

*Language, Ethnicity, and Inequality in The Wire*  
EN 5950– Fall 2013 – T 4:00-6:30p – Lucas 202

Instructor: Benjamin Torbert, UM-Saint Louis  
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Office: 422 Lucas Hall, office hours TR 11:30-12:30, 2:00-3:00 (you are encouraged to visit)

TEXTS TO PURCHASE:

*The Wire: The Complete Series*. DVD Boxed Set. HBO Home Video.  
Lisa Delpit, ed. *The Skin that we Speak*. (2003)  
Jane Jacobs. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. (1961, 2011)  
John Rickford and Russell Rickford. *Spoken Soul*. (2000)  
Rafael Alvarez. *The Wire: Truth be Told*. (2009)  
Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro, eds., *The Wire: Race Class and Genre* (2012)

We will only read portions of these books. Other readings will be distributed on MyGateway

READING & VIEWING ASSIGNMENTS: Reading assignments are listed on the syllabus. The reading/viewing assignment should be completed by the day on which the assignment appears on the syllabus. In other words, have it read or seen before the class period in which we are discussing it.

ACADEMIC HONESTY: As in all classes at UMSL, students must adhere to University policies about cheating and plagiarism—see [http://umsl.edu/studentlife/dsa/student\\_planner/policies/conductcode.htm](http://umsl.edu/studentlife/dsa/student_planner/policies/conductcode.htm)

CIVILITY: UMSL lists university policies about our shared responsibilities as teachers and as students for creating a positive environment for learning. Our classroom must be an intellectually safe space. Refrain from using your cell phones in any fashion during class. We also need you to display respect for your fellow students. See [http://www.umsl.edu/studentlife/dsa/student\\_planner/policies/positive.htm](http://www.umsl.edu/studentlife/dsa/student_planner/policies/positive.htm).

ACCESS/DISABILITY: Students who have special needs must meet with the campus access office in MSC 144. If you require special accommodations, please meet with me to discuss accessibility of disability needs.

EARLY ALERT: UMSL uses an early alert system to notify students who are struggling academically.

MYGATEWAY: I will place supplemental materials on MyGateway throughout the semester.

CONTENT DISCLAIMER: *The Wire* examines very serious topics, and the viewing is of an adult nature. Those who enroll in the class will be expected to view all of the first four seasons carefully. Adult content includes but is not limited to extreme physical violence, depictions of illegal drug use and the sale of illegal drugs, nudity and depictions of human sexuality, nudity of a medical/forensic nature, and the use of taboo language including frequent use of racial epithets and epithets relating to gender and sexuality. Racial epithets usually appear in the show in an intra-ethnic context, but are also occasionally employed by European American characters describing ethnic minorities. Students who enroll in this class will be expected to deal with all of this content uncensored, and in a sensitive and mature manner.

SPOILERS DISCLAIMER: *The Wire* presents intensely intertwined story lines. In order to discuss a given topic (e.g., gender, sexuality, the drug war, habitus, education) in depth and with a comprehensive view towards the series, it is not possible to completely “shield” first-time viewers of earlier seasons from finding out about events later in the series. We are here not merely to find out what happens in a television show, but rather to learn as much as we can, together, about the series and what the series tells us about urban life in America in the 2000s.

SCHEDULE DISCLAIMER: It is impossible to make topics neatly “match” chunks of four consecutive episodes. This syllabus will attempt to relate the day’s topic to the most recently viewed episodes as much as possible, but the fit will necessarily be inexact.

**SCHEDULE** *Subject to Change*

The daily structure of class beginning on 27 August will be as follows. 4:00 to approximately 5:15 will be reserved for “post-gaming” the episodes we have viewed that week. After about a five minute bathroom break, 5:20-6:30 will be reserved for discussion of the day’s major topic.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Viewing Assignment</i>	<i>Reading Assignment</i>
T 8/20	Introduction A little about language variation A little about language & power	reluctantly, nada	buy texts
T 8/27	Language in <i>The Wire</i> Day 1 Sociolinguistic Basics of AAE	I.1 thru I.4	<i>Spoken Soul</i> 91-160 <i>Skin/Speak</i> Chapter 5 (on MGW) Rickford 1999 excerpt
T 9/3	Language in <i>The Wire</i> Day 2	I.5 thru I.9	<i>Spoken Soul</i> 163-229
T 9/10	Habitus in <i>The Wire</i>	I.10 thru I.13	(on MGW) David Swartz The Occupational Therapy Journal of Research 22 61S-69S
T 9/17	Ethnicity in <i>The Wire</i>	II.1 thru II.4	Kennedy and Shapiro TBA
T 9/24	Urban Inequality in <i>The Wire</i>	II.5 thru II.8	(on MGW) the five articles from Autumn 2011 <i>Critical Inquiry</i>
T 10/1	Urban Design	II.9 thru II.12	Jacobs chapters 1, 6, 7 and 8 (on MGW) <i>Home from Nowhere</i> Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 7
T 10/8	Approaches to Urban Places The Drug War	III.1 thru III.4	Jacobs chapters 14-17 (on MGW) John McWhorter essay
T 10/15	Policework in <i>The Wire</i>	III.5 thru III.8	(on MGW) David Simon First two chapters of <i>Homicide</i>
T 10/22	The Craft of <i>The Wire</i>	III.9 thru III.12	central argument for Sidney’s <i>Defense of Poesy</i>
T 10/29	Education in <i>The Wire</i> Day 1	IV.1 thru IV.3	(on MGW) Jonathan Kozol 1-39 From <i>Savage Inequalities</i>
T 11/5	Education in <i>The Wire</i> Day 2	IV.4 thru IV.6	<i>Skin/Speak</i> Chapters 3, 6-8, 10
T 11/12	Gender and Sexuality in <i>The Wire</i>	IV.7 thru IV.9	Rod Brunson & Jody Miller Gender & Society 20: 531-532
T 11/19	Humor in <i>The Wire</i> /Presentations	IV.10 thru IV.11	(on MGW) DH Monro TBA
T 12/3	Presentations	IV.12 thru IV.13	none

Guest talks, subject to change: Shousterman 9/3; DEA agent I haven’t met yet 10/8; Herzberg 10/15; Rankin 11/12

#### OTHER USEFUL RESOURCES:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/series/the-wire-re-upwire-re-up>

These are good to browse in order to keep episodes distinct in your mind.

#### YOUR GRADE:

- 1) You will keep a weekly journal of 1-2 page responses to the viewing for the week. You are to send your entry to me **not later than 7:00 on Monday nights** so that I can read them before class on Monday. The purpose of this journal is to consolidate your thoughts, to keep up with the viewing and reading, and to give us spring boards for discussion in class. 20%
- 2) If you have an observation while viewing, please tweet it with the hashtag #UMSL2013Wire. This activity won't be graded, but will be a fun way to catalog observations anyone in the class may have.
- 3) You will write a 1000-word essay picking a regular character in the cast. This brief paper will be thesis-driven and will examine the motivations and actions of that character. Why does your character choose particular actions someone of your acculturation might not? How do the character's actions reflect habitus? Due in class 1 October. 20%
- 4) You will write a 300-word abstract outlining what you intend to accomplish in your final paper. I will give you guidance about this in October. Due in class 29 October. 10%
- 5) You will write a research paper on any relevant topic of your choosing (15-18 pp.) We will have individual conferences in my office after I have read your abstracts. Papers will not be due until Tuesday, 10 December at 5:00, electronically or in my mailbox. However, students will give 20-minute oral presentations in class on 19 November and 3 December. 50%