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The Heart of the City: A Conversation about *The Wire*

Kelly Quinn



The Wire was a television series that ran for five seasons (2002–2008) on the premium cable channel Home Box Office (HBO).¹ Its name referred to the surveillance devices that police enlist in monitoring and infiltrating criminal activity. Using the access these devices provide, viewers traced a series of tangled plots through West Baltimore, Maryland, crisscrossing police precincts, hustling down alleys, swaggering across courtyards, and scrambling over parapets. The show pursued the wire through metal detectors at the courthouse and city hall; in boxing rings and shooting

Above: In season five, as the series scrutinized the media, the actor/director Clark Johnson (far left) played Gus Haynes, the city-desk editor for the “*Baltimore Sun*.” *The Wire* decried the decline of investigative reporting and public-service journalism, indicting newspapers as accomplices in the decline and dysfunction of contemporary urban institutions. From left to right: Clark Johnson, Brandon Young, Michelle Paress, and Tom McCarthy. Photo by Paul Schiraldi, courtesy of Home Box Office.

galleries; in classrooms and corner stores; in bars, backrooms, and beige cubicles; in conference suites, funeral parlors, jail cells, and parish halls; in cargo containers and abandoned rowhouses; and in public parks and cemeteries.

Formstone and takeaway lake trout convey the particularities of Baltimore, but the setting is also Everycity, standing for post-Fordist rustbelt Detroit, Cleveland, or Oakland. Each season addressed an institution of the contemporary city. Season one introduced criminal justice; season two explored labor issues at the Port of Baltimore; season three scrutinized the political machine of municipal government; season four tackled public education; and season five investigated journalism and print media.

Ostensibly a cop show, the series rejected the well-worn conventions of the genre. This cityscape was not one of fancy editing and jump-cut grittiness. Viewers could linger in overlooked places and learn about the lives of longshoremen, schoolteachers

and administrators, political candidates and advisors, police, and dealers.

The show was also grounded in ancient traditions of storytelling. David Simon, its creator, executive producer, and writer, repeatedly referenced Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles in interviews. To tell the tales of postmodern, postindustrial Baltimore, he explained, “We stole from the Greeks and we made the gods into institutions.”²

The Series

Simon and his partner, Ed Burns, developed *The Wire* after both had had careers in public service. Simon had worked as a police reporter at the *Baltimore Sun*; Burns had been a police officer and schoolteacher. Previously, Simon had authored *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, a nonfiction novel that served as the basis for NBC’s television series *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993–1999). Simon and Burns had also partnered to write an account of life in an open-air drug market in West Baltimore, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*, which resulted in a six-hour miniseries for HBO, *The Corner* (2000).

The Wire, like *The Corner*, was the brainchild of these two roundish white men who, clutching clipboards, hung out on street corners in West Baltimore listening, watching, soaking up the city. They were astute observers, passionately devoted to probing the everyday experiences of America’s inner cities.

Their city was not one of glitzy waterfront redevelopment, corporate stadia, or luxury lofts. And their work repudiated this convivial city in large part because of their disdain for practices they believed have imperiled contemporary urbanism. For Burns and Simon, public policies like

the “War on Drugs” and “No Child Left Behind” have thwarted human experience.

In a lecture at the University of Southern California, Simon once answered a question about the meaning of *The Wire* with the following comments:

It is a political tract masquerading as a cop show.

It is an argument that our nation state is becoming less viable and will continue to become less viable.

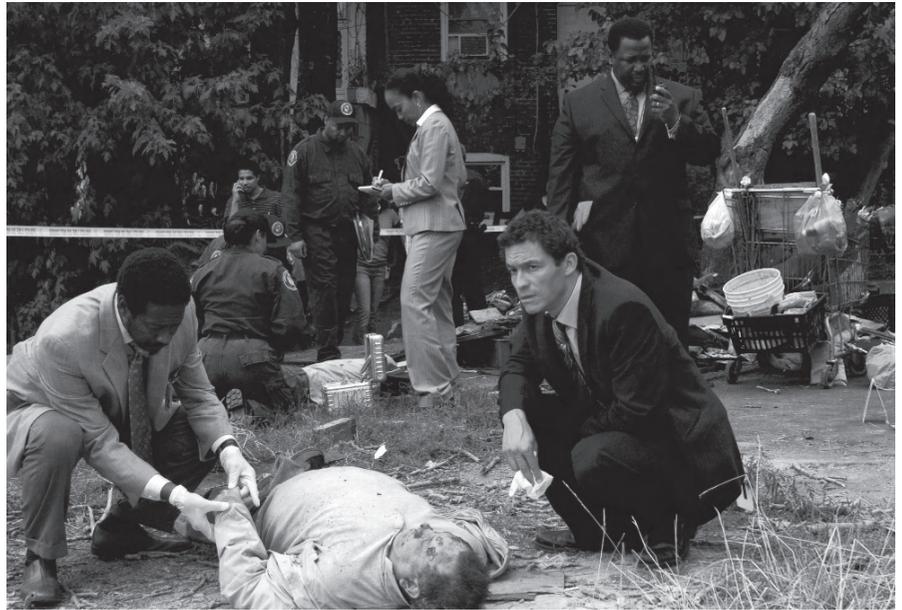
I think that it is one of the most affectionate and funny stories about the end of empire that you could compose.

And, I am proud that it is basically an argument that every day human beings matter less.³

The Conference

During its five-year run, the series developed a small, devoted following who continue to debate its meanings in on-line discussions, and who remake its scenes, posting vignettes, “lost” episodes, and spoofs on Youtube.com. Scholars have also begun to share their private viewing pleasure, and have launched formal examinations of the series in classrooms and conferences.

It was out of this climate of interest that the Black Humanities Collective and the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies at the University of Michigan decided to host a symposium about *The Wire* January 29 and 30 in Ann Arbor. Paul M. Farber and Grace L.B. Sander, its graduate-student organizers, wanted “to pay proper critical attention to a television series that from its start was too big for Prime Time.” They continued: “Whether you think of *The Wire* as a work of paramount dramatic achievement, a tactile sampling



of urban reality, or as something between those two ideals, this symposium marks an important moment for scholars and thinkers to congregate...to explore the possibilities for hope and skepticism forged at once through this influential series.”

The first academic conference devoted to *The Wire*, the meeting drew fans and critics from many fields. More than 250 people assembled to debate the show’s significance and legacy, including students, staff, faculty, and members of the public. Robin Means-Coleman, a professor of communications and Afroamerican and African studies, moderated the keynote conversation between the actress Sonja Sohn and the actor and director Clark Johnson. Sohn and Johnson swapped memories of audition tapes and moments on the set, discussed popular opinion of the show in Baltimore, and shared their views on the crafts of acting and directing. Sohn also reflected on her relationship to Baltimore, the segregated city and her adopted home during several

seasons on the show. And Johnson described how Simon’s early career as a journalist and his ear for dialogue influenced his work, and how the conceit of surveillance was able to offer an intimate view of the city.

The panels that followed included “Teaching on *The Wire*”; “Race, Labor, and Affect in the Neoliberal City”; “Sex and Sexuality in the City”; “Reading *The Wire*: The Politics of Authenticity in Season Five”; “Do Right Woman, Do Right Man”; and “Hermeneutics of Strategy and Surveillance.” The conference concluded with a roundtable about the meanings of *The Wire* in an Obama America. Facilitated by Michigan professor Jonathan Metz, participants included the music critic and Vassar

Above: Even as viewers were invited behind the yellow tape, *The Wire* rejected stylized, formulaic depictions of crime scenes and urban policing. From left to right: Clarke Peters, Sonja Sohn, Dominic West, and Wendell Pierce. Photo by Nicole Rivelli, courtesy of Home Box Office.

College literature professor Hua Hsu, the cultural commentator and Duke University professor Mark Anthony Neal, the hip-hop scholar and Bucknell University professor James Peterson, and the University of Pennsylvania professor and contributor to the *the-root.com* Salamishah Tillet.

While many presenters approached the show as appreciative fans, they also enlisted a variety of disciplinary methods to analyze and critique it. A few relied on close analysis of the series and its characters to consider issues such as public education, gender and sexuality. For example, Paul Anderson, an associate professor of American cultures and Afroamerican and African studies at Michigan, mapped the anomie of deindustrialized Baltimore. Chris Love, a Ph.D. candidate in comparative literature at Michigan, evaluated its elements of Greek tragedy, highlighting the use of epigraphs, dialogic echoes, and staging. She argued that “true modern tragedy can be found in Baltimore in the [characters of] Barksdale, Bell and Bunny.” And Leigh Claire LaBerge, an assistant professor of humanities at the University of Chicago, discussed the fictitious serial killer storyline in season five as a strategy that challenged viewers to question depictions of reality.⁴

Other presenters considered the implications and possibilities of the series as a reflection of contemporary urban issues. Shavon Holcomb, a sociology student, and Paul Draus, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, explained how they used the series in an education program at Ryan Correctional Facility on the east side of Detroit. Rob Choflet, a Ph.D. student at the University of Maryland, College Park, used the

opening scene of season three, the ceremonial implosion of Franklin Terrace’s highrise towers, to contemplate David Harvey’s writings on of “creative destruction.” He reviewed the decision of the Baltimore Housing Authority to eliminate 5,600 of its “severely distressed” units, and examined homeownership in West Baltimore’s Heritage Crossing, a project of semi-detached, low-rise units that is part of larger initiatives to remake public space in the neighborhoods featured in *The Wire*.

A Mirror for Urban Places

While several presentations considered housing policy and urban issues, architects, planners and urban designers were conspicuously absent, despite the organizers’ efforts to solicit papers from those working and practicing in those fields. It is a pity, because *The Wire* offers many insights about urban places. Analysis of the series can advance our understanding of the death and life of great American cities.

The Wire rewarded viewers, in part, because it was excellent television. Its palimpsestic narrative respected the audience’s intelligence, instilled empathy and inspired action. Above all, its sixty episodes insisted that viewers engage the city on its own terms, not those of Hollywood fantasy.

As Simon asserted, the series was also a lament for the lost urbanism of the first half of the twentieth century. On the street corners of *The Wire*’s West Baltimore, the sidewalk ballet extolled by Jane Jacobs became a pas-de-deux performed by dealers and junkies, a result of failed public policies and frayed social contracts.

The Wire continues to challenge urbanists to focus on postindustrial public spaces. It insists that we consider abandoned rowhouses and

forsaken factories as more than textured containers for adaptive reuse. It is a call to link social justice and urban design to a larger critique of life in the United States.

As we contemplate how to engage the city in this moment of late capitalism, we often rely on theorists, geographers, and sociologists such as David Harvey, Jane Jacobs, Saskia Sassen, Michel Foucault, Neil Smith, Robin D.G. Kelley, Clyde Woods, Sudhir Venkatesh, Iris Marion Young, Michel De Certeau, and Henri Lefebvre. Perhaps it is also time to turn our attention to David Simon. Study *The Wire*.⁵

Notes

1. Although the show no longer airs on television, it is widely available on DVD.
2. David Simon, “Journalism and the Public Square,” March 20, 2008, University of Southern California, Gould School of Law and Annenberg School for Communication, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8E8xBXFLKE&feature=channel_page. Simon discussed this at greater length in Margaret Talbot, “Stealing Life: The Crusader behind ‘The Wire,’” *New Yorker*, October 22, 2007, pp. 150-63.
3. Ibid.
4. Robert LeVertis Bell and Paul Farber have edited a special edition of *Criticism* devoted to *The Wire*; many of the conference papers will be featured in the forthcoming Summer 2009 volume.
5. More on the conference can be found at http://sitemaker.umich.edu/heart_of_the_city/heart_of_the_city.