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Linda Williams, *On The Wire*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 280 pp.

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Like so many of us, Linda Williams binge-watched *The Wire*. When ill, she consumed all five seasons in just a few weeks, and she began *On The Wire* in order to understand her compulsion to keep watching (2). She persuasively argues that *The Wire* is not a modern-day Greek tragedy, as co-creator David Simon described it, but instead a new form of melodrama. As she herself puts it: 'Naturally we want to praise such shows. But must our praise leap to grandiose and hallowed terms seemingly beyond the reach of television or its popular genres just because the work is so uncommonly good?' (80).

On The Wire is most compelling when focused on 'what is conventional about … [*The Wire*]: seriality, televisuality, and melodrama' (3). In regards to seriality, Williams points out that the busyness of the contemporary world has driven the explosion of serials: 'the less time we have, the more time we spend watching in the parcelled out mode of seriality' (48). She grounds her understanding of seriality in the fiction of the late nineteenth century (74), and explains how modern television serials developed out of soap operas (46). The popular form is both easily digestible, yet compellingly complex; seriality enables *The Wire* to 'paradoxically…afford more worlds and longer arcs of storytelling' (74). Williams then uses Michael Newman's ideas about 'beats', which create the 'basic rhythm that drives all scripted television narrative' (68). Williams literally draws a table to demonstrate the similarity in 'beats' between an episode of *The Wire* and Simon's earlier, more network friendly show, *Homicide: Life on the Streets* (64). For Williams, *The Wire* is not unique, just a 'more intense' form of beat grounded, serial entertainment (70). This structural conventionality of *The Wire* is frequently ignored in the highbrow rhetoric used to laud it.

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Williams acknowledges the presence of self-consciously 'tragic' characters—'The falls of Sobotka (season 2) and Bell (season 3) are modern, almost textbook examples of classical Greek tragedy' (99)—but argues that to call the show a tragedy is in fact selling it short. She points to the utopianism that guides *The Wire*; rather than the 'indifferent gods' (104) of tragedy, the political 'dissent' (106) of *The Wire* firmly places it within the melodramatic tradition. Williams also historicises melodrama, claiming that it 'belongs to liberalism's promise of progress' (103), and situates the form as a distinct product of liberal democracy. She also makes grander claims about the role of melodrama in culture, suggesting that 'melodrama is the dramatic convention in which timely social problems and controversies are addressed' (114). *On the Wire* thus persuasively argues that *The Wire* is firmly rooted in melodramatic conventions, and reiterates the important role that the genre has in the popular imagination.

In the final section, Williams explores race in *The Wire*, largely contesting George Lipsitz's criticisms that the show fails to acknowledge the history of racialised housing policies in Baltimore. Building on her previous work on race and melodrama, Williams contends *The Wire* is a work that breaks the black/white binary of popular culture. *The Wire* moves on from what she calls the 'Tom/anti-Tom' paradigm, and is unique in that it is 'one racial melodrama that does not "play the race card"' (176). This section, as with so much of the book, works so well because it assesses *The Wire* as a development within popular culture, rather than something outside of or beyond it. Beyond race, *On the Wire* regularly brings up the problematic depictions of women in the show—and within modern serial melodramas more generally—calling it at one point 'gender-unaware' (176). The topic is so regularly mentioned (161, 166-7, 194) Williams implies that *The Wire* should not just be valorised, and that some facets of the show are downright flawed.

The book does falter slightly in the first chapter, when Williams attempts to elevate Simon's early journalism—via the ideas of ethnographer George Marcus—to ethnography, and argue *The Wire* is the result of Simon's 'very detailed multisited ethnographic knowledge' (27). This section stumbles with its use of 'terms seemingly beyond the reach of television or its popular genres' (80), terminology she purposefully avoids in the rest of the book. However, overall, *On The Wire* is not only an important work for any study of *The Wire*, but is also an important offering for television scholarship. Furthermore, *On The Wire* provides strong analysis of the role of melodrama in society, and establishes an illuminating vocabulary for depictions of race in popular culture.