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CONSTRAINED FREQUENCIES: *THE WIRE* AND THE LIMITS OF LISTENING

Adrienne Brown

"The first thing that music is doing, rather than highlighting emotion, it's creating a sense of place. If it's a scene with Michael's crew standing on the corner, we need hip-hop to go in there." These are the words of Blake Leyh, music supervisor for *The Wire* during the five seasons it aired on HBO between 2002 and 2008.[1] Much has been written about *The Wire*'s use of music and whose music it uses, from critic Jeff Chang's liner notes for the show's first soundtrack in 2008 to the numerous print and radio interviews with Leyh.[2] And the show's music certainly merits this interest: *The Wire* featured an estimated six hundred separate pieces of music during its five-season run.[3]

Further fueling interest in the show's musical practices was the real-life feedback loop that occurred between *The Wire* and local Baltimore musicians. While the show prided itself on its attention to the specificities of the local, *The Wire* rarely included any Baltimore hip hop or house music in any of its scenes during its earliest seasons. Despite this slighting, local musicians and producers eagerly expressed their appreciation for *The Wire* through their music, culminating in the local release of a series of mixtapes titled *Hamsterdam* (2005), a nod to the show's third-season experiment in "legal drug-trafficking zones." Upon hearing these mixtapes, the show's writers attempted to make amends by both incorporating the work of local musicians into its final two seasons and releasing a second official soundtrack titled *Beyond Hamsterdam: Baltimore Tracks on "The Wire"* (2008) to publicize the Baltimore urban music scene, which, despite some high-profile wrangling amongst the pop-music literati about its authenticity and the ethics of its ever-eminent, if perpetually delayed, crossover, had never broken through to the mainstream.[4] The eventual use of Baltimore-based music on the show and its soundtracks, according to Leyh, provided "one more way 'The Wire' [could] give back to Baltimore."[5]

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The omission of local music from *The Wire*'s first few seasons was a critical misstep for a show so invested in keeping faith with its self-imposed standards of musical realism. From the start, the show distinctively used music diegetically, meaning that any music heard by the audience emanated from a source within a scene. With certain exceptions like the season-ending montages, if the viewer hears music while watching the show, the characters can hear it, as well. Within the diegetic landscape of *The Wire,* the jukebox, car radio, and boom box serve as music's primary vehicles, working to make "that environment more believable and more real" as opposed to the nondiegetic musical practice of layering music over scenes in order to "manipulate emotion," as Leyh explains. On *The Wire,* characters and viewers share the same sonic landscape, a technique of televisual realism that bars the viewer from accessing a higher plane of sonic emotive cues unavailable to the characters themselves.[6]

With the show's creed that its environments be as grittily authentic as possible, its interest in underclass characters and narrative arcs of degeneration, and its emphasis on environment as a key determinant in individuals' lives, *The Wire* aligns itself with the literary genre of naturalism. The show finds a home next to the stark urban texts of Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris, sharing their antiromantic convictions about the systemic nature of social divisions and the power of preexisting societal structures over individual agency.[7] Music does a great deal of work to legitimize the bleak authenticity the show aims to perform, standing in as a realistic detail organic to the show's characters rather than as a heavy-handed instrument of sentimentality laid over its characters from above. Leyh explains that "[w]e put music in there as a device to push you away from the people a little bit," marking music as a carefully placed barrier that prevents the viewer from forming an eased "melodramatic" identification with the show's characters.[8] Through *The Wire*'s self-imposed tenets of musical realism, one can hear the show's creators chafing against its urban detective show predecessors such as *New York Undercover* (1994) and *Miami Vice* (1984) in which the use of nondiegetic music undergirded the highly stylized music-video aesthetic these shows traded on for youth appeal.

But what happens if we switch terrain and, instead of considering what music *The Wire* uses and where, begin to consider *who* uses music; who has access to music and in what circumstances and what practices of listening are characters allowed to engage in, and to what end, are just some of the questions that result from shifting the discussion about music from the *what* to the *who.* Granting its role as authenticating detail, for whom does music function as nothing more than necessary background detail and, conversely, for whom does it become a potential space of self-reflex-

ivity, enunciation, or social and/or historical imagining? Of course, these questions of what music we hear and who actually listens to it are anything but neatly separated and bounded: what music we hear on *The Wire* clearly relates to who hears it and how. But in light of the media's focus on how Blake Leyh chose the music for *The Wire,* it seems important to go beyond the realm of artists and genres to examine the place and practice of music in *The Wire* as scripted by the show's writers and producers, headed by Ed Burns and David Simon, and consider how musical praxis remains enmeshed with issues of access, interiority, and representations of black subjectivity—especially in light of the authenticity claims that Leyh, Simon, and Burns make in music's name.

One illuminating detail illustrating the divide between the music we actually hear on *The Wire* and the way characters use and embody that music is that the actors who bring these characters to life generally do not know what music is playing in a scene either before or during filming. According to a 2008 interview with actor Gbanga Akinnagbe, who plays henchman Chris Partlow, music is typically added to scenes during postproduction.[9] That actors are neither informed of what music will be accompanying their filmed characterizations nor given the opportunity to act accordingly to these sonic cues reveals how the show disassociates music from the embodied practices of everyday life as expressed by black underclass subjects situated on the corner and in the drug game. *The Wire* calls on music to provide a documentarian accent or a dash of realism; it is something that is easily inserted later and at will by the show's producers. For scenes located on the city block, music needs to be playing in the background to make the show believable, but it does not really matter to the show what that music is because actors and, consequently, characters are not expected to engage with it as a specificity within the realm of the show. Within this context, *The Wire*'s early failure to incorporate local Baltimore music in street scenes is allowed to be construed as merely a missed detail rather than a major oversight by its producers since its presence would have had no effect on the way these scenes were shot or acted anyway. The postproduction insertion of music on *The Wire* becomes all the more significant in light of the sheer number of scenes that incorporate music, averaging up to around five scenes per episode.[10]

The show's dismissal of specific practices of listening for its corner characters comes into clearer focus in a *Baltimore City Paper* interview with Ed Burns about the making of *The Wire*'s fourth season. Burns narrows his musical target to the genre of hip hop in his following remarks about the challenges of casting black teenage actors:

> One of the problems was getting past this hip-hop world. A lot of the tapes, the readings, were always the exact same readings—the exact same hand motions at the exact same word, stuff like that—because hip-hop is so prevalent the kids are always seeing those things. And our four kids are not hip-hop kids, because when you're down at the bottom there is no hip-hop. Hip-hop grows from the bottom. If you want to see "hip-hop," you go out into the country and watch white boys walk up and down the street. So we had to find kids who were human.[11]

Here, Burns states what *The Wire* implicitly enacts—that the consumption of hip hop involves a privileged level of access no longer fully available to the very class the genre claims to represent. Burns attacks hip hop as his most direct, subversive competitor in the ongoing battle to represent the black underclass in the media.[12] He describes hip hop as fungal, something that grows, contaminates, and transforms the farther and farther it travels from "the bottom." By the time it reaches the inevitable top, its contamination and, consequently, its distance from this "authentic bottom" reveals itself, Burns explains, in its ultimate consumers and connoisseurs—the "white boys" in "in the country . . . walk[ing] up and down the street," whom he collapses with the nonhuman.

Ed Burns's collapsing of hip hop with both white consumption and the nonhuman comes as no surprise. As Bakari Kitwana notes and later challenges, "[T]he rarely disputed 'fact' that white suburban youth constitute hip-hop's primary audience may now be as popular as hip-hop itself."[13] Furthermore, the negative tethering of black representational practices to nonhumanity has centuries of American precedent. What Burns's remarks elucidate for us is that *The Wire,* as a competing popular culture representation of the life of the black underclass, must attempt to dislocate hip hop along with its partner in representational crime—the basketball court—from the aesthetic logic of his show in order to find a new representative order for the black underclass.[14] Or, in the words of political theorist Richard Iton, the hyperpresence of blacks in the cultural sphere can be pejoratively read as an overinvestment, with popular culture serving as a shadow land of black spectacle in which the overrepresentation of African Americans serves as poor compensation for their underrepresentation in institutions of the state.[15] With *The Wire,* Burns and Simon hope to push against the tropes and signs of the black underclass common to popular culture and move the discussion of black representation to the arenas of surveillance, biopolitics, and the ethical failures of both the state

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and capitalism, a discussion they cannot have while the specter of hip hop looms over their practices of representation, threatening to wrestle the discourse of the black underclass back to its normative terrain of music and sports.

But do Burns and Simon go too far in their attempted exorcism? They need to dislocate hip hop from *The Wire* in order to demonstrate that there is more at "the bottom" than what their intended target of homogenized hip hop has sold for three decades. Hip hop becomes a necessary straw man that the show must claim to resist but also ultimately needs in order to remain an authentic and believable representation. The show's producers deal with this double bind by rendering music as everywhere and nowhere. It is *everywhere* in that to deny its presence would damage the show's claims to realism, and so, accordingly, the show requires thick bassy beats emanating from cars and boom boxes to reflect the reality of the corner "environments." As Leyh says in the quote I opened with, "we need hip-hop to go there." But music is also *nowhere* on *The Wire,* meaning that the show does not have to portray music beyond the level of authenticating sonic prop.[16]

As a general rule, *The Wire*'s black corner characters are barred from engaging in any sort of active musical listening practices without harm. By *active listening practices* or a *praxis of musicality,* I mean the use of music as a space of production of either social or personal networks—attributes of music that have been highly theorized within cultural studies. A praxis of listening has the social potential to generate discussion or activity between people or the individual potential to access interiority, fostering explorations of emotion, creations of real or imaginary collectives, or the production of a recognizable self, just to name a few of its possible configurations. For those who can access music in this way, it becomes, as Josh Kun explains, "an entryway into a boundless social world of difference and possibility," where the act of private listening can bring into being "an alternate set of cultural spaces" where different places, times, and selves can be tried on for fit.[17] Contextualized by Paul Gilroy to constructions of blackness, music offers "a means to gain proximity to the sources of feeling from which our local conceptions of blackness were assembled."[18] But when music fails to serve these generative functions, it becomes *ambience:* a static, interchangeable, and barely audible detail rather than a soundtrack for interaction, memory, and imagining.[19]

Music is expressly antiemancipatory on *The Wire.* There are no characters clawing to make it to the stage, as in the film *8 Mile* (dir. Curtis Hanson, 2002) nor is there even the desire to do so. The show rarely grants its corner characters the privilege to select music as it expresses emotions,

memories, or imaginary states. For corner characters, there is no collective memory on the show enabled by music, no song left to carry on the story once everyone inevitably perishes in a game with no respect for life, privacy, or personal desire. There are no freedom writers, no ambitions to rap, paint, or dance the pain away by the show's black urban protagonists. Inside the world of *The Wire* and in stark contrast to other popular culture narratives, music can save no one's soul, and the local freestyle battle or underground dance-off is nowhere to be found. The show's only house party ends with sexual assault and death by drug overdose.

In a 2008 radio interview, Blake Leyh and actor Jamie Hector, aka the drug kingpin Marlo Stanfield, corroborate the show's disregard for corner musical praxis. When Hector discusses what music he listens to in order to get into character (New York hip hop, in fact), Leyh responds to Hector with audible surprise: "Do you think that Marlo listens to music? . . . He probably wouldn't even trifle with music. He's like existing on this plane that in the world that he moves through there's music playing. But I'm having a hard time imaging Marlo flipping through music and saying 'I feel like hearing these two today.'"[20] Hector returns to this line of discussion later in the interview when responding to a question about Marlo's emotionless state on the show, deciding that his character probably would not, in fact, listen to music because it elicits emotion, which goes against Marlo's constrained emotional register.

Within the logic of the show, Marlo's nonrelation to music certainly makes sense. He remains one of the show's most heartless and charmless characters. When Marlo's crew become the dominant drug traffickers on the streets of East Baltimore, characters and viewers alike ache for the bygone days of a kinder and friendlier drug trade, where murder was committed according to an ethical code and the motives for killing were clear to those in the know. As Hector savvily notes, Marlo's refusal to engage with music says a lot about both his character's psychology and the new viciousness of the illegal drug trade, inhabiting the ethos of raw capitalism to its murderous limit in the absence of its more regulated counterpart, which long ago abandoned such urban spaces for greener pastures. Marlo is so obsessed with presenting an image of infallible toughness that the active consumption of or interest in music on his part would be perceived by him as a distracting vulnerability that could be read as soft and, consequently, coded as queer, bourgeois, and/or feminized by his employees and competitors.

But what does it mean that the banishment of practices of musical listening extends beyond Marlo to the show's depiction of almost all of its other black characters situated on the corner, characters *The Wire* bends

over backward to portray as deeply human? Are Burns and Simon insinuating that an engagement with the music that goes beyond its use as a screen for wiretaps or as mere background music remains unavailable to those who are truly at "the bottom," situated by both Burns and the show as "under hip-hop" and music in general? Is this banishment of musical praxis a critique of the emancipatory or self-actualizing possibilities of music, where the show's rendering of music as no different from sound or wardrobe or props proves its inability to provide either a valid means of expression, the potential for action (either communal or personal), or a space of escape? Or is this banishment a space where we should critique the show for such a dismissal?

We can frame this question in terms of how music has been theorized as a medium of creation and reconstruction by theorists from Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy to Richard Iton and Josh Kun. Whether conceived of as an audiotopia, imagined community, or a more specifically black diasporic imaginary based in the relays of motion, mobility, and migration that defined the spaces of the black Atlantic, music has oft been discussed as an open space in which its listeners can envision versions of selves, histories, or communities located in either the past, present, or future. In contrast, *The Wire* asks whether musical practice and, more specifically, black musical practice as it has been theorized as a potential space of memory, imagining, and motion, remains available to those with restricted access to physical or social mobility in a neoliberal era where capital moves more freely than the bodies of the black underclass. *The Wire* troubles the notion of unmitigated access to the psychosonic capacities of music.[21]

The show's disavowal of musical praxis goes hand in hand with its depiction of the harsh conditions faced by poor African Americans living within the decayed infrastructures of the postindustrial city, in which no new population or economic base has yet arrived to replace those lost during the multiracial middle-class flight out of urban centers during the 1960s and 1970s. *The Wire*'s dismissal of the potential of practices of listening feeds its implicit critique that diaspora, hybridity, creolization, or cosmopolitanism (for which black music is one potential vessel) are just more (re)constructions of consciousness no longer available to those lacking access to these potential genealogies. Musical constructions of alternate communities and subjectivities join the nation-state as sites of citizenship to which the urban underclass subject has limited access. The show questions the potential for diasporic music, or any music for that matter, to serve as a workable medium for all black subjects equally.

I want to approach *The Wire*'s critique of musical praxis in two ways—to keep open the show's critique of music, and more specifically, black

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music, as a restricted medium with privileged access points as well as a space of limited agency for those black subjects truly at "the bottom," while also considering how this critique also brings to light some of the show's own institutional biases as it reproduces hierarchical norms in the name of its proclaimed gritty realism and progressive politics. The show's refusal of musical praxis would seem noteworthy, if not particularly meaningful, if it were instituted across the board equally to all of its characters. Simply to locate and critique the absence of musical practice on *The Wire* risks essentializing active listening practices as a relationship required of all subjects and interiorities. Naturalizing modes of listening is not my intention. Rather, what makes *The Wire*'s disregard for musical praxis on the corner significant comes from the show's willingness to grant music a tangible use-value to the middle-class "taxpayers" situated above the corner and the drug trade. Furthermore, even as the show situates a praxis of musical listening as a classed activity, it attaches these practices to outsider characters, depicting music as something of use only to those soft and insulated enough to need it.

While the show intentionally blurs the line between good and bad, moral and immoral, and those who help and those who hurt, in terms of music and its use-value, the show staunchly differentiates between those situated within the game and those who police it. I turn here to the few scenes depicting an attempted musical praxis by corner characters on *The Wire* before turning to the markedly different relationship between music, subjectivity, and use-value granted to the show's "citizens," as stickup man Omar Little insightfully refers to them, whose class and social otherness provide them access to an engaged practice of listening banished from life on the corner.

During the show's first season, the few scenes featuring a corner character actively engaged with music inevitably end in calamity, signaling that character's expendability within the drug trade. Those who dare partake in a moment of musically enabled interiority end up at the mercy of someone else whose bare-life desires lead them to find and take any presumable advantage they can. One such scene takes place early in the first season when Bubbles, the show's resident junkie, steals a stash of drugs from a rubber tire on the ground by fishing it up with a hook and wire from the roof of an adjacent building.[22] Bubbles makes his move while the man in charge of protecting the stash is absorbed in a personal and assumingly private act of musical expression, freestyling some less-than-stellar rhymes while Bubbles, in a Lil' Rascals–like moment of inspiration, reels up the drugs in the background. Although the lines the nameless rapper spits consist mostly of hip hop clichés, they are nonetheless personal reflec-

tions on a life of violence, poverty, and pain, recalling the "people I grew up with, long dead" or "locked up" through verse. The scene is brief and initially played for laughs until we see the dilettantish rapper apprehend and brutally beat the wrong culprit as Bubbles looks on in horror. Here we get the first sense of the show's conception of musical praxis as empty, and even foolish, when engaged in by those within the game. The only practical product resulting from music's evocation is a violent beating.

The prohibition of musical praxis for *The Wire*'s corner characters stretches from musical production to acts of private listening. The Discman becomes the symbolic object of musical taboo, signaling the impending downfall of corner characters who dare to entertain its enticements during each one of its first-season appearances. It initially emerges in the first season during a street robbery performed by stickup man Omar against two low-level nameless dope slingers who work for the Barksdale crew.[23] As Omar approaches his marks, he whistles the tune of "The Farmer in the Dell," his audio calling card throughout his appearances on the show. The four-bar nursery rhyme is less a space for attentive or active listening than a jingle of instant recognition meant to alert those within hearing range to Omar's presence as a trademark robber. As Omar's jingle echoes out and does its job, the street empties of people who have received its message and know to get out of the way. The only person who cannot hear the musical warning is one of the nameless corner boys listening to a Discman through headphones, who fails to hear or recognize everyone else's panic until it is too late. Upon realizing his peril, he clumsily runs away, dropping his Discman in the process. The camera focuses in on the disc player as it hits the ground, breaks, and sends its CD loose on a spiral path on the sidewalk. In a steady shot, the camera follows the CD's spiral for a few seconds until it drops flat on the pavement before the camera switches back to the robbery of its owner, already in progress, at the hands of Omar.

The totemic object of the Discman continues to signal imminent doom in two scenes involving Wallace, the young soft teenager whose anxieties about the drug game are eventually realized when he is murdered by his two childhood friends for snitching. The Discman first appears in Wallace's squatted apartment in the hands of one of the several children in his charge.[24] After bringing Chinese food to the children for dinner, Wallace engages the child in a conversation about music by asking him what he's listening to and how he feels about it. Poot, Wallace's friend and future murderer, observes this warm conversation with seeming fondness. The show has already represented Wallace as a maternal figure in his single-parent responsibilities of feeding and clothing the children he looks after,

but further marks him as compassionate and gentle through his willingness to engage the child in his interests and drawing out his practices of listening. The child speaks excitedly about his Big Tymers CD, reinforcing their family dynamic in spite of their dilapidated living conditions and nonnormative family structure. The love that emerges from this act of mutual musical engagement not only induces Poot's tender smile but the broader viewing audience's empathy. Yet, even as music actively produces the viewer's compassion for Wallace, it simultaneously marks Wallace's fallibility in the necessarily loveless drug trade, foreshadowing his eventual disposal. *The Wire* may use music to produce powerful connections between the audience and its corner characters, but the show eventually makes its corner characters pay dearly for these fleeting moments of musical praxis we sweetly enjoy.

Wallace is murdered later in the episode within the same confines of the squatted apartment. But this time, the children have been strategically removed from the space by Wallace's foes. He enters the room in search of the children, calling their names and yelling halfhearted threats, but they are nowhere to be found. Amidst his search, Wallace picks up a Discman, presumably the same one from the earlier scene, as his two friends, Bodie Broadus and Poot, pull out a gun to signal their murderous intention. As Wallace faces them, he holds the Discman in his hand as he backs up against a large poster of hip hop artist 2Pac, hanging on the wall behind him. In the shot's framing, both Wallace and the image of 2Pac in the background appear from the chest up, with 2Pac's gaze resting only an inch below Wallace's own eye level. While his friends murder Wallace, the Discman and the 2Pac's steady gaze encase his death. As Ed Burns's objects of hip hop from "above," these musical mementos mark Wallace as outside of the game, as someone who fits better beside objects once removed from the drug trade rather than as a working part of that trade itself.

The Discman's final appearance occurs when detectives discover Wallace's corpse, with the player firmly in his grip. The Discman contradictorily marks Wallace both as childlike, making him into the figure of the child he had previously engaged on the subject of music, as well as extremely mature, gesturing to his role as caretaker to the child who owned the Discman. After Wallace's murder, the question of what will happen to all of the children in Wallace's care lingers. The child featured just two scenes earlier no longer has either Wallace or this technology of listening as potential sites of protection, warmth, or reflection. As a consequence, he will most likely, according to the logic of the show, reemerge as an employee of the drug trade, the only work available in a space with no alternate structures of life or labor to offer.

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Rey Chow's theory of the portable music device as a tactic of self-production can help us understand the stakes of *The Wire*'s implicit denial of this technology to its corner characters. In *Writing Diaspora,* Chow argues that the "history of listening and the emotions that are involved in listening change with the apparatuses that make listening possible," and focuses on the Discman as a technology that takes the once-public act of listening to music and ushers listening into a new era of privacy-enabling interiorization.[25] For Chow, the Discman is complicit in the creation of

> a mode of making, which corresponds to a composite mode of listening that involves multiple entries and exits, multiple turnings-on and turnings-off. If music is a kind of storage place for the emotions generated by cultural conflicts and struggles, then we can, with the new listening technology, talk about the production of such conflicts and struggles on the human body at the press of a button. In the age of the Walkman (or its more sophisticated affiliate, the Discman), the emotions have become portable. (162)

Chow argues that the Discman enables its individual listeners to become "deaf to the loudspeakers of history," awakening the presence of a collective as well as instituting a potential barrier between the self and the world, allowing the listener to disappear from both the present and from history while sabotaging the "technology of collectivization" of modernity that yearns for subjects to collect and possess. The Discman provides an alternate model of collectivity as a mode of "self-production" located in the "mundane mechanical, portable part of ourselves which can be tucked away in our pocket and called up at will," even amidst other activities and interpellations. In Chow's argument, the object of the portable music device replaces the rhetoric of mobility often used by theorists of diaspora, creating an active space of listening where "the emotions of music" can become "dehydrated, condensed, and encapsulated, so that they can be carried from place to place and played instantly—at 'self-service'" (164).

In *The Wire*'s version of East Baltimore, dehydrated, condensed, and encapsulated euphoria can come in only pill or needle form, and self-service beyond the realm of the material is considered a dangerous excess. The multiple entries and exits and multiple turnings-on and turnings-off that Chow argues are fostered by a space of closed-off listening are the exact routes that have been denied to the black corner subjects in *The Wire.* When Wallace successfully leaves East Baltimore for the safety of his grandmother's house outside of the city, he ultimately returns to the

corner because, as he explains, while pointing to his inner-city surroundings, "this is me, yo, right here."[26] Even as the city has been abandoned by both industry and the middle class, Wallace cannot entertain exit as an option—he is unequipped with the knowledge of, or even an imagination for, anything outside of the site specific, consequently leaving him unequipped to imagine a self who could function removed from the hyperlocality of the block. In expelling the Discman from the corner, the show forces its subjects to be continuously at the mercy of the "loudspeakers of history" or, in this case, the loudspeakers of survival, with limited relief for hidden moments of self-making listening. *The Wire* shows how in the yet-ungentrifiable Baltimore projects, neoliberalism and the drug trade align to profit from the immobility of the urban black underclass, whose labor and quality of life are more easily devalued and disposed of in neighborhoods structurally sequestered from the spaces of "citizens" busy wrestling with their own loudspeakers—drowning out these other frequencies. As an object of portable interiority, the disabling Discman represents on a small scale the show's larger prohibition against mobility or motion, either literal or metaphoric, discouraging the black urban underclass of *The Wire* from real or imagined movements or collectivities.[27]

These limits are seemingly removed or eased for characters who have attained class mobility, even as their mobility within other social realms remains constrained. Officer Roland "Prez" Pryzbylewski, and Cheryl, the girlfriend of Detective Shakima "Kima" Greggs, are two noncorner characters who *The Wire* grants something resembling a musical praxis during its first season. As members of the middle class, the show allows these two characters the time and space to encounter music in meaningful ways without the risk that shadows corner characters' musical engagement. Pryzbylewski, the inept street cop whose family connections save him from being severely punished or fired for police brutality, and Cheryl, who openly opposes Kima's dangerous occupation and whose queer presence stymies the chief of police as he refuses her formal consolation for her partner's injury, exist as marginalized characters in the macho world of street sense and "good po-lice" work that dominates the show. Like Wallace, Pryzbylewski and Cheryl are presented as soft characters with vulnerabilities and sensitivities that mark them as peripheral to both the corner and the precinct, as opposed to the streetwise swaggering "hard" characters such as McNulty, Greggs, Stringer, or Bodie. Yet, unlike Wallace, their class mobility gives them the comfort and protection that affords them a beneficial musical praxis.

The show depicts Officer Pryzbylewski as grossly incompetent for much of the first season. He received his job as a cop through nepotism

and, after a disastrous display of police brutality, is allowed to keep his job by the same means. The indecorous Pryzbylewski's road to redemption occurs through the discovery of his uncanny ability to decipher codes, a skill he hones while on desk duty as a punishment for his earlier disgrace. His decoding savvy is given a musical backstory in a scene where he and a few fellow detectives are listening to incoming voice streams from wiretapped project pay phones while attempting to decipher black slang for drug-trafficking information.[28] Pryzbylewski is the lone officer in the room, white or black, able to both accurately hear and decipher the slang from the intercepted calls. When asked by his colleagues how he acquired such a skill, Pryzbylewski puzzlingly responds by reciting the first two opening lines from the Rolling Stones' "Brown Sugar" (1971) before offering a boastful explanation: "I bet you've heard that song five hundred times, but you never knew, right? I used to put my head to the stereo speaker and play that record over and over."[29] Although his coworkers are initially baffled by Pryzbylewski's musical citation, he proves that a dedicated musical praxis can have a practical application.

The Wire grants Pryzbylewski a musical backstory with a bankable use in the present. Unlike the practices of listening that result in robbery or death for corner characters, his practices of listening allow him not only to find redemption but to become a formidable case-making cop who excels at his job, enabling him to hear things where others cannot. Music becomes an invaluable form of training for his character, producing a tangible result. In Cheryl's case, music also has a use-value, albeit a less explicitly advantageous one. As neither a cop nor a corner character, the show posits Cheryl as an outsider. However, her status as a woman already marks her as other on a show that, in terms of both casting and culture, remains overwhelmingly male. Before turning to Cheryl's specific practices of listening, I want to consider briefly *The Wire*'s construction of gender as the one aspect where the show conforms to preexisting popular culture representational precedents without much resistance.

Along with Kima and Assistant State Attorney Rhonda Perlman, Cheryl is one of the few prominent recurring female characters featured on *The Wire*. Representations of women of color on the show generally remain wedded to the same cultural dynamics that critic Michele Wallace originally identified in 1991 in films about black inner-city life. With the exception of Kima, Cheryl, and Snoop, black women most often appear on the show as either strippers or mothers who ruthlessly encourage their sons to bring home either money or drugs for consumption. The show cements the deficiency of the single black mothers through its implicit moral that "the boys who don't have fathers fail [while] the boys who do have

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fathers [or father figures] succeed."[30] Richard Iton points out that crack was the first drug consumed more heavily by women than men, producing a range of sex-specific stereotypes like the crack whore, crack mother, and crack baby in its wake that circulated throughout the media during the 1980s and 1990s.[31] Yet, on *The Wire,* even this "privileged" position of the black dope fiend, with a few exceptions, is assigned to men. While women populate the background of drug buys and twelve-step meetings, male addicts are most often the ones who are scripted as speaking and recurring characters.[32]

Given the relatively peripheral place of women of color on the show, it becomes all the more important that *The Wire* assigns the most distinctly musical moment of the entire first season to Cheryl as she grieves for her girlfriend, Detective Greggs when Greggs is shot while undercover and remains in critical condition.[33] During the forty-second dialogue-free scene, Cheryl cries on her living room sofa while listening to Nina Simone's "I Want a Little Sugar in My Bowl" (1967). The camera pans across her face as she openly weeps for her injured lover, grabbing onto an ink stain on the sofa that Kima left behind in an earlier episode. Music opens up this avenue of memory and feeling, providing a lyrical scene of grief and emotion. In light of the show's general displacement of women from hypermasculinized sites of urban warfare, the assignment of the longest and most intensely musical scene of the entire first season to Cheryl suggests there is more at issue than simply class-based privilege in who the show grants musical praxis.

Cheryl's grief is set in harsh relief when placed next to stickup man Omar's analogous scene of grieving for his undoubtedly dead male partner, which occurred only an episode earlier.[34] Denied the comfort of a well-decorated home, Omar's grief takes place in the morgue as he identifies his lover's dead body. The only soundtrack the show provides Omar's pain is the static of an unclear talk-radio station, which Omar punctuates with his own offscreen scream. This show's decision to deny Omar's grief any opportunity for abetted musical expression, either diegetic or extradiegetic, feels especially deliberate when placed next to Cheryl's carefully considered scene of grief. For the middle-class characters who have the option to move in and out of the life of the drug trade on the corner, *The Wire* grants encounters between music and subjectivity. Their citizenship grants them not only a level of protection from the immediate warfare of the drug trade but access to a musical praxis with beneficial qualities.

Let us return to the original question I raised about *The Wire*'s skepticism regarding the availability of a meaningful musical praxis to the black male underclass. Only robbery and death can result from a corner

character's engagement with music as a space of self-making and interiority that delivers them away, even momentarily, from the all-demanding and self-consuming drug trade. This lack of affordable space for musical consumption or praxis speaks against the lyrical testimonies of drug-slingers-turned-rappers such as Jay-Z, 50 Cent, and others who claim music as their ticket out of the projects. For corner characters on *The Wire,* music is as much of a stale and failed institution as education, journalism, politics, and law enforcement, grouped together by the show as societal bodies that can no longer serve the communities they claim as their constituents.

But, even as these are valid cultural critiques, they are particularly tricky accusations for one cultural product, a television show, to launch at another. Because, in spite of its critique of cultural structures as unequipped to help anyone find grace, *The Wire* itself cannot escape the fact that it, too, is a cultural product and a medium of expression. It cannot shake its own status as a fellow mediator between communal culture and individual consumers and, consequently, a voyeuristic access point to a version of the black underclass to viewers situated outside, in "the country," as Burns refers to it in his derogatory remarks. Like the Discman that circulates on the streets of the show during the first season, signaling the downfall for characters on the corner who lower their street vigilance for a few seconds to engage in an act of private, individual listening—who dare to block out the street and end up being knocked out by the street in result—*The Wire,* too, is inevitably a cultural product in circulation facing the same limits of consumption, transcendence, and authenticity it reads onto music. While the show may critique the potential for music to produce meaningful modes of expression for the characters it imagines into being, the show uses its own status as exactly this—a cultural medium of expression that brings an audience into being—to transmit an underseen image of the life of the urban underclass in the name of a realism that wants, more than anything, for its audience to pay attention to the real and the simulacra simultaneously. If music now exists as an unsuitable and nonbeneficiary mode of cultural production for the black underclass, what does *The Wire* as cultural product hope to achieve and for whom?

In its exclusion of music from its sphere of urban representation, *The Wire* attempts to work against the grain of the images of black street life circulating in the hyperblack popular culture sphere of the recent past. Consequently, *The Wire* challenges theorizations of music's radically transformative potentialities. Music may have been a potent medium for the rallying and distribution of messages of social change during the Civil Rights movement, but *The Wire* suggests that such potentialities are strug-

gling to survive in the contemporary era where the declining significance of race and the increasing significance of class continue to fracture a coherent idea or even a coherent imagining of black consciousness. As a markedly post–Civil Rights representation of urban black America, *The Wire* refuses to grant music the power to overcome by strictly enforcing the limits of musical access and possibility available to its black underclass characters. For David Simon, music cannot change the current fact that "in this postmodern world of ours, human beings—all of us—are worth less. We're worth less every day, despite the fact that some of us are achieving more and more."[35] The show's naturalist pessimism has been remarked upon before, and its denial of a generative practice of music can be viewed as one instance of its trademark bleakness.[36]

Simon's point is well taken: with every individual success story of social mobility, there are countless unseen others who remain left behind and unrepresented. For every Jay-Z, Lil Wayne, or Allen Iverson, there are a myriad of Wallaces, Bodies, and Stringer Bells who fail to achieve a status of relative comfort and security. *The Wire*'s inclusion of music as one more space to which the black underclass has lost privileges is a radical break from nearly all previous representations of black subjectivity, flying in the face of accounts of blackness from Du Bois's epigraphic use of slave songs and Ellison's lower blues frequencies to Morrison's waves of sound. African American survival has always been entwined with music. Consequently, the show's refusal of black musical praxis cannot be arbitrary, forcing us to consider what the show gains from such an elision, as well as what conceptions of black subjectivity are lost. If we are able to follow in Pryzbylewski's steps and put our head to the stereo speakers of *The Wire* to listen over and over, recalibrating our loudspeakers of history to *The Wire*'s corner vibrations, the tune we hear remains buried in static, if we can make out any melodies at all.

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NOTES

1. "*The Wire:* Ear to the Streets," special music feature at the HBO website in 2009.
2. Chang Jeff, "Everything Is Connected," liner notes, *"The Wire": And All the Pieces Matter—Five Years of Music from "The Wire,"* Nonesuch, 2008, CD. See also the accompanying liner notes by cocreator David Simon and series writer George Pelecanos.
3. Many of these features are cited within this essay. For additional articles referencing Blake Leyh, see Sean Fennessey, "All in the Game," *Vibe* 16, no. 3 (2008): 116–17; Al Shipley, "Way Down in the Hole," *Baltimore City Paper,* 2 January 2008; Rashod D.

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Ollison, "Show Is Hip to Baltimore's Undiscovered Rappers," *Baltimore Sun,* 10 December 2006; and Dave Walker, "Bow Down to 'The Wire,'" *New Orleans Times-Picayune,* 9 December 2006.

4. In 2001, around the same time as *The Wire*'s debut, Scott Seward made the case for Baltimore House as radically transcendent music that "bewilders and scares you with its newness" in his article "Why Baltimore House Music is the New Dylan" (*Post Road Magazine,* Criticism, no. 3 [2001], www.postroadmag.com/Issue_3/Criticism3/Seward-Critic.htm [accessed 1 August 2009]). See also Andrew Devereaux, "'What Chew Knew about Down the Hill?': Baltimore Club Music, Subgenre Crossover, and the New Subcultural Capital of Race and Space," for a history of Baltimore House music and the recent problematic attempts to make it cross over into the mainstream (*Journal of Popular Music Studies* 19, no. 4 [2007]: 311–41).
5. Jon Caramanica, "For 'The Wire,' Rap That's Pure Baltimore," *New York Times,* 10 September 2006.
6. Jess Harvell, "On the Corner," *Baltimore City Paper,* 30 August 2006.
7. The one aspect of literary naturalism that *The Wire* rejects is the belief in biological determinism. For more on the relationship between naturalism and modes of biological determinism such as eugenics, see Christophe den Tendt, *The Urban Sublime in American Literary Naturalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Lois A. Cuddy and Claire M. Roche, eds., *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture, 1880–1940: Essays on Ideological Conflict and Complicity* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2003); and Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
8. "*The Wire:* Ear to the Streets."
9. "On the Wire," *The Leonard Lopate Show,* WNYC, 30 January 2008.
10. I am restricting my analysis mostly to the first season while also hesitantly claiming it applies generally to the whole series. While the show incorporates more local music in its later seasons, the practices of listening engaged in by its characters, for the most part, remain the same. For example, Bodie's shock upon realizing that radio stations change for different regions in season 2 or Chris and Snoop's use of Baltimore house music as a code to identify who is and who is not from Baltimore in season 4—both of these moments invoke music as code or accent without content specificity. Even Cutty's headphoned run through the streets of Baltimore to Curtis Mayfield's "Move on Up" (1971) in season 4 falls within these same parameters—on the DVD commentary, director Dan Attias and writer William Zorzi discuss making the decision to have Cutty listen to the radio during his run rather than depicting him as choosing a tape (originally by Eric B. & Rakim).
11. Bret McCabe, "Back to School: 'The Wire's' Fourth Season Is for the Children," *Baltimore City Paper,* 30 August 2006.
12. My use of the term *underclass* is most indebted to William Julius Wilson's use of the term to describe the largely African American urban poor who face structural problems such as underfunded and ill-equipped schools, decreased job opportunities, networks, and resources in the postindustrial city centers, less reliable transportation, the consequences of Federal Housing Administration redlining in the early and mid-twentieth century, as well as related cultural deterrents that decrease the likelihood of escaping poverty. For the latest version of this argument, see Wilson's most current book, *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City,* Issues of Our Time series, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).

13. Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wangstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (New York City: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 83. Kitwana argues that there is no reliable source for the oft-recited statistic that up to 70 percent of hip hop's consumer audience is white and that the perpetuation of this myth harmfully results in the dismissal of blacks and Hispanics as both tastemakers and consumers.

14. An example of the exile of sports from *The Wire*'s representation logic is the season 1 basketball game between East Baltimore and West Baltimore, populated by ringers bought from the local community college. None of the characters we have been introduced to from the corner are allowed to participate in this potentially transcendent moment of regional battle that takes place outside of the drug trade—they are literally sidelined from the sport as it represents a potential avenue to wealth and fame for black inner-city kids, which has become a common trope. Boxing is perhaps the one exceptional sports space granted within *The Wire,* but again, just as with the basketball court, the most spectacular fights take place outside the ring, even as they are located within the physical space of Cutty's gym.

15. Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics & Popular Culture in the Post–Civil Rights Era,* Transgressing Boundaries series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17–18.

16. This also means obfuscating the real-life musical connections of some of the actors cast on the show. Recording artists Method Man and Steve Earle both held substantial recurring roles as a drug dealer and a sobriety sponsor, respectively, and former Onyx member, Fredro Starr, appeared in three episodes as Barksdale henchman, Bird. Michael K. Williams, who plays Omar Little, was a professional choreographer and backup dancer for artists such as Janet Jackson and Missy Elliott before being cast on the show. During the show's run, its actors have appeared in music videos by Monica, Ludacris, and Lil' Flip. It doesn't hurt to also mention the post-*Wire* musical ambitions of Idris Elba (Stringer Bell), Felicia Pearson (Snoop), and Maestro Harrell (Randy) (see Hillary Crosley, "'The Wire' Taps Urban Music's Pulse," *Billboard* 119, no. 50 [2007]: 14).

17. Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* American Crossroads series (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2.

18. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 109.

19. This is not to say that Leyh's choices of music are without commentary of their own—there are many moments where his choices open up moments on the screen or shift them in surprising ways. But this almost always takes place outside of the realm of the character's acknowledgment or practices of musicality. It is for the audience to get rather than the characters, and music actually becomes extradiegetic in these moments.

20. "On the Wire."

21. Rey Chow and Pheng Cheah separately critique diasporic configurations of identity, but with different emphasis. Cheah remains suspicious of theorized ideas of hybridization for its disregard of the importance of the nation-state for postcolonial spaces as a means of protection against global capital's imperializing force. Chow questions notions of diaspora and migrancy, along with their attendant structures of resistance and agency, as terms that "neglect this ongoing situation of ethnicity as systematically produced and perpetuated outside of a given society" and risk essentializing ethnic otherness. See Pheng Cheah's "Given Culture: Rethinking Cosmopolitical Freedom in Transnationalism," in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation,* ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, Studies in Classical Philology series (Minneapolis: University of

Minnesota Press, 1998), 290–328; and Rey Chow's *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

22. "Game Day" (2002), dir. Milcho Manchevski, *The Wire: The Complete Series* (New York: HBO Video, 2008), DVD. Hereafter, episode citations are based on this DVD box set.
23. "The Pager" (2002), dir. Clark Johnson, *The Wire.*
24. "Cleaning Up" (2002), dir. Clémont Virgo, *The Wire.*
25. Rey Chow, "Listening Otherwise, Music Miniaturized: A Different Type of Question about Revolution," in *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies,* Arts and Politics of the Everyday series (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 144–64; hereafter cited in the text.
26. "Cleaning Up."
27. The Discman remains a signal of impending trouble for black underclass characters beyond *The Wire*'s first season. For instance, in the beginning of season 2, Port Officer Beatrice "Beadie" Russell's bucolic existence policing the port before it is under formal investigation is punctuated by her listening to music through headphones—not much is going on, so Beadie is free to happily tune out the port. On the other hand, D'Angelo's headphoned listening is construed as a more desperate act of tuning-out, accompanying his new hobby of heroin use in prison. In the same season, McNulty catches Bubbles stealing a Discman and uses the theft to blackmail Bubbles into the risky job of finding Omar. Later in the episode, McNulty gifts the headphones to his ex-wife, who comfortably enjoys them as she washes dishes.
28. "One Arrest" (2002), dir. Joe Chapelle, *The Wire.*
29. Ibid.
30. Michele Wallace, *Dark Designs and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 216.
31. Iton, *In Search,* 155.
32. The relative underrepresentation of women of color on *The Wire* puts Pryzbylewski's reference to the Rolling Stones' "Brown Sugar" in a new light, with even Pryzbylewski's development of a musical praxis coming at the expense of black female's subjectivity via the five hundred sonic revisitings of sadomasochistic lustings from "Brown Sugar" that Pryzbylewski uses to fine-tune his ear.
33. "The Hunt" (2002), dir. Steve Shill, *The Wire.*
34. "The Wire" (2002), dir. Edward Bianchi, *The Wire.*
35. Mark Bowden, "The Angriest Man in Television," *Atlantic* 301, no. 2 (2008): 50–57, http://current.com/10ihs4c (accessed 5 June 2009).
36. For a summary of the debate surrounding *The Wire*'s bleakness, see Brian Cook's "Joys of 'The Wire,'" *In These Times,* 22 February 2008.