"All in the Game": Using *The Wire* in Teaching African American Narratives

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The measure of a successful literature course cannot be determined by any one thing. We want our students to continue developing their critical thinking and writing skills, to show in class discussions and in their written work that they are able to identify an author’s intentions, to locate major themes and symbols, and to make connections to other works we have read in the course. We also want our students to see literature as an expression of the human experience. And in courses that feature writings of historically under-represented groups, we want students to connect that experience to the discriminatory practices that shaped it. Moreover, we need them to trace the development of those practices and come to understand their contemporary equivalents. For example, the 1940s of Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946) is representative of a particular moment of time, but it also showcases an urban segregation that continues today.

At the small liberal arts college where I work, I have taught two courses that focus exclusively on African American narratives. During the first semester, I was struck by my students’ inability to make connections between the class differences, gender discrimination, and racism
demonstrated in the texts we read and in contemporary society. Even though we could agree that *The Street*'s Lutie Johnson drowned under the weight of the discriminatory forces of the 1940s, I could not get students to see how those forces continued to work against the Luties of the 21st century. While my students enjoyed the class and I received positive feedback, I ended the semester feeling as though the course had failed them, that I had failed them.

As I prepared to teach the course a second time that sense of failure was still fresh in my mind, and I looked for different narratives that would encourage students to make connections across historical eras. In a first-year composition course the previous semester, I had successfully used David Simon and Ed Burns’s HBO miniseries, *The Corner* (2000), to guide class discussion and generate topic ideas for the course, but I had dismissed their multi-seasonal, dramatic series, *The Wire* (2002), because it was too long and too involved for my purposes. In a course on African American narratives, however, the first season of *The Wire* provides an interesting alternative to the more traditional texts studied in the course. *The Wire* could become a framing device for our study of black narratives and, most important, force students to accept discrimination not as a part of our historical past but as a dominant influence on our historical present and future.

In its five season run from 2002 to 2008, *The Wire* presents its viewers with an uncompromising look at the city of Baltimore and has quickly become a darling of television critics and academics. Labeled by many as the best television series ever, *The Wire* has found its way into essay anthologies, special issues of journals, and academic conferences—including a special session at the 2008 Modern Language Association conference. The series has also found a place in the classroom as instructors across disciplines—from film and media studies to sociology—employ this narrative to help illustrate the vicious cycles of class conflict, poverty, and urban decay (Bennett). Since both critics and
the show’s creators often claim the show is like a novel, The Wire can also be invited into the literature classroom.

In my second African American narratives course, the students were a mix of both English majors and non-majors; the latter enrolled in the course to satisfy their Literature general education requirement. Because this was an entry-level course, I anticipated working with students to develop methods for literary analysis, and we spent a good part of the first few weeks developing a language with which to examine the texts. Based on my experience with The Corner and other television series in past courses, I also anticipated the need for us to develop a way to “read” The Wire. To that end, we watched the first episode together. Students would then be responsible for watching the next eleven episodes outside of class; we would view the final episode of the season on our last day of class.

I wanted to convey to students early on that even though The Wire differed from our other narratives, all could be viewed as texts, all could be read and understood through a critical lens. That argument, as you can imagine, is much easier to make with traditional forms of literature, and my attempt to critically analyze a television show was initially met with some skepticism. My students were accustomed to viewing television passively and were resistant to becoming active viewers; television, they argued, was for entertainment. Watching the first episode in class, then, became an important first step to transforming their understanding of the show and the role it played in the class.

As any one who has seen The Wire knows, keeping track of the series’ protagonists is a monumental task, so I provided my students with a list of characters. A few of my more ambitious students immediately improved upon my work by printing out, for the class, color copies of character names and their pictures, all available on HBO.com. In addition to cast sheets, I also provided students with a bit of background on the genesis of the show, detailing David Simon’s experience as a newspaper
reporter in Baltimore, Ed Burns’ stint as a homicide detective in the city, and their previous collaborative productions, their book *The Corner* and its adaptation as a HBO miniseries. Most important, I explained to my students that, unlike traditional television shows that place a premium on exposition and an end-of-the-episode conclusion, *The Wire* should be “read” as what Simon has called a “visual novel” (25); the first few episodes of the show should be like the first few chapters of any novel: inevitably, you’ll have more questions than answers.

Episode 1, “The Target,” begins with Detective James McNulty’s interrogation of a witness to a murder he is investigating, and the witness reveals that the victim was killed for robbing a craps game, something, the witness claims, he does every day. When McNulty asks why they had previously allowed the victim in the game if he was only going to rob them at some point, the witness responds, “Got to. This is America, man.” This revelation immediately introduces viewers to one of the constant themes in *The Wire*: the rules of the Baltimore city streets are the same rules that govern American society as a whole. As the show progressed, I reminded students to watch for instances where drug dealing and the street mirrored American capitalism, and they surprised me with their insights. When D’Angelo Barksdale murders a competitor in plain sight of a number of witnesses and forces his uncle (and soon to be target of a police investigation) to buy off those witnesses, my students identified his subsequent demotion to a less lucrative housing project as an appropriate punishment levied against a mid-level executive who makes a costly mistake; it would be akin, they argued, to an ad executive who is removed from a high profile portfolio because of a publicity faux pas.

The first episode also showcases local government’s inability to combat drug trafficking and the violence it produces; it establishes Simon’s premise for the first season: “a dry, deliberate argument against the American drug prohibition—a Thirty Years’ War that is among the most singular and profound failures to be found in the nation’s domestic
history” (12). Unimaginative thinking, bureaucracy, and competing political goals all work against solutions to a serious problem. Moreover, The Wire suggest that these features of American society infect all the participants of this “game”—drug dealers, users, and police officers—with a sense of fatalism. When responding to a fellow officer’s discussion on the war on drugs, one detective responds, “Girl, you can’t even call this shit a war…Wars end” (“The Target”). As the season continues to unfold, this pessimism gives way to a growing sense of environmental determinism that governs so many of these characters’ actions, and as I began to introduce other African American narratives alongside The Wire, the role environment plays in character development became much more apparent.

In each of the more traditional narratives we read in the course—James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912), Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), Ann Petry’s The Street, Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940), August Wilson’s Fences (1986), and Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place (1980)—environment is a controlling factor in their characters’ lives. As my students “read” The Wire with/against an assigned portion of these narratives, they were required to submit a response paper that established connections between the visual and written works. At times, this proved to be a fairly easy task, particularly with Petry, Wright, and Naylor’s texts, all of which are set in large cities that mimic the Baltimore setting of The Wire. Wright and Petry’s—and to some extent, Naylor’s—use of literary naturalism opened up the most avenues for comparison, as students continually indentified the destructive environmental forces responsible for the protagonists’ decline. Native Son and The Wire worked with each other to highlight the tragic outcomes of oppression and discrimination. D’Angelo’s attempt to take his girlfriend to an upscale restaurant engenders the same response as Bigger Thomas’s when he arrives at the Dalton’s home; unable to understand the rules of this environment, both
men feel a sense of discomfort and shame that quickly turns to anger. And in *The Street*, students finally drew parallels to the discriminatory forces that shaped Lutie Johnson and the ones that continue to shape Detective Kima Greggs and the other women of *The Wire*.

In our reading of *The Wire*, Greggs became one of the most intriguing characters, and our class discussions compared her to a number of the other female protagonists we had read. As the only female detective featured in this season, Greggs already occupies a privileged place in Simon and Burns’s narrative, and she constantly must prove herself to her male contemporaries. When a drug suspect strikes another (male) police officer, Greggs joins her colleagues in beating the suspect as retaliation for his actions, a behavior that impressed one of the other officers enough for him to remark, “she beat him like a man” (“The Buys”). In a police department where patriarchal power is absolute and women are viewed as weak and objects of desire, Greggs must adopt stereotypically male characteristics in order to be accepted. If she doesn’t, she could find herself laboring under the same conditions that governed Lutie and subject to the same limiting choices.

At those times when connections between *The Wire* and the other narratives proved difficult, I asked students to move beyond discussions of literal connections and focus instead on identifying symbols and other literary elements. During our viewing of the first episode, I stopped the DVD on a conversation between D’Angelo and another character, Wee Bay, which takes place outside a restaurant that features two neon signs, one of which is “Burgers,” the other “Chicken.” D’Angelo’s placement under the “chicken” sign is an important symbol that conveys to careful viewers his inability to play the game and foreshadows much of his character development.

After that example, I asked my students to continue looking for other “signs” in these narratives. In their written responses and in class discussions, students not only identified the obvious symbols of the pear
tree in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the role of baseball in *Fences*, they also located more obscure ones in *The Wire*. In the climactic episode of the first season, “The Cost,” an undercover investigation goes awry when Greggs is shot and her informant killed. The shooting, which occurs in the informant’s car, is one of the most shocking developments in the show and as the episode concludes, the camera’s point of view shifts from the victims to the eight ball swinging from the car’s rear view mirror. That shot, my students contended, was indicative of the position in which both the informant and Greggs found themselves. The informant had no choice but to work with the authorities, and the undercover work required an African American woman. Both characters were behind the eight ball.

Beyond themes and symbols, *The Wire* also allows for discussions about narrative structure. The show’s unique camera shots create a text with shifting point-of-views not unlike those found in Petry and Naylor’s texts. We discussed the effect these shifts had on our readings. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor’s decision to divide her narrative by providing the perspective of seven women complements Petry’s method, and both texts are concerned with giving their readers as complete a picture as possible. And although *The Wire*’s inclusion of varied viewing angles certainly serves an aesthetic purpose, it also works to create a sense of distance from these subjects while still providing an intimate look into their lives.

In a literature class that seeks to develop critical thinking and writing skills, the inclusion of *The Wire* has a number of positive benefits. Through their “reading” of the show, students can develop the ability to identify major themes and symbols and make connections across genres and historical time periods. As we watched D’Angelo struggle in the final episode of the season between his obligations to himself and to his family, students pointed out similar moments in the other texts we had read in the course, and I decided to include a question on those instances in their final examination. The conflict between the individual and her/his
community is present in every text we read: Johnson’s narrator chooses to pass and abandon his race in The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man; Janie chooses love over class in Their Eyes Were Watching God; and Troy chooses his desires over the needs of his family in Fences. And when D’Angelo’s mother reminds him that if “you ain’t got family in this world, what the hell you got?” (“Sentencing”), D’Angelo—like Bigger and Lutie—surrenders to his environment and sacrifices any opportunity he has to be free. This was a sobering moment for my students, one that drove home the message found in so many of the works we read.

As characters in our historical present, D’Angelo and Greggs become examples of the continued impact of discriminatory practices in this country. In a course on African American narratives, The Wire serves as a valuable pedagogical tool by providing students with a perspective that encourages deeper examination of traditional texts, and it infuses discussions with contemporary examples of gender discrimination, class differences, and racism. As contemporary politics intersect with these issues, this kind of discourse is particularly relevant. The study of literature must, therefore, equip students with more than the ability to recognize theme and symbol: we must show them how a text fully engages with culture, so that they might better understand the real-world applications of its lessons. In an America where many now claim discrimination is no longer a factor, The Wire reminds us that this game is far from over.
Works Cited


