All in the Game: Mapping and making sense of the urban through sound, language, and codes on HBO's *The Wire*

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Abstract

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The Wire has been praised for its particular realist aesthetic style that is a radical departure from the traditional television police procedural and that takes many of its cues from the film noir. *The Wire*'s unique use, and functioning, of sound extends beyond the limits of visual representation which privileges audio detail. It relies on listening as its central thematic to propel the story while obscuring the gaze. The series explores the specificities of Baltimore's West Side vernacular and how its use complicates power, knowledge, and meaning while simultaneously remapping its urban spaces. It expertly demonstrates how complex vernacular, along with foreign languages, codes, dialects and accents, can complicate listening and understanding.

The Wire's representation of urban spaces and experiences allows for meaningful consideration of Edward Dimendberg's seminal work on the representation of the city in the film noir, as well as Michel Chion's work on film sound studies. Employing Dimendberg's framework, and considering Henri Lefebvre's concept of modern spatial practices, I analyze representations of *The Wire*'s urban spaces and experiences, taking into account the crucial role that sound and surveillance play in constituting its urban spaces and lived experiences. Employing Chion's work, I explore how *The Wire*'s use of sound demands the active perception of its complex acousmatic imaginary, in order to achieve a rich understanding about different spaces within the same city. *The Wire* invites active engagement in order to promote complex understanding about modern American urban.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

The Wire ran on HBO for five seasons between 2002 and 2008 and was a fresh new take on the popular urban police procedural genre. With its stylized realism, *The Wire* is distinctly different from your average television police drama. Rather, it employs recognizable elements of the genre to provide the framework for what is essentially a politically engaged morality play set in a modern day, second-tier, decaying American city: Baltimore, Maryland. Taking cues from the film noir, the police procedural, and urban crime films, *The Wire* constructs its street-level representation of the city and its people. It takes its gritty sense of aesthetic realism from the noir—that is at street-level, steeped in a certain authenticity that comes from its ethnographic influences and its roots in hard-boiled journalism. Moving away from the individual heroics and ideological uplift of the police procedural, *The Wire* provides an uncompromising view of urban lived experiences in post-industrial and ghettoized urban spaces.

Its unique approach grabbed the attention of critics and viewers alike. Unlike the *Law & Order* and *CSI* franchises that offered episodic closure and emphasized expert crime solving technologies, *The Wire* made detection obtuse. *The Wire*'s police force is underfunded and ineffective, the opposite of the Special Victims or Major Homicide units of the primetime police procedural. The show's use of language was unprecedented; it was like no other crime show that preceded it. Watching *The Wire,* the viewer is actively forced to try to decipher regional accents and over-lapping vernaculars along with the police unit, who are also unfamiliar with the language and numerical code strategies at work.

It becomes quickly apparent that narrative closure is not of primary concern on *The Wire*; rather its resistance to narrative closure is what makes it compelling. I was driven to watch three or four episodes in a sitting--a phenomenon that is quite common amongst *The Wire* fans. While the overarching surveillance narrative interested me, I was intrigued by the series' representation of a city and the people who inhabit its spaces and who were allowed to speak in their own voice. The difficulties presented by the disconnection between listening, spoken vernacular, and understanding are a key element that makes *The Wire* compelling storytelling, and what drives my fascination with it.

The Wire is interesting in its formal aesthetic, its style, and its narrative complexities that bridge a gap between what has been termed, "post-television" and film study, particularly because it occupies a place that is both and neither. It transcends the traditional limits of television, blurring the boundaries of genre, convention, and modes of practice. It also exhibits aspects taken from existing literary genres, and has roots in old-school journalism, drug/crime fiction, and the novel, lending what has been called a "Dickensian" aspect to its multi-narrative multi-character plot structure. Its novelistic pacing allows for 12-13 story arcs per season over the life of the series. The richly detailed street-level representation of the city provides a false sense of secure temporal and spatial coherence, as the city and its spaces undergo many shifts and changes over the course of five seasons.

David Simon, who is an author and former Baltimore Sun crime beat reporter, co-created *The Wire* with former Baltimore policeman and schoolteacher Ed Burns, and with author Richard Price. Notably, Simon also wrote the books *Homicide: Life on the Streets* and *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*. Both books were

produced for Television—*Homicide* ran on NBC from 1993-1999 and *The Corner* aired on HBO as a six-part mini-series in 2000. All three productions were shot on-location in Baltimore, featuring real-life Baltimoreans in many of the key and supporting roles. *The Wire* is notable for its predominantly African-American cast that reflects the actual demographics of the city. The City of Baltimore on *The Wire* is represented as multilayered and multivalent. All of these elements invite readings that make it a subject worthy of academic study, particularly looking at the show's dynamic representation of Baltimore, at the intersections of age, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. The prominence of Baltimore itself invites an investigation into the ways that the city functions as a representation of urban Bush-era America in relation to its systemic institutional failures. *The Wire* does this by providing critical readings of six interrelated institutions as well as via a complex heterotopia representing the city's diverse socio-economic and geo-political strata.

I am primarily interested in the ways in which *The Wire* employs sound as a technique to engage the audience. On *The Wire,* sound subverts any effective police surveillance. The criminals' strategic use of language and numerical codes, and their use of evolving communication technologies at the time, such as pagers and disposable cell phones, challenge traditional police surveillance methods. In this way, *The Wire* demands that the audience interpret codes and vernacular along with its characters (*Audio-Vision*, 33). *The Wire* privileges audio detail in order to obscure the visual gaze. Sound scholar Michel Chion has explained that, in the cinema, the audience is invited to look and explore everything visually present within the frame whereas the aural component of a film is not confined to the boundaries of the screen (Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 21). For Chion,

the "addition of realistic, diegetic sound imposes on a sequence a sense of real time" (*Audio-Vision*, 17). It is within its exhaustive linearity, which is devoid of flashbacks or flash-forwards that the temporal succession in action is not unlike everyday experiences. This linearity gives the program a sense of time that is chronological and sequential. *The Wire* establishes this secure temporal-spatial template upon which its highly stylized aesthetic is fleshed out. In essence, according to Chion, the realistic diegetic sounds of *The Wire* structure the stylized realism of its urban spaces—that is, its ability to represent authentic characters and various urban spaces, achieving a rather striking effect. *The Wire*'s complex use of sound invites the active perception of its acousmatic imaginary; that is the off-screen sounds that include unseen speakers within a diegetic space (*Film, A Sound Art*, 39). In order to explore *The Wire*'s representational strategies, I will situate my thesis within two areas of relevant critical and theoretical frameworks: Chion's work on film sound, and Edward Dimendberg's work on the film noir, modernity, and city spaces.

While decidedly not classic noir, *The Wire* lends itself to being analyzed through the framework of film noir because of its street-level representation, its thematic preoccupation with corruption and crime, and the violence that certain spaces succumb to. Additionally, its noir influence is seen in its focus on the everyday, in its writing, and its formal aesthetic. Noir often depicts a nightmarish urban nightscape of occluded spaces that are often resistant to the otherwise survey-able city. While voice-over narration and skyline-establishing shots pervade the film noir and police procedural, *The Wire* dispenses with these elements, replacing the single narrator voice-over with multiple diegetic narratives and substituting establishing skyline shots with the sounds of the city

at street-level, or rather "on-the-scene". These types of noirish urban representations lend *The Wire* its aesthetic and narrative preoccupations that reflect the marginalized spaces and the people that populate such spaces. While *The Wire* does not belong to the noir genre, Dimendberg's work on modernity and the city, in conjunction with sociologist Henri Lefebvre's concept of spatial practices, lends itself to a remapping of *The Wire*'s Baltimore. *The Wire* invites a critical reading of surveillance, urban spaces, and spatial practices in order to provide new understandings that help to provide a radical remapping of Baltimore.

    The Wire demands consistently engaged listening by its audience while at the same time highlighting the myriad difficulties that hinder understanding. There are precedents in film history for such explorations. Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) and Brian De Palma's *Blow Out* (1981) are two notable films that focused on obsessively decoding audio detail and deep misunderstanding, and *The Wire* certainly takes its cues from such films. Listening is pushed to the foreground. Much of *The Wire*'s spoken dialogue employs a distinct dialect, a complex vernacular, and codes in order to subvert dominant modes of social policing. The use of this stylized vernacular, attributed to Baltimore's West Side, actively complicates the panoptic gaze. Likewise, the prominent use of audio surveillance over the course of *The Wire*'s five seasons underscores listening as its central thematic. In season one, audio surveillance begins with a simple wiretap on a few payphones, located in the fictional Franklin Terrace low-income housing project in West Baltimore, but the investigation demands evolving surveillance equipment in order to keep up with new communication strategies, such as the use of disposable cell phones. *The Wire*'s implicit focus on the importance of

listening points the audience towards modes of understanding that extend beyond the comprehension of language and content and towards meaningful connections and mapping of marginalized communities.

Several journalists, critics, and academics have explored *The Wire* in terms of its modes of production, its socio-historical contextualization, and in terms of its genre and form, from film and television studies perspectives, as well as philosophical and sociological readings. Scholar Blake D. Ethridge explored *The Wire*'s complicated relationship with the City of Baltimore in the essay "Baltimore of *The Wire*: The Tragic Moralism of David Simon." Ethridge's two-fold assessment includes positioning *The Wire* as a modern day Greek tragedy, and explores its "tragic moralism" through character study (156-161). Ethridge also provides a historical contextualization of *The Wire* by focusing on the program's reception and relationship to the City of Baltimore. For Ethridge, *The Wire* concerns itself with representation of urban social problems and the provocation of its audience. However, the series does not articulate any solution as to what should replace the city's dysfunctional institutions nor does it suggest how these institutions could be radically altered (161). Ethridge's essay is included in the book *It's not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (2008) wherein academics Janet MacCabe, Avi Santo, and Brian Ott also position *The Wire* as "post-TV" by framing it within the scope of contemporary pay-television "adult" programming. McCabe explains that HBO aims to disturb the established rules of television production while, "voicing their determination to change television fiction and how it is made" (86). Author Brian D. Rose explores *The Wire* in the book *The Essential HBO Reader* (2008) describing how the program subverts the police drama's strategies by dispensing with the good vs. evil

dichotomy in order to more accurately reflect the multilayered realism of law and lawlessness and to represent what America has left behind, and at what cost (85).

In his essay "Across Racial Lines" in *Moving Image Source*, scholar Nelson George explores, how the white male creators of *The Wire* use plot as an excuse for what he calls a "multi-layered conversation" about race in the city. In *Sight and Sound*, critic Kent Jones attributes the shows realism to its actors and acting style, as well as its representation of urban spaces. Jones purports that "we're watching actual characters, rather than agglomerations of behavioral and fashion cues, walking through real places as opposed to vague approximations and responding to believable situations instead of artfully contrived set-ups" (para. 4). Critic Dan Kois notes in *Salon* that *The Wire* is compelling because it offers rich, deep characters, believable scenes, and innovative plots (para. 7). From a reception studies perspective, scholar Julian McDougall has analyzed the preferred readings of five professional groups that inform and circulate around the program as an "authentic" drama, by examining the ways that these different professional groups identified with *The Wire* and how it offers a window to the world.

Much of the existing literature on *The Wire* tackles issues of reception, apply a sociological perspective, deal with modes of production, and challenges the program's generic classification. While *The Wire*'s genre hybridity may demand reading from a genre studies perspective, I will focus on its audio and visual aesthetic, which invites both formal and theoretical analysis.

The Wire is a complex and compelling text that transgresses the boundaries of television form, narrative, and style. On one hand, *The Wire* blends genres, mixes categories, and questions the boundaries of film genre and television form. On the other

hand, *The Wire*'s transgresses the boundaries of its generic classification and pushes the limits television by its representations of the intersections of people and narratives within different urban spaces that constitute the city. One of the most valuable ways to understand *The Wire* is, as Simon has described it himself, as a Greek Tragedy. On *The Wire,* instead of Gods there are institutions at which the people are at the mercy of. Despite many parallel hierarchical power structures, everyone is powerless under the will of institutional corruption. No one is spared.

In *Critical Inquiry,* Professor Linda Williams defines ethnography 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" (210). Williams then argues that Simon's journalism can be described as ethnographic "from the very beginning" (210). Williams explains that multi-sited ethnography has expanded to "give greater breadth, depth, and scope to the discipline" and that, "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" (212). Multi-sited ethnography, for Williams, "maps a more complex thread of interconnected cultural processes of an evolving and related world system" (213). This idea of multi-sitedness is not unlike philosopher Fredric Jameson's description of *The Wire*'s world as whole through its complex representation of the city's micro-levels, or social strata. Likewise, for African-American studies scholar Paula J. Massood, such street-level representation along with their aural signifiers and the ever-present themes of futility, frustration, and lack of agency are what fleshes out *The Wire*'s Baltimore. As Jameson proposes, what is at stake on *The Wire* is a "whole society that must be opened

up to representation and tracked down, identified, explored, mapped like a new dimension or foreign culture" (362).

The Wire as multi-sited ethnographic imaginary employs interlocking stories in order to give "greater breadth, depth, and scope" through narrative fiction. Williams and Jameson put forth multiple points of entry that allow for a thorough exploration of *The Wire*'s city in order to map new and/or previously unknown, cultures and sub-cultures existing inhabiting the same microcosms. Undoubtedly, these various spaces, places, and sounds flesh out this mapping of *The Wire*'s "complex thread of interconnected cultural processes" and intersections of overlapping narratives within its complete world.

Examining *The Wire* as an ethnographic project of social and cognitive mapping favors the analysis of how *The Wire* effectively represents the City of Baltimore through its urban spaces that are constituted primarily through sound, codes, and language. Its innovative use of sound, and its raw representation of urban spaces and subject matter invites a critical investigation of the ways in which *The Wire* actively buttresses its particular realism. In terms of the city and film noir cycles, Dimendberg has explained that the police procedural tends to emphasize an "appropriation of true stories, collaboration with law enforcement agencies, location cinematography, and voice-of-god narration as elements of a transparent style" (66). Indeed, *The Wire* appropriates many true stories, in collaboration with the actual history of Baltimore's law enforcement, and provides multiple perspectives in its representations of different people who all live in the same city.

Casting also lends itself to *The Wire*'s realism. The series often cast local Baltimoreans in smaller roles, such as real-life former Drug Kingpin "Little Melvin"

Williams as the Deacon, and ex-convict Felicia "Snoop" Pearson in the role of Snoop, one of gangster Marlo Stanfield's soldiers. Likewise, the real Baltimore policeman Jay Landsman was cast as Dennis Mello, the Western District's administrative lieutenant, while actor Delaney Williams plays the character Detective Jay Landsman. This type of casting occurs throughout the series and its characters would not exist without Simon and Burns' direct knowledge of, and engagement with, actual Baltimore law enforcement history. *The Wire*'s main mode of realism occurs at this level of representation. It taps into Williams "ethnographic imaginary," locatable as much in its complex narrative, its linearity, and cohesive sense of space, as in the details of its casting, acting, mise-en-scène, and location cinematography. This "ethnographic imaginary" is supported by the ways that sound informs each scene, buttressing the impression of real inner-city life and of lived experiences of different urban spaces within the same city.

Dimendberg, borrowing from Lefebvre, proposes a study of the representation of the modern city in terms of four elements. These are: architectural forms such as skyscrapers and residential neighborhoods, spatial practices as in crowd movement and police surveillance, spaces of representation such as shots of a city's skyline, and representations of space that considers the urban core, and employ grids and maps to assess space (108). Lefebvre was interested in a conceptual triad that includes spatial practices, representational spaces, and representations of space. For Lefebvre, spatial practices are directly lived and ensured continuity and cohesion in terms of social spaces, and sometimes involve levels of performance (33). Lefebvre also considers representations of space as tied to the relations of production, arguing that the order imposed via these relations embodies complex symbolisms that may be coded,

clandestine, or of underground social life (33). By taking these modes of analysis into account, Dimendberg's purpose was to "recover occluded controversies and spaces" that he contends were omitted from conventional histories, or have been neglected and forgotten. He focuses on the film noir cycle and the "built environment of the United States during the period from 1939 to 1959" (Dimendberg, 9). I concur with Dimendberg that such film and certainly programs like *The Wire* can help us to recover such occluded controversies and spaces that can be conceptualized as underground or clandestine.

As I will be covering the entire five seasons in my thesis, it is prudent to provide a brief explanation of the show and its characters. A brief outline of each season and a description of its key characters in attached Appendix A. Each season introduces more characters resulting in more intersecting individual and group narratives, and the series expands to encompass more failing institutions such as the criminal justice system and the public education system. It also introduces ties to global crime through its story arc on international human trafficking and examines union corruption of the port system that emphasizes a system that deals with the local as well as the global.

Through its dynamic representation of Baltimore's heterotopia, *The Wire* fleshes out its city. The use of stylized local vernacular engages different modes of listening in the audience that is unmatched to any other television program either before or after it. I am specifically interested in the way *The Wire* makes connections that lead to an understanding of urban street culture in a way that disposes of any simple good/bad binary. In its novelistic approach and its long-form multi-narrative structure, the program uses language and sound to render each of the different spaces as represented over the course of the five seasons. The first chapter of this thesis expands on the film sound work

done by Chion in order to examine the use of different sound strategies in constructing different urban spaces that structure *The Wire*'s realism. The second chapter employs Dimendberg's work to explore the mapping of *The Wire*'s noirish urban spaces. The final chapter addresses language strategies and codes.

Building on a textual and formal analysis, I will examine how *The Wire* opens out its representation of post-9/11 urban America onto the city's institutions and depicts the impact of these institutions on the fates of the city's poor. This examination will be based on an exploration of how the use of sound, language, codes, and other signs effectively remap urban spaces and construct an unprecedented portrait of a city via its inhabitants and their daily, lived experiences. *The Wire*'s uncompromising view of sociopolitical themes, play with formal structure, and narrative complexity make it a richly detailed and specifically focused text. The ways that *The Wire* compels its audience are multi-faceted and, for this reason, it is set up for an exceptional number of readings from various practices, methodologies and theoretical approaches.

CHAPTER 1

SOUND STRATEGIES

Sound scholar Michel Chion has explored the ways that sound is structured and recorded in film, and has undertaken a thorough investigation of the voice and the place of speech in cinema. His groundwork has provided ample material to examine the sound strategies that are at work on *The Wire*. If for Chion "sound is all content or 'containable'," then a film's sound is not framed; it is contained. Sound, in effect, helps construct space by informing the visual frame, often heightening realism through sound rendering (*Film, A Sound Art*, 226-227). Chion has explained that there is no soundtrack, but rather there is "sound setting." Sound setting is a certain consistency of sounds heard, giving the impression that they all originate in the same given scenic space (*Film, A Sound Art,* 227). Sound setting aims to explain all heard sounds within narrative, diegetic space.

Scholar Randolph Jordan proposes that the work of analyzing film sound as an ecology "unfolds on precisely the point of inextricable relationship between definitively individual organisms, each of which is also separate from the environment to which it is connected" and so, the template of ecology works well for what he calls "the study of sound/image relationship in film" (26). For Jordan, sonic ecology aptly includes, "the interrelationships between *all* the elements of a film's soundtrack—the entire soundscape of the film" (26). The sounds that clearly emerge from *The Wire*'s soundscape, comprised of these sonic ecologies, are often the voices of the characters that inhabit the city's spaces. Yet, these voices are all too often muffled by the sounds of the city that drown them out. Here, *The Wire* lends its ear to these emerging voices. Similarly, David Kolber

explains sound ecologist Hildegard Westerkamp's concept of the soundwalk, describing how the sound of the city interferes with listening by "occupying all acoustic space" and points to the imbalance between the sound of a single voice against the roar of the city (41). No doubt *The Wire*'s city sounds pervade, occupying all acoustic space, purposefully interfering with intentioned speaking and listening.

The term "sonic ecology" functions well here in explaining the spaces and places represented on *The Wire*, given that the primary function of sonic ecology is to provide an authentic representation of a city via its neighborhoods and territories that are as much identified by their sounds as by their visual elements. It is well established that sound can evade and obscure the gaze as much as it can enhance it. Sound informs the frame, in effect, extending the gaze by including off-screen diegetic sounds, on-location sounds, and the rendering of additional layers of sound effects in post-production, along with the narrative's diegetic dialogue, in order to establish its realism. As sound theorist Andra McCartney states, in reference to the work of academic Edward Casey, if "places gather experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts," then it is arguable that *The Wire*'s places are in turn overloaded by, and ripe with, myriad histories, experiences, languages, and thoughts (179). Sound is a key tool for expressing these layers.

This chapter explores the ways that sound is used on *The Wire* to map the city and its spaces. I argue that *The Wire* goes beyond photographic likeness. From a visual standpoint, film noir provides the generic lens for approaching much of *The Wire*'s representation of urban spaces, their characters and their lived experiences. However, it is the sophisticated use of sound that distinguishes its street-level urban realism. Chion's theories provide a framework to demonstrate how sound fleshes out *The Wire*'s mapping

of spaces. It is this creative use of sound that anchors the gritty street-level portrait of the city and underscores the ambivalent nature of modernization and its characters.

Point-Of-Audition Sound Strategies and Realism

The use of sound helps create *The Wire*'s gritty urban representation by rendering its spaces as sonic ecologies through a sophisticated use of spatial point-of-audition ("POA") sound recording and its use of Elements of Audio Setting ("EAS"). Spatial POA sound refers to the correlation between visual distance and the perceived distance of the sound emitted that presumes "a unified ear and eye" between the camera's gaze, the distance between the camera and the subject, and the placement of the microphones (*Film, A Sound Art*, 295). The way that *The Wire* uses spatial POA actively engages the three listening modes that Chion refers to as causal (listening in order to gather information about its cause), semantic (referring to a code or language to interpret a message), and reduced listening (focusing on the traits of the sound itself, independent of cause or meaning) (*Audio-Vision*, 26-30). Chion also contends that, along with spatial POA, EAS can be an effective technique to create and define spaces through their specific and distinct touches (*Audio-Vision*, 55). For Chion, such techniques suggest a certain feeling of space and terrain (*Film, A Sound Art,* 239) and on *The Wire* the series expertly renders its urban spaces by invoking these techniques. This focus on the formal elements of *The Wire*'s sound further underscores its thematic preoccupation with listening and how *The Wire* engages with different modes of listening.

POA sound functions much like the point-of-view ("POV") shot, structured by the camera as 'with' a character in a given space. In a spatial sense, POA addresses both what and how one hears, as well as from what position in space. Subjective POA is

concerned with who is hearing and what hearing sounds like for that person from their position in relation to a sound source. For Chion, a 'realist', formal functioning of spatial POA refers to the correlation between visual distance and the perceived distance of the sound emitted that presumes that "unified ear and eye" (*Film, A Sound Art*, 295). In addition, the use of direct sound from location-shooting, and the strategic use of EAS in order to render different sonic ecologies, supports *The Wire*'s realism. The stark absence of musical scoring and limited use of non-diegetic sound further buttress this realism. Non-diegetic sound is replaced with sounds that are specific to a certain location, such as crowd noise or traffic, and underscore the authenticity of each space represented on *The Wire*. These formal strategies, along with spatial POA, create the sound ecologies of very specific urban spaces, effectively creating a rich and detailed representation of Baltimore: its time, places, experiences, and people. The culmination of this particular aesthetic is a complex pluralist perspective on North America's urban poor. This approach expresses the relationship of the urban poor to the post-industrial, post-suburbanization, second-tier city, and explores many otherwise invisible intersections of oppression, such as gender, sexuality, age, class, and race. All of these elements provoke critical investigation and are present in *The Wire*'s fatalistic examination of modern urban culture that is sutured by its meticulous sound editing and masterful execution.

On *The Wire,* major consideration is given to the authentic representation of sounds in different locations and spaces. For instance, there are birds and sparse traffic noise and a slightly audible echo in some of *The Wire*'s less populated outdoor locations, whereas indoor locations (such as in a nightclub) are constructed using loud diegetic music and bustling crowd noise. Spatial POA fixes its sound specifically to the location in which it

is heard, and from the precise location where it is being heard. Found and direct sounds recorded during location-shooting are included in the sound rendering process during post-production, and are represented in each individual sonic ecology along with a clear take of the dialogue—if there is any. In other words, *The Wire* avoids the use of subjective POA sound—that is, hearing what a particular character is hearing. Rather, it makes sophisticated use of spatial POA sound to help render its sonic ecologies. In turn, *The Wire* over-privileges what should or should not be heard, considering a space and its other sounds, in relation to the placement of the camera. A scene's multiple POAs help to situate the audience within the different narrative spaces that are being represented, further supporting *The Wire*'s sophisticated realist aesthetic. These sound strategies support the over-arching theme of obfuscated listening while simultaneously activating, in the audience, the different modes of listening proposed by Chion. This engagement actively foregrounds the slipperiness of spoken language, creating a unique representation of the modern American city, a polyglot comprised of many different groups within a still heavily segregated city. As *The Wire* expands its urban spaces, it also incorporates various dialects and accents, making for a disconnected and cacophonous urban experience.

In a typical single protagonist story arc, spatial POA privileges the perspective of the protagonist, revealing the majority of information through the parallel narrative experience of the main character without necessarily going inside his head. With its multi-narrative, multi-character network structure, no one particular character's perspective is privileged on *The Wire*. This open network is reinforced formally by avoiding excessive shot reverse-shot and over-the-shoulder editing patterns, instead

favoring longer-takes with camera movement (including pans, cranes, dolly and tracking shots, handheld camera, and steadicam) in order to show many characters in one shot, each of whom are embodied within specific urban spaces. For example, in the opening scene of one episode, there is an audible, persistent, dripping noise. The camera, in a long shot, dollies down to street-level. As the camera cuts to a low-angle medium-close up shot of a dark alley, the sound of water gets louder. Then there is another cut that reveals the source of the dripping sound, an eavestrough from which water is dripping into the alleyway. The water dripping out of an eavestrough is now audibly louder than before. The closer the sound source is to the camera, the louder the sound. While water is the most prominent sound, there is also the faint sound of someone whistling, heard from a distance. As the camera cuts to a medium close- up on vigilante gangster Omar Little, the whistling, likewise, becomes louder and the audiences' ear and eye are unified, identifying the sound source of the whistling as Omar. This places the audience in the same diegetic space as Omar, without overtly identifying with his particular perspective. Rather, the audience is situated within the narrative space and time experiencing Omar's presence, and what that sounds like. For the most part, when Omar shows up on the scene (in any scene), there is a sense of fear and paranoia sending everyone to scatter or hide indoors with the warning, "Omar's coming!" Whenever Omar is heard whistling the children's song "The Farmer in the Dell," his whistling takes over as the primary sound in a space that was previously densely populated, lively, and loud, now emptied and with a silence that accompanies Omar's whistling, the sound of his shoes, and, in this sequence, the drip of a drain.

On *The Wire*, spatial POA is most clearly present in any scene wherein the audience is "with" a pair of undercover police officers who watch and photograph people under criminal investigation. However, the surveying officers cannot hear what they can see in terms of what would be reasonably audible within that space. For instance, they can see the dealers but they cannot hear their voices from their surveillance location that is removed from the scene being surveyed. The Baltimore police detectives' work provides only visual identification as proof of who is talking on the monitored payphones, and when. This is a clear example of spatial POA that is represented through the logical absence of the sound of a visually observable, but far-away conversation. There are countless scenes wherein some of the police officers, who are building a case against the Barksdale criminal drug organization, are doing this type of tedious surveillance such as watching certain payphones with binoculars, taking photos with telephoto lenses, and keeping in communication with the unit's headquarters via police radio. At headquarters Officers Lester Freamon ("Lester"), Caroline Massey ("Caroline"), and Roland Pryzbelewski ("Pryz") painstakingly listen to everything coming off the wiretap of these specific payphones. Early on in the first season, Lester lays out the ground rules for audio wiretap surveillance whereby, according to the laws governing police surveillance, every incoming call must be marked "pertinent" or "non-pertinent". A call must contain pertinent information within the first fifteen seconds of conversation in order to be justifiable as evidence. Such a rule poses many problems for the unit, who are forced to be effective and efficient listeners in order to decipher if a call will contain pertinent information. Lester explains how "all the pieces matter," a motto that becomes a maxim through its repetition by different characters in various episodes. Understanding that all

the pieces matter requires close monitoring of the wiretaps. He explains that even though there is a wiretap on the payphones, nothing can be used in the case unless one of the targets is confirmed to be on the phone, and thus the implicit need for visual identification. Visual surveillance is paramount to the Barksdale case, whereby listening to telephone conversations, tracking, and tracing pager numbers and deciphering codes must ultimately connect voices to names and faces.

The Wire tends to stick with this formal use of spatial POA, generally avoiding the stylistic proclivities of subjective POA. Breaking with this convention would potentially rupture its logic and when it does occur there is a distinct rupture in the series' aesthetic. As Chion has argued, "nothing works better to plug us into the ears of a given character than making us share in her or his temporary difficulty in understanding an audio signal addressed to him or her" (*Film, A Sound Art*, 295). In other words, subjective POA concerns itself with what a particular character is hearing at a given moment in the story. On *The Wire,* there is a focus on what particular characters hear together within different spaces. Sounds belong to the spaces in which they are heard. Each sound is clear in relation to the perceived distance between the eyes and ears of its characters in a space, and sound is not distorted in the way that would help define sound as subjective. Subjective POA operates similar to how the subjective POV shot functions, and is often coupled with a close-up shot and hand-held camera work simultaneous to certain sounds that are associated as being heard, subjectively, by the character. Subjective POA compromises *The Wire*'s aesthetic by countering its otherwise standard use of spatial POA. Subjective POA tends to be represented by "aberrant or distorted sound perceptions" and is attributed to the perception of a character in a state of crisis

(*Film, A Sound Art*, 297). In this way, subjective POA structures itself around what a specific character is hearing at a precise moment, and usually marks itself through distortion and/or suppression of ambient sound that suggests being inside a character's 'mind,' and experiencing what they are going through. Unlike the subjective use of POA, spatial POA works to situate the audience as internal auditors within a certain space, while avoiding over-identifying with any one protagonist.

There is, however, one striking instance of subjective POA that occurs near the end of the second season involving Ziggy Sobotka, the incompetent son of Frank Sobotka (the Baltimore dock's union leader of the longshoreman "Stevedores"). After a season of lewd and outlandish behavior—exposing himself in public on a regular basis, wasting money on extravagant purchases, burning money, and fatally poisoning his pet duck by feeding it excessive amounts of alcohol—Ziggy has a mental breakdown. In this scene, the sounds of the scene shrink down to Ziggy's subjective experience of an altered state of mind represented through the dropping out of ambient sounds giving way to this aberrant noise that is understood as being in Ziggy's mind. Visually, this is done with a shaky handheld camera holding Ziggy in a close-up, circling dizzily around him, suggesting Ziggy's subjective experience. For Chion, "it is the visual representation of a character in close-up that, in simultaneous association with the hearing sound, identifies that sound as being heard by the character shown" (*Audio-Vision*, 91). In this scene, the sound departs from its standard realist aesthetic that relies on direct sounds such as light traffic heard within the diegetic space, on location, and minor EAS in rendering.

This is a very interesting moment because *The Wire* unabashedly does a formal about face, rubbing up against its own realism. There is no other single pronounced use

of subjective POA across the sixty hours and five seasons. This shift from spatial POA to subjective POA functions so well in this scene because Ziggy is a terribly unsympathetic character, a modern day Icarus, connecting once more to *The Wire*'s Greek tragedy framework. If the audience ever has the opportunity to identify with Ziggy it is at the precise moment of his downfall when, albeit too late, he becomes cast as the tragic prodigal son. As this is the only example of the subjective POA throughout the entire series, it also becomes clear to anyone invested in over identifying with the show's white male characters, which are cast as the protagonist in noir and police procedurals, that *The Wire* deliberately chooses one of its least likeable. The moment where Ziggy's subjectivity is embodied through the combination of POV and POA also calls into question how audiences align with certain characters. This also serves to highlight the way that audiences are so often led to identify with any number of white male protagonists who inhabit most of North America's screen-time by overrepresentation (at the level of casting as well as writing), and through these formal devices. In this sense, where the white male protagonist in the typical film noir would be read as the hero of the story, Ziggy is everything but.

EAS and Sound Rendering of *The Wire*'s Sonic Ecologies

While *The Wire* deals with the acousmatic voice throughout the series, there are far too numerous examples of off-screen, diegetic, unseen voices to note given that audio surveillance is one of *The Wire*'s central motifs. Chion specifically deals with urban film and their sonic ecologies explaining that the "sound of a siren or horn does more than evoke its source, it allows our ear to feel the urban landscape" (*Film, A Sound Art*, 242). Using this logic, it is prudent to include off-screen voices of children and crowd chatter

as EAS to help render neighborhoods and parks as sonically different from the off-screen voices of particular characters that inhabit other urban spaces who are connected to the on-screen action by mediated audio technologies, usually the telephone. Chion asserts that it is acousmatic voices, such as off-screen children heard in a playground, or more specifically the street-level drug dealers known as "hoppers" whose continuous and persistent hawking of their wares that, "brings into simultaneous coexistence, through continuous sound, unity of space" (*Film, A Sound Art*, 169).

As sound expresses the city, *The Wire*'s sounds suggest the feeling of a specific, chronological and straightforward linear space, terrain, and time (*Film, A Sound Art*, 239). For Chion, sound rendering means, among other things, that "film provides only a summary sensory approximation of perceptions that are in reality much more complex and intertwined, it is not enough merely to film and sound-record an event if you want to convey the event's impact and even its very appearance" (*Film, A Sound Art*, 237). In the rendering of a sonic ecology, EAS help create and define spaces through specific and distinct touches (*Audio-Vision*, 55). Typical sounds employed on *The Wire* to render different sonic ecologies include helicopters, distant dogs barking, car alarms, sirens, light traffic and, often, crowd noise. Where birds chirping would be present in a park or along the docks, it is replaced by the persistent sound of helicopters patrolling the airspace over the West Side ghetto. The net effect of these kinds of sounds help construct different spaces through contrast or by comparison, as well as by pointing towards the reading of places as different or similar. For example, many of *The Wire*'s street corners share similar sounds, such as traffic, diegetic music, and crowd noise, allowing the audience to understand such spaces are located inside the city's ghettos. These congested

spaces are isolated from other city spaces, and sounds are trapped within their particular neighborhoods. The opposite occurs when *The Wire* represents non-urban spaces. City sounds are replaced by sounds of the county, which are slower and quieter. In this way, the audience is forced to reconcile city spaces as predominantly chaotic and congested.

Crickets chirping are a standard, even clichéd, EAS that is used for rendering the space of a Southern summer night. *The Wire* plays with the cricket trope, making crickets unfamiliar by setting the sounds of West Baltimore's nights apart from the countryside. The sound of crickets is certainly recognizable to the audience, but is made strange through dialogue in a few different scenes during the first season. There is a brief scene where the young hopper, Wallace, is being driven to his grandmother's house out in the county as part of seriously deficient "witness protection" program. Wallace asks Lt. Daniels, "What's that? That noise?" referring to the persistently loud chirping, to which Daniels answers, amazed, "Crickets." A few episodes later, Wallace tells his fellow hopper Poot over the telephone, "Crickets louder than a motherfucker. Can't sleep." Later, hoppers Poot and Bodie hear crickets and comment on them as being distinctly different from the sounds of night in the city. The absence of crickets at night in the city may not be noticed until their presence is signaled through contrast, and supported through dialogue, as particular to different locales (and also used for humour).

During the third season many of the hoppers are picked up by police and taken out into the county at night, where they are dropped off with instructions explaining which star is the North Star and to "walk the other way" in order to get back to the city. The hoppers are left in the quiet woods, absent of any city sounds, marked instead by the pervasive sound of crickets in the night. It is interesting that the only time that the

crickets are present is in the scenes where the hoppers have been physically removed from their corners and taken into the country. As a result, the hoppers are disoriented. The lack of city sounds, that may otherwise help orientate the dealers within familiar spaces, renders them vulnerable. They are vulnerable when they are removed from the familiarity of their normal habitat.

During the second season, Bodie and fellow Barksdale soldier Shamrock drive from Baltimore to Philadelphia. As they drive, the Baltimore radio begins to go static as they travel further away. The static is completely foreign to Bodie, who assumes the radio is broken. Shamrock chides Bodie, realizing that Bodie has never been outside of Baltimore before and therefore has no idea that radio station signals only travel so far or even that different cities have their own radio stations. Bodie's naïveté in this situation renders him rather provincial outside of his comfort zone of West Baltimore. When the police round up the hoppers, their removal is an exertion of power by the police that directly relates to power and geography and sets up the urban/pastoral dichotomy, once more using sound in particular to define different spaces and places. The crickets' absence is thus specific to the inner city—specifically Baltimore's ghettos. Helicopters mark the city and crickets mark the country. For Fredric Jameson, on *The Wire* "nobody knows that other landscapes, other cities, exist: Baltimore is a complete world in itself; it is not a closed world but merely conveys the conviction that nothing exists outside it." (369). Furthermore, "even nature (and the shoreline) does not exist" (Jameson, 369).

During the third season of *The Wire*, the Hamsterdam area provides some excellent examples of how a specific sonic ecology is rendered through EAS and by engaging the acousmatic imaginary. Hamsterdam is the name given to three "free zones" in

Baltimore's Western district that Major Bunny Colvin ("Bunny") sets up as an experiment to help reduce drug related violent crimes. The first time that Bunny is shown in one of the desolate areas, the camera tracks in a long shot across the width of a deserted alley near an abandoned warehouse, looking down the alley at Bunny and Deputy Denis Mello. There is an abundance of weeds and overgrowth and the area is very quiet. The EAS used here are simply that of a distant train and some minimal bird chirping. The second zone is an abandoned low-rise housing project that is boarded up and slated for demolition. Bunny is shown in a low-angle, long shot. The only audible EAS are distant dogs barking and again minimal bird chirping. In a long-shot, Bunny and Denis walk away from the camera towards a block of boarded up row houses. As Bunny and Denis stop and look around, birds are audible, but other than some distant sirens, there is an absence of typical street sounds that are present in other urban spaces. This area, and the other two abandoned zones, *sound* deserted.

The quiet of these desolate urban areas is rendered in stark contrast to what the area transforms into in the middle of the third season. In one scene, at night with minimal light, the junkie/criminal informant Bubbles is held in a medium close-up as he pushes his T-shirt cart through the now bustling areas of Hamsterdam. A cut to a long shot reveals many silhouetted figures and some vehicular traffic. Much use is being made here of *noir*'s predisposition to play with darkness, shadows, and fog. Very little visual information is being transmitted to the audience, which fills in the blanks using the audio rendering of Hamsterdam's sonic ecology. The relatively sparse visual detail mixed with an overloaded acousmatic imaginary rendering of Hamsterdam's frenzied sonic ecology is what constructs this urban nightmarish dystopia. What is present through

Hamsterdam's sonic ecology is a very specific sense of the violence and degradation that the city's most marginalized residents are subjected to. Sound here is uncontainable; the obscured gaze of the camera is sublimated to the soundscape. The sonic ecology is now in a frenzy with wild crowd noise, yelling and shouting, glass breaking on cement, heavy objects crashing to the ground, bottles clinking, car alarms, dogs barking, loud music from various car stereos and boom boxes, and the dealers plying their trade. Familiar sounds are now masked by other more prominent, louder noises causing disorientation in its characters and its audience. The sound of one stereo blasting on a ghetto corner is lost amidst the cacophony of many stereos and a sea of shouting and traffic. Whether by its sparseness or by its overloaded rendering, the way that sounds compete to define a space on *The Wire* remain the same. Through all five seasons, *The Wire* is concerned with representing the authenticity of each space and employs sound rendering to flesh out its various locations.

Near the end of the third season, Bunny brings Councilman Tommy Carcetti ("Carcetti") for a walk through Hamsterdam, alone, during the day. Bunny tells Carcetti, "Let me show you the ugly. Now, what you're going to see isn't pretty but it's safe," framing what Tommy will see. Like Bubbles, Carcetti is held in a medium close-up as he takes in Hamsterdam. Once more, the acousmatic imaginary is overloaded with babies crying and loud, visceral crowd noise, shouting, fighting, sirens, and the ubiquitous street drugs "WMD," "Death Row," and "Pandemic" being touted. The consistent touting not only helps to render the sonic ecology, it also helps to underscore *The Wire*'s fatalistic view by the persistent repetition of the names of drugs that are fatal in their own right, with package names that evoke certain death. The different names evoke a fatalistic irony

in that each one references threats to humanity, all too big to comprehend, such as a real pandemic or actual "weapons of mass destruction". In these ways, *The Wire* effectively constructs a richly detailed urban space through its sonic ecology without having to rely on too many reverse, or establishing, shots. Where the eye is denied visual information, the ear works to fill in the gaps. This contributes to the series' visual aesthetic, which relies on a single camera set-up, location shooting, lots of moving camera, and what tend to be longer takes[1].

The Wire also engages acousmatic imaginary in other ways besides the wiretap or off-screen, un-seen, acousmatic voices, and EAS. The program offers dozens of examples of what Chion terms "telephemes". Telephemes simply refer to the representation of telephones and the sound of different telephone conversations. These acousmatic intrusions leave ample room for misinterpretation, due to not knowing the source of a voice for the first time. Chion has identified seven modes of telephemes, and *The Wire* actively employs several of them. These are most commonly recognizable in the scenes where the police wiretap "hears" a phone call without seeing the source of the voice(s) (*Film, A Sound Art*, 366-371). There are multiple variations of this situation, simultaneously revealing and obscuring the identity of voices being listened to. Various combinations can be described as cross-cutting combined with sound editing so that the audience sees and hears both sides of a telephone call, sees one side of the call but hears both ends, or hears one side of the call but is allowed to see both, and so on. It is quite common that the audience hears both sides of a phone-call, broadcast from the police

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[1] There is a substantial amount of cross-editing going on at all times; there are really no "long takes". Rather, some scenes last only a matter of seconds and aesthetically run counter to its version of televisual neo-realist aesthetic. These brief scenes do not serve a narrative function; they simply show daily life in the city.

headquarters, but sees neither the speaker nor the intended listener. There are also many scenes in which the character is making or taking a call not associated with the wiretap in which the audience only sees and hears the one side of the telephone call. At other times, the sound editing allows for the other end of the call to be just barely audible yet unintelligible. Such scenarios are primarily depicted as mundane daily telephone calls as opposed to the coded speech and acousmatic voices dealing directly with the ongoing police investigation. For example, a personal phone call that Detective Jimmy McNulty ("McNulty") might hear or be engaged in does not offer the audience the other side of the call, and a monitored incoming call may deny any visual identification relying solely on the ear for identification. This is interesting because it helps set up a dichotomy between what kind of listening, detection, and deciphering that the audience is engaged in. It actively maps out what the audience is supposed to know and hear, and what they are not supposed to know and hear.

"Worldizing" *The Wire*'s Baltimore

Another type of sound strategy that helps to define a physical location is what sound designer Walter Murch calls "worldizing" (Jordan, 28). Worldizing is the term Murch coined to describe what happened when he recorded sounds in various different spaces represented during a given sequence, which he could then fluctuate in post-production sound editing. These sounds would be played back through a speaker in real-world situations. For instance, Murch has explained that in *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973), he recorded the sound of a car stereo playing a certain song or Wolfman Jack hosting his ubiquitous radio show, heard from within different cars and locations on the street. In such a sequence, sound might fluctuate with editing first from outside a car with

the window rolled up, then outside the car with the windows rolled down, then from within an adjacent car with windows down or up, from the street as the car passes by, and so on. Control over auditory extension (the limits of sounds within a space) and spatial signature (the way that sounds are effected in certain spaces) were used both to "ground the soundscape within the diegetic world" and to transcend that world by providing "access to realms existing only in cinematic representation" (Jordan, 28).

Worldizing helps us to understand *The Wire*'s diegetic world. One example of worldizing occurs when Carcetti is speaking at a televised mayoral debate. At first the audience listens to the debate as it takes place on location and then moves through a series of edits while Carcetti is shown (and heard) simultaneously on various different television sets, in different locations. For instance, after a shot from within the debate room there is a cut to former Barksdale soldier/ex-con Dennis "Cutty" Wise watching television in bed. He immediately changes the channel from the debate in favor of football. Another cut goes to a long-shot in the police department of several officers in the homicide unit standing around watching the debate on television. A third cut then takes the audience to middle-schooler Naymond Bryce who switches from the televised debate to play a videogame. Each of these locations sound different, and thus the way that Carcetti's speech sounds is faithful to each of the different sonic ecologies. Carcetti's speech effectively constitutes *The Wire*'s spatial-temporal linearity by linking different characters within different sonic ecologies through their common act of listening at the same time.

In this series of shots, theorist Patrick Jagoda describes how "plotting is subordinated to the detailed mapping of Baltimore's intersecting social and political

worlds" (189-190). Jagoda is suggesting that such sequences, which occur regularly, bind the multiple overlapping narratives by connecting different people and spaces within the City of Baltimore. While I agree that such montage-based sequences actively map Baltimore through its characters and their various different spaces, this sequence is also a rich example of worldizing as a sound technique. The function of worldizing underscores connections among different characters within the same time period or moment effectively remapping Baltimore according to groups of people. If *The Wire* can be understood through its representation of various groups of people and the spaces they inhabit, then the good/bad binary that occupies an important place in the noir and police procedurals can be dispelled.

Another way that worldizing is prominent on *The Wire* is during any car chase scene in which music is playing on a stereo. Music fluctuates appropriately along with editing, from inside the car in which the music is playing, to the street as the car drives past with its windows down, and to other cars involved in the chase who may or may not be listening for the stereo sounds to help locate the car that they are in pursuit of. Worldizing enriches the audiences' understanding of how characters navigate their relationships between different spaces, revealing a powerful narrative theme of ecological engagement (Jordan, 28). Not only does worldizing reveal narrative themes of engagement, it reveals and enables engagement by the audience. Worldizing engages spatial POA in that it creates a sense of place by establishing sonic ecologies though the use of locatable sound sources. These sound sources are movable, and actively map and remap certain urban places by their movement in and around these spaces. For instance, employing spatial POA, kingpin Avon Barksdale's ("Avon") car stereo structures space in relation to its

volume and the distance between the camera and the mobile sound source. If Avon's car is in a chase, then the sound of the car's stereo effectively remaps the space through its movement in and around a certain area. The lack of non-diegetic sound helps suture *The Wire*'s realism, providing access to its diegetic world by rendering different urban spaces through worldizing—the use of diegetic music, POA sound recording strategies, and by complex rendering of EAS.

The Wire's lack of musical scoring is another way in which it establishes its sophisticated aesthetic. There are a few musical montages throughout the entire series, but otherwise there is a complete lack of non-diegetic music. The musical montages that occur at the end of each season stress the passage of time by focusing on the daily tedium of its multiple characters as time wears on and nothing seems to change. In the essay, "Invisible City: The Wire: the cycles of urban life in television's most novelistic show," critic Dana Polan discusses the lyrical montages at the end of each season of *The Wire* and in particular, the series' finale montage. Polan notes that the final montage is not anchored to McNulty's perspective—McNulty is not seeing the images in memory or through time passing—rather, what the images reveal is the "cyclical nature of life in the city, where the new is continually replacing the old" (2) He further points to the absence of a central perspective to indicate a sense of self-awareness; instead the montage suggests the urban landscape as a complex knit fabric. For Polan, *The Wire* moves through cycles of substitution wherein one dealer replaces another—such as when Marlo replaces Avon (3). The focus on the passage of time during these musical montages reinforces *The Wire*'s cyclical rhythm.

Conclusion

 The Wire's realism depends heavily on location sound recording, point-of-audition and post-production sound rendering. These techniques establish its authentic sonic ecologies through complex acousmatic imaginary that structures *The Wire*'s time and space. Employing several complex sound strategies, *The Wire* utilizes many of sound's properties. Sound on *The Wire* serves to renders ecologies, engages listening, and establishes locations. *The Wire* connects its characters primarily through geography and less so on narrative connections. *The Wire*'s connections are thus less causal and more causal. All this, in turn, is instrumental in mapping the city and its spaces. The end result is television programming that engages the audience and challenges them to examine the themes portrayed over the course of its five seasons. On a larger scale, the use of these techniques and strategies demonstrates how sound can be utilized to create compelling programming.

CHAPTER 2

REPRESENTING THE URBAN

This chapter focuses on *The Wire*'s representation of the modern city and its urban spaces. While *The Wire* is not classic film noir per se, scholar Edward Dimendberg's framework for understanding the city is useful for reimagining Baltimore through its lived spaces and the people who inhabit them, including both those who perpetrate violence and those who succumb to it. *The Wire* recognizably borrows from myriad literary, cinematic and televisual traditions. In particular, its innovative use of sound and its representation of urban spaces and subject matter invite critical investigation of the ways in which it actively takes its cues from earlier modes of film noir. In *Senses of Cinema*, scholar Eloise Ross examines Dimendberg's work on the city and noir in her essay "Sounds from the City". She explores Dimendberg's work on the noir dealing specifically with street-level representations of the city and how it captures the lives and spatial practices of its urban occupants (para. 23). For Ross, when films place the citizen and the criminal together in the street, it is understood that "crime is equally important to the constitution, and creates the sense of all-pervasive crime in the everyday city" (para. 23). In scenes where the frame structures the audience's gaze, sound actively extends the narrative space beyond the frame. In fact, *The Wire*'s urban spaces and its constituents may be mapped employing Dimendberg's work on film noir cycles and the city as discussed in *Film Noir and Spaces of Modernity*. As mentioned before, *The Wire* is not classic film noir, as it does not take up many of the most recognizable tropes of noir, such as the femme fatale, or the use of stylized camera work, voice-over narration and dramatic low-key lighting.

As Dimendberg has explained, the noir's subsidiary genre the police procedural tends to emphasize an "appropriation of true stories, collaboration with law enforcement agencies, location cinematography […] as elements of a transparent style" (66). These qualities can be found in *The Wire*'s realism, which is grounded on appropriating true stories and exploring collaboration with law enforcement. This is quite understandable as *The Wire* creator David Simon wrote the Baltimore Sun's "Police Beat" for several years, and co-creator Ed Burns is a former Baltimore police officer. Additionally, *The Wire*'s linearity and cohesive sense of space, the details of its mise-en-scène, and the ways in which sound informs the scene gives an impression of authentic inner-city life. Its location cinematography allows for the representation of lived experiences, providing access to multiple perspectives. By providing these multiple perspectives, *The Wire* sets itself up as an exceptionally diverse representation of vastly different people who live in the same city. Its main mode of representation occurs at the street-level, affording a comprehensive view of the layered narratives that are situated within various urban spaces. The street-level representation, overlapping narratives, and complexly rendered spaces tap into what Professor Linda Williams refers to as the "ethnographic imaginary" which fleshes out multiple ethnographic sites through overlapping fictional narratives with multiple characters (213).

When Dimendberg examined noir cycles, modernity and the city, he borrowed from Lefebvre's proposal to study the representation of the modern city in terms of its architectural forms of skyscrapers and residential neighborhoods. Lefebvre contended that spatial practices precede and order space (33). Lefebvre considered spatial practices to be the lived experiences of people. He examined spatial practices in terms of spaces of

representation and representations of space (108). He also conceptualized representations of space to refer to maps, grids, and blueprints that may structure and define what space is. Additionally, he defined representational spaces as being tied to the relations of production, and that the order imposed via these relations embody complex symbolisms that may include signs that are coded, clandestine, or emanate from underground social life (33). Lefebvre was interested in a conceptual triad that included spatial practices that are directly lived and ensure continuity and cohesion in terms of social spaces, and sometimes involve levels of performance (33).

Likewise, Chion's theories lend themselves to this mapping because, at the street-level, *The Wire*'s representation of urban space is filled in with carefully rendered diegetic, acousmatic sound. Within this framework, and in particular surveillance, functions as a prominent and reoccurring spatial practice dealing with listening and making meaning from sounds and voices not intended to be heard.

By taking these modes of analysis into account, Dimendberg's purpose was to "recover occluded controversies and spaces" that he contends were omitted from conventional histories or were often neglected and forgotten (9). Dimendberg's exploration of the film noir cycle was tied to the "built environment of the United States during the period from 1939 to 1959" (9). Certainly *The Wire* works hard to recover such occluded controversies, and spaces are depicted as underground or clandestine borrow heavily from the noir, particularly in terms its representations of Baltimore's most marginalized residents. For Dimendberg, film noir's indispensible quality of centripetal space animated the noir cycle, simultaneously celebrating and mourning as its characters "traverse the vertical urban center, partake in its dynamism, or succumb to its violence"

(108). Violence and the representation of flesh and blood human beings are in direct dialogue with *The Wire*'s Baltimore and its spaces.

The street-level representation of Baltimore's urban spaces, its narrative linearity, and its intense attention to detail, inform *The Wire*'s specific realism. Its multiplicity may seem to point towards post-modernity. However it is, in fact, a backwards-looking model trying to recover some type of cohesiveness and structure that will connect all the city's spaces and its people. *The Wire* forces the audience to recognize the incommensurable that is present in the series. Thus, *The Wire* appears authentic in its representation of intersecting social strata and the daily spatial practices of inner-city life. Its stylized realism is underscored particularly through its richly detailed mise-en-scène and sophisticated use of sound, involving frequent use of low-angle tracking shots, clipped dialogue, and montage based editing. While there are many long takes within specific sequences and a resistance to "shot, reverse-shot" editing, scenes on *The Wire* continually interrupt one another, reinforcing the sense that time is always ticking and life goes on. Its linearity allows the audience to keep track of the overlapping narratives and multiple characters, all of whom live in the same time and occupy the same city space.

The Wire is largely preoccupied with representing the everyday life of its characters. In his essay on *The Wire*, author Dan Kois described the show as compelling because it offers "rich, deep characters, believable scenes, and innovative plots" (para. 7). Indeed, *The Wire*'s creator David Simon explains that the show is "really about the American city, and about how we live together. It's about how institutions have an effect on individuals, and how, regardless of what you are committed to, whether you're a cop, a longshoreman, a drug dealer, a politician, a judge, a lawyer, you are ultimately

compromised and must contend with whatever institution you've committed to" (para. 4). From this perspective, *The Wire* can be understood as an evolving history of a city through its people and their sublimation to established but systemically ineffectual institutions. I say established because these structures are intrinsic to the patriarchal model of capitalism that lays at the foundation of the United States of America. *The Wire* explores its failing institutions and their impact on its citizens beginning initially with the judicial and penal systems, and then incorporating the failures of the "War on Drugs", the corrupt civic and state level political systems, the failings of the underfunded public education system and social services, and finally of the media itself. The storyline spends a great deal of time and energy representing the city at every level. This is not surprising given that Dimendberg notes that the noir may begin on the micro level of the evidentiary trace which can be any material record, photograph, or report, before moving to the "larger frames of architecture and then the city, and the interplay of bodily detection and metropolitan representation" (Dimendberg, 26). *The Wire* benefits from this noirish model, as it is preoccupied with the minutiae, with the evidentiary traces that comprise *The Wire*'s multi-layered complex representation Baltimore. In other words, *The Wire*'s Baltimore is so effectively represented at the micro level that it affords new ways of understanding the urban experience, an experience that is often subsumed by larger frames of representation that can occlude the very spaces that *The Wire* is invested in excavating.

Employing Dimendberg's proposal, and considering Lefebvre's work, it is possible to analyze *The Wire*'s the street-level representation of Baltimore by taking into account the crucial role that sound surveillance plays in constituting a particular

representation of the city and its various urban spaces. Lefebvre proposes that modern spatial practice might thus be defined by "the daily life of a tenant in a government-subsidized high-rise housing project," that is, the lived experience and its lived spaces, and that a "spatial practice must have a certain cohesiveness, but this does not imply that it is coherent" (38). *The Wire* begins by dealing directly with the lived experiences of tenants in a government-subsidized housing project, the fictional West Baltimore Franklin Terrace housing project. Here, mapping *The Wire* in terms of these forms of urban representation situates this study as concerned with representations of different urban sonic ecologies, some hidden, some heard, some visible and some invisible.

Mapping, Connections, and Spatial Practices

The concept of mapping is illustrated on *The Wire* by two main modes of spatial practice. First, there are the police who employ geographical grids, maps, and photo boards to survey the city through established territories. For the most part, this objective and often geographical-based mapping represents an outdated system that is replete with gaps. This mapping is meant to emphasize connections but there are missing links, unknown players, unidentified voices, and misinterpreted information. For instance, the police must first map out on a board those who they think are players, and from there they begin their investigation. It takes quite a while for the police to identify the drug kingpin Avon Barksdale because, given his clean police record, there are no fingerprints or photo ID in the police database. Once the police wiretap is up and running, they quickly realize that Avon is too high up in the organization to ever be caught on a wiretap conducting any illegal business. Likewise, in the fourth season, Marlo Stanfield

is known to be an up-and-coming player but the police have a great deal of difficulty identifying or gathering any evidence against him.

The second type of mapping at work here is one that is fleshed out through the lived experiences of the urban population. The lived experiences of the characters create a cognitive map of the City of Baltimore. This cognitive type of mapping is created through the characters' relationships, their interactions, and their perceived status in society, as well as "the accumulated knowledge with which societies transform their spatial and social environments" (Dimendberg, 105). Dimendberg has stated that this urban cognitive mapping is "grounded in the lived experience of the pedestrian, and becomes ubiquitous in both theoretical statements and film noir" (109). Likewise, Lefebvre describes spatial practices as the representation of lived experiences within lived spaces that he called "representational spaces" (38).

If *The Wire* is about the city mapped out through the lived experiences of its people and their spaces, then cognitive and social mapping is likewise at the foreground of its formal and narrative structures. The carefully detailed representations of *The Wire*'s lived experiences are very much a "theoretical statement" taking cues from film noir. This type of mapping allows the audience to build a stable spatial-temporal structure in which they can begin to comprehend the characters' motivations and actions, lived experiences, and lived spaces. Dimendberg proposes that different senses of space are apparent in film noir. Both centripetal space and centrifugal space occur and overlap on *The Wire.* Collective cognitive mapping disperses knowledge and power outward, to the margins and elsewhere, evoking the centrifugal space that Dimendberg attributes to some cycles of film noir. Another type of mapping, done through police surveillance, can be

understood as both a spatial practice and as representational spaces that underscore the disconnection and isolation between different urban spaces and their inhabitants. In this way, the representation of space through grids and maps on *The Wire* is directly tied to the development of knowledge and power, or rather, faulty knowledge and pseudo power, as well as the relationships between vertical and horizontal, top and bottom, and hierarchies that are simultaneously present.

For Dimendberg, the notion of centripetal space constitutes a set of cultural attitudes and beliefs (99). Dimendberg emphasizes that the "lived experience and appropriation of space, as well as representations and conceptualizations of it," (99) explain how specific urban forms and practices emerged as a product of developments in architecture, urbanism, and technology. Dimendberg distinguishes some tendencies with centripetal and centrifugal cycles of the noir, acknowledging that both forces and their tendencies towards concentration and dispersal "recur and even overlap through film noir" (18). For Dimendberg, if centripetal space is characterized "by a fascination with urban density and the visible" such as inner-city neighborhoods, then its centrifugal variant can be "located in a shift towards immateriality, invisibility, and speed" (177). He goes on to explain that "where centripetality facilitates escape or evasion by facilitating invisibility in an urban crowd, centrifugality offers the tactical advantages of speed and superior knowledge of territory." (178). Emergences such as concentrated populations within inner-city neighborhoods and the city's vertical (downtown) core suggest centripetal space, while the simultaneity of media, speed (particularly of evolving communication technologies), invisibility, and the dispersal of the city outwards to the suburbs lend themselves to this coexisting centrifugal space (Dimendberg, 177). For

example, Dimendberg suggests that, "a shopping center with a pedestrian mall located on the outskirts of a city is one example of a centering activity brought to the edge of a metropolis" (Dimendberg 177). On *The Wire*, the ghettos that lay at the edge of the metropolis invoke both centrifugal and centripetal space. Certainly Baltimore on *The Wire* is a complex society, allowing for both competing forces to exist along with many other contradictions in form and narrative and myriad intersections.

Alongside its competing spaces, *The Wire*'s city lacks a cohesive central core—despite its downtown, that is quite typically comprised of skyscrapers. It does, however, have many satellite cores such as the Franklin Terrace low-rise courtyard in the first season, the docks in the second season, and the many street corners inhabited by the hoppers and drug addicts throughout all five seasons. Centrifugal space disperses away from the city's physical center while centripetal force pulls towards the center. Thus, the focus of the city is pushed to its margins without expanding beyond the city limits. The city then embodies both centripetal and centrifugal forces by locating the margins within the city but at the farthest reaches of its boundaries. These competing forces underline the tensions surrounding comprehensive accounts of the myriad social and cultural realities at work in the characters' daily lives. Despite the presence of a downtown core, *The Wire*'s Baltimore encompasses multiple ethnographic sites that, as Professor Linda Williams has described, allows for multiple cores to exist within the same space, along with multiple narratives. When Dimendberg considers Lefebvre's idea of the core, he describes not only the development of a core comprised of densely populated, vertically situated architectural forms, but also the core as something that reiterates the "tension between public space as a physical gathering spot and its function as a site for receiving

media messages" (112). However, Dimendberg does contend that this central core offers an "antidote against the ills of alienation, boredom, and lack of civic consciousness" (113). *The Wire*'s long-form narrative is linear, and is therefore imbued with a secure sense of spatial-temporal stability in lieu of a centralized city core. Alternatively, one can think of the term "core" in terms of the major institutions examined over the course of the five seasons of the series. Season one's core is the Franklin Terrace low-income housing project with the low-rise courtyard known as "the pit". The second season features the harbor, shipping yards, and docks. Season three offers Hamsterdam, the quasi-sanctioned open-air drug market in three strictly designated territories in West Baltimore. Edward Tilghman Public School is the primary site in the fourth season and the Baltimore daily paper's newsroom fills this role in the fifth and final season. These are not only physical locations and gathering sites, but also sites of media communication. These cores embody many tensions at work, which are present in the changing architectural forms, such as the demolition of the Franklin Terrace towers or the proposed redevelopment of the harbor. *The Wire*'s Baltimore is full of parallel cores that are alternatives to a city's downtown core, invoking both centrifugal and centripetal space.

Dimendberg has asserted that the "connection posited between urban environment lacking recognizable landmarks and the individual's loss of spatial position [is] a disorientation in centripetal space that leads to murder" (150). On *The Wire*, one's spatial orientation depends on knowledge of terrain, landmarks, and sounds, as well as codes of behavior that are specific to different urban spaces. A lack of physical landmarks is prevalent on *The Wire*, specifically in the ghettos. On the street, different types of codes, including unfamiliar vernacular, help map the urban landscape. To members of the

community the appropriate signs are understood, whereas these same signs are incomprehensible to outsiders. One example is evident when Bubbles prepares Officer Sydnor for undercover work and explains that "you're married to the needle now" so Sydnor should remove his wedding ring. Additionally, the soles of his shoes must be dirty from stepping on "dead soldiers," the empty drug vials that litter the ground in the projects, in order to pass. Another example occurs when the hoppers turn street signs around in order to confuse the police during pursuit, causing a disorientation that has devastating effects for the police. On one occasion, this disorientation causes Officer Kima Greggs to give the wrong location and she inadvertently gets shot when she is caught without back up. For Dimendberg, a city lacking formal harmony results in a disconnected city that in turn "frustrates the experiences of time and movement" (104). However, traffic of certain types (namely sex and drugs) persists on *The Wire*. There is tertiary movement *within* certain spaces but rarely *between* spaces; the Franklin Terrace housing project and the surrounding West Side neighborhood affords a good deal of freedom of movement for its constituents while its stark lack of landmarks frustrates outsiders. The city itself is imbued with the stagnation of its hopeless residents who are living in the margins, and who are experiencing a fatalistic frustration of time, space, and movement. These fatalistic concepts are expressed in the slow-moving multi-narrative structure, lack of narrative closure, and lack of movement between urban spaces. Many of the characters exhibit a sense of hopelessness such as the soldiers in the Barksdale organization who are trapped in a hierarchical structure. While the representation of *The Wire*'s streets focuses explicitly on themes of alienation, boredom, and lack of civic consciousness, they also present communities that paradoxically exhibit engagement

and/or deep civic consciousness. These communities are represented by the major crimes unit, the Stevedores, the Barksdale organization, and in the civic leadership of Major Bunny Colvin and Councilman Tommy Carcetti.

The Wire wisely makes ample use of alterity, in the form of plural voices, to flesh out its map. Alterity, represented through plural voices, is a concept borrowed from the Dickensian model of storytelling. It is employed here in order for a particular character to engage his or her identity politic in a provisional manner. This is evident in such scenes as when the underage dealer, Bodie, strategically invokes his rights as a minor or rightfully argues police entrapment, or when Bubbles' turns criminal informant (CI) in order to exact a certain type of judicial revenge. Each strategic movement opens up mapping to new modes of understanding. More importantly, alterity actively complicate the ways that differences are understood. Differences expose the lack of equality often portrayed and help to map connections and disconnections within the same city. Instead of announcing difference, the narrative allows differences to exist in a way that expands the audiences understanding.

On *The Wire*, equality is complicted primarily through language strategies. Ironically, this lack of equality handicaps the police rather than the dealers who employ language and coded strategies that the police are ignorant of. *The Wire* attempts to provide a representation of Baltimore as its own complete world through multiple sites, but the isolation of each site from the others highlights the lack of a unified or comprehensive account of the city. Tension is achieved through characters who are often oblivious to life outside of their neighborhood, or who choose to ignore and avoid certain areas. *The Wire* works at developing and maintaining multiple accounts of these different

realities, each registering differences in experience and representing alterity through plurality, in order to portray the city through inclusion of its many different lived experiences and spaces. As *The Wire* demands the commensurability of multiple differences, accommodating what cannot be judged by measurement or common standard, the audience is compelled to draw their own interpretation of events. Certainly, it is evident that *The Wire* works to present multiple overlapping narratives that highlight differences rather than commonality.

The program also maps its characters by explicitly connecting several of them to Baltimore's Western District history. For example, the gun-toting gay "stick-up boy" Omar Little is connected to Detective Bunk Moreland because they both attended the same West Baltimore high school "back in the day". This connection serves to underscore, in a general sense, the similarities and differences between the police and the criminals, or more simply between citizens themselves within the same city. It also highlights the fact that Omar went to high school and possibly graduated, something that most of his peers on the street did not accomplish. Not only does this mapping trigger a social, political, and geographic connection, it points towards the uneven outcomes of the public school educational system, wherein one student becomes a homicide police detective and the other a vigilante gangster.

There are other tertiary connections made apparent through *The Wire*'s cyclical sense of time. As well, its narrative linearity aids the mapping process by providing a chronological time-line that can be easily followed. However, this cyclicality is inferred rather than explicit. The most prominent example of this is that the kids of the fourth season will transition into predestined roles. Young Michael will become the next Marlo

Stanfield (a cold-blooded ruthless drug kingpin), young Dookie will become the next Bubbles (a homeless junkie), young Randy the next Bodie (a soldier in the game), and so on. On one hand, *The Wire*'s linearity offers a stability that structures its realism within a cohesive time and space. On the other hand, its cyclical rhythm lends itself to a fatalistic realism that denies narrative closure and requires the audience to deal with the gaps between *The Wire*'s narrative and form.

As for the fatalistic nature of the show, writer Kent Jones asserts that death on *The Wire* seems as "natural as breathing and this is what gives the show its eerie undertone" (para. 12). While *The Wire* features an unprecedented number of characters who each have their own story, it enables meaningful understanding by making hoppers like Bodie, fiends like Bubbles, and police officers like McNulty all equally identifiable, though not necessarily sympathetic. Each character is afforded traits that are at times commendable, often reprehensible, and quite often unprecedented. For example, McNulty is "good police" because he cares about the victims of crime and the impact of systemic crime on the city's underprivileged. At the same time, he is an alcoholic, a womanizer, and a rather irresponsible divorced father. Likewise, while Bodie may be a reprehensible drug dealer, he is also well-spoken, street smart, and understands and respects the structure of the overarching systems of oppression at work. Meanwhile, Bubbles is a drug addict that is recuperated as a "good citizen" by informing on the more violent dealers. Dispensing with the good/bad binary allows each character to be fully fleshed out in terms of the grey area in-between good and bad. The audience can ignore the good versus bad dichotomy in order to follow the progression of time and its effect on the show's characters. This complex representation of character helps to fill out the mapping process on *The Wire*.

The audience's allegiances expand and contract just as Baltimore is caught between the centripetal space that pulls towards a center and the centrifugal force that pushes outwards to the margins. The audience is both compelled and repelled by these contradicting forces. Dimendberg suggests that centripetal space infers that *any* place in the city is potentially "survey-able" (33). If the centripetal space of the noir brought the city under a survey-able gaze, then it is no surprise that the urban street corner is an obvious and open site of observation where everyone always-already knows they are being watched. As the dealers are always-already aware of being under surveillance, counter-surveillance strategies are in place, primarily in the ways that they use a specific vernacular to obscure meaning. *The Wire* focuses the audiences' attention towards language through disconnections and misunderstandings, and away from communication. In this way, misunderstanding is at the surface of *The Wire*'s frustration and fatalism.

This deep disconnection between language and understanding is further underscored by the way the series portrays the parallel adoption of evolving communication technologies. It is established early on that the Baltimore police are underfunded, somewhat corrupt, and, as an institution, a complete failure. There is no real budget for new audio surveillance equipment, so the major crimes unit acquires some old equipment from the FBI by making a drug-related homicide investigation appear to be an investigation into homeland terrorism. This case bending effectively makes the point that the War on Drugs has already failed and that federal security has shifted its focus to the domestic War on Terror in post-9/11 culture. While clear distinctions are made between drugs and the idea of terrorism, *The Wire* implies that street drugs in American cities are a type of street-level terrorism occurring on a daily basis that no one particularly cares

about. For the police, as an institution, it all comes down to the statistics and quotas rather than real results. They achieve their quota of "solved" homicides by "jukin' the stats" (that is, distorting the numbers). While the police type their reports on typewriters, use landline telephones and employ antiquated audio wiretapping surveillance equipment, the Barksdale organization has an up-to-date communications system with cell phones, number codes and a sophisticated system of nicknames, slang terms, and strict rules about never *ever* speaking about business on the phone. As the police slowly develop their audio surveillance techniques, the Barksdales abandon their payphones and pagers, and adopt hard to trace disposable cell phones (burners) as their modus operandi. This ensures that they can always stay one step ahead. The police may train their ear to comprehend the West Side vernacular, but the West Side gangs have already embraced newer hi and low tech communication strategies.

Listening Modes and Making Meaning

Film sound has many abilities. As utilized on *The Wire,* it has the ability to set a place, establish a location, refer to a historical period, draw attention to detail, engage the acousmatic imaginary, and heighten or diminish realism. It actively engages its audience with different modes of listening by isolating and replaying recorded voices that negotiate between fidelity of sound and clarity of speech. The use of a combination of on-location sound recording and post-production sound rendering, along with the stark lack of non-diegetic music and the narrative focus on listening, is evident. It may be presumed that the unification of the eye and ear helps inform the audience as to what is happening within a given scene as well as helping to determine the differences between non-diegetic and diegetic sound. Particularly in the case of police surveillance, it would seem that

audio surveillance would help move a case closer to closure for the audience. Yet, while the police collect information, the addition of audio surveillance works against the police's panoptic gaze by obscuring unseen voices demanding that the audience, along with the police unit, decipher both meaning and content of incoming wiretapped calls.

The Wire often includes the voices of unseen speakers, making use of the acousmatic imaginary, that is defined by Chion as the sounds that one hears without seeing its source (*Audio-Vision*, 71). Midway through the first season, the unit's audio surveillance wiretap is set up on a number of payphones in the pit. The audience, along with the police unit, is confronted with the problem of translating the West Side vernacular and specific numerical codes set up by the Barksdale organization, as well as identifying the acousmatic voices that are captured over the wiretap. This problem of translation points towards the greater problem, which is the complete breakdown of understanding. On *The Wire*, different modes of listening are demanded of the characters, as well as of the audience, in order to interpret the codes and vernaculars that endure throughout the entire five seasons. These codes and vernaculars carry with them the capacity to sonically render the various (and varied) urban spaces represented on the series, of *The Wire*'s Baltimore, without proposing any solutions to its many problems. The way that *The Wire* highlights these profound problems, at the institutional level as well as at an interpersonal level, without suggesting solutions underscores the series' underlying fatalism that is supported by a desperate frustration to flesh out connections in order to make meaning. Just as *The Wire* proposes no solutions, listening and understanding are simultaneously underscored and obscured as both narrative and formal problems.

A common sound trope of mainstream Hollywood cinema presents dialogue as a problem wherein fidelity of sound is often sacrificed for clarity of speech. Most television series favor clarity of speech by lowering the volume of any atmospheric sounds to an unnaturally low level in order to allow the audience to hear a conversation. Such a strategy allows the audience to comprehend dialogue clearly at absurd noise levels, particularly in scenes located in very loud spaces such as a bar or dance club. The most obvious example of this occurs during the scenes that take place in Orlando's Stripclub, where music is played so loudly that is makes it difficult to understand the scene's dialogue. Another example of speech clarity, or lack thereof, occurs in second season, when officers Carver and Herc become so annoyed with their tedious undercover visual surveillance that they invent a criminal informant named "Fuzzy Dunlop" and purchase a very expensive surveillance microphone with their own money. They put the tiny microphone inside a tennis ball and plant it on the corner that they are watching in order to try and hear what they cannot hear from a distance. In this case one might think, like Carver and Herc, that the microphone will help inform the scene, but it does the opposite, delivering sound that is faithful to the sonic ecology—that of a microphone inside of a tennis ball placed in the gutter of a noisy street corner. This technique completely foregoes any clarity of speech in favor of sound fidelity. Ultimately, Herc and Carver are frustrated when they hear only garbled and distorted noise instead of any trace of clear speech. In this way, *The Wire* adds layers to its narrative complexity and formal sophistication without sacrificing fidelity for clarity.

When the audience does get to listen to the hoppers' conversations, in addition to what comes in over the wiretap, certain acousmatic voices become recognizable or

familiar and then, with visual corroboration, they are identified. Once a voice is identified, listening focuses on the contents of the speech in order to make meaning. Often however, the audience's focus on comprehension is pushed to the limits. In fact, specific overlapping dialects act to muddy the audience's aural comprehension that is further obscured by particular regional accents. With practice, the audiences' ear becomes adept at shuttling between listening modes, as the series does not allow for its language to soften or slow as the narrative progresses. Rather, making meaning from language *is* narrative progress. *The Wire* does not make detection easy for its audience. The audience must pay attention to codes and language, as well as the elements that make it possible to recognize certain voices without seeing the speaker. In addition to sound fidelity over clarity, the use of codes and evolving communications strategies announce the work of deciphering meaning.

As Chion has described, there are three active listening modes at work: reduced, causal, and semantic. Referring to a code or language that needs interpretation, semantic listening ignores considerable differences in pronunciation and even pertinent differences in language (*Audio-Vision*, 28). Allowing the listener to ignore differences in dialect, and even presuppose understanding differences in vernacular, enables the ability to recognize the spoken language to be, in this case, English. Using semantic listening, the audience can focus on deciphering content and meaning rather than deciphering a foreign language. Causal listening identifies a sound's source while, "reduced listening the descriptive inventory of a sound cannot be complied in a single hearing. One has to listen many times over and because of this sound must be fixed, recorded" (*Audio-Vision*, 30). Reduced listening has the enormous power of sharpening ones listening skills, and for

this reason Pryz has an advantage over the other officers (*Audio-Vision*, 31). Pryz is particularly adept at negotiating between listening modes. He is able to not only decode meaning using semantic listening, he can employ reduced listening in order to easily decipher differences in language, and can employ causal listening to identify acousmatic sound sources. Through Pryz, the other officers and the audience are guided through the process of semantic listening in order to learn to focus on the meaning of content on the wiretap. As the episodes unfold, the audience's ear likewise becomes trained to shuttle between listening modes, relying less and less on the type of expository dialogue that congests most primetime television.

The very first time the audience hears something that has been captured over the wire is also the first time the entire unit is hearing the tap themselves. Once the wiretap has been set up, it is established that Pryz displays a knack for deciphering codes, and understanding vernacular and different dialects. Herc attempts to decode a monitored call but ultimately admits that he is only fluent in the "East Side" and the "Perkins Homes" dialects. Through Herc, and the confusion of the other officers, what is heard on the wiretap is established as particularly dense and open to misunderstanding. After Herc fails to decode what is being heard, Pryz recites the opening lyrics of The Rolling Stones' song "Brown Sugar," "Gold coast slave ship bound for cotton fields/Sold in a market down in New Orleans/Scarred old slave know he's doing all right/Hear him whip the women just around midnight". The use of the lyrics to "Brown Sugar" announces some of the difficulties that language will present as the series progresses. The song is coded in that it employs an African-American vernacular to present a song about African-American slavery. While Pryz has trained his ear to comprehend some African-American

vernaculars, the song complicates effective listening by coding its meaning. As the other police look stunned, it is clear none had ever really "listened" to the song. In this moment the difference between hearing and listening is made apparent whereby one may hear a sound but to listen requires comprehension, understanding, and meaning.

The series directs viewers towards understanding with cues such as "listen hard", "soft eyes", and "all the pieces matter". These clues all point the audience, along with its characters, to pay attention and to disregard nothing. To "listen hard" implies understanding, to have "soft eyes" implies considering all the possibilities without fixating on one or two aspects of a case, and "all the pieces matter" infers that evidence is everywhere. Essentially, this model adapts a realist mode of audience engagement whereby paying close attention brings the rewards of information, knowledge and awareness necessary to comprehend and make meaning about the city and its people. In this direct way, dialogue underscores the prevalent themes of surveillance and detection, but more importantly highlights ways of understanding. The scene described above not only highlights variations within vernacular, it also demonstrates the difference between causal and semantic listening, the type of listening for the cause of a sound (the tape recorder, then music, then specifically The Rolling Stones), and the meaning and content of the sound (the song lyrics and their meaning). Pryz explains that as a kid he would listen to records over and over in order to decipher the lyrics and their meaning, and this type of focused listening as a kid had subsequently trained his ear to shuttle between listening modes in order to listen effectively. Chion has explained that "reduced listening [of] the descriptive inventory of a sound cannot be complied in a single hearing. One has

to listen many times over and because of this sound must be fixed, recorded" (*Audio-Vision*, 30).

As the seasons wear on, Pryz also cracks the number codes that the Barksdales have been employing as part of their pager/payphone system. Frustratingly, while Pryz can decipher voices, accents, vernacular, and codes, he cannot resolve any of the real problems presented to him over the course of five seasons. Pryz's ineffectiveness as a police officer often causes larger problems rather than solving anything substantial. This sort of "one step forward, two steps back" movement is foundational to the show's overall pessimism and is another example of how *The Wire*'s form and narrative content mirror and support each other. First, the audience engages causal listening skills in order to gather information on a sound's source, such as deciphering that the sound is a human voice, and then shuttling over to the semantic listening mode in order to interpret the meaning of what is heard through the louder competing sounds of the sonic ecology (*Audio-Vision*, 26-30). *The Wire* does not favor intelligibility or clarity, allowing for direct on-location sounds to help construct its spaces and to take precedence over a scene's dialogue. Its realism is thus constructed through the formal treatment of spatial POA, engaging active listening modes in its audience, and requiring the audience to focus on the act of listening, in addition to simply hearing.

Shuttling between these listening modes, along with the complex rendering of each distinct sonic ecology, makes apparent that the act of listening is heavily mediated specifically in order to expose the futile uncertainty and anxiety that surrounds listening and complicates meaning. These listening modes expand the realm of understanding by complicating the meaning making process, pointing towards the actions of deciphering,

detailed listening, and detection. If the given problem of a scene is the aural comprehension of spoken English, *The Wire* finds ways to hinder the audiences' comprehension, not only through its use of language, but also through sound recording and editing techniques that establish each sonic ecology.

Each of the different sonic ecologies represented on *The Wire* has its own system of knowledge, language and power, and its own modes of surveillance and social policing. In other words, each space of representation has its own specific spatial practices. In the first season, the pit is the main site and is established through its architectural forms whose spatial practices include crowd movement tied to drug traffic, the face-to-face "parley," and police surveillance. The parley, in particular, takes cues from film noir, recalling the face-to-face parleys that occur in supermarkets and other public spaces such as in the classic noir *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) and later in *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974). This sets *The Wire* up to persistently center itself in disconnection, dysfunction, and misunderstanding, which becomes the foundation for its critical investigation of power, knowledge and language. The ways in which *The Wire* uses language and knowledge as power in order to represent different sonic ecologies leads to a radical remapping of the urban setting that is tied to spatial practices revolving around sound, language, codes, and speech.

While *The Wire* jettisons unnecessary technical jargon, it relies heavily on a stylized vernacular. The Barksdales are empowered through their codes and vernacular. The demands of the audience's listening skills are pushed to the brink when, during the second season, a conversation between a man and a woman is heard on the wiretap. It is obvious that Pryz and Lester are unable to comprehend the content of the call (to which

there are not even subtitles when using the special DVD features). Without a word Caroline writes something on a piece of paper and hands it to Lester and Pryz who both read it and nod. The audience briefly sees the piece of paper, yet is given no more help deciphering the drug related call than Lester and Pryz. The audience must piece together as much information as possible by activating their semantic and causal listening in order to decode meaning. Causal listening is used to identify the speaker or to glean some information about them, as conveyed by their vernacular, dialects and accents. Causal listening allows the audience to gather information about who is speaking, and most importantly, decipher the meaning of what is being said.

The first time that Lester and Pryz log a pertinent call, it is because they have visual confirmation that mid-level player D'Angelo Barksdale is on the phone to his superior Stringer Bell, who is Avon Barksdale's second-in-command. Stringer is identified on the telephone by name while D'Angelo is identified through visual corroboration from rooftop surveillance. The actual content of the call is less than incriminating, but it does serve to identify both D'Angelo and Stringer's voices, connecting both names and faces to often acousmatic voices. In this way, the audience hears what D'Angelo and Stringer sound like *over the phone*. The audience must train itself to identify acousmatic voices heard over the phone, voices that are not recorded for clarity and thus do not bear any spatial signature, while engaging overlapping modes of listening. Voice identification also taps into both of Chion's described listening modes, whereby the audience first must listen to identify both who is speaking and then the content of what is being said, all of which is shrouded in a stylized vernacular. After carefully determining what to listen for, Pryz and Lester engage (along with the audience) in shuttling between the three modes of

listening. Undeniably, listening without seeing is one of the major challenges that *The Wire* tackles. Furthermore, as Chion posits, the enigmatic effects of radio and telephonic sounds are prime examples of the acousmatic imaginary, and *The Wire* provides ample examples of this enigmatic effect.

Throughout the series, the audience is subjected to numerous voices heard over the police unit's wiretap. All the calls logged over the wiretap employ telephonic sound recording techniques that sacrifice fidelity of the location's sound. All monitored calls are recorded, listened to repeatedly, and deciphered to the extent possible. Dimendberg has suggested that radio in film noir often takes on the attributes of an informant that not only disseminates information, but also "spatially and temporally locates the protagonists" (228). Instead of a radio playing, there are the ubiquitous audiotapes of recorded telephone calls that operate very much as an informant locating key players. Not only does the radio-like presence of these intercepted calls inform the police of possibly illegal drug activity, it also allows for time and space to converge in the instances of pertinent logged wiretap calls and visual corroboration of the hoppers using the telephone.

The use of West Side vernacular, along with other types of other codes, allow for the possibility of misinformation. In this regard, *The Wire* is heavily indebted to Walter Murch's brilliant film sound design work. Murch's sound work on *The Conversation* does something similar with the representation of deciphering the acousmatic voice in a telephonic sense. In *The Conversation*, recorded audio surveillance has the ability to be repeated, broken down, and listened to intently. This degree of engaged listening employs reduced listening skills that depend on the repetition of a recording in order to decipher its content, meaning, and/or sound source. Similarly, paranoia that is centered on

misunderstanding is prevalent on *The Wire*. For Dimendberg, the radio is considered a medium that facilitates and speeds up "the circulation of information, overcomes separation, and promotes decentralization," three attributes he has identified in centrifugal space (217). *The Wire* substitutes the radio with the wiretapped phone calls that are continually heard in real-time in the unit headquarters. The wiretap dually circulates information and aids in making connections. Listening to logged calls in real-time at the unit's headquarters promotes simultaneity of space and time that is consistent with the straightforward linearity of *The Wire*.

The show's acousmatic imaginary stimulates the audiences' mind in order to engage with, and attempt to identify, specific voices. However, this type of reduced listening often leads to more questions than answers, imbuing *The Wire* with its fatalism and futility. Repetition of this acousmatic voice provokes an anxiety that is centered on misunderstanding. This play of acousmatic imaginary does not end with the listening of recorded telephone calls. Each call must also be corroborated with visual identification, which poses a problem. *The Wire*'s slow-paced police investigations painstakingly reveal the tedium of rooftop surveillance. During the first two seasons, Officers Kima, Carver, Herc and Sydnor camp out on rooftops overlooking the pit, waiting patiently to photograph suspects using the payphones that are simultaneously being tapped and recorded back at the unit's headquarters. Without these visual corroborations, there would be tapes of voices alone, coming from parts unknown and from nobody in particular. While Detective McNulty insists numerous times that the case is to be made on "voices alone," the unit must painstakingly match voices to faces, along with the added problem of codes, and the very specific West Side dialect and its vernacular. In

this way, engaged listening helps to map the city by focusing on uncovering obscured vernaculars, which in turn attempts to comprehend and come to an understanding about the people in vastly different spaces within the City of Baltimore.

Conclusion

The use of sound as a cinematic technique to engage its audience is a hallmark of *The Wire* and a major element of its critical success. While it references many earlier sound techniques and strategies, the combination of these elements and the emphasis on their use as a backbone of the narrative is truly unique and groundbreaking. Sound not only structures its urban spaces, the use of complex vernacular requires the audience to engage various modes of listening. The audiences' experience of listening and making meaning is represented through the characters who are also engaged in active listening and trying to come to a level of understanding that informs the show's narrative and structures its spaces. Through the process of mapping connections and disconnection, there emerges the possibility to achieve meaningful understandings about the many different groups of people who inhabit *The Wire*'s Baltimore.

The use of stylized vernaculars works to establish differences that are tied to represented urban spaces, and dually mark such urban spaces by the ethnicity and social status of its inhabitants. Beyond marking spaces, the use of stylized vernacular pushes the audience to make connections and develop an understanding about diverse social strata in order to map the city in a comprehensive manner that is far more holistic than simply locating isolated urban spaces and defining them in terms of their political and geographical attributes.

CHAPTER 3

LANGUAGE STRATEGIES

This chapter explores the ways that speech, language and codes on *The Wire* function to map its urban spaces. While sound is fundamentally important to the formal and thematic structure of *The Wire*, speech is particularly imbued with the power to either obfuscate or convey clear meaning. Talking and other specific uses of speech underscore some interesting dynamics linked to making connections, conveying meaning, and understanding. This is illustrated by the strategies used to bypass standard police sound surveillance practices. As I have explained, the audience is forced to engage with *The Wire* through its spatial practices in a way that allows for understanding difference to develop from knowing characters in their own space, each with their own rhythms. These characters are linked by their relation to others within the same spaces, and within the same community or organization, or by their relation to other groups that are linked through interaction. This understanding of *The Wire*'s characters comes from exposure to their daily routines and their urban reality, or as Henri Lefebvre describes it, "the routes and networks that link up the places set aside for work, 'private' life, and leisure" (38). For Lefebvre, concepts of space tend "towards a system of verbal (and therefore intellectually worked out) signs" (39). There are a number of ways that verbal and non-verbal signs are employed on *The Wire* in order to constitute different urban spaces, in terms of what Lefebvre calls spatial practices.

Spatial practices are useful here because language and codes are deeply rooted to geography and tend towards a history of space that explains the development of networks. Mapping *The Wire* by its spatial practices helps the viewer understand this

long-form complex network narrative. The stakes on the streets are high and require the characters to have a working knowledge of verbal and non-verbal signs which in turn help constitute various urban spaces and mark differences such as race, class, and gender. The network structure on the series allows for language to connect spaces or conversely, to illustrate disconnection. Various urban spaces represented can be conceptualized in terms of both their specific verbal and non-verbal signs.

African-American studies theorist Paula J. Massood uses filmmaker Spike Lee's body of films as a way to identify that, within the "Black City" film genre,

> "the heteroglot collection of characters suggests that the urbanscape is home to a highly complex and venerated community. By constructing an urban space defined outside the more common parameters of poverty, criminality, and drugs Lee provides a view of community that is more diverse than the majority of representations of the inner city away from earlier constructions of the ghetto" (*Black City Cinema*, 130).

Representations of *The Wire*'s Baltimore can be likewise mapped within Massood's theory of the ghetto as "highly complex and venerated" (*Black City Cinema*, 130). Massood sets up a framework that complements Dimendberg and Lefebvre's concepts of space and modernity that work at the street-level. For Massood, the ghetto has long been a metaphor for the African-American experience and the aural signifiers of African-American urban experiences are locatable, along with visual signifiers, in a film soundtrack's mixture of dialogue, dialect, and music (*Black City Cinema*, 134). *The Wire* takes it cues, in part, from Black City film wherein representation of urban spaces are primarily based on class and race, and borrows its prevalent, reoccurring themes of surveillance, entrapment, movement, and lack of agency (*Black City Cinema*, 201). These same themes are all present concerns on *The Wire* and expand beyond its depiction of

poverty, criminality, and drug culture. As Massood has identified in Lee's work, *The Wire* provides a view of a community that is far more diverse than the conventional representations of drug culture and criminality.

The Wire's representations of urban experiences are firmly located within its complex rendering of dialogue, overlapping dialects, and diegetic music. Here, diegetic sound informs its realism and gives it a sense of authenticity that comes, in part, from the similar utilization of sound in different films within Massood's Black City film genre, such as *Do The Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989) or *Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991). On *The Wire*, the lack of musical scoring and absence of non-diegetic sound underscores the authenticity of each urban representational space. Heteroglossia is generally understood as the coexistence of distinct variations within a single language. Massood proposes that within the Black City film, heteroglossia structures spaces of representation specifically in terms of race, economy, generation, and gender (*Black City Cinema*, 130). *The Wire*'s dynamic heteroglossia is the one of the major ways that its realism represents its urban spaces, people, and communities. In this way, language binds and draws inward towards a center, core, or site. The audience is allowed to listen to spoken dialogue, as well as get a sense of how different urban spaces sound, instead of being pushed or pulled by an empathic musical score or directed towards certain readings by non-diegetic narration.

The Wire's spatial practices are grounded in both verbal and non-verbal signs. These signs promote an understanding that retains cohesive meaning for its residents, but can also foster misunderstandings through its subversive uses that are generally incoherent to outsiders. *The Wire* uses codes, vernacular, dialects, accents, foreign

languages, numerical patterns, hand signals, and the face-to-face parley in order to constitute different urban spaces and establish each space within the larger space of the city. These spatial practices focus attention on the daily, lived experiences of its characters through the verbal signs of its inner city inhabitants, while simultaneously employing a complex system of non-verbal signs and symbols in order to represent the space of these inhabitants—primarily West Baltimore's ghettos. In this way, both verbal and non-verbal signs constitute *The Wire*'s Baltimore, actively remapping the city through the program's spatial practices, representational spaces, and representation of spaces. Both representational spaces and representations of spaces "tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs" (Lefebvre, 39). As I have discussed, representational spaces are generally tied to relations of production, such as the Franklin Terrace low-rise court where drug deals go down or the police unit's headquarters. Representations of space are often architectural and often involve blueprints, maps, and grids in order to define certain places.

Fredric Jameson positions *The Wire*'s realism in relation to Utopianism in his essay "Realism and Utopia in *The Wire*". Jameson argues it is the inability of the city's inhabitants to know their whole city, and the police department's ignorance of Baltimore's different urban spaces that "opens up a space for realism: for seeing things, finding out things, that have not been registered before; and for investigation, for solving problems and tracking down causes as in a scientific experiment or classical detective procedures" (Jameson, 362). Seeing things previously obscured, hearing things previously indecipherable, registering and finding things that had previously been unknown, is a constant process on *The Wire*. As discussed earlier, *The Wire*'s complex

acousmatic imaginary activates listening, employing the ear to extend the visual gaze that is limited to the frame. Jameson has explained that on *The Wire*, "a whole society must be opened up to representation and tracked down, identified, explored, and mapped like a new dimension or foreign culture" (362). He contends that *The Wire*'s Baltimore ceases to be replicating a "static reality" (365), but rather it provides an intensive focus on the micro-levels of society that comprise a city wherein "nobody knows that other landscapes, other cities, exist. Baltimore is a complete world unto itself; it is not a closed world but merely conveys the conviction that nothing exists outside it" (Jameson, 369). Providing a space that is whole unto itself allows for the representation of Baltimore to have limits that are real geographic boundaries as well as keeping it isolated from the rest of the world. Here, languages occupy Baltimore and not wider signification such as the State of Maryland or the United States of America.

The first season of *The Wire* limits representational spaces to primarily West Baltimore and the downtown core where the courts and police headquarters are located. Areas outside of West Baltimore tend to be reduced to interior spaces, such as court rooms, police interview rooms, and prison cells. Subsequent seasons include more of Baltimore's urban spaces by examining more of the city's intricate social strata. Accordingly, there is no one single character identified as responsible for factors such as crime, corruption, addiction, poverty, or for the city's systemic institutional failure. There is no one "bad guy". The series avoids the good/bad binary, allowing for a far richer representation of the city and a more fruitful examination of its spaces, inhabitants, and practices. This level of complex visibility is very much a project of *The Wire*, as it offers dynamic collective representations of a city and its urban spaces through its spatial

practices and representational spaces. It also offers a multilayered representation of the city's legitimate and illegitimate economies. As such, Baltimore is represented on micro-levels from various perspectives. At each micro level there are verbal and non-verbal signs such as languages, codes, rules, and spatial practices structuring the realism of each different urban space.

Babel

One of the language strategies at work on *The Wire* is what Michel Chion calls "Babel". Babel is the phenomenon wherein characters are permitted to speak their own "true languages if the film means to affirm cultural or social identity" (*Film: A sound art,* 86). The heteroglossia that is apparent on *The Wire* can be understood as Babel, as the uses of language very much work to affirm identity as well as to structure the program's realism. There are a number of languages spoken on *The Wire* alongside its West Side vernacular and multiple dialects. Greek, Hebrew, Mandarin, Turkish, and Russian are represented alongside variations of American English (and West Side Baltimorean for that matter). As I have described, when the police unit is shown listening for the first time to a section of recorded conversation, they have difficulty making sense of Babel and are unable to identity of the voices. Officer Herc makes an attempt at translation, stating that he has no problem with the East Side but that the West Side speech is much more complicated. Officer Pryz then takes the opportunity to explain what is being said over the wiretap, revealing his adept listening skills. While this vernacular complicates meaning, engaging modes of listening, it also affirms the presence of different cultural and social identities. The difference between the West Side and other vernaculars imbues a particular aesthetic that is inherent to *The Wire* and is inclusive of various cultural

identities. As a result, its aesthetic is underscored through recognizable differences in language and speech. Later, Officer Herc jokes to Officer Kima that his new post on the East Side is considerably easier than working the West Side Barksdale case, specifically because of pertinent differences in language. Herc chides:

> "White boys I love 'em. Fucking knuckleheads. Talking about the brain-deads in my Kane street case. I call 'em up. I tell him I wanna buy some drugs. You know what he says? 'Okay, I'll sell you the drugs. How much do you want?' I swear to god Kima, they don't code it, they don't ask for a meet, nothing. And then when you make the deal, there's no runner, no bullshit. It's the guy himself walking up to you in the park, saying 'I brought the drugs. Did you bring the money?' I'm not kidding. I have much respect for black people after working with these idiots for two weeks. No, seriously. If white boys wanna sell drugs in Baltimore, they have to make different laws for it. Like, even it out for them."

The use of English and its myriad variations are foregrounded through contrast and by the explicit connections to language in the narrative. Furthermore, both cultural and social identities are affirmed directly through these uses of language. The fact that the West Side gangs employ sophisticated counter-surveillance strategies points towards a critical distinction that is rooted deeply in race. The imbalanced judicial system makes dealing drugs a game wherein the white kids don't have to work very hard while the black kids need to stay one step ahead, always-already strategically prepared.

As I have explained, semantic listening (decoding in order to interpret messages) ignores the considerable differences in pronunciation if not the pertinent differences in language itself (*Audio-Vision*, 33). Semantic listening is the most common type of listening, employed when listening for meaning over content. *The Wire* brushes up against and even repels semantic listening by constantly referring to and engaging in misunderstanding. Sound theorist Rick Altman agrees that,

"when we speak of language, we implicitly agree to
disregard certain aspects of linguistic discourse as
somehow sub-linguistic. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers
may make something of the difference between ee-ther and
eye-ther, but no normal user of the English language shows
such concern. Regional accents and personal idiosyncrasies
produce recognizable differences, but these are not taken to
be differences in language. Whether it's ee-ther or eye-ther,
it's still the English word "either" (19).

Semantic listening is apparent when, during the first season, Herc and Carver are getting

progressively restless waiting for Barksdale mid-level dealer D'Angelo to use the pit

payphone. They decide to prank page him in order to catch him on the phone, providing

them with the visual corroboration they need. When D'Angelo returns the page from the

pit payphone, calling Carver's number, Carver fakes a generic Asian accent muttering

something about a delivery order while Herc takes photos of D'Angelo. D'Angelo

assumes the page was a wrong number and hangs up, leaving the payphone, but not

before his voice is caught on the wiretap and Herc and Carver have photographic

evidence of him on the phone. Upon hanging up Herc chides Carver, "what was that?"

laughing at Carver about the accent. Carver quips, "that's my Korean counterman" to

which Herc retorts, "sounded Chinese". This scene foregrounds semantic listening by

exposing the subtle differences in spoken English, and using these differences as a joke

about listening, as well as to point out differences within a spoken language. Within this

short scene, the representation of multiple dialects is underscored through a subtle joke

about recognizable idiosyncrasies that are not a difference of language but of accent.

While Korean and Chinese are both Asian languages, the joke is about a particular accent

and the limitless variations of accents within the English language. The joke also exposes

underlying essentialist, racist stereotypes, while distinguishing otherness through the

representation of various co-existing cultural and racial groups. Whether speaking their own language or in their "own voice" *The Wire*'s expansive network structure allows space to affirm several different cultural and social identities.

While *The Wire* is centered on understanding differences, the audience commonly ignores semantic differences within spoken English. As Altman has explained, "ee-ther" and "eye-ther" are still "either". The various English dialects spoken on *The Wire* are dialects that the audience will recognize, register, and then disregard. At the same time, there is a complex vernacular whose meaning hinges on variations within English while disregarding dialect (19). *The Wire* masterfully highlights these differences, even those that are small and inconsequential, while simultaneously demanding that critical attention be paid. Because *The Wire*'s Baltimore is closed off to the larger world, the audience brushes up against and is forced to deal with difference. This pluralistic framework is increasingly as frustrating as it is compelling. The audience is continually bombarded with seemingly unfiltered information, supporting an intricate network narrative structure that depends heavily on recognizing differences. *The Wire* underscores the idea that, while Baltimore's citizens are all individually different, they do have some shared differences in common. These differences refer to deeper and more widespread problems. For instance, the young hoppers are each individually different but they are also collectively different from other groups marked by geography, language, and codes, as well as by their age, gender, race, and class. Throughout the series, there is the constant process of evaluating differences and affording the audience potentially liberating ways of dealing with these differences.

One method of examining these differences is by looking at multiple intersections of oppression. For instance, a group may share the common experience of abject poverty and class-based systems that perpetuate racism, homophobia, sexism, and other forms of resentment and hatred that the audience cannot avoid or ignore. This is very clear during the fourth season when a group of schoolboys is introduced. Through the boys' experiences, the audience is able to come to some understanding about these intersections of oppression. The boys are at the age where they are being indoctrinated into established class and race-based systems, such as becoming disciplined through the public education system, by being "men" on the corners, and by streets which become important partly due to the lack of safe public spaces within West Baltimore. West Baltimore is mapped as severely impoverished and is racialized Black. This is apparent when only African-American police such as Officers Lester and Sydnor are able pass undercover during the police investigation.

Alongside a stylized vernacular, local dialects, and accents, *The Wire* adds foreign languages to the mix. Generally speaking these other languages are not subtitled. During the second season Officer Caroline Massey acts as a translator for the police unit; her job is to monitor the wiretap and aid the unit's aural comprehension. Likewise, Bubbles acts as an interlocutor and translator, though he is more adept as a Criminal Informant (CI). Moreover, Bubbles is the one character that can navigate between all the different spaces represented. For the viewer, he has the ability to connect different spaces as he wanders the city on foot. Not only does his role on the street help to connect different urban spaces and help to identify various groups within the city, he aids by translating street code and maps the city by his constant transience. Bubbles transience underscores a sense of

liminality or inbetween-ness inherent in *The Wire*'s overarching resistance to narrative closure and has the ability to confront and connect different social and cultural groups and identities. Both Omar and Bubbles come and go, but the audience is only allowed to follow Bubbles out of West Baltimore whereas when Omar is away, he is unseen and unheard. When Bubbles is absent from the corners of West Baltimore, life goes on and through him the viewer is able to register other spaces as simultaneously co-existing alongside the urban spaces that are actively being represented. Unlike Omar, Bubbles travels through the city, constantly in motion and unfixable, and as such is a key mapping and translating figure.

The second season introduces a group referred to as "The Greeks" that supply the East Side's Proposition Joe with drugs and other goods, such as prostitutes, cars, electronics, and chemicals, which are imported through Baltimore's port system. It is understood that Greek is being spoken, occasionally with subtitles. Here, Babel serves to affirm a false cultural identity. In addition to various types of codes, the presence of multiple non-English languages further buttresses the program's inherent heteroglossia. The Greeks—who are not actually Greek—use language not only to obscure information but also to affirm a strategically false cultural identity. Certainly they evoke an Eastern Europe ethnicity with their accents and their knowledge of several languages, including Greek, Hebrew, and Turkish. In addition, The Greeks employ a Russian man named Sergei Molotov as their enforcer. Other allies of The Greeks are Eton Ben-Eleazer, an Israeli who speaks Hebrew, and Double-G who speaks Greek.

While the second season introduces this host of foreign languages (alongside its stylized vernaculars, dialects, and accents) *The Wire* also relies heavily on decoding and

deciphering patterns. A great deal of time is directed away from visual and audio surveillance in favor of tedious computer record checking, looking for codes and patterns by examining ten years' worth of the Stevedores computer logs. While the first season was about learning to listen, the second season centers on a case that is all about deciphering codes and searching for patterns. After the initiation of aural comprehension, *The Wire* continues to challenge its audience to stay actively engaged in various ways in order to comprehend and possibly come to an understanding about systemic poverty, urban street culture, and the failed War of Drugs. The confirmation of cultural identities is complicated by stereotypes that are invoked in order to destabilize their prescribed pre-existing meaning, such as when Sergei is repeatedly called "Boris". In this way the city opens out through language. Language allows the audience to examine stereotypes and the wiretap can be seen to use language in order to complicate stereotypes by registering difference without passing judgment. Babel is a key strategy for fleshing out *The Wire*'s complex representation of the city's myriad social and cultural identities.

Repetition and Elastic Speech

On *The Wire*, traditional meanings of signs and symbols often become irrelevant primarily because the 'game' changes through the process of renaming. In one scene, Detectives Bunk Moreland and McNulty discuss "lake trout" that is available at any ghetto bodega. They both laugh at the irony, as there is "no lake, no trout". "Lake trout" is actually simple white fish. They jokingly call this type of fish "White Trash Fish" being that it is "all dressed up as something it ain't". Conversely, McNulty aptly points out that, "Sometimes it is what it is, really". This idea of renaming, and of people and

objects being called one thing while being something altogether different, is a prominent theme across the show's five seasons.

The process of renaming occurs on a number of levels. This renaming occurs when Barksdale soldier Slim Charles gets shot in the leg and is nicknamed Tilt; when the drug package "Bin Laden" is renamed "WMD" and later "Pandemic" through a strategy known as "new name, same package"; when the warehouse gets a new phone number (but the same guy still answers the phone); and when Stevedore Nicky Sobotka goes into the Witness Protection Program with his girlfriend and their child and assume new names and identities. Likewise, Spiro and The Greek are not overly concerned because, as Spiro says of Nicky, "he knows my name, but my name is not my name. And you, they only know as 'The Greek,'" to which The Greek replies, "and I'm not even Greek." This type of renaming, or misnaming, proliferates throughout the course of the series, underscoring *The Wire*'s futile and fatalistic cyclicality. The process of renaming (same package, different name) points towards the strategy of "elastic speech" that is at work on the series. Here the use of elastic speech and Babel together allows language to point towards renaming as a counter-strategy and complicates the concept of representing and affirming both real and false cultural identities. As Lester puts it, "another day wasted in an already misspent life working for the City of Baltimore."

Where Babel is inclusive and affirming of plurality, the effect of elastic speech is that language is exposed as being slippery, underlining that meaning is not fixed, and that all things are, in fact, uncertain. *The Wire* revels in playing with the slipperiness of language, and indeed, listening to it is delightfully compelling. Film sound, whether it employs elastic speech or not, includes communication employing both the acts of speech

and of listening/hearing. Hearing, of course, is open to mishearing. There are two particular instances where the rules of language expose the ways in which the slipperiness of language permits, or at least highlights, deviation. During the second season, the major crimes unit makes a huge error leading to the termination of its wiretap due to a critical misunderstanding. This points back towards the work of aural comprehension and the paranoia of misinterpretation in *The Conversation* and is reminiscent of the confusion at work in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), such as when J.J. Gittes mishears a critical clue, "bad for the grass" as "bad for the glass". In another instance on *The Wire*, it is commonly understood that the term "dog" is a loyal and reliable ally rather than referring to a canine. When East Side dealer Cheese actually is referring to a canine dog when he says "dog" over the phone, there is deep confusion with devastating consequences for the case, the wiretap, and the unit. Here, the unit assumes that Cheese has slipped up and has been caught on the wire talking about a murder. This type of dialogue reveals the elasticity of speech that is prevalent over course of the series, in a play between understanding and misunderstanding.

Chion has asserted that a single word can shift everything, stating, "in American English, there is a capacity to allow the same word to be repeated twenty times with different intonations and nuances each time" (357). For Chion, sound film has the "flexibility to let words just be words, which can be taken back, or explained away" (357). The most prominent example of elastic speech occurs when Detectives Bunk and McNulty revisit a crime scene. Without so much as a digital camera, employing only a variety of vocal intonations and nuances, the two re-investigate a crime scene with a tape measure, notebooks, pencils and forty variations of the word "Fuck",

Bunk:	Aw, Fuck.
McNulty:	Motherfucker.
Bunk:	Fuck, fuck, motherfucker. Motherfucker. Fuck. Fuck. Mmm, fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Oh, fuck.
McNulty:	Fuck. Oh, Fuck.
Bunk:	Motherfuck.
McNulty:	Oh fuck. Oh Fuck. Fuckity fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. Fucker. Oh fuck. Fuck, fuck.
Bunk:	Fuck, fuck. Fuck.
McNulty:	Fuck.
Bunk:	Motherfucker.
McNulty:	Fuckin A. Fuck.
Bunk:	Fuck.
McNulty:	Mutherfucker.
Bunk:	Fuck me.

This scene exemplifies elastic speech at its most obvious. With only audible variations in tone and inflection of the word, "fuck" substitutes for the scenes' dialogue in a way that is entirely comprehensible. In this way, repetition and elastic speech brush up against semantic listening that would otherwise focus the listening on deciphering meaning, by registering nuanced variations within a spoken language. What matters, and makes the scene comprehensible are the nuanced variations themselves, along with the investigation that Bunk and McNulty enact during the scene. The narrative and thematic preoccupation with difference is doubled in this scene through the very differences in the way a single word is spoken and repeated. Elastic speech also functions in numerous ways that foreground understanding and misunderstanding, through both its dialogue and in its narrative. It continually works to destabilize meaning and, by complicating meaning, mishearing points back to the elasticity of speech.

The Wire employs certain repetitive techniques of elastic speech in every episode. Not only are title card quotations repeated, the repetition of other quotations, such as "all in the game" function as a sort of Greek chorus continually commenting on the narrative

action. The repetition of such lines, by different characters at different times, allows for multiple meanings to co-exist. These repeated quotations function like mottos and maxims. One example occurs when Lt. Daniels says to his wife Marla, "you can't *win* if you don't play". Marla agrees the game is rigged, but "you cannot *lose* if you do not play." These two variations are repeated in numerous situations in different contexts over the entire course of the series. Such repetition also forces the audience to listen closely for variation in meaning when there are no linguistic differences.

Each episode's opening quotation will be spoken at some point during the episode by the character to whom the quote is attributed. It will then also be repeated by other characters in different situations, for different reasons, carrying different meanings, on multiple other episodes. Eventually, some of these quotes become mottos and maxims that are repeated throughout the entire series. A motto is a rule or a slogan such as "all the pieces matter", "follow the money", or "soft eyes" that implies a type of adherence to code that generalizes the motivations and intentions of a group. Maxims, on the other hand, imply a rule or commonly accepted belief such as "conscience do cost," "all in the game," or "the king stay the king". The repetition of such sayings by different people, in different episodes, with altogether different contexts, has the effect of opening up the sayings to multiple understandings. They also destabilize any sense of singular cohesive meaning while their repetition simultaneously underscores a sense of authenticity.

Codes

On *The Wire* the drug trade is referred to as "the game" implying that there is a strict code of conduct and rules that govern the Barksdale organization. This is not the case however, as the players must be prepared to change up patterns, names, numerical

codes, code words, and rules at any moment. For philosopher Michel Foucault, "power is not an institution, a structure, or a certain force with which certain people are endowed; it is the name given to a complex strategic relation in a given society" (236). On *The Wire*, the only functional power that exists is through and by the complex strategic relations that lie outside the city's legitimate economy. Power is not represented through the city's institutions; rather, the institutions examined are seen as ineffective. The only tangible power on *The Wire* is locatable within the intersecting corrupt networks that are present and that are centered on some foundational comprehension of the complex lived experiences of the people within different urban spaces. Power is inherent to making meaning and comprehension, and so power is continually shifting between the listeners and the speakers, forever revealing and obscuring meaning and understanding.

Lefebvre considers representations of space as tied to the relations of production, and that the order imposed via these relations embody complex symbolisms that may be a coded, clandestine, or underground social life (33). On *The Wire*, the relations of production are fleshed out through mirroring the hierarchical power structures where the workers report up a chain of command. For example, the hoppers report to Stringer who reports to Avon, and the police officers report to a captain who in turn reports to a lieutenant and the commissioner. In the season one episode "One Arrest", the opening quotation is "A man must have a code," which is taken from a conversation between Bunk and Omar at the homicide headquarters in which Omar explains that he's never turned a gun on someone who was not in "the game". Both Bunk and Omar agree that, "a man must have a code." Omar commands respect by ripping off drug dealers, stealing their cash and drugs. Omar's code is two-fold. The first part of his code operates at street

level in that by violently taking another dealer's possessions he gains great respect. The second part operates on the understanding that Omar's code is quite strict regarding when and why he would use violence, valuing the safety of West Baltimore's civilians.

This concept of having a code becomes a paramount maxim that weaves itself into the fabric of *The Wire*. Along with a code that functions like the rules of a game, the audience is also presented with a range of examples of other types of codes, or non-verbal signs. These other codes help construct a particular understanding of urban American culture. Predominantly these codes of conduct pertain to certain types of masculinity and the roles that the male characters must adhere to in order to survive life on the streets. The more illegal the activities of a certain community or individual, the more coded and clandestine they become. These are primarily codes of conduct, and the adherence to or avoidance of these codes provides ways of understanding. Some of the codes of conduct referred to over the course of the series are: helping old ladies, respecting the rules of the game, the codes of Alcoholics Anonymous, social codes such as "kissing ass" in order to satisfy one's superior, chains of command, the process of filling out paperwork, how to pass undercover on the street, the protocol of listening to and deciphering pertinent calls over the wiretap, and the rules of dealing with and protecting the identity of Criminal Informants. Adherence to these and other behavioral codes greatly inform *The Wire*'s representation of inner-city life and their impact of its chiefly male characters.

There are many allusions to chess as the structure of the "game". Chess is used to explain how the illegal drug trade works, underscoring the importance of adhering to strict codes, such as the codes of conduct employed by the Barksdale organization. At the

beginning of the first season D'Angelo explains the "rules of the game" using chess as his metaphor. D'Angelo explains to the hoppers:

> "This the kingpin, he da man. They got his back, he so
> deep he don't gotta do shit (like Avon). This the Queen, she
> smart, she fierce (like Stringer). Castle like the stash.
> Pawns, they like the soldiers, they be like the front lines.
> The King stay the King. The Queen ain't no bitch, she got
> all the moves. The pawns in the game, man, they quick they
> out the game quickly…unless they some smart ass pawns."

Codes dictate knowing ones role in the game and that one abide by such prescribed codes of conduct. The emphasis on the rules of the game, and chains of command are present throughout the show via its narrative and dialogue. The chess metaphor also functions to map the illegal drug trade onto a structure that has no out and wherein no one is able to effectively change their prescribed role. As D'Angelo notes, the pawns stay pawns and "the king stay the king". There are many parallel examples of codes of conduct that proliferate throughout the series. Some of these codes include the "Sunday truce," where there is to be no violence or retaliatory action between gangs on Sundays, the code of never snitching, or Omar's code that he never turns a gun on a civilian.

The police and Bubbles establish a code of colored hats to identify certain key players in the Barksdale drug case. This occurs as Bubbles pushes his shopping cart through the pit, or past a certain corner. As Bubbles approaches a group of young men he tries to aggressively sell them a bunch of hats. The police, who are watching from an unmarked car, take photos of Bubbles going through this act. Bubbles and the unit have worked out a code whereby Bubbles will put the red fedora on the key players that he thinks need to be identified to the police. Another type of non-verbal code is apparent during the scenes that take place during the typical hand-to-hand drug deal. In such a

scenario, a drug addict approaches one of the dealers and gives him some money. The dealer then uses hand signs like baseball signs to communicate with the hopper across the street as to how much to give the customer. The customer will then walk away without his money, and go over to the next hopper who hands off the drugs. These types of signs mark a multi-step process and communicate specific information, without speech.

Another example of a non-verbal code is the pager/payphone numerical codes employed by the Barksdale organization. For the bulk of the first season the unit cannot decipher the number code that the dealers use by turning their pager upside-down. One of the mid-level dealers, such as D'Angelo, will receive a page that is a series of numbers. The dealer then goes to one of three payphones in the Franklin Terrace. They return the page by calling another pager and entering a series of numbers. The unit cannot make heads or tails of the numbers used. In one sequence Officer Pryz is shown at the headquarters photocopying the number keypad for a standard telephone. Later during the first season, Officer Kima receives a page and calls the number, but the number she calls is out of service. When she returns to the unit's headquarters, Pryz asks her, "Did you try it?" referring to calling back the page number, to which Kima replies that the page was not from a working number. Pryz smiles and adds, "Woulda worked if you knew the code." He then goes on to explain the code,

> "Take the number I sent you. Now, take the 7 jump it over
> the 5, you get 3. Jump the 1 over the 5 you get 9. With 4
> you get 6. 3 and 7. 4 is 6, 3 again, and 2 is 8. 0 switches
> with the 5 so, 714 3432 is 396 7678 our number. It works
> cause it's all about where the buttons are on a phone. All
> you gotta do is jump the 5. No math."

Unfortunately, not long after the unit has cloned a pager and has begun to build a case by identifying key players and by wiretap surveillance, the Barksdales ditch their pagers in favor of disposable cell phones, called "burners", once more "switching up".

During the second season, Detective McNulty is reassigned to a police boat working the harbor. When he finds the body of a dead woman floating in the bay, he uses maps and zoning blueprints in order to attribute the Jane Doe to the city's jurisdiction instead of the county's. He then works to connect the Jane Doe to a case that the major crimes unit is investigating regarding dead prostitutes found in a shipping container on the docks. Here, real police work is represented as routine, dull, tedious, and often futile; protocol, paperwork, and procedure. Officers Lester and Pryz spend the bulk of the second season working to uncover patterns, codes, and clues. They comb through years of computer logs and follow the money trail up the chain of command, from the street corners up to the state's top government officials. When the union leader of the Stevedores, Frank Sobotka, figures out that the police are tapping his office phone he alerts the other Stevedores and The Greeks, and once again everything "changes up". The bulk of the content on the wiretap during the second season is what Lester calls, "straight to the point drug talk. No muss, no fuss," but once the wiretap is inadvertently exposed there is no more traffic, no cell phone use, and no pager number codes being used, once more leaving the unit with little to go on.

In her essay "After the Towers Fell: Bodie Broadus and the space of memory" Professor Elizabeth Bojean positions the Franklin Terrace high-rise towers as representative of the Barksdale organization and their role in "defining cultural space and shaping the identity of young black men who grew up within their social sphere" (164).

The towers demolition is the center of the neighborhood's focus and a photo-op for the corrupt Major Clarence Royce. Here, Bodie explains to Poot why he thinks it is important and a loss to lose the towers. From Bodie's perspective the towers symbolized a structure where the rules were clear and consistent and that, without the towers, power is dispersed out onto the street corners. He mourns the loss of this old model while Poot merely laments the he had lost his virginity in one of the towers. In this way geography is tied to memory and history but allows for different memories and histories to coexist. When the towers come down in the third season, Bodie and the Barksdale organization must adjust and reestablish themselves in relation to the changing neighborhood. When the Barksdale organization redefines its power, Stringer organizes a co-op wherein all the major drug kingpins from Baltimore cooperate to buy bigger and better quality drug packages and minimize street violence by agreeing to redistribute the city's major drug territories. The previous hierarchy is dismantled and dispersed outward with centrifugal force. Bojean contends that the Barksdale leadership "defines and redefines its social space for its members" describing how hand gestures, rotating stash (drug) houses, pager codes, and disposable cell phones "inscribe a system of order, hierarchy, and respect" (167). Through these codes, order and a sense of hierarchy is maintained and respect is gained.

For sociologist Elijah Anderson, nothing is more pressing than the problems besetting the poor inner city African-American community which experiences interpersonal violence and aggression. Anderson asserts that violence springs from the systemic poverty of inner-city life (para. 1). Interpersonal violence and aggression is present in the petty rivalries between the corner boys of different gangs, particularly Marlo Stanfield's crew. The Barksdale's maintain a certain order and level of respect

while actively redefining their changing cultural space amidst the cycle of systemic poverty in its predominantly African-American urban spaces.

The Wire deals with masculinity in terms of street code and what it means to be a man. It explores masculinity as a behavioral code and, in particular, masculinity as it relates to its characters and certain urban spaces. Massood contends that representations of the city reveals power relations through the inclusion and exclusion of city spaces and its inhabitants and that these power relations point to a duality of the African-American identity as both included in the American experience and excluded from it and its legitimate economies (*Mapping the Hood*, 88-89). Indeed, *The Wire* invites an exploration of masculinity in terms of power relations, city spaces, and of the African-American urban experience. This experience is characterized on *The Wire* by a lack of choices between legitimate and illegitimate employment opportunities, the subsequent insufficient access to decent education, housing, and health care, and the opportunity to earn a living wage. For example, the hoppers have few valid life choices and are forced into the illegal drug trade in order to earn a wage and to gain respect on the street.

Anderson discusses the concept of manhood in the inner city explaining that being identified as a man implies a certain physicality and "a certain ruthlessness," and that this form of masculinity is a defense (8). "For many inner city youths, manhood and respect are flip sides of the same coin; physical and psychological well-being are inseparable, and both require a sense of control, of being in charge," (Anderson, 8). It is clear that a certain type of masculinity is at stake on *The Wire*. Being in control and being in charge are central preoccupations made apparent through the individual narratives of the characters. *The Wire* further explores the concept of manhood in terms of respect. For

Anderson, respect is at the heart of street culture, explaining how it is viewed as "almost an external entity that is hard-won but easily lost, and so must constantly be guarded. The rules of the code provide a framework for negotiating respect" (2).

In terms of social space and the relation of each inhabitant to that space, such codes comprise a spatial practice that "implies a guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance" (Lefebvre, 33). These behavioral codes inscribe *The Wire* with non-verbal signs that constitute different representational spaces and include the inhabitants who know and live the code, while excluding those who do not as "outsiders". These codes provide a framework not only for negotiating respect, but for the viewer to connect to the lived experiences in such ghettoized spaces. For example, the codes of conduct and the adherence to, or avoidance of, point to the state of the culture in question, here being "the streets." Street code, according to Anderson, involves a set of "informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, including violence" (1). In this way, those who unable to command respect must actively campaign for it. Anderson claims that knowledge of code is largely defensive, it is implicit that everybody is responsible for being familiar with the street code (1). Furthermore, it is repeatedly underscored that the drug dealers have an arsenal of strategies already in place before the unit's wiretapping case begins.

At the beginning of the fourth season, Major Bunny Colvin is approached to join a research team led by John's Hopkins Professor Parenti who wants to conduct a study involving young men between 18-21, looking into possible interventions for dealing with repeat violent offenders. Bunny suggests that the target age for the university study is far too high and that by eighteen young men are "heavy into the game"; by then they are

fully indoctrinated and living street code. As such, these men have adapted to stay in a defense mode, fully understanding the failings of the judicial system, and with a deep contempt for the police who attempt to enforce it. This profound lack of faith is entrenched into its street culture, and respect comes from opposition to the police. For this reason Bunny suggests looking at a group of middle-school children who attend Edward Tilghman middle school explaining that it is essential that intervention happen much earlier in these boys' lives.

The students of Edward Tilghman middle school are loosely identified as either "stoop kids" or "corner kids". The stoop kids abide by their parents rules to stay on the stoop and not go wandering. Meanwhile, the "corner kids" hang out on the corners getting into trouble. By the time the boys are old enough to work the corners, sometime around thirteen or fourteen years-old, they are well initiated into street culture codes and, if they have any respect or "cred", it is grounded in their profound lack of faith in the police, the judicial system, and other social services. Their masculinity is bolstered by interpersonal violence.

Anderson describes how street code emerges where police influence is lacking and where personal responsibility for one's safety begins. In fact, "it is implicit that everyone is held responsible for being familiar with the code" (8). For Anderson, acquiring valued possessions shores up an individual's identity, but that this identity hinges on material items and is thus precarious at best (6). One example is the ubiquitous code that "snitches get got". Street code dictates that one must give due respect and gain respect through interpersonal violence or by taking another person's possessions, and maintain a form of personal security by never snitching to the police about anything

whatsoever. Unfortunately, this cultural adaptation to violence means that they will be personally responsible for what fate befalls them. Thus witnessing something that one should not see can put one in mortal danger, that being in the wrong area at night can be fatal, or that being a stranger unfamiliar with the street code can get you "got". One middle-school boy, Randy, is particularly torn between street and decency codes. He is shown wanting to be have the safety of being a stoop kid while struggling to avoid being turned into a corner kid. Randy witnesses several crimes. This places him in the position of being both a "snitch," and a criminal informant or "witness." He is terrified of being uncovered as a snitch but is placed in the position that he must tell adults the truth about what he has seen. Another middle-school boy, Naymond, is placed in the position where his mother is actively championing for his "street cred", attempting to get him working corners for Bodie, while his imprisoned father Wee-Bay and Bunny work to keep Naymond off the streets and on the stoop.

Conclusion

On *The Wire,* the ghetto is represented as a dynamic community with an inherent heteroglossia. The series' aesthetic, in terms of its street level representation, invites a strong focus on aural signifiers. While poverty, criminality, and drugs are major elements of the city that *The Wire* refuses to ignore, it succeeds on a larger scale as an exploration of the most racially diverse representation of a city on television. This exploration occurs, in particular, through its strategic uses of dialogue, dialect, codes, and its heteroglossia. *The Wire* fleshes out Baltimore's multiple ethnographic sites through this complex use of sound and rendering. The collection of characters conveys that its urban spaces are home to highly complex venerated communities. Not only are speech and codes employed in a

number of ways that operate to counter the police audio surveillance, the distinct variations within the English language are underscored. These variations are also present along with the existence of multiple languages that render Baltimore a complex heteroglot city.

The Wire engages its audience to embrace several different types of verbal and non-verbal signs. Verbal signs work to flesh out the lived experience of the people who inhabit different urban spaces through the representation of spatial practices. Spatial practices allow for language to map out daily life in Baltimore, and non-verbal signs that include codes of conduct to constitute its representations of space. Engaging with the programs' many verbal and non-verbal signs requires the audience to simultaneously have "soft eyes" and "listen hard." It illustrates that, in this community, a man must "have a code" and that one must remain ready to "change up" at any moment. The Wire exposes many profound contradictions about power and knowledge, respect, and masculinity. These codes propose a structure for different cultures. Likewise, these codes change and evolve. In its play with the rhythm of daily life, the defensive possibility to change up propels the narrative forward as much as the probability of misunderstanding compels it.

Employing multiple sound strategies, and an intricate narrative structure, The Wire is open to mapping by the exploration of its representations of Baltimore's urban spaces that are as a whole a closed-off world. Strategies, such as elastic speech and Babel, are the types of verbal signs that The Wire utilizes in order to structure the complex realism of the city. Within the city, endemic poverty highlights the inherent systemic racism and sexism in urban American society and the fallout of drug culture, not

to mention the complete occlusion from any material solutions, or any social or political justice. Indeed, a central theme of the series is making meaning and connection through understanding voices and their lived experiences within predominantly impoverished, raced, and masculinized urban spaces.

CONCLUSION

Despite multiple viewings, I still find *The Wire* remains incredibly compelling television. No other program since 2008 has matched or attempted to emulate its intricate network narrative structure, let alone its unique approach towards sound and language. Certainly, *The Wire* has been explored in a number of ways, from literary theory to post-television studies. Sociologists and cultural critics alike have taken it up. I think that *The Wire* is rich material for further exploration across a variety of fields. For my purposes, within the realm of TV and film studies, *The Wire* has been a rich model to explore many of Michel Chion's sound theory concepts, and to apply Edward Dimendberg's work on the city in order to interpret the show's depiction of Baltimore. I chose to focus on sound and language as my mode of exploration. By no means is work on *The Wire* complete.

Before providing concluding comments on the use of sound and spatial concepts as key elements in my academic study of *The Wire*, it is worthwhile to survey some of the areas of the series that merit further exploration. While *The Wire* has been heralded as having one of the most racially diverse casts in the history of North American television, representing the diverse demographic of Baltimore, it fails to represent from a varied gendered perspective. Likewise, much of existing scholarly work on *The Wire* surprisingly only dabbles in race and avoids gender. Further work could include examining representations of race and gender from a film studies perspective as well as from a cultural studies standpoint or as part of an ethnographic study. As well, a study of David Simon's larger body of work would help expand the currently available work as it relates to *The Wire*. Certainly David Simon's books and the mini-series *The Corner* are ethnographic studies that would provide additional insights. *The Corner* takes place over

the course of a year and is situated around one family living in an open-air drug market at the corner of West Fayette Street and North Monroe Street in West Baltimore. Likewise, Simon's current HBO series *Trème* (2010-) is centered on the residents of the *Trème* parish on New Orleans, Louisiana beginning in the months following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In lieu of a surveillance theme, *Trème* features listening and sound in the context of music as experienced through its characters which include several musicians and a radio DJ. Whereas *The Wire* is a multi-sited ethnographic imaginary that employs interlocking stories through narrative fiction, *Trème* and *The Corner* limit their scope to a single neighborhood providing a more traditional ethnographic template. Simon's work consistently offers a dynamic representation of the people living within certain urban spaces. In turn, these spaces tend to be framed by race and class.

For Dimendberg, the "truth" of a city is exposed in the shadows of its decaying neighborhoods, ready to be surveyed and gazed upon (54). The articulation of space that is "neither too insubstantial nor too constricting, neither too anonymous nor too visible" constitutes the city's openness to the controlling gaze that is a key condition for the emergence of the trope of the naked city (Dimendberg, 36). Laid bare, "an appeal to its unity and knowable origin" renders the urban familiar (Dimendberg, 77).

Feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey has read the city as female body within a Freudian schema that is marked by its applicability to "various scopic regimes" (Dimendberg, 56). Classic binary thinking would consider the city, a space of modernity and reason, as masculine and the wild, dangerous unknown of nature as feminine. The object of the gaze on *The Wire* is explicitly on the body of city; the object of this scopophilic or surveillant gaze in turn feminizes the city and its spaces. Here, under such

scrutiny the city and its people are laid out in detail, and specularized. In this sense, *The Wire*'s Baltimore is rendered as a feminine space populated by largely masculine characters.

While its focus on female characters is somewhat limited, a range of different masculinities is accessible in glorious detail. Certainly, *The Wire* represents a variety of sexualities—notably Omar (gay), and Kima (lesbian)—but it does not give much of a voice, or narrative space, to its few female characters. While female characters on *The Wire* are allowed to be violent and strong enough to survive on the streets, the few key female characters are not nearly as fleshed out as their male counterparts. In this sense, while being otherwise inclusive, *The Wire* presents a limited scope of Otherness in terms of femininity and female sexuality. Rather it favors masculine expressions of gender, queerness, and sexuality. The future study of race and gender as portrayed in the series would be a welcome addition to the existing body of work. Here, the predominantly male cast of characters is depicted in terms of class, knowledge, power relations, and sexuality. *The Wire* is indeed one of the most complex representations of inner-city life ever presented and so it holds great potential for future study within film and cultural research by examining these specific intersections of race and class within the city. Indeed, *The Wire* invites an exploration of power relations, urban spaces, and of the urban lived experiences. Further exploration of *The Wire* could lead to important work in the realm of film history, film practices and modes of representation specifically in terms of how gender and race intersect with a range of power dynamics and the urban lived experiences.

With regards to my investigation of sound, I have shown that *The Wire's* innovative and creative approach in these areas is fundamental to the establishment and support of the series' overarching gritty street-level realism. This realism is supported by select stylistic elements from film noir, particularly within the sub-genres of the police procedural and the urban crime film. Utilizing these elements and adding its own modes and genres has resulted in a television series of unique authenticity. The series simultaneously resists generic conventions while freely mixing various modes and genres.

With regards to my study of the representation of the city, I have examined *The Wire* through its portrayal of the city, its institutions and their impact on the city's most vulnerable population. This has led to a greater understanding of some of *The Wire's* central themes, predominantly the critical disconnections among Baltimore's marginalized citizens, the city's institutions and its legitimate economy and the choices that result from these disconnects. The audience is exposed to the inner workings of the clandestine and coded street cultures that flourish despite the panoptic gaze of the city's major institutions. On a broader scale, the show's frank and unflinching portrayal of Baltimore speaks to the state of American urban culture in general.

The program's spatial practices and representations of space help to connect groups of people who reside in the different urban spaces within the same city. Exploring *The Wire* in this way has provided a model to understanding its representation of Baltimore and its citizens. *The Wire* uses language and sound in a number of ways to inform and engage the audience in the complexities of different urban spaces. The presence of multiple languages, stylized vernacular, and several dialects and accents help

to define and differentiate these different urban spaces. In addition, these sounds establish the order and function of certain spaces.

The Wire situates the audience as hearing within the narrative diegesis, engaging the three different listening modes—those being reduced, causal and semantic listening. This positioning is supported by the (almost complete) absence of non-diegetic narration, or scoring, so that the audience is not distracted by sounds that do not belong within a given scene. Listening is foregrounded over the course of the series through its use of formal sound strategies and through its narrative preoccupation with listening. This listening is presented primarily through the use of police audio surveillance that includes the wiretap of certain payphones and cell-phones, with the use of cloned pagers, and the use of specific vernaculars that actively complicate the gaze. *The Wire's* uses of these formal sound components are paramount to effectively rendering its sonic ecologies and establishing each urban space as unique and particular.

I have shown how *The Wire*'s use of codes and vernacular are particularly open to misinterpretation and misunderstanding, such as when the police mistake a non-pertinent call for a pertinent one. Just as *The Wire* proposes no solutions to institutional corruption, endemic urban poverty, and underlying racism, listening and understanding are simultaneously underscored and obscured as both narrative and formal problems. Indeed, part of the show's appeal lies in the way that it challenges the audience's ability to fully or easily comprehend what they are watching and hearing. This challenge occurs continuously over the course of the five seasons as it requires the audience to employ active listening and pay careful attention to details as they are revealed through its characters. In other words, *The Wire*'s use of sound demands the active engagement and

conscious perception of its complex acousmatic dimension. Its complex acousmatic dimension are expertly rendered, employing the various sound strategies that I have discussed here, fleshing out *The Wire*'s palpable street-level aesthetic.

The problem of translation or comprehension on *The Wire* points towards a greater problem, which is the complete breakdown of understanding. Different modes of listening are demanded of the characters and the audience, in order to interpret the coded language that endures over the course of the series. The use of sound, as presented in the form of multiple languages and codes, is used to create the various urban spaces. It is also used to differentiate various urban spaces from one-another. Clearly spoken English, with minimal or no regional accent, is easy to understand and connect to. It marks the downtown core and the suburbs, where the characters tend to be middle-to-upper class, educated and employed. English with a prevalent accent and/or a minor regional dialect tends to mark the working class space of the dockworkers. Difficult to comprehend vernacular and codes mark the impoverished areas such as West Side Baltimore.

Perhaps what is most at stake on *The Wire* is the act of negotiation. The act of negotiation represents the non-communicative aspect of language; it involves two positions or parties, or several parties, that can find a middle ground through some sort of discursive practice. Negotiation is a path to understanding. There must be a negotiation between what is being said and what is being heard, what is listened to and what is ignored, between what is seen and unseen, and between what is shared and what is suppressed. The audience is challenged to assess what is pertinent and what is not pertinent. It requires the audience to retain or discard sound with the ultimate goal of

making a connection through compromise. At the very least, this process connects people through the art of negotiation, even if no viable solutions are advanced.

While *The Wire* is decidedly apocalyptic, proposing no solutions, its complex view of urban American culture may foster understandings that may lead to critical interventions. Its implicit focus on the importance of listening may point towards modes of understanding that can become the catalyst for change. Likewise, the representation of urban spaces points to the need for understanding marginalized cultures and the need to provide a voice to the city's most abject constituents. In this way, actions such as making meaning, understanding, and listening allow hope to emerge from the hopeless. This in turn is the basis for a community to strive for a better future.

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APPENDIX A:

NARRATIVE SYNOPSIS AND CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

Season One

The Baltimore police department's investigation of a black criminal drug gang and its far-reaching impact on the City of Baltimore, is the starting point of the series' five seasons. Season One begins with Homicide Detective Jimmy McNulty ("McNulty") beginning a new case based on the fledgling "Barksdale" gang, and its connection to the murder of a Criminal Informant (CI).

To start the investigation, a Major Crimes unit is cobbled together. The unit is comprised of Lt. Cedric Daniels ("Daniels"), who is married to Marla Daniels, an aspiring city councilor; McNulty, an alcoholic detective who is divorced and the father of two boys; Officer Roland Pryzbelweski ("Pryz"), the incompetent son-in-law of Police Major Valchek; Detectives Kima Greggs ("Kima"), and Lester Freamon ("Lester"); officers Thomas ("Herc") Hauk, Ellis Carver ("Carver"), and Leandor Sydnor ("Sydnor"). Other law enforcement characters include: Police Deputy Commissioners Rawls and Burrell, Detective Bunk Moreland ("Bunk"), Judge Phelan, and Assistant District Attorney Rhonda Perlman.

At the top of the drug gang hierarchy are Kingpin Avon Barksdale and his second-in-command "top dog" Stringer Bell. Below them are "hoppers" (young drug dealers) Bodie, Poot, D'Angelo and Wallace, and "soldiers" Wee-bay, Stinkum, Shamrock, and Slim Charles.

The audience is also introduced to a homeless, drug-addict "Bubbles" and his sidekick "Johnny", who commit petty crimes to finance their habit. Another character is Omar Little ("Omar'), a homosexual vigilante who survives by robbing drug dealers in

West Baltimore. All of these characters continue to appear throughout the series, many
having their own fleshed out narratives.

Season Two

The second season revolves the discovery by Officer Beattie Russell of a shipping
container on the Baltimore docks that recently landed from Europe. The container is full
of dead women who apparently suffocated while being smuggled into the United States
as part of a human trafficking ring. Meanwhile, Major Daniels puts together another unit
to investigate corruption within the local Stevedores Union, targeting secretary treasurer
Frank Sobotka. Coincidentally, Detective Bunk investigates a Jane Doe murder case that
ultimately has ties to the shipping container case. The Stevedores are linked to an
international crime syndicate known as "The Greeks" that include Spiros Vandalous,
Sergei "Serge" Molotov, "Double G" George Glekas, and an elderly man simply known
as "The Greek". The Greeks have ties to "East Side" drug players Proposition Joe and his
nephew Cheese. Season two also introduces a lesbian couple, Tosha and Kimmy, who
works with Omar to rob drug dealers.

Season Three

The third season takes place during the course of Baltimore's civic elections,
adding another group of new characters to the mix. This season also brings a new case
against the Barksdales. After the ghetto housing project know as the Franklin Terrace
towers is torn down, the Barksdale dealers are pushed out onto the West Side's street
corners and a territorial dispute arises. Ex-con and former Barksdale soldier Dennis

"Cutty" Wise is released from prison and decides to go straight, giving up crime in order to work landscaping. Later, he opens a boxing gym for the West Side middle school boys to train and spar after school and on weekends, in an effort to keep them off the street corners. Marla Daniels vies for a city council seat as her relationship with her husband disintegrates. City Councilors Tommy Carcetti ("Carcetti") and Tony Gray are introduced, along with corrupt Mayor Clarence Royce and Governor Clay Davis.

As season three progresses, Major Bunny Colvin ("Bunny"), of the Western district, creates three "free zones" known as "Hamesterdam" that are a quazi-sanctioned open-air drug market. While Bunny is trying to reduce drug related crime, Stringer Bell forms a co-op and invites all the major drug dealers in the city to join. His idea is to share territory and to pool resources in order to allow affiliated dealers to buy bigger and better drug packages. A new up-and-coming player on the scene, the ruthless young Marlo Stanfield, along with his cold-blooded soldiers Chris and Snoop, refuses to join Stringer Bell and the New Day co-op. After the fall of the Barksdale organization, Marlo Stanfield makes a move to become Baltimore's new kingpin. Young hopper Bodie offers McNulty testimony on Marlo and his organization.

Season Four

As the city council elections draw near, the fourth season follows Pryz to his new job as a math teacher at West Baltimore's Edward Tilghman Middle School. The series introduces a group of students named Dookie, Namon, Michael Lee, and Randy. Each student has a prominent storyline during this season, which focuses on the public school system. Michael ultimately joins Marlo on the streets and Dookie quits school to work.

Randy's foster home is firebombed after he "snitches" about a murder. Naymond is put into a test group at Edward Tilghman and eventually moves in with Bunny and his wife, removing him from his fate as a corner boy. Also, notably, Bubbles gets sober and begins attending Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

Season Five

Lester uncovers a string of murders tied to the Stanfield organization. McNulty and Lester set up an illegal wiretap and invent a fictitious serial-killer, complete with false reports and evidence, in order to build a case concerning several dead bodies dumped by the Marlo Stanfield gang in abandoned, boarded up row-houses in Baltimore's most desolate ghettos.

The final season also introduces a group of journalists from *The Baltimore Sun*. Reporter Scott Templeton falsifies a story, lying that McNulty's fictitious serial killer has contacted him directly. City editor Gus Haynes is suspicious, but the story leads to the restoration of funding to the police department and brings attention to the city's homelessness. Meanwhile, another reporter Mike Fletcher writes an in-depth profile on Bubbles.

As Kima and Sydnor work the case against Marlo Stanfield, McNulty tells Kima about the fictitious killer so that she will not waste valuable time on the investigation. Kima brings this information to Daniels' who, with Assistant Attorney General Rhonda Pearlman, takes the news to newly elected Mayor Tommy Carcetti. Carcetti, who now has his sights set on a senate seat, is concerned that the news will be damaging to his career. He orders a cover up, asking Daniels' to falsify the city's crime statistics in order

to bolster his campaign. Lester and McNulty are pulled from the serial killer case and

threatened with criminal charges if the cover up is exposed. They, along with Daniels, opt

for retirement as the season and series end.