AMERICAN DREAMS: PORTRAYALS OF RACE, CLASS, AND 21ST CENTURY CAPITALISM IN DAVID SIMON AND ED BURNS' THE WIRE

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Arts
In
Media Studies
University of Regina

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July 2014

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Mazin Bashire Saffou, candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Media Studies, has presented a thesis titled, *American Dreams: Portrayals of Race, Class, and 21st Century Capitalism in David Simon and Ed Burns’ The Wire*, in an oral examination held on June 19, 2014. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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Abstract

From 2002-2008, the television series, *The Wire*, realistically conveyed the inner city problems of Baltimore, with a particular focus on the drug trade and its social and psychological effects on Baltimore’s black underclass. This dissertation values *The Wire* as a major achievement in television, for its sophisticated and intricate approach in exposing and critiquing systemic problems of inequality, disenfranchisement of the inner city black community, and bureaucratic dysfunction, and, in doing so, portrays the American Dream as a fallacy. By utilizing a Marxist ideological critique of late market capitalism I examine how *The Wire* positions Baltimore’s underclass in contention with neoliberal cutthroat market logic. My methodology is discourse analysis: I examine how the series stages this conflict through a series of paired characters or dramatic situations and how the tensions between these characters/situations expose the tensions/contradictions/lies in the American Dream. After setting up my theoretical framework, I focus on the paired relationship between drug traffickers, Stringer Bell, and Avon Barksdale, and their differing and contradictory philosophies toward the drug trade. This leads into an assessment of the “War on Drugs”, and how this is critically portrayed in the series, particularly in the context of Season 3’s representation of a Free Zone for illegal narcotics. I analyze the plight of inner city black male youth, and how they are incorporated into the drug trade, and how this is rendered in Season 4, as well as the potentially liberating pedagogical role that the education system might play. Finally, I address criticisms of *The Wire* that argue that the series is too bleak and deterministic, and in doing so, suggests that neoliberal capitalism cannot be reconfigured, ineffective institutions cannot be reformed, and that positive social change with lasting effects is not possible. My discoveries led me to conclude that *The Wire* is not deterministic, as it
subtly proposes relationships that advocate for community involvement and community interaction as a discourse in opposition to closed, predominantly white, elite, patriarchal systems. The implications of my conclusion have led me to consider and question whether *The Wire* is a useful pedagogical tool in pragmatically addressing the real-world concerns and ills of African-American inner city youth drug culture, a possible departure point for further research.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my special appreciation and thanks to my advisor Dr. Christine Ramsay, you have been a tremendous mentor for me. I would like to thank you for encouraging my research and for allowing me to grow as a scholar. Your advice on research, writing, as well as on my career has been invaluable. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Michael Trussler, and Dr. Sheila Petty, for serving as my committee members, and for your brilliant suggestions and ideas. Thank you. I would especially like to thank all of the faculty and staff at the University of Regina who have guided me in my Graduate program, with special mention to Dr. Sheila Petty and Dr. Philippe Mather for providing me with the opportunity to publish, and share my writing. In particular, I would like to thank the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for the Graduate Studies Scholarship, and a Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Sheila Petty and Vaughn Borden for the Sheila Petty and Vaughn Borden Graduate Student Scholarship in Media Studies and the Government of Saskatchewan’s Ministry of Advanced Education for a Saskatchewan Innovation and Opportunity Graduate Scholarship. Your support has been vital in facilitating my research.

A special thanks to my family for your love and encouragement. I would also like to thank my friends who supported me in writing, and have inspired me towards my goals. Thanks to all of you.
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Chapter 1: *The Wire and the American Dream*

In the last fifteen years there has been a noticeable shift in American television. If one believes that we can understand an era and a culture by the cultural artifacts that it produces, then it is important that we consider the pronounced shifts in American television in the 2000s. Euro-American societies have undergone rapid change in recent decades in which Euro-American culture has become globalized, media saturation and information flow has intensified, and international borders are dissolving. 9/11 proved to be a crucial traumatic moment, not only for the ways in which it impacted American society, but for the ways in which on a global scale, Western nations have become increasingly preoccupied with notions of security, and the “Other” that threatens to infiltrate and invade. The failure of the War in Iraq and the global recession of recent years have intensified antipathy towards dominant power structures. The 2011 near-collapse of Wall Street through financial scandals has had a detrimental effect upon the middle-income and working classes and has made visible the market’s unethical and exploitative practice culminating in a backlash toward what has recently been dubbed the 1%. This crisis has its roots in neoliberal discursive and economic practices, a discourse that *The Wire* critiques, as well as calling attention to the failure of the American Dream in contemporary American society, particularly for the black underclass. Because of the ever-widening gap between rich and poor in recent decades the American Dream as a myth in support of “hard work” as a guarantee for financial security and prosperity has become an increasingly contested terrain in American society. The notion that “hard work” will lead to material and spiritual fulfillment has always been contentious in practice, but the fallacy of the American Dream appears to be increasingly more evident.
Reminiscent of American social realism like the writing of Upton Sinclair, who portrayed the economic disparity, and social malaise in urban America, *The Wire* (2002-2008) shifts our attention away from looking at the individual’s quest for the American Dream, and refocuses our attention on how institutions and social structures shape American society and people’s access to the Dream. *The Wire* is distinctive and rare in this regard, one of few American televisual texts to dramatize the complex interconnectedness of the American Dream with the structures that shape it. Here, the American Dream as an ideal is complicated by America’s “War on Drugs”, with civic politics and sluggish bureaucracy, the lack of opportunity in inner city black communities, the effects of intensified globalization, and the struggle of a dwindling working class as manufacturing and labour industries have been relocated offshore.

*The Wire* is an important text because it avoids romanticizing the quest for riches inherent in various American narratives. It does not imagine an individual’s journey through the American heartland to achieve the Dream. In *The Wire* there is not one single protagonist or heroic figure, but rather an ensemble of characters that are inexplicably connected to one another. As a television program lasting five seasons, containing 60 episodes, and with an immense cast of principle players, *The Wire* is able to grapple with the complexity of Baltimore in a way that would be synonymous with a multi-part labyrinthine novel. Embedded in my analysis is an attempt to champion the long-form narrative structure that television provides, a medium that can no longer be overlooked or dismissed as disposable pop culture ephemera. *The Wire* showcases the possibilities of television at its most ambitious, a multi-layered drama with an immense cast, deftly woven narrative strands that develop and complexify over time, and various
overlapping themes on contemporary American life. What interests me is how the American Dream has been reconfigured to reflect American life in the first decade of the 21st century amidst intensified market capitalism, and how this ideology is being dismantled in the arena of American TV drama. In her analysis of The Wire, Sherryl Vint argues that the series exposes how the neoliberal “merciless market logic” has shaped all aspects of social life (4). I will illustrate how this market logic in practice is in perpetual contention with – and yet dependent on – the illusion of the American Dream, the pursuit of social stature and economic prosperity and the belief that this is possible for everyone that is pervasive across American social life and consciousness and which The Wire’s characters pursue.

I argue that The Wire is an insightful televisual performance of a Marxist ideology critique. Using an aesthetic repertoire of social realism (stylistically, the series, also visually recalls documentary and muckraking journalism, reminiscent of writers like Upton Sinclair) scene by scene The Wire constructs a thorough argument against American capitalist ideology in its attempts to convincingly portray the reality of the disenfranchisement of America’s black underclass. This essay will demonstrate how The Wire exposes and critiques this dominant ideology.

However, I will also discuss criticisms of The Wire that suggest that the series reaffirms the dominant ideology through a deterministic structure that represents market capital as impervious to change. Creator David Simon has argued that The Wire is deeply influenced by the poetic mode of Greek tragedy (Anderson 84). In C.W. Marshall and Tiffany Potter’s “I am the American Dream: Modern Urban Tragedy and the Borders of
Fiction”, they argue that tragedy has been difficult to render since the Industrial Revolution. They explain that:

Tragedy is a concept that Western literature has found difficult to represent since the late-nineteenth century, in part because its central preoccupation, the cost and consequences of greatness, sits uncomfortably with the democratizing tendencies coincident with the effects of the Industrial Revolution. First Büchner, then Ibsen and Chekov, nevertheless found a way to valorize the ordinary individual in their plays, discovering a tragic dignity in ordinary situations and characters (Marshall 5).

Indeed, Simon’s deployment of tragedy differs significantly from the classical Aristotelian model in that Aristotle’s model of Greek tragedy emphasizes “one unified action rather than depicting multiple, divergent, or unnecessary actions” and also focuses on characters that come from high positions, “otherwise their tragic circumstances would not be remarkable” (Aristotle qtd by Leitch 85). Yet Simon’s structure shares Aristotle’s preoccupation with fatalism that is predicated upon a character’s tragic flaw (*hamartia*). This “flaw” takes two forms in *The Wire*: those who appropriate and internalize the dominant neoliberal ethos of the American Dream, like Stringer Bell (Idris Elba), and those who begin to seriously question the overarching system and attempt to step outside of it – like D’Angelo (Larry Gilliard, Jr.), whose fate is determined as soon as he begins to question the forces that have shaped his life. *The Wire’s* representation of tragedy is akin to Arthur Miller’s reconceptualization of tragedy in “Tragedy and the Common Man” enacted upon “an urban generation that has long been excluded from the cultural valuation and social status traditionally required for tragedy” (Marshall 6).

*The Wire* renders how individual lives are ruined or torn apart by the ideologies of neoliberal capitalism, and in doing so, does not point to easy solutions or a way out of the fated “rigged game” of market capitalism that cannot be overcome. Paul Allen Anderson
– influenced by Roland Barthes – argues that *The Wire*’s rhetorical structure is thus *tautological*, representative of a “dead, motionless world” that keeps perpetuating itself through a discourse that suggests that “the game is the game” and “it is what it is”, the suggestion that the current paradigm of “merciless market logic” cyclically recreates and renews itself and is justified merely by its own previous existence. Thus, critiques of *The Wire* argue that it lacks the ability and foresight to imagine a way out of the predicaments that it so astutely exposes and critiques. Tautology is a key concept that I will return to at length in the final chapter.

How I came to *The Wire* and my appreciation of it is a combination of the personal and political. I come from a predominantly working class family (my mother is the first and only person in my family besides myself to attain a post-secondary degree) and spent much of my youth growing up in ethnically diverse Canadian neighbourhoods with plenty of working class families, and there was a familiarity about the young men of *The Wire* like Randy, Duquan, Namond, and Michael in Season 4 or Nick and Ziggy in Season 2 which reminded me of the boys with whom I grew up. Also as a Canadian with a Middle-Eastern background (my father an Iraqi immigrant), I felt profoundly affected by the tumultuous, polarizing shifts occurring in North American culture since 9/11. The Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq disrupted and dislocated my Iraqi relatives and I watched my father become increasingly concerned, severely depressed, angry and withdrawn, an understandable response to what was evidently a Western imperialistic agenda to gain a foothold in the Middle East. Shortly after the Bush administration announced its invasion of Iraq, I found that I could no longer stomach television and its biased coverage of the Iraq War, the seeming banality and narcissism of reality TV, and
the vapid discourse of consumerism. So I tuned out and threw out my television, a gesture that I felt at the time to be a political act as it did not have any validity for me as a complex form of artistic expression. But tuning out did not have the effect that I hoped it would have. I felt out of touch and years later I started watching again through a much more selective process. In watching a handful of American dramas in the last few years, I began to notice a pronounced tonal shift from the television drama that came before in the 1990s. I started by watching DVD collections of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) on my home computer (thankfully no commercial interruptions being beamed into my home in the process), a television series that was receiving high critical praise. And in a short time I had consumed many of the popular shows of the last decade or so that were being produced by independent cable networks such as HBO or AMC.

Most importantly, I began to trace a noticeable strain of dissatisfaction with American power structures, whether it was the prosperous mob of *The Sopranos* (the Mafia is often a stand-in for the violent “dark side” of the American Dream), or the Baltimore police force in *The Wire*. In each of the many series I watched, it seemed that powerful American institutions or patriarchal organizations were being critiqued and re-evaluated. In *The Sopranos*, the Italian mobster genre (a potent American masculine archetype) was being disassembled and pulled apart towards a more nuanced meditation on Italian American identity, the effects of patriarchy, violence, exploitation, and American materialism. *Mad Men* (2007-Present) deconstructed sexism and the rigid gender roles of upwardly mobile white society in 1960s advertising industries that still resonate today. *Deadwood* (2004-2006) reconfigured the Western to critique the noble American frontier myth, and *Manifest Destiny*, and the formation of American
civilization through violence, colonization, and oppression. Even more fantastic genre shows such as *Rome* (2005-2007) and *Game of Thrones* (2011-Present) recreate imperialist or medieval settings in order to explore cutthroat politics, corruption, as well as themes of conquest, discipline, and punishment that metonymically invoke the competition, violence, exploitation, and the need to conquer the Other inherent in contemporary Euro-American society.

*The Wire*, in particular, is a brilliant example of this recent strain of contemporary televiral critiques of the American Dream. After being so thoroughly depressed over American popular culture when I discovered *The Wire* in 2011, it was refreshing. In particular, it deconstructs the hard-boiled cop show drama, or police procedural genre, by shifting its focus from investigative activity to the complexities of inner city life, crime, justice, racial tensions, and poverty in an American city. Perhaps the most nuanced of these dramas that destabilizes the American Dream and the effects of living in an intensely hierarchical society, *The Wire* critiques institutional dysfunction, stifling and intensified bureaucracy, surveillance, civic politics, inner city crime, education, systemic racism, and the dissolution of the working class. Most provocatively *The Wire* is particularly critical of the American Dream as an ethos and ideological framework that suggests that America is the land of opportunity if one is willing to work hard enough, if one is willing to embrace the entrepreneurial spirit inherent in the American character to pull themself up out of poverty and despair, and into the stratosphere of material richness. The notion that America is an egalitarian system is debunked in *The Wire* as it takes a close look at the unequal distribution of wealth in American society and its links to entrenched processes of classism and racism that produce insurmountable barriers to
upward mobility. In *The Wire*, the world is not made up of “good guys” and “bad guys” but human beings attempting to navigate a complex, stratified social fabric. Influenced by the Dickensian social realist novel criminality in particular is not merely a disreputable social ill but is born out of a complex set of conditions. Criminality and poverty go hand in hand in *The Wire*, a mutually co-dependent set of conditions that reinforce one another. *The Wire* is bold and intricate in that it is not restrained in its display of horrific and unsettling street violence or drug addiction, but rather looks at how this violence is predicated upon a complex arrangement of determinants. In doing so it is poignant without being mawkish or overly melodramatic – albeit didactic in its approach to the ills of American society. *The Wire* forces us to face these determinants, to understand how street violence is maintained and reinforced, from both inside of and outside of gang communities.

The American Dream

The term “American Dream” was first invoked by James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America* (1931), which he defines as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement”. For Adams:

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of their birth…It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unpressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every
class. And that dream has been realized more fully in actual life here than anywhere else though very imperfectly even among ourselves (Adams 374). Adams is articulating the notion of meritocracy, where an individual’s worth is based not on hereditary, or entrenched classism (as associated with the stifling backwardness of old Europe), but on the individual’s will and innate ability to self-actualize their dreams and desires. Meritocracy thus is the great equalizer. The American Dream inspires an entrepreneurial spirit, a propensity to grow and excel according to “innate ability”, without being stifled or imposed upon by classist strictures. In the American Dream it is merit, and not the circumstances of one’s birth, that determines access to the riches believed to be at the centre of American life. The American Dream conveys a classless society, a utopia of hard-working, industrious, salt-of-the-earth, self-made men and women who work hard, and do not cry foul when confronted with dreams unfulfilled, or with hardship. And yet if we ponder this closely, classism is still implicated within this scenario. For some will make it to the top – not everyone will – and for anyone who fails to succeed, it is implied that their failure is due to a deficiency in character, an inability or unwillingness to pull themselves up from hardship. They fail because they are stubborn, backward, or lazy. In the American Dream, it is never the failure of industry, government, economics, politics, or racial and sexual divisions that indicate failure, but rather the lack of willpower of the individual to remake themselves. The Wire is important because it shifts our attention back onto these spheres of influence that are too often ignored in mainstream discourse on the determinants and conditions of poverty. In The Wire individual choice matters, certainly, but so does the station that people are born into and must contend with on a daily basis. In the American Dream failure is not predicated by a lack of opportunity, but rather an inability on the part of the individual to
grab hold of opportunity and in the American imagination opportunity is perceived to be limitless. This construct has deep implications for those deemed to be unsuccessful, as it is perceived indolence rather than neglect or poverty-inducing mechanisms that constitute failure in America. And as many argue, the gap between rich and poor in America has never been wider and the achievement of the American Dream has never been more difficult (White 6).

While Adams articulated the American Dream into a cohesive thesis, this abstract idea was certainly operating before Adams’ definition. As Jim Cullen argues in “Twilight’s Gleaming: The American Dream and the Ends of Republics” it thrived in the American colonies before there was a name for it, and we can see its roots before the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, as a “cultural product” that was crafted in the auspices of frontier “bare-bones governance” (21). The term “cultural product” is important because, as Cullen argues, the American Dream is a cultural idealization rather than a distinct political ideology, and thus it is easily appropriated from all across the broad spectrum of American life and from all throughout American history (19-21). For example, the Pilgrims and Puritans of the seventeenth century were motivated by a progenitor Dream while practicing their religions without the persecution still endemic in the “Old World,” inspired by an industrious work ethic, as well as communal egalitarianism (19-21). The roots of what would become the American Dream can also be traced to the colony of Virginia’s quest for “instant riches” (19-21). It is evoked in the rhetoric of the Promised Land by Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and is continually summoned in various other communities, such as Latin and Asian Americans, and crops up in American women’s activism and gay
rights movements. It is embedded in the ideologies of both the American Left and the American Right as a utopian vision of plenitude and bounty. Like its ideological cousin, the Frontier Myth, The American Dream is a manifestation of an imagined terrain of unlimited wealth, happiness, and prosperity and is embedded deep in the American psyche.

It is a purely mythical construction rather than a political affiliation and as Cullen points out it is important to understand that the American Dream is adaptable, flexible and multi-faceted. It was even embedded within American criminal enterprises, such as the Mafia as a way into the American franchise, and fictional criminals such as Scarface, Don Corleone, Tony Soprano or the Barksdale/Stanfield organizations in The Wire subscribe to the manifesto as readily as anyone else in America (Cullen 19-21). In this latter case it is the American entrepreneurial spirit as applied to ‘illegitimate’ or illegal means in order to achieve enfranchisement, believed to be the God-given right of every American.

But why is the American Dream so enticing to so many? Why do people pursue it? In a brilliant essay entitled “The Politics of the American Dream, 1980 to 2008” Michael C. Kimmage argues that the American Dream is powerful because it contains both a “material and spiritual component” (27). This is an important distinction as the American Dream is both simultaneously very concrete and very abstract. The material component suggests upward class mobility, material comforts, and security. The spiritual component refers to the “metaphysical joy,” the optimism and delight in achieving this goal and of accumulating material security and conspicuous, surplus wealth. As Kimmage claims “[the] American Dream could be defined as the spiritualization of
property and consumption, the investment of joy and dignity in consumption and property ownership” (27). This last point is crucial in understanding the nature of materialism as an ideological framework. Kimmage claims that our relationship to the material world and material things in Euro-Western culture is not merely an exercise in baseline greed or acquisitiveness, but that material things have become imbued with a seductive and intoxicating metaphysical substance. Materialism is a ritual and all rituals are bound in metaphysics. This metaphysical relationship is akin to Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism wherein commodities have a use-value, yet also become attached to other abstract concepts that have little to do with their function. As Marx puts it:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties...It is as clear as noon-day, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table-turning” ever was (Marx 664).

I will touch upon commodity fetishism further in this chapter, but for now I wish to emphasize the role that materialism plays in market-driven Euro-American societies. In the American Dream the ritual of acquisition and consumption, the quest for and pursuit of stature, prosperousness and upward mobility, the conspicuous display of wealth, all point to a materialism that is imbued with transcendent and ecstatic dimensions. Achieving material wealth and entrepreneurial success is thus a “spiritual” journey coinciding with the romantic “rags to riches” mythology that is ingrained in every American’s psyche. The display of fetishized commodities (cars, clothes, or property, for
example) indicates the successful attainment and realization of that mythology. The realization of this mythology informs the ambitions of many in *The Wire*, particularly those of Baltimore’s black underclass.

Yet as I have argued, the failure to achieve this ideal is most often perceived to rest on the shoulders of the individual. Kimmage’s conception of materialism is important in understanding the importance of the American Dream in American consciousness, and the formation of American identity. It helps us understand how American desire is stimulated and maintained, and the pull that the American Dream exerts on individuals. It helps us to understand the lure of criminality in *The Wire* (and criminality is often romanticized in anti-hero configurations in American culture – consider Omar Little’s (Michael K. Williams) “Robbin’ Hood” practice of stealing drugs and money from drug kingpins and his free redistribution of drugs amongst the black underclass), and the importance of the drug trade to those exempted from the American franchise. The Barksdale and Stanfield gangs in *The Wire* are pursuing the American Dream, both its material and its metaphysical components. They are pulling themselves up by the bootstraps to seize the opportunity presented to them (the sale of narcotics to their own impoverished, neglected communities) to attain wealth and stature. As part of the context of the dissolution of the welfare state and using “merciless market logic” they are exploiting their own disenfranchised communities but nevertheless they are not indolent or lazy – as is far too often the viciously denigrating stereotype of African Americans – but are organized, industrious entrepreneurs exercising that quintessential American right and the enterprising spirit.
Race and Criminality in *The Wire*

So what does the American Dream mean to black America? How is it shaped? How is it similar to white America’s dream and how does it differ? At the height of hypocrisy, white America has preached the American Dream while practicing slavery, then racial segregation, and the continued institutional racism and neglect of black communities still endemic today. At the same time that white America espoused the American Dream, an ideal that should be attainable to blacks and other minorities, providing they were willing to work hard enough, it also espoused “scientific racism,” the notion that some races were intellectually and morally inferior to others (with Caucasians placing themselves at the top of the pyramid) (O’Kane 15). While much progress has been made since the Civil Rights Movement radically altered America’s history of racial politics, many black communities remain neglected, and it is important to understand the influence of the American Dream on black communities and on African-American consciousness. W.E.B. DuBois spoke of a “double consciousness” in black American identity and it is crucial to understand how “double consciousness” plays a role in black America’s interpretation of the American Dream. In “The Souls of Black Folk” (1903), Du Bois defines double consciousness as a violent internal battle between a desire for self-realization for people who are both black and are part of groups who have been rooted in America (and who have endured America’s appalling history of displacement, slavery, subjugation, and marginalization of black people). Du Bois’ theory is important for understanding black America’s relationship to the American Dream and I will quote him at length:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by
Double consciousness is a vital theoretical tool for appreciating the inner conflict rooted in the collective experience of black America. It outlines the tension between a black American’s blackness and their Americanness and illustrates how the two sites of identification must be intimately merged and reconciled if one is to achieve empowerment. Removed from traditional cultural practices, a diasporized African population has had to adapt and incorporate American mythological ideals like the American Dream, while, configuring it to and synthesizing it with traditional knowledge and practices. Furthermore, Du Bois argues that black Americans must reconcile the warring contradictions of African American identity rooted in a history of slavery and oppression. This is evident in “The Souls of Black Folk” where Du Bois argues that “few men ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries...Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites” (14-15). Based on Du Bois’ use of emancipatory rhetoric and Biblical allusions, the American Dream in the post-Antebellum era would have intertwined neatly with black America’s yearning for a
utopian “promised land” that would provide a panacea to the crises, tribulations, and ills that confronted black America in this period – and still resonates today.

The concept of double consciousness also pertains to *The Wire*’s portrayal of black America and its various black characters, both those trapped in the ghetto and those living outside of it. As Du Bois might argue, the American Dream is yet another mythic concept that is deeply embedded in the psyche of black America; it is yet another ambiguous American concept that must be struggled over and reconciled in the hearts and minds of diasporized black Americans – in addition to neoliberal market logic that often accompanies it. As Du Bois argues above, in order for black Americans to survive in the American landscape they cannot be denied enfranchisement and thus “[have] the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in [their] face.” Black America’s relationship to the American Dream and the “double consciousness” therein is significant in order to appreciate the lure of criminality in impoverished inner cities after the mass migration of blacks from the South in the post-Antebellum period.

While American criminality is often stereotypically overemphasized as a black American enterprise, organized crime in America predates the incorporation of African American urban communities into its framework. In *The Crooked Ladder: Gangsters, Ethnicity, and the American Dream* James M. O’Kane charts the history of American organized criminality, particularly in New York and other eastern cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Atlantic City, and Baltimore. O’Kane’s study of crime reveals that in America gang culture is an institution in itself, an industry that has flourished for at least 150 years, a method of climbing “to the top” that has been appropriated and utilized by nearly every disenfranchised ethnic group at one time or another. In O’Kane’s survey
the American underground economy did not originate in black communities, but rather in
disenfranchised Irish communities in the 1820s and 30s (54-55), was appropriated and
supplanted by Italian and Jewish organizations in the twentieth century (62-63), and has
finally been taken up by African American, Hispanic, and Asian communities in the
period of late capitalism (108-109). For American black communities this trend
coincides with the mass migration of blacks from the rural South into congested,
impoverished and competitive urban environments in the post-Antebellum era (90). For
O’Kane there is a mutually reinforcing link between the ethnicized Other and lack of
access to the American franchise:

Indeed the climb from the bottom is exceedingly difficult, with the higher
status groups – whether they be native Americans or former ethnic minorities
– impeding the lower-class newcomers every step of the way, denying them
access to respectable jobs, formal education, and social respectability.
Deprived of these prerequisites, the ethnic minorities have little chance of
achieving their own upward mobility exclusively through the conventionally
accepted routes. If significant upward mobility is to take place, alternative
avenues of advancement have to be considered and, if appropriate, utilized as
additional vehicles in the climb from the bottom (O’Kane 23).

O’Kane argues that organized crime is yet another American institution that has filled the
vacuum left by inaccessibility to the franchise of the American Dream for communities
that at one time or another are placed outside the margins of that franchise. O’Kane’s
argument is pertinent in that it outlines the history of America’s underground economy,
and describes the relationship between the institution of organized crime and
disenfranchisement and ethnic/racial marginalization. Vint argues that segregated black
communities were particularly vulnerable to this trend – and particularly in Baltimore,
wherein white flight was strong and in 1910 “the first law in American history that
prohibited blacks from moving to white residential blocks, and vice versa,” was passed
(37). Marlene Kim Connor argues that the pressures of American life on black men
during this time were particularly devastating in that gendered definitions of black masculinity that emphasized the role of provider and patriarch were highly dependent on wealth, power, and status which were consistently and frustratingly being placed out of reach:

America, a nation devoted to capitalism, defines manhood through achievement, money, possessions. Black men had very little money, and very few means of earning it. The Black man had to develop a reality for himself, a new culture that protected and empowered him within his own environment, his own neighbourhood; a code of honor that conveyed his growing manhood, and eventually anointed him with the coveted title of “man” (9).

The lure of the underground economy is dependent upon rigid gender codes. These spheres recreate the ritualized practice of attaining wealth, status, and power without the threat of emasculation or shame and humiliation produced by racial discrimination from white society. Over time, and following the “shift from industrial to financial capital,” (38) the loss of jobs in working class communities and inner cities intensified the vulnerability of black neighbourhoods and provided few alternatives for black men in particular to attain economic security.

In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, bell hooks also discusses the ways in which American materialism has detrimentally affected black men and the role it plays in shaping ideology and gender roles. hooks refers to Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun* as an example of the tensions between legitimate and illegitimate labour in the life of young, impoverished black males (16). The protagonist Walter Lee claims that money is synonymous with life, and his possession of it profoundly increases his sense of self-worth, saying “There ain’t no causes – there ain’t nothing but taking in this world, and he who takes most is smartest – and it don’t make a damn bit of difference how” (16). Walter Lee’s reasoning is echoed by many of *The Wire’s* inner city entrepreneurs.
such as Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris), Stringer Bell (Idris Elba), and Marlo Stanfield (Jamie Hector). hooks traces the shifts in black male political consciousness in a culture informed by advanced capitalism, where it is money that talks but the means to achieve it have since become irrelevant (17). What matters is being wealthy and having the capacity to demonstrate conspicuous consumption, regardless of how one achieves this status.

The central conflict in *A Raisin in the Sun*, according to hooks, is Walter Lee’s realization that “being a person of integrity, being honest, sharing resources, placing humanist goals over material ones...are not the values that lead to economic success in a capitalist society” (hooks 18). This conundrum is particularly disempowering for many black people who are already dealing with entrenched racism and disenfranchisement. hooks argues that black masculinity has often been adept at adjusting with these cultural pressures where it is crude accumulation that matters by any means necessary, and less so notions of integrity or dignity or community, notions that influenced previous generations of black men towards legitimate work (18-19). She argues that even the majority of black elites and intellectuals seem to have shifted their position from critiques of white ideology and domination (resonating with the Civil Rights era and Black Power movements) towards strategies of assimilation to secure their own status and financial stability (18). In *The Wire*, this tendency is represented in the portrayal of Mayor Royce (Glynn Turman) or Police Commissioner Ervin Burrell (Frankie Faison), both members of the black male elite who are preoccupied more with ensuring their status and securing their careers, than with confronting the ills that face Baltimore, ills that leave a detrimental effect on its black community (18). Thus the development of the drug
economy in American black ghettoes is deeply embedded in the overarching ideologies of American materialism that suggest that wealth be accrued by any means possible and that exploitation is permissible. hooks writes:

In a culture that secretly subscribes to the piratical ethic of ‘every man for himself’ – the social Darwinism of ‘survival of the fittest’ being far from dead, manifesting itself in our ratrace political system of competing parties, in our dog-eat-dog economic system of profit and loss, and in our adversary system of justice where truth is secondary to the skill and connections of the advocate – the logical culmination of this ethic, on a person-to-person level, is that the weak are seen as the natural and just prey of the strong (hooks 27).

In the American Dream it is tolerable (in fact one could say it is encouraged) to exploit and take advantage of others who are considered weak as part of the enterprising spirit. After all “it’s all in the game” as many characters in The Wire contest, a slogan repeated throughout the series, pointing to the configuration of American society as one of winners and losers in aggressive competition for material wealth and status, as well as the appropriation of the white patriarchal celebration of the individual (rather than the community) who must compete and earn his way in order to survive. Those in the drug trade work just as hard as their “Wall Street counterparts” hooks claims, but with the added bonus of making a living wage while not having to deal with racial discrimination (19). Synonymous with O’Kane’s argument, hooks regards gang life as the development of a “new class” created in the vacuum of a lack of resources, lack of employment, and lack of opportunity for advancement through legitimate means while also tying it to rigid gender politics (19-20).
Theory: Neo-Marxism and Ideology Critique

This study of *The Wire*, the American Dream, and neoliberal capitalism depends upon a Marxist reading, which I will intertwine with my theoretical considerations of race and gender. Marxist theory is crucial because it provides us with an understanding of capitalist societies, and those embedded within their framework, a most central concern in *The Wire*. Also, Marxist theory is concerned with systems and communities and their inter-relationship where the “base” (resources and how and to whom they are distributed) informs the “superstructure” (social organization and cultural processes) which is also in line with *The Wire*’s depiction of stratified urban social life. *The Wire* is also critical of the negative impacts of capitalism, and its effect on individuals, and like Marx, *The Wire*’s worldview is one in which it is material conditions which shape human consciousness and social processes. As Marx claims: “The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (Marx 662-663). For Marx, consciousness and one’s worldview are directly influenced by one’s position in a classed society.

As such, Marxism is also concerned with the analysis of labour, and *The Wire* is one of the few American television series that depicts people *working* as opposed to merely *consuming.* *The Wire* does not veil labour as part of the day-to-day life of American society as numerous television programs do, where urban professionals are repeatedly engaged in rituals of consumption in malls, restaurants, pubs, bars, and nightclubs while their often idealized day job (doctor, lawyer, TV executive, writer, etc) and main source of income is rarely depicted – as well as the lack of representation of
those in blue collar professions or the underclass. The procedural elements of the cop show that are incorporated into *The Wire* have the added effect of shifting our attention to the processes of labour, in fact the very *performance of labour*, whether that is the labour of police officers patrolling the street, investigating a crime scene, and listening for long, painful hours on a wiretap. Further, lawyers and judges are shown in the courtroom or in offices consulting with those they represent. Other forms of labour are depicted in *The Wire* creating a broad definition of work in Baltimore: longshoremen move cargo on Baltimore’s ports, journalists conduct interviews, teachers facilitate classrooms, dealers sell drugs on a street corner, drug addicts scramble through various odd jobs putting enough money together for a fix. Whereas many television programs glamorize lives of leisure in American society and stoke the audience’s desire for lifestyles of consumption and entertainment, *The Wire* chooses to situate its lens on the unglamorous city of Baltimore and the performances of labour within this dwindling American post-industrial centre.

In some respects, traditional Marxism might seem overly deterministic now as well as anachronistic. The ways in which global flows of people, money, and information function today could not have been foreseen by Marx, nor did he incorporate considerations of race and gender and a contemporary Marxist framework that considers these changes is crucial. Yet, at its most basic level, Marxism provides an important groundwork to comprehend the ways in which material conditions and the distribution of wealth in a society impact individuals and as communities, psychologically and socially. *The Wire* is greatly concerned with the material conditions of the contemporary American city, and how these conditions actually serve to reinforce inner city poverty, corruption,
and displacement. Marxism provides a counterpoint to ideological views and representations that argue that it is human willpower and endeavour that are the determining factors in shaping economic and social forms, a perspective of the individual that we find embedded within the mythology of the American Dream (Marx 662-663).

Another useful Marxist concept is *alienation*, the sense of malaise endemic to capitalist societies wherein people have little to no control over their own labour, are alienated from the work that we do (as evidenced by the police, judges, lawyers, and longshoremen in *The Wire*), and are forced to “sell” their labour power to another in order to survive (Leitch 653). Marx argues that workers become alienated as they begin to resent their station, and are overwhelmed by a feeling that they lack knowledge of themselves (as time and energy is bound in stifling, repressive toil rather than other forms of development) (655). In a capitalist society, Marx argues, people become alienated from themselves and they become alienated from each other. Social relations are marked with competitiveness and exploitation “in the icy water of egotistical calculation” (659). Social connections are shaped by the contact zones of economics rather than interpersonal exchange. Social interaction is a “transaction” and we become “consumers” rather than concerned citizens. Material goods provide a momentary distraction and fleeting alleviation from this overarching sense of alienation; Marx’s *commodity fetishism* (664-665). When Kimmage refers to the materialism of the American Dream, he is referring to exactly this notion, that goods are imbued with “metaphysical joy” – they are not merely things unto themselves but are imbued with metaphysical properties. In a capitalist economy alienation is pervasive across all spheres of social life. The characters in *The Wire*, and in all of the TV dramas that I have
mentioned here, are characterized by profound alienation whether they are of the elite or lower class. They are men and women displaced and dissatisfied with their station, and are at odds with themselves and their society. In *The Wire*, it is not only the begrudging white working class longshoremen, or the black inner city residents that are alienated but those within the ranks of power and privilege as well. Alienation is a metaphysical and spiritual malaise endemic throughout all ranks of capitalist society that would define human relationships and human worth solely in utilitarian terms.

The most important tool that Marx provides in cultural studies is *ideology critique*. How is it that we allow unequal distribution of wealth? How is it that such a small percentage of the global population are able to hoard such a large percentage of the world’s wealth with our consent? Marx argued that this status quo is maintained by *ideology*, worldviews that are disseminated throughout society that suggest that the way things are is a natural process and to be taken as a given. We allow “the 1%” to hoard the proportionate amount of wealth and resources in part because we see this arrangement as a justifiable condition that is unalterable and perfectly natural. Marx argues that our worldviews are overwhelmingly shaped by ideology, which serve bourgeois interests. Ideology veils the methods and processes of exploitation and the unequal distribution of wealth and resources. Ideology is found in all of our interactions and institutions – the family, schools, the arts, legal institutions, political arenas, religion, etc. – and in our cultural texts.

In “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1944) Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue that the institutions of mass culture (publishing houses and motion picture studios, et cetera – in which we would include the recent
innovation of information technologies as well) are homogenizing agents that serve “the totalitarian impulses of modern capitalist society...[in] its attempt to produce and reproduce the social relations of a homogenized society, [further] the culture industry contributes to the liquidation of the individual and the maintenance of the status quo. It transforms art into commodities and people into complacent consumers, depicting a ‘realistic’ world that is really no more than a combination of stereotypes, advertising, and propaganda” (Leitch 1108). While Horkheimer and Adorno’s argument is deterministic in its approach to cultural and media studies, other Marxist cultural theorists take different approaches. In “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” Raymond Williams develops a less rigid argument, and viewed the relationships between dominant cultural forms and more subversive texts as more interactive, suggesting that while bourgeois hegemony is a dominant force responsible for shaping and molding ideological and social processes, oppositional texts can and do inform and affect the dominant ideological framework (Leitch 1421-1422). Stuart Hall, another leftist cultural theorist, goes a step further and argues in “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies” that cultural texts are not stable entities that either produce and reproduce a strictly bourgeois or oppositional ideological stance but are rather “dynamic [sites] of numerous contending forces” which include class, race, gender and various other contentious sites of identification and conflict (Leitch 1781). This approach in particular informs my own views on *The Wire* as a text that is sensitive to class and race issues as it is staunchly and unrelentingly critical of market capitalism and black America’s marginalization, and yet is mostly neglectful in regards to representation of women. To take Hall’s approach, all cultural texts are a woven tapestry of conflicting identity politics and *The Wire* is no
exception in this regard. Yet, in regards to class and race identity politics, *The Wire* is self-consciously situated in opposition to dominant market capitalism ideologies, in addition to the dominant paradigm of mass popular culture that Horkheimer and Adorno critique. My main focus is on how *The Wire* is a major achievement in televsual ideological critique that represents the ideology of the American Dream as a loaded game in the context of 21st century disenfranchised black American male youth through the running trope of tautologies that signal their entrapment as “pawns in the game” of what is essentially a closed, white, elite patriarchal system.

The American Dream is ideology in the Marxist sense; it is pervasive in American life (and beyond America as Euro-American culture expands globally and rapidly through developing information technologies), from politics to daily interactions, rituals, habits and routines. It is embedded in popular television, and in *The Wire* the American Dream is represented as an ideal that is flawed. My argument is that David Simon, Ed Burns, and the various other creators of *The Wire* have deployed an ideology critique of their own within the text that points to the processes and effects of social alienation and neoliberal “merciless market logic” that has a devastating effect upon our lives, especially upon America’s black underclass.

The intersection of the false promise of the American Dream, black masculinity, and pernicious capitalist ideology is evident in *The Wire*’s opening scene (1:01). The scene begins with a tracking close-up of a dark trail of blood on the pavement illuminated intermittently by the flashing blue of a police light. Amidst the dilapidated rowhouses of Baltimore, bathed in a sickly orange glow, we see police officers working the crime scene, gathering evidence, a din of static and chatter over the police radio and frightened
neighbours watching and whispering in hushed voices. This is our first introduction to
*The Wire’s* America: gritty, economically depressed, and washed-up, a place reminiscent
of grainy photojournalism, Dickensian “social problem” novels, film noir’s downtrodden
American city, and the demoralized abject inner city of the ‘hood’ genre. Removed from
the scene of the crime Detective Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West) sits on a stoop with a
witness, a young man (Kamal Bostic-Smith) who seems to know what has happened to
Snot Boogie (uncredited), the victim. Initially reserved, McNulty’s affability (despite the
fact that he is a white cop and outsider to the black community) rubs off on the young
man. According to the witness, Snot Boogie, a regular at the alley crap game, stole the
pot and ran, a regular occurrence that Snot has performed many times before. Most times
this would result in Snot Boogie being knocked around a little but this time he is killed
for his indiscretion. McNulty’s witness is angry that someone would go so far and claims
that merely beating Snot Boogie should have sufficed. Playing along, McNulty agrees
but is incredulous. He doesn’t understand how the local crap players would allow Snot
Boogie to keep playing if they knew that he was going to make a run for the stash every
time. At this remark, the witness is now incredulous at the inanity of McNulty’s
question, irritated that he must put into words a typically unspoken and unwritten code of
conduct. Turning his head away from the detective, he remarks “You got to play. This is
America, man” before the scene cuts to the introductory credits.

In this opening scene, the ideological tensions between the American Dream,
impoverished black masculinity, and neoliberal market ideology are set in stark relief.
The local crap players let Snot Boogie play because Snot Boogie is part of the franchise
exercising the ritual of the pursuit for wealth believed to be embedded in America’s
heart. To deny Snot Boogie access to the franchise of the Dream is to deny him something essential to every American, Kimmage’s “metaphysical joy” in the pursuit of wealth and stature and in taking a great risk for financial gain. But the flip side to the American Dream is the discourse of aggressive neoliberal capitalism that champions acquisitiveness and advocates violence against those who are deemed vulnerable or weak. Snot Boogie makes a play for the American Dream, loses, and eventually pays with his life. The introduction establishes the themes of *The Wire* and the contradictions within the American Dream that encourage competitiveness, boldness, and entrepreneurial risk (Snot’s habitual play for the stash) and at the same time violently and oppressively denies fulfillment of it. Every scene of *The Wire* is crafted to call attention to the ambiguity of American ideology that encourages the dogged pursuit of the American Dream of prosperity and material wealth and the violent, competitive, oppressive realities that frustrate its attainment.

Thus my method is a **discourse analysis** that traces the series’ self-reflexive ideological critique of market capitalism through its aesthetic strategy of self-consciously pairing characters or dramatic situations to reveal the contradictions these black youth of Baltimore experience as they pursue the American Dream and its tautological traps. Hall defines discourse thus:

> Discourse...constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can meaningfully be talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. Just as a discourse ‘rules in’ certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it ‘rules out’, limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it (Hall 72).
Essentially, discourse is a “system of representation” that indicates how a cluster of ideas or concepts are being framed and discussed (72). For example, the concept of mental illness differs from the concept of madness (72). Mental illness is framed in the discourse of contemporary mental health, and psychiatric practices, while madness is framed in the discourse of medieval medicine as an affliction, that was often produced by an outside force ie. possession. Madness and mental health are both systems of representations attempting to define a similar phenomenon, yet, they are bound within specific historical contexts that shape how this phenomenon is to be discussed – and dealt with. In The Wire I am interested in discovering how discourses of criminality, capitalism, neoliberalism, the American Dream, labour, postindustrialism, the black underclass, masculinity, narcotics, education, and a host of correlated phenomena are being represented and produced. Due to my emphasis on discursive frameworks, and how they are linked together across paired characters, or dramatic situations, I have chosen in this dissertation to forego textual analysis that would incorporate a more detailed analysis of cinematography, mise-en-scène, character blocking, and other televisual aesthetics – a valuable set of tools, but, unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis.

Chapter 2: “Stringer Bell and the American Dream: CEO of Baltimore’s Streets” will be a character study of Stringer Bell and his partner in crime Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris) and their differing performances of masculinity (the CEO versus the soldier) and their contradicting ethos concerning the drug economy, “merciless market logic”, and their place in society. The drug economy of Baltimore’s mean streets becomes “legalized” in a small sector of the inner city in Season 3 and Chapter 3: “Hamsterdam:
Legalizing Drugs” will be a close look at *The Wire*’s portrayal of America’s hapless “War on Drugs” through its utopia/dystopia pairing of Hamsterdam (the free zone) with the utopian inner city black community removed from the detrimental effects of the drug trade. Chapter 4: “We Got Our Thing, But it’s Just Part of the Big Thing: Higher Learning and Pedagogies for Corner Boys” will be an analysis of Season 4’s dramatization of the problems of America’s schools and its relationship to young black males who seemed bound for the street corner and gang life. Here, four young boyhood friends growing up in the inner city are reflexively paired with each other and Major Colvin’s (Robert Wisdom) special class is paired with Prezbyłowski’s (Jim True-Frost) regular classroom as well as Cutty Wise’s (Chad Coleman) boxing gym for at-risk youth as potential sites of transcending the entrapment of gang life. I will spend some time on Season 4 as it is a crucial chapter in *The Wire* for its intimate portrayal of young black men and how they must negotiate race, gender, violence in their community, and inequality as well as the ideology of the American Dream. The final chapter, “You Want it to be One Way, but it’s the Other Way: Determinism and Tautologies in *The Wire*” will discuss criticism directed towards *The Wire*’s tautological predilection towards bleakness, fatalism, and a deterministic worldview.

*The Wire* is not invulnerable to criticism particularly in its lack of complex representations of female characters. While there are many well-rounded female characters at *The Wire*’s disposal – Kima Greggs (Sonja Sohn), Rhonda Pearlman (Deirdre Lovejoy), and Beadie Russell (Amy Ryan) come immediately to mind – they are not given the same amount of screen time devoted to their male counterparts such as Jimmy McNulty, Bunk Moreland (Wendell Pierce), Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters) or
Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick) or the various male characters of Baltimore’s inner city. Frequently it is as if women do not even exist in the Baltimore inner city as they are virtually absent – and the few that are shown are sex objects. A representation of the place of women in the marketplace of global capital (particularly women of colour) is still sorely lacking in The Wire. However, as a study in the concerns of our contemporary milieu, our dissatisfaction with power structures, with cultures of surveillance, with the “War on Drugs” which is simultaneously a war on impoverished black communities, and the loss of industry The Wire is likely the most provocative television series that has been produced. In the largely conservative territory of television The Wire is a major achievement in serialized melodrama, a multi-faceted portrait of an ailing American city and a sharp, pointed critique on the American way of life as well as an indictment of the discourses of patriarchal individualism that trap black male youth⁴.
Chapter 2

Stringer Bell and the American Dream: CEO of Baltimore’s Streets

One of the most dynamic and compelling narrative strands of *The Wire* in relation to its critique of capitalist discourse is the rise and fall of the Barksdale organization throughout the first three seasons, in particular the relationship between drug kingpin, Avon Barksdale and his right-hand man and childhood friend, Russell “Stringer” Bell. While equally deeply entrenched in “the game”, Avon and Stringer both have differing philosophies concerning the control of the drug trade. My analysis of the Stringer/Avon arc is greatly influenced by Jason Read’s “Stringer Bell’s Lament: Violence and Legitimacy in Contemporary Capitalism” in which Read discusses the pairing in regards to their differing philosophies and divergent conceptualizations of urban space and territory and points to two opposing practices of “merciless market logic” (Read 127-128). Read’s analysis is instrumental to and forms the backdrop of the specifics of my argument regarding *The Wire*’s representation of the American Dream, black masculinity and upward mobility in revealing how these two characters adopt neoliberal discourse and are in turn shaped by it: Stringer is a staunch disciple of market ethics, while Avon while also appropriating cutthroat principles, chafes against it in preference for a more traditional model of the drug trade economy. Furthermore, they both embody differing notions of power in relation to urban space. For Avon, power over the inner city street corners is his primary goal, while for Stringer eventual escape from the ‘hood gradually becomes his paramount ambition (Read 128). This differentiation in the use of the drug trade, one for power over the inner city and one for escape from it, yield two revealing portrayals of inner city black masculinity and the avenues they both choose for attaining the American Dream.
Avon’s territory is the nodes of inner city Baltimore where the drug trade occurs, including the Pit, which is the courtyard below the Franklin Terrace Towers. The relationship between the Pit and the hovering Towers is reminiscent of the hierarchical arrangements of capital and the vertical top-down positioning of power and wealth (Lucasi 138). When Avon’s cousin and lieutenant, D’Angelo, is released from prison in the first episode, he is demoted to the Pit, where he is told by Stringer that he must work his way back up the ladder in order to get back into the high rises (1:02). Stringer’s insistence on “climbing the ladder” is directly modelled after corporate social mobility dynamics, sharply indicating the ways in which the institution of illegal narcotics is directly modelled after corporate discourse (Lucasi 138). Avon is portrayed much differently than Stringer, more as a staunch traditionalist of “the game”, which includes securing his street corners, the Sunday truce (no gang activity on Sundays), an “eye for an eye” disposition towards his rivals, and a sentimentalist preoccupation with notions of family and brotherhood (albeit a hypocritical one with both D’Angelo and with Stringer, his childhood friend and brother-in-arms) (Read 128).

One of the strengths of The Wire is its ability to portray black characters involved in the inner city drug trade with such variance and complexity – rather than the monolithic emotionless thug stereotypes that popular media propagate. Don Belton argues in “Speak My Name: Black Men on Masculinity and the American Dream” that we must address the specificity and variety of black male experience in order to combat denigrating and destructive stereotypes, the narrow scripts of self-definition that many young black men attempt to emulate (4). Belton argues that we need to think beyond homogenous depictions of black life and experience that fulfill totalizing cultural myths
(4). Even though Stringer and Avon are both thug archetypes their pointed differences in personality, ambitions, worldview, attire, and masculine performance despite emerging from the same class and raced position addresses the diversity of black experience. More totalizing cultural myths about black America and inner city violence were a staple of the traditional cop show such as *Dragnet* (1951-59). In a departure from traditional police procedural television wherein the focus is on predominantly white protagonists as symbols of law, justice, and order, and black criminality as a violent disturbance to white American public life, *The Wire* spends as much time with characters entrenched in “the game” as it does the police officers and does so with remarkable impartiality and complexity. The portrait of Stringer Bell is particularly indicative of that trend and is important for the ways in which Stringer’s philosophy has profound utopian aspirations in alignment with the American Dream and is yet paradoxically bound in neoliberalist cutthroat capitalist methodologies. As Jason Read argues in “Stringer Bell’s Lament: Violence and Legitimacy in Contemporary Capitalism:

> The break between the world of business and the world of drugs is never clean; however, they are both constituted by the same fundamental economy and the same drive for profit. They are unified by the fact that in each economy it is money, and not morals or any other measure, that stands as the highest value (Read 125).

> “It’s just business”, Stringer coldly asserts when making the choice to inflict violence, indicating the impersonal and passionless detachment evident in his conception of the nature of the drug trade.

> In contrast to Avon, Stringer’s central focus is profit, a focus that narrows even further after Avon must spend a year in prison, and Stringer is handling the organization in Avon’s absence. In an important scene where McNulty is tailing Stringer, he follows
him all the way to a community college where we see Stringer in attendance, taking business classes (as we see him actively participating in a class group discussion) leading to his incorporation of business and economic theories into the drug trade (2:05). This revelation indicates Stringer’s intellect and work ethic and the scene is ironically suggestive of what might have been Stringer’s potential for legitimate self-realization if his subjective agency were not shaped by being brought up on the street and in the drug trade. Later, he desires to expand outward from the streets by investing his money in real estate and buying up lucrative property, not for the purposes of laundering, but to eventually insulate himself from the day-to-day business of the drug trade and become a legitimate businessman (Read 130). Certainly, Stringer has internalized the American Dream’s mythology that one can come from the lower echelons of society, as he has, and, with a combination of hard work and a sharp business acumen, rise to the top. He has shrewdly embraced the neo-liberal “virtues of the market” (Read 133), and with his polished appearance and sharp three-piece suits fancies himself as a CEO, consistently referring to his drugs as mere “product”.

Stringer’s vision is the elevation of the drug trade into the franchise of legitimate corporate America. And Stringer reconfigures the rules of “the game” and the drug trade in order to achieve his vision. When forced to put out a lesser “product” (there is a point at which he loses access to his “quality” narcotic and must put out weaker drugs) he repackages them in different colours, and markets them with a new brand name in order to increase his profits (Read 130). His consultation with his drug crew subordinates begins to resemble a board meeting in which he “schools” them in business logic rather than street logic, where retaliating or not against a rival gang is weighed using the
business scales of profit and loss rather than violent displays of power (Read 128). In this way, it would appear that Stringer’s methodology removes violence from the day-to-day practices of the drug trade. He eventually forms the co-op (a “merger” in corporate-speak) with rival drug kingpin, Proposition Joe (Robert F. Chew), and the other lead drug runners of Baltimore (Read 130). When violent upstart Marlo Stanfield (Jamie Hector) starts aggressively taking the Barksdale’s territory, Stringer is unfazed. In terms of pure economics and cash flow the Barksdales have already “won the game”. As far as Stringer is concerned, Marlo can have his petty corners as “the game” has been reconfigured in Stringer’s mind where it is no longer about territorialism, merit as a soldier, proving masculinity, or personal honour. It has been reconfigured along the lines of pure economics and neoliberal market practices represented by the corporate model of the co-op: “The co-op ultimately becomes its own end, the idea of the drug trade as pure business, separate from street-level conflicts” (Read 129).

While still exploitative, there is a subtle utopian strain about this vision of “the game” and that is the reduction of violence that this brings to Stringer’s Baltimore. While violence is still present and sometimes deemed necessary (as indicated in Stringer’s decision to execute D’Angelo) it is rare and to be avoided if possible both for the way it disrupts the flow of money, and the way it calls attention to outside spheres such as the cops, the media, and the justice system. Thus Stringer’s reduction of violence is not a moral imperative but rather a pragmatic, utilitarian one. Stringer refers derogatorily to the traditional conception of the drug trade as “gun-and-run shit” and “beefing over corners” and the ongoing gangland bloodshed over territory is deemed more and more archaic by Stringer as his arc develops, a formulation of street politics of
a bygone era as represented by his partner Avon. The relationship between the drug trade and violence and the *The Wire’s* ability to distinguish between them is critiqued by McNulty in an earlier scene in Season 1 and is reflexively brought up again by D’Angelo in the subsequent episode: “Everything else in this country gets sold without people shooting each other over it”, they both say. “Why it got to be that way with drugs? Why not just sell the shit and walk the fuck away?” (1:02 and 1:03). Stringer’s remodelling of the drug trade away from street codes of conduct and towards a corporate model alleviates some of this violence. And eventually Stringer’s property investments represent a move towards pure legitimacy, an attempt to leave the drug trade behind entirely, and to fold and incorporate the Barksdale criminal organization into legitimate business (Read 130).

Stringer’s attempt to elevate “the game” is a perfect model of both the utopian and dystopian contradictions and tensions inherent in the American Dream. On the one hand Stringer as an entrepreneur has elevated himself to the top but at the expense of others who are exploited as worker bees in the drug trade or the addicts upon which the drug trade is dependent. The American Dream asserts that Americans can start out from any walk of life, and with the right disposition, and hard work can elevate themselves “to the top” as long as they work hard and are able to employ a quintessentially American entrepreneurial spirit. This ethos is predicated on a mutually dependent “top” and a “bottom” (“winners” and “losers”). As I have argued, the American Dream suggests that America is a meritocracy, a sphere of equality in which anyone from can transcend their humble origins. On the surface, this ethos suggests equal opportunity where in fact a hierarchy still operates between those who profess to work hard and possess an
entrepreneurial spirit and those who are deemed lazy and lack the proper commercial mindset. In order for the American Dream to be valid and to be achieved there must be those on top and those on the bottom, an organizing principle based on merit (rather than the status of one’s birth as associated with retrograde European classism), as well as an ongoing dialectical tension between “the individual” and “society”.

The American dream encourages individualistic competitiveness and a shrewd, merciless business sense which most often involves exploitation. Stringer embodies this philosophy. His utopian vision of upward mobility for himself and others like him within the co-op is also dystopian in that it involves the exploitation of drug addicts – labelled pejoratively as “fiends” by those in the drug trade. The fact that his wealth is accrued at the exploitation of so many desperate, broken souls of Baltimore who are also from his own black community does not affect Stringer Bell’s conscience. As Gordin argues in “Utopia and Dystopia Beyond Space and Time”: “[Even] as the utopias of communism and cosmopolitan peace stand indicted, the neoliberal utopia of the market creeps up on us, now under the ideologically driven notion of a Smithian human nature. This also produces the dystopic vision of the ‘planet of slums’, a Dickensian wasteland of urban poverty, exploitation, and violence” (Gordin 13). For Stringer, the urban wasteland of inner city West Baltimore that he has helped produce and the exploitation of addicts are justified; it is after all a matter of supply and demand. Using business logic, Stringer believes that, if there is a demand for drugs then there is no reason that the market should not supply it, and thus profit from its exchange, a form of tautological reasoning (‘business is business’) that morally justifies exploitation with the notion that drug addiction has been a pervasive social ill longer than “the game” has been around, and will
continue to be so well into the indefinite future. As Stringer tells D’Angelo in his justification of the drug trade: “them fiends is always going to be there...this shit is forever”. It is market logic that legitimizes the drug trade for Stringer and eases his conscience and furthermore Stringer likes the winners versus losers discourse, because he desires so much to be a winner – to win the American Dream. Stringer’s methods are also aligned with the ethos of pure monetarism; “of cash without territory or industry” (Lucasi 141), the postmodern neoliberal business acumen that emphasizes investment and cash flow, while deemphasizing the accumulation of territory or industrial space which lies in stark contrast with Avon’s obsession with territory and visible displays of power and wealth.

Stringer’s utopian vision of an upwardly mobile black underclass (represented by himself and Avon) and the reconfiguration of the drug trade into legitimate business (and thus without violence), is ground to a halt in Season 3 by two forces: the “legitimate” world of business on the one hand and the traditionalism of “the game” as represented by Avon and the Barksdales’ rival, Marlo Stanfield, on the other hand. Stringer, under the impression that the legitimate market is fair and free and clear of dirty ethics and backstabbing, is fleeced by the supposedly “legitimate” developers, white collar criminals who are never brought to justice in The Wire, another clear moment of the series’ ideological critique of criminality as a black urban enterprise is to be attacked with aggressive street patrols, surveillance, and search warrants while white collar crime goes unnoticed, uninvestigated, and unpunished. The “War on Drugs” is portrayed as synonymous with an attack on impoverished black communities, believed to be “ground
zero” of America’s illegal drug economy, when in fact it is white collar crime and its economic practices that provide the overall infrastructure for exploitation to occur.

While sincere and diligent in his efforts to become a developer, Stringer’s peers see him as an ignorant thug from the backwater of Baltimore’s ghettos. Ironically, Stringer is both intelligent and hard-working enough to become an entrepreneur but lacks the knowledge of this particular game where political manoeuvring, manipulation and power plays are much more subtle than on the street. As Read argues concerning the transition from feudalism (represented by The Wire’s portrayal of inner city Baltimore) towards capitalism:

At first glance the narrative of primitive accumulation, whether on the individual or social scale, would seem to bring an end to violence, as legitimate means of exploitation take the place of plunder. For Marx, however, primitive accumulation is not so much an end to violence, but a transformation of it…Capitalism is not an end to violence but a codification of it, a normalization of it to the point where it becomes invisible (Read 131).

Stringer naively believes that because his reconceptualization of the drug trade diminishes physical violence that it is morally sound and justified and he is oblivious to the codified violence of exploitation bound in the neoliberal discourse that not only surrounds him, but that he also employs on the black underclass, a discourse which is used against him by the developers (Read 133). For this reason, primitive accumulation, the “invisible” methods of white collar corporate violence, used to embezzle Stringer are done so deftly and professionally that he is caught completely unaware. Stringer’s ambitions to invest the earnings of his drug empire into real estate, thus leaving behind the streets forever, are thwarted by the developers, whose supposed legitimacy and market shrewdness (without the need for physical violence), Stringer ironically covets as the ideal of American enterprise:
Stringer’s story is thus not just a retelling of the fundamental narrative of capitalism, in which the game stands in for the violent and honor-bound world of feudalism, but it becomes an allegory for life under capitalism. Stringer has proven to be too good a student, taking seriously capital’s lessons about the virtues of the market and idealization of the CEO – all of which proves to be his undoing (Read 133).

More representative of the feudal ethos that Marx argues capitalism has replaced as the dominant mode of social organization, Avon resents Stringer’s economic vision and labels Stringer Bell as a “man without a country” (indicating Avon’s obsession with antiquated notions of territorialism) who is “not hard enough for this right here” (ie. “the game”) (Read 128) (3:08). The scope of the two men’s perceptions of the world are noteworthy as Stringer insists to Avon that “there’s games beyond the game” indicating Stringer’s burgeoning realization that the economics of the ghetto and the drug trade is directly linked to the overarching model of market logic of capitalistic society, but also his desire for social mobility beyond the ghetto of West Baltimore and into what he sees as a broader arena of economic and social competition. When he’s knocked down from the broader arena by letting himself be taken advantage of by Clay Davis (Isiah Whitlock, Jr.) and a handful of predominantly white developers, he’s chastised by Avon. “What’d I tell you about playin’ them away games...They saw your ghetto ass coming a mile away, man. You got a beef with them? *That shit is on you*” (3:11). Indeed as Stringer’s narrative develops he is straddling two worlds, and becomes thwarted by the ideological tensions between them, the street and the world beyond the street, both modelled after a neoliberal capitalist framework and yet Avon’s approach is myopically focused on honour-bound street codes of conduct that are in contention with Stringer’s burgeoning philosophies: “while Stringer is able to accumulate money, he is unable to acquire security and legitimacy, and he remains caught between the semi-feudal loyalties of the
drug trade and the ruthless world of capital, until the contradictions between the two eventually kill him” (Read 122).

As a foil to Stringer, Avon cares little for the world outside of Baltimore’s inner city. The only America that matters to him and that dictates the terms of his reality and his behaviour within it is the inner city and its black community. For Avon, the world outside of black America’s inner city is alien territory with a dissimilar and unrelated set of rules, practices, ethics, and ideologies that he naively perceives as inconsequential and insignificant to those of the inner city (Read 129). While Stringer is preoccupied with the developers and the co-op (which Avon resents for the ways in which the co-op involves “compromise” between gangsters, because from his point of view it makes them all appear weak), Avon is feuding over territory with the upstart Marlo. When Stringer advises Avon to let it be, reiterating his economic strategies and the fact that the Barksdale organization has already won “the game” in terms of pure profit, Avon rebuffs him: “Yeah, I ain’t no suit-wearing businessman like you. You know I am just a gangster, I suppose. And I want my corners” (3:06). Avon’s stubborn rebuttal re-emphasizes his own preoccupation with accumulating territory and codified displays of masculine violence that visibly indicates who is really on top of the pyramid. For Avon displays of power are not merely guided by economics but the visibility of phallic power through territory and physical force (Read 131).

Stringer and Avon’s methodologies both emphasize violence but differ in that Stringer’s violence is strategic while Avon’s violence is symbolic (Read 131). For Stringer it is a calculation weighed using scales of profit and loss while for Avon it is to “send a message” that is symbolic of his status as top dog within “the game”. While
Marlo is a violent interloper, Avon displays admiration for him, claiming that Marlo is playing the game with heart. The insinuation is that Marlo, despite being Avon’s rival, ultimately transitions into more of a kindred spirit than Stringer, whose violence is a strategic calculation enacted covertly, impersonally, and in the shadows. Marlo and Avon are fighting in the open for territory, as well as for the preservation of manhood, and a code of honour as dictated by the politics of inner city Baltimore. As their partnership and friendship degrades, Avon spells out their differences for Stringer: “You know what the difference is between you and me? I bleed red. And you bleed green”, connoting Avon’s fiery passion against Stringer’s profit-minded calculating indifference (3:10). For Avon, as Stringer moves further away from “the game”, he loses his passion as well as his masculine identification as a black male from West Baltimore. Stringer has become “a man without a country” with a modus operandi that is guided purely by neoliberal economics rather than “heart” as a soldier of the streets.

Stringer’s overidentification with the American Dream, with neoliberal “merciless market logic” of winners and losers, and his arrogance that he is undoubtedly a victor in his pursuit of wealth is his hamartia, his tragic error that marks him as a Greek tragic hero. Similar to Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman, Stringer has been indoctrinated with an unwavering devotion to the American Dream ideology which blinds him to seeing the codified violence of “primitive accumulation” that Marx proposes, the method of exploitation that he enacts upon the drug users that he is dependent upon and the type of white-collar violence the developers use against him. Stringer’s devotion to economic philosophy as a source of liberation is evident when McNulty and Bunk visit Stringer’s ornate yet tidy and uncluttered apartment after his demise (3:12). “Who the fuck was I
“chasin’?,” McNulty exclaims, as he examines Stringer’s bookshelf which includes Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, a potent manifesto on economics, free trade, and the benefits of industrial wealth. After Stringer’s rise he is brought down and killed by stick-up boy, Omar, and the Muslim mercenary Brother Mouzone (Michael Potts) – a set up of Avon. The developer’s exploitation of Stringer, Avon’s betrayal of him, and his murder is evocative of classical Greek tragedy that emphasizes the moment of reversal (*peripeteia*) wherein the tragic hero is removed from his elevated position and comes into forceful recognition (*anagnōrisis*) with his fate (Leitch interpreting Aristotle 85). It is revealing that he is killed by Omar and Mouzone who have both been used by Stringer as their principled, righteous vigilantism stands in stark contrast to Stringer’s dispassionate market ethos.

However, before Stringer Bell’s murder in one of his aborted condominium projects (a metaphor for the abortion of Stringer’s reconfiguration of the drug trade towards “legitimate business”), Stringer forms a like-mindedness with an unlikely candidate: Major Colvin of the Baltimore Police Department (3:11). As Stringer meets with Colvin in order to provide evidence that would incarcerate Avon, who has begun to jeopardize the profits of the co-op, Colvin’s Hamsterdam project has been exposed and is also being dismantled. It is a thought provoking scene where these two men from opposite sides of the drug war are reflexively paired, both wondering why it is that the drug trade is embedded in violence and seeking a way to reshape “the game”. The scene is punctuated with gravity and a mutual sense of understanding as both men’s hopeful – albeit disparate – projects for the drug trade are aborted. “Looks like you and me both trying to make sense of this game”, Stringer observes, indicating the difficulty in
reconfiguring the rules of something that has become so tautologically entrenched and virtually unalterable. Sensing Stringer’s unease, Colvin inquires as to why Stringer would betray his lifelong friend and partner. “Must have done something to hurt you”, Colvin suggests. “No. It’s just business”, Stringer awkwardly replies.

There is irony in this response as we can see that the decision is painful for Stringer. From previous scenes in Stringer’s arc it is clear that he is fond of Avon but under no circumstances will he limit himself to the street; he desires to be seen as more than just a thug (Idris Elba plays this contradiction out in his laudable performance as Stringer Bell). In their final scene together, Stringer and Avon reminisce on a harbourfront hotel canopy overlooking the city, an overtly symbolic transition from their place in their towers in the projects (3:11). Avon remarks upon how incredulous it is to own that which they always dreamed about. “We ain’t gotta dream no more, man. We got real shit”, Stringer proclaims indicating his identification with the American Dream as both men take a moment to revel in their rags-to-riches elevation that has motivated them all their lives.

Avon reminisces about their youth together and an incident when Stringer as a boy was being chased by a mall cop for stealing a badminton racket and they both laugh at the ridiculousness of this as they both realized that they didn’t have a yard to play badminton in anyway. The story is remarkably funny but also telling as it discursively points to the absurdity of American materialism where Stringer fetishized, coveted, and stole a commodity for which he had no use for, thus indicating the failure of the American Dream to provide the black underclass with basic needs and security, while problematically stoking the fetishized desire for material displays of social mobility and
wealth. But it is too late for Stringer and he has learned his market lessons well. He desires to escape the ghetto and will not let even Avon disrupt his single-minded pursuit of wealth and upward mobility. It is fitting that before his death he protests to Omar and Mouzone that his life as a gangster is behind him. “I ain’t involved. I ain’t involved in that gangster bullshit no more”, he claims, thus indicating his desire to be viewed not as a thug, but as a legitimate member of the American Dream franchise and as a legitimate capitalist (Read 130). Yet, the fact that Stringer finds an unlikely ally in Colvin before his death, thus transgressing the boundaries of street honour, indicates how far Stringer has come in desperately attempting to secure his own legitimacy in the franchise of the American Dream (Read 132). As one of the other main strands of Season 3 that destabilizes the American Dream, it is Colvin’s “Hamsterdam” project which I turn to next.
Chapter 3

“Hamsterdam”: Legalizing Drugs and the Utopia/Dystopia Dialectic

Season 3’s focus on Hamsterdam, a designated Free Zone for drugs, is perhaps The Wire’s most unlikely narrative trajectory as far as realism is concerned and perhaps the closest the show moves towards fantasy. This is not detrimental to the realism at stake in The Wire. In fact, Hamsterdam is one of the series’ most poignant and illuminating narrative arcs. To look at it another way, I want to briefly consider genre theory, in particular the spectrum between realism and fantasy and the ways in which the boundaries of realism can be stretched to accommodate important thematic concerns. For example, in a more fantastical genre such as science fiction (originally termed “speculative fiction” when it emerged) utopian and dystopian worlds are created, where, alternative models of social, political, cultural, gender, or class arrangements are formed that can act as models for speculation and conjecture. Now The Wire is far from science fiction on the realism/fantasy spectrum (stylistically and thematically its influences are Dickens, noir, the police procedural, muckraking journalism, and ‘hood films, all modes associated with the conventions of realism), but the model of Hamsterdam plays a similar function in that it is a “what if?” scenario, a thought experiment that invites speculation and conjecture on what would happen if there was a “Free Zone” in the inner city of Baltimore for the drug trade, thus imagining a different kind of “game”. On a grander scale it speculates on what would be the outcome if America gave up the “War on Drugs” – which is synonymously depicted as a war on the black underclass – and moved towards legalization and reconfigured the “War” in terms of “a public health solution, not an interminable project of incarceration” that involves social outreach and harm reduction
programs rather than displays of force and control of an afflicted social body. (McMillan 58). If The Wire is akin to Greek tragedy then visiting Hamsterdam is a journey into the Underworld, but parallel to numerous science fiction settings, Hamsterdam is also a microcosm of specified social relationships, a new cultural growth forming in a bottle. What is interesting in the Hamsterdam arc is how this new cultural growth impacts the residents not only within its borders but to the greater social body outside of its margins, thus producing a paired dystopia/utopia dialectic between the afflicted space of Hamsterdam and the unafflicted black inner city community that is able to rejuvenate itself without the interference of the oppressive drug trade. The creation of Hamsterdam reshapes its surrounding neighbourhoods into livable spaces and later the revelation of Hamsterdam’s existence throws a monkey wrench into the inner workings of the Baltimore police force and the political arena.

The paired dystopia/utopia of Hamsterdam and inner city Baltimore with a relocated drug trade is comparable to The Wire’s continuous depiction of the two Americas described by Slavoj Žižek in “The Wire, or, What to Do in Non-Evental Times” between “those participating in the American Dream and those left behind” (Žižek 218). In this season The Wire depicts a utopian enfranchised black working class neighbourhood after the boundaries of the drug trade are removed and relocated into another geographic location where drugs are unofficially “legalized”. This initiative transforms the topography of Baltimore and not only the illegitimate drug trade but also the institutions of law and order – institutions that need an enemy to fight because they “effectively require it” since “illegality is a condition for the system to function” (Žižek
As McMillan argues the drug trade and law enforcement are intertwined and co-dependent practices wound together in an overarching disciplinarian structure:

Such delinquency is, as Foucault notes, not only a “product” of an institutional context, but “a part and an instrument of it” (Discipline 282). Discipline does not relate to delinquency in a purely negative or punitive fashion, but uses the delinquent for its own purposes. Their economic niche having been produced in the first place by the War on Drugs, the gangs’ activities are organized in turn around police surveillance and potential prosecution. The politicians they bribe do their part to discourage investigations; lawyers like Levy create structured pleas to ensure that the gangs can continue their operations (and lawyers’ practices can flourish). When a leader is imprisoned, someone quickly assumes his role...This kind of bleak social realism makes the Baltimore of The Wire a frustrating place for any would-be hero (McMillan 56).

But how does the “War on Drugs” connect with the “merciless market logic” of late capitalism? As David Simon argues: “We pretend to war against narcotics, but in truth, we are simply brutalizing and dehumanizing an urban underclass that we no longer need as a labor supply” (quoted by Žižek 219). I wish to take this argument one step further. As industry has declined and as the welfare state becomes increasingly dismantled the black urban underclass becomes increasingly irrelevant as a “labor supply” as Simon argues, but it is also perceived as a drain on the system and the smooth functioning of capital. In public discourse drug abuse is perceived to be an epidemic that is particularly pervasive amongst impoverished black people and the “War on Drugs” is a visible, aggressive show of force indicating America’s “zero tolerance” for not only addiction, but perceived indolence and lethargy, and the inability of the impoverished underclass to contribute to the overall operation of the capitalist system. In essence, the “War on Drugs” is an attempt to control and police a neglected social body perceived to be the source of a number of society’s ills when in fact the ravaging effects of global corporate enterprise on local communities is never taken into account – such as the dissolution of
inner city industry and jobs which are relocated to third world economies where poor
labourers are exploited for a pittance. The black underclass may be perceived to be a
parasitical community on the system while the true parasitical body on society’s
resources is unchecked, unrestrained global capital. Season 3’s Hamsterdam arc sets the
two Americas in stark relief and exposes the “War on Drugs” to be a farce – it is in fact
an attempt to control a population without really addressing their needs.

The Hamsterdam experiment is initially an attempt to remove the drug trade from
inner city corners so that the inner city can become rehabilitated, but eventually
Hamsterdam becomes a site of potential rehabilitation itself as social assistance, harm
reduction, and outreach programs attempt to help afflicted drug users in the zone. Yet
ultimately the free zone is too radical an idea and upsets the co-dependent relationship
between the legal system and the drug trade in that the legal system needs a clear enemy
to combat in order to justify its existence and its function. This is evident when
Hamsterdam is revealed to the public and the police force violently and militaristically
takes down and dismantles Hamsterdam at season’s end clearly indicating their need to
be seen as an aggressive force against drugs in the public eye:

These modes depend on a logic of visibility and representation, in which
order is maintained partially through messages sent to the public: messages
guaranteeing police accountability, strict enforcement of the law, and swift
and severe punishment for infractions. In The Wire, these competing forms
are recast as games of pure power, technologies for preserving the institution
rather than ensuring public order (Brooks 66).

With this argument in mind it is as though the police are really in contention with the
scrutinizing public eye of the media even more so than they are with the black underclass,
who they are obligated to attack in the power play of appearances in order to maintain the
illusion of order and a zero tolerance stance against drugs.
The creation of Hamsterdam is initiated by Major “Bunny” Colvin (Robert Wisdom), a black police officer who has grown up in the inner city of Baltimore. Colvin is characterized as a wizened, intelligent, compassionate and experienced police officer coming into retirement, an elder of the black community with a penchant for unorthodoxy and thinking outside of the box. Yet his unorthodoxy is not like Jimmy McNulty’s issues with authority as Colvin is not an instigator, nor is he impulsively rebellious. He is respected by his peers and subordinates and works well with others. He is also connected to community organizations such as the Church – notable by his friendship with the Deacon (Melvin Williams) – and numerous social assistance programs as well as in academic circles. This characterization is important, in that Colvin is portrayed as a reasonable man who desires to create lasting solutions, not a loose cannon. The decision to create a “Free Zone” for drugs is not an impetuous one, but is borne out of growing up in inner city Baltimore and of an entire career spent fighting the elusive “War on Drugs”, and watching the detrimental effects ravage inner city communities and wear down the institutional functioning of Baltimore’s law enforcement. As he claims,

Dozerman gets shot for some bullshit...and that’s when the idea of the free zone, of Hamsterdam, come to me. ‘Cause this drug thing, this ain’t police work. Naw, it ain’t...I mean you call something a war and pretty soon, everybody gonna be running around acting like warriors...Soon the neighbourhood that you supposed to be policing, that’s just occupied territory (“Reformation”).

There is a sense that Colvin, who has been witness to these dynamics for much of his life, is exhausted with “the game” and determines that the only course of action left is a radical attempt at change.

Colvin’s utopian gestures are also predicated on past, bygone models of policing. His ideal police officer is not the hypermasculine jock performance that inflects many of
the younger generations of police officers that are portrayed in *The Wire* such as Ellis Carver (Seth Gilliam) and “Here” Hauk (Domenick Lombardozzi), but a nostalgic return to an idealized policeman of a former era that walks a beat and interacts with the community, who is a central part of that community’s desire to create safer, hospitable neighbourhoods, free of crime, drugs, violence and other social ills. The police officer in Colvin’s utopian vision is not about control, displays of force or invisible surveillance, but a strong visible presence in the neighbourhood that emphasizes strong communal interaction and building infrastructure with real positive effects.

Colvin is not alone in his ideas of policing. It is a utopian model that crops up repeatedly throughout the series. Colvin’s musings on the role of the police officer are echoed during a Westside community meeting where he escorts mayoral candidate Thomas Carcetti (Aiden Gillen) to illustrate the impacts of Hamsterdam (3:11). One vocal woman speaks out on her ideal of the police officer to high applause from the audience as she remembers it as a young woman, compared to the police officer of today. The contrast is sharp and biting as she reminisces over the beat cop of her memories – whom she identifies as white, and who typically would be an outsider – who would patrol the neighbourhood and interact face-to-face with its people and would address their concerns. “I knew his name” she says, “and he knew my name,” noting the difference between this idealized gentleman cop and the authoritarian gung-ho cops of the present who race in, bust up the street corner, rough up the corner boys as a display of force, and then leave as if they were just another gang.

This motif of the idealized beat cop is returned to in the montage at the end of the season. After realizing that his career as a homicide detective only fuels his own self-
destructive behaviour and alcoholism, Jimmy cleans himself up and returns to the humble position of the beat cop. Jauntily strolling through his post and wearing the traditional blue beat cop uniform, we see McNulty jovially twirling his nightstick as if he’s on parade, talking to and laughing with Baltimore’s inner city residents (3:12). The scene is reminiscent of the notion of the ideal neighbourly cop, in this case a white cop, who by virtue of his level of involvement and his visibility on the sidewalk has become a part of the community, rather than an alienating bully in a threatening police cruiser. The woman’s idealization of real policing and the characterization of McNulty with affable Irish charm, casually socializing with black residents, invokes Simons and Burns’ utopian ideals of “folk” cultures intermingling, simple and ordinary working class people who are not consumed with aspirations for wealth or power, coming together to sustain, rebuild, and rejuvenate communities. In “Realism and Utopia in The Wire,” Fredric Jameson argues that these brief glimpses of idealized local folk cultures in The Wire is punctuated by a “postmodern” return to regionalism, the contemporary fascination with distinctly local cultures in the face of their dissolution by the culturally flattening processes of globalization: “[The] ethnic still very much exists here [in The Wire], particularly if you include the police as an ethnic category, both in some figurative or moral sense, and also on account of the Irish tradition still very much in evidence among them” (389-369). The portrayal here of intermingling blue collar African and Irish Americans on the street of inner city America, enjoying each other’s company and working together to create safer inner city communities, stands in stark relief to the pervasive alienation and paranoia that dictates many of The Wire’s social interactions and relationships that are shaped by “merciless market logic”.
Colvin’s creation of a “Free Zone” for the drug trade is an attempt to further “realize” this communal ideal as the relocation of the drug trade opens up the space for inner city black residents to conduct their affairs without fear. Dealers and addicts are given the green light to sell and use drugs within the designated district that is nicknamed Hamsterdam as long as there is no violence. It is important that Hamsterdam is a zone of mostly abandoned residential homes (labelled “the vacants” by Baltimore’s residents) in that they signal the vacuum of poverty and bureaucratic neglect towards the impoverished within the city, but here is used to greater purpose. The “vacants” are abandoned infrastructure that, instead of being converted into homes for Baltimore citizens in need of housing, are jettisoned and left neglected. Colvin puts this abandoned infrastructure to use to try out his radical reconfiguration of the drug trade. Colvin’s “Free Zone” is so incredulous and revisionist that it initially baffles everyone and destabilizes the “War on Drugs” and the co-dependent relationship between law enforcement and the drug trade. It baffles the people under his command – whom he convinces, claiming that eventually they are going to perform a mass arrest, a major strike against the drug trade, a lie in order to get them to back him, and to protect his people against legal ramifications down the road – and the drug dealers (who sense a set up) and the users (who cannot fathom how they are able to use openly and without abuse). “Why you got to go fuck with the program?” one confused dealer exclaims to a police officer as he tries to make sense of the new dynamic that reconfigures the standard paradigm that pits police and dealers on opposite sides of the fence as “the enemy” (3:04). All of these various parties require serious convincing in order to concede to the idea and some fabrication on Colvin’s part is necessary to get his officers and dealers to accede.
Hamsterdam simultaneously becomes a haven for the drug trade, as well as a
dystopian hell wherein addicts use and abuse themselves and each other with drugs and
the sex trade. While Hamsterdam might benefit Baltimore as a whole, it is still an
abyssmal concentration of social harms, pain, and self-destruction whose boundaries are
policed by Colvin and his officers only where violence is concerned. There are no
weapons allowed in Hamsterdam and violent offenders are thrown out and prohibited
from further return. Essentially Colvin has found a way to separate physical violence
from the drug trade. He has also found a compromise that gives everyone what they
want: the police officers are much freer to pursue “real police work”, the dealers are free
to sell their trade openly, and without fear of reprimand from each other or the police, and
the users are able to get high openly without threats of violence or persecution. However,
as the project develops Colvin, the Deacon, and the others involved realize that
Hamsterdam is an abomination and must be addressed rather than just looking the other
way. The “other” America that has been left behind and the various social ills therein
cannot be simply ignored. Thus Colvin and the others involved in creating Hamsterdam
reconfigure the space as a focal point for medical care, outreach, and harm reduction
groups who assist in helping people get clean or distribute clean needles, thus reducing
the risk of spreading disease. As Gene, an academic that Colvin recruits says, in defense
of Hamsterdam: “All I know is that from a public health perspective there are remarkable
things happening in the Free Zones. Needle exchanges, on-site blood testing, condom
distribution...most of all, we’re interacting with an at-risk community that is usually
elusive. We’re even talking some of these people into drug treatment” (3:11).
By bringing drugs and drug use out of the margins and exposing it in the open, without reprimand or stigma, drugs and drug users become “controlled” and contained without an absolute show of force and its long term goals become rehabilitation and treatment. In addition, Baltimore’s inner city corners become “Free Zones” of another kind, as citizens, no longer in the grip of fear of gang violence, walk the streets again. After his experiment is exposed, Colvin takes Carcetti through serene, peaceful streets now evacuated and unburdened from threatening and oppressive gang and police activity, inner city black neighbourhoods that are thriving again: we see people relaxed and socializing on the sidewalk, children playing basketball and skateboarding carefree in the street, ice drink stands, music ringing through the air, people tending to their homes and front yards, and local businesses flourishing (3:06). Colvin has in effect created two havens: one for the drug trade (which is indeed also dystopian) and one for everybody else in West Baltimore.

Colvin’s experiment is not to last however. It is too radical to find support by his superiors, by the mayor’s office, or the media. Hamsterdam reconfigures the drug trade, dissolves gang violence, provides clean needless for users and the opportunity for harm reduction groups to tackle addiction en masse, frees the police to pursue more pressing investigations, and frees Baltimore inner city neighbourhoods from the oppressive circumstances of the “drug war”. However, to all outside appearances Hamsterdam is an abomination, a dystopia of squalor, wretchedness and disease and it sends a message for the legalization of narcotics. Contemporary law enforcement is dependent upon the drug trade as its “enemy” in order to justify its own function and without it, it too falls apart. Also in our contemporary media saturated-world, such a radical reconfiguration of the
drug trade cannot be dressed for the cameras in any way that would gain public support. Thus appearances and actual effects are shown to be in stark opposition. Hamsterdam cannot stand for the ways in which it appears to the general public, and for the ways in which it embarrasses and implicates those in positions of power. It legitimates drugs as a visible part of daily urban life and a part of America. It exposes the “other America” to the public and justifies “indolence” and “affliction” and a black underclass that is perceived to be parasitical to the overarching system and the processes of late capital. However beneficial Hamsterdam may be in terms of actual effects, it is appearances that matter and those in power must maintain their oppositional stance.

Like the “show of force” enacted by police officers in their “buy/bust” drug shakedown routines – which are revealed to be useless spectacles akin to “raking leaves on a rainy day” as the minister Deacon puts it – the civic institutions must maintain a visible front to the drug trade. As Burrell puts it in a previous episode where the police mount up for a drug raid, “we’ve got to go out there [in front of the media] with dope on the table” (1:11). Hamsterdam is shut down with “extreme prejudice” in a police raid that is a constructed overwrought performance for the media and for public perception – with Wagner’s triumphant “Flight of the Valkyries” blaring ironically if not preposterously from police cruisers – to construct a staged spectacle of “The War on Drugs” with a clear demarcation between the “good guys” and the “bad guys” (3:12). In the production of disciplined bodies within the ranks of the police department (to dissuade future renegades like Colvin who is made an example of) and to discipline members of the abject drug trade, the institutions of law and order must display the use of intolerant force in front of the media. In one shot there is a user being pulled out of a
vacant struggling to keep his pants on as he was clearly engaged in a sexual exchange and he is paraded in front of the news camera. Tearing Hamsterdam apart while with “their pants down” (literally as one person is being dragged out of a building by a police officer in his underwear) is a shaming device emphasizing the undesirability of indolence that is used in the production of disciplined, compliant bodies.

Drugs must be portrayed as a controlled substance, and its users and distributers as being punished for their abject behaviour and practices. The fact that illegal drug use in Hamsterdam is connoted with notions of filth, disease, depravity, and psychosis, and is thus not representable to the public, without instilling revulsion and loathing, is also part of the reason that Hamsterdam is shut down. As Julia Kristeva argues in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*:

> It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior...Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility (Kristeva 4).

To extrapolate on Kristeva’s examples, I will include the shiftless and promiscuous drug users that we see in Hamsterdam. While Bubbles (Andre Royo) maintains a measure of dignity and discipline in his addiction (a semi-functioning addict who works in legitimate jobs for his high), others like his friend Johnny (Leo Fitzpatrick) lie, cheat, and steal and takes dangerous risks in his drug abuse (it is revealed that he is HIV positive after sharing used needles). The people of Hamsterdam and their environment destabilize notions of systems, order, and cleanliness, and the notion that the police would allow a space of abject drug use blurs the boundaries between law/order and drug abuse, thus exposing the
fragility of such a border. “War on Drugs” paramilitary tactics may not be effective in terms of actual long-term effects, but they provide visible reassurance, that abject practices like drug abuse are being contained and restored to order. And in the public eye, Colvin is presented by the department as a lunatic rogue cop who has gone astray, a lone wolf howling at the moon who is rejected from the system (he is demoted and then fired so that he does not go out with a major’s retirement pay), and it is made clear publicly that he is not representative of his institution’s goals and aims. In essence, Colvin’s utopian project is undermined by society’s unequivocal opposition to drugs that must be maintained in front of the scrutiny of the public’s watchful eye and discriminating gaze.

In agreement with Simon, I have argued that America’s “War on Drugs” is synonymously a war on the black underclass, an attack on a marginalized community deemed to be indolent and abject. This dominant perception of impoverished black communities fails to recognize the relationship between those who lack resources and opportunities and are disenfranchised and in despair who seek out drugs to escape a dismal day-to-day reality: or, rather, seek out the drug trade for employment and advancement, opportunities that are otherwise not provided or are invisible to them. In many ways Hamsterdam is the dark side of the American Dream that is unrepresentable. In the late capitalist economy Hamsterdam exposes not only the horrific extent of the cyclical despair of many black American citizens, but also a legacy of neglect towards America’s impoverished black communities. In the “merciless market logic” of late capital appearances matter in order to stimulate economic growth, and Hamsterdam is too ugly, too similar to European “socialism”, and paradoxically too revealing of the neglect
and impoverishment enacted upon black inner city communities to be permissible as a visible feature of America, even if it provides a focal point to treat those who are afflicted with addiction with actual lasting effects. Methodologies that produce actual lasting effects and methodologies that creates the *appearance* of lasting effects when in fact they reproduce social ills is present in the Hamsterdam/"War On Drugs" dichotomy and is also present in the 4th season’s portrayal of the American education system that is in dialectical tension between opposing pedagogical methods that directly address the crises of black inner city youth and the imposition of standardized testing. It is this tension I turn to in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4

“We Got Our Thing, But it’s Just Part of the Big Thing”: Higher Learning and *The Wire*’s Pedagogies for Inner City Youth

Season 4 of *The Wire* is one of the series’ most illuminating chapters on the conditions of inner city poverty and neglect that shape African American consciousness, and arguably the series’ most poignant. After three seasons that dramatize the “War on Drugs” and the conflicts and tensions of the drug trade, Season 4 shifts our focus to look at the school system, and how these young men are drawn into a world of criminality. In its portrayal of young black teenage boys we are given insight into the world that shaped Avon or Stringer or Omar. In doing so we are given the opportunity to see the roots and the devices that reinforce a cycle of violence and exploitation for young impoverished African Americans. In showing us the lives of Namond (Julito McCullum), Randy (Maestro Harrell), Duquan (Jermaine Crawford), and Michael (Tristan Wilds) we are made to understand previous characters such as Avon, D’Angelo, or Bubbles with greater insight and complexity. Remarkably, *The Wire* hints at these connections subtly and ultimately allows the viewer to reach their own conclusions.

Season 4 is *The Wire*’s most intimate rendering of Baltimore’s inner city and the most emotionally affecting. Season 4 subtly places the dramatized politics of police investigations and wiretaps into the background, and brings to the fore the narrative of four young boys who are trying to navigate and make sense of their world as young men, and as African Americans in the context of their class position. The franchise of the American Dream is confusing for young black men. Media and advertising proliferates images of successful black males in the realms of entertainment and sport, and yet the American franchise often denies black males access to basic resources, supports, and
education and fails to encourage learning in intellectual realms. These contradictory tensions abound in shaping a conflicted self-awareness and consciousness as black inner city youth are “exposed to many of the most desirable outposts of capitalist society, and the corollary to this desire-producing exposure: an utter absence of the structural and civic resources necessary to transcend abject poverty” (Peterson 107). As James Braxton Peterson explains:

Some of the socioeconomic forces that rigidly construct black masculinity are the material lack and ad-induced desire that collude to produce the collective willingness to engage in the underground economy. Poor public education, crumbling postindustrial residential neighborhoods, and the inherently violent communities that result from these structural challenges all work to obscure the full range of black masculine possibilities. It follows that the literature, film, and music that represent black masculine behavior tend toward these monolithic depictions (Peterson 111).

Du Bois’ double consciousness is always at play: young black men are interpellated and seduced by mass marketing to participate in the rituals of consumption and celebration of material richness inherent in the American Dream, but they are inconsistently denied opportunity, selfhood, and enfranchisement. The American Dream instills desire, and yet forcefully denies African Americans fulfillment of that desire.

hooks confirms this argument and also discusses the emotional havoc on black men that these contradictions create. She argues that, while it may seem through media representation that Americans love black men, and that they are a valued part of the American franchise, in fact nothing could be further from the truth:

Sadly, the real truth, which is a taboo to speak, is that this is a culture that does not love black males, that they are not loved by white men, white women, black women, or girls and boys. And that especially most black men do not love themselves. How could they, how could they be expected to love surrounded by so much envy, desire, hate? Black males in the culture of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy are feared but they are not loved. Of course part of the brainwashing that takes place in a culture of
domination is the confusion of the two. Thriving on sadomasochist bonds, cultures of domination make desire for that which is despised take on the appearance of care, of love. If black males were loved they could hope for more than a life locked down, caged, confined; they could imagine themselves beyond containment (hooks xii).

The dramatization of the struggle of Season 4’s protagonists illustrates how class, race, and gender intersect in the production of young black male consciousness. Parallel to this development is a critique of America’s public school system and its failure to adequately engage inner city black youth. *The Wire* dramatizes the crumbling, underfunded American school system and the effects of state mandated curriculums that fail to acknowledge or validate the experiences of black youth in the classroom. Even in a desegregated school system public education is still predominantly a white discursive framework, one which, according to Ann Arnett Ferguson in “Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity,” fails to address and acknowledge the differences between teaching disenfranchised black youth (particularly males), and whites, differences that speak to issues of marginalization and black identity politics.

The setting of Tilghman Middle is drawn upon authentic experiences as inspired by *The Wire* co-creator Ed Burns and his tenure as an inner city school teacher in Baltimore who also feels that the problem with the American educational system is its inability to address the world that these youth must contend with:

> Their needs are so phenomenal on the educational level. And then, as you get to know them, you realize that that is just the crust on the cake. Kids are seeing people killed in front of them. In the first year I was teaching, there were 120 kids in our group; thirteen had been shot. This was in seventh grade. Lots had been stabbed. All of them had been abused, one way or the other. So when you put them in a classroom with a curriculum that doesn't compute with their world, everybody has a way of surviving, right? (“A Teacher in Baltimore: An Interview with Ed Burns”, 2006).
Burns also emphasizes the importance of being a model of stability and reliability in the classroom because “when they see an adult who's consistent, who's always there, who always comes through with what he said, then that's a new world for them” (“A Teacher in Baltimore: An Interview with Ed Burns”, 2006). Thus Season 4 is acutely personal for Burns and also pedagogical in its aims as it thematically illustrates various approaches of interacting with emotionally traumatized youth that speak to their experiences, and bridge the chasm of unknowability and mistrust that is far too often in place between student and teacher, adult and youth. We see this dramatized and reflected in three corresponding settings in Season 4: in Colvin’s class for at-risk youth and his relationship with young Namond who seems destined for criminality, Roland Pryzbelewski’s interactions with his students in the standard class (particularly Duquan, a soft-spoken youth neglected by drug addicted parents), and ex-con Cutty’s boxing gym for young black males in the inner city community.

The fourth season is also pedagogical in that it represents the standard American education system as another neoliberal utilitarian structure that is shaped and molded by “merciless market logic”, – or what Ralph Beliveau and Laura Bolf-Beliveau refer to as a “banking model” that is geared towards preparing its students to fulfill a place in market and bureaucratic oriented society, but which paradoxically does not address the particular concerns and needs of the disenfranchised black community. As Burns claims the standard “banking model” simply does not “compute” for inner city black youth, and does not provide them with the tools to adequately deal with their reality or provide alternatives to the street corner. This failure of the traditional education system and its
links to neoliberal capitalist discourse, is exposed and critiqued in the fourth season, which I will address.

After Colvin’s Hamsterdam project, he finds out that he has become a hero in academic circles, and he is brought in to become part of a special program (another “social experiment”, this time conceived and conducted by sociologists at John Hopkins), aimed towards at-risk youth within the education system (4:02). Colvin’s model is similar to Hamsterdam in that the troubled youth are separated from the standard classroom environment, so that their specific needs can be identified and addressed while the standard classroom benefits from the lack of disruption. While initially there is concern from David Parenti (David DeLuca), the white researcher heading the project, that separating receptive students from troubled ones is another form of tracking (treating students differently and signalling the troublemakers out from the others which reinforces feelings of alienation and resentment), Colvin argues for a more matter-of-fact approach that does not pretend that these youth are not already being tracked for the street corner by family and peers and the demands and pressures of life in the threatening inner city (4:04). Colvin’s approach is to directly address the troubling fact that for many of these youth the street or prison is a very possible destination. Colvin quickly and perceptively realizes that in the classroom these youth “are not training for our world, they’re training for theirs” (4:10).

When Colvin and Ms. Duquette (Stacie Davis) pose questions to their students about the rules of survival and codes of conduct on the street corner their students stop misbehaving and are immediately forthcoming in their experiences and knowledge of their terrain (4:08). They come alive, discussing what it takes to survive on the street,
how to deal with physical confrontations, how to sell a drug package or how to deal with someone who has stolen from them, whether or not to punish someone physically, or allow them to make amends. These students are perceptive, realizing that the ethics of the street differ very little from the overarching structure of primitive accumulation and exploitation endemic in capitalist discourse. They know that the gold standard of American success is profit and they are deeply aware of the stark individualism inherent in the American way of life and the American Dream, a survival-of-the-fittest ethos that emphasizes that it is every man for himself. Like *A Raisin in the Sun*’s Walter Lee they have adapted to and internalized an ethical discourse where it is wealth and power and status that are the height of value. They are quick to point out in their own language that the model of the street corner is only a microcosm of violence and exploitation that is pervasive across the board of American life, and that they are playing “the game” as it is meant to be played.

These youth are not portrayed as ignorant, but rather are navigating a particular terrain that they are locked into, which the overarching “banking model” of the education system is portrayed as failing to address. The neoliberal capitalist discourse that is embedded in the “banking model” of education is staunchly utilitarian in that it emphasizes competitiveness and efficiency (through standardized testing) and emphasizes specific skill sets necessary for competition in a market-oriented culture (for example applicable maths and sciences), and discursive frameworks that guide the student towards fulfilling a role in the marketplace. It does not provide these students with the language required to make sense of the “other America”, the neglected and alienated black underclass that has been left behind, nor the multiplicity of black
experiences in American life. It is a universalist discourse that assumes that “all people are born the same”, that “we are all just people” and race and sexual divisions are no longer a problem (hooks 133) and does not address the legacy of slavery, colonialism, segregation, or the effects and impacts and experiences of the African diaspora. The ways in which these students are able to articulate and display the overarching neoliberal competitive discourse indicates their intelligence, but the ways in which they are not provided the tools to put into language their experiences of what it means to be black and impoverished in America, to fully understand the implications of their race and class and gender position, to attain a language of self-assertion and a rhetoric of decolonization – and to gain real power from that knowledge – is disheartening.

At the beginning of the season it is made apparent just how deeply broken the education system of Baltimore is. The teaching staff are depicted as undermanned, overworked, and overwhelmed. In “Home Rooms” (4:03) it is the first day of school, and we see the excited, restless students rush the entrance that is framed by overarching metal detectors, again connoting the school system as an institutional model akin to the prison system. Truant officers like Cutty are hired to force students to appear at school, heightening this relationship between schools and the penitentiary, and thus between inner city education and institutions of incarceration, surveillance, and punishment (4:04). Primary schools in The Wire are depicted as sites of violence, surveillance and conflict; as unofficial daycare centers or panopticons more than sites of guidance and learning. When introverted ex-cop Roland “Prez” Pryzbylewski meets with Marcia Donnelly (Tootsie Duvall), the school principal, to apply for a teaching position, it is indicated that he is selected and hired on the basis of his previous occupation as a police
officer, a potential disciplinarian (4:01). The implication is that he will be able to maintain order and discipline while his inexperience as a teacher is never taken into account (or his troubled history as a police officer), and he is given little additional training. When the students refer to the classrooms as “Gen Pop”, they are putting into language the realization that the spaces of the education system and the prison system are synonymous in that the school system has become another disciplinarian and scrutinizing structure in which they are incarcerated. As Ferguson puts it:

However, for African American children the conditions of schooling are not simply tedious; they are also replete with symbolical forms of violence. Troublemakers are conscious of the fact that school adults have labeled them as problems, social and educational misfits; that what they bring from home and neighbourhood – family structure and history, forms of verbal and nonverbal expression, neighbourhood lore and experiences – has little or even deficit value (Ferguson 169).

The Wire represents this model as ineffective. While feelings of anger, alienation, futility, and rage are pervasive amongst these children, the overarching structure of discipline and surveillance, without looking at the various roots of the problem, only seems to perpetuate this malaise. Colvin’s approach (as is Cutty’s in his boxing gym, as we will see below) is to find methods of mentorship that acknowledge the rage and isolation that they feel, but to harness these emotions into constructive purposes. The goal is to find ways in which to alleviate feelings of alienation, emasculation, self-destructiveness, and helplessness, and ideally to invoke a sense of empowerment in black male youths. In addition, Colvin and Cutty’s approaches invoke a sense of community-building, of people working together to solve real problems and build social connections and networks that are inclusive rather than competitive, a counter-discourse subtly embedded in The Wire that stands in contrast to the utilitarianism and ethos of
individualism and “merciless market logic” that guides and shapes The Wire’s portrayal of oppressive American institutions.

In The Envy of the World: On Being a Black Man in America Ellis Cose elaborates why the street with all of its violence and danger is an alluring option for young black men, and an attractive alternative to formal schooling. He argues that the space of the street in America is the one place where black men are made to believe “that [they] alone can own”, an illusion of agency, ethnic solidarity, and control over one’s destiny in contrast to the oppressive demands and pressures of white society (42). Cose claims that the street conveys a powerful subculture that “controls...our perception of reality”, a real and yet imagined environment – shaped in part through repeated depictions in movies, music, music videos, literature, and television programs like The Wire (42-43). The street is psychologically embedded in black male consciousness as a space to enact codified male rituals of power, dominance, wealth, and aggression. Marlene Kim Connor relates the subculture of the street to the formation and expression of cool, a “psychological, physiognomic, and linguistic” American paradigm of thought and behaviour formed by black men that conveys reserved emotions, discipline, defiance, bravado, and sexual confidence (xv). Cool is embedded in the codified masculinist psychogeography of the street, a paradigm created in American black culture since enslavement that demanded that black men must condition themselves to internalize and mask their emotions, while maintaining an outward appearance of impassiveness and calm in order to avoid further punishment and abuse (7). While far removed from the oppressive and dehumanizing conditions of slavery, the street becomes another subcultural site for playing out the rituals of cool in relation to dehumanizing violence.
These environments foster and breed the necessity for hypermasculinity in order to survive day-to-day life (Cose 59), a situation, that paradoxically the educational system does not acknowledge and strongly discourages, which results in mutual alienation between students and formal schooling.

Furthermore, Cose argues that a significant contribution to the failure of formal education to provide an avenue for development for black male youth is the debilitating internalized notion that black people are intellectually inferior, the perception that “[whites], genetically and culturally, are academically inclined, and blacks are better at other, less mentally demanding things” (61). This belief system is ingrained in stereotypical conceptions and representations of blacks, and as Cose argues is detrimental and destructive to black self-perception and black communities, and becomes a major deterrent towards school as a rewarding and worthwhile endeavour. The failure lies in part on the education system’s bankrupt inner city “slum schools”, which consistently devalue their black student body with the underlying assumption that blacks are ignorant and that black experience outside of the school system is valueless (75). Recalling his own experiences in the inner city school system Cose claims:

My point is that educators must justify themselves and what they do at least as well as the drug dealer down the street. They must show that school offers something more than simply another way to while away the day – particularly if their students reside in impoverished environments hermetically sealed off from the so-called mainstream. Teachers have a responsibility (whether they seek it or not) to show how education can be a bridge to a new world. But, like so many inner-city schools, mine failed, for the most part at making us understand their purpose, at showing us any connection between them and the universe beyond. So, when I finally did travel, when I finally did speak another language, when I did spend time in offices where learning translated into money, position, and power, when I saw how the schools other people had gone to had given them a huge head start in life, I felt more than a little resentful. I was upset not only with the schools I had attended (whose responsibility, I knew, was limited) but with the vague entity called society
that had created colonies, labeled ghettos, where young boys like myself learned every conceivable lesson in being cool but were kept ignorant of the way the larger world worked and of the skills we would need to survive in it (80-81).

The structure of Colvin’s special class is designed with similar goals in mind: to bridge the gap of experience between what black male youth have learned on the street and the “universe beyond”, to acknowledge the deep-seated rage and resentment that many black youth feel, but to find constructive ways to exorcise it – and to find alternatives to self-destructive paths that are provided by the street. Ralph Beliveau and Laura Bolf-Beliveau argue that Colvin’s class utilizes a method of “critical pedagogy” similar to the theories of Paulo Freire (Beliveau 92). Traditional learning (the “banking model”) is based on conditioning malleable subjects, “passive receivers of knowledge” that can be easily incorporated into the wider society’s hierarchical strictures (92). Ann Arnett Ferguson refers to the goals of this process as “being trained to follow directions, to conform, to be passive, to take standardized tests rather than to think creatively and independently” (Ferguson 52). However, Freire theorized a pedagogy that is potentially more empowering for young students, a process by which students are able to express, incorporate, and actualize their experiences, which are often “excluded from institutional context” as Beliveau explicates (94-96):

A static reality is reinforced through the banking model of education. Grasping reality-as-process happens when learners understand that they can intervene in the construction of reality, as a result of problem-posing. Learners are able to resist the oppressive use of power from outside and seize the productive possibilities of their own power (Gore 67). Rather than accept an imposed idea of themselves, learners become participants in the construction of their identities, thus turning the focus from static being to a dynamic of becoming (Beliveau 93).

Colvin realizes this early on after the initial failure of his school-within-a-school program when he proclaims “they’re not learning for our world, they’re learning for theirs”. He
realizes that in order to make progress with at-risk youth their experiences must be rendered as a valid starting point for learning. He then begins to tailor the program’s structure in such a way as to incorporate the experiential knowledge of the students that allows them to “seize the productive possibilities of their own power” (Beliveau 93). He allows for their identities, experiences, and knowledge to be brought into the classroom as a way of bridging the gap between what they already know and the frightening world in and beyond inner city Baltimore. In doing so, they also come to realize that local codes of conduct on the street will not serve them as well in other social arenas outside of the street corners, which allows them to imagine and conceive of alternative possibilities of being and behaviour that the street cannot provide.

The ways in which these youth are “learning for theirs” is also portrayed in the standard classroom where Pryzbylewski also comes to a similar realization. In “Corner Boys” (4:08) he is trying to get across the finer details of a difficult math problem to his students, a problem laid out on the board with multiple answers and when one student determines the correct answer, Pryzbelewski asks him to share with the class how he arrived at the conclusion. The student cheekily replies that he came upon the right answer because it has the “dinks”, which are light marks on the blackboard where the tip of Pryzbelewski’s chalk has been touching. The student did not arrive at the answer based on logical deduction and arithmetic, but by keenly observing his teacher’s body language where he has been unconsciously hovering around the correct answer, thus forming the “dinks”. In this student’s experience, keenly observing body language is necessary for his survival, and, much more immediate and practical than abstract
arithmetic, an example of “training for their world” that Colvin has discovered is essential in incorporating into his program.

Throughout the course of the 4th season Colvin and his teaching staff make remarkable progress with their troubled students. In one scene they incorporate trust exercises where one student falls backwards and allows their classmates to catch them. At first the students are skeptical and scoff at the notion that they should put their trust in each other. Namond, who has made considerable progress in the class, takes the lead in the exercise, indicating his transition from troubled student and corner boy to leader. The students are also encouraged to put their experiences into their own language: Zenobia (Taylor King), a female student and corner girl, makes a remarkable observation about their place in the world and “the game”, stating that “we got our thing, but it’s just part of the big thing” (4:08). She realizes that “the game” is essentially another model of a larger game for power and wealth being operated on a grander scale beyond the inner city, which harbours all of the contradictions of the American Dream. Namond immediately agrees: “Like you say: don’t lie, don’t bunk, don’t cheat, don’t steal, or whatever. But what about y’all, huh? What, the government? What it – Enron? We do the same thing as y’all, except when we do it, it’s like, ‘Oh my God, these kids is animals.’ Like it’s the end of the world coming…”Cause it’s like – what is it – hypocrite – hypocritical.”

Namond is wise in correlating the violence of the street with institutionalized violence found in many bureaucratic and corporate entities, the primitive accumulation that Marx theorizes where violence in a capitalist society is not erased, but rather becomes normalized and made invisible in the exploitative and entrepreneurial realm of
the market (Read 131). Where disenfranchised black communities are too often viewed as problematic and parasitic entities upon the overarching system of capitalist and consumerist society Namond inverts the relationship and points to corporatized culture as the true parasitic entity that is the overarching source of inequality and exploitation, a violence that we do not see because its processes are rendered invisible and in a competitive market are deemed “natural”. Namond’s response also reveals the ways in which violence in black communities is often perceived with being “animalistic” – in contrast to white collar crime which is a form of acceptable civilized violence – indicating that he is aware that hypocritical racist notions of black people as “primitive” and “uncivilized” are still being perpetuated. Namond and Zenobia are articulating their realization that “merciless market logic” is pervasive across all spheres, in their own lives and community, but also on a global scale. They realize that the violence of the ghetto is predicated on the violence of the totality of American life in government, in corporations, or in America’s own military-industrial complex. They comprehend that neoliberal market discourse which valorizes profit margins over individuals is the dominant discourse that they must appropriate in order to survive, particularly as marginalized African Americans who are already being placed at a disadvantage. The fact that Namond fumbles for the word “hypocritical” is important, indicating his attempt to find and utilize language as a way to describe and affirm his own reality.

Despite the barrier of being a white male in a position of authority (and after numerous awkward initial stumbles in a trial-by-fire turn as educator) Pryzbylewski’s epiphanies in the standard classroom are parallel to and reflexively paired with Colvin’s. He realizes that to incorporate the practical knowledge of the students is essential. He
realizes that by using dice games (the ritual of competition and gambling for wealth and status referred to in the first scene and practiced in the alley ways and on the corners of inner city Baltimore), that he is able to teach theories of probability effectively to his students, a model that allows the students to bring their identity, their realities, and their experiences into the classroom (4:09). Over time Pryzbelewski also begins to earn his students’ trust, protecting Randy from police questioning into the murder of a young boy in order to keep him safe. As a former police officer Pryzbelewski is aware that if Randy becomes a witness, he will be put in danger, and the police will not be able to adequately protect him. He also takes a particular liking to Duquan, a quiet, intelligent boy virtually orphaned by his drug-addicted parents and he begins to launder Dukie’s clothes and bring him food from home.

Paired with this student-teacher friendship, Colvin befriends rebellious but open-hearted Namond who is being groomed by his parents to enter “the game”. Yet with the eventual blessing of Namond’s father Wee-Bay (Hassan Johnson), who ultimately decides that he does not want his son to go down the same path of violence and criminality that he did, Colvin adopts Namond and in doing so facilitates his growth away from the confines of the street (4:13). Colvin knows that, despite Namond’s rebelliousness he is not “hard” enough for the street, indicated when Namond confronts Kenard (Thuliso Dingwall) about a package of stolen drugs (4:12). Kenard refuses to pay up and Namond is reticent to use physical violence, at which point Michael steps in and beats Kenard into a bloody pulp, insisting that Namond take back the stolen drugs. Namond is horrified at the violence he has just witnessed and blurts out “I don’t want it”, fleeing the scene. Namond’s phrase is intended to have a double meaning, that he does
not want the drugs back but also that he does not want the life of a gangster that he is
expected to inherit from his father. This moment signals a turning point for Namond
where he begins to seek alternative avenues that will take him away from the street. Both
of these pairings (Pryzbelewski/Duquan and Colvin/Namond) are important for the ways
in which they point to the blurring of roles between mentor and friend/caregiver and even
the formation of potential parental roles and kinship ties:

The expansion of kin networks to incorporate friends into family is not new
to African Americans. Since enslavement, African Americans out of
necessity and by choice have constructed family broadly with more flexible,
inclusive boundaries than the traditional nuclear or even extended family.
Networks of kin, some related by blood, or marriage, some “fictive,” were
established to mobilize and maximize the limited material resources and
social power of the individual members (Ferguson 121).

By indicating that Colvin and Pryzbelewski are capable of forming care giving,
paternal bonds towards Namond and Duquan The Wire also subverts dominant gender
roles. Teachers in fiction are often predominantly female with the role of teacher as
synonymous with that of caregiver, often overdetermined as an essentially and naturally
feminine trait. Unfortunately, while The Wire’s fourth season ignores focusing on any
female teachers or mentors such as Ms. Duquette or Marcia Donnelly, it does provide us
with a representation of male mentors (Colvin, Pryzbelewski, Cutty) who are not
portrayed as authoritarians, but as capable male elders in the community who are also
able to fulfill both paternal and nurturing roles. However, the attempts at
mentorship/caregiving are not always successful. Cutty’s open affection for his students
is off-putting for Michael who has been sexually abused by his own step-father. Michael
does not trust Cutty, and rejects him as an elder and potential mentor, insisting to his
friends that Cutty is “too mother fucking friendly”. He stops going to Cutty’s gym,
preferring instead the street corner where Michael’s brooding rage is able to be realized and expressed. He befriends Chris Partlow (Gbenga Akinnagbe), an enforcer for Marlo Stanfield’s organization, another implied victim of sexual abuse. Chris intuitively comprehends the nature of Michael’s rage, and without words on the unspeakable violence that they have both experienced he is able to provide Michael with stoic mentorship, yet with enough emotional and physical distance, thus providing the particular type of “safe” elder figure that Michael requires.

Noticing Pryzbelewski’s affection and protectiveness of Duquan, vice-principal Marcia Donnelly warns him to not allow himself to get too close to his students, to maintain professional distance in the teacher/student relationship (4:12). The prevailing logic is that the no-nonsense “public face” of the education system put students at a distance in order to enable proper discipline and order. It is also advice given to protect Pryzbelewski from over-attachment to students who are presumed to fail. She suggests that instead of adopting Dukie that Pryzbelewski and his wife start thinking about having their own children instead. Uncertain about the role he should play, Pryzbelewski chooses to heed Donnelly’s advice. Duquan graduates from middle school, and Pryzbelewski maintains his distance (4:12). Unlike Colvin, who readily assumes his role to Namond as a father figure, Pryzbylewski hesitates, to his own regret, as indicated in the final montage of Season 4 where he watches helplessly from his car as Dukie becomes a corner boy in order to support himself (4:13). Pryzbelewski’s hesitancy to reach out to Dukie at a crucial moment seems to make all the difference, as Duquan, with nowhere to go, and no parental figures to support him, slides into the oblivion of the street and addiction in the 5th season. It is implied in the narrative that the “informal”
bonds between teacher and student represented in *The Wire*, that emphasize trust and communication, become essential for the growth of many of these youth (many whom have a dysfunctional home life as Namond, Dukie, and Michael do), as opposed to the rigid hierarchical arrangement of the “banking system” of institutionalized education that also imposes emotional detachment. *The Wire* suggests that informal bonds that verge into parental/elder configurations towards students should not be discouraged when formed, particularly when domestic spaces are threatening or eroded as Namond, Michael or Dukie’s are.

Cutty’s arc is particularly illuminating for the ways in which he is able to identify with young black males, which makes him a good candidate as a mentor and as an important figure in the community. Cutty is a survivor of the street, who after his release from a long tenure in prison, attempts to get back into “the game”. It is revealed that he has been involved in the drug trade since his youth, knows little else of the world beyond it, and has never had a legitimate form of employment. Initially, he fears he will not be able to support himself, because he does not have any other skill set other than as an enforcer in the drug trade. His dilemma is characterized between choosing the dangerous, destructive, yet familiar world that he knows and attempting to lead a life away from the pull of the street, which is alien to him, unfamiliar and frightening. Thus, after a half-hearted attempt to go back into the drug trade, he realizes that he is no longer who he once was, and that he needs to change. This indicates a breakthrough in his “false consciousness” by denying the lucrative material comforts and celebration of wealth that the drug trafficking provides: instead, he chooses the humble position of a landscaper.
Desperately searching for a way to give his life further meaning, Cutty eventually realizes that he can put his experience to use in helping troubled male youth in the community who once like himself are destined for a life on the street corner. Thus, Cutty’s arc is another of The Wire’s pedagogical demonstrations, illustrating how reformed members of the drug trade can have a place in society other than prison, but rather, harness those experiences in working within inner city communities with at-risk youth. With the help of community leaders like the Deacon, Cutty is able to form a boxing gym for black male youth. The importance of a controlled space for fighting is instrumental in giving a space for at-risk youth to vent anger and other emotions, to bond, and to keep them occupied away from the lure of street corners. It also allows for the need for physical contact amongst males that in a reinforced heterosexual context is not legitimated:

The interaction [of fighting] involves the convergence of the desire for physical and emotional closeness with another...Boys from an early age learn that affectionate public physical contact such as an embrace with those who are seen as most like oneself, other males, is taboo. For them, a physical embrace, the close intertwining of bodies is culturally permissible only in the act of the rituals of the fight. Thus the fulfillment of desire for physical intimacy, for body contact, can most safely be accomplished publicly through the apparent or actual infliction and experience of bodily pain. A desire for closeness, for identification with a reflection of oneself, can be achieved through an act that beckons and embraces using apparently threatening and hostile gestures (Ferguson 192).

Cutty’s life experience as a troubled youth is instrumental in his ability to understand, empathize, and negotiate with the turbulent emotions of the young men he takes under his wing and he becomes another portrayal of a respected elder in the inner city black community. Cutty is not able to help every young male in the street; in fact, his attempts are often punctuated with as much failure as success, as with Michael, where
he is shot in the foot by another gang member after trying to persuade Michael from the street corner. This heightens the sense of realism in *The Wire*, wherein progressive change is portrayed as a difficult undertaking that requires immense patience with no certainty of success. At one point all of Cutty’s charges abandon him to go back to the street corner, after which, in close-up, we see Cutty, angry and alone in his darkened gym unleashing his rage and frustration and feelings of helplessness on a punching bag (3:11).

And yet this depiction of failure and the challenges of reaching hardened youth who have erected such immense walls is part of Season 4’s pedagogical aims: how to reach traumatized youth and how to build healing, communal relationships and sustain them, as well as the importance of perseverance even when it appears as though little progress is being made. Cutty’s approach is synonymous with Burns’ model of adult stability and reliability when he claims that it is crucial that these youth “see an adult who's consistent, who's always there, [and] who always comes through with what he said”, a model of dependability that at-risk youth do not experience on a regular basis but which is crucial for their development away from the street. Cutty’s steadiness and his unwillingness to give up on his students is one of *The Wire*’s true moments of heroism.

The portrayal of Colvin and Cutty as elders that are invested in guiding, healing, and shaping their community resonates with James Braxton Peterson’s praise of *The Wire* and its refusal to subscribe to flat representations of the monolithic “Strong Black Man forged in the crucible of racial hatred and historical oppression, [which] obscures the multifaceted range of black masculine expression in reality, in the media, and in artistic production” (115). Peterson wisely argues not merely for more positive versions of black masculinity, but rather more complex characterizations and multiplicity that emphasize
black male agency and experience (115). For my purposes, however, Colvin and Cutty’s portrayals of positive masculinity that contains wisdom, strength, expressiveness and vulnerability are crucial not merely because they offer non-stereotypical and positive performances of black masculinity amidst a media glut of hypermasculine “Strong Black Man” stereotypes, but also in that their gender performance moves towards notions of community-building rather than stark individualization and repressed emotional expression that is part and parcel of neoliberal capitalist patriarchal discourse where it is expected that strong men fight and compete to attain “top dog” status within a pyramid scheme of winners and losers – ie. Stringer and Avon. Colvin and Cutty’s American Dream is not doggedly pursuing wealth or status but rests in their determination to rejuvenate their neglected communities, build positive relationships, and to use their wisdom, emotionality, intelligence, and experience in guiding male youth7.

Despite the significant progress of Colvin’s program, however, the ideal of black inner city youth becoming emancipated through the education system to be confident, empowered members of society, is ultimately reversed by state-wide government testing ie. the “banking system”. Colvin and Pryzbylewski’s progress is interrupted, and in Colvin’s case, his special class is aborted so that the students can be streamlined into a standardized system, a process that ultimately alienates his students and does not allow for their voice. The “critical pedagogical” methodology that has proven to genuinely reach these youth by meeting them intellectually and emotionally where they are in their experiential development is dismissed as another form of “tracking” (4:12). The school board’s representatives are also convinced that Colvin’s class is not teaching the students skills that will prepare them for the “banking model” of social and intellectual
development. Colvin’s students are sent back to the regular classroom and standardized testing is imposed and the results smoothed over to indicate to the public that the educational system is not defunct. Standardized testing is represented as another bureaucratic “display of force”, an aggressive tactic that suggests that the education system is serious and diligent in its pursuit of preparing students for the world, presented as a great irony within *The Wire*’s ideologically critical framework. Like Hamsterdam, the special class is making actual headway with real effects but cannot be integrated into the “banking model” that regards students as a homogenous body.

Sadly, of Season 4’s four main protagonists, only Namond seems bound to escape the pain of the ghetto, mediated by Colvin’s intervention. Michael’s rage has consumed him and he arranges the murder of his step-father and embraces the path of an enforcer for Marlo Stanfield. After Randy’s foster mother is attacked and hospitalized by Marlo’s crew in order to intimidate Randy to not “snitch” for what he knows about a boy being murdered, he is placed into another group home where we see him being bullied and beaten, indicating that he will likely become another “hard” boy in order to survive. And Duquan, completely abandoned by his family, begins to sell drugs on the corner.

The resolution to Season 4 appears bleak, indicating the depths to which the systemic problems of poverty, racism, and institutional neglect operate to stifle the lives of many young black males before they are given opportunity to flourish. And yet I argue that we are made to realize that not all social stations are locked, that there is fluidity. This is exemplified in the role reversal of Namond and Michael. In the beginning of Season 4 it appears that Namond’s overt rebellion and the fact that his parents are part of the drug trade will shape him in the direction of the street corner. In
contrast, Michael seems too smart and determined to be swayed, indicated by his parental role to his little brother Bug, and his refusal to accept the handouts from Marlo that his peers delightfully accept. But Michael’s repressed emotionality, his brooding rage and resentment, consume him, and in order to protect his younger brother from being abused by their step-father, he willingly becomes entangled with gang life that can provide him with the support and protection and a sense of belonging that he feels that he needs. Sadly, Michael’s commitment to the “Strong Black Man” masculine performance that Peterson discusses leads him towards a violent and bloody path – in Season 5 after leaving Marlo’s gang where he becomes an enforcer who has killed numerous times. In the final montage we see Michael taking over for Omar in the role of stick-up boy.

According to bell hooks this “Strong Black Man” is a debilitating and self-destructive gender construction according to bell hooks that only serves to reinforce trapping black men in cycles of patriarchal violence:

Unlike black females, who are given permission by sexist thinking to be emotional and therefore able to remain in touch with our feelings in childhood even when we are abused or taught to mask them to appear “strong,” black males are required by rituals of patriarchal manhood to surrender their capacity to feel. The soul-murdered black boy then has a much harder time recovering himself than the damaged girl has. Tragically, the patriarchal thinking the black man embraces is precisely the logic that will keep him mentally enslaved and mentally ill (hooks 138).

In contrast, Namond is initially tough, yet expressive and open-hearted, and this openness and receptiveness allow him to discover alternative paths to being in the world and towards his own self-actualization. In Namond’s final scene of the series we see him passionately engaged in a school debate on the effects of HIV in Africa, indicating that he has also learned to think in a framework that is punctuated with notions of community and decolonization. In reversing Namond and Michael’s positions The Wire’s ideology
critique demonstrates how various paths are not pre-determined and are susceptible to change. Yet deterministic cynicism is one of the most voiced critiques of *The Wire* and not without good reason. It is this critique that I will address in the concluding final chapter.
Chapter 5

Conclusion: “You Want it to be One Way, But it’s the Other Way”: Determinism and Tautologies in The Wire

While *The Wire* has been lauded for its complexity and remarkable depth, as well as its nuanced critique of late capitalism, it still does draw significant criticism for its bleak portrayal of contemporary American life. One of the most prominent criticisms leveled against *The Wire* is its portrayal of American late capitalist society as wholly deterministic, that the dominant socio-political and economic order of neoliberal capitalism cannot be altered or overcome and that ultimately this oppressive system of market logic that has affected every arena of our lives is invulnerable to change. In “The Wire, or, What to Do in Non-Evental Times” Slavoj Žižek argues that this is due in part to living in an era that is “non-evental” with “no potential for a radical emancipator movement on the horizon” (222) wherein the market is perceived as an overarching, omniscient body that is godlike in its ability to affect, dominate, and determine our lives (220). Or perhaps *The Wire*’s failing in this regard is that its setting and worldview is patriarchally bound, indicating an exhausted masculine lament for the closed systems that American men have built. Indeed, *The Wire*’s ideology critique, while progressive in its rendering of the black male underclass is still hog-tied by its own patriarchal bias in that its lens is primarily focused on American male experience.

In this last chapter I wish to address this criticism of *The Wire* and provide an analysis of its deterministic structures. Anderson addresses this element of *The Wire* in “The Game is the Game: Tautology and Allegory in The Wire” by discussing how *The Wire*’s narrative structure is bound (and trapped within) tautological framing devices.
The problems inherent in tautological reasoning are put forth in Roland Barthes’ seminal work *Mythologies* (1957) in which he discusses the relationship between social systems and values and the mythologies that support them. The American Dream is one such mythology that idealizes the ritualistic journey of the self towards the pursuit of wealth and status as ideal, attainable, and as an essential rite of passage for entry into the American franchise – a mythology that runs counter to actual lived experience and in spite of actual economic, social, or political conditions that, in reality, confound and deny that mythology. Barthes also discusses tautology as a rhetorical device in reinforcing overarching mythologies. He defines tautology thus and I will quote him at length:

*Tautology*: Yes, I know it’s an ugly word. But so is the thing. Tautology is this verbal device which consists in defining like by like (‘Drama is drama’). We can view it as one of those types of magical behavior dealt with by Sartre in his *Outline of a Theory of Emotions*: one takes refuge in tautology as one does in fear, or anger, or sadness, when one is at a loss for an explanation: the accidental failure of language is magically identified with what one decides is a natural resistance of the object. In tautology, there is a double murder: one kills rationality because it resists one; one kills language because it betrays one. Tautology is a feint at the right moment, a saving aphasia, it is a death, or perhaps a comedy, the indignant ‘representation’ of the *rights* of reality over and above language. Since it is magical, it can of course only take refuge behind the argument of authority: thus do parents at the end of their tether reply to the child who keeps on asking for explanations: *‘because that’s how it is’*, or even better: *‘just because, that’s all’* – a magical act ashamed of itself, which verbally makes the gesture of rationality, but immediately abandons the latter, and believes itself to be even with causality because it has uttered the word which introduces it. Tautology testifies to a profound distrust of language, which is rejected because it has failed. Now any refusal of language is a death. *Tautology creates a dead, motionless world* (my emphasis) (152-153).

Tautologies are gestures toward circular false reasoning which suggest that because something exists already, that its existence is already justified, and our behaviour must be in accordance to factuality’s demands, “the rights of reality over and above language” (*‘business is business’* or *‘war is war’* or *‘nature is nature’* or *‘it is what it is’*). It is a
rhetorical device that suggests stasis and immobility (‘because that’s how it is’) and is not representative of a malleable condition but rather an inert one. Tautologies are used when real reasons for the condition cannot be determined (‘The game is the game’), when the problem itself is so perpetually elusive as to be unidentifiable or inarticulable. Tautologies abound when language breaks down. Anderson argues that *The Wire* is rife with tautological phrases and dramatic situations that reinforce the sense that the culture of late capitalism conveys a “dead, motionless world” that cannot be altered.

Accordingly, Peter Dreier and John Atlas observe that while *The Wire* offers a powerful critique of contemporary American society and how it exposes the fallacy of the American Dream, it nevertheless offers little in the way of solutions and furthermore portrays current ills to be so systemically entrenched and so deeply embedded within the social fabric that positive change is not possible, or, at the very best, highly unlikely. In particular Dreier and Atlas critique *The Wire* for ignoring the stories of the institutions of community activism that “[mobilize] people to reform institutions, to change the system, to change the relationships of power in the city” (141). According to one community leader, they write, “[the] show does an excellent job of telling one side of the story. But it’s missing all the pastors, parents and teachers, principles, young people who are doing amazing work, radically trying to change and improve Baltimore” (141). Specifically, they also argue that *The Wire* is too preoccupied with cynically dwelling on the issues and ills to be able to look towards and point to useful, realistic solutions:

In this regard, *The Wire* is similar to much of American sociology, which, despite its reform impulse, is better at describing the various forms of inequality and injustice in society than at identifying the political opportunities that make mobilization and reform possible. Sociologists are typically sensitive to examining what’s wrong, but not as useful at offering solutions. There are, of course, many important exceptions to this
characterization, but, in general, sociologists – even the radicals among them – are typically more comfortable emphasizing the structures of oppression over human agency, political strategy, and public policies that promote greater fairness, equality, and opportunity (133).

While Dreier and Atlas’ critique of The Wire as muckraking doomsday sociology is perhaps a bit broad (and prejudiced against American sociology), nonetheless they do make a useful point in terms of outlining the ways in which The Wire frames its crises while at the same time pointing to them as unalterable conditions.

Simon’s own response to his ambitions for The Wire seems to confirm this analysis. When asked if he thought that reform was possible in an interview with the New Yorker, he responded flatly with “No, I don’t. Not within the current political structure” (Dreier 132). In another interview, this time, with Slate magazine, he goes on to say that “Thematically, [The Wire is] about the very simple idea that, in this postmodern world of ours, human beings – all of us – are worth less. We’re worth less every day, despite the fact that some of us are achieving more and more. It’s the triumph of capitalism…the triumph of capitalism over human value. This country has embraced the idea that this is a viable domestic policy. It is. It’s viable for the few” (143). He has also compared The Wire to Greek tragedy “in which the postmodern institutions are the Olympian forces” (Anderson 84) wherein we watch “doomed and fated protagonists who confront a rigged game and their own mortality” (107). Dubbing the series as “postindustrial American tragedy” he claims that:

[Whatever] institution you as an individual commit to will somehow find a way to betray you on The Wire. Unless of course you’re willing to play the game without regard to the effect on others or society as a whole, in which case you might be a judge or the state police superintendent or governor one day. Or, for your loyalty, you still might be cannon fodder – like Bodie. No guarantees. But only one choice, as Camus pointed out, offers any hope of dignity (quoted in Marshall and Potter, 5).
Simon’s flat-out dismissal of hopeful or positive change within the current framework and his insistence that capitalism has triumphed in its deployment of a “rigged game” is indicative of a narrative structure of fatalism and inevitability that is also pervasive within the discourse of *The Wire*, an inevitability similar to Greek tragedy in which human beings are fated to come into ruin and disaster.

Conceptually the very notion of fate in itself is deterministic wherein human beings lack agency and are brought down by machinations or forces outside of their control (the gods in Greek tragedy or the forces of late capitalism in *The Wire*) or are punished by their desire for that which cannot be. As Marlo Stanfield tells a lowly security guard who confronts him for stealing a lollipop – whom Marlo later has killed – that he “[wants] it be one way, but it’s the other way”, he is affirming the realization that in life human beings often suffer or are punished for wanting it to be one way (the ideal) when it is in fact the other way (crushing reality) (4:04). As Anderson argues, tragedy informs the series’ tautological structure wherein tragedy seems predetermined, particularly for those who break the rules of the capitalist machine. He argues that phrases such as “*Business is business*” and “*The game is the game*” or “*It is what it is*” or “*That’s how they do*” or “*Nature is nature…Pitiless*” indicates the breaking down of rhetorical tools in which case we “[take] refuge in tautology” as Barthes puts it (Anderson 96).

I would take this argument one step further. I would argue that in the culture of global capital (a model of capitalism that Marx could not have foreseen) wherein language is repeatedly being co-opted and absorbed into the inner workings of consumerist discourse, that language itself has become particularly vulnerable. In the
same way that once subversive cultural forms, practices and expressions such as punk or reggae or graffiti art or sit-ins or protest marches have become absorbed into the mainstream in such a way as to seem innocuous in contemporary life, the same can be said for subversive rhetorical phrases or utterances. Footage of Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream Speech” can be torn out from its original context and appropriated by advertisers to sell Coca-Cola or IBM computers across the globe, and in such a climate language’s capacity to engage critical and non-consensual thought can become exhausted. In such a climate we can appreciate how easy and effortless it is to “take refuge in tautology” and cliché. There is the sense in The Wire that the characters who are embedded in this network struggle to grasp and use language to describe both their conditions and the prevailing discourse, whether in the politico-speak of the mayoral administration, or the ebonics spoken in the black inner city, a struggle for language that often leaves them wanting, which in turn instigates a return to tautological reasoning. It is as though the characters of The Wire have long since given up attempting to define the limitations of their world and have instead embraced empty, cynical tautologies in order to survive, an outlook shaped by a crushing realism that “that’s just the way the world is”. Tautology also reveals itself in the ways in which by series’ end old roles have simply been filled by new players in an aesthetic tactic of “doubling” its characters in order to indicate how unyielding the overarching system of neoliberal capital is: Sydnor becomes the new McNulty, Michael becomes the new Omar, Kenard becomes the new Marlo, and Duquan becomes the new Bubbles (5:10). This indicates that they are merely pieces on a board that are simply slotted and shuffled around in order to maintain the shape of the
overarching social and structural order, thus heightening the determinism at work in *The Wire*, and the notion of fate.

Game metaphors abound in *The Wire* whether it is the game of the street, the game of politics, or stats games that the schools and police department both engage in (Anderson 87). It is evident that *The Wire* portrays the ritualistic pursuit of status and wealth (the American Dream in which “you got to play” as is pronounced in the very first scene) as a competitive game for power and resources by any means necessary. To refer back to Marx “the game” is synonymous with the American Dream as false consciousness, the illusion of agency when in fact our choices are restricted by our starting position in the hierarchical social order. The allegory of capitalism as a game is evident when D’Angelo schools Wallace (Michael B. Jordan) and Bodie (J.D. Williams) on the finer points of chess (Anderson 94) (1:03). D’Angelo compares chess to their lives on the street and in the game, proclaiming Avon and Stringer Bell as the king and queen of “the game”, and pointing out that they are the pawns “who get capped early and be out the game quick”. Bodie, of course, desires to know how a pawn gets to become a king. “It ain’t like that”, D’Angelo remarks, “everyone stay who they is”, but he points out the rare occasion that a lucky pawn will make it to the other end of the board, in which case it becomes a queen. D’Angelo emphasizes the improbability of this outcome, and the ways in which pawns are exploited by the stronger pieces. “Unless they some smart ass pawns”, Bodie retorts with confidence. D’Angelo’s allegory of the chessboard and “the game”, and the rigidity and programmatic determinism therein, is rebuffed by Bodie who believes that if he’s clever, keeps his wits about him, and works hard that he will achieve his slice of the pie of the American Dream (Anderson 92).
To his credit Bodie survives until near the series end, a mid-level lieutenant who toes the line and keeps a straight head, a pawn hoping to keep moving forward in the game, when in fact he maintains the same position that he is given in the beginning. Despite Bodie’s streetwise savvy and commitment his status as middle management is never advanced. Yet Bodie reaches his own impasse late in the series when he confides in McNulty the sense of alienation that he feels after years serving as a pawn in the game (94). Barely in his twenties, he tells McNulty that he feels weary and old, and that he has realized that “the game is rigged” (4:13). “I been out there since I was thirteen. I ain’t never fucked up a count, never stole off a package, never did some shit that I wasn’t told to. I’ve been straight up. But what come back? They want us to stand up with them, right? But where the fuck they at, when they supposed to be standing by us?...This game is rigged, man. We like them little bitches on the chessboard” (Anderson 94). Bodie’s false consciousness slips away over time and he can no longer accept a world that “is what it is” and retaliates against the laconic Marlo, whose cruel market logic leads to the senseless death of many of Bodie’s colleagues. According to Elizabeth Bonjean, Bodie’s last stand in the final episode of Season 4, his cry “I’m right here!” is testament to his need to claim loudly that he is “here!” in a world that repeatedly denies and ignores his very existence (174). Bodie’s last stand is a reclamation of his personhood against fateful alienating market logic that determines him and his colleagues as mere pawns to be exploited and discarded, a reclamation of his identity against postmodern market-driven society in which “[social] environments of memory are collapsing” (174).

It is revealing that Bodie is murdered just as he finally becomes reflective and aware of how “the game” works, and decides to no longer play by its rules. Anderson
notes how often *The Wire*’s characters are marked for death at the moment when they begin to think outside of the parameters of “the game” and question the structures that are imposed upon them. Wallace, Frank Sobotka (Chris Bauer), Bodie, Stringer, and D’Angelo are all murdered at the moment of recognition – Aristotle’s *anagnōrisis*. It is the moment when their psyches begin to push through the boundaries of false consciousness that the narrative marks them for a tragic demise. Yet, it is their tragic situations that make us feel for them, and so self-reflexively engage us in pushing through our own false consciousness or willful blindness. *The Wire* invokes *katharsis* which Aristotle theorized in classical tragedy as an affect of good tragedy, a “purgation” of intense emotions, which, also “cleanses” the audience and produces “clarification” (Aristotle qtd by Leitch 92). Thus, the characters are useful in saying something to the audience – after all, they are only characters, but that is also their aesthetic value in conveying deep insights to *us* as real people. In Season 2 when Frank realizes that there will be no return to a utopian vision of “back in the day” for the Polish-American working class and no magic grain pier that will salvage Baltimore’s blue collar industry, he is murdered by the Greek (2:11). Young Wallace, horrified by the violence that he has already witnessed in his young life, decides that he no longer wants any part of the drug trade and with D’Angelo’s blessing decides to leave it behind, only to be murdered by Bodie and Poot (under Stringer’s orders) for fear that he might become a “snitch” (1:12). Later, Stringer in his own way tries to reconfigure the drug trade toward legitimacy, and while his methods are aligned with market violence and the exploitation of those struggling with addiction, his transition is notable for the ways in which he begins to question the contiguous relationship between the sale of narcotics and physical violence,
that which is “just the way it is” for Avon. Also, he is murdered just when he comes to realize that, despite, his wealth his “ghetto-ness” will hinder his ability to become part of the legitimate franchise of the American Dream, when his naïve belief that he can climb to the top seems to come crashing back to reality (3:11).

D’Angelo comes to a similar realization, albeit in a more gentle way than Stringer. As a Barksdale, D’Angelo has inherited a worthy position in the criminal organization, a world that he admits has suffocated him his entire life (1:13). After he realizes that Stringer ordered the murder of Wallace, and after he is set up by his uncle Avon to go to prison for twenty years, he begins to unravel, distancing himself from his family and the life he has previously led. In prison, D’Angelo begins to reach a level of realization denied to him before as he begins to question where he has come from, and his place in the world. Notably he begins to work in the prison library surrounded with books⁸, indicating D’Angelo’s transition and his burgeoning self-reflection. In the last scene before his death we see him in a reading group discussing The Great Gatsby with an instructor and other inmates, most of them black (2:06). The scene is powerful and insightful for the ways in which we see men we are taught to disregard as violent sociopaths interpreting a work of literature (written by a dead white male at that), and putting it into their own language and relating it to their own experiences. After the group dances around the central paradox of Gatsby, D’Angelo speaks up and decides to take the argument home: “[The author] is saying that the past is always with us,” he proclaims. “Where we come from. All that shit matters. Like at the end of the book: boats and tides and all. You can change up. But what came first is what you really are and what happened before is what really happened. Like all them books in his library.
He fronting with all those books…he ain’t read near one of them. That shit caught up to him…I think anyways”.

D’Angelo is clearly talking about himself in his assessment of Gatsby, but we can interpret D’Angelo’s thoughts in at least two other ways. In one way it signals circular tautological reasoning wherein “what came first is what you really are”, the realization that the way things are is set in stone, as if he is speaking about himself, a young black male in America who was trying to become something else and was punished “for wanting it to be one way, when it’s the other way”. On the other hand, it is important to take into account the ways in which D’Angelo is attempting to push through the boundaries of false consciousness here that has previously entrapped him, his former pursuit of the American Dream at the expense of others, a discourse that he now wholeheartedly rejects. It is as if his comparison with Gatsby is to acknowledge his starting point as part of a designated underclass in a rigged game, and to confront this difficult, but essential realization, is to set oneself free from delusions of “climbing the ladder”, or “pulling oneself up from the boot straps” so that he can “become like regular folk” as he puts it in his own words. This is the groundwork for a more inclusive, compassionate and less individualistic ideological framework. Certainly D’Angelo’s interpretation of The Great Gatsby is rife with tautological reasoning, and yet paradoxically it also signals a burgeoning and potentially empowering realization of race and class consciousness, the very tension between what is and what should be with which The Wire constantly grapples (Anderson 93-94).

D’Angelo’s progress is cut short, however, as he is murdered by one of Stringer’s hired hands, one of the series’ saddest deaths. The tendency of The Wire’s characters to
meet tragic fates just at the crucial point at which they begin to deconstruct their false consciousness is bound within the tautological framework that *The Wire* provides, wherein, in Lukác’s terms, ‘after such self-recognition has been attained, the ideal thus formed irradiates the individual’s life as its immanent meaning; but the conflict between what is and what should be has not been abolished and cannot be abolished in the sphere wherein these events take place’ (Anderson 94). The conflict between striving for an ideal and the constraints imposed by reality is vital in *The Wire*, exemplified by Marlo’s touchstone remark to the security guard, whose problem seems to be that he wants “it to be one way, but it’s the other way”. The entirety of the *The Wire’s* thematic paradox hinders on this line: the “one way,” that is our desired ideal for equality and community; and “the other way,” that is the crushing tautological realism of “the way the world really works”. It is revealing that it is Marlo who utters this fateful line. In many ways Marlo is the series’ most troubling character, a laconic, affectless gangster utterly devoid of compassion to the point of psychopathy, and entirely motivated by personal gain, the most horrific manifestation of “merciless market logic” that we encounter in the series (Vint 59).

While the criticisms of *The Wire’s* determinism are relevant, I believe that this tension between *what should be* and *what is* is important to the development of *The Wire’s* thematic structure. A more optimistic approach perhaps would be more evenhanded, and while the series portrays contemporary American life as a tautological wheel, wherein all of the detrimental structures remain in place, and in which to attain consciousness of the mechanisms of exploitation, is often to invoke the fate of death, it is nevertheless revealing in its goals to expose the weak links in the system. The voice of
the cynic or indeed even the nihilist requires the ability on the part of the audience to perceive in their own minds that *which should be* in opposition to what we witness on screen. It is crucial to realize that the voice of the cynic forces us to imagine outside of deterministic paradigms and to provide counterarguments; *or*, on the other hand, it requires us to seriously consider and confront that which it negates. In the case of *The Wire*, in order for it to have the most impact in illustrating the detrimental effects of late global capitalism, and the flaws in idealized notions of the American Dream, some elements of tragedy or melodrama might be indispensable. After all, these are the aesthetic modes that drama has at hand.

The question remains, however, what the lack of agency of these characters suggests about its outlook on our ability to invoke change. In conclusion, I argue that it is not so much a lack of agency that is being portrayed, but rather an articulation of how we are more bound within the social structures and institutions that we have erected then we are taught to believe or are perhaps cognizant of. Unlike much American popular culture, wherein exceptional heroes proliferate, which is yet another ideological construction of neoliberal capitalist culture that celebrates competitive individualism, *The Wire* demythologizes romantic melodramas of the “wishful thinking” variety where these exceptional individuals rise above it all, and achieve their rightful place at the top of the meritocracy that is the American Dream. *The Wire* reminds us that each of us is connected to a complex web of relationships, a tapestry wherein movements in one area have ripple effects upon the others. If we consider the character of Jimmy McNulty, which the series wavers on as an “exceptional individual” maverick cop railing against the system, a potential leading man with nods to the hard-boiled white hero of many cop
dramas, *The Wire* ultimately ignores such constructions as the series unravels. Indeed he is mostly absent in Season 4, and his self-destructiveness and egotism is amplified and critiqued in Season 5. Ultimately McNulty is not the white male hero protagonist that we are accustomed to celebrating, but only another member of an expansive continuum of individuals who are all connected to one another in subtle but important ways. I argue that the real heroic gestures of *The Wire* reside in quieter moments of small-scale victory rather than the meticulous wiretaps and grand sweeping gestures of “real policework” and reform. They reside in Cutty’s role as an elder of his community and his boxing gym for struggling male youth, or reformed cop Prezbylewski’s choice to become a teacher rather than an enforcer as a conflicted police officer, or a sober McNulty walking his humble beat and fraternizing with inner city residents. They involve straight-arrow and level-headed Cedric Daniels resigning from a dysfunctional police department, just as he is promoted to Commissioner, a position of authority that he has been striving for but realizes he no longer desires if he cannot initiate positive change. Or Colvin’s adoption of bright, young Namond who at series’ end we see passionately engaged in a school conference debate, clearly an agent of his own future rather than a victim of the streets. Or perhaps the most powerful victory in *The Wire* is open-hearted and vulnerable Bubbles’ struggle to finally become clean. He begins working at a local soup kitchen and is able to finally let go of his guilt over Sherrod’s death, which he reveals in a Narcotics Anonymous meeting at the behest of Walon, his friend and sponsor. Bubbles’ poignant story is told in *The Baltimore Sun*, a companion piece to McNulty and Lester Freamon’s fabrication of a serial killer preying on the homeless, a ruse to attain more funding from City Hall for their ongoing and illicit investigation of Marlo Stanfield. McNulty and
Lester’s fabrication is front page news, but is ultimately a sham, while the real victory is Bubbles’ touching story. These quieter moments of connection and human decency are subtly woven throughout *The Wire* and stand in relief to all of the violence and exploitation that we have witnessed throughout. Those who refute the capitalist patriarchal individualist discourse of vying for “top dog” and rather embrace a discourse of community and people learning how work together and rely on one another to create lasting solutions that address the roots of the problems are the ones who truly win “the game”.

The tagline of *The Wire*’s first season asks us to “Listen Carefully” and there is a double entendre in this phrase. We are implored not merely to listen carefully to the influx of data picked up by the wiretap so that we are in awe of the cleverness of the “good guys” over the “bad guys,” as in the investigative structure of the traditional cop show, but rather that we listen carefully to the ways in which all of these lives are entangled together and affect one another in an intricate tapestry where “all the pieces matter”. The *wire* is the invisible discursive thread of connection, the link between disparate and desperate lives struggling to make sense of a threatening urban world where market logic dominates. The title’s double meaning implies a dual narrative, the investigative police procedural on the surface and the investigation of the American Dream and the people struggling to come to terms with it lying underneath. But the wiretap is a red herring. The real investigation that we should be listening attentively to is the small stories of victory like Bubbles or Namond or Cutty and the significant gestures of compassion and community therein.
Throughout this essay I will refer to *The Wire*’s depiction of impoverished West Baltimore with the term “black underclass”. This term will be used for the sake of simplicity throughout my argument, but with the recognition that inner city black communities are diverse in regards to individual experiences, relationships, power relations, memories, personalities, and identities (that are also shaped in context of gender, age, or sexual orientation). The “black underclass” is not a monolithic, all-encompassing construct.

One of the major critiques of *The Wire* is its predominantly masculinist worldview which often neglects developing its female characters. In many instances, it is as though women in the inner city do not even exist as they are virtually absent as the series focuses predominantly on the construction and reproduction of hypermasculinity in the ‘hood. Female protagonists like Kima Greggs, Rhonda Pearlman, or Beadie Russell are portrayed as independent, resourceful, intelligent, complex and assertive women and yet lack the screen time devoted to counterparts like McNulty, Daniels, or Bunk. Other compelling female characters are peppered throughout, but are barely developed while others are merely ciphers for male desire and consumption such as the strippers in Orlando’s, one of which is raped by Wee-Bay after she overdoes, and is disposed of by tossing her into a dumpster. Season 4, centered on the school system, would have been an opportunity to develop some of the female characters, either students like Zenobia, or a teacher like Ms. Duquette, yet this does not come to fruition. Some women are merely victims of the drug trade’s violence such as the faceless Eastern European women in Season 2, or the handful of African American women murdered by the Barksdale and
Stanfield organizations who often play roles of either ex-lovers or potential witnesses. Female gender analyses are clearly in order, but beyond the scope of this paper. However, for insightful analysis concerning the women of *The Wire* see Lynne Viti’s “I Got the Shotgun, You Got the Briefcase” on the narrative arc of Rhonda Pearlman and Courtney D. Marshall’s “Barksdale Women: Crime, Empire, and the Production of Gender” on *The Wire*’s representation of inner city black femininity.

3 Creators and Baltimore natives David Simon and Ed Burns are both influenced by their own experiences working in the institutions of journalism, law enforcement, and education in Baltimore before working in television. Simon worked as a crime journalist for the Baltimore Sun for twelve years and has written two non-fiction books, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (1991) and *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighbourhood* (1997), co-written by Burns. Burns is a former Homicide and Narcotics detective for the Baltimore Police Department as well as a former inner city 7th grade school teacher.

4 While *The Wire*’s primary focus is Baltimore’s black inner city, Season 2 diverges significantly to explore the plight of the predominantly white Polish-American working class in postindustrial Baltimore, that after the decline of industry, and lack of government support have also become vulnerable to the drug trade. Unfortunately, a discussion of Season 2 is beyond the scope of this paper, but for insightful analysis on *The Wire*’s portrayal of the white working class see Hamilton Carroll’s “Policing

The phrase “send a message” is used repeatedly throughout *The Wire* by gangsters, police, media, and politicians alike. The preoccupation with how something appears and the message encoded within it is rendered to be in dialectical tension with actual effects. For example, the actual effects (beneficial or otherwise) of the Hamsterdam project is set in contention with the message it sends (that drugs should be legalized and regulated). When the project is shut down by the police, it is done so with extreme prejudice in front of Baltimore’s news media (Simon parodies the gung-ho jock-cop militarism of the police by having them play Richard Wagner’s epic “Lord of the Valkyries” blaring from their police cruisers, an intertextual reference to Colonel Kilgore’s American invasion scene in the Vietnam War film *Apocalypse Now*), in order to “send a message” that drugs will not be tolerated. For a Foucauldian analysis of *The Wire*’s representation of Baltimore as a culture under surveillance, and its repeated need for demonstration (“sending a message”) see Ryan Brooks’ “The Narrative Production of ‘Real Police’” as well as Alasdair McMillan’s “Heroism, Institutions, and the Police Procedural”.

In a macabre turn of events, the “vacants” later become tombs where new drug kingpin, the ruthless Marlo Stanfield, has his victims murdered and entombed.
While an outsider to the black community Pryzbelewski is also redeemed in the role of teacher, a stark contrast to his history as a timid yet volatile police officer. When we are first introduced to the character he is invested in the hypermasculine performance of the “jock cop” when he blinds a young offender by striking him with the butt of his gun. Over the course of the series Pryzbelewski is rehabilitated and matures into a more healthy representation of masculinity as a teacher in the school system who is invested in his students rather than displays of power.

Learning and appreciation of literature is hinted at numerous times in The Wire, particularly as a source of empowerment for black men. This is evident in the classroom scenes of Season 4, of Bubbles’ attempts to push Sherrod to go to school and to learn to read, Michael helping his little brother with his homework, Bunk telling Omar how as a young man he wanted to be “hard” but his father pushed him in school instead, Stringer’s book collection which includes Adam Smith and Sun Tzu, and even Brother Mouzone, a Muslim enforcer from New York, who reads Harper’s and The Nation, proclaims “that the most dangerous thing in America is a nigger with a library card”.
Bibliography


