DEALING WITH DRUGS: GENDER, GENRE, AND SERIALITY IN *THE WIRE* AND *WEEDS*

By

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2008
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like especially to thank my director, Trysh Travis, for her guidance, encouragement, and support throughout the writing process and my time at the University of Florida as a whole. Additionally, my committee members, Florence Babb and Joseph Spillane, deserve thanks for their participation in the project and particularly for, respectively, allowing me to work out some of the ideas presented here in her seminar fall 2007, Sex Love & Globalization, and providing me with useful reference materials and guidance. I would also like to thank LaMonda Horton Stallings for giving me the opportunity to develop substantial portions of my chapter on The Wire in her fall 2007 seminar, Theoretical Approaches to Black Popular Culture. In her spring 2008 seminar, History of Masculinities, Louise Newman also provided me with valuable theoretical resources, particularly with regard to the thesis’ first chapter. Mallory Szymanski, my Women’s Studies colleague, deserves acknowledgement for her role in making the last two years enjoyable and productive, particularly during the thesis writing process. I would also like to thank my parents for their support in all my endeavors. Lastly, my sisters, Beverly and Cassie Long, and friends who are too numerous to name (but know who they are) deserve special acknowledgment for giving me much needed diversions and generally putting up with me during this busy time.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
DEALING WITH DRUGS: GENDER, GENRE, AND SERIALITY IN THE WIRE AND WEEDS

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May 2008

Chair: Trysh Travis
Major: Women’s Studies

Since its emergence during the formative years of modern, global capitalism in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, drug distribution has historically worked to cement the hegemonic status of white, capitalist masculinities and marginalize those of racial/ethnic “others.” Although historians and cultural studies scholars have explored the various ways in which discourses about illicit substances have circulated within cultures at particular historical moments, little attention has been paid to the figure of the drug dealer within fictional narratives. Here, I focus on this figure’s development and his representations across a range of texts residing in what I call the “drug dealing genre.” Typically, generic texts work to confer upon the legitimate capitalist economy the meanings that many of its adherents find lacking by emphasizing drug dealing’s failure to provide its practitioners with the self-made masculinities they attempt to achieve.

However, two recent television shows that center on drug dealing—HBO’s The Wire (2002-2008) and Showtime’s Weeds (2005-present)—significantly subvert the genre’s conventions by turning its established tropes in on themselves to critique rather than validate legitimate capitalism through the lens of drug dealing. While The Wire uses depictions of its characters’ masculinities to illuminate the connections that exist between licit and illicit
economies, *Weeds* portrays its female protagonist’s illicit career choice as particularly suitable to the production of an autonomous identity, thus validating drug dealing at licit capitalism’s expense. Situating *The Wire* and *Weeds* within the drug dealing genre, examining their serialized structures, considering their locations on premium cable, and providing close readings of their narratives, I explore the nature and implications of both shows’ generic subversions.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Scholars have written relatively extensively on the various ways that ideas about drugs are produced and perpetuated through particular sets of discourses concerning drug use, addiction, interdiction, and distribution. Drug historians have explored the numerous ways in which these discourses have been put to use to create and naturalize uneven distributions of social, economic, and even global power.¹ Cultural studies practitioners have looked at the ways in which the intensely gendered, racialized, class-based, and nationalistic ideas that circulate around drugs are reflected and refracted in literature, film, and other media.² Ethnographers have written about drug users and addicts and, particularly within the last two decades, examined the inner-workings of drug dealing organizations and the inner lives of those who operate within them.

More specifically, social scientists and anthropologists have begun to recognize and articulate similarities between the structures and operations of drug dealing organizations, economies, and practices and “legitimate” or legal capitalist enterprises. For example, in their study of middle-market drug distribution in the UK, criminologist Geoffrey Pearson and sociologist Dick Hobbs outline the complex organizational hierarchies along which dealing organizations are structured, discussing them in terms similar to those that might be used to describe licit business organizations.³ Sociologist Patricia Adler refers to her drug trafficking informants as “American entrepreneurs.”⁴ Philippe Bourgois states that one of his “more subtl[e]” goals in writing *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* was to “place drug dealers and street-level criminals into their rightful position within the mainstream of U.S. society.”⁵
Bourgois reminds readers that drug dealers “are not ‘exotic others’ operating in an irrational netherworld;” rather, as he states, these “highly motivated, ambitious” underground entrepreneurs “have been attracted to the rapidly-expanding, multi-billion dollar drug economy … precisely because they believe in Horatio Alger’s version of the American Dream.” In short, recent ethnographic scholarship has focused on the ways in which actual drug dealers conceive of themselves, how these conceptions influence their actions, and how they use their positions within illicit economic networks to vie for the capitalist legitimacy and masculine self-assertion that they feel they are unable to attain within licit occupations.

However, much less attention has been conferred upon the figure of the drug dealer within fictional narratives. The dearth of scholarly focus on this figure should not be taken to mean that representations of drug dealers have little to tell us about our social formations and cultural practices. On the contrary, the figure of the drug dealer crystallizes a host of anxieties surrounding race, gender, class, and nationalism, particularly in terms of masculinity and its relationship to capitalist production and/or work. Since the early twentieth century, popular cultural texts have employed the trope of self-made, entrepreneurial masculinity (to which Bourgois’ invocation of Horatio Alger refers) in their representations of drug dealers. However, these narratives generally obscure the dealing figure’s close relationship to the discourses and practices that confer power upon the legitimate capitalist economy and its related masculine norms and hierarchies.

Although the actual practice of drug distribution has been closely bound to formations of masculinity since the development of modern, global capitalism in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, the figure of the drug dealer proper did not emerge until the years directly preceding the 1920s, when particular drugs—mostly opiates, cocaine, and marijuana—were
subjected to increasingly harsh restrictions and, in most cases, outlawed completely. The production and distribution of illicit drugs thus moved underground, much as did that of alcohol following Prohibition (and in roughly the same time period).

The figure of the drug dealer emerged from a combination of particular mind-altering substances’ newly outlawed status and the historical context in which this categorization took place. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, white, middle-class men’s gender identities came under increasing strain; they experienced their work as bureaucratic and alienating, and marginalized groups challenged their supremacy on a number of fronts. Since the late eighteenth century, popular culture has worked in many ways to reassert white, masculine hegemony; the value of legitimate capitalist work; and the preferability of the hierarchical social relations that capitalism creates and perpetuates, one of which has been through the figure of the drug dealer.

In this project, I focus on the historical conditions of this figure’s emergence and his (and, less frequently, her) representation in novels, films, and television shows from The Great Gatsby (1925) to my primary texts, The Wire (HBO, 2002-2008) and Weeds (Showtime, 2005-present). I refer to the group of texts in which the figure appears as the “drug dealing genre” and discuss it in terms of its texts’ shared tropes and associations. Thus, before going on to provide an overview of the project as a whole and a brief explication of The Wire and Weeds in relation to both the project and the dealing genre, I will first discuss my conceptualization of the drug dealing genre and genre more generally in order to better delineate the relationship between the texts that populate the dealing genre and the discourses through which they are rendered intelligible.
Genre Overview: Generic Discourses and Drug Dealing Narratives

In his *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, Jason Mittell contends that in conceiving of genres as “*discursive practices* … we can examine the ways in which various forms of communication work to constitute generic definitions, meanings, and values within particular historical contexts.” Drawing from Michel Foucault’s “accounts of discursive formulations,” Mittell argues that “the discourses surrounding and running through a given genre are *themselves* constitutive of that generic category; they are the practices that define genres and delimit their meanings, not media texts themselves” (13). In other words, genres are not inherent components of the texts with which they are associated. Rather, genres are produced as much through the particular texts that come to populate them, the ways that generic texts get talked about (in, for example, the popular press, trade magazines, and academic scholarship), the discourses by which those texts are made meaningful, and the interactions occurring among and between the texts as through textual properties such as formal distinctions, subject matter, and narrative structure.

Drug dealing narratives span a wide range of cultural forms and generic categories, from newspaper articles and novels to crime dramas and situation comedies. Indeed, the heterogeneity characteristic of narratives that centrally feature the practice initially begs the question of whether or not drug dealing actually works as a useful lens through which to examine the vast array of texts in which it appears. However, although these texts fit less neatly together than do those typically grouped into other, more “commonsense” genres (such as romance novels or period films), drug dealing narratives generally draw from a similar set of discursive formulations that, in spite of the texts’ noted differences, work to unify them into an intelligible generic category. These discourses operate differently at various historical moments and in
particular cultural contexts but all generally revolve around the dealer’s relationship to work, legitimate capitalist institutions, and the raced and class-based components of masculinity.

While fictional dealing narratives frequently work to produce and confer power upon the discourses they employ, historical events, policy debates and decisions, journalistic accounts, and anecdotal evidence concerning drugs and drug dealing initially established and continually reiterate the relationship between masculinity and drug peddling. Drug dealing narratives make use of these already-circulating discourses about drugs and their dealers and, in turn, work to further institutionalize the discursive conventions on which they draw. In short, the meanings and tropes associated with drug dealing narratives arise not necessarily from the texts themselves, but rather relate to, are informed by, and come to bear on the various extratextual components that comprise and shape public knowledge about and understandings of drugs and their distributors.

The drug dealing genre thus provides an apt lens through which to explore not only the ways in which the aforementioned media-centered practices and processes come to constitute generic categories and conventions but also the ways that circulating discourses about particular kinds of activities, lifestyles, and subjects work to shape representations and the genre distinctions imposed upon them. Moreover, because drug dealing narratives appear in such a wide range of cultural forms, looking at them as a genre constituted by particular sorts of interactions and shaped by historically-specific yet enduring discursive formulations also allows for the exploration of the ways that generic conventions and discourses are produced and transformed in their encounters with and shifts to different cultural forms.

The heterogeneity endemic to the drug dealing genre necessitates some clarification as to what exactly the term means (or, at least, how exactly I intend to use it here). Drug dealing
narratives are, importantly, distinct from stories primarily concerning drug use or drug addiction. Such narratives may depict dealers and/or dealing practices, just as narratives that specifically center on drug dealing may also peripherally or even centrally feature depictions of drug use or abuse. The difference primarily resides in drug dealing’s narrative function. Illicit dealings may appear peripheral to some generic texts—for instance, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby or Dennis Hopper’s 1969 film Easy Rider—but are actually integral to the texts’ meaning-making processes.

Drug novels like Irvine Welsh’s 1993 Trainspotting (as well as its American film adaptation, released in 1996) and Hubert Selby Jr.’s 1978 Requiem for a Dream (also adapted for the screen in 2000) may offer passing glimpses of dealers and dealing practices, but both are ultimately more concerned with drug use and addiction than with drug dealing. As implied by the inclusion of texts like The Great Gatsby and Easy Rider, however, drug dealing need not occupy the page or screen at every moment. Indeed, actual instances of dealing are rarely if ever depicted in either text. Rather, dealing works as a vital subtext that informs particular character constructions, readers’ and viewers’ interpretations of the text, and the ultimate outcome of the story itself. In other words, whereas Trainspotting’s addicted characters might as well get their heroin from any available source, the fact that Easy Rider’s protagonists finance their cross-country road trip by selling cocaine significantly impacts the film’s ideological operations.

Of course, drawing such distinctions can at times be tedious, difficult, and somewhat arbitrary; certainly narratives about and discourses surrounding drug use cannot be so easily separated from those that circulate about drug dealing. However, drug dealing – unlike drug use – acts as a distinct occupational or economic activity that both runs parallel to and deviates from acceptable routes to legitimate capitalist and masculine achievement. Thus, while drug use may
inhibit users’ abilities to participate in social and particularly capitalist (re)production, drug dealers infiltrate capitalist economies and work within them at the same time that they operate, in some ways, outside of their borders. Because gender distinctions and definitions are so closely bound up with capitalist discourses and institutions, drug dealing narratives work as particularly useful sites through which to explore the intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality and capitalist political economy.

I have also imposed my own distinctions upon the genre. First, I will concentrate primarily on narratives produced and released in the United States. Secondly, I obviously cannot address every generic text and have thus had to make choices about which narratives to include in my brief overview of the genre’s history. However, in choosing I have attempted to present as eclectic and representative a picture of the field as possible. Most fundamentally, returning to Mittell’s discussion of genres as discursive practices, the dealing genre has been profoundly shaped by a particular set of gendered and racialized discourses about drugs, drug users, and drug dealers that gained prominence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These discourses have influenced my decisions as to which narratives to include and exclude from the first chapter’s the narrative overview.

Thus, the exclusion of a particular narrative should not be taken to indicate that it does not belong within the genre. Rather, the narratives on which I will focus in my first chapter are some of the genre’s most recognizable texts and most clearly exemplify the its tendencies. In general, dealing narratives function to confer power upon the licit capitalist institutions in which many people live and work. Whether the narratives work to belittle and vilify certain social groups and geographic regions by exploiting their discursive associations with illegal drugs or serve to validate extent social inequalities by demonizing drug dealing in order to give meaning
to legitimate occupational activities, they generally do so through particular masculine tropes – primarily that of the failed self-made man.

**Project Overview: The Wire, Weeds, and the Drug Dealing Genre**

This project is divided into three chapters, the first of which examines the history of drug distribution and its association with formations of masculinity over time. Additionally, chapter one provides a brief overview of the dealing genre’s discursive prehistory, the ways in which these discourses were used to control and inhibit primarily nonwhite men and white women’s mobility and participation in legitimate capitalist endeavors, and the early narratives in which such discourses circulated. However, the chapter’s major emphasis is on contemporary cinematic narratives and their literary post-Prohibition predecessors.

Using readings of *The Great Gatsby*, Brian De Palma’s *Scarface* (1983), *Blow* (2001), *Hustle & Flow* (2005), and *American Gangster* (2007), I discuss the ways in which dealing narratives employ the figure of the self-made man to positively valuate and give meaning to the legitimate capitalist economy by depicting drug dealers’ masculinities as deviant, illegitimate, and dangerous to the social body. Dealing narratives perform this task in a variety of ways, but all draw a clear and impermeable distinction between licit and illicit economic spheres and juxtapose them against one another, valorizing legitimate capitalism at drug dealing’s (and drug dealers’) expense.

The project’s next two chapters consist of close readings of *The Wire* and *Weeds* through the lens of the dealing genre and its masculine tropes. Both series employ their uniquely serialized structures to examine, critique, and/or transform the traditional conventions of the genre to which they belong. Both arise out of particular industrial conditions and are produced by creators and writers who have strong views regarding the United States’ approach to drug interdiction and specific visions for their shows’ contents and meanings. *The Wire* and *Weeds* are
also both complex narratives that require some initial explication and contextualization prior to their respective close analyses.

*The Wire* debuted on HBO in 2002 and is currently in its fifth and final season. The show is an hour-long, dramatic serial that explores and critiques the sociopolitical conditions of postmodern urbanity through the lens of drug dealing and interdiction. Its narrative centers on the major players in Baltimore’s drug trade and the police who investigate them—primarily those who were part of Lieutenant Cedric Daniels’ now-defunct wiretap detail. Each new season also introduces a new narrative angle or element in addition to continuing its dealing and police focus.¹²

As I will discuss in more detail in my chapter devoted to the series, its narrative works with but significantly subverts the oft-used trope of self-made masculinity in order to pose challenges to dominant discourses about drug dealing and legitimate, late American capitalism in general. Using a “reverse puzzle structure” and a metaphor of “material masculinity,” *The Wire* points to the increasingly abstract nature of the legitimate economy as the displacing agent that makes dealing a sensible occupational choice for its mostly black protagonists and inhibits men in all areas of the economy from deriving fulfilling identities from their work.

*Weeds*, which debuted on Showtime in 2005 and was recently commissioned for a fourth season, initially looks much less subversive than its more dramatic counterpart. However, it in some ways constitutes a more total subversion of the genre’s historical operations. The show follows a suburban, widowed, mother of two as she struggles to maintain her family’s upper-middle class lifestyle by dealing marijuana. As a half-hour, single-camera situation comedy, *Weeds* differs significantly from any other television show in the dealing genre. The series
balances its humor with a solid dose of drama and significantly reworks the conventions of
typical network comedies, but at its core *Weeds* remains tied to the sitcom format.

Like *The Wire*, *Weeds* engages with the trope of self-made masculinity, but by exploring
the trope through a female protagonist the show undermines and reworks the genre’s typical
functions. Rather than denigrating dealing as an illegitimate shortcut to capitalist achievement,
*Weeds* depicts dealing as more conducive than licit enterprises to the production of rewarding
and reflexive work identities. The show’s serialized and episodically inverted sitcom structure,
suburban setting, and location on premium cable also contribute to its gendered generic
subversion.

In the conclusion, I look more closely at the industrial context in which *The Wire* and
*Weeds* are situated in order to produce a better understanding of the conditions that facilitate the
production of such generically and generally subversive television narratives, in spite of the fact
that more traditional representations of drug dealing continue to flourish in Hollywood films.
While I do discuss their respective industrial contexts within the chapters that focus on *The Wire*
and *Weeds*, a fuller examination of the televisual landscape produces a more satisfying picture of
the historical conditions from which these texts’ emerged. Additionally, I explore the
construction of the premium cable audience, address the political implications of that
construction, and discuss some of the illicit ways that non-subscribers access the shows.

However, none of the aforementioned factors–serialization, authorial intent, the content
of the narratives, or even industrial context–alone explains the emergence and success of these
generically subversive drug dealing narratives. But looking simultaneously at the series’
innovative structures, their authors’ visions, their locations on premium cable, and the actual
narratives themselves–as well as the interactions between these textual and extratextual
elements—helps to more firmly situate the texts within the genre to which they belong. Doing so enables a better understanding of the ways that the figure of the drug dealer has functioned historically, how those functions have carried over into contemporary narratives, the specific natures of *The Wire* and *Weeds*’ reformulations of this figure, and the mechanisms that provide space for these particular television shows to contest the figure’s embedded associations.

**Notes**


2 For examples, see Marez’s *Drug Wars*, Liu’s *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*, and Nancy Campbell’s *Using Women: Gender, Justice, and Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2000).


6 Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*, 326.

8 Mittell, Jason, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 12. All subsequent references parenthetically noted in the text.

9 *Easy Rider*. DVD. Directed by Dennis Hopper (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2002).

10 In her *Using Women*, Nancy Campbell argues that drug discourses frequently construct addiction “as threatening to modernity, democracy, and capitalism – rather than produced by them or endemic to them” (90). She further contends that women act as particularly potent figures through which to depict the dangers of drug use and trafficking because, more so than men, “women are made responsible for absorbing the costs of social reproduction” (6).

11 In calling their narrative structures unique, I obviously do not mean to imply that *The Wire* and *Weeds* are the only popular cultural texts to be structured serially. Rather, the specific forms that serialization takes in each show—*The Wire’s* reverse puzzle structure and *Weeds* episodically inverted, serialized sitcom format—are particularly innovative and novel.

12 The second looks at the declining value of work through its depiction of a stevedores union involved with a transnational smuggling organization, the third uses its portrayal of city politics to explore issues of reform, the fourth adds in an examination of Baltimore’s school system, and its fifth includes a media-centered subplot.
CHAPTER 2
GENDER AND THE DRUG DEALING GENRE: HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND CAPITALIST LEGITIMACY IN DRUG DEALING NARRATIVES

The figure of the drug dealer—with his self-made, entrepreneurial but ultimately unsuccessful masculine identity—did not emerge fully formed in contemporary dealing films like *Scarface* (1983) and *Blow* (2001) or even earlier archetypical texts like *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Rather, the figure developed out of the close relationship that has historically existed between drug distribution and legitimate capitalism. With the emergence of modern capitalism in the “long sixteenth century,”1 drug distribution allowed its practitioners to profit financially, exploit indigenous and colonized populations, and ensure the hegemonic status of their own masculinities. As drugs came to be more intricately categorized as “licit” or “illicit” commodities, the discourses that produced their associated meanings continued to put mind-altering substances to use in naturalizing the oppression and criminalization of particular social groups, justifying the colonization or exploitation of certain geographic regions, and valorizing the licit capitalist economy at the expense of its illicit counterpart.

However, by the early twentieth century, the legitimate economy’s ability to provide white, middle-class men with the autonomous and rewarding gender identities they had come to expect from their work had decreased. The association between entrepreneurial masculinity and the figure of the drug dealer thus emerged as one of many representational tropes through which cultural producers could proclaim the moral and material benefits offered by legitimate work at a time when middle-class men were experiencing those benefits’ decline. Particularly as drug economies moved underground during and following the advent and repeal of Prohibition, the fictionalized drug dealer crystallized and subsequently ameliorated the tensions produced by
middle-class white men’s declining abilities to derive masculine satisfaction from their legitimate occupations.

Beginning with *The Great Gatsby*, many texts residing within the dealing genre depict drug dealers as unable to realize their gendered entrepreneurial ambitions through their illicit economic endeavors. In order to do so, however, such generic texts must ignore the historical and contemporary connections between drug distribution and legitimate capitalism. In his review of *Traffic* (2000) and *Blow*, David Banash argues that Brian De Palma’s 1983 remake of *Scarface* “explores the ways in which the gangster is the ultimate representative of capitalism itself.”² He argues that the film proclaims that “there is no difference between legal capitalism and the drug trade; both are exploitative and destructive.”³ In most narratives that either attempt or never intend to make such an assertion, however, drug dealing more frequently than not appears as a dirty, debased form of capitalism that legitimates the legal capitalism (and its related masculine identities) against which it is juxtaposed.

Rather than products or producers of licit capitalism’s inbuilt inequalities, drug economies become mirrors that reflect the worst components of legal capitalism, deflecting blame from capitalism itself and displacing it onto those who feel compelled to engage in drug dealing because they have few alternative options. The gangster, in other words, and not the system to which he metonymically refers, becomes the culprit rather than the victim. In short, narratives of the dealing genre typically obscure the historical relationships and experiential similarities that exist between drug dealing and the legitimate capitalist economy and instead depict licit capitalism as the only way in which men can produce and enact successful, self-made masculinities. Thus, in order to better understand the genre and the significance of *The Wire* and *Weeds*’ departures from its norms, I will briefly discuss the historical relationship between drug
distribution, capitalism, and formations of masculinity; examine the genre’s discursive prehistory; and provide close readings of several generic texts.

**Gendered Expansion: Hegemonic Masculinity and the Emergence of Global Drug Markets**

Drug dealing narratives and discourses frequently exhibit anxieties about and negotiate relationships between hegemonic and subordinated, marginalized, or deviant masculinities. R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, in their 2005 “rethinking” of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, define the term as “the pattern of practice … that allow[s] men’s dominance over women to continue.” They contend that hegemonic masculinity is distinct from other iterations of masculinity, “particularly subordinated masculinities” (832). Furthermore, the practices and attributes that constitute hegemonic masculinity cannot, according to the authors, “be considered normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact” them (832). Rather, as the “normative” mode of masculine performance, hegemonic masculinity “embodie[s] the currently honored way of being a man, it require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimate[s] the global subordination of women to men” (832).

Moreover, the concept of hegemonic masculinity, as historian John Tosh observes, relies on Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony,” which “refers to a domination [that] goes beyond the exercise of brute force or legal power because it has become embedded in the culture; … it amounts to the sense of reality by which most people in society order their perceptions.” Thus, as both Tosh and Connell recognize, popular culture and textual representations are integral to the ways in which particular masculinities come to dominate the vast horizon of masculine possibilities at certain moments in history. The concept of hegemony, according to Connell and Messerschimdt, also allows for an “element of optimism in an otherwise bleak territory” (833). The authors argue that the concept usefully “assume[s] that gender relations [are] historical, so
gender hierarchies are subject to change” (832). As they state, “More specifically, there can be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones” (833).

Since its inception in the early 1980s, scholars have applied the theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity to a variety of academic projects. Although the term has subsequently suffered from a lack of precision, its encounters with other disciplines and thinkers have also imbued it with greater nuance and complexity. Tosh asserts that “The gist of much work in recent years is that hegemonic forms of masculinity have sustained different structures of power in different historical formations, and that the priority which Connell gives to patriarchy is overstated” (54). In other words, scholars no longer view hegemonic masculinity’s role in perpetuating particular regimes of gender and sexuality (specifically, men’s dominance over women) as its primary or only function. Rather, hegemonic masculinity works best as an explanatory concept when viewed in relation to other axes of difference and institutions of power such as race, nationality, and class or the operations of the state, capitalism, and imperialism.

In his Masculinities, Connell contends that as “the modern capitalist economy came into being” in “the period from about 1450 to 1650” so too did “those configurations we now call ‘masculinity,’” primarily in and around the North Atlantic states. Connell identifies four developments that allowed for the emergence of modern gender norms, namely “the cultural change that produced new understandings of sexuality and personhood in metropolitan Europe” (186), “the creation of overseas empires by the Atlantic seaboard states,” “the growth of cities that were centres of commercial capitalism” (187), and “the onset of large-scale European civil war” (189). The changes of which Connell speaks are closely related and mutually constitutive. Indeed, as masculinity came to be “defined as a character structure marked by rationality” with
Western civilization acting as “the bearer of reason to a benighted world,” Connell asserts that “a cultural link between the legitimation of patriarchy and the legitimation of empire was forged” (187).

Drug historian David Courtwright locates the emergence of a global drug trade within a similar time period as that in which Connell places the development of masculinity—“the years from about 1500 to 1789.”¹⁰ Courtwright terms the emergent global distribution and greater availability of mind-altering substances – from those we now consider “licit” like tobacco and caffeine to “illicit” drugs like cocaine and marijuana – the “psychoactive revolution.” (2). As he states, “one of the signal events of world history, this development had its roots in the transoceanic commerce and empire building of the early modern period” (2). Thus, much like hegemonic masculinity, the emergence of a modern, global drug trade depended upon the new forms of trade and travel developed during what Connell, borrowing from French historian Fernand Braudel, terms “the long sixteenth century” (186).

Perhaps most importantly, the drug trade and drugs themselves were often integral to imperialist expansion and the development of globalized commodity distribution systems. As Courtwright states, “Drug taxation was the fiscal cornerstone of the modern state, and the chief financial prop of European colonial empires” (5). Moreover, “psychoactive trade benefited mercantile and imperial elites in ways that went beyond ordinary commercial profits,” as “elites quickly discovered that they could use drugs to control manual laborers and exploit indigenes” (4). Courtwright cites instances of colonial elites employing opium to keep “Chinese laborers in a state of debt and dependency” and alcohol to induce “native peoples to trade their furs, sell their captives into slavery, and negotiate away their lands” (4).
Moreover, as Curtis Marez notes in his *Drug Wars: The Political Economy of Narcotics*, Britain instituted a series of “Opium Wars” with China during the mid-eighteenth century in hopes of “expanding the opium trade,” “safeguard[ing] opium profits” and “forc[ing] the Chinese to legalize” the drug.\(^\text{11}\) In short, the drug trade did not simply come into being during the same period in which European elites began transnationally trading with and in their colonial subjects. Rather, psychoactive drugs allowed traders and colonizers to profit from their overseas adventures (through taxation, exploitative labor practices, and war) in ways that further cemented the unequal geographic power relations that Connell identifies as central to the process of creating and constituting hegemonic masculinities (187).

The globalized, transatlantic economy and imperialist expansion that Connell argues facilitated the development of modern notions of gender and identity also allowed the global drug trade to expand such that the use of psychoactive substances became integrated into the fabric of everyday life for early modern Europeans (as well as their colonial subjects). Courtwright’s psychoactive revolution was predicated on the “new emphasis on individuality of expression” that Connell identifies as a crucial factor in the emergence of the concept of masculinity (186). Indeed, many of the same processes that produced what Connell calls the “cultural prerequisites for the idea of masculinity itself” (186) also contributed to the expansion of drug-related commerce. “Drug commerce and its externalities were,” Courtwright argues, “manifestations of mature capitalism’s limbic turn, its increasing focus on pleasure and emotional gratification” (4). The rationalized individuality brought about by cultural changes like the Protestant reformation and “the spread of Renaissance secular culture”\(^\text{12}\) thus acts as an important prerequisite for Europeans’ increasing use of and trade in mind-altering drugs for purposes of pleasure and profit.
Connell records a similar turn within the capitalist centers that, he argues, “creat[ed] a new setting for everyday life” and “made a thoroughgoing individualism possible,” thus bolstering the establishment of hegemonic masculine identities (186). The sexual subcultures and new commercialized leisure activities of which Connell and historians like Marek Kohn and Mary Ting Yi Lui speak were not the only outcome of “the growth of cities that were the centres of commercial capitalism” (186). However, they were important in providing opportunities and spaces for the sale and use of drugs for entertainment rather than simply health-related purposes (although many drug users did employ their substances of choice as cures for ailments like headaches, nervous dispositions, and even addiction to other drugs).13

Connell also identifies another set of related conditions upon which the concept of hegemonic masculinity was predicated. As he states, “In combination with the ‘first industrial revolution’ and the accumulation of wealth from trade, slaving and colonies, a calculative rationality began to permeate urban culture” (188). Connell argues that, along with the establishment of a notion of masculine identity defined by reason and rationality (186-187) and “the centralization of states” that resulted from “the onset of largescale European war,” this increased economic rationalization institutionalized masculine power within the state and, particularly, the economy (189). The drug trade was not immune to such shifts. As Courtwright notes, “The globalization of wine, spirits, tobacco, caffeine-bearing plants, opiates, cannabis, coca, and other drugs … was a deliberate, profit-driven process” (9). Thus, similarly to the ways that the expansion of the drug trade coincided with the expansion of European power across the globe, the increased rationality that Connell ascribes to modern capitalism also extended to drug-related commerce.
Connell further contends that, with the advent of the eighteenth century, it becomes possible for historians to “define a hegemonic type of masculinity and describe some of its relations to subordinated and marginalized masculinities” (189). He explains that “it was the class of hereditary landowners, the gentry, who dominated the North Atlantic world of the eighteenth century” (190). Gentry masculinity, according to Connell, was “[b]ased in land ownership” and “involved in capitalist economic relations,” but it “did not emphasize strict rational calculation in the manner of the merchants” (190). Furthermore, “Gentry masculinity was closely integrated with the state,” defined in part by “domestic authority over women,” and “involved a much more brutal relationship with the agricultural workforce,” who “still [made up] the bulk of the population” (190 – 191). According to Connell, exerting control over agricultural workers was not only “an ordinary part of local administration,” but was also achieved through such violent and oppressive practices as “evictions, imprisonment, the lash, transportation, and hangings” (191).

However, lashings and imprisonment were not the only ways in which the gentry exerted control over its agricultural workers. In his discussion of Piero Camporesi’s Bread of Dreams (in which the author claims that, due to their intake of poisoned bread, early modern peasants “lived in a … universe of completely unreal extrasensory perceptions”), Courtwright argues that “The real value of [the author’s] work is that it underlines the dire utility of psychoactive substances in helping peasants and workers cope with lives lived on the verge of the unlivable” (59). According to Courtwright, “Coping drugs that did not entail hallucinations would have been of greater value to the gentry who controlled peasant labor” (59). Drugs like “chocolate, the milder strains of tobacco … coffee and tea,” Courtwright contends, “were more compatible with the emergent capitalist order” than were substances like opium or alcohol. Furthermore, as
Courtwright notes, these drugs were “capitalist goods in their own right” and “produced profits for merchants and revenues for princes far greater than what they could extract from the old regime of stale beer and hemp-seed bread” (59).

Thus, psychoactive substances were useful to the gentry for several reasons. First, they allowed landowners to placate their peasant populations by offering them coping mechanisms rather than actual improvements to their material lives. Second, as commercial products, drugs (particularly those of the “soft” variety) allowed the gentry to extract even greater profits from their agricultural workers than they might gain simply from collecting rents or selling peasants’ raw materials and manufactured goods. Most importantly, in gaining revenue from the coping mechanisms they offered to agricultural workers in exchange for exploitative and unpleasant working conditions, landowning men employed mind-altering substances to maintain the hegemonic status of their own masculinities.

In other words, by keeping workers placated for a price and profit, men of the landowning classes worked to ensure the continuation of their elevated status. Such practices not only secured the hegemonic status of gentry masculinity but also created and sustained various forms of subordinated and marginalized masculinities situated in opposition to their hegemonic counterparts. Thus, drugs have been integral not just to facilitating global trade, bolstering colonial expansion, and generating profit but also helped to further cement the supremacy of gentry masculinity at the expense of the working masses.

The processes and practices – changing conceptualizations of individual identity, new urban centers in which commercial capitalism could flourish, imperial expansion, war – out of which modern notions of gender and identity emerged run in many ways parallel to the processes and practices that gave birth to the globalized drug trade. Thus, it should come as no surprise that
drug dealing discourses and the narratives that employ and sustain them are so closely tied to constructions of gender, race, class, nationality, and capitalism. Drug dealing narratives attempt to negotiate the tensions produced through dealers’ close approximations of capitalist self-fashioning and the illicit products that set their economic endeavors apart from capitalist norms. These tensions are built into the structure not only of the dealing genre but (as the above history shows) the practices and values that its narratives represent as well.

**Gender and Genre: Drug Discourses and the Prehistory of Dealing Narratives**

Although drug distribution may have initially benefited gentry masculinity (and in many ways continues to provide support for hegemonic masculinities and state institutions), with the onset of the first major “drug panics” in the late nineteenth century, drug distribution and drug use quickly became discursively associated with racial/ethnic minorities and other oppressed groups residing in, particularly, Britain and the United States. Indeed, Marek Kohn argues that “The outlawing of drugs was the consequence not of their pharmacology, but of their association with social groups that were perceived as potentially dangerous.” In short, legal prohibitions against drugs and their associated sensationalist discourses emerged at the moment when mind-altering substances ceased to primarily benefit the hegemonic order and began (at least imaginatively) to pose a threat to white, masculine, capitalist supremacy.

However, this racialized demonization of drugs was not merely a defensive strategy. Rather, discourses that negatively associated mind-altering substances with minority groups again allowed hegemonic masculinities and imperial powers to further cement their positions within globalized race, gender, and class hierarchies. Drug discourses assisted in maintaining white men’s dominance over all women, men categorized into particular racial groups and social classes, and colonized territories and populations. Although the hegemonic orders that benefited
from these discourses shifted and changed over time, drugs and drug distribution continued to act as useful tropes through which white, masculine, capitalist hegemony could be perpetuated throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.

Interestingly, it is within this same time period (the 1800s) that Connell places “the splitting of gentry masculinity, its gradual displacement by new hegemonic forms, and the emergence of an array of subordinated and marginalized masculinities” (191). He identifies three central reasons for these changes: “challenges to the gender order by women, the logic of gendered accumulation process in industrial capitalism, and the power relations of empire” (191). The changing positions of women in society, nationalistic or imperial concerns, and capitalism’s increasingly bureaucratized institutionalization are equally central to changing ideas about and narratives that center on drug use and distribution.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century drug discourses frequently work to shore up the boundaries of white, masculine hegemony by emphasizing the sexualized menace presented by racial/ethnic others, whose drug-facilitated seductions of white women threaten to undermine prevailing race, gender, class, and geographic/national hierarchies. White women’s vulnerable bodies often serve as screens upon which these fears—particularly those concerning racial degeneration and miscegenation—are projected, and drugs act as a privileged trope through which such anxieties can be depicted. As Kohn states, Britain’s emerging drug trade “immediately gave rise to a rich folklore, in which conspiracy theories and the evil influences of other races were prominent” (4).

Although he notes that such tales were “closely related to [xenophobic] spy stories that flourished during” World War I, they “were also clearly descended from the mythology, already well evolved, of the white slave traffic” (4). Kohn contends that drugs function in such stories to
dissolve “the natural boundaries between the races,” not only encouraging the dreaded practice of miscegenation but also rendering white women vulnerable to capture and sexual enslavement (4). Dealing discourses and narratives thus provide justifications for the criminalization of particularly racialized or ethnic masculinities, render their marginalization a function of their immoral actions, and affirm the cultural superiority or modernity of the West in opposition to its “uncivilized” counterparts.

Additionally, Mary Ting Yi Lui contends, speaking specifically of New York’s Chinatown neighborhood, that discursive proclamations concerning the dangers posed to white womanhood by opium-wielding Chinese men eventually produced calls for (and, at times, actual instances of) legal restrictions on the movements of white women in particular geographic areas. As she contends, “By arguing that [white] women put themselves at great risk, when venturing into Chinatown,” contemporary writers, social reformers, and government bureaucrats “essentially called for a reassessment of women’s shifting gender roles at a particular historical moment when white middle-class women were increasingly entering the public sphere.” In other words, the idea that predatory Chinese men and their boundary-blurring opium posed a danger to white women not only worked to marginalize the men they demonized but also to contain at least some of the “challenge from women” that Connell documents (191).

Moreover, such narratives could also serve to naturalize unequal distributions of global power by denying the violence enacted upon colonized and otherwise exploited populations or proclaiming the superior modernity of Western powers. In his discussion of British opium den narratives, Marez concludes that “By making whites—especially women—the people who ultimately pay for the opium trade, this set of narratives imaginatively inverts the hierarchical
relations that defined British domination in Asia.”19 As he states, “the imaginary Chinese threat to white women helped to partly eclipse criticism of British imperialism.”20

Nancy Campbell assigns a similar function to narratives that connect drug traffic to the traffic in women in the United States. She argues that “The analogy between [drug traffic] and the traffic in women achieved several goals. The whiteness of ‘white slavery’ obscured the victimization of women of color.”21 Furthermore, “the analogy diminished the impact of chattel slavery on persons of color” and “positioned white women as prey,” particularly in terms of their sexual relations with nonwhite men, which were “constructed as the sexual coercion of white women by men of color.”22 In short, the victimized bodies of the white women who so often appear in narratives about predatory (usually Chinese or otherwise nonwhite) drug users and distributors worked to reinscribe and justify uneven distributions of gendered, raced, and even global power by naturalizing or denying their existence.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century produced a spate of narratives that employed these discourses, some more explicitly sexual or sensationalistic than their more canonical counterparts. For example, in David Garnett’s novel Dope-Darling (1919), a young white woman is drugged, initiated into prostitution by a predatory black trafficker, and later dies as a result of her drug taking.23 Charles Dickens’ last unfinished work, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), features a white female opium den proprietress who has, readers are told, “opium-smoked herself into the strange likeness of the Chinaman.”24 D.W. Griffith’s film *Broken Blossoms* (1919) depicts the failed attempts of an opium smoking Chinese emigrant to successfully assimilate into British society and transport the “pure” moral values imparted to him by his native China to his barbaric new countrymen.25 In the British case, such generic texts primarily functioned to naturalize and justify the nation’s imperial relations with China.
Within the United States, however, dealing narratives were and continue to be more closely associated with the relationship between masculinity, work, capitalism, and class status. As Gail Bederman contends in her examination of masculinity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century United States, “By the 1890s … both ‘manliness’ and middle-class identity seemed to falter, partly because economic changes rendered earlier ideologies of middle-class manhood less plausible.” As she explains, “Middle-class manliness had been created in a context of small-scale, competitive capitalism which had all but disappeared by 1910” (12). Middle-class white men increasingly moved into low-paid, bureaucratized white-collar professions that curtailed the economic independence many of their fathers had experienced and on which notions of middle-class masculinity had previously been predicated. Additionally, “middle-class men’s social authority faced an onslaught from … working-class men” (13), many of whom had only recently immigrated to the United States. (30).

Thus, as “the dream of manly independent entrepreneurship” became increasingly unrealistic for white, middle-class men, discourses about and narratives that centrally featured some aspect of drug distribution took up their cause. Although the specter of miscegenation still lingers over such narratives, many texts of the late 1800s and early 1900s use the trope less to justify uneven divisions of global power than to render suspect the working-class and non-native populations encroaching upon middle-class white men’s prerogatives. For example, Lui catalogues numerous early short and/or silent films – such as *The Heathen Chinese and the Sunday School Teachers* (1904), *A Raid on a Chinese Opium Den* (1900), and *Secret Sin* (1915) – that trade in opium’s perceived ability to dissolve sexual boundaries between Chinese men and white women.
Indeed, as she states, “Such plots, where respectable white women are tricked into entering opium ‘joints’ run by Chinese men, were fairly familiar to this period’s filmgoers.”28 Additionally, the trope frequently appears in what Lui calls “the yellow journalism genre” (4), which includes sensationalist newspaper stories and editorials, tourist guidebooks, investigative travelogues, and xenophobic cartoons.29 These narratives had material as well as symbolic implications. For example, Lui argues that stories of this sort worked to justify increased surveillance of and restrictions placed upon Chinese emigrants and their business establishments.

As she explains, “Police and social reformers routinely targeted many Chinese-owned businesses out of the [concern] that they harbored Chinatown vices such as opium dens or prostitution” (65). Representations of sinister Chinamen and their unwitting white female victims worked to galvanize support for legal and cultural responses to the alleged threat posed by Chinese emigrants, such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and police raids on and civilian boycotts of Chinese business establishments.30 Thus, discourses and narratives about white women’s opium-fueled seductions by men of Chinese descent not only naturalized Chinese men’s economic and social marginalization but also actively fostered it through official and unofficial sanctions and limits placed upon Chinese men’s business ventures, their places of work and residence, and their mobility in general.

More specifically, these discourses attempted to neutralize the economic threat posed to white, middle-class businessmen by increasingly visible Chinese workers and entrepreneurs.31 Claims that Chinese men’s apparently licit business establishments secretly peddled such vices as opium and prostitutes suggested that, despite their apparent assimilation into American entrepreneurial capitalism, Chinese men indeed posed a threat not only to innocent young white women but the white middle class at large. In short, circulating discourses and fictional
narratives proclaiming the vice-ridden character of Chinatown’s inhabitants worked to symbolically marginalize Chinese masculinities as well as to impose material limitations upon their economic accumulation and business activities.

However, not all such discourses were so blatantly sexualized. Drug historian David Musto discusses white United States Southerners’ “fear[s] that Negro cocaine users might become oblivious of their prescribed bounds and attack white society.”32 Marez similarly asserts that discourses surrounding “the work of Mexican smugglers epitomized the dangers of radicalized Mexican immigrant workers” during the second half of the nineteenth century up to about the 1930s or 40s.33 These broader, less sexualized discourses further suggest that it was not so much the danger posed to white women per se that alarmed anti-drug reformers, politicians, and the general public but rather wider-ranging fears about the Western world’s increasing racial heterogeneity, particularly in terms of labor issues.

Indeed, Marez argues that, as early as the mid-nineteenth century, the works of British writers like Rudyard Kipling and Oscar Wilde exhibit a profound fear of “the seeming ability of Chinese emigrants to reproduce their labor power at a cheaper rate, and hence for lower wages, than [white] workers.”34 He further contends that the criminalization of marijuana in the United States was primarily a “labor-control tactic” that “gave the state additional power to police Mexican immigrants and labor activists.”35 Thus, drug discourses and the narratives they inflected registered anxieties about the declining hegemony of the land-owning classes as, in Connell’s words, new “forms of masculinity organized around wage-earning capacity, mechanical skills, domestic patriarchy and combative solidarity among wage earners” emerged and became institutionalized within the industrializing economy (196).
In short, drugs served an important ideological function in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In much the way that the early drug trade helped to maintain distinctions between hegemonic and subordinated masculinities and justify uneven distributions of global power, the discourses reflected in drug-centered narratives of this period work to contain threats to the race, class, and gender hierarchies by which U.S. society is structured. However, these late nineteenth and early twentieth century narratives do not belong within the dealing genre proper. Although the opium den proprietors and drug users who populate such stories resemble and set many of the representational parameters for the fictional dealers who followed in their footsteps after the 1920s, it was not until the Prohibition era that the dealer became a legible figure within American popular culture.

By the time the U.S. government passed the Harrison Tax Act of 1914 (which sought to more efficiently regulate the production and distribution of opiates and cocaine), Musto can identify the “dope peddler” or “pusher” as an identifiable type. But until legislators instated the Narcotic Import and Export Act in 1922 (effectively outlawing the nonmedicinal use of narcotic drugs), physicians – not street dealers – bore the brunt of public scrutiny with regard to drug distribution and increasing rates of addiction. Moreover, the illicit nature of Prohibition-era alcohol production placed bootleggers in a position similar – if not identical – to that currently occupied by drug dealers, and the discourses used by reformers and government officials to justify alcohol prohibition converge quite neatly with those employed by advocates of narcotic prohibition.

As Michael Woodiwiss notes, the reform movements that proliferated toward the end of the nineteenth century were “partly justified by a perceived threat to Protestant morality and social order from newly arrived immigrants and African Americans.” Furthermore, alcohol
prohibition received wide support from “the country’s commercial and industrial leadership” due to its imagined potential to drive up productivity and decrease workers’ demands for greater wages.39 Unsurprisingly, then, representations of bootleggers closely resemble those of their contemporary dealing counterparts. When alcohol production moved underground with the advent of Prohibition in 1920, popular cultural texts began contending with the figure of the bootlegger, setting the stage for later representations of drug dealers following the repeal of Prohibition in 1933.40

**Drug Dealers as Self-Made Men: Race, Gender, and Capitalism in the Dealing Genre**

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* stands as the archetypical drug dealing narrative. With its focus on the bootlegging Jay Gatsby, Fitzgerald’s novel laid the foundation for later dealing narratives that appeared following the re-legalization of alcohol in 1933. Unlike earlier narratives, which focused on characters who are more accurately described as drug distributors than “dealers,” generic texts after *Gatsby* function less to simply demonize the economic endeavors and class positions of particularly raced groups than to do so in order to assert a meaning for legitimate capitalism by depicting the illegal dealings undertaken by bootleggers and drug traffickers in relation to licit capitalism and the gender, race, and class hierarchies it produces and perpetuates.

*The Great Gatsby* may be the first generic text to depict its dealing protagonist in terms of what Michael Kimmel has called the “Self-Made Man.”41 In his *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, Kimmel argues that the industrialization and bureaucratization of which Connell and Bederman speak culminated in the emergence of a new form of hegemonic masculinity, epitomized in the figure of the self-made man. Kimmel asserts that the self-made man – defined, as he states, by “success in the marketplace, individual achievement, [and]
wealth” – acts as a central figure according to and against which white American men and racialized “others” have fashioned and measured their gender identities since the nineteenth century. As Bederman suggests, few men might enact this self-made masculinity (13), but the figure nevertheless assumes a prominent place in middle-class men’s conceptualizations of their gendered selves. Indeed, the figure may have been granted a greater symbolic importance as its actual attainability declined.

Dealing narratives that, like Gatsby, employ the figure of the self-made man emphasize the inability of their protagonists’ illicit occupations to confer upon them the respectable masculinities associated with legitimate work in a legal sector of the capitalist economy. Generic texts of this type depict dealers as businessmen and entrepreneurs whose illegal activities catapult them too quickly and easily to economic success and social mobility, inevitably leading to their downfalls. These narratives thus attempt to assert a symbolic value for legitimate work in order to counter the alienation and dissatisfaction that men experienced within legitimate capitalist institutions (though, as we shall see, the genre’s inaugural text represents this relationship with more ambivalence than do its more recent counterparts).

Scholars rarely highlight the illegality of the occupation in which Gatsby’s titular character toils. Rather, literary critics more frequently discuss the text in terms of the concept of the “American dream,” which Maxine Greene describes as “a dream about [the] continually new beginnings” to which every American purportedly has a right. Indeed, Roger L. Pearson goes so far as to argue that Gatsby’s author himself “has come to be associated with … the American dream more so than any other writer of the twentieth century.” However, Gatsby’s inability to successfully enact the self-made masculinity that constitutes the realization of the American dream relates integrally to his position as a bootlegger in the Prohibition era. His
illegal dealings undermine his attempt at self-made masculine assertion, which is represented in the novel by Gatsby’s dream of reuniting with and finally marrying his former love, Daisy Buchanan.

Gatsby comes close to attaining his goal, but Daisy reconsiders and renounces her decision to leave her husband, Tom, for Gatsby after Tom reveals the source of Gatsby’s rapid economic accumulation following his exit from the army after the First World War. According to Tom’s informant Walter Chase, as Tom exclaims when he confronts his foe, Gatsby and his Jewish business associate Meyer Wolfsheim46 “bought up a lot of side-street drug stores in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter.”47 Moreover, as Tom states, “That drug-store business was small change … but you’ve got something on now that Walter’s afraid to tell me about” (119). Gatsby’s romantic opponent thus hints at activities even more sinister than Prohibition-flaunting alcohol distribution, perhaps even drug dealing.48

Although Gatsby—like the majority of the dealing protagonists who follow in his footsteps—dies before the narrative’s end, Tom’s revelation had already killed the dream around which Gatsby structured his life since meeting and subsequently losing Daisy to Tom. As Robert Ornstein argues, Gatsby “loses his life” and, more importantly, his love “even though he makes his millions because they are not the kind of safe, respectable money that echoes in Daisy’s lovely voice.”49 Indeed, Fitzgerald consistently juxtaposes Gatsby against Tom to emphasize the illegitimacy of Gatsby’s apparent gender, race, and class status. For example, Gatsby’s humble origins (88-91) and residence in “the less fashionable” of the Long Island suburbs – East and West Egg – in which the majority of the novel takes place (10) sit in sharp contrast to Tom’s “enormously wealthy” family and the “white palace” he owns in “fashionable East Egg” (11).
In revealing to Daisy the illegal activities through which Gatsby made his fortune, as Gatsby complains to narrator Nick Carraway, Tom “told her … things in a way that … made it look as if I was some kind of cheap sharper” (134). Indeed, Tom consistently casts aspersions upon Gatsby’s wealth, accusing him of such things as being “a common swindler who’d have to steal the ring he put on [Daisy’s] finger” (119). Even before he learns of the underground origins of Gatsby’s money, Tom suspects that Gatsby is “some big bootlegger” as “[a] lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know” (97). Tom thus discredits Gatsby by emphasizing his recent and illegal economic ascent. But Tom primarily balks at Gatsby’s desire to accumulate the material and moral trappings of upper-middle class masculinity—represented not only in the bootlegger’s lavish estate but, more importantly, his attempts to re-capture Daisy’s heart and take her hand in marriage.

However, unlike nineteenth and early twentieth century narratives that employ the specter of drug distribution to denigrate and justify the oppression of vulnerable populations, Fitzgerald uses his depiction of Tom to subtly critique hierarchical class structures and the mechanisms through which they are perpetuated. For example, Nick discusses Tom and Daisy in terms that express his contempt for their secure and “careless” class position; he describes them as “careless people [who] smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness … and let other people clean up the mess they had made” (158). He even refuses to shake Tom’s hand the last time he encounters him (157). Through Nick, Fitzgerald depicts Tom not as the paragon of virtue he imagines himself to be but rather as an irresponsible, entitled aristocrat whose actions ultimately result in Gatsby’s demise.

By juxtaposing Gatsby’s self-made (if dubiously achieved) economic success against, as Fitzgerald puts it, “the wholesome bulkiness about [Tom’s] person and … position” (134), the
novel reveals the unevenness and inequality embedded in the very idea of self-making. Moreover, Gatsby thus establishes two of the central tropes of the dealing genre – namely, that of setting the dealer’s illegal activities in opposition to the secure class positions of other characters who earn their money through legitimate capitalist channels and attributing the dealer’s demise to his illegitimate approximation of middle-class identity. However, Fitzgerald does so not in order to justify Gatsby’s death or his inability to reclaim Daisy’s love but to question the notion of self-making that undergirds the American dream Gatsby fails to achieve.

The suspect nature of Gatsby’s black market fortune—positioned in opposition to Tom and Daisy’s secure and legitimate class status—points to the “double irony” that, according to Ornstein, characterizes the novel’s depiction of American idealism and entrepreneurial masculinity. As he states, “Those who,” like Nick or Daisy, “possess the necessary means lack the will, motive, or capacity to pursue a dream,” while “those with [Gatsby’s] heightened sensitivity to the promise of life have it because they are disinherited.” Dealing—or traffic in illegal substances—thus comes to represent all that is false and impossible about hegemonic masculine ideals and the raced and (particularly, in this case) classed hierarchies they create and support.

Thus, although Gatsby trades in many of the same tropes through which drug discourses have historically upheld hegemonic masculine ideals, it does so with enough reflexivity and self-consciousness to successfully undermine at least some of the assumptions on which those tropes rely. However, the genre’s historical baggage has carried over into more recent representations of drug dealing, and contemporary narratives are less likely to exhibit Fitzgerald’s reflexivity and extend similar societal critiques. Recent dealing films like Brian De Palma’s Scarface, Blow, Hustle and Flow (2005), and American Gangster (2007) employ the association between self-
made masculinity and drug dealing; although they do so in different ways, all ultimately put the
trope to use to argue for the value of legitimate capitalist endeavors by denying their protagonists
the opportunity to craft fulfilling masculinities through their dealing activities.

De Palma’s Scarface—a loose adaptation of Howard Hawk’s controversial 1932 film of the
same name—narrates the rise and fall of Cuban refugee turned cocaine dealer Tony Montana.
Montana quickly and stealthily moves up the ranks in Frank Lopez’s Miami drug gang. He
eventually assassinates Lopez, seduces the deposed leader’s wife, and takes his place within the
Colombian drug cartel from which Lopez obtained his cocaine. Cocaine dealing allows Montana
to acquire all the trappings of upper-middle class, self-made masculinity: an attractive wife, a
large home, and an apparently fulfilling career. However, Montana’s quick ascent to kingpin
status soon presents him with a multitude of moral dilemmas that he cannot resolve within the
social strictures of the drug trade; when he purposely botches the assassination of a journalist
who threatened to expose the cartel to United Nations authorities, its leader Alejandro Sosa,
orders Montana’s death, sending a squad of assassins to kill him at his mansion.

In his discussion of Scarface, Banash argues that “the villain in [the film] is neither Cuba
nor cocaine, but the … injustices and contradictions that function as the conditions of possibility
for capitalism itself.”51 He further contends that Montana “is punished … only insofar as his
drugs are themselves the worst kind of exploited and alienated capital.”52 However, Montana’s
death results not from his dealing per se nor from his close approximation of legitimate capitalist
achievement; rather, he dies because he attempts to reconcile drug dealing with middle-class,
familial values. Indeed, Montana does not simply refuse to kill the journalist. He chooses to
thwart Sosa’s goals only upon discovering that his target is traveling with his wife and children.
Before he realizes that the journalist is not alone, a coked-up Montana insists that “I don’t care where you blow him up; just tell me when, okay? You just tell me when. That’s all I care about.” However, when he spies the journalist picking his family up from their apartment, Montana tells his fellow assassins to “[f]orget it. We kill this guy alone. No wife. No kids.” Importantly, this scene immediately follows Montana’s first expressions of dissatisfaction with drugs and the drug trade. “This what I work for?” he asks his associate, Manny, before lamenting that he has “got a fucking junkie for a wife” whose “womb is so polluted” that he “can’t even have a kid with her.” Thus, Montana’s occupation may allow him to accumulate the material signs of entrepreneurial masculinity—a sports car, a mansion—but it prevents him from attaining another important marker of full masculine status: fatherhood.

Montana’s disenchantment with his illegal occupation culminates in his subsequent refusal to “blow up” the journalist’s family, which ultimately brings about his own assassination. Thus, rather than pointing to the similarities that characterize legitimate capitalist work and drug dealing, *Scarface* distinguishes dealing from licit economic endeavors by pointing to its moral deficiencies. Drug dealing, the narrative implies, may confer upon its practitioners the material wealth they are less likely to gain through licit employment, but it cannot provide them with the moral wealth associated with masculinities produced through legitimate, honest work. Indeed, Montana’s occupation not only prohibits him from becoming a father but also results in the death of his sister and most beloved family member, Gina.

In other words, whereas, according to Banash, *Scarface* asserts that “there is no difference between legal capitalism and the drug trade,” the film’s somewhat peripheral though ideologically significant focus on family belies this explanation. In much the way that Gatsby’s dealing thwarts his attempt to win Daisy’s heart and thus establish the nuclear household
required to attain the masculine status he seeks, Montana’s struggle to reconcile familial values with those of the drug economy is doomed to fail. The dealing economy leaves no room for familial satisfaction (for its participants or its foes) and thus cannot confer full masculine status upon its workers.

Although the film includes a brief scene in which Montana’s mother admonishes him for his career choice, refuses the money he offers her, and declares that “I work for my living,” *Scarface* does not engage in exactly the same kinds of work-related juxtapositions as does *Gatsby*. Rather, De Palma’s film emphasizes the moral and masculine limits with which the dealing economy presents its protagonist. *Blow*, on the other hand, consistently juxtaposes the illicit work performed by its dealing protagonist, George Jung, against the honest, blue collar toil at which his father makes his modest living. Indeed, as Banash contends, “the film revolves around Jung’s troubled relationship to his working-class roots in Boston.” In explicitly (rather than, as in the case of *Scarface*, implicitly) constructing dealing in opposition to legitimate work, *Blow* emphasizes the masculine meanings that are available to men who earn their living within licit occupations and distinctly unavailable to those who choose to work outside of its borders.

The first time Jung’s father appears in the film, Jung explains in a voiceover that “[m]y dad ran a plumbing and heating company. He had three trucks, ten employees, and did big jobs. He was my hero.” Despite his hard work, however, Jung’s father “didn’t make enough money to keep mom happy,” and the family eventually “lost everything to a bankruptcy.” As Jung states, continuing his voiceover narration, “I decided right then and there I wasn’t going to live like that. I needed to get as far away as possible.” To this end, Jung moves to California and starts dealing and, later, trafficking large amounts of marijuana as a young adult. Although he eventually goes to prison for trafficking, his time in jail proves beneficial; his cellmate, Diego,
sets Jung up with his cocaine contact, and upon his release Jung replaces his weed dealing with cocaine trafficking. His cocaine dealings earn him enormous amounts of money, and he eventually (much like Tony Montana) marries his coke connection’s wife, purchases a lavish home in Southern California, and (unlike his generic predecessor) becomes a father.

In short, Jung appears to have fashioned a successful and thoroughly fulfilling masculine identity out of his illicit occupation. However, throughout the film, Jung tries simultaneously to use his dealing to distance himself from his father’s working-class lifestyle and to impress his father with the material possessions dealing allows him to acquire. For example, although Jung (in a voiceover) pronounces his life to be “perfect” just before his parents arrive to visit his newly acquired mansion, his father remains unimpressed not simply with the house but with the source of the money its purchase required. He laments that drug dealing is “not [the career] I would have chosen for you” but assures his son that “it’s good if it makes you happy.” The younger Jung replies (rather unconvincingly) that “at the moment I am happy,” but he does not remain so for long. By the film’s end, Jung has been double-crossed by several of his dealing associates, lost his wife and most of his contact with his child, and been jailed for a third and final time.

Although Jung never entirely loses his father’s support and love, their interactions clearly imply that the younger Jung has failed not only to live up to his own dream of carving out a life for himself that entirely diverges from that of his father but also to create any sort of full, rewarding identity out of his dealing. While it could be argued that the film depicts drug dealing as simply no more fulfilling than licit work, Blow’s depiction of Jung’s father clearly conveys that—despite his low socioeconomic standing—the elder Jung has achieved the masculine status that continually eludes his son. He and his wife remain married, he still resides in the house in
which George was raised, and he maintains a connection with his wayward son – in contrast to George Jung’s eventual economic ruin and the relatively estranged relationships he shares with his wife and daughter.

Thus, Blow juxtaposes dealing against licit capitalist work to emphasize not their similarities but, much as does Scarface, their differences. Moreover, these differences intimately relate to licit and illicit workers’ (in)abilities to produce rewarding masculine identities through their occupations. Whereas George Jung’s illicit self-made masculinity ultimately leaves him destitute and alone, his father’s legitimate entrepreneurial identity provides him with all the trappings–both material and moral–of middle-class masculine status, despite his working-class bank balance. In a tape-recorded message Jung sends his father from jail at the film’s end, Blow’s dealing protagonist finally admits that “you’re the best, Dad.” He thus tacitly acknowledges the film’s ideological conclusions: although dealing holds out the promise of unlimited wealth and excitement, only its legitimate counterpart can provide participants with the tools necessary to fashion a successful and self-made masculine identity.

Both Hustle & Flow and American Gangster also employ the trope of self-made masculinity established in Gatsby and continually articulated and reformulated in later dealing narratives. Hustle & Flow’s protagonist, DJay, begins the film as a down-and-out, drug dealing Memphis pimp who dreams of one day making it big in the music industry. DJay is depicted (along with the women he employs) as morally, spiritually, and economically destitute until he begins recording hip-hop tracks with two musician friends, Key and Shelby. Although DJay is sent to jail after assaulting successful Memphis rapper Skinny Black for refusing to listen to his demo tape, one of DJay’s prostitutes, Nola, convinces the local radio station to play his track. The song makes an impact on listeners, and the film ends with two rapping fellow inmates
begging DJay to listen to their demo. Unlike Skinny Black, DJay agrees to give the fledgling rappers a chance.

DJay responds to the men’s request by repeating the film’s tagline: “You know what they say; everybody gotta have a dream.” Thus, Hustle & Flow positions itself in terms of the same “American dream” motif with which scholars associate Gatsby. However, DJay can only realize his dream after he has been punished for the illicit activities in which he previously engaged. His attempt to get noticed through Skinny Black primarily fails because the rapper sees DJay only as a marijuana dealer – the pretense under which he gains admission to Black’s party. But after DJay goes to jail for attacking Black, he achieves the success that eluded him as a pimp and drug dealer. In contrast to the disheartened, struggling criminal viewers meet at the film’s beginning, the jailed DJay who appears at its end is happy, fulfilled, and successful. In short, DJay’s illegal activities were not conducive to masculine self-making; only after he has been forced out of the drug trade can DJay craft a legitimate, rewarding gender identity.

American Gangster fits more neatly within the framework exemplified by Gatsby. Its protagonist, drug dealer Frank Lucas, makes a name for himself selling the potent “Blue Magic” heroin he imports from Vietnam. Although he sets his family up with a respectable estate in New Jersey and marries a beauty queen, Lucas conducts his dealing in a diligently discrete manner. He thus manages to remain below honest, hard-working law enforcement officer Richie Roberts’ radar until the detective spies Lucas wearing an uncharacteristically gaudy fur coat and sitting with a group of high-level criminals at a Muhammad Ali match. In other words, Lucas’ demise results less from his dealing than from his public appropriation of the mannerisms and attributes of legitimately wealthy men. Thus, in much the way that Gatsby’s illegally acquired wealth inhibits his ability to enact the middle-class masculinity he tries to make for himself,
Lucas’ downfall begins when he disregards the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate gender, race, and class positions.

Although the majority of dealing narratives have historically worked to valorize legitimate capitalism and its associated masculinities by denigrating those associated with the drug trade, there are several generic texts that either disregard the trope of self-making altogether or put it to use to subvert the genre’s normative operations. Narratives of the first sort tend to ignore the figure of the self-made dealer and instead continue the racist and imperialist ideological trajectories set by the older drug discourses discussed above. For example, Maria Full of Grace (2004) works in much the same way as did Broken Blossoms nearly a century earlier. After pregnant rose factory worker Maria Alvarez decides to trade in her low-paying job in Colombia for a stint as a transnational drug mule for a trafficking organization, she witnesses the drug trade’s brutality first hand.  

Thus, rather than returning to poverty-stricken Colombia and her dangerous trafficking employers at the film’s end, Maria decides to stay in the United States to raise her unborn child. The film not only depicts her decision as redemptive but also constructs North America in direct opposition to its South American counterpart; in contrast to the incorrigibly impoverished Colombia, the United States appears as the land of opportunity, safety, and freedom. Maria’s body thus acts—like those of the innocent young white women who populate nineteenth and earlier twentieth century narratives—as a screen upon which to negotiate the tensions between a brutally backwards Colombia and the properly modern United States, with the West ultimately coming out on top.

Similarly, Traffic uses the white body of Drug Czar Robert Wakefield’s young adult daughter to demonstrate the resultant horrors of the transnational drug trade and thus justify the
law enforcement tactics the rest of the film depicts. Although the aforementioned films focus less on the figure of the dealer than on dealing economies in general and law enforcement efforts aimed at controlling them, even films like *Scarface, Blow,* and *Hustle & Flow* abide by this racist, misogynist tradition. Both Tony Montana and George Jung partially constitute their masculinities by “stealing” the wives of their former bosses, and DJay’s prostitutes not only support his hip hop endeavors but remain on the sidelines while only he reaps the benefits of their collective work.

Additionally, some films that *do* employ the trope of self-made masculinity resist the temptation to construct dealing in direct opposition to legitimate employment in order to assert the value of legitimate capitalist enterprise. Seventies blaxpoitation films, for example, often work to disavow the connections between drug dealing and black communities or, more importantly for my purposes (though somewhat less frequently), allow their protagonists to fashion successful masculinities through their illegal activities. For example, the protagonist of *Superfly* (1972), Youngblood Priest, successfully outsmarts corrupt policemen and manages to conduct one last drug deal before exiting the business. However, while dealing does allow Priest to fashion a successful masculinity, he must renounce his illegal occupation to enact the gender identity he desires.

The 2006 film *Alpha Dog* could be read as a mocking commentary on contemporary masculinity. When the film’s protagonist, Jesse James Hollywood, fails to extract the money he is owed from one of his dealers, he and his young, white associates kidnap and ultimately kill the debtor’s younger brother. By the film’s end, however, the young dealers’ flamboyant hypermasculinities have landed them in jail, while the older, more reserved dealers for whom they previously worked continue to evade law enforcement officials. Self-fashioning sits just
outside of the young protagonists’ grasps not because they are drug dealers but because they are middlemen. Thus, the film points to the conditions—twenty-first century extensions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century economic shifts of which Bederman speaks—that inhibit not only dealers but workers within the legitimate economy from enacting the self-made masculinities available to declining portions of, in this case, the white male population in particular.

However, like many drug dealing narratives that appear to offer up some sort of resistance to dominant generic paradigms (as well as those that make no attempt to do so), films such as *Alpha Dog* and *Superfly* fail to provide sustained, critical analyses of the political and economic factors that make drug dealing a logical occupational choice for particular individuals and oppressed groups. Despite fleeting and limitedly successful instances of generic resistance, most drug dealing narratives work within, react to, or at least acknowledge the raced and gendered parameters set by their predecessors and contemporaries. Using the figure of the self-made man, these texts draw comparisons between drug dealing and the legitimate capitalist economy. However, they typically do so not to point to their similarities or the unequal distributions of power that push dealers into their illicit occupations but to deny their dealing protagonists the opportunity to fashion fulfilling gender identities within the drug trade. Such texts thus construct the legitimate work that dealers reject as the only path toward the successful enactment of a self-made masculinity.

**Resistant Strains: The Wire, Weeds, and Drug Dealing on Post-Network Television**

Drug dealing narratives currently comprise two of television’s most popular and critically acclaimed premium cable series—*The Wire* and *Weeds*—but network television is no stranger to the dealing genre. Drug dealing takes center stage on television shows like *Miami Vice* (NBC,
1984-1990) and David Mills’ failed drama series, *Kingpin* (NBC, 2003), and occupies time on episodic cop dramas like *Dragnet 1967* (NBC, 1967-1970)\(^4\) and NBC’s *Law and Order* (in its multiple incarnations). Rarely, however, has a televisual dealing narrative succeeded both critically and commercially while resisting the dominant strains of dealing discourse. But with the appearance of *The Wire* in 2002 and *Weeds* in 2005, the nature of drug dealing’s representation on television shifted. Both shows have achieved critical and (to greater and lesser extents) commercial success at the same time that they significantly rework and resist their genre’s conventional operations.

Although both *The Wire* and *Weeds* acknowledge and explore the dealer’s relationship to hegemonic, self-made masculinity, they do so not in order to reflect or reproduce the problematically gendered, raced, and class-based assumptions under which the majority of their generic predecessors operate but to expose and challenge them. Their abilities to do so result from the combined effects of authorial intent, industrial context, and their long-form, serialized structures, as well as the narratives themselves. Unlike their generic predecessors, *The Wire* and *Weeds* construct drug dealing as a logical, necessary, and even preferable occupational decision for particular individuals in the face of capitalism’s inherent inequalities. These televisual texts thus provide the critical reflections that (as previously noted) other generic texts typically lack.

*The Wire* primarily accomplishes this through a sustained critique of late American capitalist institutions and their accompanying discourses of race, class, and gender. *Weeds*, on the other hand, uses its white female protagonist and her dysfunctional suburban milieu to denaturalize the gendered, racialized, and class-based assumptions undergirding not only dealing discourses and representations but the notion of self-fashioning as well. My next two chapters focus on the sophisticated critiques these vastly different television serials impart through their
narratives in order to examine the ways in which the genre has been redefined, reworked, and transformed through its encounters with different cultural forms—particularly serialized, premium cable television.

Notes


3 Ibid, par 2.


5 R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” Gender & Society 19 (2005): 832. Subsequent references noted parenthetically in text. Connell and Messerschmidt write the section of their article from which I am quoting in the past tense in order to emphasize the differing and expanded ways that the term has been used since its original coinage; I have converted their arguments into the present tense for linguistic clarity and consistence.


7 Connell, Masculinities, 185; Tosh, “Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender,” 52.

8 See Connell and Messerschmidt’s discussion of the concepts’ applications in “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” 833-835 and Tosh’s similar discussion in “Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender,” 51-53.

9 Connell, Masculinities, 187. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent references to Connell derive from Masculinities and are parenthetically noted in the text.


12 Connell, Masculinities, 186.


14 Campesori quoted in Courtwright, Forces of Habit, 58.

15 See the introduction to Marez’s Drug Wars, 1-38.

16 In actuality, such associations are not without precedent. As reported previously, drugs frequently supported imperialist agendas and provided justifications for particular groups of people’s low societal positions.

17 Marek Kohn, Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Underground (London: Granta, 1992), 2. Subsequent references to Kohn derive from Dope Girls and are noted parenthetically in the text. Throughout the better part of the 1800s, few if any legal restrictions (aside from taxation) impeded the importation and sale of narcotic drugs to and within the United States; the Harrison Tax Act of 1914 was America’s “first major national anti-narcotic law … intended to curb recreational narcotics use and non-medical addiction” (Musto, The American Disease, x). Britain’s only anti-drug legislation (until it expanded 1914’s Defense of the Realm Act to include prohibitions against the sale of illicit drugs) was the Poisons and Pharmacy Act of 1868, which, Marek states, “[i]ntended to regulate shopkeepers rather than street hustlers” (Dope Girls, 38).


19 Marez, Drug Wars, 65.

20 Ibid, 66.


22 Ibid, 73 – 74.

23 Leda Burke (pseudonym of David Garnett), Dope-Darling (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1919).


28 Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*, 72. Subsequent references noted parenthetically in the text. Lui provides more thorough discussions of these and other narratives in the second chapter of *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*, particularly pages 70-73 and in the third chapter, especially pages 82-85. For the most part, the Chinese men who appear in such stories are unilaterally condemned, and the same holds true for the majority of the white women as well. However, in some narratives—such as the 1905 play *A Night in Chinatown*—the white woman in question (or one particular white woman among several) is redeemed by marriage to or rescue by a white man whose masculinity sufficiently aligns with hegemonic norms.

29 For discussions and examples of these texts, see Lui’s *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*, particularly its first two chapters, respectively entitled “‘Terra Incognita’: Mapping Chinatown’s Racial and Gender Boundaries in Lower Manhattan,” 17-51 and “Beyond Chinatown: Policing Chinese American Male Mobility in New York City,” 52-80.

30 For a more extensive review of such actions, see the second chapter of Lui’s *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*, 52-80.

31 As Lui documents, Chinatown was home to numerous Chinese-owned business establishments like laundries, restaurants, and shops.


33 Marez, *Drug Wars*, 111.

34 Ibid, 100.


39 Ibid, 16.

40 For example, one of the country’s first sound movies, *The Lights of New York*, centers on bootlegging (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 1928).

Ibid, 17.


Although he is not the central focus of the novel, Gatsby’s mentor and business partner, Wolfshiem, more closely corresponds to the dealing or drug-related figures who populated narratives in the half-century prior to *Gatsby*’s release. Fitzgerald depicts him as anxious and somewhat shifty — the kind of person who wears “cuff buttons” made of the “[f]inest specimens of human molars” (66-67). Furthermore, Gatsby’s association with Wolfshiem initially rouses Tom’s suspicions about the legitimacy of Gatsby’s self-made masculinity (119). Interestingly, however, though Wolfshiem’s masculinity is unquestionably depicted as suspect (particularly in Tom’s eyes), he does not suffer for his dubiously achieved self-fashioning in the same way as does Gatsby.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 119. All subsequent references noted parenthetically in the text.

That Gatsby is a drug dealer (or somehow involved in drug distribution) is a potentially controversial claim. However, considering the widespread drug use occurring in the United States prior to the passage of the Harrison Tax Act in 1914 and the Narcotic Drugs Import and Export Act (the United States’ most comprehensive anti-narcotic legislation at the time) in 1922 (the year in which the novel is set), that Gatsby might switch from bootlegging to drug dealing appears more logical.

Ornstein, Roger, “Scott Fitzgerald’s Fable of East and West,” *College English* 18, no. 3 (1956): 140.

Ibid, 140.

Banash, “Intoxicating Class,” par. 2.

Ibid, par. 2.

54 Banash, “Intoxicating Class,” par. 2.

55 Ibid, par. 5; emphasis added.


57 Just before going on the run for a final time, Jung goes to visit his father, who—unlike his mother—admits that he still cares about him and considers him his son. He even reluctantly approves of his son’s decision to evade law enforcement officials.


64 For a fuller examination of this particular incarnation of Dragnet’s treatment of drugs and drug dealing, see “Policing Genres: Dragnet’s Texts and Generic Contexts” in Mittell’s Genre and Television, 148-151.
CHAPTER 3
“AND ALL THE PIECES MATTER”: THE WIRE’S SERIALIZED SUBVERSION OF THE DRUG DEALING GENRE

Since *The Wire*’s debut in 2002, its creator, David Simon, has often described the show as a “visual novel,” and critics quickly integrated this metaphor into their discussions of the series.¹ The term, in many ways, accurately describes *The Wire*’s structure and pacing, thematic scope, and ideological ambitions. The series certainly does not lend itself to cursory plot descriptions or intermittent viewing; as Brian Rose notes, “[The Wire] does not make it easy for casual viewers to simply tune in and start watching,” and “[t]he narrative moves in distinctly un-television ways.”² However, *The Wire*’s “un-television ways” are integral to its ability to subvert the normative operations of the drug dealing genre, as well as those of the traditional cop show against which Simon frequently rails.³

The show employs a unique form of televisual serialization—which I describe as a “reverse puzzle structure” and discuss in more detail below—that gives shape to its generically subversive narrative and allows its producers to tell stories in more complex ways than do the majority of *The Wire*’s generic counterparts. The show’s use of serialization is not unprecedented. Many recent television programs, as Jason Mittell notes, employ some form of serialized plotting.⁴ Additionally, *The Wire*’s serialized format in some ways resembles that of the serial stories that ran in late nineteenth century newspapers, about which Michael Denning writes in his *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*.

Although Denning asserts that a narrative’s lack of serialization “should not be taken as simply a sign of [its] deteriorat[ed]” complexity, he nevertheless maintains that “changes in format ha[ve] some effects on the fiction.”⁵ In other words, finite narratives may exhibit complexities equal to those of their serialized counterparts, but serialization provides cultural
producers with a privileged starting point from which to craft their stories. *The Wire* capitalizes upon the narrative privileges associated with serialization and, indeed, further complicates its mechanisms by forcing viewers not to, in Denning’s words, “read for the ending,” but rather to “read” backwards, bringing events and revelations provided in later seasons or episodes to bear on their interpretations of earlier plot points and, most importantly, the series as a whole.

This reverse puzzle structure also renders the arguments *The Wire* imparts through its narrative difficult to describe to the uninitiated. Thus, a thorough examination of the show’s depiction of drug dealing, masculinity, and late American capitalism requires an initial description of *The Wire*’s basic plot. The series is currently in its fifth and final season. However, in this chapter I primarily deal with its first, second and third seasons, which revolve around the attempts of Lieutenant Cedric Daniels’ wiretap detail to indict the violent and elusive Barksdale dealing organization. Thus, the following plot summary will only address events that occur within this particular narrative arc and not those that arise in subsequent seasons.

*The Wire*’s first season centers—to a greater extent than the show’s later seasons—on the inner workings of both Baltimore’s drug trade and its police department, particularly those units charged with investigating drug-related activities. After Detective Jimmy McNulty incites a minor scandal by informing a city judge of the department’s failure to investigate Avon Barksdale, the most violent and powerful drug dealer on Baltimore’s Westside, Daniels puts together a detail comprised of Detectives Ellis Carver, Lester Freamon, Kima Greggs, Thomas “Herc” Hauk, McNulty, Roland “Prez” Prezbylewski, and Leandor Sydnor. Daniels’ wiretap detail must constantly struggle against police higher-ups (or “bosses”) like Major William Rawls and Deputy Commissioner of Operations Ervin Burrell to keep their cases going, as
neither man looks favorably upon the sprawling wiretap investigations at which Daniels’ detail excels.

However, the more important group of characters for my purposes work not within Baltimore’s police department but Avon Barksdale’s drug dealing gang. The Barksdale organization—of which Avon serves as head—consists primarily of Russell “Stringer” Bell, Avon’s business-minded second-in-command, and D’Angelo Barksdale, Avon’s nephew, who runs the organization’s low-rise project territory (dubbed “The Pit”). During the first season, the Barksdales’ ownership of the Westside remains relatively uncontested, with the exception of its dealers’ frequent victimization by Omar Little—a stick-up artist who, as he puts it, “robs drug dealers” for a living—particularly after Omar discovers that the organization was responsible for the torture and murder of his boyfriend, Brandon.

Throughout the season, The Wire’s police protagonists attempt to indict Avon for a series of murders (though his dealing activities also attract their attention) committed by Barksdale soldiers as Avon’s behest. By the season’s end, both Avon and D’Angelo have landed themselves in jail, with Avon taking a light sentence for drug-related activities and D’Angelo receiving 20 years of incarceration on charges stemming from the interstate drug-run on which police caught him. Thus, in The Wire’s second season, Stringer takes Avon’s place as the organization’s leader and begins to shift its emphasis from territory—Avon’s primary concern—to product (or, more specifically, procuring higher-quality drugs).

To this end, Stringer teams up, against Avon’s wishes, with Eastside dealer Proposition Joe Stewart, who promises Stringer access to his purer product in exchange for a portion of the Barksdale “real estate” (a term the show’s dealers use to refer to the corners and project buildings on and in which they sell drugs). Unaware that Stringer has given Joe’s crews...
permission to deal on Barksdale territory, Avon hires legendary New York hitman Brother Mouzone to provide the organization with extra muscle while he and many of his soldiers are in jail. Stringer hatches a dubious scheme to rid himself of Mouzone so that he can continue running the business his way, but these backdoor dealings eventually return to haunt Stringer in the third season.

In its second season, *The Wire* also introduces a new side plot, which narrates the destruction of Baltimore’s once thriving blue-collar economy through a network of dockworkers who get involved with the drug trade in order to stave off, if only momentarily, the demise of their livelihoods. The port union’s president, Frank Sobotka, attempts to keep his impoverished union afloat by allowing a transnational smuggling organization—led by “The Greek” and his second-in-command, Spiros “Vondas” Vondopoulos—to quietly move its contraband through the Baltimore docks.¹⁰ Sobotka also hires a lobbyist in hopes of convincing local politicians to either deepen the port’s adjacent canal or repair the city’s deteriorating grain pier.

Early in the season, the port union comes under the investigation of Daniels’ wiretap detail at the request of Eastern District Commander Stan Valcheck, Sobotka’s enemy and rival, who believes that Sobotka is throwing around more money than the president of a flailing union could possibly obtain legally. However, when port cop Beatrice “Beadie” Russell discovers the bodies of thirteen Eastern European and Asian prostitutes in a shipping container on Sobotka’s docks, the investigation takes a more serious turn. The detectives come close to indicting the smugglers for the women’s deaths; however, after Sobotka agrees to testify against them, Vondas and The Greek murder Sobotka and dump his body in the canal, where police find it the next morning. Furthermore, the grain pier that Sobotka had been lobbying the city to repair has, by the season’s end, been announced as the site of a new waterfront development initiative.
Thus, despite Sobotka’s efforts to save his struggling union, it ultimately meets its demise at the hands of city bureaucrats and developers (not to mention the union-busting FBI).

In *The Wire*’s third season, Avon is released from jail and returns to his former post as head of his dealing empire. However, his and Stringer’s visions for the organization increasingly clash with one another, as Avon continues to fight for territory while Stringer insists that they are “past that [war] bullshit” and entreats his partner to consider running the organization more like “businessmen.” Indeed, while Avon is out warring for his version of real estate, Stringer is working with developer Andy Krawczyk to erect a high-rise, waterfront condominium in downtown Baltimore.

Daniels’ detail continues to investigate the Barksdale organization, and they eventually obtain the location of Avon’s wartime safe house and catch Stringer on the wiretap. However, before the police can get to Stringer, Omar and Mouzone kill him for his earlier deceptions of both men and his involvement in Brandon’s brutal murder. The police later arrest Avon and the majority of his muscle, and the deposed kingpin returns to jail for at least five years. Thus, by the end of *The Wire*’s third season, Avon is incarcerated for an indeterminate period of time and Stringer is dead.

Through its depiction of these events, *The Wire* forwards a sharp critique of the declining value of work within late American capitalist institutions, primarily by juxtaposing the differential masculinities of its protagonists—particularly those of Avon and Stringer—against one another. However, unlike other dealing narratives, *The Wire* does so not to valorize licit capitalist institutions and practices but to expose and challenge them. The series employs a metaphor of “material masculinity”—which I discuss in greater detail below—to critically examine the economic destabilizations that compel particular individuals and groups to engage in illicit
practices like drug dealing, thus providing the sociopolitical critique that its generic counterparts typically lack.

However, *The Wire*’s critique does not unfold linearly; rather, the series’ reverse puzzle structure requires viewers to work back through the narrative, piece together its various components, and decipher the complicated ideological challenge the series puts forth over the course of its five seasons. Certainly, authorial intent and *The Wire*’s location on premium cable also contribute to these critical abilities. Thus, understanding the way the series uses drug dealing as a lens through which to look critically at late American capitalism requires a discussion of the cultural—or, more specifically, televisual—context in which *The Wire* is situated.

“Swear to God, it isn’t a Cop Show”: Situating *The Wire* in the Televisual Landscape

As previously noted, *The Wire*’s ability to subvert the normative operations of the drug dealing genre can be partially attributed to authorial intent and the relative freedoms provided by the show’s location on premium cable channel HBO. In the case of HBO, industrial and authorial concerns merge quite neatly, allowing for the creation of television shows (like *The Wire*) that could or would never find their way onto network television. Indeed, the business model on which HBO relies provides the creators of its series with the opportunity to explore issues and tell stories that are incompatible with television’s traditional goal of, as Simon puts it, “reassur[ing] viewers that … the time [has] never [been] more right to buy more automobiles, cell phones, dish soap, and disposable diapers.”

Examining the assumptions on which HBO bases its business strategies and the position *The Wire* occupies in relation to such practices helps to provide a better understanding of the series’ ability to perform the aforementioned generic subversions.
Gary Edgerton explains that “HBO [is] based on an entirely different economic model than the one followed by the three major broadcast networks, … their affiliates, and the country’s independent stations, which all [sell] specific audiences … to sponsors.”¹³ Unlike traditional broadcast networks and basic cable channels, “HBO’s subscriber format focuse[s] all of the channel’s attention on pleasing and retaining its viewing audience.”¹⁴ HBO’s differential economic model has undoubtedly contributed not only to the commercial but also to the critical success of its original series. However, according to Chris Anderson, “the direct subscription model” also “leaves premium cable networks … particularly vulnerable to … the mercurial tastes of audiences.”¹⁵ Thus, as he states, “In order to ensure HBO’s continuing economic value for subscribers, the network [had to] establish a unique cultural value among television networks” (30).

During the late 1980s and into the late 1990s, HBO worked, first, to construct itself as a “consistent and identifiable … luxury brand in a populist medium” and, next, to deepen the “relationship between subscribers and the brand” (30). Anderson contends that “In this [second] stage, HBO turned increasingly to the production of original series” like Oz (1997-2003) and Sex and the City (1998-2004) “that had the potential to engender loyalty among viewers by insinuating the network into their weekly viewing habits” (30). In other words, HBO used its original series to strengthen subscribers’ awareness and increase their use of the service for which they paid (or might eventually begin to pay) each month in an attempt to retain fickle consumers in an increasingly crowded cable market. Unfortunately, however, as Anderson notes, when HBO “chose to compete directly with the commercial networks by introducing original series” the channel “erased one of the key points of distinction” between itself and its competitors (35).
In order to maintain its distinctive identity (and its subscriber base), HBO sought “to translate the reputation for quality earned by its award-winning movies into the realm of series television, while making this distinction salient for the upper-middle-class viewers who were its most likely subscribers.”

Television scholars like Deborah L. Jaramillo and Horace Newcomb similarly connect this notion of “quality” to HBO’s solidification of its brand identity. Jaramillo contends that HBO’s definition of quality emphasizes its original series’ “graphic language, sex, and violence” as well as realist, cinematic, and auterial pretensions in order to juxtapose such offerings against the inauthentic, commercial “trash” in which its competitors trade.

Newcomb further asserts that HBO’s ability to brand itself in terms of the quality of its programming “is also clearly the result of the economic value associated with ‘premium’ or ‘subscription’ channels within the larger universe of cable offerings.”

Anderson identifies three major strategies by which HBO attempts to deliver on its brand-constitutive promise of quality. First, HBO’s ability to assert the superiority of its original programming derives in part from the fact that the channel, as he states, “lavish[es] more money on the production of its … series than any of the broadcast networks can possibly afford” (35).

Second, HBO “spends more money on marketing[,] promotions[,] and public relations] than any other network” to ensure that “viewers recognize and value the signs of quality” in its original programming (35). Most importantly for my purposes, HBO’s third strategy consists of “promot[ing] the creators of [its] series and encourag[ing] reporters to flesh out their biographies so that the public learns to identify the artistic vision of a single creator behind each series” (36).

Thus, HBO not only provides more funds for the production and promotion of its original series than do its network and basic cable competitors but also frames such programs in terms of authorial vision and control.
The control and support that HBO (at least nominally) offers its creative talent played a significant role in Simon’s decision to bring his re-worked police procedural to the premium channel. According to Brian Rose,

The then-recent cancellation of *Homicide* [the NBC cop show on which Simon cut his screenwriting teeth] was, for Simon, conclusive proof of the format’s dead-end on commercial television, particularly as he recalled the notes he and his fellow writers would receive from NBC demanding ‘Where are all the life affirming moments?’

Simon had intentions elsewhere. Although he and co-writer Ed Burns initially pitched *The Wire* as an “inversion of the cop show” that would provide viewers with “a close examination of the drug war’s dysfunction,” they envisioned the series as being about much more than just “crime [and] punishment.”

Simon sought not to provide viewers with “the one-hour solutions and easy, triumph-of-justice explanations” typically associated with police procedurals and urban crime dramas but rather to produce a show “that would, with each season, slice off another piece of the American city, so that by the end of the run, a simulated Baltimore would stand in for urban America, and the fundamental problems of urbanity would be fully addressed.” Although Simon did not initially inform HBO of these grand plans, he eventually “sat down with HBO execs and laid out the argument to begin constructing an American city and examining the above themes through that construction.”

Here, HBO’s business model served the creator well. *The Wire*’s debut season garnered respectable ratings, and its port-centered second “proved to be its most popular.” However, its third season—thematicallly focused on issues of reform and city politics—suffered a significant ratings decline, and HBO was initially hesitant to commission a fourth. Fortunately, the channel stuck by its series—continuing its tradition of, as Edgerton states, “nurturing and supporting creative personnel to a degree that is unusual in the industry”—and its loyalty paid
off. The Wire’s fourth season concentrated on Baltimore’s school system in addition to its usual drug dealing and police storylines and received “tremendous critical reviews.” Simon was thus allowed to accomplish his goal of using the show’s fifth and final season to examine media practices and explore Americans’ “capacity to recognize and address our own realities.”

In short, the industrial context in which The Wire is situated—HBO—significantly impacts Simon’s ability to utilize his authorship in the way he desires and intends. However, Simon’s goals are not only incompatible with those of network television; they are also difficult to realize within the confines of conventional Hollywood film. The ambivalent depictions of criminals and cops that The Wire offers appear as infrequently in mainstream cinema as they do on commercial television. As Curtis Marez notes, the federal government not only “provide[s] millions of dollars in subsidies to [television] networks that incorporate antidrug messages into the plots of popular shows” but also “directly shape[s] … representations of the war on drugs in film.” He cites the “local law enforcement agents [who] actively influenced the making of Scarface” and Clear and Present Danger and the website “Drugstory.org,” which “serves as an ‘informational resource for entertainment writers and feature journalists’” and even “provides filmmakers with models for their scripts,” as examples of such state interventions.

Moreover, in his account of televisual narrative complexity, Mittell contends that the “extended character depth, ongoing plotting, and episodic variations” that characterize long-form, serialized television narratives like The Wire “are simply unavailable options within a two-hour film.” By way of example, Mittell compares Joss Whedon’s television series Firefly (FOX, 2002-2003) to its cinematic counterpart, Serenity (2005). As he states, the film “extended the [show’s] narrative” but “compressed an entire season’s plot into two hours, minimizing storytelling variety, character exploration, and ongoing suspense” (31). In short, serialized
television provides cultural producers with greater opportunities (and more time) to craft complex and reflexive narratives than does the more finite medium of film.

*The Wire*’s complex, argumentative, and generically subversive narrative thus derives not only from its position on HBO and its creator’s intentions but also from its intricately serialized structure. Although each season departs, in some ways, from the thematic elements that characterize those preceding it, the meanings these distinctive pieces of *The Wire*’s narrative impart work together to provide a complicated explanatory framework that ultimately comes to bear not just on seasons to come but those that have already passed as well. Exploring the show’s first three seasons through the lens of the drug dealing genre and its masculine tropes reveals the ways that *The Wire*’s elaborate seriality affects its ability to critically examine drug discourse, late American capitalism, and their raced and gendered implications.

“Everything is Connected”: *The Wire, Puzzle Logic, and Generic Subversion*

Despite its ideological departure from generic norms, *The Wire* engages many of the same tropes through which drug dealing has typically been represented in novels and films. Most notably, Simon explicitly positions his series in the same terms employed by narratives like *The Great Gatsby* and *Scarface*.35 Invoking the trope of self-made, capitalist masculinity, he describes *The Wire* as being “wedged between two competing American myths.”36 The first of these myths, as he states, “tells us that in this country, if you are smarter than the next man, if you are shrewd or frugal or visionary, if you build a better mousetrap, if you get there first with the best idea, you will succeed beyond your wildest imagination.”37

The second, which Simon describes as “a countering myth,” assures those left behind by this fantastic creation of capitalist individualism that “if you are not smarter than the next man, if you are not clever or visionary, if you never do build a better mousetrap, then [America] holds a
place for you nonetheless.”38 The majority of drug dealing narratives, as we have seen, deal most evidently in the first myth, holding out to their protagonists the promise of unbridled economic achievement and gendered class mobility. We can detect traces of the second myth in such characters’ inevitable declines; typical generic texts malign their dealers’ occupational choices by juxtaposing the supposedly easy, debased money they earn through their drug slinging against the (either implied or explicitly portrayed) hard, honest work to which Simon’s counter myth alludes.

For The Wire’s creator, such juxtapositions have, along with his second American myth, lost their plausibility. As he asserts, “In Baltimore” and other rust belt cities across the United States, “it is no longer possible to describe this as a myth … It is, in a word, a lie.”39 Simon thus set out to create a television series that would expose and interrogate this “lie” through depictions of “what we have left behind in our cities, and at what cost we have done so.”40 In other words, The Wire rejects the easy answers offered by its generic predecessors and focuses instead on investigating and subsequently debunking the assumptions that make such solutions appear logical and preferable. Although this goal could arguably be accomplished in print or cinematic narratives, Simon and the rest of The Wire’s production team primarily realize their intentions through the show’s serial structure.

However, The Wire’s version of televisual serialization works somewhat differently than does that of its complex counterparts. In his discussion of the series, Mittell points to the “puzzle structure” employed by “many of television’s complex narratives … to motivate viewer interest [and] inspir[e] fans to watch … with a forensic eye for details” so that they might eventually “piece together the mysteries … encoded within [such shows’] serial structures.”41 Yet, as he observes, “The Wire offers almost no mysteries” and instead depends upon “its focus on
procedure” to generate “suspense and tension.” Thus, Mittell contends that *The Wire* does not organize itself around the same “puzzle structure” as do other complex television narratives like *Lost* (ABC, 2004-present) and *Heroes* (NBC, 2006-present). Alternatively, I suggest that *The Wire* does exhibit such a structure. But rather than imploring viewers to speculate about what comes next, *The Wire* asks them to look backward in order to decode the tangled messages Simon and his production team impart through their narrative.

For example, season two’s shift toward the Baltimore docks seems almost illogical given its predecessor’s strict focus on the city’s streets and sustained polemic against America’s “war on drugs.” However, through its portrayal of, as Simon describes it, “the death of work and the betrayal of America’s working class,” *The Wire* provides its most obvious and sustained justification for the rampant dealing and desolate inner-city conditions depicted in earlier episodes. More importantly, however, the dockworkers’ function within the narrative integrally relates to the ways that Stringer and Avon’s gender identities correlate to particular and shifting notions of work, capitalism, and masculinity.

In the show’s second and third seasons, the differences between Avon and Stringer’s conceptions of “the game” (a term that both the show’s dealing and police protagonists use to describe the inner workings of and interactions between the drug trade and the police bureaucracy) take center stage, with Avon still clinging to territory and Stringer insisting that superior product and coalitions with other dealing organizations—not reputation and turf wars—represent the wave of the future. But to fully appreciate the growing tensions between the two men, viewers need the framework offered up in the second season’s portrayal of Baltimore’s flailing working-class economy.
Rose contends that “The black drug organizations of season one are mirrored” in the show’s port plot line “by white counterparts, extending from comically inept imitators of their speech and dress codes to international operators who use the ports to smuggle in drug-processing chemicals (and eastern European prostitutes).” Rose correctly draws attention to the second season’s focus on whiteness and the way in which the actions undertaken by the (mostly, though not exclusively, white) dockworkers echo those performed by The Wire’s black dealers. However, he misreads this relationship as one of simple imitation; the “white counterparts” serve as more than comic relief and transnationalized parallels. Rather, the dockworkers’ plight metonymically refers to the conditions that make drug dealing a preferable, viable, and logical occupational decision for The Wire’s black dealers.

As Rafael Alvarez explains in the show’s companion book, The Wire: Truth Be Told, Baltimore previously housed a thriving manufacturing industry that employed and sustained many of its working-class inhabitants. Additionally, “when the economy would go soft and things got tough at Bethlehem Steel or the Esskay meatpacking plant or even Westinghouse – jobs were still stable around the port.” But, as Alvarez notes, Baltimore’s manufacturing industry recently went bankrupt (129), and “[m]achines … have replaced thick arms and strong backs on the waterfront, moving more cargo more cheaply and efficiently, yet at a great loss of jobs” (130). Although “Johns Hopkins medical system and university” has taken Beth Steel’s place as “the largest employer in the metro area,” Alvarez maintains that “[f]or the average Baltimorean, making beds and taking blood does not pay as well as making steel” (129).

The “death of work” and “betrayal of [the] working class” on which, Simon contends, The Wire’s second season centers are not new to the city’s black dealers or to many of its white, working class inhabitants. As McNulty suggests in the second season’s premiere,
Baltimore’s legitimate, blue-collar employment opportunities have been in decline since at least the 1970s, when both McNulty’s and his unit partner’s fathers were laid off from Bethlehem Steel. Indeed, Sobotka dates the beginning of his union’s slow death within this same time period—about 25 years prior to the time in which *The Wire*’s second season takes place. Moreover, D’Angelo justifies his dealing to McNulty and Assistant State’s Attorney Rhonda Pearlman by explaining that “you grow up in this shit. My grandfather was Butch Stanford. Do you know who Butch Stanford was in this town? … All my people, man–my father, my uncles, my cousins—it’s just what we do.” In short, while white, working-class families like the Sobotkas are struggling to hold onto some of the last legitimate blue-collar jobs in Baltimore, inner city black families like D’Angelo’s lost their illusions about such opportunities at least three generations ago.

Sobotka echoes these sentiments in the episode “Bad Dreams” when, in the face of his union’s demise at the hands of government bureaucrats (and legitimacy-seeking dealers like Stringer) who would rather erect waterfront condominiums than resurrect Baltimore’s dying ports, he laments that “we used to make shit in this country, build shit. Now we just put our hand in the next guy’s pocket.” In short, *The Wire* points to Baltimore’s move from an economy based on physical labor and tangible products to one based more on information, technology, and services as the displacing agent that turns drug dealing into a logical occupational decision. As Alvarez states, “This is the windmill Frank Sobotka tilts against, believing the money he’s getting to smuggle containers of contraband off the docks can be used to save a way of life that has largely passed from the city, the port, his union, and his family” (131).

The show’s reverse puzzle structure thus relates closely to its successful use of serialization to counter hegemonic drug discourses and the generic conventions that typify most
other dealing narratives. Without understanding the ways in which *The Wire* has previously positioned and depicted particular characters, institutions, and practices, viewers cannot fully appreciate the complicated challenge the series puts to conventional discourses about and representations of drug dealing over the course of its five seasons. Put more simply, a viewer who watches the third season without having seen the first or, most importantly, second season not only misses important plot points but also lacks the explanatory framework that the series’ argumentative narrative requires to make sense and cohere.

With this in mind, my analysis of the show will use the thematic connections *The Wire* creates between and among its various characters and settings to demonstrate the ways in which the show accomplishes it generic subversion. The most fruitful of these relationships (particularly in terms of the gendered conventions of the dealing genre) exists between Avon Barksdale and Stringer Bell. Although both Avon and Stringer imagine their dealing as an avenue through which they can achieve self-made, capitalist masculinities, they conceive of their praxis and its ultimate goals in different ways. Stringer hopes that his success in the game will catapult him into capitalist legitimacy. Avon, on the other hand, retains a street-centered, territorially-based, and community-oriented ethos that ultimately clashes with Stringer’s business-like approach to drug dealing.

The way that this partnership functions in the narrative, however, remains obscured unless paired with an analysis of the show’s other depictions of drug dealing, capitalist institutions, masculinity, and work more generally. As mentioned previously, the dockworkers’ position at the edge of a shifting economic paradigm sheds light on the relationship that *The Wire* constructs between Stringer and Avon’s attempts to assert self-fashioned masculinities. Just as the dockworkers are being left behind in the globalized, postindustrial economy, Avon’s family-
oriented, communally-based, and territorially-centered dealing praxis must also move aside to make room for Stringer’s more individualistic and neoliberal conception of the game. However, both men’s goals are ultimately untenable within the maze of institutions that characterize late American capitalism.

“All in the Game”: Seriality, Materiality, and Late Capitalist Masculinity

Throughout the series, Avon bases his masculinity and his dealing praxis on notions of family, community, reputation, and–most importantly–territory. He provides economic support to his sister, Brianna Barksdale, despite her lack of direct involvement in the organization, and employs her son, D’Angelo. When Stringer fears that D’Angelo might turn on them after he goes to jail at the end of the first season, Avon does his best to convince Stringer that his nephew will remain loyal, citing “family” as the reason. Additionally, when retired soldier turned children’s boxing coach Dennis “Cutty” Wise asks Avon to invest in his gym, Avon agrees. He offers Cutty a significantly larger amount of money than he originally asked for and encourages him to “take care of them little niggas.”

In short, Avon–despite his somewhat brutal disposition–uses his position of power to assist members of his family and community when such opportunities present themselves. However, Avon’s primary concerns lie in maintaining his reputation and protecting his Westside real estate. For example, when Stringer suggests calling a (temporary and disingenuous) truce with Omar, Avon worries about “what motherfuckers be saying while we waiting? … Like it ain’t no thing to take my shit.” He expresses even more concern over Stringer’s desire to team up with and concede pieces of Barksdale real estate to Proposition Joe when, in the second season, the organization loses its drug connection and must look elsewhere to procure decent product.
Avon’s emphases on reputation and territory derive from his adherence to the rules by which the game has historically been played. However, when Avon goes to jail, he places Stringer in charge of distribution (Avon’s former post) and moves Brianna into Stringer’s previous position as the money handler. In his new position, Stringer attempts to change the rules to which Avon remains loyal, primarily through his dealings with Proposition Joe. However, far from saving the weakened Barksdale organization, Stringer’s coalition with Proposition Joe not only initiates a serious rift between Stringer and Avon but ultimately results in Stringer’s own demise as well.

Stringer’s plans regarding and subsequent acceptance of Proposition Joe’s offer represent the culmination of his earlier attempts to run the Barksdale operation like a legitimate business and foreshadow his eventual hopes of obtaining a different kind of real estate than that with which Avon concerns himself—namely, high-rise waterfront condominiums. Indeed, throughout the series, Stringer tries to bring the lessons he learns in the college economics classes that McNulty observes him attending to the street.\(^{57}\) He consistently applies market logic to the duo’s dealings, peppers his speech with phrases like “elastic product” and “supply and demand,” and compares his dealing praxis to actions undertaken by global corporations like Ford and WorldCom.\(^{58}\)

When Stringer takes over the organization in Avon’s jail-induced stead, he begins conducting meetings with soldiers and slingers in accordance with *Robert’s Rules of Order*,\(^{59}\) downplaying the importance of turf wars,\(^{60}\) and violating long-held traditions like the “Sunday truce.”\(^{61}\) He even goes so far as to order D’Angelo’s murder when he fears that Avon’s nephew might talk, thwarting Avon’s attempts to reach out to and protect his family member.\(^{62}\) In all such actions, Stringer demonstrates his willingness to sacrifice territory, reputation, and even
family – the cornerstones of Avon’s masculinity – to attain his ultimate goals of profit and legitimacy.

In the episode “Backwash,” Proposition Joe approaches Stringer at D’Angelo’s funeral and proposes that the two team up to solve their mutual problems. As he states, “You got half the Westside coming over to [the Eastside] twice a day because Eastside dope be kicking the shit out of Westside dope.”63 And while the Barksdale organization “got the best territory and no kind of product,” Joe “got the best product but could stand a little more territory.”64 Although Stringer notes that “Avon fought real hard for them Towers” (the low-income housing projects at the center of the Barksdale empire), Joe retorts that “[t]his shit is just business,” and Stringer eventually agrees to “talk to Avon.”65 However, when he broaches the subject with his jailed partner, Avon balks and issues a resounding “no.”66

Avon attempts to solve their problems by hiring Brother Mouzone to protect Barksdale territory from Proposition Joe’s Eastside crews.67 However, Stringer has already taken Joe up on his offer without Avon’s knowledge.68 Both Joe and Stringer recognize that Mouzone presents a problem for their partnership, but, as Joe states, “a whole passel of hard-ass hitters took a go at Brother Mouzone and ain’t lived to say shit about it.”69 Thus, neither Joe nor Stringer can afford to go up against Avon’s hired muscle. However, they suspect that Omar would be willing to do so if presented with the right justification.

To this end, Joe asks Omar’s friend and banker Butchie to set up a “parley” between Omar and Stringer, suggesting that the Barksdale organization is interested in calling a truce with the stick-up artist. During the meet, Stringer tells Omar that Brother Mouzone—and not the soldiers sent out at his and Avon’s behest—was responsible for the torture that Brandon received before his death in the first season. He further warns Omar that Mouzone is “building a rep for
himself, and he wants you bad. The brutal shit, that’s, you know, that’s his calling card.” In short, Stringer blames Mouzone for Brandon’s torture in hopes that Omar will redirect his vengeance toward the hired hitman, whose death would allow Stringer and Joe to return to business as usual without informing Avon of their plans.

These actions not only violate Avon’s territorial ethic; they also jeopardize the hard-won Barksdale reputation. By lying to Omar and outsourcing the organization’s dirty work, Stringer departs significantly from Avon’s insistence upon “do[ing] it on your name,” and his backstage treachery eventually catches up to him. In the second season, Omar tracks down Mouzone and shoots him in the stomach. The hit man, however, calmly replies that his assailant “got some wrong information,” adding that “[w]hat happened to your boy, it’s not my style.” Realizing that Stringer has tricked him, Omar calls an ambulance for the ailing Mouzone, who subsequently “absolve[s]” his agreement with the Barksdale organization. When Stringer relays his version of the story to his partner, Avon—as Stringer expected—reluctantly agrees to the coalition with Proposition Joe, advising Stringer to “run it as you see fit—at least till I get home.”

By the time Avon returns to the street in the show’s third season, the city has razed the project towers for which he fought so hard, and the game, as Cutty notes, “done changed.” In the year between the second and third seasons, Stringer has not only shifted the organization’s emphasis from territory to product and established a coalition—the New Day Co-Operative—with most of the city’s major drug dealers but also begun meeting with downtown developers, lobbyists, and corrupt Senator Clay Davis to discuss his planned condominium building. In short, the game, as Stringer states, laying out its new rules during the co-op’s first meeting, no longer involves “beefing” or “drama – just business.”
For Avon, however, the game remains largely the same. He expresses little interest in Stringer’s attempts at legitimacy and scoffs at his suggestion that they surrender their territory to younger dealers. Stringer believes that he and Avon have cemented their positions firmly enough that they can now sit back and “[l]et the young’uns worry about how to retail … I mean, who gives a fuck who’s standing on what corner if we taking that shit off the top?” Avon, however, disagrees; as he explains, “I ain’t no suit-wearing businessman like you … I’m just a gangster, I suppose. And I want my corners.” Avon quickly returns to fighting for territory, starting up a messy turf war with powerful newcomer Marlo Stanfield, while his partner negotiates with developers, lobbyists, and politicians.

As the narrative progresses, however, Avon’s “gangster” ways begin to strain Stringer’s relations with the co-op. They eventually move to cut Stringer “out of the package” unless he can curb Avon’s violent activities. When Avon refuses to comply, chastising his partner for “playing those fucking away games,” Stringer calls Major Howard “Bunny” Colvin—the commander of Baltimore’s Western District—and gives up the location of Avon’s wartime safe house. As Stringer expected, Daniels’ wiretap detail eventually uses this tip to send Avon back to jail for at least five years on a parole violation, though not in time for Stringer to experience it; just when he believes he has succeeded in crafting a legitimate masculinity out of his illicit activities, Stringer’s past returns to haunt him.

Mouzone and Omar reconvene in the third season’s last few episodes and hatch a plan to exact revenge upon their opponents, the Barksdale organization. But when Mouzone approaches Avon to inquire about the previous year’s events, he realizes that Avon had been unaware of Stringer’s backdoor dealings. Unlike Stringer (who turned his partner in to protect his singular vision for the organization—as well as his profit margins), Avon remains true to his name and his
friend. He reveals Stringer’s plans for the following day only when Mouzone refuses his offer to “pay the cost” on his partner’s behalf. Indeed, the game’s tenets necessitate that Avon provide this information to avoid tarnishing, as Brother Mouzone states, “your word and your reputation.”

Thus, when Stringer arrives at his half-finished condominium building for a meeting with his developer the next morning, Omar and Mouzone already have the place staked out. After the gun-toting gangsters shoot and kill Stringer’s bodyguard and catch up to their fleeing opponent, Stringer implores them to accept money as payback for the wrongs he committed against them, declaring that he “ain’t involved in that gangster bullshit no more.” Omar, however, contends that Stringer “still don’t get it, do you? This ain’t about your money, bro.” Rather, Stringer’s death results from his attempts to subvert the rules by which the game has historically been played (and to which characters like Omar and Brother Mouzone remain resolutely true) in order to achieve a legitimate, capitalist masculinity that runs counter to the kind of gendered articulations that (like Avon’s) have currency on the street.

While the narrative clearly sympathizes with Avon, however, it neither uncritically celebrates his actions nor unilaterally condemns Stringer’s. Rather, each man’s demise results from the flawed institutions within which he operates (or to which, in Stringer’s case, he is struggling to gain access). Although The Wire emphasizes the corruption endemic to the new game that Stringer attempts to play, it does not ignore the negative components—primarily violence—of the more traditional game to which Avon remains loyal. In many ways, Stringer’s reformulation of the game produces positive changes: less murder, less police interference, and more profit. Additionally, the narrative depicts Avon’s masculinity as equally unviable. It must
not only move aside to make room for Stringer’s new formulation but also remains vulnerable to police scrutiny as long as contests for territory involve shootings and murders.

However, the game is predicated on–even constituted by–the notions of territory and reputation around which Avon organizes his masculinity. These tenets may necessitate the violence that the show’s police protagonists spend their time investigating (and that results in Avon’s initial jail sentence), but they also produce a more transparent economy in which participants can be held accountable for their actions. Whereas, for instance, Stringer can never be certain that the money he funnels into Davis’ campaign chest will have its intended effects, Avon can rest relatively assured that his opponents receive the messages he imparts in his turf wars. In short, The Wire may not entirely condone Avon’s approach to drug dealing, but the narrative does value the discipline and materiality it accrues to the game.

Avon articulates this connection between his conception of the game, his masculinity, and its relationship to notions of materiality in the episode “Moral Midgetry.” When a member of Marlo’s crew shoots Avon in the shoulder, Stringer insists that they are “past this [war] bullshit.”" However, Avon again disagrees, asserting that “the difference between me and you” is that “I bleed red, [and] you bleed green;” he continues, “I look at you these days and I see a man without a country.”" He thus implies that his dealing praxis, in contrast to Stringer’s, remains rooted in the values by which the game has historically been characterized by describing himself and his praxis in material–bodily and territorial–terms. Avon’s consistent warring for corners, resistance to making money from the sidelines, and enduring loyalty to Baltimore’s Westside also work to reiterate the connection.

The show frequently uses this metaphor of materiality to refer metonymically to the dwindling availability of meaningful, licit work opportunities in the United States’ postindustrial,
late capitalist milieu. *The Wire*’s police protagonists describe what they conceptualize as “real” police work—primarily the wiretap cases under Daniels’ command—through allusions to its material character. For instance, when Prez mistakenly marks a call they receive on the wiretap as “impertinent,” Freamon calls him on his mistake, explaining that “[w]e’re building something here, detective, and all the pieces matter.” McNulty similarly complains that “I’m trying to build something here, … and Rawls couldn’t care less. He wants me home, and he wants the stats. That’s all.” Police like McNulty also frequently emphasize their unit’s focus on “bodies”—or murders—as opposed to activities like drug dealing. They thus, much like Avon, conceive of “real” police work in tangible terms that accrue a measure of materiality to their praxis.

As McNulty’s exclamation suggests, police bureaucracy higher-ups like Rawls express little interest in “building” anything. Instead, they concern themselves with clearance rates and statistics. For instance, in the second season, a port authority official attempts to convince Rawls’ Homicide Unit to take on the murders of the aforementioned dead prostitutes. Rawls refuses to comply with this request, explaining that he has “fought and scratched and clawed for four months to get my clearance rate above fifty percent, and right now it’s at exactly 51.6 percent.” If he takes “14 whodunnits” off the port authority’s hands, his clearance rate will, he calculates, lower to 39.4 percent. Such bureaucratic emphases on numbers continually thwart the efforts of detectives like McNulty and Freamon to perform the sort of police work to which their material metaphors refer, in much the way that Stringer’s focus on profit inhibits Avon from structuring his dealing around notions of territory and reputation.

*The Wire* most succinctly elucidates the relationship between Stringer and Avon’s masculinities—fleshed out in the third season—through its use of this metaphoric cluster in the second season’s portrayal of the Baltimore docks. Sobotka taps into such meanings when he
mourns the fact that Americans no longer “build shit.” The dockworkers’ storyline acts as a metonymic justification for the illicit economies that flourish elsewhere in the city, but it also provides a larger framework through which Avon and Stringer’s masculinities and their relationship to The Wire’s critique of late capitalism can be interpreted. Indeed, the narrative articulates several parallels not only between Avon’s masculinity and those of the imperiled dockworkers but also between the docks, its workers, and Stringer’s failed attempts at legitimacy.

In the second season’s first episode, Sobotka discusses his strategy for reviving the port with fellow union members Vernon “Ott” Motley and Thomas “Horseface” Pakusa and the leader of another union, Nat Coxson. Sobotka insists that the port’s workers would benefit most if the unions lobbied for the state to deepen the canal through which the ships they load and unload enter. Coxson, however, remains hesitant, reminding Sobotka of “how much money you gonna spend to even get them talking about that shit.” Instead, he believes that if the unions focused their energies on “get[ting] them to rebuild the grain pier” they “might actually come away with something.” Further, he warns Sobotka that “if the grain pier don’t get fixed up soon, some asshole’s gonna fuck us by building condominiums all over it.”

Sobotka, however, refuses to listen and spends much of the season working with a lobbyist, inducing politicians—through bribes, much as does Stringer—to support his effort to dredge the canal. But when, at the season’s end, the officials with whom he attempted to buy “suction” learn that Sobotka has been arrested on several charges stemming from his involvement with the smuggling organization, his lobbyist informs him that “[n]o one is gonna stand with us”—on the canal or even the grain pier—“now that the FBI is on you.” He tries to console Sobotka by suggesting that if he can “find a way of putting this FBI thing to bed … then
maybe we can come back the next session with the grain pier.”98 However, as Nat Coxson predicted, by the season’s end, the grain pier’s former site hosts a sign proclaiming its future incarnation as a high-rise, waterfront condominium development, ironically dubbed “The Grainery.”99

Sobotka’s trajectory in many ways mirrors that followed later by Stringer. Both men unsuccessfully rely on lobbyists and political contributions to accomplish their goals of legitimacy (in Stringer’s case) and economic revival (in Sobotka’s). Additionally, like Stringer, Sobotka damages his organization’s reputation in his attempts to bring about a new era of prosperity for his and other port unions. Furthermore, both Sobotka and Stringer turn up dead by the end of the second and third seasons, respectively. However, Sobotka’s masculinity also evidences parallels with Avon’s territorial, communal, and—most importantly—material articulation.

Much like Avon, Sobotka places great emphasis on family and community loyalty. His son, Ziggy, and his nephew, Nick, work with him in the union, and Sobotka responds favorably when these relatives reminisce about the port’s more prosperous days.100 Furthermore, when one of his union’s members, Ringo, informs his boss that he is thinking about leaving the union because he is not getting enough work, Sobotka sends him to the bar the union members frequent, telling him to “have a shot and a beer on me.”101 Ringo orders his shot and beer, telling the bartender, Delores (who also apparently acts as Sobotka’s bank), that “Frank Sobotka says I need it;” Delores then hands him a large stack of money at the union leader’s request.102 Sobotka also refuses to incriminate any union members during his police interrogation.103

Thus, in much the way that Avon employs his family members, invests money in Cutty’s gym, and offers to take the blame for Stringer’s misdeeds, Sobotka values his family’s continued
presence on the waterfront, financially assists struggling union members, and demonstrates a willingness to, as Avon puts it, “pay the cost” on behalf of the union men that he intended to help through his ultimately fatal involvement with the smuggling operation. Most importantly, however, both Sobotka and Avon remain invested in a type of work (and its corresponding gender identity) that no longer offers a viable path toward successful masculine self-fashioning.

Oddly enough, high-rise condominium developments play a major role in the demise of Avon’s street-centered approach to dealing and in Sobotka’s unsuccessful attempts to maintain his family and community’s working-class lifestyles. As mentioned previously, the final moments of The Wire’s second season reveal to viewers that developers are turning the grain pier in which Sobotka and Coxson had placed their hopes into condominiums—much like those on which Stringer concentrates for the majority of the third season. The narrative thus suggests connections between Stringer’s attempts to change the rules of Baltimore’s drug trade and the postindustrial capitalist milieu that damned both the dockworkers’ and Avon’s self-made, material masculinities to extinction.

Indeed, Avon’s downfall runs relatively parallel to that of the dockworkers. Similarly to the ways in which technologies like robotic arms displace and render obsolete the dockworkers’ material, corporeal labor, Avon’s territorially-based approach to dealing must move aside to make room for the more profitable and efficient version of drug dealing that Stringer proposes. Stringer’s vision for the organization, however, entails its participation in the very processes that undermine the ability of Alvarez’s “average Baltimorean” (and young dockworkers like Nick Sobotka) to participate in and benefit from legitimate capitalist institutions.
Thus, more than simply providing an explanation for the predominance of the drug trade in Baltimore, the dockworkers’ story offers a framework through which to interpret The Wire’s generically subversive narrative. More specifically, through its reverse puzzle structure, the series posits connections between its various characters’ masculine identities (predicated on their relationships to particular types of work) and the institutional structures that perpetuate the conditions in which the men are mired. Rather than condemning Avon, Stringer, and Sobotka for their illicit economic activities, the narrative depicts drug dealing as a symptom of licit capitalism’s inbuilt inequalities rather than an aberrant form of capitalism that merely serves to confirm the validity of legitimate capitalist enterprise.

**Conclusion**

As media scholar S. Craig Watkins argues, citing economist Juliet Schor, “One of the persistent tensions in the postindustrial economy is the widespread erosion of meaningful employment opportunities for poor, inner city youth.”\(^{106}\) Most drug dealing narratives ignore such realities, using their depictions of the illicit practice to validate and affirm the legitimate economic sector from which their protagonists’ occupations deviate. These narratives operate under the assumption that their characters’ choices arise not out of particular political and economic circumstances but rather result from dealers’ desires to carve out an easier path toward masculine, capitalist achievement than that offered by the legitimate work opportunities that, the narratives suggest, are indeed available to them.

*The Wire*, however, remains conscious and critical of the “erosion of meaningful [work] opportunities” of which Watkins speaks.\(^{107}\) Rather than denigrating its dealing characters’ use of their illicit endeavors to construct and assert their masculine identities, the show sets its sights on the institutional structures and practices – such as drug prohibition and postindustrial economic
shifts – that work to make dealing the most logical, meaningful, and widely available occupation for the predominantly black urbanites on which its narratives center. Furthermore, by offering the dockworkers’ storyline as a framework through which viewers can interpret its juxtaposition of Avon and Stringer’s masculinities, *The Wire* also draws attention to the ways that the legitimate capitalist institutions toward which other dealing narratives ask their viewers (as well as their protagonists) to direct their ambitions actually inhibit individuals’ abilities to construct and maintain meaningful, fulfilling identities and lifestyles.

More specifically, *The Wire* uses its constructions of its protagonists’ masculinities to wrestle with the tensions and destabilizations produced through relatively new economic paradigms and practices like postindustrialization and neoliberalism. Through a metaphor of materiality, the narrative laments the subsequent loss of corporeal labor and meaningful work. Avon’s material masculinity corresponds with older forms of capitalist production that—like his dealing praxis—have largely disappeared in the increasingly abstract, corporatized, and global socioeconomic landscape embodied in Stringer. In short, the series employs its depictions of masculinity to confront and critique the economic changes and destabilizations that inhibit men’s abilities to construct fulfilling identities out of their work.

*The Wire* thus turns the masculine tropes through which most other dealing narratives reiterate the value and desirability of legitimate capitalist institutions in on themselves to point to the ways that, as Simon states, “everybody who serves an institution in post-modern America is [in] some way betrayed by that institution—the institution no longer serves the people it was intended to, or the people who serve it are misused, or sometimes both.”108 While its creator’s intentions and its location on premium cable—and specifically HBO—play major roles in *The Wire*’s ideological outcomes, the show primarily accomplishes its critique through its use of
serialization. By drawing long-running and intricately constructed connections between its various characters and settings, *The Wire* challenges the normative operations of the drug dealing genre and—perhaps most fundamentally—the discourses through which drug dealing and interdiction are rendered intelligible in the material world as well.

Notes


3 See, for example, Simon’s discussion of his anti-cop show ambitions in the memo he sent to HBO in an attempt to convince them to take on the project, reprinted in *The Wire: Truth Be Told*, 35-39.


6 Ibid, 72.

7 Although *The Wire*’s fourth and fifth seasons continue the subversive tradition set forth in those that preceded them, the show’s first three seasons stand as a relatively cohesive whole and epitomize the show’s overall ideological stance. While I may occasionally gesture to events that occur in later seasons, my major focus is on the first, second, and third seasons.

8 In *The Wire*’s first season, Rawls holds the rank of Major and commands the Homicide Unit. By the second season, he has been promoted Criminal Investigations Division Colonel, and in the third season he acts as Deputy Commissioner of Operations. After Burrell is forced to resign in the fifth season, Mayor Tommy Carcetti promotes Rawls to acting Police Commissioner until Daniels has served enough time in his new post as acting Deputy Commissioner of Operations to take his place as Police Commissioner.

9 In the second season, Burrell becomes Police Commissioner and remains in the position until Mayor Carcetti pushes him into resigning in the fifth season.
Vondas, viewers eventually learn, supplies Proposition Joe with the superior product he agrees to share with Stringer. Additionally, Vondas and The Greek are responsible for bringing in the 14 dead prostitutes on whose murders the majority of *The Wire*’s police protagonists concentrate in the second season.


Ibid, 1.

Christopher Anderson, “Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television,” in *The Essential HBO Reader*, 30. All subsequent references to Anderson derive from “Producing an Aristocracy” and are noted parenthetically in the text.


Horace Newcomb, “‘This is Not Al Dente’: *The Sopranos* and the New Meaning of ‘Television,’” in *Television: The Critical View*, 573.

Many cultural producers who have worked with HBO have commented on and affirmed the great degree of freedom and control the channel grants them. For example, *Weeds* creator Jenji Kohan said of her first experience working in premium cable—on HBO’s *Tracey Takes On*. . . (1996 – 1999)—“It was my first taste of the freedom of premium cable, and I loved it” (”LAist Interview: Jenji Kohan, Creator of *Weeds,*” *LAist.com*, August 6, 2007 [accessed February 23, 2008]). *Oz* creator (and former writer and producer for *Homocide: Life on the Street*) Tom Fontana convinced Andy Meisler that HBO “offers more creative freedom,” telling Meisler that “When you don’t have to bring people back from a commercial, you don’t have to manufacture an ‘out’ . . . You can make your episode at a length and with a rhythm that’s true to the story you want to tell” (“Not Even Trying to Appeal to the Masses,” *NYTimes.com*, October 4, 1998 [accessed February 23, 2008]).


Ibid, 19.

Simon, “Introduction,” 4

25 Simon, “Think Again,” 19

26 Ibid, 19.

27 Rose, “The Wire,” 89

28 Ibid, 89.


31 Simon, “Think Again,” 19


33 Ibid, 24; 29.

34 Mittell, “Narrative Complexity,” 31


37 Ibid, 5.

38 Ibid, 5.

39 Ibid, 6.

40 Ibid, 8.


42 Ibid, 9, 8.
Ibid, 9.


Addicts like Reginald “Bubbles” Cousins and Johnny Weeks, politicians like Tommy Carcetti, and other players like stick-up artist Omar Little also use the term with varying degrees of frequency.

Rose, “The Wire,” 86. In its second season, The Wire employs another popular generic trope, using the bodies of these dead (mostly white) women conduits through which it explores the anxieties and tensions negotiated in its depictions of work and masculine identity. Although the narrative subverts this trope in some ways (and certainly uses it for different ideological ends than do its predecessors), the women essentially continue to act as blank screens on which meanings can be projected.


“Bad Dreams.”


“Slapstick,” 3.9. DVD. The Wire: The Complete Third Season (New York: Home Box Office, Inc., 2006). In his increasingly desperate attempt to get back at Omar for murdering a Barksdale soldier, Anton “Stinkum” Artis, and wounding another, Roland “Wee-Bey” Brice, Stringer gives the two men he has stationed on Omar’s grandmother’s house approval to shoot him when he appears to take his grandmother to church on Sunday morning, in spite of the truce. Significantly, this action appalls Avon, who orders the perpetrators to replace Omar’s grandmother’s ruined hat (“Slapstick”). Furthermore, Avon’s new second-in-command, Slim Charles, criticizes the soldiers responsible for the shooting by accusing them of “trifling with Avon Barksdale’s reputation” (“Reformation,” 3.10. DVD. The Wire: The Complete Third Season [New York: Home Box Office, Inc., 2006]).

“All Prologue.”

“Backwash.”

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

“Stray Rounds.”

Ibid.


“Bad Dreams.”

“The Wire.”

“Bad Dreams.”

Avon frequently demonstrates his commitment to the Westside of Baltimore. In the episode “Game Day,” Avon and Prop Joe jointly host an Eastside vs. Westside basketball game, after which Avon tells Joe that “if you come over on the Westside again, baby, without a ball, I’ma light your ass up.” When he begins to hire Eastside soldiers to bulk up his organization’s muscle, he replies to Stringer’s assertion that “good help is hard to find” with the rhetorical question “if it wasn’t, you think I’d be paying Eastside niggas for shit?” (“Slapstick”). Furthermore, in the fifth season, Marlo attempts to visit Sergei Malatov, a jailed member of the smuggling organization for whom Sobotka worked, to go behind Prop Joe’s back to obtain access to the package with which Sergei’s associates supply him; however, when he gets to the visiting area, he finds Avon – not Sergei – waiting for him. Avon eventually allows Marlo to speak with Sergei and applauds his fellow Westsider’s efforts to get around the co-op, throwing up a Westside hand signal (“Unconfirmed Reports,” 5.2. The Wire, HBO, January 13, 2008).

“Collateral Damage.”

“Bad Dreams.”

“Ebb Tide.”

Ibid.

Ibid.

“Bad Dreams.”

Ibid.

“Port in a Storm.”

“All Prologue.”

“Hot Shots.”

Ibid.

“Bad Dreams.”

Interestingly, Stringer works with the same developer–Andy Krawczyk–who, in the second season episode “Collateral Damage,” showed the commander of the Southeastern District, Stan Valchek, a scale model of The Grainery development on which he was working.

“Backwash.”


Ibid, 560.

CHAPTER 4
“DEALING IN THE SUBURBS”: GENDER, RACE, AND SERIALIZED SUBVERSION IN 
WEEDS

Although The Wire’s use of its characters’ masculinities to critique late capitalist 
institutions, structures, and practices significantly subverts the drug dealing genre’s conventions, 
Weeds—which debuted on premium cable channel Showtime in 2005–in some ways constitutes a 
more radical generic transformation, particularly in terms of gender. Whereas The Wire 
complicates the binary relationship that discursively characterizes licit and illicit economies 
through the lens of drug dealing, Weeds portrays dealing not just as analogous to or bound up 
with legitimate capitalism but rather as more conducive than licit capitalist endeavors to the 
production and enactment of autonomous and rewarding identities. In short, drug dealing allows 
Weeds’ protagonist to fashion a new kind of gendered identity through her illicit work.

Like The Wire, Weeds exhibits an innovative, serialized structure that facilitates its 
generic subversion. Additionally, Weeds upsets the dealing genre’s historical conventions further 
by centering its narrative on a white, middle-class, widowed mother of two–Nancy Botwin–who 
deals marijuana to her upscale suburban community. Thus, both its main character and its setting 
constitute significant departures from generic norms. However, its most fundamental 
contribution to the drug dealing genre lies in its use of these narrative elements to positively 
valuate not legitimate capitalism but its illicit counterpart: drug dealing. As this valuation occurs 
and is embodied in Nancy over the course of Weeds’ three seasons, a short summary of the 
narrative and it’s protagonist’s trajectory helps to build a better base from which to more 
thoroughly examine the series.

Weeds’ first season begins approximately a year after the death of Nancy’s husband, 
Judah. When viewers first meet her, Nancy is already firmly ensconced in her dealing career.
She enjoys a close relationship with her bulk supplier, Heylia James; she boasts an established customer base in her fictional suburb, Agrestic; and by the season’s end, she and Conrad Shepherd, Heylia’s nephew, have hatched a plan to establish a marijuana grow house and cultivate their own strain. However, Nancy struggles throughout the season to balance her illicit career with her mothering and her middle-class, suburban lifestyle. Although she receives some parenting help from her freeloading brother-in-law, Andy Botwin, her hardships only increase after the first season’s finale, in which Nancy discovers that her new love interest, Peter Scottson, works for the Drug Enforcement Agency.

Nancy attempts to break things off cleanly with Peter at the beginning of the second season, telling him that his job is too dangerous and that, as a widow, she cannot handle losing another man. Peter already knows about her illicit occupation, but he promises to look the other way in exchange for another chance to establish a relationship with Nancy. She agrees only after Peter offers to marry her, which prevents him from ever having to testify against her in court. But Nancy’s dealing eventually creates an irreparable rift in their relationship, and Peter commands Nancy and Conrad to sell their remaining crop to a single buyer, give the money to him, and get out of the drug business.

Nancy and Conrad set about complying with Peter’s demands and procure a single buyer – drug dealing gangster, U-Turn. Meanwhile, Heylia devises a more permanent way to get rid of Peter; she hires Armenian hitmen to kill him while Nancy and Conrad conduct the deal with U-Turn. However, U-Turn and his lieutenant, Marvin, rip Nancy and Conrad off, arriving at the grow house with guns rather than money. Thus, when the Armenians bust through the back door demanding their payment, Conrad has nothing to give them. To make matters worse, Nancy opens the grow house’s safe to reluctantly hand over the weed and discovers that her eldest son,
Silas, has taken it. The second season thus ends with five guns pointed at Nancy’s head, two of which belong to U-Turn and Marvin and the three others to the Armenians.

Despite her best attempts to recover the missing marijuana when the third season commences, Nancy ultimately returns to Heylia, who accompanies her back to the grow house with money to pay off the duo’s debt. However, U-Turn refuses to accept the money, instead commissioning Conrad to grow another batch of his acclaimed “MILF Weed” under U-Turn’s patronage and ordering Nancy to repay her debt in trade. Although Nancy’s situation during the first quarter of the third season appears particularly bleak, her time as U-Turn’s “bitch” assists her in crafting a persona—which I describe as a “gangster identity”—that allows her to conduct her dealing in a more autonomous and confident fashion than she had previously.

Following U-Turn’s death in the middle of the third season, Nancy gains increasing control over her dealing and her personal life. With the help of her gangster identity, she improves her ability to cope with the predicaments in which her dealing constantly places her; reformulates her approach to parenting; reconstitutes her sexuality; comes to view her middle-class, suburban lifestyle less as something she must work to maintain than a burden from which she feels compelled to liberate herself; and—most importantly—casts off the patriarchal forces that have been constraining her throughout the series’ run. The personal evolution of which Nancy’s gangster identity is the culmination acts as the primary way that Weeds portrays her illicit career choice not as a shady shortcut but rather a legitimate avenue through which Nancy can attain the typically masculine prerogative of self-fashioning.

In short, most generic texts, as we have seen, juxtapose drug dealing against sanctioned occupations or economies in order to assert a meaning for legitimate capitalism and naturalize the hierarchical power relations it produces and perpetuates; Weeds turns this convention on its
head, juxtaposing drug dealing against the normative values promoted by late American consumer capitalism (to which its suburban setting metonymically refers) in order to critique and satirize those values. In doing so, the series depicts drug dealing not just as a legitimate path toward self-fashioning but also as an antidote to the capitalist malaise and middle-class disenchantment with work that its predecessors and contemporaries attempt to soothe by valorizing legitimate work at dealing’s expense.

Both of these generic subversions result primarily from the combined effects of *Weeds’* incorporation of serialization into and episodic inversions of the situation comedy’s formal and thematic conventions as well as from its female protagonist and suburban setting. Authorial intent and the relative freedom provided by the show’s location on premium cable also contribute to *Weeds’* ability to highlight and challenge the assumptions on which most of its generic counterparts rely. However, the series’ innovative structure and unconventional dealing protagonist provide the show with a privileged starting point from which to expand and transform the genre’s traditional operations.

“Little Boxes on the Hillside”: Situating *Weeds* in the Televisual Landscape

Media scholars have conferred much less critical attention upon *Weeds’* home channel, Showtime, than on its premium cable competitor, HBO. Even within the popular press, Showtime most frequently appears as a second-tier imitation of HBO, and it boasts significantly fewer subscribers. However, the two channels exhibit similar branding and programming strategies. Much like HBO, Showtime primarily defined itself as a movie channel until the late 1990s. As Scott Wible notes, during the 1980s and early ‘90s, Showtime’s “reputation … hinged upon [its airing of] B-movie thrillers and soft porn.” In 1997, the channel set out to revamp this
image, exchanging its former slogan–“We Make Excitement”–for an edgier brand identity based around its new maxim, “No Limits” (49).

According to Wible, Showtime’s “advertisements in trade publications now assert that ‘No Limits’ captures its vision to ‘push the boundaries of everyday television, offering an emotional escape that has no limits and endless possibilities’” (49). Showtime works to deliver on this promise by “creating original series that ostensibly target niche audiences served less often by broadcast and cable networks” (50). Thus, much like HBO, Showtime bases its brand identity on its ability to, in the words of its chief programmer, Jerry Offsay, “find shows and characters and worlds that just aren’t being portrayed on network television.”

Although Showtime does not promote the biographies of its creators with the same intensity as does HBO, it does capitalize on the increased “creative license” offered by “its status as a pay channel.”

*Weeds*’ creator Jenji Kohan took full advantage of this freedom and created a show that not only revolves around an edgy topic but also experiments with the entrenched conventions of the situation comedy and subverts those of the dealing genre.

Indeed, Kohan – whose previous writing credits include such diverse fare as *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (NBC, 1990-1996), *Mad About You* (NBC, 1992-1999), and *Tracy Takes On* (HBO, 1996-1999) – discusses her show not only in terms of broadcast network expectations but also in relation to the easy, half-hour solutions associated with traditional situation comedies. As she states, *Weeds* “was sort of my anti-network homage … I became obsessed with wanting to explore the gray areas of life as opposed to everything being so black and white.” Many commentators have referred to *Weeds* as a “dramedy”–or “a television program … which fuses elements of comedy and drama”–rather than as a sitcom. However, while the show has its
dramatic moments, it sufficiently engages with the formal attributes of the situation comedy to
deserve a position within the category.

Lisa Miriam Heilbronn describes “the plot structure of situation comedy” as being “built
on the introduction of difficulty into the lives of the regular cast members.”12 Although Weeds
generally bases its plots on Nancy’s enduring position as a widowed mother dealing pot in the
suburbs, each episode indeed introduces a new “situation”–most of which seriously threaten
Nancy’s ability to continue participating in the drug trade–into this larger context. The series
thus conforms to the sitcom’s conventions by structuring each episode around the precarious
situations in which it places its lead character. However, Heilbronn further contends that, “with
very rare exceptions,” sitcoms must resolve “these difficulties … in a single half hour episode”13
– a convention to which Weeds almost never conforms.

Other recent sitcoms and the contemporary academic discussions that engage them have
challenged Heilbronn’s conception of the form’s conventions. For instance, in his discussion of
television’s expanding textual boundaries, Jeffrey Sconce notes the ways in which sitcoms like
Seinfeld (NBC, 1989-1998) and Friends (NBC, 1994-2004) balance the episodic conventions of
the form with more serialized plots like the “reluctant romance” of Rachel and Ross or the
cumulative “world building” that culminated in Seinfeld’s “meta-reflexive” season finale.14
However, as Jason Mittell contends, the “arcs and ongoing plots” to which Sconce rightly refers
as formal innovations typically “demand little explicit knowledge from episode to episode, as
actual actions and events rarely carry across episodes.”15

Because such innovative sitcoms as Seinfeld, Friends, Malcolm in the Middle (FOX,
2000-2006), and Arrested Development (FOX, 2003-2006) do allow, as Mittell notes, “some
story lines [to] continue, while others are never referred to again,” he terms this textual strategy
“conditional serialization.” Unlike its comedic predecessors and contemporaries, however, *Weeds’* version of sitcom serialization cannot be described as conditional. Rather, nearly all of the series’ episodes end with the sorts of “cliff-hangers” most frequently associated with serialized television dramas. Moreover, instead of ignoring the cliff-hanger and returning to diegetic normalcy with the advent of each new episode, *Weeds* generally resolves the previous installment’s cliff-hanger in the episode that follows, only to introduce a new twist before the half-hour’s end.

Thus, *Weeds* not only serializes but also episodically inverts the conventions of the situation comedy. In other words, a typical episode of a traditional situation comedy initially presents its protagonist with some sort of conflict that s/he must and usually does resolve before the episode’s end; a typical episode of *Weeds*, however, not only follows Nancy as she resolves the problem that constituted the previous week’s cliff-hanger but also introduces a new problematic situation in the episode’s last few minutes, which must then be ameliorated in the episode that follows. In short, whereas most situation comedies end each episode having successfully resolved the conflict around which it revolved, *Weeds* refuses such episodic closure, inverting the sitcom’s traditional formula.

These episodic inversions of sitcom conventions facilitate *Weeds’* depiction of Nancy’s dealing as a legitimate career choice and path toward self-fashioning in contrast to its generic predecessors and contemporaries. Whereas viewers of a film like *Scarface* presume that they will witness the dealer’s inevitable decline, *Weeds* fans cannot realistically hold such an expectation. Because the series premise and continuation depends upon Nancy’s status as a drug dealer, audience members not only anticipate her eventual victory but also *root for* their protagonist to overcome the problems she encounters each week. To borrow a term from Stuart Hall, a desire to
see Nancy succeed is “encoded” within the show’s episodically inverted, serialized sitcom structure and its basic premise.¹⁹

The series’ format and premise thus produce a particular kind of audience engagement that requires viewers to identify with a drug dealer who they know with relative certainty will not be caught or punished. Rather than waiting for Nancy to fail—as might the audience of a conventional dealing narrative—the text asks viewers to hope that she will prevail over the various forces conspiring against her dealing success. In short, *Weeds*’ premise and, more importantly, its unique structure compel regular viewers to sincerely desire that Nancy continue participating in the drug trade (if only so that they can continue watching her antics in episodes and seasons to follow).

But to fully account for *Weeds*’ generically subversive narrative, its use of serialization must also be more thoroughly examined. More than simply resolving the previous episode’s cliff-hanger, each installment of *Weeds* further develops the show’s overall narrative arc and fleshes out the identities of its characters with increasing detail and complexity—a task also undertaken more frequently by dramatic television serials than by situation comedies.²⁰ Nancy undergoes a series of trials and tribulations—the constitutive “situations” around which each episode is organized—over the course of the *Weeds*’ three seasons. Each of these events ultimately affects not only Nancy’s character but also the show’s overall portrayal of drug dealing as a legitimate way to achieve a self-fashioned identity.

Through its use of sitcom serialization, *Weeds* allows viewers to follow Nancy’s ongoing struggles to create a fulfilling identity out of her illicit work. Rather than exhibiting the sort of fixed or static identity associated with typical sitcom characters like Jerry Seinfeld, Nancy must actively produce her identity through her dealing praxis. As the narrative progresses, Nancy’s
trajectory takes on particularly gendered meanings and provides *Weeds* with a way to explore and ultimately transform the conventions of the drug dealing genre and its white, masculine biases. Tracing this trajectory throughout the show’s run illuminates the ways in which *Weeds* subverts the meanings typically associated with drug dealing narratives by depicting its protagonist’s illegal occupation as a legitimate avenue toward a particularly gendered type of self-fashioning.

**“Mrs. Botwin’s Neighborhood”: Sitcom Serialization in Suburbia**

*Weeds* generically subversive narrative, in many ways, inheres within its episodically inverted and serialized sitcom structure, but its suburban setting adds another layer of transgressive possibility, particularly with regard to issues of race, class, and gender. By taking drug dealing out of the inner city and placing it within the context of a largely white, upper-middle-class suburb, the series renders visible the assumptions on which most of its generic predecessors rely for intelligibility. Furthermore, its setting provides *Weeds* with the opportunity to satirize and critique the materialistic, legitimate capitalist values on which suburbia’s existence depends and for which it stands as a representative. In other words, by juxtaposing the illicit economic activities embodied in its drug dealing protagonist against the legitimate capitalist values to which its setting metonymically refers, *Weeds* denaturalizes and renders suspect commonsense assumptions about both.

*Weeds*’ creator and actors have affirmed that the show explores, as Mary-Louise Parker (who plays Nancy) states, “the myth of suburbia … How it seems normal and perfect, but how that doesn’t actually exist.”21 The suburbs have provided American cultural producers with a productive site from which to examine and, at times, cast suspicion upon white, middle-class lives and values at least since the publication of Sinclair Lewis’ *Babbitt* in 1922.22 *Weeds* thus
draws on a rich tradition of literary, cinematic, and televisual texts that work to complicate the myth of normative, white, middle-class bliss supposedly offered by suburban settlement. Whereas suburbia purports to offer its residents “the good life … the dream of happiness in a single-family house in an attractive, congenial community,” its representations more often propose that, as Catherine Jurca states, “the suburb … cheat[s] characters out of the very thing that is supposed to be their white, middle-class, property-owning due.”

Novels like *Babbitt*, James M. Cain’s *Mildred Pierce* (1941), Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1955), John Keats’ *A Crack in the Picture Window* (1957), Joyce Carol Oates’ *Expensive People* (1968), and Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives* (1972) depict suburbia as an empty, repressive landscape rife with conformity, hypocrisy, and middle-class angst. However, Jurca contends that these “oppositional gesture[s] … [are] predicated on [the texts’] disavowal[s] of the very real privileges that the suburb has offered those who live there.” As she states, “twentieth-century literary treatments of the American suburb [tend] to convert the rights and privileges of [suburban] living … into spiritual, cultural, and political problems of displacement, in which being white and middle class is imagined to have as much or more to do with subjugation as with social dominance.”

Although Jurca speaks specifically of twentieth-century novelistic representations of suburbia, narratives centered on white, suburban discontent have enjoyed immense visibility across a range of media forms in recent decades. Suburban themes have appeared in such best-selling and critically acclaimed novels as Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm* (1994), and Tom Perotta’s *Little Children* (2004); popular films like *Pleasantville* (1998) and *American Beauty* (1999); and hit television dramas such as *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-2005) and *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-present). Despite their
somewhat critical or, at times, satirical looks at suburbia, however, these novels, films, and television shows often work—like their thematic predecessors—not to dismantle but to shore up white, middle-class, masculine hegemony, leaving unchallenged the unequal distributions of power on which it depends.

Such texts rely heavily on the acts of disavowal and displacement that Jurca identifies as defining features of earlier suburban literature, portraying their white protagonists as materially wealthy yet spiritually, culturally, and personally bankrupted by their stifling suburban milieus. Drug dealing rarely acts as the primary lens through which suburban narratives depict this state of affairs, but the practice has appeared in representations of suburbia from *The Great Gatsby* and *Babbitt* (in the form of Prohibition-era bootlegging) to more recent works like *American Beauty* (in which teenage pot dealer Ricky Fitts helps protagonist Lester Burnham resuscitate his ailing white-collar masculinity and ultimately takes Lester’s place as patriarch upon his death at the film’s end, running off to New York with Lester’s daughter to start a new life as an urban drug dealer).  

However, while these representations appear to forward critiques of white, middle-class, suburban norms—particularly by invoking rebellious economic practices like bootlegging or drug dealing—they generally carry on the ideological traditions to which Jurca refers, reinforcing and upholding the very middle-class ideals against which their protagonists rebel. For instance, Babbitt eventually realizes the error of his defiant ways and returns to his former life of suburban normalcy, and *American Beauty*’s young couple only slightly revises the patriarchal script to which their parents conform. *Weeds*, on the other hand, uses its female protagonist, setting, focus on drug dealing, and unique structure to expose and critique the raced, gendered,
and class-based meanings that the majority of its counterparts—in both the drug dealing genre and representations of suburbia—work to uphold.

Through its portrayal of drug dealing, *Weeds* manages to avoid the traps into which other suburban texts fall. In *Weeds*, suburbia stands in for white, middle-class privilege; patriarchal gender norms; and licit capitalist consumer culture. But rather than simply depicting middle-class privilege and material prosperity as oppressive and malaise-inducing burdens to its benefactors, the series forces its protagonist to acknowledge and accept responsibility for her own complicity in the production and maintenance of the hierarchical social structures from which she initially benefits. Moreover, as the serialized sitcom progresses, Nancy becomes increasingly aware not just of her white, middle-class privileges but also of the ways in which those privileges inhibit her ability to successfully fashion her dealing identity.

Nancy’s position as a white, suburban mother may accord her certain privileges, but it also presents her with specifically gendered (as well as raced and class-based) oppressions. Unlike the mostly male protagonists of suburban-centered texts, Nancy’s feminine gender undercuts her ability to partake in the privileges conferred upon her male counterparts. Throughout the series, she wrestles with patriarchal forces that undermine her attempts to succeed both as a middle-class suburbanite and a drug dealer. However, through its use of sitcom serialization, *Weeds* demonstrates the ways in which Nancy’s process of self-fashioning—which eventually culminates in the gangster identity she enacts in the third season—allows her to negotiate and maneuver within the structures that oppress her.

Thus, for *Weeds*, drug dealing functions to reveal to Nancy (and, in turn, to viewers) the unequal race and class hierarchies that bolster her own privileges at the same time that it provides her with a way to maneuver within and overcome the gendered oppressions she faces.
Weeds’ episodically inverted, serialized sitcom structure and suburban setting facilitate these processes. Nancy undergoes significant transformations in her attempts to create and maintain her identity, and each derives from the predicaments in which the narrative places her each week. This transformative trajectory from “mother” to “gangster” (which I discuss in more detail below) constitutes the primary way in which Weeds transforms the conventions that typify most representations of drug dealing. Through its innovative structure, unconventional protagonist, and generically unfamiliar setting, Weeds not only denaturalizes many of the racist and masculinist assumptions on which dealing narratives typically rely but, in doing so, depicts dealing as an appropriate way for its protagonist to successfully fashion a fulfilling identity through her work.

“I’m Not a Dealer; I’m a Mother”: White Privilege, Symbolic Fatherhood, and Dealing Identity in Weeds

In her “Ms.-Representation: The Politics of Feminist Sitcoms,” Lauren Rabinovitz contends that the “situation comedy … has been the television genre most consistently associated with feminist heroines and with advocating a progressive politics of liberal feminism.”

Rabinovitz traces the feminist sitcom’s roots to 1970s programs like The Mary Tyler Moore Show (CBS, 1970 – 1977) and Maude (CBS, 1972 – 1978), explaining that “network executive initially became interested in ‘feminist programming’ in the early 1970s because it was good business” (145). These early examples focused on “the new implicitly feminist woman coping with her everyday world” – usually “within the nuclear family or the surrogate family of the workplace” (146).

Moreover, early feminist sitcoms, according to Rabinovitz, often featured “white, middle-class women who were divorced or single moms … attempt[ing] to cope with the tensions between self-fulfillment and selfless mothering” (146). Although “the father [is] erased or
marginalized” in most feminist sitcoms, “the nuclear family [is] maintained through the regular inscription of symbolic fathers, patriarchal figures who … authorize the women’s positions as simultaneously married/unmarried” (146; emphasis added). Additionally, citing more recent shows like Designing Women (CBS, 1986-1993) and Murphy Brown (CBS, 1988-1997) as examples, Rabinovitz argues that while the feminist sitcom “consistently articulates feminism as reformist, liberal, and progressive, it simultaneously disavows any racial or class determinants” of women’s experiences (145).

Weeds draws on at the same time that it expands this feminist sitcom tradition. The series revolves around the problems that arise from its “implicitly feminist woman” protagonist’s efforts to manage both her business and her household, or what Rabinovitz calls “cop[ing] with the tensions between self-fulfillment and selfless mothering” (146). Particularly in the show’s first season, Nancy struggles to maintain an appropriate balance between her dealing career and her obligations to her two sons, ten-year-old Shane and fifteen-year-old Silas. Indeed, Nancy initially insists upon the primacy of her status as a mother over her status as a drug dealer. For example, when her friend and accountant Doug Wilson refers to her as a dealer, Nancy rebuffs him, declaring, “I’m not a dealer; I’m a mother who happens to distribute illegal products.”

Furthermore, during its first two seasons, Weeds—like the earlier feminist sitcoms Rabinovitz discusses—attempts to maintain some semblance of a nuclear family structure through the introduction of several “symbolic fathers,” most notably the lingering memory of Judah; his innocuous brother, Andy; and Nancy’s secret husband, Peter Scottson. These symbolic fathers do “authorize [her] position as simultaneously married/unmarried,” but they also hamper Nancy’s attempts at self-fashioning. Her production and enactment of a gangster identity, however, eventually allows her to purge them from her life (with the exception of Andy, whose immaturity
and financial dependence on Nancy render him unthreatening to her authority) and liberate herself from the patriarchal oppressions they represent.

Weeds further expands Rabinovitz’s conception of the feminist sitcom by refusing to obscure the race and class-based privileges upon which its white, middle-class protagonist’s position depends. In its portrayals of Nancy’s black dealing associates—primarily Heylia, her daughter Vaneeta, and Conrad—Weeds not only points to the specific oppressions endured by black dealers and people in general but also emphasizes the ways in which the privileges conferred upon whites work to create and perpetuate the oppressions experienced by people of color. This racialized expansion of feminist sitcom conventions also constitutes a substantial subversion of the conventions of the dealing genre, which, as noted in chapter one, generally work to naturalize nonwhite peoples’ subordinated social positions.

In its earliest instances, Weeds accomplishes this feat simply by gesturing toward the differences that characterize white and black experiences. For example, when a freight plane carrying bottles of Coca-Cola crashes into Nancy’s neighbor and sometimes-nemesis Celia Hodes’ house,34 Nancy relays the story to Heylia, Vaneeta, and Conrad on her next supply run. The tale does not impress Heylia, who scoffs at Nancy’s assertion that “they could have been killed,” assuring her that “that white girl gonna make out like Haliburton.”35 The narrative further emphasizes this point when, minutes later, bullets—not Coke bottles—come shooting through the James’ windows; as Heylia quips, “white folks get soda pop; niggas get bullets.”36 Later, when Nancy starts up a front bakery, Conrad, speaking of Heylia’s experiences, remarks that “banks … will only give loans to white dealers.”37 In short, the show’s black characters make frequent though fleeting references to the discrepancies that characterize their positions in contrast to Nancy’s.
As the narrative progresses, however, these gestures become more overt, more central to the plot, and more specifically gendered. In particular, Nancy’s relationship with Peter renders visible the advantages with which Nancy’s white femininity provides her. Indeed, Peter initially proves beneficial to Nancy’s endeavors. When she and Conrad move to establish their own marijuana grow house, they discover that a rival drug organization—“the Armenians”—have already laid claim to their territory. Nancy thus provides Peter with a map of the suburban neighborhood in which their grow house is located and suggests that the DEA raid the Armenians’ grow houses so that she can conduct her business in peace. Peter reluctantly agrees to bust the Armenians, telling Nancy to “go be a mom.”

Conrad reacts with suspicion to Nancy’s overly confident demeanor following the nearby bust. After he confronts her about “our little miracle” and accuses her of “still fucking that DEA guy,” Nancy admits to the details of her and Peter’s arrangement, asserting that “I have the marriage certificate, so we’re protected.” Conrad, however, realizes that the privileges Nancy gains in marrying Peter do not extend to him. As he asserts, correcting her, “you’re protected – ain’t no ring on my finger.” Although Nancy insists that “we’re partners,” Conrad recognizes and draws her attention to the inequalities that characterize their partnership. Emphasizing its lack of parity, he poses the rhetorical question, “then why is it that every move you make digs my grave?” Conrad’s reaction to Nancy and Peter’s marriage highlights the privileged position in which Nancy’s white femininity places her. As a young black man, Conrad’s chances of seducing a DEA agent are significantly slimmer than Nancy’s—even in the twisted world of Weeds. Moreover, as Conrad points out, Nancy acquires her “insurance” (as she calls it) at his expense.
Similarly, in the episode “MILF Money,” Peter tells Nancy about a planned DEA raid on Heylia’s house. She attempts to change his mind, but her efforts prove futile. Significantly, Peter rationalizes the bust against Nancy’s objections by explaining that “since I’m keeping you [under my radar], I gotta show my boss some results.” In other words, Nancy’s arrangement with Peter might protect her, but it increases the pressure placed upon other, less privileged dealers who do not have or have not chosen to exercise the option of marrying a DEA agent. The narrative thus uses its depiction of Nancy’s marriage to Peter to refer metonymically not simply to the differences that characterize the experiences of black and white dealers (and, to a lesser extent, people in general) but also the ways in which white privilege works to produce black oppression. As both examples illustrate, the privileges that accrue to Nancy in her marriage to Peter necessarily work to the detriment of her black associates, to whom such privileges are unavailable, inapplicable, and damaging.

But Nancy’s dealing increasingly strains her relationship with Peter, and as the narrative progresses, their marriage becomes less a racial privilege for Nancy than a gendered liability. After Nancy thwarts Peter’s bust by tipping Heylia off to the impending raid, Peter demands that Nancy quit dealing and “be my wife,” explaining that, as he states, “drug dealer’s not a career.” However, Nancy quite obviously disagrees with Peter’s assertion about her occupational choice. To her, dealing is a career—one that she enjoys and at which she excels—and she clearly dislikes the idea of quitting. Nancy not only attempts to defend her choice by noting that “I make more money than you” but also immediately suggests that Peter leave after he proposes. But when she confides in Conrad, he advises her to “tell him you love him. Tell him you out after this harvest. You get your money back … I take the equipment and disappear.”
Although Nancy expresses clear disappointment over both men’s plans, she reluctantly accepts Peter’s proposal and, to prove that she means it, invites him to dinner with her family the next night. Family dinner does not go well. Shane and Silas rebel against Peter’s attempt to insert himself more fully into their lives by misbehaving at the dinner table. Despite Nancy’s repeated insistence that Silas stop “be[ing] a brat and get your elbows off the table,” her eldest son continues to talk back to Peter and ignores his mother’s requests. When Silas rudely interrupts Peter’s apology for intruding on the family’s celebration of Judah’s birthday the previous week, Peter reacts violently, forcibly removing Silas’ left elbow from the table. Peter’s response to Silas’ outburst bothers Nancy, but she does not reproach her “husband” until the two climb into bed together. As Peter leans in to kiss her, Nancy pulls away from him, quietly inquiring as to “why [he did] that thing to [Silas’] elbow.” With that, their planned romantic evening ends, and Nancy sends Peter home.

In short, as Peter’s fatherhood moves out of the abstracted, symbolic realm in which it had previously existed and threatens to become a material, embodied reality (represented in the physical reprimand he doles out to Silas as well as his presence in the Botwin home), Nancy recoils at the threat that his patriarchal “protection” poses to her authority and her identity not just as a mother but, more significantly, as a drug dealer. Immediately following the authoritative assertion he exacts upon Silas, Peter similarly assumes a more active, controlling, and ultimately sinister role in relation to Nancy, Conrad, and their illicit activities. After he listens in on a phone conversation in which Nancy tells Conrad that Peter “just walked out my front door five minutes ago, and I don’t want him ever coming back,” he disrupts their meeting at the grow house the next day and demands that Nancy and Conrad exit the drug trade after their sale of the remaining “MILF.”
As previously noted, however, Peter’s plan does not work out as he expected; the DEA agent ends up dead, and *Weeds*’ second season finale closes not only with five guns pointed at Nancy’s head but also with the police—at Celia’s request—pulling Silas over for his theft of the “Drug Free Zone” signs and surveillance cameras that Celia (now a city councilperson) installed in Agrestic. Although neither Celia nor the cops know about the large quantity of pot hidden in Silas’ trunk, viewers (as well as Silas himself) remain unsure as to whether or not the substance will be discovered when the series returns for its third season. Thus, as usual, Nancy’s dealing career and, indeed, her life hang in the balance at the season’s end.

However, over the course of the second and third seasons, Nancy comes to realize the extent to which she has been dependent upon as well as inhibited by the patriarchal power that symbolic fathers like Peter and Judah exercise over her life and her dealing praxis. Additionally, she becomes increasingly disillusioned with the middle-class suburban lifestyle she spent the first two seasons trying to maintain. However, just after she succeeds in ridding Peter from her life, Nancy’s attempts at self-making are once again undermined when she is forced to submit to yet another masculine (though not so much “patriarchal”) authority, U-Turn.

*“Nobody’s Bitch Anymore”: From Mother to Gangster in *Weeds*’ Third Season*

In an interview with WNYC’s Leonard Lopate, Kohan describes *Weeds*’ third season as being about “the evolution of a gangster.” The season’s narrative arc supports her statements and, moreover, depicts Nancy’s new gangster identity as one that affords her more freedom and agency than did her previous incarnation as simply a “mother who happens to distribute illegal products.” In its depiction of Nancy’s evolution from mother to gangster, the series provides its most succinct subversion of the dealing genre’s conventions. Nancy’s gangster persona both allows and requires her to cast aside the trappings of her increasingly oppressive middle-class
status. Additionally, her new identity provides Nancy the tools she needs to climb out from under the patriarchal forces against which she has been struggling since the series’ beginning. However, before she can begin fully enacting and benefiting from this new identity, she must deal with the predicament in which the second season’s finale placed her.

*Weeds*’ third season opens to the same scene with which its second season ended; U-Turn, Marvin, and the Armenians are still jockeying for the weed and holding Nancy and Conrad at gunpoint. Nancy convinces U-Turn to let her leave to look for Silas and the marijuana, with Marvin and one of the Armenians—Vasag—as chaperones. However, the police forced Silas to turn his keys over to Celia when they took him into the station, and the pot now rests in her hands. Nancy and Marvin finally find the weed, but it has not survived its encounter with Celia. Upon discovering the marijuana in Silas’ trunk, Celia dumps it into Nancy’s swimming pool.

At this point in the narrative, Nancy begins to recognize the burdens with which her suburban lifestyle saddles her. Although her racial advantages, her gendered oppressions, and her class-based privileges relate intimately to one another, Nancy’s association with U-Turn reveals to her the ways in which her desperate struggle to hold on to middle-class, suburban ideals detrimentally impacts her ability to fashion a successful dealing identity. In addition to Celia’s pool-facilitated destruction of Nancy’s weed, U-Turn threatens to “come to her nice house with her pool and her kids, and … float them all where my weed was drowned at” if Nancy cannot come up with the $150,000 she owes him. As the gangster’s threat implies, the supposedly idyllic conditions of suburban, middle-class living—with its conspicuous consumption and obsession with appearances (to say nothing of their accompanying financial costs)—function less as privileges than burdens for a drug dealer.
With her debt to U-Turn in mind, Nancy puts the family’s house up for sale, fires her housekeeper, and begins to conduct her business more openly, at least as far as her family is concerned. However, before she can sufficiently break with her oppressive setting, Nancy must once again learn to live under and ultimately rise above a new masculine authority – namely, U-Turn. Significantly, U-Turn’s version of masculine imposition differs markedly from those Nancy has experienced in the past. Rather than seeking solely to exert power over or protect Nancy, U-Turn expresses an interest in, as he puts it, “grooming” her and preparing her to replace Marvin as his lieutenant.

U-Turn integrates Nancy into his operation, sending her on drug-related errands, teaching her “how to drive-by,” and generally showing her how to conduct herself like a “thug.” In doing so, he forces her to cultivate and embody the confidence, control, and autonomy she previously lacked. In her evolution from bumbling suburban weed slinger to assertive, self-assured gangster, Nancy gains a newfound sense of confidence and strengthens her ability to persevere in the face of the obstacles with which she is consistently presented. As she tells Andy, “I think I am okay. I mean, stuff keeps piling on … and while tomorrow’s another day, I’m pretty sure something even more heinous is gonna happen to me because that just seems to be the way it rolls. I really think I’m finding myself.” She then holds out her hand to him to display her recently acquired “nerves of steel.”

Marvin certainly notices the gradual loss of his power to Nancy. She begins to take his place as U-Turn’s exercise buddy, and U-Turn trusts her—not, as he previously would have, Marvin—to protect a trunk of heroin from the Chicano drug gang, Tres Ace, with whom he is currently engaged in a turf war. U-Turn even asserts, in Marvin’s presence, that Nancy would make a better lieutenant than the “fat fool” who currently holds the position. Marvin’s anger
and jealousy ultimately result in U-Turn’s death. When U-Turn collapses while he, Marvin, and Nancy are jogging, Marvin sends Nancy to get help and, while she is gone, suffocates U-Turn with his arm “for sayin’ I was too stupid to be your second-in-command.”

Following U-Turn’s demise, Nancy and Conrad assume that their debts will be absolved, but Marvin—who takes control of the drug trade in the wake of his former boss’ passing—insists that they remain under his command. Thus, even with Peter and U-Turn out of the picture, Nancy continues to exist under a masculine authority from whom she must once again work to free herself. This time, however, Nancy procures her autonomy on her own rather than, as she had previously, depending on Peter or waiting for Heylia or Marvin to do the job for her. Nancy uses the power with which her new identity imbues her and the knowledge she gained in her experience with U-Turn to negotiate a way out of her patriarchal predicament.

At U-Turn’s funeral, Marvin decides to “call a meeting” with Tres Ace to “figure something out before we all kill each other.” He enlists Nancy to join him, since “[n]o one wants a dead white lady on their hands.” The next afternoon, Marvin and Nancy approach the Chicano gangsters, whose leader, Guillermo, immediately demands the return of their “chieva” (Spanish for heroin). Although Marvin insists—even at gunpoint—that he “don’t got your chieva,” once one of Guillermo’s associates translates for her, Nancy realizes that Guillermo is referring to the trunk with which U-Turn entrusted her.

When Marvin refuses to “wipe out” Nancy and Conrad’s debts in exchange for her return of Tres Ace’s heroin, Nancy uses her position as Marvin’s “bitch” to convince him to comply with her request; as she explains to Guillermo, “Marvin doesn’t want me to give you your chieva back. I want to, but I’m his bitch, so I can’t.” Faced with the prospect of death at the hands of Tres Ace, Marvin reluctantly agrees to let Conrad and Nancy “off the hook.” Thus, Nancy
finally rids herself of the (living) masculine authorities who have been wreaking havoc on her dealing career since the end of the first season without help from better-connected dealers like Heylia and Conrad or a third party like Peter.

Nancy subsequently begins to conduct her life and her business thoroughly in terms of the gangster ethos she acquired from U-Turn. Indeed, she even has a “U-Turn” traffic signal tattooed on her posterior to remind her, as she tells the tattoo artist, “that thug means never having to say you’re sorry,” a piece of advice U-Turn offered her near the time of his death.

In cultivating her gangsterized dealing persona, Nancy gains greater confidence in, control over, and competence with regard to her dealing and her personal life. She begins speaking more authoritatively, acting more assertively, and thriving financially. Above all, she learns to better handle the numerous threats to which her occupation leaves her vulnerable.

For instance, she successfully drives away a blackmauling private investigator by turning his surveillance tactics against him. Nancy also threatens to kill Celia when she attempts to extort money from her. Holding a knife to Celia’s neck, Nancy warns, “Celia, if you go to the police, if you continue to threaten me or my family in any way, I will kill you … I will end your life.” Unlike the feats of courage Nancy previously accomplished, she appears here not only collected and sure of but also pleased with herself. After she explains to Shane, who witnessed her attack on Celia, that their neighbor “threatened Mommy, and we can’t have that,” he guesses that “[t]his is kinda how it’s gonna be from now on, huh?” Nancy smiles and replies, “Yeah, I think it is.”

Later, a gang of drug-dealing bikers assaults Silas after Nancy decides to cease carrying their inferior product. She realizes that she cannot go “up against an army of bikers” with “no muscle [and] no army,” so she again looks to outside sources for protection. This time,
however, Nancy initiates the deal. She assertively approaches Guillermo and suggests that they make an arrangement to ensure her, her family, and her associates’ freedom from shakedowns and violence. Guillermo demands that Nancy make him a “50/50 partner” in exchange for his “total protection;” she hesitates somewhat at the hefty price tag but decides in the end that the sense of security is worth the cost.87

While it could be argued that her partnership with Guillermo functions to place her once again under the control of a patriarchal or masculine authority, Nancy’s arrangement with Guillermo differs significantly from those under which she previously lived. Rather than acquiring a total and basically unearned debt—as she did with U-Turn—or placing herself at the mercy of a government agent—as in her relationship with Peter—Nancy and Guillermo negotiate an equal profit share. Moreover, Nancy explicitly frames her actions not, as she had with Peter and U-Turn, in terms of desperation and coercion but rather states that she “bought some protection.”88 In short, Nancy can now exercise agency in her dealing practices, forming equal partnerships and negotiating business coalitions on her own terms.

Significantly, however, the narrative does not “masculinize” Nancy after she adopts her gangster mentality. Rather, Nancy revolutionizes the feminine scripts by which she had previously enacted her gender identity as well as the masculine tropes through which dealing is typically represented. By conducting her business and her personal life in accordance with the tenets of her self-made gangster identity—becoming more agentive, forceful, and reflexive in her dealing praxis; reconstituting her familial relationships; and taking control of her sexuality—Nancy constructs an identity that aligns with neither hegemonic masculine nor traditional feminine gender norms. Nancy’s gangster persona is not “un-gendered,” but it does represent a significant reworking of conventional notions of gendered presentation and performance.
In *Weeds*’ first and second seasons, Nancy enacts a femininity that inhibits her from taking control over the precarious situations in which her dealing constantly places her. In the third season, however, she inserts the newfound confidence, calm, and knowledge with which her gangsterism imbues her into her dealing praxis and becomes better able to deal with her business-related predicaments. For example, when Nancy gets “jacked” by a competing dealer in season one, her exhibition of feminine vulnerability compels Conrad to come to her rescue. As Heylia explains to Nancy, “I’m sure you didn’t tell him to … beat the tar out of [the other dealer], but you blinked them big brown eyes, and there he go.” However, when people like Celia, the blackmailing PI, and the violent bikers endanger Nancy’s business or her family in the third season, she takes matters into her own hands, as we have seen.

Additionally, Nancy rejects the patriarchal, heterosexist relationship norms to which she had previously conformed. She spends most of the first season mourning Judah’s death, and when she marries Peter, Nancy again places herself under a masculine authority, returning to monogamous, normative, even legally sanctioned couplehood. In the third season, Nancy rejects such heterosexist norms, initiating noncommittal, casual sexual relationships with Sullivan Groff (her boss at her short-lived legitimate job) and, later, Conrad. Both partnerships work primarily according to Nancy’s rules, desires, and whims, and the sense of necessity and relative passivity that characterized her relationship with Peter remain absent from those she initiates with Conrad and Sullivan.

Thus, Nancy assumes control over and asserts her agency in both her choice of partners and in the courses the relationships will take. Moreover, Nancy’s interactions with Sullivan and Conrad defy conventional relationship definitions and categories. She and Sullivan both know that their relationship is only sexual, and Nancy and Conrad never have a serious or definitive
conversation about where their partnership might lead them. In short, her new gangster persona allows Nancy to liberate herself not just from the passive feminine ideals to which she prescribed in the show’s first two seasons but also from the heteronormative scripts by which her sexual relationships had previously been characterized.

Most importantly, Nancy experiences a significant shift in her relationship to motherhood. In contrast to her first season assertion that she is “not a dealer” but “a mother,”” Nancy owns her dealing identity by the end of the third season. In the episode, “Protection,” she proclaims her status as a drug dealer for the first time without qualifying the statement with an appeal to her motherhood or its accompanying financial responsibilities. As she declares to Conrad, “like it or not, I’m a drug dealer. There. I said it out loud. I’m a fucking drug dealer.” However, Nancy does not renounce her motherhood after she comes to terms with the occupation she has chosen. Rather, she reconciles her business with her family life by reformulating her approach to parenting.

Several television bloggers and critics in the popular press have castigated Nancy for her poor mothering skills. Because her reformulated version of mothering differs from traditional ideas about and representations of the practice, critics and viewers may indeed have a difficult time interpreting Nancy’s new parenting style in nonpejorative ways. However, she actually integrates her family more fully into her life as she embraces her identity as a drug dealer. For instance, Silas begins dealing for her, eventually goes to work with Conrad in the grow house and, significantly, cares about something productive for the first time in his life. She also allows Shane to assist her with protection; he installs surveillance and alarm systems in the house, and the tiny microphone hidden inside the necklace Nancy wears to meet with the blackmailing PI was Shane’s idea.
Moreover, Nancy generally works to provide for and protect not just herself and her business but, more fundamentally, her family. One of her main fears throughout the series’ run has concerned the fate of her children should she be killed or arrested, and the bikers’ target Silas, not Nancy, for their physical attacks. While explaining the deal she made with Guillermo to Conrad, Nancy insists that “I did what I had to do to protect my family.” Thus, the impetus behind her construction of and the actions that constitute her gangster identity lies at least partially in her desire to take better care of her sons—a motivation not shared by the majority of her fictional (and mostly male) dealing counterparts.

In short, after she adopts her gangster persona, Nancy’s success at protecting and providing for her family increases significantly, despite the declining amounts of time she has available for traditional familial pursuits. However, her gangster identity cannot entirely protect her from the dangers of the drug trade nor from those associated with suburban living, gendered oppression, and motherhood (or, more specifically, widowhood). When Shane begins “communicating” with his dead father, the narrative reveals and provides Nancy with an opportunity to rid herself of the last vestige of patriarchal power hanging over her head: Judah’s lingering legacy.

The narrative never clearly prescribes a way for viewers to interpret Shane’s interactions with “Judah.” On the one hand, it could simply be, as Silas contends, that Shane is “fucking nuts”—or, more specifically, that his invocation of his father’s memory is a response to his mother’s increased absence from the domestic sphere, as Nancy suggests when she asks Shane whether or not “this is you talking.” On the other hand, the ways that characters like Nancy and Andy react to the things that Judah purportedly has to say suggest that Shane might, in fact, be speaking with the dead patriarch. For instance, Shane tells Andy that Judah “wants to know
why you let mom down, why you didn’t take better care of all of us.” He informs his mother that Judah “likes the way you wear your hair now … but he’s angry … at all of us.” Thus, Judah’s “presence” acts as yet another instance of a symbolic father attempting to dismantle Nancy’s hard-won authority and rob her of the pleasure she derives from her illicit occupation.

Once again, Nancy’s gangster-inflected dealing persona assists her in dismissing Judah’s residual patriarchal authority. After she talks with Shane, procures protection from Guillermo, and explains the situation to Conrad, Nancy returns home to news of an encroaching wildfire, which, as Andy informs her, “started in [the bikers’] grow field. Someone torched it.” Nancy realizes that the fire was Guillermo’s (and, thus, partially her) doing, but she rebukes Silas and Andy when they contend that they are “proud of her” and her new “gangster” ways. Nancy instructs her family to ready themselves for evacuation and proceeds to tie up her loose ends before accompanying them to the emergency shelter.

However, as Shane tells his mother, Judah “doesn’t want to leave the house [and] I’m not leaving if he’s not leaving.” In convincing her son to evacuate, Nancy overtly criticizes Judah’s legacy for the first time and thus begins planning her escape from the patriarchal power that his return represents. When Shane refuses to give up his father’s ghost, Nancy decides to play along, addressing her dead husband directly. She turns (on Shane’s direction) to face Judah and demands that he “kindly tell our son that he needs to leave because his safety is more important than hanging out with you in this prefab shitbox you loved so well. You both need to let it go.” After Nancy tells Shane that “your father wants you to go,” he agrees to evacuate and ceases his communications with Judah.

While at the shelter, Nancy receives a call from Guillermo and rushes off to meet him. When she expresses concern over the impending loss of her home, her customer base, and her
weed, Guillermo suggests that perhaps “it’s a sign … that it’s time to move on.”110 He intimates that perhaps Nancy could sell for him, but, although she appears intrigued by his suggestion that she try her hand at trafficking, Nancy proclaims that she’s “nobody’s bitch anymore.”111 Guillermo shrugs and, just before exiting, proposes that “maybe the fire won’t get [to your house]. You could stay here forever.”112 Nancy appears visibly disturbed by this image, and she decides to take matters into her own hands.

With Guillermo’s statement in mind, Nancy heads to her house and pleads with the policemen guarding the area to allow her one last chance to visit her home, manipulating them with a story about having left “my husband’s ashes … in there.”113 However, in actuality, she has other plans. Entering the house with a gas can in hand, Nancy pours the flammable liquid over her furniture and floors. Just before striking a match, she again addresses her husband’s ghost, tearfully asserting that “I tried.”114 Nancy’s statement suggests her recognition that the lifestyle on which she has been struggling to maintain her hold is ultimately untenable and that the middle-class, suburban milieu in which she has heretofore existed is not conducive to the enactment of the gangster identity she has fashioned. Furthermore, in destroying Judah’s beloved “prefab shitbox,” Nancy also casts off her dead husband’s residual authority.

Her arson thus represents the culmination of both her growing disillusionment with suburban living and her final rejection of patriarchal rule. Rather than reconciling herself to the constraints of middle-class, suburban idealism–as do other suburban protagonists like Lewis’ Babbitt–Nancy rejects them outright. Moreover, she finally discards the last remnant of the patriarchal authority under which she has been living throughout the show’s three seasons (and which Shane’s conversations with Judah represent). Most importantly, however, Nancy’s dealing
and the gangster persona it allows her to cultivate ultimately act as the catalysts that compel her to free herself from this confining context.

**Conclusion**

In Rabinovitz’s formulation, the feminist sitcom both obscures the race and class-based components of women’s experiences and capitulates to patriarchy by refusing to grant its protagonists’ an autonomous existence.\textsuperscript{115} *Weeds* works within this tradition, but it also transforms the feminist sitcom’s ideological operations. The series not only highlights the race and class-based privileges on which Nancy’s position is initially based but also attends to the gendered oppressions she faces. Moreover, *Weeds* provides its protagonist with a framework–drug dealing–through which to understand and acknowledge these privileges as well as to overcome her oppression at the hands of symbolic fathers like Peter and Judah to construct an autonomous gangster identity.

*Weeds* thus expands the parameters of the feminist sitcom but, more importantly for my purposes, this expansion also constitutes a subversive transformation of drug dealing narratives’ raced and gendered generic conventions. By representing her dealing and the gangster identity it allows her to cultivate as the way that Nancy comes to terms with the privileges her whiteness and middle-class status accrue to her and the tool that allows her to expel oppressive patriarchal forces from her life, the series debunks one of the dealing genre’s primary assumptions; in *Weeds*’ depiction of drug dealing, the practice appears as less a debased replacement for legitimate work than a superior (and, indeed, quite difficult) form of capitalist enterprise that provides for the construction of more reflexive and fulfilling identities than do its licit counterparts.
In short, using its female dealing protagonist, serialized sitcom structure, and suburban setting, *Weeds* highlights (for both its viewers and its main character) the ways in which white privilege functions to produce black oppression, as in, for example, its portrayal of Nancy and Conrad’s differential relationships to Peter. At the same time, drug dealing allows *Weeds*’ protagonist to carve out a space in which she can (and, indeed, does) create an autonomous and fulfilling self, freed from the patriarchal forces by which her life was previously circumscribed. *Weeds* thus depicts drug dealing not as an illegitimate shortcut to economic attainment or gendered achievement but rather as both a useful lens through which its protagonist can reassess the assumptions that formerly governed her life and a strong base on which she can build a new, more fulfilling identity.

Showtime commissioned a fourth season of *Weeds* in November of 2007. True to the show’s established format, the course the narrative will take when it returns to the air remains uncertain. Despite Nancy’s exorcism of patriarchal authority, her dealing career again faces extinction – this time at the hands of Celia, who immediately uttered Nancy’s name to authorities after firefighters discovered the numerous pot plants that Nancy and Conrad had been growing in her house. However, Nancy’s precarious situation at the third season’s end does not simply threaten her ability to continue dealing drugs but also opens up a horizon of possibility not offered in the finales of seasons one and two. Thus, whatever path Nancy takes when *Weeds*’ fourth season commences, her self-fashioned, dealing-derived gangster identity will continue to provide the narrative with the necessary tools with which to maintain and hopefully expand its subversions of the dealing genre’s historical conventions.

Notes
Although none of the characters ever explicitly state the exact period in which Judah’s death occurred, in the episode “The Punishment Light” Nancy, her sons, brother-in-law, and friends go to Judah’s unveiling (1.8. DVD. Weeds: Season One [Hollywood, CA: Lions Gate Television, Inc., 2006]), a Jewish burial ceremony that traditionally occurs “about 11 months after the death” (“Unveiling the Marker,” Hillsidememorial.com, 2003 [accessed February 5, 2008]).

Nancy and Peter fly to Las Vegas and get married in secret. They continue simply dating (as Nancy states, their arrangement is “strictly business”), and Peter lets Nancy keep the certificate to, as he states, “do with it what you will” (“Last Tango in Agrestic,” 2.3. DVD. Weeds: Season Two [Hollywood: Lions Gate Television, Inc., 2007]).

The strain derives its name from Snoop Dogg, who, in the episode “MILF Money,” refers to Nancy as a “mother I’d like to fuck” after she and Conrad bring their first crop to Conrad’s friend’s recording studio, where Snoop is laying down some tracks; after he smokes the weed, Snoop pens an impromptu rap that prominently features its name (2.8. DVD. Weeds: Season Two [Hollywood: Lions Gate Television, Inc., 2007]).

See, for example, Tim Goodman, “Greatness of Weeds Could Make Showtime Must-Pay-For Television,” SFGate.com, August 11, 2006 (accessed February 1, 2008); Goodman points to such comparisons, stating that “People want to speculate on whether Weeds will bust [Showtime] into the must-buy arena now dominated by HBO.”

During a 2005 press conference on the Winter Television Critics Association tour, Showtime’s chairman and chief executive, Matthew Blank, informed an audience of reporters that “100 percent of Showtime households have HBO [but] less than 50 percent of HBO households have Showtime” (Blank quoted in Ed Martin, “Critics Pursue Elusive Showtime Ratings Information at TCA; An Emotional Session with USA Network’s New Kojak,” Jack Myers Media Village, January 14, 2005 [accessed Feb 1, 2008]).


Offsay quoted in Wible, “Media Advocates,” 50.

Wible, “Media Advocates,” 50.


For instance, Katie Button refers to the series as a “domestic drugs dramedy” (“Weeds Creator Happy About Illegal Downloads,” TVScoop.tv, August 8, 2007 [accessed February 2, 2008]), and the website Televisionary terms it “a pot-fueled dramedy” (“Showtime Dreams of More Dexter, Another Puff of Weed(s),” Televisionary.com, November 11, 2006 [accessed February 2, 2008]).


13 Ibid, 9.


15 Mittell, “Narrative Complexity,” 34. Subsequent references noted parenthetically in text.

16 Ibid, 34.

17 Ibid, 34.

18 This convention is best exemplified by the “cliff-hangers” that are sometimes used at the end of *Seinfeld* episodes. Mittell explains that “Many episodes leave characters in untenable situations – Kramer arrested for being a pimp, Jerry running into the woods after becoming a ‘wolf-man,’ George stuck in an airplane restroom with a serial killer;” however, “[t]hese unresolved moments do not function as cliff-hangers as in serial dramas but rather as comedic punchlines never to referenced again” (“Narrative Complexity,” 34).


20 Mittell, “Narrative Complexity,” 34.

21 Quoted in “Going to Pot? Far From It,” *Times Online*, October 9, 2005 (accessed February 23, 2008). Additionally, Kohan states that she “set *Weeds* in suburbia because I was fascinated with the suburbs – my mother always said all the interesting stories are in the valley” (quoted in Bolonik, *In the Weeds*, 1), and Elizabeth Perkins (who portrays Celia Hodes) says of her character, “She is very much a metaphor for the world she lives in, this false, prefab society that is springing up in America” (“Going to Pot”).


26 Ibid, 4.

27 All three novels were eventually adapted for the screen. Ang Lee took on Moody’s novel in 1997. Sophia Coppola’s adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides* hit theaters in 1999, and Todd Field cinematized *Little Children* in 2006.


32 During much of the first season (as well as, less frequently, the second and, as I will discuss later, the third), Nancy’s children measure her parenting skills against those of their father or attempt in some way to take his place or fill his shoes. For example, in the episode “Good Shit Lollipop,” Nancy mistakenly thinks that Shane shot a neighbor’s cat instead of the mountain lion he claimed to have hit with his BB gun. When she asks him why he shot the animal, Shane replies that it is “what Dad would have done” (1.3. DVD. *Weeds: Season One* [Hollywood: Lions Gate Television, Inc., 2006]). Later, when Nancy tells Silas about her marriage to Peter (after Peter interrupts the family’s celebration of Judah’s birthday and Shane informs Silas and Andy of Peter’s occupation), Silas angrily objects to her decision, claiming that “It’s Dad’s birthday … but he’s dead, so what difference does it make?” (“MILF Money”). Nancy implores him to “[s]top playing the dead-dad card,” and voices her belief that “the wrong parent died” (“MILF Money”). When Nancy, in the third season, demands that Silas “let the head of the family deal with [protection],” Silas replies that “the head of the family is dead” (“Protection,” 3.14. *Weeds*, Showtime, November 12, 2007). Additionally, as discussed in more detail above, in the third season, Shane begins communicating (or pretending to communicate) with his dead father, once again reinforcing Judah’s continuing status as a “symbolic father.”
Rabinovitz, “Ms. Representation,” 146.


Ibid.

“Dead in the Nethers.”


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

“MILF Money.”

Ibid.

Nancy actually tips her associate off the impending raid (“Bash,” 2.9. DVD. *Weeds: Season Two* [Hollywood: Lions Gate Television, Inc., 2007]). By the time the DEA arrives, Heylia and her suitor, Nation of Islam practitioner Joseph Mohammed, have transformed the former dealing operation into a “house of worship,” thwarting the DEA’s plans and allowing Heylia to escape prosecution but nearly destroying her business (“Bash”). After the raid, the DEA continues to surveil Heylia’s home and track her movements, making it all but impossible for her to carry out her business. Indeed, she eventually takes a new job as a crossing guard for school children (“Mile Deep and a Foot Wide,” 2.10. DVD. *Weeds: Season Two* [Hollywood: Lions Gate Television, Inc., 2007]) until Conrad reestablishes his growing (“A Pool and His Money,” 3.2. *Weeds*, Showtime, August 20, 2007). Thus, although Nancy warns her former dealer about the raid, her arrangement with Peter continues to negatively impact those around her.

“Bash.”
Both boys know what Peter does for a living, though only Silas is fully aware of Nancy’s occupation and her arrangement with Peter.

During Nancy and Marvin’s absence, U-Turn cut a deal with the Armenians, paying them $150,000 for killing Peter and subsequently assuring that he retains the marijuana. After receiving a call from his fellow hitmen, Vagas silently walks away from Nancy’s car as she is filling it with gas, and the Armenians never appear again (“Doing the Backstroke”).

She informs them of the danger with which U-Turn presents them (“The Brick Dance”), has Silas divide her bulk weed into smaller, sellable quantities within Shane’s view (“The Brick Dance”), and eventually allows Silas to sling for her (“Shit Highway,” 3.4. Weeds, Showtime, September 3, 2007).

“Grasshopper.”

“Bill Sussman.”

Ibid.

“Grasshopper.”

“Bill Sussman.” In fact, Conrad and Heylia started the turf war. As Conrad explains to Nancy after U-Turn dies, “[m]aybe [Tres Ace] didn’t shoot Marvin in the ass. Maybe someone else did it to make it look like the Mexicans did it. Maybe someone did it to start a gang war and let all them motherfuckers kill each other so that we could all be free” (“He Taught Me How to Drive-By”).

“Grasshopper.”

Ibid.

“He Taught Me How to Drive-By.”

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


“Grasshopper.”

“Cankles,” 3.11. Weeds, Showtime, October 22, 2007. After she inexplicably befriends Peter’s ex-wife, Valerie, Nancy—as his wife at the time of his death—receives Peter’s life insurance and pension checks from the DEA, both of which, Valerie contends, ought to have gone to her. Valerie thus hires a PI to investigate Nancy, and after he finds out about her drug dealing, he shakes her down for a $50,000.


Ibid.

“Protection.”

Ibid.
Ibid., emphasis added.


“He Taught Me How to Drive-By.” Nancy took a legitimate job in the episode “Shit Highway,” becoming, as she tells Shane, “the Executive Assistant to the head of the Majestic Project.” In “He Taught Me How to Drive-By,” she decides to take advantage of her boss’ (usually) unwanted advances for the sake of convenience.

“The Dark Time.”

“Dead in the Nethers.”

“Protection.”


The aforementioned evaluations of Nancy’s mothering skills also reek of sexism; male dealing protagonists rarely if ever encounter such criticisms. For example, in the fourth season of The Wire, viewers learn that Barksdale soldier Wee-Bey has a son, Namond. Namond visits his father in jail several times, and both his parents frequently chastise him for his inability to step into his father’s shoes. However, bloggers and television critics did not jump on Wee-Bey for trying to push his offspring into the dangerous occupation that sent him to jail for life. Indeed, Wee-Bey was ultimately redeemed when he allowed Bunny Colvin to adopt Namond at the season’s end (“Final Grades,” 4.13. DVD. The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season [New York: Home Box Office, Inc., 2007])


“Cankles.”

“Protection.”

“Risk.”

“Protection.”
Additionally, Shane first acknowledges Judah’s “presence” after the alarm system he installed goes off and he successfully discerns that there has been no security breach. Viewers could read the system’s activation as a consequence of Judah’s ghostly entry into the Botwin home (“Risk”).

“Protection.”

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


“Go.” At the start of the third season, Conrad was growing in a warehouse paid for by Heylia (“The Brick Dance”). However, faced with the threat of a fire inspection, Conrad had to move his operation; Nancy—the crop’s only investor—convinced Celia to allow them to grow in a house that Sullivan (with whom Celia had also been intimate) had given her after she separated from Dean (“The Dark Time;” “Bill Sussman”). Because the house was under the name of a dummy corporation, Celia assumed that she would not be held responsible if authorities discovered the marijuana plants.
As we have seen, the narratives of the drug dealing genre have historically worked to shore up white, masculine, capitalist hegemony by negatively associating dealing with vulnerable populations—women of all stripes, men grouped into particular racial categories, colonized or otherwise exploited nations and regions, or working-class people—in order to naturalize the oppressive structures under which they live and the criminalization those structures exact upon them. Particularly in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, generic texts construct dealers in terms of the trope of the self-made man, juxtaposing their protagonists against men who toil at licit endeavors and using the dealers’ inevitable downfalls to give to legitimate capitalist institutions the meaning and value that so many of its adherents find lacking. However, two recent and very different television serials—The Wire and Weeds—subvert and transform this generic norm by turning the very tropes through which such meanings are typically produced against themselves.

Using a metaphor of materiality, The Wire juxtaposes the masculinities of its various protagonists—most pertinently, Avon and Stringer—to argue that legitimate capitalism’s increasing abstraction inhibits men from producing fulfilling gender identities through their work. Weeds, on the other hand, narrates its female protagonist’s construction of a gangster identity that allows her to both recognize her race and class privileges and defend herself against the patriarchal forces inhibiting her construction of a rewarding identity through her illegal occupation. Drug dealing thus appears as a particularly appropriate path toward the production of autonomous gender identities rather than, as in most dealing narratives, an illegitimate shortcut. The Wire and Weeds’ uniquely serialized narrative structures facilitate these generic subversions, but they do
not in and of themselves explain the narratives’ successful overhauls of the dealing genre’s conventions.

The United States has been engaged in a “war on drugs” for approximately three decades, and Americans have grown increasingly aware, weary, and critical of its vast wastefulness, its general failure, and—most importantly— the devastating effects it has had on people of color, the urban poor, and much of the earth’s Southern hemisphere. Certainly, such widespread disillusion opens up space in which critical cultural representations can flourish. Additionally, The Wire addresses itself to specific conditions that characterize the contemporary capitalist economy, and though Weeds’ focus on suburbia may not be new, the norms and values that characterize suburban living continue to act as powerful ideals in American culture.

However, as my analyses of recent dealing films and other scholarly work on representations of drug dealing make clear, contemporary generic texts continue to espouse meanings that almost entirely resemble those of late nineteenth and, particularly, early to mid-twentieth century narratives. Thus, The Wire and Weeds’ generic subversions cannot be attributed solely to the historical context from which they emerged or to the complex narrative structures through which they tell their stories. I have cursorily discussed the importance of industrial context, but a fuller analysis of these conditions produces a more multifaceted picture of the various factors that contribute to these texts’ abilities to challenge and transform the conventions of the genre to which they belong.

The factors to which I have already pointed—HBO and Showtime’s divergent economic models, premium cable’s ability and willingness to cross the lines that have historically circumscribed network and basic cable television, and the weight given within these contexts to authorial intents and concerns—are important elements that facilitate the creation of such
generically subversive narratives. However, two factors that I have not yet given sufficient attention also weigh heavily on the successfully subversive narratives presented in *The Wire* and *Weeds*: the opportunities presented to cultural producers in what television scholars call the “post-network era” and the premium cable audience’s composition, as well as that of *The Wire* and *Weeds* more specifically.

**The Post-Network Era, “Pay Cable Chauvinism,” and Drug Dealing Narratives: Situating Generic Subversion in the Televisual Landscape**

Both *The Wire* and *Weeds* debuted at a time when television was fully ensconced in the post-network era. Amanda D. Lotz locates this televisual phenomenon’s emergence in certain “institutional adjustments … that began in the 1980s.” In particular, “changes in ownership and the steady consolidation of media holdings” placed more television outlets in the hands of a relatively small number of corporations and conglomerates (24). At the same time, the successful launch of “new broadcast and cable networks … expanded viewers choices,” and new technologies like the VCR (and, later, the internet and the DVR) “offered [consumers] more control” over their television viewing practices (24-25).

In short, the post-network era is characterized by the existence of a greater number of television outlets and increasingly sophisticated technologies that provide viewers with more entertainment choices and more control over the ways in which they exercise them. That these expanded options are produced, distributed, and owned by a few large media conglomerates complicates the picture, but it does not negate the post-network era’s increased programming variety. Indeed, for Lotz, the “narrowcasting” strategies—or “targeting a niche segment of the overall audience”—that resulted from expanded competition “in the television industry as new broadcast networks were successfully launched and the technical capabilities of cable slowly
reached the broad populace” constitute one of the most significant transformations that occurred during and due to television’s shift away from the network era (25-26).

According to Lotz, in the post-network era, traditional broadcast networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX, and the CW) must “compete with cable networks that are able to maintain profits while narrowcasting to small audience segments” (25). Indeed, HBO and Showtime exemplify this turn toward narrowcasting. Both channels explicitly orient themselves toward specific viewing populations, as opposed to the broader audiences courted by network programmers. As my discussions of HBO and Showtime in the chapters devoted respectively to *The Wire* and *Weeds* indicate, each channel adopted particular branding and programming strategies in the late 1990s that helped them to distinguish themselves from their network and basic cable competitors.

In HBO’s case, the transition toward the post-network era inspired the channel to refocus its attention on original programming in the mid-1980s. But it wasn’t until 1997, when it took on its now ubiquitous slogan, “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO,” and launched its first dramatic series, *Oz*, that HBO solidified its brand identity. Since the late 1990s, HBO has achieved both popular and critical success with such “quality” original series as *The Sopranos, Sex and the City, Six Feet Under*, and *The Wire*. However, as Horace Newcomb suggests, invoking John Thornton Caldwell’s description of “boutique television,” HBO’s notion of quality carries distinct, audience-related class codes.

The channel ostensibly targets its audience not on the basis of “demographic” factors like race, age, or gender but rather seeks to appeal to a more “sophisticated” set of viewers for whom typical network fare and basic cable programming lack the “authenticity” offered in HBO shows. However, HBO’s high subscription rates implicitly construct its viewers as predominantly white
and/or upper-middle class. As Jaramillo states, citing Jane Feuer, “‘If a series appeals to (and captures) decent numbers of an upscale demographic, large numbers of lower income viewers are secondary.’” Jaramillo refers to this equation of “‘quality’ demographics with ‘quality programming’” as “pay cable chauvinism,” which she contends “not only holds broadcast TV to a different standard but also implies that pay cable consumers can handle graphic language, sex, and violence in a more thoughtful and productive way than broadcast viewers.”

Showtime exhibits a similar sort of “chauvinism.” Gary Edgerton notes that Showtime’s corporate owner, CBS, “adopted … aspirations for Showtime” that closely resemble those that Time Warner (the conglomerate under which HBO operates) has for its “boutique network.” As CBS president and CEO Leslie Moonves has stated, “there is no reason [Showtime] won’t become for CBS what HBO is for Time Warner.” However, as the less established of the two, Showtime bases its brand identity more firmly on its willingness to push televisual boundaries than on the “quality” of its original series. As the channel’s slogan, “No Limits,” suggests, Showtime juxtaposes itself as much against traditional network and basic cable conventions as its premium cable competitor, HBO.

Although Scott Wible argues that part of Showtime’s branding strategy consists of “creating original series that … target niche audiences served less often by broadcast and basic cable networks,” he recognizes that the channel also “interprets ‘No Limits’ to mean … picking edgy, sexual or violent topics” around which to organize its original series. In many ways, these two goals work in tandem with one another. Broadcast and (to a lesser extent) basic cable networks are basically barred from airing content that is as “edgy, sexual or violent” as that which can appear on Showtime. Thus, original series like Soul Food (2000-2004), Queer as Folk...
(2000-2005), *The L Word* (2004-present) and, of course, *Weeds* can target niche audiences at the same time that they accomplish the boundary pushing that constitutes Showtime’s brand identity. However, Showtime’s premium status—much like HBO’s—places limits upon the degree to which low-income populations can access its programming. Thus, both channels target a particular audience niche, which Jaramillo describes as “young, urban adults from 18 to 34.” Wible expands this conception of the niche audiences toward which premium cable channels orient themselves, stating that Showtime’s “No Limits” maxim partially requires producing “representations of minority groups and ‘other’ lifestyles that white, moneyed viewers can feel comfortable watching.” Put more simply, as Adam Sternbergh reports, paraphrasing *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-2006) creator David Milch’s argument against the dichotomous terms in which cable and network television are typically discussed, “everyone’s selling something: … on [premium cable], it’s upper-middle class values.”

The existence and success of *The Wire* and *Weeds* can thus be partially attributed to the conditions that characterize the post-network era, of which HBO and Showtime are and were both symptomatic and productive. In other words, as the cable universe became increasingly crowded in the late 1990s, premium channels had to work harder to compete, and they concentrated much of their efforts on the production of original series that had no place on the traditional networks nor, at the time, on basic cable. As programming executives were forced to lower their expectations as to what constitutes a high ratings share, niche audiences (particularly those of the young professional variety) became more valuable than the broader demographics to which broadcast networks have historically catered. Increased competition, a greater focus on original series, and shifting conceptions of ratings thus create space for the
production of provocative programs like *The Wire* and *Weeds* that are considered too edgy or controversial for mainstream audiences.

However, while both *The Wire* and *Weeds* assist their home channels in constituting their brand identities by centering their narratives on a topic that more conservative television outlets are unwilling to touch, middle or upper-class white people are by no means these shows’ only viewers. Indeed, as Margaret Talbot observes, *The Wire* “has been a hit [among] people who identify with [its] inner-city characters.”\(^{18}\) She describes “HBO message boards [that] are full of testimonials … suggest[ing] an affinity between ‘Wire’ fans and ‘Wire’ characters.”\(^{19}\) Additionally, according to Brian Rose, *The Wire* boasts “a strong following among both cops and criminals, who admire the show’s faithful recreation of their lives.”\(^{20}\) *The Wire* also began syndication on BET in 2007, which significantly expanded the range of viewers to which it is available.\(^{21}\)

Moreover, illegal downloading and media bootlegging further complicate assertions that *The Wire* and *Weeds* are, like many of their premium cable neighbors, simply “representations of minority groups and ‘other’ lifestyles that white, moneyed viewers can feel comfortable watching.”\(^{22}\) For example, Katie Button reports that Jenji Kohan “was pleased to see the first four episodes of her show’s third season available illegally” on free downloading sites.\(^{23}\) As Kohan explained, “I’m excited it’s out there. Showtime is great, but it does have a limited audience.”\(^{24}\) Talbot similarly cites the “[b]ootleg copies of *The Wire* DVDs [that] circulate widely in the mostly black and poor neighborhoods of West Baltimore.”\(^{25}\) In short, premium cable subscribers are not the only members of the viewing population who have access to either show. Many people instead illegally download *The Wire* and *Weeds* for free or purchase the black market copies that are available cheaply both domestically and internationally.\(^{26}\)
Statistical calculations documenting the number of people who consume the shows in these illicit ways remain elusive, but downloading and bootlegging are nevertheless documented phenomena that negate easy assumptions about The Wire and Weeds’ actual audiences and their viewing practices. While the shows’ locations on premium cable clearly bear on their meaning-making processes, the vast array of consumption formats available to viewers also open The Wire and Weeds up to other meanings that may be unavailable or obscured in their original contexts. Moreover, as media scholars have documented, audiences of all stripes bring their own assumptions, beliefs, and desires to the narratives they consume, further complicating discussions of television’s ideological and discursive functions.\(^{27}\) In short, while their premium cable contexts act as important factors that both facilitate and hamper The Wire and Weeds’ generic subversions, there are other ways in which viewers access these shows, and scholars cannot draw singular or totalizing conclusions about actual audiences’ viewing practices.

**Conclusion**

The inability to conclusively analyze the conditions for the emergence of The Wire and Weeds’ generically subversive narratives based solely on historical and industrial contexts, audience compositions and responses, or the series’ complex structures works to further underscore the importance of the narratives’ textual contents. Certainly, as my analysis has shown, their innovatively serialized structures, their premium cable locations, and the historical moment in which they appear weigh heavily on the meanings imparted through both series. However, without the diegetic events and arcs that these less explicitly textual elements work to produce and illuminate, there would be little to say about where exactly The Wire and Weeds fit within the drug dealing genre.

In other words, were Weeds not characterized by Nancy’s gangster trajectory or The Wire by its concern with the loss of materiality in an increasingly abstract economy neither show
would constitute the generic subversion that it does, even within the context of premium cable and the post-network era. In the stories they tell, both series complicate, critique, and overturn the gendered tropes through which drug dealing is typically represented. In doing so, *The Wire* and *Weeds* not only challenge the conventions to which other dealing texts adhere but also shed new light on the genre’s historical and contemporary operations.

*The Wire* and *Weeds*’ generic subversions help to elucidate the ways in which particular genres’ encounters with different cultural forms (such as serialized television) and moves into new media contexts (like premium cable) facilitate the production of more complex and reflexive narratives. Both series work within but nevertheless refuse to conform to their genre’s historically constituted conventions, and these refusals are abetted by the greater thematic and structural freedoms offered by premium cable and serialized television. Moreover, these subversions of the drug dealing genre serve as particularly potent examples of popular culture’s radical possibilities.

Scholars more often criticize than celebrate the narratives that appear in such debased contexts as television, obscuring the potentially critical or dissentious meanings such narratives might put forth. As Jeffrey Sconce contends, “Gather a roomful of intellectuals of almost any stripe and their one point of agreement will be that television is the sewer of national and global culture.” Television narratives can and often do work to reify and perpetuate the problematically gendered, raced, class-based, and nationalistic terms in which particular subjects are typically discussed. However, as my analyses of *The Wire* and *Weeds* has shown, television narratives can also reveal and expand the parameters of these discourses, opening them up to criticisms and engendering dialogues that might eventually lead to substantive social change.
1 David Musto credits Richard Nixon, whose presidency began in 1969 and ended in 1974, with beginning the “war on drugs” in which the United States is currently engaged (The American Disease, 248).

2 For more thorough discussions of such phenomena than are possible here, see, for example, Nancy Campbell’s Using Women: Gender, Justice, and Social Policy (New York: Routledge, 2000) and Curtis Marez’s Drug Wars: The Political Economy of Narcotics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). Evidence of Americans’ growing disenchantment with the drug war can be seen in the proliferation of activist organizations like NORML (National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws) and the Drug Reform Coordination Network, a coalition of activists that “calls for an end to drug prohibition … and its replacement with some sensible framework in which drugs can be regulated and controlled” (“About the Drug War Reform Network,” Stopthedrugwar.org [accessed February 26, 2008]). Additionally, some states (most famously California) have loosened their restrictions on marijuana and legalized it for medicinal purposes (“Medical Marijuana,” Drugwarfacts.org, May 24, 2007 [accessed February 26, 2008]). Recently, the U.S. Sentencing Commission voted to “cut the sentence range for first-time offenders” in possession of crack cocaine (“U.S. Sentencing Ranges Lowered,” NPR.org, November 2, 2007 [accessed February 26, 2008]), and Niko Karvounis observes that “other crack-sentencing reforms are also possible,” citing the Drug Sentencing Reform and Cocaine Kingpin Trafficking Act introduced by Senator Joe Biden in 2007, “which would eliminate the longstanding disparity in crack-cocaine and cocaine powder sentences, increase funding for drug treatment, and get rid of the five-year mandatory minimum sentence for crack-cocaine possession” as well as “increase the amount of crack needed to trigger other mandatory minimums” (“Mandatory, Minimum, and Misguided,” Motherjones.com, February 15, 2008 [accessed February 26, 2008]).


4 Amanda D. Lotz, Redesigning Women: Television After the Network Era (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 24. Subsequent references to Lotz derive from Redesigning Women and are noted parenthetically in the text.


6 Ibid.

For a more thorough discussion of the racial disparities that characterize cable (and particularly premium cable) viewing, see Beretta E. Smith-Shomade’s “Narrowcasting in the New World Information Order: A Space for the Audience?” Television and New Media 5, no. 1 (2004): 69 – 81. Additionally, Christine Acham discusses the issue in the conclusion of her Revolution Televised: Television and the Struggle for Blackness (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 170 – 194.


Ibid, 585.


Wible, “Media Advocates,” 50.


Edgerton contends that “the aftereffects of [HBO]’s shows were clearly evident in the programming and branding strategies of not only FX and Fox, but also Showtime …, the USA Network …, TNT …, and even ABC” (“A Brief History of HBO,”13). In other words, having witnessed the success of HBO’s “ground-breaking” programs, other cable and even broadcast networks were forced and afforded the opportunity to, in Edgerton’s words, “consider what they might learn from HBO” (16).


Ibid, 154. Talbot goes on to reprint several notable comments, such as one poster’s assertion that “My favorite character is Michael because his character and me are the same I was raised in the streetz and had to take care of me and my people thats why alot of people call me streetz and
it’s tatted on my hand” and another’s contention that “I like ma nigga Bodie sad 2 see him go he waz a true ridah!” (155).


22 Wible, “Media Advocates,” 50.


24 Kohan quoted in Button, “Weeds Creator Happy.”


26 In addition to *The Wire*’s previously noted bootleg circulation, *Weeds* viewer George Kessel reports that he bought a bootleg copy of the show’s third season for approximately seven US dollars during a trip to Peru in December of 2007, a mere month after the season’s finale aired on Showtime (telephone interview by author, February 27, 2008, Gainesville, FL).


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