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"How my hair look?"

Linguistic authenticity and racialized gender and sexuality on *The Wire*

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This article builds on research in queer linguistics and linguistic scholarship on race in the media to examine the semiotic representation of race, gender, and sexuality in *The Wire*, often considered one of the most "authentic" media representations of Blackness. Based on an analysis of the entire series, the article argues that this authenticity effect is partly due to the show's complex African American characters, who reflect a range of gendered and sexual subjectivities. The analysis focuses on three queer Black characters on *The Wire* who are represented as both "authentically queer" in their social worlds and "authentically Black" in their language. However, the semiotic authenticity of the series is linked to its reification of familiar stereotypes of Blackness, especially hyperviolence and hypermasculinity. Thus, these characters both contest and complicate traditional representations of queerness and gender while reinforcing problematic representations of Blackness for its largely white, affluent target audience.

Keywords: African American English, authenticity, Blackness, gender, masculinity, queerness, race, representation, semiotics, television

1. Introduction: Linguistics and queer Blackness

Since the emergence of queer linguistics as a recognized field in the 1990s (Leap 1995, Livia & Hall 1997), researchers of language and sexuality have investigated the linguistic representation of queer sexualities in mediatized cultural products ranging from detective fiction (Livia 1995) to comics (Queen 1997) to television (Baker 2005) to feature film (Morrish & Sauntson 2007) to erotica and pornography (Bolton 1995, Leap 2011). Such research has demonstrated the force of both hegemonic and counterhegemonic ideologies in shaping the queer imaginary for

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in-group viewers as well as a broader consuming public. With several key exceptions, however, such scholarship has primarily examined representations of queer white sexualities, and race has rarely been an object of analysis in its own right.

Conversely, research on Black language and culture has been overwhelmingly focused on heterosexual identities and practices (but see Barrett 1999 for a crucial exception). In part, this absence may reflect a well-intentioned but misplaced overcompensation for the field's racist history of titillating and sensationalistic representations of Black (hetero)sexuality by white scholars (for a critique of such representations, see Morgan 1994: 136–138). But more fundamentally, the near-invisibility and inaudibility of queer Blackness in linguistic scholarship stems from the conundrum of intersectional difference: To be Black and queer is to be (at least) doubly different, hence doubly marginal to most scholarly agendas. In her call for greater attention to intersectionality in sociolinguistics, Sonja Lanehart notes:

> One example of the problem of intersectionality's complexity in […] sociolinguistics can be seen in a problem I encountered while organizing my Spring 2008 African American Women's Language conference. I wanted a researcher who studied Black lesbian language. I couldn't find anyone despite numerous inquiries. This is an example of diversity and intersectionality. "Black Lesbian Language" involved more than one degree beyond "the norm," if we agree or consider that society views the norm as White heterosexual male.
>
> (Lanehart 2009: 6)

To be sure, the marginalization of queer Blackness is by no means unique to linguistics, nor to the academy generally. This issue has been perhaps most widely discussed in relation to popular media representations. Media scholars, commentators, and activists have noted that despite gradual improvement, queer Black characters in narrative television and film remain underrepresented compared to straight Black characters and queer white characters (Gaines 2009, GLAAD 2014, Stephenson 2012), and most of these representations of Blackness are limiting and stereotypical (Cobb & Coleman 2010, Payne 2014).

In this article we examine one complex and partial exception to this general trend: the portrayal of queer African American characters on the television show *The Wire*. The analysis builds on our previous studies of cross-racial appropriations of Blackness in Hollywood film (Bucholtz 2011a, Bucholtz & Lopez 2011, Lopez 2009, 2014), in which gross racial stereotypes are frequently exploited. Our work on such films demonstrates that in entertainment media, African American linguistic and cultural practices are often deployed as semiotic resources for reproducing entrenched racialized ideologies of gender and sexuality. The present study instead focuses on African American actors portraying African American characters in a television show which is widely acclaimed for its authenticity and which for the

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most part avoids the crudest racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes of Hollywood films. Nonetheless, its representational strategies, particularly regarding the queer characters on the show, have been criticized as simplistic and distorted. We argue that *The Wire* simultaneously complicates and reenacts stereotypical representations of both Blackness and queerness by semiotically authenticating its queer African American characters in ways that rely on highly racialized ideologies. Thus even as *The Wire* expands the representational range of African American gendered and sexual identities in popular media, it also reinscribes familiar and deeply problematic racial representations of Blackness for a predominantly white viewing audience.

2. *The Wire* and the authenticity effect

The critical ascendancy of *The Wire* is part of what is often characterized as a new television golden age currently under way, with numerous series around the world drawing praise for pushing past the boundaries of established television conventions. *The Wire*, the most celebrated of these shows, is a Baltimore-based crime drama that ran from 2002 to 2008 on the U.S.-based subscription-only premium cable channel HBO, which caters to a wealthy, mostly European American, audience. During its five-season run, the show expanded from its initial focus on a Baltimore police task force trying to take down the city's top-level drug dealers to eventually offer a broad indictment of the legal system, the global economy, politics, education, and journalism, with particular attention to how these institutions have failed the poor and working classes.

The irony that a show focused on lower-class people of color targeted an affluent white viewership has not been lost on critics and comedians, and the cultural trope of the show as a peculiarly white obsession is widespread: *The Wire* is item number 85 on the humor blog Stuff White People Like, and the white fan base of the series was also satirized on a *Saturday Night Live* skit well after the show had ended.[1] Despite its initial exclusiveness, however, *The Wire* now circulates to a much larger and more diverse audience around the world on DVD as well as via peer-to-peer internet streaming.

1. The relevant blog entry of Stuff White People Like can be found at: http://stuffwhitepeoplelike.com/2008/03/09/85-the-wire/. The *Saturday Night Live* skit, which aired November 12, 2013, can be viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nI0ib11evdU. The discussion of *The Wire* starts around minute 2:44.

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Although *The Wire* earned weak viewer ratings when it originally aired and regularly risked cancellation, it has been called the best television show ever made by a range of media outlets and scholars (e.g. Metcalf 2012, Ross 2013, *The Telegraph* 2009, Vest 2011, Weisberg 2006, Wilde 2007), and no less a luminary than President Barack Obama himself has characterized it as "one of the best shows of all time" (Simmons 2012). *The Wire* has attracted admiring attention not only from fans and media critics but also from scholars. A number of courses on the series have been offered at elite American universities such as Harvard, Duke, and Berkeley (Bennett 2010); in addition, it has been the focus of academic conferences, journal special issues and sections, theses, and scholarly books and articles in disciplines ranging from media studies to urban studies to journalism to law to rhetoric and beyond. The show is frequently praised for its liberal social agenda, its novelistic narrative complexity, and its depiction of a range of characters, especially African Americans, with a depth and nuance rarely seen on television.

Above all else, adulation of *The Wire* focuses on the perceived authenticity of the series, an effect that is created not only through its memorable characters and interweaving narrative strands but also through the immediacy of the show's camerawork and sound editing, its casting of local Baltimore residents rather than professional actors in a variety of roles, and its carefully crafted dialogue, which is rooted in the vernacular of its characters, particularly African American English. We term the semiotic phenomenon that produces this perception of authenticity an *authenticity effect*. That is, authenticity is the result of authenticating practices that are enacted by users of language and other semiotic systems and ratified by those who observe these practices. Recognizing authenticity as a jointly produced semiotic effect shifts the focus of linguistic analysis from efforts to empirically verify the authenticity of some language sample to understanding how authenticity is accomplished for and with particular audiences (Bucholtz 2003, Bucholtz & Hall 2004, Coupland 2003). This issue has emerged as a focus of particular attention in sociolinguistic investigations of media representations of social groups (Stamou 2014), in line with the theorizing of authenticity in literary and cultural studies as a concern stemming from the distinctive conditions of late capitalism (e.g. Cobb 2014, Dussere 2014).

These two different theoretical perspectives on authenticity, as quality and as effect, are evident in the only two published sociolinguistic studies of *The Wire*. The first, by Joe Trotta and Oleg Blyahher (2011), seeks to assess the linguistic accuracy of the show by qualitatively comparing its representations of African American English to patterns reported in previous research on the variety. The authors conclude that the show "presents a high-fidelity, albeit densely packaged, reflection of African-American Vernacular English, with strong regard to both

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grammar and vocabulary" (Trotta & Blyahher 2011: 38). The second study, by Michael Toolan (2011), instead conceptualizes authenticity as an effect. Toolan examines British fans' positive reception of *The Wire* despite what is widely viewed as its "incomprehensible" dialogue due to in-group slang and jargon as well as the African American English phonology of some of the show's characters. He argues, "the attraction is chiefly of a particular kind summarisable, I propose, in terms of realism: the barely comprehensible ways that its characters speak feels 'more real' than the fluent, 'transparent' speech encountered in most previous comparable shows…" (Toolan 2011: 167).[2] This statement acknowledges authenticity as an audience effect rather than an objectively measurable quality of the language itself. Despite their differing perspectives, both of these sociolinguistic studies of *The Wire* clearly demonstrate the authenticating power of language in viewers' reception of the series. However, neither study takes into account the crucial specificities of viewers' racial, class-based, gendered, sexual, linguistic, and national subjectivities in contextualizing such authenticating judgments (see also Lopez & Hinrichs forthcoming).

Indeed, among feminist, queer, and antiracist critics and scholars, response to *The Wire* has been decidedly mixed. On the one hand, the series includes recurring complex queer characters and thus has been read as subverting heteronormativity (e.g. Dhaenens & Van Bauwel 2012, Robbie 2009). Moreover, these characters include, most prominently, three intriguing queer characters of color who contrast sharply with the stereotypical representations and wholesale erasures of Black queerness elsewhere on television. Feminist theorist Patricia Hills Collins, for example, notes that *The Wire* challenges traditional media portrayals in which "Black people could not be homosexual or those Blacks who were homosexual were not 'authentically' Black" (Collins 2005: 106 et passim). On the other hand, *The Wire*'s consistent valorization of hypermasculinity uncritically reproduces racist ideologies of Blackness as inherently masculine while rendering femininity within the series invisible at best, ineffectual or emasculating at worst (e.g. Ault 2012, Steans 2011, Waldron & Chambers 2012; cf. Lopez 2014). As Michael Johnson Jr., a scholar of queer and cultural studies, writes regarding the show's racialized representations of gender and sexuality:

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2. Non-linguists' discussions of language in *The Wire* also highlight the linguistic barriers the series presents to its audience and draw conclusions similar to Toolan's: "The show's excessive linguistic authenticity thus pushes it to an increasingly narrow and more dedicated and committed audience, effectively utilizing the trope of realism to help push the show further into the murky waters of 'quality television.' The opacity of language on *The Wire* challenges the viewer to learn its languages without clear explication, requiring her to pay careful attention to the dialogue in order to glean clues about the meanings of its colloquialisms and acronyms" (Hanson 2012: 205).

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> Use of stereotypical tropes that equate blackness with hypermasculinity, that associate whiteness with heterosexuality, and that inseparably link femininity with female performativity do little to advance any argument for political awareness or sensitivity for social justice that some of the story arcs aim for; in fact, the racialized essentialism that the narrative reproduces in some of its characters indirectly *contributes* to the arguments against which the series purportedly argues. (Johnson 2013: 336; original emphasis)

Thus even as *The Wire* subverts certain heteronormative expectations, it reasserts other intersectional ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality that reproduce social inequalities.

In the remainder of this article, we examine how strategies of linguistic representation, embodied semiosis, and narrative work together within *The Wire* to create an effect of racial and sexual authenticity that nonetheless relies on familiar gender stereotypes of blackness, especially hypermasculinity, a widely mediatized ideological linkage that we have discussed elsewhere (Bucholtz 2011a, Bucholtz & Lopez 2011). In particular, in creating its characters the show wholeheartedly embraces the widespread language ideology of African American English as inherently cool, tough, and masculine (cf. Bucholtz 2011b, Morgan 1999); in fact, every character who uses African American English is either male or represented as hard or masculinized in some way. As critical and scholarly response to the show suggests, the authenticity effect that *The Wire* achieves through its various representational strategies may resonate powerfully for many middle-class white straight male viewers, but it is not necessarily experienced in the same way by audience members with other racialized, gendered, sexual, and/or class subjectivities.

The multimodal semiotic analysis used in this article is inspired in a general way by the long tradition of linguistic analysis of media representations of language and sexuality mentioned above, as well as similar analyses of gender (e.g. Lazar 2006, Talbot 1995) and race (e.g. Alim & Smitherman 2012, Hill 2008, Lippi-Green 2012). The analysis also builds on the recent development of linguistic anthropology of media as an emerging area of scholarship that understands mediatization as a complex set of semiotic processes of production, circulation, uptake, and resignification (Agha 2011). These tools enable us to examine in detail how ideologies of racialized gender and sexuality are disseminated in televised representations of language and embodied practice, as well as the responses to these representations by academics and critics.

Drawing on the entire sixty-episode series, we focus in detail on the three primary queer African American characters on *The Wire*, who have received a great deal of attention from fans, professional critics, and scholars: Omar Little, a gay stick-up man – that is, a thief who robs drug dealers of their earnings at gunpoint; Shakima "Kima" Greggs, a lesbian police officer and later detective in the

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Baltimore Police Department; and Felicia "Snoop" Pearson, a genderqueer lesbian killer on the payroll of one of the kingpins of West Baltimore's drug trade.[3] The language, embodiment, and storylines of all three characters allow them to be understood by viewers as both "authentically queer" and "authentically Black." However, we argue that the show's racial, sexual, and linguistic authenticity is linked to its reification of Black hypermasculinity. Thus, these characters contest and complicate traditional representations of queerness and gender while reinforcing problematic representations of Blackness for a largely white audience.

3. Queer Blackness on *The Wire*

One of the reasons that the three characters who are the focus of this study seem so authentic to many viewers is that they are based to some extent on real people – in fact, in the case of the character of Snoop, the actor is playing a fictionalized version of herself. Most of the major characters in the show have some counterpart in real life, drawn from the professional experiences of the show's European American co-creators David Simon, a crime reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, and Ed Burns, a Baltimore police detective and later schoolteacher.

In most critical discussions, however, the much-remarked linguistic authenticity of *The Wire* is generally credited not to the show's African American actors but to Simon, as exemplified in an admiring *New Yorker* profile of the show:

> Because Simon and his primary writing partner, Ed Burns – a former Baltimore homicide detective who was once one of Simon's sources – are both middle-aged white men, people tend to assume that the dialogue spoken by the drug dealers and ghetto kids is ad-libbed by the black actors on the show. In fact, one of the show's writers was always present on the set, keeping the actors on script. A single dropped word was noted and corrected. Gbenga Akinnagbe, the [Nigerian American] actor who plays a drug dealer's henchman named Chris Partlow, said, "This is David's domain. He gets the streets of Baltimore better than we do." The [European American] novelist Dennis Lehane ("Mystic River"), whom Simon hired to write several scripts, agrees: "When you hear the really authentic street poetry in the dialogue, that's David, or Ed Burns. Anything that's literally 2006 or 2007 African-American ghetto dialogue – that's them. They are so much further ahead of the curve on that. (Talbot 2007)

3. In addition to these characters, *The Wire* includes several other minor queer characters, both Black and non-Black, such as Kima's lover, Omar's various boyfriends, two lesbian members of Omar's crew, and a closeted gay police major.

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For the *New Yorker*'s readers – who overlap substantially with *The Wire*'s target viewership – the linguistic authentication of Simon as the white auteur who understands Black language better than Black speakers themselves contributes to the show's aura of authenticity. The reality, however, is more complex; as Felicia Pearson, who plays Snoop, notes in her memoir, she was often able to change her lines to conform to what she viewed as the character's voice (Pearson & Ritz 2007), and it is likely that other African American actors also shaped the show's dialogue in similar ways.

Although language is often foregrounded as one of the primary sources of *The Wire*'s authenticity effect, the artistic ambitions of the show demand an equally striking visual component. To this end, *The Wire* relies on a carefully selected visual vocabulary to position its characters, including clothing, hair style, physical movement and facial expression, and other elements of physical self-presentation. This embodied dimension is mainly remarked upon by critics and commentators in relation to the ways that it semiotically challenges or reproduces overt racial, gender, or sexual stereotypes; unlike the show's language, which for the most part is accepted as authentic (except in the case of the three British actors playing American characters), *The Wire*'s visual representations of queer Blackness are more closely interrogated.

A final reason for the authenticity effect is *The Wire*'s general narrative strategy, whereby plot and characters are introduced with much less expository background information than is provided in traditional entertainment media. Just as the show's "authentic" language demands close attention from viewers, its lack of exposition also requires more of its audience, allowing them to take pleasure in the potentially confusing narrative style and hence their own discernment as consumers. One result of this narrative strategy is that the sexual identities of queer characters are generally presented or mentioned without fanfare (cf. Kitzinger 2000) and are thus framed as simply one part of their subjectivities among others rather than their defining characteristic.[4] This matter-of-fact form of representation invites viewers to imagine themselves as sophisticated and open-minded toward sexual and gender nonnormativity, unlike the audience for mainstream television, which is thought to require explicit signaling of key points in the narrative and characterization and overt cuing of the appropriate reaction.

In short, part of what makes *The Wire* feel so real is in fact its carefully engineered construction. As we discuss in the following analysis, this deliberateness often results in much richer characterizations of queer African Americans than are found on most other television shows. At the same time, some aspects of the

4. In the case of the police major, for example, viewers only learn of his sexuality when he briefly appears in the background during a scene set in a gay bar.

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language, embodied semiosis, and narrative of the series ultimately reinforce certain conventional tropes of race, gender, and sexuality, limiting its capacity for innovative representations even as it produces an effect of authenticity for many viewers.

3.1 "Meaner, funnier, cooler and braver": Omar

We consider first the most prominent of *The Wire*'s main queer Black characters: Omar Little, the highly principled stick-up man played by Michael Kenneth Williams, an African American actor from New York. Omar, who is partly based on various real-life stick-up artists (Alvarez 2009), makes his living by robbing drug dealers. Though a thief and a murderer, Omar adheres to a strict code of honor whereby he does not rob or kill those who are not part of the drug game. He also avoids profanity and condemns its use in others, in sharp contrast to most other characters on the show; although this might simply be understood as an amusing character quirk, Simon has stated in an interview that it is meant to suggest that Omar is not "debased" by participating in a corrupt system, unlike the cops and drug lords around him (cited in Hanson 2012: 206). Despite his distaste for profanity, Omar is still positioned within dominant language ideologies, linguistically authenticating himself as tough and masculine through his use of African American English and street slang and his generally affectless speech style.

As a working-class queer Black character who is hypermasculine rather than flamboyantly gay, Omar departs from stereotypical media representations of gayness as middle-class, white, and feminized (cf. Raley & Lucas 2006). In an interview with the *Guardian*, Simon explains, "I thought Omar, as an unaffiliated character, could be boldly and openly homosexual in a way that a gay man within the organized drug trade or within the police department could not be" (Delaney 2008). Thus Omar's outsider status is simultaneously signaled and enabled both by his language and by his sexuality (see also Choat & Fox 2010).

This outsider status is also evident in Omar's embodied semiosis, which is far more complex than that found in most media representations of gay men.[5] As the visual representations of Omar illustrate, his sexuality does not define him. He is a tender lover, portrayed as cuddling with his various partners (e.g., Season 2, Episode 3), as well as a caring paternal figure who shows affection to the child of

5. Due to copyright restrictions, we are unable to include the images from *The Wire* that we describe in the text. We provide the season and episode number of each image and scene that we discuss so that readers can view them via the HBO website (http://www.hbo.com/the-wire), on video, or by other means.

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a drug addict (Season 1, Episode 8). But he is also an all-around bad-ass, whether he is brandishing his shotgun (e.g., Season 4, Episode 12), wearing a cowboy-style duster and a Kevlar bulletproof vest (Season 3, Episode 10), or sporting a satin dressing gown and pajama bottoms (Season 4, Episode 3). Williams says of his character, "Yeah, he's gay, but that's not the thing you're gonna remember him for if you meet him down an alley. It's that shotgun that will have you worried, not his gayness" (Delaney 2008). Indeed, Omar tops every list of favorite *Wire* characters precisely because of his complexity; as one critic puts it, Omar is "meaner, funnier, cooler and braver than any other character you've ever seen on TV" (Delaney 2008).

With his penchant for swaggering nonchalantly through desolate urban landscapes, Omar is portrayed less as a traditional gangster than as a "cowboy hero figure" (Topola 2013: 1) – a positive hypermasculine media archetype, and also often an outsider. A scene in Season 3, Episode 10 illustrates how *The Wire* uses the trope of Omar-as-outlaw to visually suggest Western themes. In this scene, Omar appears in his typical uniform of oversized pants, T-shirt, body armor, and firearms. While Williams notes that the clothing reflects Baltimore street style (Alvarez 2009), it is also a practical way for the character to hide both his small frame and his multiple weapons (Topola 2013).

Although Omar consistently performs a hypermasculine persona, there are times when he participates in visual displays of "dandyism" (Topola 2013), as shown in one much-discussed scene in which he appears in public in turquoise satin pajamas. In some ways, his billowing robe in this scene mirrors his trademark duster. Unlike his traditional uniform, however, this outfit leaves him vulnerable because he is unable to carry a weapon. Barely dressed, small of stature, and unarmed, Omar is not physically imposing. However, as the scene plays out, it is revealed that he does not need a weapon because his reputation protects him. This largely wordless scene, which occurs in Season 4, Episode 3, follows Omar to and from the local convenience store. As he walks home with his groceries, the corner boys in the neighborhood scatter and can be heard warning one another that Omar is approaching. In fact, his mere presence so terrifies the local drug dealers that they drop their drug stash from an open window to his feet without even being asked. The fact that Omar can casually stroll down the street clad in brightly colored pajamas and still incite fear demonstrates one way in which this character simultaneously challenges and reproduces media representations of masculinity.

This balance between sustaining and subverting heteronormative masculinity is also found in other scenes. For example, by maintaining loving monogamous relationships throughout the series, Omar undermines media images of gay men as promiscuous and of Black men as oversexualized and aggressive. Yet he consistently plays a traditionally dominant masculine role in his relationships

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with younger men, who are not fully developed characters in their own right. In Example (1), Omar is portrayed as nurturing while also sustaining bravado. In this scene, he and his crew members Bailey and Brandon – who is also Omar's partner – sit in an intimate huddle. As Omar counts the money from a previous heist, he gently scolds Brandon for uttering his name in the middle of the stick-up. However, his concern is for Brandon's safety and not his own.

(1) Season 1, Episode 4 (16:58–17:55)

1	OMAR:	*Yeah, it's all right. That play was a little bit raggedy in there,*
2		*though.*
3		*(Bailey shakes his head.)*
4	BRANDON:	*I fucked up, I know, letting go your name.*
5	OMAR:	*I'm saying. I don't really care you shouted me out. Everybody*
6		*in these projects been knowing Omar, you heard? (Bailey*
7		*laughs) I just don't want them coming down on you, baby boy.*
8		*(Omar caresses Brandon's hair while Bailey looks*
9		*uncomfortable.)*
10		*(Shirley, a drug addict, approaches, carrying her baby.)*
11	BAILEY:	*Shirley coming with her game.*
12	BRANDON:	*Every fucking day with that shit.*
13	SHIRLEY:	*Mr. Omar? My check late.*
14	OMAR:	*(gestures for Shirley to approach. Plays with the baby, then*
15		*calls to one of the hoppers on the street.) Yo, Mike. Hook a*
16		*sister up, yo.*

This scene, which takes place relatively early in the show's first season, is the audience's first indication both of Omar's sexuality and of his caring and generous nature. Even in the midst of selling the drugs they stole the night before, he and Brandon share a tender moment that includes Omar's addressing Brandon as *baby boy* (line 7) and gently caressing his hair. This intimate act takes place in public and in the presence of a straight male crew member, Bailey, who carefully keeps his negative reaction out of Omar's sight and hearing (lines 8–9). The scene thus invokes the taken-for-granted homophobia of street life in order to illustrate the respect that Omar commands within his crew and in the neighborhood.[6]

Omar's concern for others as well as his paternal tendencies continue to be displayed when in the next part of the scene a drug-addicted woman, Shirley,

6. Bailey's reaction may stand in for that of homophobic members of the viewing audience, but it also enables the largely white and liberal intended audience of *The Wire* to experience itself as socially progressive, in contrast to the unenlightened masses represented by Bailey. In fact, as the audience for *The Wire* expanded, homophobic and ambivalent reactions to Omar and other queer characters were expressed online and documented in reception studies (e.g., Dhaenens 2012, LeBesco 2009).

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approaches and asks him for a handout, using the respectful title *Mr.* (line 13). Although both Bailey and Brandon scorn her request (lines 11–12), Omar sweetly plays with Shirley's baby before telling one of the street kids who works for him to give her what she wants. This portrayal is a departure from other, more traditional gangster characters in the show: Unlike those characters, Omar is not out for profit nor is he brutish toward addicts. For this reason he has been called a Robin Hood figure by some critics, another heroic outlaw character (e.g. Robbie 2009).

This nurturing representation of Omar is prevented from being read as feminized, however, in part thanks to the character's linguistic and embodied semiotic authenticity. In addition to his physically tough, masculinized appearance and manner (including a dramatic – and genuine – facial scar), his speech, like that of his crew members and of most other Black characters in the show, is rich in the phonology, grammar, and lexicon of African American English, including grammatical constructions rarely heard in media dialogue, such as remote-past *been* (lines 5–6: *Everybody in these projects been knowing Omar*). Thus, through a variety of narrative, semiotic, and linguistic devices, *The Wire* represents Omar as an authentically Black, openly gay, caring, hypermasculine outlaw who always commands respect. Yet this representation is secured only by ensuring that Omar's masculinity is never questioned within the logic of the show. Indeed, even the homophobic drug lords praise his courage; as one remarks, "He got a lotta heart for a cocksucker."

This sentiment appears to be shared by viewers of *The Wire* as well, many of whom admire him despite rather than because of his sexuality (LeBesco 2009). Meanwhile, Omar has generated disagreement among critics about the extent to which the character is an improvement on earlier representations of Blackness and queerness; for example, Hillary Robbie argues that "he is groundbreaking in presenting the idea that black men can be gay, and masculine, and masculine without being purely sexually driven" (Robbie 2009: 2), while Rebecca Bramall and Ben Pitcher state dismissively, "Omar can be thought of as little more than the projection of the desire of socially liberal, predominantly middle-class and predominantly white audiences troubled by 'bad' media representations" (Bramall & Pitcher 2012: 87). Similarly divergent interpretations are found in the reception of the show's two main queer Black female characters.

3.2 "Men with tits": Kima

As the primary gay male character on *The Wire*, the outlaw character of Omar in many ways contrasts with the primary lesbian character, Kima Greggs, a beautiful yet tough female police officer who operates entirely by the book. Portrayed by Sonja Sohn, who is of African American and Korean heritage, Kima departs from

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most media representations in her racial complexity; although her Asian background is briefly acknowledged within the show, she is usually positioned as simply Black, in keeping with U.S. ideologies that Black heritage is racially definitive. As one of the few female officers in the Baltimore Police Department, Kima exercises agency in similar ways to the male characters (Lipsitz 2011) and – in a common media trope of female protagonists in male-dominated settings – is portrayed as a better cop than most of her male colleagues. However, in a challenge to traditional media representations of female characters in law enforcement roles, Kima's toughness and aggressiveness are generally treated as assets rather than character flaws (cf. Wilson & Blackburn 2014).

In fact, despite her relatively feminine appearance, which is typical of contemporary media portrayals of lesbians (e.g. Dove-Viebahn 2007), Kima's character is centrally defined by her masculinity. This is perhaps less a deliberate act of characterization than a limitation of the show's writers; Simon has admitted in an interview that he has difficulty writing plausible female characters: "I tend to suspect that my female characters are, to quote a famous criticism of Hemingway, men with tits. … Fictionally, Kima Greggs is based on a couple lesbian officers I knew, but largely, I write her as a man and then, I confess, it's Sonja Sohn who adds all the subtlety in her performance" (Jordan n.d.).

Kima visually embodies both feminine and masculine semiotics, or as she says (conflating gender and sexuality), "I know I look like I could go either way." At work, especially in the beginning of the series, she often fits butch stereotypes by wearing comfortable jeans and a denim jacket, her long wavy hair pulled into a ponytail and tucked under a baseball cap (Season 1, Episode 8). In later seasons, when she is promoted to homicide detective, Kima conforms to the more formal and feminized dress code of her new position, including form-fitting pants suits, heels, and makeup (e.g., Season 5, Episode 2). Whether in jeans or a suit, she adorns her ears with earrings, giving these outfits a touch of the feminine. Her most feminine outfit in the series is worn during an undercover "buy-bust" (Season 1, Episode 10). The tight pink blouse and hip-hugger jeans she must wear to pose as a drug buyer do not allow her to wear her badge, her gun, or a bulletproof vest. Unlike Omar, who is able to dress in a less masculine style with impunity, the displacement of these masculine trappings by feminine ones makes Kima not only symbolically but literally vulnerable. This point is brought home to viewers when she is shot and nearly killed during the undercover mission. Although *The Wire* often links femininity with vulnerability, throughout the series Kima is occasionally portrayed in more positive feminine roles as she interacts with her family in tender, nurturing situations (e.g., with her partner Cheryl in Season 2, Episode 1, and with her son Elijah in Season 5, Episode 7).

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The Wire's representation of Kima as butch yet feminine, tough yet sexy, makes her available to the male gaze (DeClue 2009). Kima is the only openly queer member of the police force in the show; her sexual identity is subtly acknowledged in the first episode of the series in a conversation with her lieutenant when she refers to her partner, Cheryl, as her "girl." However, Kima's sexuality is also shown to be a source of fascination for her male colleagues, leading her to fend off their intrusive and offensive questions.[7] It is not until the third episode of Season 1 that her sexuality is discussed at any length. It is in this episode that one of the show's primary characters, McNulty, a straight white male detective, learns that Kima is a lesbian. Example (2) takes place after he has been informed of this fact.

(2) Season 1, Episode 3 (24:10–25:13)

MCNULTY: I should've known.
KIMA: Should've known what?
MCNULTY: I worked with one other female police officer who was worth a damn,only one.
KIMA: A lesbian.
MCNULTY: Yeah.
KIMA: In the beginning, you're in your radio car alone, working your post. Most women aren't getting out that car.
MCNULTY: Right.
KIMA: Not without side partners showing up. They intimidated, physically. They gotta be.
MCNULTY: You weren't?
KIMA: Yeah, at first. But I'm talking about some old straight-out-of-the-academy-type scared; you know what I'm saying? I wasn't about to stay scared. You know, you get your ass kicked once or twice, you realize it's not the end of the world, right? Most of the women, they don't want to believe that. Some of the men, too. They don't even want to go there.
MCNULTY: You think 'cause you're gay?
KIMA: I don't know. But is there any other fucking way to police? All I know is I just love the job.

Here both characters align around an ideology of lesbians as tougher than straight women. Both McNulty's claim that the only good female cop he worked with was a lesbian (lines 3–4) and Kima's story of getting her "ass kicked once or twice" before realizing "it's not the end of the world" (lines 15–16) implies that she is

7. For example, in the second episode of Season 1, Kima is on a rooftop taking surveillance photos with her co-worker Carver when he abruptly asks her, "Kima, if you don't mind me asking, when was it that you first figured you liked women better than men?" Kima curtly responds that she does indeed mind and does not answer the question. Once again, such scenes may play the dual role of indirectly educating audience members who may have similarly naive questions about sexuality while fostering a sense of knowledgeability among queer-friendly viewers.

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tougher than other female cops precisely because of her sexuality. Her toughness is underscored by her use of profanity in her rhetorical question "Is there any other fucking way to police?" (line 19). This essentialized link between lesbian identity and masculinized gender qualities positions Kima not only as authentically queer but also as "real police" (the highest praise that can be conferred on police characters within the show). At the same time, Kima's racial identity is also authenticated through her use of African American English, including zero copula (line 10; *They intimidated*) and the prepositional construction *out that car* (line 8). In this way, she aligns with the working-class speech style that predominates among the male police officers and detectives, successfully positioning herself as "one of the guys."

Similarly, in an explicit parallelism to many of the male cops on the show, Kima struggles to balance the demands of work and home. Collins (2005: 146) notes this parallelism approvingly: "On *The Wire*, the committed love relationship of the Black lesbian couple is treated no different than any other relationship on the series. This ordinary treatment thus provides a mass media depiction of middle-class Black women that remains highly unusual." Other commentators, however, criticize the domesticated representation of lesbianism as mere homonormativity, or the accommodation of queerness to heteronormative structures (e.g. DeClue 2011). Moreover, the relationship also locks the two women into an overdetermined heteronormative gender binary, with working-class-oriented police officer Kima playing a masculine role and middle-class-oriented broadcast journalist Cheryl playing a feminine role. As seen in Example (3), these gender roles become further polarized with Cheryl's pregnancy, about which Kima is highly ambivalent:

(3) Season 2, Episode 10 (17:20–18:57)

(Kima enters the apartment, throws her keys, gun, and badge on the kitchen counter, and opens the refrigerator.)
CHERYL: *(from other room) That you?*
KIMA: *Hm. I thought you was gonna go shoppin.*
CHERYL: *Me?*
KIMA: *Yeah, we round the clock with surveillance.*
CHERYL: *When do we get to the part where you do all kinda shit for me, whe-when do we get to that part?*
KIMA: *Oh so you past the point of lifting a grocery bag or two.*
CHERYL: *Uh, you try being me like this. (She lifts her shirt to show her pregnant stomach. Kima takes a sip of her beer, smiles, and walks past Cheryl.)*
(camera cuts to Kima sitting on the couch)
CHERYL: *Something wrong?*
KIMA: *(shakes her head)*
CHERYL: *(cuddles more closely to Kima) Baby's kickin, wanna feel?*
KIMA: *(hesitates, then puts her hand on Cheryl's stomach.)*

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Once again, Kima uses features of African American English, including third-person singular verb regularization (line 4: *you was*) and zero copula (line 6: *we round the clock*; line 9: *you past the point*). Her use of vernacular grammar contrasts with Cheryl's speech, which is colloquial but consistently standard; the lack of linguistic alignment between the characters plays on the language ideology of African American English as more masculine, tough, and working-class (categories also ideologically indexed by Kima's drinking of beer) and Standard English as more feminine, refined, and middle-class.

Thus the language in this scene not only serves to racially authenticate Kima despite her nonnormative sexuality, but it also dramatically underscores the distance between the two women. Cheryl is cast as the "nagging wife figure," a common and much-criticized role for secondary female characters within *The Wire* (e.g. Wisniewski 2009). Meanwhile, Kima plays the role of the distant and disinterested husband, enacting a particular form of traditional masculinity within the relationship. This position is cemented by her nonresistant endurance of Cheryl's domesticity, represented by Cheryl's placing of Kima's hand on her pregnant stomach. Such overt gender stereotypes, which are paralleled in similar scenes between heterosexual couples, particularly McNulty and various women, assert an essentialized difference between femininity and masculinity that even structures the relationship of these female partners. Ironically, in being positioned as authentically queer (through her enactment of masculinity) and as authentically Black (through her language), Kima is separated both semiotically and emotionally from her Black female partner.

Critics generally acknowledge that Kima's combination of feminine and masculine semiotics complicates conventional media representations of lesbians (e.g. Ault 2012, DeClue 2011). Yet *The Wire*'s consistent valorization of masculinity and its marginalization of femininity limits the extent to which Kima may be both feminine and agentive (Lipsitz 2011). Further, the show reduces Kima and Cheryl's relationship to the same polarized gender dynamics that drive the show's heterosexual relationships, denying the possibility of a lesbian intimacy that does not follow heteronormative logics.

3.3 "Is you a girl or a boy?": Snoop

The final queer Black character we consider is also a lesbian, but unlike Kima she is affiliated with the drug trade, not with policing. The character, Felicia Pearson, nicknamed Snoop, is a ruthless hitwoman played by an actor with the same name. Snoop does not appear in *The Wire* until the third season, yet her local West Baltimore speech patterns and genderqueer style – which, along with her name,

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are both drawn from the actor herself – make her one of the most memorable characters on the show.

Similar to Kima as a female cop, Snoop is the only female "soldier" in a very masculinized social setting.[8] The skill and pleasure with which she kills those who cross her drug lord employer, as well as her deadpan demeanor, prompted horror writer Stephen King (2006) to label her "the most terrifying female villain to ever to appear in a television series." Snoop's toughness is without question: Despite her small physique, she verbally dominates the much larger men in her crew, and despite the constant danger she faces on the streets, she never reveals any sign of fear.

Just as Kima's and Omar's sexuality is treated matter-of-factly, Snoop's ambiguous gender identity is not highlighted within the show and is only eventually clarified through other characters' reference to her with the feminine pronoun and addressing of her as *girl* rather than with the masculine address terms *dog*, *man*, or *nigga* used toward Black male characters in the show (Minow 2013). Unlike Kima, whose male coworkers are fascinated by her lesbianism and regularly hit on her, both Snoop's sexual identity and her gender identity are treated as unremarkable by her male colleagues.

Throughout most of the show, she wears baggy, hip-hop-style clothes and caps similar to those worn by many young Black male characters, which hide her feminine form and features; in addition, she wears her hair in gender-neutral cornrows (e.g., Season 4, Episode 8). In the first few scenes in which Snoop appears within the series, she does not speak, and even when she eventually does so, her voice can as easily be heard as that of a boy as of a girl or woman. In fact, when the show first aired, Snoop's masculine embodied style generated a great deal of confused discussion among viewers regarding her gender, and many were shocked once it became clear that the character is both female-bodied and female-identified. Pearson notes that this gender confusion extends to real life. In the official HBO guide to *The Wire*, she recalls the first time she met Williams, the actor who plays Omar, outside a Baltimore club. She recounts that he stared at her for some time before approaching her and asking, "Is you a girl or a boy"? This chance meeting resulted in the casting of Pearson in the show on the basis of "her potential and authentic voice" (LoLordo 2009: 361).

As with Kima, the show authenticates Snoop's masculinity by creating narrative situations that require her to temporarily misrepresent her gender identity for professional purposes. In two different episodes Snoop performs a more feminine persona in order to deceive male targets. In Season 3, Episode 5, she rides on

8. Omar, by contrast, has two women in his crew; continuing the show's linking of queerness and outsider status, the pair are lovers.

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the back of a motorcycle driven by Chris, her male co-assassin. She wears a pink jacket and capri jeans, and her braids are bedecked with ribbons tied into bows. Because of Snoop's incongruously feminine outfit as well as the motorcycle helmet obscuring her face, her target does not recognize her, despite looking directly at her, which allows Chris to approach closely so that Snoop can make the kill. One commentator interprets this scene as Snoop's initiation into the crew and her feminine outfit as emasculating (DeClue 2011). However, her disguise is more convincingly interpreted as a form of drag that reveals the constructed nature of gender through its ironic juxtaposition of indexicalities of youthful femininity and the character's hard-core murderousness (cf. Barrett 1999, Butler 1990). Whereas Kima's feminine drag puts her in mortal danger, Snoop's facilitates her claim to the masculine power of violence.

A second example of Snoop in a more feminine style is found in a scene in Season 4, Episode 1. In this scene she is wearing layered form-fitting tank tops and leaning against a playground structure. Her feminine form is further emphasized by the camerawork in the scene: The camera first shoots her in silhouette before cutting to a closeup of her face. In this way Snoop is able to fool both the audience and her unsuspecting male target, Lex, who believes he is meeting the mother of his child at the playground; Snoop's feminized appearance lures Lex close enough for Chris to shoot him. For Snoop, feminine clothing is professional gear and not part of her everyday persona. Hence it is precisely through these embodied performances of false femininity that Snoop is positioned as authentically masculine and authentically genderqueer.

Snoop's masculine gender identity can also be read as indexing her lesbian sexuality. Unlike Kima and Omar, Snoop's love life is not portrayed within the show; she is shown only in work contexts on the street, never in domestic or intimate settings. However, a brief scene in Season 4 informs the audience that Snoop is indeed a lesbian. As the scene opens, Snoop and Chris have been pulled over by Kima and two Black male detectives, Bunk and Lester, who are searching for the weapon used in a series of murders, based on information they have received identifying Snoop and Chris as the killers of one of the victims. While the two sit on the curb in handcuffs, Bunk laughs mockingly at them, precipitating an equally tough response from Snoop.

(4) Season 4, Episode 13 (35:32–35:41)

1		*(Bunk laughs mockingly while smoking a cigar)*
2	SNOOP:	*Think you all that for hasslin' niggas and shit.*
3	BUNK:	*I know I'm all that. I'm thinking about some pussy.*
4	SNOOP:	*Yeah. Me, too.*
5	BUNK:	*Mm hm.*

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In this scene Snoop and Bunk engage in a contest of cool masculinity; as feminist theorist bell hooks (2004) and other scholars have noted, coolness is often central to the construction of Black masculinities. In particular, the two characters try to one-up each other through verbal sparring in a similar fashion to the dozens, a playfully competitive African American speech event that is traditionally associated with males (e.g. Green 2002, Labov 1972). When Bunk initiates the exchange through his gloating laughter and celebratory cigar smoking, Snoop defiantly pushes back, accusing him of being overconfident. In doing so, she enacts her own expression of masculine cool. Not only does she display indifference to the authority of the police (a common attitude of criminals within the show), but she also emphasizes her masculinity by referring to herself and Chris as *niggas*, a term that as noted above is generally used by Black men and boys to address and refer to other males (Rahman 2012, Smitherman 2000, Spears 1998). Bunk's retort reasserts his upper hand by shifting the topic to sex, and specifically to "pussy," a term that sexually objectifies women. This rather abrupt topic shift may have been used by the writers to enable them to introduce Snoop's sexuality into the scene. At any rate, it seems to imply that Bunk is so carefree that his thoughts can wander to sex instead of focusing on the situation at hand. Snoop in turn rises to the occasion, laconically agreeing and hence accepting both Bunk's statement and his word choice. Bunk's equally succinct response, "Mm hm," conveys his skepticism about her likely sexual success, although this does not seem to be a comment on her female gender.

While signaling Snoop's sexuality to the audience, this braggadocio-filled scene supplies the information without highlighting it: Her focus is on winning the verbal battle rather than explicitly declaring her sexual identity. Likewise, the scene represents Snoop's gender and sexual identity as unproblematic to Bunk, a heterosexual male police detective, who competes with her as with a male peer. Such acceptance of gender and sexual diversity is a highly idealized portrayal of how genderqueer and trans suspects, especially those from racialized minorities, are in fact treated at the hands of the police (cf. Smith & Stanley 2011).

Despite the show's matter-of-fact treatment of Snoop's gender and sexuality, it has been argued that by not giving Snoop a sexual or romantic partner, *The Wire* misses the opportunity to represent masculine butch lesbian sexual desire (DeClue 2009). In fact, the only representations of queer sex in *The Wire* involve the more feminine butch Kima, in titillating sequences that resemble lesbian porn for straight men; Omar is never shown engaged in sexual activity (although he does passionately kiss his various partners, and he appears naked in bed with one of them in one scene). Snoop's lesbian sexuality is overshadowed by her hypermasculine gender identity, which is linked in turn to her criminality. This erasure of

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sexual engagement also renders Snoop less fully developed than either Omar or Kima: Viewers learn nothing about her emotional life, and she is thus reduced to little more than a killing machine. Even her equally ruthless partner Chris is given a horrifying back story that sheds light on his criminal activities.

As with Kima and Omar, Snoop is positioned as authentically Black through her language, and particularly the variety she speaks, West Baltimore African American English. More than any other character in the show, her speech is singled out by viewers and commentators as difficult to understand (e.g. Kelly 2009, Nannicelli 2009, Penfold-Mounce, Berr & Burrows 2011, Thompson 2012). Yet such perceived unintelligibility also produces an effect of authenticity – Snoop's language is so remote from *The Wire*'s wealthy European American core audience that it often cannot even be understood without subtitles, which many white viewers confess to relying on when watching the show.

Our final example illustrates the convergence of Snoop's authentic Blackness and her complex gender style. In Example (5), which takes place near the finale of the entire series, Snoop is driving her young protégé, Michael, to a destination where she plans to kill him, because she believes that Chris has been arrested because of him. What Snoop is unaware of is that Michael knows of her plan and has a scheme of his own.

(5) Season 5, Episode 9 (49:13–50:30)

1	*MICHAEL:*	*Pull over in that alley right there. I gotta piss somethin fierce.*
2	*SNOOP:*	*Man, you better piss in that cup right there on the floor.*
3	*MICHAEL:*	*Man, I'm gonna need ten cups. Yo, pull over, Snoop. (sucks*
4		*teeth)*
5		*(Snoop pulls into alley and parks. Michael looks around.)*
6	*SNOOP:*	*What now, motherfucker? You shy? (Michael pulls out gun.)*
7		*Smart nigga. You always was. How you know?*
8	*MICHAEL:*	*Y'all taught me. Get there early. Why? What I do wrong?*
9	*SNOOP:*	*Chris locked up behind somethin he done for you. You*
10		*downtown with the police.*
11	*MICHAEL:*	*I ain't say a word.*
12	*SNOOP:*	*Yeah, that's what you say. But it's how you carry yourself.*
13		*Always apart. Always askin why when you should be doin*
14		*what you told. You was never one of us. You never could be.*
15		*(Michael cocks gun.)*
16	*SNOOP*	*(Turns to look into driver's side view mirror and runs a palm*
17		*over her braided hair.) How my hair look, Mike?*
18	*MICHAEL:*	*You look good, girl.*
19		*(Camera pans out to wide view of the vehicle. Sound of a*
20		*gunshot.)*

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Snoop's gender performance in this scene is hypermasculine in many ways: Throughout the interaction she uses direct, assertive language, including profanity and insulting mockery (line 6: *What now, motherfucker? You shy?*). Yet her last words – both in the show and in her life – seem to be concerned with a trivial matter of feminine vanity (line 17), a concern that is at odds with her entire character up to this point.

There are at least two ways to read this scene, and especially this line. On the one hand, *The Wire*'s valorization of masculinity often leads to the representation of femininity as vulnerability or weakness in masculine spaces – as seen, for example, when Kima is shot during the undercover operation while dressed in a hyperfeminine style. Snoop's focus on her hair could thus be a way of poignantly indexing the character's impotence in this situation. Michael's affirmation of her appearance, along with the African American English endearment term *girl* (cf. Scott 2000), reinforces the feminine gendering of Snoop in this moment. An alternative reading of this scene, however, is that Snoop's question is not a sign of feminine weakness but a hypermasculine display of bravado in the face of certain death: In true cool masculine form, she intends to go out with style.

Viewers are divided in how to read the scene, and we ourselves would suggest that its very ambiguity is in keeping with the character's complex gender identity. Yet it also leaves Snoop an opaque figure to the very end of her life, emotionally disconnected even as she condemns Michael – who soon steps into the Omar outlaw role – for his outsider status. Thus Snoop, despite being based on a real person, is less a fully realized character than a trope or archetype, a boogeywoman who haunts the show; one commentator suggests that she is "non-human, or perhaps, post-human" (Lerner 2012: 221). Such a representation is little different from the one-dimensional villain roles that Black actors are often consigned to in film and television crime dramas (cf. Eschholz, Mallard & Flynn 2004).

4. Discussion

Since it first aired, *The Wire*'s handling of race, gender, and sexuality has sparked debate among viewers. Although some critics, mostly Black, deplore *The Wire*'s representations of race as stereotypical, sensationalized, and minstrelesque (e.g. Reed 2008), others, both Black and white, admire what they see as its expansive and complex representations of African American characters (e.g. Martin 2013, Peterson 2009) – and given the limited representations of most Black film and television characters, both claims may in fact be correct (Sharma 2009). In the same way, despite critiques of the highly stereotypical representations of

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heterosexual Black women on *The Wire* as "lay-about, no-good mothers, … drug addicts, child abusers, welfare dependents, prostitutes, or ladies of the drug lords" (Klein 2013: 41), at least one scholar rather surprisingly views the representation of Black women on *The Wire* as positive on the whole because they are not all prostitutes – they are "murderers, thieves, and drug dealers" as well as "mothers, sisters, and girlfriends" (Marshall 2009: 149). And concerning the show's representation of queerness, critics are likewise divided, sometimes even against themselves. In her discussion of *The Wire*'s representation of Black queer women, for example, Jennifer DeClue writes:

> 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. Yet these black queer characters do not represent the reality of lived experiences of queer black people. … 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 visuality 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. (DeClue 2011: 59–60)

Thus, while critics are mixed in their assessments of the quality of this "quality television" show, commentators on *The Wire* agree that authenticity is central to the show's goals and to viewers' hopes, expectations, and perceptions regarding its portrayals.

A similar tension is evident in the language of *The Wire*. Compared to the linguistic minstrelsy and gross racial stereotypes evident in many representations of African American English in film and television, the show demonstrates a remarkable commitment to using language that resonates as authentic for at least some viewers. At the same time, the series unapologetically traffics in linguistic exoticism, from inner-city youth slang to the Baltimore variety of African American English, and it consistently ideologically links this form of language to toughness and masculinity. As disappointing as this representation is for us as sociocultural linguists and as scholars of race, gender, and sexuality, we have suggested that questing after authenticity is a less fruitful analytic pursuit than establishing the ground on which authenticity operates, how it is achieved, and for whom.

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5. Conclusion

In this article we have shown that through language, embodied semiotics, and narration, *The Wire*'s nuanced and often deeply humane portrayal of its three main queer Black characters – the tough but caring outlaw Omar, the by-the-book lesbian cop Kima, and the ruthless genderqueer killer Snoop – challenges conventional representations of racialized queerness in the entertainment media. These representations rely on and contribute to the show's much-touted authenticity. As we have argued, however, authenticity is not an objective quality but a semiotic effect jointly constructed by the producers and the interpreters of particular acts of semiosis. From this perspective, *The Wire*'s projection of slice-of-life realness is an authenticity effect, the result of carefully engineered artistic artifice and its ratification by audience members.

As with any cultural text, the interpretation of *The Wire* cannot be separated from the sociohistorical conditions of its production and reception. What has made the show's authenticity effect so remarkable – and so controversial – is precisely the mismatches in race and class, gender and sexuality, between its straight white male creators and many of its characters, including the three examined here. In creating characters who can be seen as both "authentically queer" and "authentically Black," the show presents Black queerness as multidimensionally intersectional – as "both/and" rather than "either/or." Yet we have demonstrated that the depiction of these same characters also reinscribes racial ideologies by tightly binding authentic Blackness to masculinity, particularly through the semiotic coupling of African American English with male and masculinized characters within the show. In this simultaneous subversion and reproduction of racialized stereotypes of gender and sexuality, *The Wire* allows its imagined white audience to experience themselves as politically progressive and aesthetically discerning, all from the safety of their living rooms.

As American studies scholar George Lipsitz remarks with regard to the show, "Spectacular Blackness often serves white interests" (Lipsitz 2011: 116; see also Bramall & Pitcher 2012). Yet because *The Wire* now circulates to a much larger viewership, particularly to African American audiences, the meaning of these characters is neither fixed nor nonnegotiable. Questions of authentic queerness, authentic Blackness, and authentic language become increasingly complex in this broader context. For scholars of language, sexuality, and gender, who have long been concerned with the relationship between representation and reality, the impassioned debates that emerge from this situation create the opportunity to examine the relationship between representation and reception as well.

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