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# THE DEPTH OF THE HOLE: INTERTEXTUALITY AND TOM WAITS'S “WAY DOWN IN THE HOLE”

James Braxton Peterson

The opening theme music for HBO's series *The Wire* is a song written by Tom Waits entitled “Way Down in the Hole” (1987). Each year during the series' five-season run, the producers selected or solicited a different version of the song. As a series, *The Wire* is often interpreted as lacking a space for representations of black spirituality. Each of the five seasons features complex institutional characterizations and explorations of the Street, the Port, the Law, the Hall (i.e., politics), the School, and/or the Paper (i.e., media). Through these institutional characters and the individual characters that inhabit, construct, and confront them, *The Wire* depicts urban America, writ large across the canvas of cultural and existential identity. For all of its institutional complexity, *The Wire* then serially marginalizes black spirituality in favor of realism, naturalism, and some may argue, nihilism.<sup>1</sup> “Way Down in the Hole” is a paratextual narrative that embodies this marginalization and creates a potential space for viewers (and listeners) of the show, one that frames each episode and the entire run, through literary and spiritual black musical contexts. The multiple versions of “Way Down in the Hole” ultimately function as a marginalized repository for the literary and spiritual narratives that are connected to the series—narratives that become legible via intertextual analyses and in turn render visible *The Wire*'s least visible entities: black spirituality and the Black Church.<sup>2</sup>

In an attempt to engage this marginality and its attendant space for black literary and spiritual content, I critically engage various versions of “Way Down in the Hole,” the numerous artists who perform the song, and the spiritual aesthetics central to each version of the song. Moreover, each artist's interpretation or treatment of this song constitutes an intertextual relationship with developments in African American music.<sup>3</sup> Thus, “Way Down in the Hole” is an African American musical text—an

Afro-blues spiritual text, to be precise. In several instances, specific lyrics function as *intertext* with and to multiple narratives within African American culture, including sociolinguistic phenomena, spirituality, and African American literary history. Generally speaking, *intertextuality*, a term coined by Julia Kristeva, refers to the ways in which language almost universally refers to itself. However, there are limited forms of intertextuality that include quotations, deliberate allusions, and various other linguistic connections and relationships.<sup>4</sup> The analysis in this essay employs a limited type of narrative intertextuality as opposed to the universal intertextuality favored by various scholars such as Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida. This limited, critically deliberate intertextuality includes the cinematic variety found in the opening montages of *The Wire*, only briefly glossed in this essay; the relationship amongst the various “Way Down(s)”; developments in African American music; and certain lyrics of the song that engender connections to African American literary history and spirituality. This limited intertextual model challenges viewers and listeners to consider how lyrical language, artistic experience, and musical genre function integrally to produce thematic suggestions not readily apparent in the narratives of the series itself. As a result of its apparent absence from the show, or at least its deliberately backgrounded or marginalized presence within the show, the Black Church, particularly manifestations of black spirituality, exists in the spiritual narrativity of the various versions of the show’s theme song. The legibility of the Black Church (in *The Wire*) then, a central institution in the black American experience, relies on the audibility of multiple intertextual connections between versions of “Way Down in the Hole” and the artistic tools of African American cultural production. These multiple instances of intertextuality suggest a thematically grounded *Afro-blues spiritual* sensibility operating within and amongst the narratives of this critically acclaimed dramatic series.

Intertextuality is but one element upon which *The Wire*’s interpretability as a novel or work of literary significance might be established. At least one other narrative element, the paratextual nature or positioning of the series’ theme song, lends additional plausibility to novelistic and/or narrative-oriented interpretations of *The Wire*. “Paratextuality” is a term defined by narratologist Gérard Genette, who states that “peritext” and “epitext” together constitute the “paratextuality” of a novel or collection of texts. *Paratextuality* is defined as “those liminal devices and conventions both within the book (peritext) and outside it (epitext), that mediate the book to the reader: titles and subtitles, pseudonyms, forewords, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, intertitles, notes, epilogues, and afterwords.”<sup>5</sup>

Here, paratextuality refers to *The Wire*'s opening visual sequences accompanied by various versions of the series' theme song, "Way Down in the Hole." Part of my argument is that "Way Down in the Hole" has an epitextual relationship to the series. It mediates *The Wire* (to the viewer) through the lyrics of the song, the various versions of the song, and the particularities of genre peculiar to each version. One by-product of this mediation is the way in which "Way Down in the Hole" reflects some semblance of black spirituality not directly presented within the dramatic narratives of the show. "Way Down in the Hole" is a marginalized repository of musical narratives featuring spiritual themes rendered through expansive intertextuality within African American cultural production.

Each season of *The Wire* contains a cinematic montage, a visual *epitext* that corresponds with each version of the opening theme song, "Way Down in the Hole." Each montage features a collection of clips that point to, foreshadow, and/or underscore some element, character, or scene in the season or, in some cases, in the series. The montage is a visual precursor to the show, and its intertextual nature symbolizes an aspect of the argument of this essay because it reflects the intertextual qualities of the songs that function as the soundtrack to the opening sequence. In season 1, "[t]he sequence shows the series' fondness for counterintelligence and misdirection while setting the stage for a battle of wills in which neither side is inclined to lay down and die."<sup>6</sup> Season 1's montage introduces the audience to one clip that remains in subsequent montages/sequences that play at the opening of each episode of *The Wire*. This particular clip (again, found in each season's sequence) features two dealers (or denizens of the Street) throwing rocks at and cracking the lens of a video surveillance camera. The clip signals the dramatic ongoing tension between the Street and the Law, the central subject matter of the series. It is also "a display of defiance and a reminder that both sides are aware of the other's tactics."<sup>7</sup>

Season 4's cinematic montage is a reflective and intertextual opening sequence of the series. Since Andrew Dignan has crafted an astute gloss of each season's opening sequence, it is worth quoting him at length here:

There's a procession of shots near the end of the credits that encapsulates everything *The Wire* has worked to establish over the years. A local shopkeeper spins open a countertop security window, sending through a pack of smokes; a hand spins a pair of expensive-looking designer rims; a piece of playground equipment spins anonymously at night; a child rolls a large tire around in an empty alley; bundles of narcotics are packed alongside a spare tire in the back of a car

with a piece of carpeting pulled up to conceal them. And then a similar cut of fabric—this time a body-bag being carried from an abandoned row house. The same motions are repeated throughout, and the eye is drawn to how these shots flow seamlessly into one another: The bodega is a front for drug distribution; the rims represent wealth and status among street youth; the playground equipment, an image of youthful innocence, is corrupted by the sight of an adult perched upon it, holding an alcoholic beverage; the child with the tire, left unsupervised, is forced to amuse himself with whatever is available; the drugs are another form of self-amusement; and of course there's the corpse, where all this is destined to lead.<sup>8</sup>

Dignan's attention to the circular motions "repeated throughout" the montage reflects the multiple ways in which the sequence(s) constructs intertextual relationships between certain visual clips and the plot and themes of the show. The show underscores the cycles of institutional progress; as the seasons accrue, new criminals emerge as old ones are killed or imprisoned, new politicians take power as old ones are voted out of office, and officers of the law rise up in the ranks. The cyclical nature of the real world that *The Wire* suggestively reflects is ultimately borne out in the series' conclusion as various new characters replace dead, or rehabilitated, old characters (e.g., Michael Lee is positioned to become Omar Little, and Duquan Weems is positioned to become Bubbles Cousins). This intertextuality and repetition is also reflected in the versioning of the theme song, "Way Down in the Hole."

David Simon has often been quoted as describing *The Wire* as a series of conflicts and encounters between the institution and the individual. According to Simon,

*The Wire* depicts a world in which capital has triumphed completely, labor has been marginalized and monied interests have purchased enough political infrastructure to prevent reform. It is a world in which the rules and values of the free market and maximized profit have been mistaken for a social framework, a world where institutions themselves are paramount and every day human beings matter less.<sup>9</sup>

Various characters who populate the storyworld of *The Wire* often confront and are conflicted by the strictures of certain institutions.<sup>10</sup> These

individual-institutional conflicts help to formulate the seasonal and serial narratives of *The Wire*. Simon's vision for the series always lent itself to serial narrativity and literary interpretation. In interviews during the series' inaugural year (2002), Simon "began referring to the work as a 'visual novel,' explaining that the first episodes of the show had to be considered much as the first chapters of any book of even moderate length."<sup>11</sup> Simon's sense of *The Wire* as a "novel for television" invites certain literary analyses of the series and underscores my narratological approach that features intertextual *readings* of the paratextual matter of the show (i.e., the various versions of "Way Down in the Hole").

## I. YOUTHFUL MUSINGS

Season 4 of *The Wire* features four black male youth who are rocked by the institutional-individual nexus in inner-city Baltimore: Michael Lee, Namond Brice, Duquan Weems, and Randy Wagstaff are the season's main characters. Each of these middle school-aged African American boys faces the institutional-individual confrontation along at least two axes: the Individual vs. the School, and the Individual vs. the Street. To underscore these conflicts and the youthful themes of the season, and to localize the thematic entrance to the show, DoMaJe, an underground Baltimore group, performs "Way Down 4" (2005). DoMaJe consists of five Baltimore teenagers: Tariq Al-Sabir, Markel Steele, Ivan Ashford, Cameron Brown, and Avery Bargasse. DoMaJe's version of "Way Down in the Hole" was arranged and recorded specifically for the show. Its rhythm and blues aesthetic features a more distinctly digital and synthesized vocal and musical production of all of the versions used for the series (see table 1). One contributing element of that advancement is the female lead voice, which makes it unique amongst all of the versions, as well. Considering the somewhat limited presence of women's voices in the series itself, this version of "Way Down in the Hole" again creates space and place—here for a woman's vocalization—in the paratextual margins of the series.

Steve Earle, an actor who plays Walon in the series and records "Way Down 5," claims that DoMaJe "took the most unique approach" and that their version "proved the universality of the song."<sup>12</sup> Although other versions ("Way Down 1" and "Way Down 3," especially) of Waits's song feature various forms of call-and-response, sometimes between the instruments and other times between the vocals and the instruments, DoMaJe's "Way Down in the Hole" features a series of call-and-response improvisations that serve to distinguish it further from all of the other ver-

Table 1. The various versions of “Way Down in the Hole”

Version	Performing artist	Musical genre(s)	Broad seasonal theme
Way Down 1	5 Blind Boys of Alabama	Gospel/blues	Inside the mind of a spiritually and emotionally reflective criminal
Way Down 2	Tom Waits	Delta blues	Hustlers’/cops’/working-class blues
Way Down 3	The Neville Brothers	New Orleans blues/go-go	Fusion and amalgamation: Consider the experimental nature of the “Hamsterdam” neighborhood, where drugs are temporarily not criminalized.
Way Down 4	DoMaJe	Rhythm and blues/soul	Call-and-response and youth who came (always already) of age
Way Down 5	Steve Earle	Country blues	A full circle of sorts and the fiction/non-fiction continuum in media and in reality
Way Down X	M.I.A., Chateauhaag, Spirit & Blues, BlueTouch	Hip-hop/jazz/blues/rock (respectively)	Not applicable

sions. Call-and-response is a staple form of African American spiritual and artistic expression. The call-and-response vocals reach back to the spiritual coordinates of the mapped developments of African American music even as they suggest multiple meanings of “the hole” in Waits’s original lyrics (see figure 1). The call-and-response exchanges occur while the lead vocals repeat “Deeper in the hole / Down in the hole.” The “Deeper in the hole / down in the hole” lyrics function as the call. Members of DoMaJe respond to this call by referring to and/or lexically exchanging the original meaning of hole with *the gutter*, *the trash*, and/or *the sewer* in responsive phrases such as “keep him down in the gutter, right in the sewer yo” or “keep him in the trash, yo.” Through this call-and-response, DoMaJe suggest a sociolinguistic intervention and innovation commensurate with the modern rhythm and blues stylings and universal interpretation of their performance. This intervention adds an interpretive layer to the meaning of *the hole* and pivots around the symbolic and intertextual nature of “the hole” in African American culture.

In African American literary history and in the history of African American literary criticism, *the hole* engenders a surplus of meanings related to and reflective of identity, subversive action, addiction, and loss, amongst many other concepts, ideas, and emotions. Nat Turner digs a hole in the woods and hides for nearly a month after his rebellion is brutally put down.<sup>13</sup> How he hides out and survives in a hole in 1831 as the

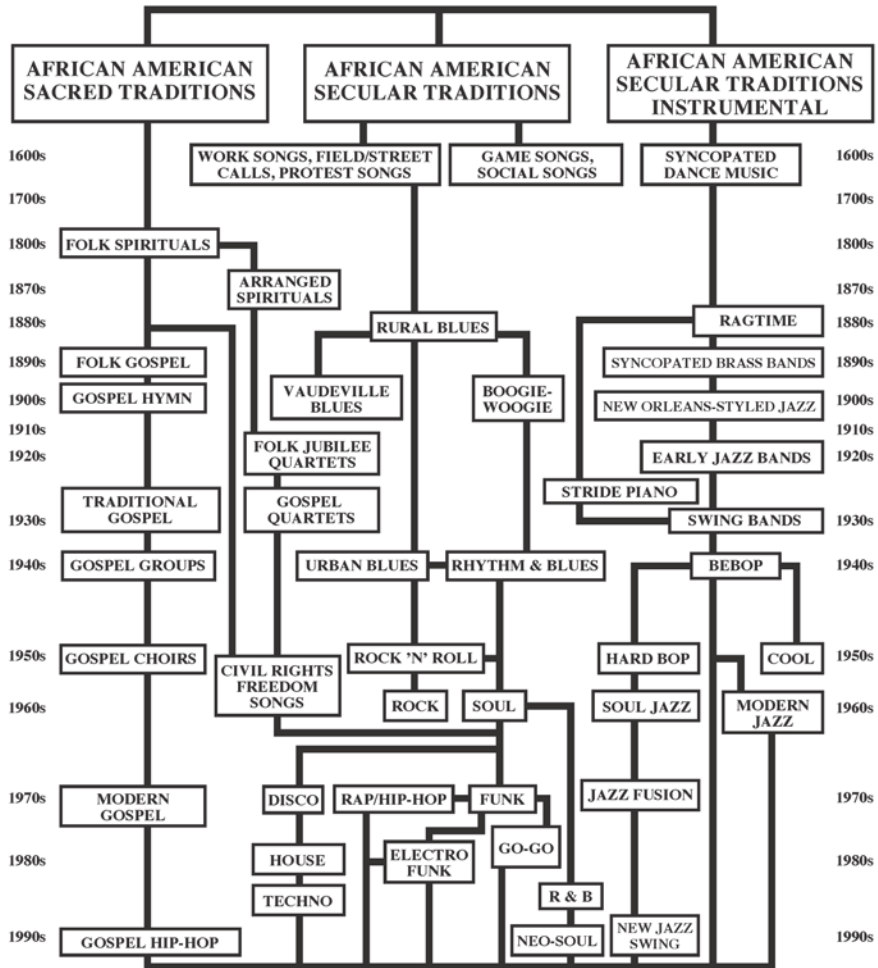


Figure 1. The evolution of African American music. © Portia K. Maultsby, Ph.D. Revised 1995, 2005, 2008. All rights reserved.

most wanted man in America (and maybe the most wanted black man ever) is still one of Black History's unasked and unanswered queries. The ability to hide oneself in/on the earth became a central practicality of the Underground Railroad in the nineteenth century. *The Hole* in this sense was an underground, but the underground was the pathway to freedom and self-identification. Richard Wright mythologizes "the hole" in "Big Boy Leaves Home" (1936), a short story that is echoed in the oppressive experiences of the young protagonists in season 4 of *The Wire*. Wright's



story connects “the hole,” or rather the black underground, to origins conceived as “fugitive property” departing “home” for liberated geographies.<sup>14</sup> After trespassing on a white soldier’s property with three middle school-aged friends, Wright’s protagonist, Big Boy, escapes certain death in the South by traveling a postbellum version of the Underground Railroad.<sup>15</sup> His family communicates with the black community’s elders. They devise a plan by which Big Boy will hide in a kiln hole while awaiting the arrival of Will, a black interstate driver from the community who is making a run to Chicago. This is exactly how the Underground Railroad worked. While Big Boy awaits his “freedom train,” and by nominative abstraction, his Will, he kills a snake and a dog and he witnesses the brutal lynching of his last surviving friend and fellow fugitive: Bobo.

Although Wright’s text is rife with symbols (e.g., Will, the struggles with snake and the dog, trains to keep time), the short story’s key image is the underground space, the hole, where Big Boy undergoes his murderous rites of passage. He is in a kiln. A *kiln* is “any of various ovens for hardening, burning, or drying substances, such as grain, meal, or clay, especially a brick-lined oven used to bake ceramics.”<sup>16</sup> In the same space that murderous hate, paralyzing fear, and unreasonable racism are being burned into the mind and soul of Wright’s protagonist, his kiln experience is a proleptic literary influence on two of the most important figures in Afro-American letters: Bigger Thomas of *Native Son* (1940) and the narrator of *Black Boy* (1945).<sup>17</sup> Wright’s literary creations, from the ground up, are essential for the black expressive urban realism that, in time, captures the imagination of the Hip-Hop Generation and certainly finds a “home” in intertextual connections to season 4 of *The Wire*.

## II. (IN)SIGHT

Season 1 of *The Wire* features a version of “Way Down in the Hole” performed by the Five Blind Boys of Alabama (FBBB). Although this version of the song is not the original, or *sui generis*, version, it is this interpretation that launches the series and elucidates several important initiate points. In addition, this song introduces an Afro-blues spiritual impulse to *The Wire*. According to Cornel West, the “Afro-American spiritual-blues impulse” consists of “polyphonic, rhythmic effects and antiphonal vocal techniques, of kinetic orality and affective physicality.”<sup>18</sup> The *Afro-blues spiritual* modifier is an intertextual, originating reference point from which each version of “Way Down” might be categorized and considered. The *spiritual* component of the term underscores the content of the lyrics,

which are fairly consistent across versions (glossed in greater detail below) and reflective upon archetypal Christian narratives in so much of African American music. The *blues* component of the term suggests both the laborious origins of the African American experience and the musical tenets articulated by and through that experience. The "antiphonal" (i.e., sung or chanted in alternation) vocal techniques, "kinetic orality," and "affective physicality"—that is, emotionally moving physical movement—also corroborate the ways in which blues performances are defined and described.<sup>19</sup>

The *afro* descriptor constitutes a more complex aspect of the term. It refers to the "West African Roots" positioned at the top of the chart in Portia Maultsby's model "African American music: its development"; the "afro" designation also distinctly captures and/or refers to the percussive underpinnings of black music (see figure 1: Maultsby's model).<sup>20</sup> Various forms of percussion, especially the drumbeat, pulsate at the core of spiritual and ritualistic practices throughout the continent of Africa. The "polyphonic, rhythmic effects" described by West thus point to an important conflation of the sacred in African percussive traditions with the secular in African American percussive and musical traditions. The "Afro-blues spiritual impulse" then enables us to articulate a starting point that captures the trajectories and coordinates through which various interpretations of "Way Down" might be organized and contextualized. Beginning the series of *The Wire* and the "Way Down(s)" with the FBBA thus makes musicological sense because, even though they are not the original writers or performers of the song, they represent the genre and a region from which the Afro-blues spiritual expression of the African American experience emerges.

The Five Blind Boys of Alabama are gospel vocalists and musicians who through the initial part of their career sang only gospel music and performed for all-black segregated audiences.<sup>21</sup> The group, and by extension their gospel-inflected or spiritually inflected performance, marks "Way Down 1." The tonal aspects of the Negro Spiritual infused in FBBA's gospel or spiritually based performance is a point of origin for African American music and the African American experience. The FBBA, who began performing in 1939, have remained true to their gospel roots but did eventually branch out as black musical forms developed and fused and as gospel or spiritual themes and tonalities continued to inform various types of musical production. Consider the 1930s and 1940s on Maultsby's model. The FBBA would have been considered a traditional gospel group since they formed in the late 1930s. Throughout the 1940s, the gospel quintet shared *cross-influences* with rhythm and blues and ur-

ban blues, which each serve to eventually spawn rock and roll, soul, and by extension various other forms and genres of African American music.

The FBBA made numerous conscious decisions to develop their recording and performative repertoire beyond their musical genre of origin. One such career-defining moment was the 1988 Broadway production of *The Gospel at Colonus*, which features Lee Breuer's lyrical reworking of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and stars Morgan Freeman as the Preacher and Messenger, whose sermonic narrative is the rubric through which this intertextual version of the Oedipal narrative is rendered. In "*The Gospel at Colonus* (And Other Black Morality Plays)," Mimi D'Aponte refers to the play as "gripping ritual drama" and "the interface between fifth-century B.C. Athenian text and twentieth-century Afro-American performance."<sup>22</sup> At one nexus of this intertextual interface, the FBBA perform the role of Oedipus's alter ego as a modern Greek chorus. According to D'Aponte, Breuer deliberately conflates and juxtaposes the Greek mythos of blindness with the poignant cultural significance of blindness in the African American musical tradition in jazz and the blues.<sup>23</sup> For the FBBA, this paradigm takes shape as their blindness allows them to ascribe to a mythological authenticity amongst black musicians (consider Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder as more popular and recent examples of this), exemplified brilliantly when they portrayed a blind-men blues version of the Greek chorus in *The Gospel at Colonus*.

The intertextual significance of FBBA's version of "Way Down in the Hole" resides in the bluesy gospel delivery of the lyrics. The recorded vocals of "Way Down 1" feature the diction, nuances in annunciation, and textured vibrato that listeners have come to associate with African American spiritual and gospel music. Yet the intertextual meaning of the lyrics (especially in certain lines) resonates with Christian narratives and themes of crime and street life in *The Wire*, and even draws from the African American literary canon. The opening line of "Way Down in the Hole," "If you walk through the garden / You better watch your back," engenders multiple meanings hinging on the pragmatic context of watching one's back and the biblical/mundane oppositional contexts of the word "garden."<sup>24</sup> A definitive meaning of *garden* is a space designated for growing plants, flowers, and vegetables. This mundane meaning of the term underscores the virtual absence of gardens across the urban landscape of Baltimore, but it is not this meaning that produces/yields the intertextuality within this line.

The biblical meaning of the garden as the site of the Fall in Genesis is a foundational intertext through which flow themes from the series and a telling example from black literary history. Surely the "garden" of inner-

city Baltimore is not the utopian garden of Genesis. It is a site, however, that is a backdrop of the fall of many characters within the storyworld of *The Wire*. In season 1, viewers are most privy to D'Angelo Barksdale's near-Christian conflicted consciousness, but we should not lose sight of other instances of temptation throughout the season (or series, for that matter), such as Sergeant Ellis Carver and Officer Thomas "Herc" Hauk's desire to steel cash from criminals after an arrest and seizure or Officer Jimmy McNulty's decision to manufacture homicide crime scenes in season 5. The complexity of moral conflict that the series tends to wrestle with throughout its five seasons is emblemized in D'Angelo's narrative. Still, the power of the garden allusion to inform D'Angelo's character and other moral conflicts in the series stems from its recurring presence in African American literature as an allusive intertextual reference.

One such allusion is the "garden" episode in Frederick Douglass's classic slave narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. In chapter 3, Douglass briefly details an episode on Colonel Lloyd's plantation where slaves cultivate a beautiful garden: "This garden was probably the greatest attraction of the place. During the summer months, people came from far and near—from Baltimore, Easton, and Annapolis—to see it. It abounded in fruits of almost every description. . . . This garden was not the least source of trouble on the plantation."<sup>25</sup> The garden was a constant "source of trouble" because the slaves on the plantation were forbidden from eating any of its fruits. They were literally denied the fruits of their own labor. Moreover, the Christian narrative of temptation is also thematically present in Douglass's tone and word choice. The temptation of the abundant fruit in the garden on the plantation mirrors the material reality to which the denizens of the Street in the storyworld of *The Wire* do not have opportune access.<sup>26</sup> The temptation to steal that fruit then slips the viewing audience's moral judgment via the circumstantial social conditions of the slaves or, in the case of *The Wire*, some of the inhabitants of inner-city Baltimore. On Colonel Lloyd's plantation (coincidentally near Baltimore), Douglass is struck by the "master's" resourcefulness with respect to policing the garden that continues to tempt his slaves. Lloyd ultimately decides to tar the fence around the garden and instructs his chief gardener to whip any slave with the mark of tar on his or her person. According to Douglass, "[t]his plan worked well; the slaves became as fearful of tar as of the lash. They seemed to realize the impossibility of touching *tar* without being defiled."<sup>27</sup>

*The Wire*'s Baltimore is a "garden" rife with material temptation, depleted sociocultural resources, and utter lack of opportunity. In this environment, watching your back is an essential survival practice. Of course,

“watching your back” is a colloquial phrase that figuratively signals a warning to look out for yourself. In the garden analogy/metaphor, the subject of the phrase is implored to be vigilant with respect to the devil’s various temptations. In the more mundane sense in which the phrase operates in the storyworld of *The Wire*, the garden/Baltimore is an environment where one’s social, economic, civic, and/or political life depends on the vigilant surveillance of one’s surroundings, often peopled by enemies and allies who would do you harm. Those slaves unlucky enough to in any way get/have tar on them were summarily whipped—that is, lashed across the back, lending more critical credence to the admonition to watch it. For Larry Gilliard Jr.’s tragic Barksdale character, this lyrical warning ultimately proves its most critical sense when he is attacked from behind and strangled while in prison serving twenty years for his role in the family business.<sup>28</sup>

That the FBBA do not have the ability to watch their backs (at least not literally) reveals the potentially tragic irony facing even those who are the most vigilantly aware, those who watch their backs most studiously (consider Stringer Bell’s fate at the conclusion of season 3 and/or the fate of Omar Little towards the end of season 5).<sup>29</sup> The vigilant watching of your back does not ultimately protect anyone in the storyworld of *The Wire*. This important thematic kernel is present in the first lines of the opening theme song of the series, and FBBA’s performance of “Way Down 1” underscores it. After experiencing *The Gospel at Colonius*, poet Lucille Clifton authored a poem entitled “Eyes” dedicated to “Clarence Fountain and The Five Blind Boys of Alabama after seeing *The Gospel at Colonius*.”<sup>30</sup> Clifton lyrically ponders the performance of the FBBA and situates her rumination within a spiritual context that gestures toward the garden motif:

the fields of Alabama  
 sparkle in the sun on Broadway  
 five old men  
 sparkle in white suits  
 their fingers light  
 on one another’s back lights  
 proclaim The Five Blind Boys

of Alabama five old men  
 black and blind  
 who have no names save one  
 what ground is this  
 what god.<sup>31</sup>

### III. THE ORIGINAL

The original "Way Down in the Hole," Tom Waits's version, "Way Down 2," opens each episode in season 2 of *The Wire*. Waits wrote and recorded the song in 1986, and it appeared in 1987 as a part of a dramatic production entitled *Frank's Wild Years*.<sup>32</sup> This lyrical precursor tells the story of Frank, a used furniture salesman, who is almost happily married but experiences the situational trap of his modern working-class/middle-class station in life.<sup>33</sup> The play, *Frank's Wild Years*, generally reflects the aesthetics of most of Tom Waits's musical productions and songwriting.<sup>34</sup> Waits evidently is not interested in restaging the play, and because little or no video recording of it exists, it is worth quoting him at some length to understand his sense of the production. In a 1986 interview with *Spin* magazine, Waits says,

It actually starts out with Frank at the end of his rope, despondent, penniless, on a park bench in East St. Louis in a snowstorm, having a going-out-of-business sale on the whole last ten years of his life. Like the guys around here on Houston Street with a little towel on the sidewalk, some books, some silverware, a radio that doesn't work, maybe a Julie London album. Then he falls asleep and dreams his way back home. I've been saying that it's a cross between *Eraserhead* and *It's a Wonderful Life*.<sup>35</sup>

Both the lyrical Frank and the dramatic Frank are important characteristic touchstones for the narrator in *The Wire*'s theme song. Frank is an existentially challenged (blues) musician who must burn down the material accoutrements of his life in order to proceed into an afterlife or other life that, though rife with pain and socioeconomic challenges, still provides

him with some hope and redemptive possibility in the end. Given the bifurcated origins of the original version of the tune, it makes sense that for the series it functions much like a standard that can and will be performed by multiple groups from multiple nuanced perspectives.

Waits's "Way Down in the Hole" sports his potent working-class blues delivery. This is a natural fit for the season that features dockworkers in Baltimore struggling with (second class) citizenship, crime, political invisibility, and general working-class warfare: "Mr. Waits is obsessed with America's low-life—the bars, the broads, the booze, the touts, the sleaze. His voice is variations on a gargle, half-conversational mutterings about life's disappointments and dreams. His songs are cast in a folkish, bluesy idiom."<sup>36</sup> Waits's "bluesy idiom" is readily audible in his recording of the song. Although it is the original, or *sui generis*, version of the tune, its position as the second version in the series is chronologically consistent with Maultsby's model for developments in African American music and West's sense of the Afro-blues spiritual impulse (revisit figure 1). That is, the blues follows gospel in the development of the African American experience and developments in African American music (and oral/folk expression more generally). This proximity, of the blues to the spiritual, underscores the ways in which secular expression in African American musical forms functions along the continuum of an Afro-blues spiritual impulse and thus the narratives of the black experience; even those that appear to be consumed by socially institutionalized subject matter, such as that of *The Wire*, always already have black spirituality as an inherent predicate.

Waits's vocal performance and the accompanying musical production reflect the Delta blues aesthetics: "The Delta blues of the 1920s and 1930s are the most homogeneous blues products associated with any of the pre-war, regionally defined blues traditions. It was usually a solo music which was dominated by rhythmic (and at its best polyrhythmic) repetition, deep gravely vocals and bottleneck guitar playing."<sup>37</sup> The vocalized form of Waits's "gravely" or "gargle"-like delivery both suggests an authentic folk style and underscores a spiritual longing that suits the lyrical content of the tune. Tom Waits's bluesy, spiritually inflected singing voice might (to many listeners) sound like the archetypal black blues singer. In his essay "Why Do Whites Sing Black?" Mike Daley explores this phenomenon and qualifies this trace of authenticity: "The discourse of folk authenticity can be traced back at least as far as the nineteenth-century Romantics, inasmuch as it articulates a longing for a fantasized lost innocence—as if the folk society is a reflection of the modern culture 'before the fall,' as it

were."<sup>38</sup> Waits is not black, but his voice is, according to nearly all critical consensus, authentic in its articulation of a folk ethos.

One laudatory essay on the music and vocal styles of Tom Waits is "The Flying Slaves." This title alludes to a foundational African American folktale and its various attendant African mythologies. In the most common version of the folktale "The People Could Fly," a mysterious old man approaches various field slaves who have been brutalized by a vicious overseer. He whispers something in the ear of each, and they are subsequently able to fly away.<sup>39</sup> The folktale is related to myths of flying Africans, the concept of death as liberation or transcendence, and a mass suicide committed by a group of Igbo captives who refused to be slaves. According to the author of the essay, Stephan Wackwitz, "Tom Waits gets close to the archaic experience of liberation—the experience of flying away from death."<sup>40</sup>

The "flying slaves" essay attempts to explicate the work of Waits by generating an intertextual relationship between Waits's music and one of the earliest African American folktale narratives. The intertext that connects Waits to certain African American cultural foundations is, in this case, not the blues—not the "Negro spiritual" or other forms of black music along the Afro-blues spiritual impulse to which Waits pays artistic homage. The intertextual relationship rests on the liberation themes that anchor the spiritualized folk aesthetics in Waits's music. Waits celebrates this intertextuality in his oeuvre, in his music, in a variety of ways (and means): he articulates the style(s) of the folk: "Stylization, sweeping gestures, grandiosity, mannerisms, as emblems of a weakness that can't be expressed any other way: these are the formal gestures Tom Waits has inscribed into his figures and songs. They are the big gestures of the small people."<sup>41</sup> Waits also often combines blues aesthetics with spiritual or religious reflection: "[B]lues musicians themselves, as well as scholars, have noted the affinity of the blues and religion. The resemblance between blues performance and ritual has led black theologian James Cone to refer to blues as 'secular spirituals.'"<sup>42</sup> The sacred and the profane regularly intersect in his lyrics: "The cities through which Tom Waits' figures move might be Heaven and Hell."<sup>43</sup> Lastly, through his music Waits is invested in both sociopolitical and spiritual liberation. Wackwitz is, again, incisive: "The aesthetic (or is it ethic?) of the escape in the face of death and power is at the center of Tom Waits' songs."<sup>44</sup>

In Waits's music, "Jesus and the Devil pass by us in regular beats—as does death."<sup>45</sup> In fact, the refrain for all versions of "Way Down in the Hole" is "You gotta keep the devil / Way down in the hole." Not unlike



the “garden” in the first lines of the song, the “devil” in the refrain engenders multiple meanings and a distinct intertextuality with African American spirituality and cultural history. The literal or standard meaning of the devil is Satan, Lucifer, or the ruler of Hell. The standard devil certainly holds its meaning in “Way Down 2” based upon its existential origins in the song and play, *Frank’s Wild Years*. The traditional meaning of *devil* here also underscores the religious or spiritual aspect of the Afro-blues spiritual impulse within which each version of “Way Down” is artistically rendered.

At least two other meanings of devil should be considered here. Historically, the founders and several leaders of the Nation of Islam (NOI), including Elijah Muhammed, a young, pre-Mecca Malcolm X and retired minister Louis Farrakhan, have often referred to the white man as the devil.<sup>46</sup> Although an elaborate mythos, NOI religious narrative, and black sociopolitical history accompany this meaning of devil, it is not nearly as conventional within the black community as it was at the zenith of the NOI during the civil rights movement. The NOI meaning of the devil as the white man is not necessarily maintained (or does not necessarily emerge) in *The Wire* series. Instead, the meaning of the devil in *The Wire* that is most relevant is actually a tertiary meaning in most dictionaries: something that is unruly or difficult to control. In the series, this could take on many meanings across various episodes and seasons, but the devil that is most pervasive (and often backgrounded) is the devil of addiction. Characters in the series were addicted to money and power (Avon Barksdale, Marlo Stanfield, Mayors Royce and Carcetti), and alcohol (Jimmy McNulty and various other police). However, drug addiction centers the narrative on the underground economy of the illegal drug trade throughout much of the series. Drug addiction is the devil that must be kept in the hole or at bay for too many folk in the storyworld of *The Wire*, but this struggle is most readily apparent in the narrative of Bubbles.

In many ways, Tom Waits’s music and the song “Way Down in the Hole” are aesthetically suited to the themes of the series—no surprise there. The creators of maybe the best show ever written and produced for television picked an apropos opening theme song. Each version sheds some light on how the lyrical nuances of the original song construct a powerful cultural valence with the show and sometimes with particular seasons and or characters. Waits’s ability both musically and in his performative persona, to represent and reflect *fugitive culture* then helps to seal the sociocultural and spiritual intertextualities within the show, as well as between the show and numerous forms of African American cultural production: “The term, fugitive culture, designates less a rigid cultural for-

mation than it does a conflicting and dynamic set of experiences rooted in a working-class youth culture marked by flows and uncertain interventions into daily life."<sup>47</sup> Fugitive culture includes the folk of the criminal underground ruled first by the Barksdales and eventually by Marlo Stanfield, the workers at the Port, the children in the school system, and the citizens of inner-city Baltimore. Within the storyworld of *The Wire*, the writers/creators are able to express the trauma of those "uncertain interventions" that dog the existence of their characters.

#### IV. MUSICAL FUSION

"Way Down 3" then lies at a center within the Afro-blues spiritual mapping of the various seasonal versions of Tom Waits's tune. The Neville Brothers (of New Orleans) recorded and perform a New Orleans jazz-styled interpretation of "Way Down": "The New Orleans sound . . . is actually based on a particular rhythmic feeling, a certain syncopation or 'backbeat' that seems to have been infused into the city's collective unconscious and which no doubt can be traced beyond parade music to slaves dancing in Congo Square."<sup>48</sup> The mapped connection between the New Orleans percussive sound and the experience of enslaved Africans in America interlocks Giroux's fugitive culture with slave culture (see figure 1). The visual accoutrements and reflections of the culture include a variety of kinesthetic communal celebrations and rituals, including the Mardi Gras celebration. The music encourages constant movement in response to its syncopated rhythms. Thus, it embodies the "affective physicality" component of the Afro-blues spiritual impulse. The Afro-percussive roots of the New Orleans sound also serve as a pool of musical resource for go-go music. Cultivated in the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area by Chuck Brown in the middle to late 1970s, go-go music features a syncopated backbeat laden with both hip-hop and funk-styled vocals and instrumentation: "Go-go's essential beat is characterized by a syncopated, dotted rhythm that consists of a series of quarter and eighth notes . . . which is underscored most dramatically by the bass drum and snare drum, and the hi-hat . . . [and] is ornamented by the other percussion instruments, especially by the conga drums, timbale, and hand-held cowbells."<sup>49</sup> Musically and percussively, the sound of the Neville Brothers' version of "Way Down in the Hole" is animated by its fusion-oriented form and its aesthetic intertextuality between the New Orleans sound and go-go music. Once again, when the lyrics are taken into account (i.e., considering the song as a whole), "Way Down in the Hole" powerfully captures each sig-

nal component of the Afro-blues spiritual impulse in African American music.

That the Neville Brothers contribute this selection (for this season of *The Wire*) is not completely coincidental or disconnected from the thematic underpinnings of the show. In George Lipsitz's essay on the Mardi Gras Indians, "Carnival and Counter-Narrative in Black New Orleans," he explicates the fusion of African and Native American culture in the form of music and the ritual (and rituals in) the parade. The Neville brothers are related to a tribe that performs regularly in New Orleans, and Lipsitz cites Art Neville as remembering "music as a viable alternative to gang fighting in the public housing project where he grew up in the 1940s and 1950s."<sup>50</sup> There is no indication that music is a viable alternative to violence in the storyworld of *The Wire*.<sup>51</sup> But Lipsitz suggests that Neville's recollection links various African American communal-musical practices across region, genre, and history.<sup>52</sup> He quotes Cyril Neville as saying, "The drum comes to me as a symbol of what I, or we, used to be. I can't speak on the drums, but I try to convey my feelings. . . . [M]y Africa is the drums 'cause when I feel like going back to Africa, I play my drums."<sup>53</sup> The syncopated percussion in the Neville Brothers' "Way Down in the Hole" links the Afro-blues aesthetic to the New Orleans sound and to the region-specific sounds of go-go music and thus helps to center this version within the Afro-blues spiritual trajectory or black musical mapping of the show's theme.

"Way Down in the Hole" also subtly (re)connects the theme music to the themes inherent in season 3 of the series. The season's themes of innovation, transition, and collaboration or fusion are also present in the musical coordinates that designate the areas within which the New Orleans and go-go sounds exist within the developments of African American music (see figure 1). As an additional point of fiction-nonfiction intertextuality, Slim Charles (a denizen of the Street) is played by Anwan Glover. Slim begins season 3 as an enforcer for the Barksdale organization. As the battle between the Barksdale organization and Marlo's insurgency continues, Slim attempts to organize and innovate the Barksdale crew but to little or no avail. Eventually Barksdale is arrested, and Slim fortuitously avoids incarceration and is almost immediately recruited into "Proposition Joe" Stewart's organization. By the series' conclusion, Slim emerges as the head of New Day, the series central criminal co-op. Anwan Glover is also known as "Big G," a founding member and vocal front man for the go-go musical group Backyard Band. Because go-go music is generally regional, most viewers of *The Wire* outside of the metropolitan

Washington, D.C., area would not have recognized Slim as a go-go music star; that he is a local go-go sensation is only one example (amongst many) of where the creators of *The Wire* blur the boundaries between storyworld and reality in order to render an affective realism in the series. Slim/Big G's pivotal role in season 3 accentuates the intertextual relationship between "Way Down 3," the themes of season 3, and the various forms of music flowing through "Way Down 3" that are generated via the Afro-blues spiritual impulse.

## V. FULL CIRCLE

Steve Earle performs the fifth and final version of the theme. This version is a modern country version of the song, and Earle is an accomplished, award-winning country music singer and songwriter. Country music is a fusion of popular music forms emerging out of the Southern United States, including folk music and gospel music. Although it is technically not considered a part of the Afro-blues spiritual impulse or documented or charted in the Maultsby model of African American musical development, country music and many of its subgenres—bluegrass, rock and roll, and Southern rock—are all influenced by the Afro-blues spiritual aesthetic, and certainly some of the subgenres can claim space on the map of black musical forms. Steve Earle's success as a musician and his recurring role on the series make his recording a natural fit for the final season of *The Wire*.

Steve Earle is also a recovering drug addict, and in *The Wire* he plays Walon, who is in recovery but lends his considerable skills as a drug reform/recovery coach to work with Bubbles, who is tragically addicted to heroin. As Bubbles's scruffy Narcotics Anonymous sponsor, Walon leverages his own painful past to help others clean up their lives. His gentle hand with Bubs has firmed up over the past year, though, and Walon is losing patience with his friend's treading water in the program. By the end of season 4, Bubbles is committed to a psychiatric institution after he attempts to hang himself while in police custody. He is distraught for many reasons, including losing the battle with his addiction, but in a failed attempt to poison a brutal bully in the neighborhood he mistakenly kills Sherrod, a close friend and street mentee of his, with whom he builds an intimate relationship over the course of the season. For viewers, Bubbles's narrative is the most personal reflection of "the hole" and/or "the devil" as signifiers of addiction and the perils of unabated substance abuse in the

raw naturalistic environs of inner-city America. Knowing that Earle struggled in ways similar to Walon and Bubs is an important intertextual narrative connecting the series to lived realities of its actors.

In season 5, Bubbles becomes more committed to his recovery, and by extension he is more receptive to Walon's sponsorship and guidance. He gets a job selling newspapers and is able to convince his sister to allow him to stay at her home. She is very reluctant and only agrees to allow him to stay in the basement. He is thus restricted to the sublevel or "hole" of the home. Throughout season 5, Bubbles is able to stay clean and in some ways redeem himself in his own eyes. Eventually, Walon's efforts and his firm support results in Bubs's own recovery in the series finale. This recovery is signaled in the closing montage of the series when Bubbles emerges from the basement and joins his family at the dining-room table. That Bubs overcomes his devils and emerges from the hole are important signifiers of the themes in "Way Down 1–5" and subtle statements made in the finale.

The critically acclaimed historical novel *The Chaneyville Incident*, by David Bradley, features a professor of history as a protagonist who struggles with the complexities of race, region, and history as they relate to his family and the cultural lineage to which he is bound. In an early analysis of societal institutions, the protagonist states, "[T]he Church justifies the actions of the State, the State the teachings of the School, the School the principles of the Economy, the Economy the pronouncements of the State."<sup>54</sup> According to the protagonist of the narrative, societal institutions tend to conceal any agendas so that they might more effectively control the populace. While much has been made of the institutional themes of *The Wire*, many have noted that one institution is obviously lacking from the creators' analysis and treatment: the institution of the Black Church. I contend that the series marginalizes black spirituality within its paratextual matter. Sometimes this matter is presented through the title and credit sequences that unveil the real people behind the dramatic performances, and other times it rests in the versions of the theme song and each versions attendant genre distinctions and the aesthetic choices made by the artists performing the song. Through my intertextual analyses of Tom Waits's "Way Down in the Hole," certain spiritual and literary themes emerge in the atmosphere of the show. The themes of insightfulness and working-class struggle are both spiritually rendered and regenerated through the dramatic intertextualities of "Way Down 1" and "Way Down 2" with the lyrics of the song as well as the plays that function intertextually with the lives and artistic products of the FBBA and Tom Waits. The black musical and literary intertextuality of "Way Down 1–4" also underscores cer-

tain spiritual narratives and themes within the show, such as the *garden*, the *devil*, and the *hole*. The song then, through its ability to exist as an interwoven pattern in the fabric of black musical history, production, and development, encroaches upon the institutional space that might be normally reserved for the Church, at least in the storyworld of *The Wire*. That is, the multiple versions of "Way Down in the Hole" provide a repository of spiritual and literary intertextuality that suggests ways in which it might stand in for *The Wire*'s missing institution: the Church. This is in some ways cemented by the mimesis and intertexted fictive and nonfictive elements of Walon (vis-à-vis Steve Earle), Bubbles, and certain interpretations of "Way Down 5." Thus, what many have referred to as (or crowned as) the best show on TV has/had in many ways the most textured and textual theme song that a show of such vaunted praise might have. And although the Church does not exist in the storyworld of *The Wire* to the extent that the Street, the Law, the School or the Port do, it is subtly and powerfully present in each version of Tom Waits's "Way Down in the Hole."

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## NOTES

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1. Spirituality and realism or naturalism are not necessarily parallel categories (e.g., *spiritualism* is not readily deployed as a literary descriptor). My point here is that the show's sense of realism and its naturalistic depiction of the individual versus the institution marginalizes black spirituality. Nihilistic interpretations of the show have been proffered by Mark Chou in his 2010 article "When the Towers Fell: Mourning and Nostalgia After 9/11 in HBO's *The Wire*" ([www.e-ir.info/?p=4217](http://www.e-ir.info/?p=4217) [accessed 30 October 2010]) and in Rev. Eugene Rivers's fall 2010 study group at Harvard University—"Obama in the Age of the Wire"—where he reads the series, especially the figure of Marlo Stanfield, through the lens of Cornel West's well-known essay from *Race Matters* (1994), "Nihilism in Black America."
2. The African American church (used interchangeably with "Black Church" throughout) is one of the formative institutional entities in the black experience in America. It has served all of the traditional spiritualistic and redemptive functionality of the church in general, but the African American church historically has been also charged with political progress and organization. Black spirituality emerged in and thrived through the African American church; its near absence in the show is thus striking. When the

African American church does “appear” in *The Wire*, it is generally relegated to the realm of the political via the oft-referenced “ministers” who represent a valuable political voting bloc.

3. Occasionally, I refer to specific versions as “Way Down 1,” “Way Down 2,” “Way Down 3,” etc. See table 1 for a taxonomic breakdown.
4. According to Christian Moraru,
 

Intertextuality refers to the presence of a text A in a text B. A is the intertext if one stresses the textual precursor, the pretext absorbed by a later text. Or one could call B the intertext if one lays emphasis on the text incorporating a previous text thereby becoming intertextual. (*Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan [New York: Routledge, 2005], s.v. “intertextuality,” 256–57)
5. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Literature, Culture, Theory series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xviii.
6. Andrew Dignan, Kevin B. Lee, and Matt Zoller Seitz, “*The Wire*: A Close Analysis of the Season 1 Title Sequence,” video essay, Moving Image Source: Extra Credit, Part 1, [www.movingimagesource.us/articles/extra-credit-part-1-20080728](http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/extra-credit-part-1-20080728) (accessed 18 September 2009).
7. Ibid.
8. Andrew Dignan, Kevin B. Lee, and Matt Zoller Seitz, “*The Wire*: A Close Analysis of the Season 4 Title Sequence,” in *ibid.* (accessed 20 September 2009).
9. David Simon, introduction to “*The Wire*”: *Truth Be Told*, ed. Rafael Alvarez, rev. ed. (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 2–34, quotation on 30.
10. For example, in season 1, D’Angelo Barksdale was often at odds and sometimes in direct conflict with the institution of the Street represented by his own family: the Barksdales. In season 2, we see Jimmy McNulty against the Law and the workers (especially union secretary treasurer Frank Sobotka) against the Port. Season 3 features Omar Little versus the Barksdale organization/the Street and Major Colvin, oddly enough, against the Law.
11. David Simon, introduction, 23.
12. Rafael Alvarez, “Way Down in the Hole: The Music of *The Wire*,” in Alvarez, *The Wire* (see note 9), 246–50, quotation on 247.
13. Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*, Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 1996).
14. Terms and phrases borrowed from Houston A. Baker Jr.’s groundbreaking discussion of Black (W)hole Theory in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 172.
15. The name/character Big Boy appears throughout the genealogical intercourse between African American literature and culture. Big Boy is the character/subject of Sterling Brown’s work, as well as the nickname of Jean Toomer’s Tom Burwell from “Blood Burning Moon” in the modernist classic, *Cane* (1923). Toomer’s Big Boy is tortured and lynched after he slashes the throat of his love interest’s (the sirenlike Louisa) white “boyfriend.” The (cross)-references alone suggest that the figure (and by extension the

figurative literary and lyrical voice) of Big Boy resonates in underground culturally expressive formats.

16. *American Heritage College Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), s.v. "kiln."
17. A cursory, comparative reading of "Big Boy Leaves Home" (1936), "How Bigger Was Born" (1940), *Native Son* (1940), and *Black Boy* (1945) will bear this point out.
18. Cornel West, "On Afro-American Popular Music: From Bebop to Rap," in *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1983), 177–87, quotation on 177.
19. Giles Oakley, *The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues*, updated edition (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997).
20. Portia K. Maultsby, "Africanisms in African American Music," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991), 185–210, quotation on 186.
21. Ben Sandmel, "The Blind Boys of Alabama," [www.npacf.org/uploads/BlindBoys\\_bio.doc](http://www.npacf.org/uploads/BlindBoys_bio.doc) (accessed 15 September 2009).
22. Mimi Gisolfi D'Aponte, "The Gospel at Colonus (And Other Black Morality Plays)," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 1 (1991): 101–11, quotation on 106.
23. The intertextual connections of blindness and tragedy serve to highlight important thematic touchstones between "Way Down I" and season 1 of *The Wire*. While Oedipal blindness functions both as the metaphorical inability of the protagonist to "see" his tragic circumstances and the retributive response to his familial tragedy, the literal blindness of the FBBA serves to authenticate them as black musical practitioners and make powerful suggestions about how viewers might engage *The Wire* as a narrative series generally and the character D'Angelo Barksdale in particular. *The Wire* depicts an urban (under)world that features (in season 1) the Barksdales, an organized black crime family, whose prodigal son, D'Angelo Barksdale, played by Larry Gilliard Jr., is prone to deep reflection about the criminal activities with which he and his family are engaged. D'Angelo's general consternation throughout season 1 subtly suggests and foreshadows his tragic assassination whilst in prison in season 2. In many ways, D'Angelo reverses the trope of Oedipal blindness. He is painfully aware of his tragic circumstances. He knows who his mother is (which does not necessarily erase all Oedipal traces in the mother-son relationship) and knows who his father was. He is a brooding, insightful character who, in narrative world of *The Wire*, simply thinks too much.
24. Tom Waits, "Way Down in the Hole," *Frank's Wild Years* (New York: Island Records, 1987), album.
25. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), 59. (Originally published 1845.)
26. On the HBO website for the series, the characters are assigned to distinct categorical designations, including the Street, the Law, the Hall, the Port, the Paper, and the School.
27. Douglass, *Narrative*, 59.
28. D'Angelo Barksdale is an enigmatic character in the storyworld of *The Wire*. My truncated reference to him here is an attempt to situate him as a "garden" figure in the sense that his consternation about his role in the illegal family business ironically does not prevent him from being assassinated in prison. The scene of his murder puts into bold relief the significance of the theme song's warning to "watch your back."



29. Stringer Bell is murdered by Brother Mouzone and Omar Little at the end of season 3. He is essentially set up by his longtime partner in crime, Avon Barksdale. Omar Little is murdered by Kenard near the end of season 5.
30. Lucille Clifton, "Eyes: For Clarence Fountain and The Five Blind Boys of Alabama after seeing *The Gospel at Colonius*," *Callaloo* 39 (1989): 379–81.
31. *Ibid.*, 379–80.
32. Waits, "Way Down in the Hole."
33. *Frank's Wild Years* (see note 24) was cowritten by Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan and directed by actor Gary Sinise. The play ran for two months at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre. The general thematic narrative of the play derives from a song penned by Waits in 1983. That song, also entitled "Frank's Wild Years" was recorded on the album *Swordfishtrombones*.
34. In response to his unnarrated alienation from a white-picket-fence existence, Frank drinks some beer, Mickey's Big Mouths, to be exact; purchases a gallon of gasoline; goes home; and douses his home and sets it ablaze as he watches from across the street. After murdering his wife and burning his house and his wife's dog that he "never could stand," Frank turns on a top-40 station and heads north on the Hollywood Freeway. Although this foundational narrative for the play is both tragic and transcendent, Waits's original Frank also exhibits signs of the emotional nihilism present in certain characters in *The Wire* (especially Marlo Stanfield and his murderous henchman, Chris Partlow). The humor built into the closing line of the song, "Never could stand that dog," does not alleviate the horrors of murdering his wife by driving a nail through her forehead or burning his house down as he watches, but the conflation of the horror, the humor, and the existential angst is a generally classic recipe of the blues oeuvre and of *The Wire*'s thematic underpinnings.
35. Glenn O'Brien, "Tom Waits for No Man," *Spin*, November 1985.
36. John Rockwell, "Tom Waits Stars in 'Frank's Wild Years,'" *New York Times*, 10 July 1986.
37. Fred J. Hay, "The Sacred/Profane Dialectic in Delta Blues: The Life and Lyrics of Sonny Boy Williamson," *Phylon* 48, no. 4 (2005): 317–26.
38. Mike Daley, "'Why Do Whites Sing Black?': The Blues Whiteness, and Early Histories of Rock," *Popular Music and Society* 26, no. 2 (2003): 161–67, quotation on 162.
39. This is the Virginia Hamilton version published as a children's book with an audio companion narrated by James Earl Jones.
40. Stephan Wackwitz and Nina Sonenberg, "The Flying Slaves: An Essay on Tom Waits," *Threepenny Review* 40 (1990): 30–32, quotation on 32.
41. *Ibid.*, 30.
42. Hay, "Sacred/Profane Dialectic," 319.
43. Wackwitz and Sonenberg, "Flying Slaves," 30.
44. *Ibid.*, 31.
45. *Ibid.*, 32.
46. Although many viewers of *The Wire* and even some of its characters might associate Brother Mouzone with the Nation of Islam, there is not enough conclusive evidence to prove this (or it has not been conclusively proven) in the storyworld of the series.

47. Henry A. Giroux, *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence, and Youth* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 8.
48. Mark McKnight, "Researching New Orleans Rhythm and Blues," *Black Music Research Journal* 8, no. 1 (1988): 113–34, quotation on 115.
49. Kip Lornell and Charles C. Stephenson Jr., "The Roots and Emergence of Go-Go," in *Beat: Go-Go's Fusion of Funk and Hip-Hop* (New York: Billboard Books), 11–44, quotation on 12.
50. George Lipsitz, "Mardi Gras Indians: Carnival and Counter-Narrative in Black New Orleans," *Cultural Critique* 10 (1988): 99–121, quotation on 101.
51. In fact, Chris and Snoop, Marlo's murderous henchmen, use a musical litmus test to murder a low-level New York drug dealer randomly in season 4. After asking the victim if he has heard of certain local Baltimore performers/songs, they immediately conclude that he is from New York City and shoot him in the head.
52. Lipsitz, "Mardi Gras Indians."
53. *Ibid.*, 118–19.
54. David Bradley, *The Chaneyville Incident: A Novel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 6.