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“PRECARIOUS LUNCH”: CONVIVIALITY AND POSTLAPSARIAN NOSTALGIA IN *THE WIRE*’S FOURTH SEASON

Robert LeVertis Bell

MARLO: *You want it to be one way.*

SECURITY GUARD: *What?*

MARLO: *You want it to be one way.*

SECURITY GUARD: *Man, I don’t know what you . . .*

MARLO: *You want it to be one way.*

SECURITY GUARD: *Man, STOP! Stop saying that!*

MARLO: *But it’s the other way.*

“Refugees,” *The Wire*¹

*[The Wire is] really about the American city, and
about how we live together.*

David Simon, *The Wire*, series creator²

The major thematic intervention of *The Wire*’s fourth season is its refocusing from the institutional worlds of adults to the ripe world of pubescent boys as they emerge into young adulthood against the backdrop of a Bushian educational apparatus that the viewer, *prima facie*, knows will render the children among the Left Behind. While it has been said many times, by the series’ creators and others, that the school system in the fourth season is configured as a serialized manifestation of a general decline, it would be hard to locate in the series’ logic a high point from which the schools have descended. *The Wire*’s depiction of the school system in its fourth season seems to hinge neither upon nostalgia for schools past nor on any effable models for schools future. This marks in the fourth season a tonal shift in the series’ affective investments in nostalgia. Whereas with *The Wire*’s other institutions—policing, government, various criminal organizations, the press, etc.—*decline* is mapped teleologically and characterologically, with paragons and avatars of the better days pitted against

progressive failure and *its* avatars, the schools' past is unmarked, or is at least unmarked *as* past, and insofar as the crisis depicted is one that is derived from history, the origins of the crisis seem to fall outside the series' apparent scope as a critical refutation of the recent past. Contrast with organized labor, community policing, or the fourth estate; the "better days"—found in the recent past—of each is often cited within the series as an object of postlapsarian nostalgia. Even Baltimore's drug dealers and murderers bemoan the passing of the lapsed code of conduct that maintained honor amongst the criminals and a putative stewardship of the community, as illustrated by Slim Charles's dressing-down of two Barksdale gang employees who violated the long-standing injunction to refrain from bloodshed on the Sabbath:

SLIM CHARLES: On a Sunday morning?!

GERARD: We called to ask . . .

SAPPER: And Shamrock said to go . . .

SLIM CHARLES: On a Sunday morning?! Y'all tryin' to hit a nigga when he takin' his wrinkled-ass grandmas to pray? And y'all don't hit the nigga neither? All y'all kill is grandma's crown? . . . Ain't enough y'all done violated the Sunday morning truce. No! I'm standing here holdin' a torn-up church crown of a bona fide Color Lady. Do you know what a Color Lady is? Not yo' moms, fa' sho. Because if they was that, y'all woulda known better than that bullshit.³

But for these institutions, decline is contingent on being outmoded by the exigencies of a changed world—labor power succumbs to the creep of neoliberalism, local policing to a global War on Drugs, journalism to corporatism and new media; fellows like Lester Freamon, Jimmy McNulty, Frank Sobotka, Gus Haynes, Bodie Broadus, and Slim Charles are left sputtering in their negotiations between the usable past and an uncertain present.

This isn't to suggest that *The Wire* primarily reenacts pitched battles between Good Guys and Bad Guys—indeed, one of the series' crowning achievements lies in its convincing, relativistic muddling of those very tropes—except to note the extent to which the fourth season's refocusing on a school system that lacks precisely a usable past facilitates an acceleration of that muddling. While a few of the schools' adults, especially Ro-

land “Prez” Pryzbylewski, clearly wear white hats, the children of the series, within this vise, can be neither good guys nor bad guys. This is a feature inherited from the series’ early days, in which the audience was first introduced to the cohort of Wallace, Poot, and Bodie. Even when these characters encountered and enacted some of the most brutal moments in the series tenure, they were protected by the innocence and inchoateness of youth. The youth of the fourth season are similarly, by nature and by design, inchoate, pregnant, and undetermined within *The Wire*’s moral networks.

With its schools in failure, but not precisely decline, the postlapsarianism of *The Wire*’s first three seasons pauses (to be resumed in the final season) for an uncharacteristic exploration of the inchoate *as such*, the nature of the potential. This tonal situation redounds throughout *The Wire*’s fourth season and dialogically rewrites the series’ tonal investments in nostalgia and its utility. This isn’t to state that the fourth season comprises the *only* moments in the series that the series investments in nostalgia are subject to an inward critique, but the fourth season’s engagement is exceptional for its directness.

The Wire’s fourth season may be the bleakest and least nostalgic but is also, precisely due to its inward critique, the site of what might be *The Wire*’s most utopian moment: the brief if unlikely friendship that develops between Detective Jimmy McNulty and the consummate corner boy, Bodie Broadus. This essay locates this moment among others that facilitate an exploration of the ramifications of the season’s turn against postlapsarian nostalgia. More specifically, I explore the season’s shifts against the series’ own postlapsarian nostalgia as it struggles in turn to conceive of models of collective living in line with both a post-Fordist condition of generalized precarity and with the creeping expiration of hegemonic forms. I will refer to this tone and affective condition as *conviviality*.⁴ In this respect, my goal is the intentional conflation of the affective *setting* of *The Wire*—and the relational conditions delineated in the specific local affective networks between characters in the series—with the series’ general orientation to the world at large. In other words, though I’m aware that the feeling of *The Wire* and the content of its characters’ *feelings* are not always isomorphic, or even fruitfully compared, I’m concerned, particularly in the series’ fourth season, with the times in which such a comparison *is* both fruitful and necessary. The term *conviviality*—with its Latin roots *con* and *vivere*, “live together,” which David Simon reminds us is the “real” subject matter of *The Wire*—is useful on all of these counts. With appreciative nods toward the everyday (if also somehow archaic) use of the term and its connotations with feasting and drunkenness, my usage

of “conviviality” is a negotiation between its most famous iteration, that of the late Ivan Illich in his radical polemic *Tools for Conviviality*, and a recent example found in the work of cultural theorist Paul Gilroy, who expressed hope that “an interest in the workings of conviviality will take off from the point where ‘multiculturalism’ broke down.”⁵

I. CONVIVIALITY

The ex-priest philosopher Illich contrasted “tools for conviviality” with “the institutions of industrial society,” describing the “crisis” of the latter in terms which might preface *The Wire*: “Schools are losing their claim to be effective tools to provide education . . . [T]he assembly line has ceased to be an acceptable mode of production.”⁶ Illich set “conviviality” as the anticipation of a decidedly postindustrial mode of collective living. *Tools for Conviviality* was a critique of High Fordism, written at a time in which the author could boast with some *optimism* of his goal to eventually “write the epilogue to the industrial age.”⁷ But Illich is careful to separate conviviality from the affective status of an intimate bond between individuals, assigning it instead to the technical function of nonindustrial “tools” that would contribute to the formation and sustenance of an intimate, inter-related collective of “politically interrelated persons.”⁸ This rhetorical dance aims explicitly to avoid a problem of translation. The polyglot Illich wrote early versions of *Tools for Conviviality* in Spanish, then French, before the English version, and preferred the Romanic cognates to *convivial*, which (at least at the time of Illich’s writing, if not now) denoted none of the association with “seek[ing] the company of tipsy jolliness” related to the English “convivial.”⁹ I, on the other hand, welcome that association and find it to be a fine bedfellow to Illich’s avowedly “austere” evocations of the convivial as a de-schooled, de-industrialized, if disciplined play (*eutrapelia*, “graceful playfulness,” in Illich’s argot). Also, “convivial” contrasts favorably against a term like *solidarity*, itself associated with a hoary workerism and its historical failure to locate the world outside of the workplace at the heart of its critique. “Conviviality” is, in both Gilroy’s and Illich’s usages, concerned primarily with the everyday.

In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy redeploys “conviviality” as a substitute for *multiculturalism*: conviviality anticipates the discovery of novel strategies for “liv[ing] with alterity without becoming anxious, fearful, violent.”¹⁰ For Gilroy, “conviviality” enables the discussion of multicultural cohabitation while shucking or “creating some distance”¹¹ from essentialist claims of foundational identity. This distancing is key as it can,

according to Gilroy, facilitate considerations of multicultural cohabitation without naturalizing race. In addition, it should be clear that racial formations are not the exclusive impediments to realizing conviviality. Rather, wherever the capacity to recognize the Other is in crisis, so is the convivial. At any rate, the great utility of Gilroy's adoption of the term lies in his use of the term to conceptualize the problem of a difference that persists in spite of (not because of) the inchoateness of identity. Particularly between Bodie and McNulty, there is an attraction that bespeaks process as well as an acknowledgment of both the consequences of history and its ultimate opacity while still accepting those consequences and opacity as anything except terminal.

Illich's "conviviality" is considerably more teleological, being predicated on the notion that the breakdowns among the major institutions of mass society—compulsory schooling, the penal system, etc.—were both inherent and necessary. But, in this respect, Illich's "conviviality" is also a utopian political condition and the affective, relational condition of which the utopian condition is the generalized global form. To say that *The Wire*'s fourth season is tonally convivial is to state that a striving for the convivial is its content and its metacontent; it's what is happening, at least in certain moments, and also it's what that happening is *about*. Leaning on Illich's generative and recombinant hope in post-Fordist possibility at the site of affect (conviviality) can help us consider *The Wire* as a speculative text. This provides a salve to the incessant charge that *The Wire*'s cynicism reflects a lack of vision. For example, John Atlas and Peter Dreier, writing in *Dissent* magazine, lambasted the series and creator David Simon in their article "Is *The Wire* Too Cynical?"

Simon's worldview is hardly radical. He generally views the poor as helpless victims rather than as people with the capacity to act on their own behalf to bring about change. He may think he's the crusading journalist exposing injustice, but he's really a cynic who takes pity on the poor, yet can't imagine a world where things could be different.¹²

The personal nature of a critique that locates ostensible critical failures in the series as David Simon's personal failures notwithstanding, such a critique broadly misses the feature of *The Wire* that unceasingly relates to an imagined "world where things could be different." In most cases, this world is rendered as part of a lost past. But it's also useful to consider several of the powerful, if rare, utopian sentiments portrayed on *The Wire* during its five-season run and also the utopian quality of the fourth sea-

son's engagement with conviviality. And, though the precise content of David Simon's personal orientation toward, say, the poor, may be in doubt, it is necessary to delve precisely into the affective world of *The Wire* and consider the imbrications of the series orientation to the world at large. The depth of *The Wire*'s social critique hinges precisely not only on its engagements with a long history but indeed also on its concomitant, if subtler, engagement with futurity. The convivial tone of *The Wire*'s fourth season structures the problematics of cohabitating with the Other if, like, in the case of Gilroy, the Other is not terminally so and, as with Illich, the process of cohabitation supplants its destination.

II. THE USABLE PAST

Prior to *The Wire*'s fourth season, personal investments in nostalgia were linked to moments of collective triumph stymied by the creep of capitalism. This is true not merely of *The Wire*'s second season, in which the decline of labor unions is explicitly explored, but also even when the series depicted the drug trade and, particularly, the decline of the Barksdale gang, nostalgia is rendered as both a feature of collectivity¹³ and that which renders the bonds of collectivity into an effable consciousness. The murder of Russell "Stringer" Bell and the reimprisonment of Avon Barksdale at the end of *The Wire*'s third season usher the ascendance of Marlo Stanfield's particularly vicious operation, but, it's important to remember, the Barksdale gang was not defeated on the field of battle by the Stanfield gang but were undone by the collapse of the friendship bonds between the Barksdale principals: Avon Barksdale and Stringer Bell. This point is reinforced in Barksdale and Bell's final meeting, after their mutual betrayals, on the eve of Bell's murder. The two men gather on a rooftop overlooking Baltimore's Inner Harbor to reminisce over their lifelong friendship and their meteoric rise from small-time crooks to the kingpins of West Baltimore. When Stringer laments that, only a few years prior, with his current wealth might have been able to purchase harbor real estate at basement, pre-urban renewal prices, Avon suggests that Stringer "forget about that for a while" and invites him to "just dream with me," to which Bell replies, "We ain't gotta dream no more" as the two men tense up, each remembering that the time for their collective imaginings, as their collective as such, has passed. They exchange a wistful hug and with a toast to "us" before walking away from each other for the last time. The lapsing of the Barksdale-Bell relationship at the end of the third season sets the stage for a fourth season that thematizes both a yearning for collectivity and the absence of a usable past as its foundation.

Much of the fourth season's narrative is propelled by regular, structuring, misrecognitions and misidentifications. At the center of the series is a group of young students, followed as they are summarily Left Behind¹⁴ by both a low-risk, low-reward educational apparatus and by their parents' generation, itself floundering in the estuary where unforgiving economics meets urban dereliction and a geographical, historic retreat of the black middle-class. When young Michael Lee steadily refuses Dennis "Cutty" Wise's efforts to father him or when the cop-turned-teacher Roland Pryzbylewski struggles to bring math to his eighth graders or when Major Howard "Bunny" Colvin introduces these same students to haute cuisine, the conflict is rendered transparent. In the words of Colvin, "They're not fools, these kids. They don't know our world but they know their own. They see right through us."¹⁵

This diaphaneity, proceeding from the familiar mission creep of adulthood, typifies *The Wire*'s broadly allegorical generational sagas and contrasts with the opacity engendered when the series' conflicts cut across race, education, or class. In such situations, which are no less real and no less tonally structured by conflict than those situations involving youth, the inability to recognize the Other enters not as mere misunderstanding or mistranslation, but as an inability to see one's self within a broader collective: Major Colvin himself needs a translator to parse the language of academia; or, perhaps more paradigmatically, Chris Partlow and Felicia "Snoop" Pearson hunt down New Yorkers slinging dope on Baltimore's corners. Chris and Snoop's plan to sniff out carpetbaggers—as Chris puts it, "Ask a Baltimore question, something a New York nigga wouldn't know . . . something about club music"—ridiculously underscores the aleatory nature of affinity. Snoop herself professes that even she "don't know nuttin' 'bout that 92Q shit"—referring to Baltimore's popular hip-hop/club music station.¹⁶ Ironically, at any rate, the "club music" litmus-test song, Young Leek's "Shake It and Jiggle It" (2006), is not even a by-Hoyle Baltimore club track; it's a club-influenced rap song, adding another Babelic layer to the series' precarious vision of affinity.

We may notice that there's a certain timeliness to these encounters that allows them, within *The Wire*'s structuring vises of the postindustrial and convivial, to remind us that the difficulties imagined within the series are inherited from a history of real events. The problematics of precarity and affinity are always at the forefront of the series' drama, and *The Wire*, in turn, tends to proffer its own hypotheses regarding these problematics. In this way, *The Wire* composes a grammar of both conflict and collectivity in which its fictional world comes to represent the world at large.

There are three major encounters in *The Wire*'s fourth season in which these problematics come to the fore in the form of interactions between

unlike figures who must engage the Other at the sites of identification, collectivity, and affect. The *first encounter* is the very first scene of *The Wire*'s fourth season and involves the radically abstracted character Snoop at a point of subtle crisis within a quotidian setting. The *second encounter* is Snoop's boss, Marlo Stanfield, as he and an adversary both actualize a conflict on the very grounds of an affective rejection. The *final encounter* includes moments dedicated to the late but unlikely friendship that forms between the likes of Detective McNulty and the corner boy, Bodie, which is forged on the ground of the barest mutual recognition. In each of these moments, *The Wire* takes stock of the social side of precarious life and the processes of mutual recognition, which I'll call *affinity*, and the speculative, broader social condition produced by the aggregation of such an affect—the condition that I've called *conviviality*.

In the first scene of *The Wire*'s fourth season, a temporal placement that allows it to be considered lineamental, the character Snoop enters a big-box hardware store much like Lowe's or Home Depot. Snoop and her partner Chris Partlow comprise drug lord Marlo Stanfield's main team of murderous enforcers, and, on this particular day, Snoop is at the hardware store in search of a nail gun to be used for entombing Stanfield's victims inside Baltimore's abandoned row houses. The scene stands out as a rare comedic set piece in the entire run of the show. In it, Snoop gets the hard sale from a store employee urging the purchase of the Hilti DX-460, one of his "Cadillac" models:

SALESMAN: I see you got the Dewalt cordless. Your nail gun, Dewalt 410.

SNOOP: Yeah. The trouble is, you leave it in a trunk for a while, you need to step up and use the bitch. The battery don't hold up, you know?

SALESMAN: Yeah, the cordless'll do that. You might want to consider the powder-actuated tool. The Hilti DX-460 MX or the Simpson PTP. These two are my Cadillacs. Everything else on this board is second best, sorry to say. Are you contracting, or just doing some work around the house?

SNOOP: Nah, we work all over.

SALESMAN: Full time?

SNOOP: Nah, we had about five jobs last month.¹⁷

The comedic value of the scene lies in a peculiar masquerade in the encounter. Snoop—played tellingly and eponymously by Felicia “Snoop” Pearson, a first-time actress, herself once convicted of murder—is a queer woman, who in this comedic scene plays the “straight man,” interacting without pretense with the salesman, accepting his cues to compare the nail gun to a ballistic weapon with a graphic, *vérité* diversion about murders witnessed or committed:

SNOOP: .27 caliber, huh?

SALESMAN: Yeah, not large ballistically, but, for driving nails, it's enough. Any more than that, you'd add to the recoil.

SNOOP: Man, shit . . . I seen a tiny-ass .22 round-nose drop a nigga plenty o' days, man. Muthafuckas get up in you like a pinball, rip yo' ass up. Big joints, though . . . Big joints, man, just break your bones, you say, “fuck it.” Hehehe . . .¹⁸

It's the salesman, though, who is constructing a layered mystification to which the killer is characteristically privy. The subterfuge is borne from the fashion of the Hardware Barn (the store fashioned as a Home Depot) itself. The Hardware Barn is designed to look like a shop floor and the salesman a shop worker, when they are, respectively, a retail outlet and a salesperson. In other words, the Hardware Barn masquerades as a point of production when it is actually a point of consumption and its immaterial laborer masquerades as a material worker, namely, a carpenter. His uniform is an orange carpentry apron but is clear of sawdust and any other residue of material labor. The big-box hardware store is itself a post-Fordist invention. Its ideal consumer, the do-it-yourselfer par excellence, embodies the comportment that Paolo Virno links to the post-Ford laborer, a self-directedness precipitated by “insecurity about one's place during periodic innovation, fear over losing recently gained privileges, and anxiety over being ‘left behind.’” This, Virno continues, results in a labor force in which “flexibility, adaptability, and the readiness to reconfigure oneself,”¹⁹ are among the most vaunted traits. The big-box hardware store in turn targets, as consumers, that labor force both at the site of this contemporary condition and at the nostalgic site of its past. Existential vulnerability, though, is concealed by a spatialization of the prelapsarian dream. In this world, the shop floor is the sacred site of exceptionalistic American progress and the shop worker the recipient of qualified privileges for his (*sic*)

role in maintaining this progress. This is the world into which Snoop has entered to purchase her nail gun. Snoop recognizes, however, that she is ideal neither as customer nor as a laborer and that the dream that the Hardware Barn tries to re-create is not of her own past. This is made especially clear when the camera first spots Snoop in the Hardware Barn. She passes two customers, the first an elderly man, the second a middle-aged woman, both white. Each stares at her for a moment as though everyone present realizes that Snoop is out of place. Is this atavistic dream world open to a dangerous black dyke, even if she can shoot a nail gun as good as the best of them? Not apparently. The staring customers and the following encounter with the salesperson underscore her position as a racial, gendered, and class (i.e., the criminal class) anomaly in the Hardware Barn. It is clear that the act of tipping the salesperson for his persistence has the express purpose of clarifying Snoop's preference for the present to the past.

Within this framework, it would be seductive to then see this sale itself as a somewhat aggressive act, despite the salesperson's kindness and apparent willingness to accept Snoop as an equal (nobody here but us contractors). Clearly, Snoop sees it this way as she in turn embraces her status as Other in this arrangement, with her graphic descriptions of bullet wounds and murders committed and witnessed, while punctuating her speech with curses and chuckles. Neither choosing to leave the dream world of the Hardware Barn nor choosing to temporarily inhabit a fantasy in which she is invisible or closeted, Snoop insists on bringing us back to reality by refusing to play along with the game. She refuses to see the salesperson at the Hardware Barn as an industrial laborer and thus refuses him the fantasies of High Fordist social prestige and treats him in the manner of a very effective *affective* or service laborer and tips him healthily after purchasing the "Cadillac" ("He mean Lexus but he ain't know it," Snoop would inform her partner Chris Partlow, preferring a post-Ford, or, if you will, post-General Motors, metaphor for high-class luxury.) That Snoop pays in cash, leaving an \$800 tip to the salesman ("You earned that buck like a muthafucka"), highlights the degree to which she either cannot understand or cannot locate an affinity in the salesperson's precarity and is rather intent upon purchasing away whatever value his nostalgic dream has, along with its attendant relativism, with cash money. This scene foreshadows the aforementioned later one (in the episode "Know Your Place") in which Major Colvin ushers his middle-school students to a Ruth's Chris Steak House. The kids' exuberance regarding the new experience ("Oh shit, there's a waiter?!"²⁰) quickly fades into self-consciousness ("Shhh. . . Shut it down, other people be lookin' at us") and, finally, dejection

("Mr. C, can we stop at McDonald's?").²¹ Juxtaposed with the dinner scene, Snoop's moment in the Hardware Barn seems to proceed not from an inability to recognize one's self within the broader social life, but from a hyperawareness of an incommensurable difference that, without her performative anomie, results in a disappointment in one's self rather than the virtual exaltation of the circumstances. There's no indication that Snoop, unlike Colvin's embarrassed students, would have it any other way.²²

But it's worth remembering that Snoop's nail gun is not exactly a tool for conviviality—it's actually something close to the opposite. Its singular purpose, narratively, is to group many deaths at only a few sites. Snoop and Chris will use the nail gun to close up the abandoned row houses where they store the bodies of their murder victims. With that in mind, and Snoop's essence as a killer, in general, perhaps we should remain to recover the dead end left behind in the act of the tool's procurement. Because isn't there a death there, too; namely, that of the possibility of conviviality? While we may certainly empathize with Snoop's choice, given especially her limited options and the historically and fantastically closed space of the Hardware Barn, we are reminded that there is a cost, too, to a realism that responds to precarity with denial. Snoop's performance, as hilarious as it is, ultimately relies upon and perpetuates an engagement of bad faith. We're not to trust Snoop and, as though with Gilroy's "conviviality" in mind, *The Wire* seems to be reminding its audience that identities and relationships are in flux and, unlike the capitalist forms on trial in the Hardware Barn, the recognition of the Other is not always a zero-sum game.

While the stakes in Snoop's encounter are relatively low, the consequences of such a response, when taken to their extreme, are accentuated in a similar, more tense, moment in a later episode in *The Wire*'s fourth season, in which Marlo Stanfield similarly interacts with another nameless service-industry worker in a retail establishment. In this scene, Stanfield, the kingpin, enters a corner store to purchase a bottle of water. While he completes his purchase, a security guard watches from the door as Marlo quietly pockets one of his trademark lollipops. Obviously, Stanfield does not need to pocket the lollipop; the theft is intended to provoke the security guard. Stanfield could easily attempt to clip the sucker with his left hand, with his body concealing the crime from the rent-a-cop's line of sight, but he chooses not to take such a tack, which is to say that he intends to get caught, as he looks the security guard in the eye just before heading out.

Marlo had come to the corner store from a high-stakes card game, where he'd lost to an older gangster, who had, before taking the pot, ad-

monished the young drug lord and all the other “young’ns” for their choice of luxury vehicle. Marlo, his mentor suggests, needs to get himself a Lincoln Town Car because “a man look quiet and correct in one of them.” It was in this context that Stanfield decided to get caught stealing, clearly looking to palliate the blow to his ego incurred by the losses at the card game. On his way out of the corner store, Marlo passes the security guard and walks out the door, leading to the following encounter, which bears recounting in its entirety:

SECURITY GUARD: What the fuck? You think I dream of co-min’ to work in this shit on a Sunday morning—tell all my friends what a good job I got? I’m workin’ to support a family, man. Pretend I ain’t talking to you. Pretend like I ain’t even on this earth. I know what you are. And I ain’t steppin’ to you but I am a man. And you just clipped that shit and act like you don’t even know I’m there.

MARLO: I don’t.

(The security guard steps in front of Marlo. Marlo responds by stepping in closer, until their faces are a few inches apart.)

SECURITY GUARD: I’m here. Look, I told you I wasn’t steppin’ to you. I ain’t disrespectin’ you, son.

MARLO: You want it to be one way.

SECURITY GUARD: What?

MARLO: You want it to be one way.

SECURITY GUARD: Man, I don’t know what you—

MARLO: You want it to be one way.

SECURITY GUARD: Man, *Stop!* Stop saying that!

MARLO: But it’s the other way.

If “the other way” is clearly the status quo, however defined, what is the “one way” that Marlo sees in the guard’s ethos? The security guard’s “way” echoes the Fordist fantasy of the Hardware Barn but with a decidedly

black masculinist patois. His incantations, “but I *am* a man” and “I’m working to support a family,” recall the post-Moynihan cult of black fatherhood, in service of the singular demand that Marlo recognize him (“know that I’m here”): the security guard’s demand for recognition as a father and as a worker *qua* worker is an isomorphic injunction to also respect him as an authority figure. Here we witness the precise epistemological bind that has wrought historical formations of politicized black masculinity. As the guard explains himself, he knows *what* Marlo is but not *who* he is. Leaving aside, for instance, the question of whether Marlo *also* has mouths to feed (*Does* Marlo Stanfield have children? What sort of father might he be?), the guard casts Marlo both as an objectified Other (“what”) and as a “son” by virtue of that “what.”

This grammar underscores a typically gerontocratic mapping of black male homosociality. The guard’s brother-man exhortations—which reflects sort of race-man nostalgia—and double appeal to fatherhood recall, in turn, the heterosexism and authoritarianism behind patricentric renditions of racial uplift. Moreover, as Marlo sees when he does not “see” the security guard, the collective formations proceeding from such an affective arrangement tend to disadvantage “sons” to fathers and to be more effective at intragroup surveillance—minding the store—than in facilitating projects of collective or autonomous agency. And agency is the only thing in the world that matters to Marlo Stanfield. In another scene, Marlo charges his front man, Old Face Andre, with appraising a ring said to have sentimental value: “What’s the real value? I ain’t much for sentiment.” And, at least in this respect, it’s worth the sober question: Against a condition of diminishing political returns and generational precarity, what *is* the real value—not the sentimental value—of a politicized investment of black masculinity founded upon the “one way” nostalgic models of uplift and generational authority? Still, where Marlo’s rhetoric is illustrative, his ethics demonstrate the great fallacy at the base of his West Side supremacy, that the Other as such, once identified, warrants destruction; he later orders the security guard’s murder. At the same time, here, as with Snoop in the hardware store, material wealth enters to stymie the notion that nostalgia could or should produce a convivial collectivity.

III. PRECARIOUS LUNCH

Such a model of precarity is the workaday world of Preston “Bodie” Broadus. Eternally youthful, and portrayed expertly by J. D. Williams, for whom the character is only the most substantial and most recent iteration

in a long career of playing baby-faced, barely differentiated man-child thugs, from music videos to HBO's series *Oz* (1997–2003). Bodie, a fixture of the series since the first episode, begins *The Wire*'s fourth season in limbo. His previous employer, the Barksdale organization, had fallen to Marlo Stanfield's aggression, a criminal investigation, and its own institutional deficiencies. As a result, Bodie was essentially alone in the streets, "mostly independent," he says, save his few friends, who were themselves beginning to be picked off by the Stanfield Organization. Thus, despite his long work history, and his rank-and-file loyalty to the Barksdale clan, Bodie was, by the fourth season, downwardly mobile.

Lauren Berlant, writing of post-Fordist affect, but about the transnational, migrant workers of the Dardennes' film *La Promesse* (1996) could have just as easily been describing Bodie at this historical juncture: "The end of mobility as a fantasy of upwardness, and the shift to the fantasy of stop-loss, is itself a subtle redirection of the fantasy bribes transacted to effect the reproduction of life under the present economic conditions."²³ Bodie's corner, always at risk of being "bumped" off the map, was all that he had. Something about Bodie's condition resonated with Detective McNulty and vice versa. First brought together by a chance encounter, soon McNulty was bailing Bodie out of jail for major offenses. The two would eventually meet for an ultimately fatal lunch, which was both the high point and the end point of a very brief, genuine friendship between the two men.

The ostensible topic of Bodie and McNulty's final conversation was a plan for Broadus to inform the detective about some of the Stanfield operation's activities. This would otherwise violate the street code; Bodie, in his entire tenure on the streets, took an excessive, even Calvinist pride—which the detective understands—in his, to that point, successful performance of street morality. Bodie indicates, however, that he's had something of an epiphany with regard to his own position in the drug world; namely, that the traditions and safety nets that he could once count on for structure had lapsed and could, at this point, benefit only those (e.g., the Stanfield organization) whose attachment to the rules extended only as far as the rules would perpetuate their power, and who shucked them when they did not. Meanwhile, he realized, his still-unshakable loyalties to the Barksdale organization would not be repaid by their loyalty to him:

Bodie: I been doing this a long time. I ain't never said nothing to no cop. . . . I feel old. I been out there since I was thirteen. I ain't never fucked up a count, never stole off a package, never did some shit that I wasn't told to do. I've been straight

up. But what come back? You think if I get jammed up on some shit, they'd be like, "Alright. Yeah. Bodie been there. Bodie hang tough. We got to pay his lawyer. We got a bail." They want me to stand with them, right? Where the fuck they at when they supposed to be standing by us? I mean, when shit goes bad and there's hell to pay, where they at? . . . This game is rigged, man. Be like the little bitches on a chessboard.

McNULTY: Pawns.²⁴

This is a reference to one of Bodie's first and most memorable scenes in the series, in which D'Angelo Barksdale explains the rules of chess to Bodie and Wallace upon noticing his younger charges attempting to play checkers with chess pieces. D'Angelo explains the role of each piece and compares that role to analogous figures within the Barksdale gang: Avon Barksdale is the "king," Stringer Bell is the "queen." ("She smart, she fast. She move any way she want, as far as she want. And she is the go-get-shit-done piece."²⁵) Bodie, even then, understood that he was merely a pawn, though his eyes lit up when D'Angelo explained the process of promotion. Yes, while as D'Angelo explained, "The king stay the king," a pawn on the chessboard might one day become a queen, knight, rook, or bishop. To forestall any undue optimism, Bodie cautioned that, "in the game," the pawns "get capped quick . . . they be out the game early." "Unless," Bodie pipes up, "they some smart-ass pawns." But, by the time Bodie repeats the pawn analogy to McNulty, it's in acknowledgment, precisely, of his realization that promotion, at least from the pawn's perspective, is aleatory rather than meritocratic. Bodie himself had executed his friend Wallace, probably the smartest pawn in Bodie's cohort, while D'Angelo Barksdale and even smart, fast Stringer Bell suffered similar fates. Detective McNulty can relate to Bodie's sentiments because his own career has led him to an isomorphic cynicism regarding meritocracy. But also, McNulty understands because he is intimately aware—by way of a father laid off from Bethlehem Steel and McNulty's own work in *The Wire*'s second season in close proximity to the troubled stevedores' union—of the pawn's subject position.

The ghosts that Bodie invokes here, Stringer and D'Angelo, each played his own role in drawing Bodie and the detective together. Though, it must be noted, that these moments with Bodie are entirely different from those previous instances in which McNulty realized, albeit too late, that the drug dealer in his targets was special. Upon searching Stringer

Bell's classy apartment after his murder, McNulty took in the scenery, noticed a copy of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* on a bookshelf, and asked, "Who the fuck was I chasing?"²⁶ The shock to McNulty in this case was that Stringer's capitalist proclivities were forged by cosmopolitanism rather than provincialism. That is to say that McNulty recognized Bell as a radically different type of individual—different, first, from the typical target of one of McNulty's drug investigations but, more importantly, radically different from McNulty himself. Likewise, prior to his recognition of Stringer Bell, McNulty displayed a remarkable sympathy—again, mostly in death—for D'Angelo Barksdale and is motivated, long after D'Angelo's death, to solve the mystery of that death. But in his later recognition of Bodie Broadus, Detective McNulty notices a window of commonality, rather than (primarily) alterity, as with Bell, or pity, as was the case with D'Angelo Barksdale.

To refer to this moment as the most utopian in *The Wire*'s run is not to suggest that it is an unqualified success. After all, Bodie—having been spotted with the cop—would be soon murdered by the Stanfield organization. But, despite this, and against a nearly total backdrop of interminable failure across the entire run of the series, Bodie and McNulty succeed here in locating mutual recognition and make a genuine claim, for once, to the possible. But on what is this convivial moment based? As neither would have made the claim that the other's past is his own nor that these relative pasts are necessarily commensurate, they begin by eschewing the very nostalgia they had in the series previously, incessantly claimed an inherent virtue and usability to a closed past. The essential tool for conviviality is a fresh set of eyes.

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NOTES

1. "Refugees," dir. Jim McKay, in *The Wire* (New York: HBO, 2002–8), 4.4 (i.e., season 4, episode 4). Unless otherwise indicated, subsequent citations from the series in the text refer in the same form to season and episode and are from *The Wire: The Complete Series* (HBO Home Video, 2008), DVD.
2. "The Target," commentary, *The Wire* (New York: HBO, 2005), DVD.
3. "Slapstick," dir. Alex Zakrzewski, *The Wire*, 3.9.
4. By "tone" here, I'm relying on Sianne Ngai's use of the term to describe a "global and hyper-relational concept of *feeling* that encompasses attitude: a literary text's affective

bearing, orientation, or ‘set toward’ its audience and world” (*Ugly Feelings* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008], 43, emphasis in the original). In writing that the season is tonally convivial, I hope to indicate that the relationships at the heart of the season redound upon the relationship of the rest of *The Wire* to its component parts and to the series’ relationship to its audience, particularly to that audience’s thirst for programmatic change, which routinely greet Simon and his colleagues at public appearances.

5. Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Wellek Library Lectures series (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), xv.
6. Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, Open Forum series (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 8.
7. *Ibid.*, xx.
8. *Ibid.*, xxiv.
9. *Ibid.*, xxiv.
10. Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, xv.
11. *Ibid.*
12. John Atlas and Peter Dreier, “Is *The Wire* Too Cynical?” *Dissent Magazine* 55 (2008): 79–82, <http://dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=1236>.
13. Throughout this piece, I use the word *collective* and its derivatives merely to refer to groupings of any number of individuals, in which the individuals make claims to a shared past or future.
14. The oft maligned, Bush-era No Child Left Behind Act is the topical backdrop of *The Wire*’s engagement with the school system. HBO promotional posters for the fourth season mock “No Corner Left Behind” while the series dramatizes prevailing criticisms that the education initiative disincentivizes student-oriented creative classroom solutions in favor of options (e.g., teaching to the test), which insulate the school bureaucracy from punitive sanctions for low performance.
15. “Misgivings,” dir. Ernest Dickerson, *The Wire*, 4.10.
16. It would be hard to overstate the importance of 92Q in the history of Baltimore club music or in the cultural geist of young Baltimore. For some sense of perspective, we can look to the response to the accidental, swimming pool–related death of 92Q DJ K-Swift (née Khia Edgerton), who was also namechecked by Chris and Snoop on the series. Edgerton’s funeral brought out thousands of mourners in Baltimore and received national attention that far outstripped that of a typical radio disc jockey.
17. “Boys of Summer,” dir. Joe Chappelle, *The Wire*, 4.1.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Paolo Virno, “The Ambivalence of Disenchantment” in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, Theory out of Bounds series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 13–36, quotation on 16.
20. “Know Your Place,” dir. Alex Zakrzewski, *The Wire*, 4.9.
21. *Ibid.*
22. This moment marks the greatest failure of the efforts by former cops Colvin and Pryzbylewski to enact, within the constructs of the education system, as Cutty Wise

attempts through his boxing gym, a post-Moynihan institution of positive male role models as a salve to black youth dereliction.

23. Lauren Berlant, "Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal: Post-Fordist Affect in *La Promesse* and *Rosetta*," *Public Culture* 19, no. 2 (2007): 273–301, quotation on 291.
24. "Final Grades," dir. Ernest Dickerson, *The Wire*, 4.13.
25. "The Buys," dir. Peter Medak, *The Wire*, 1.3.
26. "Mission Accomplished," dir. Ernest Dickerson, *The Wire*, 3.12.