

Jennifer DeClue

# Lesbian Cop, Queer Killer: Leveraging Black Queer Women's Sexuality on HBO's *The Wire*

HBO's drama series *The Wire* has been the subject of at least one academic conference, an online academic journal, numerous college courses, several scholarly articles, and as of this writing, there are rumors of a forthcoming book on the series. Although much has been written and probably even more has been spoken about *The Wire*, concerns have primarily been with the realistic manner in which institutionalized racism, political corruption, and impoverished communities are depicted. I find it startling that fewer discussions have been concerned with the representation of racialized genders and sexualities given that a host of black queer characters populate this HBO series.

The five seasons of the controversial and provocative series (2002-2008), expose the inner-workings of the Baltimore police department through ongoing police investigations that utilize wire tapping (hence the title) to break codes of communication used by local crime rings. The show's fictional narratives address contemporary social and political issues specific to Baltimore. In doing so, the show cast local talent as well as professional actors, and incorporated actual neighborhood businesses into its narratives. This combination of real life and fiction creates diegetic complexity and an atmosphere of authenticity. As a result, *The Wire's* strengths lie in the narrative deconstruction and critique of

systems of power that conspire through racialized violence, failed education, nefarious politicians, and law enforcement to subjugate marginalized communities in the United States. Nearly every major character in *The Wire* has a rich emotional interior that provides an entryway into the complexities of life in Baltimore. *The Wire's* creator, David Simon, prides himself on linguistic accuracy achieved through immersing his cast and crew in a city's rhythms and sounds during production<sup>1</sup>. The rich realism with which Simon treats his characters is attributed to his long career as a crime reporter with the *Baltimore Sun*; through a mix of veracity and fiction, this HBO drama is habitually credited with being the "real thing."<sup>2</sup>

During what Ron Becker calls the "gay nineties," prime-time television programs included gay characters who were predominantly white, save Carter, a black gay character on *Spin City*.<sup>3</sup> Becker critiques these representations of gay and lesbian characters on prime-time television for not depicting the "lived experiences of thousands of gay and lesbian people" who experience poverty, racial discrimination, and social oppression.<sup>4</sup> He says:

The problem, of course, as with nearly all television representations, is that they do embody stereotypes. Instead of images of

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nely queens or motorcycle dykes we are presented with images of white, affluent, trend-setting, Perrier-drinking, frequent flyer using, Ph.D.-holding consumer citizens with more income to spend than they know what to do with.<sup>5</sup>

Since the so-called “gay nineties,” there has been an increase, albeit a small one, in representations of queer characters of color on TV shows including *Greek*, *Ugly Betty*, *Noah’s Arc*, *The L Word*, *Six Feet Under*, and *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. *The Wire* also rectifies this disparity with the inclusion of several black queer characters that present a range of genders, sexualities, income levels, and ethics. The black queer characters on *The Wire* expand the representation of blackness on television beyond the lone black gay character like Carter or past the parameters of an explicitly black gay show like Logo’s *Noah’s Arc*. Furthermore, *The Wire* also stands apart from other television representations for its incorporation of black queer female characters; along with *The L Word* and *Pretty Little Liars*, *The Wire* is among the first fictional TV programs in the U.S. to depict black queer women. *The Wire* creates a dystopic landscape in which black queer women navigate their surroundings without their sexualities or genders inhibiting their movements or causing their premature deaths.<sup>6</sup> An impeccable attention to detail in writing, direction, and production creates never before seen black queer women that we love and despise.

While the presence of these characters on television expands representations of black sexualities in popular culture, I argue this expansion is tempered by the use of black sexual taboo to produce an aesthetic of quality TV.<sup>7</sup> With media representations of marginalized groups come expectations that lived experiences are taken into account; in my discussion of quality TV, I consider the manner in which visual representations of blackness have been mired in the rhetoric of authenticity. Specifically, I interrogate the ways that the fraught history of black women’s sexuality in the U.S. is leveraged in the production of *The Wire*’s black queer women characters.<sup>8</sup> I contend that *The Wire* both complicates and exploits black queer sexuality in order to produce provocative quality television.

My analysis of *The Wire* hones in on the narrative treatment of two of the black queer characters, Detective Shakima “Kima” Greggs, a sexy lesbian cop, and Felicia “Snoop” Pearson, a hypermasculine ruthless criminal. I attend to the representations of Kima and Snoop’s sexuality and gender by examining the production of black queer women’s sexuality in the context of quality TV, wherein race and gender have played a key role in the elevation of television through complex, sophisticated narratives. In this context, I question the manner in which *The Wire* both expands the parameters of quality television and concomitantly situates itself solidly within this genre by utilizing black queer sexuality to refine aesthetic values and intensify narrative arcs. I am concerned with the ways in which quality TV programming creates a demand for black queer characters but then delimits the depth with which these characters can be written into existence.

### Quality TV and *The Wire*

Quality TV has been troubled by its value-laden moniker because “quality” inherently distinguishes that which falls within its parameters from television programs that are presumably lacking in quality.<sup>9</sup> Robert J. Thompson asserts that “[q]uality TV is best defined as what it is not. It is not ‘regular’ TV.”<sup>10</sup> This distinction between quality TV and “regular TV” is reminiscent of the distinction made between art and mass culture, which placed television solidly within the purview of the latter. Thompson characterizes quality TV as having a “quality pedigree” and asserts that quality TV writing is complex enough to handle multiple plots woven among a large ensemble cast. He argues that the audience is from a “blue chip” demographic of “upscale, well educated, urban dwelling young viewers.”<sup>11</sup> Quality TV, according to Thompson, tends both toward controversial subject matter as well as realism.<sup>12</sup> “Quality TV’ is then simply television’s version of ‘art film.’”<sup>13</sup>

Janet McCabe and Kim Akass address the manner in which HBO exhibits “the best of American TV” through “misogynistic violence” and the pleasure derived from pushing moral boundaries.<sup>14</sup> They write:

Contentious subject matter and edgy scripts containing adult themes are predicated on risk-taking that strains broadcasting limits... Pushing limits of respectability, of daring to say/do what cannot be said/done elsewhere on the networks, is entwined with being esoteric, groundbreaking and risk-taking.<sup>15</sup>

This discussion of HBO's edgy, quality television programming that at once promotes diversity while taking advantage of gender, race, and class differences informs my analysis. *The Wire* secures its quality TV status, in part, by foregrounding the marginalized sexualities of black queer female characters. While many characters marginalized by race, class, gender, and sexuality do appear in *The Wire*, Kima and Snoop, in particular, produce quality television narratives that push moral boundaries and showcase diverse representations.

While *The Wire* boldly makes black queer women characters visible, the series does not escape reproducing stereotypes either. Rather, representations of black queer women on *The Wire* reinforce and resist stereotypes. In addressing these complex characters, I begin by contextualizing the pathologization of black women's sexuality in the U.S. as a way to reflect on the history in which Kima and Snoop are situated. I turn toward this history in order to discuss the secrecy and taboo that are implicit in the provocative nature of black lesbian sexuality that is utilized in the production of quality TV.

### Black Women, Gender, Sexuality, and Quality TV

Historically, black sexuality has been constructed as existing outside of heteronormativity yet perpetually perceived as heterosexual. Roderick Ferguson offers insight into this paradox: "As figures of nonheteronormative perversions, straight African Americans were reproductive rather than *productive*, heterosexual but never *heteronormative*."<sup>16</sup> Heterosexual blackness not only exists outside of heteronormativity but queer sexuality has been conceived of as inauthentic to blackness. Patricia Hill Collins discusses a twist in logic that renders blackness inescapably heterosexual:

Either Black people could not be homosexual or those Blacks who were homosexual were not "authentically" Black. Black people were allegedly not threatened by homosexuality because they were protected by their "natural" heterosexuality.<sup>17</sup>

If blackness is constructed as diametrically opposed to homosexuality, then being black means being heterosexual. This understanding of authentic blackness as naturally heterosexual but not heteronormative situates black queerness as inevitably aberrant. The denial of black homosexuality is linked to black women's sexuality that historically has been produced as insatiable, wanton, and perpetually available to sexual domination and violence.<sup>18</sup>

Black women in the Victorian era uplift movement designed and enforced a politics of respectability that was initially meant to protect black women from being stigmatized as lascivious and immoral, a pathology that was rooted in chattel slavery. During this period of time, respectable black women upheld strict codes of silence and dissemblance around their own experiences of sexuality and desire in an effort to elevate black women from the status of property to human.<sup>19</sup> This culture of impeccable morality and sexual secrecy, however, further effaced black women's desire.<sup>20</sup> From the black women's club movement to the civil rights movement, discussions of sexuality were silenced in order for black people to attain equal rights of citizenship.<sup>21</sup> Given the contentious sexual landscape in which black women are sexualized into depravity and racialized outside of heteronormativity, Kima and Snoop's sexualities in *The Wire* are inescapably imbricated in these fraught conceptions of black womanhood.

Along with sexuality, black women's gender has been pathologized as overly aggressive and the catalyst for the demise of the black family. In 1965, sociologist turned Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan published *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which accused the female-headed household of being the fundamental problem with the Negro family:<sup>22</sup> "As a familial formation that 'retards progress' because of its nonheteronormative conformity, the female-headed household impedes the march of civil rights."<sup>23</sup> The Moynihan report

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shifted the blame off of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy and onto the backs of black women:

The problems facing communities of color no longer stem primarily from discrimination but from the characteristics of these communities themselves, from unrestrained sexual behavior and childbirths out of wedlock, crime welfare dependency, and a perverse sense of group identity and group entitlement.<sup>24</sup>

*The Wire's* representation of Kim and Snoop's genders and sexualities relies on this type of pathology of black womanhood to produce quality television. Simon's realistic approach calls upon familiar and damaging *knowledge* about black womanhood that has circulated in politics and culture since the time of chattel slavery. The reproduction of stereotypical knowledge of black women's nonheteronormativity through Simon's verisimilitude allows the edge of quality television to be produced through forbidden black sexuality and suspect gender identity. While Kim and Snoop's sexualities are handled differently because of their gender presentation, both of these characters' queer masculinities tread on taboo ground in the production of scintillating quality television. Kim's masculinity places her in a traditional, dominant, homonormative role in the relationship with her girlfriend Cheryl and also grants her entry into the Baltimore police department's old boys club. Snoop's gender presentation on the other hand fits solidly within the realm of masculinity. When characters in the show refer to Snoop as "she" a dissonance occurs that forces Snoop's masculinity out of a presumably male body into a gender ambiguous one. Snoop's masculinity obscures her legibility as a woman or a man, a reality that makes her sexuality impossible for the show to represent.

In *Female Masculinity* Jack Halberstam discusses the indellible ties between white maleness, masculinity, legitimacy, and privilege. Halberstam asserts: "Masculinity...becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body."<sup>25</sup> Kim and Snoop's respective masculinities embody the disaggregation of masculinity and male bodies,

exposing the construction of masculinity as an ideological source of power and domination that remains the property of middle-class white men.<sup>26</sup> Kim's masculinity, however, is less effective than Snoop's in upsetting the ideological connections between middle-class white males and masculinity. Kim's black female masculinity retains enough femininity that her womanhood is never called into question and as such does not threaten to displace men from masculinity. By contrast, Snoop's black female masculinity wrests masculinity from male bodies. While Snoop's masculinity does make black female masculinity legible in culture, the show's refusal to depict black female masculine sexuality mars this representation. Snoop's possession of masculinity forecloses the possibility of her having a love life because her gender ambiguity blurs the line between woman and man. Snoop snatches masculinity from the possession of white male bodies but does not deposit it into an easily identifiable woman's body. The dissonance that this ambiguity produces twists Snoop's gender into her sexuality and withholds her black female masculine love life from viewers.<sup>27</sup>

### Kim: Lesbian Cop



At the police station, the cops treat Kim like one of the guys. Her lesbian identity, rather than ostracizing her, situates her as a member of the old boys club in the Baltimore Police Department. Kim's sexy masculinity is commanding yet disarming. She is tough and no-nonsense on the streets and in the squad room. As a detective she wears pants suits on the job or loose fitting denim

and sweaters. She has long wavy hair that is usually underneath a ball cap or pulled back away from her face. As with many police officers, Kima has to negotiate her love of police work with her partner's desire for her to quit the force for safer, more intellectual endeavors.

Kima proves her allegiance through police work routine to the streets of Baltimore's west side. For example, on a typical day at the towers, one of the housing projects in Baltimore, the mid-level drug dealers manage the yard of young drug dealers and crackheads. When narcotics officers descend, Kima included, drug dealers and drug addicts scatter. Bodie, a mid-level drug dealer is caught by a narcotics officer who works him over. Kima runs toward Bodie, presumably to rescue him from police brutality. Instead, she joins in the fight, kicking and cursing Bodie as he cradles his body trying to shield himself from the blows.



At home, Kima's lesbian sexuality is made clear by the relationship she has with her girlfriend, Cheryl. There are several sex scenes between Kima and Cheryl in which Kima takes the lead. In the season one episode "Old Cases," Kima and Cheryl lie on the couch in their pajamas. Kima wears a white A-Line tank-top and cotton boxer shorts and Cheryl wears a nightgown. As they kiss, Kima moves on top of Cheryl. Kima's lesbian love life with Cheryl and her dominant role in the relationship produce a queer female masculinity that reinforces her position as "one of the guys" on the detective's squad. Even though Kima possesses a female masculinity her gender identity remains clearly within womanhood. Kima is masculine enough to make her inclusion within the old boys club believable and feminine enough that she remains alluring when climbing on top of her girlfriend.

### Snoop: Queer Killer



Snoop's character stands in stark contrast to Kima's. Whereas Kima is played by Sonja Sohn, an established Hollywood actor, Snoop is a native of Baltimore's inner-city and is not a trained actor; Snoop was cast as part of the show's authentic Baltimore flair. In addition, her character is a member of Marlo Stanfield's drug crew that appears as the younger, wicked rival to the established Barksdale crew, which controls the drug trade in west Baltimore. Because Snoop first appears in several scenes without speaking, it is difficult to decipher her gender; she has masculine body language and wears baggy jeans, jerseys, and T-shirts. While her face is pretty, everything else about Snoop is hardened and masculine. Snoop's initiation into Marlo's crew includes dressing up in an emasculating disguise complete with pink bows in her hair, a pick satin jacket, and denim pedal pushers. In this costume, Snoop rides on the back of a motorcycle and guns down members of the rival Barksdale crew.

Although characters easily refer to Snoop as a woman, her gender identity is ambiguous if not simply accepted as masculine, and even as hypermasculine. The show conflates Snoop's gender and her sexuality; because Snoop is gender ambiguous and hypermasculine, the narrative expects us to assume that she is lesbian; yet, the only hint about Snoop's sexual desire is a scene in which Snoop and her male partner in crime Chris are handcuffed and sitting on the curb after being pulled over by Kima and her partner Bunk. Bunk stands in front of Snoop and Chris smoking his cigar:

Snoop: Think you all that for hasslin' niggas and shit.

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Bunk: I know I'm all that. I'm thinking about some pussy.

Snoop: Yeah me too.

These three words are the only utterances of Snoop's sexuality. Masculine womanhood, however, does not necessarily correlate to lesbian identification. Gender identity and sexuality are distinct as well as overlapping expressions; yet the conflation of gender and sexuality in Snoop's character obscures the complexities of both of them.<sup>28</sup> Snoop's gender ambiguity is constructed to stand in for her lesbian sexuality, which is almost never discussed. Arguably, the absence of Snoop's love life and home life makes the character more menacing and constructs her as the scariest of all bad guys in *The Wire*; her lust for killing is insatiable and remorseless.<sup>29</sup> Snoop's ability to kill concretizes her masculinity and makes the sight of her as ominous as the grim reaper itself.

The tropes of gender deviant women, cross dressing men, and transgender characters have been used in the creation of villains throughout American film history: John Huston's 1941

film *The Maltese Falcon*; the 1950 film *All About Eve* directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz; Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 *Rebecca* and his 1960 film *Psycho* and Jonathan Demme's 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs* to name just a few. The horror of villainous characters is intensified by their gender transgression; this device reinforces a presumed oddity of gender deviance and transgender identities. Snoop's ambiguous gender serves to make her character more monstrous and less human. While it may have been a conscious choice to omit any allusions to Snoop's family or a love life, these omissions ultimately avoid depicting the sexuality of a gender queer black character.

Halberstam's concept of transgender butch, "a form of gender transitivity that could be crucial to many butches' sense of embodiment, sexual subjectivity, and even gender legitimacy" offers a way to think through the imbrication of gender and sexuality of queer masculine women like Snoop.<sup>30</sup> Black womanhood complicates Halberstam's notion of transgender butch; crucial to black female masculinity is the struggle black women have faced, both historically and contemporarily, to be considered women.<sup>31</sup> Black transgender butchness produces a tension between retaining contested black womanhood and occupying a gender ambiguous female masculinity. Black female masculinity as embodied by Snoop, tears apart masculinity and white maleness while it evokes the pathological aggressiveness that has historically been attributed to black women's gender identity. That Snoop's gender eclipses her sexuality is indicative of the blurred lines between gender and sexuality as well as of masculinity's ties to white male bodies. Snoop's black gender ambiguity throws masculinity into disarray, thus contributing to the impossibility of portraying Snoop's sexuality.

### Discourse of Reality

In almost every discussion I have had about *The Wire*, whether at a conference or in a casual conversation, people consistently refer to the show as depicting "reality." To the production team's credit, their collective research, writing, and production efforts have masterfully constructed a convincing depiction of Baltimore that resonates



as authentic to natives of Baltimore as well as those who may only know the city through this mediated representation.<sup>32</sup> *The Wire* is captivating, provocative, and unnerving because the narrative content combines nodes of real Baltimore street life. This program's focus on a privileged, corrupt few that wield power over an impoverished multitude that is, wittingly or unwittingly, embroiled in perilous drug warfare, can stimulate introspection and a renewed sense of community engagement as it simultaneously reproduces stereotypical conceptions of blackness.

This discourse of reality emanates from the "water cooler" and from the set. In a 2007 interview with Brian Lehrer, Felicia "Snoop" Pearson discusses the manner in which David Simon's narrative treatment of Baltimore's crime and corruption is not unlike the reality of surviving Baltimore's perilous street life. Pearson states that "*The Wire* is all reality, they just put it out there that this is what's going on in the world. Either it's in Baltimore, New York, Chicago, wherever, it's going on."<sup>33</sup> Lehrer then interjects, "It's a scripted drama but it's more like a reality show than *American Idol*."<sup>34</sup> Pearson emphatically agrees with Lehrer on this point.<sup>35</sup> Because Pearson was born and raised on the streets from which Simon draws his inspiration, it is difficult to contest her assertion. Pearson's claim that *The Wire* is a portrait of reality is understandable given that few representations of blackness on television detail the complexities of racist systems of oppression with such conviction and depth.

Writing about *The Sopranos*, Dana Polan raises important concerns about scholarly research on the HBO drama series that can be applied to discussions of *The Wire*. He says, "They read past form to imagine that the show enables one to peek into real-life situations and raises moral or philosophical issues that come from the narrative's placing of characters in thematically resonant situations."<sup>36</sup> Polan's concern reveals a problem that is not particular to HBO, quality TV, or *The Wire*; underrepresented communities that are depicted in popular culture, especially in television and film, are often expected to reflect the lived experiences of the communities that they represent. *The Wire* thus serves as a form of entertainment that catches an audience's attention by depicting

abhorrent racialized violence and taboo sexual lives of black queer men and women but not without consequences; the social complexity, sexual deviance, and atmosphere of authenticity produces specific knowledge about blackness.

Black cultural production has been plagued by a problematic need to reflect reality. In her discussion of the discourse of reality that frames Spike Lee's films, Wahneema Lubiano examines the expectation of authenticity in African American cultural representation: "Realism used uncritically as a mode for African-American art implies that our lives can be captured by the presentation of enough documentary evidence or by insistence on another truth."<sup>37</sup> The quest for truth in cultural representations of African American people derives from a response to generations of Euro-American distortion of African American people in culture. A mission of African American cultural producers during the Harlem Renaissance was righting racialized wrongs, a tradition that set the foundation for a black aesthetic dedicated to producing narratives that counter racist depictions of black life.<sup>38</sup> Lubiano identifies a fundamental problem to truth claims: "Realism establishes a claim to truth, but it also presents the ground for its own destruction – somebody else's truth."<sup>39</sup> While the desire to depict the truth has become a facet of black aesthetics, representing black sexuality beyond the scope of eternal heterosexuality is more productive than attempting to divine the truth from narratives of black life. Indeed, the presence of Kim and Snoop's respective genders and sexualities on *The Wire* not only counters the impossibility of black homosexuality, but the specificities of their genders and sexualities make visible a range of queer possibilities.

The black queer characters on *The Wire* resist heterosexual representations of blackness and contribute to the multiplicity of black sexuality present in popular culture, filling a deficit left by the slew of gay nineties prime-time programs.<sup>40</sup> Yet these black queer characters do not represent the reality of lived experiences of queer black people. Following Stuart Hall's insight that popular culture is not where black subjects go to find out who we really are but rather is "a theater of popular desires" in which "we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are

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imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who don't get the message but to ourselves for the first time."<sup>41</sup> Because of the scarcity of black queer characters written with depth and complexity, an expectation of veracity and a desire for authenticity looms in these characters' shadows. The distinction between enjoying a representation of blackness that expands the scope of black theatricality and visibility and determining that a fictionalized narrative represents reality is crucial in that the former preserves the field of play and the latter runs the risk of collapsing a fruitful and vital expansion of blackness.

### Conclusion

Historic constructions of black women's sexual desire and tropes of monstrosity are exploited in order to produce complex narratives that push social and political boundaries to generate edgy, quality television programming through the bodies of Kimble and Snoop.<sup>42</sup> *The Wire* expands the confines of quality television as it positions itself squarely within this genre by leveraging black queer female masculinity in the production of sensational narratives and cinematic textures. The presence of a black lesbian Baltimore police detective, and a black, arguably transgender, butch killer for hire in *The Wire* produces, responds to, and complicates the presence of racialized queer characters on quality TV.

As is the case with black women's sexuality, Kimble's lesbian sexuality and Snoop's gender queer

identity are encumbered by a history of sexual violence, monstrosity, sub-humanity, and sexual depravity. The history of black women's sexuality in the U.S. makes representing black queer women characters a precarious venture, one that treads on the discourse of reality that is imbricated in black cultural production. By making black queer women characters visible, *The Wire* counters misguided notions of blackness being inescapably heterosexual while it also reinscribes the indelibility of masculinity within white male bodies by refusing to represent black female masculine sexuality in culture.

Entering into the terrain of black sexuality ensures that the presence of black queer women in *The Wire* at once achieves racialized sexual diversity in popular culture while it also draws heavily upon the historic abject sexuality of black womanhood in the production of quality television. Storylines that feature Kimble and Snoop push the boundaries of television, thus making the narratives more complex and sophisticated, as quality TV demands. The discourse of reality that shrouds representations of marginalized communities, specifically black people, appears as a threshold that must be crossed before it can be set aside. In order to appreciate the "theater of desires" at work in representations of black queer sexuality, blackness must be represented without being representative of a totalizing blackness and without producing knowledge through visceral encounters with sexy, captivating, black queer women characters.

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### End Notes

1 J.C. Frenan, "Interview: David Simon," *Slant*, May 7, 2010, <http://www.slantmagazine.com/tv/feature/interview-david-simon/225> (accessed January 17, 2011).

2 "2010 MacArthur Fellows, David Simon, Author, Screenwriter, Producer," MacArthur Foundation, [http://www.macfound.org/site/c.1kLXJ8MQKrH/b.6241271/k.8712/David\\_Simon.htm](http://www.macfound.org/site/c.1kLXJ8MQKrH/b.6241271/k.8712/David_Simon.htm) (accessed January 17, 2011).

- 3 Ron Becker, "Prime-Time Television in The Gay Nineties: Network Television, Quality Audiences and Gay Politics," *The Velvet Light Trap* 42 (1998): 43.
- 4 Becker, "Prime-Time Television in the Gay Nineties," 44.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, And Opposition In Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28. Wilson defines racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."
- 7 While my paper is chiefly concerned with Kima and Snoop's black queer sexuality it is important to acknowledge the strides made with the character Omar, an out and proud black gay man. Omar is afforded a love life and respect on the street; he does not hide his sexuality and is allowed to be black, gay and maintain his masculinity.
- 8 Although this paper focuses on black queer women and does not attend to the host of castrating black mother characters, I do recognize that the depiction of most of the black mothers in HBO's *The Wire* is problematic, especially in light of the truth claims made about the series.
- 9 In her article "Is Quality Television Any Good? Gender Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgment" Sarah Cardwell contends that a fundamental problem with quality TV is the value judgment implicit in the moniker. Cardwell suggests that quality TV is not synonymous with good TV but rather denotes a set of traits consistent with this kind of programming.
- 10 Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 13.
- 11 Thompson, *Television's Golden Age*, 14-15.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Thompson, *Television's Golden Age*, 16.
- 14 Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, "Debating Quality," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, 63 and 66 (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).
- 15 McCabe and Akass, "Debating Quality," 67.
- 16 Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 87.
- 17 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 105-106.
- 18 Sojourner Truth's famous "Ain't I A Woman" speech delivered 1851 at the Women's Convention in Ohio addresses the manner in which blackness excludes black women from being considered women. Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* discusses the manner in which black families exist outside of heteronormativity because of the stigmatized conceptions of blackness that were disseminated in studies like Neil Patrick Moynihan's 1965 "The Negro Family: The Case For National Action." The Moynihan report ultimately blamed black women for the demise of the black family. Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* delineates the manner in which black womanhood is constructed as overly aggressive, hypersexual, docile, and caretaking of whiteness. Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* address the precarious position enslaved black woman occupied in which they were inherently unrapable during chattel slavery because of being considered property and not human.
- 19 In *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History*, Darlene Clark Hines discusses the manner in which black women's sexuality was forced into concealment during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century because Victorian era codes of womanhood and the legacy of chattel slavery that constructed black womanhood as wanton and lacking morality.
- 20 Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2-3 (1994): 5.
- 21 Claudette Colvin, a teenager in 1955 refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person in Montgomery, Alabama nine months before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in that same city. After Colvin's arrest she became pregnant and was considered not to be an appropriate representation for the bus boycott. This account is detailed Phillip Hoose's *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* and is the subject of an NPR story by Margot Adler. In his biography of Bayard Rustin, John D'Emilio chronicles the consequences of Rustin's sexuality as they impacted his role in the civil rights movement. For example, after an arrest for sodomy, rather than be exposed as a homosexual, Rustin step down from his role as leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.
- 22 Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 119.
- 23 Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 122.
- 24 Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 123.
- 25 Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 2.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 For more about black female masculinity in the context of television programming refer to Kara Keeling, "We Got Next: The WNBA Advertising Campaign's Negotiations with Femininity," in *Sexual Rhetoric: Media Perspectives on Sexuality, Gender and Identity*, ed. Meta Carstarphen and Susan Zavoina, 199-207, (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1999).
- 28 In his article "Are Lesbians Women?" Jacob Hale addresses the cultural and regional specificity that informs gender identity and the manner in which people are gendered through sexuality but encourages us to attend more carefully to variations of gender identity as they are not interchangeable or consistent from person to person.
- 29 I am using the pronoun "she" but I do recognize that "she" does not address Snoop's gender complexity. I am not attempting to simplify Snoop's gender by addressing the character with "she" or "her." If Snoop were written as trans I would use the pronoun the character uses, but as written the character uses "she" and I will address Snoop with this pronoun throughout the paper. This usage

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of “she” or “her” does not minimize Snoop’s trans identity, pronoun usage is not the only way to signal trans identity, gender presentation is also a factor.

30 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 144.

31 See Deborah Gray White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* and bell hook’s *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* for in depth discussions of black women’s struggles to be recognized as women.

32 See Tim Goodman, “Yes, HBO’s ‘Wire’ is challenging. It’s also a masterpiece,” SFGate.com, September 6, 2006, [http://articles.sfgate.com/2006-09-06/entertainment/17312122\\_1\\_wire-storytelling-desperate-housewives](http://articles.sfgate.com/2006-09-06/entertainment/17312122_1_wire-storytelling-desperate-housewives) (accessed January 19, 2011); Rick Kushman, “A Fond Farewell To HBO’s ‘The Wire,’” *Miami Herald*, March 7, 2008, <http://www.miamiherald.com/2008/03/07/447957/a-fond-farewell-to-hbos-the-wire.html> (accessed January 19, 2001).

33 “Felicia ‘Snoop’ Pearson: My life is like ‘The Wire,’” YouTube video, 00:02:40, wyncradio, December 17, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvVLJIIJOJw> (accessed January 17, 2011).

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Dana Polan, “Cable Watching: HBO, The Sopranos, and Discourses of Distinction,” in *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting*, ed. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Chris, and Anthony Freitas, 268 (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

37 Wahneema Lubiano, “But Compared to What?: Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing*, and the Spike Lee Discourse,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25 no. 2 (1991): 263.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Becker, “Prime-Time Television in The Gay Nineties,” 43.

41 Stuart Hall, “What is this Black in Black Popular Culture,” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent & Michelle Wallace (New York: The New Press, 1983), 32.

42 Thompson, *Television’s Golden Age*, 14-15.