

Teaching Scholarship Through a Seminar on *The Wire*

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I. Television as Literature

It may seem odd to claim that watching television will help students to write, but that is what I aim to prove. Not just any television, of course, but the HBO television series, *The Wire*, a show with gravitas that treats the war on drugs in the United States as its central subject.

In my seminar on *The Wire*, I assigned law review articles to complement assigned episodes. Consider the controversy over informants. The character of Bubbles helped my students think deeper about snitching than most law review articles have and made them more open to nuances. “Bubs” is an addict with dignity, capable of deep friendships, who is neglected by the Baltimore police when he most needs help. One of my students wrote an article arguing that informants are encouraged to continue to abuse drugs; if they become clean, they are no longer useful. Bubbles is another casualty of the war on drugs, she argued. In class, we also discussed Omar Little, “a fascinating character” as President Obama noted.¹ The scene where Omar testifies for the prosecution in a murder trial is a wonderful way to connect prosecution and police ethics to the informant controversy. Asked what he does for a living, Omar truthfully answers “I rip and run,” meaning he robs drug dealers. His honesty endears him to the jury but when a police officer later asks Omar: “You really see him [Bird] shoot the man?” Omar replies “You really asking?”² In a seminar on *The Wire*, a professor can assign articles on false testimony and know that the discussion and student papers will be enriched by two dramatically different versions of “the snitch.”

II. Structure of the Seminar

I developed a seminar on *The Wire* for the fall 2012 semester at Howard University School of Law where the assignments included watching the whole series in chronological order coupled with reading mostly unabridged

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1. J. Patrick Coolican, *Obama Goes Gloves Off, Head On*, LAS VEGAS SUN, Sept. 1, 2013, available at <http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2008/jan/14/obama-gloves-off/>.
2. *The Wire: All Prologue* (HBO television broadcast July 6, 2003).

law review articles. Students submitted 25-page papers of “near-publishable” quality at the end of the semester. Early in the course, they selected paper topics. Enrollment for the seminar was capped at 15, allowing me time to give feedback on multiple drafts. For the first 10 weeks of class we discussed law review articles or book chapters in conjunction with episodes from *The Wire*. For the last five weeks of the semester, students presented their papers to the class and generated class discussions.

Students chose a topic related to the show and papers were required to include a quote from *The Wire*, as well as to discuss a scene. I encouraged them to link their papers to a particular character or a particular season or even to write about the show as a whole, pulling out overarching themes. As I explained to them up front, this was essentially a “law and lit” class even if the literature was actually film.

Students learn more when their feelings are engaged. Narrative is how people make sense of the world.³ Narratives can also change how people think about issues. Students connected with the show and therefore were more eager to learn. In their papers, the narratives about a scene or character in *The Wire* succeeded in drawing the reader into the discussion as well as showcasing some of the complexity of the subject at hand.

While teaching *The Wire* seminar was demanding, I recommend it to law professors interested in teaching students how to think critically and to write interesting scholarly papers.

III. Challenges

There were three challenges to teaching this course. First, it was difficult to pace the episode assignments so students could see enough of the show before choosing topics for their papers. Second, during class, it was not always easy to find the right balance between discussing the law review articles and tying the issues they raised to the show. Third, while the show offers much on a second viewing, I think it might be a hard course to teach repeatedly. As my family informed me, “if you teach it again, don’t expect us to watch it with you again.”

As all aficionados of the show know, *The Wire* must be watched chronologically to receive its full impact. Each season provides its own power and themes, but Season 4 is crucial because it brings in the plight of the corner kids. Season 4 puts the school-to-prison pipeline up front, the show’s central indictment of the war on drugs and one that connects with the racial implications of policing.

The first time I taught the course, I required students to watch a full season of *The Wire* before the first class. I then assigned three episodes a class, or six episodes each week, then two episodes a class, then only one episode per class. Consequently, students entering off the wait list had to watch an extraordinary amount of television during the first week of class to catch up. Another

3. Gerald Torres, *Translation and Stories*, 115 HARV. L. REV. 1362, 1364 (2002).

drawback was that sometimes there was too much material to fully digest in a class. On the other hand, the course benefited from richer discussions immediately. Moreover, many students were inspired by the fourth season and were able to choose topics related to those episodes because of the pacing.

Watching *The Wire* helps students recognize the connections between black letter law, procedural law and its consequences on people, an essential ingredient of lawyering and legal policy making, and one generally beyond the scope of traditional doctrinal courses. The show also reveals that the drug war is not limited to police or courts but connects to many areas within society and therefore many areas of law. There is another way that *The Wire* resonates for law students. As they commence their careers, many students worry whether they can change the world and also fit into the institutions where they work or whether those two goals will prove mutually exclusive. *The Wire* explores that knot, the tendency of institutions to jettison those who seek to change them and the related tendency of most people employed within bureaucracies to conform.

IV. Conclusion

When I first started teaching at Howard University School of Law, my Criminal Procedure students urged me to watch *The Wire*. Most Criminal Procedure students in 2012 no longer understand references to Stringer or McNulty. After all, *The Wire* finished running in 2008.⁴ But while *The Wire*'s haircuts and technology are out of date, its comprehensive critique of the United States' anti-drug policy is unfortunately as relevant as ever.⁵ Having read scores of articles about the war on drugs, I can say that none of them gave me insights as deep as the HBO series into the seemingly intractable and interrelated problems of drug prohibition in the United States. Teaching this course encourages law students to watch the show and therefore learn from the masterful critique of the criminal justice system, and particularly to question the continued use of criminal prosecution as the method to eradicate drug use. Thanks to *The Wire*, I receive creative and engaging essays on a diverse array of topics at the end of each semester.

4. The first episode of *The Wire* aired June 2, 2002, and the series ended on March 9, 2008.
5. The war on drugs continues to be responsible for the increased disparity between white and minority incarceration. André Douglas Pond Cummings, "All Eyes On Me": America's War On Drugs And The Prison-Industrial Complex, 15 J. GENDER RACE & JUST. 417, 418 (2012), citing to Marc Mauer & Ryan S. King, THE SENTENCING PROJECT, UNEVEN JUSTICE: STATE RATES OF INCARCERATION BY RACE AND ETHNICITY 1-5 (2007), available at http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/rd_stateratesofincbyraceandethnicity.pdf.