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Preface

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PREFACE

Robert LeVertis Bell and Paul M. Farber

In a standout scene of the HBO television series *The Wire*, a recently paroled felon, Dennis “Cutty” Wise, struggles to come to terms with the changes to the “the game” that have occurred since his imprisonment. Upon struggling to find legitimate employment after his release, Wise finds work as a hitman in the Barksdale drug syndicate only to discover that the characters, mores, and logic of Baltimore’s drug trade have lapsed into even more brutal forms during his lockup. Slim Charles, Wise’s new coworker and the Barksdale gang’s head enforcer, puts these changes in perspective in a mode of address as blunt and cautious as the series itself: “The thing about the old days is that they the old days.”

This statement, as delivered, measures no ambivalence. But much later, in the final episode of the series, Slim Charles fails to heed his own caution against nostalgia. Charles shoots the treacherous Cheese, who’d orchestrated the death of the sagacious and avuncular druglord Proposition Joe, just as Cheese was himself speechifying on the value and necessity of moving on, keeping the past in the past. “There ain’t no nostalgia to this shit,” Cheese declares, “there’s just the street and the game and what happened here today.” Shortly thereafter, as Cheese retraces his betrayal of Joe, his uncle and mentor, and begins to boast of the benefits the betrayal has sown, Charles puts a bullet into Cheese’s brain. Standing over the man’s convulsing body, Charles announces, “That was for Joe,” repudiating his earlier injunction at the grotesque sight of a friend’s murderer announcing a form of the same idea. Cheese’s demise was a singular, visceral, cathartic moment in the series; many viewers report vocally cheering when Cheese went down. One critic lamented not being able to watch the series finale in a crowded theater, if only to have collectively experienced the scene and subsequently enlisted in a round of applause.

Both the original injunction and its subsequent reversal embolden a challenge the series sets for us as we look back at *The Wire*. In the series’ aftermath, we are faced with dueling proclivities: Either to disavow nos-

talgia for the moment of *The Wire*—after all, the moment of *The Wire*, the moments that *The Wire* portrayed and critiqued, are characterized by a darkness from which looking away sometimes feels natural, healthy, prudent—and to let the past be the past; or, conversely, to arm that very nostalgia for the sake of viewing the series and its critical dispositions against a changed and charged lifescape, so as to seek some kind of vengeance on the inherited past. It's this latter tack that we feel would best reflect and respond to *The Wire*'s particular cultural valence. The series is an unprecedented achievement in television production, narrative, and scope partially because of its nuanced and detailed second-look portrayal of progress. The series' dramatic sophistication, lucid portrayal of municipal institutions in the wake of the War on Drugs (and, eventually, the War on Terror), and critical mission offered a rare moment in our public culture to interrogate “progress,” “truth,” and “power,” and the very idea of the past. *The Wire*, both as a critical model and as an object of criticism, matters precisely because of the emerging present and the constantly expanding footprint of its reflexive vantage point. This special issue of *Criticism* comprises its contributors' commitment to bring *The Wire* forward while looking backward.

This issue first grew out of an interdisciplinary symposium at the University of Michigan (U-M) called “Heart of the City: Black Urban Life on *The Wire*,” held 29–30 January 2009. U-M's Black Humanities Collective (BHC), a group focused on study of the African Diaspora, planned the two-day event. The success of the event was due to the diligence and creative vision of BHC's graduate student organizing team, and the support of U-M's Center for Afroamerican and African Studies (CAAS), as well as the eighteen other cosponsoring units. At “Heart of the City,” we sought critical considerations of *The Wire* that looked to the series as both an object and a model for criticism. In the latter respect, we found it necessary to embrace the critical—even didactic—quality of *The Wire* that accounts, at least partially, for the series' broad appeal within the academy and elsewhere. Rather than retreat from the fandom that would surely motivate many of the submissions, we were especially interested in presentations that would reflect upon the series' unique relationship to the world at large. The resulting dialogue was rich and heterogeneous and involved scholars from more than a dozen universities, and over 250 attendees from Ann Arbor and the surrounding Michigan communities. We were also very grateful for the spirited involvement of Sonja Sohn, who portrayed Detective Shakima “Kima” Greggs on the series, and Clark Johnson, who directed four episodes (including the first and last) and starred in the final season as *Baltimore Sun* editor Gus Haynes. In what may be an academic symposium first, BHC also curated an exclusive “Heart of the City”-

themed mixtape produced by DJ Scottie B, one of the progenitors of the Baltimore Club music genre. The event was capped by a roundtable discussion among Professors Mark Anthony Neal, Hua Hsu, James Peterson, and Salamishah Tillet (and moderated by Jonathan Metzl) that examined *The Wire*'s import in light of the inauguration of President Barack Obama (himself, a fan) the week prior. The culmination of the symposium in the week after the Obama inauguration marked one moment of the series' afterlife. In times currently that resemble not the optimism of that moment, but some of the bleakest of the series, we urge the *The Wire*'s viewing audience to return again to the show.

This issue features several essays first shared at the symposium (Anderson, Bell, La Berge, and Love), as well as ones written expressly for this issue (Brown, Farber, Hsu, Jameson, Neal, and Peterson). Each essay considers a formal concept or organizing principle of the series, and extrapolates and explores an argument therein. There are plenty of nods to devotees of the series (and spoilers for those still waiting to watch). This isn't the first collection to be published in *The Wire*'s afterlife—which now appears preternaturally long—and it won't be the last. Our hope is that this issue, and the excellent essays within, will circulate in a broader conversation going on amongst scholars and critics across the world, from elite institutions to underrecognized intellectual fertile grounds. We collectively revisit *The Wire* to take on its mantle and its burden, and rather than merely look back, make anew.

We are indebted to our editors at *Criticism*, Jonathan Flatley and Richard Grusin, who offered us the opportunity to edit this issue and guided us at each step of the way. Their trust in us and tutelage throughout the publication process helped spur this issue to completion. We also thank Managing Editor Marie Buck, the *Criticism* editorial board, and all of the contributors who pushed our thinking in this process. We extend much gratitude to BHC organizers Grace Sanders, Matthew Blanton, Adrienne Carson, Rachel Afi Quinn, Tayana Hardin, Brenna Greer, Nava EtShalom, Kya Mangrum, Joe Cialdella, and Patricia Moonsammy, who were instrumental in shaping the "Heart of the City" symposium (and thus the underlying intellectual concerns of this issue), as well as Professors Kevin Gaines, Angela Dillard, Paul Anderson, and Robin Means-Coleman, and CAAS staff liaisons Chaquita Willis, Elizabeth James, and Faye Portis, for their encouragement and support.

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