

Corners in the City of God



Corners in the City of God

Theology, Philosophy, and *The Wire*

Edited by

JONATHAN TRAN

and MYLES WERNTZ



CASCADE Books • Eugene, Oregon

CORNERS IN THE CITY OF GOD
Theology, Philosophy, and *The Wire*

Copyright © 2013 Wipf and Stock Publishers. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: Permissions, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401.

Cascade Books
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

ISBN 13: 978-1-60899-851-7

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Corners in the city of God : theology, philosophy, and The Wire / edited by Jonathan Tran and Myles Werntz.

X + Y p. ; 23 cm. Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 13: 978-1-60899-851-7

1. 2. 3. I.

CALL NUMBER 2013

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction ix

Part I: **Prologue**

- 1 The Church in *The Wire*: Prophetic Witness as a Prop
in Urban America 3
—JAMES H. COSTON
- 2 Living on Set: A Year Spent Living and Working
in Baltimore City 17
—WHITNEY JOHNSON
- 3 “Way Down in the Hole”: Systemic Urban Inequality
and *The Wire* 31
—ANMOL CHADDHA and WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON

Part II: **Encountering *The Wire***

- 4 Marlo’s City of Words: Tempting a Natural Theology of
Language 59
—JONATHAN TRAN
- 5 Sexual Communication and Institutional Dysfunction
in *The Wire* 76
—DAVID MATZKO MCCARTHY
- 6 Realism and Utopia in *The Wire* 95
—FREDRIC JAMESON

7 “This Is Me”: Ronald Pryzbylewski, Mis-Performance, and Transformation in *The Wire* 109

—BRIAN BANTUM

8 Down in the Hole: Melancholy, Vulnerability, and the Puncturing of Black Masculinity 128

—JOSEPH WINTERS

Part III: **Engaging *The Wire***

9 The Ethics of Counter-Insurgency in *The Wire* 147

—JACOB L. GOODSON

10 Keeping the Devil Down: The Church on *The Wire* 174

—NEKEISHA ALEXIS-BAKER

11 Depravity and Hope in the City: Karl Barth in Conversation with *The Wire* 191

—KEITH L. JOHNSON

12 On Naming the Work of God: Ecclesiological Witness and Theological Transformation in *The Wire* 210

—MYLES WERNITZ

13 “It Don’t Matter that Some Fool Say He Different . . .”: The Pretense of Frank Sobotka’s Self-Sacrifice 230

—JOSEPH WIEBE

14 Earthly Peace in the Halls of City Schools 249

—PETER BOUMGARDEN and KRISTEN DEEDE JOHNSON

Part IV: **Life after *The Wire***

15 The Communication of the Nameless 269

—DANIEL COLUCCIELLO BARBER

16 *The Wire*, Or, What to Do in **Non-evental** Times 285

—SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Introduction

BETWEEN 2002 AND 2008 the HBO series *The Wire* offered television audiences a dystopic vision of modern-day Baltimore, a city caught between promise and peril, replete with complex characters remanded to the forgotten corners of America's beleaguered experiment with democracy. The series was named "the best show on television" (*Philadelphia Daily News*, *Salon*, *London Guardian*, *Time*), winning Peabody, Broadcast, and Cable Critics awards, and was nominated for Emmys as well as NAACP Image and Edgar awards. Deemed "too Black for America," the show's sustained critique of late capitalism meant that its popularity never quite matched its critical acclaim.¹ Over five seasons, the series explored the crowded intersections of poverty, drugs, sexuality, urban crime, law enforcement, race, local government, business, public education, and the media. Subtly adding nuances every episode and each season, creator David Simon and the writers of *The Wire* eventually produced one of the most ambitious projects entertainment media has ever witnessed: "We were always planning on moving further and further out, to build a whole city."² The breadth of the show's relational and institutional matrix borders on the brilliant and gives its viewers a glimpse inside the complexities of contemporary urban life.

Augustine of Hippo, nearly two millennia ago, similarly offered an account of cities—the earthly city of man and the heavenly city of God. Augustine narrated the political realities of his day by mapping Roman culture onto the eschatological kingdom of God that he believed the church proleptically, though imperfectly, embodied. While his political masterpiece *De Civitate Dei's* extolment of the heavenly city came with invectives against the practices and presumptions of the earthly city, Augustine understood his task as articulating the possibilities for sanctified desire in the pilgrim

1. On this criticism, see Danielsen, "The Wire: Too Black, Too Strong?"
2. Quoted in Talbot, "Stealing Life."

cities of the temporal kingdom. Augustine thought he was calling Rome to its better self.

The Wire beautifully dramatizes the earthly city's pilgrimage in time. With its disordered loves and powerful impulses toward good, the Baltimore of *The Wire* displays desire as an urban landscape where hope dies and is born again on every corner. The death and rebirth of hope finds expression in chalked bodies and the dogged presence of children in a world where kids die too often. Not surprisingly, homicide detectives are given as the city's caretakers, as if meaning might be found in the austere narrative of the police procedural. Yet, when murder cases lead only to more murder cases, meaning gives way to larger questions and the dawning sense that something is deeply wrong, not simply with Baltimore or inner-city America but America as such, the inner city an unfortunate miner's canary of the American dream, and maybe even the ritual sacrifice that makes for its possibility.

This volume tries to give voice to this sense of something being wrong, terribly so, but also to capacities for wonder even amidst terribly wrong conditions. It does so by reflecting (theologically, philosophically, and with whatever resources still salvageable) on *The Wire* and the questions the show provokes, though with only the space and energy to answer a meager handful; it is the nature of the show's genius to raise more questions than can be addressed, which is both the show's virtue and its burden.

The structure of this volume consists of four parts. The first part offers three autobiographical perspectives that orient as well as disorient the reader as the authors seek to dislodge certain assumptions while calling forth attention to the city in new ways. The second part lays out thematic concerns permeating the show. Using the resources of theology and philosophy to diagnose and describe themes of structural inequity, power, and identity, the authors of these essays examine the show using specific conceptual lenses. The third part moves beyond diagnosis to engagement, once again using theological and philosophical tools to explore particular issues raised by *The Wire*. The final part, rather than offering a conclusion that neatly "solves" *The Wire*, sends the reader back out again with greater appreciation for the complexities of the world in which we find ourselves, challenged by its peril and emboldened by its promise.

The first part (Prologue) offers three autobiographical selections that reflect on the disorienting experience of living in places like Baltimore. Reverend James H. Coston's essay relates the story of someone who spent a decade in Trenton, New Jersey, as both a pastor and city council member. His essay, which describes the institutional dysfunction of a city unable to come to terms with its problems, examines *The Wire's* depiction of the church

and offers the perspective of one whose voice is largely silent in *The Wire*: the pastor. Whitney Johnson's essay tells the story of a woman who lived in Baltimore for a year as an Americorps volunteer and still struggles to name the ways that living in Baltimore's East Side still lives with her. Rounding out this opening section of the volume, a previously published essay by Drs. Anmol Chadhha and William Julius Wilson offers a descriptive account of the systemic inequalities that contribute to the difficulty of altering deep-seated social inequalities portrayed in *The Wire*.

The second group of essays (Encountering *The Wire*) moves beyond observing the events of the show's Baltimore and directly engages thematic issues that permeate the show. In Jonathan Tran's essay, the show's violence is framed as tempting a certain view of the incarnation which Tran resists by appealing to Wittgenstein's account of language as ordinary and therefore available to God's presence. David Matzko McCarthy's essay argues that *The Wire*'s highly sexualized language expresses certain power dynamics, and that coming to terms with the language means coming to terms with these power dynamics. McCarthy insists that power is communicated by language, specifically naming, which creates pathways for relational corruption. Frederic Jameson's republished essay casts *The Wire* as struggling for place along the spectrum of realism and utopianism. In Brian Bantum's essay, the figure of Roland "Prez" Pryzbylewski is seen as embodying the show's possibilities for moral transformation; as Prez transitions from cop to teacher, Bantum asks the question of what it means for transformation to occur and what, theologically speaking, transformation leaves undone. By looking at the ways in which racial and gender identity are formed and deformed in the lives of the Barksdale criminal organization, Joseph Winter's essay examines how *The Wire* scripts personhood.

From the second to the third part (Engaging *The Wire*), we turn from description to prescription regarding particular questions the show raises. Jacob L. Goodson starts things off by questioning whether locutions like "the war on drugs" condition conversations about America's drug problems in discursively disastrous ways. Joseph Wiebe's essay explores the role of sacrifice in social change, as seen in the problematic and tragic figure of Frank Sobotka, a sorry character who exemplifies the effort to remain human amidst Baltimore's equally sorry institutions. In his essay, Keith L. Johnson offers an account of human corruption, encountered so forcefully in *The Wire*, using Reformed theologian Karl Barth's construal of sin and the powers. Nekeisha Alexis-Baker's essay challenges the impotence of *The Wire*'s church with her own description of on-the-ground initiatives taken by actual Baltimore churches, offering a more hopeful picture of the church's faithfulness. Myles Werntz's essay follows by accounting for *The Wire*'s

dismissive view of the church by offering an alternative vision for Christian ethical engagement. In an essay by Kristen Johnson and Peter Boumgarden, the decaying education system is subjected to an Augustinian analysis, exploring the ways in which justice is sought for the students of Baltimore and the reasons justice seems permanently out of reach. For Johnson and Boumgarden, ordering a society rightly requires not only rightly aligning educational access, but ordering the soul as well.

The final part (Life after *The Wire*) backs out of *The Wire* mindful of how *The Wire* has changed our theological and philosophical presumptions. Daniel C. Barber's essay explores what "religion" means after *The Wire*. For Barber, the show's relative absence of religion may indicate that we have misunderstood what it means for religion to be present. And in a previously published essay, Slavoj Žižek uses a materialist understanding of religion to consider how *The Wire* helps viewers deal with life in what he calls "non-evental" times.

Throughout these essays, the reader will find themselves challenged by both the ways theology offers new lenses for seeing the world of *The Wire* and the ways *The Wire* reveals theology's gaze in need of correction. The issues explored in this volume, though provoked by a television series, are issues of flesh and bone and of soul and spirit. Every city, whether it be Baltimore or Waco, Texas, remains *in via* and so suffers the practices and presumptions of the earthly city, as Augustine put it two millennia ago. On corners all along the way, pilgrims claiming citizenship elsewhere set up shop in hopes of bearing witness to another city.

A brief word about the format for the references to episodes of *The Wire* that appear throughout the essays in this volume: the season number is listed first, indicated by the letter S, followed by the episode number indicated by the letter E. Authors have included episode names either in the essay text or in the footnote at their discretion.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Danielsen, Shane. "The Wire: Too Black, Too Strong?" *The Guardian*, July 21, 2008. Online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/tvandradioblog/2008/jul/21/thewire/tooblacktoostrong>.
- Talbot, Margaret. "Stealing Life: The Crusader behind *The Wire*." *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2007. Online: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/22/071022fa_fact_talbot.

4

Marlo's City of Words

Tempting a Natural Theology of Language

JONATHAN TRAN

THE INCARNATION TEMPTS US to think we have God in a way we don't. The temptation is a uniquely metaphysical one, where God's revelation in Christ is taken as authorizing our life in words, and if not authorizing at least constraining what words might otherwise mean. God in Christ as the verbalization of the divine mind, we think, tells us what God is or is not (God, for example, does not answer to human bidding) and so Christian use of "God" cannot go anywhere (by "God" for example we don't mean someone who answers to human bidding). Then one of the tasks of theology is to discover what that verbalization, ensconced as it is in scripture, must imply metaphysically (metaphysics subsequent to scripture's grammar in the order of theological investigation). This is all straightforward enough. The pull comes when the giving of the one Word is seen as authorizing all words, as if God in Christ as revelation of the divine mind tells us something essential about cats on mats or brains in vats (if cats and brains exist anywhere, the thinking goes, they first exist in God's mind and only secondarily on mats and in vats). Here the notion is that one word serves as the key to all words. This notion is predicated on the idea that a word means just one thing (or just a few things) and that one thing is decoded by Christ. If what a cat or a brain *is* is what it is in the divine mind, then the Word gives access to the

divine and by correspondence access to the essence of cats or brains. Here is a picture of language as encoded and Christ as cypher; figure out the cypher and you figure out what all other words mean, delimiting the possibilities of how one might appropriately use them.

This is important because linguistic use conditions human life. The possibilities of one's language are the possibilities of one's world. Without some constraint on what a word can mean, the tempting notion continues, we lack the capacity to delimit human speech and therefore human action (human speech and human action rendering each other intelligible). And here is where a certain fantasy of the incarnation cashes out. Insofar as Christ as cypher maps onto all words, that Word can then be used to judge what other words mean. We freely admit that without something like divine revelation language and interpretation go on and on. Since the meaning of a word is determined by use there is no telling where or how far from the familiar our language will stray, what a word might come to mean; we might be able to say what a use has derived *from* (the natural history of a word, as in "we used to mean this by this word") but not what it will derive *to*. And so it is for words, where "God" can be made to mean just about anything (well, as far as the grammar of one's scripture allows, which taking Christian scripture as an example can be quite a ways). And so too with other words—cats, brains, love, history, and so on. We find ourselves flummoxed by the range of linguistic derivation and think we have found in Christ a stopgap to derivation and so think we can use Christ to get behind words and then proclaim and then protest, "This is what 'God' means and so your use of 'God' is not authorized!" And so on with cats, brains, love, and history.

I am concerned in this essay with resisting this temptation by arguing that neither the doctrine of the incarnation works this way nor do words. I make this argument by rejecting not the notion that the Word *can* have a controlling relationship on all our words (that after all is what Christians call discipleship) but that it *necessarily* does; but first I dismantle the fantasy that the incarnation gives God into our hands, that we so possess God in Christ that we are given handles on human language. If anything, Christ is cypher not for what words mean but how words work. The working out of language is such that the Word *can* be made to rule other words, not that it has too. If, and this is critical, it was the case that human language relied on God for its authority, then the incarnation would be redundant; that it was not redundant is shown in the features of its history, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The tortured drama of Christ's (and Israel's) history exemplifies how language works, where words can come to mean anything and only as such does the Word become flesh and make its home among us; it then becomes (became) up to us to figure out what that word means

(meant). As such is language available to us, and God. I want to say that if not for language working just this way, the Word would not be the Word for us; we certainly could not do to him what we did; he certainly would not have become for us what he has. It is only because words can be made to mean anything that the enjoining of Christian words to the Word proves so momentous (the church being the momentous if provisional occasion of the Word's reign). The wonder of the incarnation is precisely that God submits himself to the derivations of human speech, deriving what we took "God" and "human" to mean (and hence what "cat," "brain," "love" and "history" *can* come to mean). To get to this, I need first describe what the incarnation tempts, as I do below by considering how the violence confronted in *The Wire* tempts a natural theology of language. By a natural theology of language I mean the sense Rowan Williams has about how we tend to respond to the facts of language, facts I have described as derivation. The unbearable facts of language make us wish for an essence of words similar to how the slippery facts of life make natural theologians seek after the essence of things ostensibly available in nature. I turn to Williams in a bit, after first discussing *The Wire's* violence in terms of commitments shared with ordinary language philosophy.

MARLO'S CITY OF WORDS

The Wire is a show of unspeakable violence. It is the kind of violence (picture the show's only true hero, Omar, his brains splattered on a wall, shot dead by a random twelve-year old) most people lack words for; except for empty gestures (imagine suburban pontifications on the evils of the inner city) they would not know how to speak about it. When people speak of such violence as "meaningless," what they mean is that it is hard for them to imagine the violence as part of a coherent moral universe that would render it defensible and therefore meaningful, even responsible, inspirational, and enjoyable. Again, certain thinned out descriptions of violence seek to opine in this direction but can venture only the most abstract speculations. When the reality of urban violence is confronted (*The Wire*) and the splattered aspects of violence come to the fore, pontification gives way to ascriptions of meaninglessness. And this is the way it should be; we should not be able to speak well of *The Wire's* violence; it is a virtue of society that it does not know what to say when confronted by it. Our speechlessness in these moments tells us that our moral universe has reached its limit, telling us our moral universe remains intact. No moral universe should be able to comprehend everything.

The difficulty with a show like *The Wire* is that, apparently, some moral universes do allow such things. I said *The Wire* portrays violence *most* people lack words for. But what about those whose words prove adequate for this violence, words that sound like ours but are used so very differently, used to make acts of violence defensible and hence meaningful, even responsible, inspirational, and enjoyable? What about those whose language extends far beyond ours on the scale of allowable possibilities? What about those who call acts of egregious violence “love” or use “God” to authorize what we otherwise consider apathetic or godless? What do we do then? To what are we tempted in such moments? What do we do when faced with monsters?

Marlo Stanfield, the chief antagonist of *The Wire*'s final three seasons, is a monster, in the words of the show's writers, “terrifying in every way . . . a psychopath: devoid of the capacity for empathy, without restraint in exploitation and cruelty.”¹ The creators of *The Wire* intended as much. David Simon says of Marlo, “He represented the ultimate totalitarian impulse—beyond money, beyond power or the exercise of power for its own sake, but instead that strange combination of self-love and self-loathing that rarely dares speak its name openly.”² Part of what makes Marlo a terrifying personality in the show and a dominating figure in its fictional Baltimore is the inevitability with which he carries his power. Unlike those groping after power (from the local corner boys to the city's political players), Marlo wields power with a degree of frightful casualness that is unique among television characters in recent memory. We never see him angry or even emotionally invested; he does not need to carry weapons or raise his voice; he never utters a threat and yet comes off as the show's most threatening character. Unlike fellow criminals Avon Barksdale or Stringer Bell, the character of Marlo Stanfield elicits no sympathy; he is a sociopath who operates at a level of brazen nonchalance. Dennis Lehane, writer of the episode “Refugees,” which I discuss momentarily, said of him:

Marlo is very de-human. That's different than subhuman which suggest an evolutionary disconnect or an insult in regard to intelligence. Marlo is exceptionally intelligent and in an evolutionary sense he's Machiavelli's ideal . . . he's been dehumanized to the point where he's incapable of understanding why he should care about anyone or anything that doesn't enrich his bottom line. Where other characters on the show had a lot of flesh—I'm talking about everyone from Omar to Bunk to McNulty, even Bodie—Marlo is practically Stalinist in his lack of it. That makes

1. Alvarez, *The Wire: Truth Be Told*, 476.

2. *Ibid.*, 333.

him all the more terrifying. It's hard to expect mercy from someone you can't imagine telling a joke or having a mother.³

Marlo, with his slight persona, preppy pastel polos, and mild voice, is the show's least imposing criminal, a jagged scar the only hint of menace.

In a scene early in the fourth season, Marlo enters a local convenience store. This one has private security. As is the case here, the people employed to provide security for these businesses are no less desperate than those who would rob them. "Rent-a-cops" play an unfortunate role in the power matrix of inner city Baltimore, despised for policing one's own people while never attaining the transcending power and respect of real police. They stand in as capitalism's laughable attempt at imposing traditional markets on the city. Marlo, the kingpin of West Baltimore, will have none of it, and while he could easily afford it, intentionally steals candy *so that* the security guard can see, in order to let the hired security guard know who's in charge, who actually runs the store and the city. As Marlo nonchalantly walks out of the store the security guard follows him.

Security Guard: What the fuck? You think I dream of coming to work up in this shit on a Sunday morning? Tell all my friends what a good job I got? I'm working to support a family, man. [After Marlo turns away] Pretend I ain't talking to you. Pretend like I ain't even on this earth. [Marlo coolly makes eye contact after shamelessly putting the stolen candy in his mouth] I know what you are. And I ain't stepping to, but I am a man. And you just clip that shit and act like you don't even know I'm there.

Marlo: I don't.

Security Guard: [After moving to stand directly in front of Marlo] I'm here. [Now Marlo steps forward so that the two are only inches apart] Look, I told you I wasn't stepping to you. I ain't disrespecting you, son.

Marlo: You want it to be one way.

Security Guard: What?

Marlo: You want it to be one way.

Security Guard: Man, I don't know what you're –

Marlo: You want it to be one way.

3. Ibid., 322–3

Security Guard: Man, stop. [A finger pointed at Marlo] Stop saying that.

Marlo: But it's the other way.

Marlo's enforcers Chris and Snoop pull up and without making eye contact, Marlo gets in and is driven away. Marlo's flippant authority is chilling; the security guard will later be killed by Chris and Snoop for "talking back." The scene is remarkably frustrating. Viewers identify with the security guard, coming face to face with our impotence, our inability to do anything, faced as we are with the lame choice between turning a blind eye or getting killed for a trifle (candy).

We want it one way. We want the basic laws of human decency to apply or at least the rule of law. We want for the barest of local economies to sustain themselves, for those courageous enough to brave work for their families to get back to those families. We want the rich not to steal from the poor. We want stealing to bear the marks of purpose (to feed a family or make one rich). We want for killing to be necessary, and if necessary, coupled with some measure of regret, if only regret for the necessity of killing. We want it one way. But it's another way. In Baltimore, where corruption and political ambition serve one another, there is no one to whom we might appeal to tell us how things ought to be even if it isn't always that way. We want at least to know it should be this other way. Marlo **tell** us, "You want it to be one way. But it's the other way." The other way is what *The Wire* so powerfully portrays. There are of course many ways, as many ways as ways of speaking about the world, and I am interested in the way in which Marlo's ways are made familiar, how the unspeakable is made speakable, how violence becomes ordinary.

Season 4 starts with Snoop walking through Home Depot. Snoop and Chris serve as the main enforcers of the Marlo Stanfield criminal organization. In previous seasons, Marlo's gang beat out rivals primarily by a willingness to perpetrate its criminal activities at a level of audacity and violence unmatched by previous generations of drug dealers. In Chris and the androgynous Snoop, the drug trade has gone off the rails of anything approaching morality. The Stanfield gang operates at a level of extraordinary violence, making for an extraordinary moral universe. And yet we find Snoop shopping at Home Depot, the most ordinary of places. Specifically, she is considering the Dewalt cordless nail gun.

Snoop: The trouble is you leave it in the trunk for a while and you need to step and use the bitch, the battery don't hold up, you know?

Salesman: Yeah. Cordless will do that. You might want to consider the power-actuated tool. The Hilti 460 MX or the Simpson PTP.

Taking Snoop for a local contractor rather than a murderous enforcer with “about five just last month,” the salesman goes on to pitch power tools he extols as “my Cadillacs.” When he begins on the Hilti’s light recoil, Snoop throws him for a loop:

Snoop: Man, shit. I seen a tiny-ass .22 round-nose drop a nigga plenty of days, man. Motherfuckers get up in you like a pinball, rip your ass up. Big-joints though, big joints, man, just break up your bones, you say “Fuck it.”

After paying the salesman \$800 cash for the \$669 Hilti, Snoop says, “You earned that buck like a motherfucker. Keep that shit.” The scene is comic, a hilarious collision of Snoop’s extraordinary gang world with the ordinary culture of Home Depot (or is it Home Depot that is extraordinary? which one serves as the common, the baseline?). Until we realize what the nail gun is purchased for. Talking to enforcer partner Chris, Snoop jokes about the nail gun’s many features, “This here is gunpowder-activated, .27 caliber, full auto, no kickback, nail-throwing mayhem, man. Shit right here is tight. Fuck just nailing up boards. We could kill a couple motherfuckers with this right here.” We discover what Snoop means by “nailing up boards” when Chris and Snoop murder people and hide their bodies in the walls of abandoned homes, using the nail gun to seal the makeshift mausoleum.

In one scene Chris and Snoop are about to murder someone. As the victim begs for his life, the two methodically cover him in plastic and quicklime, Chris calmly assures the victim, “Quick and clean, I promise.” When the victim vomits from fear, Chris and Snoop look at each other exasperation, as if imminent murder should not warrant so much drama. (Right before Snoop is later executed she asks with equal detachment, “How’s my hair look?”) By the time the police discover the ploy, the vacant neighborhood has become a macabre cemetery, bodies literally coming out of the walls. The abandoned homes prove the perfect place to dispose of victims exactly because the buildings are visible but abandoned—“We got vacants on both sides. He’ll stink is all”—a convenience made possible by neglect, serving the show’s ongoing commentary about the desperately ordinary violence of American urban life.

By ordinary violence, I mean the shocking violence that occurs within ordinary everyday places where we expect the absence of violence (in neighborhoods where children play, at Home Depot, in convenience stores) but

more so the philosophical sense, what some have called ordinary language philosophy following Wittgenstein's attempt to return words from their metaphysical to their everyday home. One guiding sense there is that the meaning of a word is its use, and so that the rule, or criterion, for a word's or an utterance's right use is none other than that which the users of that language establish and maintain. Claiming that words don't have meanings detachable from use might suggest a certain rulelessness to language, as if language lacked grammar. It is the opposite, that language is ruled by none other than grammar and grammar is not ruled by God (in contrast to Nietzsche's instructively askew dictum that as long as we have grammar we will have God). This is not at all to say that language cannot speak about God (obviously it does) nor that God cannot be present to human language (Jews, Christians, and Muslims think it obvious that God is), but only that humans rule language, grant it its sense, authorize its use. So if we take the basic claim that words and utterances have their meaning by way of use, that the criteria that rule a language are granted and governed by those who share the language in common, then we have come to terms with the fact that language can go as far as its use and that a word can go any way we use it. Again, this is not to say that anything is correct, for certainly a community's grammar can rule out a use (we rule in partly by ruling out); only that anything can be correct, that anything can be ruled into a grammar or out of it, that anything *can* be made to mean anything (that some things mean some things at all tells us this). To be sure we tend to use words reflective of the kinds of lives we live and the things such lives cause us to think and care about and so while use is conventional, convention is natural (to the lives we live) rather than arbitrary. Words can come to mean anything, but the process by which new uses are derived is as thick as biography. Another way to put this is to say that grammars and meanings are constitutive of the lives of those who share those languages.

There is no essential limit to one's language and therefore one's world except that which is natural for one's community to talk about and natural to the commitments certain ways of speaking commit one *to*. Taking all of this, violence can be understood as an utterance of language, a kind of speech. The implications here can be unsettling. As Sandra Laugier writes, "We have not yet understood, or we have quickly forgotten, the original point of departure for analytic philosophy, the linguistic turn, and we have not understood or have forgotten what it *means* to be interested in language."⁴ To be so interested in language is to be interested in those who

4. Laugier, "Rethinking the Ordinary," 84. Emphasis original.

order its ways, to pursue language is to fall back on ourselves. Consider this comment from Stanley Cavell:

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. . . . Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.⁵

Again, “ordinary” indicates not so much the commonplace or common sense as much as this manner in which a word’s use is determined by criteria maintained by us. And so it is we who determine (and discover) what we mean by “good” or “evil,” we who set the criteria for what is to be identified as “good” or “evil.” By returning words from their metaphysical to their everyday uses, Wittgenstein meant to return to us the maintenance of language, or more precisely, sought to return *us* to its maintenance, hoping we might come to terms with our language, come to terms with ourselves (our words speak us as much as we speak them—Herbert McCabe adds the important point that words grow and we grow into our words).⁶ What is a nail gun for? What is the criterion by which we assess its use? Well, it is not so simple as deciphering the purpose for which it was made, for who can determine such things as intentions and how far those reasons should carry (we may want it one way; someone else, another way). A good many things come to us without purpose; there is often no point where intention comes into view; our use imbues things with purpose. As examples, though we might get away with asking, “For what use was the nail gun made?” it would not be so easy to ask, “What is the proper use of money?” and nonsensical to question, “What is the point of jealousy?” In adjudicating right use of a nail gun, we are thrown back on Chris and Snoop and their uses. Now we could disqualify Chris and Snoop from its maintenance (this has been deemed as a reason for prison) but such a move only furthers the point, that we return to us as the givers of criteria. Hence, by “ordinary” I mean the “we” of attunement in language. To underscore how far derivation can migrate, consider these reflections on the Partition of India and Pakistan and its many violences, about which the anthropologist Veena Das writes,

5. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 52.

6. McCabe, *Law, Love and Language*, 18.

[I]t is because the range and scale of the human that is tested and defined and extended in the disputations proper to everyday life move through the unimaginable violence of the Partition into forms of life that are seen as not belonging to life proper. That is to say, these experiments with violence raise certain doubts about life itself, and not only about the *forms* it could take. Was it a man or a machine that plunged a knife into the private parts of a woman after raping her? Were those men or animals that went around killing and collecting castrated penises as signs of their prowess? These are not, however, simply places of doubt about the human—for the terror of the violation of the Partition was precisely that victims *knew* their perpetrators to be human: that is what puts life itself into question . . . The precise range and scale of the *human* form of life is not knowable in advance, any more than the precise range of the meaning of a word is knowable in advance . . . What I found compelling in my relations with Manjit [a victim of the Partition that Das comes to befriend in her research] was her recognition that her violation was of an order that the whole principle of life stood violated and that to put it back into words could not be done except with extreme hesitation.⁷

The situating of violence into normal patterns of life, its normalization, occurs through linguistic impartation; when we begin to speak thus, things have been made possible for us, and when we speak again and again about it, the abnormal has been made normal. *The Wire* portrays how violence has been instilled in the regular patterns of life by ensconcing itself in regular speech. In discussing everyday violence and death, anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes speaks of trying to “uncover and call attention to forms and spaces of hitherto unrecognized, gratuitous and useless social suffering by referring to them as invisible genocides and small holocausts.” Scheper-Hughes offers a depiction eerily similar to Chris and Snoop’s makeshift mausoleum: “The paradox is that they are not invisible because they are secreted away and hidden from view, but quite the reverse. As Wittgenstein noted, the things that are hardest to perceive are often those which are right before our eyes and therefore simply taken for granted.”⁸ This paradox of visibility and invisibility gets to the heart of what Scheper-Hughes intimates by these invisible and small events that take place so near us (nothing is nearer to us than our speech, and nothing so hidden as that secreted in what

7. Das, *Life and Words*, 90, 92. Emphasis original.

8. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “Small Wars and Invisible Genocides,” 889. Matthew Whelan pointed me in Scheper-Hughes’ direction.

we say). Chris and Snoop are exasperated by their victims' terror because for them murdering people and burying their bodies in abandoned homes occur "as if they were the most normal and expected behaviors."⁹ The writers of the show tell of "how cheap life can be out there" as "people die over stupid shit." Speaking of Omar's death, Lehane says, "There's zero nobility in it. That's the street."¹⁰

It is helpful to examine the conditions under which linguistic—and therefore, imaginative—change occurs. On the one hand, language change occurs constantly if not noticeably. According to linguist John McWhorter, "To be a language, then, is to be a mess, and the only question is to what extent. As you might suppose, irregularity decreases to the extent that adult learners have smoothed it out over time. This means that a hideous amount of irregularity is, like an equal amount of ingrownness, the default state of language."¹¹ On the other hand, intense cultural circumstances put pressures on language to meet the descriptive needs of its speakers, making change more rapid and noticeable. Studying gang and drug culture in Harlem, anthropologist Phillippe Bourgois summarizes, "In the particular case of the United States, the concentration of social marginalized populations into politically and ecologically isolated inner-city enclaves has fomented an especially explosive cultural creativity that is in defiance of racism and economic marginalization."¹² Language serves everyday life, and if one's everyday involves regular violence, language will serve life by giving it place within the common parlance. Of course this has a circular effect; insofar as language is available, so then will be the practices imagined in that language. The unimaginable becomes routinized through language, which isn't to say that unimaginable violence becomes imaginable to everyone, just everyone who speaks that way. Hence, the collision of ways: "You want it to be one way. But it's the other way." The point here is not that urban America is more violent than elsewhere; whatever "violent" comes to denote (whatever the criteria for "violent") is determined locally and provisionally, making judgments like "more violent" themselves local and provisional. It is the nature of violence, insofar as "violence" is a word at all, to have a vague (to use Peter Ochs's semiotics) future, even if our retrospective use of the word grants the semblance of certainty.¹³

9. *Ibid.*, 890.

10. Alvarez, 324.

11. McWhorter, *What Language Is*, 73. I am indebted to KC Flynn for this point.

12. Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*, 8, 9.

13. See, for example, Ochs, "Theosemiotics and Pragmatism," 59–81.

What is terrifying about Marlo Stanfield is not that his language plays fast and loose with the world, but precisely that it matches onto the world, that it bespeaks a reality of things we don't want to acknowledge (that violence and speech about violence avail one another). Marlo has worded his city (as we each word our worlds) in his image, and this city, and hence Marlo's moral universe, is not easily dismantled. As Cavell writes, "The conventions which control the application of grammatical criteria are fixed not by customs or some particular concord or agreement which might, without disrupting the texture of our lives, be changed where conveniences suggest a change."¹⁴ Marlo Stanfield's existence would be less frightening if it *were* arbitrary. That it is not, that Marlo is natural to our world, to the human form of *life*, tells us things we don't want to know about ourselves, that the violence he ushers in is not only coherent but natural to the world in which we find ourselves. It is not that Marlo puts it in his head to speak and act in a way different than how others might wish *it* to be, nor the security guard who may, as Marlo rightly surmises, want it "the other way." What terrifies us about Marlo is that while his way is strange to us, it is continuous with a history we find ourselves part of (it is telling that the older drug lords refer to Marlo as "Youngin"). As Cavell writes, "I cannot decide what I take as a matter of course, any more than I can decide what interests me. . . . What I take as a matter of course is not itself a matter of course. It is a matter of history."¹⁵

TEMPTING NATURAL THEOLOGY

I have been saying that *The Wire's* transmutation of language tempts something. I think it makes us wish language didn't work this way, that words were not as pliable to human touch as they are. I am trying to say that this temptation presses in on something about our life in words, that we are tempted out of it, out of life. It is not just the show that tempts us, but the

14. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 110.

15. *Ibid.*, 122–23. Questions as to how accurately *The Wire* portrays "reality" often turn out to be red herrings. The show certainly has been lauded for its "realistic" depiction of urban poverty and violence and for how that depiction raises awareness of the realities of urban poverty and violence. Such appraisals harbor a latent empiricist allure. That is, we can begin to think that reality is the goal (where some people "get it" and some don't), a thought which quickly yields to the regression that something as banal as entertainment television will always miss the mark because it can never capture "what life is really like in the inner city." Hence Cavell referred to film as "a moving image of skepticism" by which he meant that such habits of thought distract from one's responsibility to one's words (meaning what one says) by raising the specter of realism/anti-realism. Cavell, *World Viewed*, 188.

show insofar as it lays bare a temptation for life as other than created, and so tempting a moral life without God.

Working through Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, Rowan Williams identifies this temptation. Williams reads Augustine as figuring epistemology as an issue of desire, such that to understand language is to understand how human creatures (those creatures with language) move about the world as drawn forward by love. Only within this account of desire does it make sense to speak of words, to offer up a view of language only after first having set the context as one of love. Otherwise we might think that what is important about the world can be spoken of outside our relationship to it. According to Williams,

Augustine assumes that "signifying" is a threefold, not a twofold, affair, involving the subject *for* whom signs signify. We cannot miss the point that discussion of signification is also discussion of those beings who are involved in meaning or "intending" or understanding. The distinction between *frui* and *uti* (I.iii) is thus superimposed on the *res-signum* distinction, and will pervade the whole of DDC; it is the means whereby Augustine links what he has to say about language with what he has to say about beings who "mean" and about the fundamentally desirous nature of those beings—a link which is undoubtedly the most original and interesting feature of the treatise.¹⁶

While no sign adequately signifies God as *res* and while God as *res* signifies no further *res*, God as supreme *res* provided his own sign in the divine Word. To understand Williams on this point one needs to understand inadequacy beyond its narrow Platonic scope. The emphasis here is not the basic sense that God exceeds every signification; any theology that majors on God's transcendence and hence the inadequacy of language qua language has ripped the theological notion of transcendence from its conceptual context—it has not only minimized the incarnation but forgotten it altogether. The point about the inadequacy of signs is not that "God" cannot mount up to (is not expansive enough for) all that God is. Casting the incarnation as solving the problem of language's inadequacy would have the theologically fatal effect of denigrating our life in words as if what is important about the incarnation is that it conveys information rather than expresses love. Our words are adequate to our life with God because of God's con-descending availability to them. No sign signifies God not because God is information and our language is not up the task of that

16. Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire," 140. Emphasis original. I am much indebted to Natalie Carnes for many helpful conversations about this essay.

information but because God is the very form of love and love is known in its actuality, the Word made flesh.¹⁷

This is where the superimposition of desire onto the *res-signum* scheme begins to pay off, helping us understand that things are enjoyed insofar as they enthrall us toward final enjoyment and signs signify things in terms of this enjoyment. Williams gives us nothing less than an erotic account of language whereupon words are indexed to human desire such that not only do we have the world through words but the world in terms of our desirous relationship to it. All signs—signs being relays of desire—therefore gesture to God just as all desire ends in God. The incarnation fires the sacramental imagination, rendering the world sign, as this supreme *res* is made sign. To confess the incarnation is to see the world operating in just this way, as replete in its multifarious *res* as divine script, the flesh made word.

Notice, however, that none of this is to deny that creation with full integrity and resounding intelligibility subscribes to and for itself meaning through its respective languages; doing that just is the work of any natural language, the human occupation of wording the world according to desire. It is only that in its desire meaning reaches beyond itself. This point is critical, not something that Williams takes much time to underline but which serves as the basis of his labored distinction between use and usury. It cannot be that the words we use or the concepts we employ have meaning only when they indicate God as supreme *res*; no, such words and concepts have a present unity even if not yet made subject to this final signification. If they did not, critically, they would have no use at all and would have no place in our life in words. If these concepts and words did not already work *for* us, did not already do the work of conceptualizing the world, then they could not do the further work of pointing to God. It is exactly that language works as it does (is available as it is) that it can be made to work for the purpose of revealing God. Only insofar as our words give us the world can they also give us God. It is just that no matter how much our words give us a grip on the world, their futures are through and through vague, continuously opening up to new uses and meanings, and hence continuously opening up new worlds.

There is something unsettling about this. Words that give us the world can also give us God; words that give us the world can also give us monsters. We want it one way but more often it's the other way. And so nails are used to build homes, and they are used to murder and hide bodies. When Marlo's city of words "steps to us" we are tempted by what Williams calls "a 'natural

17. This is not to deny knowledge in the sense of *aedequatio mentis ad rem* but only to underscore knowledge of God as relationally constituted. On this point, see Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite*, 135.

theology' grounded in the facts of language." This temptation goes two ways, both trying to get around language. First, the thought that language's derivation reveals to us God as likewise derivative, with the added effect of rendering the incarnation redundant—i.e., we don't need the incarnation if we can read the same stuff off the surface of our life in words. Second, that despite language's derivation, it is not so hopelessly (and dangerously) open, that there is a ground to it. Both temptations relocate the theological relevance of language away from its unsettling fluidity. The first, harkening on surfaces as it does, claims that what is important about language is not what it gives us (e.g., the world, God, monsters, etc.) but its fluidity as such. The second promises us that at bottom all is solid, rendering fluidity trivial. In both instances the attempt to still the "restless fluidities in meaning" takes us out of life and forfeits the manner in which we might have the world at all, and so God.

Williams helps us understand the temptation by engaging literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman's claim, "There is no absolute knowledge but rather a textual infinite, an interminable web of texts or interpretations." Contending that "no worldly *res* is securely settled as fixed object 'meaning' itself, or tied to in a fixed designation, that no worldly state of affairs can be allowed to terminate human desire, that all that is present to us in and as language is potentially *signum* in respect of the unrepresentable God," Augustine on Williams' reading "certainly has affinities with the popular notion that everything is language."¹⁸ But Williams departs from Hartman, and it is important to note where this departure takes place and what Williams means and doesn't mean by it. For Hartman, there is no key that proves normative for the interpretation of texts, no one text that decodes all other texts. For Williams, there is "the canonical text that witnesses to the canonical (normative) representation, Christ."¹⁹ It is what Williams calls "the definitive sign." Let me consider two divergent ways one can read Williams on his difference with Hartman. This is a crucial point not so much in regards to Williams and Hartman (Christian orthodoxy and contemporary linguistic and literary theory) but more so for my present concern, coming to terms with wanting it one way when it is the other.

18. Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire," 145. Williams quotes from Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 202. By "absolute knowledge" Hartman is referring specifically to Hegel's notion and continues, "the fact that we discern periods or sentences or genres or individual outlines or unities of various kinds is somewhat like computing time. We can insist that time has a beginning and an end; or more modestly, that Romanticism, for example, began circa 1770 and ended 1830; but this is a silly if provoking mimicry of providential or historical determinism" (*ibid.*).

19. Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire," 146.

Williams could be arguing that no matter the range of linguistic possibility (what I have been calling derivation) there is a base of meaning settled before use takes words afield, a center to linguistic range, and a necessary commitment of all grammar. This base, center, and commitment is none other than God and at the incarnation God gave what Williams caricatures as “a breakthrough into clear metaphysical knowledge” that rescues language from the realm of infinite derivation and interpretation from infinite regression. Because Christ anchors language as its base, center, and commitment, all language not only points to God in Christ, but God through Christ grounds all language. How this anchoring works can be worked out in any number of suggestive arrangements that we need not get into here. The important point is that whereas Hartman thinks language can go anywhere Williams, on this reading, thinks that the doctrine of the incarnation commits one to language’s metaphysical delimitation. This is one way to read Williams’ (Christianity’s) difference with Hartman.

I take Williams conversely, as challenging the likes of Hartman but in the opposite direction, not by showing forth an anchor to language such that Hartman and Marlo Stanfield go too far, but by unleashing language from any one base, center, or commitment, such that Hartman and Marlo stop too short. This has to do with what one thinks animates language’s derivation. Hartman bases the derivation of language on language qua language whereas Williams bases the derivation of language on human desire for God’s infinite triune life. The problem with any account of language fixed on finite affairs (language qua language) is that it settles in finite political arrangements; it simply is not up to the task of its projected infinitude (Hartman’s “textual infinity”) precisely because it will repeatedly settle for finite desire (a basic Augustinian claim). Marlo wants it one way, but there are other ways. When another way “steps to” Marlo he is killed; this will happen whenever one speaks the world differently in a city of words that allows no “talking back.”

Another way, one that properly respects God’s infinitude, has been given. It is the life of the one who properly signified that life in his very body (a genuine textual infinite) first in his carnal fleshy body and then the body of the church that continues as sign of this supreme *res* made flesh. In being so given, the divine Word is given to human wording and hence is called variously “Emmanuel,” “drunkard and glutton,” “Messiah,” “Beelzebub,” “King of the Jews,” and so on and so forth. Submitted to our wording of the world, Christ—what Williams describes as “the central displacement of fixed concepts”—is killed; this will happen whenever one speaks the world differently in a city of words that allows no “talking back.” God speaks again

and rewords the world in a syntax of resurrection, though some remain in their city of words, for it is the nature of words to allow every possibility.

For Christians the giving of the one supreme *res* in Christ reinterprets all language as infinite desire for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, making that which comes through language beyond possession. Marlo is to viewers of *The Wire* as the security guard is to Marlo, something wished not there. Which is to say we sometimes wish God not there when indeed God is as close to us as our words. Christ is the sign of the supreme *res*, and so the sign of the unpossessable God (demonstrating in the form of this sign that we have been given God in Christ and yet can never possess God in Christ). Williams says it best: "Wisdom elects to be mortal; and what prevents this from being a straightforward theophany that would lead us to *identify* Wisdom with the world of mortality is that it is precisely *mortality* itself, limit, incompleteness, absence, that is the speech of Wisdom with us."²⁰

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alvarez, Rafael. *The Wire: Truth Be Told*. New York: Grove, 2009.
- Bourgois, Phillippe. *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Cavell, Stanley. *The Claim of Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- . *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- . *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. Enlarged ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Das, Veena. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
- Griffiths, Paul. *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009.
- Hartman, Geoffrey H. *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.
- Laugier, Sandra. "Rethinking the Ordinary: Austin after Cavell." In *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, edited by Russell B. Goodman, 82–99. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- McCabe, Herbert. *Law, Love and Language*. New York: Continuum, 2003.
- McWhorter, John. *What Language Is (And What It Isn't and What It Could Be)*. New York: Gotham, 2011.
- Ochs, Peter. "Theosemiotics and Pragmatism." *Journal of Religion* 72 (1992) 59–81.
- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. "Small Wars and Invisible Genocides." *Social Science & Medicine* 43 (1993) 339–900.
- Williams, Rowan. "Language, Reality, and Desire in Augustine's *De Doctrina*." *Theology & Literature* 3 (1989) 138–50.

20. *Ibid.*, 149.