

# NARRATIVES OF MIAMI IN DEXTER AND BURN NOTICE

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## ABSTRACT

In popular discourse around television, a series' relationship with place is often marked through the suggestion its setting is "like a character in the show", but this article argues against adopting this as a framework for analyzing television's relationship with space and place. It articulates the relationship between this discourse of "spatial capital" and hierarchies of cultural capital within the television

industry, limiting the types of series that are deemed to warrant closer investigation regarding issues of space and place and lacking nuanced engagement with place's relationship with television narrative in particular. After breaking down the logic under which these discourses function through an investigation of AMC's *Breaking Bad*, this article offers a more rigorous framework for examining how television drama narratives engage with spatial capital in an age of narrative hybridity. Through a close analysis of depictions of the city of Miami, the article considers how two specific narrative strategies—place as narrative backdrop and place as narrative engine—manifest across both serial and procedural programming, disconnecting spatial capital from its exclusive association with "quality television" and building a model for analyzing how place and narrative intersect in the contemporary moment.

## INTRODUCTION

Writing for *The New Yorker*, Rachel Syme characterizes AMC drama series *Breaking Bad* (2007–2013) as “a show organically tied to its shooting location”, and she was not the only one to think so (2013). In a travel article focused on the series’ setting in *The New York Times*, series creator Vince Gilligan describes Albuquerque as “a character in the series” (Brennan 2011), a description reiterated by Bryan Cranston in an interview with Albuquerque alt-weekly *Alibi* where he suggests the city has “become an important character to our show. The topography. Really the blue skies, and the billowy clouds, and the red mountains, and the Sandias, the valleys, the vastness of the desert, the culture of the people” (Adams 2011). The “characterization” of Albuquerque also emerges in a *Forbes* interview with series cinematographer Michael Slovis, whose evocative images of that topography have become iconic of the series (St. John 2013). *The Sante Fe Reporter*, writing about the series’ finale, makes the distinction as explicit as possible: “while many TV shows use a city as a setting, none have used it like a character like *Breaking Bad* did” (Reichbach 2013).

The notion of “city as character” is a specific manifestation of “spatial capital”—defined as the value attached to space and place through a series’ production, distribution, and reception—evident in popular discourse and program marketing. It is not a new discourse: in the study of film, the city of Los Angeles has often been understood as a character, whether in Thom Anderson’s documentary *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003) or in Alain Silver and James Ursini’s book *L.A. Noir: The City as Character* (2005). In the context of television, however, the idea of the city as character has become increasingly common as a form of legitimation. Consider, for example, *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–08) and *Treme* (HBO, 2010–13). In popular discourse around these shows – whether articulated by series creator David Simon, actors in the two dramas, or journalists (see Mettler 2014, Haley 2013) – Baltimore and New Orleans are, respectively, referenced as anchors for the authenticity of both series. In addition to being lauded for their sense of place, these series are also central to what has been termed a “golden age of television”, where complex serialized dramas have redefined journalistic definitions of television quality (see Martin 2013, Sepinwall 2013), and where the sense of place in newer series like FX’s *Fargo* (2014–) have been lauded in similar terms (Ley 2015).

This article interrogates the intersection of these discourses, exploring how the negotiation of spatial capital is inherently linked to the negotiation of cultural capital more broadly in

the context of dramatic television programming. Through a close exploration of discourses of “place as character”, I identify how claims to spatial capital function as legible claims to authenticity, and how the emergence of these discourses is more dependent on hierarchies of cultural capital functioning within the television industry than on the textual representation of place within a given program’s narrative. Pushing past the notion of place as “character”, this article links spatial capital to television narrative, which is crucial both in delineating between different forms of television drama—serial, procedural, and hybrids thereof—and in terms of distinguishing the “television city” from the “cinematic city”, where considerably more research and analysis has taken place. By introducing two alternative approaches to analyzing place in television narratives—place as narrative engine and place as narrative backdrop—the article disconnects spatial capital from its exclusive characterization alongside “quality television” and seriality in contemporary discourse, as demonstrated through a close analysis of place and narrative in two Miami-set drama series, *Dexter* (2006–2013) and *Burn Notice* (2007–2013). The result is an adaptable framework that better explores the complexities of spatial capital in contemporary television, moving away from “character” toward a granular consideration of how space and place function distinctly within the medium.

## 1. SEARCHING FOR THE “TELEVISION CITY”

In both collections and monographs, the politics of the cinematic city have been explored in great detail (see Donald 1999, Clarke 1999, Brunsdon 2007). However, there has been significantly less research into the televisual city. In *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image* (2011), for example, John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel include only a single essay on non-fiction television, suggesting that the relationship between location and the moving image remains predominantly seen through the lens of film. This hierarchy emerges in a 1999 conversation between Karen Lury and Doreen Massey in *Screen*, where Lury argues that “television is, of course, a medium that is determined by different commercial and public interests, and its ideological function is often to try and erase or obscure real multiplicity and difference” (234).

This dismissal of television’s ideological complexity was already somewhat short-sighted at the time, but in the years since, the television ecosystem has dramatically expanded,

and with it the complexity of spatial representations. Lury's discussion with Massey took place immediately prior to what has been discursively constructed as the modern "golden age of television", where series like *The Sopranos* (2000-2007) set new baselines for hour-long dramas. In *The Essential Sopranos Reader*, William C. Siska goes as far as to posit *The Sopranos* as "Art Cinema", an effort to legitimate the text by elevating it beyond its status as television (2011). However, while Siska and others are logically pushing against the delegitimation of television demonstrated by Lury's claim, these efforts do not erase a sense of hierarchy. In *Legitimizing Television*, Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine deconstruct these discourses, accurately assessing the legitimation of television as an act that problematically elevates some television over other television, ascribing value in uneven and often problematic ways that seek to claim that television as a medium does not itself have claim to legitimacy (2011). Rather, it is these individual programs—compared to cinema or literature—that transcend the medium, leaving the generalized notion of television's inferiority—whether in reference to a historical past or a contemporary margin—intact.

This culture of legitimation is a double-edged sword as it pertains to the study of television's relationship with place, particularly as it pertains to the hour-long drama. Although what Jason Mittell identifies as "complex television" includes a wide range of genres, it is most commonly associated with the contemporary hour-long television serial, of which *The Sopranos* is considered a touchstone (2015). These are also the texts that Newman and Levine place at the center of discourses of quality television, a space in which the type of analysis typically reserved for film is considered more viable. As a result, complex, serialised series like HBO's *The Wire* and *Treme*—both co-created by David Simon, and set in Baltimore and New Orleans respectively—have been embraced as ideologically rich engagements with their respective cities. The role of place in *Treme*, in particular, was the subject of a special issue of *Television and New Media* edited by Vicki Mayer in 2011, and the topic of a number of papers on *Treme* panels at the 2011 Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference in New Orleans. Such work has crucially extended our consideration of the "cinematic city" beyond the bounds of film, engaging with televisual representation of location in substantive ways.

However, the intense focus on these particular texts risks creating the impression that spatial capital is not manifest within texts that lack the same claims to legitimation. There has not been the same level of analysis of Fox's 2007 dra-

ma *K-ville*, which similarly investigated post-Katrina New Orleans—although the series' short one-season run was likely a contributing factor, the lack of prestige associated with the program and its network compared to Simon and HBO is a barrier to its consideration in these terms. Although analysis of shows like *The Wire* and *Treme* represent crucial and productive work, it remains analysis that is too often reduced to a narrow set of case studies of series that have concurrent claims to cultural capital—often manifesting as "place as character"—to support analysis of spatial capital. While spatial capital exists as a spectrum, its adoption as an articulation of quality television has reinforced cultural hierarchies prominent in contemporary television culture, and has in unproductive ways limited the range of series—and the types of narratives—that are considered through the lens of space and place.

## 2. THE LIMITS OF "PLACE AS CHARACTER"

Discursively, series like *Breaking Bad*, *Treme*, and *The Wire* are commonly legitimated relative to space and place through the discourse of "place as character," which Ken Fox frames relative to narrative. Defining the roles of place in film in the *Critical Dictionary of Film and Television Theory*, Fox begins with a clear dichotomy: while "place as a backdrop" is identified as "the least sophisticated function", in which place "invest[s] a scene or an action with aesthetic or emotional significance", "place as character" offers scenarios where "the location becomes vital in the way the film's narrative develops" (2001: 413). Citing examples such as Monument Valley in the work of John Ford, or New York in *On the Town* (1949), Fox argues that in these cases place is "more than just a backdrop: it defines the attitudes and actions of the characters", marking a clear link between place and narrative within this analytical framework (413).

"Place as Character" has become a fairly common framework for analyzing film, as evidenced in the aforementioned *Los Angeles Plays Itself* where "Los Angeles as Character" serves as one of the discrete sections of the visual essay, or in considering specific genres like science fiction (Strick 1984); the framework also has earlier origins in literature (Fowler 2003). However, the way that the idea of "place as character" is deployed in regards to television within popular discourse is uneven, lacking the type of definitional clarity Fox strives for. Actress Blake Lively used the simile in order to capture how she feels about shooting The CW's *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012) on

location in New York, describing it to *The Independent* as “a magical place” that “just makes me warm and fuzzy” (2008). In an interview for her Canadian single-camera “black comedy” series *Sensitive Skin* (2014-), actress Kim Cattrall uses her own intertextuality to compare Toronto’s role as a character in the series to New York City’s role in *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), noting the show’s choice to focus on Toronto specifically—including Director Don McKeller “show[ing] the crew neighborhoods they didn’t know existed”—rather than setting the show in “Nameless City, North America” (Jancewicz 2014). In some cases, the lines between Fox’s categories are blurred. In an interview with *The Mirror* for the Belfast-set BBC/Netflix series *The Fall* (2013-), actor Jamie Dornan acknowledges “There’s no definitive need for it to be set in Belfast, but it’s a great backdrop. Belfast is like a character in the show” (2014).

These all offer examples where the discourse of “place as character” is consciously deployed by those within the television industry as a legitimating gesture, a claim to spatial capital that rarely functions in direct relationship to the text. Rather than focusing on the relationship between place and narrative, the discourse of “place as character” most commonly serves as an extradiegetic framing of a series’ authenticity. *Breaking Bad* embodies the type of series that has been associated with place as character, and demonstrates its ties less to narrative and more to circumstances of production and the way that production is framed within popular discourse.

“Place as character” is predominantly applied to series which actually film in the location where they are set—while there are exceptions to this in the case of period series like *Boardwalk Empire* (2010–2014), series like *Breaking Bad* can more easily claim access to spatial capital when they are shooting in Albuquerque, rather than doubling another city for that location. Connected to this, the discourse is also more common for series which actively set scenes within a given landscape, which *Breaking Bad* did often throughout its run. New Mexico-based location manager Rebecca Puck Stair notes, for instance, that “when landscape is in the shot, it’s usually almost a character”, an acknowledgment that the logistics—and cost—of shooting a given scene on location are usually only undertaken if the presence of the landscape serves a specific purpose (Personal Interview).<sup>1</sup>

While “place as character” can at times emerge organically within critical reviews of a given series, it is most common with shows where place becomes a signifier within interviews,

promotional materials, and other key paratexts. In advance of their premieres, both Showtime’s *The Affair* (2014–) and HBO’s *True Detective* (2014–) released behind-the-scenes videos where actors discussed the importance of place in the story through the framework of “character,” while the discourse proliferated with *Breaking Bad* in part because of how consistently it was discussed by the creative team in interviews like those referenced above. It was also central to the “Ozymandias” video released during its final season, in which Bryan Cranston’s reading of the Percy Bysshe Shelley poem is combined with a collection of time-lapse establishing images of the New Mexico landscape used throughout the series.

These three guiding principles—location filming, scenes set in the landscape, spatial paratexts—that group together texts associated with the discourse of place as character provide easy access to forms of spatial capital in television industry discourse. *Breaking Bad*’s surge in mainstream attention and ratings in its final season additionally amplified the visibility of media tourism to Albuquerque, where the intense online appetite for coverage of the series resulted in numerous unofficial paratexts where websites such as *The A.V. Club* and *The Etc.* visited locations like Walter White’s house and the car wash where he laundered his drug money (Adams 2013). It has also become a huge marketing boom for the city of Albuquerque, which on its website boasts “the city...stars as a character in [*Breaking Bad*] with film locations throughout the metro area”, including testimonials from Gilligan and the series’ cast. Albuquerque even became a “recurring character” for the series, remaining central to discourse surrounding spin-off prequel *Better Call Saul*, which debuted in February 2015.

However, although Albuquerque has become a huge part of the discourse around *Breaking Bad*, the expansiveness of this discourse has obscured that it was not originally a creative choice, but rather the result of financial considerations. Gilligan originally set his story of a teacher-turned-meth cook in Riverside, California, but before shooting the pilot, production company Sony Pictures Television and AMC made it clear that the economics would not work in southern California. In a roundtable interview with Charlie Rose in the buildup to the series finale in 2013, Gilligan spoke of his reaction to the mandated move to New Mexico to take advantage of its production incentives:

They said “What’s the big deal, you put new license plates on that say California instead of New Mexico, it’ll be fine.” And I’m glad they came to us

1 Puck Stair raised this characterization without being asked about it directly.

with this idea, but I'm so glad I said "no, let's make it Albuquerque." Because the sad truth of it is, unfortunately, you can't swing a dead cat in this country without hitting a meth lab somewhere or other... It could be California, it could be—no one state has the lock on it, unfortunately.

The fact that *Breaking Bad* was not originally set in Albuquerque does not mean its setting is unimportant: through the series' conscious engagement with the landscape, the setting was used in ways that invite deeper consideration. However, that the series' narrative was conceived in a different location speaks to the way "place as character" lacks a clear connection to narrative, where Albuquerque plays a less significant role compared to its prominence as a symbolic and thematic anchor to the series' milieu. While series like *The Wire* and *Treme* were conceived as stories about specific cities and their citizens, *Breaking Bad* is a story that could have been set anywhere, which creates a distinction of spatial capital that the broad application of "place as character" flattens.

Although "place as character" has become shorthand to signify the importance of place within a given text, the discourse has lost a clear relationship to texts themselves through its ties to broader discourses of cultural capital, and to specific negotiations of spatial capital tied to the location of production. Accordingly, the next section introduces two alternative approaches to thinking about place's relationship with narrative—place as narrative backdrop and place as narrative engine—that push beyond "place as character" to consider the intersection of place and contemporary television storytelling.

### 3. PLACE AS NARRATIVE BACKDROP

In returning to Fox's basic categories for the function of place, understanding place as a backdrop remains valuable. However, in considering television's seriality as compared with film, we can understand place functioning as a narrative backdrop, with the long-term evolution of the series' plot and its characters developing a relationship with spatial capital over the course of a show's run. Whereas Fox notes that films like *Thelma and Louise* (1991) "[draw] attention to these places as sites of mythical imaginings, where other screen stories have been played out", within television those mythic imaginings can become intratextual rather than intertextual (413). Although series in which place functions as a narrative backdrop may remain engaged with place in limited ways, the long-form nature of

television narratives creates a distinct engagement that draws out the value of spatial capital in conjunction with the development of stories and characters in an ongoing series.

In the case of a series like *Breaking Bad*, place is consistently utilized as a backdrop to heighten thematic impact or draw out character distinctions as the narrative unfolds. There is a conscious engagement with the landscape in the series. In the pilot episode, for example, the bank where Walt withdraws the money to pay for the R.V. is consciously isolated, surrounded by desert and mountains. Placing Walt's scene with Jesse within the landscape as opposed to a crowded urban environment calls attention to the characters' efforts to be as discreet as possible, while also previewing their journey into the desert to complete the cook in question. That iconic cook location in the Navajo reservation of To'hajiilee becomes crucial again at the end of the series, when Walt buries his drug money in the same location, and ends up in the middle of a shootout trying to ensure its safety. In one of the series' most powerful engagements with spatial capital, the opening scene of "Ozymandias" calls attention to this serialized use of location: beginning with a "flashback" to previously unseen moments from the events of the pilot, that scene ends with Walt in the foreground, and Jesse and the RV in the background, fading away (5.14). Then, following the series' opening title sequence, we see the same location, this time with the action from the previous episode—two vehicles, Aryan gunmen, Walt, his DEA agent brother-in-law Hank, and Jesse—gradually fading in, the location the link between the past and present (Figures 1 and 2).

However, although To'hajiilee is central to the series' narrative, its sense of spatial capital is defined purely through its aesthetic and symbolic value to the story. It is a landscape that is given meaning through the storylines that unfold within it, but the location itself holds no agency over that story—in this case specifically, the Navajo Nation plays no significant role in the series' narrative, with the series choosing not to engage with the cultural or political dimensions of those who own and govern the land in question. Although the episode is named after the reservation, and early speculation from *Vulture's* Margaret Lyons—based on episodes of *The X-Files* (1993-2002), which Vince Gilligan wrote for, that took place on Navajo reservations—hoped that the episodes would explore the specifics of Navajo culture (2013), the series went no further in investing the series with the place-identity of the lands its characters occupied in these pivotal scenes.

While *Breaking Bad* is undoubtedly leveraging spatial capital in these scenes, tied to its use of Albuquerque filming lo-



FIGURES 1 AND 2. TWO SCREENSHOTS FROM “TO’HAJIILEE”, THE EPISODE 05.14 OF *BREAKING BAD*. FIGURE 1 DISPLAYS WALT AND JESSE, RECREATING A SCENE FROM THE SERIES’ PILOT. THEIR IMAGES FADE OUT LEADING INTO THE OPENING TITLE SEQUENCE, AFTER WHICH THE VEHICLES IN FIGURE 2 REEMERGES TO EMPHASIZE THE SERIALITY OF THIS PARTICULAR NARRATIVE BACKDROP.

cations distinct from shows filmed in other parts of the country, their investment with place is limited by their selective engagement with spatial capital. The series took full advantage of Albuquerque and the surrounding area to serve as an evocative and distinct backdrop for the series’ narrative, but the resulting representations of place show limited engagement with the complexities of spatial capital, even if they are memorable in relation to the series’ ongoing storytelling.

#### 4. PLACE AS NARRATIVE ENGINE

Every television series has a narrative engine, which is distinct from the engines that drive cinematic storytelling. In order to generate enough storylines to support an ongoing television series, a show must start with a set of themes, situations, or character relationships that sustain the series moving forward, through what Michael Newman characterizes as the “beats and arcs” of TV narrative (2006). Whether considering a high school drama or a workplace sitcom, all shows rely on one or more engines to generate these beats and arcs, maintaining storytelling momentum through an entire season. In the context of contemporary drama, meanwhile, shows tend to rely on multiple engines, able to generate storylines that can function both episodically and serially over the course of a season or series.

Some engines are designed to last for a single season, whether in increasingly common short-order limited series like HBO’s *True Detective*, or in shows like FX’s *Justified* (2010-

2015) where an episodic procedural engine—in this case, the Lexington, Kentucky office of the US Marshal Service—is supplemented by season-long narrative engines designed to start and finish within a single season. Such serialized arcs are more common in cable dramas, while procedurals like CBS’ *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-2015) tend to rely primarily on narrative engines like the workplace dynamics of a forensics lab, which in its basic day-to-day function generates over a decade of crimes to be investigated.

However, although plots and characters might be perceived as the most logical sources of narrative momentum, place is often a crucial component of these series’ arc structures, and a productive narrative engine within these hybrid models. *Justified* has primarily remain focused on Kentucky more broadly, but the series used its second season to dig deeper into the local culture of Harlan County, with a season-long arc focused on drug matriarch Mags Bennett’s efforts to defend her community against the threat of a mining company’s attempts to access the nearby mountain. While Margo Martindale’s Emmy-winning performance and the character’s memorable exit were widely considered the season’s largest contribution to the series, its use of Harlan as a narrative engine was equally crucial, grounding Mags’s actions in their relationship to the community, and building a stronger sense of place that the show would continue to leverage into its final season, which was celebrated in part by a screening of the series in Harlan.

The strong relationship between seasonal serialized story arcs and place within shows like *Justified* has been more like-

ly to draw the discursive engagement with spatial capital discussed in this chapter, but place equally functions as a narrative engine within episodic procedurals like *CSI*. The show's status as part of a larger franchise, and as part of a genre that relies on small variations to a basic episodic crime-solving template, could suggest that place functions as a narrative backdrop, with the *CSI* franchise moving the same basic procedural engine from Las Vegas to Miami and New York in its subsequent spin-offs. However, while certain episodes of *CSI* may rely on non-specific establishing shots of the Las Vegas strip as a way to add flourish to rote murder mysteries with limited ties to location, Derek Kompare argues in his book on the series that "Las Vegas is an essential component of *CSI*", specifically noting that "the component sensibilities of Vegas...—as indulgent resort, as workaday city, as mythic realm, and as environmental extreme—set the stage for a wide variety of compelling, horrific, and spectacular crimes." (2010: 54) Here, Kompare details how different spaces within Las Vegas function as separate yet interconnected engines for episodic storytelling, with the wilderness around Las Vegas proving as productive as the Las Vegas Strip most commonly associated with the city within the cultural imaginary; collectively, these four different points of view on the city create the diversity necessary to generate over 300 episodes of the series over fifteen seasons. For a show like *CSI*, place becomes a crucial narrative engine, with any given episode able to engage with Las Vegas from a new angle, albeit within short episodic stories.

## 5. BACKDROP VS./AND/OR ENGINE: WELCOME TO TV'S MIAMI

While the discourse of "place as character" serves as a broad evaluation of a series' spatial capital, separating it from shows in which place is apparently not a character, understanding place relative to narrative is not a question of definitive claims as to a series' engagement with location, nor is it about hierarchies of spatial capital. While we could generalize and suggest that shows that engage in place as a "narrative engine" are in a better position to investigate the sociocultural dimensions of spatial capital as opposed to shows in which place is a "narrative backdrop", this ignores the episodic and seasonal realities of television, in which a show's relationship to spatial capital will change over time as its narrative evolves. By utilizing these frameworks—place as narrative engine and place as narrative backdrop—to analyze narratively distinct dramatic representations of a single city like Miami, we can

better understand how space and place intersect with different forms of dramatic storytelling, moving beyond discursive claims of "city as character" to consider how spatial capital is constructed on an episode-to-episode basis.

In his book on NBC drama *Miami Vice* (1984-1990), James Lyons notes the importance of the series' setting: Miami was undergoing a dramatic change in which increased Latin-American immigration—including the infamous 1980 Mariel boatlift—had ushered in a period of racial tension, and where the rise in the drug trade and related illegal activity would reshape Miami's reputation and begin a period of significant economic growth (albeit through drug money being laundered into construction projects). Lyons remarks that the resulting

image of a subtropical city jittery on a cocktail of cocaine, currency, and construction lent itself readily to crime fiction, and De Palma's *Scarface* provided Yerkovich with the prototype for *Miami Vice*'s vision of high-rolling drug lords reveling in the trappings of the 1980s consumer boon (2010: 13).

Although *Miami Vice* would go on to become known for its contribution to television style under the guidance of Michael Mann, embodying what John T. Caldwell identifies as a "designer televisuality", it also signals a case of spatial capital being crucial to establishing a narrative engine—in this case a steady supply of crimes and criminals—to generate procedural storylines (1995: 86).

In order to explore these dynamics, I turn here to a case study of two more contemporary series set in Miami: Showtime's serial killer drama *Dexter* (2006-2013) and USA's spy drama *Burn Notice* (2007-2013). However, whereas *Dexter*—as a serialized premium cable drama with awards recognition and critical acclaim—has clearer access to discourses of spatial capital, considering the two series through the lens of narrative reveals a disconnect between serial storytelling and spatial capital, and undermines the cultural hierarchies that have been reinforced through the proliferation of "place as character" discourse.

### 5.1. "Mutilated Corpses with a Chance of Afternoon Showers": *Dexter's Miami*

In one of the promotional images created for *Dexter* ahead of its first season, blood spatter analyst Dexter Morgan stands reading a copy of the fictional *Miami Star*, with the headline "Miami Killer Beats The Heat." He is wearing a colorful shirt,

standing in front of a colorful backdrop, with bold hues tinting an image of what we can identify as Miami's South Beach (Figure 3)

The centrality of Miami in the promotion surrounding the series is a choice made by Showtime, but the setting itself was a choice made by author Jeff Lindsay, whose books about a vigilante serial killer served as the basis for the series. In a 2015 interview with Australia's *Cream Magazine*, Lindsay says that he "can't imagine [Dexter] being anywhere else". The interviewer, Antonino Tati, says Miami "seems the perfect setting for his dark shenanigans", and then asks Lindsay if he would agree that the city "stands for all the superficiality of the western world and yet, not far beneath it, lurks this certain darkness". Lindsay agrees with the leading question, and says "there's just something about the beautiful scenery and the palm trees and the pastel colors in the sky—all of that as the background for a headless corpse or two. It just makes it so much more interesting" (2015).

Dexter says much the same in the series' pilot. Arriving at the episode's first crime scene, Dexter remarks through voice over—a motif used heavily throughout the series—that "there's something strange and disarming about looking at a homicide scene in the daylight of Miami. It makes the most grotesque killings look staged, like you're in a new and daring section of Disney World." He dubs this "Dahmerland," after noted serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. There is brightness to Miami, which makes for a strong contrast with the darkness of a crime series, especially one as dark as *Dexter*. One of the other crime scenes in the show's pilot takes place in a brightly lit Miami living room, with white furniture against white walls, which is that much more effective for showcasing the blood spatter Dexter uses to paint the audience a picture of the gruesome crime that took place. As Dexter says while observing another crime scene in the series' second episode, "Crocodile": "another beautiful Miami day: mutilated corpses with a chance of afternoon showers".

In promotional material released ahead of the series' debut, Showtime positioned Miami as part of what would make *Dexter* "thought-provoking," "complex," and "fascinating" drama. Identifying that the series would be shot in both Miami and Los Angeles, they suggest "the series captures the unique vibe and scenic vistas of South Florida. Gone are the pink flamingos, neon stucco and pastel suits of yore—this Miami is a character all its own." The deployment of the discourse of "place as character" is unsurprising, central here to Showtime's claims to the show's use of place transcending those that came before. Executive producer Clyde Phillips tells would-be viewers



FIGURE 3. A SHOWTIME PROMOTIONAL IMAGE FOR *DEXTER*'S FIRST SEASON.

"we are trying to show the Miami that you haven't seen", and that while they are shooting on location in Los Angeles and "in interesting parts of Miami", *Dexter* is ultimately "a show that's filmed on location in Dexter's soul, and it's all through his eyes that we are watching his own home movie" (Press Release).

As noted above, these discursive claims to spatial capital are limiting, particularly in the claims to be shooting on location in "interesting" parts of Miami—interesting to whom, and in what way? However, more importantly, the series is an ideal example of a case where place is positioned as crucial to a series when it in fact serves predominantly as a backdrop for narrative action unrelated to the location in question. While symbolic and evocative, extending from Lindsay's use of Miami in his novels, *Dexter*'s negotiation of spatial capital showcases an uneven and limited engagement with the cultural identity of the Florida city, accepting its function as an "interesting" place to set this story, rather than a necessary dimension to telling it. It also demonstrates the challenge of engaging with spatial capital within serial narratives that consistently pull the character in question away from the intersectional spatial capital located in minor, episodic dimensions of the series' setting.

In the series' pilot, the spatial capital of *Dexter*'s Miami is activated in three ways. The first is through location shooting in Miami, which features more prominently in the early episodes than later in the first season, and all but disappeared as the show moved deeper into its run. The opening scene of the pilot features Dexter driving through South Beach at night,

with its art deco hotels and bright neon lights. South Beach is crucial spatial capital within mediated images of Miami, with *Time Out Magazine* noting in 2014 that “every Miami scene ever filmed in any movie seems to have been shot here” (“South Beach Neighborhood Guide”). This iconography is subsequently supported by the second point of activation, Dexter’s voice over, which dominates the series’ point-of-view, and completes work—including those quotes mentioned above—to engage audiences with regards to the series’ setting. As Dexter drives through South Beach, he remarks that “Miami is a great town. I love the Cuban food, the pork sandwiches—my favorite. But I’m hungry for something different now.” Building on the reference to Cuban food, the pilot also uses its two Latino characters—Angel Batista and Maria La Guerta, both of Cuban descent—as markers of location, although primarily through their use of Spanish in the workplace as opposed to meaningful characterization tied to their heritage.

These place-making activities are effective at activating basic forms of spatial capital: it is clear that *Dexter* is set in Miami, and the series acknowledges basic facts about Miami’s culture—the language, the music, the food—to engage the audience’s own knowledge of the location. The show even inspired one ambitious fan, Gary Wayne, to devote significant time and energy to documenting the real location of every space featured in the series, using Google Maps and other forms of online forensics to discover which locations were really in Miami, and which were shot on location in Long Beach, California (2011). The spatial dimensions of his fandom speak to the series’ commitment to spatial capital, and to the effectiveness of these place-making activities both in the series’ pilot and throughout the show.

However, notably, none of the storytelling in either the first or second episode is driven by that culture. While various Miami locations serve as effective backdrops, the specific details of the Ice Truck Killer’s murders have little to do with Miami, and Dexter himself shares no clear relationship to the local culture despite having grown up there. That the seasonal arc would be tied more to Dexter as a character than to Miami as a city makes sense, but it also limits the opportunities for the show to engage with place as a narrative engine. When the series focuses more on Miami in an episode where the Ice Truck Killer is leaving body parts around the city, the locations involved are all framed through their connections to Dexter’s past. While the investigation eventually touches on the city’s redevelopment, with one detective remarking that “the whole fucking city of Miami reinvents itself every five years”, the point is raised primarily as a thematic backdrop for Dexter, who is haunted by

his past and is confronting a fellow serial killer who knows his secrets. The Ice Truck Killer would be the first of eight seasonal arcs in the series that largely ignored the function of place as a narrative engine, content to play out the “interesting” contrast of Dexter’s line of work set against the sunny Miami backdrop.

This is not to suggest that *Dexter* entirely ignored the possibilities presented by Miami for generating narrative developments. The show would often pair small developments in its ongoing case with Dexter investigating and eventually murdering a criminal, and during the middle of the first season one of these stories stretches across two episodes, and focuses on a human smuggler who is murdering those who illegally immigrate from Cuba but are unable to pay his fees. However, in “Crocodile” (1.2), which is the first episode to feature a substantial storyline of this nature, the character of Matt Chambers is consciously identified as a traveler, who tells Dexter that “there’s nothing a new city can’t cure” as he celebrates getting off on his latest hit-and-run rap. The series’ average victim was not a character engineered out of the Miami setting, but rather a stock character who, like Dexter, is placed against the Miami background for dramatic effect.

Dexter’s appropriation of the symbolic dimensions of Miami’s spatial capital functions similarly to cases like *Breaking Bad*, wherein a base serialized storyline is inflected—rather than generated—by location. Over the course of the series’ run, the continued presence of racial diversity and the series’ use of the surrounding swampland in contrast with Dexter’s white suburban existence would undoubtedly continue to connect to Miami in meaningful ways, but these negotiations of spatial capital are rarely connected to the negotiation of the show’s serialized narrative. In general, serialized storytelling tends to be primarily drawn from plot and characterization, with place considered more of a static object despite the ways in which spatial capital can fluctuate over time. Although Dexter’s cultural capital as an Emmy-nominated and critically acclaimed serialized drama allowed discourses of “city as character” to emerge around the series, the actual narrative reveals an evocative backdrop, with limited interest in place functioning as a meaningful narrative engine over the course of the series’ run.

## 5.2. “As long as you’re burned, you’re not going anywhere”: *Burn Notice*’s Miami

The symbolic Miami that *Dexter* used in its pilot is central to USA Network’s spy drama *Burn Notice*, which in its love of non-specific establishing shots of bikini-clad women on South

Beach and waves lapping onto the city's beaches epitomized the channel's "blue skies" programming philosophy—in fact, former NBC Universal Cable Entertainment president Bonnie Hammer revealed in a 2009 interview that the series was originally set in Newark, in "rat-infested alleyways", prompting her to request a change in location (Snierston 2009). "A couple weeks later," she explains, "we got the same fabulous voice in sexy Miami. It brought a sense of humor and levity to the series." In this way, the show's Miami setting was a conscious effort to retain this "blue-skies feel" albeit a case where place would seem to have been incidental to the genesis of character and plot in the pilot's original conception.

Despite this, *Burn Notice* is another series in which place has been identified as a character in the show, although notably by actors and fans, as opposed to critics (Gallagher 2009, Mitovich 2009).<sup>2</sup> The setting is certainly important to the show: as evidenced by the series' original Newark setting, Michael Westen could have been dropped into any city after being blacklisted by the CIA, yet the opening montage that begins each episode continually reinforces that it was Miami, where Michael grew up but has not visited for some time. The series' serial through-line focuses on Michael's efforts to escape from Miami, which the opening suggests he's not allowed to leave, investigating the people who "burned him" and trying to re-enter the agency. In these circumstances, Miami serves as a narrative backdrop to Michael's quest for redemption, as he gradually discovers that his real home is with his friends and family in a setting that suits USA's brand identity needs.

In this way, *Burn Notice*'s Miami functions as a backdrop similar to the city's function in *Dexter*, but the series' balance of serial and procedural narratives is distinct. While the serial components of *Burn Notice* show little engagement with the cultural specificity of its Miami setting, they make up a small portion of the series in its early seasons. While most episodes of the show involve some type of connection to the ongoing storyline, this often constitutes only a few scenes, compared to *Dexter* where the Ice Truck Killer storyline is the dominant narrative engine in most of the first season's episodes. Instead, *Burn Notice* relies more heavily on episodic storylines in its early seasons, with the procedural engine of Michael taking on freelance jobs to make ends meet driving the plot of most episodes. This engine is also distinct in the

fact that it offers a greater variety of storylines for Michael to investigate: *Dexter*'s procedural engine of either fellow killers whom Dexter eliminates as a vigilante or cases being investigated by the Miami Police Department's Homicide Unit relies on the victims and perpetrators of violent crime, providing a limited vantage point into the culture of the city. By comparison, Michael Westen's set of skills are applied more broadly, allowing him to battle the same cartels as the Miami PD in one episode, while helping one of his mother's friends deal with a scam artist who conned her out of her retirement savings in another.

Similar to *Dexter*, the series' approach to Miami is reinforced in part through voice over narration. As Michael notes in the series' pilot, upon waking up in Miami after being "burned",

Most people would be thrilled to be dumped in Miami—sadly, I am not most people. Spend a few years as a covert operative, and a sunny beach just looks like a vulnerable tactical position with no decent cover. I've never found a good way to hide a gun in a bathing suit.

This voice over echoes *Dexter*'s detached relationship with Miami as a location, and draws out a similar contrast between Michael and Miami as was evident in the Showtime series between *Dexter* and Miami. The voice over plays over a sequence of images of women in bathing suits, a recurring motif that is joined by watersports and other beachside activities in the series' plentiful non-specific establishing shots. As compared with *Dexter*, however, the series uses more substantial location shooting, given it was exclusively shot in Miami over its seven seasons, meaning that Michael's voice over plays out between scenes of the character walking along South Beach, which would continue over the course of the series.

These sun-soaked establishing shots and voice over claims to spatial capital do not function alone, though, connecting to the pilot's episodic storyline. The plot sees Michael get involved in the case of Mr Pyne, a rich condo developer—a type found "everywhere nowadays", according to an art dealer Michael interviews as part of his investigation—and a victim of theft in the form of \$22 million worth of goods missing from his waterfront estate. Michael is brought in to help clear the name of Pyne's Cuban caretaker, Javier (coincidentally played by David Zayas, who plays Batista on *Dexter*). Upon first meeting with Pyne, Pyne places Javier's presumed guilt in the eyes of the police in the light of Miami's racial poli-

<sup>2</sup> The discourse also emerged in a Facebook discussion celebrating the show staying in Miami for its final season, with one user noting that "Miami IS a character in the show!!!"



FIGURE 4: A SCREENSHOT FROM *BURN NOTICE*'S PILOT, FEATURING MICHAEL AND THE CHARACTER OF JAVIER. THE SKYLINE BEHIND THEM IS GIVEN ADDED MEANING THROUGH THE STORYLINE'S REAL ESTATE DEVELOPER VIL-LAIN, ASSERTING THE POLITICS OF CLASS THAT INFLECT THIS INTERSECTIONAL STORY OF A FALSELY ACCUSED IN-DIVIDUAL OF CUBAN DESCENT.

tics: "This is Miami—any incident and the police blame the nearest Cuban, or Haitian. You should have seen how they were all over my gardeners." In this scene and the one previous, stunning views of Miami's skyline can be glimpsed in the background, working in conjunction with the work done to establish Miami's local culture in previous scenes. However, the dialogue in the sequence works to outline the cultural politics of that skyline, emphasizing the racial dimensions of the case and the inherent intersectionality of spatial capital (Figure 4).

Embracing this intersectionality, the storyline engages the class politics of Miami, with the rich condo developer's manipulation of his Cuban caretaker framed relation to Miami's intense redevelopment. When Pyne is revealed to be a corrupt real estate developer who stole from himself in order to collect the insurance money so that he could cover illegal business dealings, it gives new meaning to the Miami skyline in the distance, as well as the non-specific establishing shots of waterfront condo developments used at various points in the episode. This intersection of race and class is built into the series' procedural engine, with Michael's cases often focused on those who are marginalized by society more broadly. In the pilot, a larger investigative firm refers the case to Michael when it is considered "too small", but Michael's disadvantaged position in Miami makes it ideal for his situation. This is similar to the season's seventh episode, "Broken Rules", where Michael is enlisted to help a local merchant in

Miami's Little Havana neighborhood. It is also echoed in the season two episode "Truth and Reconciliation" (2.14), where Michael assists a Haitian national whose daughter was imprisoned and executed for speaking out against a corrupt government regime. In these cases, the show's narrative engine embeds Michael in the struggles facing these communities, and moves beyond the notion—expressed in the expositional sequence that opens each episode—of being "dropped in a city" to embrace Miami as a narrative engine in and of itself.

These negotiations of spatial capital continued over the course of the series, which would set scenes in abandoned condo developments and foreclosed mansions as the 2008 recession dramatically changed the realities of the real estate market. However, such developments would never emerge as the series' primary narrative motivation: although the engine at the heart of *Burn Notice* is well-suited to exploring the cultural politics of Miami as a distinct location, the spatial capital engaged by the series was limited by the series' place within USA Network's programming block. Although the "Blue Skies" brand would begin to fade as *Burn Notice* concluded its run, pushing shows more toward edgier, serialized storytelling, this change did not push the series toward embracing Miami as a narrative engine. Instead, as *Burn Notice* pushed further toward serialized storytelling in its sixth and seventh seasons, its narrative engine shifted almost exclusively to Michael's quest to restore his place within the espionage community, a shift that pushed the show further away from the specificity of its Miami location. Whereas we often associate complexity with seriality, in this case the complexity of the serialized case pushed the Miami location further into the background, replacing an episodic engine with the potential for stories rooted in Miami's spatial capital with a serialized engine tied to global espionage. Although the show's episodic storylines drew on this spatial capital inconsistently, they still represented an opportunity for more culturally specific storytelling, which would fade as the series moved away from its initial hybridity.

## CONCLUSION

The discursive framework that results in place being identified as a "character" in a television series is logical, building on existing discourses in film and offering a shorthand way of acknowledging that a text has developed a strong sense of spatial capital. However, as demonstrated in this article, that framework has become entangled with discourses of le-

gitation that privilege complex serialized dramas, falsely suggesting that only those series that generate significant cultural capital warrant engagement with questions of spatial capital, and falsely associating seriality with a complex representation of a given location. As “place as character” becomes a tool that networks or creators use to legitimate their respective series, its usefulness as an analytical framework deteriorates, necessitating a more rigorous framework that derives from the manifestation of place in the text as opposed to the paratexts around it.

This article has offered such a framework, suggesting that we engage with place’s relationship with television narrative by considering how it functions in a given series either as a “narrative backdrop” or a “narrative engine”, or some combination thereof. By unpacking the way locations interact with television narratives that evolve over the course of a series’ run, and can differ from episode-to-episode, these ways of engaging with spatial capital are better suited to addressing a wider range of television narratives, expanding beyond prestige dramas to consider how place intersects with both serial and procedural narrative formats, particularly given the increased hybridity of these modes in series like *Burn Notice*. Such a model also allows for a closer consideration of how other forms of identity—race, class, gender—intersect with spatial capital over the course of a series’ narrative, topics that cannot be separated from an investigation of space and place. Rather than accepting the discursive claims that a city is “like a character in the show”, this method breaks down the more complex intersections of place with character, theme, and narrative within a given series, and helps unlock a more nuanced understanding of the “place of place” in contemporary television storytelling.

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