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WALKING IN SOMEONE ELSE'S CITY: *THE WIRE* AND THE LIMITS OF EMPATHY

Hua Hsu

Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together.

—Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*¹

How do you get from here to the rest of the world?

—Duquan Weems, *The Wire* (5.5.3)²

In January 2005, investigators in Queens, New York, closed a tedious, three-year investigation of a local drug ring responsible for distributing nearly fifteen million dollars worth of cocaine annually. They seized forty-three kilograms of cocaine, eighteen handguns, and nearly one million dollars in cash from the ring, which included a city correction officer and a sanitation worker. This in itself was not particularly noteworthy. What caught the attention of many, however, was that the drug ring had been imitating the fictional, Baltimore-based Barksdale drug ring of *The Wire*, the highly regarded television series that was, at the time of the investigation, wrapping up its third season. “Believe it or not, these guys copy *The Wire*. They were constantly dumping their phones,” Sergeant Felipe Rodriguez explained to the *New York Times*, referring to the Barksdale gang’s use of disposable mobile phones. “It made our job so much harder.” A related occupational hazard: several members of the gang would chatter incessantly about the actions of characters on the show, occasionally spoiling any surprises for investigators eavesdropping on their conversations. “If we missed anything,” Rodriguez continued, “we got it from them Monday morning.”³

A light, bemused tone runs through the *New York Times* report about a drug gang borrowing plays from their favorite television show, and there is certainly a neat circularity to this story. A series acclaimed for its painstaking attempts at verisimilitude somehow inspiring real-life mimicry? It

only confirms what most followers of the series already feel: that *The Wire* is somehow *realer* than other attempts to represent crime and punishment, hope and despair, the halls of power and the dreary mazes of the invisible city. During the series' run from 2002 to 2008, it was often described as accurate, authentic, or uncompromising, a break from television's usual tendencies toward shallow escapism. It was held up as mirror of our real-life urban negligence. During the series' fourth season, for example, *Slate* magazine invited documentarian Steve James and journalist Alex Kotlowitz—both famed for their work reporting on the struggles faced by young African Americans in the inner city—to comment on the crumbling Baltimore public schools of *The Wire*.⁴ The following year, sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh convened a series of meetings with real-life drug dealers to watch the series' fifth and final season—Venkatesh's dispatches were posted on the *New York Times* website under the heading "What Do Real Thugs Think of *The Wire*?" (2008–10). And much has been made of the series' use of former police officers, local politicians, and criminals to essentially play fictionalized versions of themselves. The most fevered criticism suggests that *The Wire* transcends entertainment; it becomes a sort of pop ethnography.

Whether *The Wire* truly approaches some sense of what life is really like in the streets of Baltimore is beside the point—it is still *television*, just as *The Battle of Algiers* is a film and not a documentary and *Ragtime* is a novel and not, by most measures, history writing. Of course, these divisions between fiction and nonfiction are provisional in their own way. But to deny *The Wire*'s status as television is to ignore its unusual ambitions as television. Like many notable series of the 2000s, *The Wire*'s rich narrative complexity is built on narrative and conversational digressions, extended periods of seeming stasis, and an affection for the quotidian. It goes further than most other series, however, by invoking these strategies of narrative *slowness* not for the sake of an enriched drama; rather, *The Wire* seems to aspire toward some condition of documentary truth. By offering itself as a gritty, meticulous, and therefore more realistic alternative to traditional televisual representations police work and urban turmoil—the series rewards its most careful viewers with access to what we presume to be a trustworthy, unfiltered experience of life in Baltimore. We not only understand *The Wire*, then, as somehow more authentic in its representation of reality, but we understand this quality in relation to other, inferior, presumably negligent attempts at the same. The viewer who can follow the series' massive, dizzying plotlines, recognize its moments of self-referential wit, or grow fluent in Baltimore slang is flattered as an insider, an honorary citizen. And yet this city, we are constantly reminded, might be

staged but is not truly imaginary: it is Baltimore as it is, somewhere beyond the viewer's television or computer screen. The effect of this is a kind of empathetic attachment that is rare in television—an empathy that rests on collapsing the distance between the audience and the events on screen, the complex ambitions of a televisual narrative and the real-life conditions of tedium and despair that first animated those ambitions. How is this empathy achieved and managed through the series' novel approach to geography and time? What are the limits to this empathy—and how does the series itself impose them?

The initial gesture *The Wire* makes toward the viewer is by identifying and then distancing itself from conventional television narratives. As a medium, television implicates its audience in a distinctive way. It has the illusion of being free and, by virtue of the immense width of the broadcast spectrum, it empowers the viewer with a sense of agency. But television is also a medium that junks the illusion that we are anything *but* consumers. It socializes us to its rhythms. We grow to anticipate the commercial break and the quick digestibility of content packaged in eight-minute blocks. We expect progress and, more often than not, resolution over a thirty-minute or sixty-minute programming block. Even the most complicated network television program assumes that a first-time viewer can catch up during a two-minute recap, or piece together whatever happened prior to the commercial break. But television doesn't merely treat us as consumers. We are consumers of acceptable stock narratives, as well. As Theodor Adorno writes, "Every spectator of a television mystery knows with absolute certainty how it is going to end. Tension is but superficially maintained and is unlikely to have a serious effect anymore. On the contrary, the spectator feels on safe ground all the time."⁵ Though Adorno was writing in the 1950s, when the television industry was still in its infancy, his pessimism still holds. Television rarely makes great demands on its viewers—this, after all, would run counter to the commercial forces that sustain it.⁶

The Wire certainly benefited from being broadcast on a premium cable network, indulging in darker, more cynical themes, and celebrating the full range of profanities available to the truly exasperated. Rather than submitting to the medium's traditional tropes, *The Wire* drew attention to its own differences. While the series was beholden to the same commercial forces that animate (and define) all television, it took a defiant and self-aware stance in opposition to competing narratives about police work. Jason Mittell has argued that television genres are always provisional and intertextual—we understand programming categories only as a result of the "creation, circulation, and consumption of texts within cultural con-

texts.”⁷ Initially, *The Wire*’s self-aware refusal of the conventions of police procedurals is expressed through its distinct pacing, which restores the flat monotony of *procedure*. Cops on stakeout, undercover investigations, suspects cracking under pressure, prosecutors offering plea bargains—all the standard devices of the police drama are present in *The Wire*. But they proceed at a laborious, sometimes random pace. One obvious example is the very name *The Wire*, which remains unexplained for the first few episodes of the series. The possibility of wiretap surveillance isn’t even introduced until the fifth episode, and by this point we are well familiar with the amount of paperwork and logistical back-and-forth it requires.

The Wire’s appreciation for the quotidian certainly distances it from other, competing representations of police work, if not the bulk of broadcast television programming. The realist aspirations of this patient, everyday approach surface in the scenes when *The Wire* debunks those competing versions as somehow counterfeit. During the third season, when Detective Shakima “Kima” Greggs’s informant suggests that she dust a suspected drug trafficker’s discarded phone for fingerprints, she merely scoffs. “Look at you, gettin’ all *CSI* on me and shit,”⁸ she says, referring to the highly successful network series about a team of forensic scientists. Within the reality of *CSI* (crime scene investigation), every crime scene is a rich bounty of microscopic evidence waiting to be processed in some well-funded laboratory, often on a piece of equipment that doesn’t actually do what is claimed. For Greggs, actual police work is different from some “*CSI* bullshit that don’t exist,”⁹ as she jokes in a different episode. Later, when an awkward, self-important FBI expert tries in vain to impress Greggs and Jimmy McNulty, another hardened city detective, he explains, “They use a lot of my stuff on those *CSI* shows. I’ve consulted for them.”¹⁰ Greggs and McNulty greet his boast with blank stares.¹¹ Whether uttered with contempt or quiet envy, these references to a rival police procedural bring into relief the uniqueness of *The Wire*: it is a television series in which characters have the free time to watch television and then, on our behalf, discern between the harsh realities of their lives and a “bullshit,” technology-wonderland fantasy of policing.

On the rare occasion that *The Wire*’s underfunded Baltimore Police Department can supply its officers with modern equipment, there are forms to be filled out and disheveled, out-of-the-way stockrooms to be explored. Within its reality, there are no quick fixes, no shot-in-the-dark hunches that happen to work or dramatic courtroom confessions. There are no mediating characters lending contrast to right or wrong: everyone ends up being both right and wrong, and any sense of cosmic justice is, at

best, arbitrary. It is a world of loose ends, stultifying bureaucracy, and ever-shrinking budgets.¹²

Most importantly, it is a world that feels proximate to ours. Where a television series like *CSI* follows a patterned, teleological cause-and-effect, *The Wire* implicates the viewer in a different kind of story—a spatial story. By distinguishing itself from unrealistic television programming—by mocking it outright, even—*The Wire* somehow approaches our world, our reality. This is why the case of “crime imitating art imitating crime”¹³ involving the real-life Queens drug gang is so intriguing. We aren’t imagining the Queens gang inhabiting the same temporal moment as *The Wire*—but we do understand their actions (and the reactions of the law enforcement) in relation to the spatial logic the show has established for us. Whenever we imagine real life in relation to something like *The Wire*—a Queens gangster likening himself to a television character; a reader of the *New York Times* understanding the day’s news in relation to a television series; a television character watching television—it is an awareness of the proximity between the imagined world and ours, a visualization of one plane colliding with another.

The Wire encourages this kind of affinity by mapping out its community in compelling detail and then equipping the audience with ways to navigate this space successfully. Mapping is never a neutral act; it privileges sanctioned thruways and the built environment but rarely acknowledges the social relations or patterns of labor that truly govern a given space.¹⁴ *The Wire* is an attempt to recover these “geographies of exclusion” by remapping Baltimore along unacknowledged, unofficial circuits—circuits the audience is trained to recognize.¹⁵ It attempts to understand the city as a dynamic, contingent space that is constantly being remade by the diverse individuals traveling its terrain. There are police officers—desk jockeys and foot soldiers, midlevel commanders, and their business-as-usual bosses. There are rank-and-file drug dealers, gang lieutenants, and sequestered kingpins. There are judges and ministers, city and state politicians, drug addicts and ex-felons. All of these characters exist on the same Baltimore city map. But *The Wire* teaches us that such a map is insufficiently detailed; we begin to recognize the stylistic differences that distinguish East Side from West Side, the class connotations of the inner harbor or Prince George’s County, the unique topography of the high-rise apartment complex. This is an awareness that is instilled by the characters themselves, all of whom are acutely aware of the boundaries of this map—of the boundaries that define the city they call “Balmer.”

Michel de Certeau has argued in his writings on “spatial stories,” that “there is no spatiality that is not organized by the determination of fron-

tiers”—narrative is always about negotiations in space and “marking out boundaries.”¹⁶ This is true within the series’ reality, as various characters’ awareness of these boundaries verges on obsession. The most literal examples of this are the various squabbles over territory, as when the upstart gang leader Marlo Stanfield threatens violence upon rivals who refuse to cede high-traffic corners—occasionally, they are instructed to move mere yards away. Similarly, when Stanfield and his gang have dead bodies to dispose of, they begin leaving them to decompose in the *vacants*, a zone of abandoned row houses that represent a sort of forbidden urban hinterland. Street names, territories, Baltimore’s proximity to Washington, D.C.—these are the raw materials for their identity. “Baltimore is all I know,” an outlying robber named Omar Little remarks when he is encouraged to lay low out of town.¹⁷ Later, when a small-time fence named Old Face Andre confronts a similar predicament, he observes with a subtle sense of pride, “I don’t know no one outside of B-more.” The provincialism troubles Joseph “Proposition Joe” Stewart, the sage leader of one of the series’ major drug gangs: “Why is it that every Baltimore nigga think that running the fuck away means crossing downtown?”¹⁸ Characters in *The Wire* are constantly prideful of Baltimore, yet the borders around Baltimore are what circumscribe their imagination. The effect of this constant show-and-tell—the relentless claims of Baltimore-as-exceptional and the colorful scenes that confirm that claim for us—is that we are drawn into this imagined Baltimore. The boundaries, as de Certeau describes, have been “marked.” But we are allowed to breach them in order to understand the image of Baltimore shared by the characters, to see what Kevin Lynch describes as the “hidden forms in the vast sprawl” of the city.¹⁹

The audience’s relationship to Baltimore is complex. While the series relies on the negotiation of formal and informal spatial boundaries, it also empowers the audience to recognize the city’s unofficial thruways and underground economies. We are allowed to participate. By simultaneously reinforcing the uniqueness of Baltimore and allowing us some affective response, be it pride, despair, or maybe a weary pang of nostalgia, *The Wire* situates us as more than just tourists or voyeurs. It is a map we begin to visualize—but it is also a map that begins to implicate us. We grow conversant in street-corner microhistories, we recognize the lore of “Division and Gold”—where “Tater Man” was shot—and “the vacants.” Whether the street intersections and neighborhoods hew to the true geography of Baltimore, what’s important is that the series encourages the viewer to explore this imagined city, to mentally map its territories, to familiarize oneself with local establishments like Lake Trout, Kavanaugh’s

Bar, or Pollock Johnny's. The attention to specificity has two effects: the local details make the show seem more authentic or real, and it keeps us at arm's length, if for a moment. But after that initial sting of alienation—the recognition that we are not to take “safe ground” for granted—we are allowed the privilege to stay and watch, and we are encouraged to share in the characters' glories and frustrations. We are welcomed. And we are convinced that our relationship to this map is more sensitive or intimate than that of Baltimore's real-life supervisors or its politicians, journalists, or academics.

As we witness in season 4, the penalty for arriving in Baltimore without this deference can be brutal. Two of *The Wire's* more fearsome gangsters, Chris Partlow and Felicia “Snoop” Pearson have been dispatched to dispose of rival drug dealers from faraway New York City. To identify the out-of-towners, Partlow suggests that Pearson “ask a Baltimore question. Something a New York nigga wouldn't know.”²⁰

“Maybe something about club music,” he continues. But Pearson does not follow—it's a fair assumption that most viewers do not, either. Partlow is referring to *Baltimore club music*, a highly localized hybrid of hip-hop and house music. “You don't know Marc Clarke? *The Big Fat Morning Show?*” he asks. But Pearson lacks his zeal for music, so he claims, “You ain't right, girl. The average Baltimore nigga know all that shit.” Minutes later, Pearson nearly shoots a local who replies to her question about Baltimore club with names she does not recognize. Partlow pulls her off the almost-victim just in time. It is a brutally, cynically funny moment, and it feels like an apt metaphor for the viewer's own trespass into their Baltimore: our capacity to follow the characters' highly localized reference points guarantees our comfort in their space, and we ignore these details at our own peril. Soon, they identify the actual “New York nigga” and shoot him dead.

Partlow's brief music lesson is a rare break from his usual impassive introversion. His presumed enthusiasm for Baltimore club is disarming. It is strange to imagine that Partlow has the free time to listen to music—just as it is strange to imagine the real-life gangsters in Queens reserving their Sunday nights to watch *The Wire*.

* * *

When *The Wire* first introduces its viewer to the veteran detective Lester Freamon, he is peering through a craft lamp, carefully whittling away at a miniature armoire. The implication is that his years marooned in the

dead-end Pawnshop Division sapped him of any desire to do more than what is necessary. As a defense against the deadening rhythms of the job, he has forged this private space of meaning: he crafts dollhouse miniatures.²¹

In this scene, he is no longer by himself, left to his miniatures and his pawnshop paperwork. He has been assigned to a newly formed detail dedicated to monitoring the Barksdale drug gang—and yet he still sits by himself, seemingly disinterested in the detail's mandate. Freamon's rejection of office etiquette carries a spatial implication. This act of side-hustle defiance has long been hidden in plain sight, in a lowly division of the police station rarely visited by anyone. Upon being assigned to a new and comparatively high-profile division that requires him to collaborate with others, his presence unnerves those around him. Just as *The Wire* scours the unmapped regions of Baltimore for unofficial truths, the image of Freamon—a sharp, once-promising detective—wasting away in a forgotten office testifies to failure of a management and bureaucracy-oriented police hierarchy. His presence is a denial of the powers that be; his move from the pawnshop division to the Major Crimes Unit means his dissatisfaction will no longer be contained.

Freamon's powerlessness within the police hierarchy is an example of *The Wire's* attempt to represent (and ultimately unite) the different systems of labor that constitute Baltimore. The spatial approach to narrative relieves the narrative from the burden of strict causality. Instead of a progressive chain reaction of events or isolated actions over time, we get context—many characters' contexts—and a rippling outward of unintended consequences. Sometimes characters' fates intersect as a result of an exercise of power; sometimes it is mere chance. But it is never strictly linear. Instead, we follow a diverse array of people throughout the city, spending the same moment in time, implicated in the same systems of labor; some people are hard at work, but most are merely waiting for something to happen. Just as the Queens drug dealers have time to watch television, the characters of "Baltimore" have free time, as well—to watch *CSI*, go to the movies.

A few seasons after our first encounter with Freamon's dollhouse miniatures, he attempts to convince McNulty of the necessity of having passions outside of police work. For nearly every character, there is a way in which work is a spiritually self-sustaining endeavor, even if, as in the case of Freamon, the workplace itself is a stifling, deadening one. The dignity of being "good police" or a "warrior" on the street corner commands its own form of loyalty, and this is captured succinctly in characters like McNulty or Greggs. "All I know is I love my work,"²² Greggs remarks, momentarily forgetting her qualms with how the department is run. *The*

Wire encourages empathy for this kind of honest, yeomanlike laborer, from the endangered stevedores of season 2 to the old-fashioned reporters of season 5 to the code-driven righteousness of the series' most sympathetic gangsters.

But there are limits to work's redemptive and restorative powers—and this is Freamon's point. McNulty, whose behavior has grown more erratic and impulsive, refuses to listen: landing a major case is reward enough. "Tell me something, Jimmy: How do you think it all ends?" Freamon asks. He assails McNulty for hiding behind the self-righteousness of his work and sacrificing his family and his own mental well-being in the name of crime-fighting heroism. McNulty protests—he is veritably addicted to police work—but Freamon assures him, "The job will not save you, Jimmy. It won't make you whole. It won't fill your ass up." He implores McNulty to find "a life. A life, Jimmy. You know what that is? It's the shit that happens while you're waiting for moments that never come."²³

But is work enough? It is no doubt a question a viewer has asked him- or herself—and it is a question that binds the audience to *The Wire*'s characters. Within the context of the episode, this is but a brief moment designed to illustrate McNulty's self-destructive habits. By the end of the series, we grow accustomed to McNulty's constant, seesawlike war with his own worst instincts, just as we grow to admire Freamon's patient, mannered civility. The scene introduces a dynamic that permeates nearly every character's life: the relationship between "the job" and "the life." (Put more cynically by Theodor Adorno, "Free time is shackled to its opposite."²⁴) It's a relationship that gives context to the series' slow pacing, its self-conscious emphasis on "the shit that happens while you're waiting" for the gratifying bust, the screeching car chase or the bloody gunfight. We follow a menacing robber who is wearing a bathrobe as he walks down the street to buy cereal—where to stow the pistol? A trio of police officers out with their girlfriends cross paths at the movie theater with a trio of drug dealers doing the same. Two woefully dim-witted gangsters are reprimanded for shooting at a targeted foe as he escorts his grandmother to church—"Never on a Sunday," they are told.

The series invokes these divisions between work and nonwork strategically. It isn't merely a suggestion of depth or a gesture toward a character's inner life, and it isn't a neat, carefully scripted flaw that encourages the viewer to question the nature of a character's heroism. Beyond making the characters more relatable, these moments also help rescue the seemingly mundane everydayness of the city from abstraction. In the simultaneous presentation of characters at work and at rest throughout the city, we begin to visualize the relationships that constitute Baltimore's systems of labor.

One of the most powerful illustrations of this comes during season 1. Ellis Carver and Thomas “Here” Hauk, two police officers on surveillance, are puzzled that a housing-project plaza usually teeming with drug dealers is deserted. As they venture down from the rooftop to patrol the streets, they notice that stores are shuttered for the afternoon and the sidewalks have emptied. “West fucking Baltimore is on vacation,” Carver observes. Eventually they are drawn to a crowd gathered on a hill. They investigate and discover that everyone, from taxpaying citizens to drug dealers, has flocked to the annual West Side against East Side community basketball game. Though the game essentially pits two rival drug gangs against each other, the material stakes are low: “bragging rights” for the winner, while the loser has to throw a “big-ass” party the following weekend. The officers are astounded by what they see: gang warlords usually hidden from sight sitting courtside, barking out plays, and harassing the hapless referee. “Ain’t y’all on the clock?” asks Preston “Bodie” Broadus, a young, drug-dealing wiseacre they have encountered many times. He notes that he and the rest of the drug dealers are “on break” that day.

We rarely see characters “on break” in programs like *The Wire*: the image of cops and robbers at rest usually doesn’t make for compelling viewing. But this is one of the series’ unique interventions. The sprawling scale and sedate pacing of *The Wire* acclimate us to the slow, quiet moments inconsequential to the progression of plot, when time merely passes. There is a bruising, yet pithy, truth to the moments when characters feel cynical about the glacial pace of their jobs, as when Greggs rues the department’s approach to policing as “fighting the war on drugs, one brutality case at a time.”²⁵ But there is something additionally stirring about how she utters this in the presence of static, unchanging backdrops of dull bureaucracy. The viewer is not shielded from the tedium. We bear witness as a maze of administrators thwart Carver’s attempt to adopt a young man for whom he feels responsible. We follow along as a city prosecutor secures the necessary signatures to authorize a wiretap. Weariness runs through us as we see boxes upon boxes of papers waiting to be filed and ancient, immovable steel desks. There is an awareness that time is passing.

Free time, hobbies, waiting, and the passing of seemingly idle time disrupt our patterned expectations for narrative, especially television narrative, but what are we to do with this awareness (gained, no doubt, during our free time)? It’s certainly no less of a mediated reality than *CSI*—albeit founded, seemingly, on more topical concerns. Consider Adorno’s usefully cynical claim that “free time” is never truly “free.” *Free time* complements rather than opposes labor, and the entire discourse of hobbies, boredom, and *spare time* merely distracts us from our true “unfreedom.” For Adorno,

this time that, by its very name, is measured in relation to *work time*, is an illusory freedom that distances us from an ideal “oasis of unmediated life.” The rhythms of industriousness are inescapable.

That *The Wire* calls attention to these moments “on break” merely underscores the reality that *work*—whether it is the drug dealer the audience underestimates or the pseudo—corporate hierarchies of city governance, the dutiful grunt valuing craft or the cynical boss merely following the rules—is the common condition that binds the series’ diverse array of characters. And for all *The Wire*’s emphasis on “good police” and “warrior” craft, the series’ representation of work is a deeply pessimistic one. While we might agree with Freamon’s claim that the job will definitely not “save” a character like McNulty, are we to see Freamon as somehow superior to McNulty merely because Freamon has found a hobby? Does the hobby truly insulate Freamon from a system that is no longer meritocratic, if it ever was? Or is the hobby a sign of defeat? What one realizes by taking in the cross section of *The Wire*’s world is that time spent off the clock is but a brief, teasing respite from the larger, darker, inscrutable forces that determine the characters’ fates. Just as there is no exit from the spatial reality of Baltimore, there are no moments when the characters are not somehow implicated in some form of labor hierarchy. Nobody is actually in charge. It is a perpetual state of unfreedom.

The characters themselves devise a useful set of metaphors to understand this state of unfreedom. The drug economy is continuously referred to as the “game”—over the series’ sixty episodes, it is the mantra: all is fair “in the game.” This, presumably, clues us into the fact that the characters are pawns on someone else’s chessboard—a metaphor the series invokes in the first and fifth seasons. But during season 3, Howard “Bunny” Colvin achieves a more sophisticated metaphor for the condition that rules all lives, friend and foe alike: “middle management.” At his wit’s end dealing with the bureaucracy of both the law enforcement system and the drug-gang hierarchy, Colvin assigns his officers to speak directly to the corner lieutenants: “These are lieutenants running the corners—and I personally feel their pain. Now middle management means that you have just enough responsibility that you gotta listen when people talk. But not so much that you can tell anybody to go fuck they selves.”²⁶ When Colvin invokes this image of middle management, he is describing the paradox that bonds both police officer and drug dealer alike. It is an illusion of *individual agency*.²⁷

Judging by the somewhat cold attitude the series holds toward even its most well-intentioned characters, middle management might be seen as the governing logic that darkens every character’s fortunes. The bleakest

expression of this comes during season 2 with the demise of Frank Sobotka, the stubbornly proud union chief zealously devoted to revitalizing Baltimore's shipping industry. Though Sobotka oversees a flagging operation, he certainly benefits from a loftier position than those Colvin describes as middle management. To accomplish his ambitious and somewhat noble goal, Sobotka attempts to influence government policy through hefty political donations and aggressive lobbying. Season 2 is unique in situating the city within the larger context of globalization. New technological advances—advances that make global trade cheaper and more efficient—have rendered old-fashioned operations like Sobotka and his stevedore union unattractive. To fund his project and restore the image of his port, Sobotka forms alliances with a syndicate of Eastern European gangsters involved in drugs and human trafficking.

Sobotka, though, cares little for the causes and effects; he pays no mind to the world outside his union hall. His desperation ultimately costs him dearly. "You know what the trouble is, Brucie?" Sobotka remarks to his lobbyist as he realizes his effort to reenergize the union is on the verge of failing: "We used to make shit in this country. Build shit. Now we just put our hand in the next guy's pocket."

Actually, this describes only part of the problem. What Sobotka is actually protesting against are the consequences of global capitalism, though he is doomed by his myopic inability to see beyond the boundaries of Baltimore. In fact, it is his failure to recognize the spatial consequences of his actions that initially draw the attention of law enforcement: he refuses to take responsibility for the dead bodies found in a shipping container. They are collateral damage in his intensely local fight, and, after all, they must have died somewhere on the high seas, that abstract and ungovernable liminal space of globalization. Sobotka's ignorance to the forces of globalization—forces that once built and now destroy his livelihood—is tragic. The decline of the Baltimore longshoremen in particular and American shipping and manufacturing as a whole isn't just the story of bullying "the next guy," though one is sympathetic to Sobotka's wit's-end frustration, the allure of fingering a villain rather than confronting an idea. It's the consequence of the new economic regime—a system that surpasses the imagination of almost every character on *The Wire*. Sobotka's fury evokes a brilliant contrast—it is a rare moment when the myopia of *The Wire*'s Baltimore is called into question. We have mastered the intricate layout of Baltimore, and it is but a lone dot on the interlacing loops that describe the map of global capital.

Is the viewer immune to Colvin's startlingly frank charge that we are all, law enforcement and criminal alike, middle management? How might we steel ourselves against the fate of someone like Sobotka, beyond acknowledging and then submitting to the forces of global capital? In other words, how does the very pessimism of *The Wire* implicate the audience?

We are always free to turn away from the screen: But does that relieve the viewer from considering *The Wire* as a criticism of our lives and conditions, as well? In *City: Rediscovering the Center*, William Whyte writes of how the modern American city offers moments of unlikely encounter or empathy through a process called "triangulation." *Triangulation* occurs when an external stimulus "provides a linkage between people and prompts strangers to talk to other strangers as if they knew each other." Whyte describes a scenario in which two strangers on a street corner oversee a third person panhandling for change. They each judge the act as gauche and disgraceful: "In the tone of voice usually reserved for close friends the two exchange thoughts on the decline of American values."²⁸

Whyte's notion of triangulation is a useful way of approaching *The Wire's* attempt to court the audience. Consider the cold opening of *The Wire's* very first episode. The camera lurches toward the scene of a murder. Police officers survey the lot and scribble notes; onlookers crane their necks in hopes of identifying the victim. In the distance, McNulty speaks the series' first words: "So, your boy's name was what?" "Snotboogie," a dazed African American man, ostensibly a friend of the victim, replies. The man continues to recount how, every Friday night, a group of them would gather to roll dice for middling, but not insignificant, stakes. Accordingly, every Friday night, the victim, "Snotboogie," would wait until the heap of cash was sizable enough, grab it, and run. And, accordingly, the others would chase after him, rough him up, retrieve their money, and continue playing. "You let him do that?" an incredulous McNulty asks. He is genuinely baffled: Why allow this man into the game if it means enacting a predictable charade each Friday night? "Got to," the man replies. "This America, man."²⁹

After the title sequence, the episode and series begin with McNulty entering the city courthouse with his partner, William "Bunk" Moreland, midway through a retelling of the previous night's anecdote. "Guess what he said?" he says. "You gotta let him play. This America." We, of course, already know this one.

These opening minutes are an index of *The Wire*'s various themes and effects. The humor is crude and cynical. There is camaraderie to be shared amidst the gloom—and there is definitely a lot of gloom. There is tenderness in McNulty's interrogation of the witness, an unlikely sense of cross-racial empathy between the middle-aged, white police officer and the young, African American man. And there is also a sense that their fates have been decided for them. *The Wire* does this frequently, drawing the viewer into its confidence and rewarding those who become conversant in its world of "hoppers," "burners," and West Baltimore accents. But the scene is unusual for implicating us as omniscient. After the title sequence, we meet McNulty in mid-anecdote. The scene's construction privileges us as insiders. We don't need him to repeat the beginning for us, and we wait patiently as McNulty gets Moreland up to speed.

These moments of recall suggest an intimacy between the audience and the characters on screen, particularly when they are stretched out across seasons. The relationship is affirmed each time we recognize a scene or a character as an echo of something that has already happened. In the first season, a drug dealer named D'Angelo Barksdale takes his girlfriend to an upscale restaurant downtown, only to feel alienated by the experience. In the fourth season, Colvin, who is now working in the school system, brings three of his brasher students to a restaurant downtown, and their reactions remind us of Barksdale's. In season 2, a local longshoremen's union struggles for city support to attract new shipping lines to Baltimore's crumbling ports. At the beginning of season 3, a detective flipping through old case files stops for a moment at a photograph of a gangster we recognize from season 1. In season 5, the newly installed Mayor Thomas Carcetti attends the groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of port-side condominiums; the same longshoremen, now presumably unemployed, are present to heckle him.

As the third season winds down, Major Colvin's superiors in the police force maneuver to sabotage his career. A pragmatic and deeply ethical figure, Colvin's only moments of cynical surrender come when he thinks of the police force. As he reflects on the inglorious end to his career, he stands in the police station parking lot, drinking a can of beer. The scene is familiar to us: we have come to understand, over the seasons, that the departmental parking lot is where off-duty officers congregate for a beer or two after their shifts. There's something ironic about the fact that even when they are off duty and angered at departmental mismanagement, the officers remain on site. Once Colvin finishes his beer, he tosses the empty can onto the roof of the station, as is the tradition. It feels like an act of defiance; at the very least, it is a very aggressive act of littering. But it is a sanc-

tioned kind of deviance, just like Freamon's hidden-in-plain-sight side job or the numerous scenes of detectives driving drunk. The chain of command is not disrupted by this kind of behavior.³⁰ As the camera draws back, we see that the roof is littered with thousands of beer cans, all heaved with venom and sitting inert on the roof of a building.

These moments render visible the dark, dead-end "realities" of *The Wire*. Little within the series' spatial reality changes or improves; even worse, we see the cycle start all over again with each new season, with each new cohort of middle managers unable to see beyond their city's limits.

There is a single, self-evidently optimistic arc of *The Wire*. It involves Reginald "Bubbles" Cousins, a chatty, well-meaning drug addict who struggles throughout the full five seasons to stay clean. He is constantly victimized: by police bureaucracy, rugged street bullies, his addictions, and even his own trusting instincts. At the conclusion of season 5, after a series of devastating setbacks, Cousins has finally kicked his habit. But there remains an aching deep in his soul. He is reticent during his group recovery sessions, deflecting praise and wisecracking his way out of awkward situations. We understand that the deaths of his friends Johnny and Sherrod during previous seasons still haunt him; Cousins cannot accept that he is, as his sponsor assures him, "good." A chance encounter with a sympathetic newspaper reporter results in a lengthy, front-page human-interest feature that pays admiration to Cousins's spirit. And yet Cousins cannot understand why anyone would cast him in a positive light. His arc reminds us that even though the show privileges space—a space that is "unfree" for all—over linear progress, there remains the possibility of change or recuperation. The reporter is our proxy, his narration of Cousins's life details a reminder of our capacity to draw back and engage the full panorama of *The Wire*.

All of these moments when *The Wire* refers back to its own past help reaffirm our status as the audience. We surveil the full panoply of the city, just as the characters in the city surveil one another. We grow aware of the random, seemingly nonlinear effects of labor and crime as they are scattered throughout the city. But these moments of self-referentiality *across* time restore our distance as omniscient viewers—and our capacity to judge that Cousins is indeed good. For all the local microhistories we cannot grasp, despite all of the obstacles to truly comprehending the series' Baltimore, we are ultimately reminded that we can access these characters' seemingly asymptotic arcs and map them as a totality, and it is a totality that never comes into focus for the characters within. As with the example of Cousins and the newspaper reporter or Sobotka and the forces of global capital, the characters themselves are incapable of seeing the

broader contexts and piecing together the kinds of stories about themselves that the viewer can. In a sense, these connections equip us to map Baltimore for ourselves. When characters and scenes echo each other across seasons—dozens of hours of actual television have passed—it reminds us that we are merely witnesses to someone else’s drama, cartographers of someone else’s city.

What are we to do with all that we have seen? How are we to understand *The Wire*’s clever and finely crafted social criticism in relation to our lives as actual middle management? If the purpose of realist narrative is to activate the sentiments of its audience, what future does *The Wire* allow us to imagine? To paraphrase Susan Sontag, who are the “we” at whom such a series, with its bleak situations and even bleaker outcomes, is aimed?

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag describes the limits of empathetic spectatorship. While her inquiry is animated by visual representations of warfare, her concerns apply here, as well. If *The Wire*’s unconventional formal approach and antiestablishment content are supposed to urge us to rethink the present, does the series itself offer us any reason for optimism? As Sontag observes,

Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing “we” can do—but who is that “we”?—and nothing “they” can do either—and who are “they”?—then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic.³¹

These questions linger as *The Wire* ends. The series abides by a sense of justice that is unpredictable and occasionally cruel, as evidenced by the lone redemption of Cousins or the fact that the most privileged and obnoxious of season 4’s quartet of young, teenaged leads is the one who the series allows to escape the streets. *The Wire* provides its audience without a sense of how to calculate justice or tragedy, and while this arbitrariness might be the realest possible representation of reality, it robs its audience of any meaningful way of deploying its realism.

This isn’t to say that *The Wire* encourages a totalizing pessimism. There are creative models for community policing and school reform, as well as persuasive philosophical arguments against bureaucracy and overly rigid enforcement of drug laws. As well, there are characters scattered up and down the series’ rough hierarchy who embody the kind of idealistic cunning required to deliver such change. But beyond this, the series, in its

implication of the viewer, encourages a reappraisal of the possibilities of collectivity. It attempts to both activate and then surpass the possibilities of mere pathos.

In her work on trauma and empathy, Carolyn Dean warns that the limits of empathy are seeded in the troublesome distance between victim and spectator. It is a distance that, over time, accumulates the potential for a certain kind of numbness: "It may also be that numbness merely exposes in new and dramatic terms the limits of the ideally expressive liberal 'we.'"³² While Dean's observation offers one possible answer to Sontag's question, her use of the "ideally expressive" *we* relies on an ultimately limiting notion of liberal politics. Perhaps this is *The Wire's* ultimate gesture: its unsatisfying sense of justice notwithstanding, the series radically reimagines the possibilities of collectivity. *The Wire* is an attempt to rearticulate this "we," and not merely across lines of class or race. Sometimes it rests on politics and self-interest, as with Stringer Bell's vision of the city-wide drug cooperative wherein rival factions pool their resources in the name of shared empire. Other times, it is an expression of common humanity, as when police officers and a small-time hustler they finger off the streets share sodas, a game of pool, and a stolen moment of chummy camaraderie. Gone are the divisions between cops and robbers, East Side and West Side, television series and audience.

* * *

They eat sandwiches in silence, the serenity of Cylburn Arboretum a stark contrast to their presumed ideological oppositions. One of them is Broadus, the charismatic, young drug dealer. Beside him sits McNulty, who is enjoying a spell of sober, stable self-discipline. "Are we still in the city?" Broadus asks in a disarmingly gentle tone, as though the quiet of their surroundings has spooked him. "This is nice."

The conversation pauses. Broadus rubs his chin; McNulty chews slowly. "I feel old," Broadus confesses, a weary droop in his voice belying that he is only nineteen or twenty years old. When *The Wire* introduced Broadus in the first season, he was one of three fresh-faced, sixteen-year-old "hoppers" being groomed by a high-ranking member of the Barksdale gang. Diligently abiding by the gang's code of conduct, Broadus ascended through the gang's ranks. But now he is more or less by himself, bossing a less disciplined crew on a low-traffic corner. He launches into an impassioned diatribe on the righteous way to sling drugs, the warrior ethics that have guided him to the cusp of adulthood. At this point, though, as a rival

gang verges toward citywide domination, it is difficult to maintain any faith in greater redemption. “We be like those little bitches on the chessboard,” Broadus observes, referring back to a conversation years earlier, which the viewer recognizes from season 1. “Pawns,” McNulty offers—but he does not follow the reference. He probably does not realize that he himself might be regarded a pawn as well.

A viewer might feel similarly old. After all, Broadus’s statement reminds us of how much time—within the show’s reality and outside of it—has passed since D’Angelo Barksdale taught Broadus and Wallace, another young drug dealer, how to play chess by transposing the hierarchy of the drug gang on the surface of the chessboard. The unsettling conclusion of this lesson: they were all in some way pawns to the whims of power.

Now, years later, Barksdale and Wallace are both dead. Broadus is no longer the untested pupil, more mouth than mettle. Now, he is a stalwart of the corner, bossing his own crew of followers and repeating the survival lessons passed down to him by the late Barksdale. Similarly, McNulty has gone through his share of rising, falling, and rising again. He has found the sense of balance that had long eluded him. They are still pawns in the space of Baltimore but also individuals with a firm sense of integrity. “You’re a soldier, Bodie,” McNulty praises, once Broadus consents to aid his investigation.

Soon after this conversation, we are with Broadus and his crew, selling their drugs deep into a cold, barren night. Malik “Poot” Carr, Broadus’s right-hand man, burrows his hand into the sleeves of his parka for warmth. Across the street, they notice a rival gang quietly approaching, and Broadus reaches for his pistol. Carr begs him to flee, but he refuses. This corner—a boarded-up storefront, a street lamp, a tiny parcel of concrete, memories of hours hanging out with his crew, the site of his own maturation as a “soldier”—is his. “Yo, this *my* corner, I ain’t runnin’ nowhere,” he shouts before an upstart gangster guns him down. We watch from a distance.

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NOTES

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1. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 97.

2. *The Wire: The Complete Series* (New York: HBO Video, 2008), DVD. Subsequent citations from the series in text are in the same form: episode, season, and chapter number (i.e., 5.5.3).
3. William K. Rashbaum, "Police Say a Queens Drug Ring Watched Too Much Television," *New York Times*, 15 January 2005.
4. Steve James and Alex Kotlowitz, "Breaking Down *The Wire*," *Slate*, 18 September 2006, www.slate.com/id/2149784/entry/2149865/ (accessed 8 February 2011).
5. Theodor Adorno, "How to Look at Television," *Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television* 8, no. 3 (1954): 213–35, quotation on 215.
6. See also Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, 3rd ed., Routledge Classics (1974; repr., New York: Schocken, 2003); and Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).
7. Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 11.
8. Using the DVD format, this statement comes during season 3, episode 5, chapter 1. Herein, I will cite dialogue accordingly.
9. Season 4, episode 4, chapter 6.
10. Season 5, episode 8, chapter 4.
11. Additionally, *CSI* frequently plays in the house of Michael Lee, a young gangster, during season 5—though rarely is anyone paying attention (5.1.4).
12. I should qualify this by noting that *The Wire* did, occasionally, indulge in these kinds of conventional narrative conceits, with McNulty's fake serial killer stunt of season 5 being the worst offender. But it is significant that these gestures to narrative convention were few and far between. It's arguable that the aggregate effect of these rare departures from the series' own rules for storytelling was to highlight how rigorous the series was most of the time about avoiding them.
13. Rashbaum, "Police Say."
14. See, for example, Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989). For more recent work, see Nato Thompson, ed., *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism* (New York: Melville House, 2009).
15. See David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion* (London: Routledge, 1995).
16. de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 123.
17. Season 4, episode 9, chapter 2.
18. Season 4, episode 9, chapter 4.
19. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), 12.
20. Season 4, episode 8, chapter 5.
21. Season 1, episode 2, chapter 4.
22. Season 1, episode 3, chapter 3.
23. Season 3, episode 9, chapter 2.
24. Theodor Adorno, "Free Time" (1977), in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 1991), 187.

25. Season 1, episode 1, chapter 2.
26. Season 3, episode 6, chapter 4.
27. See Olivier Zunz, *Making America Corporate, 1870–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
28. William Whyte, *City: Rediscovering the Center* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 154.
29. Season 1, episode 1, chapter 1.
30. See Paul Piccone, general introduction to *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), ix–xx, quotation on xix.
31. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 101.
32. Carolyn Dean, *The Fragility of Empathy After the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 5.