

Spring 2024 Syllabus for Spring 2025 Advanced Registration, Subject to Change

URBAN STUDIES/HISTORY 0210: THE WIRE AND THE CITY

Spring, 2024

Mondays, 1:45-4:45 pm

“There are times when expanding our imaginations is what is required. The radical movement has over emphasized the role of activism and underestimated the role of reflection.”

Grace Lee Boggs

Nina Johnson (ninajohnson2010@u.northwestern.edu), and

Michael Nairn (mpnairn@upenn.edu)

Johnson is a sociologist who has written on race, class, and public policy while Nairn is a landscape architect and urban planner who specializes in community development.

When John Waters was filming *Hairspray* in Baltimore in 1988, Pia Zadora reportedly complimented the filmmaker on the extraordinary authenticity of the set. “This isn’t a set Pia,” Waters chuckled. “people *live* here...Of the many storytelling goals pursued by David Simon...a priority was to humanize the underclass...Just beneath the drama, *The Wire* is making the case for the motivations of people trying to get by in a society in which indifferent institutions have more rights than human beings.

Rafael Alvarez

The Wire is one of the course’s core “texts.” The HBO series has been called a “visual novel” by David Simon, its co-producer, and according to *Slate*, it is “the best TV show ever broadcast in America.” Even though *The Wire* was conceived in the late 1990s and its five seasons aired between 2002 and 2008, much of its content is still crucially relevant. At its core, *The Wire* explores the lives of young Black males in Baltimore, the institution of policing, and the uneasy and often unjust intersection between the two groups.

Warning: *The Wire* contains scenes of graphic violence, sexual behavior, and profanity, so be forewarned. Some scenes are difficult to watch.

Introduction

Cities present real, multifaceted, and complex challenges. We have created these problems; they are neither inherent nor natural. The problems are urgent, concerning life and death, and the stakes are high. There are social, economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions to them. There are no simple solutions. Those offered do not address the root causes because they would disrupt the existing social order. Some people are benefiting from the status quo while others are condemned to poverty and violence. In such light, our current predicament is largely a question of values.

The Wire shows West Baltimore and the resourcefulness as well as the frustration and exhaustion of its residents who have endured systematic neglect, segregation, disinvestment, violence, and racism. Denied participation in the traditional economy, the main characters in *The Wire* have pursued the American dream through the underground economy, harnessing basic capitalism and employing the power of the marketplace to further their businesses and achieve that dream. It also shows the exploitation of workers. They and the community in which they are embedded pay a steep price that include poor health outcomes, addiction, violence, loss, grief, and trauma.

The Wire is set in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a time in which the national War on Drugs expanded and became increasingly politicized, policing was increasingly militarized, and the criminal justice system greatly expanded while simultaneously industrial and manufacturing jobs were moved overseas to cheaper labor markets, population loss in cities increased exponentially decreasing the ability of cities to provide services and social safety nets were slashed. *The Wire* convincingly shows the failure of the War on Drugs and the impact of the carceral system on residents of West Baltimore. It does not tackle mass incarceration but instead, on policing and the community trauma experienced by residents, particularly young boys.

Using *The Wire* as a narrative text, URBS 0210 examines not only the aforementioned issues but also some of the movements that have arisen to dismantle these systems. The course examines what justice and public safety mean to disenfranchised communities and efforts to enact them. It also examines such controversial topics as abolition which is popularly and erroneously thought of as only eliminating police while continuing the status quo in every other aspect. Abolition instead is a movement focusing on the eradication of the conditions that produce violence and despair and necessitate policing as it exists today and creating communities in which collective care and social provision are the norm. All people want to live in safe, humane, and flourishing communities where they can exercise their basic human rights and idealized American values. Our question for you, is how do we get there?

TEXTS:

The Wire is available to stream on HBO MAX and for sale on Amazon. Articles and other resources will be available on Canvas (ER). The texts below are required. All are available online from the Penn Libraries.

- Desmond, Matthew, *Poverty, By America*, 2023. ((Currently, it is available online through Penn Libraries but as a single use license meaning only one person can read it at a time. You may wish to purchase it.)
- Peniel Joseph, *The Third Reconstruction: America's Struggle for Racial Justice in the Twenty-First Century*, 2022 (Currently, it is available online through Penn Libraries but as a single use license meaning only one person can read it at a time. You may wish to purchase it.)

- Ellen, Ingrid and Justin Steil eds., *Selections from The Dream Revisited: Contemporary Debates about Housing, Segregation, and Opportunity in the Twenty-first Century*, 2019, available to read or download from Penn Libraries.
- Joycelyn Simonson, *Radical Acts of Justice*, 2023. Available from Penn Libraries for reading or download
- Travis, Jeremy and Bruce Western eds., *Parsimony and Other Radical Ideas About Justice*, 2023, Available from Penn Libraries for reading or download

RESOURCE:

Penn Libraries Course Guide

<https://guides.library.upenn.edu/baltimore>

SCHEDULE:

MODULE ONE -- Three Eras of Reconstruction January 22: Welcome and Introduction

In Class

- Introductions
- How to read critically
- How to have difficult conversations
- Framing the course:
 - Cities: identifying challenges, defining the problem(s) and solutions, and their evaluation
 - Community trauma
 - Building community assets
 - Reimagining urban justice and the right to the city
 - Housing and community segregation as a violation of Universal Human Rights
 - Poverty by design
 - Violence in the city
 - Restorative justice and a Healing-Centered Paradigm
- Class exercise
 - The discussion question with which we will begin the course is: *What does segregation look like where you are from?*
- How to watch *The Wire*
 - Season 1, episode 1 (in class)

Readings (To be completed before class)

- Alec MacGillis, What Philadelphia Reveals About America's Homicide Surge, https://www.propublica.org/article/philadelphia-homicide-surge?utm_source=sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=majorinvestigations&utm_content=feature

- James Baldwin, "Letter From a Region in My Mind," *New Yorker*, 1962 (the main essay in Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, 1963).

January 28: Introductory Statement due

What is your understanding and experience of the contemporary predicament in our cities and Philadelphia or Baltimore in particular? What is your current understanding of our current third era of reconstruction and abolition?

January 29: Poverty by Design

Asynchronous

- Season 1, episodes 2-6 Reading:
- Desmond, Matthew, *Poverty by America*
- Pew Charitable Trusts, "State of the City, 2023,"

February 5: The Three Eras of Reconstruction

Asynchronous

- Season 1, episodes 7-10
Reading:
- Peniel Joseph, *The Third Reconstruction*

February 12: The First Reconstruction and the 13th Amendment

Asynchronous

- Season 1, episodes 10-13 Reading:
- Eric Foner, "Introduction and the 13th Amendment", *The Second Founding*, 2019, pp. 154.
- W.E.B. DuBois, "The Propaganda of History," *Black Reconstruction in America*, 1933, pp 711-730.
- Amendments 13-15 to the US Constitution

In Class:

- Duvernay, Ava, *Thirteenth*

February 16: Synthetic Essay 1 Due: *The Three Eras of Reconstruction*

Using Joseph's analysis and his reflections on his lived experience as a blueprint, how have you lived through the reconstructions? How have they impacted you, your hometown, how have they shaped your life chances and outcomes?

Or

Using Joseph's historical analysis as a blueprint and the current state of things as a set of indicators, what do you anticipate will be the next phase of reconstruction?

Module 2: Discrimination and Community Segregation

February 19 and February 26: The Enduring Legacy of Community Discrimination and Segregation Asynchronous:

- Season 3, episodes 1-3 Reading:
- Ellen, Ingrid and Justin Steil eds., Selections from *The Dream Revisited: Contemporary Debates about Housing, Segregation, and Opportunity in the Twenty-first Century*, (Introduction, Pattillo, Ifill, Charles et al.)
- David Hureau, Seeing Guns to See Urban Violence: Racial Inequality & Neighborhood Context
- <https://thehill.com/opinion/criminal-justice/402367-to-reduce-urban-violence-letsconsider-the-real-causes-not-guns> (an alternative viewpoint from the right)
- The Philadelphia Controller's Office, "Mapping Philadelphia's Gun Violence Crisis"
- Nahra, Alia, and Bruce Western, *Vital City*, https://www.vitalcitynyc.org/vital_signs/poverty-disadvantage-and-violence-an-ironlink

March 11: Gentrification, Speculation, Private Equity

Asynchronous

- Season 3, episodes 4-7 Reading:
- Urban Institute, Structural Racism Explainer Collection <https://www.urban.org/racialequity-analytics-lab/structural-racism-explainer-collection/causes-and-consequencesseparate-and-unequal-neighborhoods>
- Derek Hyra, et al. "Contextualizing Gentrification Chaos: The Rise of the Fifth Wave"
- Ananya Roy, Unhousing the Poor: Interlocking Regimes of Racialized Policing
- https://ssir.org/articles/entry/centering_racial_justice_in_the_fight_for_housing_justice#
- Elora Lee Raymond, Ben Miller, Michaela McKinney and Jonathan Braun, "Gentrifying Atlanta: Investor Purchases of Rental Housing, Evictions, and the Displacement of Black Residents," January 2021, *Housing Policy Debate*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2021.1887318>
- Hwang, Jackelyn and Tyler W. McDaniel, "Racialized Reshuffling: Urban Change and the Persistence of Segregation in the Twenty-First Century, *Annual Review of Sociology*. 2018.
- NYT article What happens when private equity becomes your landlord

In Class

- Washington Post, "Investors bought a record share of homes in 2021. See where.:"

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/interactive/2022/housing-marketinvestors/>

March 15: Synthetic Essay Two: Community Discrimination and Segregation

Many argue that desegregation is a failed project, citing coordinated patterns of resistance between and among various public and private stakeholders and institutions. Is desegregation necessary? Is it possible to pursue reinvestment in neighborhoods to stave off gentrification absent the goal of desegregation?

MODULE THREE: REIMAGINING CITIES – BUILDING SAFE, JUST, SHARED, AND FLOURISHING URBAN COMMUNITIES

March 18, 25, and April 1: Towards the Third Reconstruction: Percolating Social Movements in Public Safety and the Justice Systems Transformation Asynchronous:

- Season 3, episodes 8-10
- Season 3, episodes 11-12
- Season 4: episodes 1-2 Reading:
- Joycelyn Simonson, *Radical Acts of Justice*
- Travis, Jeremy and Bruce Western, Selections from *Parsimony and Other Radical Ideas About Justice*,
 - Travis and Western, “Introduction: Reimagining Justice,”
 - Atkinson and Travis, “Parsimony,”
 - Riser, “A Call for New Criminal Justice Values,”
- Yale Justice Collaboratory, Reimagining Public Safety
- Harvey, David, “The Right to the City,”
- Dereka Purnell, *Becoming Abolitionists*; Selections pp. 129-201
- I. Bennett Capers Afrofuturism, Critical Race Theory, and Policing in The Year 2044, *New York University Law Review*, 2020
- Roy, Ananya, “Housing Justice,” *Housing Justice in Unequal Cities*
- Monica Bell, “Anti-Segregation Policing,”

April 8: Youth

Asynchronous

- Season 4, episodes 3-6 Reading
- Monique Morris, Push Out, “Introduction, and chapters 1-3, pp. 1-135.
- Inquirer article, <https://www.inquirer.com/newsletters/morning/forever-youngchildren-lost-to-gun-violence-philadelphia-shootings-2023-20240117.html>
- Trejos-Castillo, Elizabeth, Evangeline Lopoo, and Anamika Dwivedi, “Humanizing Justice: Supporting Positive Development in Criminalized Youth,” *Parsimony and Other Radical Ideas About Justice*
- Schiraldi, Vincent, “Least Restrictive Environment: The Case for Closing Youth Prisons,” *Parsimony and Other Radical Ideas About Justice*

April 15: Towards Justice and Healing

Asynchronous

- Season 4, episodes 6-9 Reading:
- Western, Bruce, "Slash Poverty and the Rest Will Get Easier," *Vital City*, April 4, 2023. <https://www.vitalcitynyc.org/articles/slash-poverty-and-the-rest-will-get-easier>
- de la Torre, Bea, "Centering Racial Justice in the Fight for Housing Justice," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/centering_racial_justice_in_the_fight_for_housing_justice#
- Shawn Ginwright, "Shifting from Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement,"
- <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/making-communities-safe-without-the-police/>
- Tapia, Nneka Jones, "Holistic Safety at the Center of Incarceration," *Parsimony and Other Radical Ideas About Justice*.

April 22, and 29: Just, Safe, Flourishing Communities

Asynchronous

- Season 4, episodes 10-13.
- *We Own the City*, episodes 1-3
- *We Own The City*, episodes 3-6

Class:

- Voices of reentry and creating safe communities for all. Reading:
- *Parsimony and Other Radical Ideas About Justice*
 - Hawks, Laura, Evangeline Lopoo, Lisa Puglisi, and Emily Wang, "Decarceration Through Investment: Reducing Reliance on Prisons and Jails," *Parsimony and Other Radical Ideas About Justice*
 - Glazer and Sharkey: "Weaving the Social Fabric: A New Model for Public Safety and Vital Neighborhoods," *Parsimony and Other Radical Ideas About Justice*
 - Alexander, Amanda and Danielle Sered, "What Makes a City Safe? Strategies That Don't Rely on Police or Prisons," *Parsimony and Other Radical Ideas About Justice*
- Abolitionist Law Center Saleem Holbrook.
- [https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/making-communities-safe-](https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/making-communities-safe-without-the-police/)

[without-the-police/](https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/making-communities-safe-without-the-police/)

One who attempts to improve existing systems of justice [universities] is very likely to become preoccupied with removing current deficiencies. Unfortunately, getting rid of what one does not want does not necessarily yield what one does want. This is apparent to those who get rid of television programs they do not want by changing channels. They have a high probability of getting programs

they want even less. Therefore, effective design of a new justice system [university] must be directed at getting what one wants, not at getting rid of what one does not want.

Russell L. Ackoff

Premier among the consequences [of human existence] is the capacity to imagine possible futures, and to plan and choose among them. How wisely we use this uniquely human ability depends on the accuracy of our selfunderstanding. The question of greatest relevant interest is how and why we are the way we are, and from that, the meaning of our many competing visions of the future.

E.O. Wilson, *The Meaning of Human Existence*, p. 14

If we haven't specified where we want to go, it is hard to set our compass, to muster enthusiasm, or to measure progress. But vision is not only missing almost entirely from policy discussions; it is missing from our culture. We talk easily and endlessly about our frustrations, doubts, and complaints, but we speak only rarely, and sometimes with embarrassment, about our dreams and values.

Donella Meadows

May 7: Final Paper Due

Synthetic Essay 3: Making and Remaking the City

What is your vision for a just city? Who is the city for? Who is involved in the planning? How might you carry it out in ways that are ethical and demonstrate “right relationships” between all residents and the environment?

Or

How do you explain the 20% drop in homicides and reduction in violence in the last year in Philadelphia? How would you extend this reduction? How would you create just, safe, and flourishing communities in this city?

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Class participation/discussion leading/questions (25%).

Please note that this class is a seminar; its success depends on students' willingness to come to class having completed the reading, watched the appropriate episodes, thought about questions for discussion, and being prepared to participate in class. We ask that you turn off all electronic devices, including laptops, while you are in class.

a. **General Requirements:**

- i. Students are expected to participate in every class.
- ii. We ask students to submit questions about the reading for discussion five times during the semester. These are due by 8 p.m. the night before class. Post to the discussion board.
- iii. More than three (3) unexcused absences is grounds for failure.

b. **Guidelines for Discussion Leadership**

- a. Each student will select one class session during which they will lead an **INTEGRATED** discussion with one or two other students. Group members will meet to prepare material and plan discussion before the assigned class session. In addition to discussing the assigned readings, group members should choose at least one supplemental resource on the internet to share with the rest of the class. The resource should somehow relate to the week's theme. It might be a recent news item, a blog posting, an organization's website, a brief video, etc. It should connect to content that illustrates, illuminates, or in some other way expands on the readings. For your assigned session your group will be responsible for distributing the outside resource to the class, creating a handout, and for leading an in-class discussion of 60 min.
- b. Please make note of the date you will be leading class discussion *and* your group members and email addresses so that you can meet prior to class to work on the questions and plan how you would like to use class time. NOTE: Plan ahead! And allow sufficient time for everyone to be able to find a suitable meeting time!
- c. LEAD THE DISCUSSION: THIS IS NOT A POWERPOINT PRESENTATION WITH A QUESTION
 - i. Learn to ask good, penetrating, thought-provoking, and open-ended questions about the readings and the subject at hand to stimulate discussion.
 - ii. Additional sources and materials are intended to enrich the discussion.
- d. Elements of the Group Presentation
 - i. Outline -- For your class session, your group should create an outline of the texts that you will use to synthesize the readings and highlight important points for discussion. Possible strategies for writing your outline include (a) identifying and clarifying each author's main argument (b) reflecting on themes that cut across readings, (c) examining the assumptions and evidence that different authors use, and/or (d) relating the week's readings to other material from the course.
 - ii. In addition to the textual analysis, the outline should also include the following:

1. A *list* of key concepts, themes or points you identify that cross-cut the readings and films (list and define these. You do not need to identify all main points—but what you determine to be the most important ones—the key concepts that will be the focus of the discussion you will lead in class.)
 2. *Key passages*: Transcribe three to five passages from the readings and explain how they relate to the main points or why they stand out as significant.
 3. *Discussion questions*: List 3-4 thought-provoking questions for discussion in class.
 4. *Link*: Post to the course discussion board, a link to a resource you find on the internet that illustrates or somehow relates closely to the session's theme and add a discussion of why you find it significant/interesting in relation to the readings and films. This can be a short video on YouTube, a website, a news article, a blog, etc.
 5. (optional) Add reflections, reactions, anecdotes, or other related commentary related to the readings that your group would like to share with the class.
- e. Leading in class— Finally, given your additional advance preparation and group discussion you will be expected to lead 60-65 minutes of the class session.
- i. Presenting your outside source—Your group should prepare a VERY BRIEF presentation (non Power Point)to share the external resource you have found and posted to the Discussion Board. This presentation should in some way highlight connections that you see to issues of focus in the readings.
 - ii. Leading discussion—You should have a flexible plan for guiding our discussion through the key elements of the week's readings. Also, be prepared to share your insights about the answers to these questions. Think of creative ways to get discussion going. Do you want students to first discuss in pairs or small groups and then report back? Do you want everyone to address the same question? Do you want to organize a debate? It's a good idea to come prepared with at least four topics to address or questions to pose during the class. Make sure that your questions or topics for discussion are tied closely to the readings and highlight some of what you consider to be key themes or issues. Below are some ideas to help you and your group generate good discussion themes:
 1. Use the reading process and central questions of the course as a guide.
 2. Ask questions that are based on specific portions of assigned readings. These might be questions that ask students to

discuss their reactions to these passages or to take a position on a controversial topic.

3. Ask analytical questions (usually starting with “why,” “how”)
4. Challenge other students to make connections to previous readings. Be prepared to model with an example of connections you find to be interesting.
5. Share your own personal reactions to one of the readings and ask students to respond.
6. Once you have posed a question to the class, if there is no immediate response, give it some time . . . wait for students to gather their thoughts and respond. If it seems particularly difficult to generate discussion, do not abandon your question and move to the next—take a different angle: for instance, you might allow students to reflect in silence and write a brief response on paper, then ask students to share their ideas.
7. BE CREATIVE!-- Most of all, think creatively about how to engage all the class participants in a discussion and in a process that will lead to greater understanding of key ideas.
8. A written reflection of the week’s reading that follows the steps of our reading guide is due the Friday **before** you lead discussion.
9. PLEASE NOTE: These are the basic responsibilities for groups leading class on a given day. Each class session will be different. This is why each group must meet in advance to plan for the class.

f. Summary essay

- i. Write a summary of your presentation that is no longer than 1,500 words.
- ii. The essay is due the night before your presentation.

2. Introductory Statement

- Please write a CONCISE statement no longer than 500 words
 - Due: January 28

3. Synthetic papers (60%). We require that you write a synthetic essay no longer than 1500 words each at the end of each module.

- The Three Eras of Reconstruction ▪ Due February 16
- Desegregation
 - Due: March 15
- Making and Unmaking the City
 - Due May 7

Course Policies • Academic Integrity

Please note that we expect that you will adhere to the strictest standards of academic integrity in all of your work. Students may work together on certain projects, but all written work must be completed individually. Any student who is found to have violated the university's code will fail the class. If you need help in learning how to cite materials, the library has a helpful website at <http://gethelp.library.upenn.edu/PORT/documentation/>

• Late Work

Please do your best to plan ahead and ask for an extension on any paper well in advance if you need one. We are very accommodating about extensions, and do not mark grades down for late work if you ask for an extension before the due date (or if you have a last-minute personal emergency, health or otherwise). If you do not ask for an extension before the due date (or have a last-minute emergency), late work will be marked down one full grade (e.g., A to B).

Absences

Attendance is mandatory but we understand life happens. You are permitted two (2) unexcused absences during the semester after which your grade will be affected. Please do not email us with reasons or excuses. We reserve the right to fail any person who misses more than four (4) classes.

- **Sector Four, Humanities and Social Science, College Curriculum Requirement** URBS 0210/HIST0810 fulfills Sector Four, the Humanities and Social Science requirement for the College Curriculum. In this course, we integrate narrative text, for example *The Wire* and direct experience through authors such as James Baldwin in "Letters from a Region in My Mind", with data and evidence from the social sciences to understand processes, structures, events, and experience in real urban communities.