

Talking Through the Wire  
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I am at something of a critical loss when it comes to discussing The Wire. As a feminist media theorist especially interested in filmic representations of race and gender, I am pretty well trained at deconstructing hegemonic instantiations of the privileging of whiteness in movies and on t.v., especially those that seem to offer themselves as radical critiques but end up simply reinscribing familiar hierarchies. Popular culture—hit t.v. programs, award-winning movies, Hollywood stars—offers an endless supply of material on which to hone my knife. This is mostly shooting fish in a barrel, instead of any great testament to my mad skills.

But The Wire, HBO's critically acclaimed yet apparently largely unwatched series, leaves me a bit flummoxed. The problem is, first, that I loved watching it, reveling in its intricate, almost Shakespearian or Dickensian handling of interwoven plots and themes of power and corruption at all levels: economic, political, juridical, educational, racial, journalistic and sexual. Characters are complex and multidimensional, revealed in their working and personal lives to be neither good or bad, but some of both, often at the same moment, or neither, just like the rest of us. They sometimes try to do the right thing, even if by dubious means, or make more money, or get laid, or help others, but just as often they fuck up, and their motives are a nice messy stew of righteousness and self-serving. The show solicits me as a smart viewer, which on the one hand I critically distrust, but on the other hand flatters me to no end.

No small part of my pleasure in the show is what might be called, for lack of a better term, the diversity of the cast, quite unparalleled in television. A majority of the cast is African American, so those who tire of searching in vain for black faces on t.v. as more than background or token can find it a relief just to see so many working black actors. The fact that the roles are so varied: good cops, bad cops, good drug dealers, bad drug dealers, good and bad kids, international traders, politicians, teachers, journalists—in short, a far more accurate representation of the variety of black American life than most programs, is a not inconsiderable achievement.

While the female characters are arguably less multivalenced (see, e.g., Sophie Jones's analysis of "Women and 'The Wire'" in which she awards "the most intelligent show on TV, a compelling exploration of the circumstances and institutional pressures that make people who they are ... an 'F' in Gender Studies"

<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/61210/women-and-the-wire/>), I am still thrilled to watch the complex performances of Sonja Sohn as the lesbian cop Kima, Deirdre Lovejoy as the DA who embarks on an interracial relationship with the married Lt. Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick), Amy Ryan before her Academy Award nomination, Felicia "Snoop" Pearson (playing an ambiguously gendered and extremely violent character of the same name), Callie Thorne (like several of the cast familiar to Homicide fans), and Maria Broom as Lt. Daniels' politically ambitious wife.

I was also from the beginning gratified by characters like Kima Greggs (Sonja Sohn), the lesbian cop, and Omar Little (Michael K. Williams), the gay gangbanger. The show's

inclusion of gay and lesbian characters who are, like all the others, unremarkably interwoven into the fabric of The Wire, seems cause for celebration. That all these diverse characters inhabit the same world, like my world, seems right and appropriate. But where am I left, critically, beyond praising instead of burying?

Perhaps the most politically relevant item to note is that Barak Obama is on record, and quite famously, as citing The Wire as his favorite show and Omar Little his favorite character. He has been quoted as claiming that "Omar is a great guy," although hastening to add, "That's not an endorsement. He's not my favorite person, but he's a fascinating character." Obama goes on to explain that "He's this black, gay gangster who only robs drug dealers, and then gives back... He's the toughest, baddest guy on this show, but he's gay, you know. And it's really interesting." Obama has taken some flak by internet posters who rightly point out the troubling assumption behind his inclusion of the conjunction "but," but I'm interested in what it might mean for America's future that the possible next president shares my t.v. viewing taste. I'm naturally skeptical that any show which itself deconstructs dominant representations is going to reach a wide enough, non-graduate-school educated audience to matter. The fact that it was only nominated for one Emmy (for writing) means it hasn't even reached the critical viewing audience that votes on the Emmys. I'm actually pretty sure all this means McCain and Palin are a shoe-in.