

*The Wire*

Urban Decay and American Television

edited by  
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# "I am the American Dream": Modern Urban Tragedy and the Borders of Fiction

C. W. Marshall and Tiffany Potter

*"It's kinda fun figuring shit out."*

—Prez (1.07)

## Requiem for Snot Boogie

A cop and a drug dealer are sitting on a stoop in front of a boarded-up vacant, talking about the murdered man on the street before them. The opening dialogue of *The Wire* (1.01) encapsulates so many of the series' tensions that it is worth spending a moment contemplating the fate of Snot Boogie. Street names are in some ways a cover, hiding who you are: for a while, Little Kevin's physiologically inapt name keeps him safe from police (4.09). But they are also a badge, of honor or of shame. The cop, Jimmy McNulty, contemplates the body on the ground: ". . . his nose starts runnin', and some asshole, instead of giving him a Kleenex, he calls him Snot. So he's Snot forever. It doesn't seem fair." It isn't fair, and the show implicates its viewers in that unfairness by drawing us into a position where we often think of characters only by their street names.

Bodie, Stringer, Wee-Bey, and Snoop don't have recognizable first names for most viewers, and even if the names are known (Preston,

Russell, Roland, and Felicia), they never become the primary associations. In editing this book, one of the tensions we felt was the fact that white characters tend to default to surnames or to recognizable corruptions that do not efface identity (Herc for Haulk, for example, or Prez for Pryzbylewski), while black characters, on the other hand, typically default to street names. Even among the police, "Bunk and Jimmy" or "Bunk and McNulty" seems a more natural collocation than "Moreland and McNulty." There are exceptions, of course, and enough exceptions that we can assure ourselves that we aren't just falling into a linguistic trap that the series has laid for us. D'Angelo is D; Prop Joe, Chris, and Wallace are known by forms of their given names; on the docks, the white Thomas Pakusa is more familiar as Horseface; conversely, Avon Barksdale remains little more than an unfamiliar name to the police, his face known only from a boxing poster from his youth, until Herc realizes that he is likely at the East side/West side basketball game (1.09).<sup>1</sup> So the loss of Snot Boogie's birth name proves to be only the first of many examples of the rifts in the maintenance of identity that are created by the conventions of urban life in the Baltimore of *The Wire*.<sup>2</sup>

But Snot does more than this for us. He has been killed, we are told, because he has robbed a craps game.<sup>3</sup> This is something he does repeatedly; whenever the pot gets big enough. In the past Snot Boogie has been beaten for stealing the pot, but McNulty's source thinks this time things have gone too far. The whole process has become almost routine: a regular game, an increase in the stakes, a tempting Pot, and Snot tries to get away with his prize, never to succeed. Incredulous, McNulty asks why, given the predictability of this pattern, Snot Boogie was allowed in the game. They had to let him play, McNulty is told: "This is America, man."<sup>4</sup>

We are told in passing that Snot's given name was Omar Isaiah Betts. The series opens, then, with a guy who habitually, compulsively robs the drug dealers of Baltimore, who in the end gets got. And his name is Omar, but as with so many of the series' African American characters, his name has been effaced. So Snot becomes a prototype for another Omar who habitually, compulsively robs the drug dealers of Baltimore. Omar, unusually, has kept his real name, and never was labeled despite the imposing scar across his face that could prompt any number of nicknames. When Omar is killed (5.08), the scene is harrowing because

of its apparent emptiness for the larger meaning of the series (fan response to his death is discussed by Kathleen Lebesco in this volume). This loss is reinforced when the city paper declines to run the story of "a thirty-four-year-old black male, shot dead in West Baltimore grocery."<sup>5</sup> The presumed interest of the broader Baltimore community is reflected in this decision, and so the news media further undermine the identities of residents of the projects, leaving street names, chosen by oneself or best-towed by others, with their power both to efface and to create one's identity.<sup>6</sup>

The contrast between Omar and Snot Boogie is instructive. While the latter is merely pathetic, the former "is loved because he is meaner, funnier, cooler and braver than any other character you've ever seen on TV" (Delaney 6). Actor Michael K. Williams praises his character's integrity: "He makes no excuses for what he is. He is not duplicitous in any way. That's not only rare in the show but in real life, too" (Delaney 6-7). We find a heroism in Omar because he only robs from the drug dealers. There is a purity in this vision, as when he insists on paying for his cigarettes after he has robbed a shopkeeper whose store also serves as a drug front (4.03). Such variant visions of the institutions of the heroic in *The Wire* are discussed by Alasdair McMillan and Ryan Brooks in this volume.

In one episode, Omar wears a shirt that proclaims, "I am the American Dream" (2.10). It's a charming, ghastly thought. Earlier in the season, Omar appears as a witness in court (2.06), where he is described by Maurice Levy (one of the attorneys discussed by Lynne Viti in this volume) as "a parasite who leeches off of the culture of drugs." But in playing such a role, he is, as the scene powerfully declares, no different than the lawyer himself. With the irony possible only on a mass-produced t-shirt, Omar proclaims a profound truth.

The phrase "the American dream" was first used by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 work, *The Epic of America*:

There has also been the *American Dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement . . . a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (374)

It is an idea that has been corrupted into a drive for financial profit seen in the corrupt politicians and developers who take advantage of Stringer Bell, as he seeks legitimacy for himself and the Barksdale organization (and who is discussed by Stephen Lucas and Jason Read in this volume). It is an idea that is shown to be a fiction through every episode of the series, as we see characters continually fail to improve their lives, or to escape the circumstances of their birth. In Season One, Wallace selflessly tries to provide family stability to the kids in the low-rises whose parents are dead or addicted. He makes them lunches from store-bought snack food (1.06) and he helps them with their homework (1.08), providing them with some nurture and continuity, until, that is, he is shot by Bodie and Poot (1.12). The bullied and socially outcast Dukie sees the promise of a life away from the streets, proving competent with the classroom computer and even being promoted to ninth grade (4.11); but, despite the protection offered by Michael for a time, Dukie ends up as just another drug addict living on the streets (5.10).

*The Wire* shows us an urban America in which life becomes better and fuller for only a precious few (as is addressed by Ralph Belineau and Laura Bolf-Belineau in this volume). Opportunity and innate ability seem not to have a place, since mere survival becomes a legitimate measure of success. In the end, Omar lives with integrity, but he cannot achieve that American Dream. His Wild West mentality, the lone frontiersman taming the wilderness of the drug trade, loses focus when he violates his code by acting on his anger. With the murder of his lover, too much has been taken from him, and in the end, his erasure from the series lacks the resonance we expect from a fictional death, particularly of a major character. It has no apparent purpose, except to ascribe value to social forces that we are challenged to understand. The same is true, of course, of Snot Boogie. *The Wire* isn't interested in a dream. This is America, man.

#### "a simple man, who was horrifically punished"

A term that has frequently been applied to the narrative of *The Wire* is "tragedy." Simon himself has termed the show "postindustrial American tragedy," arguing that

whatever institution you as an individual commit to will somehow find a way to betray you on *The Wire*. Unless of course you're

willing to play the game without regard to the effect on others or society as a whole, in which case you might be a judge or the state police superintendent or governor one day. Or, for your loyalty, you still might be cannon fodder—like Bodie. No guarantees. But only one choice, as Camus pointed out, offers any hope of dignity. (quoted in Havrilesky)

Tragedy is a concept that Western literature has found difficult to represent since the late-nineteenth century; in part because its central preoccupation, the cost and consequences of greatness, sits uncomfortably with the democratizing tendencies coincident with the effects of the Industrial Revolution. First Büchner, then Ibsen and Chekov, nevertheless found a way to valorize the ordinary individual in their plays, discovering a tragic dignity in ordinary situations and characters.

In *The Wire*, Senator Clay Davis is located at the top of the show's political and economic hierarchies. He is patently corrupt, but nevertheless is able to see himself as a tragic victim. When he is finally required to explain his financial dealings, he calls an impromptu press conference on the courthouse steps. In his hand he holds a translation of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*; while he mispronounces both the author's name and the play's title, he presents himself to the assembled crowd as a traditionally tragic figure, martyred for being "a simple man, who was horrifically punished by the powers that be for the terrible crime of trying to bring light to the common people" (5.07). The ridiculousness of such self-positioning is evident, as Davis presents a summary that might describe Christ as well as it does Prometheus, before it is reduced to a cliché: "In the words of Uh-silly-us, 'No good deed goes unpunished.' I cannot tell you how much consolation I find in these slim pages." The play works—the public accepts the story—but in this scene we are also pressed by the explicit comparison of classical tragedy and *The Wire* to acknowledge the inapplicability of traditional theories of the tragic to these narratives.

According to most definitions, the arcs for most of the show's characters are not tragic, but rather merely sad (and Amanda Ann Klein argues in this volume that they are more easily read as melodrama than as tragedy): we regret the murders of D'Angelo Barksdale and Frank Sobotka; we are disheartened at the hardening of Randy Wagstaff;

we are outraged at the murder of Omar Little. But that doesn't make any of these life stories particularly tragic, any more than that of Clay Davis is. There are simply too many stories, too many characters whose experience is presented in *The Wire*, for the focus on the individual to assert itself, as would be required by conventional representations of tragedy. Whenever something bad happens to someone the audience has been led to care about, we are equally committed emotionally to several other characters as well, and inevitably their stories go on. Events have consequences, but they are denied grandeur.

Yet each of them in his own way seems to demand that "attention must be paid," in the words of Arthur Miller's Willy Loman. Miller's 1949 essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" provides a mid-twentieth-century iteration of the tragic that offers us a starting point for a sense of tragedy in *The Wire*. David Simon is in some ways both author and agent of this revisionist tragedy for an urban generation that has long been excluded from the cultural valuation and social status traditionally required for tragedy. Miller is describing character, for example, when he articulates his sense of the nature of the tragic flaw (a term widely, if misleadingly, appropriated in such discussions from Aristotle's *hamartia* in *Poetics* 13, 1453a), but he might also be talking about the social function of *The Wire* as a series:

Only the passive, only those who accept their lot without active retaliation, are "flawless." Most of us are in that category.

But there are among us today, as there always have been, those who act against the scheme of things that degrades them, and in the process of action everything we have accepted out of fear or insensitivity or ignorance is shaken before us and examined, and from this total onslaught by an individual against the seemingly stable cosmos surrounding us—from this total examination of the "unchangeable" environment—comes the terror and the fear that

is classically associated with tragedy. (4)

Few of Simon's characters demonstrate the wherewithal to enact this demanding requirement, though Stringer's doomed attempt to reject the presumed naturalism of black criminality or Bodie's refusal to soldier on as a mere pawn might come close (Bodie's character is discussed at

length by Elizabeth Bonjean in this volume). The show itself, however—and Simon's vision—clearly functions as tragedy in these terms, shaking out what the generally affluent HBO viewer has long accepted, and giving a human face to what is usually written off as unavoidable urban blight, criminality, and addiction. The faces are (mostly) fictional, of course, but their humanity cannot be identifiably false if we are to experience the intellectual and emotional effects of tragedy.

*The Wire* gives us the deaths of several salesmen, shifting the perspective from the narrative of the single common man to that of disposable men, killed off amid their pursuit of the twisted version of the American Dream that is all that is available to many young men of the Baltimore projects. The men of *The Wire* share with Willy Loman what Miller argues is the tragic element of character (regardless of traditional nobility):

the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is willing to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his "rightful" position in his society. (4)

When Bodie refuses to submit to Marlo Stanfield's new order and insists on controlling his own corner, and then refuses to run from that corner even as Chris and Snoop approach, he claims his rightful place: "I ain't never fucked up a count, never stole off a package, never did some shit I wasn't told to do. I've been straight up. But what's come back?" (4.13). Similarly tragic, and less dramatically noble, Dukie's battle for personal dignity is finally lost when, in the closing sequence of the series, we watch him tie off and shoot heroin, slipping into exactly the "frightful place" that others have always expected of him. The eventual protracted death implied for Dukie is functionally no different than Willy Loman's suicide. Loman just kills himself faster.

Even outside of the projects, the new common man seeks dignity, at times not just for himself, but for those he represents. Frank Sobotka fights for a future that is the same as the past, and his loss is the more painful because his requests seem so eminently reasonable. As Miller points out, if the story is not to be mere *pathos*, "The possibility of victory must be there in tragedy" (7). Until the day he is murdered,

Sobotka—and the viewers—allow for the possibility that his view of the world will win out, and the blue-collar middle class will continue to sustain itself in a Baltimore that values the appearance of wealth and success over the economic survival of its individual citizens. His view doesn't win out, of course, and the "fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what or who we are in this world" comes a little closer to the HBO viewer, forcing us to recognize that "it is the common man who knows this fear best" (Miller 5). In the words of Helena Sheehan and Seamus Sweeney, "*The Wire* is a Marxist's idea of what tv drama should be. Its specific plots open into an analysis of the socio-political-economic system shaping it all."

Though they may often seem so, tragedy and bleakness are not necessarily the same thing. There are optimistic moments in *The Wire* that prevent any automatic sense that there can be no hope for redemption, that the social ills depicted are irremediable—a feeling that may accompany viewings of Simon's earlier miniseries *The Corner* (HBO, 2000). Bubble's readmission to his family, Namond's apparently bright future, the elevation of the good lawyer Rhonda Pearlman to the judge's bench, and Kima Greggs's return to motherhood all remind us that change and hope are not impossible. More subtly, the willingness of *The Wire* to pay attention to those whom society often considers disposable allows a consideration of the tension between the possible and the impossible. In modern tragedy, there remains, as Miller argues, "the belief... in the perfectability of man" (7). *The Wire* writes starkly of the human costs of a capitalism of the disenfranchised, but, like Bodie, it also refuses to allow the corners to be taken away from the control of those who inhabit them. As television presents the individuals who have dropped below even the standard of the common man in twenty-first-century popular and political discourse, *The Wire* goes beyond Miller's twentieth-century argument that tragedy "is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly" (5), to argue that all of American culture must act with justice in this necessarily brutal self-assessment.

### Documentary Fallacy

Perhaps as part of this self-assessment, more than any other series, *The Wire* works to confound the line between truth and fiction. Its stories

scream of verisimilitude, and the authentic dialogue draws the viewer into a sympathetic consideration of characters who live the sort of lives many viewers will not ever have examined with careful, concerned, critical awareness. Again, the series forces the HBO audience to confront its own prejudices. HBO is a subscriber-based channel, and the bulk of its audience is composed of (comparatively) affluent, middle class, white Americans. Subscribers choose to invest in programming that is assumed to have a certain quality that distinguishes it from "regular" tv. A second audience is generated through DVD sales, another means for direct marketing of quality television to viewers, without the economic pressures of advertisers. This change in television viewing habits, particularly over the past decade, has altered the economic drives of American television.

For these viewers (who through investment in a specialty channel, or through the purchase of DVDs have committed to HBO and *The Wire*), the initial episodes of the series may possess an almost anthropological fascination. Many would not have previously invested emotional energies in caring about the drug problem in urban America and its ramifications. Intellectual energies, sure, maybe. But the veneer of fiction offered by the series in fact stimulates a desire for identification with the characters, immersing the viewer into the heart of an American city.

What we see is a war zone: a side of America that appears extreme—at times incomprehensible—in a representation that is intellectually and morally challenging. The series appears to eschew any episode-based resolutions (as Ted Nannicelli discusses in this volume), preferring instead to offer larger narratives, juggling a Shakespearean cast of dozens of individuals, some of whom have names for us, some of whom are recognized or perhaps only partly recognized by their faces. Five seasons, each of which coheres as a unit, together form a super-narrative that shows the progress of time in a fictionalized Baltimore, but not any clear moral or narrative advance. Faces change, characters enter our awareness or drop from view, but the drug problem (which may be seen as the series' principal concern) persists. There is change rather than advance: whatever closure offered is, painfully, only temporary. By eschewing strong episodic conclusions, *The Wire* offers its viewers a narrative form unlike that offered typically by television, and with a scale

(in terms of pure length, obviously, but also in terms of narrative sophistication) unparalleled by most cinema as well.

David Simon and others have drawn analogies between *The Wire* and the nineteenth-century novel, a genre whose sweeping narrative produces a coherent whole, belying its serial origins. Nevertheless, smaller narrative gestures can be pulled out, isolated strands from the larger skein. These strands might concern individual characters or a single episode or group of episodes, which may contain a discernable unity because of a strong or individual directorial hand (see Kevin McNeilly in this volume).<sup>7</sup> Beyond the novelistic, there is also an epic scope to the series, which—over the broad canvas of more than 60 hours of television—takes the time to focus on small details. Given the generic expectation of substantial length, epic can afford to linger over apparently insignificant objects and people, to find virtues in the ordinary, and can take the time to establish the place of the everyday in the larger world depicted. *The Wire* explicitly adopts epic ambitions at different points over its five seasons, perhaps most notably when it chooses in Season Two to examine the death of the urban middle class. The grand theme is not localized in one individual, but is shown to have an impact on many figures, amidst an expansive narrative of dockyard corruption. Yet at the same time, *The Wire* ascribes value to two teenagers sitting on an abandoned couch in the courtyard of a low-rise housing project. So much gets spoken in their silences, as they contemplate the economic implications of the invention of the Chicken McNugget (1.02). The series can even turn an apparently extraneous fish-out-of-water scene, in which Snoop goes to a big-box home improvement store to purchase a nail gun (4.01), into a crucial plot point for the whole of Season Four.

Despite the literary sophistication of *The Wire*, there is an authenticity that bleeds through the screen. Part of the reason for this is the deliberate blurring of truth and fiction that the creators have inscribed into the casting and the characters of the series. Identity is written, rewritten, and overwritten as actors' biographies and previous roles, characters' names, and real-life citizens of Baltimore dissolve into one another, problematizing aggressively any idea of easy constructions or associations of identity. Melvin Williams, for example, plays the Deacon over 11 episodes (starting 3.02). The character is a peaceful community builder, but the role reveals nothing of the actor's past as a Baltimore

drug lord, who was arrested in 1984 by series co-creator Ed Burns when Burns was still a Baltimore police officer. After serving as a homicide detective in Baltimore, Burns turned to teaching, a career trajectory echoed (somewhat more abruptly) by the character of Roland Pryzbylewski in Season Four. Jay Landsman, a retired Baltimore homicide detective who features prominently in David Simon's book, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, plays police officer Dennis Mello in 18 episodes; actor Delaney Williams plays a character called Jay Landsman throughout the series. Baltimore's first elected black mayor Kurt L. Schmoke appears as the Baltimore Health Commissioner, who advises the series's Mayor on his drug policy (3.11 and 3.12). Grand Jury Prosecutor Gary DiPasquale is played by Garry D'Addario, a former Baltimore Homicide Shift Lieutenant.<sup>8</sup> Recovering heroin addict and musician Steve Earle (who sings the series's title song in Season Five) plays Whalon, a recovering heroin addict who is Bubbles's sponsor. David Constable plays managing editor Thomas Klebanow in all but one of the episodes of Season Five, a character based on former *Baltimore Sun* managing editor Bill Marimow; the real-life editor's name is echoed in that of Charles Marimow, the ineffectual lieutenant of the major crimes unit (beginning 4.03). And Ed Norris, Baltimore police commissioner from 2000–2002, plays a homicide detective in the show, who is also called Ed Norris.

Precisely this overlap—playing a character with your own name, who both is and is not a fictionalized representation of who you are—also affects Felicia "Snoop" Pearson. As she describes in her 2007 memoir, Pearson was born in Baltimore to two crack addicts; as a child she worked as a drug dealer; and in her teens she was sentenced to eight years in prison for killing someone in self-defense. Her real-life recovery and rehabilitation must be measured against the bizarre reflection created by the character she plays in *The Wire*. Snoop's life (and death) in Seasons Three, Four, and Five, which establish her as a merciless enforcer in Marlo Stanfield's drug organization, form a counterpoint to the life she has instead chosen for herself. Pearson was introduced to the writers and producers after a chance meeting with actor Michael K. Williams (who plays Omar Little). The doubled awareness of actor and character serves to reinforce the emotional impact of the character as she moves through the violence that surrounds her, and it certainly contributes to

horror writer Stephen King's estimation of Snoop as "perhaps the most terrifying female villain to ever appear in a television series" ("Alarm"). Less directly, the character of Omar (discussed in detail by James Peterson in this volume) is based on a number of real-life individuals who made careers robbing drug dealers in Baltimore. One of these, Donnie Andrews, provides a particularly powerful resonance with Simon's series. After turning himself in to Detective Ed Burns (co-creator of *The Wire*), Andrews was sentenced to life in prison in 1987 for murdering one of the dealers he robbed (see Urbina). But from this, there nevertheless emerges a story of redemption. Two years after his release in 2005, he married Fran Boyd. Boyd is the real woman at the center of the drug-addicted family documented in *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner City Neighborhood*, written by Simon and Burns in 1997. This book was adapted into the six-episode miniseries *The Corner*, that, with *Homicide*, forms a crucial part of the groundwork Simon had established before he began work on *The Wire*. The unlikely pairing of a (rehabilitated and recovered) stick-up man and a (recovered and rehabilitated) drug addict proves to be a real-life fulfillment of the promise the series at times presents to the viewer.<sup>9</sup> Fiction, fact, documentary—blurring these lines and generic distinctions has never been attempted before on television at this scale, and its persuasive argumentation seduces viewers into a larger, albeit mediated, understanding of the urban life of modern America, and provides some sense of hope for the American Dream.

One final example of the elements of truth hiding among the fictional stories of *The Wire* seems necessary here. At the wake of Detective Ray Cole (3.03), a character who had been played by executive producer Robert F. Colesbury (who died unexpectedly after Season Two), police officers sing a 1986 song by the Pogues, entitled "The Body of an American." The song itself is set at the wake of a boxer, who is described as

The man of wire  
Who was often heard to say,  
"I'm a free man born of the U.S.A."

Colesbury, of course, was a "man of wire," instrumental in the series' production. So indeed is the fictional character of McNulty, for whom a mock wake is held, where the song is again sung (5.10). Again, this "man

of *Wire*" is eulogized by Jay Landsman (except it is not Landsman, but the actor playing a version of him, a counter-self). Throughout *The Wire*, names and identities blur, producing gripping television that challenges notions of how fiction works, and to what it can aspire. But all of these themes, it should be noted, had been shown to the viewer in miniature before the first title sequence was run. That initial conversation on the stoop of the boarded-up vacant repeats at times verbatim a true story (570). From those opening moments of the narrative of *The Wire*, we are forced constantly to reconsider what terms like verisimilitude and authenticity can mean. Nevertheless, we must always remember that as he lies there, dead before the first episode of the series begins, Snot Boogie too offers us the body of an American.

#### Notes

1. We discuss Herc's investigative career elsewhere (see Marshall and Potter, "Fuzzy Dunlop").
2. The City of Baltimore is arguably a character of its own in *The Wire*, and the representation of the city is discussed in this volume by David Alff, Peter Clandfield, and Afua Weaver.
3. Viewers of Season Four remember that Prez teaches his Middle School math class basic probability through the odds of craps, and they all become proficient in the skills that Snot lacks.
4. Margaret Talbot expands on the poignancy of this moment in her profile of series creator David Simon: "It was a perfectly crafted setup for Simon's themes: how inner-city life could be replete with both casual cruelty and unexpected comedy; how the police and the policed could, at moments, share the same jaundiced view of the world; how some dollar-store, off-brand version of American capitalism could trickle down, with melancholy effect, into the most forsaken corners of American society."
5. Omar almost loses his name again in the morgue (5.08), where his name tag is left on a body bag containing an elderly white man. This is corrected, but it is worth noting that the date of birth on the card in the morgue is certainly incorrect, off by roughly 14 years. The card indicates 15 August 1960, but other indications suggest Omar was born closer to 1974: he claims to be "about 29" in Season Two (2.06), is 34 in Season Five (5.08), and is apparently 11 or 12 in 1985 (*The Wire: The Chronicles* <<http://www.hbo.com/thewire/chronicles/>>). This obvious error is most likely not a mistake within the dramatic world, but rather a meta-television nod to the birthday of someone involved with *The Wire* (perhaps David Simon himself, who was born in 1960).

6. When Omar helps a court bailiff with his crossword puzzle, explaining the distinction between Mars and Ares, he could be speaking about any one of the nickname dealers in *The Wire*: "Same dude, different name, is all" (2.06).

7. For example, the direction of Clark Johnson bookends *The Wire*: he directed the first two episodes (1.01 and 1.02; also 1.05) and the final episode (5.10). His vision therefore frames the audience's experience of the overall series, but Johnson also mediates the show from within, as he plays city editor Gus Haynes in Season Five. His connection with Simon is longstanding: Johnson also played Detective Meldrick Lewis in *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993–1999), which Simon created.

8. "D," as he was known, was also the inspiration for "G," Al Giardello, the shift lieutenant played by Yaphet Kotto in *Homicide: Life on the Street*, and in which Gary D'Addario also had a role as a SWAT team commander.

9. Relationships among the representations of women, crime, and the domestic realm are discussed by Courtney Marshall in this volume.

## Baltimore before *The Wire*

### A Memoir

Afaa M. Weaver

As *The Wire* closes, Michael takes on the work Omar has done before him, robbing the rich gangstas, redistributing the wealth, and upholding a truncated sense of honor and decency in a world ground down into feeding on its own life. He comes into the rim shop with his partner and delivers a gunshot wound to the knee of another gangsta, and makes off with their income, leaving him and his cohorts looking very frustrated there in the rim shop. The rim shop is actually there in East Baltimore where I grew up. It's at the intersection of Gay Street and North Avenue, where Gay Street rises up from the Johns Hopkins hospital area on a 45-degree angle. The rim shop is also where the drug dealers recently had a strategy of handing out free samples near the end of the month when everyone is low on cash. It was a feeding frenzy, a site that seemed more unreal than anything you might want to imagine as all kinds of people scurried over the area as if they were ants on a sugar cube.

In the late 1950s, my parents were among the young, black, working class couples that bought row homes in East Baltimore, many of them from the same areas in Virginia and North and South Carolina. Some people moved into the area from the public housing projects as time progressed. East Baltimore was all white before we moved into the area as part of the block-busting strategies used by real-estate companies nationwide in the 1950s, strategies that made fortunes for them as they resold houses to black folks at exaggerated prices after spreading fear among

whites that black folk were coming. We came, and we painted the porches that had never been painted before. We added aluminum porches in different colors, the porch business that is the subject of Barry Levinson's 1987 film *Tin Men*, and we planted vegetable gardens in our backyards. These were southern families, an agrarian culture. We were their children, the bright ones who would do great things in the white man's world, even as they were launching us into it in the days of southern segregation.

The Baltimore of my childhood was segregated. It was also the childhood of Proposition Joe, the master of double dealing.

Joe and I were attending junior high school at the same time. We might have known each other, each of us dressed as we were in those days for success, although the mandatory shirt and tie did not come until I got to senior high at Baltimore Polytechnic. But when I started Herring Run Junior High in 1963, the month of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, I was part of the train of children of bright hopes that were sent out on buses into white neighborhoods from the circumscribed black worlds of American apartheid.

The schoolyard used to film that prequel of *Joe in junior high* looks remarkably the way my junior high school looks now, although it has gone through several changes and no longer carries the name of the large public park nearby. Joe went wrong, the way a lot of us did in those days, but it was a genteeel wrong before the wholesale violence of Omar's generation became the prevailing mode of criminal life. Those of us who went wrong did so in relatively innocent ways that gave way to larger enterprises, and some of us are still in that life. Some of my schoolmates are senior members of criminal life in Baltimore, and some of my relatives have done time in prison for matters serious or not so serious.

Joe and our crowd got to be 16 or so and started hanging out on the corners of East Baltimore where we wore shirts pressed with starch and shoes polished all the way to the stitched soles. We stood there and drank cheap wine and smoked reefer while we imitated The Temptations, The Four Tops, James Brown, The Supremes, Mary Wells, and all the bright fantasia of African American Urban Theater. Violence crept in as if on the feet of giant cats.

If you walked southward from the rim shop along Milton Avenue to the intersection of Federal Street you were at a locus of East Baltimore street life, just four blocks from my parents' home. Lucky's Bar and Cut Rate was

the corner landmark. This is where I learned several lessons in the hard and often insane courage of a black man living for the city. We were a group, about four or five of us, and our leader was a member of a respected family. His brother was the lord of that section of East Baltimore. He stood on the corner of Federal and Milton in a top hat and with a cane, the attire that would emerge almost 20 years later in Run-D.M.C., who are now elders of Hip Hop. In the old days of Milton and Federal, these elders of Hip Hop were 10 years old, the little boys.

One night, just one block away from Lucky's, some friends and I were confronted by a slightly older man who was looking to make a reputation for himself. He was holding a .25 semi-automatic, and we were all unarmed. He caught me in the forefront, just in front of the right fender of the car parked next to us. It was a minute or so of menace. There was only one thing to do, and I was prepared to do it if necessary. He was about 20 feet away, and, as the closest person to him, I could rush him and try to bust his heart, scare him down and take the chance of eating a bullet along the way. I had to make the decision in the space of a few seconds, something one of my uncles taught me.

Uncle Jason was a knife fighter who walked everywhere and always carried at least two switchblades. His way of training us when we were kids was to catch us unaware and slam us up against a wall. The knife came up to the sides of our necks instantly, and in the calmest of voices he said, "Now chump! What you gonna do? Huh? Chump!" I learned to monitor my fear and to pray for intervention.

We were saved that night there up the street from Lucky's. The leader of our little gang came up from Lucky's and ordered our would-be killer to put the gun away. That was the hierarchy of things in street life in those days. Much of it was the respect of younger men for older ones, older ones who earned that respect for things that became the myths of life. There was some semblance of that hierarchy when Omar was a young teenager in the mid-1980s. Omar is part of the age group of the elders of Hip Hop. In the prequel that shows him returning the stolen cash to the West Indian man on the bus stop,<sup>2</sup> it is a time in Baltimore when violence and illegal enterprise were worlds away from that night in 1969 under the barrel of the .25 semi-automatic. Heroin was much scarcer in the late 1960s than in the mid-1980s when it became as plentiful and familiar as Kool Aid.

As black Baltimore was burned away and worn down beginning in the 1960s, the jobs that had sustained my parents' generation left the city and the country. They were replaced first with a stark and stunning absence and then with the paper promise of the service industry. From 1970 to 1985, I was a blue-collar worker in the city before going off to Brown University's creative writing program. Proposition Joe was busy building his empire in East Baltimore, one that he set up under the façade of a TV repair shop. It's in a neighborhood where the old row houses were gradually abandoned, as black folks moved to the suburbs. Their children would not know our memories, but they would have the same racist forces set against them in life. These forces could even take the form of the seemingly kind faces that want to assure them that racism is no longer America's problem.

One day in the early 1980s, two men escaped from the Maryland State Penitentiary, known as Central Booking these days. They made their way to a trendy restaurant on Charles Street, two blocks away from Walters Art Gallery. There they made what I can only think was a planned hit and killed one of the restaurant workers. Then in the dead aplomb of street courage they got onto a city bus that was headed toward North Avenue. The SWAT team was assembled, and the two men swore they would not go back to prison. They kept their word. At North Avenue, they got off the bus and had a shootout with the police department, who fired from every available angle. The men died in the streets, shot to death and through death's door to what lay waiting for them in the great beyond.

Omar was just two years away from making that difficult decision of doing what must be done, turning his .38 on his compadres to force them to give him the small cash that was all the West Indian gentleman on the bus stop had at the time.

Milton Avenue went through tremendous changes from the time Proposition Joe and I were in junior high school and in the 20 years up to Omar's emergence as a self-styled vigilante. As children Joe and I could go to the five-and-dime store there on Milton Avenue and with a dollar buy a whole bag of toys. With another dollar we could have gone to the movies next door for 35 cents and had a hot dog and soda for another 65 cents. The only problem might have been Joe's shenanigans.

Partly for amusement and partly to polish his entrepreneurial skills, young Proposition Joe might have stolen something from the five-and-dime, something he probably did not even want. Ever alert, the store clerk would confront us outside, and Joe would begin apologizing for me immediately because, in his sleight of hand, he had put the stolen goods in my pocket. I would begin to apologize and sweat, and we would both be allowed to go. Around the corner, I would jack Joe up and commence to whoop his ass, whereupon he would make me an offer, an offer beyond my imagination. Such is street genius.

Just a few feet away from the place where we were held at gunpoint, around the corner, there is a set of old garages that have mostly fallen down and rotted away. When they were in operation, they were a center for card playing, working on old cars, and drinking. Uncles and cousins of mine hung out there. It was just three blocks from my family house. One uncle of mine would sit in his car in the afternoon sun, listening to his radio. For awhile, he had a '64 Impala Super Sport that he outfitted with little conveniences of his own, such as the one switch in the console that turned on his stereo system. At the time he was my age now, in his late fifties, and now I know that moment of sitting in the sun and rolling back over one's life.

I do it from inside the white world that was legislated away from us when Joe and I were children, and began to deconstruct when Omar was born. Snoop is younger still. She was a tiny girl when Omar was making his reputation, and she grew up on Patterson Park Avenue, two streets over from Milton Avenue and just across from Collington Square Elementary School, where my son entered the Head Start program in the early 1970s. He and Omar are about the same age, and the two of them are rooted in the Baltimore that is rooted inside me, although now I am miles away in the Boston area, a place where the constructs of race are opposite to what I knew as a youngster coming along in Baltimore.

In my moments of greatest discomfort, it is a Boston where the city magazine can run a cover story referring to one of our most prominent black scholars as the H.N.I.C. or Head Nigger in Charge. This Mississippi Up North is a world where the liberal kindness is too often steeped in denial of the very thing it propels from this academic vortex.

Not only is it a white world that feels alien, it is also a black world that feels alien. These are black people I find it very difficult to know. I long for home, a home that is mostly no longer there. Just as Proposition Joe said at the meeting of the dealers, “I think we all see the writing on the wall in East Baltimore” (5.01); Johns Hopkins is buying East Baltimore in huge chunks and has already bulldozed an entire stretch of property from Monument Street northwards to Biddle Street. It feels like an absence in my heart.

When I am more reconciled to the hopeful world the Christian charity of my upbringing taught me to hope and work for, I realize America is home, as difficult as that may be.

#### Notes

1. In November 2007, during the hiatus between Seasons Four and Five, HBO.com released three short “prequels,” called *The Wire: The Chronicles* <<http://www.hbo.com/thewire/chronicles/>>. One of these features Proposition Joe in 1962.
2. Another entry in *The Chronicles* shows a very young (12-year-old?) Omar, already with his distinctive scarf, in 1985.

## Baltimore and Its Institutions