

Critical Response

III

Ethnographic Imaginary: The Genesis and Genius of *The Wire*

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Television is a time suck, especially now that its stories tend to go on and on. But in the summer and fall of 2007 I had time. A friend had brought me an inspired gift: bootlegs of the first three seasons of *The Wire*. I watched all that I had been given; then I had to wait until the next season became available (the show ran on HBO from 2002 to 2008 but ran on my bedroom TV from 2007 to 2008). By the time I finished, I was more than a fan; I was a convert. But I didn't know to what I had been converted. I had never seen anything so absorbing, so complex, so simultaneously challenging and gratifying coming from the screen. In the microcosm of one decaying American city, we see the interconnected truths of many institutional failures—rampant drug trade and thus the failure of police and law, declining unions and thus the decrease of the very value of work, a cynical city government and the failure of reform, the poignant waste of schools, and a media that cannot see the truth of what is revealed before its very eyes.

Some critics might say I had been awakened to the raw truth about American culture, the medium be damned. For example, in a lament about the failure of the American novel to tell stories that matter to the neoliberal present, Walter Benn Michaels has claimed, not unlike *The Wire*'s creator David Simon, that the series is the “most serious and ambitious fictional

Thanks to Zeynep Gürsel for multisited ethnography. Thanks also to Kelsa Trom and Alexa Punnamkuzhyil for editorial help.

narrative of the twenty-first century so far.”¹ Though never published as prose, it is, as Simon and Michaels want to claim, the great novel that no twenty-first-century novelist has yet written.² Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson also see it as literature, arguing that it “is part of a long line of literary works that are often able to capture the complexity of urban life in ways that have eluded many social scientists” (Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson, “Way Down in the Hole”: Systemic Urban Inequality and *The Wire*,” *Critical Inquiry* 38 [Autumn 2011]: 166). They cite novelists Richard Wright, Italo Calvino, and Charles Dickens as models, while Michaels cites Émile Zola and Theodore Dreiser.

Wilson and Chaddha point out that as a work of fiction, *The Wire* is able to demonstrate “the interconnectedness of systemic urban inequality in a way that can be very difficult to illustrate in academic works.” Scholarly works, they argue, “tend to focus on many of these issues in relative isolation,” whereas the fiction of *The Wire* is able to “deftly weave together the range of forces that shape the circumstances of the urban poor while exposing deep inequality as a fundamental feature of broader social and economic arrangements” (p. 166).

If the first thing everyone notes about *The Wire* is its authentic way of revealing broad social and economic arrangements through its grounding in a realist observation of daily lives in each of the institutions portrayed—police, unions, drug trade, city government, schools, media—then it is not surprising that what usually follows is the adjective *novelistic*. The series has the ability—like Dickens, Wright, Zola, and Dreiser—to give dramatic resonance to a wide range of interconnected social strata, their different behaviors, and their speech over long swathes of time. But how do authenticity and the freedom of artistic expression to which Chaddha and Wilson allude combine in this work? For it doesn’t quite do to describe *The Wire* as our greatest novel or as the best nonacademic proof of sociology’s argu-

1. Walter Benn Michaels, “Going Boom: The Economic Collapse Points up How Little Our Literary World Has to Say about Social Inequality,” *bookforum.com* (Feb.–Mar. 2009), www.bookforum.com/inprint/015_05/3274

2. Simon calls it a “visual novel” and goes so far as to compare it to *Moby-Dick* (David Simon, “Introduction,” in Ralph Alvarez et al., “*The Wire*”: *Truth Be Told*, ed. Alvarez [New York, 2004], p. 25).

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ments about inequality before we understand what it is in itself. In a larger study I tackle what Jeffrey Sconce has called “ever more complex narrative universes” and how they have evolved from soaps through cop series and narratively cumulative serials that have learned to utilize television’s resource of abundant time.³ In what follows I only want to understand what enabled the leap from journalistic fact to serial televisual melodrama by searching for the creative origins of the series.

The Ethnographic Imaginary: The Origins of *The Wire*

Simon only ever wanted to be a great journalist. However, his conception of journalism was grandiose, tending towards a deeper sociocultural understanding of the lives of the people who generated the stories he encountered when he first worked as a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*. If ethnography can be defined as a method that “privileges an engaged, contextually rich and nuanced type of qualitative social research, in which fine grained daily interactions constitute the lifeblood of the data produced,” then Simon’s journalism can be described as ethnographic from the very beginning.⁴

Simon filed three hundred bylines at the *Baltimore Sun* in his first year out of the University of Maryland, reporting on the cop beat.⁵ Starting with short pieces, he would soon develop a strength writing longer, multipart series. His first long story on Little Melvin Williams, published in five parts in 1987, was about a late eighties drug lord then ruling the roost (Williams is in many ways the foundation of the character of Avon Barksdale, and he would later play the Deacon in *The Wire*).⁶ This story was published after Simon took a leave to write *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* and had developed a knack for really long stories. The book was based on cases occurring in 1988 and was finally published in 1991 at 646 pages.⁷ Simon was allowed to follow the lives and cases of a homicide unit on the condition that he did not communicate what he witnessed to his newspaper and on condition that he not quote anyone by name unless they agreed to be

3. Jeffrey Sconce, “What If? Charting Television’s New Textual Boundaries,” in *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham, N.C., 2004), p. 95. See my forthcoming volume *On “The Wire.”*

4. Mark-Anthony Falzon, “Introduction: Multi-sited Ethnography: Theory, Praxis, and Locality in Contemporary Research,” in *Multi-sited Ethnography: Theory, Praxis, and Locality in Contemporary Research*, ed. Falzon (Surrey, 2009), p. 1.

5. See Lawrence Lanahan, “Secrets of the City: What *The Wire* Reveals about Urban Journalism,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 46 (Jan.–Feb. 2008): 24; hereafter abbreviated “S.”

6. See Simon, “Easy Money: Anatomy of a Drug Empire,” *Baltimore Sun*, 11 Jan. 1987, pp. 1A, 14A–15A; 12 Jan. 1987, pp. 1A, 6A; 13 Jan. 1987, pp. 1B, 2B; 14 Jan. 1987, pp. 1B, 2B; and 15 Jan. 1987, pp. 1B, 6B.

7. See Simon, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (New York, 1991).

quoted.⁸ The twenty-something Simon hung out with selected shifts, drank with the detectives in many bars, followed the progression or impasses of both heartbreaking and mundane cases—most frustratingly the rape and murder of a young girl that was never solved.

After completing *Homicide*, with deeper knowledge of the police department at his disposal, Simon wrote another series for the *Baltimore Sun*, “Crisis in Blue,” a four-part article about the increasing dysfunction of the Baltimore Police Department. In this series he revealed that the failure at the heart of the system was institutional, not merely individual.⁹ In 1993 he took another year off, this time with former cop and school teacher Ed Burns, to investigate the perspective of the cops’ antagonists. The resulting book, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*, reports on an extended West Baltimore family (crack mother, heroin-addicted father, crack-dealing son, and their friends, lovers, and associates) over the course of a year. This hefty 543-page tome was published in 1997 after Simon had abandoned journalism.¹⁰

Both of Simon’s long books employ the basic methodologies of ethnography: a long-term—one-year—stay in a field where a particular set of social relations can be observed by an outsider who follows selected individuals in their work and daily lives. Simon’s goal in his longer works was to understand and depict the deeper workings of the culture by seeing the world from a specifically located informant’s point of view. In *Homicide* this had meant interviews with representative cops, accompanying them as they investigated a murder scene, interrogating witnesses, and watching the unsolved cases accumulate on the board. It also meant hanging out in bars in leisure hours. For *The Corner*, Simon and Burns, who had not been given any institutional permission to observe, hung out on the West Fayette Street neighborhood corners practicing what they unpretentiously call “stand-around-and-watch journalism” (C, p. 538). This journalism transmutes into ethnography at the point at which the two men became fixtures on the scene and began to understand its day-to-day rhythms and dramas.

Field techniques are rooted in the idea of participant observation in which data is regarded as a gift from informants. Simon was not a profes-

8. See *ibid.*, p. 624.

9. See Simon, “Crisis in Blue,” *Baltimore Sun*, 6 Feb. 1994, pp. A1, A21; 7 Feb. 1994, p. A1; 8 Feb. 1994, p. A1; and 9 Feb. 1994, pp. A1, A12. Already, as his first editor at the *Baltimore Sun* notes, Simon “was writing about the sociology of the city through the prism of the cop beat and the criminal-justice system. . . . He fairly uniquely looked at the people who we tend to view just as victims or bad guys, and looked at these neighborhoods as real places that we had better understand” (“S,” pp. 24–25).

10. See Simon and Edward Burns, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (New York, 1997); hereafter abbreviated C.

sional ethnographer; studying the cops, he may have been too enthusiastic, too identified for good ethnography. He admits he simply loved “these guys,”¹¹ their language, their procedures, their tough and sometimes tender ways. Studying the corners, he and Burns were more measured than Simon had been in *Homicide*. Their model was Elliot Liebow’s *Tally’s Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*.¹² Liebow’s rule was adopted by Simon and Burns: to limit loans of money or other favors to what each asker would have gotten from another friend had he the same resources. Thus they would occasionally drive a sick addict to a clinic or loan a little money for a fix.

George Marcus argues that there is an inherent problem to the ethnographic method when it concentrates solely on a specific location of study. How do you indicate the existence of the larger macrosystem that affects the microlevel of the location studied? To do so, he argues, ethnographers of a “single site” inevitably have recourse to a larger whole that has not yet been studied so systematically. Marcus calls this the “fiction of the whole.” It usually amounts to some abstraction, “the state,” “the economy,” “capitalism,” and so on.¹³ This fiction enables the telling of the ethnographic tale as tale; it enables some kind of closure: “however slightly developed or imagined . . . the fiction of the whole . . . exercise[s] a powerful control over the narrative in which an ethnographer frames a local world” (*E*, p. 33). Even the most scrupulously factual of ethnographers must presume that the microworlds of (say) cops or drug corners exist in a larger system. This is why Marcus and others have developed a multisited ethnography—one that could approach the whole system by studying more of the concrete sites that compose it.

Since the 1980s, multisited ethnography has expanded traditional single-sited ethnography to give greater breadth, depth, and scope to the discipline. In place of the classic concern with the unique perspective of local cultures, especially those of colonial subalterns, some ethnographers have sought to link multiple sites by identifying a more “diffuse time-space” of study that “cannot be accounted for ethnographically by remaining focused on a single site of intensive investigation” (*E*, pp. 79, 80). This method maps a more complex thread of interconnected cultural processes of an evolving and related world system (*E*, p. 82). Through the discovery of these relations, the ethnographer attempts to “bring these multiple sites

11. Simon, *Homicide*, p. 638.

12. See Elliot Liebow, *Tally’s Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (Boston, 1967).

13. George E. Marcus, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (Princeton, N.J., 1998), p. 33; hereafter abbreviated *E*.

into the same frame of study and to posit their relationships on the basis of firsthand ethnographic research" (*E*, p. 84).

The only problem, as Marcus freely admits, is that no single ethnographer has enough knowledge of enough worlds and enough time to show enough parts to reveal a whole system. Admitting that multisited ethnography might be more of an ideal than a reality, Marcus and his colleagues in this endeavor nevertheless hold out a dream of an ethnographic "imaginary." He writes, "I am looking for a different, less stereotyped, and more significant place for the reception of ethnographically produced knowledge in a variety of academic and nonacademic forms . . . within a multisited research imaginary, tracing and describing the connections and relationships among sites previously thought incommensurate is ethnography's way of making arguments and providing its own contexts of significance" (*E*, p. 14). As the word "imaginary" and the ambition to reach beyond "academic forms" signal, it may not be surprising that the place where there is "world enough and time" to make arguments that can provide ethnographic "contexts of significance" should prove to be Simon's fictional but ethnographically informed serial television melodrama.

When Simon found a way to put together the factual, ethnographically observed, and detailed worlds of his first two long works of microethnography—essentially the world of cops and the world of drug-dealing robbers—into one longer, converged, fictional world (as he was already beginning to do in the 2000 script he peddled to HBO, entitled *The Wire: A Dramatic Series for HBO*), he had discovered the original genius of the series. There had been plenty of long-running police procedurals on television, both episodic and serial. And there had been plenty of movies about gangsters or boyz in the hood, but, with the exception of Spike Lee's 1995 indifferent adaptation of Richard Price's fine novel *Clockers* (1992), there had never been a film or a television series that had given equal time to both sides of the law and portrayed them comparatively as systems in themselves. And not even the novel *Clockers* had managed to capture the systematic day-to-day workings of law enforcement and law breaking over a sustained period of time.

In the first season of *The Wire*, cops and robbers inhabit the two sites of the institutional world that is the series' initial frame. Unlike most traditional genres, in which cops are posited as either morally better (or single bad apples) in relation to the robbers they police, both sites are equally caught up in the procedures and codes of their work. The characters of both are complexly motivated. They are simply situated in different, though significantly adjacent, ethnographic sites.

We can pinpoint the exact moment when *The Wire* ceases being a story

about cops and becomes multisited. At 24:04 minutes into the first episode of the first season, the black defendant in a murder trial, D'Angelo Barksdale, who has just been acquitted, is driven to a strip club by Roland "Wee-Bey" Brice, his uncle's main enforcer, to celebrate his freedom. While it might be typical in a cop show to glimpse the exultation of the acquitted but guilty party as a brief interlude before returning to the procedures of the cops, we now pay equal attention to the procedures of the robbers. D'Angelo makes the mistake of violating the rule against speaking of business in a vehicle that might be bugged. Wee-Bey stops the SUV and out on the sidewalk lectures D'Angelo on the rules of silence. In the following scene, twice as long as any other in the episode, we are introduced to D'Angelo's uncle at the club that fronts his drug-dealing organization, where D'Angelo receives another lecture about discipline, in this case the unnecessary murder for which he was just acquitted. Two scenes later, we see that D'Angelo has been demoted to work drug sales in a low-rise instead of the apartment block towers he once worked. The contrasting procedures of cops and robbers are thus established, from this moment on in the first season, as the first two fundamental central sites of the series.¹⁴

The ethnographic knowledge of the cops and drug dealers comes from *Homicide* and *The Corner*, but the intercutting of these microsites enables a rich thematic comparison of the two institutions: cops who mostly want to bust heads and robbers who run a much tighter organization. The paradox of Simon's ethnographic imaginary is that he was able to abandon the flaw of the ethnographer's "fiction of the whole" by moving out of ethnography and into an ever-complicating serial fiction that could connect more and more worlds. In the words of Lester Freamon, one of the wiser cops who knows how to build a case, "all the pieces" (of this serially interconnected world) "matter."¹⁵

The first season is followed by a less successfully connected second season focused on the world of a predominantly Polish dockworkers union. A more successful third season returns to the cops and drug dealers but now adds the site of a city government whose efforts at reform are effectively contrasted with reforms undertaken by the drug kingpins—who form a functioning cooperative—and some police, culminating in the great experiment of Hamsterdam. A truly remarkable fourth season focuses on a new generation of corner boys and drug dealers within a new primary site at Tilghman Middle School, where a former cop now teaches. The fifth

14. See Simon, "The Target," dir. Clark Johnson, 2002, *The Wire: The Complete Series*, DVD, 23 discs (2002–8), season:1, episode 1.

15. Simon, "The Wire," dir. Ed Bianchi, 2002, *The Wire*, season 1, episode 6.

season keeps all but the docks of the second season in play, adding the site of the *Baltimore Sun* and its persistent failure to report the real city news while cops still try to police a more ruthless new generation of drug dealers.

As the series intercuts from one world to another, rarely stopping to recap or reiterate, adding one site of knowledge to another, it approaches what the ethnographer could only dream of: a multisited ethnographic imaginary that no longer needs to depend upon allusions to abstract ideas of the state, the economy, or capitalism to be understood in a more concrete, vivid, and accessible form. The vivid and concrete interlocking stories are what fiction affords, what ethnography aspires to, and what newspaper journalism can only rarely achieve.¹⁶ But before he could arrive at a position to cut loose from factual journalism and achieve his televisual version of an ethnographic imaginary, Simon, dyed-in-the-wool journalist, had to end his career as a reporter and make his leap from fact to fiction. He remains furious at the newspaper business that rejected his brand of reporting, but he must know it was the best thing that ever happened to him.

Rifle-Shot Journalism

As a journalist Simon was effectively trying to tell the stories of his city in the fashion of new journalism's more imaginative and novelistic way of telling what were still "true" stories. The new journalist is so "*saturated*"—as Thomas Wolfe would put it—with the situation of the subject that he or she feels entitled to get inside characters' heads to say what they think. Wolfe writes that in this kind of writing the basic units are no longer the five Ws but "whole scenes and stretches of dialogue."¹⁷

"Whole scenes and stretches of dialogue" are precisely what we get in Simon's 1995 *Baltimore Sun* story "The Metal Men." Because the killing of this story is what would lead him to quit journalism, it is worth examining. It begins by setting the scene of a crime: "Kenny wipes his mouth, passes the wine and stares into the shopping cart, his mind managing a quick calculation." The calculation consists of how much he and his brother Tyrone might get for certain quantities of copper pipe and other pieces of metal from a vacant house. Kenny and Tyrone are depicted in the middle of a heist, ripping out metal from a Fulton Avenue row house in West Baltimore. Tyrone goes deeper into the guts of the building with a hack-saw, thinking, "get the metal now or someone else comes behind you to

16. See Sconce, "What If?" p. 95.

17. American Society of Newspaper Editors, "Thomas Wolfe: The New Journalism," *Bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors* 544 (Sept. 1970): 22.

grab it.” He and his brother emerge with a shopping cart full of stolen metal. In their rattling cart they “shoot down Fulton and cross Fayette where the corner boys are touting a fresh heroin package. . . . There’s no way to sense the speed involved unless you’re with them, cantering beside a full shopping cart, making for the scales in absolute earnest.”¹⁸

That’s our excited reporter cantering right alongside them. And this is our reporter in the next section, pronouncing upon the meaning of the scene:

Behold the ants. . . . Day after day, they rattle back and forth with their shopping carts, crowbars and mauls at the ready, devouring Baltimore bite by bite. . . . Right now they’re taking the downspouts from Westport’s public housing, and the metal handrails from Wilkens Avenue rowhouses. . . . On Lafayette Square, there’s a church that closed one Friday with copper flashing adorning the roof; come Sunday, it rained in the house of the Lord. [“MM”]

As the metaphor of the ants suggests, our reporter is more than a little in awe of the sheer energy and speed of the dismantling, even as he acknowledges the cannibalizing waste:

The metal men know that it’s late in the game — that the neighborhoods around the scrap yards have been stripped bare of the best stuff. Now, a good afternoon’s work can be dragging a pair of 250-pound radiators for 12 blocks in the hot summer sun. But still, that’s \$10. And \$10 will get you a vial of heroin and a cap of cocaine to go on top.

The ants are here; the picnic is us. [“MM”]

The story shifts to the repercussions located at other sites: the director of a nonprofit cooperative seeking to rehabilitate rental units for low-income residents surveys the devastation of a gutted shooting gallery beyond the point of restoration; the housing commission, seeking to quickly restore housing units by using bidless contracts, is encouraged to engage in corrupt deals and high prices; the company that buys the stolen metal is indifferent to the obvious illegality of its source; a police colonel, Ronald Daniel, lacks officers to police the problem. A later scene introduces a new character, Gary, not present at the initial scene of the scavenging, but also a metal man. He hovers around the edges of the story and chimes in whenever Simon needs a more articulate and moral voice, the voice of someone

18. Simon, “The Metal Men,” 3 Sept. 1995, *Baltimore Sun*, articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-09-03/features/1995246139_1_metal-carts-copper-shopping-cart; hereafter abbreviated “MM.”

who knows that the scavenging is wrong, who would like to earn a more legitimate dollar, but who, like the others, can't work for that "wait-for-Friday money" since he needs his daily fix.

A final scene in this six-section story has the original metal men Kenny, Tyrone, and a cohort getting high in the wrecked basement of what was once their neighborhood's after-hours club. But, again, even though there is no indication that Gary is getting high with them Simon chooses to insert him, as if he were present at the scene. The story concludes:

And Gary—he's a hard-core metal man only in the cold months, when business gets weak at the crab house where he's been working and they cut him back to a day or two a week. Come warmer weather and he's back in the kitchen, where the crab house pays cash every day—same as at the scales.

They all claim to pull carts because a job isn't available, because the jobs are gone and this is a way to make money from nothing. But in the same breath they admit they can't work for that wait-for-Friday money. These are desperate lives that can stand no structure, though that's not to say there's anything fleeting or temporal about the game itself. Metaling is now a fixed part of the city's drug culture, certain to endure for as long as the scales stay open and the dealers want cash for vials, for as long as some unguarded part of Baltimore can be pried apart.

The ants will see to it. Grant them, at least, some small due for creating wealth by destroying wealth, for going beyond the stereotype that says a dope fiend stands on a corner all day, scratching and nodding. Hard work doesn't scare a metal man.

"Sometimes," says Gary, "getting high is the toughest job there is."
["MM"]

Viewers of *The Wire* may recognize Lieutenant Cedric Daniels in the helpless police colonel Daniel; and they will certainly recognize in Gary more than a glimmer of one of the series' most beloved characters, Bubbles—metal man extraordinaire. With antlike perseverance, this sometime criminal informant, scavenger, and amateur philosopher will be found, half-way through the third season of the serial, converting his metals scavenging shopping cart to a quasi-legal traveling emporium to sell tee shirts and discarded cell phones in Hamsterdam; in the fourth season he will try to enroll his latest crime partner in Tilghman Middle School. By the end of the fifth season he will have been clean for a year and will be found selling the *Baltimore Sun* on the street while simultaneously serving as the subject of a journalistic profile in the very paper he sells. Bubbles is the fictional-

dramatic device that allows Simon to develop and expand the ethnographic observation of his two initial sites into a multisited system. His pathos, his enterprise, his addiction, his doomed relationships with younger comrades all grow out of the thick descriptions of Simon's previous ethnography. Yet no one figure of that reporting could do the emotional and ideological work of this one character. Bubbles is fiction, but he is an amalgam of two real people: a twenty-year criminal informant named Possum and Gary—the Gary whose factually unwarranted presence at the end of "The Metal Men" would end Simon's journalistic career.

Gary turns up in the *Baltimore Sun* article "The Metal Men" because he was then being exhaustively researched for *The Corner*. He is the son of a churchgoing family who came to Baltimore in the Great Migration and briefly prospered. Gary is not an overt victim of social circumstances. He does not lack education or moral upbringing. As a result, however, he is not street-hard, and the failed neighborhood he sticks to is the worst place he could possibly be. We meet Gary early in the book, getting high in the empty three-floor Victorian he once owned, recalling the day's earlier caper scavenging copper right out of the basement of a still-occupied house. Gary's metal scavenging escapades punctuate the series, for they embody what is left of his work ethic and optimism—an optimism that will fuel the creation of the even more effervescent Bubbles.

Gary is not Bubbles. He has too much education and a bit too much self-pity. He has an ex-wife, ex-house, and a girlfriend, while Bubbles has only a suspicious sister and his police contacts and only forms strong attachments to younger men whom he believes he can school. But, like Bubbles, Gary is intellectually and morally a cut above most of the people he hangs out with, and, like Bubbles, he comes to represent the soul of dopefiendom. His hapless goodness combined with his perennial need for a fix, his lesson drawing and predilection to philosophize, not to mention his metal capers or the very line describing the suburban place he must go for sentencing—"Leave It to Beaverland"—are enough for us to recognize the prototype. The difference, of course, is that though Gary can beautifully represent his own doomed world he cannot lead us into any other. He cannot pivot between cops and corners; he cannot put hats on the major dealers so the cops can ID them. Simon clearly loves Gary, but restrained by facts, he cannot make him either as lovable or as perceptive and insightful as Bubbles. He cannot use Gary, as he uses Bubbles, to silently witness the totality of what transpires on the corner, with cops, in schools, or as a media story himself. He cannot use Gary to witness the folly and the grandeur of the fictional experiment that was *Hamsterdam*. Neither, of course, can he choose to redeem Gary. Gary dies of an overdose just as Possum, the

other contributor to the character, dies of AIDS; but it is Simon's choice to portray Bubbles as one of the very few moderately hopeful stories in *The Wire*.

The point is not that Bubbles is a more sentimental and hopeful version of Gary and therefore that *The Wire*'s "artistic freedom" softens the social realism of its realist ethnography. Such an argument implies that only an unredeemably bleak picture of the multiple sites of the city are the true ones, as if this "happy ending" negates the realism of the rest. This would be a definition of realism that puts things as they are in irrevocable opposition to things as we might want them to be and that sees melodrama as diametrically opposed to realism.¹⁹ But Bubbles provides Simon not only with a bridge between multiple ethnographic sites but also with a bridge between fiction forms, exposing the realism in melodrama and the melodrama in realism.

Bubbles performs the fictional function of the typical Dickensian underclass character, which is not only to make us love him despite his foibles but to connect the different strata of serially unfolding multiple social worlds via his movement through them. Like Jo the crossing sweeper in *Bleak House*, who connects the disparate worlds of Lady Dedlock and Esther Summerson, Bubbles is a connector.²⁰ However, Simon's ethnographic imaginary does not permit him to simply use Bubbles to orchestrate the reunions of mothers and daughters or fathers and sons. Nor does it permit him, as Dickens might do, to drop this connector after he has served his purpose of uniting the more "central" middle-class characters. Bubbles is as central a character as one can be in a serial melodrama with some thirty-five crucially important characters developed over five primary sites. The dramatic form forged out of the multisited ethnographic imaginary of this sixty-hour work can best be described as serial melodrama with occasional overtones of tragedy. What differentiates this

19. Melodrama, rather, perpetually modernizes by taking up newer and more "real" social problems, recasting them in the form of melodramatic victims and villains whose qualities are often initially occulted then made clear. The serial melodrama of *The Wire* differs from ordinary melodrama in its focus on the villainy of institutions as much as personal villains. Thus, while its multisited ethnographic imaginary gives it a special breadth and depth and while occasionally tragic moments (deaths of Frank Sobotka and Stringer Bell) punctuate its narrative, the operant mode is melodrama. See Linda Williams, "Playing the Race Card": *Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, N.J., 2001).

20. In an interview with Simon, Nick Hornby first described the "hapless Bubbles" as Baltimore's answer to "Joe the Crossing Sweeper." By this he means "Jo" of *Bleak House*, who shows Lady Dedlock the haunts of her old flame Captain Hawdon, who also befriends Esther Summerson, and who, before dying himself, communicates smallpox to both Esther and her friend Charlie. See Hornby's interview with Simon, *The Believer* (Aug. 2007), www.believermag.com/issues/200708/?read=interview_simon

serial melodrama from most of what we see today on television is not so much that it is based on “real events”—after all, the drugs-are-allowed scenario of Hamsterdam is hardly a real event—but the very detailed multilayered knowledge that goes into the construction of the tale as a whole.

From Op-Ed Rant to Ethnographic Serial (Melo)Drama

“The Metal Men” is a late and decisive work in Simon’s career at *The Sun*. It begins as a story about the scandal of scavengers in the voice of an outraged but unquestionably classed and raced citizen (“The ants are here; the picnic is us”). Although the story of the ants is told with great sympathy, still there is no mistaking the white middle-class “us” upon whom those ants are feasting. Simon strains to tell the larger economic story of absent jobs and the need to fill this emptiness with a vocation of a sort. And it is precisely this larger economic situation—the complexity of the connections among metal men, the housing commission, cops, and metal dealers—coupled with the story’s obvious sympathy for the metal men themselves that caused his editors at *the Baltimore Sun* to kill it.²¹

To the *Baltimore Sun* editor John Carroll, Simon’s article was too similar to the work he was doing for *The Corner*, which probably means it had too much cultural interpretation. Simon refutes this, arguing that he did original reporting with mostly newfound sources. But it is obvious that the story grew out of the then-still-in-process *The Corner* and that the figure of Gary inhabits both. Simon’s other boss at *The Sun*, Bill Marimow, objected that the piece ennobled the thieves who were stripping the city of its infrastructure (see “S,” p. 27). Marimow would have preferred a simpler story about the scandal of the scavenger.

Simon is still angry and calls them “venal,” citing their tumescence at the very word *Pulitzer* (“S,” p. 27). The quarrel with his former bosses raises the question of what journalism should be; but it more importantly points to what *The Wire* would become. For Simon, newspapers should adopt a “broad sociological approach”; for Carroll and Marimow they should aim a “rifle shot” at individual stories and individual problems. Simon describes the rifle-shot approach as follows: “Surround a simple outrage, overreport it, claim credit for breaking it, make sure you find a villain, then claim you effected change as a result of your coverage. Do it in a five-part series, and make sure you get ‘the Baltimore Sun has learned’ in the second graph” (“S,” p. 26). At issue is how much you report only on the individual

21. Note the disagreement about this: Simon says editor John Carroll “spiked the story” whereas another source says it actually ran on the front of the Sunday magazine; the dispute is tied up with the turning down of another series on race Simon had proposed and Simon’s belief that his book reporting should have earned him more money and recognition (“S,” p. 29).

story—often necessarily reduced to the melodramatic story of villainy or victimization—or how much you explain the whole system that leads to the story. “The Metal Men” seeks to explain the system and is indeed more ambitious and complex than the usual expose-a-wrong rifle shot, but there is also no doubt where Simon’s sympathies lie: not with the police colonel, not with the housing commissioner, certainly not with the scrap metal companies, but with Gary as the eloquent voice behind the deeds we actually see Kenneth and Tyrone commit.²²

Simon sees himself on the side of a nuanced world with “real, complex human beings,” while Carroll and Marimow see themselves as performing a public service that cannot reach for the larger ethnographic complexities when they have a victim to champion or a wrong to expose (“S,” p. 27). Cast this way, the argument seems to be about Simon’s nuance and complexity versus the melodramatic black-and-white worldview of his editors. With the hindsight of the achievement of *The Wire* it is tempting to side with Simon against the Pulitzer-lust of the newspaper business and to place him, as his former editor John Carroll put it, “on the side of the angels” (“S,” p. 30). But this would be to succumb to the simplistic vilification of melodrama itself as precisely the story of good and evil that Simon claims to have renounced but cannot renounce if he is to tell a compelling serial story. Furthermore it would be to misunderstand the deeper value of the new kind of television, serial melodrama, that can juxtapose dramatic situations over time, allowing situations to ripen, characters to change, history to unfold. It is time—that extra time in 2007–8 that I had to watch television, the extra time that *The Wire* takes to develop a plot, to prepare the significance of a character and his or her place in an institution, the extra time that Simon had to unfold the story of Baltimore over five seasons and five years of narrative time—that enabled him, as Lorrie Moore puts it, to “transform a social type into a human being, demography into dramaturgy.”²³ With time it becomes possible, as Michaels puts it, for the series to be “about the world neoliberalism has actually produced rather than the world our literature pretends it has.”²⁴ With time, also, Simon would learn to stop writing op-ed pieces.

Simon was a tenacious reporter because he did not just want to get facts

22. Lanahan’s story on Simon’s quarrel with his bosses occasioned by the airing of *The Wire*’s fifth season on the media shows Lanahan struggling with the right or wrong of these two sides, unable to perform “rifle-shot journalism” himself. Simon is angry and, Lanahan suggests, even perhaps jealous that his brand of journalism was pushed out of the profession.

23. Lorrie Moore, “In the Life of *The Wire*,” review of *The Wire* by Simon, *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* ed. Tiffany Potter and C. W. Marshall, and “*The Wire*” by Alvarez et al., *New York Review of Books*, 14 Oct. 2010, p. 2.

24. Michaels, “Going Boom.”

and expose a simple outrage. He wanted to expose the larger institutional and systemic ones. In “The Metal Men” those outrages were not just the scavengers but the lack of work, the corrupt scrap dealers, an overwhelmed police department, a corrupt housing commission. We can appreciate how Simon strained against the limits of the *Baltimore Sun*, but we can also see how the short graph and the relatively short punchy story is the fundamental discipline of reporting Simon absorbed from journalism that would help him build the greater scope and institutional complexity of *The Wire*.

Still, Simon’s editors did have a point. You can lose your reader if you go off—as Simon often does go off in *Homicide* and *The Corner* and even in “The Metal Men”—into long sociological arguments about what’s wrong with the culture that produces dope fiends instead of citizens. You can lose your reader when an ethnographic story tips over into an overlong op-ed—or what can only be called the Simon rant (see “S,” p. 31).²⁵ And this is where we discover how Simon’s faults as a journalist were overcome by the new discipline of writing for a multisited dramatic serial.

In all Simon’s journalism—both the long and the short forms—the editorial comments are presented in his own white, middle-class, educated, impassioned voice—the kind of voice that can boom out with mixed admiration and outrage, “Behold the ants. . . . The picnic is us.” Given the extended length of a book like *The Corner*, this is a voice that can rage on about the futility of the “war on drugs” in an impassioned royal “we”:

We can’t stop it.

Not with all the lawyers, guns, and money in this world. Not with guilt or morality or righteous indignation. . . . No lasting victory in the war on drugs can be bought by doubling the number of beat cops or tripling the number of prison beds. . . . Down on Fayette Street, they know. . . . In the empty heart of our cities, the culture of drugs has created a wealth-generating structure so elemental and enduring that it can legitimately be called a social compact. . . . At Monroe and Fayette, and in drug markets in cities across the nation, lives without any obvious justification are given definition through a simple, self-sustaining capitalism. The corner has a place for them. . . . Touts, runners, lookouts, mules, stickup boys, stash stealers, enforcers, fiends, burn artists, police snitches—all are necessary in the world of the corner. . . . In this place only, they belong. In this place only, they know what they are, why they are, and what it is that they are sup-

25. Many of the ideas about the form of *The Wire* and the form of journalism are prompted by Christine Borden’s excellent unpublished paper “Cross Cutting in *The Wire*: The Journalist’s Editorial Comment.” I am deeply indebted to Borden’s insights.

posed to do. Here, they almost matter. . . . We want it to be about nothing more complicated than cash money and human greed, when at bottom, it's about a reason to believe. We want to think that it's chemical, that it's all about the addictive mind, when instead it has become about validation, about lost souls assuring themselves that a daily relevance can be found at the fine point of a disposable syringe. [C, pp. 57–58]

Eloquent, passionate, ironic, angry: this is the voice of David Simon in an “editorial” about Gary and his corner world that goes on for eighteen pages, turning into a history of the drug trade in Baltimore from the time of the heroin-using fringe hipsters of the late fifties through the cocaine revolution and into the early nineties when the mothers—once the bastions of the community—became fiends also.

This editorial voice speaks *on behalf* of the victims of a dysfunctional, drug-addled society, but it is not *of* them. Because it has done its ethnographic homework it feels entitled to speak as a royal “we” that we quickly recognize as distinctively that of Simon (and Burns). Other long argumentative essays include a beautiful set piece on “the quiet genius” of “the paper bag”—“a staple of ghetto diplomacy in all the major American cities.” The bag ostensibly disguised the public consumption of alcohol and made it possible for the government “to ignore the inevitable petty vices of urban living and concentrate instead on the essentials.” But since there is no equivalent of the paper bag in the war on drugs, our editorialist explains, there can be no “accommodation between the drug subculture and those policing it. . . . Rather than target the truly dangerous. . . . rather than accept the personal decision to use drugs as a given—to seek out a paper-bag-solution to the corner’s growing numbers—we tried to live by mass arrest” (C, pp. 158–60).

Other “editorials” treat the scandal and waste of prisons, the lack of real training for police, the economic failure of the American dream, the reason the schools, once “the way out for us, and our parents,” “cannot save us.” These public schools “that launched the immigrant masses out of the pushcart ghettos and into manicured suburbs hold a place of honor in the American mythology,” but not, this “editorial” goes on to tell us, in the American reality of West Baltimore (C, pp. 278, 277, 278). Yet another “editorial” offers an argumentative essay on teen pregnancy (“Accident is not at all the word for it” [C, p. 233]) while another compares the school system’s “joking the stats” to give students higher scores to the police department reclassifying crimes to make them seem less (see C, p. 283).

A final editorial represents the apotheosis of this impassioned white, middle-class, op-ed: what if “we” were in “their” shoes?

We’d persevere, wouldn’t we? . . . Come payday, we wouldn’t blow that minimum-wage check on Nikes, or Fila sweat suits, or Friday night movies at Harbor Park with the neighborhood girls. . . . We’ll head of to our college years shinning like a new dime, swearing never to set foot on West Fayette Street again. . . . We would rise above the corner. And when we tell ourselves such things, we unthinkly assume that we would be consigned to places like Fayette Street fully equipped, with all the graces and disciplines, talents and training that we now possess. . . . We would be saved, and as it always is in matters of salvation, we know this as a matter of perfect, pristine faith.

Why? The truth is plain:

We were not born to be niggers. [C, pp. 478–79]

Fans of *The Wire* will recognize in these op-ed rants many of the crucial themes of the series, as well as the genesis for many of its greatest dramatic actions: the futile “war on drugs” that will be repeatedly compared in the post-9/11 context to the equally futile “war on terror”; the deep embeddedness of drugs as the only viable source of income and the only reliable diversion; and the paper bag that Major Bunny Colvin will hold up in a police district meeting, calling it a “great moment of civic compromise.” Colvin’s speech lays the moral groundwork for his later Hamsterdam experiment to create the equivalent of a paper bag for drugs.²⁶ The failure of schools will find its greatest expression in the focus on Tilghman Middle School in season 4 when former police officer Roland “Prez” Pryzbylowski notes that the schools juke the stats just as his old police bosses did.²⁷ In the ethnographic journalism of *Homicide* and *The Corner*, the op-ed comes alive and ceases to be an angry white man’s rant.

We are relieved of Simon’s most impassioned prose because it has been rendered as drama, arising from the mouths of characters. In *The Wire* the op-ed transmutes into drama spread out over the course of the five seasons, and the point of view expressed in “we were not born to be niggers” is fortunately no longer necessary. “We” ceases to be “us” trying to understand “them.” What Simon discovers when he turns to the melodramatic serial is a way to let one site be the commentary on another. He no longer needs to pronounce in an editorial voice on the dysfunctions of any one system.

26. Simon, “All Due Respect,” dir. Steve Shill, 2004, *The Wire*, season 3, episode 2.

27. Simon, “Know Your Place,” dir. Alex Zakrzewski, 2006, *The Wire*, season 4, episode 9.

In the last scene of season 3 we find Bubbles and his latest protégé scavenging metal with their shopping cart amid the piled up ruins of Hamsterdam. The city has torn down the paper bag experiment where drugs were tolerated, and Major Colvin's police career is over. Bubbles teaches a new scavenging partner the value of aluminum that he pulls out of the rubble. He also gives advice: "you green [inexperienced]; I hope you listening because I'm trying to school you here." We catch Bubbles in a pattern of repetition, tutoring another younger man, excited about the possibilities of earning enough for a fix through this hustle. (He is also preparing us, thematically for the next season's shift to the new site of the school.)

Bubbles then pauses, leaves his partner and cart, and we discover Bunny Colvin, standing alone in civilian garb before the bulldozed ruins of his former experiment. Bubbles and Colvin silently contemplate the deserted scene. Finally Bubbles says to Colvin: "That's something huh . . . like someone took a big eraser and rubbed across it." Colvin, defeated, just looks at Bubbles. Bubbles continues, "but before, a dope fiend come down here, cop a little somethin'—ain't nary a soul hassle him. . . . They just let him be." Colvin, cautiously asks, "it was a good thing, huh?" Bubbles, equally cautious, unsure to whom he is speaking, backpedals, "I'm just sayin'," but as he walks away to join his partner and continue along with his shopping cart he explains, "you probably don't know, but it's rough out there baby; cops be banging on you; hoppers be messing with you." Colvin stands alone again before his failed experiment as Bubbles moves away, saying, "Yeah, thank you."²⁸

If Simon had still been writing journalism, this would be the place he would dilate upon the ruins of a noble social experiment. It would be the place where he would pity the poor dope fiend, condemn the narrow-minded city government, and expound upon the general lack of social justice. Instead, we only need this brief acknowledgment of the "good thing" that was Hamsterdam by both a police major and a peripatetic addict. But we should not let the understated nature of the scene fool us. This is one of those wonderful Dickensian coincidences when two characters we have grown to love and admire, coming from very different social worlds, coincide and understand one another. The ethnographic knowledge we have gleaned from what we have seen about each of their worlds says the rest.

This is a "recognition of virtue" that does not feel like old-fashioned

28. Simon, "Mission Accomplished," dir. Ernest Dickerson, 2004, *The Wire*, season 3, episode 12.

melodrama yet still performs its function. This is not an “excess” of theatrical suffering.²⁹ Nor is it rifle-shot journalism. This is drama between two characters, one of whom distrusts the other. In other words, and in *so many* words, *Hamsterdam* was a good thing. We understand that we have just seen the one person in the series qualified to pronounce upon the good that *was* *Hamsterdam* and thus the good that *is* ex-Major Colvin.

Simon may have quit the newspaper business, but the newspaper business did not quit him. In place of the five-paragraph rifle-shot story, he would eventually create a five-season cumulative serial whose primary outrage—a futile war on drugs—encompasses myriad others. These outrages are never simple; they are multiple, and they are compounded. In place of the credit to the *Baltimore Sun* the credit will go to HBO. In place of a ranting editorial voice of dissent, the dramatic voices of characters from across the spectrum of Baltimore life are dispersed in a multisited ethnographic imaginary where serial melodrama can show us, in a way sociologists and ethnographers cannot, how much “all the pieces matter.”

29. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, Conn., 1995), pp. 24–25, 43.