"They gon' study some [things]": Representations of schools and schooling in HBO's *The Wire*

Habib Siam

Department of Integrated Studies

McGill University, Montreal

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“He never was a silly little boy
Who whispered in the class or threw spit balls,
Or pulled the hair of silly little girls,
Or disobeyed in any way the laws
That made the school a place of decent order
Where books were read and sums were proven true
And paper maps that showed the land and water
Were held up as the real wide world to you.
Always, he kept his eyes upon his books:
And now he has grown to be a man
He is surprised that everywhere he looks
Life rolls in waves he cannot understand,
And all the human world is vast and strange–
And quite beyond his Ph.D.’s small range.” (Langston Hughes, 2001, p. 224)

DEACON WILLIAMS: “This thing over at the University of Maryland School of Social work, they got a grant, big money.”

MAJOR COLVIN: “Just stop.”

DEACON WILLIAMS: “Half million to look at repeat violent offenders. Clinical intervention, all that mess.”

MAJOR COLVIN: “So they gon’ study some shit, huh? Melvin, I had me a good helping of them downtown, tie-wearing, come to do good, stay to do well college types last year.” (Price & Burns, 2006a, 6:43)

“[L]’école fait la nation.” (Georges Davy, 1929, p. 233)

Abstract

This qualitative inquiry is a close reading of the representations of public schools and schooling in HBO's television drama *The Wire*. I pay particular attention to the experiences of school administrators, educators, and students. *The Wire* draws from the ethnographic work of David Simon, a former Baltimore Sun journalist, and Edward Burns, a retired homicide detective and public school teacher. In examining the show's critiques of public schooling, I ask these questions: What types of representations of public schools and schooling are revealed in season four of *The Wire*? What kind of knowledge do these representations produce, and how is this knowledge socially and culturally relevant to teachers and to teacher education programs? I conceive of *The Wire* as a heteroglossic text that challenges dominant conceptions of schools and the education enterprise. Linguist Mikhail Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as the presence of different languages within a body of work, where each language presents and represents distinct worldviews. I use French philosopher Julia Kristeva's view of texts as productive entities that disrupt unexamined assumptions and generate new forms of seeing, being, and doing. Through my interpretive understandings, I suggest that schools are resistant to organizational change but that institutions of formal education may offer the potential to forge interpersonal relationships through which meaningful learning can occur. I also propose a revaluation of managerial approaches to education that rely on statistics to quantify learning. In closing, I recommend further research into the social functions of schooling, and the similarities that exist between schools and other normative institutions like law enforcement, mental health, and prisons.

Résumé

Cette enquête qualitative est une lecture approfondie des représentations des écoles publiques et de la scolarisation véhiculées dans la série télévisée de HBO : *Sur écoute* (*The Wire*). Nous nous concentrons plus particulièrement sur les expériences des administrateurs dans les écoles, des éducateurs et des étudiants. *Sur écoute* s'inspire de la recherche ethnographique de David Simon, un ancien journaliste du quotidien *The Baltimore Sun* et de Edward Bruns, un investigateur de homicide retraité et enseignant de l'école publique. C'est à travers les critiques de la série vis-à-vis du système scolaire publique que nous soulevons les questions suivantes : quels types de représentations de l'école publique et du système scolaire sont révélés dans la quatrième saison de *Sur écoute* ? Quel rapport à l'école ses représentations forment-elles et comment ce dernier est-il socialement et culturellement pertinent par rapport aux enseignants et à leur programme éducatif ? Nous considérons *Sur écoute* en tant que texte hétéroglossique qui questionne les conceptions dominantes de l'école et de l'entreprise éducative. Le linguiste Mikhail Bakhtin définie l'hétéroglossie comme la présence de différents langages au sein d'un même corpus et où chaque langue présente et représente des visions différentes du monde. Nous utilisons la pensée de la philosophe Julia Kristeva sur la théorie du texte comme élément de travail qui repense des hypothèses infondées et génère de nouvelles façons de voir, d'être et de faire. Au travers de notre interprétation, nous évoquons l'idée que les écoles résistent au changement organisationnel mais que les institutions de l'éducation formelle offrent un potentiel pour forger des relations interpersonnelles qui permettraient un apprentissage significatif. Nous proposons également une réévaluation des approches managerielles à l'éducation qui se fondent sur des statistiques pour quantifier l'apprentissage. En

conclusion, nous recommandons une recherche plus approfondie sur les fonctions sociales de l'école et sur les similarités qui existent entre l'école et d'autres institutions normatives, telles que celles du maintien de l'ordre, les hôpitaux psychiatriques et les prisons.

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Author's Note

This compact disc contains an electronic version of my dissertation, in which I have embedded scenes from *The Wire* that are relevant to my analysis. The hyperlinked text is in underlined font; blue in the electronic version and black in print. These minor formatting alterations should help readers locate the scenes in the print dissertation and watch them electronically. Viewing the scenes is not mandatory but adds to the level of reader engagement with the text. An internet connection is required.

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Chapter 1 – Fade to Image: An Inquiry Into the Worlds of *The Wire*

The Wire is a Home Box Office (HBO) television series created and written by former *Baltimore Sun* journalist David Simon and retired Baltimore homicide detective turned public school teacher Edward Burns. The show's pilot episode begins with a memorable exchange. The image fades in to the sound of sirens. The camera follows a trail of blood that leads to a dead body lying face down on the pavement. A gloved police officer collects evidence into a zip-lock bag as three children, around the ages of 7 or 8, are seated on a bench, gazing at the spectacle. The shot of the children flashes for only a second but leaves a lasting impression. The young ones appear out of place as they sit in the streets after dark, seemingly unsupervised. Why are they at a murder scene, staring at a corpse? Is their subdued demeanor caused by shock or is it because they have witnessed so much violence that they have become desensitized to it? Their presence is, perhaps, the first indicator that viewers are being invited into a world that does not follow convention, where social norms are refashioned and may seem unintelligible to outsiders.

The Wire's opening scene suggests that the show constructs and engages alternate realities representative of fringe experiential worlds. In an interview with Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) reporter Bill Moyers (2009a), Simon explains that *The Wire* is about the other America, "the America that got left behind" (4:01). The series' intent, the co-creator adds, is to challenge traditional depictions of communities considered to be the under-class, the urban poor, those relegated to underground economies like the drug trade as their sole means for financial sustenance. These are the people whose participation in mainstream society is impeded by institutional and other systemic barriers that ensure diminished access to social, cultural, and intellectual capital. French philosopher Pierre

Bourdieu (1986) defines capital as different forms of material and symbolic resources in specific social arenas, whether financial, educational, cultural, or linguistic. The accumulation of various forms of capital has a direct bearing on social position and upward mobility. Over the course of 60 episodes, *The Wire*'s writers examine organizational practices in different social institutions, from law enforcement to trade unions and the public schooling system. The show's creators are concerned with the worlds these organizations are intended to govern, the individuals that inhabit these worlds, and the ways in which these worlds are interconnected.

[Screenshot 1] Detective McNulty and his murder witness on a stoop (Simon & Burns, 2002a, 1:16)

The Wire's opening sequence, previously described, continues with a White police officer, Detective Jimmy McNulty, and a Black murder witness, seated side-by-side on a

stoop in Baltimore, Maryland. Stoops are small staircases leading into the entrance of buildings or row houses and are akin to urban porches. They differ from balconies, which are usually private and afford their occupants a perched view of the street. Stoops provide a ground-level view of the neighborhood and are ambiguous spaces in that it is unclear whether they are extensions of the home onto the sidewalk, or vice versa. This liminality, or "in-betweenness," blurs the boundaries between the private and the public, and allows the two spheres to coalesce. Civil rights activist and American sociologist W.E.B. DuBois (1965) might have considered stoops to be points of transference, a term he used to describe places and spaces of contact between different cultures and social classes that extend beyond daily intermingling. DuBois emphasized the importance of these sites in the social analyses of class and race relations, and conceived points of transference as locations where different social groups negotiate political, economic, and historic meanings. He also favored physical points of transference that encourage social contact in everyday life to those more abstract spaces that involve intellectual exchanges. The latter consists of academic libraries, publications, and conferences; the former includes neighborhoods, public spaces, and perhaps even stoops.

The choice of setting for the discussion between the policeman and his witness is telling as the detective and the civilian, who come from different racial, social, and economic backgrounds, are attempting to make meanings from the chain of events that led to a murder. This transcribed excerpt from their exchange picks up mid-conversation (Simon & Burns, 2002a):

MCNULTY: "Doesn't seem fair."

WITNESS: "Life just be that way I guess…"

MCNULTY: “So… Who shot Snot?”

WITNESS: “I ain’t going to no court!” *Brief pause* “Motherfucker ain’t have to put no cap in him though.”

MCNULTY: “Definitely not.”

WITNESS: “I mean, he could have just whopped his ass like we always whop his ass.”

MCNULTY: “I agree with you.”

WITNESS: “You gon’ kill Snot. Snot been doing the same shit since I don’t know how long. Kill a man over some bullshit. Look I’m saying, every Friday night, we in the alley behind the cut ready to move all them bones, you know. I mean all the boys from around the way and we roll ‘til late.“

MCNULTY: “Alley crap game, right?”

WITNESS: “Like every time, I mean, Snot, he’ll fade a few shooters, play it out ‘til the pot’s deep… Snatch and run.”

[…]

MCNULTY: “Let me understand you… Every Friday night, you and your boys would shoot crap, right? And every Friday night, your pal Snot Boogie, he’d wait ‘til there was cash on the ground and then he would grab the money and run away? You let him do that?”

WITNESS: “I mean, we’d catch him and beat his ass but ain’t nobody never go past that.”

MCNULTY: “I gotta ask you… If every time Snot Boogie would grab the money and run away, why’d you even let him in the game?”

WITNESS: “What?”

MCNULTY: “If Snot Boogie always stole the money, why’d you let him play?”

WITNESS: “Got to… This America, man.” (1:02)

McNulty’s rephrasing of the witness’ statements is a technique interviewers use when attempting to gain a more thorough account from their interviewees. Here, the policeman employs this technique to bridge a linguistic gap that exists between two individuals, a verbal chasm where caps are bullets, moving bones is playing craps and fading shooters is rolling dice. “Let me understand you,” McNulty iterates as he rewords the witness’ colloquialisms.

The detective is portrayed as an ethnographer engaged in fieldwork in a cultural community to which he does not belong and attempting to establish an account of a series of occurrences. In an exchange with his partner a few episodes later, McNulty justifies a drug dealer’s reticence to co-operate with the police by explaining: “Every now and then we visit the projects. They live there” (Simon & Burns, 2002b, 12:42). His statement alludes to the tensions that govern the relationships between “we,” members of law enforcement that represent the interests of dominant society, and “they,” those peripheral communities the detectives are mandated to police. McNulty’s Irish drawl and the witness’ use of Baltimore street slang accentuate the cultural differences between the two characters. They have conflicting conceptions of the world, of what constitutes fairness, and, in keeping with the game analogy, of what rules to live by. When McNulty asks, “why’d you even let [the victim] in the game,” the witness appears genuinely confused, as it made perfect sense to allow Snot Boogie to play. The scene, as does the rest of the show, serves as an indictment of capitalism and the belief in the idea that everyone deserves and receives an

equal chance at participation in mainstream society. “It’s a wonderful metaphor for what’s going on in the American city, that those who are excluded from the legitimate economy make their own world. And we’re trying to depict the world that they’ve created,” Simon (2002, 3:01) explains.

“This America, man.” As the witness says this, the camera pans to the dead body. McNulty smiles, seemingly aware of the irony that those excluded from the mainstream would fashion a world predicated on the ideals of a social order that has marginalized them. These are some of the complexities with which viewers of *The Wire* are invited to engage. The show’s writers forgo clichéd cop show formulas that depict righteous police chasing amoral criminals in favor of thoughtful analyses of urban life and cities’ social institutions. Simon is skeptical of drug enforcement legislature, explaining that he sees current policies as a means for the institutional management of the urban poor. “We’ve raised a Draconian standard of prohibition, to a point where what began as a war against illicit drugs and narcotics, and the damage they do has now become a war on the underclass in American cities” (Simon, 2002, 46:16). Despite this assault, the fringe communities that populate *The Wire*’s world(s) endorse a principle tenet of the so-called American dream, the notion that everyone merits an equal shot. After all, bullets do not discriminate.

To their credit, *The Wire*’s writers explore the social tensions that govern city life without privileging a particular character or experience. Comparative literature scholar Marsha Kinder (2008) suggests that, because of *The Wire*’s reliance on a large casting ensemble and the absence of dominating protagonists in the series’ narrative, the show’s primary unit of analysis is the city and its bureaucratic organizations. “Baltimore is such a

character in the story," explains Clark Johnson (2002, 9:00), who directed four of the series' episodes and plays journalist Gus Haynes in the show's fifth season. *The Wire*'s creators are particularly interested in race-relations in major urban centers and in the institutional management of inner-city residents. Simon, Burns, and their team of writers critically examine law enforcement strategies, the public schooling system and the decline of newsprint journalism, among other social issues. Kinder (2008) also recognizes the show as a subversive alternative to mainstream images of American social fabric. She cites the casting of Black actors in high-ranking political and administrative positions as an example of racial representations that television rarely espouses. The show's characters elude reduction to tired stereotypes like that of the ignorant street thug or of the virtuous police detective. *The Wire*'s central figures include Omar Little, a homosexual stick-up artist who never uses profanity, robs criminals, but refuses to "put [his] gun on nobody that wasn't in the game" (Alvarez, Simon & Burns, 2002, 51:46). Stringer Bell, a high-ranking official in one of Baltimore's leading drug organizations, is enrolled in community college and reads Adam Smith to inform his illicit business ventures. Thomas Carcetti is an adulterous politician with gubernatorial aspirations who emphasizes family values.

In 1985, while working for *The Baltimore Sun*, Simon took a yearlong leave of absence to shadow the Baltimore Police Department Homicide Unit where he met Burns. This experience led the journalist to pen the true-crime book *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* in 1991. He and Burns would later co-author *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* after spending extensive time in a West Baltimore community ravaged by drugs. *Homicide* offers detailed accounts of the daily experiences of Baltimore homicide detectives; *The Corner* an intimate portrayal of heroin addiction and the effect

substance abuse has on inner-city residents. Simon opted not to fictionalize his observations, offering "true to life" depictions that resemble ethnographic reportage, work that is anthropological and journalistic in nature. Ethnography is a qualitative research method "grounded in a commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation" (Atkinson et al., 2001, p. 4). Ethnographers also rely on interviews, informal conversations, and other textual materials as sources of information. The dating of entries and individual events supports the analogy of the books as field notes or daily newsletters. *The Wire*'s plot draws heavily from events recounted in *Homicide* and *The Corner*, which have seen adaptations on network and cable television, respectively. The stoop exchange between McNulty and the young Black man is based on a real-life conversation between then-Detective and now-Major Terrence MacLarney and one of his murder witnesses (Simon, 2010). The dialogue is borrowed, almost verbatim, from *Homicide*. Later in *The Wire*'s first episode, as McNulty recounts the discussion to his partner, he quells his colleague's disbelief by swearing "Could I make that up?" (Simon & Burns, 2002a, 4:33).

Research Questions

Though the show's five-year run ended in 2008, *The Wire* has only recently begun to garner academic attention. Educators are starting to recognize the show's sociological relevance and pedagogical implications for teachers in urban schools. A number of universities, including Duke, Syracuse, and the University of Southern California have integrated *The Wire* into their curricula. Harvard's Kennedy School of Government has developed an undergraduate course entirely dedicated the show. Acknowledging *The Wire*'s ability to weave a range of social factors that affect the lives of urban residents, the

professors who designed the Harvard class emphasize the series' usefulness in showing connections that are difficult to illustrate in traditional academic works (Chaddha & Wilson, 2010). Simon and Burns pay special attention to schools and the experiences of schooling in the inner-city, both of which are themes central to the show's fourth season. The writers make a sharp distinction between schooling, understood as the act of formally attending a school, and education, the general process of learning that can occur within or outside of schools. The series' creators explore various modes of learning and accentuate the pragmatic deficiencies of information acquired through formal education in comparison to the usefulness of experiential knowledge gained by engaging the world.

The complexity of *The Wire*'s narratives and its writers' penchant for presenting unorthodox solutions to social issues, like drug addiction and the public schooling crisis, invite the audience to view the show as something more than a television police drama. *The Wire*, I contend, can be conceived as an audiovisual text whose producers are concerned with the institutional aspects of urban life, from policing to education. Throughout this dissertation I pose these questions:

1. What types of representations of public schools and schooling are revealed in season four of *The Wire* and in selected episodes of season one?
2. What kind of knowledge do these representations produce and how is this knowledge socially and culturally relevant to teachers and to teacher education programs?

More specifically, I analyze *The Wire*'s representations of urban schools, of teachers, and of administrative practices in institutions of formal education. Through my inquiries of the show, I challenge mainstream conceptions of public schooling, and engage in a reimagining

of what schools are and what it is they do. I also investigate the role that educational organizations play in the institutional governance of inner-city populations and the ways in which language, within educational institutions, creates normative ways of thinking, being, and doing that reinforce power differentials. Thus, I introduce *The Wir*e and provide a roadmap that can enable readers and viewers to navigate my textual endeavor. I summarize the theories and life experiences that frame my inquiry, provide a brief summary of my data collection process, and ensuing analysis of selected episodes. I then engage the drawbacks of making *The Wire* the subject of academic analysis, and the hazards of intellectual co-optation and repressive tolerance.

Are We There Yet? A Roadmap to the Study

I begin Chapter 2 with an overview of my curriculum vitae – a revisiting of what is, literally, the "curriculum of my life." I recount the experiences that shaped my views on schooling, education, and language. I tempered my discomfort with self-disclosure and with placing my narrative at the foreground of this inquiry, if even temporarily, by embedding a broader body of educational literature within my autobiography. I introduce my philosophical and moral positionings, and the theorists whose ideas recur throughout this text. These scholars include deschooling advocate Ivan Illich, Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman, educational philosopher Edgar Friedenberg, and critical pedagogue Paulo Freire. I included this section in my methodology because my life journey has enabled me to make sense of the many, and often dissonant, worlds I have inhabited. In the remainder of the chapter, I discuss the representations of urban schools and schooling in mainstream media. I suggest ways in which *The Wire* constructs alternative images to those that flood dominant films and television shows. The HBO series presents nuanced depictions of urban

educational experiences that account for institutional barriers to learning. I ask how *The Wire* informs our understanding of inner-city schools and what the implications of the show's alternative representations are on classroom practice and policy development. To answer these questions, I select scenes from the series' fourth season, whose major theme is public schooling and engage in a close reading of the data to outline emerging educational themes.

In Chapter 3, I explore the relationships between language, values, and worldviews. From street slang to academic jargon, *The Wire*'s narrative consists of a multiplicity of world-specific languages, each of which embodies a particular set of values. These various discourses afford the series the characteristics of a heteroglossic text. Heteroglossia denotes the presence of a number of different languages within a body of work, where each language or lexicon presents distinct worldviews and represents its own set of values (Bakhtin, 1981). French philosopher Julia Kristeva (1980) suggests that texts are productive entities in that they disrupt old ways of seeing and generate new forms of understanding. She views a text as a fluid, intertextual entity insofar as it is "the intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 65). Given its writers' impetus to reimagine social institutions, I approach *The Wire* as a cultural and political audio-visual text. Many of the show's resonating moments are purposely ambiguous and open to readings that are not restricted by authorial intent. *The Wire*'s creators seem to invite dialogue, between the series' characters, its institutions, and their competing ethos, as a means of sense making and knowledge construction. Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) explains that dialogism is the

epistemological mode of heteroglossic worlds, where meanings intersect and authoritative interpretations make way for new understandings.

Chapter 4 is a bridge between my conceptual frame and analysis of *The Wire* where I expand on the narrative and visual characteristics of the series. These traits afford readers an understanding of the show's creative process and its ability to produce knowledge on social institutions in general and schools in particular. Masquerading as a police drama, *The Wire*'s creators engage in an analysis of social inequality and invite a reevaluation of institutional values that favor Tayloristic approaches. Taylorism is a school of thought that encourages the application of scientific principles to the management and organizations of workers (Taylor, 1911). I then explain how the creators of *The Wire* have rooted the series in the tradition of literary journalism, a form of reporting that relies on fiction as a vehicle for the transmission of news (Underwood, 2007). The series' title implies that surveillance is one of the show's dominant themes, but *The Wire* also represents a newsfeed on urban America. It is a representation that is part real and part fiction. I present *The Wire* as a visual ethnography that emphasizes the intimacy of the ordinary, those common, everyday interactions between individuals. Ethnographic films encompass a broad range of visual texts that include certain types of documentaries, fictional narratives, and non-fictional reportage (Pink, 2001). I compare the show's production techniques to those commonly used in ethnographic films and discuss the inherent differences between written and filmic ethnographies.

I open Chapter 5 with a discussion of seasons four's overarching themes that include the administrative challenges public school teachers face and the failure of school curricula to address students' lived realities. Education has been a trope in *The Wire* since the show's

opening season, but enjoys added focus in the series' fourth, which the writers dedicate to dissecting inner-city public schools. Hampered by budget cuts and mandated standardized testing, teachers and administrators struggle to provide students with learning environments that speak to the adolescents' worlds. Given the number of protagonists, I introduce readers to the season's dominant plotlines and major characters. I then examine the representations of schools and the schooling experiences of teachers and students. The school system in *The Wire* suffers from what I have termed a legacy of neglect. Fiscal deficits accrue from one mayoral administration to the next. Schools board officials care more about political aspirations than they do student welfare, while administrators and educators are caught in the crossfire. I then analyze, in greater depth, three themes that emerge from these representations of public schools and schooling:

- The importance of pragmatic education and learning by doing
- The application of principles of scientific management to schooling and education
- The social functions of schooling and the creation of conscript clienteles

To call Chapter 6 my conclusion may be a misnomer. Sequentially, it is the final part of this text, but my hope is that, through dialogue and perhaps the future revaluation of my current positions, the ideas I present in this work might continue to evolve. The chapter title, "Showing the wide," draws from a filmmaking expression denoting the use of camera lenses that capture wide angled shots and show more context. Here, I present the implications of my research findings for teachers, teacher educators and school administrators. I discuss the rigidity of schooling bureaucracies and the limits of organizational change; managerial approaches to teaching and the need for leadership in educational settings; and the impact of social promotion and no fail policies on student

learning. I then examine the complications of conducting academic research. Simon and Burns' critiques of academia, though thinly veiled, are important considerations to intellectuals who use *The Wire* as their object of study. Considering the influence of academic research on educational policy development, ignoring the writers' representations of university faculty would be akin to overlooking a central component of the bureaucracy of schooling. I close the chapter with recommendations for future research. Season four's recurring images of long hallways in schools, group homes, and mental health suggest similarities between the organizations' physical plants and a certain kinship between formal education and other total institutions – those normative enterprises that specialize in the management of large groups of people (Goffman, 1961). I believe it important to further examine this institutional symbiosis between schools, law enforcement and mental health, and how the architectural make up of these organizations' campuses help enhance their managerial functions.

Relevance to Canadian Context

Set in Baltimore, *The Wire* transcends the limits of the local and its locale by engaging issues of urban life that are common to inner-city residents across North America. These include the impact of drug economies on impoverished urban communities, legislative inefficiencies in the public education sector, and political corruption on multiple levels of government. Though it would be easy to dismiss the show as an exoticizing, sensationalizing or romanticizing of an urban world that exists only in the United States, *The Wire*'s lessons are particularly relevant to Canadian society. Over 70% of Canada's poor live in large metropolitan areas like Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, cities whose urban core population exceeds 100,000 (CCSD, 2007). Close to 40% of the economically deplete

are under the age of 24 and 22.4% under the age of 14. Some readers may argue that the United States is a more racially divided society in comparison to "multicultural" Canada. I would be remiss if I did not invite readers to consider the extent to which Canadian education policies have failed cultural and ethnic minorities.

Although not without controversy, the Toronto District School Board recently approved the establishment of a second "Africentric" school (CBC News, 2011). This initiative aims at providing Canadians of African descent with a learning environment that speaks to the lived realities of their communities – realities that are underrepresented in mainstream curricula and schools. I urge readers who contend that institutional discrimination occurs only south of the border to reflect on the tensions and tacit social assumptions that prompted novelist Neil Bissoondath (1994) to call Canadian multiculturalism a myth. Despite the ethnic plurality of its demographics, Canada's token celebration of cultural practices does not adequately address the challenges of diversity and equity. The Canadian Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, Mr. Jason Kenney, requests that officials representing cultural minorities dress in their traditional attire when posing with him for photo opportunities (S. Dixit, personal communication, June 9, 2011). As members of a society that values polite acquiescence, Canadian educators and administrators may find Simon and Burns' analyses and representations of public schooling to be abrasive. This preconception of the television series must not prevent teachers and bureaucrats from recognizing the show's value in facilitating open dialogue about the current state of educational institutions and practices. The writers of *The Wire* address the social barriers faced by cultural and racial minorities, by the urban poor, by those kept at the periphery of social participation, and do so in

uncompromised and uncompromising fashion. There is considerable insight to be gained from these critiques.

Chapter 2 – Dangerous Finds: Self-positioning, (Mis)representations of Schools in Mainstream Film, and a Methodology

Introduction

Midnight's Children, novelist Salman Rushdie's (1981) fictionalized autobiography, begins two generations and roughly 120 pages before the main character's birth. Prior to introducing Saleem Sinai, Rushdie spends a quarter of his literary opus detailing the stories of the protagonist's grandparents and parents. The Nobel Prize winning writer, mixing fact with fiction, weaves into the plot actual political events including India's independence from British colonial rule in 1947 and the country's ensuing political unrest. The book's storytelling techniques imply that personal narratives are not bound to a fixed origin, but are historically, socially, and politically situated. Rushdie endorses a fluid conception of identities akin to public intellectual and literary scholar Edward Said's (1975) thesis that we might conceive of beginnings as belonging to a continuum of events in lived experiences, rather than static starting points. Because individuals' stories help inform their contemporary moral and philosophical positionings, understanding life experiences as rigid entities may lead to the developing of dogmatic beliefs and inflexible worldviews. To ignore writers or researchers' personal backgrounds is to overlook events, some of which precede the individuals' existence, that have imprinted the ways in which they see the world and understand their places in it. For example, when an interviewer asked French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre why Judaism and Islam appeared to exert no influence on the shaping of his thought, Sartre explained that this was simply because these religious traditions had played no part in his life (Hacking, 1999). Perhaps the inextricable ties between individual experiences and the knowledge people construct, or acquire, is why

employers assess candidates' merit based on their curriculum vitae – quite literally, the education they have garnered over the course of a life.

I begin this methodology chapter with a recounting of the personal experiences that have shaped my views on education, schooling, and the institutionalization of learning. My aim is to help readers gain a better sense of who I am, of how I conceptualize the formal education enterprise, and of how these conceptions came to be. I draw from literature on educational and organizational studies, and introduce my theories about schools and the social functions of schooling. From deschooling advocate Ivan Illich, I learned to question the differences between schooling and education, to complicate the everyday schooling practices I once saw as simple occurrences. From sociologist Erving Goffman and educational researcher Edgar Friedenberg, I became aware of the similarities between schools and other institutions of social management – comparisons that I was attuned to at the young age of 13 but did not have the intellectual maturity to articulate. From former schoolteacher John Taylor Gatto, I gained an appreciation for the delicacy of challenging institutions of formal education without renouncing the importance of learning. My attempt to connect my story to a larger body of education-based literature serves to alleviate the discomfort I feel when speaking or writing about myself and to ensure that this autobiographical task does not degenerate into narcissistic solipsism. I struggled to find a suitable place for this section, fearing that placing the focus on myself, albeit briefly, would detract from the overall cohesion my dissertation. I decided to use these reflections on my life trajectory to preface my study's methodology because without these experiences, I would likely entertain different research queries, if I entertained any at all. Following my self-positioning, I examine representations of schools in mainstream films,

revisit my research questions, and explain my methodology.

[The next section contains reworked portions of "Me, we: An unconventional, non-linear, and sometimes nonsensical journey into the literacy experiences of a wandering mind" (Siam, 2010), a journal article published in Power and Education.]

Curriculum Vitae – The Lessons of my Life

I am unable to say, with any measure of certainty, what word I spoke first. Common wisdom suggests it would have been "mom" or "dad," in one of the many variations children use to call out to their parental figures. Considering I was raised in a home that valued Arabic, our native tongue, as much as French, our colonizers' language, one is left with twice the number of possibilities. This is all speculation, of course. I spent my formative years in Lebanon, amidst Phalangist coups, Israeli raids, and Palestinian uprisings. I was there in 1982 when Hezbollah was founded. My first utterance may have been "boom," the universal sound for bomb explosions. In my earliest childhood memories, I am already a talking head. I flaunted my new literacy abilities by deciphering billboards and store names as my parents drove by them. If this annoyed my mother and father in any way, I was oblivious to it, though I suspected it wore thin, especially when stuck in traffic. With our vehicle at a standstill, I recycled material, reading the same signs over and over. At times, the repetitiveness got dull, but I remained indifferent to the lack of new stimulus. I could turn letters into sounds; morph the physical into the audible. This verbal aptitude, along with the ability to make the moon follow me, was my most cherished superpower. I was unaware that I shared the former with every member of the literate world and that the latter was an illusory manifestation of toddler egocentrism.

My transition into writing is just as hazy as my entry into speech. I have not the

slightest idea when I started scribing words, but I do recall endless hours of mechanical repetition, mastering the art of crossing a 't' two-thirds of the way up the stem, or a third of the way down, depending on your vantage point. The French curricular system in which I participated for the first 11 years of my schooling places a high premium on the aesthetics of student calligraphy. An improperly dotted 'i,' lower case, of course, may cost a mark on writing tests. Forgoing cursive handwriting for print form guaranteed a ruler slap to an extended hand – usually facing upwards, so as to smack the palm, though I generally found a hit on the knuckles to be more painful. When people ask why my scrawl is so meticulous, I explain that the habit was beaten into me. Forsaking the French educational system for the British, and eventually the American, my pen struggled to abandon run-on sentence structures favored at the lycée. At a later stage, I learned to invert the 'e' and 'r' at the end of words, drop some u's and spell grey with an 'a.' I gained an appreciation for words and grew fascinated by the colloquial differences that punctuated linguistic landscapes. This was around the time that "rubbers" became "erasers."

While it has proven a luxury and a helpful capability, negotiating the use of three languages can be a taxing task. Frantz Fanon (1952) reminds us that "un homme qui possède le langage possède par contrecoup le monde exprimé et impliqué par ce langage" (p. 13). If languages reflect embedded value systems and words influence our expressive, emotive and cognitive capacities, then there are inevitable tensions involved in reconciling multiple linguistic identities, each presenting its own epistemologies and worldviews. I had often thought of myself as an Arab man whose ego spoke a foreign tongue, sometimes French, but mostly English. I realize now that this conception feeds into what has become an empty and somewhat unhelpful conceit: the illusion that identity reduces to a primary,

formative, and fixed core with scattered linguistic, cultural, and historical appendages. I had developed compartmentalized personas, divided along linguistic lines, and grappled with what I termed 'outsider syndrome,' or the feeling that I never quite belonged anywhere – a state of being that I have come to appreciate as more gift than curse. As a holder of a Lebanese passport, my life experiences, rich as they have been, are dictated in large part by state bureaucracies. I have spent countless hours at embassies and immigration offices, applying for visas, study permits, and work authorizations, in some cases being denied the paperwork required to carry out certain life goals. Institutional constraints not withstanding, I am privileged in many ways. My parents provided my siblings and me with a comfortable and sheltered home environment, and asked only that we excel at school.

My grandmother continuously challenged me to remain atop my class and bore a heavy influence on my academic development. Despite her strength of will and personality, she lost a three-year bout with lung cancer when I was 11 years old and acquainted me with death for the first time. Though she spent her final months at home, hooked to a respirator, she managed to outlive her doctors' most optimistic of projections. Her name was Tamem, Arabic for "good," as in "all is well." Depending on whose version of the story one believes, my father's or my uncle's, she had somewhere between seven and nine years of formal schooling. Her life had provided a thorough enough curriculum to compensate for the gap in institutional learning. A widow with insufficient credentials to secure gainful employment, she instilled the value of education in her three children at a young age. My father would be the first to grace the graduation stage. He completed a degree in Law, joined the diplomatic corps, and supported his younger brother, emotionally and

financially, as his sibling obtained a Bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering. As a family, we had made a considerable generational leap. My grandfather was functionally literate, but enjoyed reading sports results and the odds-makers more than he did books; my father completed his post-secondary education; and I was expected to parlay this educational momentum into some sort of graduate degree, preferably in matters of science or finance.

Though my family emphasized schooling and the importance of learning, one of my defining literacy experiences occurred outside of school, when I visited a shopping mall in Bethesda, Maryland. A resourceful 4 year old, I escaped parental supervision, in part because my father was being fitted for a shirt and my mother was busy caring for my younger sister. While I wandered in search of a candy store, a security guard stopped me to ask where I was going. I explained that I was looking to satisfy my sweet tooth but struggled to specify my parents' whereabouts. Assuming that I was lost, and rightly so, the uniformed man asked me my name. "Habib Siam," I replied. Seemingly confused, he instructed me to spell it out. I started to recite the string of letters, in the correct order, before beginning to falter. "H-A-I... No. H-B-A…" I apologized and reached for his notepad, in hopes that writing would aid recollection. When I realized this was of little help, I began to cry.

My mother eventually emerged from a crowd of passers-by, her eyes welled with tears but looking relieved to have found me. She used the incident to highlight the importance of school and reading and writing. I nodded in agreement but was still perturbed: How could I struggle so valiantly and so imperfectly with my name's orthography; the two words I wrote on a daily basis; the nine letters I answered "present" to at every roll call? Years later, when one of my teachers explained that we would score a

400 on our Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) just for spelling our names correctly, I joked that I was not guaranteed those marks. I fell 10 points shy of a perfect score on the mathematics portion of the test, but ranked in the 60th percentile on the linguistic section. My results indicate that either my English skills are middle of the pack or that standardized examinations may not measure what they claim to measure. Considering the extent to which test scores affect educational paths, career opportunities, and social mobility, I hope my verbal aptitude is, indeed, just average. Otherwise, educational institutions are using tests with poor statistical validity to evaluate students' intellect and decide their futures.

Two years before I would take my SATs, my family relocated from Beirut to Abu Dhabi. The move brought on an important decision: should I pursue my schooling in French or attend the International School of Choueifat, a Lebanese-based institution that followed the British curriculum? Since the language barrier would pose no impediment, I thought the switch would facilitate my entry into American universities a few years into the future. Choueifat was unlike any of the previous three schools I had attended. Describing the atmosphere as prison-like understates the levels of obedience, discipline, and conformity the administration demanded of students. To say that the school was a prison would be more accurate a statement. Our uniforms consisted of gray pants and a white shirt. During the winter months, we were allowed navy-blue sweaters for warmth. The exam halls were equipped with surveillance cameras and the campus walls topped with barbed wire, whose purpose, more likely than not, was to keep students sequestered rather than to protect us from outside intrusion. Given the school's excellent academic reputation, my parents attributed the discontent I harbored towards my academic environment to a natural process of adapting to new surroundings. They failed to consider that, in the social circles

in which they spent their time, they were called or referred to by their given names, Georges and Golda. I was "student 15357" for the entirety of my school day, which lasted eight hours.

Later in life, Illich's (1970) work introduced me to the nuances between education and schooling – the first involves the general construction or appropriation of knowledge; the second is marked by compulsory participation in an institution of formal learning. Communications philosopher Marshall McLuhan (1977) encourages his readers to use the city as their classroom but the majority of people are conditioned to dismiss instruction that occurs outside the institutional confines of the school, the primary site of consumption for an increasingly industrialized educational product. "For most [individuals]," Illich (1970, p. vii) notes, "the right to learn is curtailed by the obligation to attend school." A number of intellectuals and pedagogues (Grant, 1969; Freire, 1970; Illich, 1970; Gatto, 1992; Postman, 1995) suggest that, despite their mandate to teach, schools are more concerned with the creation, management, and administration of populations than they are with students' education. Undoubtedly, schools play a bigger role in sustaining and reproducing existing power structures than they do in creating opportunities to learn and to build the resources needed to elicit meaningful social change. I emphasize "meaningful" because of the dangerously misleading notion that any change, all change, is favorable.

Illich (1970) draws attention to the Freirian hypothesis that individuals need a few hundred hours of instruction to master basic reading, writing, and literacy skills. Assuming students would require an extra two or three thousand of these hours to study relevant scientific knowledge and mathematical formulae, why, then, are they schooled for over a dozen years? So that they can, as Bob Dylan (1965) points to in *Subterranean Homesick*

Blues, end up on the day shift? These are the types of questions that helped shape my conception of schools as a managerial entities and the student populace as a type of "conscript clientele" – a term Friedenberg (1976) uses to describe social groups that cannot refuse the services administered to them. The American scholar elaborates on the history and social repercussions of legally mandated school attendance (Friedenberg, 1976):

> By 1971, about 90 per cent of Americans between five and 17 years were enrolled in school; more than 80 per cent were in average daily attendance. What proportion of these would have attended school if not compelled to by law is impossible to state and probably not a meaningful datum, since the social policy that has made schooling compulsory has also eliminated most other alternatives like employment, wandering, or actually educating onself. (p. 15)

In *Deschooling Society* and the work that followed, Illich (1970; Gartner, Illich, Greer, & Riessman, 1973) suggests a pragmatic model of education that promotes community involvement through mentorship programs and apprenticeships. Arguing the importance of connecting learning to students' lived experiences, Freire (1970) suggests that literacy is a tool that alters individuals' relationships with the world, allowing them to carve a niche in what can be a hostile and unwelcoming sphere. To name the world in one's own words is a precursor to becoming a constructor of realities, rather than a passive recipient of a predetermined fate. "A deepened consciousness of their situation," Freire (1970) elaborates, "leads men to apprehend [their] situation as an historical reality susceptible to transformation" (p. 73). The implication is that education's end is not merely the acquisition of knowledge, but the practical application of this knowledge to improve social

conditions. Education is a political tool whose goals are the expansion of consciousness and the development of agency, while schooling appears to perpetuate intellectual, political, and cultural subjugation. Gatto (1992), a former New York State Teacher of the Year, admits that as an instructor of English language and English literature, he often taught confusion, the "un-relating of everything" (p. 2), and unwittingly promoted intellectual and emotional dependency on the institution of schooling.

My colleagues ask what academics can do or what policies governments can implement to help improve schools. The skeptic in me responds that schools function precisely as they are meant to. They produce and reproduce very intended consequences. Preserving the present social order is a process contingent on maintaining a certain amount of failure, preferably among members of cultural and racial minority groups. Dropout rates weed out those who society deems extraneous, whose graduation ensures a surplus of qualified individuals competing for scarce employment opportunities and resources. It is to society's benefit to create a class of people fit for menial and demeaning positions. Who else would the elite coax into flipping burgers, mowing lawns, or collecting garbage? Certainly not me and undoubtedly not "you," for those are tasks generally reserved for "them." Meanwhile, the myth of meritocracy shrouds the upper classes with moral superiority, allowing them to overlook their complicit participation in a power structure predicated on access to cultural, intellectual, and financial capital. The French have an expression, "il n'y a pas de sous-metier," which infers that all work is to be valued and honored. It is a noble saying, but I wonder how many are willing to trade in their monogrammed leather briefcase for a dirty toolbox.

The education institutions of formal schooling promote can be a kind of anti-literacy. Didactic instruction techniques stifle student initiative and reduce learning to an effect, a direct result, of teaching. As instructors and administrators, we might rethink the existential, moral, and social hazards of perceiving education as something students receive rather than something they make – a pedagogical philosophy that points to the passivity of spectatorship as a mode of being. Illich (1970) explains some of the inherent tensions in institutions of formal education and speaks to the social roles of these organizations:

> The school system today performs the threefold functions common to powerful churches throughout history. It is simultaneously the repository of society's myth, the institutionalization of that myth's contradictions, and the locus of the ritual which reproduces and veils the disparities between myth and reality. Today the school system, and especially the university, provides ample opportunity for criticism of the myth and for rebellion against its institutional perversions. But the ritual which demands tolerance of the fundamental contradictions between myth and institution still goes largely unchallenged, for ideological criticism [cannot] bring about a new society. Only disenchantment with and detachment from the central social ritual and reform of that ritual can bring about radical change. […] No society in history has been able to survive without ritual or myth, but ours is the first which has needed such a dull, protracted, destructive, and expensive initiation into its myth. (p. 37)

Here, Illich makes important claims that I revisit at various points, and to various extents, in my analysis. The Austrian intellectual argues that institutions of formal

education are central to the creation and sustenance of dominant social narratives. These "myths" include inflating the value of and need for institutionalized learning, endorsing the process of accreditation as the primary criterion for skill evaluation and social mobility, and overstating the role of academia as a catalyst for social change. Student activism in Europe, Asia, and the Americas has led to considerable reforms, including the democratization of university curricula and decreased government control in education. It is important, however, to acknowledge that university administrations have traditionally opposed these changes (Rojas, 2007). Though I recognize the curricular and organizational deficiencies in educational institutions, I concede that they serve necessary social functions. Schools are custodial wards that allow parents to fulfill their professional obligations. They are also agents of socialization that prevent society from degenerating into a state of collective anarchy, where individuals abide by their own sets of behavioral and linguistic codes. "No society," Illich emphasizes, "has been able to survive without ritual or myth." What gives me pause is the notion that institutions of formal education, and universities in particular, encourage critical thinking and provoke social change. Critical discourse within institutions of formal education is permitted, and perhaps encouraged, but the freedom to critique social orders and practices is reserved to those who have been initiated into the academy's modes of speaking, thinking, and doing. The socialization into these institutional norms often clouds individuals' ability to discern and challenge taken for granted organizational practices.

Educational scholar Deborah Brtizman (2003) contends that seeing what is absent reveals more than noticing that which is present. To quote business mogul Sean Carter, "what you don't see is what you get" (Carter & Marchand, 1996, 1:35). Consider a fictional

ethnographer recording field observations at Jack Cram auditorium, the largest classroom at McGill University's Faculty of Education. The researcher may note the presence of a large body of students and the equipment of the facilities with three projection screens, ensuring comparable visibility of class-related media from any seat in the room. Based on the technology made available to the class, no blame can be assigned for deducing that the setting is designed for optimal learning. Seduced by the immediacy of the visible, the investigator may overlook the fact that the auditorium is void of windows or that the only clock in the room is hidden behind one of the projection screens. Segregating their members from contact with the outside world is a central feature of total institutions, organizations whose roles include the normalization of behavior to socially accepted standards (Goffman, 1961). Here, the absence of certain physical elements **–** a window to peak out of, a clock to glance at – exposes some of the social functions of formal learning and reinforces the notion that, to paraphrase the tagline from my favorite childhood cartoon, there may be more to schools and universities than meets the eye.

Examining the Reel – On-Screen Representations of Schools and Schooling

A few months removed from obtaining my Master's degree and into a position as an educational research project manager, I injured my ankle playing basketball. Ruptured ligaments and dislocated bones nulled my weight bearing abilities and confined me to my living room couch. With time to spare, I caught up on the television shows I had been following and took the opportunity to start new ones. Among these was *The Wire*, a series I learned about from a friend whose opinion I valued. Expecting a show about the Baltimore drug trade, I assumed I was committing to an action police drama, a convenient way to pass the days as the pain in my joint blunted my concentration. A few episodes in, I began to

realize that *The Wire* was unlike anything I had previously watched. The absence of a score or any mood music, the positioning and movement of the camera, the lengthy dialogue, and methodical pacing of the plot all provided a documentary-like feel to what I thought was an entirely fictional narrative. I did not know that the series was, in large part, based on the lived experiences of its co-creators.

During his time with investigators and murder detectives, Simon gained a deeper understanding of the inner-workings of law enforcement and an appreciation for the daily challenges that officers faced. Simon witnessed the handling of crime scenes, observed departmental politics, and took a substantial amount of field notes. Burns, a veteran detective turned public school teacher, was involved in a wire tap case that helped indict Melvin Williams, the Baltimore drug kingpin who serves as the inspiration for Avon Barksdale, one of *The Wire*'s main characters. The more I watched, the more I realized that the series posed as a police procedural but was really an indictment of social institutions. Simon and Burns use each of the five seasons to investigate a different aspect of urban life and repeatedly emphasize the failure of bureaucracies to meet the needs of the populations they claim to serve. Policing does not reduce crime. Labor unions can no longer protect their members' rights. The media distract rather than inform and public schools achieve little in the vein of education. As a cultural text, a vehicle for social critique, *The Wire* serves as a curriculum that informs viewers about the managerial functions of social organizations and shows how these institutions rely on one another to justify their existence.

The filmic representation of urban schools and inner-city schooling has garnered considerable academic attention and generated a substantial body of literature (Edelman, 1983; Ayers, 1994; Freedman, 1999; Trier, 2001; Dalton, 2004; Bulman, 2005; Ellsmore,

2005). The depictions of institutions of formal learning are particularly important because movies and television series can provide effective means for critical discussion about classroom pedagogy and administrative practices (Rudolph, 2006). Televisual media also bear a considerable influence on teachers' perceptions and understandings of scholastic experiences in urban neighborhoods and other parts of the city the educators may not have visited or lived in. Many pre-service teachers form opinions and develop pedagogical philosophies based on the images in popular movies like *Lean on Me* and *Freedom Writers*, among others (Trier, 2001). The influence of mainstream films on teacher attitudes is both troubling and troublesome, as Hollywoodized accounts of urban schooling are often sensational and inaccurate. Sociology professor Robert C. Bulman (2002) argues that the high-school film genre "represents the fantasies that suburban middle-class America has about life in [the inner-city] and the ease with which problems in urban high schools could be rectified" (p. 251). A number of media and education scholars have critiqued mainstream high-school films for their stereotypic representations of lower, working-class communities (Ellsmore, 2005; Rudolph, 2006; Blum, 2011). In *The Substitute*, for example, students, consisting almost exclusively of racial minorities, are violent, disobedient, and boisterous. Many of them are on-screen gang members, drug dealers, or drug addicts. The generic plot for the majority of urban high-school movies revolves around a charismatic teacher, usually a member of the middle-class, who offers salvation to Black and Hispanic students mired in a culture of poverty and despair (Bulman, 2002).

The teacher-hero generally resorts to unorthodox teaching methods that experienced colleagues frown upon and the school's administrative staff is neither supportive of students nor invested in their achievement. A central trope in the urban high-

school film genre is the emphasis on creating a cause and effect relationship between success and the adoption of dominant social values, primarily the espousing of an ethos of individualism. In *Dangerous Minds*, Michelle Pfeiffer plays Louanne Johnson, a new teacher who insists that her pupils can improve their academic standing by just studying harder. The instructor as individual reformationist instills in students the belief that they can achieve progress strictly through effort and determination (Bulman, 2002). This approach to teaching reinforces meritocracy and diminishes the influence of a variety of social and economic factors that affect the lives of inner-city residents. The implication is that social change and policy revaluation are not necessary to engender positive reform. Rather, academic success and upward mobility are predicated on the individual application of common sense, the development of a positive outlook, and the embracing of a different way of life – one that is rooted in the rational values of dominant society rather than the perceived moral bankruptcy of racial and cultural minorities. This imperialist view of urban education, in which a White instructor civilizes savage youth, is of little use to the conceptualization of effective pedagogical strategies or the development and implementation of scholastic policies. Also concerning is that the exoticizing of urban life and the cultural voyeurism prevalent in the consumption of popular high school films is legitimized through claims that the movies are based on real events or, in some cases, that they were written by teachers.

The Wire is a particularly interesting object of analysis because of Simon and Burns' refusal to replicate mainstream representations of schools and their willingness to examine public education through a broad institutional lens (Blum, 2011). The series' writers provide alternative visions of urban schooling and broach controversial practices like

educational streaming and social promotion. The tagline for the show's fourth season, "No Corner Left Behind," is an allusion to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, a 2001 United States Government initiative that aims at closing achievement gaps between students. The educational policy's heavy reliance on standardized testing has left many critics questioning its long-term pedagogical outcomes and the ethicality of its discriminatory practices (Inskeep, 2010). *The Wire* diverges from other filmic representations of schools primarily because its writers differentiate schooling and education, recognize education as a multi-directional process, and analyze systemic barriers that impinge on learning.

Differentiation between schooling and education. Though the producers of *The Wire* dedicated the show's fourth season to examining public schooling and the bureaucratic issues it suffers from, education is a theme that runs throughout the entire series. Characters treat street corners, boxing gyms, and crime scenes as sites of informal education. Burns explains that education is continually occurring and that the imparting of information is not confined to classroom settings. "Kids are going to learn," the former detective asserts, "the question is where?" (Burns, as quoted in: Baily & Errante, 2006, 26:32). To this issue of location, I add a concern for process and content. The questions are also how and what will children learn? Despite some behavioral problems and struggles with adapting to the structured environment of the schools they attend, the stuents in *The Wire* are bright and curious, engaged and engaging. They may underachieve in class, but seem to thrive in non-formal learning settings. In emphasizing the nuances between schooling and education, the show's creators display recognition that the former involves institutional mandates that extend beyond learning. Schooling includes normalization,

socialization, and the management of groups of individuals that society deems idiographic in thought and behavior.

"Multi-directionality" of the educational process. *The Wire*'s creators endorse Freire's (1970) critiques of banking models of education, approaches that treat students as empty receptacles in which teachers deposit knowledge. Simon and Burns' philosophies on teaching and learning borrow from the critical pedagogue's conception of the teacher as student, and the student as teacher. Namond Brice, a teen placed in a special class for students with behavioral problems, brags to his friends about how his new curriculum had enabled him to impart information onto his instructors. "It was like we was schooling them" (Price & Burns, 2006b, 28:09), he notes with marked enthusiasm. *The Wire*'s writers embrace an approach to learning that treats education not as a unilateral process flowing from teacher to student, but as multi-directional transfer of information. Teachers maintain a level of authority in the classroom, but are not the sole possessors of knowledge. Roland Pryzbylewski, whose story is one of the major plot lines in season four, struggles to transition from his former job as a police detective to his new position as public school teacher. "Mr. Prezbo," the nickname his students call him by, does not hesitate to ask for help from his students when he encounters difficulties using the class computer.

Recognition of systemic and other institutional barriers to learning. One of *The Wire*'s most compelling achievements is its writers' ability to weave a narrative about urban conditions in a way that accounts for the various social, economic, and political factors that impose on the lives of inner-city residents. Simon and Burns do not attribute students' scholastic failures to a lack of effort or a propensity for criminal behavior. The co-creators deem these academic setbacks to be the result of a web of bureaucratic and

institutional forces that include budget deficits and standardized curricula that do not reflect students' lived realities. When an editor at *The Baltimore Sun* asks one of the journalists to write an article about the city's public schools, a colleague suggests that a series of articles would be more appropriate. A single report cannot capture the complexity of factors that contribute to the public schooling system's inability to address students' needs. The solutions *The Wire*'s creative staff presents throughout the show are not as simple and idealistic as the "try and ye shall succeed" ethos mainstream films and television series promote.

So What? Research Questions (revisited), Data Collection, and Methodology

Considering the influence media exert on teachers' pedagogical formation, televisual documents like *The Wire* are important and useful in that they provide a counter-narrative to the dominant depictions in school-centric films. "It's definitely not *Glee*," a friend of mine joked, referring to Fox Broadcasting Company's high-school musical. Throughout this dissertation, I frame *The Wire* as a heteroglossic cultural text, a body of work that integrates a number of different institutional languages into its dialogue and narrative (Bakhtin, 1980). I then analyze the representations of urban schools in the HBO television series. In examining the educational philosophies of the show's creators and the impact of their views on how teachers and administrators conceive of schools, I ask two primary questions:

1. What are the representations of urban schools and inner-city schooling in *The Wire*?
2. How do these representations inform our understandings of pedagogical practices and administrative policies in institutions of formal learning?

I believe in the importance of research that can generate pragmatic solutions to the problems in public schooling. Thus, I evaluate the implications of *The Wire*'s alternative representations on teacher education and educational leadership. I also emphasize the similarities between schooling and other normative enterprises, most notably that of law enforcement. Here, my intention is to show how institutions of formal education are implicated in the reproduction of dominant norms that reinforce existing power structures and stifle social change.

When I mention to people that I am analyzing *The Wire* as part of a doctoral dissertation in Education, they usually respond by commenting on the show's fourth season. "Those kids are the best," an acquaintance remarked. "The school stuff is brilliant," noted another. "You get to do a write-up on my favorite part of the series." The systemic failures of public schools and the experiences of schooling in the inner-city are the focus of an entire season of *The Wire*. However, most viewers ignore that education is a dominant theme in the entire series. The ways in which knowledge is transferred, how and where people learn are issues that extend beyond the narrative confines of a single season. The show's writers often embed scenes that seemingly have little connection to ongoing plotlines, but that foreshadow events that occur or topics that are broached several episodes later. Consider these two exchanges, the first of which takes place between an unnamed character and Wallace, a 13 year-old drug dealer who works for the Barksdale organization and acts as a surrogate parent to the children with whom he lives. The second vignette is set in school administrator Marsha Donneley's office, where Reginald Cousins, a heroin addict who goes by the moniker "Bubbles," is posing as the relative of a homeless boy he has befriended.

Scene 1: A child, presumably 10 or 11 years old, walks into Wallace's bedroom in an abandoned row house. He nudges the slumbering drug dealer to ask for help with his homework. Wallace, still half asleep, grabs the young man's book and begins to read (Simon & Burns, 2002d):

> A bus traveling on Central Avenue begins its route by picking up eight passengers. At the next stop it picks up four more and then an additional two at the third stop while discharging one. At the next to last stop three passengers get off the bus and another two get on. How many passengers are still on the bus when the last stop is reached? (8:57)

It is a common type of mathematics problem that involves simple addition and subtraction, but the child struggles to compute the solution, blurting random numbers in hopes of guessing the correct answer. A frustrated Wallace rewords the problem, substituting the bus for a drug stash and the passengers for the crack vials both he and the boy sell to fiends. Without hesitation the child arrives at the right amount of vials left after several sales, a police shake down, and a one time replenishing of the stash. "How the fuck you able to keep the count right and you ain't able to do the book problem then?" Wallace yells. The child's response is sobering: "Count be wrong, they'll fuck you up." "They" being the superiors he works for, not the addicts he deals to.

Scene 2: Reginald Cousins is seated across from Marsha Donnely, the assistant-principal at Edward J. Tilghman middle school. In an earlier meeting, Cousins had presented himself as the uncle of a delinquent teen named Sherrod, whom he was trying to re-enroll at school after a lengthy drop out period. "Falling behind now isn't the way to start a school year" (Lehane & Burns, 2006, 15:54), Donnely admonishes. The

administrator is visibly unhappy with the child's failure to regularly attend classes, a condition for reinstatement that she and Cousins had previously agreed to. After some deliberation, Donnelly signs off on the paperwork to have Sherrod readmitted. "One thing though been bothering me ma'am," a hesitant Cousins interjects, seemingly afraid to say anything that might change the vice-principal's mind. "If Sherrod already missed the last three years, should he maybe be back in fifth or sixth grade instead of up with his age? I mean, so he can follow the work." Barely looking up from the forms she is filling, Donnelly quells Cousins' concerns with the briefest of explanations: "Social promotion." Confused, Sherrod's makeshift uncle asks for clarification. "We don't have the resources to repeat grade levels and we feel to place the older children in younger classes is unfair to teachers who are responsible for maintaining order. Your nephew has been socially promoted," Donnely explains. "He's an eighth grader headed to high school."

These two scenes occur almost three seasons apart. The first exchange is a critique of formal modes of learning, of scholastic curricula that do not reflect students' lived realities, and of an education system that does not hold its participants accountable for their learning, or lack thereof. "Count be wrong, they'll fuck you up," the child explains, referring to the beating he would receive should he err in his handling of the drug stash, but in schools a no-fail policy all but guarantees that providing incorrect answers has no consequence. Social promotion, a practice that supports advancing students from one grade to the next despite poor academic performance, literally ensures that no child is left behind. Retention, some educators contend, does not improve students' scholastic abilities but has detrimental effects on their self-esteem and emotional maturation (Mahoney,

2007). As a result, fewer children are made to repeat grades and students learn that learning itself has little value in aiding their progression towards graduation.

Another social barrier to scholastic success that these two scenes allude to is a lack of parental support and involvement in children's education. Wallace is a mere year into his teens but serves as a father figure to a number of parentless children with whom he resides in a decrepit two-story dwelling. The young drug dealer helps his housemates with their homework, prepares their lunch boxes, and makes sure they attend school, before he heads to his designated street corner to peddle heroin. Mr. Cousins is forced to fake kinship with Sherrod for the school administration to allow the teen to register. Since education is a recurring trope, I do not limit my study of the depiction of schools to the story lines that dominate *The Wire*'s fourth season. The data I use for analysis consists instead of education-related scenes that occur in seasons one and four. The narratives and selected vignettes from season four form the primary source of data; those from season one are supporting or secondary data. I make this distinction because I am more concerned with the ways in which non-formal education informs schooling practices than I am with conducting extensive analyses on alternative modes of learning. I use instances of informal learning to conceive of pedagogical approaches that may improve students' experiences of schooling. In the next section, I clarify why I use data from various seasons and how the different themes broached in each of these two seasons complement one another.

Data collection process, data sets, and analysis. The two seasons I selected for analysis consist of 13 episodes each and have a total runtime of approximately 26 hours. I viewed the episodes and took notes summarizing the major plot elements, the producers' visual representations schools and schooling, and the implicit lessons about education that

The Wire's writers convey. I time coded the scenes that relay a sense of the experiences of schooling in urban settings in order to facilitate retrieval and the ensuing editing process. These vignettes include, but are not limited to, representations of pedagogical challenges, administrative practices, social functions of the school, and the parallels between schooling and other normative enterprises. I used scenes that depict informal modes of learning to help foster deeper understandings of effective pedagogical techniques and inform the relationships between schooling and education. For additional help in organizing and locating the data, I referred to the detailed episode synopses made available on *The Wire*'s official HBO webpage. These summaries include a scene-by-scene description of each episode, but do not provide enough detail to be of any use other than situating specific exchanges. They were helpful in allowing me to save time and skip through material that was extraneous to my research aims. I only relied on these documents in the early stages of data collection and did not refer to them in the analysis.

Once I identified the relevant scenes, I used iMovie to edit the data from entire episodes down to segments I planned on examining in greater depth. I collected 279 scenes, ranging from 15 seconds to four minutes in length. I labeled each scene with the season and episode number it belonged to and added a brief descriptor. I then uploaded segments to a YouTube channel that serves as my database and allows for the creation of hyperlinks between the textual description of vignettes in the body of the dissertation and the actual video clips. The channel is located at the following web address: https://www.youtube.com/user/TheWirePhD?feature=mhee. Allowing readers to watch the portions of the show I analyze creates a more engaged mode of textual consumption that enables them to access the source material and generate their own inferences. I

considered forgoing the online database in favor of storing the scenes on a DVD, which would serve as an appendix to this document. This would enable interactive reading without requiring access to the Internet. The drawback to this method of embedding data is that it would complicate the sharing of the dissertation, as dissemination would require physical possession of the disc on which I saved the scenes.

Wherever appropriate, I transcribed all relevant conversation. This process facilitated the textual analysis, quite literally the reading, of the selected scenes by allowing me to attend to the specificity of language in a way that listening does not permit. The audio commentaries featured on the DVD release of *The Wire* served as additional data that provided useful insight into the series' creative impetus and the intent behind specific exchanges and plotlines. Engaging with these explanations allowed me to negotiate the meanings of scholastic representations by entering into dialogue with the aims, opinions, and philosophies of the show's creative team. Season one contains three episodes with audio commentaries and season four an additional six. The contributors to these soundtracks include co-creators David Simon and Edward Burns; directors Clark Johnson and Joe Chappelle; writers George Pelecanos and William Zorzi; and actor Jim True-Frost, who plays Pryzbylewski. Once I organized the data, I engaged in a closer analysis of the dominant narratives, the principal characters and their roles, and the signs and symbols through which the creators of *The Wire* express their views on inner-city schooling and urban education. Some of these paralinguinstic elements include posters in the staff room and the music teachers listen to while preparing their lessons.

My original intent was to analyze *The Wire* in its entirety. As I began collecting data, I realized that the magnitude of such an undertaking might diffuse my focus on the series'

educational themes. Once I collected all relevant data from seasons one and four, I began to organize the edited scenes by storyline. In narrowing my data set, it was important for me to maintain *The Wire*'s narrative integrity so that I could analyze plot developments, as well as discrete events and individual interactions. I decided to privilege the accounts of the three teacher protagonists, Pryzbylewski, Colvin, and Wise. I do not mean to imply that examining the representations of schools and schooling in *The Wire* should privilege educators; nor do I believe that learning is a top-down process where information flows from instructors to pupils. My choice is predicated on the fact that the students in *The Wire* occupy a variety of social spaces and are involved with a number of educators, law enforcers, and street thugs. To select only the segments where the adolescents are engaged in school-related activities would provide, at best, a truncated image of the youth's experiences and realities. Though the teachers surely enjoy personal lives of their own, the pedagogues' presence in the series is primarily school-bound. This spatial limitation facilitates the restriction of my analysis to scholastic representations. The educators must also contend with administrative imperatives in ways that the students do not, which allows teacher-centric examinations of *The Wire* to add an important thematic layer – that of educational bureaucracy.

Narratives, emerging themes, and The Wire as pedagogy. There are two dominant plotlines in *The Wire*'s fourth season, both of which take place at Edward J. Tilghman, a fictional middle school that Simon chose to name after the former chief of the Baltimore City Police Department. The first of these narratives details the experiences of Roland Pryzbylewski, a former murder detective who, due to staff shortages, is hired as a homeroom teacher despite lacking experience and the required qualifications to become a

public school educator. Over the course of the season, Pryzbylewski grapples with the pedagogical challenges and administrative barriers that dominate the educational landscape in urban public schools. The former officer learns the importance of developing curricula that resonate with students' lived experiences, while reluctantly catering to the assistant principal's request to teach material related to the State of Maryland's standardized examinations. The second story arch follows retired Police Major Howard Colvin. Colvin agrees to work with professor David Parenti, of the University of Maryland's School of Social Work, on a project whose mandate is to study repeat violent offenders between the ages of 13 and 15. Aware that the population he is engaging may be unwelcoming and unresponsive to outsiders, Parenti asks the ex-law enforcement official to act as a liaison between the members of his research team and the children participating in the study. The academic personnel targets eighth graders with a history of conduct problems and places these students in a separate stream that focuses on behavior modification and the promotion of social skills. The segregation of students according to perceived needs and expected performance garners mostly positive effects but sparks considerable controversy around the ethics of tracking in schools.

Preliminary analysis of the data reveals four emerging themes related to different aspects of formal education. These are: the social functions of schooling, administrative practices in schools, students' experience of schooling, and the pedagogical challenges teachers face. A less prominent topic, but one worth examining, is the relationship between schools and universities and the ways in which academic research informs educational policy and practice. Though I elaborate on all of these themes, I pay specific attention to the social functions of schooling, administrative practices in schools, and to the role academia

plays in the shaping of scholastic experiences. I am particularly interested in the likening of schools to penitentiaries and other social organizations that serve to regulate behavior. "This is prison," remarks one of the middle-school students participating Parenti's study, "and we in solitary" (Overmyer & Burns, 2006a, 27:02). Major Colvin agrees with the child's likening of educational institutions to correctional facilities and none of the teachers present during the exchange contest this opinion. Another important thread that falls under the administrative practice rubric is the implementation of standardized testing and the reliance on quantifiable measures of student success. The application of scientific management principles to schooling and education is a trend that facilitates the mass administration of services to large groups of individuals. Embracing numbers as a gauge for student learning enhances the managerial utility of schools to the detriment of their educational mandates.

The Wire's writers address educational issues in manners that present multiple opinions and connect these concerns to a web of social, economic, and cultural factors. Television critic Andy Greenwald notes that Simon is more concerned with educating audiences than he is with entertaining them (Greenwald & Klostermann, 2012). I began using portions of the show in a teacher education course I taught at the University of Ottawa called "Schooling and Society." The scenes I selected provoked my students in a way that spawned lively and informed conversation, which often extended beyond the end of our lectures. Based on this student reception, I decided to edit the series' fourth season into a stand-alone 22-minute video, using the Pryzbylewski and Colvin storylines. My goal was to produce a short film with a coherent narrative that Education students, schoolteachers, and university professors could watch and understand without any prior exposure to *The*

Wire. The audiovisual project has served as a useful pedagogical tool in my lectures and seminars. In an effort to aid prospective teachers who may want to use the video as a resource in their own practice, I have since added audio commentary that explains the scene selection, provides relevant background information, and engages in a closer reading of the dialogue. I also made the video available online, though I had to upload it in three parts due to YouTube time constraints. Readers can access these segments here:

- Part 1: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJ5rXRAczqw
- Part 2: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fPIKMFJMP4
- Part 3: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCvbq4Kpvjo

The scenes from season four that I edited in the making of the video, along with the 13 minutes of footage that I omitted in the interest of brevity, form the primary data for my analysis. The parallels between law enforcement and the institution of public education are important themes that I marginally included in the edited film but that I examine at greater length in this inquiry. Season four's two dominant characters, Colvin and Pryzbylewski, are former police officers. When Pryzbylewski introduces himself to assistant-principal Donnelly, his lack of pedagogical credentials elicits the administrator's skepticism in the new hire's ability to succeed. Donnelly's fleeting doubt is replaced with optimism when Pryzbylewski informs her that he used to be a police officer. After a brief pause, he adds that he worked "in the city" (Simon & Burns, 2006a, 22:27), as if seeking further legitimacy. The teacher orientation session at the beginning of the school year is spliced together with a police department seminar, jumping back and forth between the two so as to make explicit the similarities in training between the two professions. I gathered additional data

through the collection of scenes that intimate an intimate connection between the social functions of schooling and those of policing.

I currently teach a course at McGill University titled "Media, Technology and Education," in which I dedicate a lecture to media representations of schooling. At the beginning of class, I ask my students to reach for a sheet of paper and draw a school. I give them little else in the vein of instructions or guidance. Some sketch the outside of a building, a few the inside of a classroom, and others a playground, a cafeteria, or a hallway. Once they have completed the assignment, I instruct everyone to illustrate education. Bewildered, students tend to struggle, and rightfully so, to grasp how they might produce a pictorial rendition of what is essentially the process of learning. After a few moments of reflection, they begin to put pen to paper, albeit hesitantly. When I ask for volunteers to share their work, I notice that the majority of the representations of education are school-based depictions. Out of approximately 100 students, all but four or five will draw a teacher standing by a blackboard, or a stack of textbooks, maybe even a row of desks with pupils writing exams. These scenes all take place indoors, at a school and generally under the supervision of an adult. The illustrations imply that school is the primary site of education and that learning is rarely self-directed or self-motivated – premises that are misleading and that limit our understanding of pedagogy and pedagogical practices.

The differentiation between schooling and education is important to make in any project that endeavors to construct a thorough conception of the processes of teaching and learning. In the worlds of *The Wire,* the most useful educational moments consist of informal, out-of-school exchanges that occur on street corners, in boxing gyms, and at home renovation stores. Though I focus my analysis on representations of formal

schooling, my data also includes scenes from season one where D'Angelo Barksdale, a lieutenant in Baltimore's biggest drug ring and nephew to the city criminal kingpin, acts as a mentor to his subordinates. D'Angelo is a bright but conflicted character who seems reluctant to embrace his role in the family business. Vignettes where he teaches his heroin dealers how to play chess or engages them in debates about the morality of illicit economies are examples of informal educational approaches that often prove more effective than those implemented in schools. A secondary plotline in season four chronicles the story of newly paroled Dennis "Cutty" Wise in his quest to start a boxing program for neighborhood youth. The former convict raises funds and restores a run-down tire plant into a functional gymnasium where he teaches kids how to jab, duck punches, and stay light on their feet. The recreation center becomes a makeshift lyceum where Wise schools children on life lessons like discipline, sacrifice, and perseverance. I use these narrative moments and contrast different educational styles to support the notion that individuals gain most of their knowledge outside of institutions of formal education.

Looking Forward

I expand on the Pryzbylewski, Colvin, and Wise storylines in Chapter 5 and speak to the educational archetypes these protagonists represent – the new teacher with unrealistic ideals of the schooling system, the retired professional who finds a natural calling as an educator, and the unofficial mentor who hopes to provide youth with the guidance he never received. Though these individuals are fictional, I approached my engagement with them as if they were consenting research participants. Before discussing my data analysis, I dedicate Chapter 4 to framing *The Wire* as literary journalism rooted in a visual ethnographic mode. I also discuss the producers' filming and editing techniques. In the next

chapter, the third of my dissertation, I explain why and how I conceive of the series as a heteroglossic text whose writers use different languages and multiple modes of communication to construct layered representations of public schooling. Music, signage, clothing, and body language convey messages that, in some instances, betray characters' utterances, claims, and the verbal assurances they impart. This chapter is my dissertation's theoretical framework.

Chapter 3 – Moving a Crosswords: Conceptual Frame, Heteroglossia, and the Plurality of Worlds

Introduction

I begin this chapter by exploring the relationship between language, values, and ideology. I draw from the works of Bakhtin and Freire to examine how individuals appropriate languages and engage in a renaming of their worlds in their own words. I then present a conception of heteroglossia as it pertains to *The Wire* and speak to the importance of the show's heteroglossic features to my analysis. After investigating the ways in which languages represent specific worldviews and ideologies, I examine the relationship between language, institutions, and institutional values, as well as the importance of dialogue in generating new forms of knowledge. Borrowing from Kristeva, I outline some of *The Wire*'s textual characteristics and stress the series' impetus to subvert mainstream understandings and dominant ways of being and doing. Simon and Burns' efforts to present complex views of social organizations are made apparent in the show's refusal to reduce its philosophies to a singular way of seeing and knowing the world. In the latter sections of this chapter, I point to specific instances in which *The Wire*'s narrative engages competing worldviews and is sometimes purposely ambiguous. I close by reiterating the importance of alternative representations of schools and schooling, and by emphasizing the need to disrupt visions of the world that are naturalized through of habit and repetition.

Of Gods and Planets – Language, Values, and Transformative Renaming

The epigram for "One Arrest," the seventh episode of *The Wire*, is a quote from an exchange between Detective Bunk Moreland and stick-up artist Omar Little. "A man must

have a code" (Alvarez, Simon & Burns, 2002, 51:50), the policeman says in response to the armed robber's assertion that "I ain't never put my gun on nobody that wasn't in the game." Little explains that he differs from other criminals in his refusal to harm law-abiding citizens, members of society who follow different ethical standards than those that govern illicit economies. Little's homosexual orientation and abhorrence of curses further distinguish the Robin Hood-like figure from his drug-dealing peers. The criminal's personality traits add complexity to a protagonist who challenges normative stereotypes of misogynistic and profane street thugs. "F this and F that [...], don't nobody want to hear them dirty words"(Burns & Simon, 2002, 43:43), Little chastises his lover. Moreland suggests, in his comment, "a man must have a code," that individuals need to ascribe to a set of values and a sense of morality that mold their understandings of the world and guide their actions within it. That Little does not curse and often resorts to Britishisms like "oh, indeed" and "do tell" suggests that the use of specific linguistic styles, or codes, embody certain worldviews. Perhaps, the use of British idioms denotes a nobler conception of the drug-dealing enterprise, one that stands in sharp contrast with the Darwinian ethos of "survival of the fittest" that dominates street life. In this context, language is more than a tool speakers use to organize, describe, and understand phenomena.

Words are socially and historically situated representations of sociopolitical systems. Bakhtin (1981) conceives of "language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but [...] as ideologically saturated, [...] as a world view" (p. 271). Languages convey truncated realities that account for specific ways of seeing the world and are mitigated by the political values words are laden with. The role of language in imposing and negotiating realities and ideologies is a dominant trope in philosophy (Wittgenstein,

1978; Bakhtin, 1981), literary fiction (Orwell, 1949) and anti-colonial writing (Condé, 1978). Consider the works of two of Martinique's leading intellectuals: Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Black Skins, White Masks) and Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Notebook of a Return to the Native Land). Both men penned thoughtful critiques of colonial rules and paid particular attention to the colonized individual's relationships with the spoken word and material world. In his essay "Le noir et le langage," Fanon (1952) discusses the role of language in keeping colonized people subjugated. He likens the act of speaking to that of adopting a culture and explains that the ruling class taught French to the privileged amongst the colonized, to those the colonizers wished to shape in their own image. "Parler, c'est être à même d'employer une certaine syntaxe, posséder la morphologie de telle ou telle langue, mais c'est surtout assumer une culture, supporter le poids d'une civilisation" (Fanon, 1952, p. 13). For Fanon, to speak French does not simply mean that one can communicate with the oppressor but that one has, to an extent, become the oppressor by internalizing the values embedded within the oppressor's language. Bourdieu (2001) supports Fanon's thesis and, drawing from the work of French sociologist Georges Davy, conceives of the schoolmaster as a "maitre à parler qui est, par là même, un maitre à penser" (p. 75) – a teacher of speaking who is, as a result, a teacher of thinking.

For example, in French, the grammatical gender of a group of women becomes masculine if a single male is present among them. The shift in pronouns is emblematic of patriarchal social structures reflected in the language. Novelist George Orwell (1949) speaks to the relationship between language, representation and thought, particularly in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where the ruling party creates a "sanitized language […] to take the

place of English and its uncomfortable associations" (Orwell, 1949, p. xiii). Through a restricted and restricting vocabulary, the new dialect limits individuals' ability to reason critically and renders impossible the expression of certain thoughts and their accompanying affect. The deterministic view of language, the position that our thinking, doing, and being are bound by the words we use, is contentious. Determinism of any kind is a position I hesitate to fully endorse but I do believe that dominant social groups make use of language to impress their institutional, economic, and political power on those other social groups they wish to control. Discourse, language associated with specific social practices or professional fields, becomes more of a normative or nomothetic apparatus than it is a descriptive or communicative one. An ironist may note that Fanon and Césaire wrote in French and that both authors' bodies of work, not to mention the authors themselves, are bound by the colonial values made manifest in the use of that language. What this critique fails to account for is Césaire and Fanon's ability to manipulate the traditional structure of the French language.

The two intellectuals' impetus to reimagine the semantic implications of words and to invent discourses that better reflect their respective worlds is a central feature of their penmanship. The creators and producers of *The Wire* recognize people's capacity to appropriate language and alter their relationships with their environments. Appreciation for the ways in which individuals manipulate words is evidenced in the multiple scenes where characters negotiate acts of naming. As Little waits to testify against the Barksdale drug organization, he glances over at a courthouse security officer solving a crossword puzzle. "Ain't working out for y'all, huh?" (Simon & Burns, 2003, 0:21). The witness uses the plural to address the frustrated guard who asks if Mars is the God of War. "Planet too,"

Little replies with a discernable smirk. The security man nods, acknowledging the wordplay, and explains that the clue to the correct answer is "Greek God of War." With nary hesitation, and to the guard's delight, Little provides the solution: "Ares. Greeks called him Ares. Same dude, different name is all."

Depending on the cultural or historical context, the same character, figure, or symbol can embody distinct nominal features. In Greek lore, Ares was one of twelve Olympian Gods, the son of Zeus and Hera. His brutish and violent behavior drew the ire of other Gods and is the reason he is treated with contempt in Greek literature (Bulfinch, 2000). Ares fathered Remus and Romulus, the twins who later founded Rome. During the Hellenistic era, Roman scholar reinterpreted the myths of Ares and renamed him Mars, rendering the two figures quasi-indistinguishable. Romans, however, revered Mars in a way the Greeks never did and embraced him as the symbol of virtue and virility. One of Little's catch phrases, "it's all in the game," a metaphor for the institutional rules that govern social behavior, may well be reworded to "it's all in the name." The Roman appropriation of the Greek God of War does not simply entail a name change. Though Ares and Mars represent the "same dude," the modification in referents represents a change in values associated with the deity. The Greeks shunned Ares whom they perceived as fierce and abusive, while the Romans embraced Mars' benevolence and maturity.

Freire (1970) explains that "to speak a true word is to transform the world" (p. 75). According to the theorist, a "true" word is one rooted in reflection and subsequent action by its speaker. The ability to name one's world in one's own words is a cornerstone of critical pedagogy and liberatory education – learning whose intention is to uplift the material, social, and spiritual conditions of subjugated people. The process of redefining

one's environment using one's vocabulary is "an act of creation" (Freire, 1970, p. 77), which underpins the transformative aspect of education that leads to the raising of consciousness. Generating their own language can provide individuals with a sense of agency, the ability to reshape their surroundings, and the opportunity to enter into a dialogic relationship with the worlds they inhabit. Linguistic creation and recreation allow marginalized populations to reject dominant codes of communication and to fence out those who exclude them from certain social circles. The slang that permeates a large portion of *The Wire*'s narrative is unintelligible to the uninitiated. More importantly, the street vernacular articulates worldviews that speakers project without the imposing and formative constraints of mainstream grammar that govern much of what is seen, said, and done. Different forms of slang, however, present their own ideological restrictions, as all languages do.

The creators of *The Wire* are sensitized to the relationship between language and the ways in which individuals understand and navigate their worlds; to the imposition of normative values through acts of naming; and the revaluation of values through acts of renaming. The show's writers emphasize descriptive nuances and recognize that expressions, dialects, and colloquialisms are laden with values that represent the worlds to which these languages are bound. Detectives Shakima Greggs and Jimmy McNulty are patrolling West Baltimore in pursuit of a suspect they know simply as Bird, a lieutenant in the city's biggest drug organization. Little is in the back of the squad car, serving as their informant and guide through the housing projects. This excerpt from their conversation is emblematic of the kind of dialogue the writers of *The Wire* are able to create, where characters that speak different languages engage one another to negotiate meanings and understandings (Alvarez, Simon & Burns, 2002):

LITTLE: “Bird not up in the mix today.”

GREGGS: “Well, if we had more than a street name, maybe we could come up with an address.”

LITTLE: “What can I say? Out here, Bird just Bird. So, what up? Y’all fintna snatch him from out here or what?”

GREGGS: “That’s the plan.”

LITTLE: “He don’t pack down here, none of them do. And that’s the rule. Now, if you want iron, you gotta go to one of those kids up in the towers.”

MCNULTY: “We need the gun.”

LITTLE: “Then y’all got a problem.”

GREGGS: “Without knowing his crib, we definitely got a problem.”

LITTLE: “Not unless y’all know where Bird like to cop.”

MCNULTY: “What Bird gets high?”

LITTLE: “Not in the towers, he don’t. […] That’s another rule. Never get high on your own supply. Now if I was hunting Mr. Bird, I would consider the best package right now to be the red Dilly, that’s over there in Carrollton. That’s if I happened to be constabulating like y’all.” (41:58)

The officers are visibly frustrated with the fruitlessness of their surveillance efforts and the dearth of evidence on which to build their case. “What can I say? Out here, Bird just Bird,” Little retorts, alluding to the reliance on street names in a world that operates under a different set of guidelines than those that dominate mainstream society. The stick-up artist then points to the deficiencies in the detectives’ logic, explaining that they are unlikely to pin a weapons charge on their man. “He don’t pack down here. None of them do. And that’s

the rule," Omar schools the officers. The informant implies that what, to outsiders, may appear as lawlessness is a social order with calculated governing regulations. "If you want iron, you gotta go to one of those kids up in the towers."

Greggs and McNulty are members of law enforcement, an institution that compels the observance of normative social standards. Their search for Bird brings them to one of the many communities they are mandated to police and over which they exert administrative power. That they remain in their patrol car, observing the neighborhood from a distance, establishes the detectives as outsiders. This alien status is reinforced through their linguistic difference from Little, who helps the officers navigate terrain that is foreign to them. The detectives are akin to anthropologists attempting to make sense of a world with different rules, where iron is a gun and people go by pseudonyms. The linguistic dissonance between the detectives and those involved in illicit economies is representative of competing institutional values and meaning making markers. The use of slang and monikers indicate a rejection of mainstream dictum and a refusal to recognize government-mandated names. The refashioning of words, and particularly that of identities, allows the disenfranchised to reclaim a measure of power from the nomothetic institutions that control their lives. Bird eludes the grasp of the state apparatus, if only momentarily, because the officers cannot establish that he is Marquis Hilton.

Between the Lines – Text, Textual Meanings, and Intertextuality

The creators of *The Wire* use the series to house a number of different linguistic codes and practices, while providing a space for these languages to interact dialogically. The lexical multiplicity is not limited to street vernacular and police talk, but extends to discourse in a number of institutions, including the judicial enterprise and that of public

schooling. *The Wire* can be understood as a heteroglossic text. Heteroglossia originates from the Greek *hetero*, meaning "different," and *glossa*, meaning "tongue" or "language." The concept denotes the presence of different languages within the same work, where each language presents distinct worldviews and represents its own set of values. A text, broadly defined, is a translinguistic medium, operating through and across language to convey meaning or multiple meanings. Education scholars Franziska Trede, Joy Higgs, and Rodd Rothwell (2009) suggest that a text embodies "an intention to communicate more than mere information" (p. 2) and includes authorial meanings as well as those generated by readers. What constitutes a text extends beyond written productions to include conversations (Trede, Higgs, & Rothwell, 2009), clothing (Fiske, 1989), and films (Goodnow, 2010). Texts are socially and historically situated and can be paralinguistic, moving beyond the written word to include multimodal works that integrate images, sound, and speech. Given its aim to critique social institutions that govern the lives of inner-city residents, I approach *The Wire* as a socio-political and cultural text. The writers of the series explore the roles of social organizations in the management of inner-city residents and construct knowledge about institutions through the show's representation of urban experiences.

Kristeva (1980) conceives of text as a "productivity:" its relationship to the language in which it is situated is redistributive, or destructive-constructive. Her definition implies that the creation and circulation of texts disrupt old ways of seeing (destructive) and generate new meanings (constructive). In this regard, texts can be normative or nomothetic, if they mute dissidence and reinforce existing customs. Texts that challenge dominant so-called truths and produce new forms of engaging the world can be considered

subversive or idiographic. The ability of texts to disrupt what media scholar Tony Wilson (1993) calls the veridical image, or mainstream understanding, is a feature that I emphasize in studying *The Wire*'s alternative representations of schools and schooling. Frankfurt school philosopher Jurgen Habermass (1985) explains that textual analysis should espouse a position of skepticism regarding the status quo and aim to engender social change. Researchers must strive to develop a deep understanding of the phenomena they study, maintain a skeptical attitude towards this newfound understanding and recognize the value of dialogue in achieving transformative action (Trede et al, 2009). Dialogue derives from the Greek roots *dia*, which means "through," and *logos*, which means "the word," or more particularly, "the meaning of the word." The term signifies a "flow of meaning." Dialogue stands in contrast to discussion, whose roots mean to break apart. In discussions, people hold on to and defend their differences. These interactions often devolve into rigid debate, polarized arguments, and serial monologues. Dialogue involves a suspension of beliefs and preconceptions, where suspension means participants neither suppress what they think nor advocate it with unilateral conviction (Bohm, 2004). Because the nature of dialogue is exploratory its meaning and its methods continue to unfold.

Philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (2008) describes dialogue as a process in which "what is said is continually transformed […] and overcomes all opposition that tried to limit its validity" (p. 361). Kristeva (1980) supports the notion that dialogue generates new understandings and argues that texts and textual analyses are catalysts for social change. Drawing on Bakhtin's work, she conceives of the literary word as an intersection of textual surfaces, a dialogue among several writings, instead of a fixed point with singular meaning (Kristeva, 1980; Alfaro, 1996). Intertextuality assumes that texts are boundless, dynamic

sites where meanings are negotiated and renegotiated through dialogic relationships that undermine the authority of a singular voice. A text contains other texts, refers to all other texts. Rather than prescribing how to read phenomena, intertextual approaches recognize that knowledge is socially constructed and often predicated on competing social codes, each of which generates different sets of realities. Intertextual analysis involves studying the different components of a textual system and focuses on relational processes and practices rather than static structures and products. Mediatization and media analysis involve the negotiation of "intertextual distances that separate the represented, the audience and the institution of media [...] thereby constituting [an] interpretive framework through which we make sense of our social world" (Hiramoto & Park, 2010, p. 180). How does a text relate to and dialogue with other texts? Whose voices appear in a text and what roles do these differing voices embody? What relations of power operate between and across these texts? These are some of the questions researchers might ask and attempt to answer when engaging texts as their object of study.

The Wire's intertextuality is made apparent in the producers' penchant for weaving real events into the series' narrative and for alluding to other social texts and events. D'Angelo Barksdale orders a drink at a strip club and turns to a television set where a news headline reads: "War on terror continues" (Simon & Burns, 2002a, 52:55). The camera remains on the tube for a few seconds, as if to ensure that viewers can read the text. One of the series' memorable quotes, "This ain't Aruba, bitch" (Zorzi & Simon, 2008, 43:04), is a critique of City Hall's lack of response to high murder rates in African-American communities. The line alludes to the amount of media attention Natalee Halloway received when she went missing during a high school graduation trip to Aruba. Natalee was White.

During a late night drinking session, McNulty, frustrated with the case his detail is currently working, vents to his former-partner. "I feel like that motherfucker at the end of *Bridge on the River Kwai*" (Simon & Burns, 2002a, 51:38), he notes, referring to the 1957 World War II film. Twelve episodes later, at the sentencing of his unit's primary suspect, McNulty mumbles "What the fuck did I do?" (Simon & Burns, 2002e, 1:00:42) conjuring, as he regularly does, a famous line from the movie's final scene and adding to it a touch of profanity. Drug dealer Stringer Bell applies *Robert's Rules of Order*, a manual used in British parliamentary sessions, to lead his criminal organization's cooperative meetings. *The Wire* is also dialogic in that its narrative integrates a multiplicity of voices, or texts, and presents conflicting perspectives on social issues like the drug trade, public schooling, and organizational leadership.

Consider this scene from the show's second episode. In the Franklin Towers' courtyard, D'Angelo Barksdale leans on the armrest of an orange couch, surveilling his workers sell heroin. Wallace is at the other end of the bright three-seater, sharing a box of McDonald's chicken nuggets with Poot, another Barksdale lower level drug pusher. "Man, whoever invented these, he off the hook" (Simon & Burns, 2002f, 8:26), Wallace marvels. "Motherfucker got the bone all the way out the damn chicken," he continues, in awe of the boneless meat and its inventor's assumed prosperity. "You think the man got paid?" Poot asks. As Wallace explains that the man who thought of the nuggets is likely richer than imaginable, D'Angelo interjects. "Please! The man who invented these is just some sad ass at the basement of McDonald's thinking of some shit to make money for the real players." Poot voices his skepticism and emphasizes the injustice in such a business arrangement, prompting D'Angelo's riposte. "It ain't about right, it's about money […] [The person] who

invented them things still working […] for minimum wage thinking of [ways] to make the fries taste better. Believe." Wallace reflects and after a brief moment of silence mumbles: "He still had the idea though."

The exchange is a critique of capitalism, institutions and innovation. It also serves as an example of *The Wire*'s refusal to simplify the views of institutions its writers present and the show's resistance to narrow these conceptions to a singular interpretation. Many of the series' scenes conclude with pre-emptive lines, like Wallace's "He still had the idea though." The statement challenges D'Angelo's seemingly definitive stance that economic gain dictates social behavior and institutional development. Because *The Wire* is resistant to interpretations that reduce its content to neatly packaged messages, the most appropriate approach to analyzing the show may be to present an informed appreciation for the multiple ambiguities its writers put forth and refuse to resolve. I do not, in making claims on how I engage the series, mean to imply a prescriptive way to read the text or to value the creators' opinions over those of others. Authorial intent, while important, is not the sole marker for meaning making. Commenting on *A Clockwork Orange*, but speaking about the writing process in general, American novelist Anthony Burgess (2012) describes his most famous book as one that he "wrote without profound consideration of its meaning, […] a potboiler that turned out to have a significance unguessed at by the author" (p. 69).

In an interview with television critic Allan Sepinwall (2012), Simon expresses views similar to Burgess' but reserves the right to deem certain aspects of *The Wire* as more important than others, regardless of audience reception or reaction. "You can watch it any way you want," (Simon, as quoted in: Sepinwall, 2012, n.p.) the co-creator explains in response to the backlash against his admitted dislike of surveys determining audiences'

favorite character. What Simon deems more important than debating the popularity of *The Wire*'s protagonists is the dialogue on social issues he had hoped the series might generate. "I know I'm not allowed to speak for how people want to watch *The Wire*," Simon continues, "but let me put it on its head and ask: Am I allowed to say what I think has value in the piece for me, and for the other people who worked on the show?" Though I cannot speak for Simon and his creative team, what I believe to be *The Wire*'s crowning feat is its writers' ability to marry myriad voices and languages in giving shape to a heteroglossic narrative.

Language, as a semiotic resource or a system of representation, is infinite and flexible in its variations. Conversely, language is also limited and limiting. Words reduce natural phenomena into communicable events and are, at best, one degree removed from the objects, events, or emotions they describe. The use of multiple languages in a text allows for the recreation of different worlds and worldviews and engages conflicting value systems in dialogic relationships that help produce new forms of understanding. Texts have the ability to assume double semiotic status as both linguistic and discursive entities, bodies of knowledge predicated on the spoken or written word and catalysts for generative dialogue. Bakhtin's (1981) dialogism – the process of engaging with a text by conceiving the work as part of a greater social whole rather than a discrete entity – and Freire's (1970) concept of dialogue – the appropriation of linguistic modes to rename one's environment – are epistemological approaches that aim to complicate old ways of seeing, being, and doing. In the next sections of this chapter, I analyze some of *The Wire*'s heteroglossic characteristics and speak to the importance of these features in producing critical knowledge on social institutions, particularly the enterprise of public schooling.

E unum pluribus – Heteroglossia, Language, and Institutional Values

Institutional language(s) in The Wire. The writers of *The Wire* weave a tapestry of voices, languages and worldviews into the fabric of the show's narrative. Simon and Burns are not simply interested in analyzing the roles of social institutions in the governance of urban populations. The series' creators aim to examine how these institutions work together to create an intricate bureaucratic and managerial web. They dedicate each of the show's five seasons to exposing the internal structures and organizational philosophies of law enforcement, street economies, trade unions, city politics, public schooling, and print journalism. *The Wire*'s creators do not view these enterprises as isolated entities and use the series to explore the similarities between normative social institutions and the ways in which these organisms coalesce to justify each other's existence. Schools, jails, and mental health services, among other enterprises, are bureaucracies that rely on what Friedenberg (1976) referred to as conscript clienteles, populations who are coerced into receiving services they cannot refuse. The Canadian government, for example, mandates compulsory schooling, setting a minimum school leaving age of 16 in all provinces except New Brunswick, where the age limit is 18 (Oreopoulos, 2005). Institutions predicated on conscription produce conditions in one system that helps generate clients for another. They become mutually dependent on one another for referrals, creating an institutional symbiosis between service organizations. Communications scholar Torin Monahan and social ecologist Rodolfo Torres (2010) analyze cultures of control in public education and contend that schools ensure the creation of clienteles for a number of social organizations, including the criminal justice system.

In the third episode of *The Wire*'s fourth season, there is a sequence of shots, each lasting a few seconds, that precedes the start of the school year's inaugural day. The montage includes long and narrow hallways lined with doors on each side, cafeteria workers prepping the mess hall and the assistant-principal monitoring the campus entrance, walkie-talkie in hand. The imagery evokes architectural parallels between schools and penitentiaries. As first year teacher Roland Pryzbylewski waits in his classroom, enjoying the final moments of quiet before the student rush, the camera cuts to a police officer walking towards the school's main door. The bell rings and the law enforcer unlocks the gates, unleashing a deluge of adolescents clad in khaki pants and burgundy shirts. Later in the season, David Parenti, an academic conducting research in public schools, Howard Colvin, a retired police major, and Miss Duquette, a graduate student in psychology, discuss the mental health disorders they believe their participants exhibit. "I'm seeing oppositional defiant disorder, clinical depression, post-traumatic stress and […] borderline psychosis maybe" (Price & Burns, 2006b, 45:48), Duquette observes. "We're going to have to have a social worker here full-time," Parenti continues. The presence of psychologists in schools serves more to normalize students' behaviors than it does to improve their educational experience (Szasz, 1974). Mental health professionals use psychological labels to impose on children whose comportment deviates from socially accepted norms the administration of therapeutic and policing services that accentuate social marginalization. The extension of the mental health field into public schooling reflects the expansion of the modern bureaucratic state's activities and serves to strengthen the power of schools to coerce, control, and manage their clienteles.

The availability of full-time therapists and increased police presence in schools ensures a blurring of the boundaries that have traditionally separated the education enterprise from that of mental health and law enforcement. The lines of demarcation have moved from the physical, wherein each of these normative institutions occupies separate geographic spaces, to the linguistic. In a series of lectures entitled *Representations of the Intellectual*, Said (1996) explains that professional disciplines, and by extension the institutions that house them, develop their own jargon, terminology that is specific to particular social fields and organizations. Gang members speak in slang, judges converse in legal jargon and university professors rely on academic discourse. These working languages bestow those who speak them with an aura of expertise in a relatively narrow area of knowledge and entail an implicit acquiescence to a set of authorities and canonical ideas. In pledging linguistic allegiances, individuals align themselves with particular institutions from which they derive power and authority. When Colvin, serving as field liaison for Parenti's study, categorizes the potential research participants into two groups, the professor is at loss. The former major uses police language that is alien to the academic. "There are two kinds of kids walking in this building" (Burns & Simon, 2006a, 8:12), Colvin suggests, "stoop kids and corner kids."

The writers of *The Wire* emphasize distinctions in institutional discourses through dialogue between members of the social organizations these discourses represent. The series is a heteroglossic text in that its authors construct the show's narrative by making use of different languages and engaging the competing values they reflect. The show's producers use the speech of characters and employ a broad linguistic pallet to represent different philosophies, which may complement or contradict each other. Narratively, the

multiplicity of voices, worlds and worldviews is made manifest through the use of street slang and different forms of institutional jargon, most notably the language of policing and schooling. Whereas polyglossia entails the incorporation of multiple languages in a narrative, heteroglossia emphasizes the differences that exist between these languages, the worldviews they represent and the ideologies to which they are bound. If languages embody restricted social and historical realities (Bakhtin, 1981), the use of different languages in the construction of a narrative helps expand textual intentions beyond the constrained expression of a singular worldview. By engaging multiple and opposing institutional discourses, the writers of *The Wire* deny the absolutism of a unitary language and refuse to acknowledge any particular voice as the verbal and semantic center of the series' ideological world. The show is a vehicle for dialogic interactions between different linguistic, institutional, and social realities, neither of which the creators privilege.

In the context of this analysis, I focus on language as an institutional construct, though I do not ignore the influences of geography and space on the creation and subsequent use of words. Save for a few lines spoken by members of an international drug cartel in Russian and what viewers can assume is Greek, *The Wire*'s dialogue unfolds almost exclusively in English, albeit with colloquial alterations. The show's writers acknowledge regional differences in their characters' dialects but stress linguistic aspects that reflect institutional values and mandates. In the series' opening episode, Lieutenant Cedric Daniels complains to Detective Greggs about the inefficiency of the police department and the inter-departmental reluctance to share resources. A brief shot of a door that reads "Homicide Division" precedes Daniels' rant. Moments later, an unknown detective walks through an entrance marked "Narcotics Division." The inclusion of the two signs is a film

technique that helps audiences geographically situate themselves in the narrative. When offices and other aspects of an institution's physical plant share a visual likeness, viewers need cues to help differentiate one space from the other. What I find more interesting than the use of these insignias for plot-driven purposes is the choice of words to denote the different branches of the policing enterprise. Referring to the different arms of the law as homicide or narcotic "units" is common practice but denotes a co-operative ethos that seem foreign to the institutions in *The Wire*. Instead, the term "division" reinforces the discrete nature of departmental relationships with which Daniels is frustrated.

When Ms. Shephard, the head of the district school board, meets with Parenti and Colvin to discuss the merits of the academic's study, the administrator chides the professor whose work she sees as detrimental to students. "So, we're writing them off" (Overmyer & Burns, 2006b, 24:13), Shephard admonishes, in reference to the eighth graders participating in the study. When Colvin disagrees, she insists that the research project's aim is not to educate, but to socialize. "They weren't being educated before. There's no point in being obtuse," Parenti lashes. A few episodes later, a representative from the mayor's office describes the professor's study as "tracking, plain and simple" (Simon & Burns, 2006b, 53:32), referring to the practice of grouping individuals according to anticipated performance. The negotiation of descriptors is not merely a matter of semantic mediation. It is a lexical tug of war to ascribe values to the academic's work. Tracking assumes diminished levels of expectation for those students placed in the lower streams and is a term Parenti describes as "a nasty phrase in education circles" (Burns & Simon, 2006a, 8:31). School administrators, as exemplified by Ms. Shephard's comments, prefer to use the term educate, even if the word projects only the semblance of imparting equal opportunity

learning and useful knowledge. These exchanges between members of various educational bodies indicate a difference in teaching and administrative philosophies. The debates over acceptable terminology also depict institutions as complex social entities with internal tensions. This view of organizations challenges conceptions of schooling and policing as monolithic enterprises and offers some hope for institutional redemption, however anemic. Those members who question or challenge their institutions' mandates often meet forsaken fates, ranging from discharge to death.

Foreign tongues and dialogic engagement. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson's translation of Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* includes a glossary of terms. "Bakhtin's technical vocabulary presents certain difficulties" (Holquist, 1981, p. 423), some of which are semantic, thus justifying the need for expanded definitions. "While [the Russian philosopher] does not use jargon, he does invest everyday words with special content" (Holquist, 1981, p. 423). Bakhtin (1981) uses the terms centripetal and centrifugal to refer to more than an energetic pull towards or away from the center of an object. The linguist attributes characteristics to these words that respectively point to the nomothetic and idiographic impulses embedded within languages, the ability to either reinforce or disturb current modes of understandings. The assumption Holquist and Emerson make is that readers may require assistance to understand Bakthin's prose, to decode the common expressions the writer has refashioned to serve his own literary and philosophical purposes. A belief system, for example, does not merely entail a set of propositions one ascribes to but implies an inherent constriction of one's understanding. A literal translation of the term from Russian would read "the circling of one's vision," complementing the notion that values can be understood as conceptual horizons (Bakhtin, 1981). Viewers of

The Wire who are not familiar with the languages that infuse the show's storylines with philosophical diversity have traditionally relied on the subtitles made available on the DVD releases of the series. The equivalent of a televisual glossary, the on-screen transcription of dialogue aids comprehension for the linguistically uninitiated. Though the captions do not provide outright definitions, they serve as a visual crutch to those attempting to navigate a verbal and auditory landscape that is, to make use of a Bakhtinian descriptor, alien.

Audiences, including English-speaking ones, have struggled to make sense the street argot and police talk that dominate the series' dialogue. Confusion overtakes certain viewers when drug dealers speak of "burners," disposable pre-paid cell phones that are hard to trace, or "g-packs," street-ready drug packages worth 1,000 dollars. Even cast members faced difficulties understanding certain parts of the script. J. D. Williams, who plays Preston "Bodie" Broadus, credits David Simon's extensive research and commitment to accurate representations for the show's ability to create a narrative that makes use of different discourse and dialects (Baily & Errante, 2006). "In terms of dialogue, vernacular, description, tone," Simon explains in a conversation with Nick Hornby (2007, n.p.), "I want a homicide detective, or a drug slinger, or a longshoreman, or a politician anywhere in America to sit up and say, whoa, that's how my day is." This is why the policemen in the show routinely categorizing homicides as "dunkers" or "stone-cold whodunits." The former expression refers to cases that are easy to solve, borrowing the basketball term for a high-percentage shot where a player slams the ball directly through the rim. The latter alludes to murders that require extensive investigation. "My standard for verisimilitude is simple and I came to it when I started to write prose narrative," Simon (as quoted in: Hornby, 2007, n.p.) elaborates on his penchant for preciseness in linguistic mimicry. "Fuck the average

reader. He needs everything explained to him right away, [which] becomes this incredible, story-killing burden. Fuck him." The co-creator's contempt is directed at suburbanites who exoticize the city and limit their engagement with all things urban to cultural voyeurism experienced through the consumption of literature, music, and film.

George Pelecanos, author of crime fiction and one of *The Wire*'s 11 writers, expresses sentiments similar to Simon's, albeit less abrasively, with regards to viewers' expectations that the series be more linguistically intelligible. Pelcanos explains that people who watch the series with subtitles to aid their comprehension of the dialogue had misunderstood the producers' intent. "We wrote it so audiences would have to work at it!" the writer clarifies in an interview with *The Independent* (Akbar, 2009, n.p.). "We are not going to compromise in making it immediately accessible for everyone." The cultural and linguistic outsider is a recurring figure in *The Wire*. Detectives with surface knowledge of the communities they police rely on informants from these communities to clarify the nuances they are not sensitized to. The academic needs a "liaison operating in the urban environment" (Price & Burns, 2006a, 44:54) to help him approach, engage, and understand the students he seeks to study. The show's writers use language as a marker for difference, a signifier through which foreign status is reinforced. In an off-screen exchange that an unnamed character later describes to his peer, a couple driving through West Baltimore stops for directions. "This old White motherfucker and his wife roll up," the animated adolescent recounts (Price & Simon, 2004, 0:09). "He's like 'young man, you know where the Poe house is?' I'm like […] you kidding me. Look around, take your pick!" From the remainder of the monologue, viewers garner that the couple was inquiring about the Edgar Allan Poe House, a museum dedicated to the Baltimore poet and located in a dilapidated

part of the city. The teen, admitting that he "don't know no Edwin Allan Poe [sic]," had assumed the driver was asking about the "poor" house.

In certain African-American communities, "poor" is pronounced "po." The colloquial differences between a young Black drug dealer and an old White couple emphasize discrepancies in social status and lived experiences. The teen, who sells heroin a few blocks from Poe's home but is unfamiliar with the literary figure, scoffs at the visitors, insisting that every house in his neighborhood is a "po" house. The conversation is one of many instances throughout *The Wire* where speakers of different languages encounter and attempt to understand one another. Though the show's writers approach language as a predominantly institutional construct, they remain aware of racial, economic, and geographical variables. "One Arrest," the series' seventh episode, penned by Pelecanos, opens with five detectives listening to a wiretap and deciphering the recording. The officers are of mixed racial backgrounds. Roland Pryzbylewski, Thomas "Herc" Hauk ,and Jimmy McNulty are White; Lester Freamon and Ellis Carver are Black. The next exchange is an edited transcript of their conversation (Alvarez, Simon & Burns, 2002):

> WIRETAP: "Low man scrapped yo. He all the way down. But we going to start fresh on the latest tomorrow, down from up North."
>
> HERC: "No problem."
>
> PRYZBYLEWSKI: "No problem?"
>
> HERC: "Yeah, yo's talkin' about some guy named Lohman, who's down with the strep, like he's sick."
>
> MCNULTY: "And the last part?"

HERC: “And the last part is something about how he’s gonna to start up a Fashion Lady or some shit.”

CARVER: “Fashion Lady?”

HERC: “I’m fluent in the Perkins Homes and Latrobe Towers dialects, but I haven’t quite mastered the Franklin Terrace.”

PRYZBYLEWSKI: “He’s saying they’re sold out in the low rises so tomorrow they’re gonna start fresh with a new package.”

MCNULTY: “That’s what you hear?”

FREAMON: “Listen again.”

WIRETAP: “Low man scrapped, yo.”

FREAMON: “Low man, meaning the low-rise pit.”

WIRETAP: “He all the way down.”

FREAMON: “Is down to scraps on the last package.”

WIRETAP: “But we going to start fresh on the latest tomorrow, down from up North.”

FREAMON: “Tomorrow, he’ll start fresh on the latest package.”

CARVER: “Damn, how you all hear it so good?”

PRYZBYLEWSKI: “Gold Coast slave ship bound for cotton fields sold in a market down in New Orleans.”

HERC: “What the fuck is that?”

PRYZBYLEWSKI: “Rolling Stones. First two lines to ‘Brown Sugar.’ 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.”

CARVER: “That explains a lot, actually.”

WIRETAP: “So, wait on black, yo?”

CARVER: “What’s white on black?”

HERC: “Wait on black, right? Even I heard that shit.”

PRYZBYLEWSKI: “Black’s code for Stinkum. We picked that up once we got on his pager.”

FREAMON: “Now, there’s gonna be a re-up of four G-packs in the low-rise court. Stinkum is on the re-up and it’s gonna go down around noon.”

MCNULTY: “Are you sure about all that?”

Freamon jots down a pager message, “5-21-07-1111,” and hands it to McNulty, as Herc and Carver look confused.

PRYZBYLEWSKI: “Turn it upside down.”

The paper now reads, “1111-LO-12-S.”

PRYZBYLEWSKI: “Four hash marks in a row, one for each G-pack.”

MCNULTY: “’LO’ for low rises. “

HERC: “’12’ for the time.“

CARVER: “’S’ for Stinkum.”

MCNULTY: “How long to figure that out?”

PRYZBYLEWSKI: “Four or five hours.”

CARVER: “You sit here looking at beeper messages for five hours at a time?”

PRYZBYLEWSKI: “I don’t know, it’s kinda fun figuring shit out.” (0:07)

The exchange between the policemen alludes to the ways in which individuals use words to describe events in manners that reveal meaning to some while dissimulating it from others.

The detectives' speech and that of the recorded voice both make use of English diction, though of markedly different varieties. The writers of *The Wire* emphasize language's ability to encode the world, construct realities relevant to particular social experiences and to convey information that is intelligible only to those who speak that language – or to those who dedicate time and effort to deciphering it. A drug deal is misinterpreted as a concerned call to an ailing friend. A rock song about White slave masters raping Black women is disguised as an anthem for orgies and drug abuse. The lawmen's efforts to generate meaning of a wiretap that may have well been in a foreign tongue accentuates the intersection between language and a number of social variables like race, geography, and professional affiliation. The scene highlights features of language that are important to my research and that I will expand on in the next paragraphs. I would like to clarify that these views are not definitive but consist of conceptions presented by the series' writers and creators. While I do ascribe to similar theories, I believe language is too complex a construct to be limited to a singular theoretical inclination. The following is not an exhaustive linguistic model but a set of assumptions that help frame the remainder of my analysis.

Language, race, and institutions. "What's white on black?" Carver, one of the two Black officers, asks for clarification, as he and his peers listen to a segment of the wiretap. "Wait on black, right?" Herc corrects his partner's misinterpretation. "Even I heard that shit," the White detective continues. Considering the writers' portrayal of the officer as clumsy and dimwitted, Herc's comment may be intended as self-deprecating, but his statement also challenges the belief that people of similar racial backgrounds are more likely to share common linguistic traditions. The speaker whose voice the wire intercept

captures is Black. Viewers do not know this explicitly, but can assume so based on Herc's referring to the individual as a "yo," a gender-neutral Baltimore term used to describe Black street kids. That Carver does not understand the recording invites the theory that language is not race-specific. Awad Ibrahim (2011), a professor of Education who examines Somali immigrant youth's identity formation, refers to Hip Hop vernacular and street slang as B. L. E., an acronym for Black Language English. The term is more problematic than it is useful, as it conscripts a dialect to a reified cultural group and a very broad one at that. Socio-linguist Ben Rampton (1995) critiques this reduction of racial groups to specific and distinctive linguistic patterns, claiming that such an approach "risks an absolutist view of ethnicity as a discrete, homogenous and fairly static cultural essence" (p. 486).

Rampton agrees that socio-economic, racial, and cultural factions develop their own linguistics codes and that socialization in these modes of communication entails a degree of enculturation into an ingroup. What essentialist conceptions of language and culture do not account for is individuals' propensity to learn, adapt to and make use of modes of communication that are otherwise foreign to them, an ability Rampton refers to as "language crossing." The King's College scholar further explains (Rampton, 1995):

> Language crossing involves code alternation by people who are not accepted members of the group associated with the second language that they are using (code switching into varieties that are not generally thought to belong to them). This kind of switching involves a distinct sense of movement across social or ethnic boundaries and it raises issues of legitimacy which, in one way or another, participants need to negotiate in the course of their encounter. (p. 485)

Rampton offers a view of language that is less insular than Ibrahim's and likens the use of foreign words to a movement across racial, cultural, and socioeconomic worlds. To affirm that a form of speech belongs to Black people ignores the diversity inherent within that racial group, reduces language to a homogenous, racially-based construct and suggests that non-Blacks would struggle to comprehend so-called Black parlance.

Ibrahim seemingly ignores the institutional, educational and socioeconomic factors that bear on individuals' linguistic allegiances and affiliations. Language in *The Wire* is predicated on institutional membership more so than on racial or cultural belonging. The wiretap scene does not involve speakers of "White Language English," whatever that may be in its myriad dialects, attempting to make meaning of a recording in "Black Language English." The vignette shows five detectives, communicating in the language of law enforcement, decoding a message relayed in street-speak, the language of a criminal institution that specializes in drug sales. It is important to note that Pryzbylewski, the detective who cracks the code, is White. Throughout the series, the camera shows him solving crossword and Sudoku puzzles. His affinity for linguistic and numerical encryption serves as an advantage to his ability to understand the intercept, while his racial background seems to pose no discernable impediment. The detective's patience and perseverance, his willingness to dedicate "four or five hours" to deciphering codes is, perhaps, the "specific kind of interactional competence [needed] to situate the use of outgroup codes in liminal moments and events" (Rampton, 1995, p. 502).

Space, linguistic uniformity, and organizational complexity. Space is a common term that carries multiple meanings and connotations. Astronauts may use the word to refer to constellations of planets and stars; interior designers to discuss the size of a room

or an apartment; and cramped travellers to complain about a shortage of legroom. Sociologist and urban studies researcher Henri Lefebvre (1991) understands space as more than a geometric entity. Lefebvre explains that space is a social production bound to the realities, ideologies, histories, and social practices of the people that inhabit the space, those who conceive of and perceive this space. Education scholar Mary Maguire (2005), in her research on the relationship between space, linguistic practices and identity formation, explains in further detail:

> Every individual is embedded in material and social contexts. These contexts […] are not just physical arrangements of material things or catalogues of physical facts […] The concept of space […] can range from socio-cultural locations, real or imagined, to ideological positioning to geographical imagining and representations. This includes representational spaces and emotional conditions of being and dwelling in the world. (p. 1423)

Space, whether geographic or virtual, represents cultural and political positionings and accounts for various socially and historically mediated activities. Urban sociologist Christian Schmid (2008) borrows Lefebvre's description of social space as an architecture of forms, traditions, and rules. In my analysis, I am particularly interested in the ways in which linguistic affiliations and the ideologies languages represent are bound to specific social spaces and to the institutions that occupy these spaces.

"I'm fluent in the Perkins Homes and Latrobe Towers dialects, but I haven't quite mastered the Franklin Terrace." Herc's admission that he understands certain street dialects but is less familiar with others further denotes the relationship between space and language. The Perkins, Latrobe and Franklin projects almost literally house

different idioms and vocabulary, creating communicative barriers that impede non-residents' comprehension. There are certainly shared features between the three linguistic codes, as evidenced by two Stanfield drug organization enforcers arguing about the similarities and differences between Baltimore and New York street slang. The debate alludes to a common citywide language peppered with regional, micro-level distinctions. Though *The Wire*'s writers do not provide concrete examples as to what these variations are, they must be substantial enough for the detectives to have difficulties understanding the wiretap. The Perkins Homes, Latrobe Towers, and Franklin Terrace are within a four-mile radius of each other, the former two being on the east side of Baltimore and the latter in the city's western district. What a map does not reveal is that the buildings serve as markets and semiotic markers for different drug organizations, which may account for the differences in language.

Criminal organizations rely on linguistic codes to help prevent the competition and law enforcement from infiltrating their operations. Though illicit institutions are concerned with the legal ramifications of their members' actions, the creation of a language that is specific to an organization within a larger enterprise is common practice. In the argument I previously described between Parenti and Shephard, the parties represent the academic and school administration branches of education. They each use different terminology to support their claims. Even within universities, professors develop narrow discourses that relate to particular fields of study. Similarly to the drug organizations in *The Wire*, the academic languages are contained within the physical boundaries of faculty buildings – though they do extend beyond these structures through publications, presentations, and other forms of dissemination.

These linguistic variations support the notion that the languages in *The Wire*'s many worlds, though influenced by geography and locale, are primarily institutional constructs. The lexical nuances between the different bodies of an institution suggest that organizations are not homogenous entities and invite an appreciation for the linguistic, and by extension philosophical, tensions inherent within these social systems.

Multimodality, coding, and the deciphering of meanings. In his reflections on language, German philosopher Martin Heidegger (2001) speculates that, "we are always speaking, even when we do not utter a single word aloud" (p. 187). Communication is not bound to the verbal but includes gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and even silence. Numbers sometimes convey a greater amount of information than words and do so more concisely. The pager message reads "5-21-07-1111." Turning the digits upside down betrays the numeric encryption, revealing the time and place of a drug transaction, the size of the package, and the person designated to make the pick up. The expression of meanings through the use of non-lexical communicative tools invites a multiomodal approaches to language, ones where individuals rely on multiple semiotic resources to convey information and interpret messages. *Langue*, the French term for language, also means "tongue," implying an emphasis on the ability to speak. As I understand it, however, language is a social phenomena consisting of symbolic codes that can be expressed verbally or in writing. Sign language cannot be expressed vocally but consists of a systemic system of representation based on gestures, making it a *langue* despite being void of the element of speech.

Non-verbal modes of communication are paralinguistic in that they convey meaning but are not always considered to be languages. The prefix *para* means "beside." Linguistic elements and paralinguistic features are not mutually exclusive, as speech consists of verbal expression that is mitigated by vocal inflection, pitch, and volume, among other factors. In a motion picture document like *The Wire*, the interplay of different linguistic codes and paralinguistic elements in the construction of meanings invites a multimodal textual analysis. Communication scholars Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuen (2001) explain that "modes are semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realization of discources and types of (inter)action" (p. 21). Multiomodality includes the study of all forms of communication and emphasizes the interaction and integration of two or more modes in order to achieve the semantic functions of the text. Though I pay particular attention to language and the ways in which language reflects institutional values, my analysis accounts for paralinguistic modes of communication. Music, which is at a premium in *The Wire*, gestures that punctuate exchanges, and visual art consisting mostly of graffiti all relay important information that adds semantic nuances to the show's messages. As the assistant principal shows Roland Pryzbylewski to his classroom prior to the first day of school, the first year teacher is shocked. "So, this is me?" he utters (Simon & Burns, 2006a, 48:39), half asking, half stating. "This is you," the administrator replies. Those are the only seven words in a scene that lasts just under forty seconds. The look on Pryzbylewski's face conveys a sense of despair at the sight of chairs in a pile and turned-over desks, but a barely discernable smirk betrays a glimmer of hope at the promise and potential that his pedagogical environment represents.

Gold Coast Slave Ship – Linguistic Reproduction and Semantic Camouflage

To recapitulate, despite the influence of social factors like race, geographic space, and economic strata, I treat language predominantly as an institutional construct. Colloquial variations and the ability of cultural groups to create forms of communication that subvert dominant social norms are important elements of individuals' rapport with the spoken word and the worlds different words represent. Newly formed linguistic codes, however, often need institutions to help sustain and legitimize themselves. The relationship between languages and institutions is akin to that between ideas and organizations. In *The Sociology of Teaching,* American educator Willard Waller (1965) recounts a fictional tale about a minister who, during a morning stroll, encounters the devil. Intrigued to find Satan a pleasant and well-spoken gentleman, the priest engages in conversation and suggests a stroll. "And what are you doing this morning?" (p. 441) the minister asks. "Oh, my usual business. I am going about corrupting the works of man," the devil replies. As the two walk and chat, they notice an individual at a distance who gives all outward indications of having been struck by an auspicious idea. The person slaps his forehead with the palm of his hand, his face beams with joy, and he rushes to execute the idea. The minister, attempting to use the incident to his advantage, turns to the devil and says: "Now there's a man who has an idea, and I venture to say that it is a good idea. That's a point against you. What are you going to do about that?" The devil, unfazed by the priest's argument, responds. "Nothing easier. I'll organize it."

Waller's anecdote illustrates an important tension that underlies the organization and institutionalization of social phenomena and interactions. The ability to generate ideas is crucial to social, personal, and intellectual innovation, yet an idea alone is not enough to

produce and sustain any kind of advancement. Wholly unorganized ideas rarely live long and need to be organized, but ideas and social principles are susceptible to becoming dogmatic when institutions are built around them. "Without mechanisms [an idea] dies, but mechanisms pervert it" (Waller, 1965, p. 441). Waller points to a fundamental dialectic in the study of institutions: that ideas need organizational structures to be nurtured and given a pragmatic outlet but that institutional systems ultimately compromise the idea. The same applies to language. A person can create a word or appropriate an existing one, giving it new meaning(s). If this process of linguistic innovation occurs in a social or institutional vacuum or if it happens on an individual level, speakers run the risk of stripping language of its communicative functions. Everyone could end up developing a personal linguistic code or idiolect that is alien to all others, thereby allowing for a verbal relativism that would lead to semantic chaos. The act of language creation is fundamental to critical thinking, but the process must be a social endeavor and may not be sustainable without institutions, traditional or otherwise. Languages often need systemic structures and develop sets of rules that govern their spoken or written incarnations.

Academic discourse is created, maintained, and reproduced with the help of scholars, editors, publishing houses, and other regulatory bodies (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). American street vernacular is rooted in the philosophies of Black power organizations like the Moorish Science Temple, The Nation of Islam, and The Nation of the Five Per Cent (Knight, 2008). These institutions are not solely responsible for street argot's social and political inclinations but they have undoubtedly contributed to the preservation and dissemination of the language, in its numerous colloquial variations. The relationship between language and institutions, though symbiotic, is one of tension and contradiction. I

like to refer to the nature of this engagement as synergetically dialectic. Language is a fluid construct and system. Meanings evolve, are open to interpretation and reinterpretation. Institutions are rigid structures, resistant to change. They thin out divergence, ensuring the reproduction of normative social values. This is true of large-scale organizations like the mental health enterprise and the penal system, as it is of smaller organisms like the family. Waller suggests that the idea of function has receded from the mind of bureaucrats and that the fading distinction between means and ends is largely responsible for the rigidity that burdens institutions. The educational enterprise is predicated on the practice of schooling but institutions of formal education undercut the learning process by suggesting that schools and universities are the primary sites for acquiring socially valued forms of knowledge. Conflating schooling with education, when schools are, among other things, a conduit for education, is an example of the confusion of means with ends that Waller speaks of. Language, once it inhabits an institution, transforms into what Bakhtin (1981) refers to as authoritative discourse, an inflexible communicative form that takes on the characteristics and ideologies of its host organization. Words and expressions lose some of their mutative abilities as they become infused with values that reflect the mandates of the institutions to which they are now bound.

To borrow an idea from American thinker and writer William S. Burroughs (1967), language becomes a virus. Though Burroughs claims this disease is from outer space, I contend the illness is (wo)man-made, the result of individuals' attempts to expand their expressive palettes. The virus analogy implies that language inhabits people; that language controls them by instilling tacit values and worldviews in those who speak and write it. Words influence what members of a linguistic group see, how they see it, and the extent to

which they are able to express their observations, feelings, and thoughts. The institutional resistance to change that prevails in institutions eventually permeates language and begins to breed critical complacency through habit and repetition. Individuals begin to accept meanings without questioning their origins and their reflections are reduced to rote examinations. "Gold Coast slave ship bound for cotton fields sold in a market down in New Orleans," Detective Pryzbylewski recites during the wiretap exchange. "Rolling Stones. First two lines of 'Brown Sugar'," he explains to his dismayed colleagues. "I bet you've heard that song five hundred times, but you never knew, right?" The message is that texts convey meanings that are made invisible through codification or through custom, repetition, and a lack of critical engagement on behalf of readers, listeners, or viewers. Dialects and colloquialisms help create semantic barriers to those deemed outsiders to particular linguistic communities, but those foreign to particular linguistic norms are not disqualified from being able to decode language. In fact, outsiders may produce thoughtful semantic analyses as they are not blinded by unquestioned assumptions and taken for granted meanings.

Looking Back, Moving Forward

The Wire is a heteroglossic text. The show's narrative makes use of different languages, each of which represents specific worldviews and ideologies. Speakers of these various linguistic codes engage in dialogic relationships to negotiate contested and competing social understandings. *The Wire* is also intertextual in that the show is shaped by the intersection of multiple texts. The series' characters routinely reference books, movies, current news, and historical events. Analyzing the significance of these texts and the ways in which they add ambiguity to *The Wire*'s meanings is an essential component of

my study. I do not limit my conception of texts to written bodies of work, espousing, instead, a paralinguistic approach that emphasizes multimodality – where modes represent various forms of communication including music, video, and non-verbal cues (Kress & Van Leeuen, 2001). Though there are a number of factors that influence the creation and use of languages, including geography, race, and economic strata, I have chosen to focus on the relationship between language and institutions. I am interested in the organizational and philosophical values endorsed in field specific jargon, particularly the language of the educational enterprise. I dedicate the next chapter to examining *The Wire*'s narrative structure, journalistic impetus, and ethnographic features. This overview of the show's attributes might help readers develop a more informed understanding of the types of knowledge *The Wire* produces and the relevance of this knowledge to disrupting normative conceptions of schools and schooling.

Chapter 4 – Where is the ISBN? The Narrative Complexity, Literary Journalism, and Visual Ethnography of *The Wire*

Introduction

The Wire is a police show that has no heroes, no villains, and is not about police. Simon (2002) explains that the series' is a critique of social institutions nestled in a narrative about Baltimore's drug trade, the city's government bodies and its public schooling system. I divide this chapter into four sections. In the first, I examine audience reception to *The Wire*, explain how the series differs from mainstream police procedurals and analyze the show's storytelling techniques. Simon and Burns' reliance on an ensemble cast allows for systemic analyses that do not favor any one character, worldview, or ideology. *The Wire*'s serial format requires audiences to treat the show as a singular entity and demands commitment from viewers who watch episodes sequentially to follow the plot. I then draw parallels between *The Wire* and other forms of reportage rooted in literary journalism, a fictional news medium that privileges subjectivity and individuals' personal stories. I also outline some ethnographic features of the HBO series. I am particularly interested in the aesthetic sensibilities the show shares with ethnographic films and documentaries. These characteristics include slow pacing, the use of long shots and the forgoing of a score and other inauthentic sounds. I conclude with a discussion on textual and visual ethnographies as different modes of knowledge production. In what ways do traditional ethnographic works diverge from their audiovisual counterparts? How does meaning making emerge when analyzing film as opposed to text? These are important questions to consider before engaging in a closer reading of *The Wire*'s representations of schools and schooling.

Tangled Webs – Narrative Structure and Seriality in *The Wire*

The Wire never won an Emmy Award and garnered only two nominations during its five-year run. Yet superlatives abound when describing the series. Critics have called it the best thing on television and the greatest show to ever air (Shales, 2006; Weisberg, 2006). Conversely, audience reception remained lukewarm. Precise viewership statistics are difficult to ascertain because, at times, too few people tuned in for the show to register on the ratings scale (Bianco, 2008). *The Wire*'s final season drew approximately 890,000 viewers in the United States for premiere episodes – defined as those airing on television for the first time (Hibberd, 2010). By comparison, the finale for *The Sopranos*, another HBO series whose last episode was broadcast nine months before *The Wire*'s, attracted 11.9 million viewers (MSNBC, 2007). According to The Nielsen Company's (2011) television ratings for the week of April 25, 2011, 11.2 million people tuned in to the latest episode of Columbia Broadcasting Systems' (CBS) police drama *Naval Crime Scene Investigation* (*NCIS*). Statistics from the United Kingdom support North American audience trends, with an average of 38,000 people watching an episode of *The Wire*, compared to 74,000 for *NCIS* (Luft, 2008).

The anemic viewership can be attributed, in part, to the show's intricate narrative structure and the complexity of the social issues it raises (Lanahan, 2008). Andre Royo, who plays heroin-addicted Bubbles on *The Wire*, guest starred in two episodes of *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*, a National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) police procedural. He recalls the director's penchant for simplicity: "We're not as smart as *The Wire*. On our show, you put your hands up and get handcuffed" (as quoted in: Sheehan & Sweeny, 2009, n.p.), alluding to the dumbed-down plotlines that dominate mainstream cop shows. *The Wire*

diverges from conventional police drama formats in that it subverts the ethos of crime and punishment that underpins the majority police shows. The series' creators are guided by a sense of morality that is not concerned with the binary struggle between "good" and "evil" (Talbot, 2007). Simon and Burns do not consider the lines between what is right and wrong, just and unjust, to be clearly defined. Instead, the writers ascribe to the notion that individuals are inherently flawed, but also have redemptive qualities. Simon suggests that depicting social issues from a perspective that pits moral police against amoral criminals overshadows the systemic structures that govern people's actions. I also believe that this moral ambiguity helps humanize those who engage in unlawful activities and suggests that they are, at least in part, a product of their environments.

The Wire has no heroes; there are no villains. Instead, the story revolves around characters whose actions are constricted by their authoritative roles. Police chase drug dealers but are bound by a set of institution-specific codes that govern their behaviors. Simon (2002) elborates:

> The one thing I think this show gets right that most cop shows don't is that it's all business […] it's not 'I am personally invested in getting drugs off the street' or 'I am going to fix this neighborhood' […] That protect and serve nonsense somehow continues to exist on most television shows. (6:48)

The writers of *The Wire* depict law enforcement and criminality as maintaining a symbiotic relationship, wherein each enterprise colludes with and relies on the other to justify its existence. There can be no cops without robbers and no robbers without cops. Policing is reduced to an act of professional vanity. There are bountiful instances of officers enjoying amicable exchanges with the street dealers they are investigating simply because the

parties' cross paths while the detectives are off-duty. These officers, when back on-the clock, assume a policing role that requires an antagonistic rapport with the same criminals they had previously been friendly with. These are the kinds of character dynamics that separate *The Wire* from its cop show counterparts.

The series also serves as an indictment of bureaucracy, organizational leadership and the institutional management of inner-city residents. Masquerading as a police drama, *The Wire*, at its core, is an exposé on social inequality. In the audio commentary to the pilot episode, Simon (2002) explains the writers' intent in producing the show:

> We were […] trying to mask something different within a cop show. […] [*The Wire*] is really about the American city and about how we live together. […] It's about how institutions have an effect on individuals and how regardless of […] whether you are a cop, a longshoreman, a drug dealer, or a politician, a judge, a lawyer, you are ultimately compromised and must contend with whatever institution you've committed to. In that thematic universe, we've tried to tell a long story. (0:58)

Beginning with a look at street-level drug trade, the show draws attention to the dysfunction of the police department, the current state of labor unions, the moral bankruptcy of City Hall, the inefficiency of the public education system and the decline of print journalism. To each of these five institutions – law enforcement, trade unions, politics, schooling, and the media – the series' creators dedicate an full season, neither of which is entirely coherent without the others. *The Wire* is not episodic in nature, meaning the show does not entertain storylines that begin and end in a single episode, or even a single season.

Rather, the show's narrative requires viewers to engage the series as a singular entity. The plot is Gestaltian in the sense that the narrative whole is greater than the sum of its part.

The intricacies of *The Wire*'s plot stretch beyond insular critiques of individual bureaucracies. Simon and Burns endeavor to portray similarities in the ways different organizations operate. In her review of the series, New York Times columnist Alessandra Stanley (2008) describes *The Wire* as a tale of symmetry and disparity. In each of the seasons, she explains, unfairness, corruption, and moral decay are mirrored in different layers of society. During a smoke-break, journalist Robert Twigg laments the state of *The Baltimore Sun*. "Someday, I want to find out what it feels like to work for a real newspaper" (Simon & Burns, 2008a, 24:24), he grumbles to a couple of his co-workers. Later in the same episode, Detective McNulty, echoing Twigg's dissatisfaction almost verbatim, "wonder[s] what it feels like to work in a real fucking police department" (Simon & Burns, 2008a, 53:20). At times, the writers compare organizational structures in more subtle ways. Superiors berate their subordinates in similar fashion across institutions and, in most cases, demand quantifiable results. Police chiefs strive for a decrease in crime rates, even if this requires smudging reports; drug kingpins a boost in sales, at the cost of product quality; and school district supervisors a bump in aptitude scores by having educators teach to the test. In each of their respective institutions, leaders use numbers to create a statistical suggestion of success, rather than an actual measure. "The scenes are constructed so that you […] realize you're looking at competing institutions that operate differently, that have different standards of professionalism but that nonetheless impose the same will on individuals within them," Simon (2002, 28:24) elaborates.

In "Re-Wiring Baltimore," literature scholar Marsha Kinder (2008) analyzes the narrative strategies made possible by television. She suggests that "the expansive narrative space provided by seriality" (p. 50) facilitates *The Wire*'s complex and complicated analysis of bureaucracies. The show's reliance on an ensemble cast, the type of casting in which a large number of characters are central to the plot, allows for a broader systemic study of structural inequalities and a dramatization of the need for policy reform. Because the narrative is void of protagonists, the writers treat the city as the primary unit of analysis (Kinder, 2008). In the show's second season, Detective Greggs advises Beadie Russel, an inexperienced officer assigned to trail a police target, to use the city, to rely on corners to hide, and on reflections in windows and mirrors to observe her suspect. The exchange between the experienced cop and her rookie colleague depicts the city as an organic, living entity that its inhabitants can learn from. Whether or not it was the creators' intent, the metaphor recalls McLuhan's (1977) invitation to use the "city as classroom." Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (1984), co-founders of the original Chicago School of Sociology, viewed the city as modern (wo)man's natural habitat and considered the urban environment central to the study of sociological phenomena. Simon and Burns use *The Wire*'s storylines to explore "what it means to live in an American city and to be beholden, as we all are […] to the institutions that form a city" (Simon, 2002, 30:06).

Dominic West, who plays Detective McNulty and whose name appears first in the opening credits, is one of only eight characters to feature in each of the show's 60 episodes. HBO's website lists 84 actors in the "Cast and crew" section of *The Wire*'s home page compared to 34 on the page for *The Soprano's*. These figures represent two and a half times the number of characters for a series that has 26 fewer episodes. *The Wire*'s opening

credits are followed by an epigram lifted directly from that particular episode. These quotes bring attention to an idea or to a specific event that is central to that episode's plot and to the series' larger narrative. The producers of *The Wire* attribute the show's 60 epigrams to 42 different characters, three of which appear in five or less episodes. Six of these opening statements are spoken by individuals who feature in less than 10 episodes. This is reflective of *The Wire*'s impetus to provide a platform to a multiplicity of voices and of a narrative complexity that is more analogous to that of literary works than it is to traditional television scripts.

Simon (2002) does not shy from likening *The Wire* to a televisual novel, often referring to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* when explaining how his show's pacing differs from that of mainstream television series:

> It's not moving as fast as [the viewers] expect, but […] you don't meet the whale in the first chapter. You don't even meet Ahab. Basically, [Ishmael] comes into Bedford, there's no room at the inn and he's got to share a room with some freaky guy with tattoos and a harpoon, and that's it. That's all you get in the first couple of chapters. (50:26)

The methodical unfolding of *The Wire*'s plot requires patience and commitment from the audience. A season or two in, some of the main characters have yet to be introduced. Simon has spoken at length about the need to train viewership to watch the show differently. Condescending as his statement may sound, it is true that few series use five full seasons to tell a single story. *The Wire*'s total runtime is approximately five times longer than the six *Star Wars* films combined and the writers waste no screen time with tangential storylines that distract from the main plot.

This approach to storytelling is unique from most episodic drama and demands a level of attention to detail that audiences do not generally associate with television. Simon acknowledges some of his critics' frustrations with the series' slow plot but contends that serial narration "allows for a greater payoff at the end. We ask a lot of viewers, we ask them to follow a very intricate [story] line over many hours but we ultimately reward their effort" (Simon, 2002, 2:06). HBO provides a medium that is conducive to this kind of storytelling, which would be impossible to recreate on network television. Because the cable company relies on subscriptions rather than advertising to generate revenue, its shows air without commercial interruptions and are not subject to standard programming regulations. *The Wire*'s episodes are just under an hour-long, void of any breaks, and take liberties as far as content, language, and imagery are concerned. Laura Lippman, Simon's wife and author of detective fiction, challenges her husband's conception of the television series. "First of all, you just compared yourself to Herman Melville, which […] is a bit over the top. Second of all, if *The Wire* is really a novel, what's its ISBN?" (as quoted in: Simon, 2010, p. 23). Seeing past Simon's hyperbole, Lippman recognizes that *The Wire* can be understood as a form of fictional reportage in the tradition of literary journalism.

Fact or Fiction – Storytelling, Literary Journalism, and the Reporting of News

The nomenclatures between journalism and literature are porous, at best, and misleading, at worst. A considerable number of dramatists, novelists and poets have penned pieces for newspapers at one point or another during their writing careers (Fishkin, 1985). The list includes Walt Whitman, Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, and James Weldon Johnson, among others. Emile Zola, Charles Dickens, George Orwell, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez attest to the fact that this trend of

literary authors venturing into professional journalism is not confined to the Americas. Media professor Doug Underwood (2008) suggests certain continuities and historical connections between literary craft and the journalistic enterprise. Underwood argues that journalistic values may have played critical roles in the creation of the literary canon. Towards the end of the 19th century, literary journalism emerged as a reaction to the perceived limitations of traditional news broadcasting. By the late 1960s, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Tom Wolfe's *Electric Kool Aid Acid Test* had helped usher an era of "new journalism," a style of reporting that adopted literary forms and stylistics (Sims, 1995; Harstock, 2000).

In the same PBS interview I previously made reference to, Moyers asks Simon if fiction is an adequate medium to relay urban conditions to an audience *The Wire*'s creator once described as apathetic. The former *Baltimore Sun* journalist explains that "it's […] an uphill struggle to do this with facts. When you somehow tell a story, with characters, people jump out of their seats" (as quoted in: Moyers, 2009a, 7:39). Writers and critics have repeatedly called Simon the "Balzac of Baltimore" because of his descriptive knack (Sheehan & Sweeny, 2009). Moyers (2009a) likenes the journalist turned screenwriter to Edward Gibbon and Charles Dickens for his "remarkable and gripping portrayal of life in our cities" (0:14). Simon describes *The Wire* as his love letter to Baltimore. "It may have been […] conflicted […] but it was a love letter nonetheless" (Simon, as quoted in: Moyers, 2009b, 23:56). How personal a show this is becomes most apparent in the series' final season. Taking from Simon's last years at a *Baltimore Sun* in the midst of downsizing, *The Wire*'s fifth installment invites viewers to reconsider what society values as newsworthy and to question the ways in which print media presents information to the public. The

show's writers emphasize journalism's failure to report on a web of institutional deficiencies, constrained by newspapers' proclivity for decontextualized reporting, fabricated quotes, and feel-good stories aimed at increased circulation.

The journalistic aspect of the season's plot takes place at *The Baltimore Sun*. The names of personnel and staff members are fictionalized, but Simon admits the characters represent his former colleagues and bosses (Simon, 2008a). The Sun, founded by journeyman printer Arunah Shepherdson Abell, first appeared on Wednesday, May 17th, 1837 (*Baltimore Sun*, n. d.). The newspaper prides itself in bringing its readers news that matters most to them – a mission statement Simon feels the daily has strayed away from. "If I want to know what's happening in my city, I still need to look at the Metro section of *The Sun*," he asserts. "What's horrible is that I look at [that] section of [the paper] and I still got no clue" (Simon, 2008b, 1:09:11). Fiction is a medium that can tell us as much, if not more, about our world as traditional forms of news can. Simon (1998) shares similar convictions and says the following about Richard Price's novel *Clockers:*

> [It's] one of the best pieces of American journalism in the decade. It's fiction but it's not fiction. […] It's great journalism in the sense that *Grapes of Wrath* is the best journalism to come out of the Dust Bowl even though it is not true (n.p.).

Price is a regular in *The Wire*'s writing bullpen, which included novelists George Pelecanos and Dennis Lehane and journalists Rafael Alvarez, David Mills, and William Sorzi. Between them, the six men are credited for writing 21 of the show's 60 episodes; Simon and Burns account for a combined 30.

In the *Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera (1986) contends that mass media harbors nomothetic impulses that are concealed by the illusion of political variety. The Czech writer explains that journalism aims at simplification, while the novel remains a complicated medium. While his arguments leave room for rebuttal, he is not alone to critique conventional journalism's inadequacies in engaging its readers intellectually and emotionally (Fishkin, 1985). Corporate interests, censorship, and short attention spans are but some of the reasons for the deficiencies of mainstream news outlets. "Graft[ing] on to fictional schemes some claim of empirical validity" (Underwood, 2007, p. 2), literary journalism strays from the disengaged objectification that dominates news reporting by emphasizing subjectivity and emotional intimacy (Harstock, 2000; Fishkin, 1985). Literary journalism privileges the stories of the communities and the people academics approach as research subjects or participants. *The Wire*'s narrative is told through the trials, the failures, and the successes of its characters. Viewers see Sergeant Carver mature; endure Bubbles' struggles with drug addiction; and witness McNulty spiral into alcoholism. Literary journalism's dignifying of the ordinary and its focus on individual narratives are, in a way, ethnographic – a term whose Greek root means the writing of or on a peoples.

The scope of literary journalism has broadened and now encompasses memoirs and semi-fictional works based on real events (Underwood, 2008; Underwood, 2007; Sims, 1995). As the consumption of print media declines and people turn to non-traditional sources of news like blogs and social media for information (Debnath, 2011), an expansion of Literary Journalism to include televisual narratives rooted in literary paradigms is warranted – admittedly the literary journalism label, which is customarily reserved for written works, would then become something of a misnomer. Though audiences watch

rather than read *The Wire*, the series co-opts journalistic logic in that it aims to inform its viewers about life in the inner-city and about the experiences of a socio-economic demographic that mainstream media vilifies (Simon, 2008b). In doing so, the writers of *The Wire* base many of their storylines on real events. Simon, who prides himself in the series' verisimilitude (Hornby, 2007), has been described as stealing life (Talbot, 2007).

The character of Sergeant Jay Landsman, for example, is based on the murder detective by the same name. He met Simon while the journalist was working on *Homicide* and eventually landed a recurring role in *The Wire*, though ironically not as himself. Former Baltimore Police Commissioner Edward Norris plays a detective by the same name and, in a rant about the department's dysfunction, McNulty names Edward Burns to his short list of competent officers. Season four's Edward J. Tilghman Middle School is named after the former Baltimore police chief. Even Simon makes a couple of cameos as a beat reporter. In season two, viewers catch a glimpse of him wearing a blue shirt, asking indicted union leader Frank Sabotca a question. Simon also appears in *The Baltimore Sun*'s newsroom, typing away by a sign that reads "Save our Sun." Fictional realism, the blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality, positions *The Wire* as an ethnographic endeavor.

[Screenshot 2] David Simon cameo in *The Baltimore Sun* newsroom (Simon & Burns, 2008b, 1:00:19)

The Write Images – Visual Ethnographies, Film, and the Production of Knowledge

Because *The Wire* draws extensively from Simon's shadowing of the Baltimore Police Department, Burns' experiences as a murder detective and public school teacher, and both men's time spent living with inner-city heroin addicts, the show can be conceived as ethnographic. Ethnography is a qualitative research strategy used predominantly in the social sciences, particularly in anthropology and sociology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Researchers record detailed accounts of the communities they observe. Traditionally, this methodology privileges participants' perspectives and aims to provide an understanding of peoples, societies, and cultures, whether racial minorities, migrants groups, or colonized populations (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Researchers embed themselves within the

communities they intend to study, social groups to which they are often outsiders, and collect data in the form of field notes, interviews, and questionnaires. Ethnographers have recently extended their fields of analysis to include the study of organizations, social interactions, and professions. In her work on institutional ethnographies, Dorothy Smith (2005) studies the ways in which organizations dictate social relations. Harry F. Wolcott's *The Man in the Principal's Office* (2003) affords readers a detailed description of educational administration practices. Both authors privilege the ordinary as a source of insight into people, communities, and the customs of everyday life.

Wolcott (2003) critiques the notion that exotic communities and sensational events are richer sources of knowledge than ordinary occurrences and therefore more worthy of study. Individuals gravitate towards complex ideas, theories, and conceptions in their attempts to understand their environments, often dismissing the ordinary as banal and mundane. One of my former professors once asked a class of over 30 students how many of them could discern the arrow in the Federal Express company logo. Only a few raised their hands, as the rest squinted at the "FedEx" insignia displayed on the powerpoint projector screen. Once the arrow between the "E" and the "x" is made apparent, it is difficult to ignore. It overshadows the remainder of the logo and becomes the focus of the observer's gaze. Wolcott (2003) reminds his readers that qualitative researchers have a responsibility to reveal the hidden but also to make the obvious, or the seemingly obvious, explicit. Doing so enhances ethnographers' ability to construct representations that facilitate the recognition of the strange in the familiar and the familiar in the strange.

Viewers tuning into *The Wire* to escape into an hour's worth of shootouts and car chases may need a different outlet. The show is more words than bullets; more ordinary

than sensational. Simon (2002) explains that the series' creators were "not looking for big moments, we're [searching] for the nuance of real life" (13:15). The writers minimize action scenes and draw attention to the minutia of interpersonal exchanges, to the bonding between drunken off-duty cops or a game of pool between two detectives and their detainee as the trio awaits intake. Extending the series' narrative over 60 hours allows "the intimacies and ordinariness that constitute real life […] [to create], by television standards, a real-time logic where you have room for all the regular idiosyncrasies […] of how people relate and how institutions work," Simon (2002, 49:06) says. The former journalist points to the coarse language in the Baltimore Police Department, noting that there is a certain beauty to the way officers relate to one another. He recognizes poetry in the profane, praising Sergeant Landsman's verbal prowess. "Don't it make your dick bust concrete to be in the same room with two noble, selfless public servants?" (Simon & Burns, 2002a, 31:21) the fictional Landsman asks, as he notices two of his unit's men laboring through the effects of a heavy night of drinking. Simon rebukes the idea that inebriated officers are amoral, describing a hungover detective willing to take on a case as "Homeric. […] [There's] nothing more heroic" (Simon, 2002, 59:06).

[Screenshot 3] Domino Sugars refinery (Simon & Burns, 2002f, 36:16)

The Wire's imagery invites viewers into a world stripped of glitz and fanfare. Long shots of empty row houses along narrow streets, deserted alleyways, and abandoned industrial plants by Baltimore's waterfront dominate the series' visual pallet. Baltimore Police Commissioner Frederick H. Bealefeld recently criticized Simon and Burns' portrayal of their city and likened *The Wire* to a smear campaign. Bealefeld (as quoted in: Hermann, 2011) compared the treatment of Baltimore in the HBO series to that of cities in *Crime Scene Investigation*, Law *& Order* and other police dramas:

> You know what Miami gets in their crime show? […] Detectives that look like models and […] drive around in sports cars. And you know what New York gets? […] Tough prosecutors, competent cops that solve […] complicated

> cases. What Baltimore gets is […] a city full of hopelessness, despair and dysfunction (n.p.).

The commissioner seemingly calls for an unrealistic fictionalization of his city and, in the process, overlooks the splendor of the desolate. Recurrent shots of the Domino Sugars refinery sign are emblematic of the show's impetus to champion the working class, the everyday individual. The sign, which is lit at night and visible from most parts of Baltimore, is a valued vestige of the city's working past and stands in sharp contrast with the modern structures in what the Baltimore Chamber of Commerce is marketing as the new Digital Harbor (Howard, 2000). *The Wire*'s emphasis on the ordinary provides the series with observational and reflexive ethnographic qualities that are absent from mainstream television dramas.

Shortly after the show's fifth season ended in 2008, David Simon delivered a talk to media and journalism majors at the University of Southern California. A student in the audience asked the former journalist to elaborate on his role in *The Wire*'s filmmaking process. The show's co-creator admitted to having minimal knowledge of camera work, lens selection, and other production techniques but stressed the value of collaborating with trusted directors and producers from whom he learned a great deal. "My first responsibility is story," Simon (2008b, 1:00:16) explains, "and after that, my second responsibility is to surround myself with people that know what I don't know." The journalist's willingness to share visual authorship is relayed in his use of pronouns like "we" or "our" when claiming *The Wire* and in his attributing of the show's success to a large body of people from writers and directors to gaffers (Hornby, 2007, Simon, 2008b, Moyers, 2009a/b, Simon, 2010). Simon credits *The Wire*'s cinematographic style in large part to Robert Colesberry, a

producer and director he had worked with while filming HBO's mini-series adaptation of *The Corner*. Tom Fontana and Barry Levinson helped Simon hone his script writing when the former journalist worked with the two filmmakers as a consultant on NBC's rendition of *Homicide* (Simon, 2010). Under Fontana and Levinson's tutelage, Simon developed a sensibility for minimalist dialogue and an attention to detail.

Citing American director Frederick Weisman as an influence, Simon (2008b) admits to borrowing certain aesthetic sensibilities from documentary, which he describes as the journalism of film. The absence of mood music is one of the most striking examples. Visually, *The Wire*'s filmmakers strive to minimize the camera's presence. Addressing the university auditorium, Simon explains that he "never wanted to see the camera know more than it ought to know. The camera could be a smart person, it didn't have to be stupid, but it couldn't know more than the camera should know" (Simon, 2008b, 1:01:48). He refers to a scene where Detective Hauk is standing over a circle of squatting police officers. Hauk recites a comedic line and the camera pans up to catch the comment as he begins to speak. "I did the equivalent of yelling cut," Simon (2008b) says and further elaborates:

> How'd the camera know that [Hauk] was about to be funny? It can't, and at the moment that the camera chased and caught the line, the camera revealed itself. The artifice of film revealed itself. […] I don't care if it's is late on the line […] let the camera come up for the moment afterwards, or cut to it in coverage but don't give me a camera move. (1:03:04)

The camera is a necessary element in filmmaking. Its presence can never be entirely eliminated, though it can be minimized. Traditional ethnographic films expose the camera by revealing the production crew to remind viewers of the theatrical qualities inherent in

film but fictional ethnographies attempt to blur the boundaries between reality and representation by concealing the camera (Crawford, 1992). Ethnographic films consist of an extensive range of categories that include ethnographic footage and documentaries, research films, non-fiction ethnographies, and fictional ethnographic films. The types may differ in content and subject matter but share common filmic approaches that qualitative researchers have come to accept as "standards" in visual anthropology. *The Wire*, a fictional ethnography that draws on factual events, relies extensively on the following ethnographic film techniques, which are paraphrased from a list of "rules" compiled by anthropology scholar Peter Crawford (1992).

Emphasis on visual images considered the bearers of the film's meaning.

Surveillance is a dominant theme in *The Wire*. Police tap phones, clone pagers and monitor criminal activity. The show's creators do not limit the scope of surveillance to law offenders, as cameras are made visible in numerous settings, from courtrooms to police headquarters, grocery stores to elevators. Shots of unmonitored televisions broadcasting surveillance feeds are prevalent in the show's first season. "We tried to layer in […] innocuous shots of surveillance throughout […] to give [viewers] a sense of a world that is increasingly watched, even watched with certain indifference," Simon (2002, 4:28) explains. *The Wire*'s title sequence is a montage of short edits from some of the show's more important scenes. The sequences differ only partially from one season to another, as they contain images used in the credits for all five seasons and visuals that are season-specific. One of the recurring shots shows Bodie, seen through the eye of a perched surveillance camera, throwing rocks at the lens. "Housing must think we just dumb" (Simon & Burns, 2002b, 39:12), he shouts after connecting with his target. The line is omitted from

the title credits but suggests the character's awareness of institutional efforts to "surveille" and manage individuals. Other recurring images include public housing buildings, defunct industrial factories, City Hall and abandoned row houses whose boarded doors read "IF ANIMAL TRAPPED CALL 396-6286."

[Screenshot 4] "If animal trapped" (Simon & Burns, 2002g, 2:56)

Limited use of non-synchronous and unauthentic sound. The musical cues film directors use to evoke emotional responses from the audience are noticeably absent from *The Wire*. There is no score, as the creators forgo all of the "suggestive stuff that's supposed to tell you what to think" (Simon, 2002, 11:26). Instead, the producers amplify background sounds, like police radios, traffic, car horns, and shouts from afar. The sound in *The Wire* is what filmmakers would refer to as diagetic, a term used to denote noise whose source is part of the film's narrative sphere (Norden, 2007). The sound emanates from sources that

are either visible on-screen or implied to be present by the film's action. The music in *The Wire* might blare from home, car, and club stereo systems or faintly seep through a character's headphones, for example, but it is never artificially added. In adopting this cinematographic technique, Simon (2002) had hoped to create "a real ambient sense of the moment" (11:45). The only times the producers break this self-imposed dedication to diagetic sound is in the season-ending montages and in a short sequence in season one where Avon Barksdale, the head of West Baltimore's drug trade, walks through a courtyard to a musical score. The season-concluding songs provide each "chapter" of *The Wire* with a certain measure of closure, but the producers did not address the addition of music to Barksdale's parade in any of the literature I reviewed for this dissertation.

Long takes to give the film a slow pace and rhythm. For a show that audiences widely perceive as a police drama, *The Wire* is lacking in action sequences. There are certainly chases, shootouts, and graphic violence, but a fair share of action unfolds off-screen. Longshoreman Frank Sabotca's murder occurs between episodes, as does Brandon Wright's, Omar Little's boyfriend. When officer Greggs is gunned down, the shooting is not shown. Instead, the camera captures her colleagues listening to the incident through their car-radio receivers. The writers inform the audience of these unseen events in narrative ways, through conversations between characters or the flashing of a newspaper headline. *The Wire*'s tempered pace allows the camera to stay on individuals long enough to capture gestures that provide viewers with valuable insight into the characters, their personal relationships and their social roles. The long takes, uninterrupted film shots that last extended periods of time, reveal subtle smiles, rolls of the eyes, and emotive looks that producers may have omitted in a shorter edit. Prolonged shots slow the film's rhythm so

that it might more accurately reflect the pace of recorded events and provide increased visual continuity (Crawford, 1992). The producers' privileging of suggestive non-verbal cues over verbal expression allows certain aspects of *The Wire*'s plot to remain ambiguous, inviting the audience to draw its own interpretations and leaving the show open to multiple readings.

Use of wide-angle lenses and avoidance of close-ups. "This isn't a set […] this is what it looks like in the bowels of City Hall," Clark Johnson (2002, 4:24) explains. That *The Wire* is shot entirely on location in Baltimore, by Baltimore crafts and labor unions, is a source of pride for the show's creators (Simon, 2002). The producers gained access to the Circuit Court of Baltimore, the Shock Trauma Unit at the University of Maryland Hospital, and the State House in Annapolis, allowing them to film scenes in restricted locations that would be challenging to recreate. Johnson (2002), referring to a Fox Television police procedural, elaborates:

> *NYPD* [*Blue*], they shoot in L.A. on a sound stage and they'll come to Washington, New York or [wherever] for a couple of days to do exteriors. We like to shoot [outside] any chance we get, to show you where we are (20:30).

Colesberry, one of the series' executive producers, favored "staying in the wide" (Simon, 2002, 26:11), an allusion to the use of camera lenses that capture wider fields of view than standard lenses do. Simon (2002) explains that Colesberry, who passed away between the show's second and third season, aimed to show the world:

> You tend to be shooting on sound stages rather than the real world, and you tend to go for the close up as often as not […] Bob was a big believer in […]

> making [*The Wire*] filmic […] much more filmic than most of what's on television (26:16).

Watch What You Read – The Ethnographic Value of Film and Text

Ethnographic filmmaking is a form of representation that attempts to overcome the shortcomings of conventional ethnographic writing (Crawford, 1992). Ethnographic poems, novels, and films are possible alternatives to "traditional" ethnographic accounts, which often fail to convey cultural differences in terms of full-bodied experience (MacDougall, 2007). "Conventional" ethnographies ascribe to detached, scientific styles of writing as researchers are trained to maintain an objective distance from their "subjects" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). These modes of inquiry produce report-like volumes prone to ethnocentric biases. Researchers might misinterpret, misrepresent, or simply miss the nuances that make for what anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) called a thick description of culture and cultural phenomena. Geertz's attempt to outline an interpretive theory of cultures is predicated on the importance of detailed accounts that provide thorough historical, social, and economic contexts. Anthropology professor Kirsten Hastrup (1992) distinguishes between the ability of film and that of the written word to transmit information, viewing text, and video as separate modes of knowledge production. Ethnographic films blur or diminish the difference between the textual or visual authority and the ethnographic object. Hastrup (1992) explains that visual documentation is seductive precisely because the distance between reality and representation has been negated, but she sees pictures and film as having limited value as ethnographic evidence.

Visual ethnography, because it is explicit, is more apt at capturing forms, quantifiable behaviors, and objects that are physically present in the environment being

studied. The camera is an extension of the ethnographic gaze, an apparatus that aims specifically at seeing, while ethnographic fieldwork aspires at sensing and conveying the "context of the seen" (Hastrup, 1992, p. 10). Despite these claims on film's apparent inability to remain suggestive, visual ethnographies are effective tools in conveying the plurality of the world. "As for their anthropological value, […] films are not on equal terms with ethnographic writing," Hastrup (1992, p. 22) argues. She then suggests the need for a hierarchical relationship between writings and films as a necessary precondition in the construction of ethnographic knowledge. Though Hastrup makes compelling arguments, she neglects two important ideas and this oversight hinders her claims' validity. The first is that film is an intertextual medium whose ability to combine words, images, and sounds, makes it more conducive to thick descriptions than Hastrup suggests. The second is the notion that textual meaning is generated through circulation and that, for this reason, visual representations are sometimes purposely ambiguous (Fiske, 1989). This implies that visual ethnographies afford their audiences a higher degree of engagement in the negotiation of meanings than do their written counterparts.

In writing *The Wire*, Simon and Burns refuse to reproduce prescriptive truths that constrict social meanings. The series eludes reduction to a singular interpretation and remains suggestive in its representations and critiques. In the show's third episode, D'Angelo Barksdale teaches two of his subordinates, Wallace and Bodie, how to play chess. Ignorant of the rules, the two had been using the game set to play checkers. "See this? […] He the man," (Simon & Burns, 2002c, 11:54) D'Angelo explains as he kisses the king. "You get the other dude's king, you got the game," he continues, emphasizing the need to protect the most important piece on the board. Bodie compares the king to D'Angelo's uncle and, in

the ensuing conversation, the trio liken the chess pieces' roles to the different positions in their drug organization. The queen is Stringer Bell, second in command; the castles are stash houses; and the pawns are street level dealers. When Wallace asks how you can become the king, D'Angelo informs that you cannot. "See, the king stay the king." The quote serves as the episode's epigram and alludes to institutions' resistance to change. "Everything stay who he is," except for the pawns who become queen pieces if they reach the opposite end of the board. "Alright. So […] if I make it to the other end, I'm top dog," Bodie insists, seemingly aware of his place at the bottom of the organizational pecking order. D'Angelo reminds his workers that the objective of the game is to trap the king and that the outlook for pawns is bleak, as they are likely to be dispensed of early in the game. After a brief moment of silence, Bodie retorts with "unless they some smart-ass pawns."

The writers make use of a game analogy, as they did in the series' opening scene, but this time as a metaphor for organizations, which are portrayed as hierarchical and resistant to change. Upward mobility is possible albeit difficult and limited, as ascension to a leadership position is not permitted within the rules of particular institutional contexts. The majority of the employees of any organization, a drug cartel, a police department, a university, are trapped in what Simon (2002) describes as the hell of middle management. Middle-management is the thickest and most bureaucratic layer of an organizational pyramid and consists of individuals responsible for ensuring the implementation of policies passed down by top-management. Bodie's closing remark, "unless they some smart-ass pawns," suggests an alternative to this representation of organizations. The young dealer's reply invites viewers to reassess D'Angelo's depiction and engage in a reimagining of organizations and their social functions. Qualifying lines like Bodie's are common in *The*

Wire, presenting counterviews to opinions already expressed and reinforcing the notion that the series eludes reductive interpretations. Viewers, like Commissioner Bealefeld, who fail to see past the desolation *The Wire* is sometimes accused of glorifying, maintain an underdeveloped appreciation for the show's ability to generate dialogue between competing worldviews.

Looking Back, Moving Forward

The Wire is a television series whose writers blend fiction and reality to engage in bureaucratic analyses of social institutions. Simon and Burns' reliance on a serial, rather than episodic, narrative structure and their attention to the minutiae of interpersonal exchanges allow viewers an intimate gaze into the organizations the creators critique. As literary reportage, *The Wire* co-opts journalistic logic, intending to inform its audience about the lived experiences of socio-economic, racial, and cultural groups that mainstream media malign and that dominant society marginalizes. As visual ethnography, the show makes use of textual, verbal, and visual modes to construct its representations of institutions and individuals' social roles within these organizations. The images, dialogue, and personalities in *The Wire* are purposely ambiguous; their meanings open to multiple interpretations. Having identified the scenes in seasons one and four pertaining to education, schools, and schooling, I engage in a closer reading of *The Wire*'s representations of public school administrators, teachers, and students. In the following chapter, I outline the dominant themes in the series' fourth season, including school curricula that fail to reflect students' worlds, the role of standardized testing in shaping educational policy, and the impact of budget deficits on teacher retention. After a brief overview of the season's

dominant plotlines, I examine *The Wire*'s representations of schools and schooling in greater depth. I group my findings under three main categories:

1. Representations of public schools and educational bureaucracies
2. Representations of teachers and teaching
3. Representations of students and students' experiences of public schooling

My aim in conducting this analysis of the HBO series is to develop a better understanding of the challenges teachers face in urban public schools and a more thorough conception of the systemic and administrative barriers to student learning. In doing so, I hope to encourage my readers to reimagine what schools are and what social functions they serve.

Chapter 5 – Reading *The Wire*: Representations of Schools and the Schooling Experiences of Teachers and Students

Introduction

The Wire's fourth season engages viewers in a reimagining of what schools are and what they do. The show's writers complicate some of the tacit assumptions educators and administrators make about schools and schooling. Simon and Burns invite their audience to question taken for granted educational practices, like compulsory attendance, as well as dominant media depictions of inner-city students as boisterous, disengaged and dim. The season's narratives build layered representations of schools, the public school system, and the experiences of schooling in inner cities. My analysis of the systemic deficiencies of public schooling is rooted in Tayloristic principles that reduce teaching to a managerial undertaking. In an education context, Taylorism entails the reliance on numerical measures to quantify student learning and output. I am also drawn to the similarities between schools and other total institutions, a term Goffman (1961) uses to describe organizations that encompass the total sphere of human activity. Examples of these types of institutions are mental health wards, group homes and penitentiaries. Drawing on Goffman's work and Friedenberg's (1976) research on conscript clienteles, I examine some of the characteristics and social functions schools share with other nomothetic institutions, most notably law enforcement.

I argue that the primary aim of schooling is not to educate but to socialize students, and to manage large bodies of individuals in order to ensure the production and reproduction of socially accepted modes of seeing, being and doing. To achieve these ends, institutions of formal education engage in the tight scheduling of different phases of the

day, the programming and erosion of identity, and the coding of lived experiences in standardized speech. Recalling the ethnographic conception of the *The Wire*, Simon and Burns use season four's narratives and emerging themes to complicate thin descriptions of the public education enterprise. City budget deficits, the school board's insistence on generating quantifiable measures of learning, and the mayor's desire to remain in good standing with local and federal officials directly and indirectly affect teachers' ability to perform their pedagogic duties. Each of the themes I elaborate on in the remainder of this chapter could form the basis for an independent inquiry. I focus on the series' representations of educational bureaucracies, teachers, and students because I am more interested in examining the relationships between various aspects of schools and schooling than in analyzing a single facet at great length.

Previously on *The Wire* – Overview of Themes and Narratives

Season four of *The Wire* begins in a hardware store. Felicia "Snoop" Pearson, a member of the Stanfield drug organization, is shopping for a nail gun. She arrives at a display showcasing a spread of power devices. "You might want to consider the powder actuated tool" (Simon & Burns, 2006a, 0:44), a salesman advises after a brief conversation about battery life and frequency of use. The store employee assesses Pearson's needs and recommends the Hilti DX460. "For my money, she handles recoil better than the Simpson or the P3500." The salesman pauses to ensure his customer follows: "Now, you understand what I mean by recoil?" Pearson, no stranger to gunplay, nods. "Yeah, the kickback. I'm with you," she replies, using a firearm analogy that she would later revisit. Satisfied with the vendor's assistance, Pearson makes the purchase and returns to her vehicle where her colleague, Chris Partlow, waits. "This here is a gun powder activated, 27 caliber, full auto,

no kickback nail throwing mayhem," she proudly proclaims, as Partlow chuckles. "You laughing! I been schooled […] I'm trying to tell you," Pearson says of her store encounter.

This opening scene in episode thirty-eight can be viewed as an allegory for the remainder of the season and touches on a number of themes the writers explore, including the notion that most learning occurs informally. Education is not constricted to school settings and occurs in all types of environments. "We played the salesman being an educator of sorts and Snoop Pearson being a good student" (Simon & Burns, 2006c, 1:41), Simon explains. Pearson learns useful lessons about the equipment she needs for her job. Her interaction with the salesperson, who took the time to inquire about the drug dealer's occupation and professional requirements, points to the importance of knowledge that is relevant to lived experiences. The educator and his pupil are also from different cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. Pearson is Black and makes extensive use of street argot. The store employee is White, speaks in what can be considered Standard English, and sometimes has difficulty understanding his customer. He appears confused, and mildly shocked, when Pearson professes that she has "seen a little tiny ass 22 round nose drop a nigger plenty of days." The differences in the clerk and drug dealer's respective worlds do not appear to impede the pedagogic exchange, as the salesperson remains able to convey knowledge to his client in effective and respectful fashion.

In this season of *The Wire*, the show's writers narrate the stories of four 14 year-olds entering the eighth grade at Edward J. Tilghman Middle School. In the span of 13 episodes and roughly 10 months of real time, viewers witness Michael Lee, Namond Brice, Randy Wagstaff, and Duquan Weems's expedited development from innocent boys to burdened young men. The adolescents occupy a variety of social spaces, like classrooms,

street corners, and a boxing gym, all of which are sites of formal and informal learning. The teens are also closely involved with a number of educators, drug dealers, and police officers. This multiplicity of settings and the adolescents' engagement in extracurricular and sometimes illegal activities poses challenges when restricting examination of the season to educational themes. Because the focus of my analysis is on formal schooling, I approach the season through the tales of the three primary teacher figures, Roland "Prezbo" Pryzbylewski, Howard "Bunny" Colvin, and Dennis "Cutty" Wise. To help readers who may not have watched the series, or those who have but whose memories have failed them, I present a brief summary of each character's plotline:

[Image 1] Roland "Prezbo" Pryzbylewski (Retrieved from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roland_%22Prez%22_Pryzbylewski)

Pryzbylewski is a former murder detective turned public school teacher. He has yet to complete his teaching certificate and struggles to adapt to the rigors of the classroom. His first year at Edward Tilghman shatters his preconceptions of the educational system and exposes him to the bureaucratic constraints that impede both teaching and learning. "Prezbo," as the schoolchildren nickname him, begins to implement his lessons in ways that make the teachings more relevant to his students' lived experiences. Being new to the profession, he sees the strangeness in pedagogical practices that seasoned teachers are accustomed to and seldom question.

[Image 2] Howard "Bunny" Colvin (Retrieved from

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_%22Bunny%22_Colvin)

As a police major, Colvin lowered crime rates across his district by sanctioning drug trade in geographic areas dealers took to calling "Hamsterdam." Despite the effectiveness of his tactics, the chief of police operations reprimands Colvin's innovation and forces him to retire at a lieutenant's grade. These repercussions are examples of the measures institutional leaders in *The Wire* are willing to take to punish divergence. Colvin later joins a research team led by University of Maryland professor David Parenti. The academic's study aims to rethink social interventions for youth with histories of violent behavior. The project's participants are eighth grade students at Edward Tilghman.

[Image 3] Dennis "Cutty" Wise (Retrieved from

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dennis_%22Cutty%22_Wise)

Wise has just completed a 14 year bid at the Maryland House of Corrections. After a brief post-incarceration engagement with the streets, Wise realizes that he is no longer fit for a life of crime. The former convict begins raising funds to establish a boxing gym where he

hopes to mentor wayward adolescents. He secures employment as a truancy officer at Edward Tilghman but is disillusioned when he discovers that ensuring children's attendance serves to guarantee the school receives additional funding. His name, Wise, is indicative of a sage demeanor that allows him to continually mature as a person and a teacher. His is one of the few redemption stories in *The Wire*.

Colvin and Wise do not have formal teacher education. They grow into their roles as educators through their direct experiences working with children, thereby pragmatically learning their craft. The retired major's leadership position at the Baltimore Police Department aids him in his pedagogy. Parenti hires the officer as an assistant, but Colvin assumes a crucial role in designing the study, selecting participants, and implementing research objectives. He enjoys an intimate understanding of the students' worlds that his academic colleagues lack. Gang-affiliated as a youth, Colvin speaks the language of the streets, describing the children in Parenti's study as "corner kids," a term the students use to self-identify without any prompt from the policeman. His grasp of "corner logic" proves more useful to his practice than the knowledge a Teacher's College may have imparted. Similarly, Wise's checkered past and reputation as a ruthless but principled drug enforcer provide the boxing coach with valuable insight into his trainees' conduct and the outside pressures they face. His criminal peers and law enforcement officials recognize, respect, and support the boxing trainer's meaningful community contributions. Pryzbylewski and Colvin's teaching have transformative impacts on their students, but Wise's pedagogy seems to advance his own development as much as it does that of his trainees. Using a prison analogy, teaching helps rehabilitate the former convict by way of finding personal and professional fulfillment through his educational undertakings. Wise is also able to

work with children in a variety of settings as he is not bound to the institutional regulations that mitigate schooling and constrict student-teacher contact both geographically and temporally.

Simon and Burns use Pryzbylewski, Colvin, and Wise to outline distinct teacher archetypes whose storylines draw attention to the different experiences inner-city educators endure. Pryzbylewski, the formally educated teacher, struggles with his students' lack of interest in the school curriculum. Colvin, the autodidact instructor, assumes a confrontational approach when interacting with his research participants. Wise, the unofficial mentor, values pragmatic learning, knowledge that is relevant and applicable to his students' daily experiences and conditions. The teachers embody different educational philosophies and engage in specific pedagogical practices, from by-the-book instruction to the adoption of experimental techniques that entail student-teacher role reversals. The divergence in the educators' personal and professional backgrounds, in their pedagogical practices and philosophies, demonstrates the writers' refusal to embrace simplistic and narrow depictions of teachers and teaching. The show's creators do acknowledge shared aspects of the protagonists' development as educators and rely on their struggles with students and administrators to point to common challenges instructors must overcome. Adapting pre-service expectations to classroom realities, coping with a lack of resources, and tailoring the curriculum to meet student needs are some of the issues Pryzbylewski and Colvin learn to cope with as they become more responsive teachers. The institutional barriers to student learning are also recurring challenges the educators must learn to circumvent. In the next section, I elaborate on the systemic conditions administrators,

educators, and students must contend with by examining the representations of public schools, teachers, and students in *The Wire.*

Representation of Schools and the Schooling Experiences of Teachers and Students

Representations of public schools and educational bureaucracies. Season four unfolds in the midst of Baltimore's mayoral elections. The plot takes place in 2006 though there was no actual campaign that year. One of the candidates uses education as his platform but the most insightful inquiries into the political factors that affect schooling occur after the elected Thomas Carcetti assumes office. From the previous administration, Carcetti inherits a school system with a $54 million budget deficit. The public official must decide whether to seek federal assistance in managing the fiscal crisis or contain the problem within city jurisdiction. Accepting federal aid might remedy immediate needs but entails surrendering partial control of the school board to the state. This relinquishing of governing power may bring changes in teacher union contracts that would facilitate the firing of educators. Dealing with the deficit locally would pose less long-term complications but leaves the schools in their current and dire straights, affecting the quality of education children receive. "Whatever happens up on North Avenue is on the school system" (Pelecanos & Burns, 2006, 7:19), the City Council President argues during a mayoral staff meeting. The implication is that the board is solely responsible for its financial and institutional failures. "That's a simplistic view," the president of the District School Board counters, to which Carcetti, perhaps acting as a mouthpiece for the show's writers, asks: "How would you complicate it?"

Viewers begin to get a sense that schools are not discrete institutional entities; that they operate within larger socio-political and economic structures. When the regional

superintendent provisionally approves Parenti's program, she warns the professor and his assistant: "Nothing that gets anyone upset. […] There's an election going on and we don't want to put our schools in the middle of that mess" (Lehane & Burns, 2006, 25:44). In season five, the Baltimore Sun's executive editor, James C. Whiting, commissions journalist Scott Templeton to write a report on city schools. City editor Gus Haynes and an unnamed empolyee are present at the staff meeting, where this conversational exchange occurs (Zorzi & Simon, 2008):

> WHITING: "We want to depict the Dickensian lives of city children and then show clearly and concisely where the school system has failed them."
>
> STAFF MEMBER: "Not to defend the school system, but a lot of things have failed those kids."
>
> […]
>
> HAYNES: "You wanna look at who these kids really are you gotta look at the parenting, or lack of it, in the city, the drug culture, the economics of these neighborhoods."
>
> […]
>
> TEMPLETON: "You don't need a lot of context to examine what goes on in one classroom."
>
> HAYNES: "Oh, really? I think you need a lot of context to seriously examine anything." (20:16)

Haynes' comment invites the type of problematizing the mayor had urged from the School Board President. "How would you complicate it?" Carcetti inquires, referring to the state of public education in the city.

The Wire's writers examine the deficits in institutions of public schooling and convey a sense of organizational inefficiency in all levels of educational administration, from city budgeting to school board measures. Principal Claudell Withers and Assistant-Principal Donnelly often appear caught between board directives, like implementing lesson plans geared specifically towards statewide tests, and their students' welfare. Withers decides to forgo the proper channels and approves Parenti's program. "If you all want to still jump in and help, I'm fine with it. That's about all the ok you need in my house" (Burns & Simon, 2006a, 30:18), the principal explains, aware his superiors would hold him accountable should the professor's study cause any issues. "Puzzle palace," the term Withers and Donnelly use to refer to the school board offices, is a reference to James Bamford's 1982 book by the same title. Bamford's publication was a historical overview of the United States National Security Agency. The expression, "puzzle palace," commonly refers to an institution's headquarters or head office but also carries connotations of secrecy and hidden agendas. The use of a military term to describe educational bureacracy is an allusion to the similarities in the administrative values and practices of the two organizations, both of which Goffman (1961) would have considered total institutions.

Poor educational infrastructure, as it relates to public schools' physical plants and bureaucracies, bears a direct influence on students' academic failures but scholastic performance is affected by a number of extraneous social factors. "Sure, we can beat up on city schools. Lord knows they deserve to be beat on every once in a while" (Zorzi & Simon, 2008, 20:39), Haynes interjects during the Sun staff meeting. The city editor also recognizes that the challenges children face in public schools do not reduce to the failures of educational organizations. "There's more impediments to learning than a lack of

materials or a dysfunctional bureaucracy" (Zorzi & Simon, 2008, 21:24), the nameless employee offers in support of Haynes' assessment. The absence of parental investment, a rampant drug culture that glorifies crime, and poor socioeconomic conditions all affect adolescents' ability to learn and become socially adjusted adults. In the next two sections, I discuss some of the social factors to which Haynes alludes and examine their impact on student pedagogy.

Representations of teachers and teaching. Simon and Burns employ a variety of instructor archetypes and pedagogical practices in the series' narratives, suggesting that teachers are not a homogenous professional group. The writers reject binary models of teacher representations that prescribe how to and not to manage classrooms. Educators have differing motivations, views, and practices. Bureaucrats, administrators, and teacher education programs must account for this diversity in pedagogic philosophies lest they develop rigid policies and curricula. Despite the sundry of teacher-types in *The Wire*, the series' creators are not so diffuse in their representations that they make no discernable assertions. Managing expectations is a common challenge the teacher protagonists face. The students' unruliness overwhelms Pryzbylewski who might have anticipated more compliance. Namond's defiance pushes Colvin to concede that he and Parenti may struggle to achieve their program's goals. Even Wise is surprised and frustrated with how much red tape he must contend with to acquire the city's approval for a boxing gym. The instructors have idealistic visions of the contributions they hope to make to students' lives but eventually learn to temper their ambitions. Pryzbylewski is content to discover that a single student has completed the class assignment. Colvin and Parenti reduce the program participants from 40 to 10 children; and Wise acknowledges that he cannot keep every

neighborhood child off the corners. As they gain practical experience, the educators begin to realize that institutional agendas take precedence over student needs. Pryzbylewski learns to circumvent some of the administrative restrictions, but Colvin and Parenti, whose program cannot continue without board approval, must abandon their project.

Schools can be highly regulated environments. Teachers do not and cannot operate in a vacuum but teaching is sometimes an isolating endeavor. Prior to the start of the school year, Pryzbylewski toils alone in his classroom, scraping chewing gum off the bottom of desks, which he has neatly rearranged. Through a portable stereo, he listens to Johnny Cash's ballad "Ring of fire." The song conveys a sense of teaching as a lonely and demanding profession. "I fell into a burning ring of fire. I went down, down, down and the flames went higher. And it burns, burns, burns, the ring of fire, the ring of fire" (Mills & Burns, 2006, 8:37). The lyrics, which the country singer had penned for his wife during their divorce, allude to pedagogy as a labor of love and dedication, albeit one that comes at a great personal cost. Freire (1970) believes love, which he describes as "commitment to other men" (p. 78), to be a foundation for dialogue and critical pedagogy. Though a necessary condition for effective teaching, educators' investment in their students' success can be emotionally taxing. Edward Tilghman suffers from a teacher retention problem, due to instructors burning out and opting for a change in career. Lack of emotional and professional support, systemic failures and a shortage in resources are not the only causes of stress. Students are often adept at manipulating inexperienced teachers who are still developing a grasp of classroom management. As Namond, Randy, Duquan, and Michael are walking to school on the first day, they discuss their assigned teachers. Randy, who struggles to pronounce Pryzbylewski's name, appears content with the luck of his draw.

"He new and white" (Price & Burns, 2006a, 29:46), the child observes, emphasizing the conjunction. "We got it made!" Despite the requisite adjustment period, the students' mischief does not deter the educators from guiding the adolescents in their scholastic and personal development.

Typically, we imagine public school teachers to engage students on specific days and at specific times, weekdays from morning to late afternoon. *The Wire*'s writers, however, encourage educators to become involved in the extracurricular aspects of students' lives. It is unrealistic to expect teachers to make daily house calls or to become round the clock supervisors but showing concern for adolescents' out-of-school activities is fundamental to successful student-teacher rapport. Each of the season's three main educators forges a bond with at least one of the teens he teaches. Pryzbylewski begins the school year focused on classroom management and curriculum delivery. Eventually, the former detective relaxes his practice and begins to take interest in his students' lives. "Prezbo" slowly gains an appreciation for the extraordinary hardships his students cope with. He provides Duquan with food and clothes, helps Randy buy candy for a business venture, and grows more empathetic of Michael when he learns the teen is parenting a younger brother. Colvin becomes Namond's legal guardian and Wise places himself in harm's way attempting to steer his trainees away from crime. The trainer gets shot in the leg trying to protect Michael. As Sampson remarks in a discussion with Colvin, school is a respite, providing students with an escape from instability at home and violence in the streets.

Seeing the adolescents as more than students and recognizing their individual plights are transformative events in Pryzbylewski and Colvin's pedagogical and personal growth. The instructors develop a more informed understanding of classroom behaviors

and motivations by accounting for the extraneous factors that impact learning. If Duquan is distracted, perhaps it is because he has not eaten all day. Namond's posturing is likely the result of maternal pressures to live up to his incarcerated father's street legacy. The insights teachers gain into students' lives help them establish stronger relationships with the pupils, as the adults become invested in the adolescents' wellbeing. When Randy becomes a police informant, Pryzbylewski asks his old colleagues to protect the boy from the abuse his peers may subject him to for snitching. Aware of the repercussions of his student's co-operation, the ex-detective pleads with his former superior, Cedric Daniels: "I don't want to see him get chewed up by the system" (Overmyer & Burns, 2006a, 29:28). The extension of the instructors' roles beyond the prescriptive limits of schooling is what constitutes the difference between a teacher and an educator. The former is a job description, the latter a philosophical commitment to the personal and intellectual development of others.

Representations of students and students' experiences of public schooling. Pryzbylewski writes the variables of a mathematics problem on the blackboard. "Rashad has 82 apples and 12 friends, all of whom are hungry" (Price & Burns, 2006b, 0:08), the teacher reads, circling the numbers with chalk. His students are inattentive. Their chatter drowns the assignment explanation, but the teacher is unfazed. "He looks carefully at his apples and he sees that 7 have worms and another 15 have gone rotten." The instructor asks the adolescents how many apples would each of Rashad's friends receive if the boy evenly distributes the fruit to his peers: "A- 4, B- 5, C- 6, or D- 7?" When a student named Calvin offers a quick and correct response, Pryzbylewski is surprised, and questions the adolescent on how he arrived at the solution so quickly. "Easy, B- 5 got the dinks," the teen

replies, referring to the cluster of chalk marks around the right answer. Calvin offers to demonstrate his logic and proceeds to the front of the room (Price & Burns, 2006b):

> So you [were] like, he got 82 apples, 12 niggers, then how many bla, bla, bla, bla… Then you went dinking all around this one and no other one. So the answer is B- 5. Everybody get that? B- 5, it got all the dinks. (1:33)

The students cheer their peer. Pryzbylewsi, seemingly amused and impressed, restrains a smile and shakes his head.

The classroom scene hints at the failures of an educational system that values achieving correct answers over developing strategies to reason through a problem. Calvin proves that there are multiple ways to arrive at the right solution. The adolescent creatively finds a method to circumvent his curricular obligations, a feat that requires intelligence, resourcefulness and attentiveness to the instructor's teaching habits. Pryzbylewski acknowledges the student's aptitude but perhaps also recognizes how much effort may be required to harness this intellectual capacity into academic ends. Calvin's ruse involves a form of learning and implies that, despite his disinterest in mastering mathematical principles, the adolescent is observant and imaginative. Though they achieve failing grades and exhibit severe behavioral problems, the students at Edward Tilghman are generally bright, exuberant, and insightful. The implication of Calvin and Pryzbylewski's exchange is that systemic shortcomings may be a primary cause for students' challenges in educational accomplishments, particularly considering the adolescents' display of abilities throughout the season. Teachers, administrators, and policy makers shoulder considerable responsibility for student learning. The notion that troublesome pupils are inept and beyond redemption is a lazy justification for curricular

stagnation. The writers of *The Wire* emphasize that the potential for scholastic success is magnified when lessons cater to student needs and lived experiences. "They not learning for our world, they learning for theirs" (Overmyer & Burns, 2006b, 24:37), Colvin notes of the participants in Parenti's program.

Competing with the gratification adolescents receive by engaging in criminal activity, from notoriety to financial compensation, can be a challenge for inner-city public schools. Organizational resistance to change is a recurring theme in *The Wire* and a principal reason schools are unable to meet their constituents' needs. Rather than adapt to students' realities, the school system continues to promote learning that fails to reflect the social conditions students contend with. Sampson's assessment that Edward Tilghman is a harbor from the street and home environments the youth endure rings true. The language arts teacher acknowledges that students learn to navigate different worlds, with different rules, expectations and responsibilities. The adolescents develop what DuBois (1965) termed double consciousness, a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt" (p. 215). This duality of being prompts individuals' attempts to reconcile dominant ideals with those of their immediate social surroundings and may lead to feelings of inadequacy. The tensions between the different worlds the students in *The Wire* must adapt to are most apparent during a class excursion at an upscale restaurant. Having won a class contest, Namond, Zenobia, and Darnell are treated to dinner at Ruth's Chris Steak House under Colvin's supervision. The following day, the teacher briefs Parenti on the failed outing and explains the emotional distress the adolescents experienced. The former major likens schooling to abject theater, staged interactions where teachers and students play

predetermined roles in reproducing a social order that precludes lower economic strata from meaningful participation. "How do you get them to believe in themselves if they can't admit their feelings about who they are and what they're doing in this world?" (Corthron & Burns, 2006, 51:27), Colvin asks, addressing the affective component to pedagogy and the emotions his students work to repress.

Michael, Randy, Duquan, and Namond's narratives suggest that the factors that affect education extend beyond classroom conditions. Michael is his family's primary caretaker. He looks after his drug-addicted mother and tends to his younger brother's needs. These adult obligations prevent the adolescents from completing his schoolwork and attending detention. Over the course of the year, he matures physically but remains a child, even if robbed of his youth. Little dismisses Michael's potential as a threat and reassures his associate by noting that "he just a kid" (Corthron & Burns, 2006, 57:12). Namond sees otherwise, having witnessed his friend repeatedly erupt in violence. "Mike ain't Mike no more" (Pelecanos & Burns, 2006, 49:29), the teen discloses to Carver and Wise. Randy too experiences drastic personality changes, his radiant smile tempered to an angry and cynical scowl. "You gon' help, huh? […] You gon' look out for me Sergeant Carver?" (Pelecanos & Burns, 2006, 56:50), the young entrepreneur taunts, his face bloodied from the attack that left his foster mother hospitalized. The abuse that Randy suffers for cooperating with the police on a murder case causes the state to reclaim custody of the child, despite the efforts of detectives who cared about the adolescent's welfare and tried to intervene.

Duquan ends up a victim of Edward Tilghman's social promotion policies. Donnelly ignores Pryzbylewski's pleas and, mid-school year, determines that the adolescent is ready

to begin the ninth grade. The administration's decision leaves Duquan confused and distraught. "Did I do something wrong? I ain't acted up or nothing" (Pelecanos & Burns, 2006, 27:29), he laments to his mathematics teacher. Pryzbylewski pats the student on the shoulder and expresses confidence in the pupil's abilities. "That moment right there" (Chappelle & Pelecanos, 2006, 27:37), episode director Joe Chappelle explains in the DVD audio commentaries, "is a key moment." He expands on the symbolism of the interaction (Chappelle & Pelecanos, 2006):

> You'll see there's certain points […] where an adult character will comfort […] one of the kids, with a gesture like that […] I think Carver does it with Randy in the end […] Maybe it's [Wise] with Micahel later on, where they try to put their hand on the kid, to console them in some way […] and those are three false moves. […] But [Colvin] with Namond, he's the one that doesn't do it, [that] can't do it […] The one that ends up working is the one where the guy can't put his arm on the kid's shoulder because he can't promise him a [favorable] future. […] He knows it could not work out. (27:48)

Where the adults are hopeful, the children are resigned and, it appears, less idealistic. Saying his goodbyes, Duquan offers to show Pryzbylewski how to access the class computer's hard drive. "This isn't necessary" (Pelecanos & Burns, 2006, 28:02), the instructor quips, but the adolescent is intent. "Just in case I'm busy, Mr. P." The reply cuts through the veil of optimism Pryzbylewski appears resolved to hide behind. The children are insightful and honest but the social conditions they are born into, the poverty, the broken homes, pose considerable barriers to their education.

The Wire's producers accentuate the lack of family involvement in students' lives and attribute deficits in learning to more than just poor schooling practices. The absence of a single reliable parent figure in the series is rather conspicuous. The homogeneity of family representations can be problematic, especially considering the negative portrayal of adults. Mothers and fathers are drug addicts, incarcerated or in absentia. Some take more pride in their offspring's street credibility than they do the child's scholastic achievements. The adolescents receive guidance and support from teachers, community educators, and policemen but in most cases are too emotionally damaged to sustain long-term progress. Randy and Duquan meet bleak destinies at the hands of social institutions that claim, but fail, to protect the adolescents' welfare. Schools, group homes, and family services reduce the students to clienteles with limited agency. The only adolescent with a redemptive and redeeming narrative in this season of *The Wire* is Namond Brice, the pony-tailed teen whose guardianship Colvin assumes. The season's closing shot shows Namond standing on Colvin's porch, staring at a quaint street intersection. The greenery offers a view markedly different from the desolate inner-city landscape that dominate previous episodes.

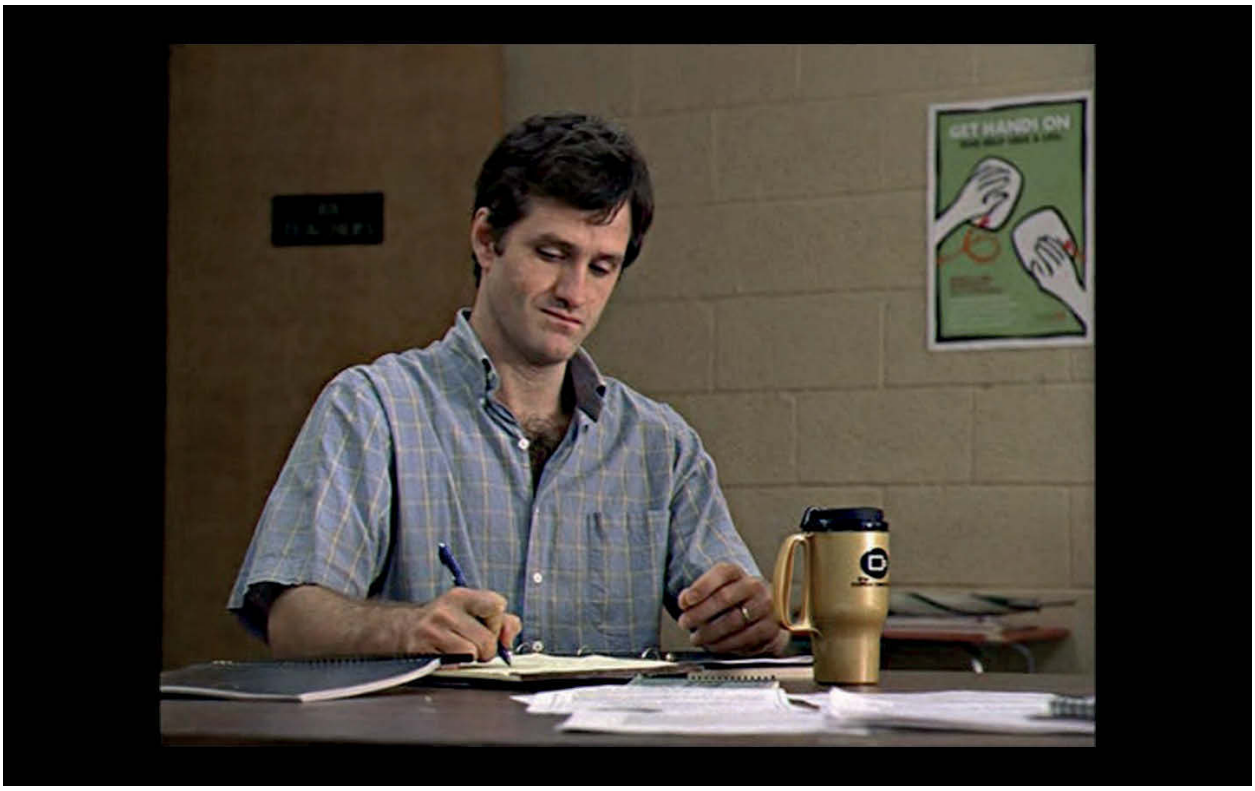
Simon and Burns' representations of students in *The Wire* invite a reimagining of adolescents and their roles in pedagogical spaces and processes. The idea that childhood may be a social construction rather than a natural, biological category, is an implicit theme throughout the series. Michael, Randy, Namond, and Duquan do not fit traditional and dominant conceptions of adolescence. The season's plotlines are void of discussions about acne, romantic insecurities and other pre-pubescent concerns. Neither is the foursome afforded shelter from adult hardships. The adolescents are adult-like and, in most cases, must care for their parents. Michael manages his family's finances. Namond's mother

expects the teen to provide for her, even if this means forgoing classrooms for street corners. Though they occasionally exhibit childish behavior, defiling historical figures in Pryzbylewski's class and taunting one another, the students in *The Wire* possess a developed level of social awareness. "They not fools. They know exactly what we expect them to be" (Corthron & Burns, 2006, 51:32), Colvin remarks. The former major recognizes his students' insight into the social roles they play, into the systemic barriers that complicate their prospects of academic success and upward social mobility. Valuing the experiential knowledge adolescents bring to their pedagogical interactions with teachers enables Colvin to engage his students in their own learning. The program students become active participants in shaping their curriculum, rather than passive recipients of knowledge they have little use for.

Between the Lines – Emerging Themes and Interprtations

As season four progresses, the writers tease out some of the contradictions inherent in schools and in the schooling experiences of teachers, students, and administrators. Withers and Donnely must balance board directives that hinder learning with initiatives they feel may benefit students. Teachers sidestep administrative supervision by dressing their classrooms with makeshift test problems while finding creative ways to conduct their lessons. Students are bright and engaging but their intelligence does not translate into scholastic success. *The Wire*'s school-based plots emphasize a disconnect between schooling and education, and hint at institutional mandates that compete against student and teacher interests. The insistence on using numerical measures for success suggests that schools value a form of knowledge that is quantifiable and easy to reproduce. The classroom exchange between Pryzbylewski and Calvin implies that institutions of formal

education deemphasize observation and participation as modes of learning. “B-5, it got all the dinks” (Price & Burns, 2006b, 1:51). The adolescent is clever enough to find alternative ways to arrive at the correct answer but struggles to pass the state test. In the next section, I expand on three emerging themes in *The Wire*’s fourth season. I begin by examining the benefits of “hands-on” education, or teaching by doing. I then discuss formal education’s adoption of Tayloristic principles of scientific management, approaches that are predicated on the statistical quantification of output. Finally, I describe the characteristics of total institutions that apply to schools and compare these features to those of other total institutions, like law enforcement, prisons and group homes.



[Screenshot 5]: “Get hands on” poster at Edward Tilghman Middle School (Mills & Burns, 2006, 46:17)

Getting hands on: pragmatic education and learning by doing. In the teachers' lounge at Edward Tilghman, Pryzbylewski seeks advice from his veteran colleagues. A poster in the background reads "Get hands on." The imperative is only visible when the mathematics instructor is in the camera's frame, almost acting as a subliminal message to the novice educator – one to which his back is turned. At the boxing gym, Wise warns Michael: "I'ma show you, as gently as I can, how much you don't know" (Lehane & Burns, 2006, 7:03). The former convict later invites two of his trainees to attend a live fight, encouraging the adolescents to learn new techniques through observation. "See how he stay in close?" Wise explains (Lehane & Burns, 2006, 54:06). "That's how he take away his power." The trainer's insistence on educating his students in a multiplicity of settings suggests an understanding of learning as a continuous occurrence that escapes limitation to a single physical space. Throughout the season, Wise's gym serves as an alternative site for education and a site for alternative education. The lessons the trainer imparts seem more relevant to his students' lived realties than those the adolescents must learn at school. Also, the student-teacher rapport differs from the hierarchical relationships that dominate classrooms. Wise's pedagogic strategies are predicated on participation and observation. Given the manual nature of the sport, boxing is a perfect metaphor for "getting hands on", for teaching and learning by doing. As schools do to signal the start and end of classes, boxing relies on a bell to mark the beginning and conclusion of each round.

The importance and effectiveness of pragmatic education is a central theme in *The Wire*. Pragmatism derives from the Greek root *pragma* and, in the context of education, refers to the practical application of knowledge, to the relationship between learning and lived experiences (Dewey, 1938). Pragmatic education philosophies do not apply only to

students insofar as instructors improve their practice with practice, learning primarily through trial and error. Pryzbylewski and Colvin struggle with developing effective lesson plans until they abandon traditional methods of teaching in favor of non-conventional techniques. Though Pryzbylewski is the only one of the three main pedagogues with teacher education, he has yet to complete his certificate and his formal training appears to be a detriment. Early in the school year, Pryzbylewski seems to follow a teaching script, almost literally. He brings notes to class and communicates with his students by reading from sheets. He is anxious and inflexible. Lesson plans are important in guiding teachers but they must not constrict instructors in the delivery of their classes, as is the case with the former detective who hesitates to deviate from his outline. After multiple attempts to redefine class rules, rearrange student seating and restructure lesson content, Pryzbylewski becomes more comfortable in his classroom practice. In a direct allusion to the limitations of "by the book pedagogy," the mathematics instructor asks his pupils to discard their textbooks so that he can begin teaching and they can begin learning.

The students in *The Wire* are most engaged in their education when the adolescents assume teaching roles or acquire knowledge that holds a measure of utility in their worlds. The partial transfer of power and control from the educators to the students fosters a sense of agency and leadership in the adolescents. Colvin, Parenti, and Duquette experience a positive shift in classroom dynamics when they encourage their research participants to explain the rules of street culture. "Let me ask y'all something" (Price & Burns, 2006b, 9:59), Colvin addresses the group. "You help us hone in on this and maybe we do a better job with you in the end," the retired official shares, in a candid moment of teacher transparency. The instructor asks for his students' assistance in improving the curriculum's

relevance to the adolescents' needs and experiences. "What makes a good corner boy?" (Price & Burns, 2006b, 10:04). The question catalyzes a level of participation from the students that the research team had yet to witness. "I've never seen kids like them this animated in a classroom" (Price & Burns, 2006b, 45:39), Duquette admits, as Parenti comments on how focused the children were. "When they talk about what they know, they talk from here," Colvin interjects, pointing at his heart and once again referring to the affective component of learning. "And they stay on point. Shit they were even taking turns in there," he adds. "The question is," Parenti ponders, "can we get them in that kind of mindset with stuff they don't know?" Pryzbylewski answers the professor's query in the affirmative when he uses dice to teach his students basic probability, applying mathematic principles to a game the adolescents often play.

The writers of *The Wire* explore this disconnect between formal education and children's worlds from the teachers and the students' perspectives. School-based interactions are markedly different than the coaching at Wise's gym or the training kids receive as recruits in the Stanfield drug organization. The show's producers splice together scenes juxtaposing these different learning environments to highlight the contrast between the students' disinterest and unruliness in institutional settings, and their attentiveness and discipline in informal exchanges. In episode 45 of the series, the eighth of the season, director Agnieszka Holland transports viewers from Pryzbylewski's classroom, where boisterous students struggle to grasp arithmetic problems, to an abandoned warehouse where Pearson and Partlow lecture a group of trainees. "You get close enough, you can take a headshot. Why?" (Burns & Simon, 2006a, 18:37), Partlow quizzes one of the children. "Maybe he vested up," the apprentice answers. "A chest shot maybe won't do it for you,"

Partlow continues, asking a different student what to do next. “It’s his turn,” the adolescent replies, deferring the question to his peer. Stanfield’s henchmen deliver their street curriculum to an orderly, vigilant and competent audience. Knowing how to operate a firearm or fend off assailants is more useful to the children in *The Wire*’s worlds than computing an equal amount of apples to allocate to friends. The series’ creators, though, do not diminish the importance of formal education, particularly the enterprise’s ability to beget upward social mobility. When Albert, a student in Parenti’s program, shares his ambitions to become a neurosurgeon, Duquette emphasizes the need to finish school in order to achieve such professional aspirations.

Schooling, policing, and scientific management. The reluctance of schools to teach lessons that connect with students’ lives and experiences suggests that institutions of formal learning may have agendas that preclude learning. Illich (1970) argues that schools work to instill a hidden curriculum, lessons that are not featured in the official curriculum but that institution implicitly endorse. Hidden curricula include teaching capitalist values like competition, obedience to hierarchy and the normalizing of behaviors and thoughts that deviate from accepted social standards. In this regard, schools share a number of organizational characteristics with other nomothetic institutions, particularly law enforcement. “I’ve been here before” (Corthron & Burns, 2006, 35:57), Pryzbylewski observes during Withers and Donnely’s announcement that teachers at Edward Tilghman must gear their lessons towards the state tests. The former detective is referring to the Baltimore police department’s massaging of statistics to provide the illusion of a drop in crime and that of a safer city. The reliance on numerical measures to achieve specific ends is common to most modern and post-modern social institutions. Drug organizations gauge

the efficiency of their operations through sales and profit margins. Newspaper editors are concerned with circulation figures, and politicians scramble to amass votes. Police deputies instruct majors to reclassify criminal offenses and school administrators boost test scores by spoon-feeding children sample questions.

Season four's tagline is "No Corner Left Behind," a critical refashioning of NCLB, the acronym to George W. Bush's controversial educational act. NCLB requires that states develop and administer standardized assessments of student skills in order to receive federal funding (Wallis & Steptoe, 2007). The state test scores, Sampson informs Pryzbylewski, are intended not to measure student progress but to appraise teacher performance and the school's proficiency. "[The examinations result] assesses us" (Corthron & Burns, 2006, 35:38), she educates her colleague. "The test scores go up, they can say the schools are improving. They stay down, they can't." Pryzbylewski realizes the educational system, like the law enforcement enterprise, relies heavily on metrics to provide a semblance of success. "Juking the stats," he replies. "Making robberies into larcenies, making rapes disappear." The championing of statistics as reliable and valid instruments to quantify otherwise qualitative constructs, like student learning or citizens' quality of life, draws from the organizational philosophies of Frederick Winslow Taylor. Taylorism, as an organizational ethos, entails adopting principles of scientific management to maximize systemic efficiency in output. "Every single act of every workman can be reduced to a science" (Taylor, 1911, p. 49). Taylor makes use of this argument to justify implementing standardized evaluations of worker productivity. He also works to develop personal coefficients to determine individual output and competence. Taylor's choice of words to describe his techniques is noteworthy, particularly his insistence that employees'

functions "can be *reduced* to a science" (Taylor, 1911, p. 49, italics added). This managerial approach, when applied to education, simplifies teachers' roles to deliverers of a curriculum (Au, 2011).

Pryzbylewski and Colvin's narratives suggest that teaching to the test favors institutional ends over educational ones. The "fucking numbers game" (Burns & Simon, 2006b, 39:51), as one police detective describes it, permeates most of the school's policies. Even school funding is tied to ensuring that students attend class at least once in each of the school year's first two months. Wise's truancy rounds frustrate the former convict who realizes that educational organizations do not cater to children but that the youth exist primarily to service the institutions' needs. The adolescents become conscript clienteles, groups of individuals who are legally compelled to participate in specific social institutions and cannot refuse the services administered to them by these institutions (Friedenberg, 1976). The belief in scientific modes and the creation of reified populations are common to what Goffman (1961) labeled total institutions, organizations that specialize in the management of large bodies of people and reproduce normative ways of thinking, being and doing. Total institutions share common organizational goals and the writers of *The Wire* appear particularly interested in exploring the similarities between schooling and law enforcement. Simon and Burns outline the parallels between the two enterprises early in the fourth season.

In "Boys of summer," the season's first episode and the show's 38th, Chappelle merges the teacher orientation session at Edward Tilghman and a Baltimore Police Department training seminar into a two minute montage. "I am lovable and capable" (Simon & Burns, 2006a, 41:06), a disinterested school staff repeats after an elderly

facilitator. The camera shifts to equally disengaged detectives. “An officer […] must ask himself: Do I know the locations of my soft targets, those where large numbers of civilians congregate?” the speaker lectures from a podium. Back at the school, the orientation leader continues: “Another hot zone in the classroom is the pencil sharpener where children tend to congregate.” The two sessions unfold in near identical fashion, down to the facilitators’ juxtaposition of certain words, in this case “congregate.” The rooms are similarly arranged, with presenters reading bullets points on police objectives and classroom interventions, soft targets and hot zones. Both audiences become restless when the orators prescribe techniques that appear unhelpful and unrealistic. “For emergency procedures, in the event of biochemical agents, you can refer to appendix B” (Simon & Burns, 2006a, 42:02), the police workshop facilitator instructs. Detective Santangelo’s reply, prefaced with “no disrespect to your appendix,” mirrors the educators’ irony and petulance. “I’d like to know what your lesson plan suggests when Harold Hanschell sends a full set of textbooks through a closed window” (Simon & Burns, 2006a, 41:47), one of the teachers jeers. The training the officers and educators receive has as much pragmatic value as the standardized tests do to students.

The police session is ongoing when Santangelo heads towards the exit and discards the workshop binder in the trash bin. McNulty stops his former colleague mid-toss and asks for the folder, which he empties and tucks under his arm. “Back to school, for the kids” (Simon & Burns, 2006a, 43:53), the Irishman clarifies. That McNulty’s children use police resources as school supplies further hints at the overlap between policing and teaching. A more explicit allusion to the common functions of formal education and law enforcement is the choice of Pryzbylewski and Colvin, both former policemen, as the season’s primary

educator figures. Donnelly's demeanor lifts when Pryzbylewski informs her of his previous career. The administrator's reaction indicates a belief that police training should mitigate the deficiencies in the new hire's teacher education and facilitate his transition into his new role as a pedagogue. At the risk of overstating, teachers are comparable to cops, in that they are agents of socialization who help produce and reproduce normative standards of thinking and behaving. The analogy of schoolteachers as law enforcers bears a literal resonance for Colvin and Pryzbylewski. *The Wire*'s creators emphasize the intersections between policing and teaching but also illustrate the similarities between these two enterprises and other total institutions. The season's main characters are forced into group homes, detention centers and hospitals. In the next section, I expand on my conception of total institutions and explain how *The Wire*'s producers use the show to demonstrate the ways in which these organizations are interdependent. Specifically, I analyze the roles the different enterprises play in the systemic management of inner-city residents.

Total institutions, formal schooling, and the reification of clienteles. In *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, Goffman (1961) presents a theory of social institutions, which he defines as places, like rooms or buildings, in which activities of a particular kind take place on a regular basis. The Manitoban sociologist pays specific attention to total institutions, organizations marked by a "barrier to social intercourse with the outside […] that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls [and] barbed wire" (Goffman, 1961, p. 4). These institutions include prisons, hospitals, psychiatric wards and boarding schools. In *The Disposal of Liberty and Other Industrial Wastes*, Friedenberg (1976) examines the populations social organizations seek to service. He coins the term "conscript clienteles" to

describe social groups that cannot refuse the services administered to them. Schools do not fit the strict definition of a total institution in the sense that they do not encompass all spheres of human activity. Members of total institutions tend to be divorced from interactions with the outside world and conduct all daily activities within the confines of the institution (Goffman, 1961). Boarding schools fit this organizational conception more closely but day schools display a peculiar likeness to other total institutions. The similarities include campus architecture and organizational imperatives.

"This is prison, and we in solitary" (Overmyer & Burns, 2006a, 27:02), Namond observes, referring to the isolation of Parenti's participants from the rest of the school's student body. The adolescent's likening of institutions of formal education to penitentiaries serves to magnify common traits and social functions between schools and correctional facilities. The mutual features of these institutions' physical plants include long hallways that facilitate surveillance and are a recurring visual theme in *The Wire*'s fourth season. Carver, Greggs and Colvin can be seen walking through or standing in long, narrow corridors in group homes, hospitals, and schools. Moments before the bell rings to announce the start of the first day at Edward Tilghman, Donnelly signals to a policeman who makes his way towards the school's entrance. The officer reaches towards the main door's handle, from which a heavy padlock hangs, and opens the gate, unleashing a flood of students into previously deserted hallways. The presence of police officers, psychologists, and social workers on campus suggests that schools serve as something of a host for other normative enterprises and total institutions. *The Wire*'s representations of schools as nomothetic organizations expand on a number of characteristics Goffman (1961) attributes

to total institutions. The list of schooling's social functions that I present in this section is not exhaustive but emphasizes the features most relevant to my analysis.

Mass administration of large groups of people. Total institutions meet human needs through the bureaucratic organization and management of large masses of people. During homeroom periods, Pryzbylewski registers attendance, makes announcements and distributes correspondences. The teacher allows his students to complete their homework and, in some cases, socialize with one another, but the primary functions of homerooms tend to be administrative. Over time, schools amass student records that chronicle the children's absenteeism, assignment completion and other behavioral trends. The paperwork serves as a form of surveillance that enhances the institutions' managerial functions by increasing education officials' observational scope beyond hallway video cameras. Members of total institutions also carry out daily activities in the company of a sizeable batch of others, all of whom the organization subjects to the same regulations. These individuals must accomplish a series of similar tasks together. In schools, this grouping occurs primarily by age cluster, which is an arbitrary criterion and assumes that students can achieve optimal learning if grouped with others whose birthdays fall in the same calendar year. Moving individuals in blocks allows for a greater measure of surveillance, a primary function of total institutions whose physical plants are designed for optimal monitoring of their members. While prisons remain the most panoptical of total institutions, the long and unobstructed hallways in hospitals, psychiatric wards and schools facilitate the tracking of patients and students, respectively.

[Screenshot 6]: Hospital hallway (Pelecanos & Burns, 2006, 57:18)

[Screenshot 7]: Hallway at Edward Tilghman Middle School (Price & Burns, 2006a, 30:19)

Tight scheduling of all phases of the day. Moments into his first lesson, Pryzbylewski is interrupted by a loudspeaker announcement that resonates across the school. "Teachers, we had trouble with first bells" (Price & Burns, 2006a, 33:13), Donnelly warns. "So, expect class change to ring in one minute. Students will walk not run to classes in an orderly manner," the assistant principal continues. Members of total institutions follow tight schedules where one activity leads into the next at arranged times. A hierarchy of officials such as school administrators and board superintendents rely on a system of explicit formal rulings to impose the sequence and pace of activities. School bells signal the beginning and end of class periods and alert students of lunch and break time. This structure endorses a conception of education that temporally limits learning to preordained periods and implicitly favors the classroom as the preferred pedagogical environment. "It's our lunch break, don't be schooling us now" (Zorzi & Burns, 2006, 9:25), a student orders Pryzbylewski, as if learning were sequestered to class time.

Gatto (1992) suggests that the division of the school day into discrete time blocks, each of which educators reserve for a particular subject matter, teaches "the un-relating of everything" (p. 2). Students who struggle to grasp the wording of a problem in physics class must save their inquiries for English period. At the university level, knowledge is compartmentalized into disciplines with field-specific jargon that complicates cross-faculty conversations. Gatto (1992) argues that the fragmentation of knowledge and the imparting of disconnected facts are antithetical to the "natural order and sequencing" (p. 2) of education.

Although Gatto does not elaborate on the meaning of these terms, the notion of "natural" teaching directives is contentious, for the same reasons expressions like

"genuine" and "authentic" are problematic. These words imply that a particular body or person maintains the authority to ascribe value judgments, desirable and undesirable outcomes and processes, to abstract constructs. Schools are social constructions and can be considered to be "unnatural" in the sense that they would not exists without the social imperative to create them. Schools perform functions that are crucial for social cohesion and sustenance. They act as custodial institutions that safeguard children so that their parents might work and, in theory, contribute to social advancement. By upholding normative standards, schools protect society from descending into a state of anarchy, of moral, linguistic, and philosophical relativism where, to make use of a colloquialism, anything goes. The troubling issue is that schools often carry out these functions to the detriment of education. Learning suffers because institutions of formal schooling primarily aim to produce and reproduce behavioral and cognitive norms (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). Teachers socialize students into what dominant groups consider appropriate ways of thinking and behaving. In the foreword to Gatto's *Dumbing us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Public Schooling*, Thomas Moore (1992) explains that learning cannot "take place in pieces of time cut out for the institution's convenience or in lessons set apart from the world in which students live" (p. xiii). Education, should it occur, is an added benefit but is not primordial to the modus operandi of institutions of formal schooling.

Programming and the erosion of identity. Admission procedures help total institutions shape and code members into objects that feed the organization's administrative machinery. The entry processes lead to the gradual erasure of individual identity and to the dispossession of self. A heavy reliance on quantifiable measures of learning encourages administrators to conceive of students as statistics. Donnelly cares for

the welfare of the adolescents at Edward Tilghman but cannot stray from the institutional prerogative to graduate students because retention burdens the system's resources. The assistant principal provides Duquan with clothing but socially promotes the adolescent despite Pryzbylewski's assessment that the student is not emotionally or academically ready for the next grade. The administrator's plight is an example of institutional mandates and motivations trumping humane concerns and relationships. School uniforms ensure that the student body maintains an unvarying appearance and provide little room for individuation. Randy is able to venture into parts of the school that are off-limits to him by simply changing his uniform to match those of the grade ranges he sells candy to. His former teacher eventually apprehends him, but not before the adolescent has made multiple visits to lower grades' recess areas. That Randy successfully runs his operation for as long as he does suggests that supervisors predominantly view children as shirt colors, navy, black or burgundy. Video cameras facilitate surveillance and add to the prison-like environment. One of the primary functions of total institutions is to eradicate divergence from social norms. Idiographic actions and thoughts are treated as deviant and ultimately realigned with nomothetic standards. Psychiatrists identify the mentally ill and prescribe medication to "cure" their behavior. Prisons claim to "rehabilitate" inmates and, save for rare cases like Wise's, create repeat offenders in the process. Schools socialize students into a way of speaking, seeing, and doing that ensures the reproduction of existing social structures and power differentials.

Coding of lived experience in standardized speech. The normalizing of thought and behavior that occurs in total institution extends to the use of standardized forms of speaking. "This year, the preferred term is curriculum alignment" (Corthron & Burns, 2006,

34:44), Withers explains, when his staff complains about the school's mandate to teach to the test. Unclear is why policy makers insist that teachers align students to the curriculum, rather than aligning the curriculum to student needs. The principal's comment does not temper the concerns of Edward Tilghman's educators. The teachers understand the board's rhetoric has merely dressed the Emperor in new clothing. Total institutions develop organizational languages through which members of the institution describe or code "the events that are crucial in their particular world[s]" (Goffman, 1992, p. 53). Schoolteachers speak of "classroom management" when referring to the techniques they use to minimize student disruptions during lesson time. Faculties of education draw from business administration models and offer courses in "diversity management" to help preservice teachers adjust to the multicultural demands of contemporary classrooms. The word "management" derives from the Latin term *manus*, which means hand or fist. The Latinate root also describes activities generally reserved for men and carries connotation of authoritarian rule. In Roman law, *manus* refers to a measure of power over the people (Wolff, 1964). The expressions pedagogues use to describe classroom practices allude to the troubling notion that teachers increasingly act as managers rather than leaders. This shift in roles carries serious implications insofar as leaders serve the interests of people; managers cater to the welfare of organizations.

Total institutions engage in a reification, or conscription, of clienteles (Fridendenberg, 1976). Reification is a process wherein an abstract concept is rendered concrete. In schools, conscription occurs primarily through the assigning of grades. Administrators cluster students into categories depending on the marks they achieve, and attribute specific characteristics and expectations to all members belonging to the same

group. Teachers and principals might judge A-students to be smarter than their peers, deem them more likely to succeed in life, and perceive them as less problematic than those who receive lower marks. These would be valid inferences if grades were a reliable measure of intellect or an accurate predictor of behavior, but they are neither. Reductionist evaluation systems aim to determine how well students have retained curricular material and how accurately they are able to recite that information. Grades does not account for social skills or personality traits, yet remain important predictors for employability and social mobility. Students' marks are tools that allow social institutions to redefine a politically powerless category of individuals, in this case adolescents, as social groups that require the administration of services they cannot refuse. School attendance is a legal requirement for minors in most Canadian provinces and American states. As a result of this inability to withdraw participation from the total institutions to which they belong, members of a conscript clientele are "treated as raw material that the service organization needs to perform its social function and continue its existence" (Friedenberg, 1976, p. 2). Pupils ensure the school's sustenance; they are there for the sake of the school and not the other way around.

An important feature of bureaucracies with conscript clienteles is their proclivity to create and recreate conditions in one system that help generate clients for another. Social institutions become mutually dependent on one other for referrals, creating what Friedenberg (1976) calls "institutional symbiosis" between service organizations. Monahan (2006) analyzes cultures of control in public education and contends that schools help create clienteles for a number of social institutions, including the criminal justice system. The availability of full-time therapists on school campuses and the increased police

presence ensure a blurring of the physical boundaries that traditionally separated the education enterprise from that of mental health and law enforcement. Students who display behaviors that deviate from the accepted norm are labeled as hyperactive, attention deficient, or delinquent. They are funneled through a system that imposes on them therapeutic or policing services that accentuate social marginalization. Former professor of psychiatry Thomas Szasz (1970) explains the presence of psychologists in schools works to normalize students' behaviors to socially accepted standards more than it does to help or critically educate them. Extending the mental health enterprise into public schooling serves to expand the activities of the modern bureaucratic state and strengthen the power of schools to coerce, control, and manage their clienteles. Education becomes a receding concern in the face of managerial imperatives. The myth that socially viable learning can be achieved only through schooling persists in order for institutions of formal education to justify their existence.

Reflective Understandings

[Screenshot 8] Mural at Edward Tilghman Middle School (Price & Burns, 2006a, 30:15)

"Home rooms," season four's third episode, features a brief montage to mark the beginning of the school year at Edward Tilghman. The sequence starts with Donnelly standing in an empty hallway, walkie-talkie in hand, anticipating the flood of students who will soon rush through the school gates. Behind the assistant principal is a mural. The painting depicts a black boy and girl at four different stages of their lives. They start as children, then become high school and university graduates, before securing what appear to be well paying, middle-class jobs. As the children progress through this timeline, the row houses in the background evolve from dilapidated dwellings with broken windows to nicely maintained residences. At first glance, it is easy to assume the improvement in housing quality symbolizes the upward social mobility that academic degrees can facilitate.

A closer look reveals adolescents cleaning litter from the front porches and painting the houses' outside walls. In the foreground, a crouching child appears to be mending the trunk of a tree whose roots are visible through a cross section of the ground and extend from one end of the mural to the other. The art piece represents a symbiotic relationship between education and community life. Schools and universities afford their graduates professional opportunities that translate not only into personal maturity and financial growth but also neighborhood development. In theory, the knowledge acquired in school must relate to lived experiences and be useful in everyday life. In practice, the enterprise of schooling arguably serves institutional ends more than it does personal and community ones.

I will not use these concluding paragraphs to reiterate the shortcomings of teacher education and the lack of teacher support; or the anemic financial resources and dysfunctional bureaucracies that administrators must contend with. I will, however, close with a final thought that I speak to at greater length in the next chapter. During an exchange in Parenti's program class, the students bring their teachers' attention to the contradictions in social perceptions and attitudes towards racial minorities and the poor. "Like y'all say, don't lie, […] don't cheat, don't steal […] but what about y'all?" (Price & Burns, 2006b, 35:14), Namond asks Colvin, Parenti, and Duquette. "The government. What's it, Amron? […] Liquor business. Booze the real killer out there," the adolescent continues, misreferencing the Enron scandal of 2001. "Drugs paid your salary, right?" Darnell asks Colvin. The adolescent is alluding to law enforcement's need for criminals and criminal activity, without which the institution of policing would not and could not exist. "Not exactly, but I get your point," the former major replies, as Namond continues his monologue. "We do the same things as y'all, except when we do it, it's like 'Oh my God,

these kids is animals'." Moments later, Zenobia adds a brief but telling remark to her peer's diatribe. "We got our thing, but it's just part of the big thing" (Price & Burns, 2006b, 35:58). The student's statement shows insight into the complexity of the social order the adolescents navigate and an awareness of their place in it.

The "big thing" Zenobia refers to is the monolithic coalition of social organization and government bodies that collude to produce and reinforce normative social standards. That this institutional conglomerate, the abstraction most refer to as "the system," remains nebulous is indicative of the diffuse nature of its member enterprises. Total institutions have similar organizational mandates and increasingly share the linguistic codes, physical spaces, and resources. Police officers make use of school buses to round up drug dealers and relocate the criminals to Colvin's Hamsterdam, where they can sell drugs without fear of legal retribution. In season four, the Baltimore Police Department discovers mass corpses in abandoned row houses across the city. At a shortage for space, police officials use a defunct school to store the bodies and conduct forensic examinations. "How you happen to pick this place for us to stage?" (Simon & Burns, 2006b, 1:07:57), Detective Freamon asks Daniels, as the recently promoted colonel leaves the school's gymnasium, now filled with gurneys. "I went to school here, back in the day," Daniels replies. "I got a good education now that I think on it." Besides the depiction of schools serving as police morgues, the exchange points to the irony that one of the few school where learning actually occurred would be closed down. At Edward Tilghman, Colvin's assessment of the theatricality of schooling still echoes: "We pretend to teach them, they pretended to learn and where'd they end up?" (Overmyer & Burns, 2006b, 25:01).

Chapter 6 – Showing the Wide: Implications, complications and recommendations for future research

Introduction

I began this inquiry with a personal skepticism towards academic research. Throughout my doctoral degree, I struggled to reconcile my beliefs about schools and universities with my realization that I am an active contributor to these institutions, the body of knowledge they produce, and the social functions they perform. My primary aim in critically examining *The Wire* was to problematize mainstream conceptions of formal education, and invite readers to reimagine schools and the purpose of schooling. I have long been dubious of dominant conceptions of schools, and even universities, as spaces and places that value education over other institutional imperatives, like the social management of large groups of people. My schooling experiences conflict with depictions of formal education as a conduit for developing critical thinking. In writing this dissertation, my intention was not merely to critique uncomfortable so-called "truths" or to trivialize the work of scholars whose opinions diverge from mine. To discard the thoughts that inconvenience one's own beliefs increases susceptibility to confirmation bias. This triage of ideas leads to the reproduction of knowledge that echoes preexisting conceptions and theses. Instead, I seek to engage alternate conceptions of schools and schooling and generate dialogues about the social roles of educational institutions.

Though I am skeptical of institutions of formal learning, I am not cynical about their social roles. Skepticism is a necessary precondition to any critical examination that might catalyze change. Cynicism is a more defeatist approach that can be crippling and rarely generates new modes of seeing or doing. It is easy for researchers to look away when the

object of their gaze challenges the ways in which they perceive the world. Critics of systemic structures that create and maintain inequities can be reluctant to acknowledge their implications in these reifying enterprises. Despite Taylorism's numerous shortcomings, it is important to recognize that scientific principles of management have transformed the world and created living conditions that most expect and demand. How many would rebel if they could not possess the trivial comforts they have become accustomed to; if iPhones or iPods were no longer made available because Apple had stopped mass-producing them in Neo-Tayloristic factories? There is nothing simple about shaking the foundations that support deep-seated beliefs and unexamined social assumptions. Self-reflexivity is a paradoxical undertaking. It entails an acknowledgement of the limitations that languages and vocabularies impose on individuals, and the recognition of other worldviews and realities that demand attention. American author Howard Bloom (1997) warns that disrupting dominant conceptions of the world can be troubling as individuals must adapt to new ways of being. Developing the ability to see the strangeness in social norms that habit and repetition help conceal is a necessary undertaking but one that remains difficult to accomplish. "To search for where you already are," Bloom (1997, p. 13) warns, "is the most benighted of quests, and the most fated."

In the first section of this chapter, I reflect on the major interpretive understandings that emerge from my inquiry. Specifically, I analyze the implications of educational institutions' resistance to change, managerial approaches to teaching, and public schools' no fail policies. I contend that teachers and administrators are more likely to affect change on an individual level rather than an organizational one. I critique pedagogical applications of Taylorism and suggest that teacher education programs develop leaders, not managers. I

also propose that students be held accountable for their scholastic performance and fulfill more than just attendance requirements in order to graduate. In the next section, I discuss the complications of studying texts that challenge dominant social narratives as *The Wire* does. I examine the limitations of academic research and the process of repressive tolerance that academics risk engaging in when they make subversive social texts the object of their study. In closing, I present recommendations for further research on the architectural and organizational similarities between schools and other total institutions. I also urge readers to consider alternatives to schools and schooling.

Maps and Haystacks – Implications of the Research Findings for Teachers, Teacher Educators and School Administrators

In *The Wire*'s fourth season, Simon and Burns examine the ways in which the nomothetic impulses of institutions of formal learning compete with, and often trump, educational mandates. The series' writers suggest that the education, law enforcement, and mental health enterprises work to regulate conduct and thinking that deviate from social norms. Schools are sites of learning but also spaces of behavioral and cognitive standardization. Institutions are complex social constructions whose inherent contradictions are difficult to distinguish, particularly because custom often clouds these internal tensions. Through their long-term membership in various social organizations, individuals learn to take for granted the strangest and most arbitrary of social practices and begin to see them as normal. Pryzbylewski appears confused when a veteran colleague emphasizes the need for "soft eyes" to succeed as a teacher. She had not explained the expression but Detective Moreland uses the same term two episodes later while training his rookie partner. "You got soft eyes, you can see the whole thing" (Lehane & Burns, 2006,

37:21), the investigator elaborates. “You got hard eyes, you’re staring at the same tree missing the forest.” The softening of educators and administrators’ vision may aid them in recognizing and considering some of the tacit and fundamental conventions that shape formal schooling. These imposed educational norms include legally compelling school attendance, grouping students by age rather than interest or abilities, and the compartmentalization of knowledge into discrete subject matters taught in separate blocks of time. From my experiences working with Ministry of Education officials, school administrators, and teacher education students, I can attest that a substantial number of pedagogues and policy makers adhere to and lack critical engagement with everyday schooling practices.

In generating a non-normative body of knowledge on institutions; in highlighting the organizational similarities between schooling and policing; and in drawing attention to the intimacy of the ordinary, *The Wire*’s producers strive to debunk the social myths that educators and school administrators sometimes accept as “truths.” The show’s writers upset unexamined conceptions of the given, of what is, so that audiences can begin to see beyond the constraints of narrow worldviews and limiting vocabularies. Conversing with colleagues, Detective Carver warns that law enforcement’s efforts to combat the use of illicit substances should not be called a war on drugs because “wars end” (Simon & Burns, 2002a, 17:44). Simon and Burns invite viewers to consider that policing initiatives, socially perceived as being moral, are the foundation for institutional structures whose purpose is not to rid communities of drugs but to manage and contain the economic underclass. *The Wire*’s comparisons of the public schools to correctional facilities are prevalent in the work of a number of philosophers, educators, and public intellectuals (Monahan & Torres, 2010;

Friendenberg, 1976; Goffman, 1961). These similarities pose inconveniences that some educators and policy makers deny or simply overlook in discussing and developing pedagogic practices. *The Wire*'s creative team aims to bring attention to the symbiosis between nomothetic institutions like schooling and policing, and explores ways in which members of these organizations can foster dissent.

Colvin attempts to reduce crime by creating "free zones" where police turn a blind eye to the sale and consumption of drugs. Pryzbylewski circumvents the curriculum and tailors his classes to his students' daily needs and lived experiences. Though both men affect temporary change, administrators help undo most of their efforts, leaving viewers to question whether institutional reform is possible from within, if at all. Though organizations are relatively static entities, they offer the potential for individual connections that elude the restraints of the institutional apparatus. The bonds teachers can forge with their students help nurture enriching relationships that are mutually beneficial and lead to personal and intellectual growth. The implications I draw from my study are directed at teachers, teacher educators, and school administrators. These research findings are based on the interpretive understandings my inquiry helped generate and my experience as a teacher educator, a project manager for the Onatrio Ministry of Education, and a graduate student. The ideas I present are intended to catalyze a reevaluation of current pedagogic practices and educational policies. I begin by discussing organizational resistance to change. I then critique managerial approaches to teaching and reassess the impact of social promotion in public schooling.

Schooling bureaucracies and the limits of organizational change. One of *The Wire*'s most important contributions to viewers' understanding of public schooling is its

depiction of bureaucracies and institutional imperatives that influence pedagogy. Educational agendas are tied to broader social and political issues that include school boards' public relations concerns, career aspirations of elected officials, and the management of limited financial and human resources. Board representatives instruct educators to teach to the test and use standardized examination scores to help provide the illusion of student learning. "You believe the numbers?" (Simon & Burns, 2006b, 1:06:23), Sampson asks Pryzbylewski when the first year teacher shares his amazement at his students' passing scores. "Proficient means they're at least two grades below their level. […] They score them like that and they can say we're making progress," she continues referring to the manipulation of test results. Carcetti's gubernatorial ambitions dictate how he handles the city's budget deficit and schooling crisis. The mayor follows the course of action he feels will least hinder his long-term political goals, rather than the one that best serves student interests. Teachers who presume to lead their classes free of institutional constraints may need to adjust their expectations. As Pryzbylewski's first year experiences demonstrate, instructors must often develop innovative ways to deliver their lessons and learn to teach around administrative impositions. Effective education requires the ability to navigate organizational mandates and to carve niches within the school that escape the institution's reach, spaces that privilege individual interactions and where learning can occur.

Institutions are resistant to change. They rely on internal mechanisms to thin out divergence and ostracize those who disrupt assumptions and practices that are fundamental to the organizations' sustenance. Colvin's superiors demote the major before forcing him into early retirement, ensuring that he receives a reduced pension. The deputy

chief of police operations recommends the downgrade despite Colvin's success at reducing crime in his district. Though individuals who challenge their respective organizations face considerable consequences, I contend that institutions of formal education offer the potential to forge interpersonal relationships through which meaningful learning can occur. After-school interactions and discussions are examples of instances where students and teachers construct and exchange knowledge free from some of constraints that govern classroom dynamics. These informal moments help mitigate the power differentials between pupils and instructors, and sometimes facilitate role reversals. Duquan teaches Pryzbylewski how to use the class computer after the school day has ended. During a jovial hallway exchange, Namond's comments about rejoining his old class force Colvin to reassess the merits of reintegrating his student into the normal stream. "The shit they teach there be deadly" (Burns & Simon, 2006b, 23:26), the adolescent notes. Namond sees his return to what he had once called "gen pop" as regression rather than progress. While I am suspicious of individuals' abilities to reform institutional systems, I do not intend to suggest the impossibility of such an undertaking. I am merely advocating that teachers invest in building rapport with their students, as I believe meaningful learning occurs through these informal relationships more so than classroom teaching.

Managerial values in education and the need for leadership. Behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner (1968) speaks of a technology of teaching, the ability to reduce pedagogic interactions to a series of quantifiable tasks and to elicit learning through student conditioning. While I hope most educators would agree that Skinner's views are narrow, there appears to be a growing trend in teacher education programs to move away from theory heavy curricula in favor of more technocratic approaches. A former colleague

of mine once explained that she saw little value in incorporating theory into her syllabi. She believed it more effective to show her students how to teach, rather than engage them in thinking about how to teach. There may only be a few teacher educators with such misguided views but this one had just recently been nominated the professor of the year at her faculty. In *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach*, Britzman (2003) critiques the current state of teacher education. "Theoretical knowledge of teaching is not easily valued and school biography matters too much" (Britzman, 2003, p. 1), she explains. The scholar is referring to the privileging of teacher candidates' own histories of learning in shaping their educational philosophies. Britzman also problematizes the increasingly popular position that no one can teach anyone how to teach; that educators must find their own way. I believe that pedagogic theory must be an integral component of teacher education. To view teaching as a series of practices and skills teacher candidates can learn and then implement limits future educators' ability to critically analyze their roles in the learning process.

Favoring practice over theory also endorses a managerial conception of pedagogy and reduces teaching to a science of curriculum delivery. Freire (1970) refers to this teaching philosophy as the banking model of education, a method where instructors treat students as vacant repositories in which knowledge is deposited. This constricted and constricting educational philosophy also renders teachers easily replaceable, and does little to foster independent thinkers and innovators. Managers are more likely to carry out the normative functions of their institutions, even if these mandates impinge on student learning. Faculties of education must endeavor to develop leaders instead of managers, and work towards educating students to think critically about pedagogical practice and policy.

Teacher education curricula might incorporate philosophies that challenge the foundations of schooling, invite a reassessment of the tacit assumptions that are essential to formal education, and encourage creativity in teaching. In a review I conducted on democratic education courses in North American universities, none of the syllabi I surveyed questioned the notion that legally compelling attendance, a fundamental premise of schooling, is a highly undemocratic process. The terms "managerialism" and "administration" carry connotations of control, supervision, and a reproduction of dominant modes of knowing, seeing, and doing. Leadership is more disruptive to the status quo and encourages teachers to work with students in developing more effective educational practices and learning environments.

Social promotion and student accountability in schools. Detectives Herc and Carver observe rival gangs fight over turf with bats and bare fists. "See that's why we can't win" (Simon & Burns, 2002e, 31:12), Carver tells his partner. "They fuck up, they get beat. We fuck up, they give us pensions," the officer responds to Herc's prompt for clarification. *The Wire*'s drug worlds operate as an institution with its own hierarchy and set of codes. These rules include a Sunday truce, where drug lords suspend violent activities for the day, and an understanding that organizational leaders will hold their members accountable for any transgressions the workers commit. Where the young boy in Wallace's room had struggled to solve his mathematics problem, he is quick to compute the number of vials remaining in his stash after a number of sales and police shakedowns. "Count be wrong, they'll fuck you up" (Simon & Burns, 2002d, 10:29), the child notes, referring to the consequences of mishandling the drugs. In public schools, social promotion and no-fail policies ensure that students will pass to the next grade regardless of their academic

achievements. Policy makers argue that grade retention leads to lower self-esteem and increases the likelihood of future drop out (Zwaagstra & Clifton, 2009). The alternative, however, is an educational system that cares little about learning, rewards laziness, and diminishes the value of academic degrees.

The new standards for graduation appear predicated on attendance requirements rather than pedagogic accomplishments. Social promotion suggests that education is not a primary concern for schools and school administrators. No fail policies also stand to have an adverse effect on student motivation. I believe that administrations should provide teachers the opportunity to hold students accountable for their academic performance. Otherwise, learning suffers. What values do schools endorse when children can move from one grade to the next without completing a single assignment? There are certainly challenges to evaluating student work, especially when teachers consider that school curricula assess for narrow modes of learning and emphasize textual and numerical forms of information processing. Students who favor artistic, oral, or visual styles of knowledge acquisition and construction are often at a disadvantage. Standardized examinations privilege content over process. Test results are primarily an indicator of students' ability to retain and communicate information rather than a measure for effort or critical thinking. Teachers, administrators, and policy makers might consider working together to develop evaluation techniques that are better indicators of all aspects of student learning. More importantly, educational institutions must reconsider social promotion practices, as the initiative reduces academic credentials to meaningless paper stubs. While I appreciate that repeating grades can have negative developmental effects on some students, I do not believe that indiscriminate promotion is a solution to these issues. Lyden Dorval, an

Edmonton physics instructor who was fired for daring to fail underperforming students, is a testament to the institutional constrictions on teaching. The Edmonton Public School Board eventually reversed its no-zero policy for unsubmitted work but Dorval's unfortunate experience points to the fact that change in educational organizations, in those rare instances where it does occur, is usually a top-down process.

Keep It Simple Stupid – Complicating Academia and Academic Research

After debating whether Parenti's program class should cater to the state test, Donnelly informs the research team that the district superintendent has decided to altogether discontinue the academic's project. Through Deacon Williams' political connections, Parenti and Colvin secure a meeting with the mayor's office, in hopes of reversing the school board's ruling. Despite the professor and the former major's pleas, the mayor's staff supports the resolution to terminate the study. A seething Colvin rants about his perceived inability to affect meaningful community change. The next exchange occurs as he and Parenti exit City Hall. Their conversation points to the limitations of academic research and the shortsightedness of some of the professors who conduct it (Simon & Burns, 2006):

> COLVIN: "Seems like every time I open my mouth in this town, I'm telling people something they don't want to know!"
>
> PARENTI: "It's not you, it's the process."
>
> COLVIN: "The process?"
>
> PARENTI: "We get the grant, we study the problem, we propose solutions. If they listen, they listen. If they don't, it still makes for great research. What we publish on this is going to get a lot of attention."

COLVIN: “From who?”

PARENTI: “From other researchers, academics.”

COLVIN: “Academics? What, they gon’ study your study?” (54:29)

The men step into an elevator as Colvin mockingly laughs. “When do this shit change?” (Simon & Burns, 2006, 54:58), the former major asks, as the lift’s doors close. The rhetorical questions cuts through the academic’s enthusiasm at the prospect of disseminating his findings. Colvin had hoped the study would lead to the implementation of policy reforms that might help students who are susceptible to violent behavior. Parenti seems less concerned with the practical applications of his research recommendations. The professor is more interested in publishing his work even if this limits his audience to other academic researchers.

The writers of *The Wire* depict higher education as an insular enterprise that produces bodies of knowledge void of pragmatic outlets. That Parenti’s program has been axed seems to matter less to the professor than the promise of article and chapter authorship. Universities tend to socialize their members into speaking, writing, and viewing the world in ways that reinforces existing power dynamics and social structures. Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) describe institutions of formal learning as systems of reproduction that replicate and maintain dominant social values. Rather than challenge and disrupt the status quo, academics arguably acquiesce and reproduce normative standards of thinking and behaving. Faculties rely on discourse, or field-specific jargon, to reinforce exclusionary practices. Curriculum compacting, communities of practice and participatory action research are examples of educational catch phrases, or what my supervisor likes to call “academese.” Those well versed in these languages are invited to participate in what is

an increasingly circular conversation: academics, generally with similar interests, speaking to one another. Those who fail to display mastery of university rhetoric and genres are marginalized, unless they make for good research subjects.

Parenti deserves credit for recognizing that he was researching a population with whom he previously had little to no contact. The academic is cognizant of his engagement in and with a world that is alien to him and hires Colvin as "a liaison operating in the urban environment" (Price & Burns, 2006a, 44:54). The former police major has difficulty understanding his job description. "I go out there myself," the professor begins to explain, "and they sell your tenured ass for parts," Colvin continues. Some scholars believe that because they have studied a topic they *know* it, when, at best, they know *of* it. It is this conceit that leads the anthropologist in Paul Bowles' (2002) short story, *A Distant Episode*, to venture to places he does not belong, speak a language that is not his, and meet a rather desolate fate at the hands of the desert tribes he sets out to study. The professor had assumed that because he spoke their language, the natives would be welcoming. Fittingly, university work is often referred to as "academic," a term the Oxford dictionary (1998) defines as "scholarly" (p. 5), but also as being "of secondary importance" and "of *no* practical relevance" (p. 5, italics added).

Simon and Burns' reservations about academia and academic work have not deterred universities from integrating *The Wire* into their curricula. Two years ago, Harvard University's Kenedy School of Government organized a panel discussion announcing the development of an undergraduate class on the series. The event featured the three sociologists responsible for designing the course, including Dr. William J. Wilson whose book *When Work Disappears* inspired some of *The Wire*'s season two

storylines. Series cast members Sonja Sohn, Michael Kenneth Williams, and Andre Rojo were also invited to speak. Upon watching the talk, I noticed the academics engaging the television show in a manner markedly different from the actors, seemingly reinforcing the *The Wire*'s views on academia. I transcribed the next excerpts from the panelists' addresses to an audience of students and faculty members. These edited statements do not appear chronologically. I reordered them to emphasize the differences in the professors' speeches compared to the actors' (as quoted in: Ball, 2010).

> ACADEMIC: "The Wire is fiction." (6:43)
>
> ACTOR: "No, it's real! It's so real that I can't begin to tell you the things that are going on in these streets of our cities." (25:58)
>
> ACADEMIC: "In watching this fictional drama, viewers not only gain a new understanding of the multi-faceted and inter-related aspects of a structure of urban inequality that so profoundly shapes the lives and life chances of poor inner city residents, they also come away with a greater appreciation of the incredible challenges these residents face in their day to day lives." (9:47)
>
> ACTOR: "I can sit here and use a number of adjectives… sad, painful, unconscionable [...] Honestly, if I could take my heart out my chest and sit it here, right on the table and let you watch it beat and bleed and cry for these kids that would be the best description of what I have to see everyday when, when I'm working with these young people." (18.40)

The professors had prepared their speeches. They read their drafts monotonously, void of affect as they intellectualized inner-city living conditions and the plight of urban youth. The academics' emotional detachment appears to reflect positivist research leanings. Positivist

inquiries rely on scientific methods to construct knowledge and privilege the supposedly objective views of researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The professor's description of the "lives and life chances of poor inner-city residents" is othering and voyeuristic. In contrast, Sohn and Williams speak freely and passionately. Sohn wishes she could "take [her] heart out [her] chest and sit it here, right on the table and let you watch it beat and bleed and cry for these kids." Williams speaks of "these streets of *our* cities" (italics added).

I find certain academics' propensity to strip complex issues down to reductionist concepts to be troubling and problematic. A large body of research on multicultural counselling and multicultural education, for example, depicts culture as a static, reified category and ignores the fundamental premise that some cultural differences are irreconcilable. Nancy Arthur and Sandra Collins' (2005) *Culture-Infused Counselling: Celebrating the Canadian Mosaic* is laden with such misconceptions and includes a chapter on how to conduct therapy with "international students." In this section of their book, the authors treat all members of this broadest of cultural groups as sharing common values and beliefs. The Canadian Counselling Association awarded Arthur and Collins' dubious publication the book of the year prize in 2006. Similarly, education researcher Shirley Steinberg's (2010) *19 Urban Questions: Teaching in the City* essentializes inner-city students and schools. Though perhaps inadvertent, the singularizing of "city" in the book's title implies a belief in the uniformity of all cities. Rather than analyze location-specific issues, the contributors to Steinberg's tome write about "urban education" in sweeping terms. In one of the chapters, family and child studies professor Katia Goldfarb examines "the urban family."

Academia's impulse to sanitize the subversive is no less disturbing. Bourdieu and

and Passeron (1970) view institutions of formal education as systems that reproduce social norms and reinforce existing power differentials. While Marxists conceive of power relations in terms of access to material or financial wealth, Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes the importance of other forms of capital, including cultural, intellectual and symbolic resources. These assets beget upward social mobility and afford those who possess them with varying degrees of power and influence. Critical theorist Herbert Marcuse (1969) suggests that, in the interest of preserving what he calls the tyranny of the majority, institutions co-opt art-forms that are disruptive to the status quo and, in doing so, strip them of their ability to promote dissent or equity. For instance, museums recognize graffiti as legitimate art and help usher the form from street corners to gallery canvases; schools consider Hip Hop as a tool for teaching literacy, but ignore the music's political and militant origins when integrating it into the curriculum; universities exoticize the worlds of *The Wire* and reduce the show to a fashionable research trend. Repressive tolerance knows no bounds and academic studies of subversive texts, because there are conducted within and regulated by a nomothetic institution, may be compromised.

In *Representations of the Intellectual*, Said (1996) reconsiders the social role of intellectuals, both within and outside the academy. Drawing on the work of Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, Said encourages a move away from the "organic" intellectualism that helps consolidate the interests of dominant society in favor of a more "traditional" scholarship that offers a counterpoint to mainstream ideology. Academia provides a semblance of intellectual diversity but operates like most normative organizations, from law enforcement to the correctional and mental health enterprises. These institutions work to diminish divergence and to marginalize voices that challenges

accepted social "truths." The production and reproduction of academic knowledge is constricted by external regulatory bodies, like publishing houses and journal editors, and by internal mechanisms, like the tenure application process and senior administrators in "higher education." Universities can foster a degree of traditional intellectualism but within limits. It may be somewhat naïve to think that an institution would freely promote thought that runs counter to its nomothetic impulses. Idiographic philosophies, critical pedagogy, and academic freedom are permissible in so far as they are not overly disruptive. Despite my unease in contributing to a body of knowledge that is rightly perceived as the product of bourgeois thinking, as being reserved to a privileged few, I believe the academic enterprise maintains some redemptive qualities. Universities can still offer spaces, albeit increasingly constricted, to engage ideas that challenge tacit social and institutional assumptions. I suspect that socially relevant inquiry is possible within the academy, if one maintains an awareness of the institutional barriers to critical thinking, and one is willing to challenge and resist them. It remains to be seen how misguided and idealistic a belief this is.

The reservations I have towards academia notwithstanding, I hope that this inquiry proves useful to administrators, teachers, and teacher educators. *The Wire* serves as a useful a curriculum to all those with vested interests in affecting positive change in systems of formal schooling. Viewers can garner valuable insight from the show's many lessons on institutions of social management. Simon and Burns use the series as a vehicle to suggest pragmatic solutions to complicated complex issues like crime reduction, drug addiction, and the failure of public schooling. A number of the show's cast members and producers have founded an organization called *Rewired for Change*, a non-profit organization that

works to empower at-risk youth in under-served communities through education, media advocacy, and street-based intervention. *The Wire*, though not overly popular during its run, has generated a substantial post-mortem following. The series has been off air for over five years but websites like Grantland.com still conduct polls to determine viewers' favorite character. Simon appreciates the attention his work continues to receive but warns that his show strives to do more than create memorable television figures. "That people have fun with the show is okay on its face," the former journalist explains to Sepinwall (2012, n.p.). "That this stuff singularly crowds out any continued discussion of our real problems and the show's interest in arguing those problems is the disappointing part," the series' co-creator continues. My impetus in studying *The Wire* is rooted in the series' ability to generate meaningful dialogue about social issues, particularly the current state of public schooling. This dialogue, I believe, can ultimately help school administrators, teachers and teacher educators develop new understandings of schools and the social functions of schooling.

Recommendations for future research

In the preface to his book *The Ethics of Identity*, Ghanaian-American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appaiah (2005) likens himself to a poor physician. The scholar identifies as someone who is "interested in diagnosis – in etiology and nosology – but not in cures" (p. xvii). I can relate to Appaiah's self-assessment. One of my greatest shortcomings is that I am more adept at presenting problems, perhaps even creating them, than I am at finding solutions. I believe that a course of action aiming at the reimagining of what schools are and what they do is best developed through dialogue. The analysis I conducted in my dissertation is intended to serve as a starting point. I purposely broadened my readership

in hopes of inviting teachers, administrators, organizational theorists, policy makers, and students to the conversation. Open dialogue about and further research on the social functions of formal education are crucial to helping pedagogues and policy makers develop new understandings of schools and schooling. The similarities in the physical plants of total institutions are areas of study I intend to pursue. I am interested in the architectural features schools share with hospitals, jails, and psychiatric wards, and how building and classroom configurations influence learning. Restructuring schools campuses in a way that promotes education and mitigates the managerial and administrative functions of institutions of formal learning would be beneficial to students.

The reliance of teacher education programs on philosophies and verbiage rooted in business administration and organizational studies also merits added attention. The word "management," whether it pertains to classrooms, diversity, or just overall change, is increasingly prevalent in course titles and descriptions at faculties of education across Canada and the United States. This linguistic appropriation points to the co-opting of business values and to the application of business models in teacher education. It also indicates that institutions of formal learning privilege the ability to control and manage students over the opportunity to educate them. While I recognize the emergence of alternative and charter schools as models that counter the nomothetic agendas of more traditional educational organizations, I call for the development of alternative forms of education altogether. I am not denigrating my colleagues' attempts to improve schools, but I am more concerned with exploring ways in which teachers, parents, and community members can work together to educate children without having to rely on schooling. These may be lofty aspirations, and more brilliant minds than mine have failed in their attempts

to find viable substitutes to schools. Illich's *After Deschooling, What?* is far less engaging and thought provoking than its predecessor, *Deschooling Society*. This observation is not intended as disparagement but serves as an appreciation of the difficult task that lies ahead. Schools are compromised and compromising spaces. Institutions of formal education ensure docility and subservience to a larger social order. These are important undertakings that shelter society from moral relativism and anarchy. Where schools have often failed is in the promotion of critical thinkers and intellectuals that might challenge the deficiencies of current systems of government and human administration.

University of Illinois scholar Norman Denzin calls for the creation of "oppositional *utopian spaces*, discourses, and experiences within our public institutions" (2003, p. 8, italics added). Education scholars Henry Giroux (2001) and H. Samy Alim (2009) view schools as sites of resistance. The impulse to champion institutions of formal learning as counter-hegemonic spaces is a luring proposition, but these conceptions of educational organizations pose a number of problems. Proponents of the argument claim that critical thinking can be fostered within social organizations to an extent that disrupts the status quo and catalyzes reform. What educators who speak out against systemic oppression frequently fail to acknowledge is that, through their participation in their respective institutions, they help sustain the social orders they critique; that formal education is, in its own right, a form of social policing; and that the weapons afforded to teachers and professors are perhaps more insidious than the clubs wielded by officers on the beat. It is difficult to fight the power, so to speak, when you are that power. Denzin's (2003) assertion that researchers "[want] nothing more than to participate in a collaborative, altruistic relationship" (p. 7) with their subjects, further romanticizes the role of academics and

bestows the enterprise of higher education with a cloak of selflessness and moral superiority. Denzin refers to the institutional niches of opposition as "utopic," a term that denotes an ideal socio-political system, but one that literally means "no place." Utopias, as Plato (1966) reminds us in *The Republic*, do not exist. Perhaps the first step in reimagining what schools can be is acknowledging what they currently are not: spaces that challenge social norms and dominant social understandings; places that catalyze meaningful social change.

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