, and lived-in atmosphere. There's also no denying that *The Wire* was an essential dramatic showcase for black actors and that its queer of color characters Detective Shakima ("Kima") Greggs and stickup artist Omar Little were groundbreaking.

In its willingness to consistently attack institutions and structures as opposed to individuals, *The Wire* was almost alone on TV. The medium is set up to "put a face" on problems, placing burdens of history on the shoulders of isolated characters. Herman Gray addresses this individualization, particularly in representations of black family life, where

> the primacy of individual efforts over collective possibilities, the centrality of individual values, morality, and initiative, and a benign (if not invisible) social structure are the key social terms that define television discourse about black success and failure. . . . Viewers question individual coping mechanisms rather than the structural and political circumstances that create and sustain racial inequality. (Gray 1994, 178)

Many scholars have made critiques similar to Gray's: that by representing social problems through its characters, television individualizes these problems.[3] Yet *The Wire* mostly avoided this trap by showcasing systemic failures and representing the difficulties experienced by individuals who run up against the limits of ossified institutional cultures or, even worse, attempt to change those cultures. Throughout the show's five seasons, from the Baltimore schools to the *Baltimore Sun*, many storylines depicted institutional failure's devastating consequences for individuals and communities. The novelty of such social commentary in televisual form accounts for some of the overwhelmingly positive critical response.

Yet in all the excitement surrounding the show, something—or someone—seems to be missing. While the show makes nuanced critiques of public institutions and structures shaping everyday life in Baltimore, its female characters are mostly confined to the private sphere of familial concerns. The show rarely takes the time to explore how the former realm shapes the latter, and its representation of family remains individualized and uniquely gendered. The world of *The Wire*, focused as it is on the public sphere of street economies and urban police forces, is notably, if not unrealistically, devoid of women; the scholarly and fan attention paid to female characters like

lesbian cop Kima or assassin Snoop underlines their exceptionality. Season four's focus on Randy Wagstaff, Duquan Weems, Michael Lee, and Namond Brice brought concerns about mothering and appropriate gender roles into sharper focus. Though *The Wire*, more so than any other show on television, offered a consciously structural critique of urban culture, it remained within limits, one of which is valorization of heteropatriarchal domesticity at the cost of the suspicion of black motherhood.

This essay will explore how *The Wire*'s representation of black mothers, unlike its representations of almost every other group, reduced them to little more than oft-reproduced stereotypes of pathological non-normativity: irresponsible, irrational, and emasculating. In so characterizing black mothers, the shows' writers undercut some of their own attempts at social critique. Specifically, I will explore how the characterizations of Michael and Namond's mothers uses the tropes of bad mothering developed and applied to black women over the past decades, including proposing solutions to this bad behavior that rely on the patriarchal family's recuperative power.

HBO's "preoccupation with authenticity" (Gray 2012, 4) lends claims about black maternal pathology credibility among white liberals, those who might regard politicians' attempts to blame people of color for other societal ills with a good deal of skepticism.[4] All the season four boys' stories naturalize the conditions of black motherhood as often pathological, and even when it isn't that, always insufficient. Viewers who are engaging with new and complex portraits of many aspects of black urban life are encouraged to question *these* women's "individual coping mechanisms rather than the structural and political circumstances that create and sustain" the oppressions they face. *The Wire*'s writers and performers are quite capable of creating sympathy for the struggles of men—and some women—in many different class and race positions and relations to authority. They show us characters like alcoholic police officer Jimmy McNulty, strategizing drug kingpin/real estate developer Stringer Bell, and corrupt (or maybe just stupid) cop Thomas Hauk and don't dictate how we interpret their storylines; rather, much of the show is full of precisely the sort of representational ambiguity that obviates calls for "more positive representations" and earns the "authentic" plaudit, except when it comes to black mothers, women without the social or cultural capital of those men. As the show chastises its mother characters for their desires, it encourages them to "help [themselves], but [not] take too much," imbricating *The Wire* in the discourses of "personal responsibility" that undergird many of the structures of neoliberalism it critiques.

Black Motherhood on Trial: *The Wire* and Historical Context

It's hard to compare the show's treatment of these mothers to its treatment of other women because there are so few women on the show at any given time. This lack of women is so pronounced, in fact, that Baltimore-based crime writer Laura Lippman's essay in an HBO-produced episode guide, which claimed to be in defense of the women of *The Wire*, read more like a defense of the (male) writers of *The Wire*.

Lippman writes that the women on the show, mostly wives and girlfriends, and a few lawyers and politicians, are drawn just as complexly as the men. This is an argument designed to appeal to hardcore viewers of the show—those who would pony up the cash to buy an HBO-produced episode guide. Her claims are typical of neoliberal multiculturalism's simultaneous reliance on and dismissal of difference, referencing *The Wire*'s women as "flawed human beings who just happen to be women" (Lippman 2004, 57). Lippman's essay was written before season four; later reviewers do acknowledge that "one of *The Wire*'s few serious flaws is its recurring tendency to cast secondary female characters as nagging wife figures," a role that is gendered female, rather than a neutral category (Wisniewski 2009). As they are written, the African American mothers on the show *in particular* would make no sense in any other context—their behaviors and attitudes are not those of "flawed human beings"; rather, they stand in for the behaviors and attitudes of a class that seems to be unredeemable.[5] Of course, the shows' writers didn't originate these representations, and they may not even be intentional: these portraits are drawing on discourses from public policy and sociology that have informed generations of such representations.

In their representations of black women in sexual relationships, then, the show's writers and producers uncomfortably reproduce the hierarchy of power critiqued in Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*: "The most important rule is that *nobody* fucks you" (Wallace 1979, 68). In the attempt to reclaim black masculinity, Wallace argues, many men turned to a misogynist desire to establish deeper black patriarchal forms, developing a deep suspicion of those who get fucked (male or female). In Wallace's understanding of black macho, "whom you fuck indicates your power" such that "the greatest power would be gained by fucking a white man first, a black man second, a white woman third, and a black woman not at all" (68). On *The Wire*, then, Lippman's claim holds true for the women on the show who were introduced prior to their secual relationships and those few who continue to be defined outside sexual relationships. But Lippman's assessment is flawed when the focus shifts beyond this small group to women wo have ceded their power by entering into sexual relationships with men. Wallace's logic accounts for the valorization (diegetically and in fan contexts) of characters like Kima, a macho woman who may have sex, but does not get fucked.

Wallace's logic helps to explain the demonization of black mothers, whose desires, whether for material goods, drugs, sex, or love, are presented as central to the negative outcomes their sons face. These desires are presented as unrelentingly pathological in a way specific to the cultural and policy narratives about black women's sexuality.[7] While *The Wire* has been lauded as groundbreaking, its scapegoating of families as the source of negative behavior and outcomes for African American children is far from it. Such pathologization of the African American family, particularly the woman-headed African American family, is nothing new. Women of color feminist scholars like Wallace, Patricia Hill Collins, and others remind us that controlling images of black female sexuality as non-normative and destructive were "the dominant ideology of the slave era" (Hill Collins 2000, 72). These discourses were updated in the Great

Society era; the "crisis" of black matriarchy goes back in its current form to 1965's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, more commonly referred to as the Moynihan Report (Moynihan 1965).

Putting the work of social scientists like Gunnar Myrdal and E. Franklin Frazier into a public policy intervention, the now-infamous report began with the allegation that "the fundamental problem" of African American communities was "that of family structure" (Moynihan 1965, i). Although Moynihan did not identify matriarchal families as inherently bad, he found their abnormality in comparison to mainstream (white) society to be harmful. Specifically, he identified this family structure at the heart of "the tangle of pathology" that he wrote characterized black urban life, concluding that it "retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male" (Moynihan 1965, 29). The Moynihan Report had two main outcomes. First, black women's allegedly too-powerful position in their communities and families, understood previously as an outcome of systemic inequalities and economic and social prejudice, was subsequently construed as the reason black communities were not, and could not be, accepted by normative white society. Power in black communities was understood as a zero-sum game; black women would, and should, have to cede their power to develop proper forms of masculinity in black men. The next outcome followed from this conclusion, as the report encouraged the development of a set of government policies enabling black men to be proper patriarchs (Moynihan 1965, 29). This meant that resources would be diverted away from increasing the resources available to women and children put in an "aberrant" situation by historical and structural forces or to changing those forces. Black feminists and anti-poverty activists protested the report loudly at the time and ever since. Policymakers, however, have found its critiques compelling, perhaps because they can be used to blame poor communities for their own poverty. In many ways, then, the Moynihan Report was an updating of historic discourses about black female sexuality for a population that wanted to relieve its conscience of responsibility for continuing racism and inequality in the post-civil rights era.

The report's centering the problem of black masculinity has continued to be the dominant paradigm for discussion about problems of race and racism in the post-civil rights era. This paradigm has extended to popular culture representations of black life, both fictional and journalistic, wherein black mothers are commonly represented as domineering, loud, and excessive in their consumption and love. Simultaneously, black men are stereotypically represented as either sexual threats or emasculated; representations that *The Wire* takes much care to counter in its panoply of interesting, complex black male characters. While the plots of season four's episodes underline the variety of threats facing young men, the strongest influence on their life chances seems to be their family structure. Through electing to focus on four fatherless boys and the men attempting to change their lives for better and for worse, *The Wire*'s writers reveal their investments in the development of proper and improper forms of black masculinity.

In many ways, *The Wire*'s focus on masculinity replicates the cultural knowledge production of "ghetto movies" that dominated early 1990s representations

of blackness. Movies like *Boyz N the Hood* and *Menace II Society* focused on the nihilistic, threatening relationships between young black men and mainstream America. Michele Wallace wrote that "what made [her] most uneasy about" the former film's representation of "single black mothers was how little we're told about them" and subsequently, "how . . . viewers are encouraged, on the basis of crucial visual cues, to come to stereotypical conclusions about these women" (Wallace 1992, 123). Wallace does not argue that the characters are "positive" or "negative" representations, but rather critiques the ways in which "the focus on violence against black men in particular only serves to further mystify the plight of women and girls in black communities" (Wallace 1992, 124). This focus links up with existing discourses that determine the distribution of resources and, Wallace concludes, "[a]s usual, it is the people who control the guns (and the phalluses) who hog the limelight" (Wallace 1992, 124). While *The Wire* is more complex and subtle than *Boyz*, some of the terms of its argument remain the same. It's understandable that a show focused on male-dominated spheres like street crime and city politics would focus primarily on telling the stories of men, but it's equally important to question how such a focus replicates the sociological understandings of preceding decades. Such questions, stemming from decades of women of color feminist critiques of masculinist racial discourse, are crucial interventions for imagining alternatives to *The Wire*'s representations, as well as for more clearly mapping the contours of its relationship to neoliberal rationales of rule.

By insisting that government policy not only needed, but was able, to address the crisis it defined, the Moynihan Report remained invested in the liberal project of the welfare state. Similarly, many journalistic and fictional representations (e.g., black sitcoms of the 1970s) that took up its terms suggested ways for the state to intervene productively in creating stronger black families. In contrast, the *neo*liberal rhetoric that emerged in the 1970s and flourished in the Reagan administration emphasizes the removal of the state from "social" functions. In its stead, this rationality of rule promotes personal responsibility, activated by the self and expressed through participation in private enterprise. To this end, Bill Clinton's 1996 fulfillment of his campaign promise to "end welfare as we know it" was even called the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). PRWORA was another watershed moment in the deployment of racist representations and assumptions in the relationship between black families and the state. It was part of a more general neoliberal ethos of, as Lisa Duggan argues, "upward redistribution" of resources—money, power, access, and, as the cases of black mothers on *The Wire* indicate, subjectivity—away from the most vulnerable, rolling back the gains, however moderate, of the Civil Rights Movement (Duggan 2003, 78). As it did so, PRWORA took the same governmental attitude toward black women that the Moynihan Report had. Whether black women were "too *independent*," and therefore castrating matriarchs, or "too *dependent*," lazy and unwilling to help themselves, their behavior had to be regulated, if not by black men, then by the state (Reeves and Campbell 1994, 99).

With the rollback of the welfare state as a result of backlash politics of the 1980s and 1990s, self-regulation reemerged as an important alternative to state regulation. Neoliberalism, even more so than classical or corporate liberalism, relies on governing from a distance, placing increased importance on citizens' capacities to fashion themselves into appropriately participating subjects. Television is a primary cultural technology through which this government is effected. Exhorting the poor to empower—and regulate—themselves through developing "self-esteem" thus became a crucial plank of neoliberal policy and cultural solutions to poverty. Barbara Cruikshank referred to the creation of a neoliberal "state of esteem" (Cruikshank 1996, 235) through state programs and popular self-help discourses, including television talk shows and genres like the Lifetime movie. Drawing on Michel Foucault's (1991) work on governmentality, Cruikshank argues that ideal citizens will take an active role in constructing their governable selves, so that the state "does not have to" (Cruikshank 1996, 234). Life outcomes, positive and negative, are taken to be the result of individual "good" or "bad" choices, rather than linked to structural forces, or even seen as products of the interplay between individuals and structures. As a result, people with negative life outcomes (poverty, drug addiction, residence in crime-ridden neighborhoods, mortgage foreclosures, etc.) are blamed for their circumstances, which are assumed to be the results of their choices. While *The Wire* is a far cry from Lifetime, and while its writers might seem to take a quite different attitude toward individual responsibility "for the perpetuation of poverty" than broadcasters (even liberals like Bill Moyers, critiqued in Reeves and Campbell 1994), they do not exist entirely outside neoliberal logics.

For example, in a 2007 interview, David Simon co-opts the rhetoric of self-governance and chastises (poor, black) parents for not adequately investing in their children's futures. He scolds them for making excuses of the failures of schools and other government institutions, failures that "[do] not absolve you, in the sense of being parents with personal responsibility, personal choice, from exercising your own demand for dignity and existential purpose and relevance for you and your kids" (Mills 2007). "Personal responsibility," as Duggan (2003) and others have consistently noted, is one of the central terms through which neoliberalism operates, and "personal choice" is precisely the language that has been used to attempt to defund public education, the nominal focus of *The Wire*'s fourth season, in favor of independent, religious, and privately run charter schools. Simon is using not only the same language but also the same logic as the neoliberal rhetoric and policy that his show customarily targets. His scolding here seems to avoid, like these rhetorics and policies, the question of race and the uneven distribution of resources for "dignity" that his show makes so brutally clear. In encouraging people to exercise their self-esteem, Simon falls back on governmentality. If people can't rely on each other, or institutions, salvation then lies in the individual's ability to conduct himself or herself properly. For those whose existence forms the outside boundary of proper conduct, like the black mothers of *The Wire*, this may be an impossible endeavor.

Season Four of *The Wire*: Mistrust in Action

The Wire's Baltimore is, in part, a monument to the consequences of PRWORA and other neoliberal policy programs. As a cultural object, *The Wire* emerges in the aftermath of welfare reform built on cultural stereotypes promulgated by the Moynihan Report and cultural production blaming the breakdown of the family for the crack epidemic of the '80s and '90s, and it shares many attitudes with these discourses. Among these are a mistrust of the ability of black women in poor neighborhoods to care for their children, a push to recuperate heteropatriarchal family structures, and a focus on children, particularly sons, as the targets of intervention. In season four, this mistrust is most clear in the treatment of Delonda, mother of Namond Brice, and Michael Lee's mother, who (along with her boyfriend) is a character so abject she does not even receive a proper name. Though they are very different characters, both women are narratively presented as failures, their relationships characterized by unregulated extremes of independence and dependency. Delonda is a force of personality, an excessive character who consumes conspicuously; Michael's mother is a void, introducing addiction and sexual non-normativity into the home.

In the show's narrative, both fail in one of a mother's primary duties: creating safe domestic space for their sons. As a result, in this narrative, they are both directly responsible for their sons' participation in the drug trade. Rather than shielding their sons from the marketplace, these women experience their relationships in economic terms. While their self-interest may seem to make them neoliberal subjects par excellance, the show uses this as a point of critique, not of the neoliberal state, which relies on the ameliorative functions of selfless behaviors such as parenting, but of some lack within the women themselves. As Wallace wrote of *Boyz N the Hood*, "viewers . . . are encouraged . . . to come to stereotypical conclusions about these women," both through visual cues like the darkness of Michael's home and Delonda's ghettofabulous[8] wardrobe, but also through the ways in which their actions harm the characters viewers are encouraged to care about (Wallace 1992, 123). The boys are the narrative focus of the season, and viewers are likely to have a protective response to them. More so than in past seasons, critical response to season four frequently used words like "heartbreaking" to refer to the fates that befell Randy, Duquan, Namond, and Michael.

For example, viewers know that eighth-grader Michael is his brother Bug's primary caretaker before his mother ever appears onscreen. When she is introduced, she's clearly high, eating pizza and fighting over the remote with an unidentified friend (and probable lover). She asks her sons perfunctorily, "y'all learn something today?," not waiting for an answer before returning to a show she's "watched five damn times" and leaving Michael to set Bug up with his math homework and a snack (The Wire 2006, episode no. 41). Viewers later learn that Michael controls the family's food stamps because his mother cannot be trusted with them—she sells their food for money to buy drugs. Later, Michael moves out of his mother's house, taking Bug with him. His mother seems indifferent to this loss and to Michael's employment with rising drug lord Marlo Stanfield. Insofar as she *is* concerned, her cares are for herself,

characteristic of the "welfare queen" who cares about her children only because they guarantee her federal and state aid. She says to someone who comes looking for Michael, "You find the boy, let him know I need some help around here. I popped him and Bug out my ass and now they forgot where they came from" (The Wire 2006, episode no. 49). Viewers can hardly blame Michael for trying to forget "where [he] came from," considering his mother's self-obsessed lifestyle and apparent indifference to her sons' well-being. While Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argues that a lack of community infrastructure has affected the mothering standpoint of isolated black women, *The Wire*'s mothers lack the complexity that would make this a compelling interpretation. Like the audiences of *Boyz N the Hood, The Wire*'s viewers are given little information about how or why these women make the choices they do.

Michael's mother's sexual behavior augments her irresponsible attitude toward her sons. When Bug's father is released from prison (where he was on unspecified charges), Michael's mother is happy to welcome him back into their home, reassuring Michael that they will "be a family again" (The Wire 2006, episode no. 45). Michael reacts to this announcement with surprise and dismay, mistrustful of this man, who he will not allow to be alone with his brother. From Michael's interactions with Bug's father and other adult men, it quickly becomes clear that he has sexually abused Michael. His mother's invocation of the family in the previous exchange only underscores how far her household is from the normative ideal, providing the show's writers with a chance to emphasize Michael's humanity—his protectiveness of his brother, his responsibility for running the household—against the depravity they have constructed as his background.

Indeed, the dangerous and non-normative sexuality on display in Michael's household is typical of that constructed by mainstream sociological discourse of the mid to late twentieth century and taken up in the Moynihan Report. In Rod Ferguson's (2006, 87) words: "African Americans were reproductive rather than productive, heterosexual but never heteronormative." Michael's mother's boyfriend can father a child, but not be a patriarch. He can have sex with Michael's mother, but admits that "a man gotta bust his nut" while in prison; he has also sexually abused Michael (The Wire 2006, episode no. 47). The problem is not in representing black sexual behavior as non-normative, rather, it's in presenting mothers' non-normativity as necessarily having dire consequences.[9] In this case, the return of Bug's father drives Michael to turn to Marlo for protection, creating a direct link between Michael's mother's sexual behavior and his eventual involvement in the drug trade. *The Wire*'s representation of Michael's mother, like the figure of the welfare queen in the 1980s and 1990s, "signals efforts to use the situation of working-class Black women as a sign of the deterioration of the state" (Hill Collins 2000, 80). As it represents the "deterioration" of the state through the pathologies of the Lee home, *The Wire*'s writers seem to suggest that Michael's mother's failure to take responsibility for herself and find her sons a proper father figure is the real perversion.

Namond's mother, Delonda, is similarly incapable of or unwilling to take responsibility for herself. While the Brice family remains in theory a heteropatriarchal one, it

too exists outside a white, nuclear, middle-class norm. Namond's father, Wee-Bey Brice, confessed to multiple murders in the service of the Barksdale gang and so is in prison on several life terms (The Wire 2002, episode no. 13). As a result, Delonda and Namond receive a pension from the Barksdales: Delonda does not receive state aid, but she is still positioned as a freeloader. Viewers' first inklings of Delonda's lack of mothering skills, and the sympathetic role that Wee-Bey is to play, come during a prison visit when he asks after his beloved tropical fish. In the first season, Wee-Bey's preoccupation with his fish tank came across as a quirkily endearing trait; in his relationship with Delonda, his emotional attachment to the fish points to some affective shortcoming in her. She tells him flatly, "The fish be fine. I mean, they fish, right? How I know how they feeling about shit?" (The Wire 2006, episode no. 39). This scene also establishes the financial nature of the Brices' relationships and Namond's ambivalence toward working as a drug dealer. In keeping with stereotypes about matriarchal power, Delonda tries to bully Wee-Bey into disciplining Namond and inciting him to work harder. Eventually, Wee-Bey will realize the importance of offering Namond an alternative to street life, while Delonda, seeking to maintain her dependence on the men in her life, refuses to see other options. Her failure to become self-actualized excludes her from Cruikshank's (1996) state of esteem, positioning her outside the realm of citizenship postulated by neoliberal discourses. But rather than position her exteriority (like, say, Omar's) as a resistance to be celebrated, her character is considered only inasmuch as her behavior negatively affects her son.

Without Wee-Bey around to discipline her every move, and seemingly incapable of disciplining herself, Delonda is free to embody the worst fears about powerful black motherhood. One character on the show refers to Delonda as "a dragon lady," whose personality gives him some insight into "why [Namond] is what [he] is"; just as Michael bears the marks of his mother's pathology, in the form of his inability to trust adults and continuing sexual trauma, so too does Namond, as he is shown to be the most cowardly and spoiled of the boys in the season's first episodes (The Wire 2006, episode no. 43). As Moynihan might have put it, Delonda denies her son "the very essence of man," which is "to strut" (Moynihan 1965, 16). This emasculation isn't all verbal either. Throughout the season, Namond's trademark is a pouf of ponytailed hair at the nape of his neck. Though Wee-Bey encourages him to cut it, implying that Namond's highly visible hairdo undermines his professionalism, Delonda ultimately threatens to cut it herself, at which point Namond begins to cornrow his hair.

In a later episode, Delonda displays an attitude of entitlement similar to that of Michael's mother (yet taken to new, materialistic, and emasculating heights) as she berates her son for failing to live up to his father's example as a drug dealer:

> Delonda: This how you pay me back for all the love I shown? Shit, I been kept you in Nikes since you were in diapers.
> Namond: I'm trying!
> Delonda: You trying, huh? That's what you gonna tell your father the next time you see him? That you're trying? . . .
> Namond: What he done got him locked up—

> Delonda: [*slaps him*] That's right. Wee-Bey walked in Jessup[10] a man, and he gonna walk out one. But you out here, wearing his name, *acting a bitch*. Aw, look at you. Crying now. (The Wire 2006, episode no. 49)

It should be possible to read this scene multiple ways: like many mothers, Delonda expresses her love for her child through material goods and through pushing her child to excel. Yet her belittling tone, use of physical violence, and materialism turn Delonda villainous. A scene from early in the fourth season demonstrates the tension between her moments of care and the show's portrayal of her as a destructively irresponsible mother: she allows Namond to bum her cigarettes while simultaneously indulging him in an array of basketball jerseys, ostentatious jewelry, and name-brand clothing. Even her indulgence is shown as self-centered, however, as she boasts, "You think *my* son ain't going to be up that school looking like himself?" (The Wire 2006, episode no. 39). James Braxton Peterson writes that Delonda "puts into bold relief the awesome potential of the single parent household to mold and negatively impact the young black male," particularly in her encouragement of "nihilistic materialism" (Peterson 2009, 117). In the context of the show, and in Marshall's (2009) analysis, Delonda's showering her son with gifts and driving him to succeed are not valued behaviors; keeping her son "in Nikes" is her only way of articulating "the love she shown." Similarly, drug dealing is the activity at which she wants him to grow and excel, in part to ensure her continued comfort.

Brianna Barksdale, a pivotal character in season one, provides a template for Delonda's behavior. Brianna's brother, Avon, is the head of the Barksdale gang, and her son, D'Angelo, is a midlevel dealer. As a result of her familial connections, Brianna has a power that the season four mothers lack. Notably, this power derives from familial rather than sexual connection, seeming to underline the show's antipathy toward those who "get fucked." This antipathy is reiterated in the treatment of D'Angelo's girlfriend, Donette. While Donette is not an overbearing matriarch, Courtney Marshall argues that her sexuality is not her own; her "sexual desire was used to crystallize the hierarchy of black masculinity" (Marshall 2009, 154). When D'Angelo is arrested at the end of the first season of *The Wire*, Brianna insists that he accept a sentence of twenty years in jail rather than become a state's witness and join the Witness Protection Program, as he desires to do. She asks, "How you gonna start over again without your family?," meaning, of course, the Barksdale drug clan (The Wire 2002, episode no. 13). In doing so, Brianna destroys not only D'Angelo's life (he is murdered in prison), but also any hope for the nuclear family unit that he has built with Donette and their son. Though Brianna works at the edges of power in a mostly male world, she is still an example of a black matriarch who has raised a son who dares not cross her. Brianna's loyalty remains to the extended and illicit Barksdale gang, a family that exists outside the "appropriate and regulatory norm" (Ferguson 2006, 123). Brianna is a much more complex character than the season four mothers, and viewers later witness her regrets over forcing D'Angelo into the position that she did. Her regrets also inform viewers' interpretations of Delonda's similar exhortations toward Namond.

In contrast to Brianna, or even Donette, whose appeals to Stringer Bell could be admired for the self-preservation instinct they demonstrate, Delonda and Michael's mother's lack of complexity stand out. It's not surprising that conversations surrounding the show online, in print, and in person prove these women to be almost universally reviled. This points to the importance of considering televisual images as pedagogical tools alongside their function as reservoirs for identification. While in another telling Delonda's situation (partner incarcerated, cut off from her source of income) might be a site for identification, the way her character is constructed makes it almost impossible to have sympathy, much less psychic resonances, with her. For HBO's target audience of savvy white audiences well-off enough to afford subscriptions, these characters fit neatly not only into the preexisting discourses about black "welfare queens" whose relationships with their children are primarily economic, but also into stereotypes about emasculating black women. The show's only proposed solution, proper fatherhood, fits into these discourses as well.

The fourth season of *The Wire*, the Moynihan Report, and neoliberal policy initiatives such as marriage-incentive programs encourage financial and affective investment in the potential of proper black fatherhood to create appropriately self-governing citizens. Retired police officer Bunny Colvin's successful patriarchal relationship with Namond is evidence of this. Namond's misbehavior in school results in his being placed in a pilot program where he catches Colvin's eye. When Namond is arrested for dealing drugs and Delonda is nowhere to be found, Colvin picks him up at the police station and brings him back to his house for the night. When Bunny takes Namond *home*, their relationship transitions from institutional to domestic, from the public sphere to the private. As a result, his intervention succeeds where others from the season, which remain within the spaces of the state, fail, reinforcing the articulation between the show's "mistrust of institutions" and neoliberal logics of government. Delonda's absence makes this success possible; her selfishness and displeasure upon Namond's return (telling Bunny to "leave [Namond] the fuck alone") are even more jarring in contrast to the idyll of middle-class domesticity Namond has just enjoyed with Bunny and his wife. Unlike Delonda, Bunny's wife takes care of household tasks and speaks softly: she knows her place (The Wire 2006, episode no. 47). Shocked by Delonda's callousness and seeming disregard for Namond's future, Bunny makes a man-to-man appeal, visiting Wee-Bey in jail to plead for another path for Namond. The pretense is that Bunny goes to save Namond from the corner; in reality, saving Namond from Delonda is as pressing a motive. As a result of Bunny's intervention, Wee-Bey finally recognizes the threat Delonda poses to Namond's long-term future and reins her in. Exercising what authority (patriarchal) remains to him, he commands her: "Remember who *I* am. . . . You gonna let go of that boy" (The Wire 2006, episode no. 50).

Because of Bunny and Wee-Bey's combined fatherly efforts, Namond ends the season living with the Colvins in a model of bourgeois heteropatriarchal life, in a neighborhood that's practically suburban with its lawns and wind chimes. Sitting on the porch in the final episode, Namond watches his former neighborhood friends drive

by, booming music in a presumably stolen car.[11] When he stays on the porch, Namond establishes, in Roderick Ferguson's words, "his distance from obviously pathological subjects and social relations"; he can therefore claim "access to state and civil society" (Ferguson 2006, 75). By the end of the season, Namond is the only one of the boys with a chance to achieve this access, to be, as Bunny promises Wee-Bey, "out there in the world in a way that didn't happen for you and me" (The Wire 2006, episode no. 50). Season five of the show makes good on Bunny's words, providing a vision of Namond as a self-governing global citizen: participating in a high school debate competition, rattling off facts about AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa as Bunny and his wife beam in the audience (The Wire 2008, episode no. 59). Delonda is nowhere to be seen.

The fate of black mothers in *The Wire*'s fourth season is disappointing in the context of a show that so often runs counter to the racial hegemony of television. Unlike the examples of good policing or rare political acts of genuine principle that *The Wire* occasionally provides to demonstrate characters' complexity or ameliorate viewers' nihilism, there is no recuperation available to poor black mothers. The only way their children can survive is to be taken from them. Through Namond's salvation in heteronormative domesticity, and Michael's "heartbreaking" fate outside institutional sanction, *The Wire* reveals its investments in creating rational citizens out of African American boys only through successful state-sanctioned, but privatized, fathering interventions. In so doing, *The Wire* establishes itself as primarily a phallocentric crime drama, replete with the signifiers of authenticity that appeal to quality audiences who in past decades were horrified and/or alienated by similar works like *Boyz N the Hood*.

It's unsurprising that *The Wire*, for all of its interrogation of structural factors, ends up reinvesting, insofar as it makes any sort of prescriptive claim, in the benefits of the heteropatriarchal family. Unsurprising because creator David Simon is focused on critiquing what he refers to as "the triumph of capitalism over human value" (O'Rourke 2006), which looks a lot like neoliberalism in its current form. At the same time, though, Simon's "skepticism" of state and other institutions is clear (O'Rourke 2006). This refusal of the powers of both state and market, not articulated to a larger politics such as woman of color feminism that might help him to identify the state as a site of violence and the possibility of politicized power relationships within the family, leaves Simon in an almost anarcho-libertarian position, relying on a notion of self-governance and families apparently untethered from the state that is as unsatisfying a dramatic resolution as it is a policy solution. The institutions that *The Wire* is so devoted to condemning have failed these women too. In order to make its damning assessment of urban politics within its own institutional context of Time/Warner-owned HBO, *The Wire* must make some compromises. In this case, black mothers' sexualities, their subjectivities, their desires, and therefore their fitness as parents is the price the show, like so many before it, is willing to pay.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Billie Holiday and Arthur Herzog (1939), *God Bless the Child*.
2. HBO's programming schedule has always varied from the standard of the networks; its shorter seasons and longer breaks speak to a certain confidence in audience loyalty, which is probably not misplaced given that people are willing to pay extra to bring the network into their homes. The politics and stakes of these maneuvers are discussed at greater length in Akass and McCabe (2005) and Leverette, Ott, and Buckley (2008), among other studies of HBO and its programming.
3. See, for example, Dow (1996).
4. In "Recovered, Reinvented, and Reimagined," his conclusion to *Television and New Media*'s *Tremé* special issue, Herman Gray discusses how HBO "market[s] blackness as quality television" as part of its lifestyle branding (Gray 2012, 276).
5. See, for example, Ethridge (2008).
6. Moreover, though subject to discrimination because of their race and sexuality, Kima and Cheryl occupy a very different class position than the mothers who have historically been scapegoated in mainstream U.S. culture. In particular, Cheryl, who works in broadcast news, is a member of the "legitimate" black middle class and therefore has access to social, cultural, and economic resources that working-class and poor African American mothers lack.
7. The contradiction between the self-sacrificing expectations that continue to be attached to motherhood and the self-interested requirements of neoliberal citizenship, which puts all mothers in an untenable position, is not one the show's writers seem particularly interested in exploring.
8. See Mukherjee (2006) for theorization on this concept as a form of resistance and as a form of cultural work in representation that adds a level of nuance not present in the characterization of Delonda.
9. We see little of Duquan or Randy's families of origin, but can assume that their liminal status—evicted, in foster care—is similarly a result of non-normative sexualities among these families.
10. Jessup, Maryland, is home to one of the state's most notorious prisons. Delonda's statement is ironic because, having confessed to several murders, Wee-Bey will probably not be walking out of prison anytime soon.
11. Donut, an experienced car thief, is driving: stealing nice cars and taking them joyriding was established as a hobby of the boys early in the season.

References

Akass, K. and J. McCabe, eds. 2005. *Reading* Six Feet Under*: TV to Die for*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Cruikshank, B. 1996. "Revolutions within: Self-Government and Self-Esteem." In *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism and Rationalities of Government*, edited by A. Barry, T. Osborne, and N. Rose, 231-51. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

DeClue, J. 2011. "Lesbian Cop, Queer Killer: Leveraging Black Queer Women's Sexuality on HBO's *The Wire*." *Spectator* 31(2).

Dow, B. 1996. *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Duggan, L. 2003. *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Ethridge, B. 2008. "Baltimore on *The Wire*: The Tragic Moralism of David Simon." In *It's not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, edited by M. Leverette, B. L. Ott, and C. L. Buckley, 152-64. New York: Routledge.

Ferguson, R. 2006. *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Foucault, M. 1991. "Governmentality." In *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, edited by G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller, 87-104. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gray, H. 1994. "Television, Black Americans, and the American Dream." In *Television: The Critical View*. 5th ed., edited by H. Newcomb. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gray, H. 2012. "Recovered, Reinvented, Reimagined: *Treme*, Television Studies, and Writing New Orleans." *Television & New Media*, 13(3): 268-78.

Hill Collins, P. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Rev. ed. New York: Routledge.

Leverette, M., B. L. Ott, and C. L. Buckley, eds. 2008. *It's not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*. New York: Routledge.

Lippman, L. 2004. "The Women of *The Wire* (No, Seriously)." In *The Wire: Truth Be Told*, edited by R. Alvarez, 55-61. New York: Pocket Books.

Marshall, C. D. 2009. "Barksdale Women: Crime, Empire, and the Production of Gender." In *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*, edited by T. Potter and C. W. Marshall, 149-61. New York: Continuum.

Mills, D. 2007. "Q&A: David Simon (Pt. 1). Undercover Black Man." January 22. http://undercoverblackman.blogspot.com/2007/01/q-david-simon-pt-1.html (accessed February 7, 2007).

Moynihan, D. P. 1965. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor.

Mukherjee, R. 2006. "The Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic in Contemporary Black Culture." *Cultural Studies* 20(6): 599-629.

O'Rourke, M. 2006. "Behind *The Wire*: David Simon on Where the Show Goes Next." http://www.slate.com/id/2154694/ (accessed December 1, 2006).

Peterson, J. B. 2009. "Corner-Boy Masculinity: Intersections of Inner-City Manhood." In *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*, edited by T. Potter and C. W. Marshall, 107-21. New York: Continuum.

Reeves, J. L. and R. Campbell. 1994. *Cracked Coverage: Television News, the Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Wallace, M. 1979. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. New York: The Dial Press.

Wallace, M. 1992. "*Boyz N the Hood* and *Jungle Fever*." In *Black Popular Culture*, edited by G. Dent, 123-31. Seattle, WA: Bay Press.

The Wire. Episode no. 13, first broadcast September 8, 2002 by HBO. Directed by T. Van Patten and written by D. Simon and E. Burns.

The Wire. Episode no. 39, first broadcast September 17, 2006 by HBO. Directed by C. Moore, and written by D. Mills.

The Wire. Episode no. 41, first broadcast October 1, by HBO. Directed by J. McKay, and written by D. Lehane.

The Wire. Episode no. 43, first broadcast October 15, 2006 by HBO. Directed by D. Attias, and written by E. Overmyer.

The Wire. Episode no. 45, first broadcast November 5, 2006 by HBO. Directed by A. Holland, and written by R. Price.

The Wire. Episode no. 47, first broadcast November 19, 2006 by HBO. Directed by E. Dickerson, and written by E. Burns.

The Wire. Episode no. 49, first broadcast December 3, 2006 by HBO. Directed by J. Chappelle, and written by G. Pelecanos.

The Wire. Episode no. 50, first broadcast December 10, 2006 by HBO. Directed by E. Dickerson, and written by D. Simon.

The Wire. Episode no. 59, first broadcast March 8, 2008 by HBO. Directed by J. Chappelle, and written by G. Pelecanos.

Wisnewski, C. 2009. "High Visibility: *The Wire* and the New Golden Age of Television." *Reverse Shot* 24. http://www.reverseshot.com/article/wire.

Author Biography

Elizabeth Ault received her PhD from the Department of American Studies at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. She is working on a manuscript that uses governmentality theory to retheorize Norman Lear's black sitcoms and the 1970s.